

ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT:
CRITICAL STRATEGIES FOR APPROACHING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC FICTION

BY

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Dissertation Abstract:

Critics of American literature need ways to ethically interpret ethnic difference, particularly in analyses of texts that memorialize collective experiences wherein that difference is a justification for large-scale atrocity. By examining fictionalized autoethnographies—narratives wherein the author writes to represent his or her own ethnic group as a collective identity in crisis—this dissertation interrogates audiences’ responses and authors’ impetus for reading and producing novels that testify to experiences of cultural trauma. The first chapter synthesizes some critical strategies specific to autoethnographic fiction; the final three chapters posit a series of textual applications of those strategies. Each textual application demonstrates that outsider readers and critics can treat testimonial literatures with respect and compassion while still analyzing them critically. In the second chapter, an explication of the representations of African American women’s experiences with the cultural trauma of slavery is brought to bear upon analyses of Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2009) and Alice Walker’s *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2003). In the third chapter, the debate between nationalist and cosmopolitanist critics in Native literary studies is adjudicated through a close reading of the same-sex desire between adolescent boys, and histories of land theft and broken treaties in Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire* (2001) and Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* (2007). Finally, the application of theoretical strategies for reading *testimonio* to literary texts is used to explore the long term effects of the Trujillato’s on the personal and national identity of people from the Haitian-Dominican-American diaspora as portrayed in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Each chapter demonstrates the potential of autoethnographic narrative techniques to present didactic messages, which serve a memorializing function for insider readers and aids outsider readers in understanding those insider perspectives.

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Chapter 1:

Whose Culture?: Autoethnographic Texts and Ethnographic Criticism, or Some Introductory Remarks on the Necessity and Practice of Ethical Ethnographic Scholarship

The old way of dealing with the problem of many cultures was to make us *e pluribus unum*. Out of many cultures, to mold one. Anyone who appreciates [. . .] the splendid variety of American literatures [. . .] is likely to balk at such a project. And anyone who has looked at our history and seen how often the one into which we were to be made was white and Anglo-Saxon and Protestant will be skeptical that the one into which we are to be made could be anything other than the cover for the domination of one of our sectional cultures. These are, in my view, legitimate skepticisms. And the only alternative, so far as I can see, that doesn't threaten perpetual schism, is the hard work of a multiculturalism that accepts America's diversity while teaching each of us the ways and the worth of others.

—K. Anthony Appiah (“Race, Pluralism and Afrocentricity” 118)

The “hard work of a multiculturalism” that accepts and celebrates diversity has been a central focus for American literary studies for some time. K. Anthony Appiah’s article is just one of the several perspectives in an ongoing conversation about the function of cultural difference in the study of the humanities in the United States. These critical conversations have been called “identity politics.” Under the umbrella of that (occasionally derisive) moniker, scholarly inquiries about the relationship of culture to identity pervade most of the criticism of American literature since the so-called “culture wars” gained primacy in the late 1980s. In undertaking an approach to contemporary American fiction that aims contribute to those debates and help, even in some small way, with that “hard work,” this project focuses

upon fictional writing by people who are not “white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant” and whose fiction seeks to represent the collective identities of others of similar cultural backgrounds to their own in ways that respond to the historiography of cultural trauma. The novels by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherman Alexie, Craig Womack, Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz analyzed in the three chapters that follow this one all present readers with a testimonial account of the traumatic events that are shared by categorical groups.

As I examine African American novels that treat slavery, Native American novels that dramatize land and child theft and Dominican and Haitian American accounts of U.S. backed hegemony in the Caribbean diaspora, I hope to demonstrate how some works of contemporary American fiction function as literatures of witness. In analyzing the testimonial functions of each novel I hope to provide a model for “reading across” ethnic literature under an ethical framework, which does the hard work of establishing coalitions across difference without colonization. I’d contend that as each author crafts his or her text autethnographically, he or she generates a mechanism for speaking to readers in a manner that encourages ideological transformation in those readers. The strategies each group uses to speak to insider-readers (who share the author’s subject position and have a personal stake in the testimony about cultural trauma) will often be based upon building group solidarity around historical perspectives that are at odds with dominant historical construction in mainstream American culture. These strategies are hard to track and to engage with on an ethical level for critics who are not also insiders. However, even as these texts speak within group identities the novels communicate across those group identities. I hope to find, in the fictive strategies that the authors employ to deliver their testimony to outsider-readers, an implicit mechanism for building coalitions for social justice around literature.

One might reasonably inquire as to whether or not investigating fiction—which by its very nature lacks the veracity of historical or scientific texts—is the best vehicle for this kind of coalition building. William Harmon's *Handbook to Literature* defines fiction as "narrative writing drawn from the imagination of the author rather than from history or fact" (202). This seems to set up a reasonable barrier

between autobiography or historiography and fiction, but the extent to which an author's imaginative intervention must differ from history and fact is quite difficult to delineate.¹ Maxine Hong Kingston's short story collection *Woman Warrior* (1975) and Tim O'Brien's collection *The Things They Carried* (1986) are both heavily influenced by historical situations and factual experiences in the lives of the authors, but both works are often categorized as fiction.

Since the distinction between fact and fiction is difficult to adjudicate, some critics have relied upon formal distinctions. Wayne Booth argues that fiction stylistically avoids both the versification and abstruse linguistic construction intrinsic to poetry and the reliance upon spoken dialogue inherent in drama (ii). However, Booth also notes that such distinctions are not always concrete, as in the case of prose poems or experimental novels.² Mark Spilka proposes a caveat to Holman and Harmon's simpler definition, noting that "*fiction* is now often used to describe any literary construction or making—any of the ways in which writing seeks to impose order on the flux of thought or experience" (xi). The order that testimonial fiction imposes on the experiences of its characters is often at odds with what is perceived as 'factual' in dominant histories of instances of historical trauma. For instance, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones* both Diaz and Danticat attempt to either raise awareness or correct inaccurate perceptions of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Haitian and Dominican Americans, especially those born on Hispaniola before 1961, are likely aware of the horrors of the Trujillato. But the effects of the dictator's reign will be filtered through systemic removal and the ideological construction of U.S. nationalism for American readers without Dominican or Haitian familial histories. For instance, a 50-something year old Dominican expatriate may read Díaz's novel and be reminded of the members of her family who were 'disappeared' by the army or remember the fear in her father's eyes when he look upon the "Dios y Trujillo" portraits of Jesus and the dictator in the family dining room. A 50-something year old white American woman may only remember her mother's tales

¹ For more about the permeability of boundaries between truth and fiction see Rabinowitz and Cornell.

² Dannenburg also stages a sustained exploration of this notion in her article.

about the difficulties in procuring sugar to bake her birthday cake in 1961 or her father reading newspaper articles touting the U.S.'s role in 'mediating succession' after Trujillo was assassinated by revolutionaries. For the first reader, the novel may memorialize familial and cultural trauma, but the novel has a different function for the second reader. Because insider-readers may already be painfully aware of the traumatic history these novels narrate, the locus of the order the novels impose is a revision to the histories (or the gaps in histories) that exist outside the novel from outsider-perspectives. In order to maintain a concern with attending to the novels' testimony about colonization, outsider readers must be especially careful to avoid overwriting the literary witnessing in the texts with their own meanings drawn from a historical narrative that ignores the perspective revealed in the fiction. Such overwriting compromises the ethos of engaging with autoethnographic texts. In order to engage with this kind of literature ethically, the testimonial properties must be explicated through careful analysis.

Considering the testimonial properties of these novels is paramount for an ethical literary analysis, as such an analysis exposes the ways in which American national identity is reliant upon the assumption of ethnic difference. Toni Morrison has described this reliance in terms of an American Africanism, and Craig Womack has protested that Native identity is usually figured as a foil for American immigrant narratives. The ways in which the novels destabilize national identity by writing correctives to U.S. historiography in fiction has radical potential. The human costs of cultural trauma—the context of which the insider reader is so aware—are revealed through the fiction—to the outsider reader who is usually either unaware or misinformed. The progressive development of American identity is, as the epigraph from Appiah seems to indicate clearly, both shaped by and reflected within American literary production. An understanding of this shaping and reflecting might be best facilitated by an additional definitional imperative; what does the phrase "American literary production" constitute? Because the first modifier in the phrase identifies a national origin, such a definition must answer some key questions: What does the category "American" mean in reference to literary studies? How does the reification (or revision) of a nationally defined canon become central (or even relevant) to construction of cultural

identity? A theoretical interrogation of identity, as an issue of nation as well as race, is a critical issue in the study of American literature and may even be necessary to generate that acceptance of diversity that Appiah stresses.³

Since much of what follows this introduction will be an examination of some explanations about how identity is created, constructed, reified or illusorily perceived (and because the wide-ranging conceptions of ethnic identity may present a conceptual difficulty to the project) a clear articulation of how the term is used herein may be an appropriate starting point. By “identity” I mean to invoke what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “personal or individual existence” in lay terms, and to make reference to the psychoanalytical process of identification, whereby one forms an awareness of this individual existence. Such a “consciousness of one’s perceived states” is “subjectivity,” according to the *OED*.

In addition to collapsing such hotly contested terms as “identity” and “subjectivity” into a single category for analysis, this definition is also complicated by the central assumption upon which the thesis of this manuscript is based—identity is shaped (but *not* wholly determined) by ethnicity. It could be important here to further separate ethnicity from race. As Appiah has rather famously and compellingly argued, race is not a particularly useful category of identity.⁴ Unlike race, which seems to be ascribed from outside the subject based upon the perception of his or her phenotypical traits, identity is a social

³ Benedict Anderson argues that national identity is the product of a collective imagining, made real through social interaction, which constructs a geographic and cultural limitation to define that national identity; he writes that the nation is imagined “as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. [. . .] it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (5-7). Palumbo-Liu makes use of Anderson’s claims to argue that the ways in which American national identity is imagined are constructed by shared grief and a sense of collective history. The Twentieth-Century is a particularly difficult time to iron out what exactly “American” means because of the complex role ethnicity plays in contemporary geopolitics and pedagogical imperatives in the language arts.

⁴ He argues that “[r]ace’ disables us because it proposes as a basis for common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort; it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the ‘intra-racial’ conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world” (“Race, Pluralism and Afrocentricity” 117).

and psychological construct that is constructed through collective identification that may split or bridge racial categories. For instance, calling both Craig Womack and Sherman Alexie “Indians” makes a racial assumption that there is a collective identity for indigenous North Americans, but referring to Womack’s Muskogee and Alexie’s Interior Salish tribal affiliations marks them as part of an ethnic group. Rather than assuming an illusory connection based on variables, like the color of one’s skin and hair, as racial categorization does, the ethnic category focuses upon shared culture, like the language one speaks or the food one eats or the place one calls home. Ethnicity, too, can easily become a category that essentializes individual difference away, but because it is a socio-psychic paradigm rather than a biologically determinist one, the ways that ethnicity may shape collective identity in the U.S. are certainly relevant to explorations of the American literary imagination.

In socio-psychic constructivist paradigm like ethnicity “identities create forms of solidarity [. . .] with those who share [one’s] identity” which then creates “a universal value of solidarity” (*Ethics of Identity* 24). One comes to understand one’s identity through the interactions with others, who are either like or unlike oneself. Because Womack’s sense of his own development may be informed by the role models and familial relationships in his Creek community, the sharing of Creek identity becomes an important category of self-definition for him as an author and critic. This self-definition by group affiliation also means that communicating with others who share one’s ethnic identity don’t require any explanation of cultural antecedents. According to Appiah, as identity is continually negotiated in every social situation it is likely that one remains most comfortable with those one is like, since they do not require one to define, defend or explain one’s identity. The distinction between this universal value and some others (like the WASPish tendency critiqued in the epigraph to this introduction) is that even in its universalizing impetus, the value refutes any position that might remake difference into sameness, because its universality is founded in its commitment to difference.

Ethnicity, then, is a cultural product that “works out in different ways for different people because different people have different identities.” In spite of these differences “many values are internal to an

identity: they are among the values someone who has that identity must take into account, but are not values for people who do not have that identity” (*Ethics of Identity* 26). Since values may be determined by identity, an ethics of evaluation would seem central to the prospect of a functional multiculturalism. According to ethicist J. L. Mackie “[e]valuations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards,” and Appiah has pointed out that cultural solidarity may function as the mechanism for agreeing and assuming those kinds of ethical standards. Mackie goes on to note that “[s]o far as ethics is concerned, [. . .] there are no objective values [. . . for such values] would be action-directing absolutely, not contingently upon the agent’s desires and inclinations” (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* 24-27). If Appiah’s assertions about ethnic solidarity’s effect upon inclinations holds true, then there may be good reasons to consider how testimonial texts situate readers as either insider or outsider when making determinations about what is ethical.

If situations arise when the values of the collective group for whom the author delivers his or her testimony are at odds with the values of the outsider reader it may be difficult to plot a clear ethos for engagement. In Womack’s novel, *Drowning in Fire*, he dramatizes the ways that different cultural backgrounds produce different judgments about history in Oklahoma. When his Creek characters consider the history of allotment, they find the actions of the Oklahoma legislature that signed the Dawes Act to be unethical, and find that maintaining their land claim is essential to the preservation of their cultural identity. For instance, the Henneha family, who are the subject of much of the narrative, is one of few families who still live on their allotment in the mostly Creek town of Eufaula. Josh Henneha, the grandson of the couple living on their allotment, works in the Oklahoma City office the Department of Agriculture with some white men who express a totally different perspective. Those men analyze projected crop yield and note that much of the arable land around Eufaula is left fallow, which they see as a missed financial opportunity for Oklahoma’s agrarian markets. The different cultural histories of the Hennehas and the white men at the state office determine their evaluation of the ethical use of that land. The Hennehas remember that governmentally forced relocation and land-theft by allotment have

produced to an increasingly diasporic Creek nation that is scattered throughout the U.S., sometimes resulting in the loss of cultural continuity between generations. This memory of cultural trauma makes holding on to their land—even when farming on it becomes less than feasible—an ethical imperative; Josh Henneha looks back on the struggle to resist allotment and draws this lesson from that history: “Hold on and salvage whatever was left. Don’t give up anything else. Sell no more land. Uphold the Treaty of 1832, its promise of unbroken land tenure and Creek national government in Indian Territory into perpetuity” (224). The white men at the DOA remain either ignorant or unmoved by that history. Instead of beginning with this history of land-theft and its human consequences in the present day, the agricultural adjusters only see that the fallow fields do harm to the state economy, and they, therefore, consider the transfer of the land to corporate farmers as an ethical imperative. Ethnic solidarity may require a particular set of culturally influenced values, so sometimes insider readers and outsider readers cannot share a singular ethos. As he considers his job, Josh notes that because of his sense of ethnic solidarity, “I shared none of my male colleagues’ interest in the agency’s philosophy” (169-70). The ways ethnic identities may incur specific ethical values has a great deal to do with the processes of acculturation, transculturation and identity-based solidarity. Fiction, because it is a product of an imaginative process on the part of an author who has a particular ethos that may be woven into the fabric of the text, may provide evidence to allow those processes to be made more apparent to readers outside the cultural boundaries created by solidarity. Womack’s fiction then, is more than just a memorial to those who have been traumatized by the wrongs visited upon the Creek nation; the novel can also function as a way to explain to non-Creek readers the ethos that emerges from ethnic solidarity organized around cultural trauma. Sharing the context in which such a set of historical values may emerge from history is a first step in an ethical cross-cultural paradigm.

Culture and a sense of shared ethnic history, then play some role in shaping a textually revealed ethos in the novels I’ll examine, and therefore, culture also contextualizes the ethical framework in which readers interpret those texts. I wish to stress that my use of the word “culture” is not an abstraction of

personal identity. Raymond Williams has argued that culture is the sum of the “processes of human societies and human minds” and that “[c]ulture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind” (16). The ordinariness intrinsic to Williams’s famous definition highlights the universality of cultural influence which results in the relativist ethics this project proposes for cross-ethnic coalitions. Every subject, whether originating linguistically or socially, undergoes a process of acculturation. It follows then, that the construction of any dominant value (whether it should be an epistemological norm or a system of mores and beliefs) would be culturally determined to some extent. Williams goes on to posit five important observations about culture; first, culture is learned. Second, culture is socially mediated. Third, culture emerges out of language. Fourth, culture works to organize hierarchies, and fifth, culture is material. Literature, as both an individual and a cultural product, may be one of the best examples of the applicability of Williams’s observations. The ethnic hierarchies produced by culture are evident in almost all written works. Language, of which all literary works—from those composed by oral-formulaic poets in the 13th Century to those written by high Modern novelists in the last 50 years—are built, is both learned and socially mediated. Because Morrison, Walker, Womack, Alexie, Danticat and Diaz each explore how their characters’ ethnic identities are shaped by solidarity and complicated by transcultural contact, each novel provides fertile ground for the analytical seeds of inter-ethnic encounters as illuminated by an ethos produced by particular histories of cultural trauma. The linguistic and symbolic maneuvers that each novelist employs in allowing readers to infer that ethos of encounter is revealed by the use of language to construct culture.

An overwhelming number of 20th and 21st-Century literary theorists seem to agree that language is among the most important of all external pressures on burgeoning subjects, but approaches to the analysis of linguistic acquisition and socialization are quite divergent. It seems natural, then that the ways the novelists employ language to shape fictionalized historiography are also divergent. In any case, the category of identity—gendered, sexed, racial or ethnic—emerges at the point of its naming and the ethos of each ethnic identity may be manifest in the symbols chosen for that naming. When Morrison and

Walker choose to employ particular dialects when framing ethnic differences between their characters to indicate their link to European, African and Caribbean cultural perspectives, the connotations of the diction and tone they choose communicate as much as the denotative meaning of the words they write. When Womack mixes Creek words and rural Oklahoman dialect into the English syntax of his novel, he helps readers understand how the level of the text and the language of the characters are imbued with culturally specific meanings. This is also apparent when Diaz mixes Spanish words and Washington Heights-slang into his English-language novel.

Each fictive act of signification necessarily draws a boundary around identity to facilitate the solidarity of which Appiah writes. The ways characters share language, and the ways they are separated by it, indicate how collective identity and difference are culturally and linguistically produced. But this use of language to emphasize sameness and difference needs not be reductively produced as evidence for any essentialist claim about the fixed nature of ethnic identity. Culture is, as Williams suggests, material, and as material conditions shift, so do cultural meanings. There is no static African American, Creek or Dominican American essence that can emerge from Morrison, Walker, Womack or Diaz's works. The difference between Morrison's 17th Century characters and Walker's 21st Century characters is not that the instance of cultural trauma—the slave trade—is a permutable event but that the material conditions for African American women who are still enslaved are radically different from those who are not, even when they share a culturally transferred sense of identity built around the spectre of slavery. This does not mean that the solidarity between Walker's narrator, Kate Talkingtree, and her enslaved ancestors is illusory. The need to generate solidarity while maintaining individuality troubles post-structural approaches to identity politics in literary criticism as well as in novels. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir argues in the introduction to *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (4). She makes an anti-essentialist claim; however, she does not imply that the act of "becoming," as she explains it in the text, is an exertion of total agency. One does not usually choose a gender, but rather is assigned one after a cursory examination of corporeal traits (much like racial identification from the

outside owing to phenotypical features). Beauvoir articulates that external hierarchies influence the meaning and evaluation of gender identity to such an extent that the polar opposition of “man” with “woman” will constrain the options and identities of any subject on the basis of sex. Any extension of this claim necessarily complicates the construction of identity for any subject defining him or herself (or any author writing his or her character). Kate does not choose an ethnic solidarity, but is assigned one as she enters into culture. The categorical construction of Kate as an African American woman is a conduit that connects the cultural trauma of slavery with her sense of community and solidarity with others. Since that solidarity is based as much upon exclusion as inclusion, it also sets up a boundary around Kate’s identity that is meaningful as it reveals difference. Difference mitigates the possibility of identity outside an a priori symbolic order. Language (and thus fiction) and identity (and thus difference) are flowers with twin roots.⁵

All meaning is shared between subjects through opposition; language itself (as a font of culture) sets up these oppositional binaries. As pairs of identifying traits are socially negotiated through these oppositions, people are able to communicate, and through communication, solidarity is created and categories of identity are named. For instance, the word “man” is defined by its negative relationship to the word “woman,” in Beauvoir’s analysis. Because there are categorical definitions for sexed traits, the ways in which individuals who possess those traits are perceived is determined by cultural context rather than personal choices. What is right and proper for “man” will be conversely wrong and inappropriate for “woman” according to their oppositional relationship. Merleau-Ponty, who approached subjectivity from a phenomenological position, sees spoken language as the initial manifestation of consciousness, but Jacques Lacan, whose perspective is heavily influenced by Freudian structuralism, understands language as a preexisting order into which the subject falls. Because the issue of methodology and critical priorities is not often a source of productive engagement with theoretical or literary texts, arguments

⁵ This metaphor is borrowed from Walker’s poem “Remember?” In the poem hope and justice are the two flowers with twin roots; given the argument that I’ll make about the links between literatures of witness and social justice, the dual function of Walker’s metaphor feels especially appropriate.

about the primacy of a self over of language (and thus of identity over solidarity) appear irresolvable. The nature of the perspective on these arguments seems to have a determinist effect on which solution is favored. This persuades me that all critical perspectives have a position that, in some way, colors the analytical processes and outcomes that are revealed by criticism. Just as culture shapes authorial ethos, so too does it shape critical ethos. Even when critics attempt to construct a position clear of bias, the risk of critics presenting an interventionist interpretation that violates the ethos of the text is inherent in the practice of reading literature. The content of every analysis is shaped by the identity of its analyst, just as the content of every narrative is shaped by the identity of its author.

Even within a determinist paradigm of analysis, one cannot rely fully on ethnic solidarity to account for all differences in a text or the analysis thereof. Just as Morrison and Walker, both African American women who write literary fiction, come to different conclusions about the potential of inter-ethnic solidarity in their novels, so too might readers who approach those texts, regardless of the similarities those readers may have in terms of identity. Feminist literary critics, for example, take radically different methodological approaches to literary analysis, but are likely to see the same masculinist bias in linguistic construction. Julia Kristeva, like Beauvoir, considers how gender and familial roles might function as a frame for subjectivity, but because Kristeva is more closely allied to a Lacanian methodology than Beauvoir, who applies an existential approach to the hermeneutics of sexism, the conclusions they come to have nuanced differences. Beauvoir is interested in disproving biologically and psychologically determined explanations for the devaluation of femininity in opposition to masculinity. Kristeva remains concerned about gender disparity, but suggests that numerous mechanisms exist that may recuperate psychologically determinist models for feminist uses. Kristeva builds upon Freud and Lacan to produce a revised model of identification that sets mothers up as spaces of unified identity, and as original others against which selves are articulated. Both Kristeva and Beauvoir find that because categorical oppositions are created and maintained through the social circulation of meaning, both hierarchies and subjectivity arise out of those categories. However, if language is an incipient point

of culture, and culture is an incipient point of hierarchy and identity, that does not necessarily make the subject using language a deterministically constructed entity.⁶ Situating subjects within a social hierarchy mandates a conception of consciousnesses that can only be expressed through language; ergo, every subject must access a symbolic order that he or she is both restrained and sustained within.

Identity, then, is performed by a subject through the use—both intentional and incidental—of language.⁷ This idea is perhaps most often attributed to Judith Butler, who forwarded an argument about the performativity of gender in her seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1991), but the extrapolation of performativity to other categories of identity—like race and class—are also prevalent in poststructural thinking. The opposition between “man” and “woman” is a good example, but other oppositional constructions are more complex than the “natural” binary biological sex presents.⁸ Cornel West writes that “[w]ithout the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be ‘white’—they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity” (xi). West notes that the designation of difference also permits the possibility of collective identification through shared negation; European-Americans become “white” because they share the collective identity of “non-black.” The opposition of “black” to “white,” as categories of identity, masks the differences in ethnic background of both categories through the constructed relationship between them, and also works to deny the existence of other categories that are neither “white” nor “black.” Because the notion of oppositionally defined categories relies upon the social negotiation of meaning, it might be argued that all identity is socially constructed and that this

⁶ Lacan notes that “language is not to be confused with the various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject—primarily because language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject [. . .] makes his [or her] entry into it” (1291).

⁷ By “language” Lacan, of course, refers to speech. However, Judith Butler considers a larger system of culturally constructed signifiers that may be aural, visual or textual. Given the fact that categorical solidarity is often posited on external markers (which are assigned meaning from outside identity), physical appearance can communicate more fully than spoken language in some instances, which may indicate that this kind of communication, even though it lacks any subjective intentionality, is also part of the symbolic order.

⁸ To call sex a “natural” binary category is problematic. While most people have an embodied gender that is legible through secondary sex characteristics (e.g. body hair, genitalia), the prevalence of intersex births complicates even that assumption.

construction is founded upon the hierarchical evaluation of difference. Debates that concern these issues are often derisively called “identity politics.”

What exactly is meant by the phrase "identity politics" might be the subject of as much critical discourse as the definitions of subjectivity and culture. I use the term here to encompass a number of cultural considerations that exert some influence on identity. Because my focus is largely one concerned with ethnicity, I must make clear here that it is but one consideration. A nexus of socially constructed identifiers have interstices of interaction. For example, solidarity and difference are produced by Walker and Morrison’s ethnic backgrounds *and* their genders. Womack and Alexie may share a pan-ethnic identity in that they are both Native American, but they also have significant differences in identity that are produced by their different tribal affiliations and sexual orientations. Danticat and Diaz, in a U.S. context, may be collectivized as Caribbean-American, but on Hispaniola the differences between their Haitian and Dominican national origins would be considered a point that prohibits full solidarity.

Identity is created not by one consideration independently, but by the interstitial matrix of often conflicting points of solidarity and difference. This matrix, like the individual identities produced within it, is created by processes of subjugation and acculturation. Hence, a theoretically ethical politics of identity would need to theorize of socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, regionality, sex, gender, sexuality, kinship and a host of other categories around which solidarity between people is built. To extricate just one of these concerns from the others is difficult and perhaps even counterproductive, but to treat all of them in simultaneity is impossible. For example, Hortense Spillers’ foundational article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" demonstrates the extent to which African-American identity is inflected by not just the racial and ethnic constructions of the dominant episteme, but also by permutations in gender, kinship and class that constitute perceptual norms for that identity structure. Other critics—Morrison, Appiah, Allen and Anzaldúa, just to list a few—make similar assertions about the performed or constructed nature of identity. Toni Morrison’s notion of the spectral “American Africanism” that generates an absent or silenced other in all American literary endeavors works to reveal

the constructed nature of ethnic collectivity in much the same way that West's point does. Appiah's work to reject the biologically reductive explanations for racial difference undertakes the same project of revealing the culturally derived mechanisms for socially mediated understandings of difference. Paula Gunn Allen considers how categorical identities intersect, and she argues that a close examination of different cultural perspectives proves that evaluations of difference (like the hierarchies that result from them) are never universal. Gloria Anzaldúa forwards some claims about the productive and radical potential of spaces between polar opposites—hybrid identities that fit neatly into no singular cultural construction. The particulars of these approaches may be radically different; each approach finds that critical interventions in literature written from marginal [read: non-white / female / non-heterocentric / non-elite] subject positions with sensitivity and modesty must not seek to apply standards garnered from Eurocentric critical models exclusively. Because identity is transcultural and built upon interactions between and within collectively identified groups, the critical methods for explicating it should be informed by the diverse origins and ethical concerns framed within the textual narrative. Often, a Euro-American critical methodology cannot account for the varied influences of interstitial cultural subject positions to texts by socially marginalized authors, and the singular application of such a method to such a text would mitigate the opportunities for using the textual ethos as a means of producing viable coalitions across identity categories. If literature is to be used as a tool for social justice, then readers and critics must seek to make the most of those opportunities.

Because testimonial fiction can provide such opportunities, it is important to look carefully at the way those opportunities have been missed, within the texts, to determine how they might be explored outside it. Because I propose a critical model for finding coalition through the ethical interpretation of testimonial literature, I begin with an examination of how some interpretive models fail in that endeavor. The chief reason for these failures, I'd argue, is the conflict that emerges between the contextual value system of writers and readers. In my analysis I privilege texts that present a legible ethos, and undertake to illuminate the ethics implicit in the text. I understand the subtextual representation of each novel's

ethical stance as an exertion of authorial intention, which outsider readers must respect. This means that the conflicts between the values of the reader and the writer are only soluble if the reader is willing and able to be receptive to the testimonial functions of the text. The reader, either insider or outsider, should look carefully at the ways the testifying author constructs a narrative that gives a more complete history. That reader must consider how the author uses narrative to compel the reader to make value judgments about different perspectives on the history of cultural trauma, and the reader must be willing to enter into a deliberation about how the author uses the text to call for action that serves to secure social justice. This model for considering these functions in the texts produces an ethical paradigm for interpretation in many cases. However, the ethical values derived from acculturation and solidarity go beyond the material functions of language and culture; Appiah notes that

[w]e pass on our language to the next generation because we care to communicate with them; we pass on religion because we care for its vision and endorse its values; we pass on our folkways because we value people with those folkways. Even when these values are not explicitly articulated, they lie at the heart of our self-conceptions and our conceptions of community. Culture in this sense is the home of what we care about most. If other people organize their solidarity around cultures different from ours, this makes them, to that extent, different from us in ways that matter to us. The result, of course, is not just that we have difficulty understanding across cultures; this is an inevitable result of cultural difference, for much of culture consists of language and other shared modes of understanding, but that we end up preferring our own kind.

(“Reconstructing Racial Identities” 71)

Accordingly, the identities of the author crafting representations, of the characters he or she represents, and of the readers and critics interpreting those representations all work together to produce a troubled maze of identification and differentiation. To navigate this maze, readers from different languages,

religions and folkways must be modest enough to suspend an initial judgment based upon their own cultural norms if they are to hear the authorial testimony as it may have been intended by the author.

An important result of 20th and 21st-Century literary theories may be that the examination of first-person accounts of difference and identity has become a much used approach to theoretical engagement with texts outside the core of the traditional canon. Examples of this sort of critical work come from a number of disciplines. For example, Mary Louise Pratt examines autoethnographic functions in non-fictional narratives; her work seeks to construct a paradigm that privileges the voices, perspectives and experiences of those marginalized communities, allowing their autoethnographic texts to define and describe their collective identities rather than imposing a Eurocentric ethnographic description upon those identities.

Pratt achieves this privileging in two ways. First, she begins with the text, and asks what rhetorical clues might be provided that suggests a manner of reading. This manner of reading is just as productive for testimonial novels as for life narratives, because fictionalized testimony serves the same autoethnographic functions that Pratt examines in autobiography. For instance, Morrison's polyphonic and non-linear narrative in *A Mercy* (2009) employs a complex structure that is challenging for the reader. In considering what Morrison may suggest about the content of her autoethnographic narrative a reader needs to attend to her form. The use of different narrative voices, each from a different 'home culture,' allows Morrison to dramatize an inter-ethnic exchange between her characters; in looking at how those different cultural values shape those characters' relationships to one another, Morrison makes an implicit point about the dangers of misunderstanding cultural referents. The form of the novel presses readers to linger over the text, to re-read and reconstruct narratives that are difficult to understand, to think about the different narrative perspectives as part of a continuous whole that is fragmented by identity politics.

Second, Pratt emphasizes the need for context, and reiterates that the burden of finding reliable contextual materials is not to be placed on "Native informants" but to be assumed by the ethnographic critic, who must be modest and attempt to suspend value judgments until after a great deal of context has

been gathered. In her speech, Pratt notes that to read the letter of Guaman Poma, a Mayan bureaucrat, to King Philip of Spain it is not sufficient to look at histories of American conquest authored by European historians. Pratt draws important context from reading texts written by other Mayans, both in Poma's time and in the contemporary period that look back on colonization. In determining what kinds of context are sufficient, Pratt looks to contextual and critical texts that are also autoethnographic in order to illuminate the original autoethnography.

During the 'culture wars,' African American literary studies were the subject of a debate about the primacy of African American critical voices. White scholars of African American literature were challenged. Joel Chandler Harris' ethnographies of Southern African American literature seem as fitting example, especially since both Morrison and Walker have offered comment upon them. Literary critic H. L. Mencken relates a truncated version of the controversy about Harris' work: "Once upon a time a Georgian printed a couple of books that [were] little more than an amanuensis for the local blacks—his works were really the products, not of white Georgia, but of black Georgia. Writing afterward as a white man, he swiftly subsided into the fifth rank" (65). In Walker's estimation, Harris' work was successful only in "stealing a good part of my heritage" ("Uncle Remus[. . .] 29), and although Harris famously recorded a folktale about a 'tar baby' and a trickster rabbit, Morrison, when questioned about her novel *Tar Baby*, claimed no firsthand knowledge of Harris and stated that the story had been part of her family's oral heritage (Ruas 99). During the culture wars, critical voices like Walker's and Morrison's were privileged above those ethnographic sources like Harris' books because of the ethical concerns about intellectual property and the authority to speak for and about an ethnically identified group. In fact, many of the most authoritative and respected voices in the critical discourse about blackness in American culture in the late 20th- and early 21st-Centuries are those of African Americans. This change, which is reliant upon an increasing number of autoethnographic scholars, has been longer coming in Caribbean studies, and is still the subject of contentious debate in Native American studies.

What these debates in these three fields suggest is that ethnographic criticism is an issue that requires ethical examination because it may take up space rightly afforded to insider-speech, and, even if not, it may be so vexed by the competition between cultural referents that it is difficult for ethnography to be reliable. I would not contend that a scholar cannot ever ethically enter into conversation with testimonial texts by authors from other cultural backgrounds, but I would contend that scholars who do enter these conversations must do so with care and respect. Pratt employs a specific set of terms to discuss the distinctions between representations crafted by outsiders—like Harris—and insiders—like Morrison and Walker: "[E]thnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others. [. . .] Autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan representations" ("Arts of the Contact Zone" 35). Autoethnographic literature foregrounds the author's culture in his or her literary representations. To foreground cultural solidarity in a narrative requires a particular kind of authorial subjectivity, one imbued with the agency to control the intentionality of the text. To raise this issue of authorial agency in interpretive praxis, as Pratt does, is to bring ethical considerations into an examination of critical practices in the study of narrative. If outsider critics are to interpret and analyze insider texts, then those critics should consider how the testimonial project of 'writing back' can be aided by allies outside the groups on behalf of whom the autoethnographer testifies. These critics need mechanisms for allegiance without oppression, for cross-ethnic communities without colonization.

There are many critics who have contributed opinions about how to build these allegiances and communities, proving that Pratt is not alone in her concern for the ethics of representing difference. The question of how to theorize difference (and consequently, to interpret textual representations of difference) is central to the study of the language arts, which are, at their semiotic foundations, rendered in terms of negation and identification. To refer to any subject position, in any way, already demands a consideration of difference; what subjects in that position *are* is determined, in whole or in part, by a contrast with what they *are not*. In an essay responding to some of Pratt's work after that influential

speech, Harold Fromm noted that "to refer, it seems, is to colonize, to take things over for one's brutal use, to turn everything else into a mere Other" (396). Fromm draws from Pratt the implication that critics can only operate ethically as insiders, that reading and analyzing across identities is always an oppressive action. Pratt's rejoinder to Fromm points out that academic scholarship *can* be distorted by personal or cultural agendas and value systems in ways that result in colonization. However, Pratt also notes that criticism, as a professional practice, can and should avoid distortions whenever (and perhaps even however) possible; she writes,

[T]he criticism industry is a reality not to be overlooked. Academics have a responsibility to stay self-aware and self-critical about their own and their profession's interests. [. . .] The image of academic colonization suggests that one has stepped beyond some legitimate borders and laid claim to territory rightfully inhabited by others. (400)

The issue of "rightful" ownership of rhetorical territory brings ethical considerations into the crucial conversation about referring to difference in the disciplines of the humanities. Fromm's argument that any reference to difference is likely to construct a power differential is similar to the one Pratt sites in defining her terminology, but Fromm's argument is framed as "simply reductive" in Pratt's retort (401). Within this dialogue *ad hominem*, Fromm and Pratt engage in a debate about the ethics of representation and identity. What the published disagreement indicates is that such a debate raises important, if complex and difficult, problems about whether (and how) ethnography can be recuperated from its colonialist incipience. Such a recuperation may require a critical intervention that carries a risk of turning the autoethnographic text into "a mere Other." Pratt admits that her on-going investigation of cultural difference is exactly that sort of "interventionist project" (401). Fromm worries that the paradigm for understanding autoethnographies as writerly texts leaves ethnographic critics with "the impossible choice of keeping permanently quiet or perpetuating ruthless violence" (396). These two oppositional perspectives may function as a

microcosmic example of an important debate about ethical ethnography, but other examples from the same period abound.⁹

I believe that Pratt's paradigm is a good foundation for an interventionist project in ethnographic criticism. However, for this paradigm to fully assuage Fromm's concerns, it is necessary to illustrate that the methodology for ethical engagement with autoethnographic texts can function in practice in ways that neither blindly affirm autoethnographers' claims nor contribute to the silencing of outsider perspectives. Any project contributing to the building of the kind of multiculturalism for which Appiah calls (and I believe Pratt's work seeks to make such a contribution) must begin by rejecting the equally problematic and diametrically polarized options Fromm identifies in favor of "something completely different" (Pratt 401). An ethical critical intervention in interpretive responses to autoethnographic American literature does not simply retreat into arguments about the inevitability of recolonization. Ethical ethnographic criticism may need to reconsider not just critical roles and responsibilities, as Pratt suggests, but also interpretive practices at the methodological level. The "criticism industry" is in need of strategies for preemptively avoiding unethical engagement (or "perpetuating ruthless violence") and ethical disengagement (or "keeping permanently quiet") with autoethnographic texts. Many critics and theorists have been hard at work developing, applying and analyzing exactly those kinds of strategies. Some of those strategies include: starting with the text as a recursive historiography and looking for intratextual clues that guide reading; relying on criticism written from a subject position that has commonalities with that of the author; reasserting the need for critical attention to authorial intentionality; expanding critical endeavors to include less-frequently taught, anthologized and researched texts and authors; conducting contextual research to appropriately historicize instances of cultural trauma; and providing deliberative

⁹ Frederic Jameson and Ahmad Aijaz had a similar exchange about the applicability of Marxist methods to "Third-world literature," and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Loose Canons* both treat a number of other examples of this kind of critical dialogue. "Rooted Cosmopolitanism", the final chapter of K. Anthony Appiah's *The Ethics of Identity*, and Martha Nussbaum's introduction to *Love of Country* stage a nuanced and cogent debate about the distinctions between patriotism (as an exemplar of solidarity) and cosmopolitanism that conducts a similar kind of disagreement more fully grounded in the tradition of moral philosophy of ethics as it relates to the social functions of categorical identity.

analysis that draws out the implicit calls to action in the texts for readers outside the ethnic group depicted by the authors.

In the final three chapters of this work, I'll explore how each of those strategies works in praxis. My analyses will always begin with what the author says about her or his text, and will then consider how critics who claim solidarity with authorial subject positions might respond. This does not mean, however, that I will refrain from using any Euro-American criticism or theory. Just as I believe that it is important to privilege insider perspectives, I am also convinced that outsider perspectives can contribute to building cross-ethnic coalitions, because without both halves of the dialogue autoethnographic texts cannot achieve the potential inherent to their dual audiences. As testimonial literature speaks to insiders, it memorializes those who have suffered most from cultural traumas and it provides a venue for correcting historical oversights in ethnography. As testimonial literature speaks to outsiders, it raises awareness about these legacies of cultural trauma—which surely can contribute to preventing their recurrence—and presents demands for introspection upon the role that difference and identity formation through group solidarity play in perpetuating ethnically-motivated acts of violence, aggression or imperialism.

Because I remain firm in my conviction that a tokenized representation of each ethnically identified group is never enough to encompass all the interstitial perspectives that will occur within identity categories, I have endeavored to complete a set of three two-text dialogues about instances of cultural trauma. I do this for four reasons. First, I wish to demonstrate how authors in similar subject positions may come to different conclusions about historical events and cross-ethnic coalitions. This demonstration allows me to stage my own attempts to produce an ethos of engagement that coheres in some way, even when the values communicated by one autoethnographer are undermined by the values espoused by another. Second, I wish to make an argument for a wider canon of American literature. Evaluations of the literary merit that separate “Great Books” from popular fiction are insufficient for critical practices. Some of the novels I have chosen are not highly regarded as literary and some are. I would maintain that an ethical reader who attends to the testimonial function of autoethnographic texts

can learn as much from a ‘bad’ book as a ‘good’ one. Additionally, because value judgments are subjective and often informed by the cultural background of the evaluator, those judgments don’t seem to contribute much to the impetus for ideological transformation through reading that is the starting point for this dissertation. Third, by reading across autoethnographic fiction I hope to illustrate how intra-ethnic dialogues face similar ethical concerns that inter-ethnic ones face. Because ethnic categories are, as discussed above, socially constructed, the ways in which solidarity is undermined are as relevant to this debate about the ethics of ethnography as the ways in which solidarity may be bolstered. Finally, I hope to provide some of the necessary context and attend to the deliberative calls I find in the six novels I have chosen. If this enterprise can be sufficiently produced under the paradigm of a doctoral dissertation, then that alone seems to illustrate that it is possible for critics in the academy at large.

The next few chapters represent my own ideas about how an appropriately ethical intervention might be presented. As Pratt and Fromm's dialogue demonstrates, ideas about the most appropriate way to approach autoethnographic texts are frequently discussed and hotly debated. Those debates are far from sufficiently resolved in the first decade of the 21st Century, and the methodological strategies emerging out of those debates have inaugurated a new set of concerns into the discourse of literary theory. In the disciplines of the language arts post-modern representational maneuvers and post-structural theoretical approaches have become dominant, and claims to the kind of authorial agency Pratt suggests are often highly suspect.¹⁰ Critics who are not in the same cultural subject position as the autoethnographers about whose works they write can (and probably should) ethically engage with autoethnographic texts by relinquishing some amount of control of the texts to the author and the group with which the autoethnography professes solidarity. I hope that beginning with the fiction-as-exposition, and then

¹⁰ There are many texts that document the problems with centering authorial agency in literary analyses; chief among them is probably Roland Barthes’s musing upon the “death of the Author” in his monograph *The Pleasure of the Text*. There are a number of reasons why critics of autoethnographic literatures should be a bit skeptical of these kinds of deconstructionist and post-structuralist arguments made about authorship. I won’t outline them all; instead, I’ll paraphrase Susan Gubar’s thoughts on the delegitimization of authorship from her 2008 Holmes lecture—it is very interesting to note that at precisely the moment when the Anglo-American canon is being infiltrated by authors who are neither male nor white that authorial subject positions become irrelevant to the study of that canon. Perhaps the European high theorist dost protest too much?

proceeding to the authors' claims about that text and the ethnographic criticism will provide mechanisms for relinquishing that control as this methodology cedes primary interpretive authority to members of the group that is represented in the autoethnography. In what follows, I will theoretically outline appropriate strategies for such a relinquishment, and rhetorically situate those strategies in an on-going critical conversation about the role of culture in a progressive tradition of literary scholarship and pedagogy in the American academy of letters.

In examining the role of the ethnographic criticism of autoethnographic American fiction, this work attempts to posit and provide evidence for some claims about the relationship between literature and American identity, as shaped by ethnicity. Chief among these claims is my belief that the diasporic qualities of American culture prove to be central to both national identity (as a paradoxical site of solidarity and differentiation) and literary production (as a material and personal artifact espousing a particular identity). Movement from place to place, from nation to nation and region to region is a central commonality in the works of most writers in the U.S. canon, even those who write from a dominant subject position. Even relatively static writers who may be regionally defined often reflect the hidden diversity within seemingly homogenous cultural groups. For instance, within Flannery O'Connor's work—all of which, it may be argued, is illustrative of the oeuvre of Southern literature—the distinctions between white Protestant Southerners and white Catholic Southerners, or rich urbanite whites and poor rural whites are explored with an attention to differentiation.

Writers in the United States live in a national community expanding out of numerous ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and to divorce their works from the context of diasporic identity would suppress some of the most important content from American literature. In spite of this diasporic root, there is no core American diaspora, but instead each diasporic experience is heterologous and denies any monolithic conception of national culture. Each instance of transculturation in the U.S. creates its own contextual instance of diasporically determined identity, and many of these instances are artfully represented, in their specific contexts, by writers of autoethnographic fiction.

The multicultural and immigrant traditions within American literature have important relevance to the ways in which I consider strategies for ethical engagement. The strategies with which this project is primarily concerned might work to generate a theoretical synthesis of divergent methods produced in area-specific literary studies. In the United States oppressive institutions create the necessary conditions for cultural trauma in the service of a nationalist concern with constructing a consolidated, white supremacist American identity—either by defining it against an African-descended other that is to be subordinated, positioning it as an achievement of ‘manifest destiny’ to repopulate space left vacant by a ‘vanishing’ indigenous population, or by constructing it as a resilient stronghold that denies entry to ‘third-world boat people.’ I hope that by looking at some autoethnographic fiction and literary criticism in African American literature, Native American literature and Caribbean American literature together, I may be able to learn what mechanisms for ethical engagement those autoethnographers recommend. In intervening in those recommendations, my object is to generate a paradigm for coalition building outside the pan-ethnic categories to which the criticism in each of those literary areas speaks. Because of its orientation on synthesis and recontextualization, what follows this introduction may make a contribution to these existing critical discourses by way of positing an emphatic shift in critical practices. In spite (or perhaps because) of this syncretic orientation (which proposes to find some commonalities between autoethnographic literature and critics written by three very different marginalized American populations), I am willing to risk proscription in my exploration of the role of the ethnographic critic, which, admittedly, is a risky theoretical endeavor that may have as many ethical problems as it attempts to resolve or mitigate.

To speak for or about autoethnographic literature risks a number of potentially hegemonic rhetorical actions against (or even insulting assumptions about) the subject position of the autoethnographer. At best, that critical intervention can start a process by which “the ways and worth of others” may more fully be understood. At worst, critical intervention in autoethnographic writing can have the result of silencing, distorting and ventriloquizing the voices of the autoethnographers. This

argument has often galvanized calls by scholars in marginal positions for metropolitan critics to “move over” (Maracle 10) so as to create a space for autoethnographic voices to take precedence over ethnographic ones. This “moving over” is distinct from Fromm's suggestion that ethnographers should keep “permanently quiet” because it doesn't elide any notion of describing or discussing difference as a mechanism for colonizing autoethnographic texts. Rather, the call to “move over” suggests that ethnographic criticism is only one part of a larger project to discover how identity-based hierarchies might be challenged through narrative. Calls to “move over” simply argue that prioritizing autoethnographic critical voices within scholarly conversations may be requisite for the success of that project.

“Moving over” may not necessarily assume that the ethnographic critic can have no productive response to autoethnography. For example, one effective strategy for “moving over” might be to go beyond a tokenized treatment of a few autoethnographic texts, which only makes superficial gestures toward inclusivity. Ethnographic critics may need to read, teach and write about less-frequently treated authors and texts. It also could be ethically appropriate for ethnographic critics to remain current in terms of autoethnographic critical production. While the literature of the culture wars is still quite relevant after the turn of the 21st-Century, limiting ethnographic responses to texts that have an established and secure place in the accepted canon of multicultural (or “ethnic”) literature that has been (sometimes grudgingly) included in anthologies of American literature also limits the number of autoethnographic voices that are being considered in critical and pedagogical conversations. This is occasionally a perilous concern to bring into one's pedagogy. For example, if my own experiences in the last few years are representative, that academy, even at the turn of the 21st century, remains a hostile environment for the teaching of Native literature. Some of my students object to the “accusatory” and “intolerant” tone of Joseph Bruchac's “Ellis Island” when I introduce the poem in an unit on autobiography in my composition courses. One student evaluation of an introduction to fiction course I taught complained that the class required the reading of “too much Indian stuff,” when only a single novel and two short stories by Native

authors appeared on the course syllabus. In a special topics course for undergraduate English majors, a student who considers herself especially tolerant and receptive recently declared that “Indians are just wiser than other people. They understand how the land and stuff is all connected.”

Each of these varied and subtly racist responses is unsurprising given the marginal presence of Native voices on many university campuses, including my own—the University of Kansas. The notable exceptions to this generalization, of course, are those BIA-funded institutions that serve an exclusively Native student body—like Haskell Indian Nations University, which is located, like my home institution, in Lawrence, Kansas. In spite of this proximity, which one might expect to highlight Native Identities in the context of institutional politics, the University of Kansas recently pulled funding for a number of graduate students in their Indigenous Nations Studies program. There may be several reasons that these sorts of discursive and policy-oriented manifestations of hostility go largely unchecked. But I suspect one contributing factor is that a large percentage of post-secondary administrators and the American academy’s professoriate (even that which specializes in the study of Indigenous cultures) is non-Native. Additionally, the fact that Native students often have a marginal presence within higher education serves to exacerbate the inclusion of Native voices and perspectives in the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. In spite of the “multicultural” initiatives in many collegiate classrooms, the current university system maintains the marginal status of Native identity in many cases. Unfortunately, pedagogical and critical activism is not likely to change the facts emerging from demographic data (although the loss of funding for programs that might train Native American students to become Native American professors certainly further complicates the issue). Scholars and teachers can begin by approaching the task of speaking to a body of largely non-Native students carefully, by finding an ethical rhetorical space from which to speak to each other and to students about explicitly indigenous concerns by using literature as a vehicle for social justice.

In addition to working toward the further inclusion of autoethnographic texts, ethnographic critics could consider situating autoethnographies in appropriate intertextual relationships to one another. This

doesn't mean that comparative projects that treat ethnographic texts alongside autoethnographic ones are useless or inherently unethical, but such projects are not without their own set of risks. For example, Toni Morrison argues in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" that critical investigations of the intertextual relationships between "whitemale authors" and writers of color must navigate some insidious and harmful assumptions; she notes that some critics assume that African-American literature in particular "is imitative, excessive, sensational, mimetic (merely) and unintellectual, though very often 'moving,' 'passionate,' 'naturalistic,' 'realistic' or sociologically 'revealing'" (9). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa echoes this sentiment, noting that she addresses Anglo readers only incidentally in her autoethnography, because she believes that these readers are likely to be unprepared to accept the radical potential of her ideas. Certainly ethnographic criticism can avoid fulfilling these pessimistic expectations forwarded by autoethnographers by carefully negotiating the intertextual relationship between ethnographic and autoethnographic texts. Anzaldúa herself notes that "[i]nstead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color [. . .] whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way" (157), and some ethnographic critics have done just that. An exploration of a different set of strategies for conducting such a respectful exchange that shares knowledge in an ethical way is also quite desirable, but perhaps the issue of considering autoethnographic voices in autoethnographic contexts is a necessary precondition to developing those strategies.

One potentially fruitful way to situate autoethnographies within that context may be to enact a practice of "reading across" a body of texts that treat similar instances of collective identity and cultural trauma (Warrior 24). The practice of "reading across" autoethnographic texts that seek to represent the same cultural groups might avoid some of the potential problems that autoethnographic critics like Morrison and Anzaldúa address. "Reading across" autoethnographies could also allow ethnographic critics to see how the intertextual relationships between autoethnographic texts stage a kind of negotiation about collective identity and cultural trauma that results in a more nuanced understanding of the issues raised in particular kinds of representational identity politics. This kind of negotiation may be one

potential mechanism for drawing lines between ethnographic and autoethnographic subject positions. To render those kinds of brightlines by relying upon linguistic self-identification and shared cultural trauma calls for increased understandings of how collective identity is constructed and maintained through solidarity. Grouping narratives together along those same boundaries may provide a starting point for privileging autoethnographic voices in debates about identity politics that emerge from the literature. Ethnographic enactments of the kinds of “moving over” assumed by the paradigm of “reading across” autoethnographic depictions might extend the inclusive initiative to a greater number of autoethnographic texts, and thereby multiply the potential for effectively addressing the identity-based hierarchies that autoethnography exposes.

The context produced by autoethnographic criticism of autoethnographic texts makes an excellent starting point for ethical ethnographic critical inquiries. For example, to read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* by beginning with an examination of that primary text (and Morrison’s own contextualization of its rhetorical project) alongside critical work about that novel by Hortense Spillers may be to allow the theoretical precepts of psychoanalysis, an ethnographic theoretical paradigm, to be contextualized by an examination of cultural trauma that may produce an ethical response to the fiction. Such an endeavor may be more effective and ethical than to use Julia Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women* as a theoretical paradigm for criticism of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, as a hypothetical point of comparison. Gayatri Spivak famously critiqued this volume of Kristeva’s work, comprised of her observations about female identity during a three week-long trip to China. In a 1981 issue of *Yale French Studies*, Spivak noted examples of Kristeva’s “glib and superior tone,” which, according to Spivak, reveal Kristeva’s narrow and shallow understanding of the historical and cultural contexts that shape the women she observed. Kingston’s project is to destabilize stereotypes about Chinese-American women by adapting some principles of American second-wave feminism to more appropriately engage the transcultural experiences of those women, so, in Spivak’s estimation, Kristeva’s theoretical agenda may be at odds with Kingston’s autoethnographic purpose. This critical cross-examination of the ethnographic critic is just one

example of the perils of ethnography without appropriate context, which further demonstrates the applicability of “reading across.” By beginning a conversation about cultural trauma with an examination of the perspectives of the inheritors of that trauma’s history and consequences, ethnographic critics may be able to mitigate their reliance upon methods and theories that could colonize the autoethnographic text. Such a mitigation could minimize the risk of co-opting the autoethnography to reinforce hierarchies that privilege the ethnographer over the autoethnographer. Foregrounding autoethnographic criticism could have an important advantage. Such a foregrounding may allow critics who are culturally uninitiated to avoid what Helen Hoy calls “domesticating difference” (9) by framing it in terms that are relative to the dominant subject position. Such a critical approach requires the autoethnographer to work to acquire a body of knowledge (not just through academic research, but also through dialogue with autoethnographic scholars and social and political involvement with the communities those autoethnographies represent) to contextualize the autoethnographic perspective in appropriate ways.

Since “moving over” may mean that one should privilege the critical voices that respond autoethnographically, ethnographic critics should be aware that this strategy has risks too. There is, undeniably, a threshold of authenticity that critical interventions by scholars in marginalized positions may pass through that scholars in dominant positions cannot—Spivak’s profession of a closer understanding of the constraints to femininity in “South Asian” cultures seems to carry more critical weight than the solidarity between “European” and “South Asian” women Kristeva seeks to draw upon, for instance—but, “moving over” in a reductive way that means never responding through ethnographic criticism may result in more rhetorical space for autoethnographic criticism at the price of a smaller sum of critical responses. A smaller sum of responses serves to further marginalize the autoethnographic literature that garners that criticism. “Moving over,” then, if it requires a refusal of any ethnographic speech about the autoethnographic literature that does not come from within the cultural space described in that literary production, would become a strategy for ethical *dis*engagement, rather than ethical engagement (McKegney56). Furthermore, this disengagement through the refusal of any ethnographic

scholarly response does not necessarily avoid the potential injustice of silencing, distorting or ventriloquizing. To fail to study American autoethnographic literature may even risk complicity in the continued marginalization of that literature and the populations it discursively represents. The silencing of ethnographic scholarly responses results in a critical complicity in the suffering the populations depicted in that literature may endure, and maintains an exclusionary canon of U.S. literature that cannot accurately convey the complexities of a diasporic national identity. To refuse speech simply maintains the status quo of institutional privilege and systemic oppression that ethnographic criticism relies upon.

Ethnographic critics might be best served by maintaining an awareness of their outsider status when examining autoethnographic literature. The barrier between that insider/outsider dichotomy is often a difficult one to adjudicate, however. Sam McKegney notes that much recent critical work is “intensely self-reflexive about the position of the critic” (56). While self-reflexivity is certainly valuable, any tendency of ethnographic criticism to focus too much on a description of the ethnographer’s subject position, even if such a description is self-deprecating and seeks to undermine that dominant subjective position, may result in taking up rhetorical space that could be allocated to an analysis of the autoethnographic primary text and the intentions of the autoethnographer. Instead of foregrounding an admission of the pitfalls the ethnographic critic may face, an approach that is oriented on privileging autoethnographic perspectives works to destabilize any notion of identity-based privilege in the texts.

Autoethnographic critical perspectives and literary texts might work in tandem with ethnographic critical interventions to construct a confluent and dialogic relationship between representation and identity. By positing myriad perspectives and interpretative strategies the narratives produced in autoethnographic literary productions could aid those productions in the activist reorientation of the construction of collective identity, which may be essential for political action on the part of cosmopolitan readers of autoethnography. McKegney writes, “[s]tories influence the extratextual world, not straightforwardly and not transparently, but stories and critical discourses about stories do influence people’s lives” (87). For instance, when Gloria Anzaldúa argues that Chicano identity was forged when

Rudolfo Gonzales published “I am Joaquin” in 1967, she illustrates how a narrative of communal self-representation can forge a sense of shared culture from which autoethnographic collectivity can emerge (23). By attending to the way that autoethnographic criticism frames autoethnography—what representations are embraced, and which ones criticized—ethnographic critics may find an appropriate context to investigate these kinds of textual representations. This means that ethnographic critics might attend to autoethnographic voices to find an empathic route to making an ethical commitment to their own critical intervention in such textual representations. However, it is most important to note that empathy and ethics are often not enough; both sentiments can suffuse an ethnographic scholarly approach only so much. Even when ethnographic critics may have intellectual, or even personal and social, connections to the communities that are represented in their work, they may never be connected to those communities “with the same intensity as one whose day-to-day lived experiences” are similar to those that are represented in autoethnography. Although ethnographers should “endeavor to be as sensitive and respectful as [they are] able, [they] simply do not stand to inherit the adverse social impact [their] critical work might engender” (McKegney 58). This fact means that the critical responses of ethnographers function in a fundamentally different way from those of the autoethnographer.

Appropriate critical engagement may begin with the privileging of autoethnographic voices, but an imperative to privilege autoethnography ought not to mandate unquestioning assent to all autoethnographic claims. An appropriate ethnographic response not only acknowledges the limits of the ethnographic subject position to make strong claims to control autoethnographic representation, but also refuses to simply present those limits as the summation of ethnographic engagement. Ethical ethnographic criticism undertakes a responsibility to interpolate as much of the autoethnographic project as the writers and critics extend to the ethnographer *before* raising conjectures about autoethnographic claims. The privileging of the work of autoethnographers in ethnographic responses is not merely “a political gesture, but a sincere attempt to produce the most effective criticism” (McKegney 64). An uncritical acceptance of all autoethnographic work is clearly not a mechanism for producing the “most effective criticism.” It may

even amount to just one more strategy for dismissal because it's a cop-out—a refusal to engage, discuss or intervene. Ethnographic critics can try to stage their interventions as acts of respectful dialogue and ethical engagement.

Ethical ethnographic criticism implies an alliance of equals rather than a patronizing altruism given by the privileged to the oppressed. The best ethnographic criticism works with autoethnographic literature and criticism to achieve one of the most important goals of autoethnography—calling for social justice for a marginalized population. Critics can do this by attempting to elucidate the relationships between the forensic, epideictic and deliberative functions of autoethnographic texts (Nance 23-4).¹¹ If an autoethnographic text serves a forensic function, then it works to correct a discursive injustice by revising an incomplete historical narrative (Nance 22). This often means that autoethnography stages an exploration of the historical context that created necessary preconditions for collective trauma. The forensic purpose corrects a selectively constructed historical record by writing into the silences of the official history, as Hortense Spillers, for example, suggests Morrison does in *Beloved* (xi). For instance, the novel's inscription—"Sixty million and more"—calls attention to the sixty million documentable deaths of Africans on slaver's ships in the middle passage; since the titular character in the novel seems to recount some of those sixty million people's experiences during a first-person passage, Spillers argues that Morrison participates in a kind of automythographic construction of that historical moment from a perspective that went unrecorded by the slaver's who merely counted dead African bodies in their historiography (211). This forensic function demonstrates how autoethnographic narratives supplement incomplete and flawed historical accounts.

Second, ethnographic critics can determine if the fiction has epideictic value by examining the extent to which autoethnographic texts address a metropolitan audience and use affective narrative

¹¹ Kimberly Nance employs these three terms to define three different functions of autoethnography. Forensic narratives correct a flawed history; epideictic narratives position readers as judges of the events in the narrative by implicitly called for a moral evaluation of actions as either "noble" or "shameful." Deliberative narratives explicitly call for some extratextual action from readers that corrects or addresses the events the narrative frames. I'd argue that all autoethnographic texts are forensic, and that epideictic functions are necessary preconditions for deliberative ones.

strategies to pressure readers to “categorize” the events depicted “as noble or shameful” (Nance 23). The autoethnographer could apply this narrative pressure in an effort to suggest the making of a value judgment about the facts the forensic narratives in the same autoethnography might uncover for a cosmopolitan audience, who may be ignorant of (or worse, misinformed about) the historical events that are represented. Characterization in the texts encourages readerly empathy that moves beyond what Frederic Jameson rather insensitively termed a “national allegory” and into an exploration of the relationships between individual trauma and collective memory (316). To extend the example of Morrison’s *Beloved*, one might see the use of the Margaret Garner case—in which a woman murders her own children—as inspiration for Morrison’s autoethnographic fiction may work to position the readers of the novel as judges of that action. By carefully crafting representations of Schoolteacher’s (and his nephew’s) treatment of Sethe while she is enslaved at Sweet Home, Morrison incites readers to consider the sticky question of whether the infanticide was motivated by murderous rage or despairing mercy. In positing such a judgment, the readers use the new forensic content to make a determination about ethics according to a culturally relative paradigm.

Critics who are able to find in autoethnographic fiction both a forensic and an epideictic narrative could situate their own intervention in the realm of the deliberative reading of the autoethnography. The testimonial function of many autoethnographic projects ultimately culminates in a deliberative narrative that frames readers as “decision makers” who should “determine whether or not to undertake a future action” that addresses the traumatic representations the novel presents (Nance 23-4). This function could encourage shifts in the paradigm of representation of those perspectives unrecorded in official histories. For instance, the Toni Morrison Society’s “Bench by the Road Project” placed a physical memorial on Sullivan’s island to commemorate “those who survived the middle passage and those who didn’t;” the Society’s homepage says that this memorial works to “extend its mission” to contribute to the memorializing of significant moments in African American history. This sort of direct action is not the only kind of deliberation critics might posit, however. A shift in paradigm may address the issues that

affect the subjugated populaces against whom the consequences of the forensic errors and epideictic misjudgments are levied. Autoethnographic texts present a duality of content that precedes this deliberation because of the bifurcated audience addressed in autoethnographic texts. In speaking to an audience of readers that inhabit a similar subject position to that of the autoethnographer, the text may dramatize strategies for resistance or provide a consolidating impetus for collective identity and communal affirmation. Perhaps that rhetoric should be the exclusive purview of autoethnographic criticism. It is hard to imagine an ethical imperative for an ethnographic critic to proscribe behavior for readers who are members of the communities an autoethnographer depicts; such a project seems doomed to be paternalistic and condescending at best, and malevolent and oppressive at worst.

What ethnographic critics might appropriately address is the communication between the autoethnographer and his or her cosmopolitan audience. That communication is often deliberative, at least on an implicit level. One important task of ethnographic criticism may be to clarify avenues of ethical response for readers who may not have access to that solidarity through communal affirmation and the formation of a collective identity with the autoethnographer. These responses may lead to direct action on the part of those cosmopolitan readers, but these responses are most likely to be ideological. An ideological response could cause readers to be self-reflexive and to participate in the Bakhtinian processes of empathy and exotopy in positioning themselves in relation to autoethnographic texts (and the forensic issues and epideictic questions raised by those texts) (Nance 68). The first part of this process, empathy, encourages readers to identify with the depictions of cultural trauma, and with the author, and his or her characters who suffer from traumatic experiences, as manifest in the literary work. Empathy is intended to simulate for the cosmopolitan reader the affect of solidarity, but this simulation must be disrupted to fully function. The second response, exotopy, reminds the readers that such an identification is, in many ways, impossible by causing them to retreat into their own subject positions. This impossibility is often illustrated by writers' reflections on the complicity of the dominant culture in creating the conditions of inequality that produce the traumatic conditions depicted in the autoethnographic narration (Wyatt 12).

This illustration is important if an ethical distance between the ethnographer and the autoethnography is to be maintained. The risk of over empathizing is a collapsing of cultural trauma into personal trauma, which may lead ethnographers to miss the importance of the cultural story that contextualizes the personal one in the literary text. After illustrating how the interplay of these subject positions sets up a hierarchy, which the autoethnography critiques, ethnographic critics might begin by presenting some specific actions that cosmopolitan readers can take to respond to the autoethnographic call for deliberation. This may be an important step in completing the “hard work” Appiah calls for in terms of generating a “multiculturalism that accepts America's diversity while teaching each of us the ways and the worth of others.”

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Chapter 2:

Who's/Whose Writing?: Considering Intentionality, Ethics and Ethnography in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*

I hoped that if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make
your way.

—Toni Morrison (*A Mercy* 163)

Black people had been cast outside of the circle of goodwill for
hundreds of years. [. . .] Many of them, like women who lived in
cultures that despised and willfully obliterated the feminine, would
never experience the connection to earth and humanity that was their
birthright

—Alice Walker (*Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* 204)

Evidence that a powerful and widespread human response can be
engaged by textual situations and even by explicitly fictional ones [. . .]
offers both experimental support and theoretical explanation for a link
between literature and the rest of life.

—Kimberly Nance (*Can Literature Promote Justice?* 17)

The achievement of forensic, epideictic and deliberative goals is often the intent of the
autoethnographic endeavor, and since that achievement is only possible if autoethnography has a
transformative effect upon its readers, it seems important to carefully consider readers' relationships with
the autoethnographic fiction (and with the autoethnographer).¹² I hope to explore this relationship in order

¹² Here, as outlined in the first chapter, I mean to suggest that testimonial fiction has three primary functions. First, it works as forensic autoethnography to correct or augment the historiography surrounding cultural trauma from the perspective of those who are traumatized. Second, the fiction places readers in a rhetorical position to evaluate the morality and ethicality of the historiographic depiction. Finally, textual representations of the collective identity and

to reveal potential methods for literary study resulting in greater acceptance and understanding across diverse identities. Forensic, epideictic and deliberative impetuses work with the dual audience of autoethnographic fiction works to demonstrate how, in praxis, audiences may ethically approach autoethnographic texts. An ethical approach may be especially difficult for readers who seek to interpret testimonial novels by writers with whom they do not share a collective identity based on racial, ethnic, national, gendered or sexual differences. In this chapter, I hope to use an analysis of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2006) to show how ceding textual authority to authorial intentionality may prove a potent mechanism for cross-cultural interpretation without colonization. By first investigating how the authors frame their novels—both in the extratextual discussions of their intentions and processes and the implicit claims in the fiction itself—readers who do not share cultural allegiances with Morrison and Walker may still intervene in their testimonial projects through analysis of the novels as literatures of witness.

Because Morrison and Walker write from a specific subject position both as authorial figures generating fiction and as narrating subjects portrayed through characters within that fiction, their works can be understood through the lens of autoethnography. In both novels I'll treat in this chapter the authors dramatize first-person accounts of trauma visited upon African American bodies. Morrison and Walker have discussed their identities as African American women shape their fiction, and their modes of representing their own identities in interviews and critical expository prose reflect the ways in which their fictionalized testimonies work to fulfill the threefold purpose of autoethnography. As Morrison's and Walker's female African American characters present their stories, those characters, like their authors, work to augment a dominant discourse. Their individual accounts also call readers' attention to the moral and ethical implications of the historiographic record those accounts augment, and they implicitly call for deliberation on appropriate ways to memorialize and correct the atrocities to which the characters bear witness. In crafting fiction that fulfills this tripartite purpose, Morrison and Walker address their fiction to

cultural trauma work to push readers to deliberate about possible modes of redress that take some action based upon the epideictic judgment for which the text calls.

a dual audience; the novels speak both to African American women seeking their own places in American history and to an audience of outsiders who read over the shoulders of those women to confront the consequences of unethical ethnographic practices and to consider their complicity in the systemic traumas visited upon the autoethnographic subjects of the fiction.

In considering how Morrison and Walker relate to their dual audience, one question seems especially important to consider when evaluating the ethics of interpretation: What types of reading and writing are likeliest to create the potential for a transformative reading experience for both insiders and outsiders who come to the autoethnographic fiction to hear, evaluate and deliberate upon the testimony? It is certain that no singular answer to this question will emerge that can produce a simple formula for ethical criticism, pedagogy or creative writing. Nothing formulaic can insure optimal didactic results for autoethnographic endeavors. However, a theoretical framework that examines some possible answers and proposes their applications in particular situations may begin to consider how autoethnographic texts may operate as vehicles for social justice. This use of testimonial fiction can be transformative within the realm of literary criticism *and* within the contemporary language arts classroom. As the preceding chapter illustrates, existing theoretical paradigms provide some of these possible answers, and examining those paradigms more closely may guide some of the requisite textual applications of literary theory. For instance, pragmatic applications of reader-response theory and reception literary analyses (which take individual readers' emotive reactions to the texts and a body of published reviews, respectively, as their primary subjects of analysis) might reveal some important nuances of that relationship between author and reader, particularly as far as these applications could illuminate the readerly aspects of the texts. Hence, the analysis that follows includes close-readings of both novels alongside analyses of Walker's and Morrison's own writings on the subject of identity in order to construct authorial intentionality. However, readers' responses and published reviews of the novels will also inform my exploration of the audience's role in the autoethnographic functions of the texts in the last half of this chapter. It is to be hoped that the confluence of these two issues provides insight into how identity politics shapes not just

the writing of literatures of witness but also the personal and critical responses to that literature. Finally, because no testimonial endeavor is purely autoethnographic, I will explore the ways in which Walker and Morrison craft depictions of indigenous identity as they explore the complex construction of African American women's cultures alongside some characterizations of Indigeneity that can only be described as ethnographic. Investigating the authors' intentions to speak for groups they are identified with and about groups from whom they have important identity-based differences reveals some of the mechanisms that Morrison and Walker present with which to build coalitions between different ethnic groups. By beginning and ending with two related questions about the didactic intent of the authors, I hope to pull, from the fiction, a modified model for cross-ethnic coalitions for social justice.

By its very nature, autoethnographic fiction pushes back against some of prevailing modes of thought about authorial intentionality. Because post-structural theories invalidate authorial intent in favor of a living text that is mutable in every transient moment of reading, it may be unpopular, at the turn of the 21st-Century to suggest that starting with the author's own rhetorical framing of her works is both necessary and ethical. However, to begin with analyses of interviews with, and expository prose by, autoethnographic authors and critics might provide insight into the author-reader relationships in some fictional narratives that espouse a testimonial purpose. Doing so flies in the face of much post-1960 literary theory, but such a departure from the divorce of the author's intentions from the textual effects on readers may permit critics to draw a more complete set of conclusions about the success of autoethnographic functions in particular reading situations. For instance, if one is to apply Pratt's conception of "autoethnography" to some of the recent fiction written by Walker and Morrison, one may do well to begin with the authors' own explanations of writerly processes and intentions. Such a beginning presents the authors' determinations about the scope of the "speaking for" and "speaking to" that her novel participates in as autoethnography. Authorial perspectives may prove essential for critical understandings of the author-reader relationships crafted during the writing and reading of texts. Authorial explanations of why, how and to whom authors envision themselves writing serves the same

autoethnographic impulse that autoethnographic fiction does. These authorial explanations clarify avenues the authors chose to pursue in crafting potentially transformative narratives that participate in forensic, epideictic and deliberative processes.

Authorial Intentionality and Autoethnographic Fiction

It was my desire to read a book [. . .] that had its own aesthetic integrity. I didn't phrase it that way. What I thought I was that I would like to write a book that didn't try to explain everything to white people or take its point of departure that I was addressing white people, that the audience for it would be somebody like me. [. . .] That was the impetus for writing it, because I had read a lot of very powerful black literature by men, but I had the feeling that they were not talking to me. They were talking about somebody else. It was not for my enlightenment.

—Toni Morrison to Donald Suggs, on how she developed her “own literary values” while working on *The Bluest Eye* (1971)

In my own life I'm part of a circle of women. And I think that all of us could definitely grieve and let each other grieve sufficiently. [. . .] I think people have to create their own temples. They have to create their own circles. I feel that writing a community is crucial. [. . .] Many of my stories are a memorial to those [women] who are ignored. [. . .] I write out of a sense of those women. Out of a sense of injustice.

—Alice Walker to Clarissa Pinkola Estés, on writing for female ancestors

Identity—particularly racial and gendered identity—are central to both Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's explanations of their intentions and processes in producing their novels. In examining Walker's and Morrison's expository writing about their fictional writing, certain similarities emerge that

situate their recent fictional works in a dialogue about the functions of autoethnography. At the most basic level, both writers work to imbue their texts with a uniquely female African American perspective that they perceive is absent from the body of fiction into which they write. For instance, both Walker and Morrison have been quoted saying that they set out to write the books they'd like to read. The very nature of a forensic narrative is that it is a story the autoethnographer feels ought to be, but has not been, told, so this statement is an affirmation of the forensic power of the literature both women produce. As Morrison and Walker craft forensic narratives they supplement the historiographic record and the literary canon that they find lacking. This supplementation works to fill that lack for other readers in their subject positions who may perceive it as well. Their work also reveals the absence of their perspectives to outsider readers who may have been ignorant of the historical or canonical lacunae.

In writing the books they wish to read, the authors undertake an autoethnographic challenge. Walker even further explains the complications of such a challenge when she notes that “to write the books one wants to read is both to point the direction of vision and, at the same time, to follow it” (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 9). To both indicate direction and follow directional indicators requires authors to occupy a two-fold perspective—they are simultaneously writing and reading. In much autoethnography, the spaces of the leader and follower (or the writer and the reader) are occupied concurrently by writing subjects who write the books they'd like to read. This unification of perspectives is evident in Pratt's model of the complications of an autoethnographer's subjectivity. Pratt articulates that the writing of autoethnography requires a style and form conducive to the projection of a single consciousness into a narrative format, which communicates effectively with two categorically delineated (and usually oppositionally situated) group identities—insiders (who are *like* the autoethnographer) and outsiders (who are *different* from the autoethnographer). Morrison and Walker, as they write the books they'd like to read, transform their personal experiences of identity-based differences into fiction that incorporates their own preferences as readers. Those experiences inform the taste of each novelist, and those tastes work in tandem with the didactic intent of autoethnography. In crafting fiction through that

unified subjectivity, the autoethnographer must consider where and how she wishes to lead those who read her work into the politicized message. That message, remember, is formulated for dual audiences. The writing subject who speaks from her own experience is at once individual—particular, specific and limited—and collective—general, aspecific and expansive. The autoethnographic novelist must simultaneously occupy her own personalized rhetorical space and craft a larger collectively-constructed position from which to speak for those in the group she envisions herself as representing. She speaks *for* that group constructed through solidarity around the cultural trauma to which she testifies, and she speaks *to* the group outside the limits of that solidarity (including those who may have been complicit in perpetuating that trauma). This speaking for and speaking to have a performative quality. The symbolic action is not merely discursive, but has real effects obtained through the autoethnographic functions.

Both Walker and Morrison use their recent work to accomplish this sort of performative speech. There are a few ways in which Walker and Morrison work to craft paradoxically personalized (and therefore private) and politicized (and therefore public) spaces from which to write these autoethnographic novels. Walker and Morrison make appeals to solidarity within and across collective identity structures. These implicit appeals usually call for readerly transformation. Each novelist uses narrative to construct a collective identity to be embodied by particular and individuated characters in specific situations. For example, Walker's novel uses a third-person limited omniscient narrator to present a plot that deviates from linear temporality. Readers follow Kate Talkingtree and her lover Yolo around the globe as they search for meaning in their lives and try to salvage their failing romance. But this journey, even though it crosses space, seems to be more focused upon the movement of time. Each chapter moves back and forth from the narrative present of the lovers' journeys to a past that is both personally and collectively presented. Kate must consider how her enslaved ancestors were separated from their loved ones and reminisce about her failed marriages before she can fully weigh her feelings for Yolo. Morrison's narrative remains in a single temporal space—the colonial period before North American colonies were united under the moniker “America”—but her use of polyphonic narration to

investigate how women, Native Americans and people of Afro-Caribbean descent are subjugated and destroyed by colonial power makes each individuated narrative voice part of a symphonic movement that protests collective trauma. Each novelist begins with a personal trauma—Kate’s experiences of marital rape or Floren’s separation from her mother—and sets it in the context of a collective experience that is tied to identity politics as the novels move toward their respective denouements. However, those personal traumas that are rendered in the texts draw from very real touchstones for solidarity in terms of constructing collectivized identities through shared trauma. The recurrent theme of the rape of women of color in Walker’s novel is contextualized by calling attention to a cultural oversexualization of the black female body, and Kate’s white husband’s assault against his wife is represented as a symptom of patriarchal control. The marital rape is linked to other African American women’s experiences with sexual assault by white men, as well as incest by disenfranchised African American men, in the text. Likewise, Florens’s motherloss is clearly rendered as a result of her enslavement and her subsequent inability to develop an attachment to a new maternal figure is indicative not just of her own psychic wounds, but also of those visited upon untold millions of black women and girls whose families were fractured by the slave trade in North America before abolition in the late 19th-Century. Many of the personal traumas in the novels are linked to these collective ones, but both novelists rely upon a forensic redrafting of history that the author must transmit textually with great verisimilitude to her readers. This verisimilitude is achieved through a reliance upon a fictional approach that works with the historiography that the forensic portions of each work augment.

Walker uses a radical forensic revision of American history as a cohering theme in her fiction. Walker’s reliance upon a sense of historical continuity is also clearly expressed in her nonfictional, expository prose about African American women's fiction. By calling upon a shared history for African American women as literary subjects (rather than simply objects for Anglo American or masculine authors to represent) Walker's essays on writing situate her own autoethnographic fiction in a tradition founded on collectivization through solidarity with other African American women writers. For example,

in an essay on the influence of Zora Neale Hurston's work upon her own, Walker recalls taking a class in African American literature from Margaret Walker at Jackson State College. She remembers that "the class was studying the 'giants' of black literature: Chesnutt, Toomer, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, with the hope of reaching LeRoi Jones very soon." In this class, she first heard Hurston's name among a short list of Black women writers who were not studied in the course, but rather "appended, like verbal footnotes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them" on the actual reading schedule for the course (*In Search of* [. . .] 85). In spite of the absence of a pedagogically reinforced canon of Black women writers, Walker sought out Hurston's works, even though they weren't assigned, and when she began to write creatively she used Hurston's fictional corpus as "belatedly discovered models" for personal and collective expression (*In Search of* [. . .] 13).

By predicating her own work on these earlier models, Walker seems to indicate an organic connection between female African American authors that constructs a historically mediated autoethnographic collectivity. In reading Hurston, a female African American author, Walker finds herself called to authorship; it is as if the autoethnographic project is at once a reaping and a sowing. Hurston's work bears fruit in the form of Walker as a reader (an audience that Hurston, like Morrison in this section's epigraph, may only have imagined since no one in the publishing industry assumed it existed). Walker herself plants her own creative seeds as she identifies as a writer and an African American woman with what Hurston has written. Solidarity is formed through shared personal and cultural experiences, but also through the act of creation. It's as if writing the books one wishes to read calls into being those, who like oneself, wish to read them, and, further, introduces the possibility that those readers, too, might write. This function is unique to insider communication through autoethnography. Walker did not entertain these thoughts when reading the works of the 'giants' at Jackson State. Neither does Walker, for instance, discuss how reading Edith Wharton, another female novelist, allowed her to find her voice. What made Hurston's work so important was the way in which it disavowed her of her notion that "only men wrote literature" and her experience when reading *Their Eyes*

Were Watching God that “it was so true to [her] culture” in ways that works by white women and black men were not (Ferris 7). Additionally, by writing autobiographically about her own experience discovering Hurston, Walker documents the connection between her individual transformation (into a writer herself) with a cultural transformation (African American women as *authorized* speakers and writers). This documentation allows Walker, once again, to perform for those reading the expository prose she writes, as writer/leader and reader/follower. Walker invites her own readers to discover Hurston and to join a collective sense of identity in doing so. The tracing of the history of any collectively identified group seems essential to Walker’s deployment of history in her work. That tracing is the origin of the novels’ verisimilitude.

Morrison also spends much time researching and integrating historical context into her own writing—both fictional and nonfictional—to generate a plausibility that may engross and persuade readers. Her meticulous attention to the historicization of her own prose may serve a similar function to Walker’s focus upon ancestry and inheritance in her work. Morrison’s in-depth historical research is evident in the novels and in her interviews about the genesis of those novels. From the Sundown towns of central Oklahoma in the antebellum period in *Paradise*, to the narrative of Margaret Garner as an Ur-Sethe in *Beloved*, the situational and contextual details of setting, character and plot are distilled from Morrison’s sense of need to depict African American culture and geography with verisimilitude that represents an ‘authentic’ cultural history as closely as is possible. *A Mercy* is perhaps an even better example of how historical detail can assist in the effectiveness of the forensic and epideictic functions of autoethnographic fiction than these earlier texts. The novel explores the era in which African ancestry becomes firmly attached to slavery in the New World, and therefore the novel stages an interrogation of racial hierarchies that emerge out of the American slave trade at an incipient moment. White indentured servants express feelings of racial hostility and free Black men have status that exceeds that of white women. This isn’t Harriet Beecher Stowe’s critique of slavery as an institution; the issues are distinct and the didactic methods are more nuanced. In *A Mercy* Morrison seems to implicitly ask readers how the

assumption of racial inferiority may have been taken for granted in the dominant history and seems to encourage a deliberation about how that assumption may have been formed. In an interview with National Public Radio Morrison points out that “[t]he notion was that there was a difference between black slaves and white slaves, but there wasn't” at the time in which the novel is set (para 3). She uses the verisimilitude of the narrative in *A Mercy* to ask readers to consider what exactly initiates the racial ideology of American history.

However, by its very nature verisimilitude is a semblance of truth and solidarity with a literary tradition is a platform upon which mimesis—or modeling to use Walker's phrasing—is built. Exploring how truth (and its skillful imitation) may work upon the dual audiences addressed in autoethnographic fiction seems to privilege readers who are accustomed to Western tradition where verisimilitude is at a premium in literary fiction. Non-western discourses may embrace the weaving of the fantastical with the realistic (e.g. ‘traditional’ Bantu stories, Yoruban folklore, and South American magical realism), so readers who are not situated in solidarity with that Western tradition may not put such value on the realistic crafting of history. Morrison expresses clear anxieties about influence in her scholarly treatments of African American literature; she explicitly interrogates the assumptions that African American literature is “imitative, excessive, sensational, mimetic (merely) and unintellectual, though very often ‘moving,’ ‘passionate,’ ‘naturalistic,’ ‘realistic’ or sociologically ‘revealing’” (“Unspeakable Things [. . .] 9). It is difficult for critics and reviewers to assess any literary tradition without making some of these assumptions. As Morrison points out, these assumptions are evidence of latent racial ideologies, and those ideologies are designed to demean the product of artistic endeavors outside the metropolitan mainstream to which autoethnography responds and is partially addressed. Hence, a failure to produce a historiographic narrative that provides forensic correction with appropriate verisimilitude may be a choice rather than a real failure.¹³

¹³ This seems especially important to consider when examining Walker’s work. As I’ll discuss later, critics and reviewers have expressed frustrations with Walker’s failure to make her narratives ‘believable’ and that may be evidence of poor autoethnographic choices or of reviewers’ reliance on Western norms to make their evaluations.

In their autoethnographic and artistic pursuits sometimes both Walker and Morrison may seem to complete a fair amount of this assembling and miming. For instance, both writers employ dialect in ways that allow readers to discern characters voices and origins. Florens's mother's stilted English indeed could be read as an indictment of the character's intellect or a touch of verisimilitude that makes her removal from Barbados seem 'believable.' The same is probably true of Walker's use of 'bradda-man' Hawa'iian dialect in Yolo's interactions with indigenous Polynesian peoples. However, the ways the novels may build upon a larger literary tradition seems to have a qualitative distinction from simply miming the dominant rhetorical discourses or assembling a cast of ridiculous ethnic rustics for the amusement of metropolitan rustics. Both Walker and Morrison take an active role in mediating and intervening in the textual presence of the collectivity for which they write. This is to say that solidarity and identity of any identity-based collectivity are generated or reified by autoethnographic prose. I will argue, in my analysis of *A Mercy* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, as I will continue to claim throughout *all* the chapters that follow, that appeals to solidarity and collectivity undergird the functions of the fictional work that autoethnographic writers complete; some of the affect and craft of those appeals is a product of the mimetic and assemblative process by which the text is constructed. This observation is, of course, not unique to autoethnographic fiction, but is a common trait shared by all fictional productions to one extent or another.

Ethnic Authenticity and Epideictic Autoethnography

I was very much into my community but at the same time I had this sense of almost always knowing I was observing it. I will always draw on my background because it was so rich, and I always recognized it as being rich. [. . .] I live in a culture where storytelling is routine, where memory is long and rich. I was born into this family where everybody told stories, and it was my function to make some sense out of it all, to

write it down and present it. It's not just me knowing; it's what they've let me know.

–Alice Walker to William R. Ferris, on being labeled a Southern Writer

[K]nowing only race you don't know anything. I don't know anything about another black person when I first meet them. Can they become my best friend? Are they going to hurt me? You don't know anything. No one does. But it's *the* most important information. Now *that* is symbolism.

–Toni Morrison to Jennifer Hoofard, on the social construction of racial solidarity

In an interview with Salman Rushdie following the publication of her novel *Jazz*, Morrison herself noted that “[e]ven though one’s working for a kind of freedom and escape [. . .] one has to accept the fact that art is contrivance” (qtd. in Denard 52). Rushdie agrees with Morrison’s note about an author’s work and even goes so far as to argue that the text of a novel is a kind of script and the writer, as much as the narrator, performs it—“the performer is also the creator” (53). To which Morrison responds, simply, “Exactly.” The autoethnographic fiction here becomes performative—a text that *does* as it *is*, and *is* as it *does*—and through this performative feature texts may achieve the epideictic and deliberative ends that autoethnography works toward. In fact, transformative reading is only plausible if one accepts the radical claim that narrative can have some agency—that texts sometimes act upon their readers. The socio-political functions of such two-fold doing-and-being permits this performative function, with regard to autoethnography, and mirrors the aforementioned duality in perspective that collapses groups into individuals, writers into readers and leaders into followers. That complicated nexus of identity is a necessary precondition for transformative reading practices. In such a transformative moment of literary analysis, the singular becomes the plural, the specific becomes the general and the personal becomes the

political; that transformative moment may be fleeting, but it may also be a mechanism for communicating across difference to garner acceptance and to increase readerly evaluations of diversity.

Unfortunately, that transformation, no matter the quality of the narrative, is never guaranteed. Furthermore, the nature of any prediction about readers' perspectives is precarious; there is always a risk in autoethnographic fiction that the performance within the text may overwhelm the truth of the extratextual histories and experiences that the verisimilitude of the performance is predicated upon. Additionally, the subjective nature of readers' responses to every textual performance may indicate that singular truth, even unconstructed by fiction or narrative, is impossible, or, at very least, quite difficult, to communicate across categorical differences in subject position. The risk of readerly misinterpretation of the testimony that the autoethnographic text delivers may, in some cases, mitigate the success of the autoethnographic endeavor for the writer and the readers. That risk certainly constrains the nature of ethnographic critical commentaries in both scholarly and pedagogical discourses about those narratives.

Multicultural Traditions and Ethical Imperatives

In this civilization of black people [. . .] everything was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled. There is this production of a new, capitalistic, modern American black, which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. [. . .] I think there is a danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past.

—Toni Morrison to Charles Ruas, on the loss of pre-modern African American communities

I think that wealthy white people would like to have a country that resembles the Fifties, when all the minorities were tucked away in ghettos and paid in very low wages, but on the surface it was very bright

and shiny and free and the rest of the world would look on it longingly. They see the country becoming more and more multi-ethnic and multi-colored and I think that is quite frightening to them. [. . .] I think there is a sense of being forced at this time to look at America's really large shadow and that's not all that bad. I don't despair.

—Alice Walker to Duncan Campbell, on what multiculturalism means after the Civil Rights Era

Considering what strategies might minimize the risk of misinterpretation requires an exploration of the relationship between postmodern literary styles in contrast with modernist and traditional forms of fiction writing. Both Morrison and Walker (and their critics) have explored this relationship in their non-fiction, which seems important to consider when interpreting the novels. Morrison, in particular, has resisted the categorization of her writing as "postmodern" or "modern" and objects to comparisons with canonical writers who produce ethnographic fiction about American history; she reiterates in interviews that in spite of critical pairing of her work with his, she is "not *like* Faulkner" and that any supposedly "neutral" (i.e.—devoid of identity politics) criteria for such comparisons only produces critical methods that are "designed and constituted to elevate and maintain hegemony" and will result in scholarship that "judges the work solely in terms of its [ability to meet] Eurocentric criteria" (McKay 152). Walker has entirely eschewed the need for any such a taxonomy of literature, based on periodization, stylistic movement or comparative analyses with canonized texts—"if the work is good, what does it matter?" (*In Search of* [. . .] 45).

In her acclaimed monograph, *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that the context of American literature supercedes subgeneric or movement-based criteria because racial difference is so foundational to the American literary imagination, and concerns about authorial identity overwhelm stylistic or periodic divisions. She argues that authors who are

[L]iving in a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer. When this world view is taken seriously as agency, the literature produced within and without it offers an unprecedented opportunity to comprehend the resilience and gravity, the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act. (*Playing in the Dark* xiii)

The paradox of literature as an imaginative act that is both inadequate and forceful is perhaps what makes novels appropriate vehicles for the negotiation of identity politics within the system of cultural identification for a society that is paradoxically defined and constrained by a deep-seated anxiety about difference. Some critics, like Linda Hutcheon, work to recuperate categories like postmodern (to which Morrison objects) in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of their political uses. While the intention of such recuperative theoretical endeavors is laudable, good intentions are often not sufficient to promote the autoethnographic position of particular texts and authors. Hard historical truths—like those rights abuses and inequities that are concealed in what Walker called “America’s long shadow”—and earlier strategies for maintaining cultural continuity—like the black civilization Morrison sees as dismantled and unreplaced in contemporary culture—are less likely to be preserved in ethnographic writing than in autoethnographic writing. However, such textual acts of preservation should be as central to the works of ethical ethnographers as to the works of autoethnographers. This fact means that metropolitan critics of autoethnography must be exceptionally careful in crafting their responses to testimonial fiction.

There is always a danger of unethical intervention when metropolitan critics argue against the claims of autoethnographic authors. The danger is especially high if the critical project within which that argument is situated seeks to reveal the potential for fulfilling forensic, epideictic and deliberative functions within those authors' autoethnographic novels. Criticism that doesn't reiterate or reinforce authorial perspectives may colonize testimonial fiction. This kind of criticism seems to insist that

someone outside the boundaries of collectivity and solidarity will write more accurately or compellingly for or about those who hold those collective identities. To speak for, or to write about, African American women's experiences, particularly for critics who aren't African American women, risks a number of potentially unethical assumptions about those women's subject positions. Each of those assumptions may have the result of silencing, distorting and ventriloquizing the voices of the women about whom the authors write, and in the case of ethnographic criticism, the voices of the authors about whom the criticism speaks. As Diane Elam notes, however benign the critical intervention of ethnographic scholars may be, critics "cannot always determine in advance whether [. . .] the act of speaking out will have done justice to the other. No preexisting rule can guide our interventions in actual controversies" (234).

Are there only two ethical options left to ethnographic critics—either to ignore autoethnography or to unquestioningly agree with autoethnographic authors and critics? Not necessarily, although it is certainly easier and less risky to accept authorial claims about intention at face value when dealing with autoethnography. Doing so does not always produce the most practical method for literary analysis. Furthermore, authors are occasionally inconsistent when discussing their complex ideas about the functions of literature. For instance, when speaking with Nellie McKay, Morrison protests against any suggestion that she borrows from a metropolitan literary tradition, but she also argues that racial difference is ubiquitously projected into American literature in ways that reflect a hierarchy set by that metropolitan tradition. Does she manage to craft narratives that interrogate that hierarchy without borrowing from its forms or subject matter? However, Morrison later tells Rushdie that her own work is, at least to some extent, "contrived," like all art. Morrison seems to insist upon an impermeable boundary between ethnographic writing (like Faulkner's) and autoethnographic writing (like her own) in the discussion with McKay, but she articulates that the construction of race might transcend boundaries between periods and stylistic movements when speaking to Rushdie. Her conflicting claims come to differing conclusions about the potential of texts to be performative.

Does Morrison mean that all African American women have access to the same sorts of literary performance so that their writing can be read with consistent results by all readers with whom that sense of identity-based solidarity is shared? If so, her explication of her own work would seem to explicitly bar cross-cultural communication, which, according to Pratt, would necessarily limit the potential of her autoethnography to work toward social justice through deliberation. It would also seem to argue that all people who share one aspect of their identity—in this case ethnicity and gender—would share a single subject position. Such an argument implicitly overlooks other sorts of categorical differences like class, sexual orientation, and regional origin. That conception of identity through solidarity would seem to violate the ethical principles that Appiah calls for when he suggests that fiction participates in “the hard work of a multiculturalism that accepts America's diversity while teaching each of us the ways and the worth of others” (“Race, Pluralism and Afrocentricity” 118). If this is not Morrison’s true intent, but rather my ethnographic misinterpretation of her words, then what does she mean to suggest about the role of ethnic and gender solidarity in her work? Does she propose that ethnographic writers cannot contribute viable insight or reliable representations to textually conducted dialogues about difference that are so central to all American literature? If that is the case, then any response I might posit to her intentions seems to colonize the rhetorical space she claims in stating them. Hence, in answering any of these questions about authorial intentionality, critics would risk speaking for Morrison as they seek to more fully understand the nuances of her theories about literature and identity.

However, even ceding authority to authorial perspectives cannot free critics from the danger of unethical intervention in texts. On the other hand, to write only about authors and narratives that one feels solidarity with is not an ethical option. Doing so simply disengages with the work that autoethnographic writers do. To refuse any speech about those with whom I do not collectively identify, or to participate in scholarship limited to affirmation, does not encourage an ethical reading practice that might illuminate the epideictic and deliberative impetus with Morrison and Walker imbue their fiction. It is another version of ignoring the other; ethical disengagement is, in this way, as problematic as unethical

ethnography—both critical strategies can result in the erasure of the autoethnographic subject. If African American women writers are to be the subjects of criticism by non-African American or non-female critics who wish to avoid this erasure, a tentative and difficult method may be more productive than ethical disengagement, which is presented in Elam's work as a "low-risk" option. In any case, the "low-risk" option may present its own problems. Linda Alcoff argues:

there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which my words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to demarcate decisively a boundary between my location and all others [. . .] The declaration that 'I speak only for myself' has the sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others; it cannot literally erase those effects (108).

For non-African American, non-female scholars to fail to speak and write for or about African American women's autoethnographic depictions of systemic oppression may serve only to maintain silence about the history and consequences of that oppression. Such silence surely contributes to the continued suffering that African American women (especially those living outside texts) may endure at the hands of institutions of privilege and oppression from which non-African Americans (particularly if they are identified in solidarity with a dominant metropolitan group) will clearly benefit.

The category of "American Literature," as a traditional canonical construction, has often depended on the displacement of Americans of color as a condition for considering the incipience of an Anglo-American literary tradition. That category is, therefore, always already multicultural, if not the ethical multiculturalist corpus that Appiah envisions. One might argue that all scholars dealing with the literatures of North America participate in the kind of avoidance that Alcoff describes *if* they refuse to carefully consider issues of race and gender when examining the cultural production of female African American authors in their critical work. Such a refusal is not, after all, an ethical disengagement, so much as it is a reliance upon keeping the unspeakable horrors in the American history unspoken, to paraphrase

Morrison. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison rather famously refers to such a refusal as American Africanism. Morrison indicates that every traditionally canonized (read: Anglo, heterosexual and male) American author is obsessed with the specter of the "dark other" to such an extent that representations of "whitepeople are marked by their oppositional relationship to the construction of the Black American" (ix). This American Africanism is perhaps the best example of an unethical ethnographic endeavor.

The interpretations of the American canon that Morrison uses to illustrate the pervasiveness of American Africanism reveal the ideologically motivated racism that surges within the collective American psyche. According to Morrison, even when African American people are not represented at all in a work of fiction or verse, the binary relationship of literary race relations almost always implies a comparison between dark and light as an ethnographic, phenotypical justification for fear and loathing. If I insist that American-identified methods of decoding signficatory acts (such as the reading of novels) committed by African American subjects are the only way to understand such acts, then I necessarily maintain the ethnic difference that is marked by the omission of 'universal' modes of analysis. On the other hand, if I reject such an insistence and try to appropriate and deploy autoethnographic methodologies, then I have stepped into rhetorical space that rightly belongs to those who committed the signficatory act. In every case I may find my position has its own perils. Because the fact of colonial domination and the centuries-long legacy of American slavery still echoes through race relations in contemporary America, any suggestion that acculturating forces may not have caused some amount of cultural contagion after the diasporic proliferation of Afro-Caribbean-descended peoples throughout North America would be shortsighted and revisionist. This means that both Euro-American traditions and African American traditions are, to some extent, relevant to the production and analysis of autoethnographic texts produced in a 21st-Century American context.

According to Morrison, racializing, and indeed racist, ideology of American literature can only be challenged through the self-representation of black writers and critics, who dedicate themselves to destabilizing America's myths about whiteness and neutrality. Morrison further indicates that African

American writers, often like their African American readerships, have disparate approaches to, and expectations of, literary expression. There is as much variance within categories of identity as there may be between those categories. The varied approaches to African American women's autethnography are, at least to some small extent, shaped by constructions of racial identity in an uniquely American context.

Alice Walker makes just such an argument when she writes that

for the most part, white American writers tended to end their books and their characters' lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle. The gloom of defeat is thick. By comparison, black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. (*In Search of Our* [. . .] 5)

While there are notable exceptions to this descriptive distinction (Morrison's own *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, closes with a reflection of the hopeless situation of a pathologically abjectified Pecola Breedlove), the support for the generalization seems to point to a similar kind of constructivist understanding of race. Walker's construction of literary difference seem to bridge over variances within the category of African American writers in order to produce a wider gap between that category and the white American writers against which her categorical definition is constructed. Such an essentializing constructivist discourse may have the some of the same risks as the essentialist discourse of American Africanism. Walker goes on to explain that black writers' works display this expectation of freedom either "because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together" or because "black people never felt themselves guilty of global, cosmic sins" (5). Such broad categorizations based on the historically situated slave/slave-owner relationship are repeated in the configuring of black literature (which, according to Walker is founded in

slave narrative—a foundational autoethnographic form) may even seem to imply a return to American Africanism in the autoethnographic impulse.¹⁴

Historical Trauma and Cross-Cultural Coalitions

Because my work is grounded in spirituality rather than in politics, I am able to follow my intuition and my sense of being one with other people much more easily than I ever thought possible. When I write [. . .] I can do so without getting bogged down in all the cultural baggage and the political resistance of various African governments and African people. [. . .] So, if you can believe that [something] is not right, then you try to change that. My point is that there is a lot of opposition to people wanting to alleviate suffering by people who have a vested interest in continuing it, because it's their means of ruling, literally controlling. —Alice Walker to William Ferris, on how writing can effect change for people of African descent

No one speaks, no one tells a story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it because they're afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it and look at it and share it, they are not the only one, they're two, and three and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective.

¹⁴ Slave narratives, like Morrison's and Walker's novels, perform those forensic, epideictic and deliberative functions. Through representing their own experiences as emblematic of the cultural experience of slavery, writers like Mary Prince, Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs were able to correct inaccurate portrayals of "happy darkies" that emerge from ethnographic writings like those of Joel Chandler Harris (Ruas 96). They also infused their narratives with calls for readers to make judgments about the morality and ethicality of the slave trade based upon their understandings of Biblical and legal criteria for adjudicating morals and ethics in American culture. Finally, they used their narratives as a mechanism to encourage deliberation upon an abolitionist political agenda that would propel readers to work in concert with former slaves to secure social justice.

—Toni Morrison to Marsha Darling, on storytelling and trauma

Calls for solidarity through shared historical trauma become, in Morrison's *A Mercy* and Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, the definitive boundary between metropolitan readers, the author and the collectively identified readership with whom each author shares this racial solidarity. Identification between African American women authors and their African American women readers (as mediated through African American women characters in the autoethnographic fiction) may be one way that Morrison and Walker work toward their forensic, epideictic and deliberative goals. However, the construction of identity through racial solidarity—as Appiah and Pratt explain such processes—may already situate a similar sense of history, moral adjudication and impetus to political action that precedes the textual encounter between author and readers who are in the same ethnic category. This explication of solidarity does not, however, account for differences within that ethnic category. Additionally, identification through solidarity cannot explain the processes by which metropolitan readers may receive forensic, epideictic and deliberative narrative encounters.

Because metropolitan readers can have neither a personal nor familial link to the trauma of slavery or of institutionalized racism against African Americans, instances of identification, akin to those that Walker and Morrison may incite their in-group readers to experience, could often be inappropriate, and even unethical, for those metropolitan readers. Jean Wyatt has argued that "the often unconscious desire to identify with, to *be*, the racialized other, produces a number of the misrecognitions that complicate race relations" (3). Whether ethical or not, some literary critics seem to suggest that identification through textual representation is a flawed vehicle for coalition-building across ethnic and gendered categories. Indeed, Wyatt goes on to clarify the fact that "identification involves an assimilation of the other into the self and thus a violation of the other's autonomous subjectivity" (4), and this violation of autonomy not only risks the collapse of extracategorical differences, but also may veil differences within racial categories.

Wyatt, of course, is not alone in raising these concerns. Diana Fuss concurs, by claiming that considerations of metropolitan readers may even produce an "imperializing character" she sees as intrinsic to "many cross-cultural identifications" (8) and Doris Sommer goes so far as to claim that "identification is a murderous trope that reduces two to one" through the eclipsing of the autoethnographic subject with the metropolitan reader. This kind of eclipsing is not usually the result of a hegemonic impulse or even of a conscious desire on the part of the metropolitan reader to preserve his or her own ethnically produced privilege. In fact, often the eclipse occurs because of empathetic responses that arise out of identification with textual representation, which are encouraged by the deliberative affect of the texts. Morrison, for instance, is able to communicate the terrible situation that forces Florens's mother to choose to give her daughter to a strange man, who will keep her in bondage, in the final section of the novel. Because Florens's mother's narrative explanation of her choice is expressed with poignant verisimilitude and an understated but palpable sense of regret and longing, my students (particularly my white female students) have reported that they can "truly understand" what it may have been like to make such a choice. In some ways the narrative experience of reading the novel's denouement affects these students to such an extent that they feel that they can inhabit the character's subject position. I am certain that this sort of empathetic response is not unique to my students, but it may be something that emerges from my teaching practices.

In seeking pragmatic instances that may demonstrate how metropolitan readers may respond to autoethnographic literature, Sonia Kruk noted that her white, female students who approach texts by women of color sometimes express feelings of being "personally exonerated from white racism by virtue of their depth of empathy" (158). Kruk's students even suggested that their reading practices may have allowed them to "vicariously 'become' women of color" (158) in their experientially-oriented processes of reading. Wyatt suggests that this sort of response may even subvert the deliberative functions of those autoethnographic texts by "replac[ing] the need to examine the realities" of a metropolitan subject position, and then to deliberate on "giv[ing] up the benefits [. . .] derived" from such a position, with an

emotive response to a text. The students' response of "outrage at racism" (4) originated in the reading and was in some sense mimicked by the students. Such outrage does not necessarily produce any motivation or mechanism for metropolitan readers to take an active role in revising systems of oppression. This outrage is, in some cases, a way of shifting responsibility by aligning oneself with the victims of a historical trauma. While such a psychic alignment seems to indicate a moral judgment made in response to the epideictic goals of the text, it avoids any sense of responsibility that may result in deliberation on a future action to redress the wrong; empathy, for these metropolitan readers, may overwhelm deliberation. This is one way in which coalition-building may actually be subverted, or at very least mitigated, by cross-categorical identification.

To achieve a better model for coalition-building, processes by which in-group solidarity are formed might be ethically adapted to generate more ethical sorts of identification across identity boundaries. But, such adaptations of this mechanism for generating solidarity must also work to minimize the risk that empathetic responses will overwhelm deliberation. Some scholars of autoethnographic literature have proposed some guidelines for this adapted textual identification. For instance, in her theorization of "differential consciousness," Chela Sandoval posits that fluid and adaptive alliances between metropolitan and marginal cultural groups might emerge from dialogues about autoethnography. These dialogues, if conducted with reciprocal respect, might produce effective resistance to systemic oppression in situations where the locus of resistance is unfixed and the interaction between metropolitan and marginal groups eschews hierarchy. In Sandoval's model, metropolitan readers' empathetic responses are used in instrumental ways to meet specific short-term goals for marginal communities. One of these goals might be to create an affective alliance for political activism, for instance.¹⁵ After those goals are met, both groups must retreat from their differential consciousness into their home-group solidarities until the next opportunity for adaptive alliance is presented. Likewise, Cynthia Franklin

¹⁵ Sandoval discusses the ways in which Chicana feminists are able to lead discussions of the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* with white feminists, and that, while the dialogues that ensued did not necessarily work to form permanent partnerships, they did produce "coalitional dynamics" that allowed the groups to come together to organize additional readings, rallies and protests that spoke to the oppression of women of color, particularly as the testimonies in the anthology describe that oppression (23).

suggests a model of "transformative politics" that produces a viable multicultural community, comprised of members who achieve solidarity through a commitment to respecting difference as manifest in text. Franklin uses an anthology by Gloria Anzaldúa called *Making Face, Making Soul/Hacienda Caras* to discuss how the text performatively "constituted new communities of and for women" (9) that worked to bring those women together across categorical identities for political action. Both Franklin and Sandoval consider the ways in which ethnic difference can be overcome to create communities among women without colonization. It seems a logical extension of these models to apply them to the scholarly conversations in literary studies and to bring them into the language arts classroom; by doing so ethnographic critics, and instructors who would teach texts outside the traditional, white male American canon, can consider how their contributions can contribute to this creation of a "differential consciousness" or a "transformative politics" drawn from testimonial fiction. Pratt's own notion of the "contact zone"—a pedagogical space that requires students to "put [their] communities and identities on the line" as they discuss issues of cultural difference—attempts to actively confront categorical difference, which may be one applied example of Franklin's model. Since both Morrison and Walker present readers with opportunities to examine cultural trauma through empathetic responses, putting these sorts of responses to work in the service of epideictic and deliberative functions may be a way to ally the metropolitan and marginal readerships in solidarity around the issues the authors frame.

Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested that the coupling of empathy with exotopic representations that further alienate metropolitan readers may produce a useful combination of identification and negation that replicates the nexus of difference with which such "contact zones" must be fraught if they are to function. The exotopy of metropolitan readers engaged with autoethnographic texts can never be universally assured (and neither can the empathy with which that exotopy should be tinged), but some textual strategies that Morrison and Walker exhibit in their works may demonstrate how the potential for eliciting such responses might be crafted. A comparative analysis of *A Mercy* (2009) and *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2003) yields some of that necessary context through which one may examine African

American women's writing in the 21st Century as autoethnography from an ethnographic critical perspective. Both novels examine the legacy of the slave trade in shaping American culture; Morrison's novel looks at the incipient era of American racializing institutions and Walker's work examines how the consequences of those incipient institutions continue to shape American national identity in a global context over three hundred years later.

The differences in the ways in which the novelists explore slavery are quite important. Morrison's novel, set in the 1680s, takes place before enslavement and African-descent were institutionalized as a set of unified signs—one signifier assuming the referent of both signs—and she investigates how that unity is produced. For example, in an early section of the novel, one white indentured servant, Willard, complains to another, Sully, that the “natural” racial hierarchy of European above African, as they each perceive it, has been violated by the fact that they are enslaved while a Black man is not. The racially motivated animosity of the white slave toward the Black free-person is only ameliorated when the racial superiority of the former is linguistically implied by the latter; the free blacksmith, a Black man, calls the indentured white farmhand by the deferential moniker “sir.” This utterance by the blacksmith to Will is the first moment in the text where the race of the farmhands is revealed to readers in transparent terms and it occurs 55 pages into the novel. Later, on page 67 of the novel, Lina, a Native American servant to the Vaarks, refers to Will and Scully as “Europes,” which seems to place them in the same category as the owner of the patroonship and to separate their status from the blacksmith's. Lina's view of whiteness as an emulsifying category is another way to complicate the color line that is depicted in its incipient moments in *A Mercy*.

The withholding of racial signifiers works in two important ways. First, the revelation of the indentured farmhands' whiteness may function to disrupt senses of solidarity by African American readers who may have begun identifying with the characters because of the shared sense of historical trauma—demonstrating, as Morrison has indicated she intended, that the novel encourages a historical perspective that “remove[s] race from slavery” (Neary para 3). The novel imaginatively produces a

narrative absent from the dominant historical discourse. The novel works forensically to unsilence the voices of those enslaved during colonial times, and those voices come from within three specific racial boundaries—African, European and Native American—which works to undermine the common assumption that slaves were necessarily black. *A Mercy* implicitly points to a historical void that Morrison’s corpus has sought to fill, but one novel, or even all the novels Morrison writes about American slavery and its aftereffects, cannot plug the gap.¹⁶ Morrison herself notes that her writing in some ways “seemed to me like entering into the Atlantic Ocean on a tiny little raft” because she could not give voice to the tens of millions of slaves whose perspectives are unrecorded. Instead, she sought to enter “the minds and the bloodstream and the perception of individuals” within a “single narrative” (Neary para 6), which may have allowed her to also effectively inspire pathos in her readers, producing empathy through identification. The solicitation of empathy from readers is also an invitation for them to examine the forensic testimony provided in the novel in an evaluative way that causes them to make judgments about the moral imperatives that emerge from the augmented history.

However, that empathy, alone, is not enough to guarantee the readers’ awareness of the deliberative potential of reading the text to inform coalition-building between marginal and metropolitan groups. Delayed revelations of racial difference also work as an instance of exotopy for metropolitan readers who may have been tempted to ally their sentiments too closely with the African American characters and slip into the troubling moments of identification that circumvent deliberation. By exploring how indentured servitude during the colonial period comes to be understood as a racially-specific system of slavery, Morrison encourages readers to reexamine the ways in which they have come to understand the relationship between slavery and African Americans as well as between slavery and

¹⁶ It should be noted that several narratives by African-descended slaves from the colonial period were published and have received increasing critical attention since the “Cultural Wars” of the 1990s. The narratives of Mary Prince and Olaudah Equiano are perhaps the most famous examples. In spite of the existence of these texts, the colloquial and commonplace understandings of slavery’s position in the history of the “New World” remain anchored to the Nineteenth Century; the pedestrian historical points my students refer to when queried about slavery, for example, generally regard the Abolitionist Movement and the Civil War as touchstones. By foregrounding the moments that predate those popular conceptions, Morrison’s prose echoes within the largeness, and relative emptiness, of the historical space in which her narrative is set. This is a manifestation of her novel’s forensic impetus.

American literary traditions. Sophia Cantave notes that “at the turn into the twenty-first century [. . .] modern readers want to bury the discourse [about slavery and race in the U.S.] under the fiction that ‘we already know about slavery,’ yet we do not know” (94). Morrison suggests a confrontation with that which “we do not know” about the subject that we have willfully ignored, or been made to ignore, through a cognitively dissonant repression in the veiled projection of knowing. Further, she solicits metropolitan readers to examine their own allegiances to characters and to be especially attentive to differences in culturally determined identities that are constructed around ethnicity and gender.

The merchant-class protestant perspective of Vaark’s narration in the second chapter reaffirms the content of Florens’s disorienting discussion of her mother’s decision to give her way in the first chapter. In some ways, Vaark’s portion of the narrative works to help the reader retrospectively make sense of Florens’s portion of the story. He serves as a secondhand observer to the events that were so traumatic for her and his observations add to her credibility as a narrator when the reader may doubt her because of the markers in the text of her distress and confusion about the incidents she describes. For instance, both Vaark and Florens characterize Senhor Ortega as reprehensible. The lechery and cruelty of life on Ortega’s plantation is set in stark contrast with Vaark’s farmstead, which is the setting of a great deal of the novel. The slaveholder is a “papist” and an ostentatious fop who “turned profit into useless baubles” was “unembarrassed by sumptuary, silk stockings and an overdressed wife, wasting candles in midday” (19). Vaark takes exception to Ortega’s Catholicism, even though he himself is not a practicing Protestant. Morrison imbeds the assumption of an evangelical Christian norm in Vaark’s seemingly secular narrative voice, and that assumed norm becomes more and more firmly identified with Euro-American identity as the novel progresses. Lina is sold into slavery by a group of Presbyterians; Sorrow, the mixed-race servant Vaark brings back to the patroonship, is given away by the first family that takes her in so that she cannot continue to “distract” two Christian boys from their faith by being an available victim for their malicious desires and Rebekka, Vaark’s white wife, throws her lot in with the neighboring community of Anabaptists when she takes ill. Just as a racial hierarchy emerges in the novel, so does a

religious one. There are also class barriers that contribute to Vaark's hatred for the Portuguese landowner. Ortega's inherited holdings in Angola and Brazil serve as a counterpoint to Vaark's accumulation of property and commodities through diligent labor. By creating such a contrast between Vaark and Ortega Morrison again invokes a trope of American literature concerning slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe encourages readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to consider how the differences in the treatment of slaves at Arthur Shelby's farm, Augustine St. Clare's plantations and Simon Legree's land shape Tom's fate, and in *Beloved* readers are encouraged to make a similar comparison between Mr. Garner and the schoolteacher at Sweet Home. In *A Mercy* Morrison incites readers to consider the events of *A Mercy* by way of evaluating the behavior of slaveholders. Stowe and Morrison use this set of comparisons to ask readers to categorize the slaveholder's treatment of the slaves as either noble or shameful, but the autoethnographic potential of the texts does not end with those facile judgments.

Like Stowe, Morrison disrupts the neat binary of slaveholders as either benevolent but misguided or sadistic and self-serving; just as St. Clare's death prevents Tom from experiencing the freedom Eva begs from her father for her friend, Vaark's death will disrupt the "merciful" existence Florens's mother thought she could find for her child. The titular mercy, which Morrison notes is a "human gesture" (Neary para 3) rather than any sort of divine absolution, is a mother's offering of her daughter to a stranger. As Cathy Waegner notes, it is "[n]ot until the final chapter of the book, which is narrated from the mother's point of view" that readers see how this seemingly callous act can be construed as merciful indeed. Only when "the mother recounts the horrors of the middle passage, slave labor on the sugar plantations of Barbados, and the sexual abuse on the tobacco plantation in Maryland" can readers begin to understand "her willingness to put her daughter in the hands of a man who laughs rather than leers" (93). By withholding the rationale for Florens's nameless mother, whom she calls "minha mãe," to give her to Jacob Vaark, which assures the separation of daughter from mother, Morrison implicitly invokes the

painful context of slavery and its consequences for familial relationships.¹⁷ Also, in using her novel to dramatize a white man's rescue of a black child from a dangerous situation from which a black woman cannot extricate her, Morrison redeploys that painful context within a familiar trope that reinforces some white supremacist notions. But to what end? How can such a terrible, human "mercy" work to situate a cross-ethnic coalition between women?

Morrison's novel focuses upon the consequences for four women—Florens only one of them—who are "unmastered" when Vaark dies (56). Gender, alongside race and class, becomes important for considering how colonialism and slavery function to generate oppressive institutions; because Rebekka, Lina, Sorrow and Florens are women "[n]one of them could inherit; none was attached a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters [. . .] subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile [. . .] They were orphans, each and all" (56-7). In the novel the similarly vulnerable positions of all four of these women are presented in rapid succession to the reader, who must then grapple with the dissolution of their civil ties to one another. In crafting these kinds of representation, Morrison extends the ethnically produced solidarity among African Americans that is oriented on the historical trauma of slavery by positing a gendered dynamic for identification that permeates the racial boundaries that keep the women separate from one another. As Waegner puts it, the pre-Federal Maryland in which the novel is set presents a possibility for "cross-ethnic, cross-class coalition" (103), but instead of fictionalizing the realization of such a possibility, Morrison portrays "the subsequent opportune 'divide and rule' strategy of the colonial governmental and economic leaders" to demonstrate how that strategy produced a set of "new laws [. . .] directed against the Africans, serving to link slavery firmly to blackness" (104) and, consequently, preventing women, who may work together as

¹⁷ Literally "minha mãe" is Portuguese for "my mother," but Florens uses it as a proper noun or title, often preceded by an indefinite article. The ways in which the American institution of slavery disrupts motherhood are well covered. Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" and Morrison's own *Beloved* present some exemplary points of analysis that would be very familiar to many members of the in-group audience of their autoethnographic prose.

the women of the patroonship do, from moving beyond ethnic difference and into a gender-based coalition to demand equality.¹⁸

Morrison alters dominant literary forms to re-represent the nascent institutionalized racism that she argues produces a paradigm of American Africanism within U.S. national identity. Florens's narration is part confession and part coming-of-age story, and both of those narratives are familiar to readers of American literature. However, "[u]nlike the traditional bildungsroman[,] which shows the maturing subject being educated for a meaningful and productive place in the social fabric," Morrison's text illustrates how the interstitial pressures of patriarchy, white supremacy and class dominance prevent Florens from fully maturing (Waegner 94). She is caught in a psychic state of mother-loss, replaying the interrupted moment of separation from "minha mãe" at several instances in the novel. Florens sees "[a] minha mãe lean[ing] at the door holding her little boy's hand" when she worries that the blacksmith will not love her since he has taken Malaik in. Florens notes that "[a]s always, she is trying to tell me something" (135). The fear of being replaced by the male child reiterates the schema of gender privilege to which Florens attributes her loss of her own mother, because her mother encourages Vaark to take Florens rather than her brother. Morrison provides the context necessary to explain the mother's reasons for seeing the risks to her daughter as greater than those to her son; in the final chapter Florens's mother notes that "[n]either [Vaark nor Senhor] will want your brother," but Florens is not already gone at the moment of that narration and therefore she is not privy to her mother's reasons for choosing to give her away. Because of her ignorance of her mother's motives, Florens is unable to properly negotiate her separation from her mother. Her abject status inhibits her ability to form a solid sense of self and this inhibition seems to have a causal relationship with her arrested coming of age in the novel. Waegner notes that "the modern female ethnic bildungsroman stresses the *creation* of the self-fulfilling social space by a marginalized figure who shows solidarity with the other disadvantaged women of her community" (101).

¹⁸ It is important to note here that in two interviews Morrison noted that her investigation of Bacon's Rebellion of 1674 proved a genesis for the novel. Because Morrison was intrigued by the resistance—comprised of a racially and economically diverse population of colonials, their servants and slaves—she began to consider a narrative of how such an historical moment might give way to the prebellum situations she explored in *Beloved*.

Florens's inability to understand her mother's motives for giving her away demonstrates how her search for that space is ultimately frustrated. The complexity and dysfunctionality of her relationships with Rebekka, Lina and Sorrow, who might have become surrogate objects for the lost mother, are also caused by the intersections of categorical difference and privilege inherent in an economically, racially and socially stratified culture that does not always allow women to form bonds of solidarity across those differences.

Because Morrison presents a quartet of marginal figures with whom a variety of readers may identify, she is able to give narrative voice to a larger set of forensic agendas. Each of the women is subjugated to an institution of oppression. Rebekka is sold by her own parents and then shipped to Virginia to a husband she has never met. In a set of scenes that may present the only successful and functional community of women the novel contains, Rebekka makes friends with a group of women on her voyage to the patroonship. These women have socio-economic differences—one is an unmarried but impregnated woman, another is a thief sentenced to indentured servanthood, and the thief's mother and two others are prostitutes, marking them as lumpenproletariat members with even less status than Rebekka—the cultural unity is achieved because of their transitory status in the steerage hold and their shared sense of isolation and danger. The shared experience of being treated contemptuously by the sailors, coupled with an intimacy that emerges from sharing their meager food and comfort together, creates solidarity for the group. In that moment of shared solidarity onboard the ship they are not “[w]omen of and for men, in those moments they were neither” (80). This portion of the text works to propel readers to consider how these women obtain this agency that is free of patriarchal control—even if just for a short span—and to deliberate upon how that agency might be recreated at other moments in the novel, and, it is to be hoped, in the extratextual world that is still effected by this oppressive forces that empower some categorical groups at the expense of others.

No racial or cultural differences (beyond the class differentiations) between the women with whom Rebekka travels are overtly revealed in the text. Since the vignettes are filtered through Rebekka's

narrative voice, the fact that no mention is made of race may indicate a universal whiteness for the group, because Rebekka remarks upon the racial differences between herself and the women at the patroonship in later passages. Or, since the small airless space the women share is always pitch dark, perhaps the lack of visibility works to erase phenotypical difference—the women literally play in the dark. The absence of racial markers from the text may be another instance in which Morrison suspends that knowledge in order to prompt readers to consider how inter-ethnic communities might be theorized based upon these moments in the texts.

Rebekka's narration during her voyage to the New World calls to mind Morrison's earlier depictions of the middle passage for enslaved Africans from *Beloved*. The experience of these women—crowded into women in the dark steerage hold, forced to sleep near their own defecation, berated by sailors who treat them like cargo rather than people, and deprived of adequate food and water—echoes the representations of the middle passage in the earlier novel, especially *Beloved*'s first-person narration in the hold of a slave-ship. Likewise, the various reasons the women have for being forced to make the journey—either because they were sold away by their families or condemned and banished from their communities—may be similar in some ways to the situations that enslaved Africans were delivered to their colonialist captors and shipped across the ocean. These are all points that may engender empathy across ethnically constructed boundaries. However, there are key moments where the differences in circumstance are made obvious. *Beloved* recalls the death of several of her fellow travelers; she is confused and afraid for the duration of the journey. Rebekka and her compatriots use the voyage as an opportunity for temporary coalition-building, which seems to allow them to avert the horrors to which *Beloved* bears witness. Their sharing of libations (which *Beloved* notes no one in her dark hold possessed) staves off the deaths by dehydration that the “man with the empty eyes” below *Beloved* suffers. Rebekka's camaraderie with the other women turns terror into humor in a sublimation of the threat of rape they meet in the gaze of the sailors, and one of the women confronts this threat when she is taken to the captain's quarters, but that woman goes willingly to the captain's quarters—in part because she hopes for greater comfort and in

part because she discovers that Rebekka is a virgin and will be rejected by her waiting husband if she is assaulted. It seems unlikely that this would have been a possibility for the enslaved women in *Beloved* if they had been threatened in the same way. Additionally, none of the characters in *A Mercy* is cast lifeless from the ship during the journey. These distinctions mark the ways in which Morrison wishes to preserve difference while still dramatizing solidarity among different categorical identities.

There are reasons to explore the similarities in women's positions, regardless of those women's varied ethnic and economic identities, within *A Mercy*. Rebekka's status as an object that her parents sell to a stranger is echoed by the fact that the other women at the patroonship are all viewed as personal property, most to an even greater extent than the sold-away daughter they all call "Mistress." Lina is enslaved when her Native community suffers a viral genocide; her home and family are decimated not by the direct, warlike tendencies of the "Europes," but as a result of a small pox epidemic that seems to have been intentionally spread to her village by the colonists gifting them with contaminated clothing and foodstuffs. Although she is "rescued" as a child from the pestilence by a group of Presbyterians, she is consequently physically and sexually abused by the pious man who takes her in. However, Lina never fully submits to this treatment and it is her refusal to patiently submit to the violence of his racist and misogynist sentiments that results in the Presbyterians' trading her to Vaark as a slave when she is fourteen. Lina's concern for the separation from her mother is textually intertwined with the loss of her culture. She has what Morrison terms "mother hunger," a pressing desire to both be and have a mother. Perhaps this desire is a mechanism for recovering the solidarity she enjoyed with her family and community before the small pox outbreak, but Lina, unlike Florens, seems able to draw a sense of self in spite of the motherloss she suffers. Morrison may intend for both marginal and metropolitan readers to consider their relationships to their own mother-figures as a mechanism for appealing to a universally female-to-female relationship that may become a basis for coalition-building. If the readers are able to understand the desire to nurture and be nurtured by other women, then perhaps a feminist coalition across categorical differences becomes possible through that desire's fulfillment.

Morrison also explores the ways in which “mother hunger” may not be as universal as Rebekka, Florens and Lina seem to believe it is in their parts of the narrative. Like Florens, Lina and Rebekka, Sorrow is a child who has been abandoned and abused. She is rescued from a situation much like the one that Vaark plucks Florens from, but Vaark’s intervention is not quick enough to spare Sorrow from rape and impregnation by the sons of her initial “benefactor.” Sorrow’s uncertain ethnic background causes Rebekka concern, and her ignorance of her parentage and refusal to assist in the domestic work aggrieves Lina. Florens remains fascinated by Sorrow in the way preteens may often identify with young women, but the racial solidarity that Florens looks for in a replacement for her “minha mãe” is imagined rather than reciprocated by Sorrow. Ironically, since the ambiguity of Sorrow’s ethnic identity is at the crux of the other women’s response to her, Sorrow seems unconcerned about how ethnicity may function to identify her to others. The narration that reveals her interior monologue finds her unconcerned with forging relationships or attending to categorical differences. Her singular preoccupation is to find time alone to be with her imaginary friend, whom she calls “Twin,” a capricious projection of herself with no clear racial or gendered markers.

Sorrow, of all the women, seems the least caught in abjection because she identifies with no one. She ignores race, rejects the trappings of gender and repudiates motherhood. Never speaking of her own mother, only her father, the sea captain who disguised her as a boy, Sorrow also possess the desire neither to mother nor to be mothered. She refuses to consider her own child actively until after its birth, and, of all the women in *A Mercy*, Sorrow is the least integrated into the household. She is childlike, and even when she delivers her child, she treats it like a playmate—imagining that it is Twin—and does not participate in the women’s never-ending labor. Thus removed from any potential for coalition building, Sorrow—even at the level of her moniker—is a pitiable figure. Morrison uses Sorrow, the most liminal of the characters, to demonstrate the consequences of an extreme separation from community. Because of her ambiguous heritage, Sorrow might seem to be able to identify with all of the women—she might be Native, white and Black. She also, of all the women, bears the most visible mark of the sexual

exploitation—she is impregnated by her rapists and is unsure who fathered her child. This might be a mechanism for her to garner empathy from the other three, each of whom has either endured a sexual trauma or lived in fear of sexual assault. Alone among the women of the patroonship she is a mother, and each of them desperately envies her relationship with her child. Sorrow might have forged bonds with Rebekka, Lina and Florens by sharing in the mothering of that baby, but she refuses even that bond. In spite of all these potential avenues for relationships, Sorrow remains separate and alone, a kind of cautionary figure for those who would deny the possibility of coalition-building. Readers might intuit from this example an exegesis for community without colonization, which, in turn, serves the deliberative goals of the testimonial novel.

Because all four women face the threat of sexual exploitation at the hands of men who are supposed to be stewards of their chastity and faith, Morrison exposes the common link between characters who could form solidarity through this shared trauma. However, the similarities of these instances of exploitation prove insufficient, which may be a metaphor for the metropolitan readers' attempts at identification and empathy across categorical differences. In creating and speaking through four female characters Morrison is also able to disrupt the potentially hegemonic empathetic responses of metropolitan readers. The four women enact a hierarchy amongst themselves. Rebekka, as "Mistress" by virtue of her racial and marital status, tops this pecking-order. Lina, a Native woman who, in Vaark's narration, is figured as one of those "to whom it all belonged" because of the prior rights of tribal nations, stands next in this hierarchy, in part because of her longer history with Vaark than Rebekka can claim. Sorrow, whose ethnic heritage is indeterminate, claims the penultimate position, more by virtue of her age and status as an expectant mother than of any systemically insured rights over Florens.

The ways in which one woman garners privilege only through domination of the others illustrates how the interstitial categories of identity that constrain those women are actively enforced through their claims to such a hierarchy. Discussions of the hierarchy among the women might, if used to a pedagogical advantage, encourage students like Kruk's to consider the complicity of metropolitan

identities in constraining and marginalizing the identities in solidarity with the autoethnographer's. Students who live within a system of ethnic privilege may do well to be reminded that "the loose patriarchal structure of the patroonship 'family'" that Vaark's masculine authority exercises over the women is replaced when the patriarch dies. Rebekka, because of her European ancestry and privileged status as property obtained via sacrament rather than commerce, is able to take up his authority. She does so by "desperately adopt[ing] the prejudicial ways of the neighboring Anabaptist community and begin[ning] to radically restrict [. . .] free ethnic space" within the household. These burgeoning prejudices are demonstrated when Rebekka curtails Lina's traditional practices and prepares to sell Florens (Waegner 97). In this way, Morrison examines the issues of solidarity within the text, which leaves a ripe sous-text for analysis as an extratextual analogue to the problem the narratives frame. By looking closely at the failure to generate an appropriate intra-feminine coalition, contemporary readers may be fore-warned of the hazards they face if they seek to participate in coalition-building. The key deliberative lesson to take from Morrison is that hierarchy must be suspended, privilege relinquished, if connections across categorical boundaries to constructed identities are to produce an affective alliance between metropolitan and marginal groups.

Walker, unlike Morrison, chooses to eschew the centrality of slavery to her plot by setting her novel in the burgeoning Twenty-first Century. In spite of this choice, Walker's narrative reflects on the legacy of slavery and colonization that still manifests itself in her contemporary characters' lives and self-images. If Morrison's novel stages a cautionary tale about how coalitions across difference are ruined by hierarchy, then Walker's novel examines how hierarchy can be set aside and empathy can be nurtured to build coalitions. Walker's protagonist in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Kate Talkingtree, undertakes a journey because of a dream she has about a dry river. Kate takes the hallucinogenic substance yagé in order to pursue a kind of spiritual development through communion with a "Grandmother" spirit that is "[t]he oldest Being that ever lived. Her essence that of the Primordial Female Human Being As Tree" (52). Before resorting to drugging herself in a "traditional" Amazonian ritual for

self-discovery, Kate attempts to satiate her need for this development in other ways—Buddhist meditation under the California redwoods, holistic talking therapy, a kind of vision-quest down the Colorado River with an all-female tour group.¹⁹ When she takes the yagé, Kate wishes to have “an experience of the soul that is undistracted by desire” (50). Unfortunately, this experience leaves her “plagued by those ancestors of hers who’d lived and died miserably” (90), so that in sacrificing her own desire, she is immediately subject to the desires of others to whom she feels beholden. This may be an implicit critic of testimonial literature that stops after only accomplishing its forensic goals. By simply correcting an inaccurate history (or augmenting and incomplete one) forensic testimonial fiction may only frame the problems that a coalition between metropolitan and marginal readers may should address. Kate seems to occupy that dual-position, as she is allied with the ancestors through a sense of shared cultural trauma, but also separate from them (much as metropolitan readers may be) and asks what it is she must do to appease the anguished subjects whose traumas she testifies about. At first, the confrontations with these ancestors while under the influence of the drug prove difficult rather than purifying or enlightening for Kate because she perceives that “[t]hey wanted her to rectify their wrongs” (91). This may be an instance wherein the epideictic function of the text is revealed. By adjudicating what those “wrongs” were and who should be responsible for them, Kate can begin to approach the deliberative task of rectifying them.

This misunderstanding of the purpose of the ancestors’ lucid appearances fuels Kate’s delayed self-discovery, the goal that the progression of the novel’s plot is oriented upon. In this way, Walker too constructs a sort of bildungsroman, but instead of adulthood as a point of arrival, maturity is a “plateau” that may actually inhibit further growth for the characters. Perhaps Walker uses this as a mechanism to refigure a Western tradition transculturally through her pastiche construction of a non-Western one (as represented by the confluence of Buddhism, New Age self-help, and Indigenous traditions from the Pacific Islands and North and South America that inform Kate’s sense of spirituality). Through generating

¹⁹ It should be noted that Walker makes no specific allusions to which cultural traditions this ritual drug use is related. As noted in the review of reviews, one important criticism of this novel may be that it plays fast and loose with indigenous identity and complex cultural origins in order to stage its didactic testimony on the necessity of community.

a spirituality that is in itself a cross-cultural coalition, Walker suggests a formula for readers to use to work to build their own coalitions.

Kate's continued development in the novel is the result of a mixture of reflecting on things past and a set of fantastical (and, yes, even extraterrestrial) experiences that broaden her awareness and sense of self, which is the personal manifestation of the political goal that Walker sets for the novel. This goal will progressively broaden from Kate, as a singular searcher for a spiritual truth, to a revelation about the interconnected nature of all life that makes all people responsible for one another and for every living thing on earth. This is perhaps the largest sort of cross-cultural coalition imaginable. For instance, in a drug-induced vision of her "ancestor spirits" Kate speaks with a toothless slave named Remus. Initially Kate is sure that the ancestor wishes to tell her how he lost his teeth. She makes this assumption because he speaks to her about his own physical beauty, marred by the cruel pulling of his teeth by a jealous slave-owner, and she supposes the injury to his vanity is the wrong he wishes her to rectify. Armando, the shaman who administers the yagé, insists that there is more to the story; he says to Kate, "He merely hooked you with that stuff about vanity. And why? Because he knows *you* are vain. Vanity interests you" (94). Upon accepting Armando's suggestions to "negotiate" with Remus, Kate takes more of the drug and seeks him out in her dreams where Remus tells her about his death. He prefaces the narrative of his truly horrific death with the simple introductory: "*It is not what you think*"(95), confirming Armando's assertion, but then recants "[r]ather *it is exactly what you think*" (95). The apparitional slave portrays his death as a "*common incident*" that he "*imagine[s] has not changed*" (95), which Walker works to link the present-day crisis of identity that her protagonist struggles with to a historically and culturally specific trauma her ancestors experienced. Readers might also understand that they, like Kate, are called upon to witness Remus's testimony and deliberate about how to rectify the wrongs it explicates. Remus's tale is short and direct, more a construction of nominatives and modifiers than a full narrative arc:

The nigger running, the white fiends chasing. The sound of the dogs. They were curiously inept at creating entertainment for themselves that didn't center around us. [. . .] Aw, naw, you shot 'im through the heart. One of them said this, as they stood looking down at me. And you know what, so disappointed was he to be robbed of a good time he'd looked forward to, of torturing me, that he turned on the man who shot me and hit him. Right there, as I was dying, they began to fight. This is what I want you to remember. (95-6)²⁰

The rhetoric of Remus's telling—the neat division of “us” from “them” and the focus on the perpetrators of the violence rather than the suffering of the victim—works to highlight exotopic constructions for metropolitan readers. His use of a highly charged racial epithet to identify himself in the third person, which is punctuated by the characterization of his murderers as “fiends,” permits no euphemism to buffer the brutality of the event for contemporary readers who would wish to distance themselves from the grim historical verisimilitude of the story. He asks Kate to “remember” rather than to rectify—perhaps indicating that a forensic rather than deliberative purpose is the focus of this vignette. Because Walker structures the narrative around Kate, and in much of the book speaks directly through her, the locus of identification is on the protagonist, so the ways in which the exotopic content are shaped by an empathetic structural device are important. Kate identifies with Remus and the reader—both marginal and metropolitan—identifies with Kate. Walker works to build a coalition through investment in the text. This coalition might achieve an ethical quality because it forces metropolitan readers to empathize with the cultural trauma of slavery and lynching expressed in Remus's tale, but also reminds those readers that the ancestor relationship Kate shares with readers is a relationship that Euro-American readers share with the “white fiends.” In this way, Walker's narration implicitly transmits a sense of responsibility that builds the sort of coalition she desires.

²⁰ Italics in original.

The invocation of slavery is not the only example of this complex structure of identification interrupted (and even inflected) by differentiation. In a reminiscence Kate relates in the midst of her psychic struggle with the apparitional Remus, the character remembers her brief relationship with Jane Stembridge, “the white woman who was pushed out of the struggle in the South because some black people were so devastated by the past they could never forget it” (93). Kate clearly indicates that she had “respected Jane for not letting herself be stuck in someone else’s image of her” even as she notes that Stembridge’s “very Being, white and female and descended from slave owners, though it was, might be a note of freedom” (93). Kate’s musing upon how a white activist who was barred from a community of solidarity during the Civil Rights Era is purposefully placed in the context of Remus’s edict to “remember.” The lesson that Walker draws for Kate, and thus both metropolitan and in-group readers, out of both Remus’s and Stembridge’s narratives is that “[o]ne’s struggle against oppression is meaningless [. . .] unless it is connected to the oppression of others” (93), and this lesson seems to argue for the potential of cross-categorical identification in terms of generating a strategic coalition for social justice. That potential, of course, cannot be a substitute for the identification across shared trauma—after all, the mystical properties of yagé do not bring Jane’s spirit to Kate; it is the pedestrian vehicle of her own memory that achieves the narrative purpose. Walker encourages readers to reconsider the centrality of their own subject positions as they approach the texts. If metropolitan readers are rendered accountable for Remus’s suffering through their ancestral relationship to the white fiends, then Stembridge becomes a model for how that ancestral legacy can be transmuted into a participation in a coalition between ethnically divided groups that works to rectify the wrongs in Remus’s testimony.

Walker’s is a different method of unifying exotopic and empathetic deliberation for metropolitan readers than Morrison employs, but the effect of either method is difficult to measure with textual analysis as the sole method of adjudication. Such practices, which are oriented upon both close reading and the application of theories about autoethnography, cannot demonstrate any repression of the hard and ugly truths about the systemic racism, classism and androcentrism that are exposed in both Morrison’s A

Mercy and Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart. Metropolitan readers and critics who participate in this sort of repression may miss the autoethnographic functions of the texts. When readers and critics miss these functions that indicates a failure of the epideictic and deliberative goals the Walker, as autoethnographer, works to present. Those same readers and critics should be encouraged to ask how and why an ethical consideration, rather than the assumptive silencing and ventriloquizing against which Elam and Alcoff warn, might function in approaching autoethnographic fiction by African American women. Balancing the two concerns is difficult, and without a large amount of historical and critical contextualization, such a balance may be impossible to attain.

Writers' Strategies and Readers' Responsibilities

It's hard to be hurt by people whose views you don't accept, but earlier it did hurt very much. I really did not like being misunderstood. It was painful to me that something that I considered so clearly an expression of love and caring could be taken to be something else. Then I realized that I was dealing with people who were quite cynical and they didn't necessarily believe what they were saying. Once I got that, I didn't suffer so much.

—Alice Walker to William Ferris, on getting bad reviews

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for.

—Toni Morrison to Marsha Darling, on slavery, American history, racial politics and *Beloved*

One problem that emerges in theorizing ways to achieve that balance is the difficulty of distinguishing between forensic initiatives that may lead to epideictic judgments and deliberative actions and textually-produced nostalgia for an unsupported conception of a history lost through colonization. This is especially difficult when considering how African-American identity is constructed in (and by) Morrison's and Walker's novels, which are fiction rather than history. To what extent do the licenses of writing literature rely upon nostalgia? Is there a brightline to be found between an forensic narrative that rewrites history to supplement a lost perspective and a fictional production that erroneously imagines a past that never was? Why do reviewers' evaluations Morrison's successful use of verisimilitude and Walker's failure to craft believable prose shape the discussions of their novels? On the one hand, the role that readerly perspective plays in determining how to make such these distinctions should not be underestimated, because the determination may in, some cases, be a matter of personal tastes, which are undoubtedly colored by the readers' subject positions. On the other hand, some novels seem to be written in ways that resonate with a greater number of readers than others, and an examination of how readers respond to both *A Mercy* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* may work to reveal how Morrison's didactic performance of coalition gone awry may affect readers differently than Walker's deliberation on coalitions built upon responsibility to one another, rather than traverse boundaries produced by identity politics.

Reviews of both novels (and some questioning of the subject positions from which these reviews posit their responses to the fiction) seem to provide ample evidence for this line of inquiry. When I ordered my copy of Walker's novel from Amazon.com, I noticed a peculiar and oppositional relationship between the two reviews of the novel that previous Amazon users posted.²¹ One, written by "John K," who claims to be from Houston, TX, argued that the novel immerses its readers in "a deeply rich world" that is "extremely modern" in contrast to Walker's earlier novels. "John K" indicated that he "always felt

²¹ I realize that verifying the identities (and ethnic backgrounds or national origins) of on-line reviewers to free-access websites is so tedious and difficult that it borders upon the impossible, and I therefore acknowledge the possibility that the person writing under the name "John K" is not from Houston, TX and the person posting reviews under the name "Dr. Skye Hughes" is not from Kenya. I do not intend to present claims about the phenotypical racial traits or gender identity of either reviewer beyond their own self-identification on the website.

the ancestors in Walker's work, but never much of herself" and that "[t]his book combines the two elements beautifully." In stark contrast, a reviewer named "Dr. Skye Hughes," purportedly from Kenya, argued that the novel is "meandering, clichéd, downright offensive in terms of stereotypes" because of Walker's treatment of ethnic identity and African culture. "Dr. Skye Hughes" goes on to write that in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*

[b]eing black is depicted in terms of such simplistic stereotypes as 'being more tolerant than anyone else,' being native [sic] American is 'being in touch with the land' and being white has nothing positive to say for it at all. For example, the author seems unaware that if Kate actually lived in Africa[,] as I do, her sexuality would be enough to get her thrown into jail by virtually every African government of the day and would result in her being an outcast by local communities. That's the level of tolerance here in the Motherland. My point ultimately is that this novel is ahistorical, ill-informed and in terms of simple entertainment value - particularly tedious if you have any interest in wit, irony, insightfulness or relevance.

Some amount of divergence in the reviews is owing to the subjective matter of taste—one man's "deeply rich" and "extremely modern" work of art is another woman's "meandering, clichéd, downright offensive" piece of trash. Such differing opinions could be found in a plethora of places (particularly in the information age when everyone with an internet connection can proliferate their own aesthetic judgments in as authoritative a tone as they can muster), but the justifications for the differences are rather telling.

"John K" finds the book's protagonist, Kate Talkingtree, compelling for her "authenticity," noting that she is "inspired by Walker's grandmother" (to whom the book is dedicated) and that her narration "channels a lot of Walker[']s feelings about the world today, and growing older." "Dr. Skye Hughes," on the other hand, suggests that Walker's characters "generally bear no resemblance to real

people” and that characterization “is used merely to make didactic points about oppression and abuse.” “John K”’s pleasure in the text is a product of his belief in the narrative truth of the novel—he even supposes to understand Walker’s feelings after reading the book. “Dr. Skye Hughes”’s displeasure seems to be a product of her disgust at the false premises of the novel, which are at odds with the realities of the subject position the reviewer claims to occupy outside the text. What is at stake in this disagreement, and what seems to shape some of the evaluative sentiments in the two reviews, is the extent to which the reader accepts Walker in an autoethnographic role. If the reader believes, as “John K” seems to in his review, that Walker speaks from her own rhetorical space about her own ideas and experiences, the book is praiseworthy. If the reader does not believe, as “Dr. Skye Hughes” does not, in the “authenticity” of Walker’s representations, but instead sees them as ethnographic ventriloquism, the book is not praiseworthy. Much seems to hinge upon Walker’s narrative performance of African American female identity and the author’s willingness to limit the scope of the narrative to a parameter deemed appropriate (again by the reader) to that identity.

Published reviews of Walker's novels also illustrate how the imagined reader-writer relationship can disrupt or facilitate a transformative reading experience. In the Sunday Reviews supplement to *The New York Times* Michiko Kakutani argues that the novel is "a remarkably awful compendium of inanities" (7). Perhaps this judgment is made because the reviewer compares *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* unfavorably to the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*:

Like so many earlier Walker characters, Kate Nelson—or Kate Talkingtree, as she has recently renamed herself—is on a quest. But whereas the heroine of *The Color Purple* was struggling to free herself from a controlling and abusive husband, and trying to establish an identity of her own, Kate is simply looking for some fuzzy New Age affirmation of herself. (7)

Kakutani seems to find the autoethnographic story lacking in prescience, immediacy or verisimilitude. While the struggle to escape an abusive marriage and formulate an identity is worthwhile, the journey

toward self-affirmation is less so, in the eyes of the reviewer. What Kakutani seems to read past are the instances when Celie's story and Kate's may share some of the same themes and occurrences. For instance, Kate, when considering whether or not to leave her lover Yolo, muses upon the ends other failed relationships—including the dissolution of her marriage following a marital rape. Kate's description of passivity in the face of this sexual violence calls to mind Celie's description of Mister's marital rape, which she refers to as "doing his business," in *The Color Purple*; Walker seems to begin some textual work that links the affirmation of self with freedom from control and abuse.

What remains to be explored are the differences in the two depictions that may cause reviewers to see them as so very disparate. What is it about the testimonial work being done through fiction in *The Color Purple* that works for Kakutani that fails to operate successfully in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*? Walker's text is not alone in presenting opportunities for this sort of comparative evaluation between her recent work and her earlier work. Morrison's newest novel has been compared unfavorably to those she published before it. Hilary Mantel, herself an author of historical fiction, makes a similar criticism of Morrison's *A Mercy*, which she views as a "pale version of *Beloved*" populated by "insubstantial characters and a mere wisp of narrative" (para 3). Neither Kakutani nor Mantel provide a clear explanation of the concrete differences that make one work superior to the other. Because *The Color Purple* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and because many literary critics and scholars attribute Morrison's Nobel Prize to the widespread success of *Beloved*, it would be difficult to top those achievements, to be sure. I wonder if there are ways in which authors who have produced compelling autoethnographic fiction once are perceived as hounding the issues they raise when they return to those issues in their new fiction. Since Mantel and Kakutani read from a metropolitan position—neither is an African American woman—their day-to-day experiences may not remind them that the deliberative work that the forensic and epideictic portrayals that *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* call for remains undone. If testimonial fiction is to have the effect of galvanizing coalitions for political action, then perhaps one novel is never enough, and the narrative must be reformulated and recirculated. In constantly facing the exotopic depiction that

figures metropolitan readers as outsiders, which is one of the functions of these texts, some amount of resistance to the message could emerge from these reformulations and recirculations.

However, not all reviewers agree with Mantel and Kakutuni's assessments. Rosellen Brown, reviewing *A Mercy* for *The New Leader*, provides a positive evaluation of the text and uses the same aspects of Morrison's characterization that Mantel disdains to qualify that evaluation:

Morrison is myth-making, creating characters who embody states of mind or, more precisely, states of being. [. . . W]ithout writing a conventional historical novel, she seems nonetheless to be peopling History—with a capital H. In lieu of plot, her characters have their arias; they engage with each other as they must, but, as in an opera, they are singing the qualities they came with—who, or what, they represent. [. . .] And they do sing superbly. (30)

The insubstantiality that Mantel critiques in Morrison's characters seems to be the textual boon that enables Brown to locate its forensic function. Because Morrison's narrative is complex and polyphonic, she is able to weave stories together, and that weaving models for attentive readers the path, and the pitfalls, that interstitial identities and cross-category coalitions must traverse successfully. These elements create a deliberative challenge within the text.

The strategy of generating polyphonic narration to present characters as archetypical representations is one commonality between Walker's and Morrison's works, and this commonality might account for some critical resistance to the complex structures that are not constructed for ease of reading. The two novels are marked by shifting perspectives and fragmented, discontinuous structures. There may be as much challenge in the form of the writing as in the content. Resistance to linear chronologies and deductive structures of reason are often lauded as permutations of language that break down hierarchies that are enforced within the symbolic order. The novels' resistant and permutable form is not easy to interpret. The challenges of the formal qualities that the fiction presents place new demands on readers—in-group and metropolitan alike. Perhaps because Mantel is a wordsmith herself, familiar and comfortable

with generic expectations in historical fiction, she reads with a pattern in mind and is frustrated when what she finds is unfamiliar and trying. She wouldn't be alone in such a frustration. Literary impresario John Updike seems to concur that "as Morrison moves deeper into a more visionary realism, a betranded pessimism saps her plots of [. . .] urgency" (para 4). Caroline Moore, too, argues that Morrison's "linguistic re-invention fails to take off [and] it becomes language-on-stilts, a sequence of empty, look-at-me rhetorical gestures" (para 8).

The basis for the negative judgments some reviewers make of the two novels appears to be in the impenetrability of the texts. If literature is to be linked in any way to social justice, then the didactic functions within the fiction are a necessary component, and complex structures may be necessary to set up complicated epideictic responses from readers. If metropolitan readers are to consider the lessons such textual didacticism transmits, then perhaps a method of reading that teaches readers to be receptive to complex structures is a worthwhile pursuit. Not all reviews posited complaints about formal difficulties. Some were laudatory and other reviews reveal that form is just one of a host of troubles—some negative evaluations also accuse Morrison and Walker of criminally didactic content. David Gates, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, even goes so far as to accuse Morrison of a pedantic and didactic agenda that supersedes her literary artistry, writing that "[p]ostcolonialists and feminists, perhaps even Greens and Marxists, may latch on to *A Mercy*, but they should latch with care, lest Morrison prove too many-minded for them" (para 9). This critique of the political content, which reviewers seem to link to the complex structure, is also present in responses to Walker's works. Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow notes that in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, "Walker seems blithely unconcerned with the literary demands her early work so powerfully fulfilled. By all indications, her priorities now are assembling politically correct pieties and dramatizing New Age dogma." Some of these accusations about the incorporation of "politically correct" perspectives are well-founded. After all, if a novel is to fulfill epideictic and deliberative functions as autoethnographic fiction, that novel must present readers with some content that mandates an adjudication and an extratextual response, which is to say that a novel must endeavor to

teach its readers. Granted this teaching is a transactional process wherein the reader makes his or her own epideictic judgments and deliberates about his or her own preferred role (if any) in taking deliberative action, but to reject the literature because it attempts to teach seems to close off the possibilities of testimonial fiction as a vehicle for social justice.

Perhaps because reviewers serve to make subjective evaluations of the text as art, it is unfair to expect them to model or even consider such a method of reading. In spite of that, some reviewers seem to imply just such an intention in their treatment of the texts. Another of Morrison's reviewers, Amy Fryckholm, notes that "the lack of coherent continuous plot will frustrate some readers [. . .] These stories are tangled and partial; they require patience on the part of the reader" (46). Only through reading patiently—with care and the suspension of judgment—can the novels' audiences begin to contemplate the issues Morrison and Walker raise. Fryckholm concludes Morrison's intent is to dramatize how "freedom" alone fails as a mechanism for self-affirmation:

What exactly is freedom and what are its benefits? [. . .] Morrison doesn't give us an answer. Instead, she gives us tiny glimpses into alternate ways to be human together. [. . .] Maybe, in Morrison's imagination, that is the best we can do for each other. Utopia is the only place where a person can be both truly free and truly loved. [. . .] Morrison provides a hint at what that would look like, and of also why it can't be so. Both exile and slavery are produced by historical and social elements and they cannot be overcome simply by will or desire (47).

Fryckholm's sentiments about Morrison's fictionalized exploration of the matrix of categorical identities that constrain, and inevitably doom, the four women, are the product of a patient and open reading. It would seem that such a practice uncovers some implicit epideictic and deliberative functions within the text by looking for them and considering them, rather than simply being disgusted to find them there. An ethical mechanism for ethnographic criticism might begin with such a maneuver—to locate and seriously consider the implicit lesson of a testimonial novel.

Morrison's complex structure works to place her didactic message in the bookending first-person narratives of Florens and her mother. At the novel's close, "tua mãe" (for the first time the woman becomes "your mother" in a direct address to the child) tells Florens, in a narrative the girl child will never hear, that "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing" (167). This is a tentative condemnation of slavery, which seems to suggest that dominion reveals the weakness of the person who possesses it. All four characters living on the patroonship are damned in some way because of the hardship of this gift. Rebekka's wasting disease seems to be the result of her ministrations to Vaark, to whom she owed a kind of wifely fealty. Sorrow's rejection of her child is a refusal to take the dominion over the babe. Lina's loss of hope that she can mother Florens, and her relinquishment of any sense of cultural continuity, seem to be a letting go of her own self-determination. Florens's murder of the blacksmith when he rejects her also seems to be symptomatic of her will to "wrest dominion over another," which in the mother's final narrative is described as "a wrong thing," which is a more explicit condemnation. To be given dominion is difficult, but occasionally necessary, but to wrest it for one's self is always wrong. However, this final narrative also casts the giving of "dominion over yourself to another" as "a wicked thing" (167), and this description is the most condemning pronouncement the mother makes. Each woman gives herself over in turn to either Vaark or one of the other women. The difficult nexus of hard, wrong and wicked choices seems to mark the taking of responsibility for privilege—if privilege can be understood as "dominion over others"—and avoiding the wrong and wicked misuse of that privilege. In exploring privilege in this way, Morrison presents a deliberative call oriented towards readers in privileged positions to consider how they might respond to the forensic narrative. She asks readers, in the voice of Florens's mother, to make a judgment in response to the questions Fryckholm poses about love and freedom in the novel's subtext. The extratextual response, deliberation, would be to work toward a humanist perspective that might achieve the utopian paradox Fryckholm says Morrison denies to her characters. Each reader, as she or he considers the fraught structure of identification, differentiation, solidarity and negation must seek to discover "alternate ways to

be human together” by sharing love and respecting freedom in simultaneity. That sharing, in Morrison’s novel, is the necessary component for an ethical cross-cultural coalition.

Walker’s novel is also concerned with the double-bind presented between love and freedom, and her didactic message to readers is clearly foregrounded in her novel. If Morrison backs into the deliberative moment, then Walker begins with it. The opening of the text tells us that Kate is unsure whether she wants to continue her relationship with Yolo. Kate’s attachment to Yolo is a kind of as a kind of granting dominion over oneself to the other, which becomes the locus of her restlessness and dreams of dry rivers. Kate’s narrated rationale for the dissolution of several of her marriages—for “like Elizabeth Taylor, Kate had been married many times” (80)—has to do with giving dominion over herself, and her worldly goods, to her spouse. Kate, thinking on a short marriage to a woman named Lolly, notes that “[w]hat was horrible was the feeling of having been taken” (84). The framing of Kate as resistant to “rectifying” the wrongs that the ancestors, like Remus, presented during her “medicine seeking” may also act as instances of fear that love will overwhelm the separateness of self necessary for the preservation of freedom.

Loving Difference and Losing Identity

It really did seem at times as if our love made us bullet-proof or perhaps invisible. When we walked down the street together the bullets that were the glances of racist onlookers seemed turned back and were sent hurtling off into outer space.

—Alice Walker to Duncan Campbell, on her difficult and passionate marriage to Mel Leventhal, a white Civil-Rights attorney, in 1967

Love is very fierce. Powerful. Distorted.[. . .] That’s why we’re here.

We have to do some nurturing before we go. We must. It is more interesting, more complicated, more intellectually demanding and more

morally demanding to love somebody. To take care of somebody. To make that other person feel good. Now the dangers of that are the dangers of setting one's self up as a martyr, or as the one without whom nothing could be done. But the acquisitions of knowledge, that's what the mind does. I mean, it may not get the knowledge you want it to have, but it's busy all of the time. [. . .] We really don't know when our love is too thick. That's a big problem. We don't know when to stop. That is the problem of the human mind and the human soul. But we have to try.

—Toni Morrison to Bill Moyers, on why love is essential to human suffering and learning

A Mercy and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* are organized around characters that have a preoccupation with the intrinsic paradox of loving—which is portrayed as an intense identification in both novels—and being free—which necessarily mandates a separation from the other with whom one might identify. This preoccupation at the heart of Morrison's and Walker's characterizations may function as an apt metaphor for the sticky line between ethical and unethical reading practices for readers who engage with autoethnographic fiction. Just as love and freedom are entangled in a matrix of desire for the other and for separation, so too is the metropolitan response to autoethnography. Readers outside the categorical solidarity of the group for whom the author speaks can identify with the author and by extension that group. This identification would be to suspend the readers' subject position and to render a judgment as if they were a part of the collectively identified group. Alternately, metropolitan readers can insist upon separateness that gives them the freedom to make a judgment about the novel from their own subject position. This double-bind—between what Bakhtin has called empathy and exotopy—cannot be neatly negotiated. For metropolitan readers and critics the difference between approaching autoethnography through pure identification with the writer—a mechanism Wyatt has argued is more appropriately named “idealization”—or through a false-objectivist perspective that eradicates categorical

difference and instead makes judgments about literary merit—as reviewers must—is fraught with tension. On the one hand, some amount of idealization of the writing subject is necessary for the forensic function of the autoethnography. This function is what allows one voice to become “representative of a larger class” (Nance 2) that allows autoethnography to perform its tripartite functions that has the potential to link literary expression to social justice. However, in privileging a single narrative of systemic oppression, metropolitan readers collapse that larger class into the single narrative perspective with which they can identify.

Additionally, that idealization—the elevating of one voice to the status of the voice of a whole class—highlights a clear limitation inherent to the subject position of the metropolitan reader. For instance, Ann du Cille notes that when a white writer, in either critical or creative prose, uses this idealized form of identification with African Americans as a means to understand his or her own position in a hierarchically inflected society then he or she “takes symbolic wealth from [. . .] the romanticized black body” while simultaneously “ignoring its material poverty” (110).²² According to Wyatt, this kind of “specularization of difference is always reassuring [metropolitan readers] of their own unshakable privileged position within a racial binary” (115). What results from that sort of reassurance through the internalization of the spectre of the autoethnographers—and of the totality of the class she comes to represent for the readers—is a “subtly racist” interpretation of the autoethnography that may lead to

abstracting a woman’s personal strength from the social conditions that fostered her development of those strengths [which] protects the white [or otherwise metropolitan] idealizer from noticing the material conditions that attach to being black [and female] in the United States—and from feeling the need to do anything about them. (Wyatt 116)

The close identification, so necessary for an epideictic judgment, may actually subvert the deliberative impetus built into the text. Since the making of an epideictic judgment is figured (by Bakhtin as well as

²² Du Cille does not imply that all black bodies are materially impoverished, but that the dominant romanticization of the color line that figures white as superior to black will reinforce that sense of material poverty.

Nance) as a necessary precondition for deliberation on the part of the reader, a method that either separates identification from idealization, or encourages empathy without identification, might be preferable. The problem that remains, however, is how to produce such a method.

A reductive response to this problem might be to default to the review-oriented paradigm. In spite of the facility of that response, it must be remembered that the reliance upon an evaluative criticism that divorces subject position from an assumedly neutral set of criteria for gauging aesthetic value cannot fully overcome these problems either. That which is normatively literary according to those criteria will necessarily be inductively drawn from a list of the characteristics of “Great Works,” and since the default cultural position of those “Great Works” is most likely to be a dominant one, autoethnographers would always be at a disadvantage. On the other hand, the generation of a separate set of criteria for evaluating the literariness of autoethnography risks a sort of ghettoization of those texts. For instance, when Marxist literary critic Frederic Jameson attempted to find a unifying thread, the “national allegory,” in what he called “Third World literature” he justly faced a great deal of criticism from writers who identify with the categorical phrase “Third World” for his assumptions about what can and cannot happen within that text.²³

Even the placing of autoethnographic texts within a broadened canon of “Great Works” is problematic. When evaluating Morrison’s and Walker’s recent novels, reviewers often judged later texts by the criterion of the achievement of earlier ones. It is as if because *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* were “Great Works,” any treatment of similar subject matter in later texts by their authors is somehow invalid, suspicious or redundant. This is not a criticism often leveled at ethnographic texts. Faulkner, for example, has been celebrated for the continuity between *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, and in spite of continuing discussions of the problematic constructions of race in those novels, neither is in any danger of being consistently eviscerated by critics, ignored by scholars and undervalued by teachers.²⁴

²³ See Aijaz Ahmad’s response to Jameson, for instance.

²⁴ See Noel Polk’s critical introductions to the Vintage editions of both novels and Volpe’s reader’s guide for an extended discussion of these laudatory remarks, particularly from continental reviewers.

This is not the case when discussing the writing of African American women, particularly if their subject matter is not the stuff of “high art” according to the Eurocentric standards Morrison indicts in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.”

There are, of course, kinds of categorical difference outside ethnicity and gender, and those instances of difference may also contribute to some of the negative comments made by reviewers. For instance, the implicit criticism of Walker’s protagonist may have as much to do with her sexuality as her predilection for “New Age” spirituality. Reviewers seem to note Kate’s orientation as a primary identifier. The first line of Tuhus-Dubrow’s *New York Times Review* reads “Alice Walker’s new novel charts the spiritual path of Kate Talkingtree, a bisexual 50-something writer of mixed racial heritage.” Tuhus-Dubrow identifies Kate’s sexuality before any other descriptor, even though the novel focuses predominantly upon her romantic relationship with a male partner. Kakutani describes some latent lesbian sentiments as examples of “feminist inanities” (para 2). While it’s true that the Celie and Shug romance of *The Color Purple* was provocatively written and occasionally explored in scholarly criticism, that piece of the narrative is not central to either the majority of published criticism and reviews of the novel, nor is it even alluded to in the most mainstream presentation of the novel—the Stephen Spielberg film based upon it. Jewelle Gomez writes about her ensuing disappointment that, rather than sparking a chain of similar works that were embraced by the publication industry and the academy, the book seemed to fill a niche that allowed the industry and profession to justify ignoring new literary production:

Why hadn’t *The Color Purple* inspired the dozens of black lesbian novels I had been waiting for? Or, if [it] had been inspirational, what had happened to the black lesbian writers who would have taken to the path of following their muse? [. . .] It will take a concerted effort on the part of those invested in black queer academic studies to avert the serious crisis that is currently in the making as a result of the insidious misogyny that plagues our culture. The invisibility of black lesbians is already an ‘epidemic’ in many

academic arenas—black/African studies, women’s studies, literature, and sociology.
(290).

If an ethics of ethnographic criticism is to be considered then some evaluation of how ethnographic critics might choose autoethnographic subject matter is quite pertinent. To ignore writing that examines extranormative identities and perspectives simply because lesbianism and paganism are unpalatable to a metropolitan audience would be counterproductive. If the object of ethical ethnographic criticism is to aid in the autoethnographic project then scholarly work and pedagogical choices that might inoculate the academy against the epidemic of which Gomez writes is surely a worthwhile pursuit. Ignoring a work that may have potential to begin such an inoculation because of a set of biased evaluative criteria is rather petty in comparison.

Additionally, it is insufficient to choose a few “Great Works” by African American women to occupy a tokenized place in a multicultural canon. Academics ought not to read the way reviewers do, in an attempt to make a “Top Ten” list for each author; instead the ethical imperative to educate students and produce meaning scholarly dialogues could guide choices and responses. To posit, for instance, that *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* is “an index of how far Walker has progressed from passionate defender of the underprivileged to nefarious purveyor of nebulous new age codswallop” (Hickling para 1) does not seem to seriously consider the epideictic judgment the novel places before readers. Without a more fully developed analysis of how literature might function to defend the underprivileged, how might one know that “new age codswallop” isn’t an effective mechanism for raising the issues autoethnography seeks to bring into the “contact zone” of academic discourse? I’d wager that only through the strategic patience of the reader, coupled with a commitment to a research-based exploration of the context of the texts, can such a determination be presented and supported. That combination of readerly patience and emphasis on context, however, does prohibit criticism that fails to recognize the radical potential of these texts.

Ethnographic Representations within Autoethnographic Fiction

[D]epictions of Indians matter in novels about African Americans—
 Morrison’s examination of the potential of civil rights struggles that fall
 prey to the very oppressive power structures they hope to subvert hinges
 on a developed analysis of the meaning of Indigenism. The idea of
 sharing space with Indigenes, the meaning of those who migrate and
 those already there, undergirds every aspect of the novel, literally and
 symbolically.

—Craig Womack, on the importance of looking closely at the
 intersections between African American and Native American history in
 Morrison’s work

A firm believer that our primary connection is to the Earth, Walker
 seconds Indians when she insists that we must restore this spiritual
 connection if we are to experience our original wholeness.

—Karla Simcikova, on how Walker’s use of “Indian consciousness”
 serves her novel’s didactic purpose

To default to acceptance of the authority of the autoethnographer is not synonymous with an affirmation of all depictions in autoethnography. Augmenting patience and contextualization with keen analysis of the implicit politics of representation within an ethical structure requires a certain amount of willingness to critique as well as accept the prose. In just such an augmentation of my interpretation of the autoethnographic properties of the texts, I now turn to the ways in which Morrison and Walker depict Indigenous identity and Anglo-American culture from an explicitly female African-American perspective. The representation of characters who are like metropolitan readers, and like readers in marginal positions that are distinct from the autoethnographers’, results in a certain amount of “speaking for” (or, at very least, about) others. In the cases of *A Mercy* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Morrison and

Walker speak both about and for Indigenous Americans as well as African American women. Walker's ethnographic speech acts undermine some of the modeling for ethical cross-cultural coalitions that her fiction and expository prose presents. Morrison, too, uses characterizations of an Indigenous Other that may trouble the paradigm of ethical ethnographic intervention I've gleaned from her work, but, as Craig Womack notes, Morrison's depictions also work to illustrate the ways in which all autoethnographic endeavors work as ethnography on a particular level. If American Africanist writers—like Faulkner and Hemingway in Morrison's own examples from *Playing in the Dark*—use the marginal figure of the African American to define American whiteness, then the depictions of Native characters in Morrison's novels, as much as her depictions of Euro-American oppressors, work to define African American identity in the service of her representation of ethnic solidarity.

Every autoethnographic text, to some extent, participates in an ethnographic endeavor, even if that ethnographic endeavor is only in the portrayal of the “connectedness” of oppressive systems that seems to permit and encourage empathy from those metropolitan readers. This may occasionally be manifest in the autoethnographic endeavor self-representing not only a localized ethnic culture—with whom the author expresses solidarity through categorical identification—but also in representing other categorically marginalized groups—with whom the author may identify even if she does not occupy a subject position within the group as bonds of solidarity are internally constructed by that group.

Walker's and Morrison's novels contain depictions of indigenous identity alongside the depictions of African American women's identity work ethnographically and their ethnographic depictions face some of the same ethical complications that metropolitan readers must negotiate when considering the depictions Walker and Morrison craft of African American women. Walker's depictions of Pan-Latin American and Polynesian traditional cultures and Morrison's portrayals of the Native Americans living in colonial Virginia have sparked a small amount of critical attention already. Some of this critical attention has been tentatively positive, but the praise from some critics has been tempered with a pronounced concern for the ethics of such ethnographic fictional portrayals of the Indigene as Primordial Other. For

example, Native Nationalist critic Craig Womack describes his interpretations of Morrison's portrayals as a "position that fits somewhere in between dismissal of Morrison for missing the boat on Indians and ecstasy over any mention of Native people whatsoever[,] no matter the quality of her depictions" (20). The tension between the divergent perspectives Womack points to represents an important instance for examining how the ethics of ethnographic representation might be explored. By considering criticism that both applauds and chastises the kinds of representations of indigenous identity that Morrison and Walker create, perhaps some insight into the function of the ethnographic portions of their autoethnographic novels can be gleaned.

Some critics have embraced the novelists' use of the archetype of the Indian-as-Steward-of-the Earth for progressive ends, and at least one of those critics has worked to explore how the ethnography might work to forward ecological preservation and human-rights initiatives. Karla Simcikova, one of the only scholars to publish analyses of *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, argues that Walker's representations of indigenous characters in the novel are indicative of an integrational impetus in her work that teaches readers to consider how they, like all people, are connected to one another and to the earth ("Life and Its Survival" 40). Walker herself, in *Living the Word*, notes that "Indians were very much in my consciousness" at the time when her considerations of Womanist spirituality "had reached another plateau" (46) and that only by an identification with what she perceived as Native traditional beliefs was she able to move forward. Simcikova suggests that this phase, beginning in the late 1980s, marked a shift in the focus of Walker's prose. She further argues that *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* may be the most progressive, if critically undervalued, text in

the phase when 'Indian Consciousness' took root in the very foundation of black womanist spirituality that [allowed] Walker, without abandoning her prior interest, [. . .] to expand her vision to broader concerns [. . .] Walker's interest in Native American spirituality [. . .] affirmed her belief that Earth can be saved *only if* we recognize the spiritual roots of our destructive habits. (38)

Certainly, the interpretation Simcikova provides of the text makes for a facile ethnographic reading of Walker's ethnographic representation of indigenous ideology. The novel performs a forensic function by narrating for readers a confrontation with a traumatic past—through the stories of the ancestors, who discuss their suffering, and through the stories of the other “Medicine Seekers,” who seek every kind of psychic salve, from absolution for murder in self-defense, to healing from childhood incest. The text also participates in an epideictic push towards its readers. Walker epideictically addresses her readers by asking them to decide whether these “destructive habits” can be justified. The text may even have a deliberative effect that encourages readers to consider, not just the “spiritual roots” of this destruction, but also how they might intervene in the systems that perpetuate it, or at very least, minimize their own complicity in that perpetuation. In spite of these potentially transformative effects, perhaps readers should also consider the representations as instances of ethnography, which must be managed with care to avoid breaches in ethics like those discussed above. Walker's ethical breach in her ethnography is apparent in the culturally essentialist tenets of this “Indian consciousness” she shares with readers.

Because Walker speaks for a pan-ethnic construction—the Indigene—that is comprised of many, many separate cultural traditions that are not fully manifest in her representations, her ethnographic conclusions may be a bit suspect. Walker's deployment of Native American identity is perhaps best illustrated by her portrayals of Armando Juarez, the South American shaman who leads Kate and the other “Medicine Seekers” in the rituals associated with the consumption of yagé, and who encourages his wards in the Amazon to consider the unity of the world as they confront their ancestors and commune with Grandmother. This depiction is not rich in context. Armando continually stresses the need for continuity between the past, present and future, but the rendering of his traditional beliefs is aspecific. Armando often sings to the “Medicine Seekers”—none of whom seem to be Indigenous South Americans partaking of the rituals of their own heritage—and the narrator maintains an almost willful ambiguity about his ethnic background in describing those songs:

He sang low and solemn, holding Kate's hand, until everyone in the camp had come out of their huts or their spots by the river, and gathered silently around them. Everyone listened to the amazing thing Armando's singing was. Most of them knew not one word of the language he was singing in. Perhaps Kechua or Mayan. It didn't matter. They felt the soul of it. They intuitively felt it was that rare, audacious yet respectful song that dared to ask mercy of the ancestors. (92)

Even though it does not matter to the privileged "Medicine Seekers," who play the part of eco-tourists on their first visits to any country in South America (50), the language of the song may matter to readers who identify with South American culture. In fact, it may matter very much.²⁵ Peruvians who are aware and proud of their Mayan heritage, or Guatemalans who grew up in Kechua-speaking villages, may find the particular cultural origin of the "rare, audacious yet respectful song" incredibly important context for their readings of the text. Metropolitan readers who look to the text for "authentic" renditions of traditional culture—particularly since the emphatic focus upon ancestry is so central to the novel's didactic appeal—may be tempted to accept a pan-Latin American construct of pre-Colombian mysticism that, in fact, relies upon an exoticized ideal of the Indigenous American—which, as Walker narrates the passage, may be construed as "the soul" of the cultural practice to which the metropolitan characters are voyeurs—to generate empathy through idealization. This sort of empathy necessarily disrupts the ability of readers to see the abuse of the earth and the oppression of indigenes as systemic rather than particular. In attempting to illuminate the connections between the exploitation of indigenous peoples and of the natural environment, Walker risks erasing differences between the indigenous populations for whom she speaks. It is this sort of ventriloquism against which Elam and Alcoff warn and Owens and Womack protest.

The romantic description of Armando's song seems to reify a long colonial tradition of literary depictions of the "noble savage" that has been the subject of much critical debate. That tradition has been

²⁵ See Nguyen's discussion of the stakes of general or inaccurate representation in autoethnographic fiction. By examining the representation of Vietnam in Joy Kogawa's writing, Nguyen demonstrates how over-generalizing works to undermine the ways in which identity is deployed to radical ends in literature.

linked to an implicit message in literature that may compel metropolitan readers to accept the erasure of threatened, particular and multiple indigenous cultures. Replacing real indigenous histories with an ethnographically constructed image does little to preserve the truth of those traditions. When ethnography has those sorts of forensic failures, the possibility of epideictic and deliberative success becomes tenuous; without a clear historical record in which to base a judgment no consideration about how to address the wrong that judgment highlights is possible. The reduction of a rich history that informs Armando's song, not as a cultural practice, but as an entertainment that the "Medicine Seekers" can "intuitively" understand, seems to indicate that attention to cultural specificity is not a concern for the construction of ancestry in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. This seems at odds with the ways in which Morrison and Walker have written about the necessity of using the ancestor in one's fiction, because the use of ethnographic representations to entertain a metropolitan reader or exoticize a didactic narrative violates the ethos of critical intervention for which Morrison's and Walker's works argue.

If, as Morrison has argued, depicting the ancestor is one of the most "distinctive elements of African-American writing" that situates contemporary stories within absent histories through the use of the ancestral "timeless people" as the subjects of forensic autoethnography, then the depiction of the cultural legacy of other marginal peoples seems a large responsibility of which African-American authors might be especially aware ("Rootedness" 343). Walker, too, sees the past as apparitional and particular. In her discussion of her own writing process, Walker has noted that she "gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life [her] ancestors lived, and in the writing of it [she] [. . .] had the feeling of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see [her] consulting and acknowledging them" ("Writing *The Color Purple*" 453). Both invocations of writing the ancestor seem to indicate that solidarity is formed across history through shared culture, particularly shared cultural trauma.²⁶ There are some important links between the cultural traumas experienced by ancestors of

²⁶ In both essays, the authors discuss the cultural trauma of slavery in particular. In "Writing *The Color Purple*" Walker indicates she was access a presence wishing for the acknowledgement of a silenced history. Her fiction was an attempt to present such an acknowledgment and her writing was guided by her concern with of the effects of the

contemporary Indigenous Americans and African Americans. The system of Euro-American colonization created both the American Indian and Afro-Caribbean diasporas. The ownership of land and distribution of wealth is clearly inflected by issues of European patrimony in both the U.S. and in Latin-America.

Neither novel, however, seems to dwell on the interconnectedness of those issues within the text, which may indicate that the forensic work is sous-textual or absent in these representations. The dangers in the representations that Womack critiques and Simcikova praises in Morrison's and Walker's novels are not only risks of metropolitan readers' idealization, which Wyatt and Franklin have found to be disruptive to autoethnographic intentions. The representation also situates personal traumas for particular characters—like Kate's crisis of self—as a sort of synecdoche for cultural traumas for whole categorical groups—like Armando's unnamed Indigenous ancestors who were the victims of genocide and colonization. Certainly some collapsing of the individual into the collective is warranted by the autoethnographic project, but the negative consequences of equating a localized trauma with a cultural one is that the specifics of that cultural trauma's history may be erased.

A similar critique might be leveled against the representation of the Two-Spirit Hawaiians Yolo meets. Their difference is iconically idealized—a manifesto against the hegemony of gender binaries made flesh, without the troubling nexus of personal and political that usually marks real difference—and thus the didactic potential of the portrayal may not force a clear confrontation of that hegemonic system for all readers. In a number of ways, Walker's novel collapses boundaries between categorically marginalized groups—Kate, Armando and Anunu are all the same sort of spiritual leader, regardless of the disparate traditions that produce their insight. Likewise Yolo, because he is non-white, is rendered as *like* the native Hawaiians, who find him to be inherently trustworthy rather than suspect, regardless of his status as a tourist and an outsider. There are ways in which this sort of collapsing of boundaries might be politically expedient for marginalized people, but these sorts of depictions may also encourage metropolitan readers and readers of color to ignore the important differences between categorical

American slave system on family structures and upon women might be reconsidered. Morrison's "Rootedness" seems to echo these claims.

identities and to fuse distinct histories of cultural trauma together in ways that may swamp the specificity necessary for qualitatively successful forensic autoethnography. Kate, as an African American spiritual seeker, is categorically identified with Anunu, an African priestess, and Armando, a Mayan shaman, in the fiction without any distinction between their culturally derived subject positions. The differences in their religious traditions are erased. Yolo, a heterosexual African American man, is similarly allied to the Two-Spirit Hawaiians without any investigation of the large differences between their socially constructed situations—particularly those that arise from differences in class, regional origin, sexual orientation and gender identity. In Walker’s novel, all non-white ethnic identities are collapsed into a monolithic “Third World” category that assumes solidarity without investigating the methods by which that solidarity is achieved.

Morrison’s novel also seems to collapse individual trauma—motherloss and physical and sexual childhood abuse—with cultural trauma—genocide, enslavement and institutionalized misogyny, in her treatment of a Native character. In doing so, Morrison may implicitly draw links between the personal and the cultural to encourage and limit empathy in ways that may present an important instance of autoethnographic didacticism. Personal traumas, as Morrison depicts them, are the root of Lina’s internalized questioning of her own cultural background and traditions, which creates an entangled web of personal and cultural identification that is further complicated by the ways in which these traumatic experiences might seem comparable to the experiences of the other women around whom the narrative is structured.

First, Lina’s narration is marked by a concern with whether or not it is possible for her to achieve Christian salvation. The Presbyterian community baptized her and pronounced her “saved,” but would not allow her to attend their church. The Anabaptists, whose community neighbors the patroonship, declare that Lina, like Sorrow and Florens, will be denied entry into heaven because her race marks her as “no different than beasts of the field” (96). Sorrow eschews any religious ideology and Florens remains

caught between her mother's Catholicism and Rebekka's agnosticism until the final chapter of her narration when she attempts to justify her murder of the blacksmith with her sense of untouchable freedom.

Lina's crisis of faith is different from Florens's, because she grapples with religion not out of a sense of guilt, but as a way to grapple with a sense of cultural bereavement. This difference is apparent in Lina's descriptions of the goings-on in the novel as hybridized set of myths—drawn from both indigenous and Christian traditions—the most notable of which involves the death of a mother eagle that parallels the casting out of humanity from Eden (60). Just before she narrates the tragedy of the mother eagle, Lina articulates a clear critique of the religious systems that the colonizing “Europes” have forced her to learn, which she frames as a prideful shunning of difference. Her narration clearly positions categorical solidarity among the Europes as a destructive influence:

Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, and family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations. (56)

Lina's considerations about solidarity through faith are part of struggle to have some sort of collective identity, which is what she lost when her community of origin died of small pox. Her mother hunger is one of the ways she expresses this desire for what was lost.

Morrison successfully connects the personal traumas Lina attempts to negotiate through religious searching and connections to the other women to the cultural trauma of colonization. Lina's transcultural religious search criticizes separateness as a spiritual value, and this implicit criticism is situated in the novel as a point of direct contrast to Florens's feeling of being “[u]nforgiven” (161). Both characters emblemize their separateness from the patriarchal, white supremacist hierarchy that organizes colonial society, but Florens places herself outside, rejected and abject, alone and untouchable. Lina, in her own imagining, is a thwarted force of communal togetherness who at last sits in judgment of the prideful impetus to differentiate and hierarchize. As Lenora Todaro has argued, Lina's narrative reconfigures the

colonization of North America as “the genesis of racist America, with Adam and Eve played by the Anglo-Dutch trader Jacob Vaark and his mail-order bride Rebekka” (para. 5).

The novel reinforces Lina’s narrative over the other characters’ perspectives on religion and solidarity. For instance, Florens’s lover, the blacksmith, enters the patroonship to make a wrought iron gate for Vaark’s opulent new mansion. The motif he chooses for this gate—intertwined serpents—seems especially prescient. In *A Mercy*, pride does seem to precede the fall. Even the opulence of the house that Vaark will never see completed seems to testify to this fact. The symbolism of a colonialist entrepreneur building himself a shrine is recurring in American literature. Readers may be reminded of Sutpen’s similar endeavor in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, or of Mauser’s mansion of sacred Ojibway trees in Erdrich’s *Four Souls*. Like Sutpen and Mauser, Vaark’s house is the symbol of an ironic patrimonial value that, like his “unscrupulously gained wealth” (Waegener 109) cannot be passed on to a socially legitimized heir. Just as Sutpen’s home is burned by Clytie and Mauser’s home is neglected by Fleur and her son, Vaark’s home is literally the text of Florens’s “confession,” which she scratches on the walls with the head of a nail as Rebekka lies dying. Florens’s scratching commits the story of her life—from the narrative of her mother’s decision to give her away to her murder of the only person she risked loving since that decision. Her scratching may be a way to grafts herself to the house, because she feels a complicity in her mother’s betrayal and a heavy weight of guilt for the murder. Her scratching might also be a mechanism for controlling the narrative; she uses the letters that she is taught by the priest to make herself the master of the house and her life story by writing it in her own hand in ways that both reject and internalize her mother’s Catholicism. The ambiguity of the text, coupled with the inevitable dissolution of the household, doesn’t present readers with a clear path for cross-ethnic coalition.

Lina’s final resolution of her own religious questioning, and her rejection of the mansion, seems to mark a clear rejection of the patriarchal, white supremacist and Judeo-Christian domination that will shape American history as the colonies become a nation. Instead of taking on the legacy of this colonial “original sin,” Lina repudiates that most obvious symbol of the colonizer’s pride by refusing to ever set

foot within the house and embraces her traditional tribal belief system. The efficacy of Lina's ultimate decision, especially in contrast to Florens's ambivalence, is perhaps undermined by the fact that the traditions to which she returns are not specified adequately within the novel. The cultural origin of her solution is entirely absent—already vanished in 1680, when the novel is set, before the signing of treaties, or the “Indian Wars,” or federal removal, or sterilization programs or any other forensic detail that may be absent from the dominant historical narrative that Morrison's novel might seek to correct.

In addition to providing ground for an analysis of divergent religious traditions, the women at the patroonship are vexed by maternity. Lina is preoccupied with motherhood; she wishes for Rebekka to mother her, even though Rebekka is her junior. Lina longs to be pregnant, and hopes that Sorrow will allow her to raise her unborn child. When Florens comes to stay, it is Lina who most readily accepts the child and attempts to act as her mother. Lina courts Florens by providing her with shoes, just as “minha mãe” did. After Florens rejects the women and decides to run away to the blacksmith, Lina mourns as if the child has died, noting that “Florens'[s] shoes, the rabbit skin ones she had made for her ten years ago, lay under the sleigh—lonely, empty like two patient coffins” (61). Both the fear of religious condemnation and the trauma of motherloss are shaped by Lina's marginalized ethnic identity in the novel. She and the other non-white characters share the disinclusion in the kingdom of heaven as constructed by the discourse of the Anabaptists, whereas Rebekka successfully joins their community after Vaark's death. Lina's separation from her mother is a consequence of ethnic cleansing, so that even though all four women are separated from maternal support, only she and Florens endure that separation through an institutionalized system that produces a cultural trauma. By linking the symptoms of personal traumas like motherloss and sexual abuse to a system of racism that colors the experiences of three of the four women around whom the narrative is organized, Morrison seems to indicate to readers that there are distinctions between experiences of loss that are located along borders between categorical identities. Such distinctions force a confrontation with difference that prevents metropolitan readers from idealizing and identifying.

For instance, these sorts of distinctions are manifest not just in the contrast of Florens's characterization to Lina's, but also in a comparison of Lina's feelings about maternity to Rebekka's. Rebekka was separated from her mother, but since this separation occurred when she had already reached adulthood the trauma is developmentally normalized rather than inflected by race. Rebekka, like Lina, has "mother hunger," which is thwarted by her repeated stillbirths and the terror of infant mortality, but unlike Lina, Rebekka's desire for a child is actually a means to exercise influence over Vaark. Rebekka believes that if she bears a living son that her husband will spend less time away from the patroonship. Lina's desire for a child is posited in opposition to the patriarchy that governs Rebekka's desire, rather than in its service, because Lina seeks to become pregnant in spite, rather than because, of Vaark's wishes. In this way, the competing narratives of "mother hunger" become symbolic of the competing narrative perspectives in American historiography. Rebekka's normative relationship to her own mother and her reasons for desiring a child serve as a sort of measure for the different sets of expectations that construct white women's lives and Native women's lives. By understanding Lina's perspective as the forensic addendum to the historiography of motherhood in colonial times, Morrison again produces an autoethnographic narrative. This narrative contains potential for empathy across ethnic boundaries—the desire to have and be mothered that Lina and Rebekka both experience—and provides ground for exotopy—the differing conditions under which each character loses her mother or is thwarted in her attempts to raise children—that prevents idealization. Rebekka's individual trauma—the inability to deliver a living child—is posited next to Lina's inability to procreate because of the cultural trauma that separates her from her community of origin.

Rebekka and Lina also present two oppositionally situated religious narratives. As Vaark's absences lengthen and after his eventual death, Lina recalls and embraces some of the traditions she remembers from her time with her own mother before the sickness. She bathes in the river, even though Rebekka, fearing Lina will become ill, forbids it. She also practices herbal healing and ice-fishes when Vaark fails to adequately provision the women for a blizzard. This insistence on retaining cultural values

might seem, on-face, to function as a repudiation of the colonial impetus that reinscribes race within the system of slavery in the novel. In fact, some critics have argued just that about Morrison's depictions of American Indian identity. Virginia Kennedy suggests that Morrison "explores legitimate historical connections between black and Indian peoples on American soil that have remained outside the realm of traditional historical accounts" (21). Paul Pasquaretta even suggests that this sort of representation is an overriding motif in much of the Morrison canon; "the interrelationships between black and Indian communities are central, if subtle elements of the writings of Toni Morrison" (279). It is undeniably true that Morrison's narratives of the intersections of African American history with Native American history preserve differences between ethnic categories better than Walker's does. Were this the only criterion for producing an ethical ethnographic representation, then *A Mercy* would model cross-ethnic coalitions perfectly.

However, Womack sees a limitation in Morrison's literary depictions. He argues that "examinations of shared African American and Native American destinies in Morrison's work" are "rather fleeting" and "it is not the actual historical interactions that have been ephemeral but their depictions in Morrison's writing that do not achieve their full potential" (23). In looking at a few novels in which Morrison treats Native characters this is certainly true. As a Muskogee literary scholar, Womack is especially suited to address those depictions. The displaced Natives in *A Mercy* originally occupied Virginia and Maryland. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's great grandfather is married to Singing Bird, a woman whose indigenous nation is also removed from the southeastern coast of the United States. The all-black town at the center of *Paradise* is located in central Oklahoma. Since Womack's Crow, Creek and Cherokee heritage links his tribal ancestors to each of these locations, he would seem uniquely qualified, by virtue of his own cultural immersion, to recognize particular cultural traditions in Morrison's texts. He finds that there are no depictions related to the experiences of specific cultural groups of Native peoples at the historical times and places in which she represents them in contact with her African

American characters. The fact that he sees that potential missed certainly points to some troubling ethnographic tendencies in the texts.

Another Native critic, Louis Owens, makes this point with even more vitriol when he claims that Morrison “shows a surprising refusal or inability to acknowledge the Native American presence in the figuration of whiteness in racialized America” (37). Morrison’s project in her monograph *Playing in the Dark* is to “draw a map [. . .] of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and core exploration as did the original charting of the New World” and in *A Mercy* that map appears as the setting for her fictionalized testimony. Owens notes that “[t]hroughout the ‘discovery’ and ‘exploration’ charted in *Playing in the Dark*, the Native American presence is implicitly invoked and routinely erased” (41). Owens’ perspective may seem exaggerated, in light of the views expressed by Kennedy and Pasquaretta, but there is a kernel of truth in his claims that Morrison’s expository renderings and fictional representations of the construction of race in American literature do not serve to correct the absence of Native Americans from the dominant historical discourse. Morrison’s works may actively encourage readers to question the moral implications of the cultural trauma experienced by particular tribal groups, but these works do not posit a clear deliberation on how to respond to any moral imperatives that might result from the epideictic judgments readers may make. Owen’s scathing critique of *Playing in the Dark*, overstated as some may find it, has particular bearing on some passages from *A Mercy*. For instance, his point might be most clearly manifest in the moment in *A Mercy* when Florens—en route to the blacksmith, alone, hungry and exhausted—encounters a group of Native men astride horses. In this moment, Florens reveals some sentiments that complicate the ethos of Morrison’s discourse about Native identity. The character’s mechanism for relating to the men reifies a dominant discourse of Nativist modernism, which, like American Africanism, posits dominant identity in relation to a vanishing figure of the Indigene as Other. Florens’s narration identifies them according to the schema of categorical allegiance she learns at the patroonship; she describes them as “All male, all native, all young. Some look younger than me” (102). Her subordinate status is assured by their

maleness, but their ethnic identities and ages are at odds with this. In fact, as Florens seeks to interpellate their ethnic categorization, she relies on comparisons to Lina, who is emblematic of Native identity for her. Florens notes that “the hair of both boy’s and horses is long and free like Lina’s” and that their eyes are “eyes are slant, not big and round like Lina’s” (102-103). She is struck by their difference from the blacksmith, Vaark and Senhor—the only other free men she knows—and these differences are manifest in their possessions. The men “wear soft shoes but their horses are not shod” and “[n]one have saddles on their horses. None. [Florens] marvels at that” (102). Their material impoverishment is indicative of their savagery, which is manifest in the fear of them that Florens espouses even though they never threaten her. The men’s speech and extension of kindness to Florens—one of them shares his water and food with her—are marked by exoticism that tinges upon the erotic:

They rein in close. They circle. They smile. I am shaking. [. . .] They talk words I don’t know and laugh. One pokes his fingers in his mouth, in out, in out. Others laugh more. Him too. [. . .] He dismounts and comes close. I smell the perfume of his hair. [. . .] He grins while removing a pouch hanging from a cord across his chest. He holds it out to me but I am too trembling to reach so he drinks from it and offers it again. I want it am dying for it but I cannot move. What I am able to do is make my mouth wide. He steps closer and pours the water as I gulp it. [. . .] The one pouring closes his pouch and after watching me wipe my chin returns it to his shoulder. Then he reaches into a belt hanging from his waist and draws out a dark strip, hands it to me, chomping with his teeth. It looks like leather but I take it. As soon as I do he runs and leaps on his horse. I am shock. Can you believe this. He runs on grass and flies up to sit astride his horse. I blink and they all disappear. Where they once are is nothing. (102-3).

Florens’s response—fear and desire mingled—presents a permutation of Walter Benn Michael’s “Nativist Modernist” aesthetic values. Micheals argues that “identitarian and racist views of culture” that mark American literature during the aesthetic transition from Realism to Modernism “are the same as those advocated in debates about identity in the 1990s” when Postmodern aesthetics become the stylistic norm (van Hallberg para 3). These native men, like the last of James Fennimore Cooper’s Mohicans, are figured

as unidimensional, primordial ancestors of the contemporary masculinity embodied in Vaark and the blacksmith, and Florens's submissive response reiterates rather than resists that masculine authority. The young men are figured ambiguously as either threats to Florens's safety or objects of her desire. Her "shaking," "trembling" and "dying for it" are either corporeal signs of fear or lust. The end of the passage doesn't feature Florens's relief or sexual frustration, only "apple trees aching to bud and an echo of laughing boys" (103). Perhaps the "aching to bud" is a metaphor for Florens's desire, denied by the boys' laughter. In any case, the encounter is fleeting and the disappearance of the Native men is total—the narration literally renders them into nothing, an absence without clear interpretive value in the story's arc.

In raising these issues of ethnographic depictions in Morrison's and Walker's novels, I do not mean to communicate that these sorts of depictions are evidence to condemn or repudiate the texts I analyze. On the contrary, I think that there is great value in presenting this sort of analysis as part of the dialogue about how representations, and critical responses to them, might shape the ways in which identity is understood and used to organize social justice initiatives. Like Simcikova, I believe that "[l]eaving aside the literary shortcomings" of any work of fiction may allow readers to examine that work's potential to teach readers (both in-group and metropolitan), which is almost always "worth exploring" in the case of autoethnographic fiction ("Life and Its Survival" 27). Like Womack, I understand that it is not helpful "to point out the deficits" of that fiction, but rather "to mark missed opportunities which, in fact, do not have to keep being missed" (50). One of the most useful claims to emerge from an examination of the autoethnographic functions of Morrison and Walker's texts may be that their implicit claims prove an ongoing need to examine the relationship between intersecting categories of identity and to consider how solidarity and identification are constructed and mediated by representation. Doing so, it seems to me, may allow readers and writers to work toward a clear understanding of how history and social hierarchy have been shaped by a colonial process that, as Womack says, "kept us from knowing one another" (51). If conversations about these novels from

scholars in multiple disciplines and subject positions might begin a process of knowing across difference, of creating solidarity without identification, then it seems a worthwhile pursuit to hold them.

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Chapter 3:

Who's Reading?: 'Red' Narrators, (Un)read Narratives and Ethical Applications of Nationalist and Cosmopolitan Literary Criticism to Sherman Alexie's *Flight* and Craig Womack's *Drowning in Fire*

The appropriation of Native issues by non-Natives is still acceptable in Native studies in ways that have long been unacceptable in regards to other minorities. [. . .] Perhaps we need some retrospection at this point—a time of self-scrutiny as to where Native literature has been, where it is going, and to what degree Indian people should control how it gets there.

—Craig Womack, in the introduction to his 1999 monograph *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*

I'm still a literary writer, but I still have a semi-pop image that has a lot to do with being Indian. There's all sorts of perceptions about me being angry. [W]ith the fame I have, every gesture gets magnified, so anything I say, any impromptu comment, has a lot of power. It may not necessarily be what I believe. Everything is exaggerated. In the end, let them think what they want.

—Sherman Alexie, in a 2003 interview with *Publisher's Weekly*

In this chapter, I will situate Muskogee author Craig Womack's 2001 novel *Drowning in Fire* in an intertextual dialogue with Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie's 2007 novel *Flight*. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how contemporary fiction by Native American authors functions as testimonial literature, which bears witness to instances of cultural trauma suffered by individual tribal nations and those instances of solidarity around trauma that effects a pan-Indian population. Like Morrison and Walker, Alexie and Womack come to quite different conclusions about the potential for

cross-ethnic coalitions to serve Native social justice initiatives and about the most appropriate mechanisms for creating such coalitions. In spite of these differences, both Womack and Alexie use their novels to illuminate some of the systemic problems that contemporary Indigenous peoples face. In doing so, their characters are explicitly framed through autoethnographic permutations to the *bildungsroman* genre.²⁷ If Morrison and Walker posited changes in the coming-of-age narrative to call attention to the ways in which African American women are prevented from achieving self-actualization by racial and gendered constraints upon their identities, then Womack and Alexie posit some changes to the narrative trope to illustrate how queer, Native boys and men also face barriers to that sort of psychic and social development. Alexie's and Womack's main characters—Zits and Josh, respectively—are denied the achievement of *bildung*—the enlightenment that indicates full maturation—in *Flight* and *Drowning in Fire* because they each face a series of systemic problems that result from the lack of social justice for the Native populations to which they belong. These systemic problems link the characters' individuated problems to a legacy of cultural trauma. The novelists implicitly attempt to persuade readers to consider social justice initiatives that address those systemic problems directly. However, in *Drowning in Fire*, these persuasive messages, and the means the author employs to communicate them to readers, are radically different from those in *Flight*. Through different autoethnographic fictional strategies, both authors work toward a literary consciousness-raising via narrative proliferation. They model, in their fiction, strategies for understanding sexual violence as an act of colonization and for addressing personal and collective traumas resulting from sexual violence. Additionally, both novels produce contextual, transcultural permutations of tribal traditions and mainstream American culture that may work to explain

²⁷ In Chapter 2, I borrow from Cathy Waegner a definition of the coming of age narrative genre that is typically called by its compound German name; *roman*, meaning novel, with the modifying prefix *bildungs*, which translates roughly as a “the cultivation of learning or enlightenment.” Waegner’s claim is that *A Mercy* stages the ways in which the four women are unable to negotiate this sort of cultivation because of the social constraints they face as women, Natives, Blacks and/or people of mixed race. I’d argue that it is possible to extend this analysis to Womack and Alexie’s text because of the ways that extranormative desire and Native identity pose problems for the characters in the novels to address before they can achieve the enlightenment that marks their initiation into manhood.

the unique facets of Native American subject positions in terms that metropolitan readers can understand. To do this, each novel augments an inaccurate dominant historical record.

Reading Native texts as literary testimony can be a useful mechanism to illuminate the kinds of judgments for which Native authors may call. Because autoethnographic literature tells a cultural story through the telling of a personal one, both Alexie and Womack write autethnographically, as they each speak collectively for a community of which they are a part. In spite of this commonality, their novels may produce contradictory judgments when the narratives are interpreted epideictically. Readers who undertake the cognitive work of an epideictic interpretation will assign blame for the atrocities represented in the text by evaluating the actions of the characters and the historical context of the setting in the fiction to determine the causality resulting in instances of trauma. Womack uses a permeable notion of Creek identity to foreground explicitly Creek issues in his text; whereas Alexie uses a pan-tribal portrayal of Native subjectivity to craft his narrative. As a result of these differences, Womack's text may produce a model for using a confederated national identity to illustrate the potential of cross-cultural coalitions. Alexie, alternatively, seems to argue that a universalist humanist message, staged through the reification of normative Western gender roles and kinship structures, is the best way to provide succor to Native subjects in crisis. In what follows, my own adjudication between these perspectives will reveal why I believe Womack's methods and conclusions may be more effective for realizing autoethnographic goals—forensic, epideictic and deliberative responses.

In affirming Womack's findings, I will also explain how I believe non-Native literary critics can use the paradigm of Native American literary Nationalism to ethically engage with Native-authored literatures of witness. The intertextual dialogue I'll produce in my analyses of *Drowning in Fire* and *Flight* stages one of the key critical conversations in Native literary studies today. At present, Native literary studies, as a field, is preoccupied with a debate between two diametrically opposed perspectives. The cosmopolitan perspective is propagated by critics who insist that Native literatures can be studied using the same methods that mainstream literary analyses use. Cosmopolitan critics, like Arnold Krupat

and Elvira Pulitano, argue that applications of high theory by Euro-American critics to Native texts are the best way to demarginalize the Native literary canon. Native Nationalist critics, like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Robert Warrior, vehemently disagree. Because Native authors write from subject positions that are heavily influenced by tribal literary traditions, which are culturally distinct from the literary tradition to which much of that high theory speaks, Nationalist critics argue that traditional literary methods serve only to colonize the texts that Native authors produce. To avoid textual colonization, Nationalist critics insist on a set of interpretive methods that promotes tribal cultures and raises awareness about the issues Native communities face. This means, among other things, beginning with a culturally relativist approach to every Native authored text. By reading Alexie's novel for indications of support for the cosmopolitanist perspective and reading Womack's novel to highlight his Nationalist representations, I hope to work to negotiate this critical dialectic in ways that allow me to ethically intervene in the debate between cosmopolitanist and Nationalist critics.

Even outside their novels, Womack and Alexie have taken part in this debate. In fact, the polarization of Womack's and Alexie's positions on the importance of tribal cultures is a microcosmic depiction of the larger conversation in the field of Native Studies. In 1998, Womack wrote that:

The assumption that everything begins and ends with the white version of reality has everything to do with [. . .] the belief that European literary theory is inherently superior for explicating texts written by Native people [. . .] Subsuming or erasing an Indian voice is central to these endeavors. ("Politicizing HIV Prevention [. . .]" 207)

Womack's allegiance to the Nationalist side of the critical conversation is clear. Alexie disagrees with Womack, and has verbally indicted Nationalist scholarship by saying "[W]hat I see a lot of Native scholars doing [is] blaming the victims. Blaming the loss of culture on the people who had the culture taken from them and blaming their descendants because we are not recovering something" (Nelson 41). Alexie finds that Nationalism may be a mechanism for generating criticism that participates in this sort of victim-blaming.

The oppositional nature of Womack's and Alexie's opinions is further demonstrated by a consideration of their status as authors. Womack, as a member of the American academy, enjoys a large amount of prestige as a literary critic and author. *Drowning in Fire* was published by an academic press, and has been read, largely, by scholars in the field of Native American studies and by the Creek communities that Womack represents. Alexie, however, has enjoyed a great deal of commercial success and his work is widely read both by scholars of American literature in the 20th-Century and by lay readers who consume popular fiction. Alexie's status as "the most visible Native writer today" is perhaps most clearly revealed by two facts: the largeness of "his audiences (and honoraria) wherever he reads or speaks," and the fact that "all his recent books have become bestsellers" (Salaita 22).²⁸ As Alexie himself notes, this visibility (and its accompanying economic success) are not without price. The ways in which Alexie's discourse about Indian identity is scrutinized and occasionally exaggerated are compounded by the fact that his writing is often figured as an analogue for all Native American voices. The use of his work as emblematic of "Native consciousness" has caused it to be a subject of debate for people with broad interests in American popular fiction and with specific scholarly foci upon Native American literary studies. If Alexie is perceived as angry (if, when speaking about his prose, he is asked by "white people if [he] hates white people") then, in this perceptual extension all "Indians" are angry (and hate white people) (Alexie and Smith 1).²⁹

Alexie's emblematic status may even extend beyond the socially constructed category "Indian" and into an assumed category of "non-white" or "multicultural." Alexie's work has, in some ways, been taken as a representative voice for Native Americans in mass market literature, and, in other ways, that voice has come to be understood as part of "a particular discourse of American multiculturalism" (Salaita 38). That particular discourse uses ethnic difference as a commodity, and the ways in which Alexie's work has been marketed are evidence that this commodification is not usually a mechanism for social

²⁸ Alexie demanded, and received, an honorarium of more than \$10,000 to speak at the annual conference of the Association for Studies in American Indian Literatures.

²⁹ A short notes review appearing in *Time* magazine once accused Alexie of being "septic with unappeasable anger;" Alexie reports having the phrase printed on a t-shirt.

justice for Native communities. These facts have led to some criticisms of Alexie's work. For instance, David Treuer, in his book *Native American Literature: A User's Manual*, claims "Alexie is not interested in portraying a movement or a challenge as much as he is interested in recreating or illuminating a condition" (qtd. in Salaita 39). Alexie's cosmopolitan position is clear in his interviews and emanates from much of the critical discourse about his work. His sales and readerships continue to grow and his visibility works to call some attention to a continuing Native presence in a mainstream that, in many ways, has absorbed the perception of Native identity as vanishing. Two of the cosmopolitanist critics who praise the political value of Alexie's work—Allison Porzio, a high school teacher who argues for the inclusion of Alexie's works in secondary language arts classrooms, and Clemens Spahr, a German scholar who specializes in Native American literatures—argue that Alexie "will help students understand and respond to power structures in the United States" (Porzio 37). This understanding, however, is explicitly separated from any sense of political motivation for readers. Spahr notes that "Alexie's works acknowledge their involvement in a particular sociopolitical constellation, [but] they also emphasize that literature cannot and must not be politics. [. . .] [S]torytelling is an act of the imagination that requires a complementary social practice rather than being politics itself" (145). Because the paradigm of reading the novels as instances of autoethnography works to unify storytelling and political engagement, Spahr's claims situate Alexie's work outside the realm of testimonial fiction. This is a puzzling maneuver for Spahr to make, given that his thesis is that storytelling can complement social justice initiatives. I'd argue that the tacit contradiction apparent in Spahr's claims is an example of the problematic analysis that troubles much cosmopolitan Native American literary criticism.

However, Nationalist critics and authors in the field of Native American literature take positions that diverge from the claims Alexie, Porzio and Spahr articulate. As Womack notes above, the liminal status of Native voices persists in American literate arts in spite of the "multicultural" initiatives in many collegiate classrooms and in the publishing industry. By the very nature of Alexie's exemplary status and apolitical stance, other voices—Native or "ethnic" in a broader American context—are dismissed as

excusably absent or misunderstood as simply imaginative rather than didactic; his fame and canonization alleviates enough liberal, white guilt to aid in the maintenance of many other Native and “ethnic” writers’ obscurity. To be fair, this is not a condition of Alexie’s creation, because to ask any one person to write about, and even for, all of the people who may lay an identity claim to a pan-ethnic construct like “American Indian,” or “multicultural,” is to participate in the erasure of cultural diversity. As the preceding chapters show, those pan-ethnic categories can, in some cases, provide a rhetorical space for reconsidering reading, from a metropolitan position, as an act of allegiance with autoethnographers, which may become part and parcel of ideological resistance that seeks to break down systemic oppression that also erases diversity.

In response to the problems of non-Native control of the study of Native literatures that Womack frames above, scholars of Native American literature have suggested that a potentially effective approach might encourage a greater proliferation of productive conversations about Native American identity and literary representations both at the level of production and at the level of consumption.³⁰ Such proliferation might start with a consideration of indigenous knowing, learning and teaching that might emanate from the existing American academy. The study of Native literatures has the potential to greatly enrich cross-cultural understandings and allow for a body of rich, complex texts that have been historically neglected by teachers and scholars to be presented to students who very much need to read them and to understand their significance.

Karen Osborne, a critic interested in pedagogy within the discipline of Native studies, notes that “[i]n teaching texts written by Native Americans about Native Americans, the teacher must also consider how these texts and their audiences have reinforced or countered damaging stereotypes” (194).

According to Crow/Creek/Dakota nationalist scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in order for these stereotypes to be dealt with in a sensitive and critically engaging manner, teachers must recognize that only when

³⁰ Robert Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets* and Daniel Heath Justice’s “Conjuring Marks” are great examples of this Nationalist perspective on Native literary criticism emanating out of the same concerns that Womack raises, but several key critics participate in a wide-ranging debate about them, and their work will be discussed at length in what follows.

tribal cultures “are examined as essentially literary events, actions and ideas” is it possible for readers to deliberate upon testimonial fiction using “a nationalistic approach” (Cook-Lynn 30). Ethical engagement with Native authored autoethnographic texts requires the use of this nationalistic approach if it is to do the ideological work of deconstructing preexisting notions about the identities of Native Americans. One potential avenue for ethical engagement by non-Native critics might be to consider the tenets of nationalism as a guide to structuring social justice initiatives based on inter-ethnic solidarity. Identifying how non-Native critics might understand and apply Nationalist methods in their scholarship and teaching may help them to participate in a discursive project that raises awareness and encourages activism to secure social justice for tribal communities. I hope that the analysis of Alexie’s *Flight* and Womack’s *Drowning in Fire* that follows may help to identify and model those methods.

What does this “nationalistic approach” entail in terms of reading, teaching and researching Native authored texts is warranted? For critics like Cook-Lynn and Osborne, Nationalism seems to be necessarily allied with what is traditional, spiritual or political “authenticity.” But, of course, answering questions about what sorts of traditions, spiritual practices and politics are “authentic” seems to participate in the description and identification of a monolithic Native essence. This line of analysis leads some cosmopolitan critics to accuse Nationalist critics of essentialist discourse, which cosmopolitan critics argue closes off rather than opens up avenues of cultural expression for Native peoples.

Alexie’s rhetoric in interviews suggests that he is wary of this sort of essentialism. Joshua Nelson, in a conversation with Alexie published by *World Literature Today*, reminded Alexie that Cook-Lynn “claimed that by not writing specifically to strengthen tribal political sovereignty, you’re engaging in a distracting or irrelevant artistic project” and noted that Alexie’s previous response to this criticism was an “allegation that her judgment is clouded by nostalgia for an irrecoverable past” (40). In lieu of responding specifically to Cook-Lynn’s Nationalist critique, Alexie plainly stated, “We’re not getting it back”. Nelson then queried this response, asking Alexie if the “it” Native Americans would not get back was land or culture. Alexie’s response clarifies his position as at odds with Womack’s. Alexie believes

that “[l]anguage, culture, land, who we were when Europeans arrived” are all irrevocably lost, and he further indicts nationalist scholarship:

It’s always interesting to me, too, the essential fallacy of engaging in literary and political and cultural criticism and pretending that it’s indigenous. You know, Liz Cook-Lynn is utterly incapable of irony, of even seeing the ironic nature of her own existence. So the stances she has are a kind of fundamentalism that actually drove me off my reservation. I think it’s a kind of fundamentalism about Indian identity, and what ‘Indian’ can be and mean and that damages Indians. [. . .] There are more rules to being Indian than [there are] inside an Edith Wharton novel about which fork to use at dinner. The social pressures, the social rules inside the Indian world, and the essential conservatism, big *C* and little *c*, of Indian people is something that outsiders rarely understand.

In *Flight* Alexie dramatizes some of the sins of which he accuses reservation-dwelling Indians. In the section of the novel that takes place on the fictionalized Red River reservation two Native men, Elk and Horse, posing as activists for the resistance organization IRON, kidnap one of their compatriots, named Junior, after they torture him. Then, the men watch as two FBI agents murder him in cold blood. Afterwards, Horse and Elk insist upon burying the body “the Indian way” (53). The contradiction between the actions that lead to Junior’s death and the impetus that causes Horse and Elk to bury him with respect may be a hyperbolic example of the pretense of indigenous identity Alexie is so disdainful of in interviews. Elk and Horse are complicit in the F.B.I. agent’s murder of a Native American civil rights activist, and the two men seem to have very little compunction about this complicity. After the murder, however, Elk and Horse cannot bear for the F.B.I. agent to disrespect his victim by denying him a traditional burial. The values that the two characters espouse are at odds; *Flight* provides no explanation for why Elk and Horse would place so little value on Native life and such a premium on Native death. The pretense of honoring indigeneity in this scene may be Alexie’s way of illustrating the problem he has with Cook-Lynn’s Nationalist agenda. The ad hominem response Alexie makes to Cook-Lynn’s

perspective in the interview with Nelson seems excessive, but the point Alexie makes about the potential damage of a “fundamentalist”—or what other cosmopolitan Native literary scholars have called “essentialist”—description (or prescription) of Native identity might merit some exploration, as it is a common point of contention between nationalist and cosmopolitan critics.

The charge that Alexie levels at Cook-Lynn is one to which Womack is especially sensitive. In the second chapter of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Womack specifically addresses allegations that his Nationalist perspective is “essentialist.”

Essentialism can be mediated; none of us can escape and ‘reject’ it in ‘any form.’³¹ There is good reason to wonder why we should want to. Monolithic treatments can be tempered by citing historical and cultural particulars, emphasizing differences, deviances and individualities as often as similarities. To escape essentialism entirely one would have to quit writing and speaking. (*Native American Literary Nationalism* 96)

Because all autoethnographic writing participates in some essentialist rhetoric (the individual speaks for the collective), Womack would argue that it is both necessary and beneficial to deal in generalizations about group identities if one is use texts to aid in political activism. Womack’s conception of nationalism addresses the ways in which the writing of Native Americans has not been adequately attended to in academic conversations. Hence, it is unsurprising that Womack would rebut any model, even one that seeks to avoid essentialist or fundamentalist discourses that commit the kinds of policing of Native identity that Alexie so strongly repudiates, that compromises the rights of indigenous peoples to speak and write and to be heard and read. He makes a compelling argument that generalizations are, in fact, usually general, but that the specificity of particular kinds of context (eg. historical events like acts of genocide and imperialism that are reiterated across tribal histories) might work to augment any essentialized categories in responsible nationalist scholarship. It would be erroneous, for example, to

³¹ The quotations appearing in my quotation of Womack are taken, by Womack, from Elvira Pulitano’s *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, which presents a rather scathing critic of Nationalism in general, and Womack’s *Red on Red* specifically. Womack’s book chapter “The Integrity of American Indian Claims” is, among other things, a response to that critique.

claim that violations of Muskogee treaty-rights in Oklahoma are essentially the same as the shrinking fishing rights Interior Salish communities in Washington state; but there is some verifiable truth in the claim that both of those instances of federal infringement upon the rights of tribal nations are acts of continuing colonization that effect the lived experiences of contemporary Native communities.

To moderate the essentialist tendencies of generalizations about Native identity, one must simply attend to the specific histories of oppression that place Native subjects in crisis. As an exercise in the praxis of this theory, *Drowning in Fire* is intensely localized and culturally specific. Its trio of first person narrators is of a particular Creek community, and an overwhelming majority of the events in the narrative occur in Weleetka, Oklahoma, which Womack invests with myriad details of contemporary and historical Creek life. These details illustrate “deviances and individualities as often as similarities.” Womack’s novel dramatizes the differences within Creek communities as much as it explores the difference between Creek culture and Euro-American culture.

In considering how ‘essentialist’ definitions of Nationalism rely upon generalizations about traditional belief systems, Kristina Fagan and Sam McKegney, both of whom seek to adopt Nationalist literary theory into a mechanism for ethical engagement, ponder an important question:

[to] what extent should the work of Native writers, critics, and researchers, as well as non-Native people who work in the field of Native Studies, be led or constrained, depending on your perspective by beliefs about what is traditional, by what is spiritually appropriate, what is politically effective, and what is beneficial to Native communities?

(32)

Before this question can be considered in the complex ways in which Fagan and McKegney clearly expect when opening such a dialogue, perhaps one must first address the questions of how and why tradition, spirituality and politics require analysis and attention in critical dialogues about Native American literature. Womack has examined the complexity of the term “traditional” in his own work, noting that “the very term ‘traditionalism’ is problematic, especially in the way it is sometimes perceived

as dealing only with the past” (41). However, Womack uses the term to mean “anything that is useful to Indian people in retaining their values and worldviews, no matter how much it deviates from what people did one or two hundred years ago” (42).

Womack suggests that his Nationalism has an important difference from the Nationalism that Cook-Lynn is promoting. Cook-Lynn wishes to discursively construct and defend a monolithic Native identity that is static. Instead, Womack’s approach is less identitarian and more instrumentalist. He is more concerned with what is “useful” than what is “authentic” and he accepts that deviations from the traditions established “one or two hundred years ago” are not only possible, but potentially radical. By insisting on an Nationalistic approach that foregrounds cultural retention as the first priority when dealing with 20th- and 21st-Century transculturation, Womack theorizes an ethos of interpretation that emphasizes the potential of representations to benefit Native communities as they exist in the present. To adopt Alexie’s terms, Womack’s Nationalism is conservative—in that it seeks to conserve “values and worldviews,” but is not fundamentalist—in that it is willing to accept deviance within collective identity and accepts, or even embraces, transcultural exchanges that necessarily alter indigenous traditions since the time of incipient contact with Europeans.

Dual Audiences and Authorial Intentionality: Outsider Readers and Insider Writers

Clairborne Smith: Who are your readers?

Sherman Alexie: College-educated white women.

Clairborne Smith: Any insight as to why?

Sherman Alexie: They’re the most curious, progressive and forgiving group of people in the country, so I think it’s natural that that crowd would go to a bookstore to listen to a brown boy talk.

—from *Publisher’s Weekly* 7 July 2003

If we take a look at the nineteenth century, we might note two facts: lots of whites spoke on behalf of Indians, and when Indians did author their own books, they had to address a white audience, since they were writing in English and their own people, for the most part didn't read them.

Those days are over. Educating white folks about Indians can only be taken so far.

—Craig Womack, in the introduction to *Red on Red*

Considering how audience-oriented content may function to communicate with non-Native readers leads to a demonstration of some different strategies authors use to address these audiences. The relationship between author and reader is a fraught one, and a great deal of narratological discourse has been generated on the subject. I hope to avoid vexing an already highly theoretically complex issue with pontifications about James Phelan's "implied author" or "ideal reader;" instead I simply acknowledge that the theoretical framework that I employ to explicate the relationship between Alexie and Womack and their respective readers is not a popular one in the post-structural world of literary studies. I want to argue, in this chapter and in this dissertation as a whole, that authorial intentionality—the way that an author him- or herself narrates a text so as to share a particular didactic message with a particular body of readers—is an important component of autoethnographic literature.³² I also wish to address the ways in which a stable ethnic and sexual identity—for both authors and characters—are constructed and questioned in Womack and Alexie's texts. I acknowledge that literary texts often have multiple meanings, and I further acknowledge that many theoretical models argue that the control of any text is in the hands of its reader rather than its writer, because textuality is understood as a medium without dialogic

³² The problems with ceding textual authority to author-as-activist are central to Euro-American literary studies even before post-structuralism and narratology. New Critics, like W.K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley argued that literary critics cannot determine "the meaning of a work of art by the author's expressed or ostensible intention in producing it" (Harmon 254). However, even Wimsatt and Beardsley admit that "the author must be admitted as a witness to the meaning of his [or her] work" (46). I'd suggest that the problems with committing the "Intentional Fallacy" are no more numerous, when considering autoethnographic texts, than the problems with eschewing intentionality and thus robbing the author of agency in yet another iteration of colonization.

powers.³³ However, if textuality is to be explored as a medium for social justice, it must be imbued with such powers; literatures of witness must constitute a performative speech act in which what the author says to the reader has the potential to render ideological alterations in that reader's consciousness.³⁴

To narrate a cultural history within an individuated story requires a particular kind of authorial subjectivity, one imbued with the agency to control the intentionality of the text. In the world of post-modern literary studies, claims to this sort of agency are highly suspect.³⁵ If non-Native critics are to find ways to avoid colonizing Native-authored texts, the rejection of those suspicions is paramount. By understanding cultural identity as a formative part of the creative process, readers can begin to see in the creative work a paradigm of self-representation that is integral to self-determination. As the epigraphs to this section show, Alexie and Womack have radically different conceptions of their own audiences. I'd argue that their different projects in their texts are closely linked to those conceptions of their readers. Because Womack addresses his work to other Native readers, his autoethnographic endeavor will be explicitly Nationalist because it can assume a cultural immersion on the part of his audience that doesn't require glossing in his text. Alexie, because he writes to "educated white women," writes as a cosmopolitanist; he universalizes his message to make it easier for non-Native readers to understand. I'd argue that examining both *Flight* and *Drowning in Fire* as autoethnography provides grounds for considering how each text functions for a dual audience that will be composed of both insider-readers who have the appropriate cultural context *and* metropolitan readers who will lack that context.

³³ Walter Ong notes that textuality—unlike verbal communication or hypertext—doesn't allow for the possibility of the receiver (or reader) to interact with either the sender (or writer) or the text itself.

³⁴ Of course, not *all* Native authored texts are autoethnographic. Native authors do not always use their writing to tell a cultural story. Later, I'll more fully explain why I believe that *Flight* and *Drowning in Fire* are explicitly autoethnographic.

³⁵ There are many texts that document the problems with centering authorial agency in literary analyses; chief among them are Roland Barthes "Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" There are a number of reasons why critics of Native American literatures should be a bit skeptical of the deconstructionist and post-structuralist arguments made about authorship. I won't outline them all; instead, I'll paraphrase Susan Gubar's thoughts on the delegitimation of authorship from her 2008 Holmes lecture—it is very interesting to note that at precisely the moment when the Anglo-American canon is being infiltrated by authors who are neither male nor white that authorial subject positions become irrelevant to the study of that canon.

Describing and depicting Native American identity is a first step in the novelist's generation of context for metropolitan readers. However, insider-readers will be patently aware that "Native American" is an umbrella term for a constructed identity category that already endorses an illusion of total solidarity between tribal nations. There is no singular, identifiable "Native American" historical narrative, but rather there are thousands of individual tribal nations that have their own histories. Though those histories are often entwined, and instances of Euro-American colonization shape all of them to varying degrees, they are radically distinct from one another in many cases. Thinking about the insider-reader as a singular entity, classified by the umbrella term in total solidarity across tribal affiliations, would risk the sorts of essentialism that Alexie's cosmopolitanism and Womack's instrumental Nationalism eschew. However, this is a risk worth taking in this instance. Because considering the works in conversation stages a intertribal dialogue about the politics of representation and the potential for cross-ethnic coalitions, the use of the larger category described by the umbrella term might work to allow people from different tribal nations to enter that dialogue. Coalitions between tribal identities are cross-ethnic coalitions, and the ways in which Native communities generate solidarity to meet instrumental goals are among the most appropriate models for ethical engagement that may emerge from Native-authored testimonial fiction.

Debates about the instrumental uses of umbrella terms are not unique to Native studies. A similar debate began, during the same timeframe, in the field of gender studies. In a 1995 article for the journal *Social Problems* Joshua Gamson suggests that the generation and destabilization of identity categories is caused by collective identifiers, such as the umbrella term "queer" that has been so widely adopted by gender theorists. The ambivalence of collected identities, in Gamson's estimation, is rather like the risk of reinscribing cultural hierarchies associated with deployments of autoethnography; neither paradigm for examining identity produces a particularly viable alternative to the hierarchy that they critique.

In his analysis of "queer" as an identity category, Gamson raises important questions about identity politics. The most interesting of these is his investigation of how queer theorists insinuate that sexual identity is fixed and stable. Gamson suggests that this insinuation is usually another instance of

instrumentalist essentialism, because the suggestion of stability allows queer theorists to use sexual identity as a foundation for examining domination (through hate speech and institutional bias, for instance) and for liberation (through solidarity building for political action and the generation communal subculture). Often, queer theorists' construction of GLBTQI identity is static, because that identity serves as a locus to generate a queer culture that shares the trauma of domination and has the potential to collectivize to protest that trauma. At best, according to Gamson, this construction is ambivalent in terms of its radical potential. Examining culture from an ethnic perspective or examining gender identity from a queer perspective, therefore, create as many problematic epistemologies as such theoretical maneuvers might question. Perhaps the focus of literary studies on decoding linguistic double antecedents (the dominant and the marginal, the Anglo/American and the non-western, the heteronormative and the extranormative) perpetuates the same kinds of categorization and hierarchies that many critics seeks to undermine in their research. Perhaps, to rework Gamson's title, "identity movements must self-destruct."

And perhaps not. If I am, in this chapter to continue "the hard work of a multiculturalism" (Appiah 118) that adheres to an ethos of respect across ethnic and sexual identity boundaries, then considering how literature works to inform identity movements—in ways that keep them from self-destructing—can produce a methodology for discursive analysis that begins with creating visibility for the cultures—be they queer or Native American—that the literature represents. There are, as one might expect, numerous debates about the potential of creating visibility. Patricia Bizzell, one of the most vocal detractors to the autoethnographic method for explicating texts, suggests that quarantining off "ethnic literatures" means that the ghettoized status of these literatures will never change (164). Gamson also suggests that a populace of sexually marginalized subjects cannot simply collectivize to craft any alternative to what he sees as a relatively homogenous dominant culture. Both critics, in my estimation, suggest that the potential of autoethnography and group consolidation lies in their ability to expose hegemony. This places a great deal of faith in the exposure of social wrongs; such faith seems to argue that the forensic function—revealing what's inaccurate or absent in the dominant historical narrative—is

sufficient as a political project. It is not. Bizzell and Gamson are quite right to question the ability of this faith in exposure to cause change. What neither critic may have considered is that exposure, in some ways, *is* change and that autoethnographic renderings of singular identities *can* and *do* alter the way that collective identities are understood, evaluated and hierarchized in the landscape of literary studies. For readers to make judgments and participate in deliberation about activism, they must first be exposed to new truths about cultural trauma. The exposure is not an end, but a beginning.

Both Alexie and Womack craft fiction that takes the relationships between the dominant history and their own cultural stories as a place to start their novels. For this reason, and because the novels address both outsider-readers and insider-readers, the texts are autoethnographic. Womack begins with examining the material poverty of Oklahoma Indians in the narrative present of his novel. Although he begins by portraying the poverty of Creeks in Weleetka in the 20th-Century, Womack then weaves the historical injustices—land theft through allotment, treaty-rights violations, child removal—that caused that impoverishment into the plot.

The Creek tribal nation's history is intimately linked to the contemporary queer Native coming-of-age story that surrounds Josh Henneha, the protagonist of *Drowning in Fire*. The crafting of this link is a forensic maneuver. But Womack doesn't stop there. In revealing Creek tribal history, the Henneha familial narrative and Josh's personal struggle with coming up and out on the 'rez' as unified story, Womack asks readers to make judgments about the violation of Creeks' treaty rights, the legacy of child abuse in the Henneha household and the homophobia Josh must face in his community of origin.

Womack's didactic intent is to both create visibility for problems and to ask readers to make judgments about those problems. The novel illustrates how American governmental policies contribute to the oppression of the Muskogee peoples, how personal traumas like sexual abuse become markers of cultural trauma, and how the mutually exclusive construction of ethnic and sexual communities limit the possibilities for his characters to achieve self-actualization. However, Womack's narrative also asks readers to lay blame for each of these impediments to Josh's *bildung*, and to consider what can be done to

remove those impediments. The novel's close finds Josh and Jimmy together, having finally accepted their orientation and Creek heritage as coherent, working to face the challenge that Jimmy's HIV-positive status sets before them. As readers consider this open ending, they are left to deliberate how the interstices between Josh and Jimmy's sexual and tribal identities provide a framework for solidarity within Creek and queer communities. By extension, readers might consider how coalitions that cross the permeable boundaries of queerness and Creekness could be formed and used in order to alleviate some of the suffering that the novel depicts.

Alexie also crafts a narrative that explores historical, familial and personal issues in ways that disrupt the stability of identity. Zits, the narrator of *Flight*, is an orphan of uncertain Native origin. His representation of his personal history is inflected by the legacy of child removal, one of the most effective mechanisms for genocide used by the American government against Native communities. Early in the novel Zits tells the reader that "There's this law called the Indian Child Welfare Act that's supposed to protect half-breed orphans like me" (8). For in-group readers, this calls to mind the pan-tribal history of child removal. When the Bureau of Indian Affairs began regulating Native kinship structures and child rearing practices, as a part of an initiative to use boarding schools and urban relocation programs to assimilate Native cultures into Euro-American culture, it was a common practice for the Bureau to seize children from their families of origin and foster them either at institutions—like the aforementioned boarding schools—or with white families, who would also be given regency over the Native children's land holdings in an allotment system or over BIA funding for the rearing of the children provided by agreements between tribal nations and the U.S. federal government. The Indian Child Welfare Act is a legislative response to the cultural trauma of child removal.

Unfortunately, as Zits notes, the Act is far from solvent for all Native children:

I'm supposed to be placed with Indian foster parents and families. But I'm not an official Indian. My Indian daddy gave me his looks, but he was never legally established as my father. Since I'm not a legal Indian, the government can put me wherever they want. (9)

Zits's testimony about how he is not afforded the protection that the Indian Child Welfare Act should afford him points to another systemic problem: blood quantum and paternity torts. Just as the BIA regulates Native kinship structures, it also regulates tribal membership, and although the determinants for tribal enrollment are influenced, to varying degrees, by tribal national leadership the most common way for Indian identity to be legally verified is through blood quantum. People who wish to be legally classified as members of Native nations must have a particular percentage of Native ancestry which is determined by genealogical means. Such measures of classification are complicated by factors like progressive urbanization, the loss of family documents, federally mandated disbanding of tribal affiliations and reservation land shares, the intermarriage between Native Americans and non-Natives, or the intermarriage between indigenous peoples of different tribes (Lawrence 5). These removal policies, relocation practices and marital arrangements produce generation after generation of people who may or may not be closely genetically related to their tribal communities, and may or may not be culturally invested in tribal traditions and nationalist politics.

In his characterization of Zits, Alexie dramatizes one such person—a child caught between cultures, marginalized by institutional neglect and mistreated because of identity issues over which he has no control. This dramatization works to connect Zits's personal traumas of displacement with a pan-tribal legacy of oppression and genocide perpetrated within the 'democratic' American system of government. As readers grapple with Zits's identity and hopeless situation, they must also grapple with this new historical context and, in doing so, assign responsibility for people like Zits. The implicit questions in these moments in *Flight* are "who should be responsible for a child as abandoned as Zits?" and "how can his trauma be addressed, mitigated or prevented?" In considering those questions, readers are called to action by the novel as testimony.

Because *Drowning in Fire* and *Flight* present connections between the personal and the cultural and ask readers to deliberate upon those connections, the novels function autoethnographically. To narrate a cultural story alongside an individual one requires a particular kind of authorial subjectivity—

one imbued with the agency to control the intentionality of the text by positing an extratextual effect upon readers. Because autoethnographic fiction presents the individual as signifier of the collective and the personal as emblematic of the political, the authors' own identities and experiences have some bearing upon how that intentionality is deployed for forensic, epideictic and deliberative ends. Exploring how the authors' own experiences are reflected (or obscured) in the narrative of their fiction may allow readers to begin to understand how personal identity works within a framework of ethnic solidarity.

Drowning in Fire presents a fictionalization of both personal and cultural truths. Womack himself has noted that the novel is “a companion volume to *Red on Red*” (Weaver, Womack and Warrior 166). Womack's own life experiences are connected to the events depicted in *Drowning in Fire*, because part of the project of *Red on Red* is to proliferate narratives that are uniquely Creek and to suggest that there are critical practices that can politicize that proliferation. Some of the connections between Womack's life and his fiction are suggested in the acknowledgements at the beginning of his novel. The inscription in the book is addressed to Womack's Aunt Barbara. Womack writes, “[t]he last time I saw you, in the old folks home [. . .] you walked out of your room, turned toward the door and announced, as if an afterthought, ‘God is Creek,’ then disappeared down the hallway” (vii). In *Drowning in Fire*, Josh visits his aunt Lucille at the Eufaula Senior Citizen's Center, where “Lucy looked up from her tray and announced defiantly, ‘God is Creek,’ as if she was daring us to prove her different” (167). This use of personal detail seems to work to align Josh with Womack and Barbara with Lucy, but the text is not fully autobiographical. For example, Lucy is housed within driving distance of the reservation on which Josh's grandparents live; whereas Womack's acknowledgement tells readers that his aunt's old folks' home was in Lodi, California.

However, Alexie's *Flight* seems less concretely tied to the author's experiences than Womack's are to *Drowning in Fire*. Alexie, unlike Zits, was raised by his biological family, who lived in a tribal community. His anecdotes about Wellpinit—the reservation town in which he was reared—are central to many of his public presentations. In fact, in the same year that *Flight* was published Alexie released

another book—*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*—that was more autobiographically influenced than *Flight*. Junior, the protagonist of *Part-time Indian*, chooses to leave the school on the Wellpinit reservation to pursue the greater opportunities afforded him in the white town of Reardan. Alexie, as a teenager, made a similar choice.

Part-time Indian seems to be a sort of *roman à clef* for Alexie, but *Flight* is not autobiographical. In fact it tells a story to which Alexie is related only culturally and imaginatively rather than personally. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* has increased Alexie's prestige, visibility and fame as a writer to new proportions. First, the novel earned a National Book Award, and second, it has already outsold all of his other fiction. In the interview with Nelson, Alexie also discusses this success saying, "I'll probably be able to live on that book for the rest of my life, financially speaking. And the critical success, all the awards, all the attention—it was great, I loved it, but I also felt like, I'm not supposed to sell this much" (40). The anxiety he discusses about the success of the novel isn't further explicated in the interview. The story *Part-time Indian* tells seems to echo the sentiments Alexie expresses about the conservatism of his reservation; Junior must leave the reservation in order to achieve the enlightenment that will allow him to have an adult life that is not constrained by the poverty and conservatism he finds so oppressive in Wellpinit. Perhaps Alexie's anxiety about the success of the novel that tells this veiled version of his own history reveals some of his apprehensions about whether such an exodus was appropriate or beneficial.

In any case, Alexie's critique of Cook-Lynn in the interview with Nelson reveals one of the reasons he may have circumvented the use of a particular reservation in crafting *Flight*. If Womack uses the spatiality and landscape of the reservation to emphasize the ways in which representation may correlate with the realities it depicts, then perhaps the absence of the reservation as a backdrop in *Flight* is also a choice, and that absence is intended to be communicative. In *Flight*, Zits, the first person narrator, cannot make the choice Junior, the protagonist of *Part-time Indian*, makes between tribal allegiance and personal growth. Instead, Zits's personal growth is stunted by a lack of tribal affiliation and cultural

continuity, because he is an orphan who has learned about Indian identity through mainstream media. Because of these facts, *Flight* would seem, on face, to be a patently cosmopolitan novel, but Alexie uses those cosmopolitan conceits to explore how a lack of cultural continuity can be disruptive in the development of some Natives—particularly urban populations and disenfranchised children like Zits—produces a rich sub-text that is rife for Nationalist explication that fits within a framework of ethical engagement.

Cosmopolitan Theory and Nationalist Praxis: Literary Criticism and Political Theory

[I posit] the assumption that Indian viewpoints cohere, that Indian resistance can be successful, that Native critical centers are possible, that working from within the nation, rather than looking toward the outside, is a legitimate way of examining literature, that subverting the literary status quo[,] rather than being subverted *by* it[,] constitutes a meaningful alternative.

—Craig Womack, from the Introduction, “American Indian Self-Determination,” to *Red on Red*

[T]he ironic thing is very, very few of those we call Native American writers actually grew up on reservations, and yet most of their work is about reservations. As someone who grew up on a reservation, I'm tired of it. No, I'm exhausted.

I've been living in the city—Seattle—for five years. I live a very cosmopolitan life now. I've traveled the world and had dinner with movie stars. To pretend that I'm just a Rez boy is impossible.

—Sherman Alexie, from an interview with *The Atlantic*

The polarization of Womack's and Alexie's positions on the importance of tribal cultures is a microcosmic depiction of the larger debate in the field of Native Studies. As Spahr argues, "critics tend to see a concern with the question of Native identity at the heart of Alexie's works" because "it has been suggested that Alexie's stories reflect the individual's capability to break out of dominant power structures and establish a sense of personal agency" (146). David Moore's reading concurs that Alexie's fiction presents an example of "critical focus on identity in Native American literature" rather than a "focus on community" (303). Moore here identifies the focus upon identity—as an individual issue—as a cosmopolitan position, which considers ethnicity as one among many constraints to burgeoning subjectivity. Alternatively, the Nationalist position considers tribal community as the most important mechanism for shaping Native American peoples' subjectivity.

Nationalist Cherokee literary critic Jace Weaver claims that "Native peoples find their individual identities in the collectivity of a community," which seems to echo Womack's argument that ethical responses to Native literatures must work from "within the nation." These positions seem to beg other questions: Who defines "the nation"? How does that definition include or exclude particular populations of Native people, some of whom (like Alexie's protagonist) are currently living with the lasting effects of cultural trauma? How do Native people who don't have the luxury of "community" find their "individual identities"? In answering these questions ethically, one must consider the ways in which the instances of cultural trauma that allow for collective identity and solidarity, both within and between tribes, are often traumatic *because* of how they disrupt collective identity and solidarity. In the same interview from which the epigraph is drawn, Alexie notes that Native Americans who have been cut off from their reservation communities are "an underrepresented population" because "nobody's writing about them" (para 2). If the Nationalist project is to increase representation in order to galvanize social justice, then the exclusion of Native subjects in crisis because of their separation from their communities seems to undermine that project. For this reason, it is important to find a way to bring the cosmopolitanist concerns together with Nationalist methodologies.

I'd agree with Spahr when he argues that cosmopolitan and Nationalist positions are "far from irreconcilable. [. . .] The individual's imagination, upon which the redemptive power of Alexie's stories rests, is shaped by a sense of community" (146). Alexie's narrative begins with the individual—Zits in the isolation of an unfamiliar bathroom in his new foster home—and Womack's begins upon the communal—Josh in his aunt's lap, her traditional story and cigarette smoke both reminding him of his connection to others and curing his physical ailments. Though the means of their literary explorations of the need for identity are distinct, there may be ways in which their ends are similar. Both *Flight* and *Drowning in Fire* work to correct false histories—either through the disclaiming of mass media representations, or through the revelation of suppressed perspectives on treaty violations. Both novels also work epideictically to cause readers to evaluate the events in history that have resulted in limitations on sovereignty and familial cohesiveness in contemporary Native American experiences by laying blame or assuming responsibility, and the novels have deliberative potential that focuses on a dual audience by encouraging both metropolitan readers and insider readers to consider how their responses to the texts may contribute to securing social justice for the events and wrongs that the narratives expose.

Although Spahr and Alexie's focus upon identity as an individuated category seems radically different from Womack and Cook-Lynn's focus upon a tribal communities, the fact that *Flight* dramatizes Zits's search for that community through the imaginative conceit of flying from time to time and personae to personae points to the need for an individuated understanding of the meaning that the missing cultural context in his life would provide through attachment to others. Womack, too, uses flight as a mechanism for exploring the connections between past and present, the self and other and the personal and political. *Drowning in Fire* positions Josh as a sort of mystic, with the ability to move through time and space in his imagination. He is able to witness culturally important historical events, like Chitto Harjo's speech to the legislature protesting Dawes allotments and enrollment for Oklahoma's Indian nations. He is also able to witness events of importance to his family—like the death of his abusive, white great-grandfather. Josh also uses this ability to see things that are important to him personally, like when he flies across Weleetka

to watch over Jimmy, the boy with whom he is infatuated. Each of these out of body experiences further aligns Josh with a traditional role—that of the *Henneha*, which is also Josh’s last name—that has significance for the way he comes to understand his own identity in the context of his community.³⁶

Flight uses an equally mystical sort of out of body experience to allow its protagonist to move through space, time and identity. The novel opens with Zits’s confusion about whether or not his ethnicity or his alienation are the causes of the physical stigma of adolescence from whence he derives his name. The character directly addresses readers, informing them “I’m dying from about ninety-nine kinds of shame. I’m ashamed of being [. . .] ugly. I’m ashamed that I look like a bag of zits tied to a broomstick. I wonder if loneliness causes acne. I wonder if being Indian causes acne” (4). After several increasingly violent incidents, beginning with pushing his foster-mother and culminating in a plans for a shooting spree in a public bank, Zits goes from being himself to occupying the body of an FBI agent in 1975 on the fictionalized Red River Reservation in Idaho. After he is the FBI agent, he then becomes a mute child watching the progression of the Battle of Little Bighorn; then, he is an Indian-tracker leading the avenging U.S. army to a band of Native thieves and vandals. Next, he is a flight instructor who commits suicide (via airplane) out of a sense of remorse for providing an Islamic terrorist with the necessary training to fly a plane into downtown Chicago. Finally, before being returned to his own body, he is his own father, a homeless man suffering the effects of alcohol poisoning in a Seattle alley. Each of these experiences forces him to confront the potential violence of intercultural contact in one way or another. These experiences lead Zits to reject his initial escalation of violence, and, in fact, take back the last heinous act in a grand speculative-fictional do-over that allows him to un-shoot the people in the bank, and to find a family and community by turning himself in to his favorite police officer and would-be uncle.

³⁶ In *Red on Red* Womack defines the Creek word *Henneha* as one who assists the town leader or chief of a Creek community; in his article “Reconstructing Community” John Gamber discusses how both Josh’s job with the Department of Agriculture and his ability to access history through Lucy’s stories and his own flights can be interpreted as functions of this traditional Creek role.

Flight presents fertile ground for both nationalist and cosmopolitan interpretive methods. On the one hand, Alexie may be calling for a rejection of the “fundamentalism” that he rebuffs in his interview. Zits finds hope of happiness and security by becoming fostered by Officer Dave’s brother and his wife, neither of whom seems to bear any relation to the tribal community from which Zits feels excluded in the opening of the novel. Because this non-Native family is able to afford Zits “a sense of citizenship” Alexie may wish for readers to assume that the eschewing of ethnic separatism and assimilation into a healthy normative family is what is best for the disenfranchised teenager. On the other hand, the specificity of several of the out of body experiences—that of the FBI agent, the child at Little Bighorn, the U.S. army tracker and his own father—corrects violent impulses in the boy by reminding him of the genocidal violence leveled at a pan-tribal indigenous population. This suggests that continuity of cultural trauma is passed on to the boy in such a way as to deny allegiance with anyone who would perpetuate such violence. Which of these interpretations is intended by the author is a subject that is very much left open to debate, and that debate would mirror the cosmopolitan/nationalist divide at the center of scholarly conversations of Native literature. This debate emerges from an academic legacy of unethical interventions by non-Native scholars of Native cultural and literary studies.³⁷ As a result, any ethical engagement between non-Native readers and Native-authored texts should acknowledge that history of poaching, and that acknowledgement should extend to both research and teaching practices. One mechanism for situating interpretive responses to Native-authored texts within an ethical framework could be produced by considering the criteria that guide Nationalist approaches.

Since a Nationalistic approach foregrounds indigenous experiences and cultural contexts, that approach may provide a model, for both Native critics and non-Native critics, for formulating critical responses that avoid colonizing the literature, particularly when that literature also functions as testimony. In framing how I understand this mechanism, and its abilities to generate guidelines for respectful critical

³⁷ This imperialist legacy, what James Cox has so eloquently termed “poaching,” is the sort of problematic misrepresentation of Native identity that results in inaccurate, colonialist ethnography as well as in a kind of romanticization of Native representations that colors many of the popular cultural and literary depictions of Natives in Euro-American culture.

interventions, I aim to disrupt the binary between cosmopolitan and Nationalist approaches. Rather than two poles in a debate, I'd like to see these positions as points on a continuum, as this allows me to place cosmopolitan authors and critics in a dialogue with Nationalist authors and critics. Such a continuum might provide a way to emphasize the Nationalist paradigm for cultural relativism and cross-ethnic coalitions built upon respect rather than domination while also circumventing the problems of essentialism and authenticity. Doing so may also allow for Native American literary studies to treat a broader community of Native peoples' issues, including those issues unique to the underrepresented populations that cosmopolitan critics and authors stress in their works.

The far Nationalist end of this continuum of critical perspectives would entail perspectives of critics like Cook-Lynn, who wish to construct and defend a static Native identity. While there are some problems with such a construction there are also some advantages to this approach. Among those advantages are the clarity of criteria for what constitutes a nationalist work, and the explication of the critical methods for treating such works according to a culturally relativist paradigm. In particular, Cook-Lynn theorizes three specific guiding criteria for gauging the nationalist potential of literary works and critical methods. Her first concern is genre; Cook-Lynn notes that orally derived narrative modes—"poetry, testimonials and plays"—are more in keeping with Native American discursive practices than novels, which comprise the center of the modern and postmodern Western literary aesthetic (Cook-Lynn 23). She stresses that these pieces of writing should be aesthetically different from Western literature, leaving tropes of "classic" Eurocentric texts behind in favor of using a distinctly Native aesthetic. Alexie and Womack write in several genres, but both men also use the novel as a form for presenting an overtly politicized commentary on the production of a racialized discourse about American Indian identity. Their use of this fiction, in addition to functioning as an implicit rejection of Cook-Lynn's orally-derived modes, presents an act of authorial agency. The two novels examined here—*Flight* and *Drowning in Fire*—represent generic choices on the part of their authors. In light of the highly nationalistic tone of Cook-Lynn's edict against the novel, that choice must be noted and merits examination alongside the

other criteria for nationalist literature that might emerge.³⁸ The choice of genre also indicates that Womack and Alexie both must fall somewhere closer to the middle of the continuum between Nationalist and cosmopolitanist positions.

Cook-Lynn's second criterion is a linguistic one; she argues that Native writers must deny the primacy of the English language as a literary medium. Her conception of nationalist writing privileges literatures written in an indigenous language or written in the colloquial linguistic configurations that are most appropriate to contemporary tribal settings. Once again, what counts as a contemporary tribal setting is the subject of some amount of debate.

For Womack, who seeks to purvey and promote a tribally-specific mode of identification that undergirds both his fictional and expository prose, tribal specificity mandates a particular sort of landscape. Creek reservations in Oklahoma, and the linguistic patterns that are practiced there, form the backdrop for both his critical text *Red on Red* and his novel *Drowning in Fire*. In both his criticism and his fiction, Womack deploys this linguistic specificity within English. This is not to say that the Creek language is absent from the text; it's not—words like *sofki* and *hitchi* remain untranslated in the text, because the original language carries the ceremonial and traditional connotations that are not fully expressed by translations. However, *Drowning in Fire* is predominantly in English, but that English is inflected by the localized dialects of Weleetka, Eufaula and Oklahoma City. For example, the characters in *Drowning in Fire* use the word “suspicion” as a verb, and Womack also does this in his critical work.³⁹ At the end of the introduction to *Red on Red*, as elsewhere in the text, Womack inserts commentary about (and later by) figures from the Creek oral tradition—Jim Chibbo and Hotgun. On page 21 Womack discusses why he speculates about these two figures' responses to his criticism, which are included as interludes between that chapters, and he notes that these figures, like himself “suspicioned that what

³⁸ It seems noteworthy that Cook-Lynn's own novel *From the River's Edge* employs a testimonial structure and has been praised for its illustration of the nationalist applications of the genre.

³⁹ In “Howling at the Moon” Womack explains that his grandmother used the noun in this way, and clarifies the connotative distinctions between “suspicioning,” “superstitioning” and “suspecting,” wherein he demonstrates that the choice is not a ‘folksy’ touch that parodies incorrect usage on the ‘rez,’ but a transcultural reappropriation of English by a Native community to suit its own ends.

happened was that Creek writers read other Creek writers, and anyhow, if they don't, they ought to, and that Creek written tradition is passed on as well as oral tradition." In *Drowning in Fire*, Lucille, a member of Womack's narrating triumvirate also uses the phrase during a frightening encounter with an aging medicine woman and a pre-pubescent watermelon thief; "I suspicion she's gonna get a willow switch or a thorn. Sometimes old folks punish kids by scratching them on their legs and arms" (291). This, along with other localized turns of phrase that are specific to the cultural context of Weleetka, are perhaps a way of responding to the sorts of provisos Cook-Lynn presents.

Alexie makes no such response. *Flight* takes a different position on Native identity, because Alexie suspends ethnic homogeneity in crafting his novel's contemporary tribal settings. Because the narrator of *Flight*, Zits, is removed from his tribal land holdings and has no concrete ties to his father's culture, an urban (and, perhaps, cosmopolitan) landscape is reflected in his smart-ass 21st Century diction. Like many of the non-Native students I teach, Zits learned "everything [he] know[s] about Indians [. . .] from television" (12). In spite of this, he claims that he could "easily beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuit" (12). It is difficult to say what conclusions Alexie wishes for readers to draw from these depictions of his narrator's identity. Perhaps the author intends these *bon mots* as a comment on Zits's assimilation, or perhaps Alexie wishes to point out that there may be a number of lay 'experts' on Indian identity who cull their 'expertise' from the Discovery Channel, and that in the place of real cultural continuity Zits accepts and internalizes the mass mediation of a pan-tribal history. Or, maybe this is a way for Alexie to note that 99% of the world knows so little about Native issues, history and cultures that someone who simply pays attention to what is broadcast about these topics might beat them. I suppose that would depend upon whether or not the "Native American Trivial Pursuit" is produced by cosmopolitan or nationalist experts in Native Studies.

Alexie's prose implies an ambivalence about the specific meaning of the passage. Staunch nationalists (like Cook-Lynn) and self-described separatists (like Womack) might see this ambivalence in Alexie's work as problematic because it may prompt "critics to talk about how [. . .] the characters were a

bunch of mongrelized mixed-bloods who weren't sure if they were Indian as they muddled about in some kind of hybridized culture, serving as a footpath between whites and Indians" (*Red on Red* 22), and *Flight* may very well be guilty of some of these charges. But Alexie's intent may be clarified by his own discourse about the book. In an interview after he received the PEN/Faulkner award, Alexie noted that "at any given point, somewhere around 70 percent of Natives live off-reservation. And our literature doesn't reflect that. Those amazing urban Indian stories are not being told" (Nelson 39). Alexie clearly sees the refusal to tell the stories of almost three quarters of the contemporary Native population as a gaping hole in representation. The fact that he takes up the task of this sort of representation is indicative of his intent to address the absence of those voices and perspectives in order to augment the historiographic narrative that Nationalist critics like Cook-Lynn produce.

Alexie's use of urban Indian narratives works as forensic autoethnography because it highlights a missing perspective in the corpus of Native literatures. What remains is to determine to what political uses Alexie's reworking of those "amazing" urban Indian stories can be put, when the centrality of mixed-blood status is foregrounded as an instance of cultural trauma in many of them. Zits describes himself as "Irish and Indian, which would probably be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me how to be Irish and Indian" (5). The status of the character as culturally, as well as parentally, bereft must have some significance for the narrative.

Cook-Lynn's final proviso for appropriately nationalistic literature may present an in-road for reading *Flight* according to nationalist standards, provided some augmentation of those standards emerges out of the conversation between Alexie and Womack. Cook-Lynn's final suggestion is that narratives should depict contact from a "strident point of view" so as to generate political capital for some key issues around which activism outside the literary realm is oriented. In particular, she suggests that such works focus on sovereignty issues, such as land ownership and cultural legitimacy (Cook-Lynn 24). The social worker who tells Zits that he has "never developed a sense of citizenship" is speaking metaphorically because she sees the absence of a stable role model as preventing Zits from becoming "a fully realized

human being” (5-6). But Alexie’s use of the word “citizenship” here may speak directly to a sense of national inclusion that is prohibited by the loss of “cultural legitimacy” that Cook-Lynn privileges so highly. Alexie’s articulation that urban experiences are as “authentic” as reservation ones merits exploration, particularly as this articulation may permute any nationalist literary qualities that could contribute to social justice initiatives.

Cook-Lynn’s criteria for measuring the appropriate political orientation in Native literatures offer one possible lens through which to evaluate writings by indigenous peoples and thereby determine whether the literature’s political infrastructure makes it useful in countering damaging stereotypes and rhetorical erasures. If used to construct a continuum of nationalist potential, Cook-Lynn’s criteria would certainly mark *Flight* as more cosmopolitan than *Drowning in Fire*. However, many of Cook-Lynn’s claims seem to rely on a clear demarcation between what is allied with traditionally, spiritually or politically “authentic.” But, as Fagan and McKegney argue, this determination about which cultural traditions, spiritual practices and political issues are most prescient is rather subjectively determined, and other critics might position other priorities alongside those that Cook-Lynn chooses.

Womack may provide a mechanism for supplementing Cook-Lynn’s criteria when he voices some similar concerns to those that Fagan and McKegney bring to the conversation:

The assumption [by mainstream authors and critics writing about Native American identities] that everything begins and ends with the white version of reality has everything to do with the suppression of sovereignty, the violation of treaty rights, the belief that European literary theory is inherently superior for explicating texts written by Native people, and a number of other issues revolving around the presence of an Indian viewpoint. Subsuming or erasing an Indian voice is central to these endeavors.

(“Politicizing HIV Prevention [. . .]” 207)

By asserting that the cause of the greatest systemic subsumption and erasure is “white control of discourse about Indians” Womack implicitly suggests another criterion for evaluating the intent of Native literatures

(208), and, indeed, for defining what may count as Native literature. Indigenous voices are the most qualified voices to enter into nationalist dialogues, because voices from the dominant culture, no matter how sensitive the intent of the expression may be, will always be outside, and will frequently be in opposition to, the viewpoints embodied by the material, spiritual and social experiences of indigenous peoples.

While Womack's suggestion that Native American literatures should be written by Native Americans seems self-evident, several of the literary and critical texts most commonly taught—in generic language arts courses, in “ethnic” literature surveys, as well as field-specific classes—are, in fact, not the products of indigenous authorship; this is perhaps the most overt sort of poaching. When the narrative that most readers are likeliest to encounter about Native identity is produced ethnographically, the privileging of indigenous voices seems especially important. One example is the popular *Education of Little Tree* which I have found, to my own chagrin and dismay, on the shelves of the “American Indian” section of my local Borders Bookstore. The book was written, not by a displaced Native boy, as the autobiographical construction of the narrative seems to suggest, but by Forrest Carter, who was, in fact, rightly named Asa Carter, a segregationist and an active member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Sometimes cosmopolitanist critical methods object to the privileging of Native authors and critics, because they find value in examining these ethnographic representations under the rubric of Native studies, and because non-Native scholars of Native literatures have complained of feeling “shut out” of key conversations in their chosen field. In order to use Nationalism as a model for cross-ethnic coalition building, it is necessary to address these concerns as they are voiced by cosmopolitan critics. Perhaps the most respected champion of this cosmopolitan perspective is Arnold Krupat, who has argued against the position Womack forwards, suggesting that the boundaries that separate Native traditions, spiritualities and political concerns from metropolitan ones are so permeable as not to be functional. Krupat writes that “Womack's distinction between ‘our canon’ and ‘their canon’ [. . .] is hardly clear after

five hundred years of contact” (20)⁴⁰. Alexander Hollenberg notes that Krupat makes the assumption that “the primary role of Native literature is to dissect and complicate white, dominant discourses of the self and thus inevitably appease the phoenix of liberal guilt that has risen out of the ashes of the defamiliarized canon” (6). Considering how Native literatures fulfill this role may, in fact, be very useful, but it is certainly not the singular, or even primary, role of every Native literary expression.

Rather than engaging in a debate about the comparative and contrasting points of “our canon” and “their canon,” Womack’s own instrumentalist Nationalist perspective contends that literary transculturation, as manifest in both canons, is transactional. In *Red on Red*, Womack works to counteract what he sees as “the supremacist notion that assimilation can go only one direction, that white is inherently more powerful than red” (12), by insisting on interpreting Native literature within its own cultural context *and* within the larger, postcolonial Euro-American context. I would argue that looking carefully at how *Flight* and *Drowning in Fire* work to encourage readers to deliberate upon those contexts as they respond to the testimony about cultural trauma can bridge Womack’s and Krupat’s positions in a nexus of instrumentalist Nationalism and respectful cosmopolitanism.

Not all cosmopolitanist positions render this dual context as desirable, or even possible. Just as Cook-Lynn is a staunch Nationalist, there are many strident cosmopolitanists. If Krupat is the most respected of the cosmopolitan critics, then Elvira Pulitano is probably the most derided, and she makes her exceptions to the nationalist agendas forwarded by Cook-Lynn and Womack clear. Pulitano accuses nationalist theorists of “overlook[ing] the complex level of hybridization and cultural translation that is already operating in any form of Native discourse” (43). This debate between cosmopolitan and nationalist critics leads back to the unanswerable question of authenticity. Pulitano’s perspective, derided as it is in the field of Native literary studies, is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that most pedagogical praxis in the field is conducted by non-Native teachers at the heads of classes comprised largely of non-Native students who wish to explore Native literature. The debate also works to set non-Native critics at

⁴⁰ Italics in original.

odds with the Native voices (both critical and literary) that their work seeks to explore. For the divide between the writer-as-insider and the reader-as-outsider to be bridged, some amount of productive dialogue between Pulitano's and Cook-Lynn's positions is requisite. Even though Womack wishes to speak first and foremost to other Creeks and other Natives, his work is at its most politically viable when it works to address metropolitan readers alongside that Native audience. Likewise, Alexie's desire to communicate with metropolitan readers may work to alienate Native readers and critics who could find new mechanisms for intertribal coalition in his texts. Reading the two novels as autoethnography reveals how the dual address—aimed at both insider- and outsider-readers—models effective cross-ethnic coalitions for social justice.

The goal of an intertextual approach to Womack's *Drowning in Fire* and Alexie's *Flight*, then, is to demonstrate how authors from different tribal affiliations treat personal and cultural traumas as literary objects and as calls for social justice that are specifically aimed at *both* an insider group that is aligned with a Native subject position *and* a larger non-Native audience. Such an approach could present some mechanisms that may generate the kinds of listening, learning, dialoging and debating that Daniel Heath Justice calls for when he writes: "to be a thoughtful participant in the decolonization of Indigenous peoples is to necessarily enter into an ethical relationship that requires respect, attentiveness, intellectual rigor, and no small amount of moral courage" (qtd. in McKegney 64). This respect and attentiveness means considering modes of address, authorial intent and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between textual expression and social justice initiatives with which nationalist and cosmopolitan authors often imbue their work. Hence, what these two authors have to say about their rhetorical intentions in their work and the audience with whom they communicate seems a good place to begin.

According to Pratt's definition, both writers produce autoethnographic literatures: "If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, [then] autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan constructions" (7). But, in bringing the criteria garnered from the dialogue between

Nationalist and cosmopolitan critics to bear on the texts, the question of whether or not these autoethnographic fictions work to serve an ethical political agenda remains to be satisfactorily answered. Kimberly Blaeser has noted that many works by American Indian authors contain within their literary representations an explicit historicization and an implicit theoretical methodology that guide readers toward respectful interpretations (348).⁴¹ To extend Blaeser's argument in such a way as to read within the literature a call-to-action for social justice may be one way of deferring to Native voices to direct non-Native readers into appropriate alliances with Native communities in an activist paradigm.

There are ways in which cosmopolitan literature can be interpreted to works in tandem with nationalist criticism. For instance, Osage Nationalist critic Robert Warrior recommends a strategy of "reading across" American Indian writings in order to provide necessary context for ethical critical engagement. This practices also requires from non-Native readers a modest and attentive way of approaching texts that is augmented by an emphatic reeducation in American history through autoethnography. To read only two novels, written by men who have radically different tribal cultures, may leave much to be desired in terms of fulfilling Warrior's suggestion. The lack of breadth demonstrated by a two text, two nation analysis is, perhaps, a failing of my project. However, to engage productively in the dialogue between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, is to insist that such "reading across" *can* demonstrate how differences between tribal nations could be bridged by an instrumentalist approach. This instrumentalist approach, which I'd argue is a third term in the nationalist/cosmopolitanist dichotomy, is a mechanism for building intertribal and cross-ethnic coalitions to serve social justice initiatives. Then, having understood how to use Nationalist methods to work to unify Womack's Creek perspective with Alexie's pan-tribal one, a cross-ethnic coalition between metropolitan readers and autoethnographers becomes possible. As Warrior suggests, "[b]y following the path I have suggested [. . .

⁴¹ In the chapter I cite, Blaeser find this to be especially true of Gerald Vizenor's haiku. She notes that each of the haiku is a kind of "'open' text [. . .] that works to activate the reader's imagination and thus engage the reader in the process of 'unfixing' the text [and] break through the boundaries of print" by crafting a relationship between the Japanese form he adopts and traditional Ojibway dream songs. In this way, the haiku communicate a sense of historical origin and provide the reader with a model for interpretation that is imbedded in the literary form.

.] I believe I am placing myself in the same position as every American Indian person who struggles to find a way toward a self-determined future” (*Tribal Secrets* xxiii), so any ethical critical intervention in such a struggle is likely to always be an inappropriate colonization of that self-determined future.

Nevertheless, if that ethical intervention is guided by Nationalist methods it can be used to build an alliance between readers in metropolitan subject positions and Native literary critics. Such a methodology would necessarily serve some ends that open more possibilities for the successful negotiation of the struggle Warrior asserts is universal to contemporary Native experiences.

Warrior might suggest that an inter-tribal multi-text paradigm is useful, but that intratribal readings are more likely to generate the most appropriate contexts that contribute to readers’ listening and learning, which are requisite to enter the dialogue about Native literatures. Such an interpretation seems to justify pairing Womack with other Muskogee writers, like Vincent Mendoza or Joy Harjo, rather than with an Interior Salish writer like Alexie. Still, Womack makes a case for intertribal dialogues in his depiction of Creek culture as fluid rather than static. Creek culture, as Womack depicts it, is always already transcultural, because Creek traditions celebrate difference and are radically inclusive.

The confederated nature of Creek nationality means that a number of non-Creek characters live in and around Weleetka, the Creek community Womack portrays. In shaping dialogue between these non-Creek characters and the Creek characters in the novel, Womack invokes a history of forced assimilation and genocide that is part of a pan-tribal narrative. In fact, Womack’s novel even examines the ways that assimilation has encouraged Native nations to be suspicious of one another. For instance, Lucy occasionally compares her white father, who is a truly despicable human being capable of all kinds of violence, with “one of them uncivilized Indians, maybe a Kiowa or a Comanche” (121). Lucy’s favorite cousin, Jennie, goes to the Chilocco boarding school with Kiowas and Comanches, and reports to Lucy that “none of them was uncivilized like the white people said. [. . .] Jennie had shown up on campus nearly scared to death that one of them wild Indians would beat the tar out of her or take her hair” (121), but became fast friends with an Apache girl. For Lucy, the take-away from this object lesson is that one

should “wonder how come white people don’t ever tell the truth about Indians, even if just by accident” (122).

The novel’s critique of this suspicion between tribes doesn’t end with Lucy’s lesson. Later, in one of Josh’s flights into the past he watches a group of Lighthorsemen, the Creek policeforce, escort a party of Snakes, traditionalists who resist allotment in the first decade of the twentieth-century, as they ride to Tulsa after speaking with Senator Dawes. Chitto Harjo, the leader and namesake of the Snakes, speaks to Seborn, who isn’t Creek, but lives on Creek lands with his partner Tarbie, who is:

Chitto turned to Seborn after he’d finished eating. He looked over at Seborn and said, ‘Do you know what you call a city full of Cherokees?’

‘No,’ Seborn replied, the first time he’d spoken to Chitto that day.

‘A full-blood,’ Chitto replied, and then Seborn knew he was being teased, relieved on the tension he felt in Chitto’s presence. Chitto knew that Seborn’s mother’s side of the family was Cherokee and part white, and he knew Seborn would understand the joke since it dealt with a popular false notion concerning the tribe that didn’t really hold true since Cherokees had also formed their own resistance factions, fiercely nationalist groups like the Nighthawks and Ketoowahs, and many of these traditionalist full-bloods didn’t even speak English. (235)

One might expect that a joke whose punchline makes light of a false stereotype about one’s familial background would constitute ‘fighting words.’ In this passage in *Drowning in Fire* the joke is a way to soothe tension and to acknowledge solidarity.

The novel explicitly makes a case for intertribal affiliation and casts blame for the suspicion of other Natives on the role of the colonizers. This is perhaps best exemplified by the chapter entitled “Jimmy’s Advertisement,” wherein Jimmy, the third narrator of *Drowning in Fire*, and his best friend, C.A. (who, not coincidentally, is identified as a Comanche raised on Creek lands), discuss placing a personal ad in *The Gayly Oklahoman*. Jimmy wants to advertise specifically for an Indian man, but C.A.

tells him that this would be akin to taking out an ad that says “WARNING I AM POISON” (152) and then accuses him of “reverse racism” (154) because Jimmy says he doesn’t want to date a white man. Jimmy retorts

The gay world is a totally fucked-up, racist, hateful, self-hating, boring, moronic, second-rate imitation of the straight world that despises it. They’re total assimilationists, the same bunch of folks telling your greatgrandparents to get a job and cut their hair and don’t talk Indian. (155)

This discussion between the two—like Jimmy’s final ad, which reads “I’m an Indian. I hope you are too. Give me a call.” (159)—seems to stress that alliances between tribal cultural groups are one way to resist the assimilationist tendencies of the mainstream (be it queer or heteronormative).

Additionally, in *Red on Red*, Womack himself adds a Cherokee writer, Lynn Riggs, to his book-length study of Creek literature because “inquiry into Riggs’ life and writings opens up Native studies to the subject of sexual orientation” and because his reading of Riggs’ play *The Cherokee Night* examines how and why Native writers may seem to “endorse vanishing viewpoints and tragic portrayals of Indians” (19). Because Alexie’s work has been repeatedly accused of taking up these sorts of tragic portrayals and endorsing the mythological archetype of the “vanishing Indian” it seems an important endeavor to apply Womack’s potentially reparative theoretical strategy to Alexie’s fiction as a way of continuing that intertribal dialogue about issues surrounding sovereignty.

Alexie’s work, and his descriptions of it, seem to challenge Warrior’s assertion that reading across Native authored texts has intrinsic value, and Alexie has explicitly repudiated the construction of an exclusively Native American canon that may call for intertextual reading practices. In an interview for *MELUS* he argued that putting two writers’ works together just because they are both Native American is “lazy scholarship” (Nygren 153). He goes on to clarify, “[f]or instance, Gerald Vizenor and I have nothing in common in terms of what we write about, how we write, and how we look at the world. There’d be no reason to link us other than our ethnicity” (153). In some ways, Alexie’s dismissal of any

inherent link between the work of Native writers does, in fact, point to an overlap between his perspective and the views espoused by Gerald Vizenor, an Anishinabe scholar and poet, that may further problematize Cook-Lynn's assertions about nationalist criticism. There is an overlap in Vizenor's worldview and Alexie's; although this overlap is not a similarity between Alexie's confrontational and confessional poetry and Vizenor's chantway inspired haiku. The overlap is both writers' assertions that an ethnic solidarity between "Indians" is illusory. In Alexie's cosmopolitan perspective on identity and Vizenor's critical work on the social construction of pan-ethnic categories the illusory nature of pan-tribal solidarity is central to their conception of contemporary indigenous identity.

Most pan-tribal constructions of Native Americans ought to be flagged as simulations of an illusory Indigenous cultural unity. As Vizenor has noted, there is no such thing as an "Indian." Vizenor famously noted that many depictions of Native identities use what he calls "the portraiture of the absence" to produce "an ambiguous discourse on simulations." These simulations are popularly misconstrued as authentic "tribal identities," which, unlike the imaginary "Indian" are, in fact, grounded in reality (*Manifest Manners* 18). If there is no such thing as an "Indian," then one might also say that Cherokee, Lakota and Spokane are certainly real ethnic categories. Tribal specificity provides a clear historiographic boundary between ethnicities, so the construction of the pan-tribal identity will probably always be fraught by essentialism. To illustrate, the Muskogean language group and the interior Salish language group bear about as much similarity to one another as Portuguese and German. In spite of this difference, linguists would group Portuguese and German together as Indo-European languages as they would categorize both Creek and Spokane as Indigenous North American languages. However, there is no mainstream assumption of an intrinsic cultural tie between Portugal and Germany, but the pan-ethnic construction of American Indian identity in popular culture seems to collapse distinctions between the Creek and the Spokane nations.

Vizenor asserts that "Indian" is a simulated category imposed from outside the subject position it describes. These kinds of simulations are largely a product of an American dominant cultural imagination

rather than an accurate expression of any of the numerous and disparate Indigenous national and cultural identities. To disrupt the process of allowing such a liminal presence to be standardized as an authentic tribal identity in literary criticism, scholars of Alexie's work interpret his use of a pan-tribal ethnic identity as discursive appeal to what Vizenor calls "postindian survivance." Because Zits doesn't know his tribal origins, he cannot simply rejoin his long-lost brethren, but that need not doom him to the tradition of the "Vanishing Indian" that is central to so many ethnographic depictions of Native Americans. Instead, Alexie dramatizes the strategies for survival and resistance that Zits employs to avoid the erasure of his cultural heritage.

Vizenor explains that narratives of postindian survivance refuse "the binaries of savagism and civilization" and instead depict "paradoxes of narrative fear, the suspension of domination and survivance hermeneutics" (*Manifest Manners* 170). According to Vizenor, "survivance is more than survival;" "stories of survivance are an active presence," which assert the perpetuity of Native peoples outside the clichéd tropes against which he calls for a resistance (*Fugitive Poses* 15). One way to see, in Alexie's work, evidence of the hermeneutic progression from absence to presence is to chart the inconsistencies in his depictions of "Indian" characters.

The simulacra of "Indianness" produced in Alexie's depictions may implicitly repudiate any notion of a static and ethnographically defined "authentic Indian" and this repudiation is at the heart of the diametric opposition of the savage to the civilized. Part of what constitutes the construction of tribal identities in the American literary imagination appears to be a recurring simulacrum of quintessential tribal descent into tragic absentia. Like many American writers, Alexie participates in the construction of this simulacrum, but there are also ways in which his participation may be read as disruptive to the larger imaginative process. For instance, in *Flight* Zits occupies the body of a young boy at the Battle of Little Bighorn. While at first he is excited to witness what he sees as a momentous occasion for Native American history, as the battle progresses Zits begins to change his mind. He decides that historians

named the battle all wrong. They shouldn't have called it Custer's Last Stand. Oh, it was his last stand. He died there. Here, I mean. But Custer wasn't important. He was easily replaced. There were plenty of other soldiers who were smarter and better at killing Indians. Little Bighorn was the last real battle of the Indian Wars. After that, the Indians gave up. So Custer's Last Stand was really the Indians' last stand. (70)

On face, this seems to be the epitome of discursive vanishing. Alexie's narrator marks the end of Indian resistance even on the occasion of their victory. However, as is the case with many coming of age stories, Zits's tale is far from its end at this juncture, and the fact that his story continues seems to provide the reader with evidence of an Indian presence long after the "Indian Wars" ended.

The combination of the experiences in the body of the FBI agent at Red River and this child's-eye view of Custer's Last stand both may suggest that whites have the insurmountable ability to overwhelm or infiltrate any organized attempt at preventing the genocide that results in this vanishing, but the questions that these experiences pose are more localized on whether or not violence can be justified in the face of genocide. When Zits, in the body of Agent Hank Storm, must watch his FBI partner shoot Junior, he vomits and then considers his own violent actions in the bank and comes to the conclusion that "I'm not any better than the real Hank Storm. I am Hank Storm too" (52). At the end of the vignette at Little Bighorn, Zits, in the body of the mute Indian boy, is encouraged to cut the throat of a young soldier. As the Indian boy's father encourages his son to take revenge by committing the same act of violence that robbed him of his voice, Zits looks at the soldier and thinks "He's a child and I'm a child and I'm supposed to slash his throat. What do I do?" (78). In his questioning of the violent response he witnesses (which is, of course, a response by Crazy Horse to the massacre Custer's men commit before Little Bighorn), Zits seems to be attempting to cope a cultural trauma and also to fashion an ethos of social justice. Because Zits is unable to make a clear epideictic judgment, Alexie uses his narration to put the question directly to the reader—what should Zits do? The readers' deliberations are left open when Zits flies into another personae before Alexie has him make a choice.

Critics who see the lack of tribal specificity in Alexie's work as troubling might claim that in leaving out a National context, Alexie is simulating Native identity for his metropolitan readers. Vizenor argues that all invocations of "Indians" without tribal specificity are "simulations with no referent [. . .] *Indians* are other, the names of sacrifice and of victimry" (*Fugitive Poses* 27). However, Alexie's uses of the "Vanishing Indian" archetype are potentially radical because he grounds this descent in an overt exploration of Euro-American cultural imperialism and forced transculturation. In spite of this potentially radical subtext, Alexie's narrative often simultaneously denies any sense of defeatist domination by insisting on the continuing presence of these "Indians." Two of the flights occurring after the Little Bighorn vignette—into the body of the Indian Tracker and into the body of his own father—present a continuing Native presence in the novel. His representations of sacrifice and victimry lack Romantic nobility or Realist tragedy. Instead, a set of truths about the functions and consequences of contact in the American present are rendered in the fiction. The narrative reproduction of colonial contact between whites and American Indians in Alexie's prose corpus can be reparatively read as an indictment *and* a reification of earlier Romantic, Realist and Naturalist representations of "Indians." The ambiguity of these disparate interpretations requires readers to make their own judgments about the historical facts that Alexie provides. This judgment has the potential to illuminate Alexie's implied acknowledgement of treaty-rights abuses and the transmission of both racial and racist discourse through transcultural contact between metropolitan characters and Native characters in narratives that seem to encourage active judgments from their readers. Because Alexie's text is structured within a discursive orientation upon readers outside a specifically Native worldview, it would seem that his novel invites theoretical investigation in a much different way than does Womack's.

This line of theoretical application could be extended to Womack's novel, but such a critical endeavor seems to violate the terms of interpretation that Womack sets forth. An explication of how *Drowning in Fire* demonstrates the combination of survival and resistance that Vizenor invokes when he stresses the importance of images of survivance is certainly possible. The application of the Bakhtinian

terms for describing the efficacy of literatures of witness is outside Womack's intentions for *Drowning in Fire*. Womack expresses his reluctance to include Vizenor's use of semiotics or Bakhtin's theories about resistance and the public sphere when he writes that restating "the same damn Bakhtin quot[at]ions] we've all heard a million times" fails to effectively frame a uniquely Creek narrative, even if those quotations "reinvigorate self-awareness within the white, multiculturalist discourse" (qtd. in Hollenberg 10).

Womack's stance objects to the use of high theory to explicate texts like *Drowning in Fire*. Womack, unlike Alexie, is uninterested in what reinvigorates self-awareness for metropolitan readers. However, Weaver, with whom Womack has worked closely, notes in *American Indian Literary Nationalism* that he agrees with Krupat's argument that "the cosmopolitan critic needs the nationalist critic" and that nationalist theories are "broad enough to encompass" many different kinds of criticism because of the plurality of the separatist vision (73-74). Weaver's caveat to Womack's perspective may indicate that there is room in the nationalist project to consider the perspectives of metropolitan readers, so long as those perspectives are shaped in accord with an instrumentalist vision of assisting in social justice initiatives for populations of Native peoples. Michelle Henry expresses this claim most clearly when she states that "those of us outside Creek worldviews" who read literatures of witness about those worldviews "carry a responsibility to set aside [. . .] theoretical jargon that ignores the lives of people who are implicated in that theory and to consider [Creek people] on their own terms" (49). If metropolitan readers approach *Drowning in Fire* with respect for the Creek worldviews it expresses, then that respect—which is augmented by a newly augmented historical narrative and some deliberation about how to address the wrongs highlighted in that narrative—can be a foundation for building cross-ethnic coalitions. Even as Womack protests that he writes to Creek and Native readers, it is possible for *Drowning in Fire* to indirectly educate and transform non-Native readers into allies under a paradigm of instrumentalist Nationalism.

Textual Performativity and Political Possibility: Native Literature and Indigenous Rights

I realize the term [Holocaust] was generated to mean something specific, but I want it to mean more [. . .] I want what happened here [in North America] to receive the same sort of sacred respect that what happened in Germany does. I want our dead to be honored.

—Sherman Alexie in “‘A World of Story Smoke’: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie”

A key component of nationhood is a people’s ideas of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty defined within the tribe rather than by external sources.

—Craig Womack, from *Red on Red*

Because both Womack’s and Alexie’s novels are autoethnographic, each author works to guide readerly intervention in the issues that are presented by the texts. Womack’s work is explicitly nationalist, and crafts representations “out of a geographically specific landscape and [out of] the language and stories born out of that landscape” (*Red on Red* 20). Womack includes several stories born out of a uniquely Creek landscape in *Drowning in Fire*. Most obviously, there are traditional stories and tribal histories. For instance, the Creek creation story that Lucy tells Josh in the opening chapter when she uses smoke and tradition to cure his earache fuses the beginning of the nationalist novel with the origin tale of the nation the novel will represent. Additionally, the inclusion of the episodes with Harjo’s Snakes and the patrolling Lighthorsemen present a mechanism for tying late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Creek history to the present in which Josh and Jimmy come together in the romantic plot of the novel. There are also stories—like Josh and Jimmy’s romance—that emerge from the present context of

the Creek geography that *Drowning in Fire* represents. Some of these stories work to foreground key issues that the community is still grappling with; for instance, Lucy's confessional tales about childhood sexual trauma and Josh and Jimmy's battles with homophobia point toward issues of sexuality and sexual violence that are still prescient for Creeks in the period in which the novel was written.

Since Womack is so clear in staging these stories and because the didactic intent of the novel is rendered with such precision in his critical treatises, the mechanisms for reading his prose are made transparent for readers who take the time to explore the wealth of context he provides. Since, by Womack's own report, the novel is written first to an audience of other Creeks and second, to Natives with other tribal affiliations, the tertiary audience of non-Natives would need to undertake that exploration if they are to understand the important calls to action that Womack's fiction issues. As Henry argues, *Drowning in Fire* "invokes a sense of responsibility, a need to reexamine history, and a need to hear the stories of those who have been silenced for too long on their own terms, and not just as a reflection of the dominant worldview" (49); as metropolitan readers look over the shoulders of Native readers at Womack's text, they must attempt to suspend their own subject positions and examine the complicity of those subject positions in the history of oppression they are called to reexamine. To do so, these readers must necessarily foreground Native voices—as Justice argues, they must listen and learn.

On the other hand, Alexie's autoethnographic fiction about "Indians" works to clarify avenues of ethical response for metropolitan readers before insider-readers. His novel may cause readers to participate in the Bakhtinian process of empathy and exotopy, as those readers positioning themselves in relation to the simulations within the text. First, readers are encouraged to identify with the depictions of cultural trauma—particularly those for which Alexie borrows the term Holocaust in the epigraph to this section—visited upon the Indigenous populations and with the characters who suffer from those traumatic experiences. The several instances of colonial violence that Zits witnesses seem to work to accomplish this end. Through narrative suture with an abandoned and culturally bereft Native teen, by witnessing the murder of a Native activist by agents of the U.S. federal government, the maiming of a young boy by

American soldiers, the massacre of an Indian village by another troop of American soldiers and by seeing inside the stereotypical “drunken Indian” readers are encouraged to see each iteration of personal trauma as linked to larger history of imperial violence. Secondly, readers are reminded by the second impetus, exotopy, that such an identification is, in many ways, impossible. This impossibility is illustrated through anathematic depictions that may cause readers to retreat into their own subject positions, and after such a retreat readers may make epideictic evaluations of the characters’ actions in the historical and cultural contexts that shaped the readers’ empathetic reactions. The impossibility of genuine empathy may be further demonstrated by Alexie’s reflections on the complicity of the dominant culture in creating the conditions of inequality that produce the traumatic conditions depicted in the fiction.

To accomplish these goals Alexie sets up the chronology of the novel to encourage readers to oscillate between these two modes of reacting to Zits as the narrative progresses. First, readers may empathize with a boy who feels ashamed, unwanted and ugly. Then, readers may repudiate that original identification when Zits treats his foster parents with such contempt, even going so far as to strike a woman. Next, a sense of sympathy that might encourage identification is manufactured by the narrative turn that finds Zits in juvenile jail and lamenting his actions and missing his late mother. Afterwards, Zits’s attraction to Justice, the handsome white teenager who becomes an object of both romantic and paternal attachment for the narrator, may give pause to homophobic readers and certainly the random act of slaughter that Zits is persuaded to undertake will cause any residual empathy to dissolve. The invitation to try to suture readerly experiences with Zits by witnessing his trauma is almost instantaneously revoked by the display of reprehensible behaviors that point out the impossibility of the precise alignment of a privileged subject position with one as abject as the narrator’s.

Without the exotopic function the text might risk rupturing the distance between the reader and the character through a romanticized empathy. Readers may then believe that they can “understand what it’s like to be Indian” and assume that they can speak for and about the experiences that are central to the autoethnographic project in ways that are an exercise of liberal guilt masking personal responsibility. The

risk of over-empathizing or of romanticizing is a collapsing of cultural trauma into personal trauma, and that collapse leads readers to miss the importance of the cultural story that contextualizes the personal one in the literary texts or to respond only to the “fugitive pose” that supports the “portraiture of absence.” The two kinds of representations—empathetic and exotopic—presented together in Alexie’s fiction about “Indians” work in tandem to highlight privilege for readers in non-Native subject positions, which is an ethically and politically useful response to autoethnographic fiction.

Alexie highlights childhood sexual abuse within the narrative; this rhetorical maneuver may be a mechanism that links Zits’s personal trauma with a cultural one. In the moment when Zits is contemplating whether or not to slash the white soldier’s throat at Little Bighorn, he is reminded of his own victimization.

[B]ack when I was eight years old, and I was living in this foster home on a mountain near Seattle. [. . .] I remember I’d been living there for a week, with my new brother and new sister and new mother, when my new father took me into the basement to show me his model trains. [. . .] I remember I played with those trains for hours and hours. Played until I could barely keep my eyes open. Then my new father took me into another dark room in the basement, one without any trains, and did evil things to me. Things that hurt. Things that made me bleed. [. . .] I stare at the white soldier again. I wonder what I would do now if that model-train man were lying on the grass here at Little Bighorn. Would I kill him? (75-6)

This link between Zits’s individual trauma at the hands of a sadistic pedophile and the history of colonial oppression that is vetted in Alexie’s depiction of Custer’s last stand may seem, on face, to be the sort of slippage between the personal and the collective against which Elam warns. However, as Qwo-Li Driskill, a Two-Spirit Cherokee, Lenape, Lumbee and Osage nationalist theorist and poet has noted, “[s]exual assault is an explicit act of colonization that has enormous impacts on both personal and national identities” (51).

In considering how personal experiences of sexual violation are connected to a cultural history of land theft, limited sovereignty and overt genocide, Driskill reminds readers that sexual violence and gender proscription are tools that are regularly used to force Indigenous peoples to abandon their own traditions. The relationship that is constructed in mainstream culture between gender and sexual desire forges an implicit link between metropolitan heteronormativity and sexual violence against those whose identities are constructed as marginal. Driskill notes,

European invasion of the Americas required a masculinity that murders, rapes, and enslaves Native and African peoples. It is a masculinity that requires men to be soldiers and conquerors in every aspect of their lives. A masculinity rooted in genocide breeds a culture of sexual abuse. It is vital to remember that most of our traditions did not allow such behavior. (53)

It seems reasonable to assert that Zits's recollection of his history of sexual abuse, at the hands of whites, becomes analogous to the Indian boy's maiming, and that this colonial legacy of abuse is both personal and cultural. Further, Alexie calls upon readers to take that history of sexual assault under consideration as they consider their epideictic judgments of the character, with whom they alternately identify and disidentify, as they are left to weigh the import of identity for the interpretation of the novel. Because Alexie crafts this link between the individual and the collective, the author speaks, through Zits, both for and about the use of sexual violence as a tool for continued colonization.

The question of whether non-Native critics can ethically contribute to the discussion about these instances of cultural violence is vexed by identity politics. In the volume *Who Can Speak?* editors Judith Roof and Robyn Weigman collect a pair of essays in which Diane Elam takes issue with some of Linda Alcoff's prescriptive recommendations for treating literatures of witness. Among Elam's chief concerns is Alcoff's insistence that attention to one's own subject position may be a mechanism for treating the potential problems of writing about the narratives of those outside one's own identity group. Elam notes that such a tactic implicitly, if not overtly, situates the critic's perspective as of at least as, and,

sometimes, of dangerously more, importance than the perspective narrated in the autoethnographic literature. This problem causes some Nationalist scholars to shut out the perspectives expressed by non-Native critics. Many non-Native critics foreground discussions of their own ethnic identity in their work, which can deter focus upon the communities whose trauma is central to the texts those critics analyze. For example, Michelle Henry employs the caveat “as a white American myself” in the first paragraph of her essay on *Drowning in Fire* (30); likewise, Hollenberg’s second paragraph begins with “as a white Canadian” (1). These self-identifications are not intended to take up rhetorical space that these two critics would allot to Native authors, but the fact remains that critical identity, as much as authorial identity, then becomes the subject of the analysis. While I would argue that these concerns about subject positions are quite valuable to ponder, the foregrounding of them seems a flawed strategy for any endeavor that seeks to replace the primacy of the white with the centrality of Native contexts, as most nationalists would deem appropriate. Perhaps, as there is a clear pattern in the field of noting tribal affiliations when naming critics and authors, the absence of such a marked affiliation—rather than an in-text examination of the author’s outsider status—may serve to mark non-Natives in such a way that their ethnic identity doesn’t merit as much consideration as the tribal context that is pertinent to the textual analysis they posit.

Another of Elam’s concerns is that to articulate one’s own subject position, in a discrete way, without any imposition on the perspectives of others, is a structural impossibility. In some ways, Elam points to the same problems McKegney outlines with Krupat’s recent work on Native literature and literary criticism. Elam and McKegney argue in such a way as to beg for a methodology that indicates how critics might engage with the discursive representations of Native writers in ways that, while never foolproof, do at least attempt to maintain an appropriate distance from and give full respect to the kinds of depictions woven into that literature. In a recent issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Sam McKegney published an “open letter” arguing that “[t]he current critical climate encourages a healthy skepticism about claims made by non-Native critics while suggesting (at times implicitly, at others explicitly) the intellectual and political value of attending to Indigenous voices within the critical arena”

(56). McKegney notes a clearer strategy for the ethical engagement between non-Native scholars and Native-authored texts is needed, and that the terms of the debate between cosmopolitan critics and nationalist ones may present a place from which to begin strategizing. Like McKegney, I'd contend that non-Native instructors and scholars need a pedagogical and research-oriented strategy that is informed by Native Nationalist literary criticism; because the Nationalist critics have developed a rubric for interpretation that privileges Indigenous voices, it seems reasonable to assert that they might provide a clear set of guidelines for ethically engaging with Native-authored texts in a hostile academic environment.

However, the set of criteria I've gleaned from Cook-Lynn and Womack's works begs a more complex and difficult set of questions: How can these new voices and ideas be located? How might "authentic" indigenous perspectives be separated from "inauthentic" ones? What is an "authentic" indigenous voice? Because of the five hundred year old legacy of erasure, assimilation and acculturation wielded against traditional Native cultures, Native identity is difficult to adjudicate. Cook-Lynn asserts that work by authors who occupy interstitial spaces "support [. . .] the idea of nationalistic/tribal culture as a contradiction in terms" (30). As previously noted, many of the contemporary Native populations currently in crisis are comprised of people who, like Zits, have liminal identities. To work toward social justice for those populations, Nationalists need to provide enough flexibility in definitions of Native identity to include those liminal subject positions. Womack concurs and theorizes how this flexibility might occur: "Maybe one can face the reality of a mixed existence while still asserting the primacy of nationalism. [. . .] What might be called for is a view of identity in terms of the larger picture" ("Howling at the . . ." 32). For Womack, cultural allegiance can supplement some lack of phenotypically determined identity, but only if the non-Native aspects of the "mixedblood" individual and culture are shunted in favor of a tribally-defined identity with a strong commitment to the restoration and retention of sovereignty.⁴² Critic John Gamber notes that Womack's use of setting and imagery in the novel reflects

⁴² Both Hollenberg and Henry give this trend in Womack's writing more sustained analysis than is presented here.

“the fact that the Creek Nation has historically [. . .] included and welcomed individuals, families, and even whole communities from other tribal, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in a broad-reaching alliance—the Creek community presented in *Drowning in Fire* is racially inclusive” (104). This consistency between the fictional depictions and the reality of the cultural story Womack tells is linked to the project his critical works undertake. Womack’s depictions of an inclusive Creek community illustrate that coalitions between tribally identified collective identities, disenfranchised urban Indians and even non-Natives who share a commitment to social justice are both possible and productive.

Discursive Reclamations and Spatial Decolonizations—Native Rhetorics and American Landscapes

We like to think our condition is special, that our oppression, our poverty, our situation, is special. It’s really not. Every problem in the Indian world can be directly related to poverty. Every problem we have is a variation of the same problem poor people all over the United States have, and we can suggest all these cultural solutions [. . .] but as a group it’s really about economic advancement.

—from “‘Humor is My Green Card’: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie”

Let me offer some hope about what we do. [. . .] If we are honest with ourselves, many of us who are Native critics would have to admit that we have unprecedented opportunities to write and teach almost anything we want to in the academy. Few endeavors anywhere provide so much freedom. Simply whining about the ways the university fails to acknowledge or appreciate indigenous knowledge often overlooks the fact that it gives us virtually free reign in producing it ourselves.

—Craig Womack, from “The Integrity of American Indian Claims,”

Chapter Two of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*

Ethical engagement requires that attention be paid to the author’s perspectives on the function of writing. It also requires readers to employ strategies that help them to intuit the political, personal and artistic uses of those perspectives, so looking at the ways in which Womack and Alexie bring the issue of sexuality to bear upon their deliberation unifies nationalist and cosmopolitan perspectives. Womack writes that the key problem with colonially transmitted homophobia and indigenous sexualities is:

the way we [Native Americans] internalize colonialism. [. . .] I suspicion this erasure of [Two-Spirit, Queer, Lesbian and] gay male presence [. . .] is an endorsement of colonialism we don’t even realize. We’ve accepted, without knowing it, the politics of silencing the Other. (“Politicizing HIV Prevention . . .” 211)

Driskill concurs and suggests that connecting the corporeality of the body and the topography of Indian Country in “literatures that participate in the process of radical, holistic decolonization” can work to question this internalized homophobia by using divergent sexualities to challenge western normative compulsions (59). In this way, the overt assertion of Two-Spirit, Queer, Lesbian and Gay male sexualities are examples of how nationalism might be found in challenges to Eurocentric sex/gender systems. Queer desire between Native characters, in some tribal traditions, contributes to the reclamation of indigenous ways of life. Two-Spirit, Queer, Lesbian and Gay identities should be positively portrayed in literature that has been endowed with overt nationalist intentions. Positive portrayals can do the necessary work of normalizing these identities and thus can begin to resist the internalization of colonialist prohibitions against sexual autonomy and diversity in sexual expression.

Womack's novel posits a potential reclamation of gay Indian identity. He produces a fictionalized discourse that draws upon traditional, historical and contemporary Creek gay male performance.⁴³ By positioning Lucy, in her youth, as a witness to Tarbie and Seborn's male-to-male love affair, which is accepted by the Creek community, Womack creates continuity between Josh and Jimmy's present-day love affair and a traditional tribal identity. Additionally, Dave, Tarbie's nephew and Jimmy's father, is torn from the care of his loving uncles and delivered to Lucy's abusive white father, who only solicits the courts for custody so that he can exploit Dave's inherited land holdings. This removal "is a response to U.S. intervention in Creek clan structures, particularly the statutory definition of a family in terms of a parent-child unit" (Rifkin 460) that orphans Dave in spite of the availability of a two-parent household that loves him and wishes to raise him. Because both Tarbie and Seborn are perceived as single men, they are deemed less appropriate to serve as guardians than Lucy's parents, who treat Dave as if he is hired help rather than a member of their family. Womack's clear critique, not just of a compulsorily heterosexual Euro-American definition of coupledness but also of the centrality of the nuclear family, is posited in opposition to traditional Creek forms of kinship. Womack's representations resist ongoing erasure of extranormative desire in Creek culture and demonstrate a tactic for healing cultural trauma and insisting upon a paradigm of survivance. Josh and Jimmy are examples of how the cultural tradition marked in the forensic narrative by Lucy's memories of Seborn and Tarbie is not lost, but rather transculturally permuted. Both gay couples are evidence of a fictionalization of resistance to the compulsory heterosexuality that colonization attempts to impress upon Creek peoples. Because of this resistance, Womack's depictions of gender variance and extranormative sexualities contribute to the Nationalist agenda of his prose.

Alexie's work has also been enriched by a consideration of the intersection of extranormative sexuality and Native identity, and, in fact, the galvanization of the Two-Spirit movement that

⁴³ Mark Rifkin has argued that "Womack's representation of sexuality, then, opens onto a consideration of the nature and contours of sovereignty" and closes with an investigation of "how the suppression of homoeroticism can be understood as continuous with the acceptance of other imposed ideals that constrain Creeks' ability to shape Muscogee peoplehood for themselves" (446). Further, Driskill notes that *Drowning in Fire* implicitly "connects the erotic to the sacred" (61).

contextualizes Driskill's claims is concurrent with Alexie's rise in visibility. In 1992 a group of concerned scholars and writers, under the organizational name Gay American Indians (GAI), opened a dialogue with the American Association of Anthropologists (AAA) at their national conference in Seattle, where the GAI challenged the anthropologists' use of an umbrella term, "berdache," to signify all these variant expressions of Native gender systems in their work (Lang, et al. 7-16). Because the word "berdache" has both racially and sexually degrading origins, GAI asked that the term be removed from use and replaced with the phrase "Two-Spirit."⁴⁴ The groups met again in 1993 and 1994 to further discuss the issue and its ramifications on anthropological research about Native cultures. The Two-Spirit movement emerged from this dialogue; one of the missions of this movement is to find and record instances of gender variance in Native cultures and to contextualize them appropriately in an autoethnographic way. If Alexie were to participate in such a contextual rendering in his fiction, then that would certainly be a contribution to issues of social justice for queer Native people—another of those pan-tribal groups that is in crisis both within and outside their ethnic communities.

In some of his work Alexie does participate in GAI's project, but not in *Flight*. Alexie's work rose to a new height in terms of its widening readership and critical popularity at about the same time as the GAI's dialogue with the AAA began to receive press (Newton 413). In the words of John Newton, "for Sherman Alexie, 1993 was a famous year" (413) as he published three full-length volumes—*Old Shirts, New Skins* (poetry), *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (prose), and *First Indian on the Moon* (multi-genre). Though *Flight* was written several years later, it is especially interesting to note that Alexie was living in Seattle at the time of the first meeting between the AAA and GAI, because much of his work, particularly his short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* and the screenplay for *The Business of Fancydancing* treat homophobia in Native communities explicitly and develop similar didactic messages to the ones that Driskill espouses. The assertion that Alexie's work is critical of heteronormative masculinity is unoriginal. Questions of prioritizing sexual and ethnic identities are

⁴⁴ "Berdache" (also "berdâche" or "berdashe") is a Francophonic rendition of the Persian word "bardaj," a term for non-Muslim "catamites;" see Lang, et al 9.

central to the thematic arc of the plot and to the development of the characters in *The Business of Fancydancing* and in *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Gender/sex and Native American cultural affiliations are subjects that Alexie finds worthy of investigation in a significant portion of his literary corpus (Gillan 93).

Although the centrality of Two-Spirit identities to *Flight* is perhaps less obvious than those themes are in *Toughest Indian* and Alexie's second screenplay, I believe that there are grounds for seeing Zits's attachment to both the enigmatic figure of Justice and the vaguely paternal figure of Officer Dave as at least latently homoerotic. Charting Alexie's representation of this desire between male characters may, once again, situate *Flight* in conversation with *Drowning in Fire* so as to show how Nationalist methods might highlight potential for cross-ethnic coalitions in Native texts. However, Alexie's text fails to resist a dominant homophobic discourse in its portrayals of same-sex desire. Zits's escalation of violence from the situationally motivated to random animosity is incipient with his desire for Justice. When the two teenagers meet in the juvenile detention center, Zits describes Justice to the reader: "His complexion is so clear that it's translucent. I can see the blue veins running through his skin like rivers. I have to admit, he's a good-looking guy. In fact, he's pretty like a girl. Damn, maybe *I'm a fag*" (21).⁴⁵ This first impression is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the clarity of Justice's complexion and his physical beauty establish him as the diametric opposite of Zits's self-image; if Zits is too Indian, too pimply, too ugly to be loved, then Justice is the epitome of all that is loveable because of his very difference from Zits. Second, the overt homoeroticism of Zits's response to Justice's physical appearance sets the stage for an attachment that seems pathological from the very beginning. It is an attachment that is contextualized in the fetishizing of whiteness.

Zits's introduction of Officer Dave to the readers of *Flight* is less palpably sexual. After pushing his foster mother, cussing his foster father and running away from his foster home, Zits is apprehended by Dave and his partner; in a tussle that ensues Zits punches Dave's partner, who responds by chiding the

⁴⁵ Italics in original.

boy, “You punch like a girl” (17). Dave further impugns Zits’s masculinity by asking “How come you always punch the moms and never the dads?” Rather than responding to the question of his tendency for violence against women, or protesting that he is not effeminate, Zits clarifies that he pushed rather than punched a woman, and begins, in his direct-address to the reader, to describe his relationship to Dave:

Dave is a big white dude. But he’s got one of those gentle voices like he’s talking you down from the ledge of a building. [. . .] Good cops are lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked. Like Officer Dave. He’s never said much about his life, but I can tell he’s scarred. And he knows I’m scarred too. The wounded always recognize the wounded. We can smell each other [. . .] Dave is okay. (18-19)

Zits’s obvious respect, and implied affection, for Officer Dave is different from his attachment to Justice. If his attraction to Justice is presented as a fetishization of difference, then his connection to Dave is here described as an identification with sameness. “Dave is okay” because Zits intuits a shared trauma in their backgrounds, even though he has no evidence that such an overlap in their experiences exists.

Zits’s relationships to Dave and Justice become a dichotomy that shapes the novel. Justice is an embodiment of the evil of which Zits is capable; he romanticizes Indian identity and encourages Zits to embrace the hatred he feels and to commit acts of violence. Dave is a personification of the potential for good in Zits; after Zits undoes the violence Justice coaches him toward, Dave becomes an avenue for Zits to have a permanent family. Because this formula of dueling white men trying to teach a Native boy to be a man is a kind of inversion of Nativist modernism—in which white boys are ushered into manhood by “noble savages”—the homoerotic inflection of the relationships is important to consider.⁴⁶

Because Zits’s attachment to Justice is more fully inflected by homoeroticism, it would seem to indicate that Alexie crafts a connection between queer desire and violence. Even when Zits denies sexual attraction, the denial seems a sort of Freudian repression:

⁴⁶ Walter Benn Michael’s conception of “Nativist Modernism”—a discursive mode in which narratives perpetuate a transmission of the simulated “Indian” from an object of oppression to an imagined ancestor of normative Euro-American masculinity—is a hallmark of romanticized representations of Native identity. The relationship between Ike McCaslin and Sam Fathers in *Go Down, Moses* is one example of the phenomenon.

The pretty white boy is my best friend. Maybe the only real friend of my life. We talk for hours. He *understands* me. He's only two years older, but it seems like he's lived for two thousand years. I fall in love with him. [. . .] I really get the feeling that pretty white kid could save me from being lonely. (24)

The recurring use of “pretty” as a descriptor for Justice, coupled with the denial of desire for physical contact within pages of a description of thrilling at just that sort of contact works to supplant some doubt of the legitimacy of Zits’s denial of romantic feelings in the reader.

These romantic feelings seem to be a mix of paternal desire, sexual desire and a yearning for a religious savior. Zits seems aware of this conflicted matrix of desires in his narration; he puzzles it out on page 26—“he hugs me. I’m not afraid of him. I’m not afraid that the cops might see us hugging. I’m not afraid of myself for hugging him. I’m a fatherless kid who wants another teenager to be my father.” Alexie almost seems to invite an Oedipal reading of the Justice-Zits-Officer Dave triangle, as Justice and Dave compete to be the most desirable Phallic authority for the fatherless boy. In the end, it is Zits’s renunciation of violence that allows him to negotiate this period of vexed identification, and that renunciation is an assumed choice of Dave as appropriate paternal figure, although, it is Dave’s brother—Robert, the firefighter—and Dave’s sister-in-law (a woman named Mary, as if to call to mind the Christian ideal of motherhood) who will form the basis of a newly sedimented and seemingly functional nuclear family for Zits.

Flight follows a cosmopolitan narrative formula—that of the *bildungsroman*—almost to the letter. The novel ends with Mary applying the curative salve to remove the physical imperfection from which Zits draws his name. The boy sheds his childhood nickname and requests that his new foster mother call him “Michael.” Mary becomes an appropriately designated object of heterosexual desire—a Freudian mother figure for whom Zits can compete with his new father. After Robert leaves for the firestation on Zits’s first day with his final foster home, Zits expresses excitement because he is “alone with Mary” and declares, “I’m in love. Is it okay to be in love with your foster mother? Well, to be

honest, I don't care if it's okay or not" (177). The conclusion of the novel—like the narrative of Jimmy the pilot and his friend Abbad the terrorist—seems oddly removed from the portions of the narrative from which one might draw a nationalist conclusion. Even according to an instrumentalist Nationalist paradigm, there is no resistance to the colonialist narrative in this dénouement.

The white mother and father figures become Zits's saviors—from his loneliness, from his lack of citizenship, from his propensities towards violence, and even from his latent homosexual desires. The unironic acceptance of an ending that dramatizes a white couple saving a Native boy from has some troubling consequences. Alexie implies that normative, middle class American life is the cure for wayward Indian orphans, that heteronormative nuclear families can replace tribal kinship structures, and that cultural continuity can be achieved through a pastiche of moments in history. Louis Owens has claimed that the "[c]haracters and culture in [Alexie's] works represent vague decaying fragments incapable of being shored against anyone's ruin" and argues that "the non-Indian reader of Alexie's work is allowed to come away with a sense [. . .] that no one is really to blame but the Indians" (qtd. in Spahr 160). This seems to hold true in the case of *Flight* because it is Zits's decision to relinquish his anger and violence and to correct in his own behavior what he ascertains have been the mistakes made in the history his flights reveal that provides him with a path to salvation. The logical extension of this implicit argument may be that other oppressed subjects can be responsible for alleviating their own oppression by making similar decisions. Additionally, the collapse of the cultural trauma of Natives into any instance of colonial or class-based oppression, as Alexie argues for in the above epigraph, seems to undercut any potentially radical ends for the identity politics at work in his fiction.

Alexie's novel may even encroach upon the rhetorical space rightly belonging to those suffering colonial or class-based oppression who are not Native. For instance, Steven Salaita argues that *Flight* works to demarginalize Indian identity by securing its allegiance with the Euro-American mainstream, which is set in opposition to the spectral Muslim figure—Abbad—in the only vignette in the novel that doesn't investigate contact between whites and Natives. Salaita notes that "Liberal Orientalism conjoins

two discursive traditions that are central to the moral suppositions of Alexie's fiction" (26) by crafting a vision of multiculturalism that, rather than being radically inclusive like Womack's vision of Creek confederation, is posited upon the exclusion of some greater evil outside the incorporated mainstream of American national identity. Because Zits's occupation of Jimmy's body positions the boy in the subject position of a white man who feels he has been destroyed by his Muslim friend's betrayal, *Flight*, in so far as it imagines a multicultural moment outside the white/Indian cultural binary, "contextualizes Muslim terrorism with a multiculturalist dialectic" and "thus creates a tension between its inclusive self-image and the exclusivist structures innate to its fundamental logic" (27). Salaita's reading of Abbad—who unlike Zits allows his cultural trauma to fuel a hatred that justifies mass homicide—is that he serves as an example for the consequences of rejecting a multicultural impulse that Salaita finds as fundamentalist and lower-case *c* conservative as Alexie purportedly finds Cook-Lynn's politics. *Flight* demonstrates that "Orientalism can be performed liberally and with a sheen of enlightened contestation that in actuality strengthens Orientalist reckonings among the empire's liberals" (Salaita 28). In speaking for and about Muslim radicals, even as analogues for violent Native American radicalism, Alexie has unethically engaged with difference.

In *Flight*, Alexie implicitly condemns same-sex desire, vilifies Muslims and sets up a Native character to participate in a Euro-America defined narrative of coming-of-age. Alexie's viewpoints clearly do not always cohere with Womack's, and even the latent Nationalist potential of *Flight* is undermined by these three representational maneuvers. Rather than seeing this as a failing of the Nationalist paradigm to effectively frame Alexie's testimonial fiction as potentially transformative, one might consider how Alexie's novel's deliberative failures can be recuperated through Nationalist teaching and critical methods. There are cosmopolitan critics who disagree with perspectives like Owen's and Salaita's. Clemens Spahr notes that Owens's reading of Alexie's work "is nothing short of astonishing in light of the constant racism that shatters and ruins the lives of Alexie's characters," and that nationalist criticisms of Alexie's works are limited by their vision of the texts as a mechanism for speaking to other

Natives about Native identity. Spahr asks the question what if “Alexie does not exclusively target a Native American audience? What if we take his books to be attempts to create a critical aesthetics that is concerned with Native Americans as one group [that is] part of a larger movement?” (161). In considering how Alexie appropriates metaphors from other cultural traumas—be they Islamic or Jewish—it may be necessary consider how nationalist modes of reading might be permuted by cosmopolitan perspectives.

If Alexie attempts, but fails, to communicate with metropolitan readers as part of a Nationalist project then the most appropriate question may be “What can be learned from this failure?” Nancy J. Peterson has found that “Alexie’s self-reflexive literary, narrative, and rhetorical experiments are not merely playful or imaginative; they reflect a significant ethical engagement with issues attached to genocidal histories and our use of them” (65). When viewed from the position of a reader without context for particular tribal histories—and indeed *Flight* seems to work actively to submerge those particularities in its narrative form—Alexie may present ground for “literary interventions which testify to and are expressive of [. . .] a visionary political aesthetics” (Spahr 162). These conclusions, however, cannot be supported when the lens of nationalism is turned on the novel, but that doesn’t mean readers cannot learn from the testimonial functions of Alexie’s prose.

Focusing upon the autoethnographic functions of *Flight* as an instance of coalition building reveals that the text has both moments that Nationalists may empathetically embrace and exotopically revile. The oscillation between the responses functions for critics in the same way as readers; finding particular issues that work to resist colonial oppression alongside those that reinforce an internalized colonization reminds critics of what is at stake when exploring autoethnographic texts. Exploring what kinds of representations have potential for reclamation alongside those that must be critiqued may allow Nationalists to use cosmopolitan qualms about Native authenticity to augment rather than inhibit social justice initiatives. Because not all of its representations are potentially transformative, *Flight*, even more than *Drowning in Fire*, shows the necessity of generalizations for the purposes of political action—a central tenet of instrumentalist nationalism. If the problem of focusing exclusively on ethnic identity or

sexual identity is associated with how it may or may not essentialize members of ethnically or sexually marginalized communities, then examining both vectors of identification and self-constitution together may remove the pressure to make of these individual accounts of marginalized experience a collective essence that is applicable to all members of either community. The texts, then, have the potential to resist identification with the colonized subject position and to productively constitute a “decolonial imaginary” in the place of that identificatory structure because of the ways that desire is recast in the fiction. What is difficult and potentially liberatory about autoethnographic literatures is that they may help to illustrate how inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic solidarity is created. These literatures may also work “to sift out the technologies of decolonial desire” (Pérez 125). In these two pieces of fiction, narrative becomes such a technology for imagining that decolonial subject position. Because the act is fantastical and speculative, it may not always work as a locus of political action. In my reading, the novels collaborate intertextually to measure potential iterations of a decolonial subject position as each author imagines their protagonists as progressively shedding colonial pressures on identity. As Josh and Zits negotiate adolescence to find and embrace a coherent sense of self the wrestle with those colonial pressures, and the ways in which the authors resolve this wrestling speaks volumes about their conceptualization of a decolonized subjectivity. Womack’s fiction stages a successful reclamation of desire for a decolonial subject, and Alexie fails to do so. Because Alexie deploys this narrative technology differently than Womack does, the result of “reading across” their literatures about queer Native subjects is a competition between narratives that readers can adjudicate deliberatively. Alexie’s protagonist and Womack’s protagonists are two very different kinds of subjects, and these differences have everything to do with the ways in which the authors imagine their decolonial projects.

In arguing that Alexie and Womack use materiality and embodiment to depict a kind of collective identity for Indigenous peoples and to record instances of shared trauma, I mean not to suggest that any singular paradigm for collective identity might fit every tribal nation and distinct cultural community that would be erroneously indicated by a pan-Indian labeling. Critics like Warrior have worked so diligently to

resist such moves to collectivize in this manner; I recognize that to do so erases important differences and collapses many distinctive modes of understanding the world and living in it into a homogenous body that ignores distinguishing features at the heart of cultural values for Indigenous peoples. However, the shared trauma of colonization and genocide draws the disparate communities together in a way that makes the material and corporeal experience of living in "Indian country" important to depict, because such depictions serve as correctives to the dominant historical narrative that belies this mode of cultural trauma.

Both Alexie and Womack work to demonstrate the conditions wherein cultural trauma becomes attached to a sense of ethnic identity, whether that identity is Creek specifically or a nebulously and aspecifically constructed simulation of Indianness.

If, as Peterson claims "there are multiple ways" to "respectfully serve the needs of ethnic and minority writers to articulate their own tribal stories," then the respectful invocation of collective trauma as a means of identifying ethnic categories can yield "life-affirming moments of [. . .] cross-cultural communication" (79). Womack's narrative makes use of a contextualized tribal culture, which metropolitan readers must explore through their own diligent attention to discovering the necessary historical background. Alexie more transparently crafts his novel for metropolitan readers. However, Womack's work is more "life-affirming" for insider-readers—particularly if they are queer and Native—than Alexie's novel. The relationships each author maintains with both cosmopolitan and nationalist critics, and their own tribal communities, while radically different from one another, show that the process of "writing back" to the dominant culture does, in fact, allow them to fictively reconstitute a decolonized subjectivity in ways that could deviate from oppressive ethnic and sexual norms. This process is a useful one to chart, even if it is not fully sustained in *Flight*, because it presents readers with characters and situations that mitigate the possibility of essentialization in a Nationalist methodology. The result of charting such a process, at best, is the revelation of the potential of testimonial literature to expose hierarchies of identity that are inscribed in ethnographic representations of Native American

identity. As Peterson notes, “we need several modes of engagement as we reckon with claims of reparative justice and seek to build communities and coalitions in newly imagined ideas” (79). Even when autoethnographic depictions cannot provide flawless means to achieve those communities and coalitions, it is important to recognize that Native authors’ narrations of personal and collective experiences of cultural trauma will be as rich and divergent as are the indigenous cultures of North America.

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Chapter 4:

Whose Nation in Narration?:

Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz and the Literary Historiography of Hispaniola⁴⁷

Nations, like narrative, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges.

—Homi K. Bhabha

Chapter Two examined issues of burgeoning nationhood and ethnic organization in the continental U.S. as represented in the autoethnographic fiction of African American women. Chapter Three analyzed the tensions between pan-Native American and tribally-specific notions of national identity in two testimonial novels about coming-of-age for young Native men. In this, the fourth and final chapter, I will further complicate the relationship between nationality and ethnicity by examining Junot Díaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in conversations with Edwidge Danticat's 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones*. In considering a Dominican American authored novel about national identity and ethnicity alongside a Haitian American novel that testifies to the cultural trauma a Dominican dictator causes a population of poor black people living on the island of Hispaniola, my goal is to further explicate the interdependency of the three functions of autoethnography—the forensic, the epideictic and the deliberative—so as to illustrate how these functions work to present a model for cross-cultural coalitions that do not violate the ethical precepts set forth in Chapter One.

The mechanisms Danticat and Díaz use to address the issues of ethics in their testimonial fiction are to be found in the connections between the collective and the individual. As I stage an examination of

⁴⁷ Much of this chapter was previously published under the title “The Trujillato and Testimonial American Fiction: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma and National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” in the first issue of volume twenty of *Antipodas* in 2009.

the ways in which the cultural traumas associated with a fascist military dictatorship on the island that Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic, I'll demonstrate that individual identity—even generations after instances of trauma—is shaped by this sort of collectivization.

My analysis of the relationship between the collective and the individual is situated in an examination of the epideictic and deliberative potential of the autoethnographic novels—which is to say, the ways in which the two novels make judgments about events in history and their effects on the present and future. Some extensions of the paradigm of *testimonio*, as a mode of autoethnography, can breach the limits of 'ethnic' fiction as national allegory. The revision of dominant historical narratives in *Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones* sets up supra-allegorical models for ethical interpretation. The national allegory in both novels is complicated by the fact that such an interpretative approach is unethical because it reads the individual narratives without attention to how they configure nation and ethnicity as a result of colonization and of separatist sentiments that emerge from trauma. As one of Danticat's characters notes, "You tell the story and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours" (246). If critics are to ethically engage with the autoethnography presented by Danticat and Díaz, they must resist the temptation to retell the story as they wish, and instead listen attentively to the ways in which the texts provoke particular responses through characterization, setting and narrative style. Ethical engagement requires a consideration of the Trujillato in the language of those who experienced its horrors, and as Danticat and Díaz imagine those voices they also provide a model for a respectful and productive dialogue about trauma, diaspora and U.S. backed-dictatorships.

Representing Trujillo: The Man, the Myth, the Monster

There are, as you and I well know, certain kinds of people that no one wants to build the image of a nation around. Even if these people are in fact the nation itself.

—Junot Díaz to Edwidge Danticat

Because representations of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's dictatorship permeate English-language fiction about the island of Hispaniola, addressing questions about the function of the dictator's reign as an instance of cultural trauma is invaluable to developing interpretive strategies for literatures of the Haitian/Dominican diaspora. Since Trujillo's regime is a touchstone for cultural trauma on the island, the considerations of the ways in which he shapes recent history of the Caribbean-American diaspora are a logical beginning to an autoethnographic project for both Dominican, Haitian and American authors. In their respective novels, Danticat and Díaz posit some questions about the Trujillato and their own testimonial endeavors to secure social justice for diasporic populations in crisis. What role does Trujillo play in the diasporic literary imagination and for what purpose is his reign of terror invoked in said literature? How is national identity constructed through literature that treats Trujillo as an instigator of cultural trauma? What response do authors, Dominican, Haitian and American, expect that their representative strategies will curry from their readers? These questions, and others, are at the hearts of the final two novels I'll examine as literature of witness—Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In investigating these two novels treating the Trujillato I hope to indicate how the forensic, epideictic and deliberative functions of testimonial literature are interdeterminate; without a forensic reconstruction of the past any judgments about the present or attempts to dictate the course of the future seem doomed to ineffectuality. The relationships between those functions point out the difficulties with any outsider's critical intervention in those functions. An ethical approach to literary representations of the cultural trauma resulting from the Trujillato requires the acknowledgement of those difficulties, and only after acknowledging them might an ethnographic critic ethically respond to the memorializing, evaluating and deliberating that Díaz and Danticat call for.

As Lucia Suarez has asked, "How can one remember violence and still heal from it?" (27). In considering the roles that the forensic memorializing, the epideictic evaluating and the deliberative action that may be most healing in the post-traumatic present this chapter responds to Suarez's question by

assuming that the ideological transformation produced in readers via narrative proliferation can enact a kind of healing. As in the previous chapters, it is my application of the methodological focus on authorial intent that ties my analysis of *Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones* together. This focus can illuminate the ways in which the literary memorialization in which Danticat and Díaz engage implies an answer to Suarez's question.

The answers I glean from *The Farming of Bones* and *Oscar Wao* could initiate an additional method for examining how (and perhaps even, why and to what effect) Danticat and Díaz represent life under El Jefe in their fiction. My response to Suarez—that textual healing can be found in the plotting of autoethnographic functions—also problematizes the role of the outsider critic, which has also been central to this project. This problematization raises new questions about diaspora, national identity and cultural trauma.

Danticat and Díaz occupy subject positions that make the liminal space between insider-writer and outsider-reader more mutable, particularly when considering authorial intentionality in an intertextual reading of *The Farming of Bones* and *Oscar Wao*. Both Morrison and Walker are members of a contemporary African American community of women writers, and both Alexie and Womack are part of a community of Native American writers. In spite of the differences readers might perceive as separating Morrison from Walker or Alexie from Womack, the collectivization of each pair of authors under broad pan-ethnic categories provides some grounds upon which each author constructs the in-group audience that is addressed alongside metropolitan readers. Even though Walker's text produces a means of successful universal connection and Morrison's produces a demonstration of the failures of cross-ethnic coalition, both authors might be said to be 'writing back' to the same ethnographic traditions as they examine a similar set of issues. Likewise, Alexie's cosmopolitanist text is radically distinct from Womack's nationalist one, but they both consider the issues of Native communities in contemporary America from an explicitly Native perspective.

Both Díaz and Danticat can be called Caribbean American novelists, but the way in which Danticat's Haitian American identity and Díaz's Dominican American identity are manifest in the testimony of their novels makes that construction of sameness difficult to support. Because of the history of hostile relations between the nations, and because both Danticat and Díaz are Americans who write in English (rather than Kreyol, French or Spanish—the languages most often spoken by islanders), the novels are less clearly connected to a singular authorial identity than the pairings of texts in Chapters Two and Three.⁴⁸ Danticat's novel is narrated by Amabelle, a Haitian character who is living in the D.R. at the time of Trujillo's most infamous act of ethnic cleansing—El Corte. Díaz uses a narrator who is similar to himself—Yunior is a Dominican American—but the story of *Oscar Wao* is not the narrator's personal story; instead the novel is about a family that Yunior is only acquainted with—two generations of Dominicans, the second of which immigrates to the U.S., and the children of those immigrants who are raised in the diasporic shadow of Trujillo.

In spite of these inconsistencies between authorial identity and narrative perspective, I have chosen to construct an intertextual dialogue about a time of shared historical trauma for Haitian and Dominican people as an instance of collectivization, and Díaz and Danticat's novels, perhaps more potently than either of the other pairings, illustrate the potential for shared trauma and diasporic experiences to unify people across national identities in ways that may illustrate an effective model for ethical inter-ethnic coalition building. Coalitions may be possible because of the ways in which the novels fail to meet some of the assumed criteria for autoethnography. I am not the first critic to posit this argument, even if I am the first to use the terminology associated with testimonio as a form of autoethnography to describe it. Elvira Pulitano, ever the cosmopolitanist writing into a separatist critical conversation, has argued that although “discourses that valorize national identities and fragmentation versus ‘intermingled histories’ and ‘reintegration’” of the distinct ethnic and national groups living within

⁴⁸ In what follows the hostilities between the Dominican Republic and Haiti will be further enumerated, but, as an example here, I'll note that the D.R. is the only nation in the Spanish Caribbean that celebrates its independence day on the anniversary of its 'liberation' from Haiti rather than Spain (Wiarda 26).

the Caribbean diaspora “still dominate the debates on the region” there is, perhaps, a very good reason to consider how diasporically produced fiction might work to address both insiders and outsiders in its autoethnographic endeavor (para. 2). Because of an increase in globalization, as well as the constant transnational movement between the archipelago and mainland America, the boundaries between Caribbean and American identities are often blurred within communities in much the same ways as they are blurred in the authorial personae and narrative forms that Danticat and Díaz use to testify to the horrors Trujillo visited upon the inhabitants of Hispaniola. The U.S. backing for the early part of Trujillo’s reign of terror is ignored in metropolitan historiography, and the spectre of the evil dictator looms large in the collective consciousness of those inhabiting the Haitian-Dominican-American diaspora. The testimony provided in the fiction is necessary to correct the inaccurate historical understandings of both insiders and outsiders.

The complex history of racial, economic and cultural divisions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic means that the use of Hispaniola as a site for examining the prospect of ‘intermingled history’ as a site of ‘reintegration’ may have advantages for both metropolitan and in-group readers of the two novels. In fact, theorists of Caribbean identity politics like Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant have advocated for a paradigm of analysis that stresses “unity and fluidity within the plethora of voice and multiple histories emerging [. . .] out of the West Indies” (Pulitano para. 4).⁴⁹ This is not to say that such a conceit is without its detractors. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that Pan-Caribbean identity politics works to further the assumptive extinction of indigenous inhabitants of the islands, who were not culturally coherent, and glosses over important cultural differences and national conflicts (26-27). Even Pulitano admits that if this sort of discourse were “applied indiscriminately to all colonized peoples” it would produce a model of pan-ethnicity in which “the political and socio-economic realities of the individual islands are consistently obliterated” (para 5).

⁴⁹ Brathwaite wrote that “the unity is submarine” between peoples living on the islands, and argues that a tropism oriented on shared landscape and common history of colonial genocide presents a useful foundation for Pan-Caribbean solidarity. Likewise, Glissant has developed a schematic poetics that draws upon Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s argument that the Caribbean is a meta-archipelago without clear boundaries or any definite center (4).

Just as the categories African American and Native American are illustrated to be illusory in Chapters Two and Three, the construction of a Caribbean diaspora as a monolithic set of identifying traits would commit a kind of grotesque generalization. In spite of the risks of this sort of identification, there are some important ways in which Danticat and Díaz work to blur boundaries between the Haitian and Dominican national identities, even as those texts work to memorialize a particular history that divides the two groups. Caren Irr sees the similarities between these authorial blurring of boundaries as both national and stylistic iterations of coalitions across differences.

Like Danticat, Díaz seems especially interested in overturning indigenist or folkloristic tendencies in Caribbean literature. Rather than supplanting a modern calendrical realism with the surreal temporality and causalities of myth (as in magical realism), Díaz's postmodern array of mediated images and supposedly premodern figures confuses the differentiations required for 'magical' effects. At the sentence level as well as in a sustained revisiting of the territory carved out by Mario Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat* (2000), a gruesome quasi-documentary novel on the assassination of Trujillo, Díaz wrangles with some of the most influential conventions for representing hispanophone Latin American generally and the Dominican Republic in particular. (14)

Because both Danticat and Díaz permute the stylistic norms that Brathwaite and Glissant rely upon in order to construct a pan-Caribbean mode of expression that speaks to their own diasporic experiences, their novels seem to press an agenda that is individually nationalistic on one level.

On another level, however, the broad-ranging collage of styles present in *The Farming of Bones* and *Oscar Wao*—including the melding of the postmodern with “surreal temporality and causalities of myth”—would seem to resist DeLoughrey's assertion that the individuation that prohibits monolithic categorizations is always productive. As Irr goes on to note, there are ways in which the uses of nationalism can be *both* conservative and radical; “revolutionary nationalism is oriented towards equality [. . .] and distinguished in the Caribbean and Latin America from both a bourgeois nationalism [. . .] and

the cosmopolitanism of a conservative oligarchy” (11). The uses of the nation state in determining identity are inconsistent within both novels, and the reasons for depicting these moments of contradictions—between race and nationality, between nationality and class, between nationality and gender—are the moments when Danticat and Díaz use their works to call for particular kinds of social justice. By illustrating how dark-skinned Dominican-Americans lose privileges that a shared national identity secures for their lighter-skinned family members, Díaz calls for a reconsideration of the collapse between race, nationality and ethnicity. By illustrating how the ability to speak fluent Spanish cannot secure safety in a time of genocide posited upon linguistic national norms, Danticat highlights the interstices between language, culture and class. In using a complex form of implicit identity politics to structure the forensic, epideictic and deliberative narratives, both authors work to centralize the sublime image of Trujillo in the novels, exploring the ways the dictator shapes individual consciousness and functions as a shared locus of trauma for those populations living within (and some of those who migrate outside) the Plátano Curtain Trujillo drew around half of Hispaniola.

In the first chapter of *Oscar Wao*, Díaz's narrator shows that the ideological apparatus of the Trujillato performs across class and generational barriers in ways that graft disparate populations together through a shared fear of the mystical qualities of the head-of-state: "every single Dominican, from the richest jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú" (3). The fukú americanus—a terrifying curse that "every single Dominican" understands—is not fully explained in the novel, though the family from which Díaz's titular character comes is plagued by the fear that it has thwarted all of their possibilities for happiness and prosperity. One example from the text follows Oscar's attempted suicide. When Oscar's roommate, Yuniór, confronts him about the attempt, Oscar indicates "It was the curse that made me do it, you know," to which Yuniór replies, "I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit" (194). Oscar's response—"It's ours too" (194)—clearly demonstrates the

inheritance that the Trujillato wills to Dominicans after Trujillo's death, even those living in faraway places who've never seen the island.

In some instances the fukú stands in for the difficulties of a diasporic existence, and in much of the novel the curse is a symbol for Trujillo and his tainting of Dominican national identity. Not unlike Columbus, who brought the curse and first suffered its effects when the *Santa Maria* was sunk on Christmas morning off of the western coast of Hispaniola, Trujillo's regime is symbolic of a quintessential oppressive colonial force, but, unlike Columbus and his Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and French compatriots, Trujillo's colonization comes from a complete denial of indigenous identity and a totalizing identification with European identity and culture. In every case, the curse adds to the political force of Trujillo by casting his influence as ethereal and fantastic as well as earthly and violent. In the narratives, the Trujillato becomes a force not isolated in the thirty-one years of Trujillo's rule, nor bound by the geographic limitations of the Haitian-Dominican border and the Caribbean Sea. Instead, the specter of the dictator is an omnipresent malevolence that marks Dominicanos/as, even those who were born after Trujillo's assassination on continents thousands of miles removed from the island. In many ways, *Oscar Wao* is an attempt to confront the "silences, gaps, and 'paginas en blanco' left by the Trujillo regime," according to Monica Hanna (498). Much of the novel is narrated by Yunior, but he is not a member of the family whose account is central to the plot and his name is not even mentioned until the reader has covered nearly two hundred pages of text. Hanna notes that Yunior's slow revelation of himself and his involvement in Oscar's brief and wondrous life is a parallel to the gap in Dominican history that the Trujillato leaves. The expository details that inform the novel, like the history of Hispaniola, is shrouded at first and only narrative development reveals that which is hidden in the beginning. This gap necessarily complicates subjectivity for Dominican Americans, particularly those who come to be citizens of the Dominican-American diaspora because their families must flee Trujillo. Even in acknowledging the lack of forensic evidence, Yunior strives to reconnect himself and his experiences to a cultural narrative that is suspended in inaccuracies and secrets.

At the level of the narrative, Díaz's novel notes that a singular accurate historical account is impossible. Instead of revealing the 'true history of Trujillo' Díaz uses his characters to testify about what sorts of personal traumas might fill the lacunae in the collective memory of the time, and, further, builds a sense of national identity around the cultural connections between those personal traumas that explicitly link Dominican and Haitian experiences during this period in the history of Hispaniola. Hanna writes

Yunior often explicitly rejects the possibility of recovering an original, whole story because so much of the history he wishes to recover has been violently suppressed and shrouded in silence. The sources to which he has recourse are fragmentary at best and he asserts the need of his art and creativity to cohere those shards and give a new shape to the vase of Dominican diasporic art and history.

In these sorts of depictions, Díaz points to artistic production—narratives imagined and created—as a means to both heal historical trauma in the present and to present ground for an ethical coalition between different subjects. As the novel shows, the reintegration of Haitian and Dominican shared history—particularly as it is marked by the overt racism and anti-*Haitianismo* of Trujillo's regime—is central to the art that Yunior's narration seeks to shape and cohere. Much of the reshaping that Díaz's characters undertake has to do with the demystification of the Trujillato.

This demystification of Trujillo's power is also at the heart of Danticat's novel. Like Díaz, Danticat peoples her narrative with characters that are removed from her own experience as a Haitian American writer—Amabelle is a Haitian living in the D.R. with no ties to the U.S. Danticat imagines and generates Amabelle's story to speak into the silence left by those Haitians slaughtered by Trujillo who cannot testify. Layers of narrative—personal histories, folk stories, and official accounts—build up around significant events occurring during 1937 and the years following Trujillo's assassination. Danticat's characters speculate about El Generalissimo's motivations and proclivities, all in an attempt to integrate the Trujillato into a historical narrative that makes meaning of the atrocities visited upon both

Haitians and Dominicans during that time. For example, some years after the state-sponsored genocide of Haitians living in the D.R. in 1937, Danticat's protagonist, Amabelle, returns to Alegría to seek out Valencia, the bourgeois Dominican señora for whom Amabelle worked before El Corte. While Amabelle talks with Valencia and her new domestique, Sylvie, the question is posed "Why parsley?" (303); the query is spoken by Sylvie as an inquiry into the army's methods for determining which dark-skinned residents of the D.R. should be executed by assessing their skill in pronouncing the Spanish language with the 'correct' inflection and blend of consonant sounds.⁵⁰

Three distinct constructions of identity are revealed by Sylvie's question and Valencia's response. First, Valencia notes that it broaches a subject that she has repressed, particularly in her dealings with her Haitian-descended housemaid; "we have never spoken of these things, Sylvie and me" (304). Amabelle notes that even though Sylvie "must have been just a child when the señora borrowed her from the slaughter" (303) Valencia has never explained to the girl the racial tensions that orphaned her or delivered her into a life of low wages, servitude, and reliance upon a family implicated in the massacre that displaced her. By neglecting any dialogue about the genocide, Valencia and Sylvie repress the very historical and material instances that allow their relationship to exist in the first place. This might be read as a metaphor for the larger relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, as much Dominican commerce and industry is dependent on a Haitian workforce, from migratory agricultural workers and day laborers to a service class that works in the Dominican upper class homes, but a lingering animosity between the two nations fuels an ideological divide along the lines of negatively defined national identities.

Second, the role Trujillo fills in Valencia's imagination, the dictator as a substitute for her own complicity and failure to resist, demonstrates the same unification of Dominicans that Díaz alludes to

⁵⁰ The trilling 'r' in the Spanish word for parsley—*perejil*—was difficult for those who spoke Haitian patois or French. In order to separate dark-skinned Dominicans from Haitians in the D.R. the guardia nacional required all black people to describe a proffered sprig of parsley. Those using the Kreyol word—*pesi*—were cut down with machetes, as were those who failed to roll the 'r' in 'perejil,' according to several accounts of El Corte, the massacre of thousands of Haitians in 1937. It is noteworthy that Amabelle had worked in the D.R. most of her life in Danticat's novel, and could speak both Kreyol and Spanish fluently. When she faces the guardia and mob in the novel, Amabelle is not even given the opportunity to attempt to speak before she is beaten and cut nearly to death.

when he discusses the widespread belief in the fukú. When Valencia explains to Amabelle that she could not speak or act against the regime she says,

Amabelle, I live here still. [. . .] If I denounce this country, I denounce myself. I would have had to leave the country if I'd forsaken my husband. Not that I ever asked questions. Not trusting him would have been like declaring that I was against him. [. . .] Amabelle, Pico merely followed the orders he was given. I have pondered this so very often. He was told to go and arrest some people who were plotting against the Generalissimo. (299-300)

In this speech, Valencia uses the figure of the dictator not only to pardon herself by explicitly framing her national identity as a mandate for supporting Trujillo, but also to excuse her husband, an army lieutenant who acted upon orders to murder Haitians, by collapsing national allegiance with marital fidelity. This rhetorical maneuver demonstrates how the fear of Trujillo and the scapegoating of his regime for a longstanding racial animosity toward dark-skinned Haitian nationals drew Dominicans together in ways that Danticat explores and critiques in *The Farming of Bones*. Danticat's construction of Valencia's reiteration of her own racial, national and class-based privilege are rather like Morrison's depiction of Rebekka Vaark. The mistress of the finca—like the mistress of the patroonship—refuses identification with women who do not share her privilege, even when she and those women share the same gender-based oppression. However, unlike *A Mercy*, Danticat's novel imagines the ways in which this reiteration of privilege might be circumvented. Amabelle's objections to Valencia's reiteration of privilege is unspoken in direct dialogue (even as it is clearly presented in indirect narration to the reader); in her direct address to the reader, Amabelle notes that Valencia is scared and guilty. Amabelle's empathy for Valencia does not excuse the woman's cowardice, but it does illustrate the ways in which it is possible for communication across identity difference to maintain legibility.

Third, the story that Valencia tells to explain how elocution and language became a justification for mass murder does not assuage either Sylvie or Amabelle. Language becomes a barrier between the

Haitians and the Dominicans that is rendered perceptible, and only by revealing the illusory nature of that linguistic divide is any reintegration possible. Danticat uses the imagined incident wherein a young Trujillo hunting errant Haitian workers in the cane fields comes to a realization that "on this island, you walk too far and people speak a different language[; t]heir own words reveal who belongs on what side" (304) to show how the language barrier does little to justify ethnic cleansing, as it only masks the interstitiality of racism and nationalism under Trujillo. The story presents the dictator as a locus for those ideological structure that belies the complicity of some civilian Dominicans in the massacre of 1937 and in the systemic racial inequities that lead up to that event.⁵¹ For Valencia, the story adequately explains the material truths of the historical narrative in its indictment of Trujillo as a singular agent, but for Sylvie and Amabelle, the story "fails to satisfy" (305) because it cannot account for their experiences of oppression, which differ radically from Valencia's. This demonstrates the differing positions Trujillo occupies in the history of Hispaniola; it also demonstrates the extent to which the subjective position of subjects of that history may shape the content of the narrative that can account for their experiences. Because Sylvie remains unsatisfied she and Amabelle are able to hold a counter-discourse to Valencia's narrative that insists upon an explicitly Haitian perspective on the instance of cultural trauma. This counter-discourse constitutes the forensic thrust of the novel, and, in turn, demonstrates for readers the ways in which Valencia's response is unethical so that in the novel there is a cautionary example of the consequences of recolonizing testimony. Valencia's unsatisfying story is revealed to be both false and hurtful, and is thus a mechanism for Danticat to show metropolitan readers why they should defer to Haitian autoethnographies when considering the historical accounts of the Trujillato.

⁵¹ Whether or not civilians participated in the mass murders of 1937 remains a subject of critical debate. Lucia Suárez reports on one such debate between Danticat and a Dominican historian Bernardo Vega, which culminates in an impasse, owing to Danticat's reliance on perceptual and affective evidence and Vega's insistence that only concrete officiated substantiation could resolve the issue. Suárez also frames the issue in historical accounts of the Trujillato by Doris Sommer and Richard Turits as a way to demonstrate the irreconcilability of the debate. It's also noteworthy that the historical narrative about civilian participation drifts as time progresses. Ernesto Sagás implicates civilians from Dajabón in particular when writing his 2006 monograph on Trujillo, but Howard Wiarda uses more tentative language about the issue in his 1968 history.

The question of linguistic identity on the island of Hispaniola is an important one, and it is a question that continues to structure the transcultural situation of Haitian and Dominican immigrants both across the island and across the Sea. Danticat has discussed her own uses of language in interviews:

[W]hen I was in Haiti I spoke Creole at home, and in school I studied and spoke French. [. . .] So I wrote in a language I didn't speak regularly and spoke in a language I couldn't write. When I came [to New York] and learned English, it was the first time I could write and speak the same language. (Lyons 189)

The writing of *Farming of the Bones* is posited upon a situation where speaking and writing can be unified, not just in the testimonial functions of the text, but also in the subjectivity of the author. The fact that the book was written in English—not Haitian patois, not French, not even a Dominican-dialect of Spanish—seems to communicate something about audience and appropriation of national identity outside the structuring of boundaries within the archipelago. The very language of the testimony draws in a metropolitan audience and complicates the notion of any static language—or culture—in the context of the diaspora about which Danticat writes.

Likewise, Díaz 's first book—a collection of short fiction entitled *Drown*—begins with an epigraph from Gustavo Pérez Firmat:

The fact that I
am writing to you in English
already falsifies what I wanted to tell you.
My subject:
how to explain to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else.

The quotation from the poem articulates some important issues for the writer. Because *Drown*, like *Oscar Wao*, is an explicitly Dominican-American text, the use of English, and the author's foregrounded

anxieties about that use, speak to the duality of address in his testimonial endeavor. Both Danticat and Díaz speak truth to colonial power in a language that is most likely to be legible to metropolitan readers and may work to reach insider readers across national boundaries because they are both insiders and outsiders in the narratives they create as testimony. Spanish, Creole and English become interchangeable in the novels. Díaz refuses italics when employing Spanish phrases, and doesn't gloss his use of specifically Dominican slang in the novel's extensive footnotes. Danticat uses both French words and indigenous Creole ones and indiscriminately italicizes them all with no glossing, leaving some metropolitan readers to puzzle them out independent of the context the narrative provides or to deal with the frustration of inadequate translation or absent colloquial phrasing and opaque idiom.

In addition to this use of language as a sous-textual comment on transcultural potential, the novels stage wide-ranging explorations of Trujillo's causal role in shifting national identity. He is both a figure that "no one wants to build the image of a nation around" and, paradoxically, a synecdochal representation of "the nation itself" ("An Interview with Junot Díaz" 90). In fact, the novels seems to respond in conversation with Suarez's question because both Oscar and Amabelle, Díaz and Danticat's protagonists, deal with the complicated and contradictory urges to both repress that which is painful and shameful and to uncover that which has been repressed so as to heal. In a poetic call-to-action Derek Walcott's "Islands" speaks directly to Caribbean writers struggling with this contradiction:

Islands can only exist
 If we have loved in them.
 Merely to name them is the prose
 Of diarists, to make you a name
 For readers who like travelers praise
 Their beds and beaches as the same

The autoethnographic endeavor that testimonial novels undertake is rather like writing about islands without merely naming them—it must be, in Walcott's estimation, undertaken with love and intimate

knowledge, with discernment and discretion. The ‘real’ islands—those that exist out of being the location of love—can displace the contrived representations produced by traveling diarists who exoticize and domesticate colonial history—making “beds and beaches [. . .] the same.” Pulitano notes that

The Caribbean artist who undertakes the daunting task of ‘writing islands’ inevitably faces two major problems: finding words to tell of the unspeakable horrors of the past that in some cases continue in the innumerable human rights violations of the present and restoring balance to the relationship with a landscape that colonialist historiography alternately represents as alien and hostile. (para 1)

Danticat and Díaz depict the connection between the Trujillato and national identity in their novels and, in doing so, they examine the connections between peoples and landscapes. These connections can compel readers to look carefully at the matrix of transcultural contact between Haiti and the D.R., and between the Caribbean and the U.S., in ways that seek to correct inaccuracies, expose atrocities, render judgments in memoriam and consider what responsibilities must be fulfilled to deliberate upon a more unified future. Reading with particular attention to the connections in the texts reveals how the fiction may work toward a tripartite testimonial goal. The fulfillment of that tripartite goal in the narrative produces a model for ethical cross-cultural dialogue and coalition building.

In fulfilling the first part of this goal, the texts serve a forensic function by illuminating how powers with hegemonic global influence (particularly the U.S. and its concerns for “red spread”) and the force of a localized nationalism (which results in the perpetuation of a police state and a vertically conducted genocide) can culminate in collective trauma. This forensic purpose not only corrects a popular notion of Caribbean nations as inherently and independently unstable, but also demonstrates the complicity of the global north in the political problems of the global south. This forensic narrative alleviates some of the victim-blaming that may cause internalized colonialism for in-group readers and encourages a more reflective understanding of causality for metropolitan readers. If readers respond to the forensic revelations in these ways, then the improved cross-cultural understandings of the historical

origins of the trauma provide a framework for a continued inter-ethnic dialogue. The novels also correct a selectively constructed historical record by writing into the silences of the official history of the Trujillato. Historian Ernesto Sagás notes that the occurrence at the border in 1937 is not noted by any official record; “[n]o documentation with direct references to the massacre—before, during or after it—has been found in Dominican archives” (47). By giving voice, even through fiction, to those who witnessed, suffered through and survived the Trujillato, Danticat and Díaz contribute to a counter-narrative of history that refutes the official history from which those voices have been expunged. Danticat’s imagining of Amabelle’s testimony produces such a counter-narrative, as does Díaz’s depiction of Yuniór’s imagining of Belí’s testimony about her flight from Trujillo’s threatening violence to the U.S. It is in these counter-narratives that the authors can lodge their appeals to readers’ sense of justice, which is necessary for the attainment of the next part of the autoethnographic goal.

In fulfilling that second part of the autoethnographic endeavor, the fiction has epideictic value; the novels address a metropolitan audience and use affective characterizations and narrative strategies to pressure readers to “categorize” the events depicted “as noble or shameful” (Nance 23). The novelists apply this narrative pressure in an effort to suggest the making of a value judgment about the facts the forensic narratives uncover for the metropolitan audience, who may be ignorant of (or worse, misinformed about) the historical events that are represented. The novelists use characterization to encourage readerly empathy in ways that move beyond national allegories into an exploration of the relationships between individual trauma and collective memory. When Danticat describes a Haitian mother’s mourning for her slaughtered children, she implicitly calls for a condemnation of the institutionalized genocide that Valencia attempts to defend in her conversation with Sylvie and Amabelle. When Díaz depicts a middle-class Dominican family’s rejection of an orphaned baby to whom they are related because of her dark complexion, he uses narrative to discuss the ways in which race and national identity cut across kinship structures. Readers are thereby encouraged to critique these constructions of identity and to make judgments about those characters and institutions in the narrative that accept the

racist and nationalist discourses that are reflected in the child's abandonment. In producing these kinds of representations, Danticat and Díaz work to situate readers within the corrected historical narrative so that these readers might take part in an affective alliance with the subaltern perspectives omitted from official histories. That affective alliance can produce an ethical framework for cross-categorical understanding and dialogue. The resulting dialogue—between both sets of readers (insider and outsider) and the text—may work to consider how the judgments about the past configure understandings of the present. This configuration is a necessary step toward inter-ethnic coalitions that work toward the healing Suarez is so concerned with. That healing becomes possible as a result of the evaluative impetus that the epideictic reading reveals. This evaluative impetus is central to the completion of the third goal of fictive depictions of life in the Trujillato.

The testimonial function of the novels ultimately culminates in a deliberative narrative that frames readers as “decision makers” who should “determine whether or not to undertake a future action” that addresses the traumatic representations the novel presents (Nance 23-4). This culminatory function could encourage shifts in the paradigm of representation of those perspectives unrecorded in official histories. Such a shift may address the issues that affect the subaltern populaces against whom the consequences of global northern policies and actions are levied because of the forensic and epideictic content that precedes this deliberation. Metropolitan readers, particularly if they are American, must reckon with their own national identity as they puzzle through Díaz's and Danticat's examinations of Haitian and Dominican histories and cultural traumas. If those readers are able to reconsider the ways in which they, like Valencia, may have deployed an apologist response to the continuing problems those living in the Haitian-Dominican-American diaspora suffer, then the novels might make those readers less likely to retreat into their own privileged positions without first empathizing across those boundaries created by categorical identity. The repudiation of these kinds of responses can produce direct action on the part of the readers, but the more likely responses from metropolitan readers are ideological. One such response may be a rejection of nationalist ideologies. Another may be a reconsideration of how global

hegemony deliberate before intervening in affairs of sovereign states; this reconsideration could create a new paradigm for listening that is more likely to build coalitions through solidarity than to rationalize imperialist action through violence. Through a close reading of the way nation and trauma are rendered in the two novels, some potentially radical authorial intentions may be revealed and some rather exorbitant claims about readerly response might be supported.⁵² The dialogue between American, Haitian and Dominican characters within each novel, like the intertextual dialogue between Danticat, as a Haitian-American writer, and Díaz, as a Dominican-American writer, demonstrates how alliances between subjects in radically divergent subject positions might effectively deliberate together upon how best to address the limitations of social justice that inhibit healing from cultural traumas. As Díaz and Danticat negotiate race, nationality and gender differences they model an effective mechanism for community without colonization for those who ethically engage their novels together.

Forensic Testimonial Fiction—Collective Memory and Narrative History

[T]he real issue in the book is [. . .] who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations—who, as you pointed out, have been annihilated by history and yet who've managed to put themselves together in an amazing way.

—Junot Díaz to Edwidge Danticat

⁵² The assertion that authorial agency and reader-reception might even be the subject of a contemporary literary analysis violates some established edicts of literary studies since the proliferation of post-structuralism. Rather than engage in a lengthy debate about the New Critical disenfranchisement of the affective fallacy or the deconstructionist death of the author, I'll simply note that, like Peter Rabinowitz, I find that "the importance of authorial reading" can be proved upon "the grounds that many readers try to engage in it, and that it is a necessary precondition for many other kinds of reading" (32). I'll also admit that some of my reasons for focusing on authorial intent are political. The disciplinary consensus to refute authorial agency arises at the same approximate time that the U.S. canon is opened to authors occupying historically marginal subject positions (e.g. women, people of color, gays and lesbians); this suggests that authorship became unimportant to the field at the same time that most authors deemed worthy of study were no longer from a narrow and privileged minority. Because of this fact one might be cautious about high theory's tendency to recolonize writers working within a paradigm of difference through erasing their particular histories and experiences from the discourse surrounding their creative work. Waheema Lubiano's treatment of these issues in her chapter "Shuckin' of the African-American Native Other: What's 'Po-Mo' Got to Do with It?" gives a more complete evaluation of race, ethnicity and authorial agency in tension with postmodern textual studies than I can provide here.

The forensic function of the novels is especially important when considering how collective memory and national identity are constructed. Lucia Suárez notes that "works exploring Caribbean memory have focused on the way complex and contradictory memories looking back to the Caribbean inform a broken identity in the diaspora" (3). In exploring complexities and contradictions that contribute to the fragmentation of identity, Suárez indicates a concern with evaluating how collective memory works to imagine identity before fragmentation; this concern cannot be fully assuaged, since "[m]emory, broken because it can never be recovered entirely, entails looking backward to configure the present in some way" (3). According to critic Richard Patterson, this remembrance of things past in order to interpret and narrate a coherent present is at the heart of Danticat's novel; for Amabelle, "[r]emembering, interpreting, and telling her story constitutes an exploration of ways in which her consciousness might shape the reality with which she has been confronted" (226). Unlike some of Danticat's characters, who refuse to give testimony because of a fear of being misread, Amabelle delivers a testimony, in the form of her indirect address to readers of Danticat's novel, that is addressed directly to the border—to Metres Dlo—the river that runs between the D.R. and Haiti and the site of the violent historical moment upon which her testimony is centered.

Díaz's characters also testify directly to borders and divisions. The polyphonic evocation of several personal stories, the multi-generational scope and the socio-historical context of Díaz's novel, may render the same argument applicable to the memorializing narrative functions of *Oscar Wao*. Hanna has argued that Díaz "strives for a 'resistance history' which acts as an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes" (500). Yuniór, a first-person narrator in whose voice most of the novel is delivered, deploys a pastiche of mechanisms to allow him to work through his own diasporic identity through a psychic transference with the de León family whose story he tells. The ways in which Díaz stages this pastiche are telling; "Díaz develops a historiography that shifts the narrative structure as well as the subject of history, allowing for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant, elements" (Hanna 500). By using a set of

allusions to historical texts, canonized American literature and speculative fiction (which Yuniors calls “the Genres” and ranges from classic Wellsian sci-fi to comic books) Díaz is able to intertextually situate his investigation of national identity within a metropolitan context that is both specifically Dominican-American and generically globalized late-capitalist.

The utopian conceits of the speculative fiction at first may seem at odds with the inequity apparent in the historical accounts of the colonization of the Caribbean and of the crimes of the Trujillato-as-rogue-state. However, the ‘writing islands’ that Walcott’s poem calls for seems to require the juxtaposition of a utopian view—of the islands as a site of love—and a cynically realistic view—that distinguishes between exotic idealization and the reality of lived experience. This juxtaposition is central to much cultural studies theory that situates historical materialist methods within a conversation of literature’s potential to incite change. How and why Díaz chooses to use allusions to metropolitan texts—like Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Stan Lee’s *X-Men*—may be further explicated by the category of identity he uses to situate his Dominican and Dominican American characters within a dialogue with his in-group and metropolitan readers. By considering socio-economic class and status, which is interstitially linked to the issues of national, racial and ethnic identity that are shaped by the cultural trauma of the Trujillato, Díaz is able to bridge the utopian and the realistic in ways that encourage readers to reconsider the historiography of Trujillo’s regime and the relationship between an established historiographic narrative and the counter-narrative his novel produces. Frederic Jameson famously catalogues “the failures of utopian thinking” and in doing so, stresses that utopian concepts can only circumvent representational failure if “the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return to just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief” (“World-Reduction in . . .”). Jameson is not suggesting that authors working in the genre of speculative fiction should refrain from the use of allegories to their own socially stratified subject positions, but rather he calls for critical examination of particular historical and ideological contexts for the fiction and its historical referent.

In the preface to his book *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson argues, “Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness [. . .] to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet” (xii). The imagining of the narrative—in speculative fiction or in fictionalized testimony—is an example of this kind of mediation on difference and otherness. In fulfilling the tripartite autoethnographic goal, Danticat and Díaz textually stage reorganizations of social hierarchies. As each author reiterates a counter-narrative that speaks into the silences of the existing historiography, he or she also refers to utopian representations in metropolitan texts. Díaz’s and Danticat’s intentions in coupling reiteration and references are difficult to understand without the recourse to the “mediation on radical difference” that might be a beginning to a “fundamental change in society.” This does not mean, however, that the context of authorial intention is not intimately linked to the means and ends of such a reorganization through utopian representations. To illustrate, Jameson wrote of Stapledon’s *Star Maker* (1937), a foundational text in literary speculative fiction dealing with extraterrestrial contact—which in the novel is figured as a kind of colonial contact—“It is indeed ironic, but perhaps significant, that the best of all alien representations [. . .] should have been composed in a resolutely Cold War spirit, and designed to preach an unremitting vigilance and hostility to the newly discovered alien species as a scarcely disguised foreign policy lesson” (*Archaeologies of the Future* 132). If *Star Maker* deploys its alien speculation to the ends of producing a didactic message about communist spread (and the xenophobia against the fictional aliens is then transposed upon the very real Soviets), then the figures from science fiction in Díaz’s novel that are assembled alongside his rumination upon Trujillo would necessarily have some clear bearing upon the historical and cultural moment into which Díaz writes.

Oscar Wao is a novel in which the boundaries between insider and outsider shift constantly. When at Rutgers University Oscar’s race, class, and his mother’s national origin mark him as an outsider. When in Santo Domingo, Oscar’s nationality as an American also make him an outsider. The character is too Dominican in the U.S. and too American in the D.R. In most of the scenes in the novel, a reader can find

Díaz's narration playing with the 'alien' status of the colonized body living within a diaspora that makes a single national identity impossible. Díaz's discursively constructs a fluid boundary between natives and aliens in different cultural and geographic contexts, so European colonization mirrors extraterrestrial colonization in the speculative fiction to which he alludes. The aliens could be metaphorical exiles—traitors to their country—or symbolic Haitians—the dark specter against which Trujillo's vision of a European-derived Dominican culture is figured. The speculative components of *Oscar Wao*, drawn from "the Genres" that Oscar and Yunior read, collapse into the political, which, as it must in autoethnographic fiction, collapses into the personal. The ways in which Stan Lee's *Galactus* erases "brief, nameless lives" in the novel's epigraph are allegorical to Trujillo's erasure of Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans. The consequences this collapse has for diasporic identities are rendered most clearly in the personal stories of the de León family.

Much of Jameson's work takes Gramscian and Althusserian notions of ideology as its foundation; in this model the cultural and material are confluent and interreliant in determinist hermeneutic. Likewise, Díaz seems to use a late capitalist ideology—focused on class as determined by consumerism—in order to frame his examination of national identity for the D.R. The poverty initially presented in Oscar and Yunior's inner-city upbringing is gradually revealed to be a level of extreme prosperity when compared to the life Yvonne lives in the D.R. Likewise the wealth of the Cabral family from which Oscar's mother is descended evaporates because of the whims of the dictator. The permutability of class as determined by national identity is central to the text.

Some implicit commentary on metropolitan identity is presented alongside the rendering of Dominican diasporic identity as both are complicated by class structures. For instance, the book's first footnote describes Trujillo: "Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor [. . .] He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator" (3). The footnote, designed to help anyone who missed the "mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" the narrator assumes would be part of the audience's educational experiences, uses intertextual references to

science fiction and fantasy to make a historical figure legible to an ignorant reader. This invocation of ideology—presented through state apparatuses like public education and through the assumption of a familiarity with *Darkseid* or *The Lord of the Rings* as a cultural touchstone—works to fuse fantasy and science fiction—in which a group of stranded space explorers or a pair of plucky little hobbits are able to unseat a dark power through tenacity and luck—with historical realism—in which Trujillo’s atrocities were abetted by an exercise of paternalism from the U.S. that had nothing to do with what was best for the galaxy, the Shire or the *campo*. Jameson argues that ideology is primarily shaped by distinctions in modes of production. Jameson notes that “Utopia poses its own specific problems for any theory of the postmodern or any periodization of it. [. . .] Postmodernism is at one with the definitive ‘end of ideologies’” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* . . . 50). He described his “particular theorization of ideology” in postmodernity (with regard to mass culture and literary studies) as “intrinsically imbedded within the reality, which secretes its own structure” (69).

According to Jameson, speculative fiction is similar to discursive resistance posited in the political realm. The speculation about utopian ideals, in some of this fiction, risks simply propping up the system the speculation purports to reform. The author using the utopian genre must conceive of a mechanism that posits a dialectical shift away from that oppositional relationship. So, rather than a simple protagonist versus antagonist plotline—like settlers versus hostile planet or hobbits versus orcs—the uses of science fiction and fantasy as a vehicle for social justice are reliant upon the production of a complex, multivalent forensic narrative. Responsibility for the horrors committed by Trujillo cannot be addressed by a narrative that blames only the dictator for the atrocities. An examination of how multiple agents—individual members of Trujillo’s army, complicit middle-class light-skinned Dominicans, Americans citizens who were blissfully unaware and uncritical of their government’s neo-imperial king-making—all contribute to the trauma is necessary to interrupt the systemic nature of that trauma’s continued effects on subaltern populations. This interruption works as a protection against reification; by diffusing blame to multiple sites within the content of the forensic narrative, Díaz’s novel prevents a simple co-opting of his

reform to further empower agents who were complicit in the traumatic events. The novel must work to resist figuring Trujillo as a mystical, but singular, evil presence so that the narrative cannot be deployed to justify the continuation of martial rule, racial stratification or American hegemony.

Jameson seems to suggest that like the Haitian work force that suffers the violence of El Corte the author of a speculative fiction that accounts in any way for that suffering might risk reentrenching the racial and nationalist ideologies that were necessary preconditions for the violence. I would not, however, suggest that the writing of utopian fiction is a labor that is *always* commodified to the same degree and through the same means as workers in the world-system that fiction revises; the production of a text, even one that will be traded as a commodity, is not the same as the labor performed by the proletarian and racially othered Haitian and Dominican populations in *Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones*. Jameson concurs that “one cannot [. . .] assimilate the ‘production of texts [. . .] to the production of goods by factory workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense” (*The Political Unconscious* 30). However, for Yuniors, writing and thinking (and remembering) become assimilated to the kinds of labor that Jameson notes are alienated. Just as the workers are alienated from the cane they produce—their subsistence wage provides no surplus for sweetsies—so too is the Dominican American narrating subject alienated from the testimony he writes into the mouths of his forebears, whose experiences go unrecorded entirely until he imagines them. Díaz represents work—both physical and intellectual—in ways that reveal how alienated labor constructs a class divide upon which ethnic difference can be inscribed throughout the diasporic space. Just as Belí Cabral’s waitressing in *Oscar Wao* and the dark-skinned cane-workers’ harvesting in *The Farming of the Bones* come to emblemize economic exploitation behind the Platano Curtain, so does the practice of filling familial and national histories with only a sanitized official history. The forensic narrative alone, even with the allusions to metropolitan texts that may make meaning accessible to metropolitan readers, cannot heal without the complementary epideictic and deliberative functions.

While there is little in *The Farming of Bones* that might be described in terms of utopian speculation, Danticat's novel also works to craft a emblematic unity between the intellectual work of thinking, remembering and writing and the physical labor that is so central to the novel. Amabelle's domestic servitude and her lover's work in the cane fields are the mechanism through which the racial hierarchy that separates Dominicans from Haitians is revealed before El Corte. As the exchange between Amabelle, Senora Valencia and Sylvie illustrates, the ideological apparatuses that establish a class-based hierarchy cannot be disentangled from national allegiance, ethnic origin or phenotypical racial traits. The darker one's skin is the clearer her place on the bottom of the hierarchy becomes within the world of the novel. For Haitians living and working in the D.R., and for dark-skinned Dominicans living under Trujillo's thumb, the reality of social stratification is presented in the most superficial way possible. The alienation of labor becomes, as Jameson points out, a symptom of exploitation that undercuts subjectivity. Valencia's husband gets not just employment and social status from his occupation, but status and identity. He *is* an army commander, and the fact that his labor manifests a sense of pride indicates that an industrialized culture, which emerges in the D.R. under Trujillo, can reify socially constructed categories like class and race not just through social mediation but in the processes of identification on a psychic level. On the other end of the hierarchy, Sebastien, Amabelle's lover, is literally erased—made nameless and inconsequential in the dominant historical record—by his labor in the fields, which inevitably produces a sort of psychic erasure that Jameson describes as alienation. In remembering Sebastien, Amabelle insists upon a subject position for her man that is distinct from his socially produced role. In writing Amabelle's memory—fictionalized though it is—Danticat works to demonstrate the processes wherein the assimilation of labor and artistic production may produce a paradigm for analysis that has radical potential, and she achieves, through crafting a collective memory that repudiates alienation, much the same effect that Díaz's novel does through a deployment of pastiche and intertextuality. In order to make both intellectual and economic production meaningful, the labor is imagined and recorded by the novelists. In these imaginary records that labor must be imbued, either through autoethnographic

discourse or through memorialization, with a sense of shared significance for the Dominican and Haitian populations. Without this shared significance that renders national boundaries permeable, the narratives fail to meet their testimonial goals.

Díaz's use of history and the ways in which he addresses much of his prose to a metropolitan audience may reveal the alienated labor upon which an industrialized D.R. is produced. That first footnote goes on to note that Trujillo's "outstanding accomplishments" included:

the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships of the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and the argentinos are still appealing); the creation of the first modern kleptocracy (Trujillo was Mobuto before Mobutu was Mobutu); the systemic bribing of American senators; and, last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do) (3).

The rhetorical maneuvers managed in this excerpt from the footnote render the boundaries between Haitian and Dominican and American identities as permeable in three ways. First, Yúnior's narrative voice in the footnote, itself subordinate to the main text of the novel, presents the notion that a "modern state" is the result of systemic oppression, which can only be understood by metropolitan readers in terms of its relationship to fantasy and sci-fi. Trujillo cannot be likened to even the most oppressive of European or American dictators—for instance, Hitler and Mussolini committed atrocities too. However, they did so by the collective wills of their people, but Trujillo is installed in office and instilled with power through an exercise of U.S. hegemony. Truman's decisions to fire-bomb Tokyo and to A-bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima killed many times the number of Japanese civilians that even the highest estimates of the dead in '37 would record as dead by Trujillo's orders. However, most mainstream historians of American involvement in WWII do not frame Truman as a genocidal megalomaniac.

Instead of making an analogy with Trujillo's contemporaries in the guises of European fascists or American war-Presidents, neither of which seems to convey the sense of mystical and irrepressible power that Trujillo wields, Díaz makes of him a Dark Lord with the protection of an evil curse insuring his citizen's docile response to his horrendous appetites and impulses. The analogy drawn (in parentheses) to Mobutu seems to suggest, again, the citizens of the global North can have no frame of reference for the magical mixture of *personalismo* and power that can modernize an agrarian economy. This pair of analogies seems to concur with Jameson's claims about the ways in which commodification, alienation and late capitalism reproduce and sustain oppressive regimes. Díaz's implicit claim, here, is that only Trujillo, and not his Marine trainers, could garner the industrial center. That center is necessary to create a national economy built upon the mass manufacture of sugar (an industry whose infrastructure served the body-politic in the person of the dictator, as Trujillo owned most of the plantations and refineries). That national economy alienates workers from labor as a sense of empowered subjectivity—caneworkers and factory workers do not establish a sense of identity based upon pride in their craft in a system of industrial oppression. This alienation of the workforce might be interpreted in line with Jamesonian reasoning from the analysis of the utopian precepts of speculative fiction to the historical accounts that inform Yunió's conception of the Trujillato's impact upon collective Dominican identity. Centralized power—in the form of a military dictatorship—generates industry—the sugar trade. Industry generates a class system—workers are separated from management. That class system is mediated by the authority of centralized power—Trujillo's ownership of the plantations and factories means a control of which people fit into which class-structure. Rather than a mystical force that allows Trujillo to take power by mass-hypnosis, the footnote reveals the very realistic mechanisms Trujillo uses to consolidate and hold power.

The second rhetorical maneuver is the footnote's invocation of a Haitian-Dominican community. This community, as represented in the footnote, seems to posit a populace for whom reintegration is a lived experience. Yunió describes the massacre of '37 not as an act of violence by

Dominicans visited upon exclusively Haitian bodies, but as violence by privileged, high status, upper class, light-skinned Dominicans upon marginalized, low status, working class, dark skinned Dominicans with Haitian ancestry. This description calls attention to a shared history of transcultural exchange which produces a particular community of people whose identities prove that any construction of a brightline between Haitian and Dominican identity is highly permeable at best and illusory at worst. This descriptive suture between two distinct national identities is not the sort of “marine tropism” that DeLoughrey has denounced. Díaz’s implicit construction of a Haitian-Dominican community through his writing reflects a real Haitian-Dominican community who did suffer at the hands of Trujillo’s institutionalized racism. The history of this community is produced as another counter-narrative in the novel. Because the collapsing of distinct national identities is writ large upon the bodies of “the kinds of people [Trujillo] doesn’t want to build a nation around” Díaz takes the conceptual unification of the archipelago that Glissant and Brathwaite present and demonstrates that it is factual. The fictionalization of the de León family exemplifies contact between Haitians and Dominicans before, during and after Trujillo in order to memorialize that conceptual and factual unity for readers.

Third, the footnote’s collectivization of “Latin types” in opposition to the Americans who ostensibly benefit from the U.S. backing of many dictatorships posits, not just Pan-Caribbean, but also Pan-Latino solidarity based on shared history. Díaz doesn’t stop at linking the Haitians and Dominicans, but extends the fellowship to Argentineans and Chileans as well. In fact, the mention of Mobutu as an analogue for Trujillo may even work to position the entirety of the global South in such a collectively constructed category that is diametrically situated opposite the global North. This is not a new maneuver, either theoretically or fictionally; in fact, much of the debate around which my project is structured considers the ethics of creating just this sort of allegiances across identities. Because Díaz’s novel participates in this sort of investigation, it is worth exploring to determine how authorial intent, in the case of *Oscar Wao*, can work to address, complicate or potentially alleviate those concerns. Because his

fiction is autoethnographic, Díaz speaks both for and about people living in the Dominican-American diaspora.

If I am to extend the analysis of Pratt, McKegney and Bakhtin that is presented in the previous three chapters to this rhetorical situation, we might be able to pronounce Díaz's testimonial fiction ethical because of the ways in which he not only self-represents, but also calls attention to the ways in which his autoethnography participates in ethnographic constructions of the characters and events in the narrative that are not explicitly grounded in his own experiences. In crafting the ethnographic portions of his novel Díaz relies upon a respectful dialogue that is cautious to avoid recolonization. Díaz, like many of his characters, is a naturalized Dominican-American who lives in the U.S. eastern seaboard megalopolis, so when, in the quoted passage above, Díaz also speaks for and about Americans, Haitians, Chileans, Argentineans, and, more obliquely, the people of Zaire/the Democratic Republic of Congo, he is careful about how he chooses frame his own relationships with those groups. He implies plurality rather than hierarchy and he declines the retreat into privilege that undermines inter-ethnic coalitions in Morrison's *A Mercy* or in the exchange between Valencia, Sylvie and Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*. Those depictions are ethnographic and ethical, but Díaz's use of other groups' experiences of cultural trauma opens up another question even as it resolves some issues of ethnography and ethics. How much does authorial subject position constrain the interventionist praxis of interpretive methods drawn from authorial intent? This is to say, if Díaz were not in a position to express his own cultural trauma as a mechanism for empathizing with the cultural traumas of other categorical groups, might his ethnographic depictions be ethically framed?

These questions are important ones to ask of *The Farming of Bones*, as well. Danticat is Haitian-American, and though there are important similarities between her situation as a Haitian-born writer working in the U.S. and Amabelle's situation as a Haitian-born domestic working in the D.R., those similarities are not identical enough to automatically merit an ethical allegory between Danticat's life and Amabelle's fictionalized narrative. After all, the dictator at the center of the novel is Trujillo, not

either of the Francois Duvaliers. Furthermore, the question of whether or not her representations of Dominican characters meet a burden of ethos is a difficult one to adjudicate, given the history of conflict between Haiti and the D.R.

Epidictic Testimonial Fiction—Cultural Trauma and Narrative Resistance

I am obsessed with the notion of namelessness [. . .] and how individuals and nations disrupt and end lives, so *Oscar Wao* was the kind of book I could easily swallow whole. I was preparing to read about this one life, however [. . .] I ended up reading about a nation
—Edwidge Danticat to Junot Díaz

The mechanisms by which both Díaz and Danticat model an autoethnographic ethos may be found not in the representations of the collective, but in their depictions of the individual. Alongside each fictionalized historiography of the Trujillato, Danticat and Díaz present a fictionalized autobiography of a protagonist. The ways in which both Danticat and Díaz explore personal narratives of individuals who remain unnamed in history primers is fairly obvious; the explorations of familial memories and of historical traumas invest the novels with particular salience in using the past to configure the narrative present. Both novels work to revise an official version of history by situating repressed perspectives into a renegotiation of the content of that version; while official histories may be familiar to their metropolitan readers, these repressed perspectives are less likely to be common knowledge outside the communities who share them. To generate a landscape in which to situate these perspectives Danticat writes into *The Farming of Bones* a look back on nationalized constraints for individuals living on the island itself. Díaz, in a similar rhetorical shaping of national identity, explores the transnational ties between the D.R. and Dominican-American communities in *Oscar Wao*.

Reading the novels together allows for an intertextual conversation that considers many different permutations of American, Dominican and Haitian identity, and in considering how the transcultural and transnational contexts of diaspora shape identities, that conversation models inter-ethnic

and international relationships as ethical and mutually respectful instances of community. The formation of this community, even as a discursive consequence to fictionalized narratives of transculturation, allows the evaluative judgments that make the past legible in the present. That community-building might permit privileged readers to set aside the defensive responses they may have to the forensic narrative in order to pursue a collaborative social justice movement with the underrepresented and underprivileged subjects of the narratives.

Both Danticat and Díaz investigate the consequences of diasporic conditions through an examination of disruptions to kinship structures caused by nationalism and racism as deployed by the Trujillato. Family functions in these instances as an allegory for nationhood and as a literal depiction of the experience of displacement and transculturation as an affect of immigration and exile. In an article from *Social Text* entitled "Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" Jameson infamously argued that "all third-world texts are necessarily [. . .] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation" (170). Aijaz Ahmad responds to Jameson's claims by arguing that many kinds of narrative can emerge in the work of artists writing from marginalized positions, and argues that to suggest otherwise is to make of those artists two-dimensional Calibans, "fated to be in the post-structuralist world of Repetition with Difference," as they are taught to signify by their Euro-American Properos. Those writers, like Shakespeare's monstrous islander, cannot truly create but can only curse, producing "the same allegory, the nationalist one, rewritten, over and over and over again, until the end of time" (186). Because I have posited some application of Jameson's work to Díaz's and Danticat's, and because here I employ the phrase "national allegory," I wish to be clear that I would neither maintain that *all* Dominican-American or Haitian-American authored texts are purely forensic testimony, nor that Haitians and Dominicans living in the U.S. are necessarily denizens of the "Third-world" as Jameson conceives of it. I use this phrase to espouse an example of how historical materialists have read novels as forensic testimony, which

necessarily sees such texts as participating in the allegorization of a national historical narrative. In examining the epideictic and deliberative potential of my own interpretations of the text I'll illustrate how some extensions of the paradigm of *testimonio* can breach the limits of national allegory. I'll also demonstrate how the forensic function sets up supra-allegorical models for ethical interpretation. I wish to complicate the notion of national allegory by suggesting that reading the individual narratives without attention to how they configure nation is also fruitful, and ought to be paired with allegorical investigations of the texts.

Unlike Jameson, I do not contend that “national allegory” in testimonial fiction simply redeploys “predominantly Western machineries of representation” (“Third-world Literature 178) as support for “the cosmopolitanism of a conservative oligarchy” (Irr 11). The novels also do more than just work as a sort of Freudian “talking cure” for cultural trauma, as has been suggested by critics like Suárez and April Shemak. Irr has pointed out that “Díaz and Danticat make their swerves away from trauma in terms partly provided by literary traditions specific to their pre-migration cultures” (11). Hence, the notion of a nationally-determined allegory, focused solely upon identifying the representation of cultural trauma within the use of postmodern conceits, would seem to overlook the ways in which indigeneity is presented, not as a nostalgically imagined *a priori* state, but as an ever-continuing aesthetic that participates in a global transculturation, and in bearing witness to culturally located atrocities, the novels actually reproduce trauma in a moment of signification that is legible to myriad audiences so as to craft an allegory that exceeds the boundaries Jameson sets and works to do much more than signify in order to heal. The communicative endeavor of a testimonial novel in transnational terms that fuses the premodern with the postmodern works to revise a dominant history first, but it is not limited to this sort of revision. In addition to revising records of the past, the novels are also endeavors to build coalitions in the present for the purpose of changing the future.

Díaz's novel uses a literal depiction of a transnational experience to dramatize the national as allegorical to the personal (or, more specifically, to the familial). In *Oscar Wao* the move from Santo

Domingo to Washington Heights literally divides a family. When Belí, Oscar's mother, is forced to flee the island after an ill-fated affair with a party official who is married to Trujillo's sister, she must leave her aging surrogate mother, La Inca, behind with little monetary support or familial care. Likewise, Belí's two children grow up in the Dominican-American diaspora with few connections to their national and familial origins. This disruption of kinship affinities is a mirroring of an earlier disruption of the family on the island, and that earlier disruption is much more clearly anchored in the oppression of the state under Trujillo. This may be rendered in the text's dénouement as a metaphor for the separation of the unity of the "New World" post-colonization, or for the unity of Hispaniola before the D.R.'s successful secession from Haiti. Oscar's final hours in the cane field are literally on the borders—between Haiti and the D.R., between the agrarian and the industrial, between the corporate control of late capitalism and the fascist centrality of power of the Trujillato. Oscar's sister's notions that Trujillo lives on in the bodies of present-day Dominicans and Dominican-Americans seems to insist that all the separations that diaspora entails are one giant fukú leveled at the whole island.

The rumination upon the consequences of this diaspora shapes much of Díaz's novel. Díaz's depictions of those consequences often take the form of representations of the conflict between familial allegiance and national allegiance. The troubles of the de León y Cabral family begin on the island either because of Trujillo's desire for Belí's older sister, or because Belí's father disparaged the regime in a public place. The very fact that no one knows what incited the punitive measures that disrupt the Cabrals' domestic affiliations demonstrates how Díaz frames the antagonism of the Trujillato as arbitrary and therefore mystical. In either case, because the father, a doctor named Abelard, refuses to give his daughter to Trujillo, or because he denigrated government policy in a cantina, or for some other reason known only to Abelard and Trujillo, he is convicted of treason against the regime, sentenced to eighteen years in prison and has all his possessions confiscated by the state. This outcome leaves his wife Socorro alone, unprotected and pregnant with Belí. According to familial lore, the evidence of the fukú's power appeared during the birth of Belí, after her father's run-in with the dictator; she was

born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's complexion as an ill omen.

(248)

Shortly after this “ill omen,” Socorro commits suicide via ammunition truck. Esteban, a servant of the family, is fatally stabbed to death. Lydia, Belí's grandmother, “perished [. . .] some say of grief, others of a cancer in her womanly parts” (249). Jackie, the beautiful eldest daughter who may have been an object of Trujillo's desire, drowns in her godparent's pool. And Astrid, the second daughter, is killed by a stray bullet while praying at the altar of a church near San Juan. This string of familial tragedies leads to Belí being “lost from sight for a long time” (253), partially because “she was so dark no one on Abelard's side of the family would take her” (252). After nine years of living with an abusive family that purchased her as a *criada* from “a group of Socorro's distant relatives” (253) Belí is claimed by Abelard's cousin, called La Inca, and reappears in the familial narrative. From the time she is ten years old until she flees the country to avoid being murdered for her involvement with the gangster who married Trujillo's sister, Belí forms a close bond with La Inca, but that too is severed by the lascivious desires of the state apparatus. In these ways, Díaz illustrates that nationalism is disruptive to the institution of the family. Kinship is sacrificed to Trujillo, just as unalienated labor and free commerce are.

Likewise, the construction of national identity according to racial phenotype is sutured to the issues of nationalism. Because Belí is dark-skinned, she loses her family. Abelard's relatives, fearful of what social scorn or state-sponsored violence might be visited upon anyone who claims kinship with a child who appears to be of Haitian descent, actually excise a child from their family in order to preserve a sense of racial purity. The relative who takes the child in is tied to Socorro, who is marked in the text as working class and seemingly from below her husband's station, so, presumably, the risk is lessened for La Inca, whose very name marks her as indigenous rather than Spanish-descended (another indicator of low

social status in the Dominican hierarchy of identity Diaz crafts). Kinship structures are clearly transculturated. The characters from the de León y Cabral family are both light and dark-skinned; they have both European and islander heritage and customs, and they are both bourgeoisie and proletariat. In spite of this diversity of categorical identity within a single family, those interstitial ties are reduced to a simple common denominator: skin color. The family that could, in and of itself, produce a discourse about the illusory nature of categorical difference in the D.R. instead is destroyed by its attempts to purge members who might complicate a coherent ethnic and economic identity for the family. This segmentation of national identity even within families seems to further complicate Diaz's fictionalized representation of communication across identity categories.

Danticat also explores how kinship ties are upset by the Trujillato, but in very different ways. Man Denise's grief over the loss of her two adult children, Sebastien and Mimi, because of U.S. imperialism in Haiti combined with Trujillo's virulently anti-Haitian policies demonstrates the connections between national identity and personal loss. Trapped in the trauma of child-loss, Man Denise demonstrates the point Suárez makes about the intrinsically broken nature of memory. Although she is confronted by numerous people who claim to have witnessed Sebastien and Mimi's deaths in the courtyard in Santiago, Man Denise refuses to believe her children were killed in El Corte. She plies Amabelle to corroborate her denial.

'You knew my Micheline. You knew my Sebastien. Do you believe it for yourself?' she insisted.

'No, I do not believe it for myself,' I said. But I did. I believed it because of what I had seen, in Dajabón, because of what I had heard of La Romana, because of what the people said in the clinic that day about those who'd died in Santiago. (241)

This repression of what is repeatedly confirmed by the strangers who come to attest to the fates of Sebastien and Mimi is evidence of Man Denise's inability to accept loss, to understand the past and

mitigate the influence of the historical trauma through the closure such an understanding might bring. In this melancholic repression she is not alone; the trauma of El Corte is culturally shared.

Man Denise's difficulties in configuring her present are echoed by Amabelle and Yves. When they succeed in crossing the border at the river they are caught in a terrible cycle of grief and survivors' guilt that marks collective memory with cultural trauma. Yves compulsively works his late father's land, refusing to discuss the flight or those who died with them as they made their way to Haiti. When Amabelle urges him to go to the cathedral to talk with the priests about these experiences he replies, "I know what will happen [. . .] You tell the story and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours" (246). Yves's response seems to directly address the issues about ethical representations that are raised by both Diaz's and Danticat's autoethnographic novels. Both tell the story, but it is constructed through fiction as they wish. An additional level of removal complicates this situation further, as the readers, who may be either insiders allied with the Haitian-Dominican-American diasporic subject positions or outsiders with no identificatory allegiance to author or characters, are left to interpret these images. In this way novels of witness always risk a retelling of an intimate, personal story according to the wishes of the audience rather than the storyteller, be it an author or a testifying character like Yves.

Like the dual audience—of insider and metropolitan readers—that *The Farming of Bones* addresses, critics are also tacitly addressed in the dialogue between Amabelle, Man Denise and Yves about how best to heal from the personal and cultural traumas resulting from El Corte. Amabelle gives testimony. Man Denise represses and denies the trauma. Yves internalizes that trauma. Danticat dramatizes these three responses for readers and critics so as to contextualize the pressures on those suffering from trauma before, within the sous-text of her novel, she implies a response to Suarez's question about how that trauma might be healed. Ethical metropolitan critics must work to empathize with Yves's silence and Man Denise's repression in the same ways that they empathize with Amabelle's testimony. By demonstrating the need to respect varied ways of coping with trauma through her

characterization, Danticat guides a respectful and ethical interpretation for outsider readers and critics. Before those readers and critics can work in coalition with the victims of trauma, they must wait, listening attentively, for those who have been victimized to invite that sort of coalition. In their refusal to share their experiences outside their collective identities, and in their reticence to relinquish hope that the atrocities may have spared their loved ones, Yves and Man Denise are representative of subjects who do not address a testimony of trauma to a metropolitan readership, and therefore, close off any ethical avenue for outsider intervention. This is an important rhetorical maneuver to honor, as unethical intervention nearly always results from metropolitan critics' refusal to respect the boundaries around experiential narratives of colonization that are not rendered permeable.

In spite of their repudiation of metropolitan access to their narratives, Man Denise and Yves—through these dialogues with Amabelle—do present clear reasons why they might insist upon impermeable boundaries between collective identities. A reticence to relinquish the past to those who cannot understand it (and who may misrepresent it) is also manifest in Amabelle's final testament to the river goddess, *Metrès Dlo*, at the novel's end. When read together, these individuated experiences of loss demonstrate the effect of nationalisms on the collective memory of Haitians during the Trujillato that extends beyond the temporal boundaries of the regime's influence. Because the collective memory is not bound by the official historical narrative, the text acts forensically to insist that the dictator's control over how national identity is constructed (and how national modes of identification impact personal ones) is an ongoing trauma that has far-reaching ramifications.

Danticat and Díaz use their novels to participate in an ongoing conversation about how national divisions on Hispaniola can be allegorized to revise histories of oppression under Trujillo's regime; this conversation participates in the perpetual construction of collective memory. The individual traumas are indicative of how larger cultural traumas and personal memory gird collective memory. Barbie Zelizer argues that "Unlike personal memory, whose authority fades with time, the authority of collective memories increases as time passes" (3). This increased authority has more to do with a socially

measured consensus about history than with the veracity of individual accounts that bear witness to specific events. The authors use fictional characters to testify to real experiences that emerge from the collective to become filtered into the personal by authorial intervention. This demonstrates Zelizer's argument that historical narratives always already hold a quasi-fictitious quality whereas "[c]ollective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past" by "pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation" (3). In seeing the testimonial functions of these novels as constituent of collective memory in their forensic and epideictic functions, the individual stories that Danticat and Díaz create become representative of a larger international narrative. However, forensic functions must not be the only ones these texts perform, particularly if interpretations are to exceed the context Jameson presents. There are, it must be noted, some very compelling reasons why writers from the Caribbean diaspora would demand that their work be read outside the limiting interpretative framework of the national allegory.

Seeing the novels as singularly forensic in their deployment of testimony would place exclusive emphasis on how the fiction corrects an inaccurate and hegemonic historical account. This emphatic focus would seem to insist upon a vision of the texts as purely allegorical on a national scale. As Irr has noted

a specifically Caribbean literary nationalism [. . .] has played a vital and complex role: [it has] helped writers define a strictly New World sensibility at odds with the mentality of the former colonial powers, distinct from the neocolonial presence of the U.S., and resistant to techno-global historical amnesia. (11)

Irr claims that the construction of a pan-Caribbean literary aesthetics, which she terms a "New World sensibility," is neither derivative of Western stylistic norms, nor posited in a context of a singular nation-state. Rather, the living and mutable tradition within which Danticat and Díaz write around the turn of the 21st Century is one that presents a forensic function as part of a radical pan-Caribbean project, but is by no means limited to the effects of that radicalized sense of national identity. By situating the texts only

within the realm national allegory, metropolitan critics risk not seeing how the authors shape national identity, collective memory and cultural trauma in nuanced ways that may go beyond the exploration of inaccurate or misleading historical narratives. If the forensic function allows the novels to correct dominant, official historical narratives with the marginal, or even subaltern, perspectives of those unnamed in the official narrative, then some judgment about the competition between those narratives is mandated by the texts. Only through the interpretative fulfillment of this mandate can metropolitan critics help achieve the authorial intent to undermine the amnesia of neocolonialist ideology. Danticat and Díaz exceed forensic purposes by grafting their historical correctives to an impetus for readers to make precisely such a judgment. Just as Morrison and Walker stage a debate about how African American women might find community with other American women to pursue social justice, Danticat and Díaz present readers with an intertextual dialogue about how the Haitian-Dominican-American diaspora might become a community that works toward the healing of cultural trauma. Because *Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones* present grounds to integrate a separatist nationalist position (which considers Dominican and Haitian and American as distinct categories of identity) with an inclusive pan-American identity (which takes diaspora as a shared point of experience for those in the ‘New World’), the novels participate in a negotiation of the fluidity of ethnic collectivity that shares similarities with the nationalist/cosmopolitanist debate that emerges from *Drowning in Fire* and *Flight*.

In representing the competition between official and subaltern narratives about historical events, Danticat and Díaz, like Morrison, Walker, Womack and Alexie, encourage readers to fulfill an epideictic impetus. Amy Novak notes that *The Farming of Bones* “repudiates the arbitrary nature of narrative; it requires the reader not persist in erasing contradictions and complications” (117) and instead engage in an evaluative process that must ultimately accept the subjective nature of narrative as a boon to the epideictic process rather than a failing of testimonial evidence. In the fictive repudiation, not only of official historical narratives, but of narrative’s power to produce a singular truth, Novak suggests that what the novel does may surpass forensic correction through a requisition of readerly participation in an

evaluative process. Readers are encouraged by the narrative strategies not to reject or suppress particular narratives in crafting a monolithic historical truth, but rather they are incited to adjudicate the contest between competing narratives in such a way that “neither pathologizes memory nor attempts to construct a cultural site of commemoration that replaces the radical work of memory with the amnesia of ‘official’ memorializing” (Novak 117). Novak sees Danticat’s novel as a staging of such a competition in the tension between the past-tense linear narrative of the novel and the bold-type present tense lamentations between discrete chapters.

Another scholar, Heather Hewett, uses a theory of disability and trauma to plot a similar competition through the suggestion that physical evidence writ upon the bodies of oppressed Haitians can press an evaluative judgment about the veracity of the subaltern narrative. Both critics suggest that simple resolutions of the competition between narratives, like the one staged in the conversation between Valencia, Amabelle, and Sylvie, may only serve to prove that “there are many stories” and that any personalized view of history will be “only one” (*Farming of Bones* 305) among those many. This multiplicity of narrative possibilities seems to eschew any notion of a unified “New World sensibility” about particular historical occurrences, even within a singular locale. Because Valencia’s perspective is so radically at odds with Amabelle’s in that moment, the presentation of Danticat’s novel as “the real truth” behind the amnesiac tendencies of dominant history seems to be undermined even within the text of the novel. However, even if the symbolic order is readily reshaped according to the whims of those who hear or tell testimony, the text that Danticat presents in the bodies of her characters come to tell stories that resist falsification or resignification to a greater extent than verbal testimony might.

In Danticat’s novel bodily trauma is but one consequence of the oppression Haitians in the D.R. face; however, this bodily trauma is a result of the ideology of the Trujillato’s construction of nationalism—exhibited by what Sagás calls “antihaitianismo”(45)—manifest under Trujillo as a racial distinction that mandates a "Dominicanization" through the elimination of Haitians in the D.R. Said "Dominicanization program" used ethnic cleansing as the means to a nationalist end. This nationalism, it

should be noted, is not the same sort of ideological apparatus that Irr and DeLoughrey endorse in their criticism, but rather it is the sort of nationalism that Martin Munro discusses when he notes the critical trend in anti-nationalist sentiments in the works of Haitian and Dominican writings that highlight the short-comings of nation-building on the island. The Dominicanization program worked "to reinforce Trujillo's ideology that postulated that he was the true savior of the country's Hispanic and Catholic tradition" (Moya Pons 370), rather than to remove any real threat to the continuance of economic or cultural domination of Haitians by Dominicans. This is illustrated by the fact that linguistic differences, in addition to physical appearances, are used to construct the boundaries between Dominicans and Haitians. The overt racism implicit in the programmatic (and pogrommatic) nation-building the regime employed has implications for intranational racial differences as well. Dark-skinned Dominicans were persecuted alongside Haitian nationals. Because many of Díaz's characters are Dominican *prietos* who suffer physical violence because of the perception of their racial difference when on the island, the configuration of the body in trauma functions similarly in his work. The physical violence suffered by Belí and Oscar, combined with the emotional trauma experienced by Dominican-American characters who also figure prominently in the narrative, proves a larger point about the function of nationalism and the racial construction of subjectivity.

The characters in *The Farming of the Bones* and *Oscar Wao* are, for metropolitan readers, a literal *body* of evidence for rendering a judgment about the Trujillato. There are numerous descriptions of beatings and injuries, of the visual markers of nourishment that is too poor (in Belí's extreme thinness) or too rich (Oscar's obesity), of the literal cutting away of characters' generative corporeal components (as in Abelard's disappearance or Belí's mastectomy). This judgment, if rendered through attention to how the authors depict national and transnational identity, will always be a complicated one that lays blame in several places. The process of writing such complicating cues into the novels is a way in which Danticat and Díaz perform a narrative resistance to hegemonic discursive representations of the regime, which are grounded in the realm of personal, embodied experiences to an even greater extent than in the

allegory of the self as synecdoche for nation. In framing individual trauma—both bodily and psychic—as an instance of personal oppression that is symptomatic of the problems of nationalism, the authors allow readerly empathetic responses to grow out of identification with the characters they so artfully craft. However, as Irr notes Caribbean-American migrant literatures depict a “traumatic past—be it torture, murder, incest or rape—[that] is not healed [and] may not even be fully recalled,” and Danticat and Díaz “are less concerned with memorializing traumatic historical losses than they are dedicated to a struggle to carve a place for new links and nodes” that may connect that past trauma to a present-day struggle (24). To accept the forensic narrative, which corrects the inaccuracies of the record of that past trauma, as true, metropolitan readers must empathize with the depictions of that traumatic past. However, this empathy is not enough. Reimagining the past from the perspectives of those victimized in history does little to produce the “links and nodes” that may correct systemic oppression in the present and future. Readers must begin with empathetic identification, but, as is noted in chapters one and two, that identification alone is never sufficient; it risks the erasure and subsumption of difference. However, identification becomes central to forming an understanding of the causal and correlative relationships of the forensic functions to the epideictic functions of the texts. In the epideictic portions of each novel, Díaz and Danticat provide readers with an opportunity to render judgments—to lay blame for present conditions. For metropolitan readers that judgment can only contribute to the social justice component of the autoethnographic projects if those readers retreat from identification into their own subject positions. Metropolitan readers must examine the ways in which their own differences from the narrating subjects are produced by the historical traumas and current conditions that are judged.

One of the ways Díaz and Danticat craft literature that reinscribes the distinction of in-group readers and critics from metropolitan readers and critics is their representational constructions of historical trauma as somatic rather than psychic. The ways in which Danticat constructs the traumatized body have received no small amount of critical attention. Hewett is particularly attentive to how Danticat shapes the bodies of Haitian characters even before the massacre; she notes the narration about Sebastien,

Yves and Kongo describes multiple scars to their faces and torso, which has particular symbolic weight that may exceed the boundaries of Haitian-Dominican racial tension to make a larger point about African bodies in a greater context of European colonialism: "the scarred back became one of the most potent and recognizable corporeal signifiers of the violence within the institution of slavery" (125). Hewett suggests that *The Farming of Bones* deploys "this image [to] provide a diasporic historical context for the power of the Dominican nation-state" (125), so that the epideictic judgment readers are asked to make may extend beyond a condemnation of the Trujillato to a more extensive consideration of the issues of race in the New World, and perhaps even of racism in a contemporary global setting. Additionally, April Shemak suggests that as the novel progresses the narration documents the ways in which Haitian bodies are "marked by sugarcane" and "by the machete" so that the novel demonstrates how the genocide of Haitians becomes the "culmination" of their work in the cane fields (98). This too has larger implications that just the forensic reconstruction of the Trujillato, because the condition of physical abjection for an impoverished labor force as a means of justifying violent repression is relevant in many other contexts. Both Hewett and Shemak see the trauma written onto flesh as an indication that the corporeality of Haitian characters can act as "sites of memory" (Shemack 85) because the scars they bear are the "material reminders, historical markers in a sense, of Trujillo's attempt to obliterate them" (88). These sites of memory, as Díaz illustrates in *Oscar Wao*, are transmitted intergenerationally, so that trauma is not just present-day Dominican and Haitian peoples' "parent's shit"—as Yunior so memorably tells Oscar. The trauma, because it is a locus of collective identity, lives on in the embodied present.

The historical trauma also lives on at the national level as well as the personal. As the children and grandchildren of people who were tortured and murdered by the Trujillato must deal with their inherited trauma, so too must the post-Trujillo political, economic and geographical organization of power on Hispaniola deal with the legacy El Generalissimo has bequeathed. If Trujillo then becomes an allegorical figure for a powerful nation-state with great economic prowess built through the exploitative labor practices linked with slavery, the narration works to critique much of the global north along with

Trujillo's republic. One reason why this strategy, while subtle, can be radically resistant is that the embodied experience of racial violence overcomes the limitations of "verbal witnessing" (Hewett 127) demonstrated by the competition between narratives. As Amabelle notes, "[t]he past is more like flesh than air" (281). The trauma is not an abstract notion locked in history, but it is a concrete, persisting presence even after El Corte is long past. Since the past is made flesh in the novel, the epideictic function of the novel is posited in Amabelle's narration of "testimonials like the ones never heard by [. . .] the Generalissimo himself"(281) to a new juridical audience—who is both like Amabelle and different from her, according to the duality of audience invoked in Danticat's autoethnographic fiction—in a call to reevaluate the evidence of the massacre and those testimonies that went unheard. However, because the structure of this testimony situates it as one story among many, and because other characters experience the trauma in different ways, this reevaluation is not a simple judgment for or against the veracity of Amabelle's perspective. In place of a simple negotiation between the truth of two competing narratives, the depiction of that competition functions as an embodied text with visible proof in the description of bodily trauma, and that embodiment bears witness to atrocities in the very physicality of the representations.

While *Oscar Wao* has received less critical attention, the embodied portrayal of trauma is also formally manifest in that novel⁵³. Díaz uses a polyphonic narrative style to demonstrate the limitations of single-perspective narration. If the formal distinctions Novak sees between the linear past-

⁵³ This absence of critical attention is in no way an indication of the novel's literary merit—Díaz won a Pulitzer for the work. Rather because only two years have passed since its initial publication, conversations about the text are still formative. Henry Wessell, in a review of the text for *The New York Science Fiction Review*, notes that the Díaz treats "Trujillo's sinister omnipresence in the twentieth-century Dominican Republic and the complex net of malign influences that the dictator controls" (10), which may predict the kind of critical investigations into national identity that Danticat's work has figured in. Monica Hanna and Caren Irr have produced some very insightful work of that nature. In two articles about Díaz's earlier collection of short fiction *Drown* John Riofrio and Jason Frydman have discussed the interstice of masculinity and ethnic identity and that could indicate that the critical reception of his work is already attuned to issues of identity and nationality. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* may prove to be among the most significant fictive explorations of the Trujillato within a testimonial framework, but it is as yet too early to tell how and whether scholars will choose to treat the text in this way. In addition to my own work, several of the articles published in the first issue of volume XX of *Antipodas* treat Díaz's novel, and, in some cases, positions it in dialogue with Danticat's.

tense narrative and the bold-type present-tense narrative are the manifestation of narrative instability in *The Farming of Bones*, then the lack of a clear first-person voice for the titular character, and the conflicting accounts given by the third-person narrator, Yunior (Oscar's college roommate) and the running commentary in the novel's footnotes demonstrate that same structural point in *Oscar Wao*⁵⁴. The delineation of the "verbal witnessing" in these confliction modes of narration is underscored by the seemingly objective truth of Oscar's death.

Although the incident occurs a lifetime (literally) after the end of the Trujillato, the evocation of the massacre of 1937 gives shape to the representation of Oscar's bodily trauma. The police captain whose woman Oscar courts sends his officers to abduct and beat Oscar. Even after the brutal beating, from which it takes months to recover, Oscar returns to the island to pitch more woo at the captain's woman; the captain sends the same two officers abduct him again:

They walked him into the cane and turned him around. He tried to stand bravely. [. . .] They looked at Oscar, and he looked at them and then he started to speak, his Spanish good for once. He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English. Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself.

(320-22)

The incident hearkens back to the massacre's geographic associations with cane plantations and linguistic fascism. In the cane with the corrupt policemen, Oscar's ability to use English, rather than his inability to use Spanish, seals his fate. Like Amabelle in Dajabón, Oscar is able to pass the test of linguistic fluency. Amabelle "could have said" *perejil* if the mob had allowed it; Oscar's "Spanish [was] good for once" in

⁵⁴ Oscar speaks in first-person only through the epistolary mechanism of his letters to Yunior during his time on the island. Occasionally he gives direct dialogue in passages with other narrators, but he does not tell his story with any interior monologues, beyond those ascribed to him by other characters.

spite of the policemen's perceptions of the paradox of his *prieto* features and his *norteamericano* privilege. What matters, to the mob in Dajabón and to the officials in the cane outside Villa Juana, is the threat the black body poses to the authority of the racialized Dominican national narrative. Because the mob visually identifies Amabelle and her party as Haitian because of their complexion, she is not allowed to utter the word that may have saved her before the beating commences. In fact, the only reason Oscar survives the first beating is because the captain underestimates him because of his appearance; Yuniór, who narrates the sequence notes that "Oscar was lucky; if he had looked like my pana, Pedro, the Dominican Superman [. . .] he probably would have gotten shot right there. But because he was a homely slob, he really looked like un maldito parigüayo [. . .] the captain only punched him a couple of times" (296). The two men who abduct Oscar after this confrontation also participate in a dialogue that reveals the enduring quality of the anithaitianismo Trujillo used in his "Dominicanization" program; "Didn't you grow up around here" one of the men asks "his darker-skinned pal" as they approach the cane fields, and notes "You look like you speak a little French to me" (297). The similarities between Amabelle's experiences and Oscar's seem to suggest a link between the historical trauma of El Corte and a persistent racism in the Haitian-Dominican-American diaspora today. To paraphrase William Faulkner, the colonialist past is never dead in the archipelago; it isn't even past. The policemen replicate the internalized colonialism that Trujillo elevated from a social stratification to a governmental policy. The persecution of the dark-skinned inhabitants of Hispaniola continues even after Spanish, French, Portuguese and American specters of 'whiteness' are no longer in control of the island directly. The ways in which the victimization of black bodies continue across centuries since colonial contact illustrate how the historical revision of a forensic narrative must be augmented by the evaluative impetus of an epideictic one in a successful autoethnography.

Because the descriptions of the body in trauma are framed by racial discourse and recounted in a fragmented manner (when not repressed fully) the depictions of physical suffering and those of the conflation of race and nation serve to structure the narratives both Danticat and Díaz present. By

situating the reader as a witness to the testimony provided by the text, the novelists demonstrate that causality according to singular identity factors—like national allegiance or origin, race or ethnicity, and familiarity with and fluency of language—which are almost impossible to extricate from one another. The net of identity woven by those intersectional qualities is disrupted by the collective memory. The competition between the historical and individual narratives is difficult to adjudicate, so readers may begin to ponder the consequences of the novels' implicit repudiation of narrative's truth claims. These same readers may wonder what, if any, effect, such a repudiation might have upon any speaker or writer's abilities to adequately and fully represent trauma or identity.

Deliberative Testimonial Fiction—National Identity and Narrative Solidarity

I think dictators want to silence writers because they want to be the only ones speaking—Edwidge Danticat to Junot Díaz

The epideictic judgment encouraged by the form of the prose and embodiment of metaphor works in the service of the third goal of the novel's testimonial apparatuses—the deliberation about on-going issues framed in the novels. Such deliberation becomes a mechanism for structuring a dialogue between disparate perspectives within the sous-text of the novels and in the extractive world the readers inhabit. By writing about the perspectives of those living under the Trujillato and in the diasporic conditions that emerge out of the historical and geographical space, Danticat and Díaz expose the issues relating to the construction of subjectivity according to national and collective identity shaped by cultural trauma. As Martin Munro argues of *The Farming of Bones*, “[i]f there is one unifying reality that cuts across all barriers of class, language, color and nationality in the novel, it is therefore the common experience of trauma” (87). The unification of this reality may also be a mechanism for readers to consider trauma as bound up in notions of nation and self. This, in turn, encourages an interrogation of readerly understandings of personal and social implicatedness in the trauma of others. Metropolitan readers—especially those in privileged positions—must begin to connect their privilege with the deprivations suffered by the testifying subjects. This connection is necessary for the creation of any social

coalition for change that the deliberative part of the autoethnographic fiction seeks to build. In-group readers—who probably are already aware of the revisionist facts in forensic accounts and are likely to form epideictic judgments independently of the texts—can work to understand how their collective identities might constrain or amplify their roles in inter-ethnic dialogues and allegiances. Munro contends that “[b]ehind the imperative to testify lies a deeper need to (re)discover identity” (89); the same can be said of the imperative to read testimonial fiction. If in (re)discovering identity, readers can deliberate upon an alternative structure of self-identification, then possibilities for coalition building as outgrowths of critical reading practices are infinitely multitudinous and potentially radical. One way that both Danticat and Díaz might encourage this personal deliberation is in the ambiguity of the *dénouements* of their novels.

Díaz’s novel closes on a more hopeful note than Oscar’s death; the story extends forward in time and away from the island, even if the *dénouement* always references that earlier time and place. Yuniór is back in New Jersey, teaching college and writing fiction. Lola continues to pursue her activism and to safeguard her daughter from the *fukú* that took Oscar’s life. In the last conversation between the two before the book’s end, Lola swears to Yuniór that she will never return to the D.R.—“that terrible country” (323)—after her brother’s murder. Even though the country is no longer in the control of the dictator, Lola maintains that “Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (324) and thus implies that the cultural trauma caused by the brutality of the Trujillato has irreparably changed the national identities of Dominicans/as, even those born and raised abroad. But the novel’s final musings on beauty and happiness—Lola’s daughter Isis, “the beautiful *muchachita* [. . .] a happy kid” (329) and Oscar’s last letter home about his time on the island “If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335)—indicate that while “nothing ever ends” (331), conditions do change and renewal is possible. The openness and hope of such an ending seems to press readers to consider how and why the narrative arrives at that point. The ambiguity and lack of closure suggests work to be done, ideas to be discovered, *fukús* to be negated through verbal or textual *zafas* that end their mystical power.

Likewise, Danticat's book ends with a testimony by Amabelle to the river, a kind of telling that cannot be reshaped by priests, justices of the peace, or dictators with malintent. *The Farming of Bones* also ends at its beginning; the dedication "In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers. Amabelle Desir" (1) explains the ambiguous final scene of Amabelle in the river at the border: "I thought that if I relived the moment often enough, the answer would become clear [. . .] I also thought that if I came to the river [. . .] the surface of the water would provide the answer. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I" (309). This statement, like Yuniors' pervasive inability to reconstruct a historical narrative that makes sense of Oscar's death, seems to indicate that a "talking cure" is not possible; as Irr noted, the trauma is not healed, but merely absorbed into the subjectivity of the testifying character.

At the end of Danticat's novel, readers are left with the image of a subject forged and drifting in the border between two nations, belonging totally to neither. Amabelle, born in Haiti, orphaned and raised in the Dominican Republic, speaks Spanish and Kréyol, finds a home in both countries and mourns the loss of loved ones on both sides of the border. When she lies down in the warm shallows of the river to recount her story to the "Mother of the Rivers," Amabelle places the reader—to whom that testimony is delivered "in confidence"—in the position of the goddess. By recounting her narrative, which frames competition between histories and questions the veracity of testimony within its own version of truth, the character calls for negotiation of the issues within the text, and of other contexts in which those same issues are negotiated by narration in competition. The final image seems to paradoxically invalidate and reify both sorts of nationalism in the same way that Díaz invalidates and reifies the Trujillato; in its critique exists the mechanism for its maintenance. Readers must then respond to the deliberative call through self-examination and an interrogation of the ethics of listening and telling, and of reading and writing about collective memory and cultural trauma. By considering the latent hope in Díaz's dénouement alongside the resignation to live with, rather than heal from, trauma in Danticat's novel, both authors seem to call for readers and critics to meditate upon the value of listening and looking

to a future. The deliberative call, in both *Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of the Bones*, suggests further colonial intervention is likely to cause further trauma. Díaz doesn't call for an American armed forces unit to cut down the captain whose men murder his protagonist. Danticat doesn't demand reparations for the descendants of Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans who were destroyed by the Trujillato. Instead, the ideological shift both novels present pushes readers to reconsider how they understand their own relationships to the historical traumas created by the Trujillato. Rather than simply rejecting "that terrible country," Díaz and Danticat call for an ideological shift that can find hope in the wake of tragedy and posit a new pan-American community that does not rely upon ethnic separatism or racist hierarchies to organize relationships across categorical differences.

There, of course, can be no guarantee that all readers will respond to the potentially radical call for reassessing subject positionality in the ends of these novels. There can be no guarantee that all readers will even perceive them. Díaz himself maintains a tacit awareness of this fact; in an interview he noted that "no matter how much I tell readers, they will try to read me their way and be unhappy with it" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 906). In spite of this acknowledgment of the limitations of testimonial fiction, some weight is still attached to its potential for literary affect in its critical reception. Because every analytical response posits a kind of intervention in the literary meanings of the novels, there can be no situation that diffuses critical culpability with any universal certainty; no ideological reformation on the part of readers, metropolitan or in-group, is ever insured.

What might encourage ethical critical intervention and appropriate personal responses to the texts, in spite of this lack of guaranteed ideological reformation, is a reading practice that encourages attention to the authors' intentional shaping of the fiction and mandates a reflection on their complex narrative styles. My own intervention, manifest in these four chapters, is structured around a literal conversation between the authors. In foregrounding this published dialogue between Danticat and Díaz in my analysis of their novels, I hope to have presented a case for attending to personal authorial histories and intentions in a corpus of literary works. The same might be said for my use of interviews and literary

criticism published by Morrison, Walker, Womack and Alexie. The best justification for this structure and case may be that radical potential can only be achieved, or even recognized, through close attention to how and why the novelists shape the representations of cultural trauma and different perspectives on how collective identities are constituted and maintained. Because all six novelists posit a model for approaching cultural and ethnic differences in an ethical and respectful framework, their fictionally staged inquiries into the potential functions of representations of trauma and community can work didactically for both in-group and metropolitan readers. If I have adequately explained the breadth of those functions, then I have also have added to an ongoing conversation about the ethics of reading testimonial fiction, rather closed down such a conversation by positing a singular interpretative framework that belies the potential of other paradigms of reading.

An open dialogue is important for the epideictic and deliberative functions of these novels. For testimonial fiction to have real effects on the hearts, minds and politics of readers, those readers must bring to the fiction a willingness to listen carefully to the voices filling in gaps in a forensic narrative or arguing for a particular judgment about that narrative. Until that happens, no meaningful discussion about history, ethics and personal obligations from differing perspectives may even be possible to organize around these narratives. However, if the intertextual examination I have endeavored to produce can be situated within such a dialogue, then the possibilities for social justice in the reconsideration of those issues from multiple subject positions might be quite encouraging. If no literary or interpretive intercession can alter the trauma caused by the slavery, land-theft or the Trujillato, then perhaps a deliberative dialogue based on texts that testify to its horrors can posit some action to prevent it by configuring the past into the present in meaningful ways. Such a configuration, in my opinion, is the best hope for a literature that builds coalitions to promote a future wherein social justice is a possibility for traumatized groups and new sites of oppression and colonization are mitigated through cross-cultural community-building.

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