RECITING AMERICA: REPETITION AND THE CULTURAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE FICTION OF RUSSELL BANKS, RALPH ELLISON, MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, AND T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Reciting America: Repetition and the Cultural Self-Sufficiency of the United States in the Fiction of Russell Banks, Ralph Ellison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and T. Coraghessan Boyle

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This dissertation argues that several post-Second World War American works of fiction dramatize the way in which American identity is assumed by its citizens, largely through the repetition, recitation, and performance of the different kinds of American discourses by which the United States talks about itself to itself, and to others. These discourses, which provide the narrative patterns, vocabularies, mythologies, and explanations whereby American individuals conceptualize both their relation to the social real of the United States and to each other, are found, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s suggestive image, already existing in “other people’s mouths” (Dialogic 294). This dissertation begins by theorizing the relation between language and consciousness, and the role of irony and the cliché in the processes of citing, performing, and repeating, with or without apparent difference, the social discourse which the individual finds in others’ mouths.

Chapter One examines the inscription in Russell Banks’s 1985 novel Continental Drift of the discourse of the American dream. Chapter Two looks at the way the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man attempts to understand his identity as an African American through, successively, three available vocabularies: that of the discourse of.
Booker T. Washington, that of the Communist Party of the United States, and that of Marcus Garvey’s Romantic Nationalism. Chapter Three considers the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, who must also decide what is worth saying again, from grade school recitation to the retelling and “translat[ing]” (209) of two traditional Chinese tales, the anonymous “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” and Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments.” The Conclusion looks at T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *East is East*, and suggests that the racial, racist cliché is a type of “preoccupied” signification, a form of repeated discourse which short-circuits its flexibility in representing the real. This dissertation concludes by examining, alongside President William Clinton’s 1995 Loyalty Day Proclamation, two Inaugural poems (by Robert Frost and Maya Angelou), both with reference to Sacvan Bercovitch’s assertion regarding the United States’ “cultural self-sufficiency” (*Rites of Assent* 22).
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Introduction: Reciting the American Legacy

"Who is speaking here?"
— Roland Barthes

On May 1, 1995, President William J. Clinton of the United States issued the following proclamation:

LOYALTY DAY. 1995

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

A PROCLAMATION

Our country's rich diversity of peoples and cultures has been called “the noble experiment.” From its beginnings, our great democracy has guaranteed its citizens the blessings of freedom and the right of self-determination. Each year, with the coming of spring and the rebirth of nature, we pause to consider the progress of our Nation and to reaffirm our allegiance to the American experiment.

Two hundred and twenty years ago in Lexington, Massachusetts, a ragged group of colonial Americans faced a column of British soldiers. As the smoke cleared from the “shot heard round the world,” eight American “Minutemen” lay dead — their blood spilled along the path to a new Nation on this soil. Their gift of freedom is held sacred to this day.

All Americans can be proud of the heritage of courage and sacrifice that has extended unbroken through generations of our citizens. The success of the United States today is seen both in our continued prosperity and strength and in our role as an international beacon of liberty. As we recall those who gave their lives for our freedom, we see our Nation’s history reflected in their ranks — from the tireless “Minutemen” in Lexington to the brave men and women who fought in the Persian Gulf. These fine citizens, along with their families and those who have served on the home front, deserve our profound respect and gratitude. Let history forever record our loyalty to their legacy.

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1S/Z 151.
The Congress, by Public Law 85-529, has designated May 1 of each year as "Loyalty Day." We spend this day in celebration of our Constitution and our precious Bill of Rights and in honor of the sacrifices that have enabled this great charter to endure.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, WILLIAM J. CLINTON, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim May 1, 1995, as Loyalty Day. I call upon all Americans to observe this day with appropriate ceremonies and activities, including public recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States. I also call upon government officials to display the flag on all government buildings and grounds on this day.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-ninth day of April, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and nineteenth.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

While this document is remarkable in several respects, for the moment I wish to regard it as an example of a contemporary American discourse through which the United States talks to itself about itself and to others. This text, which is indebted to such diverse genres as history, public oratory, quasi-religious exhortation, legal documentation, and funereal eulogy, offers both a historical narrative with contemporary meaning and a vocabulary of ideas which describe the project of the United States. As a historical moment located at (and as) the mythic origin of the United States, the event of the Minutemen's deaths leaves its trace in subsequent history, as a presence which, in the President's words, "has extended unbroken through generations of our citizens." They sacrificed their lives, the President says, for the same ideas which continue to dominate American self-description: "freedom and the right to self-determination," "democracy,"
“progress.” and “liberty.” What the President calls “loyalty to their legacy” — which might arguably provide the starting point for a definition of American identity — is to be symbolically re-enacted and performed by Americans by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. While Clinton’s call for Americans to say again certain words in order to affirm their loyalty to the United States is a very specific recitation of discourse for a very specific occasion, this study — written by a Canadian who is outside the range of that call, though partly within the culture from which it emanates — begins with the premise that American identity is assumed by its citizens largely through the repetition, recitation, and performance of different kinds of American discourses.

There are many different discourses and counter-discourses circulating in the post-Second World War United States which provide the narrative patterns, vocabularies, mythologies, and explanations by which individuals understand both their relation to the social body and to each other. I have adopted the word “discourse” largely from the English translations of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work. For Bakhtin, discourse is language in use. “language in its concrete living totality,” not language as the object of linguistics, which operates by a “legitimate and necessary abstraction” (Problems 181). Discourse is a type of “social language,” says Bakhtin, “a concrete socio-linguistic belief system that defines a distinct identity for itself within the boundaries of a language that is unitary only in the abstract” (Dialogic 356). In speaking of discourse, Bakhtin’s interest is in what he terms its “heteroglossia”: the stratifying, dialect-creating forces operating within a single language (e.g., English) which make it unavoidably “socio-ideological” (Dialogic 272). In Bakhtin’s sense, discourse is always inflected by different “socio-linguistic points of
view" (Dialogic 273) which contest its meanings. For this reason, individual language users encounter language which is already ‘inhabited’: each word carries connotative power which, even if recognized, cannot be necessarily effaced for the purpose of pure denotation:

When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others’ voices. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that other voice. . . . His own thought finds the word already inhabited. . . . When there is no access to one’s own personal “ultimate” word, then every thought, feeling, experience must be refracted through the medium of someone else’s discourse, someone else’s style, someone else’s manner, with which it cannot immediately be merged without reservation, without distance, without refraction. (Problems 202)

For Bakhtin, the already-used and already-prepared-for-use language can never be the simple mode of the expression of individual consciousness. In describing the meeting of consciousness and language, Bakhtin argues that the belated user of language therefore experiences a resistance when trying to mould language according to his or her purposes:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention . . . . Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths. (Dialogic 293-4)

This study examines American discourses which already exist — sometimes quite literally — in other people’s mouths.

President Clinton’s Proclamation calls for one such repetition of words which exist in others’ mouths. But beyond that, the Proclamation is shot through with
ideologically-loaded words and phrases which invoke some of the discourses through which the United States describes itself. The first paragraph places the American “experiment” in the tradition of the European Enlightenment and within the greater Western narrative of economic, moral, and political progress. The second recalls the geopolitical historical narrative whereby the United States was formed, against all odds, through struggle against a tyrannical British Empire. In the third paragraph, Clinton lays claim to the moral heritage of the early American revolutionaries on behalf of contemporary Americans, a heritage that “has extended unbroken through generations of our citizens.” The reproduction of those national-familial bonds is thereby established: as Marc Shell, in a slightly different, though related, context, has remarked, in “some traditions, after all, kinship by consanguinity and kinship by collactation amount to the same thing” (10). The President also relocates the American “experiment” as a crucial — and ongoing — event in world history, alluding to Puritan leader John Winthrop’s call in 1630 for the creation of a “Citty vpon a Hill” to be a model of civil (and ecclesiastical) government (Winthrop 40). The contemporary moral inheritance of “freedom” and democratic exemplarity permits the inclusion of Americans who served in the 1991 Persian Gulf war. The fourth paragraph, noting Congress’s resolution to “record [contemporary Americans’] loyalty to their legacy,” wraps up in that legacy two key American documents: the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

It could be argued, however, that when talking about contemporary American discourses it would be too easy to construct a “straw” idealism about the United States by focussing on texts or mythologies which are obviously propagandistic, naive, clichéd, or
simplistic. Indeed, President Clinton’s Loyalty Day Proclamation could be seen in these terms, culpable as much for what it says as for what it does not say. How many careful readers of American history would agree that the United States has, “from its beginnings,” guaranteed “freedom and the right of self-determination” to its people — unless the word “citizens” hides the fact of the exclusion, at various times, of women, African slaves, Native peoples, and immigrants of colour from those guarantees? Do the experiences of such Americans not suggest that the heritage of freedom has been anything but “unbroken” throughout America’s many generations? Was the American-led defence of Kuwait against Iraqi aggression in the Gulf War really for the purposes of “liberty” and democratic “freedom”? Would all Americans have unreserved cause for the “celebration” of the Constitution, a document that was created with a purposeful equivocation about who exactly constituted a “Person” (see Shell 18-9)? Is the President’s assessment of the results of “the American experiment” not decidedly — and strategically — myopic?

All these objections are legitimate; it could moreover be argued that it is hardly fair to take as an example of serious American discourse about the United States a text which practically announces its own status as propaganda by acknowledging its genre to be that of public “proclamation.” At the same time, do the historical narratives and political vocabularies outlined and repeated in President Clinton’s Loyalty Day Proclamation not function, quite ‘seriously,’ as part of the way the United States talks about itself to itself? Does the mythology enshrined in the Proclamation, as well as its moral categories (free/unfree, colony/colonizer, democracy/tyranny), not continue to
inform everything from foreign policy decisions to domestic debate about education, the judicial system, and welfare?

The fact that this discourse (for example) may no longer accurately represent contemporary American reality is one of the subjects of this study. If I insist on the word "discourse" to characterize the types and forms of language through which human beings cognitively approach the real world, it is for several reasons. Though I have adopted the word from contemporary literary theory, the interest in the materiality by which social knowledge is articulated and circulated is, as this study argues, that of the four novels examined in this thesis; there is no hermeneutic grid laid over them for exegetical purposes. That attention to the materiality which "carries" ideas about America and being American reflects an interest not only in what is known about the United States, but how it is known. The post-structuralist interest in the word discourse seems the best way of evoking that attention, both to the content (as ideas) and how it is inscribed, communicated, contested, and transformed through its use.

For more than a century, some linguists and philosophers of language have explored the possibility that language's role in the processes of human thought and communication may be more complicated than the basic expression of prior ideas in speech or graphic representation. The works of such diverse language theorists as Benjamin Lee Whorf, V. N. Vološinov, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Emile Benveniste suggest that language is very much implicated in the human operations of mental cognition, the reflective conceptualization of reality, and the establishment and maintenance of personal and social identity. These theorists suggest in their different
ways that humans gain an understanding of their surroundings and their identities as individuals and as members of a society by means of the language already available to them. I do not mean to suggest that all human mental activity happens only through the medium of language. As Paul Churchland shows in *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain*, the human brain probably processes many kinds of social, emotional and moral problems without the direct use of language. Moreover, Steven Pinker has convincingly argued in *The Language Instinct* that even some of the brain’s more analytical processes involve no linguistic dimension: “visual thinking,” for example, “uses not language but a mental graphics system” (Pinker 73). What I do want to argue, however, is that reflective analysis of an individual’s relation to other individuals and to the social real takes place through the languages and vocabularies available to him or her — through, that is, the social discourse in which the individual lives.

The contemporary American discourses discussed in this study are all objects of citation in four post-Second World War American novels: Russell Banks’s *Continental Drift* (1985), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *East is East* (1990). Chapter One, on Banks’s novel, takes as its discourse under study the American dream — the patterns of behaviour and the economic and moral vocabulary which together constitute the idea that in the United States every American is materially rewarded according to his or her efforts and abilities. The American dream, I show, is a historically rich and textually complex discourse which offers an explanation of the economic and social relations between the
individual and the American social body. While the discourse is without a singular origin, appearing on the scene as what (every)one says, it is cited both by the main characters who attempt to claim the promise of the American dream, and by Banks, who ultimately suggests that, in its present degraded form, the discourse of the American dream is no longer an accurate way of describing an American’s relation to the United States.

In Chapter Two, the discourses under study are at once more confined in their circulation, and more traceable in terms of their respective origins. The narrator of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man attempts to understand his identity as an African American through, successively, three available vocabularies: that of the discourse of Booker T. Washington, that of the Communist Party of the United States, and that of Marcus Garvey’s “Romantic Nationalism” (Wynter 441). The narrator’s citation of these American discourses is sometimes quite literal, as he begins his quest by the recitation of Booker T. Washington’s famous address at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition.

Like Ralph Ellison’s narrator, the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts must also decide what is worth saying again. The discourses performed by the narrator vary from grade school recitation to the adoption of the beauty codes of “American-feminine, or no dates” (47). This chapter considers the way in which narrative can be considered a type of discourse, as the material cited by the narrator in order to help her understand her American identity includes the retelling and “translat[ing]” (209) of traditional Chinese stories, including the anonymous “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” and Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments.”
The Conclusion begins by taking up a problem first introduced in my review of the critical reception of *The Woman Warrior* by the Chinese American community: that is, the repetition in Kingston's work of the racial, racist cliché. As a tale of cultural miscommunication, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *East is East* suggests that this kind of cliché is a type of "preoccupied" signification, a form of repeated discourse which short-circuits its flexibility in representing the real. American clichés about the Japanese, and Japanese clichés about America (to return to Chapter One's focus on the discourse of the American dream) together form an impenetrable web of cultural (and racial) illusion. I conclude this study by considering, beside President Clinton's Proclamation, two other very public orations, both with reference to Sacvan Bercovitch's assertion regarding the United States's "cultural self-sufficiency" (Bercovitch 22n).

I have chosen these four post-Second World War American works as my study's focus for several reasons. Most obviously, they are all texts (Kingston's work can only uncertainly be termed a novel) about the United States, texts which question what America 'means,' and what it means to be American. The two novels by Russell Banks and T. Coraghessan Boyle suggest that one of the meanings of the United States is described in the phrase the American dream; Ellison's novel and Kingston's work look at the way ethnic minorities have been traditionally excluded from this dream, or from some of the other values the United States assigns to itself (such as those gestured at in President Clinton's Proclamation, for example). As I suggest in Chapter One, one of the meanings associated with the United States has long been the idea of migration; accordingly, all four texts concern the way migration is, in American discourse,
constructed as a means of "starting over" (to quote Russell Banks's narrator) in a new cultural order. More important, perhaps, is the fact that all four texts exemplify the processes of repetition, as citation, recitation, or performance, whereby American individuals enter into relation with American discourses — and therefore with America itself. These texts suggest, in their own ways, that American subjectivity is assumed, at least in part, through the selected repetition of languages through which the United States talks about itself to itself, and to its subjects. These American discourses about America must be said again (or written again) in order for American citizens to assume an American identity, in much the same way that President Clinton calls on Americans to say again certain words for the purpose of marking their loyalty to the American legacy.

Finally, these four texts thematise the social materiality of 'ideas' about America — yet one more reason I have chosen the word discourse in order to talk about those ideas. It may be objected that the word discourse is merely a kind of trope which encourages an arm's length relation to what is, merely, human reality. As I have suggested above, however, Banks, Ellison, Kingston, and Boyle are interested not only in 'Ideas about America' but in the materiality of those ideas and the modes of their circulation, and how these dynamics affect their expression, transmission, reception, and transformation. These authors are equally interested, moreover, in those moments in which contemporary discourses about the United States are revealed to be inadequate to the social, political, and economic real which the discourses attempt to describe, catalogue, define and explain. This study thus argues that, while the real must be approached in mental reflection through the material of discourse, not all discourses are
equally adequate to the task.

In this regard, American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce’s work helps theorize the relations among thought, language, and reality. In “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1868, Peirce claimed that one of our human incapacities is the inability to think without signs. Much of his subsequent work on logic and signs had deep implications for how human thought represents the real. Kaja Silverman describes Peirce’s system the following way:

Peirce argues that we have *direct experience*, but *indirect knowledge* of reality. The former teaches us that there is a world of things, but gives us no intellectual access to them, while the latter supplies the only means of knowing those things, but no way of verifying our knowledge. Reality bumps up against us, impinges upon us, yet until we have found a way of representing that reality, it remains impervious to thought. (16)

As opposed to Ferdinand de Saussure’s later dyadic model of signification (as signifier and signified, excluding the referent), Peirce developed a triadic model (sign - interpretant - object). According to Peirce’s model, which changed over his lifetime (see Ayers 112-79), “A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (2.228). While Peirce argues that “we have *direct experience of things in themselves*” (6.95), the real can become the object of conscious reflection only once it has been represented in language, only once, as a referent, it enters into a relation with a sign (to revert to Saussure’s terms). The real is thus knowable only through the process (in language or in another semiotic system) of representation. Peirce does not argue that the real does not exist except in language, or

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2In-text references to Peirce’s work are keyed to volume and paragraph number.
that a real not represented by language would not affect humans or other human mental processes:

“But what,” some listener, not you, dear Reader, may say, “are we not to occupy ourselves at all with earthquakes, droughts and pestilence?” To which I reply, if those earthquakes, droughts, and pestilences are subject to laws, those laws being of the nature of signs, then, no doubt being signs of those laws they are thereby made worthy of human attention; but if they be mere arbitrary brute interruptions of our course of life, let us wrap our cloaks about us, and endure them as we may; for they cannot injure us, though they may strike us down. (6.344)

Another issue for Peirce is the accuracy, or adequacy of semiotic representation. He argues that discourse about the real must be a sort of unconscious agreement among members of a community. The real, Peirce says, “is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you” (5.311). An individual can have “direct experience” of the real, but only the communal language can provide that individual with the means of knowing that real. The relation between thought and language, therefore, is fundamentally a social issue: “Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY” (5.311).

The focus of this study is those moments when American discourses about the United States cease to be adequate to the task of describing the real; that is, when there ceases to be communal agreement — reached only through discourse — about the nature of the American real. While what I am describing might be interpreted as instances of crises afflicting the political and ideological project of the United States, a crisis in American “grand Narratives” (see Lyotard), or a crisis of faith in American purposes,
history, and institutions, it could equally be seen, less apocalyptically, as the expected and mandatory instances of the language negotiations described by Mikhail Bakhtin.

"Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it" (Problems 183), says Bakhtin. If Peirce implies that sign systems do not depend upon the "vagaries of me and you," but depend instead upon what seems to be a rather monolithic notion of "community," Bakhtin's work has shown that a living language is shot through with different and often contradictory dialects, connotations, aspirations, and intentions. When Bakhtin says that "the internal dialogism of discourse is something that inevitably accompanies the social, contradictory historical becoming of language" (Dialogic 330), the dialogue to which he refers implicates the "vagaries of me and you" (and others) as an inevitable result of finding that each of our words already "exists in other people's mouths" (Dialogic 294). That said, when Bakhtin argues that "the dialogic nature of language" is a "struggle among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills" (Dialogic 273), he corroborates Peirce's notion that language (and the reality it represents) is perhaps — and this is one of the abiding questions of this study — beyond the reach of individual will.

If social discourse, as the already-said, has the effect of locating the individual as belated, that individual becomes a site for the struggle, within discourse, "among socio-linguistic points of view." The way such struggles constitute, in part. reflective consciousness is a central problem in V. N. Volosinov's work, which first grew out of a desire to challenge the claim in the late 1920s in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that Freudian psychoanalysis presented a scientifically rigorous — and therefore
potentially Marxist — theory of the mind and of psychology (Titunik xix). Vološinov argues, in fact, that the abstract, biologically-defined human being did not exist: as he writes in *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch* in 1927, “Outside society and, consequently, outside objective socioeconomic conditions, there is no such thing as a human being” (15). According to the Freudian model, he complains, the “entire process of character formation runs its course within the confines of the subjective psyche viewed as an isolated entity” (71-2). Declaring that “human psychology must be socialized” (22) by shifting its emphasis away from biology, Vološinov believed that this shift might be achieved by examining the role of language in the creation and maintenance of consciousness, particularly the role of what he called “inner speech” (24). Vološinov argues that “Consciousness is in fact that commentary which every adult human being brings to bear on every instance of his behavior” (85). Corroborating Peirce, Vološinov contends that the material of inner speech is made available to the individual only by society: “the verbal is not his property but the property of the social group (his social milieu)” (86). While Vološinov in *Freudianism* has a substantially less rich model than Bakhtin of what the latter called heteroglossia, he does attribute a certain ideological complexity to outer speech, a complexity partially paralleled by the “different levels” of inner speech (24).

Vološinov’s next book, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, published the same year (1929) as Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, saw his view of the languages which characterize inner speech and outer speech, and the relation between the two, become more complex. Using the Marxist terminology of base and superstructure,
Vološinov argues that "Individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs" (13). Accordingly, the ideological superstructure is located in the material sign, not as a function of consciousness. Different social groups give different "accents" to each word, and the sign thereby "becomes an arena of the class struggle" (23). Vološinov also initiates a critique of Saussurean linguistics that has implications for Peirce's notion that language is beyond the "vagaries of me and you." Vološinov criticizes Saussure's construction of langue, the abstract system of language upon which individuals draw in the event of parole, the singular utterance. For Vološinov, this separation is too rigid; language is, after all, "the ceaseless generation of language norms," and only appears as a system from the individual's perspective (66). "Individuals do not receive a ready-made language at all, rather, they enter upon the stream of verbal communication; indeed, only in this stream does their consciousness first begin to operate" (81). In arguing against Saussure, who is an example in linguistics of what Vološinov calls "abstract objectivism," Vološinov wants to reserve a space within language for thinking through the ways in which individuals' choices shape the language they use.

Vološinov's work is important to this study for its critique of the idea that language expresses an inner, non-linguistic psychic content. This idea is characterized for Vološinov by a linguistic school of thought which he calls "individualistic subjectivism," and which he describes in this way: "any theory of expression inevitably presupposes that the expressible is something that can somehow take shape and exist apart from expression; that it exists first in one form and then switches to another form" (84).
Vološinov proposes an alternative model of the relation between language and consciousness, claiming that “it is a matter not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions” (91). How the “inner world” makes use of discourse during the processes of reflection led Vološinov to investigate the problems of reported speech, and its different syntactical structures.

“Reported speech is speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also speech about speech, utterance about utterance,” Vološinov argues (115).

Following Vološinov’s suggestion, the effect of conscious reflection can be located in part as reported speech about the discourses which come from outside the individual, or, to put this problem another way, as the conscious assessment of those words, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, which come from another’s mouth. Vološinov describes the “context of this inner speech” as “the locale in which another’s utterance is received, comprehended, and evaluated” (118). He goes on to analyse novelistic methods of representing reported speech, arguing that these model what happens in consciousness.

One of the key transformations that takes place involves a “texture-analyzing modification” during the transposition of direct discourse into indirect discourse:

The words and expressions, incorporated into indirect discourse with their own specificity detectable (especially when they are enclosed in quotation marks), are being “made strange,” to use the language of the Formalists, and made strange precisely in the direction that suits the author’s needs: they are particularized, their coloration is heightened, but at the same time they are made to accommodate shadings of the author’s attitude — his irony, humor, and so on. (131)

Though Vološinov remarks on the use of quotation marks, the indirect discourse here
being characterized is not, of course, the representation of dialogue, in which the exact speech of a character is reproduced without changes in syntax, tense, or pronoun.

Vološinov is arguing that within indirect discourse, specific words or phrases can be incorporated using quotation marks, signalling that, while the rest of the reported speech has been syntactically and grammatically altered, and perhaps paraphrased, the quoted words or phrases are what was actually said. His final suggestion that consciousness can develop an "attitude" to the discourse which comes from others' mouths — an attitude which he says can be marked by irony or humour — is a subject to which I return in detail in Chapters Two and Three.

Vološinov ends his study by critiquing those approaches to free indirect discourse which he considers based on individualistic subjectivism (the idea that language expresses an already present psychic content) or abstract objectivism, though perhaps the first is his most important opponent (especially considering his earlier attack in *Freudianism* on the "bourgeois" nature of its psychic model). It is here that his criticism of pre-linguistic subjectivity becomes most focussed:

> Without a way of revealing itself in language, be it only in inner speech, personality does not exist either for itself or for others; it can illuminate and take cognizance in itself of only that for which there is objective, illuminated material, the materialized light of consciousness in the form of established words, value judgements, and accents. . . . Language lights up the inner personality and its consciousness; language creates them and endows them with intricacy and profundity — and it does not work the other way. Personality is itself generated through language. (152-3)

As I have said, I do not wish to take this argument as far as Vološinov does. Subsequent research (as reviewed by Churchland and Pinker) suggests that there are mental processes
which do not occur 'in' language, processes which include, for example, the mental apprehension of the nervous system telling the brain it is hungry. That distinction is not necessarily one Vološinov would make, however:

In fact, not even the simplest, dimmest apprehension of a feeling — say, the feeling of hunger not outwardly expressed — can dispense with some kind of ideological form. Any apprehension, after all, must have inner speech, inner intonation and the rudiments of inner style: one can apprehend one's hunger apologetically, irritably, angrily, indignantly, etc. (87)

To refute Vološinov, not all apprehension, nor all feeling or mental activity must be accompanied by inner speech. But I would like to insist, with Peirce, that mental activities such as reflection must happen through language. I would like to argue furthermore, with Bakhtin, that those discourses through which we must reflect and often evaluate the real pre-exist the individual, are numerous, and are complex in the way they are permeated with different socio-ideological points of view, and in the way their words are multi-accented. I want to agree with those who suggest, at the very least, that language is the basic material through which individual identity is formed, and by which a relation to the real is maintained and cultivated.

This axiom — which, as I have suggested, is shared by the four novels examined in this study — can be measured in part by looking at how one phenomenon of language seems to strain it: the cliché. This study's focus is those words, stories and discourses which are said again and are said differently; the cliché's existence highlights the possibility that these things can be said too often and too indifferently. If language is the material in which individuals understand their identities and reflect on their relations to
the real, clichés are a type of language which seems particularly unsuited to these tasks. Chapter One introduces the problem of the cliché by looking at the works of Anton Zijderveld on the sociological dimension of the cliché and of Ruth Amossy on its hermeneutic implications. Clichés form what Zijderveld calls the "routine paths and traditional patterns" (5) of social discourse; the individuals who exist within this discourse internalize, to a greater or lesser extent, those paths and patterns. I argue that, while social discourse more generally forms the usual paths and patterns of thought and can become "one's own" through a difficult process of reflection and occupation, the cliché disallows this process. Clichés are, according to Amossy, what 'on dit' ("Reading" 35), even more so than the social discourse which Bakhtin insists we discover already existing in other people's mouths; clichés are a peculiar type of "preoccupied" language. Chapter Three explores the racial and cultural clichés (which are sometimes referred to as a *stereotype*) inscribed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The Conclusion pursues the question of this kind of cliché, and finally, develops a semiotic model of this preoccupied form of speech.

Obviously central to the issue of saying again what has been said before is the 'new' speaker's relation to the repeated discourse. According to Bakhtin's suggestive texts, a speaker discovers words already existing in other people's mouths, and consequently "His own thought finds the word already inhabited" (*Problems* 202). That discourse "becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention" (*Dialogic* 293). But is it so very easy for an 'intending' speaker to populate

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3 'One says' (my translation).
again, differently, words which have come before him or her? Can that intention be
formed without needing the service of other already inhabited words? Bakhtin
recognized these possible difficulties. Let me continue a quotation begun above from
"Discourse in the Novel":

The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. (Emphasis added; Dialogic 294)

Quotation marks around repeated discourse is usually a signal denoting attribution and connoting authority — as the etymology of citation suggests, it is the ‘summoning,’ or making present, of an (other) authority. They also imply a certain distance between the speaker and the utterance (the words are not the speaker’s ‘own’ words), or a non-identity between the repeated words and he or she who repeats. At an extreme, the distance marked by quotation marks can be used to signal irony.

This study draws substantially on irony theory to explore what happens when discourse is repeated, with or without obvious difference. The problematics which have typically surrounded discussions of irony, such as intention (mentioned by Bakhtin above), irony signals (such as tone or quotation marks), audiences (usually divided between those who ‘get’ the irony and those who do not), the ‘target’ or ‘victim’ of the irony (who may be in either of the audiences) and the ‘ironist’ (typically defined as the
speaker who says the ‘ironic’ statement) are all elements crucial to the problem of what happens when discourse is repeated. Obviously, no attempt will be made to come to terms with all the copious scholarly material on irony scattered among several disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. I have tried to sift through this material according to two principles. First and most importantly, I have engaged those theories and thinkers which are most closely concerned with the problems I am interested in: namely, citation and recitation, repetition and difference, clichés, and the relation between discourse and reflection or cognition. Second, and to that end, I have tried to draw on the works and paradigms within irony theory which act as touchstones in the various debates on irony because of their commonly-accepted status as key texts or ideas.

Among these many texts and thinkers, from Socrates to the present, perhaps there are only two common denominators among all the different theories of irony: first, the idea that irony is a kind of edged doubleness, and second, the implication that irony is always a split in knowledge, whether between the author and reader, between an audience who ‘gets’ the irony and one who does not, or within a single subjectivity or consciousness. Broadly speaking, there are two schools of irony theory. The first treats irony as a localizable verbal or textual event, most generally defined as ‘saying one thing and meaning another,’ which takes place somewhere between the user of irony and an audience which is divided between those who understand the ironic meaning and those who do not. The second school, developed by the German Romantics, sees irony as a

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4A recent search on the word irony by this author produced 1900 entries in the MLA Bibliography for 1981 to August 1996.
philosophical stance or mode of consciousness characterizing the attempt to come to grips with paradoxical truths or an incomprehensible universe. My study argues that, beyond the two common denominators mentioned above, these two schools can be linked by focussing on the relation between language and reflection, between discourse and consciousness.

Definitions of irony as a trope or figure of speech most often begin (and sometimes end) with simple antiphrasis: that is, the use of a word or a phrase to convey a meaning opposite to its apparent significance. From this most basic definition of verbal irony, critics have offered a myriad of classificatory schemes to try to map the different manifestations of irony. In A Rhetoric of Irony, for example, Wayne Booth classifies rhetorical and tropic “intended ironies” according to three variables: “Degree of openness or disguise” (whether the irony is covert or overt), “Degree of stability in the reconstruction” provided by the reader or hearer of the irony (whether it is stable or unstable), and “Scope of the ‘truth revealed’” (whether the irony extends to the local or the infinite) (233-5). In The Compass of Irony, D. C. Muecke discerns three basic “elements” within three “kinds” of irony, and then three “grades” and four “modes” of irony (which further define the elements and kinds above), and lastly breaks down one of the modes, “Impersonal Irony,” into twenty “forms.” Northrop Frye, on the other hand, incorporates “irony” as a category in a larger classificatory scheme of different “mythos” (against comedy, romance and tragedy) within his essay on archetypal criticism (223-39), though irony as a mode can also characterize fiction writing in general (40-9). Linda Hutcheon, meanwhile, offers a mapping of the “affective charge” of the different possible
functions of irony’s evaluative “edge,” indexed against both the “positive and negative articulation[s]” attributed to the various functions by different critics (*Irony’s Edge* 46-7).

Norman Knox, on the other hand, reviewing Muecke’s book and Charles Glicksberg’s *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, complains that neither of these works “get[s] beneath the familiar tags” (“Classification” 62) by taking into account what he considers to be the four fundamental variables of irony classification:

1. the field of observation in which irony is noticed; 2. the degree of conflict between appearance and reality, ranging from the slightest of differences to diametrical opposites; 3. an inherently dramatic structure containing three roles — victim, audience, author; 4. the philosophical-emotional aspect. (“Classification” 53)

Rather than try to reinvent the wheel with my own classificatory scheme, I draw freely, though sometimes critically, on the nominative categories of these critics and others.

Because my project is synthetic rather than typological or evaluative, I seek to build on the existing work on irony, but engage in detail those texts and ideas which have import for the problem of citation and recitation, of repetition and difference, and of saying again what one has discovered to be already in other people’s mouths.

In attempting to link the two ‘schools’ of irony theory by exploring the relation between thought and language, it is necessary to begin with the two common denominators proposed above. While irony’s doubleness (or even multiplicity) is described differently, its existence is customarily recognized. Norman Knox defines irony as “the conflict of two meanings which has a dramatic structure peculiar to itself . . . [namely] appearance . . . [and] reality” (“Irony” 626). D. C. Muecke explicitly spatialises the double structure of irony when he calls it a “double-layered or two-storey
phenomenon" (19). Still within this double structure, Wayne Booth refines Muecke's spatial model when he suggests that seeing the process of irony interpretation as one of "ripp[ing] up a rotten platform and prob[ing] to a solid one" (35) begs the question of how the interpreter knows the first platform is shaky; he diagrams the interpretive process rather as the movement upwards from one dwelling to another (37). Again within the double structure, Hutcheon alters these spatializations by suggesting that irony is "relational" (Irony's Edge 12) — therefore implying that irony cannot be understood as a movement which probes beneath (thus leaving the surface behind) or a movement upward from one dwelling to another (thus leaving behind the first). Irony, Hutcheon argues, "happens in the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid: it needs both to happen" (12).

In terms of irony as a mode of consciousness or a philosophical stance, the essential doubleness of its structure is no more difficult to single out. The word irony to characterize this frame of mind was first used during the period of German Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century, as Knox describes it:

In Germany, during the last years of the eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth, the ironies of Cervantes and Socrates collided with transcendental philosophy, and irony entered its modern phase. . . . The German theorists of the new irony, however, found themselves in a situation that has become familiar to the modern mind. On the one hand, there seemed to be considerable evidence that human values are only subjective and sharply opposed to an external world that is chaotic, inhumanly mechanistic, or ultimately unknowable, as in the Kantian epistemology that pervaded Schlegel's Germany. On the other hand, they could not relinquish their faith that the values of the human spirit must be substantiated somewhere . . . [T]hey turned toward the flux of existence and human art, recognizing that no "limited thing" could offer a resting place, yet hoping that out of the complex interrelationships of a
wide-ranging experience something might emerge. ("Irony" 629-30)

Here, the double structure turns out to be the conflict between perception and hope, between awareness and desire. Closely related to this kind of Romantic irony are tragic irony (see Frye 41), irony of fate, cosmic irony, and nihilistic irony (see Knox, "Irony" 627). Charles Glicksberg’s "Irony of the Absurd" closely follows the double nature of Romantic irony as outlined above:

There is the metaphysical conflict that is productive of irony: on the one hand, the passionate endeavor of philosophers to judge the universe in the light of some ultimate ideal or goal; on the other, the perception of purposelessness and non-rationality, the glimpse of the absurd. (Glicksberg 219)

The double structure of irony as a mode of consciousness can also be seen in what Paul de Man, reading Charles Baudelaire, calls the moment of "dédoublement," "the instant at which the two selves, the empirical as well as the ironic, are simultaneously present" (226) — a moment which I discuss in some detail in Chapter Two.

The proposal that irony is always characterized by a split in knowledge, the second common denominator among the many different definitions and models of irony, is more difficult to substantiate, and might provoke more objections than the first. In fact, however, this second common denominator is merely a result of the double structure of irony, as the following chapters reveal in part through the continual examination of the relation between discourse and reflection. That irony describes a kind of distribution (a split or difference) of knowledge is perhaps implied by its etymological root: the Greek word eironia means 'pretended ignorance,' and is a form of the Greek eiron, the dissembler of Greek comedy who triumphs over the boastful alazon. As I suggested
briefly above, the split in knowledge can be between an author and a reader who ‘gets’ the irony, on the one hand, and a character or a reader who doesn’t ‘get’ it, on the other. The latter possibility typifies the knowledge distribution of the irony in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, according to many critics. Alternatively, the split can divide the superior knowledge of the author and the reader from the impoverished understanding of the characters, as is typical in both dramatic irony and tragic irony, and which characterizes the irony of Russell Banks’s *Continental Drift*. An examination of what I call the “knowledge economy” in Banks’s novel maps how such irony works, and serves as a basis for looking at how other ironies split knowledge in other ways. Ironic knowledge can be distributed not only among author, reader, and character, but, speaking more broadly, it can be split within a single subjectivity or consciousness itself. Such ironic, double knowledge characterizes both the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and, to a lesser extent, the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. In both instances, however, ironic consciousness comes about only when it begins with ironic citation; that is, the sudden awareness of the “alien” or “foreign” nature. to use Bakhtin’s terms, of one’s own speech. That awareness, I argue, triggers that moment of *dédoublement*. The Conclusion begins with an examination of T. Coraghessan Boyle’s ironic repetition of racial clichés, and ends with an exploration of whether the way the United States talks to itself about itself is a discursive system of repetition of that which is incessantly the same, or that which permits the introduction of difference.

As this is a study of the problem of saying again in the fiction of the United States since Second World War and is only secondarily concerned with irony, I draw very
selectively on irony theory and irony critics when trying to theorize what happens when we say again and how saying again relates to how we think (again). Most of the pertinent scholarship on irony is addressed in the chapters which follow; however, I do want to broach in the Introduction some specific issues about irony which are important for the study as a whole. First, I want to look at a group of theorists who see irony as the repetition of previous discourse. Second, I want to examine the difference between irony and parody and explain why I use the first word to describe the process of saying again — or writing again — in the study. Finally, I want to raise the problem of the distinction between speech and writing in anticipation of returning to that dynamic in more detail in Chapters Two and Three.

Irony has been theorized as a kind of repetition of other’s words populated with a different intention, to use Bakhtin’s image. The idea that irony is a kind of “echo,” indeed, sparked off a rather lengthy debate among a series of social scientists (mostly experimental psychologists) starting in 1981. That year, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson published “Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction” in Radical Pragmatics, a collection of essays inspired by the pragmatic semiotics of H. Paul Grice. Three years later, Sperber, Julia Jorgensen and George Miller published the results of a laboratory-style test of that theory in “Test of the Mention Theory of Irony,” printed in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General. In the same issue, an alternative theoretical model of irony was published immediately following: “On the Pretense Theory of Irony,” by Herbert H. Clark and Richard J. Gerrig, proposed that the “pretense theory of irony” solved the deficiencies of the use-mention theory. Also in the same issue was a rebuttal of the first two theories.
entitled “Does Mention (or Pretense) Exhaust the Concept of Irony?” by Joanna P. Williams. She proposed in essence a “display theory” of irony. The fourth instalment of this series in the same issue of the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General was a final rebuttal by Dan Sperber entitled “Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?”

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s article essentially proposes that the use-mention distinction drawn in speech act theory (as elaborated in particular by John Searle) can explain how people interpret utterances as ironic. Offering as a primary example of irony the antiphraetic observation “What lovely weather,” made during a rainstorm (295), Sperber and Wilson argue that this ironic statement is characterized by the dissociation of the speaker from the utterance, such that the speaker is revealed to have an attitude toward it. That principle is termed the use-mention distinction: “USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION of an expression involves reference to the expression itself” (303). The speaker of the ironic utterance is not ‘using’ the utterance to convey a message (that they like the rain), but is ‘mentioning’ the utterance from which they dissociate themselves, and implying an attitude toward that utterance.

In the “Test of the Mention Theory of Irony,” Sperber, together with Jorgensen and Miller, attempt an empirical test of the echoic mention theory put forth by Sperber and Wilson in their 1981 article. For the experiment, “24 male and female undergraduate students at Princeton University” were subjected to one of two versions of each of six anecdotes, all inoculated against humour in order to satisfy strict laboratory conditions, and all of which supposedly ended with an ironic utterance (116). Both versions of all the
anecdotes fulfilled, according to the creators, what they say is the "standard" theory's definition of irony: both the speaker and the hearer understand the final utterance by the speaker to 'mean' the opposite of what he says. The second version of each anecdote, however, fulfilled the additional requirement that the "propositional content of the utterance literally understood matches at least in part that of some identifiable utterance, thought, intention, expectation, or norm which it can be taken to echo" (116). In other words, the second version made explicit the idea which the final ironic utterance mentions. Sperber, Jorgensen, and Miller argued that, if more of the test subjects found irony in the anecdotes which contained the explicit echo than in the anecdotes which did not, the mention theory of irony would be vindicated.

One of the problems with the execution of the "Test," however, was that the need to construct double-version anecdotes, identical except for a deleted sentence, necessarily led to the inexplicability of their endings. In her response article proposing a "display" theory of irony, Joanna Williams puts the problem this way: "the utterance that the subsequent ironic utterance supposedly echoes, provides part of the necessary background information for defining the target utterance as ironic. Thus, in the traditional version of those anecdotes, there often cannot be a judgment of irony" (128). A further problem, which comes up not just for Sperber, Jorgensen, and Miller, but for all the writers in the debate which followed was the intrusion of humour into a serious psychological experiment on irony. The testers discard from their experimental results — and from their theory of irony as a whole — any results having "suggestions that the speaker was joking, teasing, fooling, humoring, amusing, or playing a game" (117). About one of the
anecdotes, the testers confess that “Of the 22 respondents we categorized as 'no irony,' 7 were judgments that Daddy was playing a game, and 14 more said that he was joking, fooling, or teasing” (118). Thus the testers separate the 21 who read humour (or at least play), from the one who uses the word “irony.” Their inability to incorporate humour or playfulness into their scheme of irony tends to distort both the experiment’s results and their theory as a whole.

These specifics aside, one of the main problems with mention theory is that of what can constitute an echo. Sperber and Wilson’s archetypal irony, “what lovely weather.” might have an immediate echo if a weather forecaster had earlier predicted good weather. According to mention theory, the ironist would then be mentioning the forecaster’s earlier statement, and intending his hearer to understand his or her attitude toward it. This type of relatively immediate echo characterizes all six of the anecdotes (in their echoic versions) which Sperber, Jorgensen, and Miller use in the “Test.” But what if no weather forecaster had predicted nice weather that day? Why do we still understand the statement, “what lovely weather,” to be ironic? In the original mention theory, Sperber and Wilson work with a very broad conception of what can be considered cases of echoic mention: “Some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts or opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin” (309-10). They go on to outline different kinds of “vague echoing,” such as the “hope or expectation of good weather,” as well as different sorts of “advice” and “obsession[s]” (310), whether they are actually uttered or not. This grows to include,
later, any and all cultural codes: as they put it, “Standards or rules of behaviour are culturally defined, commonly known, and frequently invoked: they are thus always available for echoic mention” (312). Thoughts, opinions, hopes, expectations, advice, obsessions, cultural norms, rules, and standards — real or imagined, actual or implied, with a specific or an indefinite source — all these ideas can function, according to Sperber and Wilson, as the material available for echoic mention. The question that must be asked, at this point, is, can there exist a knowledge or an idea that is outside of this definition? Are they not gesturing here at precisely the kind of social discourse I have outlined above? And is this material — thus defined — any different from what we might call common contextual knowledge? If all social discourse can be “mentioned” instead of “used,” can such a distinction by itself help an audience interpret irony?

The problem of what material is available to be echoed is precisely the problem that Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig raise in the next essay, “On the Pretense Theory of Irony.” They note that Sperber and Wilson’s mention theory “does not describe any criteria for deciding what is a possible implicit echo and what is not” (124). They offer the example of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” as a case disproving the mention theory of irony:

To explain the irony, the mention theory would have to say that the entire essay was an echoic mention. But of what? It is implausible that anyone had ever uttered the entire essay or expressed its entire contents or that dining on Irish children was ever a part of “popular wisdom or received opinion.” (123)

In Swift’s pamphlet, they argue, the irony works not because Swift is mentioning a previous idea, but because he adopts the pretense of speaking as a sophisticated English
humanitarian. Clark and Gerrig argue that Sperber and Wilson ("Use-Mention") and Sperber, Jorgensen, and Miller ("Test") misread Grice, whom they identify with the traditional pragmatic approach to irony. Clark and Gerrig note that Grice doesn’t argue that the ironist uses one proposition to convey its opposite meaning, but that the ironist pretends to use that proposition (121). As they point out, Grice says that “To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it as a pretense would spoil the effect” ("Further" 125).

Joanna Williams’s response to both the mention theory and the pretense theory of irony begins by suggesting that the formulation of the “traditional” approach to irony by Sperber and Wilson, which is used consequently by Sperber, Jorgensen and Miller, “would not satisfy all traditionalists” (127). Williams clarifies that the focus of the previous three articles has been verbal irony, and tries to define the situational irony from which it arises. “There are two necessary components of an ironic situation,” she says: “First, the situation must contain two (or more) elements (events, ideas, points of view) that are incompatible or incongruous. Second, there must be someone (X), real or imaginary, who does not see the incongruity” (127). Instead of pretense or mention, Williams suggests that the ironist “displays” the situation to the listener; verbal irony is, in essence, the act of displaying a situational irony. Like Sperber and Wilson ("Use-Mention"), Sperber, Jorgensen and Miller ("Test"), and Clark and Gerrig ("Pretense"), Williams’s theory retains the essential doubleness of irony in structure (as incongruity) and in knowledge (as a double audience).
Sperber pens alone the final rebuttal, which adds little to the debate. While these empirical studies of irony seem to me somewhat misguided, the disassembling of their theories, an unfinished task, is equally unsatisfying. The mention, pretense, and display theories of irony all depend, more or less consciously and to a greater or lesser extent, on concepts long established in "literary" and rhetorical studies: audience, interpretation, intent, contextual knowledge, ironic targets and ironic markers all play their part in the three social science theories of irony. What the theories highlight, however, is the difficulty in describing a speaker’s relation to an utterance, especially if that utterance has already been in someone else’s (real or pretended) mouth. The mention theory proposes that irony happens only when a prior belief, utterance, or idea is contrasted with an echo of that belief, utterance, or idea which is different. Drawing on the use-mention distinction, mention theory has it that the difference between the prior utterance or knowledge and the echoed utterance or knowledge is twofold: first, the prior utterance is

5 His article, depressingly defensive, rewrites the mention theory without acknowledging any error; he now speaks of “verbal irony,” instead of a more universal and undifferentiated “irony,” and shifts mention theory from depending on “utterance” to “thought,” a move intended to deflect criticism away from what can stand as prior material available for echoing. This shift, however, reveals even more clearly that there is no real distinction to be made between prior thought and shared contextual knowledge. There have since been two further additions to experimental psychology’s examination of irony. In “On the Psycholinguistics of Sarcasm,” R. W. Gibbs suggests that instances of sarcasm with specific antecedents were understood more quickly than those sarcasms without a specific antecedent which could be echoed. In Roger Kreuz and Sam Glucksberg’s “How to Be Sarcastic: The Echoic Reminder Theory of Verbal Irony,” they propose an “echoic reminder” theory of sarcasm, arguing that an explicit antecedent should not be necessary for positive statements about negative events because positive statements can remind people of implicit positive expectations or culturally shared norms. In contrast, negative statements about positive events should require explicit antecedents because there are no implicit negative expectations or cultural norms to be reminded of. (376)
a message to be conveyed — it has, if you will, not lost its semantic or referential innocence. With the echoed utterance, that innocence is lost, and the knowledge does not refer to something else, but is referred to. The second difference between prior knowledge and echoed knowledge is that the latter is spoken with a critical distance. That is, mention theory argues that the ironic speaker dissociates himself from the utterance he has mentioned, so that the mentioned speech is no longer immediate to the speaker, but gestures back at its origin.

In analysing the double structure of irony, the question of origin, or priority, seems to be a key one. Sperber and his colleagues essentially argue that the second type of knowledge, echoed or ironic knowledge, cannot exist without the prior temporal existence of the base knowledge. Thus, ironic knowledge is impossible without prior (non-ironic) knowledge. As I show in Chapter Two, the temporal priority of the non-ironic knowledge within the ironic structure is denied by Paul de Man, who attributes that priority not to irony but to allegory: "this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it" (207). Mention theory’s postulation of prior non-ironic material is also implicit for the pretense theory of irony. Like mention, it depends upon the hearer’s recognition of something already known; namely, in the case of pretense, the model or person the ironist is pretending to be. The prior ‘person’ is often, according to Clark and Gerrig, not a certain individual but instead a “sort” (122) of person who exists only in terms of cultural codes and expectations.

The same question of priority (in colonial discourse, in particular) is at work in
Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, that which is almost the same, but not quite. Like irony according to the mention or pretense theories, mimicry is a “double articulation” (Bhabha 86) which depends upon a model — a prior knowledge — which has come before it. What interests Bhabha in the figure of mimicry, however, is the instability of priority which the process of mimicry initiates at the site of the origin. Bhabha argues, for example, that mimicry “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the ‘national’ is no longer naturalizable” (87). Bhabha’s formulation of mimicry — “almost the same but not quite” (89) — would seem at first sight to characterize equally Sperber’s concept of echo; that is, the echoed knowledge is almost the same as the prior knowledge, except for the difference of the attitude of the speaker toward the proposition mentioned. The crucial difference between Sperber and his colleagues (“Use-Mention” and “Test”) and Bhabha, however, is that, while irony of mention or irony of pretense may ridicule the prior utterance or cultural code, it does not question the status of that utterance or cultural code as authoritative origin. Mention theory, postulating the dissociation of the ironic speaker from an echoed utterance, and pretense theory, postulating a speaker whopretends to be other than him or her self, both assume a norm of self-presence and immediacy of language which is antithetical to Bhabha’s notion of mimicry — norms to which I return in Chapters Two and Three. For Bhabha, it the ironic structure of mimicry — almost the same, but different — which turns back upon the prior and disrupts its self-presence and linguistic immediacy.

Prior utterance and echoed utterance, prior model and pretended role: both mention theory and pretense theory situate the ironic event in a state of double knowledge
which may produce a victim but will nonetheless represent no ontological instability.

Both mention theory and pretense theory's unwillingness to consider the disruptive effect of the ironic echo or imitation on the priority of the origin is tied to their inability to consider humour or pleasure within their theories of irony. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes offers an image which I think successfully conveys both the structure of irony and the pleasure which it can, at times, give. The image is that of Tmesis, another double structure, in which two edges of a reading abrade each other, creating dissonance and friction. "Tmesis," says Barthes, the "source or figure of pleasure, here confronts two prosaic edges with one another" (11). The pleasure that results therein is the pleasure of the friction between the two edges, but also of the space between them. "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?" Barthes asks (9). Irony needs the continued presence of both edges, and though their relation may be unequal, it is only in their interaction that irony is produced. Thus Hutcheon's spatialization of irony echoes Barthes's gaping garment: as she puts it, irony "happens in the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid: it needs both to happen" (*Irony's Edge* 12). The pleasure of irony has its source in a double knowledge which is ultimately suspensive, neither asserting the hegemony of the prior nor destroying it. It is thus the opposite of the exploratory trajectory of the experimental psychologists, who seek to discover how and why an interpreter replaces one utterance with a different semantic meaning. Barthes describes that kind of pleasure as well:

> The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: [there is instead] a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope*
of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of
the story (novelistic satisfaction). (10)

In the experimental psychology of the mention, pretense, and display theories of irony,
irony loses its erotic edges and is forced to submit to the “schoolboy” fascination with
dressing and undressing.

The doubleness of irony which I am describing (both in terms of its structure and
its knowledge) could be said to characterize parody as well as irony. Both, moreover,
’say again’ something which has come before, but say it with a difference. The
distinction between them is not easily drawn. Wayne Booth, for example, classifies
parody as a kind of irony: “Though parody is not ordinarily thought of as ‘irony,’ it is
ironic in our definition: the surface meaning must be rejected, and another, incongruous,
and ‘higher’ meaning must be found by reconstruction” (72). (Booth’s constant emphasis
in *The Rhetoric of Irony* on the “reconstruction” of the ironic meaning after the “surface”
meaning has been rejected reveals that his theory partakes in the typical ‘replacement’
model of the interpretation of irony.) Booth also argues that in parody “the victim’s style
is imitated and distorted” (123). If Alexander Pope’s mock epic “The Rape of the Lock”
can be considered a parody, however, surely a definition of parody must be broader than
‘imitation for the purpose of ridicule’ (Homer and Virgil are not, after all, the “victims”
of Pope’s poem). Linda Hutcheon offers a definition of parody as “repetition with critical
distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (*Parody* 6). In *A Theory of
Parody*, Hutcheon moves away from the standard definition of parody as ridiculing
imitation. Instead, Hutcheon sees parody as an inter-art discourse which makes use of
irony “to establish the critical distance necessary to its formal definition” (68); “parody functions intertextually as irony does intratextually: both echo in order to mark difference rather than similarity” (64).

If the sense of ridicule is not to govern a definition of parody, then this term could well describe both the written record of the narrator’s recitation of Booker T. Washington’s famous Atlanta Address of 1895 in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, and the rewritten versions of Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments” and the anonymous “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior. However, for the purpose of this study I retain the use of the word irony because it better characterizes the way saying again — or writing again — impacts on identity and subjectivity. A focus on irony rather than parody allows me to place an emphasis on the process, and not the product, of repetition.

The distance at which irony and parody can be said to “mention” their prior texts parallels the distance that — some have suggested — separates writing from a more immediate speaking. Indeed, Walter Ong says that irony only becomes widespread with the psychic internalization of writing as the alphabet. In “From Mimesis to Irony: The Distancing of Voice,” Ong argues that oral cultures have no literature, because the idea of (written) literature presupposes a distance between the performer and the audience. Before the advent of writing, cultural knowledge is contained in the stories and aphorisms which its members continually repeat to one another; in this sense, “everyone is saying everything to everybody through the mouth of the poet or other narrative performer” (14). In this model, the language and content of the stories are immediate to the culture, and
neither the performer nor the performer's listeners experience the language and the stories as apart from them: as Ong describes it, “Ordinary talk and practical thought processes consisted largely of the same proverbs, exempla, epithets, and formulas of all sorts which the epic poet or narrator stitched into his more elaborate and exquisite art forms in his somewhat variant language” (16-7). Mimesis, the “unity between art and natural life” (22), is the rule in oral culture: “the entire oral noetic world relies heavily, even fundamentally, on copying not just nature but oral utterance itself in its management of knowledge” (23). As such, the principle of repetition governs the known in oral culture. “Mnemonic patterns, patterns of repetition, copyings, are not added to the thought of oral culture. They are what the thought consists in” (24).

If the immediacy which for Ong characterizes the relation between speech and the speaker is shattered with the advent of writing, it is not only because the written word is distanced from the writer, but because the existence of writing itself alters the paradigm of cultural knowledge. For Ong, this change happened in the West around Plato’s time: “Plato stood at the point in Greek history when the Greek alphabet was some three hundred years old and writing had finally moved out of the scribal stage [i.e., of the transcription of oral speech] and was being deeply interiorized in the psyche, opening the avenues of new thinking processes” (24). This process was accelerated after the development of print, specifically during the Romantic Movement, which Ong argues was “marked [by] the maturing of knowledge storage and retrieval processes made possible by print” (35). In oral cultures, cultural knowledge consists in its repeated narratives and proverbs; as such, it is always immediate to the collective consciousness of
its members. In our print culture, on the other hand, knowledge began to be tied to texts: "It could be 'parked' outside consciousness" (35). For Ong, the distance between the knower and the known which occurs with the advent of writing is connected to the new distance between, and even the non-presence of, the writer and the reader: "Who is saying what to whom in any written work? The party at either end of the dialogue may not even be there" (18). Ultimately, the advent of writing, which Ong calls "artificial" as opposed to speech, "the natural state of affairs" (17), results in the objectification of language: "Writing and print distance the utterer of discourse from the hearer, and both from the word, which appears in writing and print as an object or thing" (22). With the interiorization of writing into the cultural and individual psyche, irony becomes possible, if not unavoidable.

I have summarized Ong's argument in some detail because I believe that the metaphor of 'distance' can be useful in talking about the relation between a speaker or writer and his or her utterance when one repeats words already existing in others' mouths, but that such a distinction can only grow confused when speech and oral culture are idealized against writing and written or print culture. The metaphysics of presence which underlies such idealization has been critiqued at length in Jacques Derrida's De la Grammatologie, which predates Ong's article by eight years; Ong seems aware of the existence of such a critique, but dismisses Derrida's work as one of the "intricate mazes" characterized by "specially contrived, sometimes fanciful, concepts and terms" (11). The differences between saying again and writing again are thematised in both Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, and in one sense much
of the irony of those texts is due to the distance between a younger, naive character who believes that the power of speech will somehow enable the adoption of a specifically American subjectivity, and an older, wiser narrator who decides that his African American subjectivity, or her Chinese American subjectivity, must be written. The question both narrators face is thus not only what should be repeated, but also how it should be repeated. I explore in Chapters Two and Three the differences between writing and speech, citation and recitation for both Ellison and Kingston, and I argue against a reading of those texts which idealize, along Ong's lines, the speech performances of the invisible man and of the woman warrior as more immediate and present. The final turn to writing, I suggest, signals not so much the belief that it is wholly adequate where verbal performance failed, as the recognition of the distancing, differentiating effects which characterized speech all along: that recitation can never reproduce simply and exactly any self-present, original identity (see Derrida, Limited Inc).

Chapter One examines the discourse of the American dream as it circulates in the knowledge economy of Russell Banks's 1985 novel Continental Drift. While the discourse of the dream itself is without locatable origin, as mentioned above, both its "centrifugal" and its "centripetal" forces can be named and described. That this discourse has recently grown inadequate as a communal language through which the United States talks to itself about itself is shown by Banks in part by its devolution into cliché. The theory of irony and the cliché proposed by Rainer Warning in his work on Flaubert helps explain how the novel critiques this discourse without condemning the characters who try to use it to understand their relation to the American economic order. The work on
clichés done by Anton Zijderveld and Ruth Amossy reveals how clichés cripple the
process of reflection. and how they can become the focus of ironic double knowledge.
The chapter ends by suggesting that Banks has his narrator transgress the rules of literary
realism precisely in order to bring to the reader’s awareness the ways in which the real is
known through language. Due in part to his peculiar anti-realistic narrative voice, Banks
is able to criticize this American mythology, and yet empathetically to retain one of the
discourse’s core values, the desire to “start over.”

The second chapter focuses on different American promises: those made to
African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. In this chapter I look at
Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) and the development of what W.E.B. Du Bois
called the “double consciousness” afflicting African Americans. Glossing the model of
subjectivity this phrase is said to reflect, I reinterpret Du Bois’s concept as a form of the
ironic consciousness outlined by Paul de Man in his reading of Charles Baudelaire. This
chapter argues that the narrator of Invisible Man attempts to understand his identity and
his relation to the American social order through three available American vocabularies,
each of which the narrator attempts to cite and to perform in order to evoke its power. As
I have outlined above, the first discourse is that of Booker T. Washington, a black
educator and philanthropist who proposed that African Americans should accept social
segregation and political and legal inequality in return for the economic cooperation of
white Americans. The second discourse, that of the American Communist Party of the
1930s and 1940s, recommends a different explanation of, and cure for, political and racial
injustice in the United States. Pivotal to the narrator’s experience of this discourse is the
Party's backgrounding of the problem of racial oppression in the United States once the
Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in June of 1941. The third discourse cited in the
novel is a romantic nationalism modelled on the ideas of Marcus Garvey. The narrator's
laughter, which Paul de Man says marks the moment of ironic consciousness, suggests
the presence of a double irony in *Invisible Man*: on the one hand is Ellison's ironic
treatment of these American discourses available to African Americans as explanations of
their place in American society, and on the other is the narrator's double consciousness at
those moments of citational slippage when the discourses prove to be incapable of
making the invisible man visible — visible not only to white Americans, but, more
importantly, to himself. In this context, the narrator's final decision to give up oration in
favour of writing must be understood as the rejection of the nostalgia for indifference and
immediacy, both in terms of speech (Ong) and of unitary consciousness (Du Bois).

Chapter Three begins, as a way into Maxine Hong Kingston's text, with a look at
the critical reception of the *Invisible Man* by African American reviewers, and the
problem Ellison faced in writing again (with attempted difference) the racial cliché.
Ellison's novel departs from the social realism of Richard Wright and its political project,
and his novel is, accordingly, partly an answer to Wright's *Black Boy*. Similarly, I argue
that the cultural clichés written again in *The Woman Warrior*, which have been
interpreted as being used 'seriously' by some important Chinese American critics like
Frank Chin, mark a complex irony whose function is to halt their infinite, indifferent
repetition. Kingston, like Ellison, overcomes racial and cultural clichés by confronting
them directly, breaking their claim to represent Chinese American (or African American
in Ellison’s case) experience in the United States. Chapter Three thus explores an ironic consciousness, similar to Ellison’s narrator, which is produced by Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, as her narrator retells and “translates” traditional Chinese stories in order to fashion her identity as a Chinese American — resisting both her parents’ identification of “home” with China, and American assimilationism. As with Ellison’s narrator, Kingston’s narrator attempts the performance of the various language types which promise her identity as an American and relation to the United States. These performances include, on the one hand, reading aloud in a grade school classroom, and, on the other, rewriting the ancient Chinese “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” and Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments.” These adult “talk-stor[ies]” inscribe for the narrator the cultural possibilities for Chinese female identity; as narrative, the stories delineate patterns of action and behaviour and provide social and familial vocabularies, as well as performing evaluations of those patterns and categories as conforming to, or diverging from, Chinese American social norms. The mediation of her identity is further complicated by her need for a *female* Chinese American subjectivity alternative to those offered by both Chinese and American male-dominated societies. Beyond the narrative patterns and vocabularies inscribed in social discourse is an even deeper conflict of linguistic subjectivity, as the narrator describes her difficulty with two English words in particular, “I” and “here” — precisely the deictics which Emile Benveniste, in *Problems in General Linguistics*, argues ground grammatical subjectivity in language, enabling social identity and indeed consciousness. As with Ellison’s narrator, but unlike Banks’s Bob Dubois, the ironic slippage which marks the distance between what the citational performances promise and
what they achieve is accompanied by the development of an ironic consciousness.

The Conclusion continues the examination of the racial cliché first broached in Chapter Three. By looking at how T. Coraghessan Boyle, in East is East, and Maxine Hong Kingston, in China Men, rewrite a historical instance of American Orientalism, I argue that the figure of the 'Oriental' in the wild has become a preoccupied figure in American social discourse. That figure, as a type, is the result, perhaps, of an extended accumulation of racial clichés, and is matched, in Boyle's novel, by a clichéd vision of the American dream. By way of concluding this study, I examine, alongside President Clinton's Loyalty Day Proclamation, two other very public instances of the United States talking to itself about itself — the Inaugural poems of Robert Frost and Maya Angelou. The Conclusion thus explores Sacvan Bercovitch's argument that American ideology, as he calls it, tends to recuperate social and political protest into its own repetitive mythology and vocabularies. It might be noted in this regard that the proclaiming of Loyalty Day is itself part of such recuperation: May first has been, after all, a politically left labour holiday since it was designated as such by the Second Socialist International in 1889. The United States Congress, indeed, had this fact in mind immediately before Public Law 85-529 was passed on July 18, 1958, as the official Congressional legislative history notes:

For many years the 1st of May, in the United States, has been associated in the minds of many with Communist parades and other demonstrations. This legislation will emphasize that this day will become a day for the American people to solemnly consider their stake in democracy and to renew their dedication to the concepts of the freedom and dignity of man. (Senate Report 3052)
By transforming the international socialist values symbolically inscribed in May Day celebrations and demonstrations into a reiteration of the sufficiency of, and the loyalty to, the American legacy of freedom, liberty, and democracy, Loyalty Day is an example of one such way the United States comes back to certain vocabularies and narratives when talking to itself about itself.

Because all of these novelists are working within, and responding to, substantially different literary traditions, I contextualize each novel differently within each chapter. As I have said, within post-Second World War American fiction one of the traits these novels have in common is that they simultaneously depend upon literary realism and challenge some of its strictures. Russell Banks’s prophetic narrative voice in *Continental Drift* issues a challenge to literary realism’s pretension to providing an unproblematic mediation of the American real. Both Ralph Ellison and Maxine Hong Kingston rebel against the demand for social realism (and the protest it entailed) issued by the African American literary community in the 1940s and 1950s and the Chinese American literary community in the 1970s, respectively. T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *East is East*, perhaps the most straight-up instance of realism among the four novels, grows out of the ‘black humour’ literature of the 1950s and 1960s, but can only return ironically, with a difference, to what might have been once called in earnest ‘social criticism.’

Finally, what unites these authors is the determination to get by while saying something again. The imperative of saying again need not be interpreted as a state of futile condemnation, as Samuel Becket thought it was:
Hamm:
    Go and get the oilcan.
Clov:
    What for?
Hamm:
    To oil the castors.
Clov:
    I oiled them yesterday.
Hamm:
    Yesterday! What does that mean! Yesterday!
Clov (violently):
    That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody
    awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean
    anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (43–4)

While we find our words already existing in other people’s mouths, these authors suggest
that, though saying them again may be all we can do (short of silence), that is still
enough, because those words can be said differently. They will use the words America
taught them.
Chapter One: Dreaming America

I

“Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one, 'the American dream.'”
— Lionel Trilling

“We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed,” wrote J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur of his new American home around the time of the American Revolution. He added, perhaps a little prematurely, “we are the most perfect society now existing in the world” (36). Published in London in 1782, de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* is a series of short essays written between 1769 and 1780 which attempts to delineate the character of the nation at the time of its birth. In one letter, “What Is an American,” de Crèvecoeur offered an early formulation of what would later be known by the phrase ‘the American dream.’ De Crèvecoeur distinguished between the European economic order, in which the poor must “toil, starve, and bleed” only to have part of their labour claimed by “a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord” (40), and the less stratified economic organization of American society. “In this great American asylum,” claimed de Crèvecoeur, “the poor of Europe have by some means met together” (37). For de Crèvecoeur, the material opportunity offered by the American colonies attracted only a certain kind of immigration: “The rich stay in Europe, it is only the middling and the poor that emigrate” (53). “Endeavour[ing] to show . . . how Europeans become Americans” (44), de Crèvecoeur argued that this process required the

1Trilling 242.
new citizen’s “leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners” (39) — including “that mechanism of subordination, that servility of disposition which poverty had taught him” (56) under the European socioeconomic system. In the new American order, “the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour” (40). “The American is a new man,” wrote de Crèvecoeur, “who acts upon new principles” (40).

I am reading de Crèvecoeur at this point not in order to identify the moment of origin of the American dream, but to attempt to locate some of the “centripetal” tendencies, to borrow a term (if not exactly a concept) from Mikhail Bakhtin,2 of the American dream as discourse. As a discourse, it might be possible to establish the American dream’s textual evolution in terms of the historians, poets, philosophers, politicians, or theologians who have written about it; such an analysis would attempt to situate and to link its textual threads in their specific economic, social, political, or philosophical contexts. Grounding such an evolution of the discourse of the American dream on a cause-and-effect model of influence, however, runs two risks (at least). First, where (and perhaps equally importantly, how) might the historical origin of the American dream be located, the moment at which it breaks into the scene of Western thought and language wholly new, fully formed? If it is not entirely new — if it is made, as it must

2See Bakhtin’s “Discourse In the Novel” in Dialogic 270-3. Bakhtin argues that any given social “language” is marked by “centripetal” tendencies which work to unify the language by imposing limits on its “heteroglossia.” Obversely, “centrifugal” stratifying forces work to pull apart the never-completely centralized, official language. I am transposing these forces which Bakhtin identifies as complicating “verbal-ideological life” to a narrower field of the discourse surrounding a single idea within Western verbal-ideological life, the discourse of the American dream.
be, of pre-existing other material — has its origin been successfully located? Would there not remain the need to try to retrace the material of the discourse back still further, in an effort to identify, as an essential kernel of the American dream long before the phrase itself was coined, something that appears in its historical context as entirely other than the American dream? How far back would such a retracing go?

The second risk is related to the first: does the metaphor of an "evolution" of the discourse of the American dream not suggest the possibility — even the imperative — of developing a lineage of the discourse's ideas and vocabularies? Could the implied legitimacy of such a lineage not be challenged? While there is no question that those who have written or spoken about the American dream have been influenced by, and in turn influenced, the various ideas associated with the discourse of the American dream, it would be difficult to locate clear lines of descent, showing such things as succession, ancestry, and familial traits, among the texts surrounding and constituting this amorphous discourse.

These two problems often arise in critical writings "about" the American dream. I put "about" in quotation marks because of the difficulty in isolating a single object of discussion. The overdetermined nature of "the American dream" — which Toni Morrison has called "that well-fondled phrase" (Playing 33) — permits different writers to deal with different things while ostensibly writing "about" the American dream. Moreover, the term is frequently used to refer to American-ness in the most general sense, or is used synonymously with 'the Myth of America' or another similar phrase. One example of this generalized use is found in the editors' introduction to The Frontier
Experience and the American Dream (1989), and in the first essay in the collection by one of the editors, David Morgen. It is only as a consequence of a decision to focus on the phrase ‘the American dream’ itself, a decision which this collection avoids by using it in only the most general sense, that the twin problems of origin and evolution arise. Such is the case in Walter Allen’s The Urgent West: The American Dream and Modern Man (1969), which begins by asking “what is the American dream?” (3). He locates the “first statement of the dream” in the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, specifically its first sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (cited in Allen 4). Allen goes on to read de Crèvecoeur, isolating several passages from The Letters which talk about the different political structures in Europe and America, and the “new principle” (Allen 5; also cited above) upon which the new democratic and egalitarian American political life was to be built. By juxtaposing these two texts, Allen implies not only a lineage — de Crèvecoeur writes “What Is an American,” says Allen, “Six years after the Declaration of Independence was signed” (4) — but also that the genetic essence of that lineage is that of Enlightenment-inspired, liberal democratic theory. When he goes on to consider other influences on, and manifestations of, the American dream, he tends to relate them back to the idea of democratic political ideas. Thus the Puritan search for religious freedom in the New World is almost an early formulation of the principle of self-determination inscribed in the Declaration — though the former, as Allen points out, did not include ideas of democracy, the equality of man, or the toleration of different religious practices
The Declaration is, for Allen, not only the originary "first statement" of the American dream, but also functions as the organizing principle at work in his own ordering of the discourse of the American dream, an implicit standard against which other elements are measured, whether for their similarities or differences.

The methodological complications of finding the origin of the American dream is compounded by disagreement about its exact historical location. Unlike Allen, Ann-Janine Morey-Gaines argues that the American dream has its origin in the Puritanism of some of the early settlers: "This study considers the origins of the [American] dream, and American civil religion, in New England Puritanism as an indispensable [sic] starting point" (5). She goes on to link the Puritans' conception of the New World's wilderness to the religious imperative latent in the nineteenth century's Manifest Destiny. On the other hand, Marius Bewley argues that it is impossible to see Puritanism as the originary moment of the American dream, and cites as evidence the "implicit contrast between the eternal promises of the old religion and the material promises of the American dream" (264). Bewley presses the point that the American dream cannot be understood in terms of any essentially religious roots: "Historically, the American dream is anti-Calvinistic — in rejecting man's tainted nature it is even anti-Christian. It believes in the goodness of nature and man. It is accordingly a product of the frontier and the West rather than of New England and Puritan traditions" (265). Quoting Jefferson, Bewley argues that the Enlightenment-inspired belief in progress, with its complex connotations of science, democracy, and morality, and the working out of that progress on the American frontier is "the hard kernel, the seed from which the American dream would grow into unpruned
luxuriance” (265). Like Bewley, the editors of *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream* are inclined to view the frontier as the defining characteristic of the American dream, and of the American literary tradition (3).

As this brief catalogue suggests, there are many possible originary moments of the American dream, and even more numerous are the possible evolutionary lineages. To avoid these problems in approaching the discourse of the American dream, what would be required is a textual history somewhat akin to the “genealogy” recommended by Michel Foucault in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.” Such a genealogy would forego the search for the origin of the discourse of the American dream, and try to investigate instead the way the discourse constructs itself retroactively by organizing texts, histories, and records. It would, moreover, not attempt to establish an evolutionary model of the American dream, but would work against the issue of *legitimacy* which such a model implies. The required “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary” (Foucault 139) genealogy is obviously beyond the scope of this work, but it is possible to identify some of what I have called the “centripetal” forces at work within the discourse of the American dream. Among these are three particular centripetal forces which organize the discourse in American history, all of which receive some attention in de Crèvecoeur’s analysis of “What Is an American.”

The first centripetal force is the idea of migration, of moving from the old (Europe) to the new (America). The second, the possibility of which de Crèvecoeur believes depends on the first, is the abandonment of the “ancient prejudices and manners” characterizing European institutions for the “new principles” of America. In de
Crèvecoeur’s letter. this shift involves the rejection of European political, economic, and social structures in favour of a broader-based, more level and uniform stratification of citizenship. The difference between European and American social and economic institutions allows the third of the centripetal forces organizing the discourse of the American dream: that material wealth depends upon the individual’s ability and efforts.

Implicit in de Crèvecoeur’s Letters is what becomes this dominant theme of the American dream: that the geographical journey to a new land makes possible a new order of ethical-material relations. De Crèvecoeur argues that the European poor leave behind the economic subservience which characterized European structures, and consequently leave behind the “ancient prejudices” which support those economic structures as well. Wealth in the new world is no longer distributed according to those prejudicial structures of privilege or class position. That the new material order is ethical where the ancient order was not is perhaps suggested by de Crèvecoeur’s use of the word ‘reward’ to characterize an American’s relation to his labour, as in “the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour” (40). The word’s connotations suggest a process of impartial judgement (as opposed to the “prejudice” which organizes the distribution of wealth in Europe); the meritorious and deserving labourer is rewarded in the New World, not the prince, abbot, or mighty lord.

These three centripetal forces partially constitute a ‘logic’ of the discourse of the American dream: they are what organize the different threads of the discourse, making it recognizable when it does not go by that name, and making discernable its interdependence with other American mythologies. For instance, a complex relation
among geography, migration, and a different ethical-material order is also at stake in the idea of the American frontier, as some of the above-mentioned studies suggest. The frontier offered uncultivated land and ever-expanding opportunity — until it disappeared, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, around 1880. Turner, in his famous paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," argued that the frontier's psychological and institutional effects on the nation have nevertheless endured:

The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people — to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing each area of this progress, out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier, into the complexity of city life. (544)

Turner suggested that the immigration of Old World peasants to New World farms described by de Crèvecoeur was part of a larger pattern of migration, from East to West, of poorer peoples looking for opportunity and land. "In the crucible of the frontier," Turner wrote, "the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race" (557). The frontier may have been gone by the time Turner presented his paper in 1893, but as a thread in the discourse of the American dream, it endures. As Turner proclaimed near the end of the paper. "Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity" (566).

This historical link between the idea of America as the land of opportunity and the early European explorers is picked up by Howard Mumford Jones, who begins his book *O Strange New World* by examining the place of the New World in the European
Renaissance imagination, before Columbus's 1492 voyage. According to Jones, the “Atlantic hid in its misty vastness many wonderful islands, and these island images, compounded of wonder, terror, wealth, religious perfection, communism, utopianism, or political power, conditioned the European image of America” (5). There was, however, an “obverse” side of this image of perfection and felicity, says Jones: the European violence brought on by the search for gold, the cruelty of some of the aboriginal peoples, and “the discovery of the terror of nature in the New World” (61).

The association of wealth with the land that would become the United States is a complex one. Obviously, Columbus and his contemporary European explorers had images and expectations of wealth qualitatively (not to mention quantitatively) different from de Crèvecoeur’s New England farmers or Turner’s settlers on the Western frontier. Equally obviously, the new ethical-material order proclaimed by de Crèvecoeur — that wealth is to be “rewarded” according to the “progress of... labour” — seems very different from the post-Contact rape of the New World. On the other hand, the fabulous possibility of immense wealth seems a part of the discourse of the American dream, as an almost mythological backdrop. This more fantastic thread of the discourse of the American dream alternately descends below its surface, suppressed, or rises to the surface, assuming a dominant, defining character. This thread is emphasized particularly in the “rags-to-riches” biographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as those of the industrialists Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.3

3See, for instance, Harold C. Livesay’s biography of Andrew Carnegie, which opens with the sentence “Nothing has characterized America more than the ‘American dream’ — the belief that anyone can rise above his origins, however humble, and through
The distribution of wealth in the new ethical-material order raises some problems for the discourse of the American dream — it is a “centrifugal” force operating from inside the discourse, threatening to destroy it. When wealth reaches the level of extravagance and riches, or when its distribution becomes precariously uneven, it works against some of the other values inscribed in other American mythologies, such as a religious critique of riches, an emphasis on spiritual health and progress, or the promise of democratic equality. The historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 decried “how it was that we came to insist upon business and money-making and material improvement as good in themselves” (405-6). Adams’s complaint suggests that one of the rules governing the circulation of the discourse of the American dream is a self-policing liberal function which condemns excessive greed, and which has been in operation at least since (and possibly in reaction to) the Great Depression. This rule, which works to delimit the disruptive, centrifugal force of the unequal distribution of wealth within the discourse, and so functions as an element of the discourse’s logic, also comes up in Bewley’s account of the American dream. Bewley spells out what is implied in Adams: that the pursuit of extravagant wealth is a recent deformation of an originally purer dream, which was “brutalized at last under the grossly acquisitive spirit of the Gilded Age and Republican capitalism” (265). Reading F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (published in 1926, five years before Adams’s condemnation of “money-making”) Bewley paints a picture of this other Fall:

hard work, honesty, and thrift achieve positions of power and influence, even the presidency of the United States” (3).
The American dream which had started innocently enough when there had been a vast unexploited continent to support the possibilities it seemed to promise, had become brutalized as the only means of realizing them had more and more centred in money with the passing of the frontier and the advent of the Gilded Age. (268)

Gatsby may be "the true heir of the American dream" (271-2), but his heritage, argues Bewley, is cursed and debased, a dream turned into a nightmare.

This metaphor of the "dream" at the centre of the phrase has perhaps existed as long as the early European explorers of the New World searched for words to describe their wonder. Of a group of exemplary European immigrants to America de Crèvecoeur wrote that "Their astonishment at their first arrival from Germany is very great — it is to them a dream" (57); his use joins this wonderment with the three centripetal forces I have identified at work within the discourse of the American dream. James Truslow Adams was the first to attribute to the nation a specifically American dream in 1931 when he spoke of "the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (404). The phrase is thus coined during the Great Depression — one historical time period when the hopes embodied in its discourse seemed impossible to attain for so many Americans. At the historical moment of its coinage, then, the 'American dream' seems to have been held in an uneasy tension, between being possibly counterfeit, and being the true, albeit utopian, American ideal. It is an evaluation of this (possibly suspect) currency of the American dream that Russell Banks attempts in his novel Continental Drift.
Russell Banks’ 1985 novel, *Continental Drift*, though widely reviewed and only a little less widely praised, has received scant attention in academic circles. Banks has given several interviews which have appeared in *Publisher’s Weekly* (1985), *New Letters* (1987), and *Brick* (1989), and has participated in various symposia on the subject of contemporary American fiction, including ones published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1987), the *New York Times Book Review* (1991), and *Salmagundi* (1992). The sole academic works on Banks’s writing are a short article on one of his short stories and an extended review article. My recent query on an electronic discussion group devoted to American literature had similarly sparse results: no one recalled seeing any academic assessments of Banks, though several members responded enthusiastically to his work.

The neglect of Banks’s work is surprising, considering the enthusiasm with which *Continental Drift*, regarded as Banks’s breakthrough novel, was greeted in 1985.

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4“America.”

5In “Plot-Resistant Narrative and Russell Banks’ ‘Black Man and White Woman in Dark Green Rowboat,’” Ross Leckie suggests that one of Banks’s short stories implicates its readers in their complicity with “the socially produced narratives invoked by the story” and the gender, race, and class “cultural division[s]” which those narratives enforce (407). Leckie says that Banks’s story is “an evasive narrative, one whose very evasion establishes a dialogic relationship between the reader and a cast of characters whose lives display the wreckage of the larger cultural narratives that marginalize them” (407). In an ‘appreciation’ piece called “Drifting Toward Greatness,” which appeared over two issues of *The Cresset*, Charles Vandersee argues that *Continental Drift* should be considered a contemporary “classic,” though Banks’s next novel, *Affliction*, is less successful (“Drifting” 13).
Acclaimed by the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the notable books of the year, the novel was called by James Atlas in *The Atlantic* "the most convincing portrait I know of contemporary America: its greed, its uprootedness, its indifference to the past" (97). Where Atlas saw strength in a convincing, moving portraiture, others found the same quality discouraging: in an otherwise positive review, Garrett Epps wrote in *The New Republic* that the novel was flawed by being "unremittingly, grindingly grim, unleavened by hope, humor, or wit" (39).

But what quickly became the central critical issue in the reviews, both arousing the most admiration and provoking the most hostile criticism, was the unusual voice of the novel’s narrator. Jean Strouse, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, set the tone and the terms of the debate when she complained of the intrusive quality of the voice. "Mr. Banks keeps stepping in to explain Bob [the main protagonist], as if talking to somebody offstage, which constantly distracts you from the illusion of fiction and draws attention to the novel’s narrative voice" (11). Beside the destruction of the illusion of the real — one of the primary characteristics of the convention of realism — Strouse also argued that the narrator’s voice tended to alienate both the characters and the reader. "What is the point of these intrusions," she asked, "which condescend to Bob and lecture the rest of us?" (11-2). A year later, in a review of Banks’s next work, a volume of short stories entitled *Success Stories* (1986), John Aldridge, also writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, took up the issue of the narrator’s disruption of fictional realism. Calling *Continental Drift* "a contemporary version of the great classic story of naturalist realism," he questioned Banks’s reasons for the intrusive voice.
Curiously and rather ominously, he from time to time assumes the role of authorial lecturer explaining to his readers exactly what the central action is supposed to signify. It is as if he suspected that the realistic method of cumulative documentation was proving to be an inadequate means for displaying more than the physical and environmental externals of the story he had to tell. (22)

As many other reviewers, perhaps more, responded favourably to the narrator's voice. Robert Towers, approving of the "unabashed authorial comment and exhortation" (36), wrote in the New York Review of Books that "For the most part the intrusive voice provides sweep and momentum, advancing the action rather than impeding it, and this defiance of the conventions of faceless realism does much to make Continental Drift a vigorous and original novel" (37). James Atlas also appreciated the "moral outrage" of the voice, arguing that it distinguished Banks from "other chroniclers of the desperate and the depressed," such as Frederick Barthelme, Raymond Carver, and Robert Stone (94). And in implicit opposition to Strouse's criticism of the narrator's patronizing voice, James Marcus in The Nation thought that the constant switching between "narrative and authorial aside" allowed a "double-edged view" of Bob: "Banks steps onstage repeatedly to discuss Bob's character, intelligence and sexuality, but these lectures don't seem condescending" (506).

Marcus and Strouse, for all their differences, seem to agree at least on one thing: the adequacy of the metaphor of the stage for describing the site of Banks's narration. This metaphor provides a way of talking about the voyeuristic relation of the audience to the represented real, but it also inadvertently invokes, at least in the context of twentieth century drama, the counter tradition of breaking down what Strouse called "the illusion of
fiction.” What is at stake in this metaphor is central to the issue of realism: that is, the creation and maintenance of the illusion of reality, the supposedly unmediated relation between the viewer, or reader, and the events represented on the stage. The metaphor implies the specific regulations which govern the circulation of knowledge in realism.

“[Banks’s] methods and materials derive from the most comfortable conventions of old-style literary realism” (22), writes John Aldridge, which he later defines, as I note above, as “cumulative documentation” for the purpose of “display,” and not interpretation and explanation. Deviations from these rules may cause the inadvertent slide into a wholly other genre: the sermon, for Strouse, and the lecture, for Aldridge — the playhouse transformed into a church, or, still worse, into a college classroom. But what might be called the knowledge economy of a text is always knowledge of something, circulating through different sites of articulation and reception. An exploration of the knowledge at stake in Continental Drift helps explain the way Banks chooses to have it circulate. The reviews make clear that, for better or worse, Banks has fairly radically altered the realist knowledge economy. I want to argue that it is the subject matter — the contemporary status of the American dream — which necessitates those alterations.

Continental Drift is set in the Winter of 1979 with two main protagonists: Bob Dubois, a thirty-year-old oil furnace repairman living in New Hampshire, and Vanise Dorsinville, an impoverished peasant living in Haiti. Bob and his wife Elaine live with their two children in a working-class section of Catamount. The novel opens with the deeply depressed Bob pondering how he is going to afford a pair of Christmas skates for one of his daughters. It is the end of the week, and with his weekly paycheck in hand
(137.44), Bob seeks consolation at the local bar. and from his mistress Doris Cleeve.

His comprehension of his poverty is as meagre as his income: as he says later of the economic forces within which he is caught, “It’s probably the recession. You know, from the energy crisis and the fucking Arabs and all, and fucking Carter” (164). The narrator offers this blunt assessment of Bob’s bleak situation:

He is thirty years old, “happily married,” with two children, daughters, aged six and four. Both his parents are dead, and his older brother, Eddie, owns a liquor store in Oleander Park, Florida. His wife Elaine loves and admires him, his daughters Ruthie and Emma practically worship him, his boss, Fred Turner, says he needs him, and his friends think he has a good sense of humor. He is a frugal man. He owns a run-down seventy-five-year-old duplex in a working-class neighborhood on the north end of Butterick Street, lives with his family in the front half and rents out the back to four young people he calls hippies. He owns a boat, a thirteen-foot Boston whaler he built from a kit, with a sixteen-horsepower Mercury outboard motor; the boat he keeps shrouded in clear plastic in his side yard from November until the ice in the lakes breaks up; the motor’s in the basement. He owns a battered green 1974 Chevrolet station wagon with a tricky transmission. He owes the Catamount Savings and Loan Company — for the house, boat and car — a little over $22,000. He pays cash for everything else. He votes Democratic, as his father did, goes occasionally to mass with his wife and children and believes in God the way he believes in politicians — he knows He exists but doesn’t depend on Him for anything. He loves his wife and children. He has a girlfriend. He hates his life. (12)

The passage gestures toward some of the “socially produced narratives” (Leckie 407) against which Bob measures his life: marriage, children, employment, and leisure. The passage also contains an instance of the division of knowledge through citation of these narratives that establishes the structure of irony in the novel. The narrator offers the fact that Bob is “‘happily married’” in quotation marks. But who, exactly, speaks these two words? Does Bob speak this phrase and the narrator merely quote him? Or does Bob
quote this phrase from the larger discourse surrounding the cultural narrative of marriage and the narrator repeat his quote? Or, as a third possibility, does the narrator quote the phrase from the marriage narrative’s discourse and (ironically?) apply it to Bob’s situation (without the latter’s knowledge)?

This third possibility would reflect a superior measure of knowledge about Bob’s life on the part of the narrator. Such a difference is born out in the assessment of the cause of Bob’s depression:

The trouble with his life, if he were to say it honestly, which at this moment in his life he cannot, is that it’s over. He’s alive, but his life has died. He’s thirty years old, and if for the next thirty-five years he works as hard as he has so far, he will be able to stay exactly where he is now, materially, personally. He’ll be able to hold on to what he’s got. (13)

At this point, the narrator initiates the inscription into the novel of the discourse of the American dream, starting with the possibility of increased wealth. The problem, suggests the narrator, is that “Bob has survived in a world where mere survival is insufficient” (13). From de Crèvecoeur’s formulation that material reward follows from the progress of labour to James Truslow Adams’s proposition that life should be “better and richer and fuller for every man,” the American dream has been associated with *increase*, which makes Bob’s “mere survival . . . insufficient.” “Everything he sees in store windows or on TV, everything he reads in magazines and newspapers, and everyone he knows . . . tells him that he has a future” other than merely holding on to what he has (13). The discourse of the American dream is itself complex and multifaceted, as are its modes of circulation in advertising, entertainment, the printed word, the city street, and popular, though serious, public belief: “It’s the old life-as-ladder metaphor, and everyone in
America seems to believe in it” (13). The American dream is one of the discourses through which America talks to itself about itself, and as such it is a social language through which Bob analyses his unhappiness and attempts to solve his problems. The three centripetal tendencies of the discourse of the American dream become a narrative pattern according to which Bob attempts to restructure his life. After discussing his distress, Elaine suggests that they move, thereby enabling them to, in her words which resonate throughout the entire novel. “start over” (29). They decide to move to Florida — a place where the American dream, they believe, can finally be realized.

Their economic migration, patterned as it is on the discourse of the American dream, has its reflection in the journey undertaken by Vanise Dorsinville, with her infant child and nephew Claude, from Haiti. Their flight is triggered by the possibility that Claude may run into trouble with the local police for stealing a ham — a possibility not precluded by the fact the police chief is the father of Vanise’s child. Claude’s father is already in Florida, from where he has been sending money to the family in order that they might eventually join him. All this money must now be used so that Claude, Vanise, and her child can flee from the danger and be smuggled into the United States. In parallel journeys of economic migration, then, both families, one from New Hampshire and one from Haiti, travel to Florida in order to “start over.” Such is the promise of the American dream, and in their separate ways, both Bob Dubois and Vanise Dorsinville, with their families, attempt to claim that promise.

The above descriptions of Bob’s distress and economic difficulties, as citations of the discourse of the American dream, signal no overt irony. The narrator relates them
with no tone of mockery or discernable hyperbole. They thus appear as serious, or sincere citations of what we identify as elements of the American dream. Later in the same passage, however, the discourse's decay into cliché seems to signal that it is the object of ironic critique. "Don't be stupid, Bob," the world will tell him if he decides to just hold on to what he has:

look above you — a new car, a summer house down on the Maine coast where you can fish to your heart's content, early retirement, Bob, college-educated children, and someday you'll own your own business too, and your wife can look like Lauren Bacall in mink, and you can pick up your girlfriend in Aix-en-Provence in your Lancia, improve your memory, Bob, eliminate baldness, amaze your friends and family. (13)

This passage's hostility toward its propositions is marked by a tone of increasing condescension and mockery, as well as by the increasing absurdity of the objects to which Bob should aspire.

The passage is what Rainer Warning would call an "amassing of clichés" of the American dream. In "Irony and the 'Order of Discourse' in Flaubert," Warning argues that ironic discourse is produced through the citation as cliché of a reference discourse. To summarize Warning's argument, he begins by rejecting theories of narrative and irony which "refer exclusively to relationships immanent to the system" (254). Seeking to "construct a theory of narration as situated discourse" (254), situated, that is, in its social and cultural contexts, Warning turns to semiotics' emphasis on pragmatic relations for an explanation of ironic narrative. Irony is not lexically determined like other tropes, Warning argues (256); hence, the irony signal (by which a hearer recognizes the 'intended' irony of the speaker) works "only within the framework of an interpretation
specific to a particular communication act, an interpretation which presupposes in turn
pragmatic knowledge in the form of a familiarity with the ironically suspended value
system of the speaker” (258). This pragmatic knowledge consists of not only the value
system of the speaker — which must, according to Warning, “be supplied by the hearer”
(258) — but also of the social and cultural contexts within which the narrative is
embedded. With these theoretical parameters in mind, Warning offers his theory of ironic
discourse:

Our thesis will be that this ‘order’ of ironic discourse consists essentially
in the citation of reference discourses and that this act of citation is to be
understood in light of an ambivalent relationship of distancing and
repetition, of critique and redemption, of deceptive illusion and aesthetic
resemblance. (255)

Significantly, Warning sees a double movement of “critique and redemption” at work in
the ironic citation of reference discourses. He suggests that the irony of Flaubert’s
Madame Bovary results from the citation as cliché of Romantic “discourse.” Through the
narrative style of discours indirect libre, Flaubert has Emma understand herself and her
environment in terms of Romantic discourse, but this discourse is read as ironic cliché by
the reader of Madame Bovary. Warning gives as an example all of chapter six, which,
“through the amassing of clichés and in part through authorial comment, reveals Emma’s
romanticizing way of viewing things as a false semanticization of reality and thereby
immediately undercuts the figural medium as center of orientation” (266). A second
discourse, “bourgeois discourse,” is another target of Flaubertian irony: “Citation of
discourse is here, again, first of all discourse critique through reduction to cliché” (271).
For Warning, the cliché signals a critical irony aimed at the discourse itself, and at those
for whom the cliché is a serious, legitimate discourse.

There are, obviously, important differences in narrative style between Russell Banks’s *Continental Drift* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. For instance, the narrative of Banks’s novel is not recounted through what Warning calls a “figural medium,” which is key to the ironic narrative of *Madame Bovary*. That is, the above quoted text is not presented, through *discours indirect libre*, as if it were the conscious thoughts of Bob Dubois, as is the case with Emma Bovary. Instead, the passage is clearly presented as the ‘voice’ of the narrator — a forceful, if slightly depersonalized and abstract, persona not identical to Russell Banks the author. At other times, however, the narrative does align itself with Bob as its figural medium, perhaps the most important instance being the catalyst of the action in the novel, immediately following Bob’s failed attempt to buy his daughter skates at Sears. In a frustrated rage he neither understands nor controls, he breaks all the windows of his car with a bloody fist. When he gets home, he tries to explain to his wife his feelings of desolation, poverty, and vocational failure, his fear of reliving his father’s life, and his deep unhappiness with his own life. In an attempt to articulate these anxieties, he recalls the following event:

“One time when we were kids, Ave came over to my house, and he had this advertisement he’d cut out of some fancy New York magazine he’d seen in the dentist’s office, and we were sitting around in my bedroom talking about what we were going to do after school or something, we were maybe seniors then. And he pulled this ad out of his wallet and unfolded it and handed it to me. It was a whisky ad, and there was this handsome guy wearing his trousers rolled up to his knees and no shirt on, walking ashore on some tropical island. And he’s got this case of Haig & Haig on his shoulder and a dinghy on the shore behind him and a nice forty-foot catamaran sitting out in the bay.” (25)
The cliché is missing only the bikini-clad model lounging on the beach. A ‘sophisticated’ reader would likely recognize in the advertisement the codes of wealth, success, exotica, adventure, and possibly youth and sex, but all in a clichéd form. We also recognize this cliché as more muted than, but on the same continuum with, the earlier-cited more extreme clichés of the reference discourse.

What interests Banks, however, is the cliché’s effect on identity processes.

“Ave shows me this clipping like it’s a letter from Hugh Hefner asking him to spend a week with the Playmate of the Month or something, and he says to me, ‘There. That’s me,’ he says.” Bob is silent for a few seconds. Then he sighs. “You wanna know what I said? I’ll tell you. I said, ‘That’s me too.’” (26)

The discourse of the American dream, in the material form of a clichéd image, seems to function here as a hermeneutic pattern by which Bob at an early age began to define his desires and hopes, and through which he processes his experience — indeed, processing it as a failure to attain the codes signalled by the clichéd image. Though the passage is not discours indirect libre, the narrator — momentarily absent — ‘aligns’ himself with Bob insofar as he does not comment on Bob’s recollection, or otherwise signal his narrative presence. Bob’s internalization of the clichéd discourse parallels Emma’s internalization of Romantic clichés, so that Flaubert’s aside, “D’ailleurs, la parole est un laminoir qui allonge toujours les sentiments” (I:653),6 might be said to be true of both Bob and Emma. In both cases, the cliché signals discourse critique; it is not clear, however, if both cases extend the critiques to the characters themselves.

6“Besides, the word is a rolling press which always flattens feeling”; though allonger carries with it the sense of stretching and lengthening something (my translation).
But is the laminoir effect to which Flaubert suggestively alludes a property of discourse in general, or only the cliché in particular? As I suggest in the Introduction, philosophers of language such as Peirce and Vološinov suggest that human individuals are able to understand their surroundings and their identity as subjects within the social world only through the discourses (which provide narratives, vocabularies, and mythologies) already available to them in their particular social world. Consequently, all discourse might be said to have the effect of the allongeant of perception, affection, and action according to the pre-established patterns of social discourse. On the other hand, the fact that the cliché is simultaneously taken ‘seriously’ by some and ‘ironically’ by others suggests that it functions as a laminoir for some (such as Emma and Bob), but not for others (the reader who recognizes the clichés). Where, then, might the laminoir quality be located, if it is not immanent within the cliché itself? If it is a way for Banks to signal a critical attitude toward the portrayed image — in this case, an image of the discourse of the American dream — must that criticism also extend to those who take them seriously and ‘believe’ in them? And what is the relation between the cliché and the “reference discourse,” to use Warning’s phrase, from which it is derived?

Flaubert uses the word parole here obviously before Saussure’s distinction between langue (usually translated into English by “language”) and parole (usually translated by “speech” or “utterance”). Flaubert’s usage seems to fall somewhere between them — he speaks of the moment in which discourse (langue) is drawn on by an individual utterance (parole), producing the allongeant of sentiments.
"The cliché, as its name indicates, is the metal plate that clicks and reproduces the same image mechanically without end. . . . to Flaubert these repetitions proved more than signs of dullness, they were philosophic clues from which he inferred the transformation of the human being under machine capitalism."
— Jacques Barzun*8

One explanation of the laminoir power of the cliché is proposed by the sociologist Anton Zijderveld in his 1979 work titled On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity. Zijderveld argues that clichés are not just linguistic in nature, but must be understood as a sociological phenomenon. He offers the following definition of the cliché:

A cliché is a traditional form of human expression (in words, thoughts, emotions, gestures, acts) which — due to repetitive use in social life — has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour (cognition, emotion, volition, action), while it avoids reflection on meanings. (10)

For Zijderveld, the cliché fundamentally belongs to modernity: he traces its etymology to the mass reproduction of pictures, and, invoking Walter Benjamin’s idea that a loss of “aura” accompanies the ability to mechanically reproduce art, links it to the rise of mass communications and the advent of modern media reproduction methods (7-8). Zijderveld goes on to argue that, as “a kind of behaviouristic stimulus-response mechanism,” the cliché bypasses consciousness and influences behaviour and attitudes at a sub-conscious

*Barzun 4-5.
level (13). Implicit in this model is a chronology of deterioration; clichés are "linguistic fossils" in which "time has been frozen" (16), the culmination of an evolution which is summarized by the subtitle as "the supersedure of meaning by function." Interestingly, Zijderveld also associates the predominance of clichés in modernity with a loss of history, and suggests that increasingly "the past is not experienced as a meaningful component of the present" (39). Zijderveld likens the function of clichés to "brainwashing" (13) in that they are not heuristically convincing (that would demand reflection), but are magically compelling (they enchant through repetition).

Zijderveld's analysis helps explain how the cliché moulds expectations, attitudes, and interpretations in the social world. Ultimately, Zijderveld's theory of the cliché implies a model of language in which its transparency and rationality are by some means breached with the instance of the cliché. What Zijderveld understands as a pathology of language is in fact seen by some language theorists, such as V. N. Vološinov and Charles Sanders Peirce, as characteristic of the relation between language and consciousness in general. As I review in the Introduction, Vološinov claims that "it is a matter not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions" (Marxism 91). Unlike Vološinov, Zijderveld sees clichés as exceptions to the rule of normal language: as ready-made words or phrases, they do not give expression to perception or interpretation, but rather condition, and even determine, these processes.

Zijderveld may also have an explanation for what Banks, as well as Ralph Ellison and Maxine Hong Kingston, are doing in their works: "I venture to say that one of the
marks of a truly democratic society consists in the fact that it dares to consciously resist political clichés and that it allows its citizens to search for new political meanings beyond and outside the reign of the existing ideological clichés” (89). It is precisely “the reign of the existing ideological clichés” such as those enshrined in President Clinton’s Loyalty Day Proclamation, for instance, that writers such as Ellison and Kingston are writing against. At the end of his work, Zijderveld suggests several ways in which an unquestioned acceptance of clichés can be challenged. He argues, for instance, that Bertolt Brecht and the Dadaists used clichés “cynically in order to shatter them” (99); I would substitute the word “ironically” here for Zijderveld’s “cynically.” He also offers the possibility that humour can be used as a stratagem for relativizing the power of the cliché, noting that the “conscious or unconscious transfer of a cliché from one frame of reference to a totally different one always manages to raise a laugh” (102).

Such a recontextualization of the cliché is often productive of irony. Several examples of this process can be found in the Life in Hell cartoons of Matt Groening. In one Groening cartoon, of 14 August 1992, Groening recontextualizes the cliché of “family values” which was used by the Republican Party during the 1992 Presidential campaign. The cartoon (see Figure 1) is one of what might be called Groening’s “jail” series, and shows Bongo (a one-eared rabbit who is a regular character in Life in Hell) tied to a small chair in an otherwise bare room. The adult rabbit, who represents authority figure, jailer and parent, asks through an eye hole in the door, “Are you ready to embrace family values yet?” Groening’s ironic recontextualization of the cliché — from George Bush’s stump speeches to a jail of detention, coercion, and punishment —
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Figure 1.

highlights the paradox of having a cliché which theoretically refers to “values” associated
with the family, such as compassion, acceptance, support, and safety, become a codeword for the vehement, barely-disguised right-wing Christian fundamentalist discourse of intolerance of those Americans who did not fit the pattern of the white nuclear family. Who doesn’t have family values? Welfare mothers (another key theme in the 1992 Republican campaign), black drug addicts and criminals (Willie Horton was an important image in the 1988 Republican advertising campaign against Massachusetts Governor and Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis), gays and lesbians, and “illegal immigrants” (read: Latin Americans and Haitians, a prominent theme in the 1994 California gubernatorial race). In fact, as Zijderveld’s work suggests, the cliché of family values no longer “means” anything at all; rather, it “functions” to rally to the Republican candidate voters’ anger against those different from the implied ideal model of Americanness.

Much of Groening’s work is predicated on his “rage with the cliché” (Lawrence 154). Each new year, Groening’s weekly cartoon presents the “Forbidden Words” of the coming year, a compilation of current clichés, slogans, trendy media phrases, and over-used (thus less meaningful) words. Groening’s “Forbidden Words 1993” (Figure 2) contains several clichés left over from the above-mentioned 1992 Presidential election, including “family values,” “change,” “infomercial,” “it’s the economy, stupid,” “line-item veto,” and “new world order.” His recontextualization of these political clichés has the purpose of more than just “rais[ing] a laugh,” however (Zijderveld 102). The inscription and ironization of the clichés is an attempt at breaking their power to stimulate behaviour and influence action at a sub-conscious level. Groening’s work seems organized around trying to make his readers aware of the clichés which pervade contemporary America, as
is shown by his very first published cartoon of 1980 (Figure 3). Groening’s rage is directed against the cliché’s ossified or “frozen” nature, by which it is no longer flexible enough to allow individuals to use it cognitively to understand their relation to the social or to the real. Groening works out his rage often by citation — by quoting, in different
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context, a recognizable cliché. This recontextualization, which is sometimes
accompanied by transformation, produces an ironic double knowledge of the quoted
discourse. I have already suggested the ways this recontextualization effects a double
knowledge of "family values" in his 1992 cartoon. A similar instance would be Binky's subversive performance of the Pledge of Allegiance (Figure 4) — a performance perhaps
not sanctioned by President Clinton's call in his 1995 Loyalty Day Proclamation.

Zijderveld and Groening share a fear of the cliché's power to bypass individual reflection but nonetheless to influence, if not to determine, attitudes, behaviour, and thoughts. Related concerns are also at stake in the repetitions of racial clichés in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* — concerns which I address in detail in Chapter Three. If the real can only be experienced through language, and must be interpreted more or less according to (that is, in terms of similarity to and difference from) the recognizable patterns of already known discourses and narratives, the cliché, as a debased, lifeless, inflexible form of language, seems to narrow too strictly the possibilities for reflecting on and interpreting experience. Gilles Deleuze, in his work on film, puts the cliché's power to shape experience this way:

> They are these floating images, these anonymous clichés, which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world, so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés by which he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among the others in the world which surrounds him. (208-9)

Deleuze's point is that the cliché's power comes from its internalization, so that experience — perception, affection, and action — is processed according to, and only in terms of, the hermeneutic possibilities offered by the cliché. Deleuze argues that clichés predominate in the cinematic narrative techniques of American film after the Second World War, and function to hold together a represented world which is "without totality or linkage" (208) — a use which he traces back to the fiction of John Dos Passos. Deleuze's point about post-war American cinema could arguably be extended, at least in part, to elements of post-war American society as well. The internalization of the cliché
is not a result of individual choice in such a society, argues Deleuze, but is an imperative in the interest of survival. Parallel to Zijderveld, who sees the predominance of the cliché confirmed only with the advent of modernity and mass communication, Deleuze sees the massive circulation of the cliché in cinematic life as a relatively recent phenomenon, the cause of which he traces back to the collapse of the conventions of cinematic realism, which he calls the “action-image.”9 Deleuze goes on to describe the reign of the new type of image in the following terms: “These are the five apparent characteristics of the new image: the dispersive situation, the deliberately weak links, the voyage form, the consciousness of clichés, the condemnation of the plot. It is the crisis of both the action-image and the American Dream” (210). For Deleuze, the rise of the cliché in post-war American cinema marks a double crisis: that of the conventions of realism, and that of the American dream.

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9By “action-image” Deleuze means the set of codes and procedures of cinematic realism: “What constitutes realism is simply this: milieux and modes of behaviour, milieux which actualise and modes of behaviour which embody. The action-image is the relation between the two and all the varieties of this relation” (141). According to this formulation, the “action-image” is identified with the conventions of cinematic realism insofar as they are both constituted by the relation between “milieux which actualise and modes of behaviour which embody.”
IV

The possibility that Deleuze is right about the cliché characterizing the dual crisis of realism and of the American dream is substantiated in part by the convergence of all three in Russell Banks's *Continental Drift*. To pursue this connection, it may be helpful at this point to question how Banks's flaunting of realistic conventions in *Continental Drift* affects the type of irony it produces about the American dream. In his study of ironic discourse, Rainer Warning argues that *Madame Bovary* is characterized by a type of impersonal narrative that, "beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, became a dominant mode of narration of the modern period and that Flaubert is the first to consider theoretically, in terms of the notion of *impersonnalité*" (265). Invoking Percy Lubbock's distinction between "showing" and "telling," Warning notes that, according to Lubbock, the former is implicated in the "impersonal narration [that] completes the illusion of reality" (265). Warning notes that the impersonal narrator of Flaubert's novel is withdrawn from its textual surface, and that this withdrawal is accompanied by "a substitute centre of orientation," namely Emma Bovary, the figural medium, near whom (not through whom) the narrative situates itself (265-6). The narrator's alignment with the figural medium results in the already-mentioned ambiguous and irony-producing *discours indirect libre*. Ironic discourse, argues Warning, is possible only in such a narrative situation from which the narrator has withdrawn.

However, Warning points out that this "ironic discourse" happens — and can only happen — through the flaunting of the conditions of conventional realism by which it pretends to abide: "Flaubert's ironic *illusio* does not complete the realistic *illusion*
référentielle but rather becomes the instrument of its dissolution” (265). The ironic discourse peculiar to Continental Drift, on the other hand, is marked by quite a different narrative situation. Indeed, the narrator’s voice is characterized not by withdrawal, but by intrusion, commentary, and explanation, as both the negative and positive reviews of Banks’s novel noted. In the opening “Invocation” to the ‘muse’ (in this case, a Haitian loa), the narrator adopts the stances, which are variously held throughout the tale, of pleading advocate, grim witness, and warning prophet. “This is an American story of the late twentieth century,” he declares,

and you don’t need a muse to tell it, you need something more like a loa, or mouth-man, a voice that makes speech stand in front of you and not behind, for there’s nothing here that depends on memory for the telling. With a story like this, you want an accounting to occur, not a recounting, and a presentation, not a representation, which is why it’s told the way it’s told. (1-2)

In choosing presentation over representation, the narrator foregoes the artifice of impersonnalité and the realistic illusion référentielle it is said to produce (see Warning 265), and opts instead for the action of accounting: that is, tallying up, adding the credits and adding the debits, measuring one side of the column against the other. He outlines the tale, instructs as to its significance, analyses and comments upon its events, and finally offers it to the reader for reflection. These are the anti-realistic strategies that distinguish the ‘teller’ Banks from the (ostensible, according to Warning) ‘shower’ Flaubert, and, importantly, are precisely the qualities of the novel that aroused so much condemnation in some of its reviews. As I note above, Jean Strouse complained of the way Banks “keeps stepping in” to the narration, in violation of impersonnalité. a move
which has the consequence of destroying "the illusion of fiction" which is the apparent
goal of realist fiction (Strouse 11). But that goal is not Banks's goal, and Flaubert's
realist methods are not Banks's methods. One therefore wonders that John Aldridge,
after reading Banks's invocation, can still write in his review that Banks's "methods and
materials derive from the most comfortable conventions of old-style literary realism"
(Aldridge 22).

To complicate this problem further, the cliché poses a certain problem for realist
fiction. In "The Cliché in the Reading Process," Ruth Amossy argues that a reader either
passively registers or critically perceives clichés — but that neither halts the process of
interpretation. On the one hand, a cliché that is not noticed as such by the reader can help
construct a representational illusion of the real world. In this case, the "transparency
insured by an immediately recognized expression refers to reality, or rather to the reader's
conventional idea of the real" (39-40). On the other hand, a "critically perceived cliché"
can also contribute to the illusion of realism when the cliché is attributed to a character
(37). The cliché of the American dream internalized by Bob has this effect of increasing
the plausibility, or verisimilitude, of his character in the novel. A critically perceived
cliché can also have an intertextual effect: "An intentionally obvious cliché reminds the
reader of the pre-existent discourse from which it was taken" (37). Amossy's explanation
of this function helps explain how the reader of Continental Drift recognizes that Bob's
'reading' of the Haig and Haig advertisement and his belief in the "life-as-ladder
metaphor" are part of the contextual discourse of the American dream.

Finally, Amossy points out that a critically perceived cliché can provoke criticism
by calling attention to the "gap between discourse and Truth and between discourse and the real" (38). Such is the crux of the function of the cliché of the American dream in the novel. Banks attributes to Bob clichés of the American dream in order to illustrate the gap between the way the discourse describes the United States and the economic reality of late 1970s. Banks is bitter not only at the loss of economic opportunity in this period — that is, at the impossibility of achieving the promises of the American dream — but he is also bitter at the fact that as a "discourse" it has grown inflexible and become the stuff of advertising, without forfeiting its pretense of representing the real of American economic life. Continental Drift is about Bob’s attempt at the performance of the discourse in order to claim its promises. He, Elaine and their children migrate to Oleander Park, Florida, where Bob’s brother Eddie offers him a job managing his liquor store. His financial situation, however, does not get much better than it was in Catamount: "He works twelve hours a day, six days a week . . . . Though he’s paid in cash, with no taxes or other deductions taken out, his weekly pay is only seventy-five dollars more than it was in Catamount" (65). Nonetheless, Bob’s mood improves, as does his relation with Elaine, as he starts to feel “that he really is beginning to grasp the way the system works” (68). Even in the midst of this break, however, Banks is at pains to indicate Bob’s almost total immersion in the cliché-derived received wisdom in America. Bob becomes involved in a second adulterous affair with an African American woman named Marguerite, the daughter of the part-time stock clerk of his store. One evening he wonders if she has gone home after one of their sexual encounters, during which she had not let him have intercourse:
Unless she didn’t go straight home. Unless she stopped off for a nightcap at a bar on a corner a few blocks before her house. a dim. smoky tavern filled with black men and black women and soul music on the jukebox, and she’ll meet and drink and talk black talk with a guy she knows from the neighbourhood. a tall, slim. good-looking guy named Steve or Otis, with a pencil-thin mustache and long black eyelashes. and she’ll leave with the guy and go back to his apartment, smoke some marijuana and have wild. Negro sex with him. Afterwards. they’ll lie back on his purple satin sheets, and she’ll fondle his huge prick and wonder why on earth she tried to make it with the liquor store clerk when. any time she wanted. she could have this. The guy will shrug and say, “Beats me, baby. Everybody know honkies got small dicks.” (99)

Continental Drift. like Banks’s Rule of the Bone. is heavily inflected with issues of race in the United States. These issues surface not only with the racist clichés held by Bob and his brother Eddie. such as those in the passage quoted above. but also with the black Haitians who. like Bob. try to perform a version of the narrative inscribed in the American dream. Indeed. Bob is not the only character through which the clichéd discourse of the American dream is cited in the novel; Vanise Dorsinville and her nephew Claude are also entranced by the idea of America. As they. with other Haitians. prepare to depart the Bahamas for the United States. the narrator relates with irony the clichés of America which motivate them:

They may own more than these pitiful few possessions. a pot and a pan. some dishes. gourds. tools. bedding. a bicycle. but they don’t hesitate to leave these things behind. for they are starting over. and soon. they know, they will own all the things that Americans own — houses. cars. motorcycles. TV sets. Polaroid cameras. stereos. blue jeans. electric stoves. (301)

The phrase “starting over” is an echo of Elaine’s earlier determination to “start over” (29). an echo which marks not an ironic distance between a New Hampshire working class family and the impoverished Haitians. but rather their similar search for the
American dream. This account of the collectively-held Haitian picture of America, dominated as it is by metonymic clichés about the United States, is given straight by the narrator without any overt irony signals — beyond the implausibility of these migrants owning any of these things “soon.” The Haitians are leaving their old lives and possessions behind because “they know” that they are setting sail for the land of wealth and prosperity. This cliché about America shares Bob’s cliché’s emphasis on material wealth and corresponding social status (blue jeans), a fact which suggests their importance to the discourse of the American dream. While the narrator’s scepticism produces an irony directed at the clichéd picture the Haitians have of America, it is not aimed at Vanise or Claude themselves. In fact, in his explaining, accounting mode, the narrator’s tone is characterized by sympathy, as he continues after the above quotation:

Their lives will soon be transformed from one kind of reality, practically a nonreality, into a new and, because superior, an ultimate reality. To trade one life for another at this level is to exchange an absence for a presence, a condition for a destiny. These people are not trying merely to improve their lot; they’re trying to obtain one. (301)

The same sympathy and plea for understanding accompanies the ironization of Bob’s idea of the American dream. Indeed, in several instances Bob seems to sense the clichéd status of the discourse. Shortly after Bob shoots and kills a black man attempting to rob his brother’s liquor store and quits the job, unwilling to have to be in the position to make that choice again, he gets a job working for his friend Ave (the one who had shown the Haig and Haig advertisement to Bob years before) running a fishing charter. To make extra money on the side, Ave persuades him to try smuggling Haitians from the Bahamas to the Florida coast. On his first trip, Bob reflects on the discourse for which he
exchanged his old life in New Hampshire:

Bob believes he gave away everything in exchange for nothing, for a fantasy, a dream, a wish, that he allowed to get embellished and manipulated by his brother, by his friend, by magazine articles and advertisements, by rumor, by images of men with graying hair in red sports cars driving under moonlight to meet a beautiful woman. (310)

The narrator's voice proposes a certain awareness on Bob's part not only of the Deleuzean internalization of the cliché of the “dream” by his friends and family, but also of its anonymous circulation in the media — as Ruth Amossy remarks, the cliché is what “(every)one” believes, it is what on dit (37). On the same smuggling expedition. Bob attempts to befriend Claude, who, with his aunt and cousin, is one of the fifteen or so Haitians Bob is smuggling. While doing so, Bob begins to realize that they too have a clichéd picture of America — and that this discourse, similar to his own, also motivates them. When Claude points to Florida and asks if it is America, Bob answers, “Yep, just over the next hill. Land of the free and home of the brave. You probably think the streets are paved with gold, right?” (311). Though uttered facetiously, the line prompts Bob to do a little cross-cultural comparison:

Like me, Bob thinks. Like my father and Eddie too, and like my kids. even poor little Robbie, who'll be as big as this kid is before I know it — like all of us up on our crow’s nests keeping our eyes peeled for the Statue of Liberty or the first glint off those gold-paved streets. America! Land, ho! Only, like Columbus and all those guys looking for the Fountain of Youth, when you finally get to America, you get something else. You get Disney World and land deals and fast-moving high-interest bank loans, and if you don't get the hell out of the way, they'll knock you down, cut you up with a harrow and plow you under, so they can throw some condos up on top of you or maybe a parking lot or maybe an orange grove. (311-2)

The passage gestures toward the deeper ironic structure of Continental Drift —
deeper in the sense that it is in passages such as this one that the citation-based irony
gives rise to a larger irony which structures the novel. The qualities that distinguish the
narrative situation in Continental Drift from Flaubert’s Madame Bovary transform its
ironic discourse from being discourse critique and redemption into discourse critique
(without redemption) and then, as a result of what I earlier called the “knowledge
economy” of the text, into dramatic irony. This later term is explained by Wayne Booth
in the following way: “Dramatic irony always depends strictly on the reader’s or
spectator’s knowing something about a character’s situation that the character does not
know” (255). Telling the story rather than showing it, the narrator offers analysis and
revelation of the forces which shape the characters’ lives at a level they themselves
cannot intellectually articulate, though may dimly perceive. The narrator enjoys total
intellectual superiority over the characters: though the effect is occasionally patronizing
(“One of the more attractive aspects of Bob’s character, however . . .” [60]), its basic
substance is sympathy and “clear-eyed pity and hot, old-time anger” (1) on their behalf.
An example of this dramatic irony is the narrator’s description of Vanise and Claude’s
departure from Haiti “toward America, Vanise believes, toward Florida, where everything
will be different” (106). As he does repeatedly in the novel, the narrator historicizes the
characters’ actions, thoughts, and feelings, putting them in terms of larger patterns and
contexts. “For centuries,” the narrator tells us,

men and women have sailed this passage north of Hispaniola waiting for
the sight of one idea or another rising all aglitter with tangible substance
from the turquoise sea. Columbus approaches from the east in search of
Cathay, and Ponce de León cruises north from Puerto Rico looking for the
fabled Bimini, and now comes Vanise. . . . None of them is lost. All three
know they'll recognize the substance of their idea as soon as they see it. (107)

Vanise's idea, of course, is 'America': that is, a cliché drawn from the discourse of the American dream in which "everything will be different." Her belief in the nearness of the idea is unchanged, the narrator tells us, even when she "gets dropped off instead at North Caicos Island, six hundred miles from America" (108).

This type of knowledge-sharing, between the narrator and the audience, at the expense of Vanise (or of Bob) is an effect of Banks's narrative style, and it enlarges the localized ironic discourse. That is, the narrator grants us more knowledge than Banks grants the characters: while the same might be said of, for example, Charles Dickens, Banks goes beyond a Dickensian exhortation or a Dickensian revelation of facts important to the plot which the characters do not know, to include extensive analysis and explanation not only of external conditions, but of the characters' inner worlds and of truths about themselves or their situations of which they are incapable. This distribution within the knowledge economy of the text — which, again, has the consequence of the transgression of conventional realism — makes the irony immediately dramatic, and gives it, by the end of the novel, a pathetic-tragic colouring. Northrop Frye distinguishes between these two contiguous qualities, both of which are present in Continental Drift.

Pathos, Frye argues, "is increased by the inarticulateness of the victim," and has its root in the exclusion of the victim "from a social group to which he is trying to belong" (38-9).

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10This passage strongly echoes the first chapter of Howard Mumford Jones's O Strange New World, on the idea of a New World across the Atlantic as a paradisal place before Columbus's journey in 1492.
Tragic irony, he notes, "isolates from the tragic situation the sense of arbitrariness of the victim’s having been unlucky . . . and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be" (41). These ironies happen at the expense of the characters — they are its victims, but not the targets of the discourse critique with which the larger ironies begin. Because the deep ironic structure of Continental Drift finds its expression as dramatic irony, Bob Dubois never develops an ironic consciousness. Though he does, near the end of the novel, begin to sense the inadequacy of the vocabulary and narrative offered to him through the discourse of the American dream, that sense never grows into the fully developed ironic consciousnesses which characterize the narrators of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior.

“It’s as if,” the narrator begins one chapter in his explanatory-advocate role,

the creatures residing on this planet in these years, the human creatures, millions of them travelling singly and in families, in clans and tribes, travelling sometimes as entire nations, were a subsystem inside the larger system of currents and tides, of winds and weather, of drifting continents and shifting, uplifting, grinding, crackling land masses. (34)

Beginning with this passage, the narrator connects Elaine and Bob’s desire to "start over" to Vanise’s desire to go "where everything will be different.” Both are "responding to unseen, natural forces, as if it were gravity and not war, famine or flood that made them move” (34). The narrator invites the reader to consider these movements of economic migration, which is the novel’s central conceit, as forces as powerful and, from a local position, as inexplicable and unpredictable as the weather. “Seen from above,” he suggests, the flight of a million and a half Somalis from drought and war “would resemble” the circulation of regional weather patterns (35). The simile, which hints at
Banks’s debt to naturalism, also implies that Bob and Vanise are unlikely to comprehend fully the forces that control their lives. They will experience the massive weather-like patterns of poverty, hunger, and oppression as their personal tragedies, because they cannot attain the perspective and scale of view of the kind offered by the narrator: the “movement of the Somalis would seem inevitable, unalterable and mindless; and because we would have watched it the way we watch weather, it would seem tragic” (35).

The intrusive, analytic voice of the narrator and the dramatic irony which it produces can be further explained in terms developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Russell Banks, like Cormac McCarthy, is a profoundly monologic novelist. In Continental Drift, all types of language and discourse — from generalized cultural codes expressed in the voice of the narrator to the (presumably) autonomous speech by the culturally diverse characters — are subsumed under the single voice of its narrator. In this sense, Banks doesn’t do the police in different voices because all autonomous speech in the novel ultimately carries the accent of the author. I do not exactly mean that Banks’s attempts at Skaz (Problems 8) are unsuccessful. Banks’s work is permeated by a consistent interest in the problem of voice, and the individualized speech is as compelling in Continental Drift and even in Affliction and Rule of the Bone as it is forced in The Sweet Hereafter. Rather, Bob and Vanise never achieve the type of freedom from authorial control which, Bakhtin thought, marked Dostoevsky’s characters. On the one hand, it could be said of Bob (among the characters in the novel) that he shares with Dostoevsky’s heroes the fact that they are “not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (Problems 7). On the other hand, I have tried to show
precisely the ways in which Bob’s discourse about himself is so much more diminished and imaginatively impoverished than the narrator’s discourse about him. That difference in knowledge is part of what is at stake in making the novel’s irony dramatic. That difference is also why it could not be said of Banks, as Bakhtin says of Dostoevsky, that the latter, “like Goethe’s Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (6). While Bakhtin’s claim about Dostoevsky’s characters is not beyond questioning (what would it look like, for instance, for characters to “rebell” against their creator/author, without that author manipulating them to do so?), what I want to point out is that this claim could not be made of Banks’s characters. Bob’s discourse about himself could never conceivably challenge Banks’s narrator’s discourse about him.

This lack of dialogic autonomy (of a character’s speech about himself) also marks Continental Drift’s narrative situation in a second way: the characters are not free from the totality of its plot. Caryl Emerson, the editor of the English translation of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, suggests that for Bakhtin “the novel is more free than the epic because novelistic heroes are never equivalent to their plots” (xxxii). In Banks’s epic, however, Bob and Vanise are ‘equivalent’ to their different performances of the discourse of the American dream. How else does the reader understand the following passage which occurs as Bob takes leave of Doris to go to his car in the wintry Catamount evening?

Bob Dubois does not know what is going on, because, on this snowy night
in December in a dark, shabby apartment over a bar on Depot Street, as he draws his clothes back on, he does not know that his life’s story is beginning. A man rarely, if ever, knows at the time that his life’s story, its one story, is beginning, especially a man like Bob Dubois. (12)

This passage exaggerates the case; Bob’s life does have more than “one story,” but those stories from his past are usually told and interpreted, during the course of the novel, by the narrator, and not by Bob.11

Just as the ironic discourse of Continental Drift does not extend to criticism of the characters whose inner worlds consist in the circulation of clichés about the United States, so too this irony’s critique is not a rejection of the discourse of the American dream from which the clichés derive. Though the dream of “starting over” leads both Bob and Vanise to tragic ends, the centripetal element of hope which it represents is treated with sympathetic, if cautious, understanding. As the narrator says,

We must cross deserts alone and often perish along the way, we must move to where we can start our lives over, and when we get there, we must keep on knocking at the gate, shouting and pounding with our fists, until those who happen to be keepers of the gate are also moved to admiration and open the gate. We are the planet, fully as much as its water, earth, fire and air are the planet, and if the planet survives, it will only be through heroism. Not occasional heroism, a remarkable instance of it here and there, but constant heroism, systematic heroism, heroism as a governing principle. (40)

11The moral inflections of the current critical usage of Bakhtin’s terms — monologic, dialogic, discursive autonomy, freedom — make these matters more complicated. A thorough account of how Bakhtin’s terminology has become a set of moral categories would have to examine not only his influence on current critical theory, but an equally far-reaching analysis of the essentially religious dimension in Bakhtin’s oeuvre as well. That project is beyond the scope of this work; though I hear the moral inflections of these terms, I am attempting to use them as descriptive rather than prescriptive categories.
In his critique of the hold of the discourse of American dream in contemporary American society, Banks desires the preservation of several of its elements. The idea of “starting over,” which is a phrase first used by Elaine to describe what she and Bob must do, and is used to characterize the Haitians’ hopes for America, is in this passage attributed to both the narrator and the reader: we must all go “to where we can start our lives over.” This idea encompasses what I earlier called the first and the second centripetal forces at work within the discourse of the American dream: that is, first, the idea of migration to the new land, and second, the idea of abandoning old ways and the adoption of new ways in the new land. Implicit, of course, in both Bob’s and Vanise’s migrations to the promised space of the American dream (in both cases, Florida) is the third centripetal force within the discourse: the promise of material plenty. Though the cliché of the discourse of the American dream is ironized by Banks in the novel, the centripetal forces of that discourse, represented in the novel as the hope of “starting over,” of going to “where everything will be different,” remain unironized.

Banks’s critique of the American dream in Continental Drift is thus not so much a rejection of the centripetal forces within its discourse as it is an indictment of the discourse’s pretension to speak about the economic reality of the United States of the last

12That the narrator here quotes, without quotation marks, Elaine’s earlier plea to Bob to “start over” marks a rift in the strict dialogue-diegesis distinction — a rift that is central to Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic quality of the novel. That rift, which occurs several times in this novel, would suggest that elements of novelistic dialogism seep into Banks’s largely monologic work, and, more broadly, pose the possibility that these categories are tendencies (parallel to the centrifugal and centripetal forces in language types) along the spectrum of novelistic discourse, neither end of which is ultimately attainable (or, for that matter, desirable).
20 years. Banks suggests that the new order of ethical-material relations inaugurated by the American dream — that, in de Crèvecoeur's words "the rewards of [an American's] industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour" (40), or to use Adams's formulation, that "life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (404) — is no longer an accurate way for America to talk to itself about itself. Obviously, this new order of ethical-material relations, though never fully realized, once described some real possibilities for the working poor in the United States. Banks's complaint is that the discourse of the American dream, which was once flexible enough to serve as a narrative pattern and a language through which these poor could articulate their hopes and desires and formulate their identities as Americans, continued to dominate American social discourse in the late 1970s and 1980s, even as the possibility of fulfilling its promises was receding. This criticism continues to resonate beyond the era of the Reagan revolution into that of the Gingrich revolution, especially when one considers that the latter's return to a harsh individualism and the accompanying eschewing of communal responsibility is made possible in part through reference to clichéd aspects of the discourse of the American dream.

Banks's rage against the clichés of the discourse of the American dream is directed at their internalization, and against the culture which nurtures the circulation of such clichés. The ascendancy of the cliché in post-war American film, according to Deleuze, occurs at the intersection of two crises: that of realism, and of the American dream. It is at the intersection of these two trajectories that Banks (like the loa Legba,
situated at the crossroads) writes *Continental Drift*. In a 1987 interview, Banks spoke of the American dream: "The delusion is that you can change through success, success will change you — it’s the American dream — you can kill the old person and become a new one" ("Clarity" 59). One recalls Bob’s reaction to the whisky ad: “That’s me.” If the “old person” starting over is the unironized thread of the American dream in the novel, the old person changing his or her identity through material success is the targeted cliché.

It is not necessary to seek in the author Banks an originary relation to the discourse of the American dream, as Warning would. That manoeuvre is impossible without a virtual merging of the narrator and the author, which Warning does in the case of *Madame Bovary*.\(^\text{13}\) A parallel identification, of Banks with the narrator of *Continental Drift*, is even more problematic, for Banks’s narrator is not characterized by an impersonnalité withdrawn from the surface of the text, ‘speaking’ near the figural medium in *discours indirect libre*. As Warning has shown, the consequence of this withdrawal is not the completion of the illusion référentielle of realism, because the cliché discourse repeatedly calls attention to itself in *Madame Bovary*. But if Flaubert moves in the direction of impersonnalité only in order, ultimately, to confound it, Banks moves in the opposite direction right from the start: he creates a narrator whose constant presence is felt throughout the novel. In the same interview, Banks describes the persona of this narrator:

\[\text{I wanted to have a narrator who could tell stories, who played no part in the story itself, but who took responsibility for what was being described.} \]

\[^\text{13}\text{"The narrator \ldots who, as anonymous speaker, is identical with the implicit author" (Warning 266).}\]
To do that, I had to go back over the head of realism, naturalism and Flaubert, back over to the 18th-Century kind of narrator almost, where there was a different sense of the relationship between the author and the reader. ("Clarity" 54)

Banks’s narrator is created in the opening “Invocation” to Continental Drift, which is worth quoting in some detail by repeating an earlier citation in a fuller context:

This is an American story of the late twentieth century, and you don’t need a muse to tell it, you need something more like a loa, or mouth-man, a voice that makes speech stand in front of you and not behind, for there’s nothing here that depends on memory for the telling. With a story like this, you want an accounting to occur, not a recounting, and a presentation, not a representation, which is why it’s told the way it’s told. And though you, too, may see it with your own eyes and hear it with your own ears— as if you, the teller of the tale, sat in the circle of listeners, attentive, hoping to be amused, amazed and moved yourself—you still must see it with eyes not your own and must tell it with a mouth not your own. Let Legba come forward, then, come forward and bring this middle-aging, white mouth-man into speech again. Come down along the Grand Chemin, the sun-path, all filled with pity and hardened with anger to a shine. Come forward, Papa, come to the Crossroads. Come forward, Old Bones, full of wonder for the triple mystery of men and women clamped to one another, of blackness and of the unexpected arrival of gods from Guinea. And come forward eager to cast shame all about. Give body and entitledness and boldness to this white mouth-man’s pity and anger by covering his shoulders with a proper cloak of shame, and give him pure, physical pleasure under the slow, close sun among people and gods whose evident difference from him and from his one big God brings him forward too, finally, unto himself and unto everyone present as well. And let this man tell what the good American man Bob Dubois did that was so bad in the eyes of God and les Mystères and in the eyes of the mouth-man himself that Bob Dubois got left lost to his wife Elaine, who had loved him for a long, long time, and his son and two daughters and his friend Avery Boone and the women Bob Dubois had made love to and the men and women who had lived and worked with Bob Dubois in Catamount, New Hampshire, and in Oleander Park, Florida, and on fishing boats out of Moray Key. Again, Legba, come forward! Let this man speak that man to life. (1-2)

Legba is one of the loas (or lwas) of Haitian Vaudou. Known as the “lwa of the
crossroads, or the *lwa Gran Chemin*" (Desmangles 109), Legba is the guardian of the crossroads and of destiny, the source and sustainer of life. But in his other, darker aspect, Legba is also the trickster who causes unexpected accidents, the destroyer (110). He is an ancient figure whose genealogy can be traced from Africa. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who argues in *The Signifying Monkey* that this trickster is a central figure in African American folklore and literature and provides a pattern for a specifically African American theory of reading, sees this figure's genealogy as widespread in West Africa and among the peoples of the African diaspora:

This curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His New World figurations include Exú in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba (pronounced La-Bas) in the pantheon of the loa of Vaudou of Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States. (5)

In Haitian Vaudou, Legba is figured as an old man smoking a pipe, who leans on a cane and moves slowly (Desmangles 109). Gates explains Legba's limp as the result of his status as mediator between humanity and the gods: "In Yoruba mythology, Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (6).

Banks's invocation of Legba to possess him, the *author* of the novel who is a "mouth-man," and through such a possession become the persona of the *narrator* of the novel, makes sense on several levels. First, as the guardian of the crossroads and of destiny, Legba is the obvious choice among the *loa* to watch over the tale of two economic migrations. Vanise knows this instinctively when, after getting dropped off on
the coast of North Caicos Island instead of Florida, she tells Claude that they must wait for “Papa Legba”: “Old Bones is looking after us” (118). When a three legged limping dog emerges from the trees, Vanise immediately recognizes him as Legba, and after being properly fed, the loa speaks to them and leads them away. Second, the presence of the ancient African-Haitian deity as the invoked accomplice in the telling of the story has the effect of decentring this “American story of the late twentieth century” (1) away from America. The double tale of the American dream is thus simultaneously told from within and from without of the United States, and that double focus makes Banks’s examination of the American dream more compelling than if he had focussed on just one or the other. (I return to the problem of finding an alternative, non-American vocabulary for talking about the United States in the Conclusion, when I examine T. Coraghessan Boyle’s East is East and Sacvan Bercovitch’s argument about American “cultural self-sufficiency.”)

Third, as a loa Legba has knowledge and power superior to humanity, but as the mediator between humanity and the other gods he is charged with conveying some — but not all — of that knowledge. Able to make “speech stand in front of you and not behind” (1), Legba is a suitable choice to possess the mouth-man who wants to create a narrator without the kind of total, though impersonal, omniscience attributed to conventional realism.

It is precisely the thematic subject of Continental Drift — the contemporary status of the American dream — that moves Banks to destroy the illusion of realism. Realism implicitly rests on the idea that language can be transparent, and that it can provide an unmediated representation of the real; such is the assumption behind Aldridge’s and
Strouse's criticisms of the novel. But Banks's purpose in *Continental Drift* is to dispel the illusion of unmediated access to the economic real of the United States. As I discuss in the Introduction, Charles Peirce's work suggests that we have "direct experience, but indirect knowledge of reality" (Silverman 16), and that "knowledge" can come only through language. In order to break the power of the clichéd discourse of the American dream, Banks draws attention to the narrator, but also to the material of story telling — language. For this reason he summons the *loa*, who will help him make "speech stand in front of you and not behind" — that is, the speech itself will be foregrounded, not hidden.

Banks suggests that we know through language, and that sometimes this language is inadequate to the task. Such is his argument about the clichéd status of the American dream as a discourse purporting to describe accurately contemporary American economic reality. For this reason, he draws attention not only to the materiality through which Bob knows the American dream, in advertising, popular belief, or television, but also to the materiality through which we know of Bob and his knowledge. In order to break one discourse's illusory pretension to describe the (economic, social) real, he must break the other discourse's illusory pretension of (narrative) realism. Only the destructions of these illusions can make us reflect on, and possibly alter, our languages and our vocabularies — the discourses, in short, by which America talks about itself to itself.

Banks says that his desire to imagine an alternative narrative situation grew out of a kind of frustration that I felt with the realistic convention of the author as merely a window into the world — a kind of Flaubertian presentation of the experience with the author out somewhere behind the clouds paring his nails so that there is this illusion of reality in front of you. ("Clarity" 54)
Though Banks's narrator keeps the same spatial relation to his characters that Banks attributes to Flaubert — behind the clouds, watching the weather patterns unfold — Banks himself, following the crisis in realism in postwar America remarked on by Deleuze, chooses a narrator whose presence as teller, witness, advocate, and prophet, makes him a guide to the world rather than a "window." This last role, that of the prophet, is adopted by Banks in the "Envoi," in which the narrator's voice melts back into the author's from which it came with Legba's help. Having witnessed the deaths of Bob, and of Claude, Charles, and twelve other Haitians who drown when Bob, fearing arrest by the Coast Guard, forces them out of his boat, and having witnessed Vanise become "sad and empty, a shell," at the death of her baby, as the loa Papa Ghede puts it (328), we hear Banks's voice ring with the prophet's anger.

The world as it is goes on being itself. Books get written — novels, stories and poems stuffed with particulars that try to tell us what the world is, as if our knowledge of people like Bob Dubois and Vanise and Claude Dorsinville will set people like them free. It will not. Knowledge of the facts of Bob's life and death changes nothing in the world. Our celebrating his life and grieving over his death, however, will. Good cheer and mournfulness over lives other than our own, even wholly invented lives — no, especially wholly invented lives — deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself. Sabotage and subversion, then, are this book's objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is. (366)

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14It becomes obvious at this point that Warning and Banks seem to have come to different conclusions regarding the intent and relative success of Flaubert in creating the illusion référentielle.
"When the field of society extends to the point of absence, of the invisible, the inaudible, and the immemorable, when the local community is dislocated to the point where individuals no longer appear to one another, become capable of being imperceptible, the age of writing begins."
— Jacques Derrida

Russell Banks's novel did not destroy the world as it is. What it did do, however, was explore what can happen when individuals attempt to explain their lives according to the United States's discourses about itself, and when they attempt to claim the promises which those discourses articulate. If attaining those promises proves impossible for a white working class family from New Hampshire and an impoverished black Haitian family at the end of the 1970s, however, that impossibility does not necessarily extend to all American times and all American places; Banks's point is that the discourse of the American dream which purports to describe the real tends to be conserved irrespective of changing historical and economic conditions. This sort of gap between the real and the American discourses which purport to describe it also characterizes the experiences, generally, of another American people: those of African descent. The contradiction between American idealism and the real economic situations of African Americans and their ancestors — a condition worth briefly reviewing — is perhaps most potently symbolized by the contradiction between the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the

1787 Constitution of the United States. The first document declared “these truths to be self-evident”:

That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. (In Boorstin 86)

Article I of the later Constitution, however, saw Enlightenment idealism compromise with an essential economic structure of the South, chattel slavery, when it accepted the existence of that peculiar institution, and determined that slaves would count as only “three fifths” of a person for the purposes of taxation and representation in the House of Representatives (Article I, Section 2, in Boorstin 109). That Article also allowed each state to determine its electorate, thereby excluding as “People” black slaves — and, not incidentally, women — from the process of determining that representation (Article I, Section 2, in Boorstin 109).

The uneasy compromise and balance of power in the Senate between slave states and free states founndered at the end of the 1850s when the North and the South were no longer able to agree on a formula for determining whether newly admitted states and territories were to be slave or free. In 1863, during the Civil War that ensued, President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery, and the Constitution was formally amended to reflect the fact in 1865. The twelve years which followed the Union’s victory, known as the Reconstruction, saw another amendment define the rights of citizens, and yet another prohibit discrimination in suffrage by race or colour. Called the “improbable years” by one historian (Bennett 216), it was a time of the Freedmen’s Bureau, of black Americans voting and being elected to state legislatures and to Congress, of radical land
redistribution proposals, of the founding of many black colleges, and of the partial economic, political, and social integration of blacks and whites in the South. The years which followed the last Confederate state's reentry into the Union in 1877, however, were characterized by the rolling back of these advances by a reenergized white supremacist South, and the "improbable years" were followed by what Benjamin Quarles calls the "decades of disappointment" for African Americans (see Quarles, chapter 6).

Southern states soon passed legislation, known as the Jim Crow laws, disenfranchising black Americans through poll taxes and literacy tests, which were often enforced in tandem with grandfather clauses that allowed poor and illiterate white men to continue to vote. Other Jim Crow legislation segregated the public world in the South, beginning with railroad cars in Tennessee in 1881 and soon spreading to other Southern states and to other public places such as hotels, restaurants, theatres, streetcars and buses, schools, hospitals, public rest rooms, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries. The legal challenges to these laws which worked their way through the courts ended in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision by the Supreme Court in 1896, which ratified the "separate but equal" distinction that enabled segregation. A white supremacist terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1867, helped ensure that black Americans did not cross social, political, and economic boundaries through a campaign of terror that was effective far beyond the numbers of black Americans its members murdered; "In the peak years of the Terrible Nineties . . . a black was lynched somewhere every day or two," reports one historian (Bennett 271). The sharecropping system of agricultural production kept in place black farmers' economic subservience to white land
owners and ensured the blacks' continued poverty. The white supremacy behind the law of the land was not confined to the South, however; though not segregated like the South, Northern cities tended to ghettoize black American migrants from the South into specific sections of each city, a program which often included intimidation, violence, arson, and race riots (see Bennett 274): "Blacks paid a high price for their escape from sharecropping and the Jim Crow laws" (Bailyn 633).

Faced with this perpetual dilemma — of having one's opportunity severely limited in the land of opportunity, of having no political rights and uncertain recourse to the law in a land which proclaims universalist Enlightenment values, of experiencing the American dream more as an American nightmare — African Americans had several possible American discourses through which they could, in the first half of the twentieth century, understand their relation to the American real, and to what the United States seemed to be saying about itself to itself, and to them. Three of these American discourses are 'said again' in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which is set in the late 1930s and early 1940s — a time during which these discourses served to articulate the kind of subjectivities available for African Americans. Indeed, *Invisible Man* is a comprehensive series of 'sayings again' and of a 'writing again.' At the authorial level, Ellison writes again various figures and texts available to him from both the black literary and popular traditions, and from the dominant white Euro-American tradition. But as

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2A fourth prominent discourse, African American religious practices and beliefs, while not entirely absent from *Invisible Man* (see, for instance, the black preacher Homer Barbee's sermon in chapter 5), is more prominent in a text which *Invisible Man* rewrites: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. 
much as Ellison the author repeats these elements, so too does he create a narrator who repeats, sometimes literally, American discourses about America: the narrator both recites and performs through citation different discourses which explain, through their own logic and vocabulary, the often confusing relation between his invisible African American body and the racist, blind and blinding, American social real.

The novel thus begins with an instance of recitation — the saying again of another’s words. The unnamed narrator, having given the oration at his high school graduation, has been promised the opportunity to repeat his speech to “a gathering of the town’s leading white citizens” (14). This is what he says:

“We of the younger generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and educator . . . who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom: ‘A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: “Water, water, we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel came back: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.’ And like him I say, and in his words, ‘To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are” — cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded...’.” (23-4)

This parable is in fact a direct quotation of Booker T. Washington’s famous address at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, which initiated the so-called “Atlanta Compromise.”

Washington was a widely respected African American leader and educator, and was known to be, in the parlance of the time, a spokesman for ‘the race’ — an image he cultivated in his 1901 autobiography Up From Slavery. Washington founded the
Tuskegee Institute in 1881, a black school which emphasized vocational training in agriculture and mechanical trades. What Washington offered in the Atlanta Address was a program of race relations in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow South. With the parable quoted by the narrator in *Invisible Man*, Washington suggested that African Americans should cast down their buckets where they were socially and economically — as he continues from the above quotation in *Up From Slavery*, “in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service” (128). The “Compromise” Washington argued for on behalf of African Americans was to forsake idealistic agitation for “social equality” (131) and political representation, and accept lower wages in menial jobs and lower standards of education, all in return for the economic cooperation of Southern whites. They, in turn, could be assured that “in the future, as in the past . . . you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world had seen” (129). Washington’s promise to Southern whites, only one year before *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was that “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (129).

As an instance of American discourse, Washington’s speech — and indeed his autobiography — are indebted to another American discourse from which it borrows and with which it dovetails: that of the American dream. Writing in the midst of what Mark Twain proclaimed as the Gilded Age, Washington wants to claim the promise of material reward in return for hard work for African Americans living in the South at the end of the nineteenth century. In doing so, Washington’s biography draws on the rags-to-riches
genre made popular during this time by the Horatio Alger\textsuperscript{3} stories and by the real life stories of those such as Andrew Carnegie — who, perhaps flattered by Washington’s imitation of his life, donated $20,000 for a new library at the Tuskegee Institute in 1900 (111). In Washington’s version of the rags-to-riches story, his childhood status as a slave is merely the school of hard knocks before his ascendance to lunching with President Roosevelt in the White House (Quarles 201) or receiving an honorary doctorate from Harvard (Washington 176-8). His autobiography stands as a declaration that the American dream is possible and realizable for black Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century, no matter the obstacles: “Every persecuted individual and race should get much consolation out of the great human law, which is universal and eternal, that merit, no matter under what skin found, is, in the long run, recognized and rewarded” (24). If Washington here universalizes and eternalises what I argue in Chapter One is a specifically and historically American idea,\textsuperscript{4} and in doing so extends its applicability to black Americans, he likewise extends to them the American connection between material and moral progress, another of the threads in the discourse of the American dream, when he concludes \textit{Up From Slavery} with the assurance that “the race is constantly making slow but sure progress materially, educationally, and morally” (146).

Washington’s ideas and the language of progress, reward, and uplift upon which

\textsuperscript{3}John Tebbel describes the American dream of “the Alger heroes” (7) in the following terms: “that the United States is a place where anyone, no matter what his origins, no matter how poor and obscure he may be, can rise to fame and fortune” (4).

\textsuperscript{4}In so doing, Washington partakes of other American nineteenth century idealisms which aligned themselves “with trans-historical dreams of human wholeness and social regeneration” (Bercovitch 365) — an idea to which I return in the Conclusion.
they draw are an important articulation⁵ of what I call the discourse of Booker T. Washington, a discourse which offered both an explanation of and a plan of action for the economic, social, and political place of the African American in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. It is the promise of this discourse which the narrator of Invisible Man attempts to claim during his verbal performance of the parable from Washington’s Atlanta Address. Reciting the very words of Booker T. Washington, the narrator signals his attempt to acquire one type of American subjectivity offered to him as a black American. The logic of the performance is openly stated in the middle of the quotation: “And like him I say, and in his words.” Using “his words,” the narrator’s iteration gestures toward Washington’s presence, and here the etymology of the word recitation is suggestive. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word “cite” comes, through the French word citer, from the Latin verb citāre, which meant “to move, excite, [or] summon.” In addition to the more common contemporary denotation of ‘to quote,’ then, to cite retains its denotation of “to summon [or] call,” “to bring forward an instance” of something, or to “call to mind” some reference or antecedent. It also retains its legal meaning of “to summon officially to appear in court of law, whether as principle or witness.” The narrator’s recitation of Washington’s 1895 speech is thus a sort of summoning of Washington: of his discourse, of his authority, and of his identity as a black orator and leader. The purpose is identity formation: the narrator is “like him” not only in that he repeats Washington’s words and...

⁵I emphasize articulation because Washington’s ideas were not new, but, as William Andrews says, Washington “was the first African American to render such a programme socially and morally coherent” (ix).
argues for an acceptance of the social segregation those words represent, but also in that he “say[s]”: he speaks in order to assume the American identity of a black orator and leader. “I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington,” the narrator admits before the speech (15). His recitation, or verbal citation, is an attempt to perform, and to situate himself within, the discourse of Booker T. Washington. The narrator has not accidentally discovered his words already existing “in other people’s mouths,” to use Bakhtin’s phrase; rather, his saying again of Washington’s speech is a performance that seems to have the intention of aligning his social self and his political beliefs with Washington’s self and project. The narrator has found words already existing in Washington’s mouth, but he, seemingly against Bakhtin, struggles to repeat them not by populating them with his own intention, but by the sincere reiteration of Washington’s supposed intent.  

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As I briefly note in the Introduction, many language and literary theorists have struggled to find terminology appropriate for describing the relation between the speaker and his or her spoken (or written) words. For Bakhtin, already existing discourse can be made one’s own only through populating the found words with one’s own “intention,” a notion which Bakhtin seems not to have questioned in his suggestive texts. When Bakhtin says, for instance, that the discursive word “becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention” (Dialogic 293), does he not imply that intent can be formed without recourse to language? Bakhtin’s model — even augmented by Vološinov’s theories — seem to assume a nonlinguistic mind, or will, which lies behind and motivates the sorting of linguistic material which comes to the subject from outside of it. Only when selected other-intentioned material is vivified and re-intentioned does discourse “become ‘one’s own’” (one wonders whom is Bakhtin quoting) and enter into an individual relation with the speaker. This mind or will behind Bakhtin’s intention seems open to critique, especially one of the metaphysics of presence offered by Jacques Derrida in *De la Grammatologie*.

Bakhtin in not alone in relying on the category of intention. Most irony theory does; recall that Sperber and Wilson’s echoic mention theory of irony which I examine in the Introduction, resting as it does on the ‘use-mention’ distinction, also makes use of the category of intention (i.e., in that the speaker has a critical attitude toward the mentioned
The setting of the narrator's recitation, however, has the effect of undercutting the summoning of Washington as an authority and the aligning of his own intention with Washington's. At the meeting, the narrator discovers that his speech is only ancillary to the evening's main entertainment — a white stripper and a "battle royal" featuring himself and nine of his black schoolmates, all blindfolded, all boxing it out to the last man. Following this event, the beaten, sweaty youths get the chance to compete for gold coins on a carpet laid out in the hall — an electrified carpet, coins which are actually worthless brass advertising tokens. Only after these events does the narrator, bruised from the fight and stunned from the electrical shocks, get a chance to perform his speech. Set within this context, the recitation of Booker T. Washington's speech signals a difference within the knowledge economy of Invisible Man. As he speaks, the narrator becomes conscious of "my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut [received during the battle royal], almost strangling me" (24). Afraid to spit in one of the available spitoons, the narrator swallows his own blood — and, perhaps metaphorically, the blood utterance). In his work as well, J.L. Austin has recourse to "intention" when attempting to find a vocabulary suitable for describing a speaker's relation to the spoken. In How to Do Things with Words, Austin includes the following in his preliminary evaluation of the conditions of felicity for a performative:

Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves. (15)

In this way, the 'sincerity' of a speaker — central to the problem of interpreting verbal irony — enters into speech act theory, whether in the constative / performative distinction or Austin's later locutionary / illocutionary distinction. Austin's reliance on intention, finally, is one of Derrida's criticisms of speech act theory in Limited Inc. I deal with the problem of the speaker's relation to his or her utterance in more detail in Chapter Three, where I look at the 'performative' aspect of the woman warrior's recitations.
of the thousands of African Americans lynched by whites during the so-called “Era of Booker T. Washington” (Bennett 443-644). Ironically, the swallowing of his own blood comes immediately after the narrator has related Washington’s parable of the ship suffering from drought, whose crew is dying of thirst and is told to lower their buckets where they are. Washington’s accommodationist strategy in the face of American white supremacy, Ellison may be saying, can give economic relief to impoverished black Americans only at the cost of their own blood, symbolized in the lynchings (which Washington, in a classic understatement, referred to as an “evil habit” of the South [186]).

The irony produced by the context of the recitation, which begins to signal a double knowledge about the discourse of Booker T. Washington, is heightened later in the speech. As he speaks, the narrator is heckled by the audience, which yells for him to repeat any word of three of more syllables, and he is made to repeat “social responsibility” several times. As the narrator recalls, the “room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt, distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private” (25). The narrator accidentally pronounces the phrase “social equality” — an idea repeatedly condemned by Washington, who wrote in *Up From Slavery* that the “wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly” (131). The room hushes, and the narrator is challenged by the M.C. to

7As I discuss below and in Chapter Three, alimentary imagery is prevalent in both *Invisible Man* and *The Woman Warrior.*
recant his mistaken enunciation, which he does. I would like to suggest, however, that this accidental slip of the tongue represents the beginning of a split within the narrator of his relation to the discourse of Booker T. Washington. As happens in the novel with increasing frequency, the narrator’s body does not always comply with the mind’s instructions; here the narrator says again a phrase which finds its way from others’ mouths into his, seemingly by its own volition. As the swallowing of his own blood reflects a doubleness in the knowledge economy of the novel, by which the reader and author understand that there is an often violent political and social cost to Washington’s Compromise, so too the narrator’s slip reveals the beginning of a psychic doubleness in his knowledge of the cited discourse of Booker T. Washington.

That splitting soon becomes evident. As a reward for his verbal performance that evening, the narrator receives a scholarship to attend the “state college for Negroes” (26), which is a thinly-veiled representation of Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. Indeed, the entire first section of the novel — from the battle royal until his expulsion from the college and his journey North — can be understood as an extended ‘performance’ of the discourse of Booker T. Washington, just as Bob attempts to ‘perform’ the discourse of the American dream in Continental Drift. The purpose of that performance is the claiming of the promise inscribed in that discourse — the promise, in the metaphoric logic of Invisible Man, to constitute him as an American fully equal to other Americans, able to be seen by others, and able to fix, with his own gaze, other white and black Americans. It is this central metaphor of sight and blindness, of concreteness and insubstantiality, which unites the discourse of Booker T. Washington with the other two dominant citations of
American discourse in the novel. This metaphor is initiated by the well-known first line of Ellison’s novel. “I am an invisible man” (3). He is invisible, he says, “simply because people refuse to see me” (3). His invisibility is distinct from that of H.G. Wells’s spook, as the narrator goes on to say:

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (3)

The logic of the trope suggests that invisibility is a social condition — that is, a relational condition at once produced by and productive of the gaze of others. The invisibility of Ellison’s narrator is a synecdoche, perhaps, for the absent presence of African Americans in the traditional histories of the United States (see Franklin) — as revealed, for instance, by Clinton’s Proclamation’s elision of slavery and racial oppression when describing the character of the nation “from its beginnings.” For Ellison, however, invisibility also signifies the sense in which the three discourses cited in Invisible Man fail to attend to the narrator’s existential and human individuality, defining him instead primarily by membership in a race.

Attention to the trope of invisibility produces a richly ironic double knowledge about the discourse of Booker T. Washington. The narrator receives a scholarship to Washington’s school immediately after fighting, blindfolded, nine other blindfolded black teenagers: he goes to continue his schooling in the social and political blindnesses and blindings which constitute invisibility, Ellison seems to be suggesting. Once at the College, he describes a statue of its founder (that is, Washington) in the courtyard:
It's so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it happened at all. Then in my mind's eye I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.

(28)

The events leading to the narrator's eventual realization that the latter is true are set in motion when, as a favoured student at the College, he is one day asked to take a white benefactor, Mr. Norton, on a tour of the College's surrounding area. With misgivings, he accedes to Norton's request to drive him to the home of a poor black sharecropper, ostracized in the community because of his incestuous rape of his daughter. Despite the narrator's repeated pleas to leave, the fascinated Norton demands to hear all of Trueblood's tale, after which Norton becomes delirious and asks the narrator to take him somewhere for a drink. The action spins comically out of control as the narrator brings Norton to the all-black "Golden Day" bar, where the ill Norton is treated by an enigmatic African American ex-army surgeon. The vet, who served in World War One, but is prevented from practising medicine in the South by the Klan (72), perceives that the benefactor's philanthropical project — his financial commitment to Washington's vision — not only does nothing to counter the narrator's invisibility as an African American, but is in fact complicit with, if not crucial to, the production of that effect. As the vet tells the benefactor, the narrator is "invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams" (72). But there is a second consequence of this relation: as the vet tells both the narrator and the benefactor, "neither
of you can see the other” (73). Invisibility thus ‘cuts’ two ways: the social violence suggested by the metaphor encompasses both white Americans’ unwillingness to consider those of African descent as fully equal participants in, and creators of, the United States, but also the narrator’s inability to consider the benefactor as a morally complex human being (a complexity which I address at the beginning of Chapter Three), instead of a deified, beneficent, and abstract force.

Returning to the College, the Booker T. Washington-style President of College, Dr. Bledsoe, who is “consulted in matters concerning the race” (78), berates the narrator furiously for having taken Norton to the old slave-quarter section of town. During their interview, the narrator begins to be disabused of his Washingtonian beliefs in the alliance between white philanthropy and the black College’s principle of economic integration and social segregation. When the narrator pleads that Norton himself had told him where to drive, Bledsoe responds with, “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South — did you forget how to lie?” (107). Bledsoe reveals himself to be a cynical power-broker, manipulating both blacks and whites in order to consolidate his own position; as he says, “I’s big and black and I say ‘Yes, suh’ as loudly as any burrhead when it’s convenient, but I’m still the king down here. . . . The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me” (109-10). Bledsoe recognizes that Washington’s project ensures the status quo of race relations in the South, and the white economic and political domination of blacks within the system of segregation, but he also recognizes and is willing to justify his own privileged role in regulating and defending that system: “It’s a nasty deal and I don’t always like it myself. But you listen
to me: I didn’t make it, and I know that I can’t change it” (110).

Bledsoe ends the discussion by expelling the narrator from the College, instructing him to go to New York and seek work, aided by several letters of reference provided by himself. Leaving Bledsoe’s office, the narrator momentarily experiences the full distance between Booker T. Washington’s discourse and the American real — the distance, in short, between the promises enshrined in Washingtonian discourse and that discourse’s inability to substantiate the narrator’s invisible body as an American capable of seeing and of being seen by other black and white Americans. And so he retches, “Almost a total disembowelment” (112), his invisible body rejecting at last the blood he swallowed during the battle royal, the violent price of Washington’s Atlanta Compromise. The narrator’s relation to Washington’s discourse, from the recitation “in his words” (24) to the extensive performance of Washington’s educational and social project for three years at the College, is an instance of repetition for the purpose of identity formation. a saying again which fails to constitute him as a visible and complete American subject.
II

"Look, didn't you find the book at all funny?"
— Ralph Ellison, on Invisible Man

Is there a specifically African American mode of saying again? Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has proposed that there is. In The Signifying Monkey, Gates argues that "Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use," and names as "Signifyin(g)" that process of "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (Signifying xxiv). This specific mode of saying again is not racially based, as a kind of genetically inherited trait; indeed, as Gates elsewhere points out, the specificity of African American repetition can itself be figured as the result of reiteration within a shared cultural history, so that an African American tradition is "not defined by a pseudoscience of racial biology, or a mystically shared essence called blackness, but by the repetition and revision of shared themes, topoi, and tropes" ("Formation" 108). Gates suggests that Signifyin(g) covers a wide range of practices of repetition, from formal revision and intertextuality to critical

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8Shadow 180.

9In The Signifying Monkey, Gates comments that "Revision is a curious and perhaps even ironic matter to pursue in the black tradition, if only because of the odd role that originality has assumed in black letters" (113), in reference to the commonly accepted wisdom, voiced by those such as David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, that African peoples were imitative, and not original, by nature. The need to write against that wisdom has sometimes lead black writers to efface any black literary antecedents: "in general, black authors do not admit to a line of literary descent within their own literary tradition" (120). The procedure of sorting of literary ancestors — their naming or their effacing by a writer — while perhaps important in all literary traditions, seems to be an even more pressing issue for ethnic minority writers in the United States and elsewhere, and is an issue which demands more attention.
reworkings of texts. Signifyin(g) is additionally complicated according to the type and number of antecedent texts; Ellison and Ishmael Reed, Gates argues, create "double-voiced" texts with both black and white literary antecedents (Signifying xxiii). Gates also shows that not all textual revisions need be critical, and recommends a distinction be made between "motivated Signification," which he terms "parody" and which implies critique, and "unmotivated Signification," which he terms "pastiche" and which implies homage and respect (xxvii). In this connection, Gates argues that the kind of refiguration often exercised in jazz is an act of homage, not of criticism, and offers the example of Duke Ellington's and John Coltrane's reworkings of each other's material on their joint album, Duke Ellington and John Coltrane (xxvii).

The question of homage and critique is important to the analysis of Ellison's repetitions of black (and white) texts in Invisible Man. Any analysis of those repetitions is complicated by another factor: the double 'voiced' narrative style of the novel. The narrative is told from the perspective of the young narrator as he moves through the events of the narration, but his telling is in turn written by an older narrator who recalls those events, and whose recollection the reader reads. The novel has a double-lensed narrative structure similar in this respect to Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior; that is, the immediate 'voice' of each novel is that of a more naive persona, who believes that verbal performance is the only process by which he or she can assume a visible, substantial, American identity. Behind that voice, which is characterized by a certain gullibility or credulity toward the power of verbal language, lies the wiser, older writer, more conscious of language, but also more determined to use that language to
raise a written 'voice.' What is written is the distance between the two 'voices.' There is ironic difference in knowledge between the young invisible man steeped in Booker T. Washington or American Communist Party discourses and idealisms, and the older, laughing, invisible man who writes from his hole in the ground. Likewise, there is ironic distance between the younger woman warrior, disturbed by her mother's Chinese talk-stories and anxious about acquiring a personality in the classroom, and the older woman warrior, determined to write her own 'talking'-story — which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three. In Invisible Man, this double-lensed narrative structure helps to create a division of knowledge within the text. That division of structure complicates any analysis of how texts are repeated, or said or written again. To whom, for instance, does the reader attribute the repetition — Ellison the author, the older writing narrator, or the younger experiencing narrator? As I ask above regarding the problem of intention, how does one describe the relation of the speaker or the writer to each of these reiterated discourses?

Several examples of this difficulty occur when attempting to unravel the ways in which Ellison's novel "Signifies" on some of Richard Wright's texts. Gates argues that the primary Significatory effect of Ellison's work is a criticism of Wright's mode of realism and naturalism, noting that "Ellison in his fictions Signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures" (Signifying 106). Beyond responding to Wright's realist style, which Ellison later referred to as the "limitations of his [Wright's] vision" (Shadow 117), and to which I return in the beginning of Chapter Three, Invisible Man also echoes with a difference several figures and ideas of Wright's texts. Ellison's novel
borrows, most obviously, from Wright’s 1944 short story “The Man Who Lived Underground” — itself a revision of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous *Notes from Underground*. In Wright’s story, the underground represents a retreat from racist and capitalist aboveground social space, and is a place from which a greater understanding of that space becomes possible. The pursued Fred Daniels escapes into a cave beneath a city, which he eventually wallpapers with stolen dollar bills, and lights the room with a lone light bulb. From his new vantage point, he comes to a different understanding of the world above: “He had not stolen the money; he had simply picked it up, just as a man would pick up firewood in a forest. And that was how the world aboveground now seemed to him, a wild forest filled with death” (45). Like Wright’s underground man, the *Invisible Man*’s narrator evades the riot at the end of the novel by falling through an open manhole, escaping into the world beneath New York. There, the narrator lights his own cave by 1,369 light bulbs, the electricity courtesy of “Monopolated Light & Power” (4). From there he writes, “put[ting] invisibility down in black and white” (11), his “hibernation” below ground “a covert preparation for a more overt action” (11). Like Wright’s underground man, Ellison’s experiences revelation during the journey below.

The underground man is a metaphor for alienation, retreat, meditation, and revelation which Ellison borrows from Wright in order to talk about African American experience in the 1940s and 1950s. Ellison’s *Signifyin(g)* on Wright’s story is more an act of homage and embellishment than an act of critique. A second Wright text has a more complicated relation to Ellison’s novel: Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy*. When *Black Boy* was in publication, the Book of the Month Club offered to carry the novel as
one of its two main selections — just as they had earlier carried *Native Son* in 1940, the novel which clinched Wright’s title as the preeminent African American writer of the 1940s. The arrangement with the Book of the Month Club, however, was made on the condition that Wright agree to publish only the first two-thirds of the book, which dealt with Wright’s childhood and early adulthood in the South, and exclude the last section, which dealt with Wright’s involvement with the Communist Party of the United States and with his experiences of racism in the North. That second part would have to wait over twenty years, until it was posthumously published as *American Hunger* in 1977.10

Much, of course, has been written on the personal and literary relationship between Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, a good deal of which examines the ways in which *Invisible Man* is a response to Wright’s more famous novel *Native Son*, and there is no need to review extensively that literature here (see, for instance, Davis, Stepto, Gates, *Signifying*, and Watts). For the purpose of this study, *Invisible Man* seems at once a “motivated” and an “unmotivated” Signification on *Black Boy* (to adopt Gates’s formulation, for the moment). One example of unmotivated signification is the battle royal, which echoes Richard Wright’s fight for money in Memphis in 1926 or 1927, arranged by his white bosses at an optical factory where he worked, with a black worker

10While Ellison read most of *Native Son* as it came out of the typewriter in 1938 and 1939 (Ellison, *Territory* 210), the relationship between Ellison and Wright appears to have cooled slightly between *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, so that it is a matter of speculation as to how much familiarity Ellison had with the manuscript of *Black Boy*, especially the unpublished section. Nevertheless, their friendship would suggest that even if Ellison had not read *American Hunger* until its publication in 1977, he knew of the broad strokes and the details of Wright’s life upon which it was based. In the analysis which follows, I refer to both of Wright’s texts published in 1945 and 1977 (in the 1991 Library of America edition) as *Black Boy*, unless otherwise specified.
of a rival optical factory *(Black Boy* 222-32). In *Black Boy*, when Wright flees the brutality of the South to go to Chicago, he eventually joins the John Reed Club, an American literary club sponsored by the Communist Party in which Wright became a member until breaking with the Party in 1944. The *Invisible Man*’s narrator’s journey to New York and involvement with the Brotherhood is a grand repetition of these two important events in Wright’s life, as written in *Black Boy*. To a certain extent, some of the motifs and themes that Ellison Signifies upon had already been themselves refigured in Wright’s work. Both Wright’s and the invisible man’s journeys, for instance, can also be seen as reworkings of the escape to the North motif of African American slave narratives. An obvious example would be Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, another intertext for *Invisible Man*.

In some ways, the narrator’s ascent to the North echoes the confusion Wright felt on first moving to Chicago, a confusion which ends with his involvement in the Communist party. During his ascent, the narrator is instructed again by the black Veteran surgeon who had given first aid to Norton: “for God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface,” he counsels (118). Looking beneath the surface partly accounts for the

11The essential model of modernity in the West is perhaps the pulling back of a surface illusion to reveal the real beneath: that spatial metaphor is used by Freud to describe both the animalistic sexual urges boiling like lava beneath the thin crust of civilization which barely suppress those urges (see *Civilization and Its Discontents*) and the relation of the unconscious to the conscious; it is used by Marx to describe the relation between the social and cultural practices which characterize the superstructure and the real economic relations of the base which produce that superstructure; it is implied in Darwin’s revelation that the planet’s domination by the human species is not the plan of a divine intelligence, long an assuring fiction for Western civilization, but is instead the accidental result of deeper, more obscure natural forces operating over billions of years. As if responding to these surface / depth models of modernity, literary
increasingly dream-like quality of both the narrator’s experiences in the North, and the
quality of their written recollection by the narrator. In Harlem the narrator sees a preacher
on a ladder, whom he later comes to know as Ras the Exhorter, and goes away thinking
that scene of the preaching had “a strange out-of-joint quality” (123). His sense of
unreality is produced in part by the violation of one of the central tenets of Booker T.
Washington’s Compromise, the social separation of blacks and whites: “Walking about
the streets, sitting on subways beside whites, eating with them in the same cafeterias
(although I avoided their tables) gave me the eerie, out-of-focus sensation of a dream”
(128). During this time, the narrator stays at the “Men’s House” and uses Bledsoe’s
letters to try to get a job so that he can return to the college. One of the letters finally
elicits a response, and he makes his way to Mr. Emerson’s office one morning. The
narrator is intercepted, however, by Emerson’s son, who is reading Freud’s Totem and
Taboo and is undergoing psychoanalysis (137, 141). Steeped in psychoanalytic
discourse, Emerson’s son asks the narrator, “Aren’t you curious about what lies behind

modernism’s characteristic gesture can be described as the unveiling of surface illusion to
reveal a deeper truth. So Marlow’s final allusive likening of European civilization to a
“whited sepulchre” (Conrad 13); so Henry James’s governess’ insistence that “there are
depths, depths!” (James 55); so Joyce’s final and deadening white snowfall covering the
graves of Dublin (287-8) with what Eliot would later call the “forgetful snow” (The
Waste Land I.4). Besides being a modernist himself, Wright accepted the Marxist model
which reargued the nature of the deep forces beneath Western capitalism, and which
remained the essential depth for him, even if he later became disillusioned with some
who shared his view. Ellison, however, is perhaps at the cusp of postmodernism, which
questions modernism’s single revelatory gesture by suggesting in part that the depth
revealed is perhaps only another surface concealing something else. Invisible Man
thematises this gesture, as the narrator learns eventually not only “to look beneath the
surface,” as the Vet tells him, but to look again, and then again.
the face of things?” (143). He then reveals to him the contents of Bledsoe’s letter to Emerson. The letter informs Emerson that the narrator has been expelled from the school permanently, and that he, “gone grievously astray” (145), should never know that he cannot return. Bledsoe ends the letter thus: “I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveller” (145). Stunned, the narrator returns to the Men’s House, where he tries to make sense of his betrayal by Bledsoe and the discourse of Booker T. Washington for which he stands. Having reacted violently once before to the dissociation between the discourse of Booker T. Washington and the American real of which it had attempted to give him cognitive understanding, the narrator’s invisible body continues to remind him that he knows less than he thinks. He hears the tune, and recalls the words of, “an old forgotten jingle”:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ well they picked poor Robin clean} \\
O \text{ well they picked poor Robin clean} \\
\text{Well they tied poor Robin to a stump} \\
\text{Lawn, they picked all the feathers round from Robin’s rump} \\
\text{Well they picked poor Robin clean.} \quad (147)
\end{align*}
\]

His gradual understanding requires a saying again, a different citation of Bledsoe’s letter in terms of the childhood rhyme: “‘My dear Mr. Emerson,’ I said aloud. ‘The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running’” (147). And then, in the final disillusioning of the discourse of Booker T. Washington for the narrator, he experiences corporeally that discourse’s distance from the real, as he does the night he vomits at the college: “I sat on the bed and laughed” (148).

Laughter comes to characterize generally the narrator’s more ironic relation to the
second cited discourse in *Invisible Man*, that of the thinly-veiled Communism of the Brotherhood. His induction into the Brotherhood happens in the wake of the dissolution for him of the discourse of Booker T. Washington. After his experience at Liberty Paints, which I deal with below, the narrator returns to Harlem’s Men’s House, where other African American men continue the attempt to realize “the illusions that had just been boomeranged out of my head”:

> college boys working to return to school down South; older advocates of racial progress with utopian schemes for building black business empires; preachers ordained by no authority except their own, without church or congregation, without bread or wine, body or blood; the community ‘leaders’ without followers; old men of sixty or more still caught up in post-Civil-War dreams of freedom within segregation. (194-5)

Eventually forced out of the House, the narrator returns to the house of an older African American woman, Mary, with whom he boards. At last disillusioned with the discourse of Booker T. Washington, the narrator is at a loss for something to take its place: “I had no contacts and I believed in nothing” (197). No longer able to situate himself within American society in the terms offered by the vocabulary and logic of Washingtonian discourse, the narrator experiences a crisis in the self-conception of his identity:

> And the obsession with my identity... returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly I couldn’t help being different from when I left the campus; but now a new, painful, contradictory voice had grown up within me... If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn’t care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. (197)

Curiously, the many voices inside the narrator’s head unleashed by the final failure of his recitation of Booker T. Washington’s discourse create the desire in him to continue
speaking: “And the more resentful I became, the more my old urge to make speeches returned” (197). Like the contradictory voices inside his head, which are perhaps enunciating the divergent languages within what might be termed the early 1940s American heteroglossia, the narrator’s own words become at once chaotic and unmanageable. As he confesses, “While walking along the street words would spill from my lips in a mumble over which I had little control” (197). The narrator yearns for a cessation of the “dissonance” of the voices: for his speech to become once again unified, managed, and directed by the centripetal forces of a single discourse.

The narrator soon discovers — or is discovered by — a discourse which promises just that. Witnessing the eviction of an elderly African American couple by white landlords and the potential for a riot which it threatens to ignite, the narrator is excited and repelled by the possibility of a violent confrontation. The narrator feels the urge to make a speech, and in the midst of the confrontation notices that “beneath it all there boiled up all the shock-absorbing phrases that I had learned all my life” (208). The shock-absorbing phrase the narrator comes up with for the occasion is one he has heard repeatedly; it is a phrase that on dit, a political slogan and cliché circulating in the United States. “We’re law-abiding,” the narrator shouts to the crowd, “We’re a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people” (209). As Zijderveld contends, clichés are often used in the attempt to smooth over social conflict, as if the enunciation of accepted common sense makes divided parties recognize a shared authority rather than different interests. According to Amossy, most clichés are without origin, and although the same might be said of “law-abiding,” the phrase is actually used by Washington in his Atlanta Address
(Washington 129). In a foreshadowing of things to come, however, the narrator’s repetition of the cliché used by Washington comes to have an ironic, differentiated nuance in his speech, as if he is no longer willing, or able, to align his intention for the phrase with Washington’s. The words have become “alien” to the narrator, to use Bakhtin’s phrase: “they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker” (Dialogic 294). His quotation of Washington’s cliché, said with an irony not wholly understood by the narrator, reflects the many contradictory discourses within him. His speech doesn’t exactly fail, because it is complexly-motivated, meant at once to pacify the crowd, to stoke its anger, to explore the nature of law and religion for African Americans, and, perhaps, to perform as an orator and to hear his own voice. However, members of the “Brotherhood,” as the narrator comes to know it, hear his improvised speech, and after aiding his flight from the scene, one of them invites him out for coffee to entice him to join their organization.12

This episode begins Ellison’s exploration of the Communist Party of the United States. With the Brotherhood, the narrator discovers a discourse able to dominate the chaotic voices in his head and in his speech through the establishment of a “grand Narrative,” to use Jean-François Lyotard’s term (15). To a certain extent, this extended episode can be seen as a somewhat critical revision of Richard Wright’s involvement with the Communist Party in Chicago and New York, as told in Black Boy. For Wright,

12Perhaps they hear as well an echo of Lenin when the narrator asks rhetorically of the crowd, “What is to be done?” (210). This unintended (by the narrator, not Ellison) is another example of the fractured knowledge produced by such ironic sayings again of words which exist already in other people’s mouths.
Communist discourse represented a “solution of unity” (302), both in terms of racial division and in terms of ideology. In *Black Boy*, Wright describes his first tentative encounters with the “grand Narrative” of American Communism:

> It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. My cynicism — which had been my protection against an America that had cast me out — slid from me, and, timidly, I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. My life as a Negro in America had led me to feel — though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself — that the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself. (302)

The Communist Party offered Wright, in the beginning at least, a warmer intellectual and emotional community than he had hitherto known; there he could avoid feeling, as he puts it in one of the important tropes of the autobiography, “like an animal in the jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile” (303). It was in the Communist-sponsored John Reed Club that he first felt genuinely accepted by whites, Northern or Southern, and it was that tolerance which initially compelled him to explore Communism. As he asked himself at the time, “How had these people, denying profit and home and God, made that hurdle that even the churches of America had not been able to make?” (305).

Eventually, of course, Wright was confronted with the factionalism of the John Reed Club and of the Communist Party leadership, and was initiated into a different intolerance based not upon race, but upon knowledge and doctrine. Wright falls out of favour with some of the leaders, including “the party’s theoretician on the Negro Question,” who is determined “to rid the Communist party of all its ‘Negro Trotskyite
elements” (329), among which, to his surprise, he is numbered. Wright’s naivety about the Communist Party in the United States and about the Soviet Union is perhaps easy to condemn in hindsight. Wright seems to have been profoundly influenced by Joseph Stalin’s book, The National and Colonial Question, for example. Stalin’s book, says Wright, showed how diverse minorities could be welded into unity, and I regarded it as a most politically sensitive volume that revealed a new way of looking upon lost and beaten peoples. Of all the developments in the Soviet Union, the method by which scores of backward peoples had been led to unity on a national scale was what had enthralled me. (318-9)

That “unity” achieved under Stalin, of course, is now known to have cost millions of lives (see Klehr and Haynes 91).

Like many American Communists, Wright’s disillusionment with the party began in part with the Moscow show trials (Schaub 4). Indeed, Wright witnesses his own show trial “by proxy” (355) when the Chicago Communists try a black Communist about whom Wright had written a biographical sketch. “I felt profoundly that they were travelling in the right direction,” Wright recalls about the Communist party, “yet if their having power to rule had depended upon my lifting my right hand, I would have been afraid to do so. My heart throbbed and I whispered to myself: God, I love these people, but I’m glad they’re not in power, or they’d shoot me!” (351). That ideological unity, Wright realizes, is also a totalizing ideology, and so the accusations against the accused man must be put in global terms. As Wright describes it, speakers at the trial in turn rise and offer characterizations of the international class struggle, of its relation to the United States, and to the status of Communism in Chicago itself:
Finally a speaker came forward and spoke of Chicago's South Side, its Negro population, their sufferings, and handicaps, linking all that, also, to the world struggle. Then still another speaker followed and described the tasks of the Communist party of the South Side. At last, the world, the national, and the local pictures had been fused into one overwhelming drama of moral struggle in which everybody in the hall was participating. . . . With the exception of the church and its myths and legends, there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist party. (353–4)

The single world picture, detailed with each speaker’s progressively smaller focus, is a unified whole not only in terms of political explanation, but in terms of history as well. “I knew, as I watched.” recalls Wright, “that I was looking at the future of mankind” (354). “I knew,” Wright continues, “that once this system became entrenched on earth, for good or bad, it could not fail, that all Europe and her armies could not destroy the Soviet Union, that the spirit of self-sacrifice that Communism engendered in men would astound the world” (354). While the spirit of other-sacrifice that Communism also engendered in men (and some women, like Jiang Qing — see Terrill) did astound the world, it becomes obvious late in Black Boy that Wright has severe reservations about the practices of certain Communists, though he continues to be persuaded by the totalizing and unifying potential of Communist discourse.

It is against these two latter qualities of 1940s American Communism that Ralph Ellison writes Invisible Man. In the coffee shop, the narrator’s interlocutor enthusiastically questions him about his speech, but suggests that he was wasting his time on the old evicted couple. “You mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals,” the man says, “they don’t count” (220). According to the man, “History has passed them by” (221). As if echoing Wright’s commentary on the totalizing pictures painted by the
Chicago Communists, the narrator recalls that “There was something mysterious and smug in the way he spoke, as though he had everything figured out — whatever he was talking about” (221-2). When the narrator rejects his plea to join the “organization,” the following exchange ensues:

“But you were concerned with that old couple,” he said with narrowed eyes. “Are they relatives of yours?”

“Sure, we’re both black,” I said, beginning to laugh.
He smiled, his eyes intense upon my face.
“Seriously, are they your relatives?”
“Sure, we were burned in the same oven,” I said.
The effect was electric. “Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!” he snapped, his eyes blazing.
“What other terms do you know?” I said, puzzled. (222)

Identifying the narrator as a “spokesman for your people” (222), the man fails to recruit the narrator, but his mysterious knowledge clearly intrigues the invisible man. “He gave the impression that he understood much and spoke out of a knowledge far deeper than appeared on the surface of his words” (223), he recalls, adopting the veteran surgeon’s surface / depth metaphor.

Returning home that evening, the narrator changes his mind and decides to accept the man’s offer of employment in the “organization.” His job, for which he is well-trained, is that of making speeches. He is taken by the man, who is known as Brother Jack, to a meeting of the Brotherhood, where the narrator begins his involvement with the Brotherhood’s project — begins to situate himself, that is, within the discourse of 1940s American Communism.13 Ellison structures the distribution of knowledge in the novel

13 While it is nowhere acknowledged in *Invisible Man* that the Brotherhood represents the American Communist party, that identification is commonly accepted by those who have written on the novel — including those Communists who reviewed the
similarly to *Continental Drift*, however, so that the audience understands more about the narrator’s relation to this new discourse than he does — or at least, more than does the younger experiencing narrator, if not the older writing one. When he first enters the apartment, he and the Brothers are greeted by Emma, a white woman, into whom Brother Jack pushes the narrator:

> “Excuse me,” I said, but she held her ground, and I was pressing tensely against her perfumed softness, seeing her smile as though there were only she and I. Then I was past, disturbed not so much by the close contact, as by the sense that I had somehow been through it all before. I couldn’t decide if it were from watching some similar scene in the movies, from books I’d read, or from some recurrent but deeply buried dream. (228)

Though the narrator seems to have suppressed the connection, the alert reader recognizes the scene as a repetition, an instance of déjà-vu, of the narrator’s forced confrontation with the white stripper before the battle royal at the beginning of the novel. In a dramatization of the South’s toxic fear of miscegenation, of the potent mix of race and sex (see Bennett, chapter 10), the important white men of the town usher the black youths into the hall while the stripper is still performing: “Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not” (16). The irony-producing division of knowledge in *Invisible Man* will only happen, in this instance, if the reader recognizes this Brotherhood scene as an

novel unfavourably after its publication. Abner Berry, for instance, understood the connection and complained in the Communist paper *Daily Worker* of the novel’s “anticommunism slanders” vis-à-vis the Brotherhood (quoted in Neal 108). Ellison himself was coy about the identification in a later interview, though he did not deny it when confronted with the connection (*Shadow* 179).

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14 The narrator’s experience of repetition is similar here to Freud’s description of *das Unheimliche*, often translated as the “uncanny.” Writes Freud: “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The ‘Uncanny’” 340).
echo of the preparation for the battle royal, and marks the connection between them.

Ellison creates another such echo later on. having the narrator give his first speech for the party in a boxing ring, before a crowd — thus recalling his humiliating recitation of Booker T. Washington's speech after the battle royal (258-62).

These ironic echoes foreshadow the narrator's eventual disillusionment with the Brotherhood, and with the discourse of the American Communist party. That discourse at first appears to allow the narrator an identity outside of merely race: in the Party, he is told, he can be a leader working for "claims broader than race" (267). He learns that those claims are possible because, as he says in an allusion to Marxist theory, "the Brotherhood had both science and history under control" (288). "I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race," the narrator recalls (268). At the apartment on the first evening with the Brotherhood, the narrator is offered the chance to be "the new Booker T. Washington" (231), a "living force" at work within "history" (232). As the Brothers, all "realists" and "materialists," discuss history and science, the narrator has "the sense of being present at the creation of important events, as though a curtain had been parted and I was being allowed to glimpse how the country operated" (232). The narrator discovers in the Brotherhood a method of "look[ing] beneath the surface" of things, as the vet put it. The non-racial analyses of the Brotherhood, based as they are on class, labour, and economics, are an explanation of the American real alternative to the racially-based discourse of Booker T. Washington. Where Washington's project was religious, humanitarian, and accommodating, the Communist party is secular, radically progressive, and revolutionary; the narrator is to be a "new"
Washington in these ways, and in that his discourse shall henceforth be based on history and science.

Initiated into the Brotherhood, the anonymous narrator is given a “new name” and a “new identity” as a member (235). Verbal performance of this new discourse is again required so that it might offer him visibility and identity. Unlike the discourse of Booker T. Washington, however, the narrator performs the discourse of American Communism not by recitation, by saying again another’s very words, but by improvising speeches, drawing only loosely on the language and vocabulary of the Communist party. When the narrator arrives in the boxing ring to give his first speech, he realizes that he “couldn’t remember the correct words and phrases from the pamphlets” which the Brotherhood had given him to read, and accordingly he has to “fall back upon tradition and since it was a political meeting, I selected one of the political techniques that I’d heard so often at home: The old down-to-earth, I’m-sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they’ve-been-treating-us approach” (258-9). He begins by improvising on one of the novel’s crucial metaphors, that of sight, using it to implicate the audience in their complicity and paralysis in the face of what could only be vaguely named as the ‘establishment.’ As with his speech at the eviction, however, the narrator is not in total control of his words, and his speech becomes increasingly referenced to himself. He is eventually moved to claim to the racially mixed audience that “with your black and white eyes upon me. . . . I feel suddenly that I have become more human . . . . With your eyes upon me I feel that I’ve found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land” (261-2). Speaking on behalf of the
Brotherhood, the narrator believes that he has finally discovered a discourse which substantiates his identity as an American. The verbal performance gives the narrator both the illusion of visibility, to both blacks and whites, and the illusion of a new American subjectivity, a sense of identity as a "native" in a "fraternal" community of other natives (see Shell 17-21).

Despite his hopes for the Brotherhood's discourse to substantiate his invisible body, the Brotherhood is unhappy with the improvisational quality of the narrator's speech, drawing as it does on the "tradition" of African American protest discourse, and not on the "correct words and phrases" which he had forgotten from the Communist pamphlets. Though his speech is received well by the crowd, it is criticized for being too emotional, "incorrect" and unscientific by several party members (264). The narrator is accordingly apprenticed with Brother Hambro, the party's "chief theoretician" for four months, whereupon he becomes the district spokesman for Harlem (270). Steeped in the discourse of the American Communist party, the narrator's job is to organize the party's work in Harlem based on the recent issue of the eviction, a job he does in part by continuing to give speeches. Indeed, what connects the narrator in the middle section of the novel with the one in the beginning is his self-identification as a black orator, in the tradition, if no longer the discourse, of Booker T. Washington.

However, even the Brotherhood's "claims broader than race" (267), made up of the discourse's "correct words and phrases," fail to help constitute him as a visible, substantial American subject. This failure happens in part because of his inability — and unwillingness — to situate himself totally within the Brotherhood's discourse. Indeed,
the narrator during this time is never able to weld firmly all the different languages of the American heteroglossia into a single discourse which could be mastered by the centripetal forces of the discourse of American Communism of the 1940s. Even as he speaks this discourse, he discovers that he is divided, and is unable to have a ‘true’ relation to what he says — that is, the slippage between himself and what he says increases in frequency. As I suggest above, that discursive slippage between his self and the discourse he repeats is experienced somatically, in instances which speak to the very corporeal logic of the metaphor Ellison uses to capture the narrator’s dilemma: his invisibility, his phantom-like, partial presence in the American social order. The narrator vomits after being expelled from his college, and sits on his bed laughing after discovering the actual content of Bledsoe’s letters. And so laughter comes to mark those moments in which the narrator senses a depth beneath an illusory surface, or becomes aware of his own alien relation to the words in his mouth.

The advent of laughter coincides with his willing adoption of the role that the Brotherhood wants him to play, and with the sense of unreality that he (and the reader) experience from the moment the narrator leaves the college. In connection with the Brotherhood, the narrator notices this quality first about Brother Jack when he takes the narrator out for coffee after the narrator’s eviction speech: “I had a feeling that somehow he was acting a part; that something about him wasn’t exactly real — an idea which I dismissed immediately, since there was a quality of unreality over the whole afternoon” (219). During the evening he meets the other members of the Brotherhood, he recalls that “Everyone smiled and seemed eager to meet me, as though they all knew the role I was to
play" — which is, as he later learns, the spokesman and chief organizer for the
Brotherhood in the district of Harlem (236). But as the poor Robin who has been once
already picked clean through his credulity regarding Booker T. Washington's
Compromise, the narrator is a little wiser in understanding that his future performance
should not necessarily be authentic:

But to hell with this Booker T. Washington business. I would do the work
but I would be no one except myself — whoever I was. I would pattern
my life on that of the Founder. They might think I was acting like Booker
T. Washington; let them. But what I thought of myself I would keep to
myself. Yes, and I'd have to hide the fact that I had actually been afraid
when I made my speech [during the eviction]. Suddenly I felt laughter
bubbling inside me. I'd have to catch up with this science of history
business. (236)

When he does catch up with the science of history business, after four months of ideology
training with Brother Hambro, the laughter subsides. though the narrator still feels that he
is playing a role. In fact, laughter afflicts his body only in those moments in which the
role to be performed — the enactment of the discourse of the American Communist party
— becomes too alien to the other contradictory languages which stubbornly circulate in
his consciousness.

In one sense, the narrator's laughter can be seen as a bodily response to theory. In
his Critique of Cynical Reason, Peter Sloterdijk suggestively analyses the relation
between the body and theory by considering the ancient figure of Diogenes. Diogenes is
"the first in the tradition of satirical resistance, an uncivil enlightenment" focussed on the
body, and represents a resistance to high theory which Sloterdijk names "kynicism"
(102). Sloterdijk opposes this kynicism to master cynicism, which is a form of "double
knowledge” characterized by “one for the rules of conduct of power, and one for the norms of general consciousness” (78). Laughter, argues Sloterdijk, is one of the ways in which kynicism opposes cynicism:

Kynical antiphilosophy possesses three essential media by which intelligence can free itself from “theory” and discourse: action, laughter, and silence. . . . Diogenes, the existentialist, would not be able to stop laughing about the way in which Marx again throws himself into the business of grand theory. In the presence of so much rage to “change,” Diogenes would exhibit a demonstrative silence and, with anarchistic laughter, he would rebuff the impudent demand to make the whole of one’s life into a tool of a (good old idealistically) planned “praxis.” (290)

Like Freud, who understood that the body sometimes speaks when the mouth will not, Sloterdijk suggests there may be “a second, speechless language” (139) ‘spoken,’ as it were, by the body. In delineating his “philosophical physiognomy” (139), Sloterdijk gives a special place to laughter. “When the cynic smiles melancholically-contemptuously, from the illusionless heights of power,” writes Sloterdijk, “it is characteristic for the kynic to laugh so loudly and unabashedly that refined people shake their heads. Kynical laughter comes from the intestines, it is grounded at the animal level and lets itself go without restraint” (143).

While I would argue, adopting Sloterdijk, that the narrator’s laughter is a somatic response to the cynical idealisms of Bledsoe and the Brotherhood (and, we are to understand, of Washington and the Communist party), I would also like to suggest that his laughter also signals a rupture in his spoken languages, a rupture which marks the

15 Writes Freud in Dora: “He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingers-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore. And thus the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind is one which it is quite possible to accomplish” (69).
presence of an ironic consciousness. As I point out in the Introduction, the different theories of ‘irony’ have in common two key factors: first, that irony is edged and doubly-structured, and second, that irony is always a split in knowledge. Ironic consciousness thus describes a distribution of knowledge within a single individual. While the knowledge economies of Continental Drift and Invisible Man are structured in such a way as to convey to the reader more information than is given to Bob (for example, that his motivating ideals are only the popular clichés of the once rich discourse of the American dream) or to the younger, experiencing invisible man (for example, that the boxing ring setting of his first speech for the Brotherhood echoes the setting of his battle royal speech, and suggests that both the discourses of Booker T. Washington and of the American Communist party in some measure exploit him), the developing ironic consciousness of the invisible man is a bifurcated distribution of knowledge within his ‘single’ self.

Paul de Man explores the nature of that bifurcated distribution in his reading of Charles Baudelaire’s essay “De l’essence du rire,” in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” According to de Man, ironic consciousness is exemplified for Baudelaire by the person who, laughing at his own fall, is “un philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son mot” (Baudelaire 251, quoted in de Man 211-2). De Man argues that this notion of dédoublement — “self-duplication or self-multiplication” (de Man 212) — “emerges at the end of the essay as the key concept of the article, the concept for the

16 A philosopher, a man who has acquired, by habit, the power to quickly double himself and witness like a disinterested spectator the phenomena of his self.’ The translations of Baudelaire’s text are my own.
sake of which the essay has in fact been written” (212). The structure of dédoublement, according to de Man, is "a relationship, within consciousness, between two selves" (212), a structure which also characterizes irony, for which "il faut qu’il y ait deux êtres en présence" (Baudelaire 262, quoted in de Man 212). And because, according to Baudelaire, "la puissance du rire est dans le rieur et nullement dans l’objet du rire," for the philosopher to be able to laugh at his own fall requires "dans l’être humain l’existence d’une dualité permanente, la puissance d’être à la fois soi et un autre" (Baudelaire 251, 262, quoted in de Man 211-2).

Throughout his essay, de Man is at pains to articulate the different relations allegory, irony, and symbol have to the temporal. The main difference between symbol and allegory is that the symbol’s “structure is that of the synecdoche, for the symbol is always a part of the totality that it represents” (191), while the “allegorical sign refers to another sign that precedes it” (207). "Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference" (207). De Man also denies irony a preceding original sign: “Irony is a synchronic structure” (226), he says, “an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single moment” (225). While the allegorical

17. "It is necessary that there are two beings present."

18. "The force of laughter is in the one who laughs, and not at all in the object of laughter."

19. "In the human being the existence of a permanent duality, of the power to be at the same time himself and another."
sign refers back to an antecedent sign with which it cannot coincide, irony's double signs are both immediately present, neither preceding the other. “This is the instant,” says de Man, “at which the two selves, the empirical as well as the ironic, are simultaneously present, juxtaposed within the same moment but as two irreconcilable and disjointed beings” (226). Because of its instantaneous temporal quality, de Man is unwilling to see irony as capable of the type of sustained narrative which Warnig identifies in Flaubert, for instance:

It could be argued that the greatest ironists of the nineteenth century generally are not novelists: they often tend toward novelistic forms and devices — one thinks of Kierkegaard, Hoffmann, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, or Nietzsche — but they show a prevalent tendency toward aphoristic, rapid, and brief texts (which are incompatible with the duration that is the basis of the novel), as if there were something in the nature of irony that did not allow for sustained movements. (De Man 210-11)

While de Man's formulation of ironic consciousness is invaluable, there are a few problems with his reading of Baudelairean irony, not the least of which is the fact that, as several critics have pointed out, the word “irony” is never mentioned in Baudelaire’s essay (see Dane 178). Indeed, de Man’s work on irony, argues Joseph Dane, is both dehistoricized and delexicalized, as it does not take into account the multiple meanings irony (like allegory) has had, and continues to have, in critical discourse. If I, like de Man and to Dane’s condemnation, am “start[ing] out from the structure of the trope itself” (De Man 211; see Dane 178), I do so not in order to define a dehistoricized irony for all time, but in the interest of describing the “certain literary phenomena” (Dane 4) of repetition and difference, of citation and recitation.

What de Man’s exegesis of Baudelaire’s essay overlooks is the fact that though
irony may happen in a single instant of dédoublement, it requires the prior existence of a sign or discourse. The problem with de Man’s formulation of atemporal irony becomes clearer if we return to Baudelaire’s essay, and to the original occasion of ironic dédoublement. “Qu’y a-t-il de si réjouissant,” asks Baudelaire,

dans le spectacle d’un homme qui tombe sur la glace ou sur le pavé, qui trébuche au bout d’un trottoir, pour que la face de son frère en Jésus-Christ se contracte d’une façon désordonnée, pour que les muscles de son visage se mettent à jouer subitement comme une horloge à midi ou un joujou à ressorts? (248)²⁰

The reason, says Baudelaire, is that the rieur — recalling that laughter is always in the laughter and never the object of the laughter — has “un certain orgueil inconscient” (248).²¹ And at the heart of this pride is an assumption of superiority: “moi, je marche droit; moi, mon pied est ferme et assuré” (248).²² The philosopher who laughs at his own fall, however, laughs because his pride and the fact of his fall exist together. In this case, the philosopher’s presumption of superiority is the prior edge of meaning — it exists before the fall in the street — which comes into contact with the second edge, the knowledge of one’s own fall, and together they characterize the double structure of irony. As in allegory, the antecedent sign cannot “coincide” with the allegorical sign; so too with the ‘ironic’ sign and its antecedent sign or discourse. The difference, however, is

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²⁰“What is so pleasing in the sight of somebody who slips on the ice or the cobblestones, or who stumbles at the edge of the sidewalk, so that the face of his brother in Christ should contract in a most disturbed fashion, so that his facial muscles start to play suddenly like a clock striking noon, or a bobbing spring-toy?”

²¹“A certain unconscious pride.’

²²‘Me, I walk straight; me, my foot is solid and sure.’
that the 'ironic' sign is in conflict with its antecedent, but is (however partially) present during the instant of dédoublement, so that the two meanings (to adapt de Man's formulation) "are simultaneously present, juxtaposed within the same moment but as two irreconcilable and disjointed beings" (226).

De Man's unwillingness to grant the double structure of irony a temporal dimension is related to another problem in his conceptualization of that structure. At the beginning of the section on irony, de Man criticizes its traditional definition: "It obviously does not suffice to refer back to the descriptive rhetorical tradition which, from Aristotle to the eighteenth century, defines irony as 'saying one thing and meaning another' or, in an even more restrictive context, as 'blame-by-praise and praise-by-blame'" (209). The problem de Man locates here is a common one in irony theory: many theorists, such as Sperber and Wilson, are satisfied to talk about the "literal" and "ironic" meanings of an utterance. In this formulation, a competent reader correctly reads irony by seeing through the "literal" meaning of an utterance or text to the real or "ironic" meaning behind or beneath that utterance or text. This hermeneutic model is typically implied in the metaphoric spatializations of irony, such as those suggested by Muecke and Booth, who see the interpretation of irony as a movement from one infirm space to another deeper one (Muecke) or from one shaky platform to a higher, sturdier one (Booth). De Man's language, however, reproduces this formulation, at least in structure, when he speaks of "the two selves, the empirical as well as the ironic" (226). For de Man, it is the "ironic" self — the product of dédoublement — which laughs at the "empirical" self's "mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself" (214). Noting that irony is "the
recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (220), de Man cautions that the heightened consciousness belongs to that of the “ironic” self, and “it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world” (222). But what is “ironic” about the self that laughs at the fall? Not the act of falling: that happens to the “empirical” self. But nor can it be the fact of pride, which, as we have seen, is an assumption that has prior existence within, according to Baudelaire, the “empirical” self as well. The real source of irony, as I suggest above, is the relation of these two edges within the so-called “empirical” self. To speak of an “ironic” self as the location of superior knowledge is to imply an act of substitution which is at the heart of traditional definitions of irony (i.e., saying one thing and meaning another).

The distinction is not overly subtle. If irony is a process of semantic substitution, and the “ironic” self or meaning supersedes the “empirical” self or “literal” meaning, irony is no longer a double structure, but a dialectical structure which ‘ends’ in a single term. The advantage of conceptualizing irony as a double structure is that it transforms irony from an isolatable object into a continuous relation between two edges of meaning, one or both of which may have prior existence, but both of which are somehow “present” in the moment of friction. If we go back again to Baudelaire’s essay, we find the essence of dédoublement to be not substitution, but double presence; or to put it another way, the essence of dédoublement is the lack of coherence in the subject. This is made clear in the distinction he makes between “le rire” and “la joie”: “La joie est une. Le rire est l’expression d’un sentiment double, ou contradictoire; et c’est pour cela qu’il y a
convulsion” (253).  

I want to suggest, furthermore, that because consciousness has its materiality in language, it is the edges of two or more conflicting discourses which form the double presence characterizing ironic consciousness. What the narrator of *Invisible Man* begins to experience, while situating himself in and performing the discourse of the American Communist party, is the slippage between that discourse and an antecedent, less articulate part of his self. Those moments of slippage are revealed in part by laughter, but also by the narrator’s sense of being at once himself and another; as Baudelaire put it, it is “la puissance” — or the curse — “d’être à la fois soi et un autre.” His decision, before he knows much about the Brotherhood, to play along with their plans to make him a “new Booker T. Washington” is a decision to adopt a role, to double himself in an instant of *dédoulement* — hence his feeling of “laughter bubbling inside me” (236). As he muses before his first speech for the Brotherhood:

> This was a new phase. I realized, a new beginning, and I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal — all now far behind. Perhaps the part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, was still the malicious, arguing part; the dissenting voice, my grandfather part; the cynical, disbelieving part — the traitor self that always threatened internal discord. Whatever it was, I knew I had to keep it pressed down. . . . I was becoming someone else. (253-4)

As the narrator delves deeper into the Brotherhood’s politics and philosophy, the suppression of his “traitor self” becomes easier. And yet it is always disturbed by images from his past, such as his grandfather, that seem to remind him that the Brotherhood’s

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23. Joy is *single*. Laughter is the expression of a double, or contradictory, sentiment; and that is why there is a convulsion.”
“claims broader than race” might come at the price of the dismissal of race as a category of social analysis, and at the dismissal of what is specific to his African American heritage.

As the above quotation suggests, it is often the memory of his grandfather which recalls to him the self he tries to suppress. His grandfather had been a slave, the narrator recalls in the first chapter, and had been set free eighty-five years before:

He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his death-bed he called my father to him and said, “Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”

(13-4)

His grandfather’s final command to allow the white supremacist American social body to “swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” is an interesting parallel to what Sau-ling Wong has identified in images of eating in Asian American literature: that is, they are figurations of the American (or Canadian) inability to digest and assimilate ‘foreign’ matter (Wong, Reading 27). For the narrator, however, the memory of his grandfather is a disturbing call to enter into a struggle against American injustices, a struggle which may begin by a fundamental questioning of the two political projects to which the narrator has given his allegiance.

\[24^\text{The narrator states that “About eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free” (13). As Abraham Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in the South on January 1, 1863, during the Civil War, this puts the narrator’s fictive writing of Invisible Man at about 1947 or 1948, and the events of the novel in the five to ten years preceding.}\]
His first speech is given a mixed reception, as I note above, by members of the Brotherhood, perhaps suggesting that the discordant voices inside his head, one of which seems to be associated with his grandfather, have yet to become ideologically settled by the "grand Narrative" — or master discourse — of the Communist party. As the narrator muses about his speech that evening, he wonders about the source of his words, and what they meant, and he acknowledges that the speech was given "as though another self within me had taken over and held forth" (267). When those voices do settle down into the discursive unity provided by the Brotherhood, the narrator takes up his job as the spokesman for the district of Harlem. He moves from playing a role to more or less totally adopting that role. Yet even after that change, the portrait of Frederick Douglass hanging in his office reminds him of his grandfather, a memory he tries to ignore, "remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather's voice" (286). But the events at his new job quicken, and the narrator recalls that "it went so fast and smoothly that it seemed not to happen to me but to someone who actually bore my new name" (286). Ellison signals the continuation of the narrator's dédoublement, for even as he pursues his new work he becomes aware that there were two of me: the old self that slept a few hours a night and dreamed sometimes of my grandfather and Bledsoe and Brockway and Mary, the self that flew without wings and plunged from great heights; and the new public self that spoke for the Brotherhood and was becoming so much more important than the other that I seemed to run a foot race against myself.

Still, I liked my work during those days of certainty. (287)

Situated within the discourse of the Communist party, the narrator's ideological "certainty" lends depth and stability to his new-found identity. That stability is disturbed
one day when the narrator becomes involved in factional fighting within the Brotherhood.

"Up to now," the narrator recalls,

I had felt a wholeness about my work and direction such as I'd never known; not even in my mistaken college days. Brotherhood was something to which men could give themselves completely; that was its strength and my strength, and it was this sense of wholeness that guaranteed that it would change the course of history. This I had believed with all my being, but now, though still inwardly affirming that belief, I felt a blighting hurt which prevented me from trying further to defend myself. (306)

The narrator is instructed to take a break from his work in Harlem, and is instead to lecture downtown on "the Woman Question" (306). It is possible to hear, with this incident, Ellison's own cynical laughter at the ease with which the Brotherhood — read the American Communist party — can switch from one Question to another, without missing a theoretical step. But one can also hear Ellison's laughter at the narrator for this easy switch as well. "Until tonight I'd always heard you on minority problems," he hears one night from a white woman who is trying to seduce him. "This is a new assignment," the narrator replies. "But from now on one of our main concerns is to be the Woman Question" (313). For the narrator, his quasi-trial by the Brotherhood after which his assignment is altered to the new Question — a Signification, perhaps, on Richard Wright's trial by proxy by the Chicago Communist party — marks the start of the dissolution for him of the Communist discourse of history and science, and of its legitimacy as a language through which he can form his own identity.

But with Ellison's laughter it is also possible to locate a different blindness amidst his insight: Ellison's seeming inability to recognize the political and economic 'invisibility' of women in the history of the United States (not to speak of their invisibility in *Invisible Man*; see Tate).
There is likely a historical referent for this section of the novel, one which had widespread ramifications for the participation of African Americans in the Communist party of the United States. During the Second World War, the American Communist party’s commitment to issues of race was weakened with the abrogation of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22 of 1941, American Communists, who had opposed any American involvement in the European war up to that point (Klehr and Haynes 94), were instructed to shift their emphasis from fighting class and racial oppression at home to defeating the threat of fascism abroad. In one telling instance, African American papers which had conducted a “Double V” campaign (Victory over Hitler abroad and Victory over Jim Crow at home), were criticized by American Communist party-controlled bodies as “disruptive” (see Howe and Coser 415). As Irving Howe and Lewis Coser put it,

Those Negro leaders who felt that the struggle for the rights of their people could not be suspended in the name of the war were ferociously attacked by the Communists. . . . Throughout the war, the Communists were the main force within the Negro community in favor of muting — and often preventing — the campaign for equal rights. (415-6)

Many African Americans involved with the Communist party, including Richard Wright, were dismayed at what they saw as a betrayal of purpose. In September of 1940, Wright was elected vice-president of the Communist-sponsored American Peace Mobilization, which was opposed to American involvement in what was at the time a European war. Upon the German invasion of the Soviet Union, however, the group changed its name to American People’s Mobilization, and Wright came under pressure from party officials to mute his criticism of the Administration’s racial policies (for example, the existence of
segregation in the armed forces or its unwillingness to confront discrimination in the armament industries). The next year, Wright quietly left the party because of its unwillingness to confront ongoing racial discrimination. In this connection, Marc Shell’s comments on racial ‘brotherhood’ in the United States are especially pertinent:

Perhaps denying to American blacks the status of brother humans had the conservative effect of maintaining, even after the 1860s, America’s familial vacillation between endogamous and exogamous conflict — familiar already from the scission where one nation became two (the War of Independence) and the twinning where two nations became one (the Civil War). The role of “brother becoming other” or of “other becoming brother” in the speculative theater of American ideology — a role once played by the distant British and then by the neighboring Northerner or Southerner — could now be played out, in the tradition of Twain’s *Those Extraordinary Twins* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, by the part of “blacks becoming white” or “whites becoming black.” (Shell 20)

The facile move of the narrator’s “Brotherhood” from one (national) conflict to another (international) conflict is one such vacillation, one which proved costly for African American Communists in the 1940s.

The American Communist party’s manipulation of African American radicalism is one of the major critiques in *Invisible Man*. Soon after his assignment to the Woman Question, the narrator is told that Tod Clifton, a promising young African American leader in the Brotherhood, has disappeared from the Harlem office. The narrator is reassigned to Harlem, and instructed to find Clifton. There, he finds the organization in disarray, and its support in Harlem rapidly dwindling: “A lot has occurred about which I wasn’t told,” the narrator realizes at the Brotherhood’s Harlem office, “something that had not only stifled the members’ interest but which, according to the records, had sent them away in droves” (323). The next day, in an allusion to the historical shift in focus of
the American Communist party, he discovers more details from the members that remain:

As for the loss of membership and influence, it was a result of a new program which had called for the shelving of our old techniques of agitation. There had been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt that for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance. (324)

The narrator soon discovers what has become of Clifton, in an allegory of the American Communist party’s manipulation of African Americans. The narrator finds Clifton on the street, seemingly mad, selling Sambo dolls:

A grinning doll on orange-and-black tissue paper with thin flat cardboard disks forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face. (326)

The “mysterious mechanism” controlling the doll’s performance is Clifton, who enacts with the dolls a literalization of the Brotherhood’s control over its black members — such as the narrator. “He’s Sambo, the dancing, Sambo, the prancing, / Sambo, the entrancing, Sambo Boogie Woogie paper doll,” Clifton sings as he moves the doll (326).

Clifton’s shooting death by a policeman causes a further crisis in the narrator’s faith in the discourse of the Brotherhood, and of its claims about history. Pondering Clifton’s plunge outside “history,” the narrator begins to question for the first time the nature of the Brotherhood’s radical science of history, and the possibility that, like traditional white history, it essentially ignores the lives and experiences of African Americans (328): “The cop would be Clifton’s historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. . . . Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?” (332). Later in the subway, the
narrator sees three zoot-suiters, and they too provoke him to wonder about their status in history written by whites — whether traditional history or radical, Marxist history. "They were men out of time — unless they found the Brotherhood," the narrator thinks to himself, struggling to hold on to the discourse of the Communist party: "Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten ... But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can) — who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?" (333). The zoot-suiters' presence leads the narrator to question the Brotherhood's control over history itself: "What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise!" (333).

Unable to suppress these questions or to reassert the dominance of the Brotherhood's discourse within him, the narrator organizes Clifton's funeral. But does so doubled, "seeming to observe it all from off to one side" (339). While the funeral seems to mark a temporary reversal in the decline of the Brotherhood in Harlem, the narrator fails to realize that most of the mourners understand Clifton's death not in terms of class (that the police shot down someone who was organizing the poor and the workers) but in terms of race (that the white police shot down a local black leader). As consistently happens throughout the narrator's experience with the discourse of the Communist party, he becomes aware of people, ideas, or feelings that are outside of it, and yet are still a dissonant part of him that has been muted. As the mourners sing a spiritual, "There's
Many a Thousand Gone,” the narrator senses that “I was listening to something within myself.” The song

had touched upon something deeper than protest, or religion; though now images of all the church meetings of my life welled up within me with much suppressed and forgotten anger. . . . [T]he song had aroused us all. It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he’d changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of the Brotherhood had given me no name. (342)

As if in full circle, the narrator’s final speech for the Brotherhood is, like his first, a verbal performance in which no single discourse seems able to dominate the others, and is thus suspect from the Brotherhood’s strict ideological point of view; it is, like a jazz improvisation, a repetition and variation on old themes, none of them strictly controlled by history and science. With the repeated phrase “His name was Clifton” punctuating the speech, the narrator’s funereal eulogy owes more to traditional African American preaching and oratory than to the Brotherhood’s political goals. “It wasn’t political,” the narrator mistakenly thinks during the speech, “Brother Jack probably wouldn’t approve of it at all, but I had to keep going as I could go” (345). Indeed, the narrator goes on to allude that Clifton was killed because he was black: “But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time and the place. He lost his hold on reality. . . . The cop? What about him? He was a cop. A good citizen. But this cop had an itching finger and an eager ear for a word that rhymed with ‘trigger,’ and when Clifton fell he had found it” (345). As he finishes, the narrator experiences a “sense of failure. I had let it get away from me, had been unable to bring in the political issues” (346). As an improvised
speech, straying away from the discourse of the Communist party, it comes out of an internal discord: the voice he wants (or the party wants) does not come out but another does. This final speech and the first one for the Brotherhood given in the boxing ring are, interestingly, the only speeches for the Brotherhood that the reader actually reads. The other verbal performances, thoroughly within the discourse of the American Communist party, are not transcribed. The (older) narrator only writes his speeches when they are evidence of the conflicting discourses within his (younger) self.

Following his speech, the narrator is called downtown to a meeting with the Brotherhood’s leaders, where the final break occurs. After telling them that he tried to contact the downtown (that is, white) leaders and could not get through, Brother Jack asks sarcastically where he got the “personal responsibility” to go ahead with the funeral.

“‘From your ma — ‘,” the narrator says before he can stop himself (350) — another slip into, or out of, the African American tradition of Signifyin(g) (see Gates, Signifying 66). Against “the theory and the business of strategy,” as Brother Jack puts it, the narrator insists for the first time that he is more in tune with the political consciousness and the “reality” of Harlem, with the “whole unrecorded history” of the African American community, than is the Brotherhood (356). Brother Jack dismisses the narrator’s connectedness, and in turn asserts that “We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to ask them what they think but to tell them” (357). When Brother Jack’s glass eye falls out, Ellison takes up again the metaphors of sight, blindness, and invisibility which run throughout the novel. Brother Jack, it may be understood, has only the single perspective of Communist discourse
through which to view the world. But he is also blind to the invisible man: "He doesn’t even see me," the narrator realizes (359). Brother Jack’s blindness to the narrator is also a synecdoche for the Brotherhood’s — the Communist party of the United States — blindness to African American life and culture, and the ways race inflects social and political experience in the United States. The Brotherhood’s commitment to science and history is not so much a mode of analysis which incorporates the dynamic of racial oppression in the United States as it is mode of analysis which, by using race issues to its own ends, transcends them and leaves them behind. And so the narrator, on realizing that he is in the end still invisible to the Brotherhood, has the power of its discourse over him broken: “I had boomeranged around,” he thinks, echoing his thoughts at the final dissolution of the discourse of Booker T. Washington (359). During his final session with the party theoretician, Hambro, he is told that “your members will have to be sacrificed” in the interests of the “larger plan” (378). Claiming “scientific objectivity,” Hambro argues that “through our very position in the vanguard we must do and say the things necessary to get the greatest number of the people to move toward what is for their own good” (381). The narrator recognizes this for what it is: master “cynicism” of the kind identified by Sloterdijk (381).
"[The book] gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance"
— Frederick Douglass

_Invisible Man_ is a novel in which the narrator progressively confronts, works through, and discards three American discourses which purport to explain to African Americans their place and identity in the American social order. Booker T. Washington’s project — and the logic of its discourse, its centripetal forces, and its vocabulary — was a compromise solution for the segregated South: African Americans would accept social apartheid and political injustice in return for the economic benefits of being integrated, at the very low end, in the Southern white economy. The narrator’s performance of this discourse begins with a strict recitation of Washington’s words, and continues with the identification with, and enactment of, Washington’s proposals and patterns. The second discourse is not an African American discourse, but is a particular language, with, again, a logic and a vocabulary, aimed at (among others) African Americans. It purports to confront some of the injustices which Booker T. Washington’s Compromise sanctioned, and to do so in such a way as to create an alliance between dispossessed black and white Americans. The narrator’s performance of this discourse is partly based, like his performance of the first, on oration; his orations for the Brotherhood are, however, not as recitational as they are improvisational, especially as he becomes sensitive to his doubled self and the ironic, laughing consciousness it produces. The final growth of that ironic

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26 *Narrative* 84.
consciousness — greater than any Russell Banks permits Bob in *Continental Drift* — and the kynicism which attends it seems to disallow any thorough identification with the third discourse the narrator confronts, that of Ras the Exhorter's nationalism.

Ras the Exhorter seems to be a compound of several historical figures. Perhaps the most important is Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican American who in the 1920s exhilarated many African Americans with his nationalist project, which had as its slogan "Africa for the Africans at home and abroad" (Bennett 355). Garvey, whose power peaked in 1921, was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In 1925 he was arrested for mail fraud and jailed, and in 1927 he was deported to Jamaica. "The time has come for the Negro to forget and cast behind him his hero worship and adoration of other races, and to start out immediately to create and emulate heroes of his own," Garvey wrote in an article called "African Fundamentalism" in 1924 (Garvey 4). Garvey advocated the racial unity of Africans and peoples of the African diasporas, arguing that their allegiance should be to race, not to religion or nation. "Let no religious scruples, no political machination divide us, but let us hold together under all climes and in every country, making among ourselves a Racial Empire upon which 'the sun shall never set'," Garvey argued, as if to reverse but not destroy colonialist practices (5). The figure of Ras the Exhorter may also owe something to the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, who was also known as Ras Tafari. When Ethiopia was invaded by Italy in 1935, Selassie became somewhat of a hero for black Americans, and the event

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27An important black nationalist, Garvey is at least one source for the composite Ras, although Ellison in an interview denied their strict equivalence (*Shadow* 181).
seemed to clarify the connection between the continued white domination of people of African origin in the United States and in Africa (Bennett 362). Both figures, at any rate, suggest a pan-African nationalist consciousness of the kind that surfaced in the United States in the early 1900s and survives today, in a different form, in the Nation of Islam. Sylvia Wynter has associated Ras the Exhorter with Marcus Garvey, and suggested that both owe their influence to “the Black variant of the discourse of ‘Romantic Nationalism’” (Wynter 441). The narrator’s confrontation with this black nationalist discourse is one of temptation only insofar as it is by proxy; it is Tod Clifton, Ellison suggests, who is at some level convinced by Ras’s claims that the Brotherhood is selling out African Americans (Invisible Man 277).

By the end of Invisible Man, the disillusioned narrator does seem to be more open to images, figures, and ways of thinking that Washingtonian discourse would have identified as politically foolish, and which the Brotherhood would say was an instance of him “riding ‘race’ again” (354). However, his groping after a new articulation of his identity seems qualitatively different from his acceptances of the two discourses which came before. If his performance of Washingtonian discourse could be characterized as sincere and authentic (if naive), and his performance of Communist party discourse as at times wary, laughing, and uneasily doubled, his post-Brotherhood search for identity is characterized by an ironic consciousness, a rejection of both strict authenticity and, 

28 The Nation of Islam’s brand of nationalism, in fact, can partly be traced to Booker T. Washington. Like Washington, the NOI advocates a religiously based ethic of self-reliance, separation between black and white Americans, and emphasizes the importance of black-owned business (as well as, oddly, personal hygiene).
importantly, the need for unitary belief. These tendencies seem wrapped up in a wholly
different figure. Rinehart, who is at once a number runner, a swindler, and a priest. For
the narrator, Rinehart becomes a trickster figure who somehow embodies several
contradictory roles — and is therefore, perhaps, the appropriate figure to emulate as the
multiple, contradictory voices reemerge in his mind.

Can it be, I thought, can it actually be? And I knew that it was. I had
heard of it before but I'd never come so close. Still, could he be all of
them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine
the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rine and
heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad
man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. . . . The
world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot
world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the
rascal was at home in it. (376)

Rinehart is the final ambiguous figure of Invisible Man. As the above quotation
suggests, the narrator sees Rinehart as multiple, as “all of them” — like de Man’s self-
multiplying philosopher, Rinehart is the symbol of fluid identity, able to take on many
masks, act many roles, perform many duties. He is the principle, as the narrator senses,
of non-relation between surface (rine) and depth (heart). He is also, however, a figure of
manipulation, for the narrator identifies “Rinehartism” with the Brotherhood’s
“cynicism” when listening to Brother Hambro discourse on how, for those with power
and knowledge, “it’s impossible not to take advantage of the people” (381). He is the
principle of inauthenticity, of the separation of discourse and the real, as the narrator
realizes when he ponders the impossibility of going back to work for the Brotherhood in
Harlem:

For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing. And I could
tell Harlem to have hope when there was no hope. Perhaps I could tell them to hope until I found the basis of something real, some firm ground for action that would lead them onto the plane of history. But until then I would have to move them without myself being moved ... I'd have to do a Rinehart. (383)

In the end, the narrator senses that “somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities” (386). The tricksterism of Rinehart is also significant for the narrator’s ironic consciousness, for Rinehart seems to represent to the narrator something about himself: namely, that he is already multiple and playing roles. His dédoublement is ironic knowledge not only about himself, but about the world: “It was as though I’d learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences,” he thinks.

They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices. And because they were blind they would destroy themselves and I’d help them. I laughed. Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn’t see either color or men . . . . It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same — except I now recognized my invisibility. (383-4; emphasis added)

To a certain extent, the narrator’s ironic consciousness allows him to comprehend, for the first time, his grandfather’s last words:

So I’d accept it, I’d explore it, rine and heart. I’d plunge into it
with both feet and they'd gag. Oh, but wouldn’t they gag. I didn’t know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice. I’d overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I’d agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I’d let them swoller me until they vomited or burst wide open. Let them gag on what they refused to see. Let them joke on it. (384)

And so the narrator yeses the Brotherhood, assuring them that all is going according to their scientific plan. “They were vindicated; the program was correct, events were progressing in their predetermined direction, history was on their side, and Harlem loved them” (388-9). Even as Ras the Exhorter stirs up the nationalist fires in Harlem, the invisible man, now accepting his own invisibility, assures the Brotherhood that they are gaining in membership and influence in Harlem. But when the tensions in Harlem eventually explode into a riot, the narrator realizes that he has been used for a second time by the Brotherhood; “By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed” (418) to the Brotherhood’s plans, which are now understood to have included a race riot in Harlem. When he meets Ras, now the Destroyer, who is “dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap on his head, his arm bearing a shield” (420), the narrator pleads that he is no longer a member of the Brotherhood, and that the Brotherhood is using both him and Ras to foment the riot which they will then use for propaganda. Defying both the Brotherhood and Ras, the narrator decides that to die “because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd” (422).

In the end, the narrator falls into an open manhole, and escapes the rages of the
crowd in full riot. It is there he decides to “put invisibility down in black and white” —
to write, in short, finally giving up his beliefs in verbal performance and recitation.

_Invisible Man,_ like _The Woman Warrior,_ records the failures of verbal performance as a
process of constituting livable American subjectivities. What is more interesting,
however, is that both texts seem to reject speech for writing, recitation for citation. The
invisible man’s confusion about the need for verbal performance — begun with his
determination to be “like” Booker T. Washington as a black orator — can be seen in his
musing about Frederick Douglass, whose portrait hangs in his Brotherhood office in
Harlem. “Sometimes,” the narrator recalls, “I sat watching the watery play of light upon
Douglass’s portrait, thinking how magical it was that he had talked his way from slavery
to a government ministry, and so swiftly” (288). For the narrator, Douglass models the
power of verbal performance in the process of identity construction. As the narrator
muses:

> Perhaps, I thought, something of the kind is happening to me. Douglass
came north to escape and find work in the shipyards; a big fellow in a
sailor’s suit who, like me, had taken another name. What had his true
name been? Whatever it was, it was as _Douglass_ that he became himself,
defined himself. And not as a boatwright as he’d expected, but as an
orator. . . . For hadn’t I started out with a speech, and hadn’t it been a
speech that won my scholarship to college, where I had expected
speechmaking to win me a place with Bledsoe and launch me finally as a
national leader? (288)

As the critic Robert Stepto has noted, this passage displays the narrator’s “questionable
assertion that Douglass defined himself as an orator” (67). In fact, Douglass does not
“talk his way from slavery to a government ministry,” as the narrator puts it in an ironic
misquotation of the line “from slavery to freedom” of Douglass’s 1855 _Narrative of the_
Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Instead, Douglass, who emphasizes the importance of literacy in his passage from "slavery to freedom," in effect read and wrote his way to freedom (Stepto 67). Douglass apprehends early the importance of learning, which he explicitly ties to literacy, after hearing one of his masters assert that "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world" (Douglass 78). Douglass becomes determined to learn to read, saying of his first books, in an interesting prefiguration of Vološinov's work, that "they gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance" (84). He spread his learning around to others, secretly teaching up to forty slaves at a time to read on Sundays; as Douglass ironically comments, "It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whiskey, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God" (120).

Perhaps the 'reason' for this turn toward writing as a more productive method of self-naming and self-definition is that writing does not necessarily carry the same connotations of psychic unity in which the speaking subject is caught up. In both Invisible Man and The Woman Warrior, the initial assumption of coherence underlying speech intersects with W.E.B. Du Bois's lament for the "double consciousness" afflicting African Americans. In The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois outlines what he means by "double consciousness," — an idea which has since often been extended to include other marginalised groups of Americans (Wong, "Autobiography"; but see Chin et al., "Introduction"). "Double consciousness" is, in his words, "this sense of always looking
at one's self through the eyes of others . . . . One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (5). Though Du Bois mourns this state of schizoid consciousness, and desires the resolution of that conflict in identity which it represents into some kind of unitary consciousness, he can see no easy way for the African American, as he says, to “merge his double self into a better and truer self” (5). He goes on to say that, in an ideal “merging,” the paradigmatic African American, in his words,

wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. (5)

Du Bois’s complaint is essentially that African American identity can never be fully present to itself because of this state of “double consciousness.” Both the invisible man and the woman warrior attempt resolutions of their double consciousnesses through verbal performance, by becoming reciting subjects who repeat, and thereby position themselves within, specifically American discourses. By the end of their novels, however, they forsake this project for a different one — that of writing. The writing of their identities involves the renunciation of Du Bois’s nostalgia for a unitary, self-present identity. “Now I know,” says the invisible man in the Epilogue, “that men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health” (435). If Invisible Man ends with a continued desire for visibility, this no longer includes indivisibility.

Perhaps the turn to writing signals not so much the belief that it will be wholly adequate where verbal performance failed, as the recognition of the distancing,
differentiating effects which characterized speech all along: that recitation can never reproduce simply and exactly any self-present, ‘original’ identity. Accordingly, Ellison’s narrator’s decision to, as he says, “put invisibility down in black and white” (11), with all the possibilities which that phrase’s metaphors imply, is a decision to complicate his African American identity. I would suggest as well that what is implied in Ellison’s renunciation is a recognition of the social and discursive complexity of not only African American identity, but human identity in general. As the narrator moves from discourse to discourse, each with a different vocabulary and way of talking about the world, Ellison seems to be suggesting that no single language is sufficient to the American real. Double consciousness seems to be an insistence that any single discourse (recall Wright’s enthusiasm for the “unity” offered by the American Communist Party) is insufficient to the task of representing the real, and of articulating a subjectivity in relation to that real and to others.

Moreover, Ellison’s plea to recognize the complexity of human identity in general also encompasses the recognition that those discourses which are taken to be essential and incompatible can sometimes be mutually dependent, or indeed, functions of the other. In a middle section of the novel which I have refrained from talking about, Ellison offers an allegory of the co-dependent relation between blackness and whiteness. Shortly after discovering the content of Bledsoe’s letter to Emerson, the narrator gets a job at Liberty Paints, the motto of which is “keep America pure with Liberty Paints” (149). At Liberty Paints, the narrator’s task is the addition of the special ingredient of “Optic White”; as the foreman tells him, “It’s the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a paint any
whiter" (153). The special ingredient added to a bucket of white paint? Ten drops of “dead black” paint. As Lucius Brockway, the black chemical-mixer in the bowels of the factory tells the narrator later, “Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through” (165). Ellison’s allegory suggests — among other things — that ‘whiteness’ is constructed only through the incorporation of its absolute racial and metaphysical other, blackness. That is, for whiteness to define itself as an essential racial quality requires an equally essential alterity against which it discovers its contours and limits, and confirms its qualities and attributes. Ellison’s suggestive symbolism is theorized by Toni Morrison and worked out in some detail in her Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Reflecting on the “trope” of what she calls Africanism, Morrison proposes “an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). One such service, argues Morrison, is that the black slave in the United States gave substance and definition to American Enlightenment discourse about the rights of man, so that slavery at once highlights, and even creates the possibility of, freedom:

This black population was available for meditations on terror — the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man. (37-8)

Commenting that the “Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do
without" (47), Morrison argues that “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52).

Ellison’s plea is not only for a recognition of the ways African Americans are imagined and discursively constructed in the United States in order to define in turn the essence of whiteness — in ways which Morrison draws out — but for a further recognition that the presence of such discourses hinders any articulation of the complexity of African American human identity. *Invisible Man* argues not that race is unimportant, but that an American’s race — no matter how construed — does not exhaust the possibilities of individual identity. “My problem,” recalls the narrator in the Epilogue to the novel, “was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself” (433). As the narrator ponders whether to venture above ground again, he hesitates to adopt a unitary consciousness, as he had in the past, for the struggle ahead. “So I approach it through division,” he says. “So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love” (438).

That struggle, we hear the narrator say with what is likely Ellison’s approval, takes its course upon a final reevaluation of his grandfather’s words:

I’m still plagued by his deathbed advice. . . . Could he have meant — hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. Did he mean say “yes” because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the
vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? (433)

With these lines, the invisible man determines to use America's discourses about America for his own purposes. The saying again of those idealistic discourses will no longer be accompanied by a credulity about their magic power to effect events, as were his earlier recitations, and an insistence on their historical validity, but on the continued ideal which they articulate. Their repetitions will be ironic and divided, used to give visibility to the narrator's African American body. "Or did he mean," the narrator finally asks, "that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs?" (433). *Invisible Man* thus argues for the affirmation of some of the principles articulated in the larger American discourses through which the United States talks to itself about itself — as in, for example, President Clinton's Loyalty Day Proclamation. The invisible man's affirmation, like that offered by the woman warrior, is not, however, the "loyalty" to the American "legacy" as historicized and defined by President Clinton. *Invisible Man*, like Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, as I show in Chapter Three, lays claim to the United States by opening up spaces for different subjectivities, ones which not only recognize racial and cultural diversities, but which also complicate the very American "legacies" to which they might be willing and able to pledge their "loyalties."
Chapter Three: Translating It Well

I

"Why must I 'represent' anyone besides myself?"
— Maxine Hong Kingston

Ralph Ellison’s tentative validation of “the principle” on which the United States is based, in the face of the myriad violences which that country has inflicted and continues to inflict on African Americans, is a repetition of discourse for a political purpose different from that for which the discourse had formerly been used. As if enacting Bakhtin’s dictum that the trajectory and force of speech can be redirected to one’s own purposes (if only incompletely and imperfectly), Ellison’s repetition inhabits American discourse with a different intention, and so alters not only his relation to that discourse, but, perhaps, the discourse itself. To what extent the citation of discourse effects its transformation is a question from which this study can never entirely escape. To what measurable degree, if any, are reiterative practices themselves transformed through their repetition by human subjects? Are the very reiterative practices which socially situate (or indeed construct) the subject experienced in such a way so as to make impossible any act outside of discourse which might challenge those practices, or does the subject have some measure of will — intention — which she or he can bring to bear on such practices and in so doing alter their nature? To restate this problem in Judith Butler’s terms, if “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the

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1"Mis-readings" 63.
effects that it names” (2), how can such repetition-as-performance preserve the possibility, at least, of “critical agency” for human subjects? (x). Certainly, on a thematic level, Bob Dubois’s citation and subsequent ‘performance’ of the discourse of the American dream has tragic consequences; in its clichéd form, the laminoir effect of that discourse disallows the possibility that it might be differently inhabited, and seems to leave Bob bereft of any “critical agency” over its mediation of the American real. The invisible man, on the other hand, seems in the end to have better luck in turning reiterative processes to his own use. The difference between them lies, as I suggest in Chapter Two, in the degree of consciousness about that which is repeated. Indeed, one might argue that only the double recognition of both the repetition and the thing which is being repeated allows the transformative power of intention to have its effects as the injection of difference into the process of repetition. Gilles Deleuze goes further than this. in *Difference and Repetition*, when he argues that repetition in fact only exists as a kind of recognition in the mind that perceives it:

The role of the imagination, or the mind which contemplates in its multiple and fragmented states, is to draw something new from repetition, to draw difference from it. For that matter, repetition is itself in essence imaginary, since the imagination alone here forms the ‘moment’ of the *vis repetitiva* from the point of view of constitution: it makes that which it contracts appear as elements or cases of repetition. Imaginary repetition is not a false repetition which stands in for the absent true repetitions: true repetition takes place in imagination. . . . Difference inhabits repetition. (76)

If “true repetition takes place in imagination,” the corollary is that different imaginations will perceive repetition differently — even those who perceive a case of repetition (because some others will not) will come to different conclusions about what and how
something is being repeated.

This problem of recognizing instances of repetition is crucial to the task of interpreting the use of a cliché. As I show in Chapter One, Matt Groening recontextualizes and exaggerates clichés in order to ironize them and force his reader to reevaluate the ‘idea’ behind the cliché — to force reflection about its meaning, a process the nature of the cliché, according to Zijderveld, usually causes one to bypass. But, as Ruth Amossy notes, clichés can be passively registered — not recognized as clichés — or can be critically perceived, at which point a reader or viewer attributes a difference to the cliché’s repetition. The problem of whether an inscribed cliché will be interpreted as ironic (repeated differently) or not (more of the same) is an especially urgent one for ethnic minority writers who ‘write again’ racist clichés in their work in order to critique them. By inscribing in their work racist clichés circulating in the United States at large, these writers run the risk of having them read as straightforward representations of members of the ethnic community in question — a reader’s interpretation of a stereotype is, after all, not wholly predictable or controllable by the author. Such was the case for both Ralph Ellison in Invisible Man and for Maxine Hong Kingston in The Woman Warrior. Indeed, both writers were roundly criticized by members of the African American and Chinese American communities, respectively, for repeating without a difference racist stereotypes of African Americans and Chinese Americans. By way of

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2 I have borrowed this term from Sneja Gunew’s Framing Marginality, where she uses it “partly because it signals that such writing needs to be seen always in relation to something designated (although rarely in any overt manner) as ethnic majority writing” (23).
introducing the problem of the repetition of clichés in Kingston's text, I want to look first at Ellison's repetition of clichés in *Invisible Man*.

The reaction of condemnation to the inscrption of the racist cliché is prophesied in Ellison’s novel. Recalling the Trueblood episode which comes at the beginning of the novel, one might wonder why Dr. Bledsoe reacts so strongly to the narrator’s inadvertent introduction of the important Northern white philanthropist to the impoverished and incestuous Trueblood. What links Bledsoe’s anger, the local African American community’s ostracization of Trueblood, Norton’s mixed fascination and horror for his story, and the narrator’s uneasy bewilderment? I would like to suggest that they are all reactions to an instance of repetition: the repetition of the racial, racist cliché. When Trueblood tells Norton his tale, the narrator wonders to himself, “How can he tell this to white men... when he knows they’ll say that all Negroes do such things?” (45). As a racist cliché, black animalistic sexuality is the already-known conventional wisdom in white supremacist, American social discourse. As Houston Baker explains Trueblood’s simultaneous ostracization from the local black community and the support, with money, food, and work, from the local whites, the “rambunctiously sexual, lyrical, and sin-adoring ‘darky’ is an image dear to the hearts of white America” (341). That such a cliché is part of the already-said of American social discourse is substantiated in part by Bob Dubois’s jealous meditation about his African American mistress Marguerite, an anxiety informed by this kind of racist cliché. Bob worries that Marguerite will have “wild, Negro sex” with another black man, after which “she’ll fondle his huge prick” and wonder why she ever had sex with Bob when, as her imaginary partner puts it,
"everybody know honkies got small dicks" (99). Racist clichés are thus a way of ‘knowing’ the African American in white America. In the following passage from Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy*, one of his white bosses at the optical factory where Wright works confronts him with this form of knowledge:

“Richard, how long is your thing?” he asked me.
“What thing?” I asked.
“You know what I mean,” he said. “The thing the bull uses on a cow.”

I turned away from him; I had heard that whites regarded Negroes as animals in sex matters and his words made me angry.

“I heard that a nigger can stick his prick in the ground and spin around on it like a top,” he said, chuckling. “I’d like to see you do that. I’d give you a dime, if you did it.” (180)

In a review of *Black Boy*, Ellison makes note of this cliché, writing that the “Negro is idealized into a symbol of sensation, of unharnpered social and sexual relationships” (*Shadow* 86). Even white supremacist clichés which construct the African American as having “a superhuman capacity of love, kindliness, and forgiveness” are not negated by the “stereotyped conviction that all Negroes (meaning those with whom they have no contact) are given to the most animal behaviour” (*Shadow* 92).

Why, then, does Ellison inscribe this same cliché in his novel? If the racist cliché of African American animalistic sexuality gets its *laminoir* power, as Flaubert put it, from its status as excessively repeated common sense, will its being said again not merely reinforce its hermeneutic endurance and its power of persuasion? Not a few reviewers of Ellison’s novel thought so when *Invisible Man* was published; it was Trueblood among other characters in the novel that black novelist John O. Killens had in mind when he condemned Ellison’s work in a book review in *Freedom* in June of 1952. “The Negro
people need Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back. It is a vicious distortion of Negro life,” Killens declared (quoted in Neal 109). Against this view, that the inscription of a racist cliché merely solidifies its power in contemporary social discourse, I want to argue that, although the cliché is a type of “preoccupied” language, at once unavailable for a new mastery and incapable of giving its full attention to the matter at hand, its repetition in a text sometimes indicates an attempt at a different occupation. I have borrowed this term from A. Duff’s 1839 missionary treatise *India and India Missions*, as quoted in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*:

> Come to some doctrine which you believe to be peculiar to Revelation; tell the people that they must be regenerated or born again, else they can never “see God”. Before you are aware, they may go away saying, “Oh, there is nothing new or strange here; our own Shastras tell us the same thing; we know and believe that we must be born again; it is our fate to be so.” But what do they understand by the expression? It is that they are to be born again and again, in some other form, agreeably to their own system of transmigration or reiterated births. To avoid the appearance of countenancing so absurd and pernicious a doctrine, you vary your language, and tell them that there must be a second birth — that they must be twice-born. Now it so happens that this, and all similar phraseology, is preoccupied. (33)

Duff is trying to explain the difficulty missionaries encountered in attempting to translate theological concepts across language and cultural barriers. In his example, a key Christian metaphor is already “preoccupied” in the Hindu religious system. In I. A. Richards’s terminology, the vehicle of the Christian metaphor of needing to be born again already has a religious tenor in what was called by nineteenth-century missionaries the “subtile system of Hinduism” (see Bhabha 32-4). Though Bhabha does not elaborate on Duff’s term, it is felicitous from the perspective of postcolonial criticism. Duff’s
translating enterprise is threatened by a language which is “preoccupied” in two ways. First, in the military sense of the word, the colonizer discovers that the linguistic space mapped for colonial expansion is already inhabited by an aboriginal sign. The assumption here disturbed has its analogy in the (political, cultural) emptiness attributed to territories prior to their occupation by European powers. The implication is that unless the metaphor can be fully colonized by the new master, its use remains uncontrollable and precarious, unable to bear the weight of strict dogmatic distinctions. Second, to play on the anthropomorphic suggestiveness of Duff's word for a moment, the metaphor targeted for colonization is “preoccupied” in that it cannot give its full, undivided attention to the translating project (or any project) at hand. Easily distracted, its inattentiveness makes the metaphor unavailable to a new linguistic mastery; it is impossible to draw the vehicle's attention toward a new tenor.

This second sense of the word accurately describes the preoccupied nature of the cliché. Seen in this light, Zijderveld's point that the cliché functions by causing the speaker and hearer to avoid reflection on meaning would suggest that the cliché is both distracted and distracting, used absentmindedly and effecting absentmindedness. Spoken and heard automatically, the cliché fundamentally diverts attention: away from details, away from specifics, away from singularity. The cliché, like Duff's metaphor, cannot give its full attention to the “new”; its recipient says, with the indigenous peoples of India, “there is nothing new or strange here.” And yet perhaps the cliché is preoccupied in the first sense outlined above as well. If I speak a cliché, have I filled its linguistic space with meaning, however temporarily? As I note in the Introduction, Mikhail
Bakhtin uses this same metaphor of occupation to describe a speaker's struggle with language: “language . . . exists in other people's mouths” (Dialogic 294) and “becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention” (Dialogic 293).

Zijderveld's insistence on reflection would indicate that non-clichéd forms of speech are somehow, if only temporarily and imperfectly, 'occupied' by meaning given and received by the reflective user. But Duff's warning that a figure of speech cannot be invested with a new meaning if it is an already 'full' indigenous mark would seem likewise to characterize the cliché, as it is an inattentive, already inhabited type of speech.

Ellison's inscription of the racist cliché of black animalistic sexuality (a sexuality coded as that which either cannot or will not recognize civilization's taboos against incest; see Baker) is an attempt at introducing a difference into the endless, indifferent repetition of the cliché. Ellison attempts this in two ways, with mixed success. First, he makes Trueblood a spiritually complex and morally ambivalent figure, who in some sense foreshadows the narrator's own existential agony of being excluded from a social group. After the rape, and in the face of his family's fury and his society's ostracization, Trueblood struggles to narrate his own sense of identity in the face of his social and moral crime. As Trueblood describes his own thinking about it, “All I know is I ends up singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen” (51). Trueblood's blues response echoes the narrator's discovery of blues in both the Prologue and the Epilogue of the novel. When the astonished Norton asks Trueblood, “You feel no inner turmoil, no need
to cast out the offending eye,” Trueblood rejects the classical allusion to Oedipal incest, and, declaring that “My eyes is all right” (40), determines to write his own narrative of the event in his own voice. By making Trueblood an existentially complex human being, Ellison attempts to complicate the cliché of African American animalistic sexuality — and thereby destroy its power as that which is unreflectively accepted. Some critics have found Trueblood’s humanization compelling; Valerie Smith, for instance, argues that Trueblood is a model for the invisible man because he narrates his own sense of what happened, giving shape and depth to his experience (Smith 44). Others, however, have not been persuaded by the episode. Why, for instance, must Trueblood’s existential self-narration come at the expense of his raped daughter, whose voice we do not hear? In any case, Ellison’s different repetition of this cliché seems to have provoked further repetition and revision, as both Toni Morrison, in The Bluest Eye, and Alice Walker, in The Color Purple, respond to Ellison’s novel by rewriting the father’s incestuous rape of his daughter.

Ellison also introduces difference into the cliché’s indifferent iteration by suggesting that the taboo-breaking incest which signals the racist cliché of African American animalistic sexuality is shared by exactly those who should not be vulnerable to it: the wealthy white philanthropist, Mr. Norton. Before and after Trueblood’s tale, Ellison hints that Norton has either had or desired an incestuous sexual relation with his own daughter (Wynter 450). Norton describes his daughter, in whose memory (or in penance for an act against) Norton has helped fund the narrator’s college, as “too pure and too good and too beautiful,” and he tells the invisible man that she died in Italy when
they were traveling alone together (34). Norton shows the narrator a framed "miniature" of his daughter which he carries with him, and which, the narrator seemingly off-handedly remarks, Norton doesn't look at after hearing Trueblood's tale (53). Norton's own incestuous guilt would account for both his mixed horror and fascination for Trueblood (whom he confronts with the words, "You did and are unharmed!" [40]), and for his delirium after hearing Trueblood's tale. By hinting that Norton shares a history of incestuous acts or desires, Ellison applies the stereotype of animalistic sexuality to that which is refined, civilized, white, and morally upright.

Whether a reader interprets Ellison's iteration of this cliché as ironically different instead of an instance of that which is previously 'known' is uncertain (see Amossy, "Reading"). Even a reader who interprets the repeated cliché as ironic may still find it more problematic than compelling. What is clear is that in Invisible Man Ellison directly confronts the presence of clichés as a way of 'knowing' African Americans in the social discourse of the United States. He does so with the Trueblood episode, but also notably on two other occasions. The criticism aimed at Ellison because of the inscription of such

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3 On joining the Brotherhood, the narrator is asked by one intoxicated Brother to sing a "spiritual," or "one of those real good ole Negro work songs" (236-7). The narrator's response, which eventually becomes characteristic of his double consciousness, is laughter: "'He hit me in the face with a yard of chitterlings!' — bending double, roaring, the whole room seeming to dance up and down with each rapid eruption of laughter" (237). The second instance thematically follows up on the Trueblood episode: the invisible man and a white "nymphomaniac" named Sybil seduce one another for different purposes — he is attempting to learn about his status in the Brotherhood (she is the wife of one of the "big shots" [390]), and she wants to act out her rape by a black man in a sex game. "Come on, beat me, daddy — you — you big black bruiser," she says to him (394). Here again, the issue is not only the reader critically perceiving the clichés (of black male sexuality as animalistic and aggressive and white female sexuality as — secretly — really wanting to be raped by a black man), and not only whether the reader
racist clichés may be partly attributed to the stylistic expectations set up by the first episode of the novel, that of the battle royal. Indeed, the first episode of the novel gives the impression that what follows will be steadfastly in the tradition of African American ‘protest fiction’ popularized by Richard Wright. The battle royal episode, in both content and style, reflects the political-aesthetic program of the African American literary tradition of the 1930s and 1940s — a program by which Zora Neale Hurston was marginalised in African American letters in the wake of the so-called Harlem Renaissance.

I want to suggest, therefore, that it is the assumption of social realism which leads to the condemnation of inscribed racist clichés in both Ralph Ellison’s and Maxine Hong Kingston’s works. Indeed, literary critics, both of ethnic minorities or of the white ethnic majority, do not always display the capability of remarking on the ways in which post-Second World War American fiction simultaneously borrows and departs from the tradition of literary realism. As I note in Chapter One, John Aldridge, against considerable evidence to the contrary, places Continental Drift firmly within the tradition of “naturalist realism” — but then condemns it on the grounds that it departs from that style. For Ellison’s part, the realism of the first part of the novel, which he later acknowledged in an interview as purposefully “naturalistic” (Shadow 178), sets up the expectations which attend realism generally; namely, that the literary text is a transparent

finds the author’s critique of the critically perceived cliché compelling, but also a question of the degree to which Ellison is unknowingly accepting of other kinds of clichés. Betraying his own glass eye, Ellison has the narrator ponder that Sybil is “just the type of misunderstood married woman whom, even if I had been interested, I would have avoided like the plague” (390; emphasis added).
window onto the 'real' world, which will accurately reveal, through the "method of cumulative documentation" (Aldridge 22), the lives and environments of 'real' human beings. Such was Wright's aesthetic and political project first in Native Son and then later in Black Boy. Ellison's battle royal scene repeats both the style (social realism) of that project and the content of Wright's execution of that project (specifically, Wright's fight with another black worker for white enjoyment). Invisible Man thereby sets up the expectation that it will follow in a similar vein; that it will be, in essence, more 'protest' fiction. Coming on the heels of the creation of those expectations is the Trueblood episode, which is perhaps why Killens mentions Trueblood when mourning the "vicious depiction of Negro life" contained in the novel. When he does so, he betrays his own assumption about the purpose and styles of African American writing in the 1950s.

Like Ellison, Maxine Hong Kingston faced the wrath of several reviewers of her ethnic minority background when The Woman Warrior was published. Many of her Chinese American critics — whether other writers or academics — brought similar assumptions about the content, purpose, and style of ethnic minority writing to bear on her work as those African American writers and journalists had brought to bear on Ellison's. There was, in essence, a similar aesthetic and political program for African American writing in the 1940s and 1950s as there was for Chinese American writing in the 1970s — both of which developed, of course, in a complex dynamic of challenging and adhering to dominant, and therefore less visible, critical programs in the United States at large. While the much needed thorough investigation of the developments and eventual overturnings of these programs would require too much space for this study, I
can briefly outline three common elements of the programs by which Ellison’s and
Kingston’s novels were condemned. They are, namely, the problem of the cliché, the
requirement of social realism and verisimilitude, and the concern with how an ethnic
minority community is represented.

The second part of Kingston’s text situates all three elements of this debate,
though those elements are present in the rest of the work as well. Titled “White Tigers,”
this section is framed by Chinese and Chinese American cultural misogyny and its
attendant patriarchal family and social structures: as it begins, “When we Chinese girls
listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but
wives or slaves” (19). Like Invisible Man, The Woman Warrior is about its central
character — who is also its narrator — trying to find a discourse suitable to the dual
needs of articulating the self, and of representing the social and political real of the
United States. While the discourses explored in Ellison’s novel are most often, though
not exclusively, the languages of various contemporaneous political and economic
projects having as their explicit goal the empowerment of African Americans, those
discourses in Kingston’s novel tend to be narratives which, sometimes literally, plot
subject positions, identities, and modes of behaviour for Chinese Americans — or, more
specifically, Chinese American girls and women. I will address later in this Chapter the
way in which narrative, as stories, tales, mythologies, or songs, can be regarded as
‘discourse,’ but for the moment it is enough to note that the Chinese American adult
“talk-story” is one such way narrative lends itself to the task of socializing individuals
within a community. As Kingston’s narrator relates it, such “talk-story” contributes to
the construction of social and gender roles within the Chinese community — and, implies the narrator, the Chinese American community as well. Young girls learn, according to Kingston's narrator, that the options permitted them in later years are either "wife" or "slave."

While the power of that discourse over the narrator's life is great, its reach is not exclusively hegemonic, for within this discourse lives a counter-tradition which the narrator learns from her mother. "We could be heroines, swordswomen," she tells us immediately following the above quotation, with no discernable hint that the two statements are in seeming contradiction (19). "Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep," the narrator recounts. "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (19). Within the swordswomen stories of her mother, the narrator discovers a discourse which offers subject positions counter to the dominant misogynist cultural codes of the Chinese and Chinese American traditions. That counter-discourse comes to the narrator by way, almost, of a kind of matrilineal descent:

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (19-20)

The narrator proceeds to retell, in a much altered version, the story of Fa Mu Lan, with
herself as its heroine. In the original tale, Fa Mu Lan learns that her father has been drafted for a local army, and secretly she decides to take his place. Without her parents' knowledge, she leaves and joins the battle; “A thousand leagues she tramped on the errands of war,” eventually victorious. After twelve years, Fa Mu Lan returns to her parents, where they welcome her home. Donning a dress, Fa Mu Lan meets some of her fellow warriors, who are startled to learn that she is a woman. Since the translation of the poem is relatively short, I have reproduced it in Appendix One.

One of the changes Kingston makes to the story is to emphasize and elaborate on its gender dynamic. Kingston’s version begins with the narrator receiving a mystical call from a bird, whom she follows up the side of a mountain. There, she is trained by an old man and an old woman; this training session, absent from the original Chinese “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” draws on the wuxia xiaoshuo, or Chinese popular martial arts novels, and on the shenxian, or “immortals” tradition, which is characterized by a supernatural calling and the learning of mystical lore (Wong, “Chinese Sources” 30; Wong, “Chinatown Tour” 253). In “White Tigers,” heterosexual relations are generally marked by male violence; accordingly, “the old woman was to the old man a sister or a friend rather than a wife” (28). Midway through her years on the mountain, her mentors reveal to the warrior woman-in-training the powerful lords whom she will later fight: “Not knowing that I watched, fat men ate meat; fat men drank wine made from the rice; fat men sat on naked little girls” (30). When she finishes her fifteen year training, the old couple give her “men’s clothes and armor” (33) for her battles, and upon her return to her family, her parents welcome her home “as if they were welcoming home a son” (34). With the
narrator's return, Kingston reinserts her narrative into the traditional plot of the Ballad of Fa Mu Lan, as the daughter who takes her father's place in battle. And yet here again Kingston hybridizes Fa Mu Lan by the inclusion of another traditional Chinese genre, that of tales of peasant uprisings and revolts made popular by such famous novels as Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Outlaws of the Marsh (also translated as Water Margin) (Wong, "Chinese Sources" 31). Drawing on this genre, Kingston has the narrator become the leader of a peasant army, one which intends to "crown as emperor a farmer who knew the earth or a beggar who understood hunger" (37). Men travel far to join the narrator's army, which "did not rape, only taking food where there was an abundance. We brought order wherever we went" (37).

In the background of the gender egalitarianism and justice of the woman warrior's leadership and of her army, however, persists the sense of a misogynist and patriarchal culture which makes the woman warrior's achievements remarkable and distinct. The narrator cannot, for instance, reveal her sex to her army: "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (39). The narrator's relation with her husband, whom she finally meets in the field, is the exceptional heterosexual relation; it is characterized not by violence and subordination because he is an equal "partner" to her (39). The narrator continues her campaign even while she is pregnant, hiding only once to give birth, and finally overthrows the emperor and "inaugurated the peasant who would begin the new order" (42). She returns to her village, and as a last task faces the evil baron who first drafted her brother and the other men of her village. Calling herself "a
female avenger,” the narrator demands his “life in payment for your crimes against the villagers” (43). In response, the baron makes the mistake of quoting misogynist proverbs to the warrior woman:

Then — heaven help him — he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man. “Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. ‘Girls are maggots in the rice.’ ‘It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.’” He quoted to me the sayings I hated. (43)

After the narrator slays the baron, she frees his harem, who become ghostly “witch amazons. They killed men and boys.” “I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality,” the narrator adds elusively (45).

Kingston follows this rewritten narrative of Fa Mu Lan with a richly ironic description of the narrator’s childhood in the United States.4 The rewritten Ballad, in which the narrator plots herself as its hero, is followed immediately by her musing about the contrast between her fantasy of justice and injustice, misogyny and gender equality,

4No commentators of whom I am aware have mentioned the substantial element of humour which permeates The Woman Warrior. Like the invisible man’s laughter, that humour most often results from the conflict of two contradictory discourses in the text (the abrasion between which, Barthes suggests, accounts for the pleasure of the text); however, as the more naive, immediate narrator experiences that discrepancy as frustration and confusion, she is seldom in a position to appreciate the humour. An example is the narrator’s imagined first meeting with the old couple who train her to be a warrior woman:

“Have you eaten rice today, little girl?” they greeted me.
“Yes, I have,” I said out of politeness. “Thank you.”
(“No, I haven’t,” I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. “I’m starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies.”) (21)

This humour is brought to the fore again during the narrator’s shouting match with her mother at the end of the novel (201-4). Part of what makes The Woman Warrior and Invisible Man so humourous is the distance written, as I suggest in Chapter Two, between their younger, naive, ‘speaking’ narrators and their older, wiser, ‘writing’ ones.
and her experience in the American real:

My American life has been such a disappointment.
"I got straight A's, Mama."
"Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village."
I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important
that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when
we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to
do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat
straight A's.

When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, "Feeding
girls is feeding cowbirds," I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I
couldn't talk. I couldn't stop.
"What's the matter with her?"
"I don't know. Bad. I guess. You know how girls are. 'There's no
profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.'"
"I would hit her if she were mine. But then there's no use wasting
all that discipline on a girl. 'When you raise girls, you're raising children
for strangers.'" (45-6)

The second half of "White Tigers" is taken up with the issues of cultural misogyny, and
with the contradiction between the narrator's imaginary narrative of becoming a female
avenger in China and her more mundane experiences of family, school, and university in
the United States. What unites the two sections, as is suggested by the paraphrased
proverb her parents seemingly repeat from the Baron's mouth, is the narrator's portrayal
of Chinese cultural disinclination toward, and subordination of, female children. The
narrator tells of the "emigrant villagers" shaking their heads at her family's misfortune in
having two girls before her brothers are born. When they are born, she "learned new
grievances" upon witnessing her family and extended family's favouring of her brothers,
as when her great uncle takes the boys shopping, but leaves her and her sisters behind
(46-7). The narrator rapidly strings together one detail after another, all of which reveal
the gap between the heroism of Fa Mu Lan and the narrator's own, less
fantastic struggles. The latter includes the narrator’s refusal of traditionally (in the United States and, according to the narrator, in China) female work: “Even now, unless I’m happy, I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at other people’s tables but won’t invite them to mine, where the dishes are rotting” (47-8). The male-dominated cultural structures of her childhood, while no doubt common to both the United States and to China, seem to derive for the narrator from the latter: as she says, “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (48).

The comparisons between her fantastic battles against cultural misogyny in China and her real experiences of the same in the United States are told from a complex point of view: the narrator mixes her own mature retrospective judgements about her childhood with her childhood credulity toward both the cultural discourse of misogyny (for instance, that she might be sold upon the family’s supposed “return” to China) and the cultural discourse of female heroism (as she regretfully recalls, “When urban renewal tore down my parents’ laundry and paved over our slum for a parking lot, I only made up gun and knife fantasies and did nothing useful” [48]). These two perspectives are continually and complexly blurred in Kingston’s work. This “juxtaposition of juvenile and adult perspectives” is one way Kingston revisions the past without in turn attempting the creation of a “definitive [minority] history” (Cheung, Silences 15, 12). Even when the adult narrator’s retrospective voice emerges, it reveals itself to be not entirely free from the effects of growing up under the influence of the myriad discourses of her childhood’s Chinese American world:

But I am useless, one more girl who couldn’t be sold. When I visit the
family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I am worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally. They only say, “When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls,” because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my own mother’s and father’s mouths; I looked at their ink drawing of poor people snagging their neighbors’ flotage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river. And I had to get out of hating range. I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, “Girls are necessary too”; I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession. Perhaps it was a saying in another village. I refuse to shy my way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories. (52-3)

While the discourse of Chinese cultural misogyny is found in her own “mother’s and father’s mouths,” the narrator, recognizing that its power derives from continued repetition, refuses to say again such discourse, seeking instead the counter-tradition of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan.
“Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.”
— Monique Wittig

“White Tigers” suggests that cultural knowledge and practices are often encoded in proverbial sayings — phrases or ideas which gain currency through their repetitive use in a culture as what is generally known, said, and accepted. Such proverbs are essentially a kind of cliché, and they are repeated in both sections of “White Tigers” with a violence which attests to the kind of social and psychological damage the narrator seems to have received as a child through their endless, indifferent repetitions. The Woman Warrior’s portrayal of the kind of Chinese and Chinese American cultural misogyny inscribed in such clichés was the focus of criticism on the part of several Chinese American reviewers of the novel. These reviewers generally felt that the identification of cultural misogyny in China and the Chinese American community was itself the object of the cliché; that is, that one of the stereotypes of Chinese America in the cultural imagination of the American majority was that it was characterized by the continued oppression of Chinese American girls and women. Several reviewers of Kingston’s work felt that it merely reinscribed, without a difference, those cultural clichés.

Such a reinscription, as I have suggested above, went directly against the program set out for Chinese American writing during the 1970s. Only two years before the publication of The Woman Warrior, in their programmatic “Introduction” to the ground-breaking 1974 collection entitled Aiiiiiiii!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers,

Wittig 89.
editors Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Hsu Wong argue that the central task of ethnic minority writing must be the overcoming of racial clichés and stereotypes. Calling the racial stereotype the “low-maintenance engine of white supremacy” (xxvii), the editors condemn its role in the “psychological and cultural subjugation of the Asian-American” (xxvi). For these editors, an Asian American author’s defiance or acceptance of racial stereotypes and clichés is an important criterion for assessing an author’s work (and for deciding, not incidentally, whether that author might be included in their important anthology). Criticism of the racial cliché is thus central to their own project:

Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised . . . got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed “aiiiiiiiii!” Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEEE!!! (“Preface” vii-viii)

When Kingston’s book was published, several reviewers accused it of trafficking in racist clichés, making it another example of “yellow white supremacy” (xi), or what Frank Chin later called “Ornamental Orientalia” (“Not Autobiography” 111). Several clichés about the Chinese American community were at the centre of the criticism Kingston received. The editors of Aiiieeeeee! characterized the stereotype of the Chinese American as “good,

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6 That call parallels, perhaps, a concurrent mode in Anglo-American feminist scholarship of ‘images of women’ criticism — such as, to name one example, Kate Millett’s 1969 Sexual Politics.
loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, [and] cultured" (x). The stereotyped Asian American man, the editors maintained, was an emasculated figure portrayed "as womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" (xxx). They praise Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* precisely because of its characterization of an unexoticized Chinatown: "Chu's unerring eye and ear avoids the cliché, the superficial veneer and curio-shop expressions" (xxxii).

Kingston's novel, together with its 'sequel' *China Men*, were later singled out for special attention by the same editors of the second edition of the anthology, entitled *The Big Aiiieeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. Indeed, its Introduction and Chin's long essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," which begins the anthology, are polemics aimed almost exclusively at Kingston and what Chin terms her "literary spawn" ("Come All" 50), Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang. "In Asian American writing and in American letters," the editors affirm, "the Chinese and Japanese American writers who write from the real, instead of ventriloquizing the stereotype, are pariahs and their writings are virtually underground, writings that are under siege by literary Gunga Dins and their white Park Rangers" (xv). Like Kingston, Hwang is condemned for his use of racist clichés: "No wonder David Henry Hwang's derivative *M. Butterfly* won the Tony for best new play of

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7Even as late as 1986, the historian Shih-shan Henry Tsai seemingly approves of this positive image: "The Chinese Americans are often characterized by a friendly media as fun-loving, industrious, honest, steady, loyal, and bright" (xi). To which, one might reply with the editors of *Aiiieeee!*, "there is racist hate and racist love" (xxv).
1988. The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual
fantasy, literally kissing white ass. Now Hwang and the stereotype are inextricably one”
(xiii). What these editors’ criticisms of Kingston’s portrayal of Chinese American men
and Hwang’s portrayal of M. Butterfly have in common is the complaint that both works
merely repeat the white racist cliché of the Asian male as emasculated. That cliché is
combined, perhaps paradoxically, with criticism of a second stereotype, according to the
editors: the portrayal of Chinese and Chinese American culture as misogynistic.
According to Chin, Kingston rewrites the traditional Chinese “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” “to
the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist
victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization” (“Come All” 3). Charging
Kingston with an ignorance of the original tale, Chin complains that she “takes Fa Mulan,
turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American
girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universality” (“Come All” 27). What
Chin claims is only a cliché about Chinese culture, however, goes beyond Kingston’s
reworking of the Ballad, and permeates her work as a whole. *The Woman Warrior* and
*China Men* seem to implicate both Chinese and Chinese American cultures — as well as,
in a crucial point which Chin and others ignore, the dominant majority American culture
— in that misogyny.

This twin cliché, of a misogynist Chinese culture replicated by emasculated
Chinese American men in the United States, was the focus of criticism by several Chinese
American academics. Jeffrey Paul Chan, for instance, in a letter to the *New York Review
of Books*, and in response to a positive review of Kingston’s book by Diane Johnson, is
hostile to what he perceives to be the latter’s feminist reading of Kingston’s book, noting with sarcasm, “Never mind history, Johnson has uncovered a feminist” (Chan 41). The sociologist Benjamin R. Tong, writing in *The San Francisco Journal* in response to Johnson’s response to Chan’s response to Johnson’s review, condemns Kingston’s novel as “a fashionably feminist work written with white acceptance in mind” (6). In “An Open Letter / Review,” published in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian American Scholars*, Katheryn M. Fong writes that she read *The Woman Warrior* after it was recommended by “several white feminist friends”:

> After I finished, I wasn’t sure that what my friends and your reviewers were getting out of the book was the same as what I was getting. They had said that having read *The Woman Warrior*, they could understand Chinese Americans better, especially the pain, oppression, and horrors of growing up a Chinese American female. The sum of my reading of *Warrior* is that, while some of the experiences you describe are familiar, you do not totally represent the identity of all Chinese American women. (67)

While the latter requirement may be a tall order for any single Chinese American literary work, Fong argues that she is privileged to comment on Kingston’s work because “there is enough similarity in our backgrounds” (67). While she is generally receptive to Kingston’s feminist writing, Fong believes that Kingston overstates the case of Chinese and Chinese American cultural misogyny. “Your recurring theme that girl children were unwanted in Chinese families is another one that seems to me to be over-exaggerated,” comments Fong, who notes that her own father was loving towards her (68-9).

This twin cliché of Chinese America is only one of many that Chinese American critics have charged Kingston with inscribing and reinforcing in her work. Chin, for example, has Kingston in mind when he cites the clichés of Chinese Americans as
sojourners in the United States, as anti-individualistic, and as passive sufferers ("Come All" 9). Kingston's text certainly seems to repeat some of these clichés. The narrator's childhood reveries are filled with the anxious fear, for instance, that "my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China" (46). As I have suggested, however, many of these clichés about Chinese Americans — such as the idea that her parents intend to sell her — are inscribed in *The Woman Warrior* via the credulity of childhood. The idea, moreover, that her parents intend to "return" to China is also historicized by reference to the 1949 Communist Revolution, about which the narrator gradually learns through her relatives' letters to her parents; it is an option, moreover, that gradually diminishes over the years as the narrator matures and as the news from the letters gets progressively worse. The idea that Chinese Americans are only temporary travelers in the United States who long to return home, whereupon they can sell their girls, is thus repeated in Kingston's work, but it is repeated with an ironic difference. As I argue in Chapter Two, *The Woman Warrior* shares with Ellison's novel a double-lensed narrative structure, in which the immediate voice of each text seems to be told from the point of view of a younger, naive narrator, behind which writes a second, older and wiser narrator persona. In Ellison's novel, that older persona is recognizably fictional, but in Kingston's novel the persona seems at times tantalizingly close to Kingston the author. I would argue, however, that Kingston the author is typically misidentified with the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*. The conflation of the narrator with the author of the novel has the effect of reinstituting Kingston the author as an authoritative spokeswoman for the Chinese American community, and lends credence to interpreting the novel as a realistic
depiction of Chinese American life and experience. This confusion is only compounded by the uncertain generic status of *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston’s subtitling of the work as *Memoirs* shifts its weight in the direction of (auto)biography — perhaps enabling it to win the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for the best work of nonfiction. The book’s fictional and metafictional impulses certainly disrupt its status as authoritative autobiography, however: it “is the kind of work that sits on the borderline between fiction and personal history,” as Linda Hutcheon has argued (*Politics* 161). I have thus refrained from referring to Kingston the author as the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, in part to highlight its at least partly fictional quality. Similarly, King-Kok Cheung in *Articulate Silences* refers to the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* as “Maxine,” noting that “In withholding her name, Kingston not only links the [unnamed] narrator and her [unnamed] aunt symbolically but also suggests the indeterminate identity of the young narrator, who moves between different subject positions rather than manifesting a stable identity” (5-6). Many of the clichés which Kingston the author inscribes in the novel are taken ‘seriously’ only within the frame of the younger narrator’s childhood credulity.

Kingston’s critics’ charge that she is merely indifferently repeating racist clichés about Chinese Americans is perhaps the result of a double fear. They may not recognize the distinction I am making between the younger naive narrator (who takes the clichés seriously) and the older narrator (who repeats the clichés with irony). Rejecting that distinction is probably caused by the conflation of the narrator with her creator Maxine Hong Kingston, to whom are attributed the supposedly racist clichés and stereotypes about sojourning, misogynistic, and passive Chinese Americans. Alternatively,
Kingston’s critics may distinguish between the two narrative voices, but may believe that such subtlety will be lost on the white American ethnic majority audience. They may feel, accordingly, that such readers will read the clichés as real representations of Chinese American life and beliefs, despite the presence of textual signals (which may not be strong enough) suggesting that the younger narrator’s view of China and Chinese mores are exaggerated and fantastic.

The problem of the cliché intersects with the assumption, on the part of Kingston’s Chinese American critics, of an aesthetic of social realism as both the desirable mode for Chinese American writing and as the ‘default mode’ of how ethnic majority (and ethnic minority) American audiences read novels. This assumption about how American audiences read parallels Ellison’s African American critics who feared the novel’s “distortion of Negro life” and its inscription through Trueblood of the racist cliché of African American animalistic sexuality. The proposition of an aesthetic of social realism, conversely, parallels the call to and practice of social realism in the 1930s and 1940s by Richard Wright and other African American writers. The nature of the relation between the assumption of social realism as how ethnic minority writers should write and the assumption of social realism as how ethnic majority audiences read, which is present in definite but different historical periods in both the Chinese American and the African American artistic communities, is uncertain. It may be that certain African American writers and critics in the 1930s and 1940s and certain Chinese American writers and critics in the 1970s urged a similar aesthetic-political program of social realism precisely because those writers and critics believed most members of the ethnic
majority audience read novels — even those which more or less announce their own status as fiction — in terms of verisimilitude, and as windows onto the contemporaneous realities of ethnic minority communities in the United States. Unfortunately, a thorough exploration of this issue and some of its attendant questions would be the subject of another study. What can be noted, however, is that, on the basis of the assumption of social realism, Kingston was accused by some Chinese American critics of misrepresenting their community. Katheryn M. Fong’s complaint about Kingston’s work is partly that “while some of the experiences you describe are familiar, you do not totally represent the identity of all Chinese American women” (67). Referring to the narrator’s childhood complaint to her parents that “I don’t even know what your real names are” (202), Jeffery Paul Chan writes in the New York Review of Books that “Kingston may have misled naive white readers when she suggests that our generations go nameless in America. . . . If Kingston did not know her father’s name as a child, her experience is unique” (41).³

Those charges of misrepresentation extended to Chinese culture and literature itself. Indeed, as I discuss below, the way in which Kingston repeated with difference traditional Chinese narratives caused as much controversy in the Chinese American community as the way in which she repeated with (alleged) indifference —

³What complicates this problem even further is some evidence that the fears of these critics are borne out because some ethnic majority white American readers in fact do read The Woman Warrior as an accurate depiction of Chinese American life. In Diane Johnson’s response to Chan’s comments, for instance, she writes that, when she read Kingston’s novel, “I was particularly interested to find out what it was like to have grown up a Chinese-American girl” (41). See Kingston, “Mis-readings,” for more on this issue.
contemporaneous clichés about Chinese Americans. One of the other themes common to many of Kingston’s critics is the bemoaning of the way in which *The Woman Warrior* is seen to arise from, and in turn contribute to, American ignorance about Chinese American culture and history. If, as I argue in more detail in the Conclusion, the cliché is a way of knowing the ‘Oriental’ in American culture, Chinese American writers and critics have been dismayed by the way such clichéd discourse displaces any possibility of familiarity with what Frank Chin has called “the facts of yellow history” (“Not Autobiography” 109).

There is, perhaps, fairly widespread though partial recognition of the history of how Americans of African descent have been systematically brutalized, oppressed, and excluded from the American discourses of freedom, democracy, and economic self-determination. What is less known is the ways in which similar kinds of institutional discourses and powers — including legislative ones — have been mobilized against Chinese Americans. Indeed, as if to counter her critics’ assertions that *The Woman Warrior* effaces Chinese and Chinese American history, she includes, perhaps a little ironically (see Goellnicht, “Tang Ao” 196), a seven page chapter entitled “The Laws” in *China Men* which outlines the various legislative initiatives taken against the presence of the Chinese in the United States. While the 1868 Burlingame Treaty between the United States and China obliged each to allow the free passage of migration “for the purpose of curiosity or trade or as permanent residents” (quoted in Chen 128), the United States Congress and California, in the years which followed, passed a series of laws limiting that migration and confounding the possibilities for the naturalization of those Chinese immigrants already in America. Chinese immigrants had arrived in California in large
numbers during the California Gold Rush of 1849 and following (Chen 46-53), and
during the building of the Central Pacific Railroad (completed in 1869), which stretched
from San Francisco to Promontory Point, Utah, where it met the Union Pacific Railroad.
The growing presence of Chinese immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century in the
San Francisco area and in other communities in California was met with a white racism
which dovetailed with the fear of having to compete with cheap labour. In 1877, for
instance, a three day anti-Chinese riot in San Francisco resulted in the burning of twenty-
five Chinese laundries and the destruction of as many or more Chinese homes (Chen
140). One of the laws which confounded the 1868 treaty between the U.S. and China was
the 1870 Nationality Act, which specified that only whites and "African aliens" could
apply for naturalization. During the 1870s and 1880s, California passed laws limiting or
prohibiting Chinese immigration, created special taxes exclusively for Chinese (such as a
fishing tax), and prevented Chinese from owning land. By 1882, the California lobby had
persuaded Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned the entrance of
Chinese labourers for ten years and again made Chinese ineligible for naturalization
(Chen 148). The act was extended in 1892 for another ten years, and then again, this time
indefinitely, in 1904. During these decades, the murder of Chinese residents in California
and other western states paralleled the lynchings of African Americans in the South
(Chen 151-2). Finally, 1924 saw Congress pass the Immigration Act, which prevented the
immigration of "Chinese women, wives, or prostitutes"; it was accompanied by an anti-
miscegenation measure stripping American citizenship from an American male who
married a Chinese woman or from an American female who married a Chinese man
Congress repealed the Exclusion Act in 1943 (when the United States and China were allied against the Japanese in the Second World War), and the quota system for Chinese immigrants was mitigated by various exceptions and other federal legislation, until the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act repealed the national quota system (Chen 212).

In Reading Asian American Literature, Sau-ling Wong poses the question of the place of the Asian American in the "symbolic economy of America" (5). As I suggest in the Conclusion, that place is complicated by the somewhat "preoccupied" figure of the 'Oriental' in the American imagination. At the same time, however, the elision of Chinese American history lends itself to the easy formulation of the Asian American, in the "symbolic economy of America," as the 'model minority.' As King-Kok Cheung notes, the construction of the Asian American as this 'model minority' is a disguised racism used to hide other racisms which construct other American ethnic or racial minority groups as less than "model": "Scholars such as Tong (1971), Suzuki, and Osajima have pointed out that the label 'model minority' places Asian Americans above presumably less tractable minorities and conceals a divisive strategy of containment by the dominant culture" (Silences 2). That strategy of division, of course, has also been used between Asian American communities: as the dustjacket on Chinese American author Pardee Lowe's 1943 Father and Glorious Descendent proclaimed, in reference to the interned Japanese American community, "[it] is a timely document at a moment when

\footnote{These anti-miscegenation measures are not mentioned in Chen (see 176) or Tsai (see 104).}
America must learn how to assimilate its loyal minorities” (cited in Chin et al. “Introduction” xxxviii).

When Chinese Americans have been constructed as the model minority, they are also seen as readily assimilated into America: and conversely, when they are constructed as sojourners who keep to themselves, they are unassimilable. Sau-ling Wong has suggested that the alimentary imagery in The Woman Warrior is a trope on the American use of the word “assimilation” itself. Remarking on the narrator’s mother’s defeat of the Sitting Ghost and her other enemies in China “because she can eat anything” (Kingston. Warrior 88), Wong suggests, as I note in Chapter Two, that the imagery also opens up, metaphorically, the American (and Canadian) inability to digest ‘foreign’ matter (Wong, Reading 27). I would like to argue that beyond this suggestive metaphor is Kingston’s facing of ethnic food clichés: in this case, the dominant culture’s judgement of Chinese American foodways as strange and exotic. Kingston’s catalogue, relentless, startles her readers with these ethnic clichés:

My mother has cooked for us: raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub. “The emperors used to eat the peaked hump of purple dromedaries,” she would say. “They used chopsticks made from rhinoceros horn, and they ate ducks’ tongues and monkeys’ lips.” . . . “Do you know what people in China eat when they have the money?” my mother began. “They buy into a monkey feast. The eaters sit around a thick wood table with a hole in the middle. Boys bring in the monkey at the end of a pole. Its neck is in a collar at the end of the pole, and it is screaming. Its hands are tied behind it. They clamp the monkey into the table; the whole table fits like another collar around its neck. Using a surgeon’s saw, the cooks cut a clean line in a circle at the top of its head. To loosen the bone, they tap with a tiny hammer and wedge here and there with a silver pick. Then an old woman reaches out
her hand to the monkey’s face and up to its scalp, where she tufts some hairs and lifts off the lid of the skull. The eaters spoon out the brains.”

Did she say, “You should have seen the faces the monkey made”? Did she say, “The people laughed at the monkey screaming”? It was alive? The curtain flaps closed like merciful black wings.

“Eat! Eat!” my mother would shout at our heads bent over bowls, the blood pudding awobble in the middle of the table.

She had one rule to keep us safe from toadstools and such: “If it tastes good, it’s bad for you,” she said. “If it tastes bad, it’s good for you.”

We’d have to face four- and five-day-old leftovers until we ate it all. The squid eye would keep appearing at breakfast and dinner until eaten. Sometimes brown masses sat on every dish. I have seen revulsion on the faces of visitors who’ve caught us at meals. (90-2)

Kingston reclaims the ethnic food cliché through an ironic repetition that is in-your-face.

Ellison pursues a similar strategy. On his first day in Harlem, the invisible man goes to a diner for breakfast, where he is offered the “special.”

“What’s the special?”

“Pork chops, grits, one egg, hot biscuits and coffee!” He leaned over the counter with a look that seemed to say, There, that ought to excite you, boy. Could everyone see that I was southern?

“I’ll have orange juice, toast, and coffee,” I said coldly. (135)

Offended by the Southern black food cliché, the invisible man orders instead a steadfastly ‘white’ and Northern breakfast (Wynter 448). Later, however, Ellison’s narrator embraces the cliché as ethnic sign: “I yam what I am,” he declares on ordering his second and third yams from a street vendor. His first yam had set off the following revery:

Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not all of us, but so many. Simply by walking up and shaking a set of chitterlings or a well-boiled hog maw at them during the clear light of day! What consternation it would cause! And I saw myself advancing upon Bledsoe, standing bare of his false humility in the crowded lobby of Men’s House, and seeing him there and him seeing me and ignoring me and me enraged and suddenly whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings, raw, uncleaned and dripping with sticky circles on the floor as I shake them in his face, shouting:
“Bledsoe, you’re a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in *private* when you think you’re unobserved! You’re a sneaking chitterling lover! I accuse you of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe! Lug them out of there, Bledsoe! Lug them out so we can see! I accuse you before the eyes of the world!” And he lugs them out, yards of them, with mustard greens and racks of pigs’ ears, and pork chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes.

I let out a wild laugh. (200-1)

Both Kingston and Ellison reclaim as an ironic ethnic sign the alimentary cliché which stands in the place of historical knowledge about the Chinese American and African American communities. They do this through exaggeration and recontextualization — processes which halt the endless repetition of the cliché, and, by drawing attention to it, force the reader to consider what he or she knows — or doesn’t know — about the Chinese American desire for squid eyes, or about the African American hunger for yams and chitterlings. While the question may remain as to whether there are enough textual markers in these passages to signal to non-Chinese American or non-African American readers that they are ironic exaggerations, the point of these passages is not whether or not an African American likes yams, or a Chinese American eats squid eyes. These passages’ amassing of ethnic food clichés are written precisely against the formation of such ethnic ‘knowledge.’

For Frank Chin, it is the ignorance of history which complicates the perpetuation of stereotypes about Chinese Americans:

Before I can make an art of my yellow self, and play with my knowledge of Asian America, we have to have some agreement about the facts of yellow history. No such agreement exists among Chinese-Americans. Monotheism, Christianity, and obfuscation in an arty fog of expressionist fear and pessimism have destroyed knowledge of Chinaman history and
culture through that peculiarly Christian literary weapon: the autobiography. ("Not Autobiography" 109)

Chin is not alone in insisting on the importance of making known previously elided Chinese American history; both critics hostile to Kingston (see Chan) and those generally supportive of her work (see Wong, Reading 223) wish the silence about that history to be broken. It is this kind of silence, generally, which is complicit in the perpetuation of racist clichés about Chinese America: as King-Kok Cheung puts it,

The quiet Asians are seen either as devious, timid, shrewd, and, above all, "inscrutable" — in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable — or as docile, submissive, and obedient, worthy of the label "model minority," just as silent women have traditionally been extolled. (Silences 2)

King-Kok Cheung argues, however, that there can be no simple reconstitution of an authoritative Asian American history. Her Introduction to her study of Kingston, Joy Kogawa, and Hisaye Yamamoto offers a cogent analysis of the dilemma that, while "It is, in part, the lost annals of Asian Americans" that Yamamoto, Kogawa, and Kingston seek to recoup through memory, imagination, and scattered records," these writers are suspicious of precisely the kind of authoritative ethnic minority history Frank Chin seems to insist on (11). Remarking that "their revisions of the past must not be confused with

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10 Cheung’s inclusion of Joy Kogawa as an Asian American writer — an inclusion which is "standard in the field," according to Sau-ling Wong (Reading 16) — is prefaced by saying that she "use[s] the term 'Asian American' to refer to North American writers of Asian descent. Asians in the United States and Canada have had parallel experiences" (Silences xv). While that is certainly true, and while Cheung is mostly careful to make note of the Canadian context of Kogawa's Oba san in her discussion, her reference to Kogawa as an Asian American writer has the unavoidable effect of pulling Kogawa and her work into a context of the United States, and consequently of eliding what is Canadian about Kogawa’s novel.
definitive history” (12) Cheung argues that “Yamamoto, Kingston, and Kogawa implicitly or explicitly question the possibility of restoring an authoritative minority history and shy away from a complacent return to the past” (13).

Kingston does this, in part, by thematising the epistemological uncertainty of narrative discourse in general, and of her narrator’s authority in particular. That thematisation takes place from the start of The Woman Warrior, as several critics have noted (Cheung, Silences 13). The first section, “No Name Woman,” begins with this ironic injunction to the narrator: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” — which, of course, is exactly what she proceeds to do (3). In the forbidden tale which follows, Kingston’s narrator early learns the applicability of narrative to her life when her mother tells her the story of her father’s sister, the ‘No Name Woman.’ In retribution for becoming pregnant long after her husband had left for America, the aunt’s village attacks her father’s house, slaughtering the livestock and scattering the rice crop. “Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on” (5). And so her aunt’s narrative, hidden from the narrator until now, is revealed for its moral-social relevance to her own life: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you” (5).

For the narrator’s mother, the aunt’s story consists of, first, a pattern of events — a plot, or sjužet — and, second, a kind of moral of the story: a prohibition against adultery which reinforces mid-twentieth-century rural Chinese social norms. For the Chinese American narrator, however, the tale’s moral lesson becomes uncertain once she attempts
to piece together the *fabula* from the fragments of her mother’s *sjužet*. As Peter Brooks argues, “*fabula* — ‘what really happened’ — is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjužet*, which is all that [s]he ever directly knows” (13). For her mother, the instructional value of the story is its essential purpose. In 1924, her mother tells her, seventeen “hurry-up weddings” were celebrated, among which was the marriage between the narrator’s aunt and her new husband, who was on his way to “America, the Gold Mountain” (3). Too late, the aunt became pregnant, and on the night of the child’s birth the village took its revenge by raiding the house. Wearing masks, the villagers destroy the crop and the livestock, and scatter the family’s supply of food inside the house. When they depart, the shamed aunt gives birth outside in the family’s pigsty that night — and is found at the bottom of the family well the next morning with her child, a suicide. Her family, the narrator is told, has since disowned her: “We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born,” her mother tells her (3). To the narrator’s mother, the story’s moral is applicable to the narrator’s newly acquired sexual maturity: “Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5).

For her mother, the narrative is structurally complete and morally full; it is in its telling exhaustive, and at its end exhausted, leaving nothing to add. The narrator’s unease at its telling, however, is as much about the tale as it is about her mother’s assumptions about narrative function and aesthetic value:

If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, “Remember Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister?” I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts.
She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank which guides her life. (6)

The narrator seeks to reconstruct a *fabula* beyond her mother’s aesthetic of “Necessity.” She does not seek any authoritative elaboration by her mother, but rather progressively tests out different possible explanations to fill in the gaps of her mother’s story. She wants to know, for instance, who the man was who impregnated her aunt, and what the nature of the relationship between them was. As she works out the possibilities, with her own fictive narrations, the guiding rule is different from that which guided her mother’s story. As the narrator says of her aunt, “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8). As with the warrior woman in “White Tigers,” the narrator retells an oral tale told to her from her mother, experimenting with the codes of behaviour, patterns of action, and social and moral vocabulary to which those narratives, as discourse, give imaginative form.

To this end the narrator reflects on several different possibilities. She rejects out of hand what initially occurs to her, an almost Western model of adultery:

> Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining — could such people engender a prodigal aunt? To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family. (6)

Rejecting “extravagance,” the narrator then explores this second *fabula* in which the aunt is raped by a member of her village, a rape made worse by the fact that she must in
silence continue to "buy her oil from him or gather wood in the same forest" (7). While not entirely rejected, the narrator's continued ruminations on this possibility fade slowly into a third possibility: one that preserves some measure of freedom of action for her aunt, whom she calls "my forerunner" (8). In this possible narrative, the aunt falls in love with a man in her village after her husband leaves for America, an awakening which sees the aunt symbolically "comb[ing] individuality into her bob" (9). In contrast to the "hurry-up wedding" which sees her marry a man from another village whom she has never met (or so the narrator supposes), this love begins with a slow attraction and builds to a gradual consummation. In a final possibility, the narrator wonders about the "never-said" potential for incest in an extended family of several generations living under a single roof (10).

The narrator assesses all these possibilities in terms of their applicability and inapplicability to her own situation; she muses, for instance, on the differences between her aunt's culture's sexual mores and those of the United States. Her life in the United States — the only one she has ever known — includes the need to adopt American codes of femininity, which differentiate her from both her mother and her aunt: "Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American feminine," the narrator confesses (11). That differentiation, however, remain complex and incomplete; the narrator recalls "add[ing] 'brother' silently to boys' names" (12), a Chinese form of address which functions for the narrator like an incantation countering the dangers of heterosexual romance and adolescent sexuality. Drawing on this Chinese cultural norm
for her life in the United States, however, seems to undercut her attempts at adopting the
codes of "American feminine," as she tells the reader:

But, of course, I hexed myself also — no dates. I should have stood up,
both arms waving, and shouted out across libraries, "Hey you! Love me
back." I had no idea, though, how to make attraction selective, how to
control its direction and magnitude. If I made myself American-prety so
that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone
else — the Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese boys — would too.
Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense. (12)

Kingston ends "No Name Woman" with her narrator musing on her family's
silence about her aunt. As the first section of the novel, it gestures at several themes
which preoccupy the novel as a whole. One of the most important, perhaps, is the
function of narrative — specifically, of her mother's Chinese "talking-story" — as a
discourse inscribing social norms, cultural morality, and possible subjectivities for the
narrator. The narratives in question may be her mother's moralistic tale of her unnamed
aunt, whose aesthetic is governed by "Necessity," or the counter-discourse embodied in
the Ballad of Fa Mu Lan, which proposes the alternative role of the warrior woman to
marriage and servitude. But this first narrative also thematises the way narrative is
structured by gaps and elisions, in both its plot and its logic. After hearing her mother's

11 With the presence of such gaps in the text, the old question of the reliability of
the narrator arises. The narrator tells the story, for instance, of her mother's sister
arriving from China in part four of the novel, titled "At the Western Palace." This aunt,
named Moon Orchid, is driven by her sister Brave Orchid to confront her old husband
who moved to America decades ago and married a second time, leaving her behind in
Hong Kong. The narrator proceeds to retell what happened, as if she were present when
the sisters confront him. When the final chapter begins with the words, "What my
brother actually said was, 'I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt's
husband who's got the other wife,'" we learn that the narrator has talked-story about the
encounter — based on how much factual reportage we don't know (163). Her brother,
we suppose, is the source of the information, but as an accurate reporter, his authority and
necessary tale, the narrator attempts to reconstruct the untold, perhaps unutterable elements in her aunt’s life — elements which threaten the very moralistic uses to which the narrator’s mother wishes to put the tale. “No Name Woman” thus illustrates the way narrative, as a kind of discourse of historical memory, is put to use, albeit inadequately, to silence and to marginalise that which threatens cultural stability. Just as Clinton’s “Loyalty Day Proclamation,” as a narrative of national identity, elides those moments of American history which have not assured “freedom,” “liberty,” and “democracy” for some inhabitants of the United States, so too on a much smaller scale does the narrator’s mother’s tale also elide the real history of her aunt’s life. “The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family’s deliberately forgetting her,” the narrator tells us at the end of the tale (16). “There is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have” (16). It is thus both these kinds of silence which Kingston breaks in *The Woman Warrior* (and thereby ceases her own participation in the punishment of her aunt), though, as Cheung notes, she does so not by asserting the kind of authoritative counter-history of Chinese America that Frank Chin seems to desire. The narrator comments, in this regard, “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories. from

truthfulness are thrown into question when he asserts that the husband “motioned us not to tell” the arriving second wife that the woman before him, Moon Orchid, is also his wife. We know from the previous story, however, that the narrator’s brother brought the husband to the two sisters and then fled the embarrassing scene, so that he could not have been present when the second wife also arrives (151, 154). This epistemic uncertainty is only further underlined when the narrator admits that “In fact, it wasn’t me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he told her” (163).
what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (5-6).\textsuperscript{12} The
Woman Warrior is a reconstruction, through repetition, of a cultural knowledge which
remains unauthoritative, allusive, and anecdotal. It can only be a provisional answer to
the question of “what is Chinese”? — and what, in contrast, is Chinese American.

\textsuperscript{12}In so addressing Chinese Americans, Kingston reveals that part of her intended
audience is other than the ethnic majority white American audience which her critics fear
will read the Woman Warrior in terms of the ‘ethnic knowledge’ that it might provide.
Her singling out of Chinese Americans makes clear that her text is intended for several
different audiences, who, obviously, will read the book in different ways. As she
remarked in 1982 of one such audience, “For the record, most of my mail is from Chinese
American women, who tell me how similar their childhoods were to the one in the book,
or say they their lives are not like that at all, but they understand the feelings” (“Mis-
readings” 63).
III

"We can't just stop. We're not rocks — progress, migration, motion is ... modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*. Even if we go faster than we should. We can't wait."
— Tony Kushner

King-Kok Cheung argues that Kingston interrogates the silences imposed on herself, and on Chinese Americans, "whether in the form of feminine and cultural decorum, external or self-censorship, or historical or political invisibility" (*Silences* 3-4).

As I remark in Chapter Two, this last trope of invisibility is used by Ellison to suggest both the absence of African Americans in some traditional histories of the United States, and the lack of existential individuality afforded Ellison's narrator by the three cited discourses in *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, invisibility names not only white America's complex resistance to coming to terms with the contemporary and historical presence of African Americans, but also its resistance to recognizing the human individuality of African American identities which, while not separable from race, are not reducible to it. Kingston, interestingly enough, uses a trope similarly based on corporeal insubstantiality to talk generally about the historical and political absence of Chinese Americans from the United States history and structures of power, and specifically about her own narrator's troubled presence in her American world. In Kingston's "Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts," as the subtitle names the work, ghostly existence describes the cultural unintelligibility of, on the one hand, the narrator's mother's stories about life in China,

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13Prior, in Kushner 132.
and, on the other hand, what the Chinese American community calls “Gold Mountain” — that is, the United States. Taken together, these two ghostly existences produce a third, that of the narrator herself, who perceives herself as “half ghosts, half invisible” (194).

With this trope of ghostly existence, Kingston repeats with a difference an existing Chinese image — or even cliché. Indeed, her use of the word “ghost” has been the object of some debate. She uses the word to translate the character kuei (Wade Gilles) or gwai (pinyin), a somewhat derogatory and hostile term for whites in the Chinese American (Cantonese-speaking) community. Jeffery Paul Chan, for instance, insists that the proper translation of gwai should be devils, or demons, noting that gwai are “inherently unfriendly” (Chan 41; see also Tong 6). Sau-ling Wong, commenting on this debate, says that Chan and Tong “insist that it be translated as demon (or devil or asshole). They object to the connotations of insubstantiality or neutrality in Kingston’s translation, finding it unsanctioned by community usage and lacking in the hostility toward whites indispensable to true works of Chinese-American literature” (Wong, “Chinatown Tour” 252). But the narrator also thematises the problem of translation when she looks up “Ho Chi Kuei” in an English-Chinese dictionary (204-5). Perhaps taking into consideration these complaints, Kingston translates the phrase into ‘white devils’ in her 1980 China Men. (See Sato for more detail on the issue of translation.) Like Ellison’s metaphor of invisibility, Kingston’s refashioned spectral conceit at first seems a relatively simple concept, but develops into a more complex two-way metaphor. “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America,” says Kingston’s narrator
while pondering her mother’s story of the no name aunt (5). The “invisible” world is, of course, the ghostly realm of China — ghostly because the American-born narrator has never been there and does not share her parents’ desire to ‘return.’ But her childhood is also ghostly because it is haunted by the spectres of Chinese narratives. During the narrator’s childhood, she is haunted by dreams which originate from her mother’s supernatural stories set in China, and so that haunting becomes associated for her with things Chinese: “I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories” (87). “My mother funneled China into our ears,” complains the narrator at one point (76). One of these spectres is the narrator’s aunt, “No Name Woman,” whose story begins the novel. Her aunt — or rather, the *tale* of her aunt — is a ghost who haunts the narrator’s “solid” American world. As the narrator says, “My aunt haunts me — her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect. I alone devote pages of paper to her” (16).

Ghostliness is not exclusively a quality produced by her mother’s spectral narratives, however. The spectres which haunt the narrator’s American childhood include not only those of Chinese tales, but such creatures as the “Newsboy Ghost” and the “Mail Ghost” as well. These ghosts’ pattern of non-interactive, though regular intrusion into the Chinese American community is broken the day the “Garbage Ghost” learns his name from the narrator and her frightened siblings — that is, he learns how to pronounce the Cantonese phrase which the children cry out whenever he comes around. “Now we know,” the narrator’s mother tells them, “the White Ghosts can hear Chinese. They have learned it. You mustn’t talk in front of them again” (98).
Kingston’s use of this trope marks a doubly spectral existence for her narrator. As a Chinese American, she does not unconsciously fit into her ‘home’ in the United States the same way the white and black ghosts seem to. But as a Chinese American, she is equally estranged from Chinese culture — there is not, as Sau-ling Wong has put it, “a kind of ahistorical, almost genetic, Chinese essence to all persons of Chinese ancestry” (“Chinatown Tour” 261-2). The narrator’s cultural status is reflected in the ambivalent attitude of the immigrant Chinese American community toward her generation, the second generation Chinese Americans, who, as she remarks, “had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves half ghosts. They called us a kind of ghost” (183). Haunted by two sides, she feels herself become “half ghosts, half invisible” (194).

The advantage of these tropes — Ellison’s narrator’s invisibility and Kingston’s narrator’s spectral existence — is that they figure the problem of individual identity not as ontological, but as social; or, to be more specific, they signify the difficulty that both the invisible man and the woman warrior have in understanding their relations to “America.” In order to articulate these relations, these two figures search for discourses which might offer them specifically American subjectivities — by which I mean all of individual selfhood and identity as Americans, as well as the possibility of becoming a citable subject of discourse, something to be talked about. This process of assuming American subjectivity necessitates that Ellison’s African American narrator and Kingston’s Chinese American narrator attempt the verbal performance of different American discourses. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the cited discourses in Invisible Man tend to be specifically
political and ideological language-types, which provide moral vocabularies, patterns of behaviour, and encode ‘plots’ of action (a revised American dream for the discourse of Booker T. Washington, for instance, and a teleology of class revolution for that of the Communist party). The discourses said again in Kingston’s novel are less explicitly political, but they are no less crucial to helping its narrator establish and maintain an identity as a fully American subject. Some of the discourses said again (and written again) are, as I have mentioned, oral narratives told to her by her mother about her family (the story of her unnamed aunt) or about the heroic warrior woman Fa Mu Lan, or are written narratives drawn from traditional Chinese literature (the story of Ngak Fei, for instance, or the use of elements from the shenxian and wuxia xiaoshuo traditions).

Kingston’s narrator, however, also experiences the compulsion to perform verbally her American identity, by reciting American discourses whose origins are less locatable than Ellison’s recitation of Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Address, but which are no less powerful in their ability (or inability) to construct her American identity.

The social space for Kingston’s narrator’s verbal performance is quite different from the invisible man’s battle royal, though both, interestingly, are implicated in pedagogical institutions: as she recalls, “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent” (165). Embedded in her childhood insecurity about talking out loud is the additional necessity of having to do so in a language which is not her mother’s tongue. Unlike the invisible man, she does not regard verbal performance as a means to power and identity, but as the awful exigency that might betray her. The compulsory speech demanded in her American school, and the narrator’s
resistance to that demand, underscore both the cultural and gender divisions which complicate her search for an American identity. As the narrator says of kindergarten, "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). The imperative to perform verbally takes two forms in the narrator's kindergarten class: speaking and reading aloud. She prefers reading aloud over 'original' speech because she does not have to try to figure out what to say; however, there are two words that the narrator constantly stumbles over during this type of recitation: "I" and "here" (166-7).

As many critics have pointed out (Wong, Reading; Cheung, "Don't Tell"; Goellnicht, "Father Land"), the narrator's anxieties about speech and speechlessness are enacted during her encounter one day with an even quieter, shyer Chinese American girl in the twilight basement of their school. "I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl" (175), the narrator tells her smaller double. Even more than the narrator, her smaller double is unable to talk in class: "She would whisper-read but not talk," the narrator tells us (173). The narrator hates the things about the girl that remind her of her own perceived inadequacies: that they are both silent Chinese girls; that they are both always chosen last for schoolyard baseball games; that she seems "fragile" (176). She proceeds to pinch her cheeks and pull her hair in an attempt to provoke her double to speak — to plead that the narrator stop, to call for help, or only to cry out in pain. But the girl merely cries and waits passively, which eventually makes the narrator add pleas to her threats, tears of her own to her violence. The narrator's logic for her actions soon becomes clear, in words which call attention to her own anxiety: "If you don't talk, you can't have a
personality,” she tells the tormented girl (180). “You’re such a nothing,” she adds (178).

Here the narrator grasps that verbal performance is essential to identity — which is why she prefers recitation, reading aloud, to the expression of her own uncertain, unlocatable personality. But speech is essential not only for these abstract reasons, but for specifically American purposes and identities. The narrator’s pleas reveal the field of American subjectivities that verbal performance will open up for the silent girl. “Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader?” the narrator asks. “Or a pompom girl? What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you can’t be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife” (180).

What becomes clear from these passages is that the narrator’s acquisition of a “personality” is contingent upon the success of a verbal performance, even of a kind of recitation. For the narrator, the content of speech matters less to the obtaining of “personality” than the mere fact of performing itself. In this connection, it is pertinent to recall the earlier cited words of Judith Butler: “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). In Bodies that Matter, Butler theorizes gender norms in terms of this reiterative notion of performativity. She defines the latter “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). Butler accordingly sees subjectivity and the agency which attends it as that which is produced by going through the process of assuming a ‘sex.’ The assumption of subjectivity, Butler suggests, is circumscribed by the existence of what Butler calls the
“abject,” that which is prevented from assuming subjectivity (3). In one sense, Butler’s articulation of the role of the abject — against which the gendered subject exists and has its “claim to autonomy and to life” (3) — parallels the function, suggestively metaphorized by Ellison and explicated by Morrison, of the “Africanist” presence in defining white American qualities of freedom, desirability, power, and innocence (see Morrison 37-8). As such, the abject body is “a threatening spectre” for the (American-normal, that is, white) subject (Butler 3). For Kingston’s narrator, on the other hand, the abject is represented by her quieter double. Kingston’s narrator, herself a partially spectral body, is also haunted by this possibility, as she knows that failure to perform verbally in the classroom threatens her very sense of “personality.”

That uncertainty is perhaps caused by the contradictory discourses among which the narrator must choose to perform. She knows, for instance, that other Chinese American girls are silent as well; the lack of speech seems part of the performance which produces the social being known as a Chinese American girl. That silence may be a reaction against different codes of female volubility in the U.S. and in China; as I note in the beginning of the chapter, the narrator claims to “have tried to turn myself American-feminine” (11). That process is made necessary by white American sensibilities; as Kingston’s narrator says,

It isn’t just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thang names you can’t remember. . . . Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. (171-2)
Too far in this direction, however, leads to the total silence the narrator seeks to confront in her smaller double. “Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering,” the narrator tells us. “We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school” (172). This girl’s verbal performance — “She would whisper-read but not talk” (173) — ironically places her, in the narrator’s mind, in an association with things Chinese, things insufficiently American: “If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them — crunch! — stomped on them with my iron shoes” (178). The narrator’s tormenting of the smaller Chinese American girl seems to be a way of confronting the narrator’s own uncertainties about how she must perform, and how she must talk, to be an American girl. The reiterative performance of those gender-codes by which she turns herself “American-feminine” would ensure the production of herself as an American girl — whose subjectivity is defined, as we learn from the passage quoted above, by the progressive movement from “cheerleader” and “pompom girl” to “housewife” (180).

To return to Butler’s theory of performativity for a moment, she notes that her work in *Bodies That Matter* is informed by speech act theory as conceived by J. L. Austin and elaborated by others (see note 9 in Butler 246). As Jacques Derrida has sought to show, Austin’s theory of the performative seems to rely precisely on the problem of citation which he excludes from the theory as not “ordinary” (see Austin 22). Derrida thus remarks: “For, ultimately, isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious,’ *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined
modification of a general citability — or rather, a general iterability — without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?” (Limited Inc 17). Derrida goes on to argue, in fact, that the class of utterances Austin theorizes under the term “performative” is made possible by citation, or, to use the term Derrida prefers, iterability. “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?” (18). How “intention” enters into this dynamic is yet another problem (see footnote 6 in Chapter 2), and where that problem has its effects is the question of the subject’s agency with respect to the discourse being performed, or cited. If performance can be considered a kind of citational practice, and if the performance of certain social norms constitutes the process through which the subject becomes socially visible and politically active, to what extent does the subject have control over, or will toward, those reiterated citations? Butler argues that the “paradox of subjectivation (assujetissement) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms” (15). This problem is solved in part for Butler by conceptualizing agency itself as a reiterative practice within the process of saying again, or performing again. While agreeing with Butler on this point, I would also like to suggest that it is possible for the subject to become at least partly conscious of reiterated discourses by which he or she is produced as gendered and raced — and, furthermore, nationed, cultured, sexed, and classed. To recall Gilles Deleuze's point, which I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, “true
repetition takes place in the imagination.” Such is the case for both the invisible man and the woman warrior; both older narrators are conscious of the discourses (as language-types, narrative plots, and vocabularies) whose citations-as-performances fail to produce them as visible, corporeal American subjects.

As I have noted, Kingston’s narrator’s classroom performance helps to produce her as such a spectral body. There, contradictory imperatives require two different performances: on the one hand, her silence in the classroom reiterates the silence of the other “Chinese girls” in the room; and on the other hand, the American school requires her verbal performances of reading aloud, or verbally responding to the teacher:

> It was when I found out that I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. “Louder,” said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. (166)

Converting the graphic signs into audible sounds — a process, in a sense, of translation — is easier for the narrator than talking in class. In the former procedure, the text ventriloquises itself in the narrator’s voice; it speaks rather than her. Trouble only arrives when the narrator is required to situate herself with reference to the discourse read, at that moment when language should engender subjectivity. Significantly, she has trouble understanding and reading the word “I”:

> Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I’d gone quiet again. I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? (166-7)
Kingston’s narrator’s inability to pronounce the English “I” is interesting, considering Emile Benveniste’s assertion that the first-person pronoun has a crucial role in the acquisition of subjectivity through language. Benveniste argues that “It is in and through language that man [sic] constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality which is that of the being” (224). Like Kingston’s narrator, Benveniste comprehends human “personality,” in the wider sense of ‘personhood,’ only in terms of the possibilities offered by language use, and as a kind of effect of language use:

The “subjectivity” we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject.” It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that that “subjectivity,” whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. “Ego” is he who says “ego.” That is where we see the foundation of “subjectivity,” which is determined by the linguistic status of “person.” (224)

For Benveniste, the personal pronouns “provide the first step in this bringing out of subjectivity in language” (226). The second step is deictic markers, that class of words which have their orientation in reference to the speaker. The “indicators of deixis,” Benveniste argues, are “the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the ‘subject’ taken as a referent: ‘this, here, now,’ and their numerous correlatives” (226). Interestingly, Kingston’s narrator also finds problematic one of these markers of deixis:

The other troublesome word was “here,” no strong consonant to hang on
to, and so flat, when “here” is two mountainous ideographs [in Chinese]. The teacher, who had already told me every day how to read “I” and “here,” put me in the low corner under the stairs again, where the noisy boys usually sat. (167)

I would like to suggest that the narrator’s troubled attempts at performing English indicate a confusion, not only about who she is, but about where she is, in cultural space, as well. As the narrator says, “Whenever my parents said ‘home,’ they suspended America” (99). When reading in class, Kingston’s narrator grows silent when she comes across the two unenunciable words, “I” and “here.” Within this silence is thus wrapped up her hesitation about who she is and where she locates herself.

Kingston’s narrator’s silence is broken spectacularly one day when she, as a child, confronts her parents with a bottled-up “list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me” (197). They begin with the demand, based on the mythology about the way Chinese deal with unwanted daughters, that they not try to “give us away” to a local retarded adolescent who reads his pornography under her parents’ laundry’s awning every day (201). The narrator has other plans for herself, as she screams to her mother:

“I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I’m not, I’m not retarded. There’s nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I’m smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. . . . I’m so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. . . . I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife.” (201)

This extended shouting match is the climax of The Woman Warrior. In it, the narrator not only breaks a long silence, but she confronts her mother with the contradictions she feels inherent between Chinese American “talk-story” and American discourse. “And I
don’t want to listen to any more of your stories: they have no logic. They scramble me up,” the narrator yells at her mother. “You lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or, ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference. . . . I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up” (202), she continues. in a premonition of the realist aesthetic some of Kingston’s critics wished for in their reviews. Kingston’s narrator’s yelled accusations and complaints, however, do not remain unanswered:

My mother, who is champion talker, was, of course, shouting at the same time. . . . “You can’t listen right. I didn’t say I was going to marry you off. Did I ever say that? Did I ever mention that? Those newspaper people were for your sister, not you. Who would want you? Who said we could sell you? We can’t sell people. Can’t you take a joke? You can’t even tell a joke from real life. You’re not so smart. Can’t even tell real from false.” (202)

Within the shouting is aired some of the misogyny the narrator feels she has experienced in her family. Vocal now, she tells her mother that “it doesn’t matter if a person is ugly; she can still do schoolwork.” a protest that prompts this exchange:

“I didn’t say you were ugly.”
“You say that all the time.”
“That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite.”
It seemed to hurt her to tell me that. (203)

The sorting of the American real involves the narrator distinguishing between Chinese and American social discourse, separating “what’s real” from, as her mother puts it, “what Chinese say.” That sorting is made complicated by the younger narrator’s misunderstanding of the rules of Chinese social discourse — that “Chinese,” as her mother says, “like to say the opposite.” In this moment of revelation, the narrator learns that a substantial part of the proverbial Chinese discourse of misogyny and Chinese
American talk-story about China have their own, different modes of circulation, which she has failed to comprehend fully. The truths she in turn tells her mother are not a little ironic, given that the narrator herself is now, as Kingston, a writer:

I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (204)

Indeed, *The Woman Warrior* can as a whole be seen as the working out of the different discourses surrounding the narrator’s childhood. As she says near the end of the novel, with the adult narrator’s wiser retrospect, “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (205). The final story of the novel, a rewritten version of Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments,” is about such a continued negotiation of different cultural discourses.

Historical sources suggest that Ts’ai Yen was born around 178 A.D. to a scholar-statesman of the Han dynasty. When she was only about eighteen she was abducted from her father’s home in present-day Honan by those whom the Europeans would later know as the Huns (Rorex and Fong, “Introduction” n.p.). Ts’ai Yen was taken to Inner Mongolia, where she was forced to marry a Hun chieftain with whom she later had two children. When a Han delegation arrived over a decade later to ransom her, Ts’ai Yen was forced to make the painful decision of whether to remain in Hun lands with her children, or return to the Han people alone, where she would face an arranged marriage. Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments,” also sometimes translated as “Eighteen Songs of a
Nomad Flute” (Rorex and Fong), is a group of poems based on her travails among the Huns, and her agonizing decision to return to her father’s house.

The narrator of The Woman Warrior claims to have been told Ts’ai Yen’s story by her mother: “Here is a story my mother told me,” she remarks, “not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206). What follows is a rewritten version of Ts’ai Yen’s Laments, with several crucial revisions. The first is that it is framed by yet another story, which is, perhaps, “the beginning” told her by her mother. In this frame story, a group of bandits attack her mother’s village, which is watching a travelling theatre show. Despite the family’s fear that such an attack would occur, the narrator’s grandmother had insisted that everyone accompany her to the theatre and that, moreover, all the doors and windows of the house be left open — so that, in a kind of reverse psychology, the family might be able to concentrate on the play, secure in the knowledge that their house would certainly be sacked if the bandits came. When the bandits attack the theatre, however, and all the family escapes to return to the untouched house, this is “proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays. They went to many plays after that” (207).

Aside from its moral about the power of the performing arts, the story also sets the stage, as it were, for Ts’ai Yen’s tale. “I like to think,” the narrator tells us, “that at some of those performances, they heard the songs of Ts’ai Yen” (207). The tale which the narrator proceeds to tell is an altered version of the plot of Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments.” While Sau-ling Wong argues, in “Kingston’s Handling of Traditional Chinese
Sources," that Kingston probably did not learn the "Laments" through the oral tradition, it is plausible that she learned the plot and outline of Ts'ai Yen’s life from her mother, and later went back to a written source before rewriting the tale. Any comparison of Kingston’s rewritten version of the narrative and the 'original,' however, is complicated by several problems. Though Wong in 1991 complained that there is a lack of “a full-length translation in English” of Ts’ai Yen’s poem (Wong, “Chinese Sources” 33), she was unaware of Rewi Alley’s 1963 translation. The better known version of Ts’ai Yen’s Laments is Liu Shang’s 773 A.D. revision, which is translated in Rorex and Fong. Further compounding the problem of establishing a good translation of the original with which to contrast Kingston’s revision is that fact that, as Wong notes, “we are not sure which version Kingston had access to” (“Chinese Sources” 33).

If narrative, as a kind of social discourse, has a part in the individual’s attempts at cognitively processing the real and his or her relation to it, not all narratives will be equally adequate to that task for every individual. Accordingly, Ts’ai Yen’s original

14 Sau-ling Wong, e-mail to author, 21 March 1996. According to Ross Terrill, Alley is “a New Zealander who has lived in China more than fifty years,” and was with Mao in the caves of Yanan. He was still alive in 1984 (Terrill 165). Alley’s reliability as a translator may be slightly suspect. In his Introduction to his translation, for instance, Alley characterizes the contemporaneous “decline of the Han dynasty” during Ts’ai Yen’s lifetime in quasi-Marxist terms: “Warlords were out for power, and the people’s rebellion of the Yellow Turbans under Chang Chiao rose in struggle to try to bring peace and livelihood to the common folk with the cry of ‘Land to the Tilers’” (n.p.). Even if Alley’s translation is somewhat informed by his (assumed) Marxist politics of class struggle, his translation is only another example of the ways in which Ts’ai Yen’s tale has been written again so that its themes might be applicable in different circumstances. As for the adequacy of Alley’s translation, Sau-ling Wong is of the opinion that Alley’s version, while not the most graceful in word choice and sentence structure, does render the content accurately on the whole (e-mail to author, 25 July 1996).
“Eighteen Laments” seems more suitable to the narrator’s mother’s experiences of immigrating to the United States than to the narrator’s own life as a Chinese American girl growing up in California. In the first lament, for instance, Ts’ai Yen mourns that she is “forced to . . . go off, / adopt the customs of another land / so hard for one of Han” (I.15-18). Although not kidnapped, the narrator’s mother (whose name, we learn in the fourth part, is Brave Orchid), like Ts’ai Yen, is uprooted and transported to a barbarian land. As we learn in the fourth section of The Woman Warrior, and in a surprising turn for the Western reader, the narrator’s family in China regards America as an uncivilized land of barbarians. Although “Gold Mountain” is seen as a land of riches, when the narrator’s aunt arrives from China she tests her nieces and nephews, who were “raised away from civilization,” and desires to help work in the family laundry, as if she were, as the narrator puts it, “roughing it in the wilderness” (134-5). The narrator’s retrospective interpolation of her aunt’s explorations of the barbarous America underscores both the temptation to, and the danger of, reading the text exclusively sociologically; that is, as how ‘real’ Chinese view the United States. Indeed, those interpolations declare their own fictional status through their intertextual links to other fictional discourses. The narrator’s imaginative interpolation that her aunt “saw them [the children] eat undercooked meat, and they smelled like cow’s milk” (134) seems an echo of Ts’ai Yen’s cry that, when hungry, she is “given bad smelling mutton / and milk that so revolts me / I cannot eat” (VI.3-5).

Ts’ai Yen’s sigh that “Never a single day, never a night / that I do not think of home” may be a compelling line for Brave Orchid, but it is not for the unnamed narrator
Like Ts’ai Yen, Brave Orchid may feel the difficulty of adapting to a strange way of life in a strange land: “Han / customs. Han thought so different from / all I find here, making it hard / for me to go along with them all; / Han food, Han drink, again not the same” (IV.7-11). For Ts’ai Yen, the cultural difference between her Han civilization and the barbarian society has its metaphor in the geographical distance between her old home and her new strange land: only the out of reach wild geese can travel between the two (V). That cultural-geographical distance is marked by “the Great Wall,” which separates Ts’ai Yen from her “home folk” (X.2,15). As in barbarian America, barbarian society has as their “custom / to be careless of the old and sick. / only glorying in the young and / strong” (VII.7-10).

Ts’ai Yen’s bitterness is unrelenting; even in the Eleventh Lament Ts’ai Yen remarks that, while “my husband / who loves me has given me two baby sons / to nurse, and I bring them up without / feeling of shame, just sorry that they / are born in this environment and not / in that of Han” (XI.7-12), the only reason she has not killed herself is the thought that she might yet “see my old home again” (XI.4). When that opportunity arrives in the next Lament in the form of the Han delegation, it does so with the awful proviso that she must leave her children behind if she wishes to be ransomed by the Han emperor. The last seven of the “Eighteen Laments” are taken up with Ts’ai Yen’s bitter decision to leave her children; as she mourns, “this twelfth song has in it / both joy and sorrow; to go back home, / to stay on here, these two opposites / I cannot hold together in my heart” (XII.16-9). Laments XIII through XVI are dominated not by the joy of returning to Han lands, but by Ts’ai Yen’s despair at the prospect of leaving her children
behind:

Living
in that tent, having to follow
strange customs; Heaven answered
my prayers and permitted me to return
from the Huns to Han; joyfully it
should have been, yet because of
leaving my children, my heart became
even heavier with sadness.

............................
Children and mother parted, now this thing
I find unable to bear! (XV.3-15)

In the Seventeenth Lament, Ts'ai Yen remarks on the odd reversal that when she was
captured she could think of nothing but home, and now that she is going home, she is just
as sad, thinking of her children left behind. In the final Lament, Ts'ai Yen, now back at
home in Han China, bitterly muses on the impossibility of traversing cultural differences.
I reprint it in its entirety below, in part because it is important to the changes Kingston
makes to Ts'ai Yen's tale.

Hun music is theirs; to use
Hun words on the Han lute has
the same effect; now in this
eighteenth song I have put in
my thoughts which still are
not yet ended; musical instruments
come, I know, from heaven, able
to express the joy or sadness
of those who can use them; Han,
Hun customs and land are not
the same; heaven and earth too
are far apart; now I and my sons
are divided as are these, and
my grief grows as high as the heavens;
the world around me so big,
but never big enough to hold
all my bitterness. (XVIII)
Kingston makes several important changes to Ts’ai Yen’s story, and that which she leaves out becomes as important as what she leaves in, transformed or untouched. As I have suggested, the “story my mother told me” may be adequate to her mother’s sense of alienation in the United States and her desire to return “home,” but it cannot fulfill the same function for the narrator. Kingston plays with the difference between the narrator and her mother when she adds to Ts’ai Yen’s story that “Her children did not speak Chinese. She spoke it to them when their father was out of the tent, but they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed” (208). With this detail, Kingston gestures at the generational dynamic which can separate immigrant parents from their American-born children. Again merging two traditional Chinese tales, Kingston also offers the detail that Ts’ai Yen fought on horseback with the barbarians after she was captured; like Fa Mu Lan, this Ts’ai Yen gives birth during battle, “on the sand” (208).

However, as Wendy Eberle and I have argued elsewhere, “instead of emphasizing the lasting alienation of Ts’ai Yen and the mutual unintelligibility between her and her captors’ Hun culture, Kingston writes into the tale the possibility of real and deep connection across the two cultures” (Douglas and Eberle 6). In Kingston’s version of Ts’ai Yen’s story, Ts’ai Yen is surprised one evening to hear, on leaving her tent, the barbarian music “tremble and rise like desert wind” as they play on their flutes (208). Despite their uncivilized nature, the barbarians “reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held . . . . The music disturbed Ts’ai Yen; its sharpness and its cold made her ache” (208). In contrast to the original Ts’ai Yen, who seems ultimately untouched by barbarian culture, this barbarian music
“disturbed her so that she could not concentrate on her own thoughts” (208). This disturbance of her “own” self and thoughts suggests the compelling presence of a different cultural voice: one which, while not destroying her Han sensibilities, seems to, at some level, displace and transform them. Moreover, just as “her ‘own’ self is disturbed by barbarian music, so too does she eventually respond by disturbing the barbarian selves with hers” (Douglas and Eberle 6). The barbarians hear, one evening, Ts’ai Yen’s answering song drift from her separate tent:

a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts’ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians. (209)

As the final note of Kingston’s rewritten version of Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments” — and the final note of The Woman Warrior as well — this final emphasis on the possibility of communication across cultures seems central to Kingston’s work. Indeed, what Kingston picks up from Ts’ai Yen’s “Laments” is the final suggestion that “Hun words on the Han lute has / the same effect” (XVIII.2-3). Turning Ts’ai Yen’s lute into the barbarian flutes, Kingston suggests that art has the power to effect true communication across cultural boundaries, to establish connection across geographical and social spaces.

As with the end of Banks’s novel, the end of Kingston’s The Woman Warrior sees the narrator merge with the author; and so the narrator’s retelling of her mother’s tale becomes Kingston’s parable about her own art’s role (“I also am a story-talker,” the narrator says [206]), and about her text’s work in establishing her Chinese American
identity out of the Chinese and American discourses which she inherits. This scene, between Ts’ai Yen and the barbarians around the evening fire, does not exist in the original, but for Kingston it is the new kernel of the tale. Ts’ai Yen’s Laments end with her embittered return to Han lands without her children; Kingston downplays this theme by giving it only a single sentence and by omitting the fact that Ts’ai Yen has to leave her children behind (209). The emphasis in Kingston’s story is the ability of art to weave together two cultures — not into a single whole, but into a hybrid, double sensibility, neither Chinese nor white American. Thus Kingston’s final note to The Woman Warrior is that the tale “translated well” (209), a process which is glossed by Donald Goellnicht, in his essay on Kingston and Joy Kogawa, in the following way:

For both Hong Kingston and Kogawa, however, translation is never easy integration and assimilation. Instead, on a generic level, both replace simple mimetic and humanistic realism with complex works of metafictional life writing that, in their very self-conscious rejections of univocality, their contorted and problematizing mixtures of history and fiction, biography and fiction, lyrics and diaries, legends and prosaic dailiness, challenge the dominant discourse of the “father land.” They refuse to seek identity through homogeneity, and instead exploit the difference of multifarious subject positions so as to create junctures where radical agency becomes possible. (“Father Land” 129)

Kingston’s alterations to Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments” are in tune with the changes she makes to the other narrative discourses she inherits from her parents’ Chinese culture, such as the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” or even the moral fable of her “No Name” aunt. Her revisions of traditional Chinese works, however, have prompted some Chinese American critics to accuse her of nothing less than “destroying [Chinese] history and literature” (Chin, “Come All” 3). One telling example of this criticism took place
after Frank Chin responded to Kingston’s reworking of the story of Ngak Fei, condemning her intertwining of two distinct tales as “fake” (“Come All” 3). In “White Tigers,” the narrator returns from her fifteen-year training with the old couple to her parents, who “carve revenge” upon her back, tattooing a “list of grievances [which] went on and on” (34-5). When she recovers from the excruciating procedure, her mother brings her a mirror, in which the narrator sees “my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like an army, like my army” (35). These details, as I have said, are nowhere present in the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan,” but are adapted from the story of Ngak Fei, a warrior whose mother carved four characters upon his back before battle. Kingston makes these alterations, however, for very specific purposes:

Sinologists have criticized me for not knowing myths and for distorting them; pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. They don’t understand that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. That’s why they often appear as cartoons and kung fu movies. I take the power I need from whatever myth. Thus Fa Mu Lan has the words cut into her back; in traditional story, it is the man, Ngak Fei the Patriot, whose parents cut vows on his back. I mean to take his power for women. (“Personal Statement” 24)

Kingston and her “Sinologist” critics such as Frank Chin have very different conceptions about the cultural politics of saying again — especially saying again differently — traditional tales. Indeed, Chin insists that “Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths” (“Come All” 29). This argument is not merely a semantic one about the meaning of the word “myth,” but indeed goes to the heart of contemporary debates in the Asian
American community about contemporary Asian American authors’ uses of traditional Asian sources. King-Kok Cheung argues of both that they are feminist writers who seek to ‘re-vision’ history (to borrow Adrienne Rich’s word). If they are to be nurtured by their cultural inheritance rather than smothered by it, they must learn to reshape recalcitrant myths glorifying patriarchal values. Blinkering the authors by historical or ethnographic criteria denies their freedom as artists to mingle history and myth, fact and fiction. (“Don’t Tell” 162-3)

Like Ellison’s narrator and Banks’s Bob Dubois, Kingston’s woman warrior must try to make sense of her American surroundings by using the hybrid discourses at hand. Those discourses are the complex combination of her mother’s Chinese stories — which have their origin and reality in a different cultural-geographical space — and the American practices of pedagogy and the social engendering of its children, which the narrator as child and as adolescent attempts to cite in order to adopt the codes of “American-feminine.” The narrator’s recitations of these discourses is accomplished only

15Indeed, even the traditional sources Chin claims as “immutable and unchangeable” are far from being bibliographically fixed. Ts’ai Yen’s authorship of the “Eighteen Laments” is not beyond question, and her tale has been retold several times within the Chinese literary tradition: These elaborations include a later poem by Liu Shang, which is often rather easily confused with the original; and at least two different sets of paintings, which narrate distinct sets of visual details, some based clearly on Liu Shang’s version rather than the original. There was even a cultural revolution era Beijing-style opera appropriation by Guo Moruo of Ts’ai Yen’s tale. For many readers of Chinese fiction, the subtleties of such evolution are lost — traditionally the audience’s familiarity with the source story or stories is tacitly if often wrongly assumed, so that it becomes an increasingly difficult task to distinguish the particular original source threads of an ever more complex textual weaving. (Douglas and Eberle 7-8)

Ts’ai Yen’s cycle of poems were rewritten yet again by Wang Anshih in the eleventh century (Rorex and Fong, “Introduction” n.p.).
by profoundly rewriting them, altering their meaning and structure for an American setting, so as to suit her American life. As I suggest of Ellison in the beginning of this chapter, Kingston too enacts Bakhtin’s dictum, altering the force and trajectory of other’s words for her own purposes. Such transformations, however, are never complete; those words — as her mother’s stories, traditional Chinese tales, or American practices of feminine beauty — resist the narrator’s efforts and continue to insist on their own direction. Bakhtin describes this resistance:

And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. (Dialogic 294)

Like Kingston herself, her repeated discourses stubbornly refuse to be “assimilated” into their new context, that of a predominantly white America.
Conclusion: Using the Words You Taught Me

I

"It is not that the opposition [to the dominant American culture] is a false one; it is that the opposition expresses, on either side, solutions generated by the culture itself, so that the very act of setting these in opposition becomes at once a declaration of cultural self-sufficiency and a strategy for eliciting forms of reconciliation, compromise, and continuity."
— Sacvan Bercovitch

Ts’ai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments” is a song about migration, and of the negotiations of cultural differences which such migrations can necessitate. Her resistance to “barbarian” ways, and her longing for her Chinese home are, as I suggest in the last chapter, more compelling to Brave Orchid during her reflection on “Gold Mountain” than they are to the narrator of The Woman Warrior, who cannot look back with the same nostalgia as her mother to an originary Chinese land. The Woman Warrior is, in one sense. Kingston’s answering discourse to Ts’ai Yen’s song: both texts thematise the dynamic of migration and the exigencies of cultural adaptation (and conflict) which attend it. As I argue in Chapter One, one of the important centripetal tendencies of the discourse of the American dream is migration to a new land. For de Crèvecoeur, migration to the United States is marked by the discarding of Old World culture. Kingston problematizes this process by suggesting that cultural difference, inscribed in myth, stories, and narrative, can be ‘brought over’ as well, to paraphrase Kingston, and

1Bercovitch 22n.
transformed into American cultural material. That geographical journey, Banks suggests, is accompanied by a kind of discursive one as well; Bob Dubois and Vanise Dorsinville are in search of an America whose mythological richness and complexity are articulated in competing languages and vocabularies about the United States. Both characters are immersed in the ways in which the United States talks about itself to itself, and to them. *Invisible Man* explores a distinct set of language types which mediated between the idealized discourse of the American dream and the economic, social, and political realities of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. If the American dream explains the United States in terms of a new ethical-material order in which prosperity is awarded according to labour and ability and no other criteria, the discourses inscribed by Ellison in his novel attempt to negotiate the distance between this ideal discourse and the economic reality of African Americans: Booker T. Washington argues that the American dream, in a somewhat diminished form, is still possible for black Americans who will give up the drive for "social equality," but the Brotherhood and Ras the Exhorter, in their different ways, see the dream as an ideological formulation that has always left marginalised peoples outside of its promises.

*The Woman Warrior* and its companion volume, *China Men*, are also explorations of these same themes of migration and of the search for the American dream. Indeed, the Chinese term for the United States, Gold Mountain — which was probably first coined during the California Gold Rush — gathers up much of the discourse of the American dream and inflects it with the Chinese experiences of emigrating to America. Though told from the point of view of an American-born narrator, both texts examine her family's
and ancestors' struggles in migrating to the United States. These texts' tales of migration and cultural difference are largely organized around gender; as Kingston describes China Men in relation to The Woman Warrior,

You'll see that "I" achieve an adult narrator's voice. . . . She finds the ancestors and sympathetically follows the brothers to Vietnam. "I" am nothing but who "I" am in relation to other people. In The Woman Warrior "I" begin the quest for self by understanding the archetypal mother. In China Men, "I" become more whole because of the ability to appreciate the other gender. ("Personal Statement" 23)

China Men consists of twenty sections of varying length, all of which thematise the narrator's male relatives' journeys to Gold Mountain. In one of those sections, Kingston writes again an unusual historical instance of an Asian's migration to the United States. The story, in fact, has been repeated since it happened in 1975 by both Maxine Hong Kingston and by contemporary American novelist T. Coraghessan Boyle in his 1990 novel East is East. As a way of concluding this study, I want to look at the ways in which Boyle and Kingston repeat with a difference this 'true' story and how they understand its relation to the problematic of the American dream, migration, and the negotiation of cultural differences. The focus of this Conclusion is thus the intersection of the racial cliché — with which I deal in some detail in Chapter Three — and a particular genealogical thread of American Orientalism (see Said): that place in the American imagination that listened for an "aiiieeee" from the Asian Wild Man of the Green Swamp when he was finally captured. The way T. Coraghessan Boyle and Maxine Hong Kingston rewrite this historical instance of American Orientalism suggests that, when it comes to the problem of communication and translation across cultures, more than just
racial and cultural clichés are “preoccupied,” as I argue in Chapter Three. Indeed, the figure of the ‘Oriental’ itself is also, somehow, preoccupied in a complex way.

T. Coraghessan Boyle’s 1990 novel *East is East* begins with the novel’s hero, a Japanese merchant sailor named Hiro Tanaka, swimming toward the shore of Georgia. Approaching the coast of the New World, Hiro, like millions of migrants before him, has high hopes for his new life in America. Two hundred years before Hiro’s journey, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur analogously wrote, as I note in the Introduction, that “In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together” (37). “*He is an American,*” continued de Crèvecoeur, “who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced” (39). Like de Crèvecoeur’s European peasants, Hiro, whose father was a white American, hopes to leave behind him all the ancient prejudices of his society — prejudices which make him, as Boyle tells us, “a half-breed, a *happa*, a high-nose and butterstinker . . . forever a foreigner in his own society” (17). And like those millions of earlier migrants who came to the New World in order to escape persecution or poverty, Hiro comes with an image of what life in the New World will be like, a picture at least partially constructed through contrast to the society from which he is fleeing. Hiro understands, Boyle tells us, that

if the Japanese were a pure race, intolerant of miscegenation to the point of fanaticism, the Americans, he knew, were a polyglot tribe, mutts and mulattoes and worse — or better, depending on your point of view. In America you could be one part Negro, two parts Serbo-Croatian and three parts Eskimo and walk down the street with your head held high. (17)

Hiro also has other, possibly more empirical, sources than those available to the European
peasants from which he draws the information necessary to complete his picture of America. He knows, for instance, that “If his own society was closed, the American was wide open — he knew it, he’d seen the films, read the books, listened to the LPs — and anyone could do anything he pleased there” (17-8). Hiro has his own sort of American dream: to “go ashore and see the place for himself, see the cowboys and hookers and wild Indians, maybe even discover his father in some gleaming, spacious ranch house and sit down to cheeseburgers with him” (18).

Boyle’s North American readers surely recognize the clichéd status of Hiro’s image of the United States — just as they would likely recognize Vanise Dorsinville’s series of American clichés in Russell Banks’s Continental Drift. This image, and Hiro’s ensuing experience of American life, however, amount to more than an exploitation of the standard literary technique of the revelation of cultural foibles through the eyes of the outsider. East is East is an allegory of miscommunication across cultures precipitated by the massive circulation of Japanese clichés about America and American clichés about Japan. Sets of Occidentalist clichés form the hermeneutic patterns through which Hiro defines his desires and hopes about America, and through which he subsequently processes his experience of the United States. Conversely, the Americans with whom Hiro comes into contact use their reserve of Orientalist clichés about Japan and the Japanese in order to process, and react to, Hiro’s existence on the Georgian coast. That reserve of clichés constitutes another “preoccupied” figure in the American imagination, the ‘Oriental’ in the wild. The resulting encounter reveals not so much an essential incommunicability between the two cultures, like that suggested by the Kipling poem
from which the title of Boyle’s novel is taken,\(^2\) as a subtler problematic of that quality of language which makes precarious any translation — to recall Kingston’s usage — or communication across cultures.

This precariousness begins with the image of America constructed by Hiro’s clichés: an image as much American nightmare as American dream. He knows, for instance, that he must be careful in this promised land because Americans “killed each other over dinner, shot one another for sport, mugged old ladies in the street” (52). The country is plagued, Hiro knows, by “crack, AIDS, children gunned down in the schoolyard” (185-6). Even the swamp is not safe, because the United States is also the place “where half-crazed Negroes and homicidal whites lurked behind every tree” (131). It is this image, with its expectation of violence at American hands, that contributes to the violent reaction he receives from one of the first Americans Hiro meets after climbing ashore on Tupelo Island, off the Georgian coast. Hiro is attracted by the smell of frying oysters to the dwelling of Gullah-speaking Olmstead White. In an oft repeated pattern in the novel, Olmstead first interprets Hiro’s appearance in terms of the already known, if somewhat uncanny: the apparition of his brother, dead only six months. His surprise is even greater when he realizes that Hiro is not his brother, but “some kind of Chinaman or something. But what was a Chinaman doing in Olmstead White’s kitchen in Hog Hammock on Tupelo Island?” (41). Hiro, for his part, is also horrified by the meeting,

\(^2\)“Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgement Seat; But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!” (“The Ballad of East and West,” in Kipling 75)
largely due to his racist clichés about African Americans:

the stranger was a black man, a Negro, and he knew, as every Japanese
does, that Negroes were depraved and vicious, hairier, sweatier and even
more potent than their white counterparts, the *hakujin*. They were violent
and physical, they were addicted to drugs and they thought only with their
sexual organs. (42)

With fear of the other propelling the volatile situation, their confrontation farcically
deteriorates, ending with the unintended oysters igniting a fire which sets Olmstead’s shack
ablaze. In a further cliché-inspired inflation, Boyle tells us that the event is described the
next day on the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s electronic mail as “WHITE
OLMSTEAD FIRST DEGREE BURNS ARSON HOUSE FIRE TOTAL LOSS” (55). In this episode,
the cliché performs as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hiro’s clichés about black Americans
help to shape his encounter with Olmstead White: his perception, emotion, and action are
processed according to, and only in terms of, the hermeneutic possibilities inscribed by
the cliché. His clichés not only represent American reality to him, but, by governing its
reception and its experience, reveal a power to mould his expectations, thoughts and
actions — in ways similar to how, as I show in Chapter One, the clichés of the discourse
of the American dream motivate Bob Dubois in *Continental Drift*.

Conversely, this function of the cliché governs not only Hiro’s perception of the
United States but, perhaps more pointedly, the Americans’ reaction to Hiro. In a parallel
story which eventually intersects with Hiro’s, Ruth Dershowitz, an aspiring writer at the
writers’ colony on Tupelo Island who first encounters Hiro when he climbs aboard the
speedboat of her lover, learns that numerous sightings of Hiro have been reported around
the Island’s swamp. Boyle tells us, “He was believed to be armed and dangerous” (28).
The clichéd phrase — “believed to be armed and dangerous” — slips innocently into the texture of the story, but somehow stands out, provoking several questions: Whose phrase is it? From where does it come? And how is it being used? The ubiquitous availability of this cliché allows its easy application to the situation, and as Zijderveld’s theory suggests, it conditions the authorities’ interpretation of, and response to, Hiro’s existence on Tupelo Island. Even the knowledge of the East Asian jungle-trained ex-military specialist assigned to the case, Lewis Turco, is implicated in the economy of cultural clichés. Turco believes that he can capture Hiro by setting a trap with a special kind of bait: Guess jeans and t-shirts emblazoned with the phrases “Be Happy and Keep on Truckin” (161). Here Boyle folds the clichés on top of one another: the clichéd phrases on the t-shirts are at the centre of another cliché, that of Japanese helpless fascination with American popular culture. As Turco sums up this second cliché, “The Nips are suckers for it” (161). Indeed, the web of clichés offering possible interpretations of Hiro’s presence in the Island’s swamp spins comically out of control after he is captured and questioned by Turco, the INS detective Detlef Abercorn, and the local Sheriff Peagler: “Was he familiar with the Red Brigades? Did the name Abu Nidal mean anything to him?” (223). With the circulation of clichés governing this cross-cultural meeting, language ceases to function as a means of communication. And so the web grows to encompass Ruth Dershowitz, who had sheltered and fed Hiro: “Was she a folksinger, did she wear huaraches, attend rallies, eat lox and bagels? Was she a Jew?” (225). Boyle sums up the cliché-dominated situation: “They knew all the answers: all they needed was confirmation” (224).
The point is that clichés don’t necessarily have to ‘fit’ the situation in which they are applied. As I note in Chapter One, clichés form what Zijderveld calls the “routine paths and traditional patterns” (5) of social discourse; the individuals who exist within this discourse internalize, to a greater or lesser extent, those paths and patterns. There are a few different types of clichés at work in Boyle’s *East is East*. The primary type could be described as a sort of “metonymic” cliché, in which overly-simplified images, objects, or ideas stand for something with which they are associated. Hiro’s expectation of cheeseburgers, drugs, and murder in the United States, and, on the other hand, the xenophobia displayed by one member of the posse hunting Hiro, who confronts him with the words “You Jap bastards kilt my brother Jimmy” (218), are examples of metonymic clichés in the novel. A second type of cliché is the stock phrases readily available to limit and control new or unrecognizable phenomena, as in the quick attribution of the phrase “armed and dangerous” to Hiro.

A third type of cliché can be seen operating in the semiotic confusion which strikes Hiro when he tries to purchase junk food from a highway convenience store on Tupelo Island. In addition to the language barrier which separates the Japanese man from the local Georgian English, Hiro knows that he is a fugitive: from his freighter the *Tokachi-maru*, from Ruth and her lover Saxby Lights, and from the shotgun-wielding Olmstead White whose shack he has inadvertently helped to raze. The somewhat astonished store clerks, “Bobby” and “Cara Mae,” address him with the appropriate pleasantry as he enters the store: “Y’all must be a toorist?” (49). Though he is highly critical of the reign of clichés in modern society, Zijderveld concedes that daily social
life, including greetings, must in general be conducted as a routine, which necessitates the use of that type of language in which function supersedes meaning — that is, the cliché. Thus, in what constitutes this third category of the cliché in Boyle’s *East is East*, Hiro recognizes the need to respond with a cliché appropriate to the greeting offered by the clerks:

Say something, Hiro told himself. say something, and all at once he had an inspiration. Burt Reynolds, Clint Eastwood — what would they say? Americans began any exchange of pleasantries with a string of curses, anyone knew that... “Mothafucka,” he said, bowing to the girl as he shuffled forward to dump his booty on the counter. And to the bewildered boy, in the most amenable tone he could summon, he observed: “Cocksucka. huh?” (50)

Hiro’s pleasantries even seem to have the desired effect of smoothing out the social situation, astonishing them so much that they cease to ask any questions.

The various types of clichés circulating in *East is East* are obviously at the centre of its comedy, allowing Boyle to portray two cultures, each of whose concepts of the other are steeped in illusion, popular stereotypes, and the unreflective acceptance of advertising and media images. Nevertheless, Boyle’s comedy is rather dark, for the clichés in *East is East* circulate in a solution of fear, historical and cultural ignorance, racism, and xenophobic distrust of the cultural other. As I remark in Chapter One, Flaubert identifies the cliché as a peculiarly modern pathology, one in which the speaking subject unreflectively repeats words, phrases, or gestures which come from without. For Flaubert, clichés signal a sort of anonymous ventriloquism: anonymous because the fact of their ubiquity clouds the identification of any single source (clichés are without origin, they are not original): ventriloquism because another ‘outside’ voice gives the illusion of
speaking through an individual. When Hiro is "believed to be armed and dangerous." the voice has been 'thrown,' and while we might look around to identify the true source (who, exactly, believes him to be armed and dangerous?), no one assumes responsibility for it or its application to him. Since Flaubert's Madame Bovary (at least) the cliché's presence in literary works has often signalled an irony which is complicated precisely because the author who writes a cliché always performs this ventriloquism, so that, as Rainer Warning remarks, we are not sure to whom — character, narrator, or author — we should attribute it. Who speaks the cliché? And does its speaker know of the cliché's clichéd status?

These questions are addressed by Ruth Amossy in her essay "The Cliché in the Reading Process," with which I engage in Chapter One. To review briefly, Amossy argues that a reader either "passively registers" or "critically perceives" a cliché, and that both can be employed in the illusion of realism. In Boyle's novel, for instance, the title of the story Ruth begins work on following her first encounter with Hiro, "Of Tears and the Tide" (118), sounds 'literary,' and may only be passively registered by a reader as a sign of Ruth's 'writerliness.' On the other hand, a reader might recognize the clichéd sentimentalism or melodrama of the title, and think it realistically attributed to a struggling writer like Ruth. In the first instance, the clichéd title is taken seriously by the reader, and is thus not attributed at all. In the second instance, the reader recognizes the title as clichéd, and attributes it to Ruth, who does take it seriously.

For Amossy, the reason the presence of the cliché does not halt the reading process is that the reader still must determine how the cliché is being used. This problem
is entirely ignored by the editors of *Aiieeeeee!*, who, as I note in Chapter Three, protest against the presence of racial clichés in Asian American literature, and in American popular culture. For the editors, all racial and cultural clichés will be "passively registered" by white audiences, to use Amossy's terminology. Consequently, Chin, Chan, Inada and Wong fear the power of the cliché (as delineated by Zijderveld) to stimulate behaviour and attitudes without reflection — the power, indeed, which makes the racial cliché the "low-maintenance engine of white supremacy" ("Introduction" xxvii). Because such clichés are never "critically perceived" (to use again Amossy's terms) by a white audience, the editors condemn their presence in works by Asian American writers. As I note in Chapter Three, this criterion is the basis, in part, for the exclusion of Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang from the anthology's second edition in 1991, titled *The Big Aiieeeeee!*. 

Amossy's work, however, suggests that the passive registration or critical perception of a cliché by the reader depends not only on textual signals such as context, exaggeration, or defamiliarization, but on more abstract factors like a reader's sophistication — and, I would add with regard to the presence of racial clichés in Boyle's, Kingston's, and Ellison's works, the reader's knowledge of the cultural or racial community in question. I would venture to say that most probable North American readers of Boyle's *East is East* recognize the clichéd status of many of Hiro's beliefs about America, finding them exaggerated, absurd, and therefore humorous. That the same readers also recognize the Americans' racist clichés about Hiro and the Japanese, however, is perhaps less sure. Amossy points out that a critically perceived cliché can
provoke criticism by calling attention to the "gap between discourse and Truth and between discourse and the real" (38). Such criticism might be the result of a reader's recognition of the clichés which inform some of the Americans' reactions to Hiro's presence on the Island. But clichés exist on a sliding scale of recognizability and authorial playfulness. What does one make, for example, of this paragraph of Ruth's fiction that Hiro sneaks a glance at one day?

He was a Japanese male in the full flower of Japanese manhood, solid and unyielding, and he came home from the office in the small hours and tore at her kimono. The children were asleep, the Sony silent, the tiny apartment polished like a knife. Michiko went wet at the first touch of him. There was whiskey on his breath, imported whiskey, the whiskey he drank each night at the hostess bar, and the smell of it excited her. She loved him for the moon of his face and the proud hard knot of his belly as it pressed against hers, and for his teeth, especially for his teeth. They overlapped like joy and sorrow, the path to his smile as tortuous as a trail torn across the face of Mount Fuji.

He forced himself into her and a cry escaped her lips. "Hiro," she moaned, clinging to him, holding fast as if she were drowning, "Hiro, Hiro, Hiro!" (188-9)

This Japanese kimono-ripper could probably be read rather 'straight' the first time around. But the presence of such literary clichés as "the full flower of Japanese manhood," "the small hours," "polished like a knife," "forced himself into her," and "holding fast as if she were drowning," as well as the hackneyed style, signal a contextual irony which likely makes the reader alert to the racist cliché to come: the description of Hiro's teeth, "overlapping like joy and sorrow," makes him none other than the buck-toothed Asian of American popular culture.3 The irony of this passage, which will only

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3Recall Mickey Rooney's portrayal of the Japanese American landlord Mr. Yunioshi in Blake Edwards's Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), for example.
"happen" if the clichés are critically perceived by the reader. is aimed at Ruth, possibly at the writers' colony at Thanatopsis House, and at the reader who takes such literary clichés seriously. What I want to underline is the fact that, by inscribing these American Orientalist clichés, Boyle runs the risk of having them read as straightforward representations of Japanese — a reader's interpretation of these stereotypes is, after all, not wholly predictable or controllable by the author — which is why, in part, the editors of Aiiiiieee! condemn the presence of racial clichés in Asian American writing. The authorial mockery encircling most of the cliché-saturated figures in the novel, from Hiro and Ruth to the Southern rednecks and pretentious writers, would then extend, as Warning's theory explains, to the credulous reader who takes the clichés seriously. Boyle's mockery of those readers, however, may not entirely mitigate the exuberance which at times attends the accumulation of the clichés, even as Boyle attempts ironically to critique them. This question about how an audience will read is, as I suggest in Chapter Three, also at issue with the racial clichés which Maxine Hong Kingston and Ralph Ellison inscribe in their texts. Will non-African American readers know enough about the African American community and about racist discourse in the United States to be able to make the judgement of irony upon reading the Trueblood episode in Invisible Man? And conversely, will the non-Asian American reader know enough about the Chinese American community to avoid sliding into the impression, upon reading the novel, that Chinese Americans typically own laundries and look forward to being able to sell their young girls upon returning to China? These questions, which pertain to the

4See Hutcheon, Irony's Edge, especially chapters 3 and 4.
“politics of appropriateness” of irony, as Linda Hutcheon terms this problematic (Irony’s Edge 176), are inflected differently for a white author like Boyle than for ethnic minority writers like Kingston and Ellison.5

Irony is a powerful trope, and has often been used in the service of serious social critique. Accordingly, the point of the clichés in East is East might be a criticism of a lack of imagination which characterizes the contemporary American society in which Hiro and his pursuers try vainly to comprehend one another, working with only small reserves of inadequate stereotypes and pop culture images. If there is a serious side to this cross-cultural farce, it may likewise involve a condemnation of the intellectual laziness at work in Ruth’s easy acceptance of, and commerce in, the cultural clichés of her writing. Writers of all people, Boyle may be suggesting, should interrogate with care and attention the language they inherit and the assumptions embedded within it before they use it in their work. These readings are compelling, but I want to suggest that beyond them is implied an exploration of the way clichés represent what I argue in Chapter Three is a type of “preoccupied” language: that is, a kind of discourse which may come from someone else’s mouth, but cannot, contrary to Bakhtin’s suggestion, be filled again with a (different) intention and so directed to one’s own use. The cliché appears in one’s own mouth as an instance of ventriloquism; more than other kinds of language, clichés come to the speaker already-intentioned, with the effect, perhaps, of influencing the attitudes and behaviour of those who use and accept them. Obviously, all language

5For more on this dynamic, see Hutcheon’s discussion of the “Into the Heart of Africa” exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum (Irony’s Edge 176-204).
comes to the speaking subject from outside of it, and does not originate with the speaker; in this sense, any spoken word or phrase is the object of a ventriloquism. Roland Barthes outlines this broader ventriloquistic power of culture to speak through a user of language in this way:

> Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard: they are the [cultural] codes: in their interweaving, these voices (whose origin is "lost" in the vast perspective of the *already-written*) de-originate the utterance: the convergence of the voices (of the codes) becomes *writing*, a stereographic space. (*S/Z* 21)

But the fascination with the (narrower, ventriloquistic) thrown voice is due partly to the inactivity, especially intellectual, of the pretended speaker, known as the ‘dummy.’ Zijderveld’s insistence on reflection would indicate that non-clichéd forms of speech are somehow, if only temporarily and imperfectly, ‘occupied’ by meaning given and received by the reflective user.

> If clichés signify a pathology or an ‘illness’ within language, it is a pathology of similarity — not so much the inability to name difference as the inability to recognize the fact of the unrecognizability of otherness. Where this problem flourishes in North American culture and language, the cliché meets a kind of preoccupied figure different from A. Duff’s inhabited, distracted metaphor: the figure of the Oriental. Through his examination of the American stereotypes about Japan and the Japanese in *East is East*, Boyle suggests that the preoccupied images and types of language that surround the Oriental accumulate to the point of making the figure itself preoccupied and invisible, a site marked by cultural miscommunication. In order to explore in more detail how this figure is “preoccupied,” I want to describe first the connection between its representation
in Boyle’s novel and its slightly different representation in a chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*. In fact, I believe that both Boyle’s novel and Kingston’s chapter have their source in a single historical event that took place over eight months in 1974 and 1975, and that their fictions are retellings of this occurrence.

On May 17, 1975, the “Wild Man of the Green Swamp” was finally captured by sheriff’s deputies and game wardens in the middle of the central Florida Green Swamp, where he had survived for almost eight months. According to newspaper accounts, the “Wild Man,” who was the target of no less than six previous search parties in the previous six weeks, and who was later described by Sumter County Sheriff Don Page as “the strongest man I’ve ever seen in my life,” was “stronger than about six men,” was spotted by a search plane and cornered by “15 or 20” deputies. For weeks the posse had followed a trail of uncooked and half-eaten armadillos, snakes, turtles, and alligators. Since September of 1974, the “Wild Man” had been occasionally sighted by residents near the swamp, a shadowy presence killing animals, cooking dried corn left by game wardens for wild turkeys, and breaking in to nearby homes to steal clothing and food. In the days following his capture, the story of the Wild Man, who first identified himself as Wu Ching Pong, slowly filtered out of the Sumter County jail in Bushnell, Florida, where he was being held. The Wild Man claimed to be a Taiwanese seaman who feared deportation to Taiwan, where he would be jailed, or even executed, for losing his

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passport. “He don’t want to go back to China,” was the assessment of the “cowboy-garbed sheriff,” as quoted by the *Tampa Tribune*. The U.S. Border Patrol argued instead that he was Hu Tu Mei, a merchant sailor who had disappeared the previous September 22 from a Tampa hospital where he had been held for psychiatric evaluation. When the Liberian-registered freighter with its all-Taiwanese crew docked in Tampa in September, the freighter’s company decided to send Hu home to Taiwan, describing him variously, according to the newspaper reports, as “psychotic” and “illiterate.”

Altering his story, Hu then claimed to have pleaded repeatedly with the captain of the freighter *Harold H. Jaquet* to send him home, but said that when the captain finally agreed, four Americans and one Chinese man attempted to beat him at the Tampa airport before his departure. Investigator Ronnie Elliott, on the other hand, said Hu was taken to the airport “under guard by special police to make sure he boarded an airplane.” From the airport he was taken to the hospital from which he escaped. While these investigations were underway, Sumter Country officials tried to ease Hu’s terror at his predicament. Hu would not leave the cell to take a shower, but was persuaded to change his clothes and dine on “pepper steak.” Investigator Elliott went further: “we traced his

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9 Terry and Ballard, 1A+.

10 Terry’s Idenity Check Due Tuesday,” *Miami Herald* 19 May 1975, street ed.: 20A.


12 Chinese Interpreters” 3B.
feet on a piece of paper so we can get him a pair of shoes." Once his identity had been confirmed by the Taiwanese consulate in Atlanta, the U.S. Border Patrol informed Hu that he would have to return to Taiwan. The newspaper accounts say that on receiving this news, Hu became depressed. Two hours later, Hu hanged himself in his jail cell with a belt that he had refused to turn over to the authorities.

Hu’s story has been rewritten since his death in 1975 not only by T. Coraghessan Boyle in *East is East*, but also by Maxine Hong Kingston in *China Men*. The three page chapter of *China Men* titled “The Wild Man of the Green Swamp” gives a fairly accurate retelling of the newspaper accounts of the story — with perhaps only the appropriate creation of what once might have been called ‘tone.’ “For eight months in 1975,” Kingston writes, “residents on the edge of Green Swamp, Florida, had been reporting to the police that they had seen a Wild Man. When they stepped toward him, he made strange noises as in a foreign language and ran back into the saw grass” (221). Kingston suggests that, due to the inhospitable swamp environment, the authorities could only conceive of the Wild Man’s supposed presence as “a mass hallucination” (221). With some elaboration, Kingston follows the story to its conclusion, without mentioning Hu’s name. Carol E. Neubauer, in her article on the novel, argues that “Kingston includes the story of the Wild Man in *China Men* to show that some immigrants were defeated by the transition to life on the Gold Mountain and more importantly to demonstrate that not all sources of information, even those in print, are fully accurate” (30). Hu Tu Mei is a kind

13“*Wild Man’ Dines on Steak, Getting Shoes,*” *Miami Herald* 20 May 1975, street ed.: 2B.
of an anti-immigrant figure in Kingston's text, however; he is a contrapuntal fugitive set against the other migratory tales of the novel. Kingston's purpose in focussing on the tale seems to be more than to point out the difficulty immigrants face in adapting to life in America. Her ending, indeed, gestures toward some of the wider implications of the cross-cultural event:

In the newspaper picture he did not look very wild, being led by the posse out of the swamp. He did not look dirty, either. He wore a checkered shirt unbuttoned at the neck, where his white undershirt showed; his shirt was tucked into his pants: his hair was short. He was surrounded by men in cowboy hats. His fingers stretching open, his wrists pulling apart to the extent of the handcuffs, he lifted his head, his eyes screwed shut, and cried out. (223)

The photograph in Figure 5 accompanied a newspaper account of Hu's capture in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, which may have been Kingston's source, as she was teaching in Honolulu at the time of Hu's arrest. Photographs in other newspapers which carried the story, such as the Miami Herald and the Tampa Tribune, also show him clean-shaven with short hair, thus throwing into question the appellation of "wildness." He is shown in several such photographs being held by the "cowboy-garbed sheriff." a fact which finds its ironic echo in East is East when Hiro desires to go to America in order to see the cowboys there. The coding in the newspaper accounts and accompanying photographs thus seems to suggest an ancient American image, repeated and retold in various cultural

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14 Or was he in search of America after all, like Boyle's Hiro or Banks's Vanise Dorsinville? A map in the Miami Herald showing the location of Hu's capture placed him only 20 miles west of Disney world, that institution of American visual, cultural, and historical clichés (Miami Herald 18 May 1975, final ed.: A1).

15 Tampa Tribune 18 May 1975: 6A.
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Figure 5. 17 May 1975.

media frequently enough to make it, according to Zijderveld's theory, the object of a cliché: that is, the subduing of nature, the wild, and the uncivilized by, among others, cowboys (see Figure 6). Does Hu's story not dramatize, for the 1970s, an episode of American mythology known in popular culture as 'cowboys and Indians'?

Certainly his story seemed to resonate with something in the nation's psyche: aside from the extensive coverage in local papers like the *Miami Herald* and the *Tampa Tribune*, the story was covered by newspapers across the country, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Des Moines Register* (Boyle's possible source, as


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Figure 6. 17 May 1975.

he was at the Iowa University Writers’ Workshop in 1975) and the Honolulu Advertiser,¹⁹ and by the Associated Press wire service. Let me further speculate that the figure of the Oriental in the swamp was already preoccupied before Hu’s capture by Florida authorities

in 1975. The figure of the fugitive Oriental in the wild had already galvanized American attention the preceding year with the surrender, on March 10, 1974, of Hiroo Onoda, a Japanese soldier who had been hiding in the Philippine jungle since the end of World War Two, unaware that the war had been over for 29 years. Hiroo was persuaded to come out of the jungle only after his commander from the war was located by the Japanese government, and flown to the Philippines to give Hiroo the order to surrender his sword. But Hiroo was only the last survivor of a handful of Japanese soldiers who had skirmished with Philippine villagers and soldiers for almost 30 years. As the *New York Times* reported in an article on Hiroo’s surrender, “Japanese officials have estimated that hundreds of Second World War soldiers could be hiding out in the jungles of Southeast Asia.” Hiroo, it turned out, was the last repatriated jungle hold-out, though other Japanese soldiers had similar experiences: Ito Masahi’s *The Emperor’s Last Soldiers: The Grim Story of Two Japanese who hid for Sixteen Years in the Guam Jungle* tells how he and Bunzo Minagawa hid on Guam until they were captured by American soldiers in 1960, and *The Last Japanese Soldier: Corporal Yokoi’s 28 incredible years in the Guam jungle* tells of Shoichi Yokoi’s 28 years on Guam until his capture in 1972. Jean-Marc Pottiez’s *Les Vainqueurs de la défaite* (1975) combines the stories of Masahi, Minagawa and Yokoi with that of Hiroo Onoda. Such stories attracted considerable


22 Yamaguchi, A6.
media attention in the 1960s and 1970s, and indeed became material for episodes of popular television series. In an episode of *Gilligan's Island* entitled "So Sorry: My Island Now," a Japanese soldier played by Vito Scotti lands on the island, and believing the war to be ongoing, begins to capture the Castaways.\textsuperscript{23} The episode aired on CBS affiliated stations on Saturday, January 19, 1965. A less comic rendering of this theme was the episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* entitled "The Last Kamikaze," which aired on ABC affiliates on Sunday, January 19, 1975 — only ten months after Hiroo Onoda's surrender in the Philippines, and only four months before Hu Tu Mei's capture in Green Swamp. In this episode, the "bionic" Steve Austin must overcome the Japanese soldier Kuroda (played by John Fujioka), who still believes the war is continuing, in order to recover a lost atomic weapon on a remote Pacific island.\textsuperscript{24} Through the stories of Japanese war hold-outs in Pacific island jungles in the media and their fictionalized retellings in popular television series like *Gilligan's Island* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, the 'Oriental' in the wild jungle became a part of the American popular culture imagination.

Stories of surrendering Japanese soldiers were perhaps only a sideshow to the more serious and massive contemporaneous policing of Orientals in other jungles during the American involvement in Vietnam. The Vietnam war, of course, was marked by the jungle guerilla tactics of the Vietcong in South Vietnam. Despite the United States' overwhelming technological and military superiority over the guerillas and their North


Vietnamese backers, the Orientals in these jungles were never successfully policed. As *Time* magazine’s 10th anniversary edition of the end of the war put it, “The enemy had been invisible in an earlier part of the war, hiding in jungles, in tunnels, ghosting around in the pre-dawn: killer shadows. They dissolved by day into the villages, into other Vietnamese. They maddened the Americans with who they were.”

American opposition to the war was galvanized precisely because of the television images of that policing which saturated American living rooms every evening. What I am suggesting is a partial answer to a problem posed by Sau-ling Wong in *Reading Asian American Literature*: that of the place of the Asian American in the “symbolic economy of America” (*Reading 5*). In the 1960s and 1970s, that place is complicated by the preoccupied figure of the ‘Oriental’ in the jungle — a white American conflation of distinct Asian peoples — fugitive from American justice. To return to Kingston’s *China Men* for a moment, it is precisely this figure which Kingston’s brother must confront when he enlists in the Navy during the Vietnam war in order to avoid getting drafted into the Army. In addition to his political and moral objections to the war, he discovers in his dreams a deeper ambivalence resulting from his double signification within the “symbolic economy” to which Wong refers, for he is at once the Oriental to be policed, and the American who performs the policing. As the aircraft carrier on which he is serving nears Vietnam, he dreams of liberating a city from Communist forces. Descending into a castle dungeon, her brother “takes up his sword and hacks into the enemy.” After the battle, however, her brother “finds that he has cut up the victims too, who are his own relatives.

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The faces of the strung-up people are also those of his own family, Chinese faces, Chinese eyes, noses, and cheekbones. He woke terrified" (291). By joining in China Men these two events — Hu’s capture and her brother’s ambivalence about the Vietnam war — Kingston shifts the issue from being a question of divided loyalties (such were the imagined parameters for the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War) by provocatively suggesting that the Vietnam war was both productive of, and partially produced by, the preoccupied figure in the American imagination of the Oriental in the jungle.

Hu Tu Mei was captured in Green Swamp, Florida, less than three weeks after the failure of the American policing was spectacularly punctuated with the evacuation of the American Pittman apartments in Saigon (see Figure 7), and only fourteen months after Hiroo Onoda’s surrender in the Philippines. Perhaps images from the Vietnam war and the stories about fugitive Japanese soldiers hiding in Pacific jungles long after the end of World War Two made the figure of the Oriental in the swamp preoccupied — preoccupied in the sense of the same “déjà-vu” effect” Ruth Amossy says characterizes the cliché (“Reading” 34). For the inhabitants on the edge of the Florida Green Swamp, the appearance of Hu was déjà-vu, and he was thus also déjà-connu: the already-seen, already-known Oriental fugitive from American justice. Said Hu through a translator after his capture, “Every time he tried to talk to people they try [sic] to take him to police.”26 Perhaps Hu, and most certainly Boyle’s Hiro, are phenomena whose cognitive reception by the Americans they encounter is blocked by the existence of preoccupied

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26Tampa Tribune 18 May 1975: 6A.
figures: mirroring the structure of the cliché, they are signs which can only be received in what Zijlerveld calls the "routine paths and traditional patterns" (5) of social discourse. That is, the communal interpretation of the event of Hu's appearance in the swamp was shaped to a certain degree by the already established cliché of the fugitive Oriental in the jungle. Edward Said, speaking of the "internally structured archive" of Western knowledge of the Orient, describes such a stereotype as a structure of knowledge in this way:

Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another,
a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. (58-9)

As a method of control, the visual and cognitive clichés produced by representations of the Vietnam war and the Japanese war hold-outs allowed, and even necessitated, the interpretation of Hu’s presence in the swamp as another “version of a previously known thing.”

But exactly how this process of using the cliché to see the same again works needs more examination. One of the weaknesses of Zijderveld’s sociological approach to the cliché is that he does not explore the relation between consciousness and language, or between language and the real — what it means, in short, to “reflect” on a word’s meaning. In semiotic terms, Zijderveld’s conception of the cliché’s power to deny the user or receiver “reflection” might be explained in the following way. In normal, non-pathological (i.e., non-clichéd) language usage, the speaker and hearer of language “reflect” on meaning by regularly travelling between an instance of verbal (or written) language and its concept or idea. In Saussurean terms, the sign is constituted by the relation between the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept to which the sound-image refers). To take a pertinent example from East is East, the materiality of the enunciated sounds “armed and dangerous” is the signifier, and the signified is the concept of someone who carries a weapon, is capable of using it, and is therefore hazardous to others. The problem with the cliché is that, to borrow a concept from
Charles Sanders Peirce, the sign is without a proper relation to the referent. For Peirce, the referent is the actual object in the real world which the sign represents. As I note in the Introduction, Peirce argues that the real is knowable only through the process (in language or in another semiotic system) of representation. Reality becomes understandable only once it has, as a referent, entered into a relation with a sign. What Zijderveld obliquely refers to as "reflection," then, might be characterized not only by the back and forth traffic between the sign and the referent, but by the cognitive act of readjusting relations between signs and referents: the act of analysing, in short, the adequacy of either term within the "arbitrary" relation or the strength of the relation itself. To restate in semiotic terms the problem of the cliché, then, the space of the referent is occupied, erroneously, by the sign itself. That characteristic of the sign which should gesture toward the extra-discursive is instead, somehow, inattentive to the world, to the real. In *East is East*, the sign-cliché "armed and dangerous" bears no sustainable relation to the referent Hiro, who, as I have pointed out, is unknown to the Americans who assign him the phrase. As a sign, the cliché's peculiar quality is that it tends to short-circuit any cognitive reflection upon the (in)adequacy of its relation to a referent in the real. Within this process of reflection, the sign-cliché seems to displace the referent itself, and, by taking its place, occupies the space where the real should be. The cliché is "preoccupied" because the extra-discursive real space to which it ostensibly refers is effaced by the sign; the place of the real is occupied by (mere) discourse. If Peirce argues

27As Emile Benveniste has pointed out, it is the relation between the sign and the referent which is arbitrary, and not, as Saussure seemed to say, the relation between the signifier and the signified. See Benveniste 43-8.
that reality cannot be known unless it is represented by language, the cliché seems to be a particularly inadequate form of language for representing reality because it is a linguistic form which pre-fills precisely that space which should be occupied by the real.

Because they work in these ways, American clichés about Japan and the Japanese prove to be inadequate tools for knowing Hiro in Boyle’s novel. Cumulatively, the clichés construct the preoccupied figure of the Oriental in the swamp which disallows the recognition of Hiro for what he is: to them, a person incapable of being adequately represented by their impoverished semiotic reserve. That reserve is nothing more than a series of clichés which together constitutes what might be called a stereotype. The distinction between these two words, both of which are terms taken from nineteenth-century typography and are used today metaphorically to indicate repetitions of sameness, is not a clear one. Neither Zijderveld nor the editors of Aiieeeee! distinguish between them. In Les idées reçues: sémiologie du stéréotype, Ruth Amossy suggests that the following distinction might be made between them: the cliché is a specific group of words marked by banality and a lack of originality, and is therefore a fault of literary style, whereas a stereotype is an image (Amossy uses the word schème) which can be variously formulated. Associating the stereotype with the received or accepted idea, she thus argues that

le poncif est limité au thème purement littéraire ou poétique, le cliché désigne un fait de style ou une figure de rhétorique usée, le lieu commun se réfère à une opinion partagée et couramment énoncée par le vulgaire. Ainsi le thème du réveil printanier de la nature est un poncif, l’expression "le printemps de la vie" un cliché, et l’idée que le printemps est la saison
Such distinction has the effect of banishing any cognitive analysis of the use and reception of the cliché, and, accordingly, seems to me unnecessarily strict. Indeed, the strength of Zijderveld’s approach is his decision that the analysis of the cliché cannot remain solely linguistic, but must be understood within its use in social interaction, which includes thought processes. As my translation makes clear, hard and fast distinctions among these terms are impossible — an example is the French word poncif, or “stencil,” which can be variously translated into English as metaphorically signifying banality, cliché, or commonplace. One need only recall the passage quoted above of Ruth’s “Of Tears and the Tide,” where Hiro reads of the “tiny apartment polished like a knife” (Boyle 188), to see that literary clichés can also be stereotyped ideas. These overlapping concepts and terms, and indeed even the examples Amossy offers to illustrate her definitions, suggest that the cliché and the stereotype, in their endless and indifferent repetitions, depend on each other for their mutual existence.

What I mean by the “indifference” of the cliché and the stereotype becomes evident in East is East, which is a novel about Hiro’s constant misrecognition by everyone he meets.39 Olmstead White first sees Hiro as his dead brother Wheeler, the

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28 The poncif is limited to a purely literary or poetic theme, the cliché designates a stylistic trait or a stale rhetorical figure, [and] the commonplace refers to an opinion shared and currently expressed by the masses. Thus the theme of the spring-like awakening of nature is a poncif, the expression “springtime of life” a cliché, and the idea that spring is the season of love is a commonplace or a received idea.” (My translation)

39 Sander L. Gilman argues that the racial or cultural stereotypes that determine this process of misrecognition represent a psychic structure characterized by “the perpetuation of a needed sense of difference, a difference between the self and the object”
elderly Ambly Wooster mistakes him for the Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa (132), and
the yuppie family Jeff, Julie, and Jeff Jr. Jeffcoat take him to be the resurrection of “Billy
Bowlegs, last of the great Seminole chiefs” (275), whose story had just been recounted by
the elder Jeff. Ruth and her lover Saxby Lights first see him as “Chinese or something”
when he climbs, dripping, onto Saxby’s boat (8). In this last instance, Boyle gestures at
(the cliché of) the white American inability to distinguish ethnicity or nationality among
Asian peoples (as Sheriff Page says of the Taiwanese Hu, “he don’t want to go back to
China”). As I earlier suggested, if the cliché represents a pathology, it is a pathology of
assimilation, of seeing sameness where there may only be similarity. In this connection,
it is pertinent to recall Barzun’s words that the cliché “reproduces the same image without
end,” regardless of the newness or difference of the phenomena in question, and Duff’s
complaint that no newness can be translated using a preoccupied figure.

Over the course of this textual genealogy, which I have briefly traced from Bunzo
Minagawa, Ito Masahi and Shoichi Yokoi in Guam and Hiroo Onoda in the Philippines
and their fictional recurrences in Gilligan’s Island and in The Six Million Dollar Man,
through the American involvement in Vietnam to Hu Tu Mei in the Green Swamp with
Kingston’s recounting of that event in China Men and Boyle’s fictional account of Hiro
Tanaka in East is East, the figure of the Oriental in the wild has become preoccupied.
Kingston seeks to show that the exact space occupied by this figure — which is coded as
a liminal wildness that is at once fugitive from, and uncontrollable by, the forces of
American civilization — is culturally and historically specific. She makes this point in

(12). See Gilman 11-13 for a discussion of this structure.
the final paragraph of the “Green Swamp” chapter of *China Men*:

There was a Wild Man in our slough too, only he was a black man. He wore a shirt and no pants, and some mornings when we walked to school, we saw him asleep under the bridge. The police came and took him away. The newspaper said he was crazy; it said the police had been on the lookout for him for a long time, but we had seen him every day. (223)

The Oriental wild man of the swamp has his analogy in the Chinese American world of Kingston’s childhood as a black American “under the bridge.” Kingston’s short account of Hu’s story, with its absence of detail and unanswered questions, only gestures toward the problems of social liminality and racial stereotypes. *China Men* is provoked by the minimalism of Kingston’s father’s speech: as she addresses him early on, “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken” (15). Kingston’s suggestive, sparse tale in her chapter “The Wild Man of the Green Swamp” is likewise characterized by “silences and few words,” and represents a parallel challenge, which Boyle takes up in *East is East*. Kingston writes that the authorities first thought Hu’s existence in the swamp was a “mass hallucination”; Boyle’s account suggests that such a mass hallucination is produced by the massive circulation of Orientalist clichés in America.

In arguing this point, my purpose is not to partake of “well-intentioned moralist polemics against prejudice and stereotype, or the blanket assertion of individual or institutional racism — that describe the effect rather than the structure of the problem” (Bhabha 34). Rather, I have tried through this textual genealogy of the Oriental wild man, a genealogy marked by the cliché’s power to effect mis-reading and mis-naming, to offer an example of “the problem of cultural interaction [which] emerges only at the
significatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated” (Bhabha 34). The preoccupation of the cliché, and the inflexibility of language and image codes by which that preoccupation is produced, disrupt any successful process of translation, of communication across cultures — precisely that difficult process gestured at by Kingston in the final tale of The Woman Warrior. East is East, by recontextualizing and ironizing Japanese clichés about America and American clichés about Japan, reintroduces a difference into the endless, indifferent iteration of the clichés — and thereby into the clichés themselves. It is too late for Hu Tu Mei, but Kingston, like Boyle, desires the reintroduction of the fact of unrecognizability into the preoccupied figure that remains — one of the figures which continue to characterize, the editors of Aiiieeeee! assure us, American Orientalist discourses. Only once this cultural difference is recognized can the struggle of cultural translation carry on.
Over the course of this study, I have examined some of the discourses by which the United States talks about itself to itself, and explains its ‘project’ with reference to the rest of the world. These same discourses also function as the forms of signification available to American subjects through which those subjects can articulate their sense of identity as Americans, and their position vis-à-vis the nation and other American subjects. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, not all these available language types are equal to the task of representing and articulating American reality to those American subjects. Russell Banks’s *Continental Drift*, for example, takes the discourse of the American dream seriously, but reveals that oft-repeated discourse can sometimes lose the adaptive flexibility necessary to it if it is to remain a useful way of talking about the United States. In its extreme clichéd form, Banks suggests with T. Coraghessan Boyle, the American dream consists of nothing more than advertising slogans and popular

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30a "East Coker" III.

31 Bercovitch 23.
culture images.

In their different ways, both Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* are also stories about the search for America, about American subjects trying to claim some of the promises enshrined in the American dream and the other American mythologies with which it is entwined. Ellison's narrator embarks on a search for a language capable of making him visible to other Americans, and the novel ends with him attempting to fashion his own language, one which might make him, at least, legible to himself. This provisional language is, like that of the woman warrior's, heterogeneous, made out of already extant discourses, mythologies, and narratives. Kingston's narrator proves capable of refashioning her inherited Chinese tales into texts which can substantiate her incorporeal, ghostly form, stories which help articulate herself as American, just as they become, during the process, as Kingston says, "new, American" ("Personal Statement" 24).

The four texts on which I have focussed insist on the process of repetition as the procedure whereby American subjects invoke — more or less consciously — the American discourses about America. Following Bakhtin's allusive and suggestive texts, I have suggested that the discourses available to Americans for the purposes of the articulation of the self and of the self's social relations are found already existing in other people’s mouths. Those languages, vocabularies, mythologies and narratives must in turn be said again (or written again) by the American subject — a process which is never, contrary to the invisible man's early beliefs, the mere repetition of the same. These texts seem to suggest that those sayings again which successfully help the American subjects
constitute themselves are repetitions marked significantly by improvisation (Ellison's narrator), or alteration and adaptation (Kingston’s narrator). When discourse becomes repeated too often and too indifferently, its vocabulary becomes ossified, and it loses some of its ability to represent the American real. The cliché short-circuits the process of reflection, whereby the user of a sign system continually assesses the strength of the relation between the sign and the referent in the real world. If Charles Sanders Peirce argues that the human mind cannot apprehend the real except once it becomes representable within a system of signification, some systems (as discourse, narratives, or vocabularies) are better suited to the task than others, and that the process of human reflection must involve the continual evaluation of the adequacy of competing systems to that task — even if that process is not always a conscious one. Vološinov’s work suggests that consciousness, and the creation and maintenance of social identity occur in language; implicitly departing from his monolithic construction of ideology, however, Mikhail Bakhtin’s texts show how social discourse has at once centripetal and centrifugal forces, and is complex in its multiple and different articulations of the real. The four contemporary American authors studied here all explore the possibility that one of the tasks of human consciousness is to sort through the different available mythologies, discourses, and narratives, evaluating their adequacy both to the social real and to personal identity. Not all discourse is adequate to these two tasks; their literary texts reveal that one type of inflexible signification, the cliché, works to stall these processes. The process of discursive deterioration into cliché is the focus both of Banks’s *Continental Drift* and of Boyle’s *East is East*. This latter novel explores the way one set
of clichés construct the figure of the ‘Oriental’ in the Wild, a figure preoccupied in the American imagination to the extent that it seems to be repeated in newspapers, on the news, on television programs, and in ‘real’ life.

Faced with the ossification of systems of signification, these writers write again certain clichés with a difference — that is, with irony — in an attempt at arresting the proliferation of what Jacques Barzun describes as “the same image mechanically without end” (Barzun 4). Banks does this by probing not only the meaning of the American dream, but by focusing on its materiality as discourse. Ellison, Kingston, and Boyle repeat ironically certain racist or ethnic clichés in their writing; such repetitions are risky precisely because the authors have no ultimate control over whether their readers will understand those instances to be repetitions of the same, or repetitions with a difference. Precisely this risk is wrapped up in the question with which I began Chapter Three; that is, to what degree are reiterative practices or instances of repetition of discourse themselves transformed through the process of repetition? Several of Ellison’s African American and Kingston’s Chinese American critics fear that the answer is: not at all; that the cliché, by its very nature, is a form of signification which can never in itself change.

This question is important beyond its specific ramifications for the cliché, however. If the discourse of the American dream is a historically rich and textually complex way of describing the United States, and the (new) ethical-material order which it articulates the reasonable set of expectations held by the American subject, how is this discourse transformed through use? In an instance examined by this study, Banks’s novel can be seen as one more textual intervention in the process of the discourse’s repetition;
he has sent forth his book with the instruction, as he concludes at the end of the novel, that it “help destroy the world as it is” (366). But has that specific repetition of the discourse of the American dream had any effect on the discourse itself? As I argued in Chapter One, Banks’s novel seems to be not so much a condemnation of the discourse itself, as it is a plea that the United States live up to the promises enshrined in that discourse, which it (implicitly) makes to all Americans. Banks’s novel criticizes the way the discourse continues to circulate in the United States, still with the pretension of describing (accurately) the American economic and social real, and argues that the discourse, as cliché, has lost the flexibility necessary to be useful as an articulation of American identity and the American real. Accordingly, it should be discarded for something more flexible and accurate, or the United States should re-commit itself to the principles of the new ethical-material order which the discourse describes. Banks would certainly prefer the second option, even if the novel does not give evidence of hoping that the kind of cultural and political will that option would require is possible in the United States in the mid-1980s.

Banks is no different, in his own way, from Ellison and Kingston in this regard. All three, I would argue, are liberal American novelists, whose texts plead for a rededication to the kind of American ideals inscribed in, for instance, the discourse of the American dream. As I have argued at length in Chapter Two, Ellison’s repetition of the discourse of Booker T. Washington is an attention to the American dream; Booker T. Washington attempted to describe a way that African Americans, who had been traditionally marginalised from the American dream, could claim at least some of the
promises available to white citizens. The invisible man eventually works his way through, and rejects, the discourse of Booker T. Washington — as he does the solutions of class revolution and race solidarity later in the novel. By the end of the novel, as the narrator meditates, putting it all down in black and white, preparing for a more covert action, he ponders his grandfather’s words and comes to the realization that perhaps his grandfather meant that African Americans should continually “yes” not the power structures which exclude them from full participation in American social, political, and economic life, but should “yes” instead the principles articulated in the way the United States talks about itself to itself, because, as the invisible man muses, “we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs” (Invisible Man 433).

The pragmatism of the repetition is here what I want to highlight. It runs throughout the first three novels examined in this study. Kingston’s novel, like Ellison’s, is a way of “claiming America” (Kingston, “Talk” 1). Her claim to the United States is based, however implicitly, on much the same set of principles as Ellison’s claim. Her pragmatism takes effect not just on American discourses about America, but on Chinese discourse — as narrative and mythology — as well. But her reasons, ultimately, are to lay claim to promises which Chinese immigrants to the United States of past generations could not hope to achieve, who may have gone to Gold Mountain only to find its promises of material plenty exaggerated or masking exploitative labour practices. At the same time, Kingston implies a claim not only to the new ethical-material order of the American dream, but, crucially, to the whole of American cultural life as well. As a child, her search to become ‘American’ may have included the ritualistic performance as
iteration of American (white) feminine beauty codes, but by the end of the novel she
talks-story by using the different kinds of discourse available to her, transforming themes
and characters from traditional Chinese literature into American figures and tales. “The
myths I write are new, American,” she insists. The terms have changed; this is a plea not
only to the Chinese American community to understand why she rewrites tales from a
non-American culture, but a declaration to the United States as well: Fa Mu Lan and
Ts’ai Yen are now American heroines. Such is cultural translation.

I began this study with a publically-issued call to repetition: President Clinton’s
1995 Loyalty Day Proclamation called for Americans to mark their “loyalty” to the
American legacy by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States. As
a way of concluding this study, I would like to compare two other equally public orations
which were implicated in how the United States talks about itself to itself: Robert Frost’s
1961 Inaugural Poem “The Gift Outright” and Maya Angelou’s 1993 Inaugural Poem
“On the Pulse of Morning.” Both poems thematise several of the issues which have been
at the centre of this study: migration, United States history and individual American
identity, and the ‘idea’ of America. I would like to read them, moreover, with Sacvan
Bercovitch’s argument in The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic
Construction of America in mind — an argument very much bound up in the dynamic of
repetition which marks the way the United States talks to itself about itself, and to others.

Frost’s 1942 poem, which he read at President John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration in
1961, takes up the idea of the destiny of the United States — both in terms of the people
who settled on the continent and are retroactively constructed as the ‘first’ Americans
(though that presumption may strike us as odd today, 35 years later), and in terms of the geographical space itself, which opened up to this specific people as their ‘manifest’ destiny. Frost’s poem tells the tale of the American realization of this twin destiny. As “colonials,” the first settlers in what would become the continental United States acquired proprietorship over the land before the land, in turn, spiritually seized those settlers with all the import of their (divine) mission. As the poem is only 16 lines, I reprint it below:

The land was ours before we were the land’s.  
She was our land more than a hundred years  
Before we were her people. She was ours  
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,  
But we were England’s, still colonials,  
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
Something we were withholding made us weak  
Until we found out that it was ourselves  
We were withholding from our land of living,  
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.  
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she would become. (Frost 467)

Playing on the word “possession,” Frost suggests that this mere proprietorship over the land was unfulfilled until the land took hold of the colonials during the American Revolution, as the great unfolding of political, social, and moral potential. Only upon the founding of the nation — in and through its attendant discourses of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States — does this potential become imaginable for the new American citizens. But just as the teleology of the land itself is realized by this event, so too are the people made finally complete, the answering of a
promise that was possible all along. As Frost describes it, the birth of the nation took time because of "Something we were withholding [which] made us weak," a quality understood to be, in retrospect, the true essence (in all the metaphysical and teleological implications of that word) of "ourselves." The language of possession and giving are conceits as important to Frost's poem as the vocabulary of siege and sexual violation is important to John Donne's fourteenth Holy Sonnet, "Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God"; and as if in allusion to Donne's poem, Frost suggests that when early Americans understood that they suffered from a spiritual reticence in the face of the promise of the land, they "forthwith found salvation in surrender." The giving of the American selves involved not only the giving in war (presumably the War of Independence, but also the wars of expansion and cohesion which followed), but to the beckoning continent itself, as their manifest destiny. America and her people, Frost suggests, realize their collective destiny by migration, "vaguely realizing westward" across the continent to the moving frontier. The continent, like the nation, is potential itself: for Frost, as its space is unoccupied and awaiting occupation, so too is it, like its new people, "unstoried, artless, unenhanced."

Frost's poem is bound up in the language of the national errand, a part of American ideology, Sacvan Bercovitch argues, which was first articulated by the Puritan fathers, who in so doing "contributed in a central way to what was to become the American symbology" (85). As Bercovitch describes it, using this same language of possession, "the Puritans took possession first by imposing their own image on the land, and then by seeing themselves reflected back in the image they had imposed" (35). I
would argue that the Puritan conception of the errand — an early American discourse of migration — represents what has become a standard mythologization of American history as national destiny. While that destiny was perhaps first described in a Puritan vocabulary, it was “a rhetoric of mission so broad in its implications, and so specifically American in its application, that it could facilitate the transitions from Puritan to Yankee, and from errand to manifest destiny and the dream” (Bercovitch 35). Like President Clinton’s Loyalty Day Proclamation, Frost’s articulation of national identity obscures those parts of American history which disturb the dominant American “symbology.” The land itself thus appears as empty of inhabitants as it is “unstoried, artless, and unenhanced” — the native American presence and their cultural and poetic traditions unaccountable in terms of this Anglo-American national promise.

In many ways, Maya Angelou’s Inaugural poem, which she read at President Clinton’s 1993 Inauguration, is an answer to Frost’s. (As it is longer than Frost’s poem, I have reproduced it at the end of this study as Appendix Two.) Like Frost’s poem, Angelou’s deals with the migrations of various peoples to the land that is now the United States. Indeed, to some extent Angelou’s poem is a catalogue of the different tribes of our species which have traversed American lands: as she addresses them, “Each of you, descendent of some passed / On traveller.” Angelou notably includes in her call to the peoples who have become Americans those who were indigenous to the continent — though they, too, are the result of an earlier migration:

You, who gave me my first name, you,  
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you  
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet, 
Left me to the employment of 
Other seekers — desperate for gain, 
Starving for gold.

Angelou's work also traces the historical movement of Africans through the Middle Passage to the 'new' land: "You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought / Sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare / Praying for a dream." Largely absent from Angelou's poem is the sense of the special destiny of the United States which is at the centre of Frost's text. The promise of American shores, instead, is inscribed in the possibility that the people of these different tribes might shape "the dream" into their own images. As she urges, "Take it into the palms of your hands, / Mold it into the shape of your most / Private need." Angelou thus repeats various images and phrases from American cultural mythology, such as, here, the American dream — although the dream to which she refers also includes Martin Luther King's famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, itself another troping of this standard American figure. Angelou suggests that the dream can be bent not only to private need but to public transformation ("Each new hour holds new chances / For a new beginning"). The United States thus becomes a place for the realization of human possibility. Angelou repeats material from American cultural mythology, but also from religious sources and secular poetry as well. Thus the "Rock" becomes a place on which human possibility can stand, and not, in an allusion to one of Frost's contemporaries, a place of hiding, and of the modernist revelation of human spiritual paralysis:

Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (Eliot, *The Waste Land* I.24-30)

Instead, Angelou’s Rock

cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no hiding place down here.

Angelou’s poem is, like Frost’s, also about American “destiny” — but her sense of
America’s possibilities is opened up to groups which have been historically excluded
from those possibilities, and whose historical presence in the United States is elided in
Frost’s Inaugural poem, as it is elided in President Clinton’s Loyalty Day Proclamation.

Angelou thus implicitly dissents from the dominant American cultural mythology
in a way which, paralleling the dissents of Russell Banks, Ralph Ellison, and Maxine
Hong Kingston, tends to reinscribe some aspects of the way the United States talks to
itself about itself. In *Rites of Assent*, Bercovitch is interested in looking at the way that
social and political protest in the United States gets described in terms which reinforce
American values and myths. Bercovitch locates in American culture a strategy of
displacing “radical alternatives” to current structures of power and knowledge “with an
indigenous tradition of reform,” and calls this tradition “an omnivorous oppositionalism
that ingested all competing modes of radicalism” (19). This process has the effect, for
instance, of describing forms of injustice within the United States as themselves,
somehow, un-American. American dissent, Bercovitch goes on to say, becomes
articulated as "an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture" (20). He offers as an example the way expressions of nineteenth-century American feminism became compelling only if they were put in particularly American terms:

Probably some of these feminists believed that they were merely using patriotism, manipulating the rhetoric of the republic for ulterior radical ends. But if so, they were miscalculating the relation of ends and means. In effect (as events proved), they were conforming to a ritual of consensus that defused all issues in debate by restricting the debate itself, symbolically and substantively, to the meaning of America. (49)

Such is the fundamental function of what Bercovitch terms American ideology:

Ideology represses alternative or oppositional forms when these arise. But it seeks first of all to preempt them, and it does so most effectively by drawing out protest, by actively encouraging the contrast between utopia and the status quo. The method is as old as ideology itself. . . . Fundamental protest, that is, involves a historicist, relativistic perspective on the claims of ideology. And the immemorial response of ideology, what we might call its instinctive defense, has been to redefine protest in terms of the system, as a complaint about shortcomings from its ideals. (366)

Certainly the kind of ideological procedure here described by Bercovitch can be seen to be at work in the novels by Banks, Ellison and Kingston examined in this study. If the same is not true of Boyle's novel, that is perhaps because it is more satiric and politically cynical than the earnest Continental Drift, Invisible Man, and The Woman Warrior. Banks's protest against the American dream remains, in the end, within the vocabulary that it sets out to explore, and Continental Drift can be read, in Bercovitch's terms, "as a complaint about shortcomings from its ideals." If, as I argue in Chapter One, Banks includes the perspectives of the migrating Haitians in an attempt at decentering the discourse of the American dream, that strategy may not be entirely successful, as he has
the Dorsinville's imagine their journey within the, albeit clichéd, vocabulary of the discourse of the American dream. America is only imaginable, it seems, within American terms.

Maxine Hong Kingston, writing from the margin of one centre 'back to' a different centre — that of the Middle Kingdom — may be more successful in phrasing her response to America in non-American terms. Indeed, her insistence that her rewritten Chinese tales "are new, American," suggests that she believes, at the least, that she has injected some newness — some difference — into the American discursive system of repetition. Or has she? Let me quote again from her essay: "Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. That's why they often appear as cartoons and kung fu movies" ("Personal Statement" 59).

The cost of her translation, it seems, is putting Chinese cultural narratives within American patterns of discourse, as cartoons or kung fu movies. But what is lost in this translating enterprise? What kind of cultural complexity and difference can be articulated in the forms of type-dependent, if not stereotype-dependent, cartoons and kung fu films? If this is one more layer of irony in The Woman Warrior, at whose expense does it come?

What Bercovitch sees as the process whereby American ideology recuperates dissent is at the centre of the ambivalence of Ellison's novel as well. As I have shown, the narrator at the end of the novel suggests that American discourse about America might be turned and used against it, in a process which recalls Bakhtin's exploration of the way discourse can sometimes be wrested from other's mouths and put to one's own use. But Bercovitch's work implicitly poses the same question of efficacy and the
possibilities of social change for Ellison’s novel as it does for Banks’s and Kingston’s novels. As Bercovitch describes this problem:

[American ideology] undertakes above all, as a condition of its nurture, to absorb the spirit of protest for social ends; and according to a number of recent critics, it has accomplished this most effectively through its rhetoric of dissent. In this view, America’s classic texts represent the strategies of a triumphant liberal hegemony. Far from subverting the status quo, their diagnostic and prophetic modes attest to the capacities of the dominant culture to absorb alternative forms, to the point of making basic change seem virtually unthinkable, except as apocalypse. (367)

If the centripetal tendency of American symbology, to adopt Bercovitch’s usage for a moment, is so powerful that it brings into orbit around itself all potentially competitive or alternative forms of social discourse, how can any “basic change” to dominant social and political structures be imagined?

Although American ideologies may be a form of control, I would argue that the control is neither total nor unalterable. As I suggested at the end of the Introduction with a quotation from Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, it is not necessarily pessimistic to recognize the exigencies of repetition. Social discourse can be put to different uses: though the vocabulary may stay largely the same, the meanings of the words change over historical time. Moreover, I would argue that basic change has occurred in the United States, precisely through recourse to repeating — and transforming — the ways America talks to itself about itself to alternative ends. Ellison’s novel ends with the narrator contemplating that his grandfather’s directive might be to assent to — and repeat — the principles of the nation. The last half century has seen African Americans, before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement, repeat the way America talks about itself to itself
for their own ends, and it has seen their repetition become compelling for the dominant culture. To the extent that some basic social and political change has been achieved. The same could be said about the overturned legislation which once targeted the Chinese American community. As Jack Chen notes, the 1965 Immigration Act, which "ended the discriminatory national origins quota system and instituted the eight-category preference system to reunite families with close relatives and admit aliens with special skills and talents on a 'first come, first served' basis" was passed in the atmosphere of the civil rights movements, in which "Chinese Americans took part" (216). If the discourse through which the United States talks about itself to itself does not change, do not its political, economic, and social structures yet change through history? In some sense, then, does the meaning of America, as Bercovitch calls it, not change? To quote from Maya Angelou's Inaugural poem, "History, despite its wrenching pain, / Cannot be unlived, but if faced / With courage, need not be lived again." What Bercovitch describes then, perhaps, does not mean that history itself is repeated as the same, or means the same, even if the American terms by which it describes itself rarely do.

As I write these concluding words, it occurs to me that the two ethnic minority writers examined in this study seem to have come to a different conclusion than the two ethnic majority writers examined about the possibilities for introducing newness into, or for effecting the transformation through the repetition of, the traditional discourses, narratives, and vocabularies through which the United States talks to itself about itself. Though the invisible man and the woman warrior have an early confidence in the exigencies of the straight recitation of existing discourses as the means to a visible,
corporeally substantive American identity, Ralph Ellison and Maxine Hong Kingston end their novels with a similar — if tentative — optimism about the possibility of transforming through repetition the discourse which already exists in other people’s mouths. Russell Banks and T. Coraghessan Boyle, on the other hand, have written two novels whose tragic endings parallel their sense of foreboding about having to repeat, as unalterable cliché, American discourses about America. This unintended parallel must be a coincidence — it is hardly plausible, after all, to extrapolate based on four novels a characteristic opposition between American ethnic minority writing on the one hand and American ethnic majority, ‘white’ writing on the other. At the same time, however, I wonder if those American subjectivities which exist on the margin, or are conscious of having historical heritages of existence on the margins — those subjectivities, for example, excluded from Frost’s articulation of national identity but pointedly included in Angelou’s — do not develop a sense of the possibilities of alternative centers. Is it not possible that those American subjects on its social, political, and economic margins acquire not only a discernment about how the way in which America talks about itself is distant and distinct from the American real, but also an awareness that there have always existed other ways of talking about America? Can this kind of suspicion itself contribute to a determination to explore those other ways of describing the United States, and of individual Americans’ relation to the country and to one another? What kind of discourses about the United States are thus deemed to be worthy of being said again or written again by American ethnic minority writers?

Such questions underline the fact that much work remains to be done in the
examination of how America talks about itself to itself, and, conversely, of the possibility that some American ethnic minority writers — not to exclude American ethnic majority writers — are introducing different ways of talking about the United States into contemporary American social discourse. Maxine Hong Kingston, after all, has introduced Fa Mu Lan as an American heroine. Will such an introduction take root in American culture, becoming the narrative subject of other repetitions and transformations? In a small way, Fa Mu Lan already has: she was the subject of David Henry Hwang’s 1979 play, *FOB*. Hwang writes in a prefatory note to the play that the “roots of *FOB* are thoroughly American,” claiming that during its creation it “was invaded by two figures from American literature: Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father’s place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers, from Frank Chin’s *Gee, Pop!*” (3). Will Fa Mu Lan become part of an American literary consciousness beyond that of the Chinese American community, however? The fact that Frank Chin reprints the “Ballad of Fa Mu Lan” in Chinese and in English in his essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” suggests that he is anxious that it might — and so wants to make sure that the “real Fa Mulan” (“Come All” 4) is the one that will get repeated.

How these alternative American texts get said again and written again is the focus of another study. Such a study might look at the debates within traditionally marginalised communities, like Ralph Ellison’s African American community or Maxine Hong Kingston’s Chinese American community, about the goals and techniques of American ethnic minority writing. I have touched upon some of those issues, such as the problem
of the racial cliché, the aesthetic-political program of social realism, and the male
criticism of ethnic minority women writers, in Chapters Two and Three. These questions
could be pursued within a broader framework of American ethnic minority literary and
critical history by expanding its historical focus (to other twentieth-century texts) and by
comparing the differences among American ethnic minority literary and critical traditions.
Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has commented that “perhaps it is time for scholars to think of a
comparative American culture as a conversation among different voices — even if it is a
conversation that some of us were not able to join until very recently” ("Ethnic" 300). It
remains to be seen how contemporary American literary history will account for those
different voices, and for the ways those voices say again all the different words which
come to theirs from different, American, mouths.
The Ballad of Mulan
(anonymous, 5th-6th century)

Click. click, forever click, click;
Mulan sits at the door and weaves.
Listen, and you will not hear the shuttle’s sound,
But only hear a girl’s sobs and sighs.
“Oh tell me, lady, are you thinking of your love,
Oh tell me, lady, are you longing for your dear?”
“Oh no, oh no. I am not thinking of my love,
Oh no, oh no, I am not longing for my dear.
But last night I read the battle-roll;
The Khan has ordered a great levy of men.
The battle-roll was written in twelve books,
And in each book stood my father’s name.
My father’s sons are not grown men,
And of all my brothers, none is older than me.
Oh let me to the market to buy saddle and horse,
And ride with the soldiers to take my father’s place.”
In the eastern market she’s bought a gallant horse,
In the western market she’s bought saddle and cloth.
In the southern market she’s bought snaffle and reigns,
In the northern market she’s bought a tall whip.
In the morning she stole from her father’s and mother’s house;
At night she was camping by the Yellow River’s side.
She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name,
But only the song of the Yellow River as its hurrying waters hissed and swirled through the night.
At dawn they left the River and went on their way;
At dusk they came to the Black Water’s side.
She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name,
She could only hear the muffled voices of Scythian horsemen riding on the hills of Yen.
A thousand leagues she tramped on the errands of war,
Frontiers and hills she crossed like a bird in flight.
Through the northern air echoed the watchman’s tap;
The wintry light gleamed on coats of mail.
The captain had fought a hundred fights, and died;
The warriors in ten years had won their rest.
They went home; they saw the Emperor’s face;
The Son of Heaven was seated in the Hall of Light.
To the strong in battle lordships and lands he gave;
And of prize money a hundred thousand strings.
Then spoke the Khan and asked her what she would take.
"Oh, Mulan asks not to be made
A Counsellor at the Khan's court;
She only begs for a camel that can march
A thousand leagues a day,
To take her back to her home."

When her father and mother heard that she had come,
They went out the wall and led her back to the house.
When her little sister heard that she had come,
She went to the door and rouged her face afresh.
When her little brother heard that his sister had come,
He sharpened his knife and darted like a flash
Toward the pigs and sheep.

She opened the gate that leads to the eastern tower,
She sat on her bed that stood in the western tower,
She cast aside her heavy soldier's cloak,
And wore again her old-time dress.
She stood at the window and bound her cloudy hair:
She went to the mirror and fastened her yellow combs.
She left the house and met her messmates in the road;
Her messmates were startled out of their wits.
They had marched with her for twelve years of war
And never known that Mulan was a girl.
For the male hare has a lilting, lolling gait,
And the female hare has a wild and roving eye;
But set them both scampering side by side,
And who so wise could tell you "This is he"?

— Translated by Arthur Waley

Appendix Two

On the Pulse of Morning
Maya Angelou

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spilling words

Armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out to us today, you may stand upon me.
But do not hide your face.

Across the wall of the world.
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,
Come, rest here by my side.

Each of you, a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more. Come,
Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the rock were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
Brow and when you yet knew you still
Knew nothing.
The River sang and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.

They hear the first and last of every Tree
Speak to humankind today. Come to me, here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed
On traveller, has been paid for.
You, who gave me my first name, you,
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet,
Left me to the employment of
Other seekers — desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.
You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede, the German, the Eskimo, the Scot,
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare
Praying for a dream.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am that Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.
I, the Rock, I, the River, I, the Tree
I am yours — your passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon
This day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands,
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts
Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out and upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here, on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, and into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope —
Good morning.


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