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A Question of Identity: Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Autobiographical Writings by Minority Women

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

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Autobiography, I argue, has been recognized as the tool with which marginalized writers can disturb and disrupt the very experience of living by revealing gaps of experience ignored or left out by hegemonic culture. This project is a theoretical and textual exploration of the process of self-definition for minority women who write autobiographically. In it, I bring together feminist and poststructuralist theories of identity formation in order to demonstrate the highly complex nature of identity, as understood by contemporary women writers of autobiography. Minority women's autobiographical writing does not willingly accept the discourses of power and oppression determined by the dominant culture; instead, it records and reveals experiences chosen to deconstruct stereotypes and limitations. The genre of autobiography and the texts I consider reflect the desires of marginalized women to speak and tell their own stories. The choice and the voicing of experiences empowers the subject through the very act of self-definition. The movement away from institutionalized roles into individual selves becomes then, a conscious re-reading of the self, underscoring the recognition that an exploration of the process of identity formation demands a move from the theoretical to the practical.
It is difficult to single out the many people who helped me get through this project although there are a few who stand out in my mind. My dissertation committee has been nothing but supportive, and more importantly, genuinely interested in this project from the beginning. My informal but invaluable dissertation support group, Lisa, Mike, Ann Marie, Donna, Anne and Sharon, your comments, suggestions and friendship have much to do with the fact that I actually got this done. Lastly, thanks to my family and Scott, who always believed I would get through this, eventually.
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At the onset of this project, while reading theoretical and critical texts that address or explore non-Western issues of feminism for marginalized women, I became interested in the production of identity for minority women. Recognizing that an exploration of the process of identity formation demanded a move from the theoretical to the practical, I began to read autobiographical writings by women who are positioned, racially and sexually, on the margin. With each subsequent autobiography that I read, I sensed a commonality that would bring together such diverse interests as feminisms, minority women, autobiography, poststructuralism, and identity formation. The writers of the autobiographies that I was reading all seem to recognize that identity, and identity formation, is not simple and straightforward. In fact, the experiential nature of the autobiographical writings of marginalized women reveal the complexity of their vision of identity, as raced, gendered, classed. Moreover, the lives chronicled in the autobiographical texts could provide, I felt, an access point at which members of dominant groups could begin to understand non-white women's lived experiences.¹

¹My use of the term "dominant groups" refers, in part, to white academic feminists who tend to overlook individual experiences in
I began to envision this project as one that could juxtapose the issues of identity for marginalized women with the theoretical concerns of feminist and poststructuralist identity formation, which would make apparent to the reader just how complex autobiographical writings by minority women are. What I wanted to explore then, was not only the potential of autobiography but also representations of the self and the formation of a speaking subject that are emerging from non-Western feminisms and cultural theories. Ultimately then, my project demonstrates the importance and the relevance of the textual production of identity, as envisioned by minority women writers.

I have described the juxtaposition of my interests as the "intersection" of feminism, poststructuralism, and autobiography; this is in reality a three-tiered metaphor that provides the organization for this entire project. Underlying the basis of this project is the recognition that identity is not the clearly recognizable and understandable idea(l) that it is assumed to be in and by white liberal humanism. In addition, whether or not they consciously embrace theory, these writers realize that identity is much more complex, and they discuss this complexity through various representational forms, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, and theory. Finally, whether or not the

the construction of overarching theories; the term "dominant groups" also include hegemonic cultures that do not recognize those groups that are positioned on the margin, socially, economically, or politically.
autobiographers embrace theory, I find within their work evidence that validates feminist poststructuralism as an effective methodology. Through the intersection of these multifaceted concerns, I argue, and so hope to demonstrate, that in order for the hegemonic white culture to learn and understand the subject position of the "other" it is necessary to read and study autobiographical writings by minority women, for it is autobiographical texts that address questions of subjectivity, the politics of location, and essentialist practices of western literary and theoretical discourses.

Since the late 1970's, Western practices of feminist theory have been accused of exclusionary or essentialist practices that have tended to position third world or marginalized women as the ground of representation for the hegemonic definition of woman.² In order to avoid such exclusionary practices, Western hegemonic feminism needs to recognize the importance of 'other' voices, 'other' positions, 'other' experiences. Minority women's autobiographical writing addresses the issue of the self and the formation of a speaking subject that are emerging from non-Western feminisms and cultural theories. The scope of my project

²See, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha's "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue',' Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al's Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, Barbara Harlow's Commentary "All That is Inside is not Center: Responses to the Discourses of Domination," and Valerie Smith's "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'."
is to answer the question affirmatively, that autobiography and autobiographical writing, especially for marginalized or minority women, represents the literary location from which to disrupt essentialist theories of the self, and to create a discourse that deliberately positions itself against that of the dominant culture.

A concrete example of the crisis presented to third world women by the limiting parameters of white feminism can be found in Chela Sandoval's article, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference." Sandoval wrote this article in order to articulate the frustration and resentment experienced by the 300 women of colour who attended the conference. The 1981 conference was organized around the issue of race in order to "confront the idea of racism" (Making Face 59) both within the women's movement and in society at large. Unfortunately, as Sandoval's report details, the conference continued Western feminism's exclusionary practices. The feminists and women of colour at the conference realized that the unifying category of women erased or denied difference, and unthinkingly perpetuated racism. Angered by and reacting to the conference organizer's assumption and imposition of a "seemingly homogeneous category" (that is, "women of colour"), Sandoval argues that "this segregation reflected the way in which women of colour are positioned in the dominant culture and within the women's movement itself" (60). Whereas white feminists found in the program a variety of consciousness-raising groups
including, among others, groups for Jewish, lesbian, working-class, or educated women, the only choice for non-white feminists was "women of colour."

Sandoval's report is of interest to me because it is one clearly defined example of women of colour's positioning in and by the dominant discourse. Reacting against the imposition of the essentialist category of Woman, the women of colour at the conference called for a revisionary politics of subjectivity that acknowledges difference, not denies it. The most important aspect of the report lies in the call, by U.S. third world feminists\(^3\), for a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies only one perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to re-center depending upon the forms of oppression to be confronted. (67)

These women's historically contextualized response to the second wave of feminism which grouped all women together, regardless of differences, recognized the oppressive threats inherent in both

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\(^3\)Chela Sandoval uses this term deliberately, while acknowledging the lack of agreement among the oppressed women it represents. At the conference, the marginalized women debated the use of 'women of colour' as well as 'third world women', and while neither term seemed unquestionably appropriate, the term 'women of colour' was chosen because it represented three important issues of concern: to have been de-centered from any form of power in order to be used as the grounds of representation for the dominant group; to be working politically to challenge existing institutions of power; to underline their connection with oppressed women in third world countries.
the act of universalizing all women's experiences into the category 'Woman' and "othering" women who were not white and western. Therefore they began to re-focus the concerns of feminism to a politics of inclusion, rather than exclusion. ⁴

According to Sandoval's report, "ideological differences [which overlooked issues of racism and classism in order to present a unified women's movement] divided and helped to dissipate the movement from within between the years 1972 and 1980"(55). The 1981 National Women's Studies Conference's focus on racism seems somewhat problematical, given the existence of such unresolved ideological differences; however, it seemed to suggest the possibilities of change within the movement. Sandoval's report describes the conflict at the conference between white feminists who endorsed a united category of womanhood or sisterhood, and feminists of colour, who called for theories of oppression which would not erase differences between women. This conflict at the conference provided a jumping off point for

⁴In a telling, albeit depressing aside, the issues raised by Sandoval in 1981 continue to exist and still demand to be explored, as chronicled by Cynthia Davis in "Privileging Differences or Different Privileges?" At the 1990 NWSA meeting, in Akron, Ohio, the Women of Color Caucus walked out because they felt the NWSA "leadership was [still] not adequately addressing their concerns," a belief underscored by the presumed racially motivated firing of NWSA employee Ruby Sales, the first minority women to work in the national office (3). Furthermore, Davis's article points out the scarcity of white academic feminists "who are dedicated to anti-racist work," an observation that underscores the purpose of my project (7).
women of colour to both highlight their concerns with the women's movement and to focus the need to theorize their positioning both by and in the NWSA. Sandoval's report itself was relevant for minority women writing autobiography as well as theory and can be considered to reveal both an historical and a theoretical commonality.

The report was first published by The Center for Third World Organizing in 1982; it was then re-published in Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Colour in 1990. Following its first publication, the second edition of This Bridge Called My Back was released in 1983, Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera in 1987, Moraga's Loving in the War Years in 1983, and the autobiographical fiction of Judith Ortiz Cofer and Sandra Cisneros in 1991 and 1989. The increased publications of minority women marks the transition from women of colour's critique of the theorizing practices of essentializing feminism, as chronicled, for example, by Sandoval, to the creation of autobiographical and theoretical texts that directly address the issues recognized at the conference. I am not claiming Sandoval's article, and the 1981 NWSA conference, provided the sole impetus for the emergence of a subjectivity theorized and created by and for minority women; instead these examples act as an synecdoche for the problems faced by marginalized groups who are subject to other's theories, not their own. The emergence of autobiographical writings by minority women suggest the
possibilities contained within the genre that itself depends upon the recognition and exploration of difference. That is, autobiographical writing recognizes the individual and the discursive acts that constitute the formation of identity, which challenges the notion of universal definitions of peoples and cultures. Thus, I argue, the writers of minority women's autobiographical texts consciously engage in reconceptualizing the political and the ideological domains they inhabit.

In this project I also examine the theoretical possibilities and limitations that are intrinsic to existing theories of feminism and poststructuralism. In doing so, I am countering a problematic assumption of poststructuralist critics concerning autobiography that disputes the possibilities of a referential "I." That is, theories of poststructuralism tend to negate autobiography's body of the individual and the body of experience through a non-stable notion of the self. Contemporary women's autobiographical writing re-negotiates the idea(I) of a stable "I" as demonstrated by the

\[5\] Sidonie Smith summarizes the poststructuralist assumption as follows. Poststructuralism has "challenged the notion of referentiality and undermined comfortable assumptions about an informing "I" ... they suggest that the 'autobiographies' may be nothing more than a convention of time and space where symbolic systems, existing as infinite yet always structured possibility, speak themselves in the utterance of 'parole' ... the autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence, or identity, that does not exist outside language" (Poetics 5).
fluidity of identity evident in their texts. The autobiographical writings of minority women stand in direct opposition to the reductive poststructuralist view of autobiography as narrative artifice because, although they utilize poststructuralism's fluidity, minority women use it to re-define the relationship between signifier and signified, to disrupt the expectations of language. Putting the body, and the body of experience, back into autobiographical texts enables the minority woman writer to use autobiography as the venue to disrupt and re-create not only signifiers and signifieds but discourses of class, race, sex, and sexuality in order to re-fashion society as a whole.

Minority women writer's autobiography and autobiographical fiction interact with feminism and poststructuralism's common interests and investments in the textual production of identity. The textual production of identity necessarily entails an exploration terms such as self, identity, and subjectivity. I use the term "identity" to mean a "psychosocial construct made up of such elements as physical being, intellect and emotion, experience, behavior, and attitudes." The term "self" details an ideology of identity that takes into consideration the body and experience located in that body. However, postructuralism has posited that the "idea that the individual possesses a single, fully defined 'true' self, to be either disclosed or discovered, is a myth" (Fowler and Fowler xxiii). If the self is

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6Fowler and Fowler, xxiii.
in a state of fluxuation, then, I argue, autobiographical explorations reveal the agents that effect or are effected by such a state. "Subjectivity," in the poststructuralist sense, posits a subject as agent of discursive practices, subject to other discourses. The autobiographical writings of minority or marginalized women effectively negotiate with the theories of poststructuralism that threaten to de-materialize both the body and the body of experience, in the name of discourse. Minority women writing autobiographically also draw self-consciously from the theories of identity formation, as constructed by feminist discourses, in order to theorize themselves through the production of these texts.

By deliberately bringing together theories of feminism and poststructuralism, I am foregrounding questions of identity politics, the individual, and the concepts of inclusion/exclusion in my explication of the autobiographical writings of minority women. Poststructuralist theories hold relevance for feminism's concern to destabilize the subject, in order to move away from the traditional, rational subject, usually coded male:

For poststructuralism, subjectivity is neither unified or fixed. Unlike humanism, which implies a conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject, poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change and of preserving the status quo. (Weedon 21)

The importance of the move away from the traditional subject is explored in Linda Nicholson's summary of Donna Haraway's
Mani"esto for Cyborgs. According to Nicholson, feminist
poststructuralism has made possible
a politics which embraces a recognition of the multiple,
pregnant, and contradictory aspects of both our individual
and collective identities. Such a politics no longer requires
essential criteria of identification; rather, we are beginning
to see instead the formation of political groupings which rest
on the conscious negation of such criteria. (Nicholson 12)

Feminist theory's concern with the formation of identity is based,
in part, on its ongoing critique of liberal humanism's assumptions
of male privilege. Humanist ideology has at its centre the belief
that the individual is coherent, stable, rational and free; that he is
the creator of rational laws that effect all individuals equally, and
within the law, he is free to do as he chooses, not raced, gendered,
or bound by economic limitations. The problem with this ideal,
and its inherent freedoms, is that in actuality, (and perhaps not
surprisingly,) the liberal humanist is white, male, middle class.

The liberal humanist subject, in effect, ignores or negates
the existence of hierarchical discourses that construct difference,
or "others" in order to enable this idealized individual. Elizabeth
Weed argues that "at the very core of feminism is a struggle
against the historical constitution of individual (masculine)
identity with its collapse of the female into the biological or into
the 'naturally' ordained realm of the functional" (Coming to Terms
xiii). Liberal humanism's concern with the individual seemed
possibly pertinent to feminist interests in that it moves away
from the institution and back to the individual. However, this
focus on the individual proved somewhat problematic through its gender blindness that "masks structures of male privilege and domination" (Weedon 41). The individual of liberal humanism, constructed as white, male, and middle class, presumes the innateness of privilege for those that fall within the parameters of its ideal of subjectivity. Anyone beyond these parameters is denied access to privilege, and, subsequently, power. Chris Weedon questions the assumption of liberal humanism that locates subjectivity as the "coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of 'reality'" (8). Basing a theory of subjectivity on the fact of woman's experience without questioning the construction and constraints mediating that experience is not a productive project for feminism. The language of experience results from the combination of a series of competing discourses, including social, political, economic; therefore, by relying solely on language itself to express individuality discounts the ways in which language "constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific" (Weedon 21).

The very concept of the individual demands re-vision and re-definition, which is the point of entrance for the theories of poststructuralism. Questioning and deconstructing the liberal humanist idea of the subject enables feminist poststructuralism to theorize the production of meaning, the effect of meaning, and the changes that take place across meaning. Women who write
autobiographically exist at the intersection of the public and private or the individual and society, and are, I would argue, exemplary of the 'political subject' which represents a blurring of the humanist boundary between the public and the private. The implication of the political subject's blurring of the boundaries between the individual and society is the recognition that subjects are constructed and positioned within the various discourses of culture; thus autobiography enables the critique and the deconstruction of this positioning by social discourses.

The agenda of autobiographical writing by minority women often entails the creation of a discourse that produces and transmits power. Appropriate to this agenda is Foucault's theory of discourse that acknowledges a discourse that produces power is a process susceptible to challenge and change. Minority women's textual production of their own identity reflects their realization that it is not simply enough to speak (or write) in order to have subjectivity that escapes external inscriptions. What is necessary, in addition, is the articulation of an identity or a subjectivity that both acknowledges and subverts existing assumptions prescribed by a hegemonic discourse.

Thus the body of the minority woman and the "body" of her work become both the site and the subject of her discourse of identity formation; she must critique the inscriptions placed upon her body in order to revise notions, both personal and cultural, of her selfhood. The theorization of subjectivity and language
produced by feminist poststructuralism is particularly applicable to the production of autobiographical texts by minority women because it acknowledges that:

The political interests and social implications of any discourse will not be realized without the agency of individuals who are subjectively motivated to reproduce or transform social practices and the social power which underpins them. Individuals can only identify their 'own' interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses. Individuals are both the site and subjects of discursive struggle for their identity. (Weedon 97)

Minority women writing autobiography transform themselves from being the object of first world feminist discourse to being the subject of their own textual production. This transformation delineates the intent of third world/minority women to identify themselves as creating a discourse that reflects not the unqualified acceptance of current social practices and positionings but one that questions and thus creates anew the location of the speaking subject. Third world and minority theorists have addressed the issue of individual agency and the potential inherent in woman's body as the site and the subject of her discourse of identity formation; the resultant politics of location are reflected in Anzaldúa's metaphors in Borderlands/La Frontera and Making Face, Making Soul: the "borderlands," the "new mestiza," and "making face," and bell hooks' metaphor, in Talking Back, of "talking back."
These metaphors critique the idea of identity as established by first world feminists, an identity that locates third world women as the grounds of representation for the dominant first world feminists. Moreover, these metaphors create a subjectivity that is constituted along innumerable axes, and demand that questions of race, class, gender and sexuality must be considered within the emerging discourse of third world and minority women's writing. Chandra Mohanty has defined the theory of the mestiza consciousness as the

writing/speaking of a multiple consciousness, one located at the juncture of contests over the meanings of racism, colonialism, sexualities and class [which] is thus a crucial context for delineating third world women's engagement with feminism. ("Cartographies of Struggle" 37)

Anzaldúa's term, the mestiza consciousness, reflects the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another in order to create a site of subjectivity that does not deny difference but instead uses it, celebrates it. The new mestiza exemplifies the need to freely straddle two or more cultures, which will then break down the subject/object or "othering" binary existent in first world feminists' universalizing construction of "woman."

The metaphor of the "bridge," as taken from the anthology This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, illustrates the positioning of the body of minority women/third world feminists in that they (their backs) are literally, physically and theoretically bridging the gaps between constructed
assumptions about their subjectivity, the reality of their lives, and the reformation of the category "woman." Editors Anzaldúa, Moraga, and the women who contributed to This Bridge are constructing themselves as the speaking subjects of a new discursive formation because they recognize the displacement of their subjectivity across a multiplicity of discourses. The ability to speak their own subjectivity, to empower themselves from the margins which provides the perspective to question the centre, is what Anzaldúa's notion of the "borderlands" provides.

Similarly, Anzaldúa’s metaphor of "making face" challenges, questions, and displaces identities that are imposed by dominant ideologies and culture, in order to establish self-respect (Anzaldúa, Making Face, Making Soul). This politically subversive gesture critiques mainstream feminism's tendency to subsume differences in the name of "Woman." It illustrates the constructed need for minority women to wear masks, to deny their needs and identities in order to be recognized by the dominant feminist theories. "Making face" is a metaphor for constructing one's own identity; moreover, it enables minority women to move from the object position to the subject position of their own self-constructed discourse. One major criticism of mainstream feminism is that, by subsuming the concerns of all women into the category "Woman," minority women were "othered" by and in the discourse. In short, they entered the discourse by occupying the role formerly held by women in relation to men: as the grounds of
representation for the dominant group, white women. Moving from the object position to the subject position enables minority women to occupy the theorizing space, instead of being theorized by others.

Ultimately, what this project demonstrates is that whether they are writing and fighting from the fluxlike state of the borders, or utilizing the destabilizing power of doublespeak, or returning to non-white traditions in order to disrupt socially constructed identity practices, minority women writers utilize the potential inherent in the autobiographical process/act. Throughout the following chapters I explore these issues of identity and multiple feminisms through a close reading of various and varied theorists and marginalized writers. What I am presenting then, is a reading of these texts that I hope will contribute to on-going discourses including newly expanded notions of feminisms, identity, and writers whose work merits both praise and attention.

The anchor chapter of this project, "Re-writing the Wor(l)d: Empowering Women through Autobiography," serves to introduce the historical tradition of autobiographical writing. This chapter examines contemporary theories of women's autobiography and begins a consideration of how the voice of minority women can enter the tradition, using Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl as a case in point. Drawing on Oedipal theories of feminist psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow and those of the
French feminists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Sidonie Smith argues that the very nature and structure of language, and its inherent privileging of the phallus as the empowered namer/originator of language, is one of the reasons that autobiography has been a male-centered realm. The existing system of signs and signification "encodes sexual difference" (Poetics 40) and predetermines the privileging of the male voice, subsequently encoding autobiography -- the dominant discourse of the self -- as male. This represents a problematic constitution, as autobiography, traditionally gendered a male pursuit, does not provide or consider a place from which women may speak.

The second chapter, "Biomythography and the Counterdiscourse of African-American Women's Autobiographical Writing," addresses the question of how the politics of location is predetermined by social discourses of racism and (hetero)sexism through a close examination of three contemporary African-American women writers: Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Dust Tracks on a Road. These autobiographical texts address the double marginalization of being both black and a woman and challenge the process of social and sexual "othering" through the subjectivities constructed by the writers. Moreover, the politics of location of the lesbian writer, as explored by Lorde, extends the parameters of identity formation, and further exemplifies the
importance of recognizing the role played by overlapping
discursive practices of race, sex, and sexuality, in the formation of
subjectivity.

Chapter Three, "Writing From the Border: Autobiography
and the Latina Self," is a consideration of the autobiographical
writings of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Cherrie
Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*, and Sandra Cisneros' *The House
on Mango Street*. In it, I explore the ramifications of various
metaphors of identity formation, as posited by and in the work of
marginalized writers. I connect the emerging voice of third world
feminists with the production of autobiography by marginalized
women, to demonstrate the overlapping theoretical concerns of
voice and identity formation. Anzaldúa's theory of *la mestiza*, bell
hooks' "talking back," and Anzaldúa's the "borderland" become
discursive acts which link the subjectivity produced by and in the
autobiographical texts with the feminist and poststructuralist
theories of identity formation.

My final chapter, "'Spider Woman's Granddaughter':
Autobiographical Writings by Native American Women," considers
how Native American women's autobiographical writing addresses
the issue of multiple marginalization through an historically
constructed "othering" experienced by Native Americans today.
The autobiographical writings by Paula Gunn Allen, Mary Crow
Dog, Diane Glancy, and Leslie Marmon Silko destabilize the
discursive practices of the dominant culture and foreground both
the importance of non-traditional means of communication/articulation and of difference. The importance, and necessity, of autobiographical writing for Native American women is made evident by Paula Gunn Allen's statement:

Native women must contend with yet a third fact, one more difficult to notice or tell about: if in the public and private mind of America Indians as a group are invisible in America, then Indian women are non-existent. (9)

Writing their own lives, telling their stories, creates both the space and the identity for Native American women to establish their history and their subjectivity through an exploration of their unique and often overlooked cultural legacy.

The tradition of autobiography as disruptive of social discourses of dominance and oppression is the legacy of Harriet Jacobs, and this legacy re-appears, in turn, in each successive generation of women writers, from Zora Neale Hurston to Maya Angelou, Cherrie Moraga to Sandra Cisneros, Leslie Marmon Silko to Diane Glancy. As the tradition evolves, Harriet Jacobs' irony becomes Audre Lorde's biomythography, which becomes the potential of the borderlands, the cultural margins, which in turn lead to the reclamation of ritual and tradition for Native American women writers. The following chapters trace the evolution of the autobiographical act, as it unfolds the potential and power inherent in the lives and experiences of marginalized
women, with the hope of transforming not only a tradition but the
cultural discourses that intervene into such traditions.
Chapter One

Re-writing the Wor(l)d: Empowering Women Through Autobiography

"Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (Heilbrun 18).

Women's autobiography exists as a means to give form and venue to women's search for narrative; it provides access to a discourse that, through women's construction of their own lives, exists outside the phallocentric discourse that both inscribes and excludes women. Mary Jacobus laments that "women's access to discourse involves submission to phallocentricity, to the masculine and the symbolic" (15). And yet, stepping outside of traditional or canonical modes of expression, women have discovered and claimed the empowering nature of autobiographical writing, whether fictionalized or factual, as a venue from which to speak. To re-coin Virginia Woolf's axiom, that what women need is a room of their own: what women need, and what autobiography provides, is the ability to claim a life of one's own, not prescribed or decided by another.

Contemporary women writers utilize the fluidity of poststructuralism in order to move beyond the stable referent of traditional male autobiography.\(^1\) Theories of postmodernism that

\(^1\)Recall the discussion in the introduction that states that whether or not contemporary women writers consciously embrace theory, they do recognize the complexity of identity, and their texts
argue against the need for existence of master narratives have effectively blurred the boundaries between genres of expression, writing, and art, calling into question the very distinctions that have traditionally separated various literary styles. Books such as Borderlands or This Bridge Called My Back illustrate the emerging styles that ignore or undermine restrictions of master narratives and/or the parameters of genre. Effectively combining various styles (poetry, prose, essay) and languages (Spanish, English), these texts demonstrate the fluidity or blurring of distinctions. Autobiography exemplifies this fluidity of styles, combining fact, subjective recall, and one's life history into a text that becomes, ultimately, a fictionalized account of experience, articulated to fulfill a specific socio-historical need or vacuum. Recent theoretical interest in women's autobiographic writing considers the ways in which women utilize autobiographic writing, exploring and developing the genre beyond the boundaries of the male tradition of autobiography. Expanding the definition of autobiographic writing necessitates, then, a consideration of the formation of the male tradition.

Autobiography and the Male Tradition

Historically, the genre of published autobiography has typically been constituted as and deemed a traditionally male

reflect this realization and explore it through a variety of representational forms.
concern, often utilized to attest to great feats of heroism or intellectual pursuit. Sidonie Smith, drawing on theories regarding the Oedipal stage by feminist psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow, and those of the French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, argues that the very nature and structure of language, and its inherent privileging of the phallus as the empowered namer/originator of language, is one of the reasons that autobiography has been a male-centered realm.\(^2\) The existing system of signs and signification "encodes sexual difference" and predetermines the privileging of the patriarchal voice, subsequently, encoding autobiography — the dominant discourse of the self — as male (Poetics 40). Traditional autobiography, gendered a male pursuit, does not provide or consider a place from which women may speak or establish their subjectivity.

Critically, as recently as ten or so years ago, collections of theoretical or critical writings about autobiography reflected this gendered division, often containing only a token chapter dealing with women who were interested in autobiographical concerns and frequently, these women were themselves writing about men.

\(^2\)Here I am referring to the power of the Father to name and to control language. Lacanian theories of the Oedipal stage often conflate the phallus as the idea(l) locus of power with society’s privileging of men. Thus men are "empowered" to manipulate language which is reflected through women being positioned as the "other."
A case in point is the essay entitled "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" contained within James Olney's 1980 collection, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (my emphasis). Mary G. Mason's choice of the non-neutral "other" in her title reflects her complicity in the presumed masculine territory of autobiographical writing. Olney's definitive texts on autobiography centre around the very public figures of autobiographical practice -- Rousseau, Franklin, Barthes -- men whose private lives are constituted by the public lives they have constructed for themselves. Unsure of exactly who to credit for penning the "first" autobiography, Olney cites as possible sources "a gentleman named W.P. Scaragill's 1834 text *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, from the 1760's, Michel de Montaigne's late 16th century *Essays*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, written as the 4th century passed into the fifth, or Plato's 4th century B.C. writings.

Clearly attempting to establish autobiography as a male tradition and concern, Olney overlooks the women who contributed to the emerging tradition: Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life*, written and published in 1656, predates at least half the texts considered by Olney to be precursors to the autobiographical genre. Or, earlier still are Margery Kempe's 1432 text, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Anne Bradstreet's 17th century writings of Puritan America. Why
is it that none of these texts are recognized by Olney as possible archetypes?

Olney's sense of autobiography as a reflection of a public figure with a public life negates the experiences of the women who too were writing autobiographically. To theorize autobiography as public will be to always exclude women, whose lives, until very recently, have taken place in the private space. The writings of Anne Bradstreet reflect the domestic sphere of Puritan America, and the lived experiences of the colonists. Although not a politician or public figure, Bradstreet's text, much like the writings of other early women autobiographers, provides insight into the concerns of the community and the workings of everyday life. These texts provide an alternative to the established histories of their respective periods, and further the reader's understanding of the realities of the time. Perhaps the threat of early autobiographies by women lay in the assumed neutrality of the domestic sphere of these texts that masked alternative discourses potentially subversive to the socially constructed privileging of the male experience.

Olney's essentialist definition of autobiography reflects the assumption that masculinity and society are synonymous, an assumption that explains his tendency, as well as the autobiographical tradition's, to overlook autobiographies by women. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck recognize
Translating the work of German autobiographical critic Georges Gusdorf, Olney writes

it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures. (29, emphasis mine).

The thinking of critics such as Olney and Gusdorf seems to imply that if men are the definitive subject against which all "others" are measured, what room (and need) is there for a woman's life if she is merely going to serve as the grounds of representation which reflect men at "twice their size"? The exclusionary practices of masculine autobiography become evident if by "man" and "his" Gusdorf includes women in this definition of autobiography, as a humanist might argue. Universalizing definitions tend toward exclusion in the name of inclusion, and in the case of autobiography, it is women's experiences that are negated in and by Gusdorf's definition.

Traditionally, the genre has recognized the writings of Augustine and Rousseau as the prototypical formulas for

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3Virginia Woolf. A Room of One's Own, (35).
autobiographical writing. If this is so, the genre presumes that it is the male life that establishes the pattern, that it is the male life that demands and deserves to be told. Suzanne Juhasz states that autobiography as a

literary genre has traditionally been one of those masculine institutions: by and about men, it has established for us many of our notions about what people are like, what lives are like (especially, what constitutes important and meaningful lives) and how one writes about people like that. (221)

The etymology of the word autobiography stems from a combination of three Greek elements: self, life, and writing. The historical predominance of patriarchal ideologies seems to demand that we understand the origins of the word to be referring to men who had access to education that enabled them to write their lives, thus institutionalizing both the form and the content of the autobiographical experience. Thus "self" is constructed as predominantly male and the writing of self, a male enterprise.

Feminist theory has accused the patriarchy of propagating an ideology that "others" or marginalizes non-privileged non-males, thereby institutionalizing a discourse that hierarchizes males and masculinity by privileging male experience as the experience. Traditional autobiography has been implicated in this tendency to privilege the male experience:

From its roots in the Augustinian notion of the soul in search of God to its flowering in 19th century realism, autobiography flourished because there seemed to be
a "self" to represent, a unique and unified story to tell which bore common ground with the reader, a mimetic medium for self-representation that guaranteed the epistemological correspondence between "narrative" and "lived life," a self-consciousness capable of discovering, uncovering, recapturing that hard core at the center. All these certitudes of traditional autobiography follow, as [Candace D.] Lang suggests, upon the "conviction that 'I', the speaking subject, has a single, stable referent." (Smith, Gaze 72)

This stable "I" is in direct contrast to the fluid, flux-like "I" of poststructuralist autobiographic writing, and represents an essentializing and restrictive sense of self. The "I" of autobiography thus becomes "Man, putatively a marker of the universal human subject . . . whose identity is deeply embedded in a specific history of privilege" (Smith xvii). Autobiography as a male-constructed and dominated institution for the exploration of the self echoes this primary interest in male-centered experience, effacing, as patriarchal discourse does, the voices and experiences of the "others." Masculine-coded autobiography's tendency to negate in turn explains, in part, the resurgence of interest by women and feminist theorists in redefining the genre.

But why should it be that the male voice is the privileged voice, that the male life is celebrated and considered interesting to a public readership? Historically, men alone have had access to the public voice and the political arena, areas of exposure and

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Gayatri Spivak has defined this "universal human subject" as the straight white Christian man of property.
empowerment. They have created the laws and ruled the courts; they have constructed a language that reflects their privileging and their power. By creating the standards to be met as individuals both public and private, men have been sanctioned to propagate their self-constructed importance through the genre of autobiography. Women, denied access to public discourse, were thereby denied access to the standards for recognition and success created by men. Women were denied access to the autobiographical mode because it was presumed that they had no experience worth writing, let alone reading, about. To illustrate this assumption, Mary Mason details how the autobiography of Margaret Cavendish was originally an addendum to that of her husband's, placed there to differentiate between herself and possible other wives of the Lord Marquis of Newcastle.

Mary Mason's essay, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," addresses the issue of differing agendas for women versus men who write autobiographically. The statement "because I am a woman," taken from the opening lines of Dame Julian of Norwich's autobiography, seems to demand of women autobiographers a justification or an explanation for their "excursions into autobiographical writing" (207). This need for a justifying element helps to explain the predominant difference in the agenda of women who write autobiographically, in that they seek to unify their private lives with their public, to become, as
discussed in the introduction to this project, political subjects.

Mason states that

Nowhere in women's autobiographies do we find the patterns established by the two prototypical male autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau; and conversely male writers never take up the archetypal models of Julian, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet. (210)

Instead, she tells us that "an element, however, that seems more or less constant in women's life-writing -- and this is not the case in men's life-writing -- is the sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity" (231). Mason's study of these four early autobiographical writers establishes a radical difference between male and female autobiographical writing in that, she argues, women recognize another consciousness in their search to establish their own identity: the "grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems (if we may judge by our four representative cases) to enable women to write openly about themselves" (210).

Mason's choice of language emphasizes how women's autobiographical writings do not merely reflect the individual: phrases such as "the merging of her private consciousness with her collective consciousness," "evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity," "the double focus writer," tie together the personal and the political or the cultural. Mason's style of writing then serves to incorporate the public sphere in women's definition of their own private sphere. Alterity, the act of
identifying themselves in relation to another, provides a clear
distinction between the emerging traditions of female and male
autobiographical writers, but the question thus becomes, is this
act of identifying a positive or a negative act? Critics of women's
autobiography might argue that the need to identify oneself with
another detracts from the experiences of the individual. However,
I argue that the act itself is a positive recognition of the necessary
interconnectedness of the private and the public spheres. These
women, instead of writing within the vacuum of their own
experiences, chose to acknowledge and incorporate the cultural
and environmental influences that helped to shape their lives.
Locating the means of empowerment in others, and not in oneself
as is often the case in the self-celebratory male autobiography,
can be read as a distinguishing element of women's
autobiographies; moreover, it can be understood to form the locus
of women's community oriented empowerment.\(^5\)

An argument can thus be made to link together the
movement from singularity to alterity with the actual creative
moment of autobiography in that the construction of the self is
inherently linked to the self's interconnectedness with another.
Exploring the relationship between memory's cognitive processes

\(^5\)This recognition of the contribution of others in the writing of
women's autobiography is echoed in Harriet Jacobs' printed
indebtedness to all those who enabled her escape. See also the
discussion of the importance of community in the African-
American and Native American chapters.
and the autobiographical act, William Siebenschuh points out that each act of recalling or remembering inherently contains an act of editing, which he refers to as a "creative act": "we fill gaps between the bits of information unconsciously and with inferences supplied by common sense and more importantly with inferences supplied by our expectations, biases, present needs, and desires" (149). If this is true, then it holds a special relevance for marginalized women's autobiographical writing as it is one's relation to society at large that, in part, decides what one edits out or leaves in. One's position as a speaking subject, either marginalized or privileged, determines the resultant autobiography. Autobiographical theory and writing then, needs to be aware of and take into consideration the relation of the speaking subject to society at large.

The growing field of criticism surrounding women's autobiographical writing owes a debt to the work done by theorists such as Sidonie Smith, Estelle C. Jelinek, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, and Domna Stanton, over the last twenty years. Jelinek's groundbreaking 1980 *Women's Autobiography* helped to establish women's autobiography as a substantial literary discipline, acknowledging that it differs from the male tradition, and, in part, that it displays unique narrative discontinuities. Smith's ongoing work, ranging from her 1974 *Where I'm Bound* to her 1992 *De/Colonizing the Subject*, demonstrates that women's autobiography explores or tests the boundaries between the
public and the private sphere, something, she argues, that is overlooked in male autobiography. Heilbrun's 1988 *Writing a Woman's Life* explores the historical constraints and social constructs that have traditionally limited women's experience, not only as she lived, but as she wrote and was written about. Stanton introduced her term autogynography in her 1984 collection *The Female Autograph*. By removing 'bio' from autobiography, her work serves to emphasize women's difference, to acknowledge gender differences, and to examine her different status in the symbolic order. The sub-script of her title --"Is the Subject Different"-- delineates the underlying premise of her work, to create a theory of autobiography unique to the lived experiences of women.

Drawing on the work of these theorists, I demonstrate, in the following chapters, a continuum of concerns that links together the diverse voices of minority or marginalized women. These writers construct a politicized and political voice that determines the direction of newly empowered women in a sociohistorical context. Recent autobiographical writings by often marginalized women -- Latina-americans, African-americans, lesbians -- reflect an interest and an investment in the question of one's speaking subject's relation to society at large. Twice marginalized or "othered" as women and as minorities, denied access to privilege and power controlled by a 'white' patriarchy, women who choose to express their lives through autobiographical
writing also refuse to be silenced or denied access to an empowering voice in the dominant culture. The question thus becomes, what is the investment of these traditionally "non-privileged" voices in autobiographical writing, and why is this the medium they have chosen through which to seek their empowerment?

Collectively, autobiographical writing by non-white "western" women seems to transcend any borders, limitations, or expectations constructed by the hegemonic culture, in order to give voice to a multiplicity of concerns that reflect the political aspect of women's autobiographical writing. A consideration of a divergent array of texts by minority women reveals a set of overlapping concerns: the legacy of slavery, explorations of the construction of identity of "marginalized" figures, the struggle to empower the oppressed groups in American society, the cost of living between two cultures. Autobiography, I argue, has been recognized as the tool with which "other" writers can disturb and disrupt the very experience of living by revealing gaps of experience ignored or left out by male culture. Autobiography articulates not what has been "always already" determined by a hegemonic culture but instead records and reveals experiences chosen to deconstruct stereotypes and limitations. The choice and the voicing of experiences empower the subject through the very act of self-definition. This movement away from institutionalized roles into individual selves becomes then, a conscious and political
re-reading of the self. The end result of this movement is an empowered and self-realized speaking subject who disrupts existing narratives by re-writing the experience of the silenced. This mode of writing and the texts I will consider reflect the desires of women to speak and tell their own stories, in a sense, to re-claim not only their histories and narratives, but their lives as well.

A case in point is Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*, a slave narrative written by a woman who struggles with the expectations and impositions of the institutionalized role of a nineteenth-century black woman. In writing the text of her experiences, Jacobs was forced to contend with not only the hegemonic culture's perception of her, but also with the essentializing genre of the slave narrative, modelled upon the traditional form of male autobiography. The predominance and repercussions of the established form of male autobiography can be seen to influence the nature of the non-privileged male voice, namely that of the slave narrative. The non-privileged voice of the former slave, it can be argued, aspired to what was perceived as white male power and privilege; underlying this aspiration was the recognition by the black writer of the power inherent in speaking oneself. Therefore, the parallel structure of the slave narrative with male autobiography can be read as a desire to emulate the established form in order to appropriate its power. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* is the defining structure for the
then-developing genre of slave narratives. Douglass' text reflects the recognition accorded to the heroic individual, the "supreme achievement" of freedom resultant from his newly acquired and connected identity and literacy (Olney, I Was Born 56). The question of representativeness is of primary concern, then, for Jacobs (and all women who write) in that she is attempting to establish her own agency, to re-present herself in or through terms of her own construction instead of or in opposition to a representation established to propogate both the discourse of white womanhood and the binary opposite that posits Woman as 'other' to Man.

Fissures of/in Selfhood: Inscribing Black Women into the Autobiographic Realm

Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself can be read as the precursor to contemporary women's autobiographies which struggle with the question of selfhood and subjectivity. Jacobs' text reflects her desire for an individuality established outside the realm of experience acknowledged by white and abolitionist society as being "proper" for a freed black woman. Incidents is a detailed account of Jacobs' life as a privileged child, educated and pampered by her parents until their early deaths. The result of their deaths was that Jacobs, age six, was sent to work in the home of her late parents' mistress.
When Harriet was twelve, this kind mistress died, and both she and her brother became the property of the daughter of Dr. Flint. At this new residence, the young Harriet was preyed upon by her lecherous master. In order to escape the inevitable outcome of his advances, Jacobs escapes and hides in a tiny attic for seven years before finally making her way North. In the North she establishes her connection with the Abolitionist movement and is prevailed upon to write an account of her experiences.

As a woman's slave narrative, Jacobs' text reflects her indebtedness to those who enabled her escape. As an extension of moral abolitionist discourse on one level, it chronicles a first hand account of the atrocities of slavery, including the reality of its abuses toward women and their families. However, as an autobiographic undertaking, Incidents becomes a site of articulation for an otherwise silenced or marginalized figure, a means of empowerment for Jacobs through the expression of her subjectivity. Her text differs from male narratives of slavery in that it does not tell only of questing for an individual's freedom, but, ultimately, much more. Incidents represents a deliberate challenging of conventions, a reversal of the master/slave positioning that demonstrates the constructedness and thus the vulnerability of binary oppositions.6

6This reversal of locations is analogous to the decentering of male/female, man/other oppositions undermined through the expression of women's experience.
Slave narratives, by definition, are usually concerned with the movement north, towards freedom, and the trials overcome by the slave on his journey. They are typically expressions of an individual's will and triumph over the institution of slavery, often paralleled by the acquisition of education which enable, in part, the creation of the narrative. If Frederick Douglass' text is considered the exemplary text,\(^7\) helping to define and confine the parameters of the concerns of the pre-antebellum slave narrative, where does the woman's experience fit? Sidonie Smith argues that although Jacobs' text shares some concerns of male slave narratives, her construction of a speaking subject differs greatly:

As a narrative of self-determining agency, Jacobs' text participates in the tradition of the male slave narrative. But other positionings toward "selfhood" in the text cause Jacobs' narrative to deviate from that androcentric paradigm. For unlike the male slave narrator Jacobs has to attend as she writes to another story of "selfhood." Not only does she confront "Brent's" estrangement from "metaphysical selfhood"; she confronts synchronously her estrangement from "true [white] womanhood" and its sentimental narrative frames. (94)\(^8\)

\(^7\)This point is argued by James Olney in his book *I Was Born.*

\(^8\)Harriet Jacobs' use of the pseudonym Linda Brent further illustrates her multiple marginalization in and by society in that she herself, as Harriet Jacobs, was not empowered to criticize either the construction of womanhood or the institution of slavery. Jacobs was forced to construct the persona of Brent in order to fashion her own subjectivity, free from the constraints imposed by societal expectations.
Jacobs’ text represents a carefully constructed self in relation or in opposition to society’s determination of the “isms” of Woman(hood), a construction not demanded by the male slave narrative. The essentialized "Woman" that exists is possible only in relation to the oppressed "other", the black female slave—a relationship Jacobs needed to avoid or deconstruct in order to escape being complicitous in the construction as the black woman as "other." The self constructed in/by the male slave narratives is a self that, in a sense, is trying to insert itself into the parameters and constructions of white male society: achieving independence, education, ownership—aspects denied by the racialized economic oppression of slavery—and necessary to avoid or escape the emasculated position occupied by the oppressed black male slave. Conversely, the self constructed by the female slave

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The prescribed roles of black women were constructed in relation to the definition of white women: black women were perceived as sexual 'others', licentious and base, in order to protect white virtue. White women were bringers of property, i.e. the solidification of plantation wealth, while black women were the creators of property, i.e. children.

As an extended form of tyranny and oppression, plantation and slave owners devised means to emasculate the male slaves in order to deprive them of any status or privilege/power. Male slaves were forced to wear women's clothes and to do women's work as a way of demeaning them; moreover, the denial of parental rights to their children (slave children assumed the status of their mothers and so children born to freemen and enslaved women were legally deemed slaves) and the inability of the slave husband to protect his wife from the sexual demands of
narrative is a self that is trying to avoid or subvert the parameters of white male society, in order to escape the limitations of imposed multiple marginalizations.

John Blassingame has argued that Jacobs' text is inauthentic because, he argues, "historians need to recognize both the 'uniqueness' and the 'representativeness' of the slave narrative" ("Hear" 45). Yet, as Hazel Carby argues, "any assumption of the representativeness of patriarchal experience does not allow for, or even regard as necessary, a gender-specific form of analysis" (46). The problem inherent in the prerequisite of "representativeness" is, namely, whose representativeness is being both considered and used as the guideline? "In comparing slave narratives to each other, historians and literary critics have relied on a set of unquestioned assumptions that interrelate the quest for freedom and literacy with the establishment of manhood (my emphasis) in the gaining of the published and therefore public, voice" (Carby 46). Sidonie Smith may be read as the counter-position to Blassingame's claim that Jacobs' text does not fit into the "authentic" genre of slave narratives. Smith's insights into the demands of a selfhood for Jacobs recognize what Jacobs herself acknowledges throughout her text: that in order to be represented in a text, woman must present herself, her experiences, her voice, not filtered through the lens of male society's construction of her.

the master served to demasculinize the male slaves and to disempower them.
These two contrasting readings of Jacobs help to illustrate previous misreadings of Incidents that see the text as emulating the male slave narrative. I bring together these two readings in order to highlight my interpretation of the text: that Jacobs both acquiesced to the Abolitionist rhetoric and, at the same time, pointed out its limitations and constructedness. This new representation of Jacobs/woman exists outside the prescribed realm of woman as the other to man. In a sense then, my reading renegotiates Blassingame's use of the term "inauthentic" in order to acknowledge that previous constructions of Women did not reflect authentic female experiences, only experiences that existed within and were decided by the realm of "patriarchal experience."

Joanne Braxton's Black Women Writing Autobiography addresses the question of black women's experience and attempts to redefine the genre to include their voices and lives. She asks, "how did slave women shape their experience into a different kind of literary language?" (18). As previously stated, Jacobs' text does not fit into the traditional definition of the slave narrative because, in part, it, unlike the "narratives of heroic male slaves ... celebrates the cooperation of all the people, slave and free, who make her freedom possible. She celebrates her liberation and her children's as the fruit of a collective effort, not an individual one" (Braxton 19). Furthermore, her text represents the divergence between the individualized quest of the male slave narrative and that of the slave woman/mother: "I could have made my escape
alone, but it was more for my helpless children that I longed from freedom" (89). Jacobs too recognized that her experience, and her subjectivity, differed from that of the male slave. Jacobs' acknowledgement of the effort of the collective, not the individual, is important for the tradition of women's autobiography that follows because women's writing, I argue, often tells the story for the benefit of the all, not simply the individual.

Incidents represents the woman writer's struggle with the question of her relation to society. How was she, formerly a piece of property that could be bought and sold at a moments' notice or whim, to define herself as a speaking subject, not as the object of the slavery institution? The Abolitionist movement that provided the validation and authenticity for her story was also willing (and determined) to provide the parameters for her experience. They "encouraged" her to celebrate and emphasize her motherhood/maternal feelings and her trust in God and not to dwell on her illicit sexual liason, as they defined it. Womanhood, as defined by the dominant white culture, entailed specific codes of morality and behaviour that Jacobs was forced to both recognize and 'sidestep' in her attempt to define and articulate herself. She states that

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11 Jacobs was an exception to the practice of denying Blacks an education; she was educated by her original, kind mistress: "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her" (8).
I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard of others. (55-6)

Through this statement Jacobs articulates her realization that an essentialist definition of womanhood could not pertain to slaves, because they existed outside the definitions of womanhood in order to enable the cult of white womanhood.

Recognizing the essentializing trap of perceived womanly behaviour, Jacobs' text reflects both her acknowledgement of the "cult of true womanhood"¹² and her awareness that she herself was outside the parameters of such a definition. Through her exploration of the definition of motherhood for black women versus white, Jacobs questions the construct of the "cult of true womanhood" and the fact that it existed at the expense or the necessity of "othering" black women. This description of Jacobs' mistress watching the death following childbirth of one of her slaves – whom the mistress suspected of giving birth to the illicit

¹²Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, quoting from Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood:1820-1860" ["American Quarterly" xviii (Summer 1966)], defines the "cult of true womanhood" to be that which "prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Disorderly Conduct 13). However, Joanne M. Braxton's reading of Incidents argues and "demonstrates that it is impossible for "true womanhood" to flourish under slavery because slave women are not allowed to practice the virtues of modesty, chastity, and domesticity" (26).
onsping of her husband -- exemplifies Jacobs' understanding of the inequalities of presumed or prescribed motherhood:

Her sufferings, afterwards, became so intense, that her mistress felt unable to stay; but when she left the room, the scornful smile was still on her lips. Seven children called her mother. The poor black woman had but the one child, whose eyes she saw closing in death, while she [the dying slave] thanked God for taking her away from the greater bitterness of life. (14)

The juxtaposition of the two mothers, the mistress and the mother of the dying woman, is a bitter indictment of the perceived "true" mother, in that the true mother here is black.

Preceding the deathbed scenario is a verbal assault on the dying woman by the mistress, who exclaims "You suffer, do you? I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too" (13). The racial and sexual tensions implicit in this interaction between mistress and slave underscore the complexities of identity formation in that discourses of sex, race, and class interrupt the sympathy one might expect to exist between these women. The mistress' condemning of both the mother and child to hell as "there is no such place [heaven] for the like of her and her bastard" (14) underscores the point Jacobs wants the reader to recognize, that the "cult of true womanhood" is a construct and not a biological reality. Through such challenges of the existing constructs of white womanhood, Jacobs is able to re-define the black woman and thus empower her by forcing the reader to recognize the
obvious failings of feeling in the mistress, and, as an extension, women who propagate the institution of slavery.

Through the description of her mistress, Mrs. Flint, the reader hears echoes of Jacobs' insights regarding the construction of womanhood and the woman's sphere:

Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. (12)

The irony evident in the juxtaposition of the supposedly weak/frail woman with the description of bloodlust not only castigates southern white women's role in propagating the atrocities of slavery but serves as well to undermine the construction of the southern belle as delicate and deserving of the pedestal upon which southern patriarchy places them.

Jacobs' ironic observations highlight the contradictions inherent in the construction of "the cult of womanhood" which serves to place black women outside the parameters of the definition of "womanhood." Thus Jacobs constructs an appropriate and perhaps empowering definition for black women. Her ironic observations re-align herself, and black women in general, in relation to the dominant white patriarchal discourse, re-placing or re-asserting herself not as a marginalized object or other but as a speaking subject or agent in an alternate yet equal discourse. Jacobs' recognition of racial and sexual
tensions enabled her to escape her position as an object of slavery by authorizing her discourse as critic, challenging existing parameters of behaviour and establishing the essentialist nature of socially constructed definitions of women and blacks.

With this in mind, Jacobs’ text itself can be read as an indictment of the essentializing nature of the "cult of true womanhood" which does not acknowledge the position of black women and their racial and economic differences and oppressions. Unwilling or unable to accept the definition of herself as provided by the hegemonic culture, Jacobs helps to establish the tradition of women writing their own lives in order to disrupt and critique the monolithic givens of society:

Through the persona of Linda Brent, she achieves a coherent first-person narrative, radical because of its treatment of the topic of sexual abuse and the oppression of the slave woman. The "cult of true womanhood" decreed that sexuality was not to be discussed, and few women dared to raise it in public, let alone in print, therefore, this "autobiographical act" may be viewed as a radical one. (Braxton 27)

Jacobs' open discussion of sexuality is radical in that it both transgresses boundaries constructed by the dictates of 'polite' white society, but, more importantly, it helps deconstruct the positioning of white women on a pedestal that justified and propagated male hierarchical power.

Jacobs herself recognized the importance of telling her story. Instead of openly celebrating the support of the Abolitionist
society and the "freedom" of the North, she used the textual public forum to criticize the ignorance of liberals who unwittingly contributed to the propagation of institutions like slavery and the oppression of women. In her own words, although urged by Abolitionist figures like Bishop Daniel A. Paine of Philadelphia, Jacobs undertook the writing of her life, in part, to point out the deficiencies of the North's attitude toward slavery:

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the south, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. (1)

Despite the enabling encouragement of the Abolitionists, Jacobs felt compelled to chastise the well-intentioned Northerners in her critique of the on-going institution of slavery.

Jean Fagin Yellin's introduction to Incidents locates the political power of the text in Jacobs' creation of a new voice that is both heard and recognized by the public discourse of the day: "By creating a narrator who presents her private sexual history as a subject of public political concern, Jacobs moves her book out of the world of conventional nineteenth-century polite discourse" (xiv). Ultimately, she sets in motion a discourse that questions the presumed "naturalness" of gender roles and power positions by
publicly exploring and exposing the politicized intrusions of the dominant male discourse on the private sphere.

By utilizing the authority of the autobiographical voice, Jacobs is able to establish the authenticity of her experiences and observations; furthermore, through the articulation of her struggle to assert her womanhood she is able to project a new kind of female hero (Braxton xiv). She will not be silenced by the expectations and constructions of white and patriarchal society; instead, she will challenge and undermine both the established Abolitionist rhetoric of slave narratives and the "divisive sexual ideology" constructed by white patriarchy and propogated by white women (Intro xiv). By constructing herself as the subject of her discourse, making herself the authority, Jacobs created the voice that would enable her to critique the monolithic institutions that oppressed her. Moreover, by constructing herself as an active agent — not a passive victim of slavery — she "takes full responsibility for her actions" (xxx), an act furthered all the more by the writing down of the atrocities unrecognized by white society.

Jacobs reveals her move from being the object of slavery to being the subject of her narrative through the power of language, and of her newly created voice: the language of her text "enacts a sophisticated version of a power reversal in which the slave controls the master" (xxvi). In a sense then, by choosing to reveal her own story, to author it instead of, as many slave narratives,
telling it to another and risking the incorporation of their political or personal agenda, Jacobs, I argue, recognized the power inherent in the genre of autobiography and attempted to appropriate that "masculine-coded" power for herself and other women, both black and white.\textsuperscript{13} "Poor as it may be, I had rather give [my story] from my own hand, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me" (Intro xix). Jacobs' use of the autobiographical format can thus be understood to be an empowering agent that authorizes her critiques and observations, denying the monolithic presumptions of a patriarchal culture. Yellin correctly interprets Jacobs' public voice as, in part, the articulator of the collective concerns of women, modifying the parameters and concerns of the genre of autobiography by turning it away from the individual to the public sphere: "Informed not by "the cult of domesticity" or "domestic feminism" but by political feminism, Incidents is an attempt to move women to political action" (xxdii).

Faced with the question of how to construct a self from the position of the marginalized, Jacobs reflects and transcends the barriers confronting women of the nineteenth century who chose to write of their experiences. Sidonie Smith writes that "the meaning of Western 'selfhood' was one such meaning of privilege in the nineteenth century; and it secured its privileges by means

\textsuperscript{13}Jacobs' critique of the constructs of true womanhood is empowering to white women as well as black in that she is pointing out the false nature of the assumptions about women put forth by men seeking to oppress all 'others.'
of a specific historical phenomena, specific ideological interpellations" coded and constructed as Male ("Gaze" 76). Jacobs' text deconstructs the privileged notion of the origins of the self in that her writing challenges the boundaries of patriarchal ideologies by deconstructing the "naturalness" of the "self" gendered male. 14 Her refusal to adhere to the cult of domesticity underscores her challenging of the resultant "naturalness" of the positioning of woman as other to the privileged male "self." 15 Jacobs' at times inverted master/slave relationship with Dr. Flint as well as her carefully constructed textual roles as woman and mother illustrate her understanding of the problematic and essentializing aspects of socially constructed "Woman" as "other" to an equally essentialized "Man." The details of Dr. Flint's obsession with her, Jacobs' choice between rape victim and concubine — "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (55) — her depiction of the father of her children, all serve to underscore Jacobs' critique of existing "isms" and institutions established to marginalize or "other" her both as woman and as black.

14 As well, her writing challenged the doubly displacing monolith of racial privilege that positions blacks as "other" to the dominant white culture by engaging the mythology of race.

15 Incidents can be seen to anticipate what Paul Smith recognizes as being proffered by women's writing: "the possibility of resistance through a recognition of the simultaneous non-unity and non-consistency of subject positions" (Discerning 118).
Nineteenth century white middle-class women, perceived as frail, in need of protection, and placed on a pedestal by the patriarchy, were potentially trapped by a society that objectified them:

The surrender of "woman's" reason before embodiment also contaminates her relationship to the world... With only limited access to education and to public activity, they could not take advantage of the full play of words with their powers to name, control, authorize. Without the power of words and public discourse, without the power to theorize on and from her own, "woman" and women remain silenced, unrepresented, subject always to the theorizing and fictionalizing of man. (Smith 82)

Jacobs, empowered by her position of the doubly marginalized, was able to escape surrendering or being surrendered to men's "reason." She did not fall into this trap because she was already excluded from society's definition of woman. She did not fear these reprisals as she fell outside the parameters of these dictates; perhaps this is the reason she did not ask or allow Harriet Beecher Stowe to write her story, recognizing that Stowe too was denied access to the power of public discourse.

Speaking and writing from the margin enabled Jacobs to escape the confines of "women's language" that was decided by the dominant culture. She was not expected to echo the polite and moralistic style as demonstrated by the religious overtones of Uncle Tom's Cabin. The language of her text, the language of one on the outside looking in, is reflected in her use of an ironic tone
that would have been lost by the mediation of an intermediary writer. At one point Harriet Beecher Stowe offered to include Jacobs' history in an addendum to one of her texts but Jacobs refused the offer. Jacobs was able to criticize the institution of slavery within the text, which reflects the power of language, of re-telling her story:

My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. (8)

Expressing herself in relation to the society at large, enabled Jacobs to define both her investment in the autobiographical text and the social inequalities she perceived as being propagated along racist and sexist lines.

Incidents attempts to come to terms with the legacy of slavery: Jacobs, facing inescapable motherhood either through rape or collusion, chooses to "fall" with a man she feels will protect her. Her resultant "legacy" is the birth of her two children who make escape temporarily impossible, as she is unable to leave behind her children who she cannot and will not recognize as property under the dictates of the institution of slavery. Coerced or forced into motherhood by slavery, Jacobs assumes the responsibility of freeing her children from the bondage and inescapable choices she faced, refusing to pass onto her children the legacy of slavery that she herself had inherited. If given the choice, Jacobs would not have chosen to have children under the
conditions she was in, as she did not want to be responsible for trapping others in slavery.

Jacobs refuses to accept the constructed and exclusionary hegemonic history that denies her experiences and her very existence. Writers like Harriet Jacobs understood the need to leave evidence or testimonials of their experiences, to undermine the continuation of the institution and to establish themselves as speaking subjects, voicing their own experiences instead of being the object of someone else's discourse. She recognizes that through the telling of her life story, the power structure is reversed and the slave and the master effectively change subject/object positions. Through the use of an autobiographical text, Jacobs refuses to be silenced; instead, she has constructed her own history and her own subjectivity through the creation of an alternative discourse. This discourse enables her to move from the marginalized object position to the subject position of her own discourse. Transgressing the boundaries imposed by a society that "othered" or marginalized black women, Jacobs was able to re-define herself in a discourse that empowered and authorized her voice. Ultimately, exploring and exploiting the myths of slavery and of womanhood resulted in a discourse that enabled her to transcend the constructed jeopardy of being both black and female.

Harriet Jacobs' legacy to the tradition of women writing autobiographically is her creation of an alternate discourse of her
subjectivity in the persona of Linda Brent. Through her, Jacobs was able to question discourses of oppression that threatened to deny her self-constructed subjectivity. Being positioned on the margin provided Jacobs with the perspective to criticize and disrupt existing discursive acts that sought to silence her. The next chapter demonstrates the importance and necessity of alternate discourses of subjectivity through an exploration of Zora Neale Hurston's multiple autobiographical selves, Maya Angelou's metaphor of the caged bird, and Audre Lorde's re-creation of her self as Zami, Carriacou woman.
Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber helped me into carriages or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? ¹

Sojourner Truth's 1851 question, "ar'n't I a woman?," establishes the tradition of questioning and disrupting socially constructed discursive acts by first locating and then challenging the right and the ability of "dat man ober dar" to decide or

¹Readers may be more familiar with Truth's question as Ain't I a woman? In the notes to Deborah Gray White's Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South she clarifies that although "ain't" is often substituted for "ar'n't" she has chosen to "use the word as it appeared in [Truth's] 1878 narrative" (169). I am deliberately following White's lead because I feel that the more common use of "ain't" consciously further exoticizes and emphasizes Truth's illiterate status. Moreover, the use of the word "ain't" does a disservice to Truth by highlighting the stereotype of her 'otherness' and perpetuates the binary white/black-us/them that secures Truth's status as 'other' in Western feminist discourse.
determine whether or not she was a woman. Through this questioning she was speaking her own subjectivity -- not allowing or perpetuating a subjectivity constructed to facilitate the continuation of a hierarchically oppressive sexual and racial society. I have chosen Sojourner Truth's speech as the point of departure for this chapter because it so obviously and deliberately illustrates what I will argue is the overarching pattern of black autobiographical writing: the necessity of reclaiming speech and language from the dominant discursive acts exemplified by "dat man ober dar." By means of the trope of doublespeak, also called signifying, or specifying, black autobiography's creation of an alternate form of discourse introduces the historical tradition of black vernacular as an alternative to the dominant discourse of hegemonic oppression.

Black literary culture has traditionally included, and been heavily influenced by, elements of oral tradition and and storytelling. The teachings and legacy of Africa and African life

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2The question of what was/as a woman is discussed in the Harriet Jacobs section in the previous chapter, with regards to the cult of true womanhood, the cult of domesticity, and the perceived and constructed sexuality of white and black women.

3The deliberate use of vernacular must be seen as a literary practice, and not misread as a sub-standard form of English. The fluidity of language styles and choices exemplifies the flux-like identities described within the autobiographies addressed by this project.
are perpetuated through folklore, myth, and music; this reliance on the oral, rather than the spoken, word can be read as a defining feature of the institution of slavery that made it illegal to educate the black community.\textsuperscript{4} Silenced by and in the Western traditions of reading and writing, the black community discovered or recovered non-traditional means of communication and articulation. As an example of doublespeak, Michelle Cliff's 1984 novel, \textit{Abeng}, is titled as such to remind us that the Maroon armies of Jamaica used the conch shell, the abeng, to communicate during their uprising against the colonizing institution of slavery.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, spirituals and work songs often disguised true messages of rebellion, or information needed to escape to the North, or warned of the approach of slave hunters or overseers.

Non-traditional forms of articulation, both written and spoken, signify the intent of black writers to "ground one's

\textsuperscript{4}In his 1845 \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave}, Douglass writes of the commonly-held perception that "education and slavery were incompatible": his master, upon discovering that his wife was teaching Douglass to read, claimed that "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world" (82,78).

\textsuperscript{5}"Abeng is an african word meaning conch shell. The blowing of the conch called the slaves to the canefields in the West Indies. The abeng had another use: it was the instrument used by the Maroon armies to pass their messages and reach one another." Michelle Cliff. \textit{Abeng: A Novel}. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984.
literary practice outside the western tradition" (Gates xdi). Writing from the margin, being positioned as such outside the hegemonic tradition by the dominant discourse, allows these writers the perspective or the marginality to critique and to disrupt, to challenge, and to question discursive acts and social, racial and economic practices that commodify or deny their experiences.

The self-consciously fashioned literary practice of writing both in and against the dominant discourse is what makes the autobiographical project of contemporary African-American women writers unique. It is a literary response to the historical reality of being forcibly positioned within a dominant culture but, at the same time, being deliberately constructed as outside that culture. The practice of doublespeak exemplifies this positioning in that African-American writers are and have been immersed in standardized English and yet have retained a sense of their pre-contact or pre-slavery experiences through the prevalence of

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6Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores the trope of Signifyin(g) in his theoretical study of black rhetorical patterns, The Signifying Monkey. Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in black vernacular. Its self-consciously open rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, of oral discourse (Gates 53). Susan Willis uses the term "specifying" to denote a form of "narrative integrity [that] speaks for a noncommodified relationship to language" that is intrinsic to black vernacular (16). These acts exemplify the intent of black writers to "ground one's literary practice outside the western tradition" (Gates xdi).
orality and non-standard or vernacular English in their writings. Autobiographic texts ranging from slave narratives to postmodern autobiographical fiction represent a literary manipulation of the hegemonic society’s construction of the politics of location for African-Americans in that the texts often contain evidence of folk traditions and rural culture expected or demanded by the dominant culture. And yet, to satisfy the expectations of the dominant culture, the writers also disrupt their positioning by constructing themselves against the hegemonic society through the very use of vernacular and invective that purportedly distances and differentiates them. My discussion of Zora Neale Hurston will illustrate and thus make clear the way in which writers deliberately position themselves on the margins through the use of invective and vernacular.

Autobiographical writing by African American writers represents an extension of the practice of discursive disruption, signified by the use of doublespeak, and established by the self-conscious use of tropes of the vernacular, dialect, and oral storytelling. Autobiographic writing by African-Americans can be traced as far back as 1789, with the publication of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and the 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a
Slave Girl, Written by Herself. 7 Even the titles of these autobiographical precursors contribute to establishing a tradition of disruption, as demonstrated by the assertion of Equiano's original name, with his slave name as simply an addendum and Harriet Jacobs' qualifying statement, written by herself. 8 Autobiographical writing represents the self-assertion of an identity and a subjectivity that is not completely mediated by the rhetoric of the dominant culture. For Afro-American writings, it represents the possibilities of double-voicedness, or double consciousness, as the texts represent mediations among the socially constructed identities and discursive practices that locate them on the margin. Susan Willis defines black texts as "mulattoes" or two-toned texts that almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent, an accent that signifies upon the various black vernacular literary tradition (Gates xxiii). 9 What

7 Charles H. Nichols cites John Saffin's 1703 text, Adam Negro's Tryall, as the precursor of the genre, but, as I am not familiar with this text, I shall simply note its existence, and refer to texts that I have read. Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom, Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1963.

8 Interestingly, the title of Frederick Douglass's text does not contain any such assertion or qualifying statement, perhaps because of its heavy reliance on the texts of the historically white, male tradition which do not usually make such statements.

9 Willis' definition of the term 'mulattoes' is similar to Gloria Anzaldúa's term 'mestiza', a term which acknowledges the cultural
this means is that although Afro-American writers write in the language of the oppressor, English, they disrupt the very syntax, the grammar, and the relationship between signifier and signified through their use of the vernacular. This is the significance of doublespeak: to use, to invert Audre Lorde's metaphor, the tools of the master to dismantle his house.¹⁰

However, as Lorde points out, writing in and with the language of the oppressor brings with it the threat of being subsumed by the dominant culture's discursive practices. Black women writers write to avoid or escape being "othered" by the discursive acts of the hegemonic culture; this act of othering, at times, is reductive and threatens to erase or deny difference within the black experience. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's insightful essay, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," explores the threat, faced by black writers, of occluding individual experience through the literary expectations of misperceived universal categories of specifics and legacy from which Latina-Americans speak, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

¹⁰I am indebted to Audre Lorde for this metaphor for fighting oppression, in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1981). Although using the master's tools does contain the threat of being subsumed, deliberate literary practices such as doublespeak address both this threat and the recognition of this threat, as they negotiate with the hegemonic discourses.
'black' literature and race (145). And yet, the subjectivity of black women writers is structured, and mediated, in part, by the very fact of "otherness" — by race, sex, class — and it is impossible for them to overlook such a politics of location even as they struggle to assert their own location. Henderson defines this self-conscious positioning as a "simultaneity of discourse [that signifies] a mode of reading which examines the ways in which the perspectives of race and gender, and their interrelationships, structure the discourse of black women writers" (145). My argument about women's autobiographical writing, that the renegotiated autobiographical format allows for an exploration of the fluidity of identity while addressing the discursive acts of oppressive racial, sexual, and classist oppressions, is an extension of Henderson's notion of simultaneity of discourse. Henderson's theory both acknowledges and provides an alternative to the limitations of traditional autobiographical format that threatens to occlude or subsume the individual; that is

such an approach is intended to acknowledge and overcome the limitations imposed by assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity) in racial and gendered readings of works by black women writers. (145)

Black women writers work within a discourse that threatens to deny their differences while at the same time it demands that they explore those very differences of experiences. Such a plurality of discursive acts — race, sex, sexuality, class —
constructs the multiplicity of agendas inherent within autobiographical writing by Afro-American women writers. To illustrate this multiplicity, we will see that Hurston addresses the hierarchy of degrees of blackness in her writing, Lorde criticizes oppressions within both the black and the gay community, Angelou documents her search for an identity that is not modelled upon the blond ideals of the dominant culture. Moreover, this multiplicity of agendas underscores the overlapping continuum of concerns exhibited by the autobiographical projects of marginalized women.

The positioning of black women writers in the discourse of the dominant culture is an extension of the positioning of third world women in that both groups are writing and theorizing from within a discourse that 'others' or exoticizes them. Chela Sandoval's articulation of the concerns and criticisms raised by the third world women at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference, as well as her call for a revisionary politics of subjectivity that acknowledges difference, serves as a point of departure for the concerns of black women writers, who are included in the term third world women, as Sandoval uses it. Black women writers experience the imposition and limitations of the "seemingly homogeneous category-women of colour"; white culture's assumption of universal experiences of black women is really "unthinking perpetuated racism" (Sandoval, Making Face 60, 65). There is no one black woman's experience; instead, black
women writers write to establish experiences that are both unique to themselves and to the black culture.\footnote{In part, then, black women's autobiographical writing emphasizes the importance of community that is demonstrated by the autobiographical writings of Native American women. Selwyn R. Cudjoe argues that Afro-American autobiography is a "public rather than a private gesture, me-ism gives way to our-ism and superficial concerns about individual subject usually give way to the collective subjection of the group" (12). The importance of the community to Native American women is discussed in detail in the final chapter of this project, "Spider Woman's Granddaughter": Autobiographical Writing by Native American Women.}

If the dominant culture, unable to discern and appreciate diversity, perceives the black community as a homogeneous group, then the dominant discourse can create universal assumptions and expectations that both colour and create the parameters of black culture. Black women writers address the tendencies of the hegemonic group to universalize the experiences of black women by asserting and exploring those experiences and characteristics that make them unique, even if those differences sometimes reflect tensions within the black community. Although Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claims that "the tension at the heart of black women's autobiography derives in large part from the chasm between the autobiographer's intuitive sense of herself and her attitude toward her probable reader," my readings oppose this claim (Life/Lines 182). I would argue that the deliberately personal challengings and crossings of socially imposed sanctions
upon the behavior of black women, exhibited by the texts of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Zora Neale Hurston's quasi-autobiography *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Audre Lorde's *Zami*, reject this claim. The books are written to invite the reader to share and understand the writer's intuitive sense of herself and her community: there is little or no mediation or translation included for the reader (for instance, Gloria Anzaldúa's fluidity between languages that are not translated). When Hurston's narrator, Janie, tells her friend Pheoby, "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf," she is acknowledging the connection between the individual and the community (*Their Eyes* 6). It is important that she gives or shares her story with the community in order for the community to both benefit from the process of forming/forging her identity and to disrupt expectations placed upon black women by a complicitous acceptance of the hegemonic culture's definition of the black community. Moreover, by demonstrating her ability to storytell or to specify, she is disrupting the traditionally male-centered locus of both the store's porch and the telling of stories. She returns to the community with the knowledge that telling Pheoby the story was telling the community, and thus the act of telling is as important as the tale itself.

Hurston's autobiographical act establishes the connection between the discursive act of the individual and the community.
The tradition of the doublespeak of the individual and the community is further represented by the palimpsest of concerns evidenced in the pairings of Lorde and the silenced community of black lesbians, of Maya Angelou and victims of child abuse and incest. Ultimately, these writers utilize the potential of autobiographical writing by following the disruptive practices of Hurston in daring to speak the unspeakable, in revealing fissures within the black community.

My understanding of black women's autobiographical writing is that it takes as its point of departure a discourse of double-talk that combines and disrupts the elements of traditional autobiographic writing, 'standard' English, and socially constructed women's roles. For Afro-American writers, the tradition of autobiographic writing extends from the slave narrative. However, the linear, chronological slave narrative, modelled upon

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12 Joanne Braxton's analogy of the autobiographer who, like the blues singer, "incorporates communal values into the performance of the autobiographical act, sometimes rising to function as the 'point of consciousness' of her people," exemplifies the connection between the individual and the community and demonstrates the importance and relevance of autobiographical writing for Afro-American women (5).

13 Hurston was criticized by the artistic community of the Harlem Renaissance for acknowledging and exploring oppressive practices within the black community at a time, the Harlem Renaissance community argued, the black community was first empowered to create and articulate a uniquely black artistic experience, that, they felt, should present a unified and cohesive front.
the white, western male tradition of autobiography, does not appeal to black women writers, as discussed in the section on Harriet Jacobs in the previous chapter. It represents too close an emulation of the western discursive practices that locate black women in the politics of multiple marginalizations. Moreover, although Sidonie Smith argues that autobiography provides the narrator of a slave narrative with "artistic distancing" that removes the narrator from the harsh realities of life while at the same time providing a means to confront the reality, I would argue that women's autobiography is not merely a venue for artistic distancing (Where I'm Bound 13).\textsuperscript{14} While Black women writers are empowering themselves, and the community as well, through their texts, by calling attention to political and social issues, they are also enriching a literary tradition which is important because literary and cultural constructs shape our subjectivites and are thus inherently political. Susan Stanford Friedman

\textsuperscript{14}To be fair to Smith, Where I'm Bound is concerned predominantly with male slave narratives so, in part, I am guilty of taking her scholarship out of context; however, that does not justify her overlooking slave narratives and contemporary writings by black women in a text purporting to deal with Black American autobiography. To generate a theory of black autobiographical writing using predominantly male texts is to reproduce all the essentialist faults of theories and theorists that occlude and exclude in the name of the 'ism'.
points out that the importance of group identity repeatedly surfaces in women's and minority groups' autobiographies. [Moreover] the community identity permits the rejection [and challenging] of historically diminishing images of self imposed by the dominant culture; it allows marginalized individuals to embrace alternative selves constructed from positive (and more authentic) images of their own creation. (Life/Lines 175)

This statement exemplifies the collective voice often expressed by minority women's autobiographical writing that entails not the private individual of western male traditions but the emergence and formation of an alternate tradition and alternate agendas. In this way black women writers are politicizing themselves through their writing and are not indebted solely to the form and function of the slave narrative in their textual practices. Thus black women writers have evolved the tradition of autobiographic writing to experimental levels; and it is this evolution that enables black women writers to reappropriate the discursive acts necessary to identity formation.

Specifying about The Self: Zora Neale Hurston and the Practice of Autoethnography

_Claudine Raynaud_ explains the move away from the format of the slave narrative, and subsequently as-told-to texts which will be discussed in the final chapter, as based upon the recognition of the unequal dialogue that existed between the control of the white publishing world and the objectified writer.
As an autobiographer, Hurston is in a somewhat problematical position in that, by producing two autobiographical texts, she calls into question her own reliability as a narrator. The 1937 text, Their Eyes Were Watching God, is a fictionalized account of Hurston's life, and her sexual awakenings. The text chronicles the life of Janie, from her life with her over-protective grandmother, through three marriages and her gradual discovery of herself as a woman and as a sexualized being. Her journey toward freedom is the opposite of the slave narrative, in which everyone moved north. With each subsequent marriage and stage in her development, she moves further south, toward the edenic Florida swamplands. The text ends with her return to an all-black community, where she is finally fulfilled and content to live without any more husbands. In contrast, her 1942 Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston's lifestory is subjected to heavy editorial interference and the resultant text represents her life as envisioned by the white publishing world. The original text was published without several key, yet controversial, chapters in which Hurston addresses issues of race, and international politics just prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. The text itself is carefully

16 Critics treat TEWWG as autobiography: Joanne Braxton explores what she recognizes as Their Eyes' profound relationship to black female autobiography and autobiographical fiction in her chapter, "Motherless Daughters and Quest for a Place," 155-158.
structured into a series of essays on various topics but it seems to be missing the fluidity and manipulation of language evident in *Their Eyes*. Succumbing to editorial pressures, Hurston has written a text that illustrates the expectations of the white world regarding her rise to fame.

In her own life she was not very forthcoming about her private self, giving her date of birth as 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1910, depending on the context, and claiming she was sixteen upon entering highschool, when in reality she was already twenty-six. It is not readily apparent to the reader which text, if any, is to be trusted. In a letter dated 1st February, 1943, Hurston stated that she "did not want to write [her autobiography] at all, because it is too hard to reveal one's inner self." And yet, by this point, she had written and published both *Dust Tracks* and *Their Eyes*. It is possible to read both texts, especially *Dust Tracks*, as deliberately unreliable, as decoys, in response to intrusive editorial strategies that imposed conventional Western autobiographic and literary strategies on Hurston's writing. *Their Eyes* was subject to much less editorial control and censoring, and so, behind the mask of a novel, Hurston was able to pursue issues that would later be edited out of her acknowledged

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17 Letter from Zora Neale Hurston to Hamilton Holt. It is taken from the Hurston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Florida Library and is quoted, originally, in Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, (278).
autobiography. This might explain her acceptance of such stringent editing in the later text, because her life and various aspects of it had already been addressed.

The reception of and the distance between her texts represents Hurston's historical positioning as a black woman writing in the first half of the twentieth century. Their Eyes was published as a novel and it contains evidence of black folklore and invective presumably expected by a white reader in 1937. Its use of vernacular language, and the creation of colorful local characters validated its authentic recreation of the black community by a folklorist and anthropologist. Anything subversive or disruptive is disguised by its reception as a fiction and so there is much less evidence of external editorial interference in this text. Their Eyes was written in seven weeks and was published within the year while Dust Tracks spent more than a year in revisions. Edited out of Dust Tracks was anything that did not continue Hurston's style as a storyteller; her racial and political commentary comprises the majority of the sections dropped and the text succumbs to rigid Westernized

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18 Richard Wright said of Their Eyes that it "exploited those 'quaint' aspects of Negro life that satisfied the tastes of a white audience" which explains, in part, his heavily critical reaction to Hurston's writing (qtd in Mary Helen Washington's introduction to the 1990 edition of Their Eyes).

19 Claudine Raynaud 36-7.
autobiographical expectations. I argue that Hurston was willing to allow her second autobiography to be tailored by editorial intrusions because the first text was not recognized as such and thus, in it she was able to reinscribe autobiographical conventions under the guise of a novel. Somewhere in the vacuum between the two texts is where Hurston's autobiography lives: between the editorial and social constraints placed upon the writing of a black woman's life that had no precursor save that of the slave narrative, itself evidence of much editorial intrusion.

One of the most compelling images in Their Eyes Were Watching God definitely, and, I argue, deliberately secures Hurston's preoccupation with autobiography: that of the pear tree. Early in the text of Janie's story is the account of Janie's arrival at the state of erotic awareness. The sexually-laden description of the interaction between bees and the pear tree under which she lay parallels her own blossoming forth as an eroticized being:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when

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20 Robert E. Hemenway's 1984 edition of Dust Tracks includes the excised chapters as appendixes: "Seeing the World as It Is" contains Hurston's commentary on questions of race and politics, including insights regarding South-East Asia and Japan, deemed improper after the attack on Pearl Harbor; "My People, My People" is presented in its longer form; and "The Inside Light-Being a Salute to Friendship" explores Hurston's relationship with her various mentors and patrons.
Hurston's choice of the pear tree image finds its antecedent in one of the earliest examples of autobiographic writing, that of The Confessions of St. Augustine. In the second book of the Confessions St. Augustine ruminates on the depravity and sinfulness that led him to steal pears from a neighbor's tree. The awareness of his attraction to the forbidden fruit/action marks an awakening of his moral consciousness and the wickedness and sinfulness of sin. In its ironic juxtaposition of morality and sexuality, Their Eyes recognizes its precursor and then self-consciously undermines both the didactic nature of The Confessions' message and the established conventions of Western autobiographical format. Hurston's apparently ironic interruption of an autobiographic tradition that recognizes the fundamental role played by St. Augustine delineates her intent to refashion the parameters of textual explorations of the self and locates her in the emerging tradition of experimental autobiographers.

The practice of autobiographic writing is often the practice of manipulating literary conventions. Deliberately playing with

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21 My thanks to Lila Hanft for pointing out this connection between Hurston and St. Augustine.
the parameters of fiction and fact, language and form, contemporary women autobiographers demonstrate a unique relationship with the written word. Although it is impossible to step outside discourse, the construction of a discursive act of identity formation from within the discourse enables a questioning and a challenging of identity expectations and assumptions. Françoise Lionnet's theory of autoethnography, understood to mean "a process of defining one's subjectivity as inevitably mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis," facilitates the reader's understanding of an identity that is both constructed within social discourses and that, at the same time, challenges those very discursive acts (114). My reading of Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography exemplifies the role and the importance of autoethnographic writing in that, as an anthropologist Hurston had the language and the education provided by the hegemonic culture; however, she also possessed the understanding of her positioning as a black woman in a predominantly white world. The text reveals Hurston's skepticism concerning the anthropological process of writing culture, of the problems of shifting from "orality to fixed, rigid textuality"; unwilling to embrace the westernized and rigid anthropological discourse, Hurston re-claimed and re-created a

22Françoise Lionnet. Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture.
specifically black discursive act (Lionnet 115). The resultant text combines anthropological insights, folklore, and the Southern use of invective and simile. Her deliberate use of invective and simile demonstrates the multiplicity of plays of meaning available within language and the constructedness of accepted and acceptable uses of language. Playing with signifiers and signified meanings reveals the vulnerability of discursive acts of language and identity formation; moreover, it also reveals the potential for the restructuring of language and, more importantly, discursive practices that construct subjectivities.

One of the better known passages in Dust Tracks describes Hurston's reception by and reaction to the cast of a traveling theatre company. She had been hired to be the lady's maid to one of the woman in the company but the young Hurston soon became the "new play-pretty" of the whole cast (135). In hindsight, Hurston recognizes that she was so popular because, as the token black and southerner, she spoke a language that was foreign and fantastic to the northern cast members. By having the "map of Dixie on [her] tongue" Hurston could manipulate language and create "images and flavors" distinct from the experiences of the white actors (135-6). Hurston recalls that they, the Northerners, did not know of the way an average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names... They can tell you in a simile exactly how you walk and smell. They can furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like. (135-6)
Recalling the entertainment her tongue provided, Hurston recounts her experiences through the lens of an autoenthographer, in that she understands her acceptance was based entirely on her unique otherness. The editorial process guaranteed the inclusion of such anthropological insights that located Hurston as the exotic "other" and continued the folkloric literary voice established in *Their Eyes*.

And yet it is precisely the inclusion of such deliberately constructed episodes of rural invective that call into question the validity of *Dust Tracks* as an autobiographic text. Robert Hemenway, in the introduction to the 1984 version of the complete *Dust Tracks*, makes clear the fact that Hurston did present her textual self as envisioned by her white editors. Was it their insistence on her 'otherness' that precipitated the inclusion of this type of recollection? Careful comparisons between the original manuscripts and the 1942 version reveal evidence of rigid editorial control with regards to the language of the text. Misspellings and odd grammar and syntax are standarized by her editors, Bertram Lippincott and Tay Hanoff; the resultant text, except for the occasional rural memory, is emptied of voice and resonance. Claudine Raynaud describes the distance and

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23 For a thorough investigation of the highly edited nature of the published version of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, see Claudine Raynaud's "'Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth'? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in Smith and Watson's *De/Colonizing the Subject*. 
differences between Hurston's two autobiographical texts as the distance between a speakerly text and a readerly text. The characters of Their Eyes are allowed and encouraged to speak with the "map of Dixie on [their] tongue[s] because they are simply, or seemingly, just that: characters (135). Hurston's autobiographic self in Dust Tracks is the self of Barnard College, the protegé of Franz Boas, who was able to transcend her Eatonville roots. Thus it is Hurston's positioning between two cultures, and among diverse discursive acts, that is readily apparent in the textual mediation of the presented self, from one text to the other.

Hurston's text also plays an important role in helping to establish the precedent of autobiographical texts, especially by black women writers, as cultural translators. Such a role stems from her position as anthropologist; however, her text reveals her recognition of the need for a mediator between the hegemonic white culture and the often 'othered' and exoticized black community. Translating or mediating between cultures was a deliberate attempt, by Hurston, to escape existing simply as an 'other' or object in the discursive practices of the dominant culture. In Dust Tracks' "Figure and Fancy" chapter, Hurston includes a lengthy and detailed explanation of how and why the black race inherited their colour. The inclusion of the religious-based folktale effectively negates any inferences of racial
literacy by locating blackness as simply the result of being late to God's throne. Within the "Research" section Hurston offers her insights into the intricacies of "Hoodoo or sympathetic magic" presenting it as less threatening and exotic than based on rural healing and tradition (191).\(^{24}\) Explaining her culture explained the politics of location from which she wrote; it also challenged the assumption that the hegemonic politics of location was the only potential speaking subject.

Ultimately, the autobiographical project of Hurston seems to be a deliberate act of specifying about her life and her legacy. "Specifying" is Hurston's term, which denotes the act of "putting your foot up on a person, or low-rat[ing] your enemy's ancestors and him, down to the present moment for reference" (Dust Tracks 187). It is a form of storytelling, and Hurston uses the autobiographic format to put her foot up on the literary porch, fashioning both a fictionalized self that dared to detail her erotic awakening and a highly edited version of herself, deliberately constructed to highlight the problematic intrusions of the hegemonic culture's expectations and assumptions about herself.

Maya Angelou and the Narrative of Resistance:
Empowering the Caged Bird

\(^{24}\text{Her research on Hoodoo formed the basis for her books Tell My Horse and The Sanctified Church.}\)
First published twenty-seven years after Dust Tracks on a Road, Angelou's autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, was not faced with the same editorial contraints that Hurston's texts underwent. Instead, it represents an amalgamation of the issues addressed between Their Eyes and Dust Tracks, discussing sexuality, sexual experiences, rape, racism, and racial violence, in a straightforward account of the author's life from the age of three until her early motherhood at sixteen. It traces her movement and growth among the rural setting of Stamps, Arkansas, to the urban St. Louis, Oakland and San Francisco, from the insulated vacuum of her grandmother's house to the liberal home of her mother.

I read Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings through the rubric of Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's statement that "black women's writing becomes at once a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche" ("Speaking in Tongues" 146). Angelou's autobiography represents the breaking down of the categories of public and private – as exemplified by the section that depicts her child abuse and rape – and clearly connects the concerns of the individual to those of the community. Such a move is exemplary of the political subject, who blurs the humanist boundary between the public and the private in recognition that subjects are constructed and positioned within various cultural discourses. The formation of individual
subjectivities is inherently linked to the discursive acts that structure and locate cultures and communities. Angelou's dialogue between her self and her various communities both personalize and politicize her text in a way that the editorial intrusions faced by Hurston denied her ability to blur and merge the public and the private. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* marks an important point in the evolution of African-American autobiography because it represents the editorial acceptance of an autobiography that theorizes, not simply relates, the formation of identity.

The opening pages of the text juxtapose Angelou's inability to remember a poem to be recited at Easter mass with her realization that she does not resemble "one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" that she had dreamed of resembling when wearing her lavender taffeta dress (1). I read her inability to recite the poem, which begins with the question "what you looking at me for?", as the symbolic refutation of a society that attempts to commodify blackness into an emulation of the dominant culture. With the acknowledgement of her desire to wake "out of my black ugly dream, [when her] real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass" and her "real" eyes, which were light-blue, would replace her squinty ones, Angelou is critiquing discursive acts that deny the experiences and legacies of marginalized cultures. She deliberately opens with such an
acknowledgement of the prevalence of the hegemonic ideals in order to move beyond them by the end of the text. One of the last sections of the text details her determination to become the first black streetcar conductorette in San Francisco, and it is this situation that exemplifies her desire to empower both herself and her community. She realizes that

the receptionist was not innocent and neither was I. The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white. (227)

This realization fuels her desire to challenge and disrupt her expected compliance with the racist system. The struggle signifies the site of renegotiation with the racial, sexual, and class oriented axis of discursive practices as Angelou recognizes that the conflict had expanded beyond the Market Street Railway to "the marble lobby of the building which housed its offices, and elevators and their operators" (228).

The text represents an exploration of the discursive acts that contributed to the formation of Angelou's identity; she anticipates the concerns of Lionnet's theory of autoethnography by juxtaposing the rural experiences, invective, and wisdom of Stamps with the signification of the city. The double play of language is demonstrated by Angelou's recognition of both the necessity and the ability to mediate among the discursive acts she is positioned within:
we were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial – we learned to slide out of one language and into another without being conscious of the effort. At school, in a given situation, we might respond with "That's not unusual." But in the street, meeting with the same situation, we easily said, "It be's like that sometimes. (191)

When in St. Louis, Angelou draws upon the wisdom and teachings of her grandmother, Mrs. Henderson, when faced with the overwhelming differences between the rural Arkansas and the city. Interestingly, she withdraws into silence after the death of Mr. Freeman, the man who raped her. Not until she returns to Stamps, Arkansas, and the familiar rural surroundings does she return to speech.

As demonstrated by the graduation day speech that denied experience to the young black graduates, and by the employer who renamed Maya for her own convenience, one reason then, to write autobiographically is to break the denial of seeing, of objecthood.\textsuperscript{25} bell hooks' article, "Representing Whiteness," explains that

black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can

\textsuperscript{25}Although I am not arguing for a monolith of black experience or voice, the move to deny objecthood, to disrupt the objectifying discursive practices of the hegemonic culture, contributes to a commonality of concerns within the autobiographical writings of black women.
Angelou's first job was as a maid to a wealthy white woman, Mrs. Cullinan. It is while serving her employer and another white woman that the guest, upon hearing her name, claims that even though Angelou's name is Marguerite, "the name's too long. I'd never bother myself. I'd call her Mary if I was you" (90). The next morning, Angelou's employer addresses her as Mary, and, when corrected by the elderly cook, Glory, Mrs. Cullinan responds that "that’s too long. She’s Mary from now on" (91). However, it is the response of Glory that ultimately validates Angelou’s objectification: "twenty years [I been working for her]. I wasn’t much older than you. My name used to be Hallelujah. That’s what Ma named me, but my mistress give me 'Glory,' and it stuck. I likes it better too" (91). Glory/Hallelujah's internalization of her relegation to the realm of the invisible object illustrates the true threat of colonization: that the process and the unequal division of power becomes so omnipotent that they go unnoticed.

The graduation address at Angelou's school further underscores the internalization of racial oppression; the white speaker, Mr. Donleavy, a minor county politician, condemned the male graduates to a future of trying to be "Jesse Ownenses and Joe Louises" (151). This follows his assertion that the "white kids were
going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins." Angelou's comment, "we were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous" demonstrates the gap between the hegemonic culture and the oppressed and racialized groups on the margin.

Her description of the Joe Louis fight provides an apt metaphor for the chasm Angelou recognizes as existing between dominant and marginalized groups. Moreover, it provides an historical contextualization of the concerns faced by Angelou and her community, located in the racialized and oppressive rural south of the 1950's. Each blow aimed at Louis becomes yet another attack on the black race, each blow landed on the contender by Louis another step toward equality or the end of oppression. When the fight appeared to be turning against Louis,

my race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

(113)

The juxtaposition of the assault on Joe Louis and the entire black race underscores the threat of the imposition of hegemonic ideals upon the identity of the community itself. That is,

if Joe lost, we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were
lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes. True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty. (113)

With her description of the community of Stamps gathered around the radio in her grandmother's store, in order to listen to the fight, Angelou is providing textual evidence of the multiple levels of oppression faced by the black community as imposed not only by the dominant discourse but by the black community itself.

One of the agendas of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is to enable Angelou to move beyond a simple critique of what she perceives as the complicity of the black community in accepting their marginalized position. Sidonie Smith's commentary on Angelou's text is based, in part, on recognizing the importance of the past on one's formation, whether that past is good or bad, beautiful or ugly (Where I'm Bound, 136). Although this may strike the reader as an obvious and simplistic statement, in Angelou's case the past entails an understanding of the discursive practices that locate the black community on the margins of the dominant culture. Angelou grows into the realization that the homely sayings, rural beliefs, and mother wit of the south represent the "collective wisdom of generations" necessary to negotiate with the expectations and assumptions of the hegemonic group (136). The hindsight inherent is statements such as "if growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (3) and "it was awful to be Negro and
have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense" (153) register Angelou's recognition of her positioning, within and by the discursive acts of the dominant culture. Moreover, they represent a form of doublespeak in that her language contains both a text and a metatext: the images of displacement and a lack of control depict the politics of location for the black community, as decreed by the dominant culture as well as a critique of those very acts of discourse that deny Angelou any form of defense.

If, in the opening pages of the text, Angelou is silenced by the expectations of her community, a community she would argue that was implicated within the oppressive racist system that threatened to commodify and deny black experiences, the written exploration of the formation of her identity breaks that silence and empowers both the person and the community that formed her. A testimony to the potential of women's autobiographical writing, Angelou's subsequent understanding of her cultural and community-based legacy represents a symbolic and textual challenging of the very fabric of life through the fabric of her writing.

Although Elaine Brown's 1992 A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story stands in opposition to the counterdiscourse of Angelou's text, I have chosen to refer to it in this study because I feel Brown's text exemplifies some of the limitations that result
from the dominant culture's discourses of power and oppression. This problematically linear text, similar in form and function to the autobiography of Malcolm X, addresses imbalances of power, both imposed by the hegemonic culture and within the Black Panther movement. The text is similar in structure to that of Malcolm X: a delineation of Brown's movement from youth and misdirection to the eventual identification with an idealistic group that promises freedom and equality. And yet, it is as though, caught within the politics and discourse of a masculine-coded movement, Brown is not able to transcend the very power structures and linguistic acts she is critiquing. Writing from within a male-centered world, she mimics that discursive act at the very moment she is attempting to establish her own identity, seemingly free from those very constraints she is replicating.

The text shares similar concerns with the autobiographical projects of marginalized women, those of education, empowerment, sexual and racial oppression, and yet it represents a radical divergence from what I would argue is the emerging voice of autobiographical writings by African-American women. Noticeably absent is the invective and allegory of such experimental texts as Audre Lorde's Zami. Joanne Braxton, in her study, Black Women Writing Autobiography, claims that "for the black woman in American autobiography, the literary act has been, more often than not, an attempt to regain that sense of place in the new world" (2). In Brown's case, her text reveals an uneasy
sense of place, as she negotiates with the male-oriented and centered movement, and with the other women who very clearly exist on the margins as lovers, mothers, and cooks. On the cover of the autobiography is a review that asserts that the text is "a stunning picture of a black woman's coming of age in America"; however, that coming of age is overshadowed by her gradual recognition of the misogynistic practices the Black Panthers inherited from the dominant discourse (Kirkus Reviews).²⁶

²⁶ Although not an experimental autobiography in the nature of its form or its style, Brown's consideration of her rise to power within the Black Panther party certainly represents a unique accomplishment with regards to black politics. My criticisms of the text stem from her complicity with an institution that simply replicates power structures and issues of sexism that occlude her experiences both as an individual and as a woman. However, I am by no means dismissing the text; it represents an intrinsic aspect of Afro-american culture, namely, an oppressive sexism that provides some sense of empowerment for a disempowered and oppressed group. Brown's text is a clear demonstration of the need to place the autobiographical text in the context of its culture, as theorized by Paul John Eakin, that is, to observe scholars at work on the manifold varieties of American autobiography—black, women's, Native American—is to be reminded that the study of the genre, by its own definition a referential art, necessarily involves the study of culture. (American Autobiography 11)

As stated above, I feel her choice of a linear text, modelled after the tradition of male-authored autobiography, locates her inside a male-centered discourse that dictates the constraints of her discursive act. Her individual voice is subsumed by the concerns and the parameters of the Black Panther party; she is not utilizing the power of being positioned on the margin, critiquing and disrupting the constructedness of the center. Instead, she is
In direct contrast to the limitations of Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* is Audre Lorde's *Zami*, whose term biomythography provides the framework for my reading of the potential inherent within the experimental nature of Afro-American women's autobiographical writing. Her term, biomythography, can be read in a variety of ways: as the writing of her mythical life, that is, what she would envision it to be if not constrained by the limitations imposed by a society that is both racist and homophobic; or, the myth of her life as constructed by the society around her, as how it decrees she should live as a figure marginalized by race, class, sex, and sexuality. The term biomythography helps to define the relationship between black women's autobiography and changing political conditions; that is, it illustrates Nikki Giovanni’s belief, that "literature, to be worthy of its claims, must reflect and seek to change reality" (Fox-Genovese 69). Moreover, as Claudine Raynaud states, mythmaking is a "political act, which Afro-American and third world women writers describe as part of their agenda; patriarchal myths have to be broken, not merely reversed" ("A Nutmeg" 241). Lorde's breaking of myths, her disruptive style, is a conscious strategy employed to subvert dominant narratives.\(^{27}\) Lorde's acquiescing to her positioning as marginal, and, ultimately, she is acknowledging the validity of that positioning through her textual emulation of the male-tradition.

\(^{27}\)Raynaud's analysis describes the importance of Lorde's
uneasiness with borrowed conventions is obvious in that her text politicizes her struggles to assert an identity that is constructed and decided upon by herself, not enforced or decreed by the referential narrative of the dominant discourse.

Autobiography and Biomythography: A New Spelling of Woman

Audre Lorde's 1982 text, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, marks an important divergence from what might be called the legacy of black women's autobiography, as established by Zora Neale Hurston, and Maya Angelou. Although her acknowledgements do situate her in the tradition of writing from within and for a community of women, she is not simply or only the individual speaking for her community; she is an individual also willing to criticize and challenge the beliefs of her community. As an individual, she acknowledges and explores her multiple marginalizations too long denied by her culture, that of being a black lesbian. Her exploration of sexual awakenings, her textual movement between the narrative prose, her poetry, and

"struggle with the traditional medium of autobiography, the narrative reconstruction of past experiences in a chronological sequence. She acknowledges her uneasiness with representation, the re-creation of a referential narrative through a set of conventions borrowed from the realistic novel, and she knows herself to be primarily a poet...[However] this corresponds to new definitions of the autobiographical act" (229).
disruptive moments of memory or insight, mark the politicization of her text and her life. She recognizes her indebtedness to her community, and yet, this indebtedness is somewhat problematic: in the opening lines of the text she asks both the reader and herself, "to whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" Zami represents a textual challenging and disruption of the accepted discursive practices of Black-American culture of the 1950's and 1960's; through it, Lorde refuses to be silenced by her position as black, as woman, and as lesbian. The question, "to whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?" demonstrates the disruptive position from which she sees herself speaking (3). Demonstrating her understanding of her indebtedness to her community, in the opening pages of the text she does acknowledge the people and the lessons of Harlem. Her description of DeLois, the unmarried woman with children from various men, who never had her hair done, like the 'respectable' women do, demonstrates Lorde's identification with the marginalized, with the people who shunned conventions and expectations. "I loved DeLois because she was big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all over. I was scared of DeLois for those very same reasons" (4). Lorde's recognition of the power inherent in stepping outside of socially constructed discursive acts is reflected by her admiration of women like DeLois. Moreover, the implication of her title, A New Spelling of My Name, is that she
recognizes her need and her ability to rename herself. The text appropriates the power inherent in the ability to name, to take the active role, not to be the passive recipient: the named.

Lorde's text reveals an awareness of the threat/power of the colonizer; in discussing the legacy of her mother's island, Carriacou, and the strengths of the women who live there, Lorde details her inability to find it on any map or atlas. This geographical oversight can be read metaphorically as an attempt by the colonizer to negate the existence and the character of the colonized. In short, if there is no evidence or acknowledgement of life before colonization, then life under the colonizer gradually becomes the norm. This denial of a previous culture is best understood by the tendency of the colonizer to rename a country and its people, once colonized – for example, Siam – and by the indigenous people's need to cast off the name imposed by the colonizer, once liberated: Ceylon to Sri Lanka or Southern Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. The hegemonic discourse's objectification of a marginalized people or culture, represented textually by the denial of the physical Carriacou, is analogous to the denial of her mother's culture and lifestyle that was the result of her transplanted life in Harlem. For Lorde and her mother, the mythical Carriacou held the promise of life not negotiated among and between the demands of the dominant culture and colour: that is,
Lorde’s statement that she was twenty-six before she found Carriacou on a map, can be read, ultimately, as the acceptance of who she was, the finding of herself on the map of the hegemonic culture that had attempted to deny her identity and subjectivity. Lorde chooses to end her autobiography at the point in her life when she was in her mid-twenties, implying that, in the hindsight of writing her lifestory, that age represents a point of achievement or self-awareness, or at least represented the end of her search for a self-constructed identity.

As she searched for and constructed her subjectivity, Lorde acknowledged the power of the margins, the circumference of the hegemonic culture: positioning herself in this way provided her with the critical distance necessary to challenge and disrupt the discursive acts of the dominant culture. She asks both herself and her readers why

I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle. (15)

This realization of Lorde’s illustrates Susan Willis’s claim that "black women’s fiction develops protagonists whose 'typicality'
(the quality that best allows them to understand and represent a particular era) is their marginality" (Specifying 25). This claim for 'typicality' is in direct contrast to the idea of commodification, which delineates the intent of the marginalized group to emulate and desire that which they are not, a desire that underscores then the constructed social hierarchy and marginality that others them in the first place. Lorde's childhood realization that "all our storybooks were about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white and lived in houses with trees around and had dogs named Spot" did not cause her to desire to be those storybook people; instead, the differences simply reinforced the idea that "nobody wrote stories about us" (18). This vacuum of antecedents is in extreme opposition to Maya Angelou's conviction that in reality she was a little, blue-eyed, blond and fair white child.28

Although she did not find written texts that represented her experiences, Lorde discovered in her environment symbols and metaphors for her understanding of herself. The kinship she felt

28 An interesting question thus becomes, is it a reflection of historical specificity that Angelou, writing in 1969 of a childhood in the thirties, dreams of being white instead of exploring the legacy of her blackness, while Lorde, writing in 1982 of her childhood in the fifties, recognizes the power and the potential of being black? What then are we to make of Toni Morrison's 1970 The Bluest Eye? Perhaps Morrison does not want society to forget how the black community was positioned, in the not-to-distant past.
with and for the plane tree in the public playground is similar to Sandra Cisneros' identification with the "four skinny trees," described in *The House on Mango Street*. The stunted and lonely tree, growing perhaps where it should not, delineates Lorde's sense of herself and her differences. In her first grade class, she was forced to wear the dunce cap after she broke her glasses; the result of this alienation was Lorde's attempts to further distance herself by playing "secret games with the distorted rainbows of light" (31). The distorted light represents Lorde's relationship with the dominant culture's norms and expectations; she must position herself in the distortion, in the unsaid, to escape being subsumed by the dominant designs.

Lorde's relationship to language and its power/potential stems from her mother's "special and secret relationship with words" that encompassed her litany of island language, words repeated so as not to lose the sense of home, the familiar (31). Rewriting or remembering the words of her mother continues the private revolution Lorde's mother waged against the forces of the dominant culture that threatened to subsume and erase their island-based cultural differences: "I never caught a cold, but 'got co-hum, co-hum', she didn't massage your backbone, she 'raised your zandalee', you sat on your bam-bam" (32).

Lorde writes of herself that she is "a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers" (32). Her mother was unable or unwilling to give voice to the anger or
resentment she must have felt, at being subjected to racism and
classism in the supposed land of promise. Lorde's mother was
never able to move beyond or escape the limitations of the
socially constructed discursive acts that fashioned and trapped
her as the racial and sexual other to the hegemonic society. By
rewriting her name, Lorde was also refashioning herself beyond
the constraints experienced by her mother: by making public her
mother's secret poetry, Lorde disrupts the cultural forces that
silenced her mother, and so many other women like her.
Moreover, as the name Zami is actually a Carriacou word or name
for "women who work together as friends and lovers," both the
action of renaming herself and of titling the text as such signify
Lorde's intention to reclaim the mythical legacy of her
foremothers.

Lorde's description of her mother's mortar, its obvious
sensuous overtones, and its connection to home, to the islands that
did not deny her subjectivity and sexuality, provides an important
link with Lorde's mythical renaming of herself with the Carriacou
word Zami. This description also acknowledges that the identity
of her mother was mediated through and by the discourses of race
and class. Her mother's mortar "was an elaborate affair, quite at
variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with
her projected public view of herself" (71). Lorde herself comes to
an immature sexual awareness when pounding spices with the
As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer. (78)

Combining however, with this sexual awareness is the knowledge that there is only one way to do things in her mother's house, and that her growing awareness of herself, as a sexualized and racialized woman, might distance herself from her family. Lorde recalls that "I had grown up in such an isolated world that it was hard for me to recognize difference as anything other than a threat, because it usually was" (81). Her adolescent rebellions, longings for independence, and desires for privacy are seen by her parents as "act[s] of insolence" and "indictment[s] of [their] authority" (83). Their inability to understand Lorde's need to challenge the parameters of acceptable behavior, whether in the home or in the streets, is indicative of their unquestioning acceptance of, or resignation to, the dominant culture's oppressive acts of discourse.
It is as a child, on a family trip, that Lorde first realizes the power and the appeal of telling stories: she claims that "I thought that the very idea of telling stories and not getting whipped for telling untrue was the most marvelous thing I could think of" (46). Although it is her two older sisters who introduce her to the world of fantasy and creation, based on the radio adventure shows of the day, it is Lorde who is truly creative and who moves beyond their dependence on the white male heroes and storylines of programs such as "Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy" and "Mr. District Attorney." As an extension of her earlier realization that there weren't stories about people like her, her favourite radio program was "The Shadow" because of his ability to "cloud men's minds so they could not see him" (46). I read this identification with the ability to cloud men's minds as her desire to challenge accepted and expected views of her, being positioned as a black lesbian poet.

It is also as a child in the third grade that Lorde begins to recognize differences between her mother and the mothers of the other children. She was the only mother that Lorde knew who handed out ration books, worked at the polls during Election Day, and who "went to business every day" and yet, she is not like the mothers portrayed in and by the hegemonic culture surrounding her (55):

I was very proud of her, but sometimes, just sometimes, I wished she would be like all the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and
homebaked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blonde smiling mother in *Dick and Jane.* (55)

The erasure of black culture, as illustrated by Lorde's desire for a blonde, smiling mother, demonstrates the imposition of the hegemonic ideals on those positioned on the margin. By extension, Lorde is trapping herself in the position of the 'other' by accepting the constructed binaries that posit white against black, good against bad, them against us. As an acknowledged lesbian, Lorde discovers that other black lesbians are not as willing to publicly acknowledge their status, and thus a potential group providing empowerment and support is lost. She reads that inability to admit and to acknowledge oneself as a lesbian as an extension of not only the imposition of hegemonic ideals but the acceptance of them as well; that is, "how much of this is the pretense of self-rejection that became an immovable protective mask, how much the programmed hate that we were fed to keep ourselves a part, apart?" (58).

The price of assimilation, of wanting the *Dick and Jane* mother, took a toll on her mother who tried to protect Lorde and her sisters from the slurs and hatred of racism. Her attempt to use the tools of the master to dismantle his house, while not immediately and personally empowering or successful, did ultimately provide a path of resistance for Lorde to follow later in her life:

My mother's words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white
man's tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time. (58)

Lorde was unable to realize, until a later point in her life, the price her mother paid to keep her family sheltered from the racist society around them. The defenses become necessary as Lorde faces her sexuality; moreover, it is at this point that she discovers the true costs of her mother's resistance.

One of the more frequently anthologized sections of Lorde's autobiography is the section in which she discusses her family's first trip to Washington, D.C., and the first-hand experiences of racism that deny her family service at the counter of an ice-cream parlour and prohibit her older sister's participation in a highschool trip. The unspoken realities of the trip, the fact that her mother packed a hamper of food because blacks could not eat in the dining car, the hotel that would not allow her sister to rent a room with the rest of her all-white class, illustrated the reaction of Lorde's mother to the racism of America: that is, "as usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention" (68). The hindsight of Lorde's experiences with a racist America colour her childhood ignorance and bliss with irony; moreover, her childhood's unquestioning acceptance of her parents' response to an unnamed enemy serves to, with the insights of hindsight, underscore the unqualified racial hierarchies presumed "natural" and beyond challenge. However, the text itself belies the
unquestioning acceptance of the "naturalness" of the politics of location allotted to black Americans. Although Washington, D.C., the Fourth of July, and Philadelphia are typeset with upper-case letters, the words "america" and "american racism" and the "president of the united states" are all presented in the lower-case (70). Lorde destabilizes the traditional privileges and positions of honour usually accorded such proper nouns, and, by doing so, this literary strategy undermines and challenges the white monolith that is America. The reaction and acceptance of her parents and her sisters, when they are refused service at the white counter is even harder for Lorde to grasp; she understood and was willing to question the injustice but,

my fury was not going to be acknowledged by a like fury. My parents wouldn't speak of this injustice, not because they had contributed to it, but because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it. (70)

Her parents and her sisters were victims of a colonization so omnipotent and insidious that they were constructed and positioned by the discourse of the colonizer to see themselves as to blame: they were unable to escape their position as 'other' to criticize the dominant group. Lorde's comment, that the Fourth of July celebration was a travesty for black people in America, is juxtaposed with and further emphasized by the repetition of the word white that denotes the colour-blind democracy and justice of the monuments in Washington:
The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach. (71)

At this point, despite the fact that, unlike her parents, Lorde is not accepting of the dominant culture's perception of her, she is the racialized and objectified other, subject to the socially constructed discourses of racial and class privilege.

The section entitled "The Last of My Childhood Nightmares" details her realization that "in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me. This is no longer my home; it is only of a past time" (199). This realization is multiple; the simultaneity of discourses inherent in the realization that she no longer belongs encompasses not only the alienation her "divergent" sexuality fosters, but also her realization that she can not and will not live the life of racial and racist oppression lived by her parents. She could not simply accept her positioning on the margin; instead, she learned to use its critical distance to question and to undermine that which was positioned as central. Her determination to "seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile" illustrates her determination to re-position herself against the dominant discourse, and to move herself from the object to the subject position of her own discourse (104).
Inherent in Lorde's repositioning of herself as subject of a discourse rather than object of it is her realization of the historical discourses that locate her, as an extension of the black community, as historical object as well, and the necessity of re-writing or re-fashioning history to include and recognize black Americans. Her discovery of the historical vacuum in which her learning existed serves as a further reminder of the implications of the discursive acts of the colonizer. When in Stamford she is forced to admit that she has never heard of Crispus Attucks, the "first cat to die in the Revolutionary War, in Concord, Massachusetts. A Black man"; this admission calls into question her entire education and the lack of teaching about minority or marginalized people (131). Similar to her recognition that there were not books about people like her is her realization that her historical background is lacking:

I had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet, I never once heard the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the American revolution, nor ever been told that he was a Negro. What did that mean about the history I had learned? (133)

The imposition of a language, a culture, and a history that threaten to subsume the marginalized groups provides the framework against which Lorde's text works.

Not until Lorde leaves the physical and racial confines of America, and goes to Mexico, does the true depth of her marginality and invisibility become apparent. When she is immersed in a place where very few whites are visible, where,
everywhere she looked, faces were brown like her, she realizes the true implications of the colonizing racial forces in which she had grown up. Physically, she is released from her "life-long habit of looking down at [her] feet as [she] walked along the street" a habit that existed as a tangible expression of the oppression Lorde experienced (156). It is as if her marginality becomes most pronounced when she is finally in the majority:

Wherever I went, there were brown faces of every hue meeting mine, and seeing my own color reflected upon the streets in such great numbers was an affirmation for me that was brand-new and very exciting. I had never felt visible before, nor even known I lacked it. (156)

Coming to the understanding that the dominant culture did make her invisible, did deny her subjectivity, represents an important stage in the development of her political self, and in the development of her newly negotiated self in relation to the dominant culture. However, there exists a tension between her public and her private self, especially when she is back in New York, because she discovers that although she has negotiated an identity, the social forces that construct the hegemonic discursive acts are not willing to recognize her. Her white, progressive roommate Rhea, with whom Lorde worked on the Free the Rosenbergs Committee, is denounced by her progressive associates for living with a "homosexual, and a Black one, at that" (198). Furthermore, when she is looking for work, the response Lorde often receives is "who wants to hire a Black girl with one year of
college — she is always over or under-qualified, an educated Black woman who cannot type (186). Her newly constructed identity is seemingly a private rather than a public identity. She realizes that

Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder. Maybe four or five people knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget. (179)

The oppression that results from being denied access to her identities as student, poet, lesbian, black, must be seen as the organizing principle behind the autobiographical project: she is challenging and disrupting the social forces that sought to deny and silence her. More importantly, as she struggles to come to terms with the multiplicity of her identities, she also engages the reader's perceptions of her in order to integrate the fragmented yet simultaneous aspects of her self. She will not follow in her mother's path of acceptance and denial and so seeks to connect all the fragmented perceptions of herself, recognizing that identity is fluid and always in a state of flux.

Although Lorde discovers her source of power from her position on the margin, living on and writing from the border often illustrates the totalizing power of the dominant discourse in that groups constructed as invisible or marginal tend to reproduce, or are often guilty of reproducing in order to gain recognition, the hierarchized relationships of oppressor and
oppressed. The racism and misogynistic tendencies of the Black community as well as the unspoken racial hierarchies that Lorde discovers within the gay community exemplify this tendency to reproduce power relationships. The threat and essentialist nature of universals and universalizing ideals existed in the gay community as an extension of the hegemonic straight, conservative society around it. Although the ideals of gay solidarity through heterosexist oppression provided promise, the reality of that solidarity was a universal definition of gay women that negated or denied colour differences. Despite being positioned on the margin by the fact of being gay, the gay community was guilty of a commodification and a buying into of the dominant ideals that propagated the racism and classism of the dominant discourse. Lorde's experiences at the Bagetelle, the "most popular gay-girl's bar in the Village" illustrated the unspoken racism she felt existed, within the gay scene:

the bouncer was always asking me for my ID to prove I was twenty-one, even though I was older than the other women with me. Of course "you can never tell with Colored people." And we would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black, since, of course, gay people weren't racists. After all, didn't they know what it was like to be oppressed? (180)

Lorde realizes that her relationship "as a Black woman to our [her gay community of friends] shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay or straight" a realization that parallels the
crisitims raised by third world feminists who recognized that the essentialist construction of Woman overlooked issues of race, class, and sexual choice (181). Even her white lover, Muriel, falls victim to the perceived universalizing of experience of being gay: "even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. 'We're all niggers,' she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it" (203). And yet, within the gay community was an unspoken code that dictated that Black lesbians assumed the role "butch" because they could never meet with the white, traditionally feminine ideal of the "femme."29 Lorde describes her limited wardrobe as including "blue or black dungarees...riding pants...and navy surplus turtleneck sweaters" while Muriel could look frail in her "Bermuda shorts," wool skirts and black beret (208-9).

The multiple marginalizations of Lorde's experiences as woman, black, lesbian, are repeated within the gay community; the other black lesbians were so enmeshed within the expectations and confines of the dominant white society that there was not even a support network on which one could depend. Lorde states that

In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape upon my lips. For

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29For an exploration of this image, recall the discussion of the white woman on a pedestal, as constructed by nineteenth-century expectations of womanhood, found in chapter one.
Perhaps the writing of her life, with the revelations and explorations of the multiple oppressions experienced by Lorde, will provide the tools with which to break down the barriers that exist among women, whether they be race, class, or sexuality, and will also provide the means of empowerment necessary in the lives of marginalized women.

The autobiographical projects of these writers, following the tradition of Sojourner Truth, exemplify the need to question and disrupt socially constructed discursive acts of subjectivity. The common literary strategy of establishing some form of counterdiscourse transcends the different historical and cultural positionings of Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and Audre Lorde and delineates the connection between these writers and their texts. Speaking and writing from the position of multiple marginalizations, as African-Americans, as women, and as lesbians, these writers acknowledge and explore the discourses of oppression that have perpetuated such a positioning. The fluid subject of contemporary women's autobiography, paradigmatic of Hurston, Lorde, and Angelou, enables the questioning of not only the limitations of the traditionally masculine stable autobiographic subject but also of social constructions that disempower those subjects on the margin. Through their autobiographical projects, these three writers contribute to the emerging literary act of
contemporary women's autobiography, or establishing the power and potential inherent in being positioned on the margin. This act will be developed more fully in the following chapter's exploration of the borderlands and the implications, for Latina women writers, of transcending cultural and physical borders in their desire for a self-constructed subjectivity.
Chapter Three

Writing from the Border: Autobiography and the Latina Self

I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, White. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence (Borderlands 59).

Linda Hutcheon's theories of de-centering, of the excentric, are of extreme relevance to the construction of identity and subjectivity in the writings of Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. The questioning and challenging of the constructs of culturally prescribed behaviour, the crossing of borders to reveal the limits of essentialisms and universals, underscore the fissures of long-held conventions of identity formation. Summarizing ideas from Derrida, Russell, and Hassan, Hutcheon says:

When the center starts to give way to the margins, when totalizing universalization begins to self-deconstruct, the complexity of the contradictions within conventions -- such as those of genre, for instance -- begin to be apparent. Cultural homogenization too reveals its fissures, but the heterogeneity that is asserted in the face of that totalizing (yet pluralizing) culture does not take the form of many fixed subjects but instead is conceived of as a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on. (Poetics 59)

These theories reflect the agenda of minority women writers, positioned at the border, who cross borders of social and sexual
constructs and constraints in order to highlight the fluidity and malleability of the constructs. Each of these writers' work negotiates the textual production of identity through a contextualization of the differences inherent within her experiences of gender, race, sexuality and so on. This chapter explores the metaphors of identity used by Latina writers in order to highlight the connections to postmodernism's theories of identity and subjectivity; moreover, juxtaposing these images with the textualized theories of poststructuralism and feminism enables further understanding of the repercussions on women themselves, beyond the limits of the page.

Latina writers, whether they write autobiographically or theoretically, share third world feminism's concern with the problem/threat of the construction of woman. The construction of 'woman,' as defined by white western feminism, considers gender but not race or class, and thus tends to negate difference, not recognize it. Minority women who write autobiographically often refuse to be trapped in a mythology of constructed white womanness that locates them as the ground of representation for

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1See Chapter 1: There is an historical continuum underlying this mythology that can be traced back to the nineteenth century's slavery period. During slavery, white women were defined in opposition to the 'othered' black women; white women were placed on a pedestal by the construction of the cults of 'domesticity' and 'true womanhood.' In order to preserve the perceived frailty of the white women, black women were constructed as sexually active and available 'others' who were readily positioned as whore and mistress, and who thus were constructed as outside the definition of 'true womanhood.' This
the hegemonic white women. In this way, the construction of a minority women's autobiographical subject both parallels and furthers third world feminism's question of identity formation. The critique by third world feminists of the idea(1) of women's identity as established by the first world recognizes that subjectivity is constructed along innumerable axes: race, class, gender, sexuality. Recognizing that the individual is always somehow constructed, we must ask, how can choosing to voice that individual self, through the genre of autobiography, enable women?

Third world women transform themselves from the object of first world feminist discourse to subjects of their own textual production. This transformation delineates the intent of third world women to identify themselves as the creators of a discourse that does not reflect the unqualified acceptance of current social practices and positionings. Instead, the discursive acts of third world women question, and thus create anew, the location of the speaking subject. Third world and minority theorists have addressed the issue of individual agency and the necessity of woman's body as the site and the subject of her discourse of identity formation; the resultant politics of location are reflected in Anzaldúa's metaphors in Borderlands/La Frontera: the

dichotomy exists today through institutions of privilege, education, and class, all of which construct the black woman, or any minority woman, as other.
borderlands, the "new mestiza," and "making race," and bell hooks' metaphor of "talking back," in Talking Back (1989). Inherent within these metaphors is a rejection of the humanist understanding of identity accepted by first world feminists which locates third world women as the grounds of representation for the dominant first world feminists; moreover, these metaphors contain the recognition that subjectivity is constituted along innumerable axes, and that questions of race, class, gender and sexuality must be considered within the emerging discourse of third world and minority women's writing. Aligning these metaphors into one common discursive act facilitates the connection between feminist and poststructuralist theory and the subjectivity produced by autobiographical writing by Latina women. At issue, then, is the literary/textual production of identity and the means necessary to negotiate its formulation.

Multiple Marginalization and the Latina Lesbian Writer

Cherrie Moraga's Loving in the War Years (1983) addresses both the textual and the personal production of the author as a Latina lesbian poet, exploring the implications of each source of identification and the discursive practices involved in her formation. The title reflects the price of her sexuality as well as the cultural costs faced by Latino women who question the
subjectivity assigned to them by a culture organized around heterosexist constructions of gender roles and expectations. Twice marginalized, by the dominant culture and by the phallocentric structure of her society, Moraga mixes poetry, prose and theory to exemplify the innumerable axes of identity formation and the need to negotiate among them. The implications of class, race, and sex are questioned and contested to reveal a self-constructed identity, an autobiography whose relevance is not limited to Moraga herself, but instead provides direction to other women willing to question.

*Loving in the War Years* is a collection of poetry, prose, and theory, written over a period of seven years. During that time, Moraga struggled with and explored the implications of her lesbian identity both in her writings and in her life. Rather than being a chronological map of Moraga's life, the book is divided into sections that include flashbacks to her childhood, vivid descriptions of her family, and poetry written during especially turbulent moments. Its structure reflects the cultural, political, and sexual interactions she experiences as a Latina lesbian and the often abrupt shifts in language and form document the multiple borders across which her life must move.

The introduction of *Loving in the War Years* serves to establish the relevance of the text as autobiography; Moraga states that the moment she discovered the politics of being a lesbian "was when I learned my first major lesson about writing:
it is the measure of my life. I cannot write what I am not willing to live up to" (iv). Moraga's realization of the connection between writing and living illustrates Chris Weedon's definition of feminist poststructuralism as "a way of conceptualizing the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness which focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities of change" (19). Writing her life means taking control of the production of its meaning; living thus becomes a politicized experience designed to question and critique prescribed meanings and assumptions. Exploring the possibilities for change through her writing is not an easy undertaking when one takes into consideration the cultural and political institutions designed to deny her self-constructed identity:

The issue of being a "movement writer" is altogether different. Sometimes I feel my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others. A friend told me once

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2Drawing from theories of feminism, poststructuralism, and Marxism, Chris Weedon's theory of feminist poststructuralism questions the assumption of liberal humanism that locates subjectivity as the "coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of 'reality'" (8) in order to explore the interaction among the competing discourses of social, political, and economic language that form each individual's language of experience. Feminist poststructuralism, then, is a theory that "decentres the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness, as socially produced in language, as a site of struggle and potential change" (41); the relevance of this theory to the autobiographical writings of minority women is that they too are theorizing the possibilities of struggle and change, within both language and society itself.
The body of the work becomes the body of the women fighting against cultural and social inscriptions of subjectivity. Moraga's writing is an attempt to conceptualize the relations between language, herself, and social institutions; it represents a return to experience often negated by simply theorizing.

The importance of the connection of feminism, poststructuralism, and autobiography is acknowledged by Moraga's statement that "the danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical basis" (52). To ground this theorizing in the reality of women's lives, to apply it, make it pertinent, and even possible, is the goal of autobiography and autobiographical writing: its ability to do more than simply theorize, to examine and celebrate the experiences of women, is the source of its empowerment. Moraga tells her readers that her moment of epiphany regarding the relevance of writing autobiographically occurred while listening to Ntozake Shange reading at a concert; she realized that "for years I had disowned the language I knew best -- ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me. The sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping -- half in English, half in Spanish" (55). Shange's language, emphasizing and exploring the "brown" in her, forced Moraga to realize that she had denied or repressed her "brownness," her mother's legacy. If language forms identity, then one must acknowledge the multiplicity of discursive
practices that contribute to that formation; it is not possible to deny particular aspects of those practices. Weedon's theories, which conceptualize the "relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness" speak directly to Moraga's epiphany (Weedon 19). Moraga realizes that allowing the "perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women" negates individual experience, the experience of difference (Moraga 55). If we deny the language or the voice of the "other" then we are denying their subjectivity, their subject position, and we relegate them to the role of object or other. This is precisely the criticism that has been levelled by third world women or feminists of colour at white, western feminists; moreover, moving marginalized women from the object position to that of speaking subject is the agenda of third world women.  

Acknowledging the importance of various discursive practices, Moraga's text is bi-lingual -- or even multi-lingual -- in that she

3An example of this criticism can be found in Chela Sandoval's article, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference," which details the frustrations, resentments, and unrest experienced by the 300 women of colour who attended the 1981 conference. In her report, Sandoval describes the conflict at the conference between white feminists who endorsed a totalizing category of womanhood or sisterhood, and feminists of colour, who called for theories of oppression which would not erase differences between women. Sandoval argues that the segregation implicit in the "seemingly homogeneous category"—women of colour—"reflected the way in which women of colour are positioned in the dominant culture and within the women's movement itself" (Making Face 60).
switches from English to Spanish, from her voice to the voice of her mother, grandmother, lover, without explanation or translation, demanding of her readers an acceptance of who and what she is and from where she speaks.

The varied structure of Moraga's text, the combination of poetry and prose, English and Spanish, mirrors the varied structure of her identity in that she emphasizes the importance and the intersection of being a woman, being a Latina and being a lesbian. "Sexuality, race, and sex have usually been presented in contradiction to each other, rather than as part and parcel of a complex web of personal and political identity and oppression" (Moraga 109). Reading sexuality, race, and sex against each other, rather than in conjunction with the whole, ignores the multiple aspects or axes of identity formation, ignores the poststructuralist recognition that identity is formed at the intersection of all/many discursive practices. Moraga's critique of existing theories, that they ignore women of colour's simultaneous experience of racism and sexism, levels the implication of classism at the women's movement: the problem exists that "the only people who can afford not to recognize this are those who do not suffer from this multiple oppression" (108). White, western feminists are guilty of both racism and classism in the construction of their theories of female oppression; they are unaware of the lack of privileges experienced by "othered" women. Moraga's text reveals the need to work or organize from within, to ask the question what does it
mean to be a Latina lesbian, what does she need to confront? In order to challenge and confront patriarchal assumptions about women, feminism must first adequately confront assumptions about race and class from within. This necessity is implicit in Moraga's statement that, "although other movements have dealt with this issue, sexual oppression and desire have never been considered specifically in relation to the lives of women of colour" (109).

Central to this criticism is the implication of heterosexism for Moraga, that is, the concept of the traditional family, especially the Latino family, and its carefully delineated sex roles and gender expectations, which creates a double or triple marginalization: that of woman, racial "other", and lesbian. Her text explores the oppression propagated by the institution of the Latino family, and by extension, a feminism that does not recognize this form of racialized (and sexualized) oppression. To preserve the Latino family in a hegemonic culture that "others" difference is to negate any alternatives to heterosexual relations. Reproduction, sex, and desire become, simply, extensions of the family. A successful feminist theory of identity politics must recognize the intersection of racial and sexual oppression and realize the cultural and political implications of institutionalized heterosexuality. Moraga warns against simply accepting the marginalized, "othered" role of Latinos who hold the family as the only aspect of empowerment; instead, the issues that created this
situation must be examined. Moraga warns against the presumption of a universal (hetero)sexuality for women; theories of women, of women's identity, must be flexible, must work toward an acceptance, not an oppression of women's sexuality, whoever the object choice.

The format of Moraga's text, both its structure and its context, demonstrates that autobiography and autobiographical fiction are the tools or the means to expose the ignorance or "blindness" of privileged women, to educate them, to the realities and experiences of the lives of women of colour in order to fight ignorance and to dispel the myth of the universal "Woman." Moraga's statement, that she "feel[s] the necessity for dialogue," exemplifies the role filled by autobiography: that is, in order to provide a point of intersection for all women, to acknowledge difference, not deny it, women of colour produce autobiographical texts (58). Such autobiographical writing addresses racism and oppression unknowingly perpetuated by the monolithic category "Woman": "Time and time again, I have observed that the usual response among white women's groups when the racism 'issue' comes up is to deny the difference" (57). Deconstructing this denial, creating a politics of inclusion, not exclusion, is the intention of autobiographical writing by marginalized women; establishing one's own subjectivity foregrounds issues of difference, thus challenging previously held identity assumptions.
At issue as well in deconstructing the notion of a common experience of "Woman" is the tendency of the newly empowered to assimilate the tools of the master. A theory that locates minority women as the grounds of representation for the hegemonic white woman encourages the propagation or repetition of patriarchal oppression. Universalizing the category and the concerns of women at the expense of the "other" overlooks Moraga's realization that "in this country, lesbianism is a poverty -- as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor" (52). She believes that "the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at how it is they oppress, is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression" (58). Exploring and exposing the oppressions inherent within the agenda of a monolithic, white, western feminism is at the heart of third world feminist theories; reconstructing the category "Woman" to include all women, then, echoes poststructuralism's theory of subjectivity as being a fluid site of disunity and conflict.


5Discussions of class and of the material conditions of people's lives form an intrinsic aspect of the autobiographical writings of Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Cisneros. The autobiographical writings of minority or marginalized women effectively negotiate with the theories of poststructuralism that threaten to de-materialize both the body and the body of experience in the name of discourse. Inherent within this act of negotiation is the recognition of the limitations of poststructuralist theories and the corrective solution of a subjectivity that allows materiality and as well as agency.
able to negotiate changing political pressures and situations of oppression.

Moraga's text illustrates one of the problems faced by the women at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference, that of being, or feeling like she is located as, the token spokesperson for women of colour in an assembly of white western feminists.6 Identified as an "other," by the dominant culture, the dominant sexuality and the dominant feminism both exoticizes Moraga's experiences and makes them seemingly unaccessible to 'white' experiences:

I have come to realize that the boundaries white feminists confine themselves to in describing sexuality are based in white-rooted interpretations of dominance, submission, power-exchange, etc. Although they are certainly part of the psychosexual lives of women of color, these boundaries would have to be expanded and translated to fit my people, in particular, the women in my family. And I am tired, always, of these acts of translation. (126, my emphasis)

6One of the major frustrations stemming from the Conference's inability to directly confront issues of racism was the feeling of tokenism experienced by many of the 300 women of colour who attended the various panels and presentations: "Women of colour often found themselves frustrated as the sole representatives of "third world" opinion at a conference workshop" (Making Face 57). This positioning of women of colour served to divide the conference participants into two oppositional groups -- third world and white -- a division which seemed to negate any possibility for change.
Writing autobiography provides "othered" women with a means to articulate their lives, experiences and identities without the threat of translating for the dominant culture. Moraga's text is exemplary of texts that are both personal and political; her explorations of the intersection of race, class, sexuality, culture, and politics reveal a textually produced identity that acknowledges all forms of oppression and attempts to destabilize both the existence and the rationale behind oppression. Loving in the War Years reveals an identity that accuses the dominant culture of its complicity in perpetuating oppression, in order to reveal the fissures in the existing identities. By recognizing that "the extent to which our sexuality and identity as Chicanas have been distorted both within our culture and by the dominant culture is the measure of how great a source of our potential power it holds," Moraga delineates the potential inherent within the autobiographical production of identity for marginalized women (137). "We have not [until the emergence of the autobiographical voice of minority women] been allowed to express ourselves in specifically female and Latina ways or even to explore what those ways are" (Moraga137). Drawing from theories of autobiography, feminism and poststructuralism, Loving in the War Years challenges the existence of cultural, social and sexual exploitations and oppressions in order to enable the expression of an identity that acknowledges the multiplicity of
discursive practices that contribute to the textual production of her identity.

Cyborgs and Other Subjects On the Margin

In an extreme and somewhat radical exploration of the textual production of identity, Donna Haraway introduced the concept of the cyborg to feminist theory in her 1985 "Manifesto for Cyborgs." Although an ironic text, the Manifesto's discussion of the poststructuralist issues of identity formation and border transgressions contribute significantly to the issue of identity politics for third world and marginalized women. The importance and relevance of Haraway's vision and metaphor for marginalized writers is that it provides a model for the formation of an identity outside or beyond the hegemonic discourse of the patriarchy. Moreover, the definition of the cyborg, that it is "a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century," illustrates the role filled by autobiography: it plays the role of the cyborg, changing and questioning what counts as women's experience, expanding the borders of experience, and acknowledging difference (191). Haraway argues that "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" so the question thus becomes, how to formulate a theory of identity formation (197). She posits the theory of "oppositional consciousness" as a means to locate and
provide women's identity, an articulation of women's coalition through "affinity, not identity" (197). Chela Sandoval originated the concept of oppositional consciousness in response to, or as an intrinsic part of, the politicizing of the voice of women of colour. Oppositional consciousness was "born of the skills for reading webs of power by those refused stable membership in the social categories of race, sex, or class" (Haraway 197). This postmodern identity, as Haraway calls it, is constructed out of otherness, difference, and specificity, politicized in its questioning and challenging of western universalizing concepts that negate and suppress. Autobiographical writing by minority women, read as a site of oppositional consciousness, becomes the point of affinity for the collective textual production of identity. Sidonie Smith, reading cyborgs and women of colour as revolutionary groups who denaturalize the old certainties of identity, argues that these groups must "seize the very technology of preference in the late twentieth century, that is, writing" (208):

Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against all perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. (218)

The struggle for language, against the monolithic voice of white western feminism, is the agenda of autobiographical writing by minority women. Gloria Anzaldúa's experimental autobiography
Borderlands/La Frontera exemplifies this struggle for language; her text is a veritable "heteroglossia." The collection of voices presented by Anzaldúa and by Moraga, through their respective collections of theory, poetry and prose, demonstrate the multiple perspectives and various levels of social and cultural interaction necessary for the formation of a Latina subjectivity. Anzaldúa's litany of Latina languages clearly demonstrates the varied strata experienced both by herself and by the Latina people: standard English, working class and slang English, standard Spanish, standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, Pachuco (called caló) (55). Defining the borderlands or border cultures as a "serious contest of codes and representations" (Jose David Saldívar 77) Anzaldúa's autobiographical text exploresalternate sites of discourse such as oral traditions and non-traditional ways of recording and re-telling that represent the "emergent cultural resistance" that "challenge[s] the authority and even the future identity of monocultural America" (Saldívar 75, 84).

Calling Borderlands/La Frontera an experimental autobiography draws attention to both the form and the content of the text; that is, the enabling language and form of women's autobiography is echoed in the bilingual format of Anzaldúa's

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7 Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s term, heteroglossia, is defined as discourses from varied strata of society.

8 I am not claiming that Anzaldúa is the first, or the only, writer who deliberately mixes languages and cultures; Richard Rodriguez,
writing. She assumes that readers are open both to the changing languages and to the forms of discourse she moves among in the text. The importance of the multiple tongues and languages, both of the text and of the borderlands is that, just as Moraga acknowledges that she is tired of always translating, Anzaldúa’s text serves as an invitation to the dominant cultures, the groups and theories that "other" her, to "be met halfway" (Preface). Her statement, which defines the concerns of the book, parallels the concerns of both autobiography and feminist poststructuralist theory:

This book, then, speaks of my existence, my preoccupations with the inner life of the self, and with the struggle of that self amidst adversity and violation, with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows. (Preface)

Through her writing Anzaldúa is creating an identity that acknowledges both the experience and discursive practices of her body that will not be dematerialized by poststructuralist theories.

In the preface to the book she acknowledges that the borderlands represent the interaction of the physical borderland,

Cherrie Moraga, and Paula Gunn Allen, to name a few, also intermix English and their respective first languages to illustrate the politics of location for people living on the borderland.
the Texas-U.S. Southwest Mexican border, and the psychological, the sexual and the spiritual borderlands. Her text is an embodiment of the physical and the metaphoric, the lived and the theorized, a cyborg subjectivity inscribed along fluid, changing axes. The mestiza consciousness then, represents the possibility of non-traditional means of communication: la mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (79)

Anzaldúa defines the challenge of border dwelling, of being a part of a changing, fluid, evolving identity as "living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element" (Preface). The alien element of the mestiza consciousness is analogous to the transgressive nature of the cyborg; existing "outside" on the margins, both cyborgs and mestizas are provided with the distancing necessary to critique the centre, the hegemonic culture.

Barbara Harlow argues that theory as a commodity has been denied to third world women; theory has "come to be legislated from out of the Western capitols, thus giving rise to another "international division of labor" whereby the cultural raw materials are mined in the third world and delivered" to the first
world (168). I would argue that it is not theory itself, but the opportunity to produce it, that has been denied to third world women. What is necessary is a theory or a means to produce theory that does not "other" or commodify difference for the consumption of the West. This is analogous to the textual production of identity that is negotiated through minority women's autobiographical writing; third world women need access to theory, and an identity, produced by them. Recognizing the need to produce their own theory allows minority women to challenge the very nature of the eliteness of the culturally produced hierarchy of women's concerns.

The theory of subjectivity, as inscribed or implied through autobiography, represents the most enabling theoretical venue for minority women because it combines lived experiences with the production of a theory that incorporates the problems inherent in 'pure theory' as per Moraga's complaint "the danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base" (52). Anzaldúa's commitment to writing about life on the borders, life in the shadows, the unique positionings of her consciousness contains an important parallel with feminist theory: "to break down the subject-object duality" (80), to explore textually the relevance this politics of location has on her life. She complains that the ignorance of the dominant culture is slowly killing us -- "we have never been allowed to develop unencumbered -- we have never been allowed to be fully ourselves" (86). This
complaint underscores Harlow's exploration of the effects of the first world's commodification of the third world, and the resultant denial of self-producing theory. Describing herself as an "act of kneading, of writing and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark, and gives them new meaning" (81), Anzaldúa positions herself on the margin, away from the first world's commodifying theories of identity formation, an act of oppositional consciousness that illustrates that theories of third world women combine metaphor and theory, lived and textualized experiences.

Anzaldúa's definition of herself as the "hieros gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within" (19), as a queer\(^9\) person, both male and female, is an extension of both the metaphor and the physical realities of the borderland dwellers. Instead of ignoring or denying difference, she is promoting the potential inherent within those differences; instead of assimilating, buying into "universal", let each axis of one's subjective formation be foregrounded; acknowledge that their interaction, not their suppression, or denial, constructs identity. Identity must be fluid, reacting and reforming in response to contexts and cultures, a site of disunity and conflict:

\(^9\)Anzaldúa's deliberate choice of the term 'queer', not homosexual, acknowledges the social and sexual sanctions associated with the word. She states that she "made the choice to be queer" because it is a way of "knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our raza" (Borderlands 19).
What I want is an accounting with all three cultures -- white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture -- *una cultura mestiza* -- with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

(22)

Claiming space, making face, talking back—all the available yet non-traditional axis of communicating and/or producing a self, of breaking the silence, emphasize and declare the "I", the autobiographical act that enables and empowers Anzaldúa's textual production of identity. Writing from the borderlands both forces and allows her to explore these alternate sites of discourse and each subsequent definition of herself addresses or critiques another aspect of the dominant culture.

Within the act of carving her own feminist architecture is the recognition that existing structures of culture, theory, sexuality exclude her experiences and deny her a self-constructed identity. The necessity of seeing fissures or shifts in the dominant paradigms of social construction enables a revisionary politics of subjectivity that will acknowledge difference. Anzaldúa labels the process of seeing shifts *la facultad*, the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface (38). This awareness, the new consciousness reflected through this seeing, is the self, newly positioned and politicized. If *la facultad* is based on fear (the fear
of being exploited, ignored, oppressed), the consciousness or awareness it precipitates traces the process of her awakening: it is "anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception" (39). Shifting one's perception moves one from being positioned as passive object to active subject; moreover, it encourages a questioning, rather than a blind acceptance, of one's position in relation to social and cultural forces.

The deliberate structuring of Borderlands/La Frontera as straddling two cultures, two languages underscores the extended exploration of the connection between language and subjectivity and the realization that if you colonize a people, take away their language, you have taken away their culture, Gayatri Spivak calls this theft of language epistemic violence:

"Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war."

This quotation, from an unpublished book by Ray Gwyn Smith, acts as a segue into instances of Anzaldúa's enforced assimilation: "I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler"(53). Illustrations similar in tone to this represent the denial of a culture or subjectivity or a heritage. Like Moraga's discovery that she denied or overlooked her "brownness" within, Anzaldúa
foregrounds the importance of one’s “mother tongue.” Implicit here is the double meaning of mother tongue: the language you are born with, that marks you as such, and the legacy of your mother, her tongue, non-traditional forms of discursive practices handed down through generations of women fighting, challenging, questioning oppression. Anzaldúa’s statement, that “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” critiques existing expectations of women’s expression; moreover, it highlights the need for the emerging autobiographical voice that provides the forum for the developing voice of marginalized women (54).

Anzaldúa’s exploration of the legacy and tradition of silence among Latina women exposes the institutions responsible for both the creation and the continuation of such an inheritance. In a sense, she deconstructs the tradition through her critique of it that reveals its constructedness, its fissures and its gaps:

Ser habladora was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. Muchachitas bien criadas, well-bred girls don’t answer back. Talking back to my mother, hablar pa’ tras, repeler. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being mal criada. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women – I’ve never heard them applied to men. (54)

Through the very act of writing down this inequality, this double standard, Anzaldúa attempts to break or deny the legacy of silence by revealing that language is constructed as a male discourse, to perpetuate the patriarchal hierarchy. In part then,
the text reveals the need to recreate a language with which to question the assumptions both of a hegemonic culture, and a patriarchal privileging of male speech. This language would be one which Latinas can "connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves -- a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but both" (55). The need for a language that crosses borders both cultural and sexual, both physically and psychically, is answered in the idea of a patois: a blending of languages and cultures that has implications for Latinas and for women because it reflects the intersections of discursive practices that formulate identity.

And yet, because of the transgressive and difficult nature of the textual and the social construction of identity Anzaldúa writes: "Writing produces anxiety. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer--a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls" (72). But this analogy between writing and life is the autobiographical act: "the Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession" (75). Her use of the definite article cements the intersection of the textual and cultural production of the self--in articulating the process of coming to selfhood, to subjectivity, she is living the oppositional consciousness necessary to locate and foreground the experience of difference. The textual production of being, "for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body" (75), illustrates,
moreover, the intrinsic connection or intersection of autobiographical undertakings and theoretical concerns.

Sandra Cisneros, The Legacy of Mango Street and La Facultad

I have deliberately chosen to place my discussion of Sandra Cisneros' autobiographical fiction text, The House on Mango Street, at the end of this chapter, in order to draw from the autobiographical acts exemplified in the explications of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's texts. Cisneros' text does not contain the overt theory and theorizing so present in the earlier works discussed, but it does share similar concerns about establishing identity and negotiating between cultures and languages. The title of this section refers to Anzaldúa's term la facultad, which she has defined as a process of seeing shifts, the "capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities" (Borderlands 38). It is a process of awakening that results in a new consciousness, based, in part, on the fear of being exploited, ignored or oppressed. For Cisneros, the fear of never escaping Mango Street facilitates the development of this awareness; she recognizes her legacy as a Latina and desires to move beyond its potentially oppressive nature, to position herself outside its scope.

The House on Mango Street is a short collection of sketches taken from Cisneros' childhood: it chronicles the people of her
Latino neighborhood, as experienced by the young narrator, Esperanza. However, Cisneros' understanding of the implications of a life lived across cultures and languages underscores the young girl's observations. The text does not span all of Cisneros' childhood; rather, it moves freely across various years made relevant by the people she encounters, and the moves her family make.

Pictured on the cover of the text, and introduced in the "Three Sisters" section, are three women who represent, for Cisneros, the three fates. They are depicted as weaving, both literally and metaphorically, and it is they who recognize both the potential in Cisneros' narrator and her desire to escape. They warn her that she cannot escape her legacy and, more importantly, that she must instead acknowledge who and what she is and use that knowledge:

When you leave you must remember always to come back... You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. (105)

Cisneros is forced to come to terms with her Latina self, which will awaken in her a sense of the self that is politicized by her past. The three sisters encourage Cisneros to position herself within her culture, not to try to escape it. They are similar in function to Cherrie Moraga's encounter with Ntozake Shange, in that they refuse to allow Cisneros to forget her brownness, the voices of her mothers, and aunts, and neighbors. Cisneros writes, "I am going to
tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong" (109).
Implicit in this simple statement is Cisneros' recognition of the
power of the telling of her story, and the necessity of sharing her
experiences with others, in order to accept her differences.
Coming to terms with her differences requires that she recognize
that her self as subject is constituted across and against
representations of racial, cultural, and sexual differences. Writing
this acceptance is an empowering act, for it reveals that Cisneros
will not let herself be negated through or by her differences;
moreover, it illustrates the call by third world feminists to
celebrate, not deny, differences in the construction of the self.

Coming to terms with her background, and acknowledging
both its power over and impact on her allows Cisneros to present
Mango Street as a metaphor for this cultural legacy. She invests
the text with the hindsight of her experience, so that, although the
stories are told from the perspective of the young Esperanza,
Cisneros' understanding of the cultural realities overshadow the
selection of the narratives and anecdotes. The simplicity and
brevity of Esperanza's memories are underscored by Cisneros' struggles to chronicle the toll on her people, as they, and she,
struggle to live on what Anzaldúa described as life on the
"borderlands." The demands of life between two cultures are
personified by Cisneros' descriptions of "Mamacita" who could not learn English and who "sighs for her pink house" (77), Alicia, who
had to make tortillas instead of studying for university, and
Geraldo No Last Name, another brazer who didn't speak English" (66).

The closing lines of Cisneros' text are "they will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot [get] out." They articulate her process of awakening that is based, in part, on the fear of never escaping the physical and metaphorical restraints of Mango Street (110). She chronicles the lives of other Latinas who become trapped by the (hetero)sexist expectations of her culture in order to posit the necessity of discovering other possibilities open to women like herself:

Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar, and she married him in another state where it's legal to get married before eighth grade. She has her husband and her house now, her pillowcases and her plates. She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape. (101)

The abject reality of marshmallows and pillowcases underscores the need to provide alternatives for Latinas, in order to destabilize cultural restraints that propagate sexual and racial oppressions.

Cisneros, although not writing from the position of a Latina lesbian, certainly emphasizes the concerns raised by Cherrie Moraga with regards to the patriarchal hierarchies existent within the Latino culture. The section entitled "Beautiful & Cruel" acknowledges the sexism and the power of men within Latino culture. Cisneros writes,
I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain....I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (88-9)

Chronicling simple, subtle yet subversive actions in this way reveals the destabilizing nature of Cisneros' text; by detailing both the (hetero)sexist assumptions of the culture and her challenges to such expectations, she is offering a means of empowerment to the women who read her text.

The section titled "My Name" offers a further chronicle of the price of living on the border and the need to establish a self that is not defined by the dominant culture: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees" (11). Cisneros, utilizing the insights of Anzaldúa's *la facultad*, recognizes the colonizing implications of a dominant culture that cannot, at one level pronounce names that are different, a linguistic inability that acts as a synecdoche for the dominant culture's inability to recognize and welcome difference: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (11). In the "& Some More" section, Cisneros presents a legacy of names that exemplify the cross-cultural location of the Latina culture:

The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow, I say. I read it in a book.
I got a cousin, Rachel says, she got three different names...She got three last names and, let me see, two first names. One in English and one in Spanish. (35)

The litany of names that follows this interchange combines Latina names with cultural insults that reflect the positioning of the latinas at the margins of the dominant culture, and the necessity of establishing one's own space within that "borderland."

The section entitled "Four Skinny Trees" is the most overtly autobiographical section in the entire text. In it, Cisneros both describes and identifies with the four skinny trees that are somehow growing out of the sidewalk in front of her house on Mango Street. Each adjective or description of the trees is relevant to how Cisneros has positioned herself in her culture: "four who do not belong here but are here...their strength is their secret" (74). She has positioned herself on the borders of her own culture, succeeding despite the racial, cultural, and sexual constraints imposed upon her by both her culture and the dominant culture around her: "four who grew despite concrete" demonstrates her understanding of her experiences as a Latina women writing from and about the border (74).

One function of autobiographical writing by writers such as Cisneros is the revelation of the power of writing and its ability to empower women through the chronicling of experience and the questioning of culture. In the "Born Bad" section, Cisneros describes an aunt who used to read the poetry of Esperanza and who encourages Esperanza to "keep writing. It will keep you free,
and I said yes, but at that time I didn’t know what she meant" (61). The strength of women’s autobiographical writing lies in its ability to reconceptualize subjectivity as multiply constituted across and against representations of sexual and racial difference, entailing an acknowledgement of how those sexual and racial differences are negated in the construction of the essentializing category "woman." Cisneros’ text demonstrates the process of awakening necessary to reconceptualize oneself, and to negotiate that newly formed self around and across the multiple axes of subjectivity-forming discourses. Chronicling racial, sexual, and cultural tensions in her fictionalized autobiography, Cisneros comes to terms with the legacy of Mango Street and creates a new consciousness that accepts and celebrates those factors that make her different, and that, at one point, threatened to drive her away from herself.

The autobiographical act, as envisioned by these three Latino writers, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Sandra Cisneros, enables the creation of a newly defined identity that is both textual and cultural, that crosses borders of societal expectation and literary format. Their texts demonstrate the fluidity and malleability of autobiographical writing through the multi-lingual mixture of theory, poetry and prose; moreover, the scope of their critiques of social, economic, political, and sexual discursive practices also underscores the potential inherent in the autobiographical act. It is not enough, however, that these Latina
writers have re-defined their subjectivity through their re-definition of autobiography. The criticisms leveled against first-world feminisms and the limitations of poststructuralist theories must be recognized by an audience that extends beyond the Latina/Latino culture.

The limitations of the first world, and the need for an empathetic audience, are discussed in the following chapter, through an exploration of Native American women writers' return to ritual and the traditional teachings of their cultures, in their autobiographical texts. Too long positioned as invisible, Native Americans are writing to claim and re-define their position on the borders of the hegemonic culture, in order to produce a subjectivity free from the restrictions constructed by the dominant discourse.
Chapter Four

"Spider Woman's Granddaughter": Autobiographical Writings by Native American Women

I had to communicate with the 2 parts of myself before I could reach others. [sic]
The direct line to my Indian heritage had been lost. My father told me we were Cherokee. & there were enough trips to the old place in Arkansas I knew it was true. He'd left his heritage & migrated north to Kansas City for work. But even when the roots are severed, the beginning is still there. I can't remember anything my Indian grandmother said to me, yet her heritage stands before me like a stone iceberg, a huge presence, all the more terrible for its silence. (Glancy 59)

This final chapter considers how Native American women's autobiographical writing addresses the issue of multiple marginalization through an historically constructed "othering" experienced by Native Americans today. The autobiographical writings by Paula Gunn Allen, Mary Crow Dog, Diane Glancy, and Leslie Marmon Silko destabilize the discursive practices of the dominant culture and foreground both the importance of non-traditional means of articulation and of difference. The importance, and necessity, of autobiographical writing is made evident by Paula Gunn Allen's statement:

Native women must contend with yet a third fact, one more difficult to notice or tell about: if in the public and private mind of America Indians as a group are
Writing their own lives, telling their stories, creates both the space and the identity for Native American women to establish their history and their subjectivity through an exploration of their unique and often overlooked cultural legacy. The autobiographical project of Native Americans is unique in the sense that it is a reaction against a politically sanctioned attempt at extermination and a denial of culture, language, and beliefs. Ultimately, the historical specificity of the government's treatment of Native Americans contributes to the organizing principle behind the autobiographical agenda: these texts do not represent an act of translation -- as is relevant to the Latina writers I discuss -- they exist in order to dispel American ignorance and deliberately constructed invisibility.

In order to understand the distinct position of Native Americans in America today, it is necessary to understand the government organized policies of relocation and assimilation that resulted in the denial and decimation of their indigenous cultures. Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase marked the beginning of the removal of Native Americans from their lands. The decade of the 1830's was the decade of Indian removal; the Jefferson Plan became the Removal Act, continued by Andrew Jackson, who enabled the forced exile of the Native Americans onto what was acknowledged as Indian Territory. These Territories were guaranteed "as long as the grass grows, the wind blows, and the
waters run", unfortunately, the Railroad Enabling Act, the Homestead Act, and the Indian Allotment Act of the 1860's further opened up the West for settlement and further denied Indians their land (Spider Woman's Granddaughter 10-15). Arnold Krupat, describing the expansionist 1840's and 1850's, acknowledges that "any hope that Indians might live unmolested in the Great American Desert across the river, or even within an Indian state proved illusory... on the Plains, in the Great Basin and Plateau, in the Southwest and the Pacific Northwest, the familiar pattern of contact, conflict, and conquest reasserted itself" (For Those Who Come After 54). By 1880, of the original 150 million acres guaranteed by treaties, all but 50-60 million were reclaimed by the Western expansion, and at least half of what was left to the Native Americans was desert or semidesert land (Gunn Allen, Krupat). After the physical displacement of Native Americans was complete, the Indian School system was developed as a way to further institute alienation and forced assimilation that denied and decimated Native American culture and legacy. Gerald Vizenor's exploration of the American colonizer's imposition of cultural expectations and definitions upon Native Americans recognizes that the word Indian "became the homogenous name for thousands of distinct tribal cultures. The Anishinaabe were named the Chippewa. The Dakota were named the Sioux. Other tribal names are colonial inventions sustained in the literature of dominance" (167). Thus, I would argue, the
autobiographical project of contemporary Native American writers is a reaction to this renaming of the Nations as Tribes, to the Native American envisioned and imagined by the dominant discourses.

Histories and autobiographies of Native Americans abound, both in literary and anthropological journals; however, these texts are biased by their editors or authors' Western expectations and assumptions about Native American culture. The problematic yet traditional practice of Native American autobiography is that they are collaborative efforts, jointly produced by some white who translates, transcribes, compiles, edits, interprets, polishes, and ultimately determines the form of the text in writing, and by an Indian who is its subject and whose life becomes the content of the 'autobiography' whose title may bear his name. (Krupat 1985, 30)

Although the proliferation of such texts does serve to heighten awareness of the concerns of Native Americans, the linear structure and the standardized, Western English language of these mediated texts reflects a colonizing agenda. Western literary traditions prescribe codes of chronology, linearity, the quest narrative, theories modelled upon male sexuality -- buildup, climax, denouement. The imposition of such expectations, by editors and readers alike, on the writing of Native American women negates the possibility of these writers developing their own voice or experience. Barbara Godard argues for the necessity of revising the traditional canon of both autobiography and
American literature in order to include texts that are beyond its somewhat stringent parameters: recognizing texts based on the oral tradition expands the acceptance of literary forms of production and of meaning. Godard defines a text to be not just a book "as icon, but a performance, not just a preconstituted meaning for easy consumption, but an event in which meaning is actively negotiated" ("Voicing Difference" 87). Such actively negotiated meaning results from the juxtaposition of oral elements, ritual, myth, and experience, a juxtaposition that often produces a fragmented performance symbolic of elements of one's life.

Understanding autobiography as an act of negotiated meaning, an event, frees Native American women from the constraints and expectations of traditional forms of writing. Being positioned on the margin of the hegemonic culture enables Native American women the critical distance necessary to critique and disrupt dominant practices. The freedom of renegotiating discursive acts thus enables texts that explore rituals, ceremonies and traditional teachings symbolically, not chronologically or linearly.

Autobiographical production by Native American women is emerging as a response to a dominant culture that, to some extent, denies the diversity of its minority cultures. The autobiographical writings of Native American women reveal a renewed interest and investment in the rituals and ceremonies of the traditional way of life. The proliferation of the image and the teachings of Spider Woman, as demonstrated by the title of Allen's text Spider
Woman's Granddaughter, underscores the intent of these writers to explore the power and potential of women who adhere to the rituals of their own culture, not those of the dominant culture that has tried to deny their legacy. Allen recognizes that "native writers write out of tribal traditions, and into them. They, like oral storytellers, work within a literary tradition that is at base connected to ritual and beyond that to tribal metaphysics or mysticism" (Spider Woman's Granddaughter 5). The image of the Spider Woman is important for autobiography because she thinks creation and sings it into life, much like the project of autobiographical writing. She is a weaver who connects, and thus is an apt metaphor for Native American writers who seek to connect their people, their culture, and their legacy, through their writing:

In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those people of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. She is the Eldest God, the one who Remembers and Re-members; and through the history of the past five hundred years has taught us bitterness and helpless rage, we endure into the present, alive, certain of our significance,
certain of her centrality, her identity as the Sacred Hoop of Be-ing. (The Sacred Hoop 11)

The fabric of interconnection illustrates the importance of the renewal of memories and ritual that are demonstrated textually by writers such as Allen, Silko, and Glancy, and grounds the creative process of autobiographical writing in the re-creation of a culture long-silenced.

For this reason, their texts do not reflect the strong emphasis on individuality common to traditional Western autobiography; rather, they reflect the community orientation of their culture and the collective concerns of Native Americans. Arnold Krupat has written that "in Native American autobiography the self is most typically not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices" (Voice 133). This type of writing, as an extension of their understanding of the self, is unique to the community culture of Native Americans and it distinguishes their use of the autobiographical genre(s). There is a sense in the Native American community that to discuss oneself on the individual level is symptomatic of too much pride and detracts from the important and influential role played by the community. Margaret Blackman's study of the life of Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida woman, reports that

In a community such as Masset, a life history is never simply the product of two individuals' collaboration.
Florence's account was subject to a number of cultural constraints. Issues of cultural representation and presentation of self are crucial in Northwest Coast societies, with no exception in Masset. (xiii)

Thus the structure of Native American autobiography does not follow the chronological growth and maturation of an individual; instead, the text intertwines the development of the figure with the teachings of the tribe, the discovery, or re-discovery, of the importance of ritual and involvement in sacred ceremonies or actions. Native American autobiography does not celebrate the achievements of one person only but instead reveals the continual state of growth and learning common to Native Americans as they re-discover and re-define themselves through their textual explorations.

At issue in the autobiographical project of Native American women is the exploration of the commodity of difference on their own terms, their own discursive act, not as an "other" exoticized or existing as the signifier or symbol of the presumed 'naturalness' of an established first world hierarchy. I use the term "commodity of difference" to mean the recognizable value of difference: that difference can be constructed as something to be negotiated in order to promote subjectivity, not objectivity. Constructed as invisible by eurocentric America except as quaint artifacts of history or anthropology, Native American women who write must reappropriate their differences from the discourses of ethnography and anthropology and assert the potential inherent
within differences long denied recognition and importance.¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha's exploration of the Western world's commodification of marginalized women's differences underscores Chela Sandoval's criticisms of the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference, which, Sandoval argued, was guilty of perpetuating tokenism and othering.² Minh-ha argues that she is "tolerated in [her] difference as long as [she] conform[s] with the establishes rules" (original emphasis, Difference 22). To conform with the established rules means not to threaten or disrupt the discursive practices and hierarchies that are already in place: not to question or challenge but simply to reiterate the unquestioned validity of the subject/object, first world/third world hierarchy. Minh-ha acknowledges that the first world recognizes her differences, but they are recognized only within the parameters of a first world discourse:

Now, i am not only given the permission to open up and talk, i am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it; otherwise people would feel as if they have been

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¹The discussion of Paula Gunn Allen's Woman Who Owned the Shadows pays particular attention to the dominant culture's tendency to contain other cultures in museums, as artifacts whose importance is then long-forgotten or over-looked. See pages 164-175 of this chapter.

cheated: We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First (?) World. We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can't have, and to divert us from the monotony of sameness. They, like their anthropologists whose specialty is to detect all the layers of my falseness and truthfulness, are in a position to decide what/who is AUTHENTIC and what/who is not. . .Eager not to disappoint, I try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet, a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their own beings and makings. (22)

The divisive nature of difference, and its potential threat, is recognized and colonized by the first world, as indicated by Minh-ha's use of the words benefactors and benefactresses with all the semiotic and symbolic meaning attached with them. This commodification or colonization of difference knowingly perpetuates an othering or a tokenism; moreover, it effectively denies the constructedness of the binary opposites of subject/object. In order to move into the subject position, Native American women need to establish a discourse of difference that does not perpetuate a politics of location that simply "others" them. Donna Haraway's reading of what she refers to as Trinh T. Minh-ha's theory of the "inappropriate/d other" posits a subject position for marginalized women that enables them both to deny the first world's appropriation of their difference and to empower themselves through a self-constructed exploitation/exploration of their differences. Haraway argues that Minh-ha's phrase
referred to the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either "self" or "other" offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics. ...[Thus] to be an "inappropriate/d other" means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)inality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination. ("The Promise of Monsters" 298)

To escape an historical positioning that renders them invisible, Native American women must use the potential inherent within their differences in order to provide the distancing necessary to critique and undermine theories of universals and exotic others. They must, in Minh-ha's words, "figure 'difference' as a critical difference within" (Minh-ha 1986) and establish a discursive act that does not seek to deny the very differences that ultimately will empower marginalized women.

I would thus argue that autobiographical writing by Native American women shares important overlaps with the agendas of other minority women writers in that their texts also contain the empowering metaphors that signal the creation of discursive acts of subjectivity. Their texts explore issues that exist on the border between the traditional and the dominant culture, the importance of one's own language, accepting one's cultural legacy, and the need to be recognized, not overlooked, by the dominant culture. Echoes of Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness and her explorations of the "borderlands" can be found in the writings of Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mary Crow Dog, and Diane Glancy;
moreover, their textual production of themselves results in similar assertions of selfhood and politicized identity. The discussion that follows will explore the ways in which each of these writers reclaim and redefine their "Indianness" while at the same time each writer expands the parameters of autobiographic writing.

Dancing the Ghost Dance: Re-discovering the Past to Re-empower the Future

Paradigmatic of western-influenced and anthropological-based explorations of Native American lives, *Lakota Woman* provides a direct contrast to the emerging experimental and non-traditional autobiographical writings by Native American women. Although an emotional and moving autobiographical text, *Lakota Woman* is somewhat problematic in relation to the other texts to be discussed because it is an "as-told-to" narrative mediated by Richard Erdoes. The mediation results in the imposition of the discursive practices of the hegemonic culture that depict Mary Crow Dog as ultimately dependant upon and defined through her marriage to Leonard Crow Dog; instead of being told in relation to a community, the end result of the text is a woman's story told in relation to a man.

Despite the prevalence of "as-told-to" narratives, their structure is problematic because, in the relationship between the subject and the recorder, the
recorder-editor selects the subjects or solicits the narratives, in some cases translating from the original language, usually structuring the materials and presenting them in a stylistically pleasing manner. The narrator offers her life story, and the editor hones it for literary effect. (Bataille and Sands 12).

The obvious problem is that the "recorder-editor" cannot escape Western biases and expectations and thus interrupts the narrative with historical, cultural or anthropological facts deemed both necessary and interesting for the non-Native American reader. The response of Florence Edenshaw Davidson's daughter to the "as-told-to" text of her mother's life illustrates this problematic relationship, that is, the imposition of the dominant culture's expectations on the construction of the 'other's' self:

'I just wondered,' she questioned me [Blackman], 'why Mom kept talking about having her period. A woman has her period. They're so superstitious about things like that. I couldn't understand why she would talk about something like that in her book, because they weren't even allowed to talk about what they went through.' I remembered well the interview Florence and I had about her seclusion at menarche and our subsequent discussion of menstrual customs, a subject she would not consider broaching until the male linguist residing with her at the time had vacated the house for the day. That important life-cycle material was included in the manuscript at my urging (see chapter 7), yet obviously it was seen neither as normal Haida discourse nor as Florence's discourses on her life. (Blackman xvi)

As explained by Bataille and Sands in their study, American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives, an as-told-to text results in
the imposition of the dominant culture's textual expectations and structure on the lifestory of a marginalized figure. As-told-to texts contain echoes of Minh-ha's theories of the inappropriate/other through the imposition of the expectations of the dominant culture and are thus susceptible to similar threats of colonization and denial. I would argue that *Lakota Woman*'s lack of metaphor, its linearity, and its ethnographically influenced and deliberate explanations of Native American rituals, dances, pipe and peyote ceremonies, and sweat lodges reveal the highly westernized nature of the text, in comparison to the highly fragmented, stream of conscious thought nature of the writings of Paula Gunn Allen and Diane Glancy. I do not mean to sound dismissive of the text; its highly descriptive style emphasizes the vacuum of cultural knowledge from which Mary Crow Dog, acknowledging her own ignorance of her Indian culture, emerged. The reader discovers the intricacies of the traditional ceremonies and teachings as she does; in a sense then, the text may be read as an educational tool that makes available traditional knowledge to the dominant culture. It is not as experimental in nature as the other texts discussed; however, it represents another alternate form of empowerment through autobiography for Native American women.

Gretchen Bataille's article, "Transformation of Tradition: Autobiographical Works by American Indian Women," provides an important framework for Native American women who write
autobiographically because, in the article, she outlines the three points or levels of consciousness or politicization that frame the development of Native American women's writing. Citing Lee Maracle's autobiographical text *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* as paradigmatic of recent autobiographical projects that do involve the use of a mediating editor but that do not exist as ethnographic studies, Bataille's articulation of three responses to oppression that are found in Native American women's texts provides credibility to the as-told-to text of Mary Crow Dog. The three stages that Bataille determines are documented as follows:

The first, the submission and integration response, led many Indian people to assimilate and adopt the dominant society's values, aspirations, and world view. [The second] response to oppression in this century has been through internalized violence, manifested in drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, and physical abuse. [The third is characterized as] self-determination, Red Power, and a spate of political movements and causes. (95)

Mary Crow Dog and Lee Maracle's texts, although not structurally experimental or fragmentary, do demonstrate the emergence of the political self/subject of Native American women's writing through their depiction of family or friends caught in the throes of these various stages. Moreover, Bataille's article provides an important moment in the development of Native American women's writing in that, through the progression of stages, she describes the politicized perception of oppression that is intrinsic to the development of a theory of autobiographical writing that
both empowers the self and destabilizes the existing discursive practices.

The opening lines of Mary Crow Dog's text help to establish its tone and agenda; she writes that "I am a woman of the Red Nation, a Sioux woman. That is not easy" (3). The reader is presented with the grim reality of life on the reservation: the prevalence of rape, domestic violence, hunger, poverty, forced sterilizations. She states that

rapes on the reservation are a big scandal. The victims are mostly full-blood girls, too shy and afraid to complain. A few years back the favorite sport of white state troopers and cops was to arrest young Indian girls on a drunk-and-disorderly, even if the girls were sober, take them to the drunk tanks in their jails, and there rape them. (68)

Statements such as this exemplify Paula Gunn Allen's claim that "Indian women are non-existent" (Spider Woman's Granddaughter 9). Moreover, they serve to position Native American women as the "other," the non-privileged in a similar way to the positioning of black women during slavery who were perceived as necessarily immoral and therefore licentious, in order to preserve the modesty of white women.

Physically and mentally, living on a reservation surrounded by the dominant culture proved demanding so that "it is not the big, dramatic things so much that get us down, but just being Indian, trying to hang on to our way of life, language, and values while being surrounded by an alien, more powerful culture" (4).
The demands of the dominant culture, the thoroughly colonizing influences, dwarf and diminish the Native American culture. Much like the subalterns of the colonies of the British Empire who became trapped in a world that was neither their indigenous culture nor wholly that of the colonizer, Native Americans are trapped between the allure of the dominant culture and the traditions of their own way of life. Mary Crow Dog's grandmother's decision not to teach her to speak Sioux because it would be a hindrance, not a benefit, underscores the disempowered politics of location experienced by Native American women. Her grandmother told her that "you need a white man's education to live in this world. Speaking Indian would only hold you back, turn you the wrong way" (22). Such thinking is indicative of a culture and a people so overwhelmed by the dominant culture that they are both willing and determined to commodify themselves, to buy into the dominant system. They have unquestioningly bought into their position as "other" to the dominant subject/culture, and thus unwillingly perpetuate a racial or cultural or social or sexual hierarchy.

Part of the rationale behind autobiographical writing by Native American women is to dispel the ignorance and the invisibility of their people. Mary Crow Dog's experiences at the

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3Susan Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" Cheryl A. Wall, ed. Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women.
non-Indian school, an experience she refers to as "kidnapping," demonstrate the desires of the dominant culture to deny differences: "I learned quickly that I would be beaten if I failed in my devotions or, God forbid, prayed the wrong way, especially prayed in Indian to Wakan Tanka, the Indian creator" (22, 29). Again, the theft of language and of beliefs results in the denial of a culture which might represent a threat to the hegemonic society if the frailty and the constructed nature of the hierarchy was discovered. Mary Crow Dog illustrates her recognition of the lack of understanding between the cultures with statements such as the following: "Most of the arrests occurred not for what we did, but for what we were and represented -- for being skins" and "People talk about the 'Indian drinking problem,' but we say that it is a white problem" (64, 54). Moreover, her interaction with an anthropologist who claims that she is "an interesting subculture" belies the need to challenge her position as 'other': "To him I was an interesting zoological specimen to be filed away someplace" (59). Such thinking is representative of the museum metaphor that will be discussed in The Woman Who Owned the Shadows section of this chapter, which criticizes the dominant culture for stealing, storing and then forgetting the culture of marginalized groups in the imposition of the dominant culture.

The need to discover who she is enables Mary Crow Dog to politicize herself, in part through the discovery of her Indianness: "As a young girl I used to look at myself in the mirror, trying to
find a clue as to who and what I was. My face is very Indian, and so are my eyes, and my hair, but my skin is very light" (9). Later in life she discovers that she was "then white outside and red inside, just the opposite of an apple" (94). This moment of recognition is similar to Cherrie Moraga's re-discovery of her "brownness" at a reading by Ntozake Shange; the strength to fight oppression lies in the celebration, and not the denial, of difference (Loving in the War Years 55). Crow Dog says that "I could have accepted our flimsy shack, our smelly outhouse, and our poverty--but only on my terms. Yes, I would have accepted poverty, dignified, uninterfered-with poverty, but not the drunken, degrading, and humiliating poverty we had to endure" (111).

The 1973 seige at Wounded Knee, which lasted seventy-one days, proved to be the catalyst that reconnects Mary Crow Dog with her Indianness in that she felt connected with the legacy of the almost three hundred Sioux, mostly women and children, killed and buried in the mass grave on the site. The appropriation of a tourist site that served as tribute to the Westernizing forces by Native Americans forced a re-consideration of a history that denied Native American, and especially Sioux, losses and near extermination. The site became a physical marker of the newly emerging and politicized Native American people who were no longer willing to accept their cultural invisibility. For Mary Crow Dog, the experience brought home the relevance and the importance of the Cheyenne saying, that "a nation is not lost as
long as the hearts of its women are not on the ground" (137). She chose to have her son Pedro at Wounded Knee, in the midst of the fighting; she learned the teachings of Leonard Crow Dog including the revival of the outlawed Ghost Dance.\footnote{The Ghost Dance was first danced in 1889, in response to a vision that promised the return of the buffalo, the dead killed by the Wasicun (white men), and the unspoiled lands of the West. It was outlawed because the white forces felt it signalled an Indian uprising, not a new religion.} Leonard's teachings helped Mary Crow Dog discover her Indianness because his teachings aided in "bringing back the sacred hoop...the rebirth of Indian unity" (153). The Ghost Dance would be making a link to our past, to the grandfathers and grandmothers of long ago. So [Leonard] decided to ghost-dance again at the place where this dance had been killed and where it now had to be resurrected. (153)

To become political subjects Mary Crow Dog and the others at Wounded Knee recognized the importance of acknowledging their difference, and the resurrection of older, traditional knowledge provided the venue to explore and assert those differences.

Paula Gunn Allen believes that "we are here to testify that our traditions are valuable to us, and that we continue to resist obliteration either of our cultures or our personhood" (Spider Woman's Granddaughter 2). Mary Crow Dog's text is exemplary of the belief in the importance and relevance of Native American teachings, ritual, and culture; moreover, the text is testimony that
the Indian spirit is in a state of renewal. Its as-told-to status results in the juxtaposition of the realities of reservation life, the tragedy of Native American history, and the realization that the renewed understanding and recognition of resistance will enable the Native American community to escape the discursive acts that seek to deny their spirit and their very existence.

"She Ground Her Chili in an Electric Blender": Re-claiming the Romanticized Indian as 'Other'

Paula Gunn Allen's 1983 text, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is a fictionalized autobiography of a Pueblo Indian woman, Ephanie Atencio, and her struggles to come to terms with her Indian legacy. Allen says of her book that "it leans on the tradition of autobiography" and thus should be read as an autobiographical composite transformed into a multifaceted imagined woman (Bataille and Sands 140). Thus, Ephanie's struggle to accept her recent divorce, her search for an identity that she can recognize and understand, her remarriage, the death of one of her twin sons, and her attempted suicide is representative not only of Allen's experiences, but of what Allen

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5Bataille and Sands claim that "Allen's consciousness of the autobiographical process and its relationship to her novel suggests that autobiography is a rich resource for Indian women engaged in testing the boundaries of fiction by developing multigenre approaches to their art" (*American Indian Women Telling Their Lives* 140).
construes as common to contemporary Native American women today. The structure of the text is fragmented; interspersed with brief glimpses of her life are Pueblo creation myths and ritual stories that provide some explanation for the transformation she undergoes. In the opening pages Ephanie struggles with the significance of her name in that, "like her it was a split name, a name half of this and half of that: Epiphany. Effie. An almost event. Proper at that for her, a halfblood. A halfbreed. Which was the source of her derangement. Ranging despair. Disarrangement" (3). Her disarrangement is the result of living between or straddling two cultures: that of her Pueblo legacy and that of the dominant white, western world. Ephanie is representative of Native American women who must come to terms with their borderland identity that will always be fluid, changing, and evolving as they mediate and move among their many influences.

Too long denied the legacy of her culture by a dominant culture that would rather assimilate the Native Americans than recognize their uniqueness, Ephanie must reacquaint herself with the ceremonies and teachings of Native Americans. As she introduces her children to the tradition of powwows, she re-introduces herself as well. Interestingly, the text presumes some understanding of Native American culture, on the part of the reader, which is indicative of its Native American authority/authorship; in contrast, an "as-told-to" text would include anthropological or ethnographic background information.
in order to educate the reader, presumed white. Because the traditional teachings and stories of Native American culture are intrinsic to the interactions of the community, Allen does not feel the need to explain the tales she inserts into the narrative. The basic premise of the tales is recognizable to those familiar with Native American culture; by not contextualizing them for her readers, Allen is emphasizing the need for the dominant culture to both recognize and learn about an integral aspect of American culture. Again, this is similar to Anzaldúa's unmediated textual movements between English and Spanish in *Borderlands*, where Anzaldúa underscores the need to recognize and understand the connections between cultures.

The need to educate the hegemonic culture, as demonstrated by the unmediated textual movements between Ephanie's learning process, her memories, and her dreams, is evident in the textual encounters between Ephanie and well-meaning white liberals who purport to sympathize with the Native American cause. Their presumptions about Ephanie's identity as a Native American bias her own understanding of herself, as their interpretations posit her as the romanticized, exotic other: the ground of representation against which their dominant culture is constructed. She was

not the Indian maiden she was supposed to be. She knew that.
Not the Indian they imagined and took her to be. The felt angry when she wasn't what they wanted. She
In part then, texts such as this exist to dispel the myths of Western assumptions about Native American women. Exoticizing or "othering" a people merely re-emphasizes the minority culture's position in the hierarchicized discourse that reinforces the discursive and cultural practices of colonizer and colonized. Critiquing the false assumptions that are constructed about Native American women, and understanding their constructedness, is necessary if Native American women are to be able to take control of their lives, both textually and literally. Observations such as this made to Ephanie reflect the lack of understanding that exists about Native American culture:

'You don't seem like an Indian to me. You talk like a New York Jew, not like an Indian at all.' He was disappointed in her lack of romantic appeal. She always forgot to keep her eyes cast down, to say nature loving things. She ground her chili in an electric blender. (67)

This type of assumption also led to the romanticizing of the poverty of Native American lifestyles by privileged whites who could choose to live like her if they desire.6 Creating her own

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6Walt Whitman's 1855 poem, "The Sleepers," describes a Native American woman, a "red squaw," as having "wonderful beauty and purity," a step that was "free and elastic," an exquisite voice that seemed to connect her to all that was natural and pure. "The Sleepers" is exemplary of a tradition of Western writing that makes analogous Native Americans and nature. Gilbert L. Wilson's 1927 Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story, Told by Herself and Nancy
identity out of the mythos of the dominant culture entails both the recognition and the deconstruction of the social, sexual, economic and cultural discursive practices that attempt to trap the Native American woman in the role of other.

Language plays a decisive role in the creation of one's subjectivity. The imposition of the colonizer's language on the colonized has been a proven factor in the suppression of an indigenous lifestyle and culture; Native American's forced immersion into English and English education is arguably one of the most influential actions that has denied their traditional lifestyle. Subsequently, Ephanie's inability to speak Guadalupe.

Oestreich Lurie's 1961 Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian, both as-told-to texts, continue this tradition of exoticizing and romanticizing Native Americans. The supplement to Waheenee's lifestory is directed to "young Americans who wish to grow up strong and healthy [as] there is no pleasant way to do this than in an Indian camp" (183). Moreover, the final page of Waheenee's text is entitled "Hints to Young Campers" a designation that clearly reveals the romanticization of Indian lifestyles as natural, environmental, and closely tied to nature. Lastly, recall the earliest "Keep America Beautiful" commercials that featured an Native American male, standing amidst a garbage-strewn beach, shedding a tear, that so clearly aligned a beautiful America with the children of nature, the Native Americans.

Irene Stewart, in her text A Voice in Her Tribe: A Navajo Woman's Own Story, explains the cost of living between two cultures, as exemplified by forced immersion into another's system of schooling: "I was already caught in the middle between the white man's way and the Navajo way. It was the result of my being kidnapped for education" (35).
exemplifies what is arguably a culturally-constructed barrier designed to disempower and divide those people existing on the margins of the dominant culture. Moreover, her unintentionally self-constructed language barrier, unintentional in her decision not to learn the language, inhibits her ability to articulate herself:

She did not know the tongue [Guadalupe], but she knew the thought, its complication that piled one thing atop another...She knew that everything moved and everything balanced, always, in her language, her alien crippled tongue, the English that was ever unbalanced, ever in pieces, she groped with her words and her thoughts to make whole what she could not say. (70)

The structure of her thoughts reflects the nature of her indigenous language, in their lack of linearity, their complicated building and layering. Even if "her language was a stranger's tongue...her thought was the Grandmothers', was the people's" (70).

Allen's description of the bad clay Ephanie and her friend Elena used to dig provides a metaphor for the importance of the Grandmother's thoughts. "The pots always crumbled. Always fell apart. When she would ask her grandma why that happened, the old woman would say, 'That clay's no good. You have to have the right kind of clay' " (79). The right kind of clay is analogous to the right kind of language, the memories needed by Ephanie to dispel her cultural ignorance. By attending pow-wows and reading about the ceremonies and traditions that encompass her legacy, Ephanie works to dig through the bad clay, to discover the
In an interesting commentary on a hegemonic culture that receives its understanding of "other" cultures from its collections of artifacts and archeological discoveries, Allen's narrator chooses the metaphor of a "huge and imposing" (86) museum to illustrate her loss of identity. I read the museum as the metaphor for the monolithic and dominating white western culture: in it, the museum and by extension western culture, she is lost —

I am Ephanie Atencio. Ephanie Kawiemie Atencio. I'm wandering in the great museum and I am hopelessly lost. I recognize nothing. I can't find my way. I can't see anything because I don't have time. I have to meet someone here, but I can't find them. They aren't here. There's a lot of people here, but they are shadows. They won't look at me. I don't recognize anyone here. I am walking against the traffic. I am lost and frightened. They look so threatening, so alien. They won't look at me. They're all in a hurry and they just walk by me, moving aside to get out of my way. They won't touch me or look at me and I'm afraid to stop anyone to ask where they're going or how to find the way out. The walls are so high, so smooth. I don't belong in a place like this. It scares me. I'm scared of it because it's so big and so alien, so strange. I don't understand anything I see here. Why do they put those things in a big building? Doesn't anyone use them? What are they for? I feel so stupid, so helpless. I see my mother and the kids. They're walking along the corridor. They don't see me. I call them, I wave at them, but they just keep walking on by like I'm not even here. I am so frightened here, and nobody even cares. (87)
In this vision of the museum, Ephanie recognizes the role played by the hegemonic culture in both denying her identity and in constructing her mother's problematic identity. Her mother, who married a non-Indian, was seen by her community as rejecting her past and her Indianness, and thus was shunned. Symbolically, Ephanie is walking against her mother's path, trying to rectify her marginality, trying to regain her Indianness. Therefore, her sense that no one knows her, no one knows her name, represents her period of re-birth with an identity that she herself has decided upon and defined. The museum houses the cultural memories of western culture, including Native American artifacts, memories that are often overlooked or ignored by the dominant culture; that is, "half of what is stored in me [the museum] is unrecognized by the people who work here. They can't begin to understand the knowledge and the treasures I hold in me..." (87). Allen, through Ephanie's vision, is critiquing white, western blindness toward difference; moreover, she is also criticizing the inability of the minorities to see beyond assimilation, choosing instead to turn their backs on their legacy for now.

Ephanie's interaction with the liberal, highly politicized women re-emphasizes the dominant culture's tendency to "other" and exoticize minority groups: "after three days there she had begun to lose any sense of who she was...of what she thought about anything... [the women]...viewed her as an artifact, quaint, curious, fragile, wronged" (136). The women, Easterners,
were well-meaning in their desires to understand and identify with the multiple oppressions of Native Americans. However, they tended to see only the romanticized version of the various situations; for example, when they spoke "glowingly about the famous medicine man who had spoken so powerfully, so movingly at the survival gathering they had attended" Ephanie countered their account with the revelation that the same medicine man had "lashed out at some women she knew [lesbians]. How he had told them he ought to rape them" (137). Her question -- "do you get confused, about who you are, I mean?" -- directed to the sister of her Nisei husband, a 'halfbreed' like herself, reflects the pressures exerted on minority or marginalized people to assimilate into the dominant ideology (93). The response Ephanie receives -- but who in this country really knows how to be an American?" -- questions the constructedness of the ideal that there is a recognizable "American" (WASPS or descendents from the Mayflower?) an ideal that perpetuates the hierarchy of the dominant culture and the marginalized "others" (93). Ephanie responds to such intrusive, that is imposed, identity politics with a self-recognizing, self-creating chant:

I am Ephanie Atencio. Ephanie Kawiemie Atencio. I am myself...I know who I am. I will not give in. This is my hand. These are my eyes. My mouth belongs to me...No one else can possess me. No one else can control me. No one else can speak for me. Through me. (135)
She is establishing her identity through her body and her awareness of it; she will not succumb to colonizing acts of discourse or identity.

The connection between content and form is testament to the project of this text in that the highly experimental form underscores the alternate process of identity formation explored by Allen. The fragmented nature of the text is important because, through her use of a short, sharp, non-linear style and sentences without subjects, Allen is both anticipating western expectations of autobiographic style and subjectivity and deliberately undermining them. Her frequent use of periods and commas means that she does not have to subordinate or coordinate certain words and phrases. This deliberate stylistic mode forces the reader to decide or discover the relationship among the words, and is thus enabled to make or draw associations from one part of the text to another:

Moonlight. On the floor. Shining. A voice in it saying words she did not quite hear. About two of them. Twin archers of the moon. Mumbled, the shadows, the silver light a bow, strung tight. (173)

The text does not acknowledge chronological time passing; rather, it is left up to the reader to establish what point in Ephanie's life is being related. Moreover, her seemingly excessive use of gerunds underscores the active, creative nature/agenda of the text; Ephanie is reinscribing and relocating herself in such a way to emphasize the cultural differences that form and format her
articulation of herself. "Frowning, smiling, shutting, piling, staring, cursing, nodding, winking, scolding, talking"—verbs and nouns that become seemingly interchangeable, deconstructing traditional western expectations of the structure of sentences and sentences of subjectivity (159-60). I read Allen's deliberately experimental autobiographical structure as indicative of her recognition of, and reaction against, the traditional devaluing of Native Americans' non-traditional forms of autobiography by "eurocentric assumptions [that] parallel women's attempts to speak outside the male tradition and the subsequent devaluing of women's speech by men" (Wong 25). In his autobiographical exploration of his "Indianness", The Way to Rainy Mountain, N. Scott Momaday writes that "a word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred" (164). Claiming and creating oneself through renegotiated parts of speech and language structure enables Native American women's autobiographical writing to move outside of previously constructed and historical identity practices that limit them to the role of exotic 'other' as exemplified by Ephanie's interactions with the well-meaning expectations of the liberal women and men she encounters.

The Frontier of Native American Autobiography: Exploring "That Place-Between-2-Places"
Diane Glancy's *Claiming Breath*, because of its free-flowing yet fragmentary poetic structure, is a perfect example of what I would describe as the autobiographical project of Native American women in that it (con)textualizes the legacy of Native American women's Indianness through its exploration of the myths and rituals of the figure of Old Spider woman, the sacred pipe, and the perfect ear of corn, all representational of women's power to make and to relate (*Sacred Hoop* 17). The highly experimental format of the book reflects how the autobiographical writings of contemporary Native American women disrupt and re-define expected textual practices.

The text is structured like a journal, with thirty-eight dated entries that are interrupted, in a seemingly random way, by titled sections, poems, and, lastly, eight sections that address issues of Native American lifestyle and legacy. *Claiming Breath* does not claim to be a chronological exploration of Glancy's life; rather, it is a deliberately constructed selection of her experiences over the space of an unspecified year. In the latter sections the book addresses issues of the oral tradition, the spirit world, the creation myth, and pow wows in order to demonstrate their relevance to Glancy's search for herself in that place between two legacies. Glancy writes/re-creates herself into the position of the Old Spider Women such that Allen's description of Old Spider woman reveals Glancy's intentions as well: her "variety and multiplicity testify to her complexity: she is the true creatrix for she is thought herself,
from which all else is born. She is the necessary precondition for material creation, and she, like all of her creation, is fundamentally female – potential and primary" (Sacred Hoop 14). What this position as creatrix means in practice is explained by Glancy's own entry which states that "I want to do it in a new [read female] way" (4).

Glancy's entry dated December 26 makes clear the agenda of her autobiographical project; she states that

I also want to explore the breakdown of boundaries between the genres. This 'communal' stance is inherent in the Native American heritage. The non-linear non-boundaried non-fenced open-prairied words. Non-creative fiction, nearly. It's something that's there. I don't have to make it up with the imagination. Just think of the relationships.

I want to explore my memories & their relational aspects to the present. I was born between 2 heritages & I want to explore the empty space, that place-between-2-places, that walk-in-2-worlds. I want to do it in a new way.

The word is important in Native America [sic] tradition. You speak the path on which you walk. Your words make the trail. You have to be careful with words. They can shape the future. For instance, when a brave hunted a bear, he first drew the bear with his arrow in it, then when he went hunting, the hunt was

8Creatrix is Allen's term for the creative yet very feminine and female potential of the Spider Woman; it is an extension of the matriarchal tendencies of Native American communities that existed before contact with the European settlers and colonizers.
For Glancy, drawing the hunt, writing her life, establishes her subject position as a self-constructed subjectivity that is outside the hegemonic definition of her as Native American woman. The power of words to shape reality is a direct extension of Native American's cultural formation through storytelling; the oral tradition, and its translation into the written text, serves to insure the continuing existence of Native American culture. Moreover, she is shaping the future of not only herself, but of Native American women as well, by being both subject and source of her creative action. Her recognition of her in part communal subjectivity as outside already established positionings is the fundamental pre-condition for her autobiographical act. Understanding the problematic of an identity constructed along the axis of another(‘s) culture is represented in the empty spaces of her text, in the vacuum that is not linearity, that is not bounded. The metaphor of the spider woman, in Allen's Sacred Hoop, as thought "herself, from which all else is born" provides an important metaphor for Glancy's autobiographical project in that it underscores the creative project that is women's autobiographical writing: writing themselves into existence, into a recognizable and political subject (14).

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9For further explanation of the connection between the written word and reality, see my discussion of N. Scott Momaday, 188-9.
The relevance and importance of the autobiographical project for Native American women is exemplified in Glancy's recognition of the power of language, and the need to expand or explore the boundaries and limitations of the language of the dominant and dominating culture. Taking control over a language that has, up until the recent past, attempted to construct a culture and a people according to the needs and understanding of the hegemonic group is, as discussed in previous chapters, one place of overlap in the agendas of both minority or third world feminists and minority women who write autobiographically. Glancy's use of the image of the frontier, a place of expansion and exploration, is very similar to Anzaldúa's metaphor of the "borderlands" in that Glancy recognizes the potential of the hybrid that is the result of the often conflicting influence of two cultures on a people. She states that

Some tools of writing are the rhythm of language, the imagery & the thought conveyed. Out west, the frontier is on the edge of form. Not shape, but structure & organization of the writing. It is tribal, this hybrid & unfamiliar of the familiar. It's the part that comes from not belonging. Bawks. [sic] Words push into the new sphere. Tribal means belonging, but not belonging to civilization. This is the tension that results. (7)

Civilization in this sense refers to a non-Indian world where non-Indian views form the monolithic and inflexible standard against which others are measured. I read Glancy's reference to the traditionally constructed Native American homeland after the
Indian Reorganization Act, the West, as an acknowledgement of the need to re-claim cultural legacies, to recognize the importance of Indianness, in order to achieve the potential inherent in the exploration of difference, cultural, textual, or political. This need to re-claim cultural legacies parallels the on-going land-claim settlements being fought by Native American groups, revealing the depth of the Native American project, to re-claim not only the physical but the cultural and the spiritual. Furthermore, this brief statement reflects both the communal orientation of Native American culture and the need for the dominant culture to recognize the "unfamiliar of the familiar" (7). The image of the frontier on the edge of form locates the need for Native Americans to explore and exploit their own borderlands in the non-traditional form of Native American autobiographical writing.

Writing is sometimes an act of empowerment; when a writer creates or constructs her own subject position, in lieu of being constructed as the object of another's discursive act, she is able to manipulate how and where she is located in social and political realms. Glancy acknowledges that she "also learned

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I do not mean to sound like a humanist with this point; when I speak of a writer's ability to manipulate her or his politics of location, I am, of course, indebted to Judith Butler's work on the subject, which claims that the subject is "neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process." She asks then, "where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes?" (13) I would argue that it is
independent as [she] taught writing" (53). Writing, for her, provides a means to mediate, to struggle with her womanness, her Indianness, her multiple marginalizations. She claims that "being a minority also enlarged my difficulties...I always felt unworthy of what I wrote. It has taken YEARS to find my way. But my Native American heritage is also a strength (especially the images I get from it for writing)" (52). The act of transcribing her life has become the act of transforming her life: through her autobiographical act, she is both theorizing and establishing her self, her subjectivity. This active, creative process can be better understood when read in conjunction with Roland Barthes' insistence that "in the field of the subject there is no referent" thus writing is a creative act, a political empowering act that establishes or explores a subjectivity not complicitous with a system ready to impose its definition (Paul Smith 111).11 Teresa de Lauretis defines Louis Althusser's term interpellation to mean the "process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact

in writing that one can rework existing power regimes by disrupting and calling into question discursive acts that objectify; in this way, one's politics of location can be renegotiated in relation to newly destabilized structures of power and discourse. (Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'").

imaginary" (Technologies of Gender 12). For Native American women writers, the threat of interpellation is ever-present because they have been defined historically and socially. Writing, creating, in order to dispel accepted and often assimilated social representations "is a continual process of historicization, the ever-renewable representation of instances of subjectivity and situation across time" (Barthes, qtd. in Smith 111). A renegotiated subjectivity, then, exists very self-consciously in relation to or as an extension or opposition to the existing discourses of history, culture, representation, and/or subjectivity; it is deliberately in dialogue with existing notions in order to disrupt or deconstruct such notions.\textsuperscript{12} For Native American writers, as exemplified by Glancy's text, the opportunity for a continuing project of re-historicization provides an entry, or at least a dissenting voice, into a previously dominating and biased interpretation of themselves. Glancy's journey of or toward her self is typified by her creation of the term SHEdonism, which she defines as the enjoyment of oneself as a woman. As a figure marginalized both by culture and by sex,

\textsuperscript{12}I take as my point of departure on this discussion of subjectivity Teresa de Lauretis' insightful theories regarding gender and the institutionalized technologies that contrubute to its formation. She states that "the subject of feminism I have in mind is one not so defined, one whose definition or conception is in progress." The subject of Native American autobiographical writings then, is one not so defined by social discourses, but is instead in progress. (Technologies of Gender 57).
Glancy has recognized the power inherent in writing, in manipulating language so that discursive acts include, not exclude her. The relevance of SHEdonism in her life is that it "includes the ability to sort through things and live with dichotomy, even in a world that has its own fragments and conflicts" (52). Implicit in Paula Gunn Allen's statement earlier in this discussion, that Indian women are invisible in this culture, is the legacy of multiple marginalization that Native American women are forced to confront. Glancy's deliberate re-structuring of HEdonism, complete with its signifier of male and phallic privileging, represents a direct challenge to a culture and an history that suppresses and others women. Her writing is directly linked to her living: "the releation of words," she says, "their boldness, the imaginative impact of combined images, of seeing the familiar in a new way. That's what writing is. That's what living is. That's probably what feminism is" (53). Her act of seeing the familiar in a new way, of re-locating and re-politicizing the familiar, represents the potential inherent within Trinh T. Minh-Ha's the "inappropriate/d others" that refers to "the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either 'self' or 'other' offered by previously dominant, modern western narratives of identity and politics" (Haraway's "Monsters" 299).13 Glancy's

13Trinh T. Minh-ha's inappropriate/d others is explored by Donna Haraway in her recent "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others" in Lawrence Grossberg et al's Cultural Studies.
refusal to accept the hegemonic culture's already constructed self provides the impetus to re-appropriate the language of the dominant culture, to re-claim the tools of the master's house, to re-inscribe her subjectivity.

Glancy's text must be read as a direct acknowledgement of her marginality. She writes "margin writing. I remember it as a child. Writing in the margins of a book" which describes her self-positioning in relation to the dominant culture (76). She writes from and in the margins of the dominant culture, not to underscore her object positioning but to challenge, to dissent, in order to change hierarchicized discursive practices:

I like to surprise words.  
Ask them to do what they're not supposed to.  
Just yes I guess embarrass them.

Put them where they don't belong. 76

She is putting herself where, according to the hegemonic culture, she does not belong; that is, she is establishing herself as a speaking subject, not a silenced and silent object.

The final section of her autobiographical project is entitled "Oral Tradition Carries the Fire (The Spirit of the People). In this piece Glancy explores the ramifications of the imposition of another's language and culture on her people, the importance of re-discovering her culture, and the non-traditional means of articulation practiced by Native Americans. She states that
having one's language stripped is like having one's skin removed. Anything can get in. Alcoholism among all tribes is common. It results from the loss of culture, & personal & tribal identity. A sense of purposelessness follows. All because the oral tradition is severed. Does not the Bible say 'My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge'? [Hosea 4:6].

(111)

It is an ironic twist that Glancy uses the tools of the master, the Bible, which was often cited as the grounds for civilizing the "heathens," to deconstruct the theft of her culture.

The final pages of her text align the importance of her project, writing herself into being as a speaking subject, with the necessity of continuing the legacy of the Native American oral tradition. She cites the words of poet Susan Stewart as an epilogue both to her text and to her people's future:

When the word disappears the thing disappears.
When our way of talk disappears, we disappear. (113)

Claiming Breath is a textual exploration of the importance of self-discovery and self-delineation for Native Americans; moreover, it is an exaltation of an oral tradition that, despite or because of its differences, will not be silenced by the dominant discourse that, unable to assimilate the traditions and cultures of Native Americans, will ultimately learn to acknowledge and appreciate their differences.
Leslie Marmon Silko's 1981 autobiographical text, *Storyteller*, is much more an oral performance piece than a recognizable autobiographical work in that it is a compilation of untitled photographs and images from her past, poetry, Laguna archetypal tales, and personal experiences. The fragmented, mosaic-type structure of the text denies any connection with western expectations of text or tale, moving among the experiences and traditional teachings of her upbringing without apology or explanation. The lack of focus on Silko as individual helps to establish the overtly cultural-based agenda of Native American women's autobiographical writing; providing equal if not greater attention to the Laguna archetypes and tales enables the reader to understand the importance of the storytelling tradition to the formation of the Native America identity. In her exploration of Native American autobiography, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years*, Hertha Dawn Wong attempts to theorize the important role played by the oral tradition in the formation of a Native American tradition. She writes that considering these distinctly Native American ideas about the nature of self, life, and language, the word autobiography is inappropriate unless redefined to end the ethnocentric exaltation of the written word. A more suitable term might be communo-bio-oratory (community-life-speaking), since its roots reflect the
communal and often oral nature of early Native American autobiographical expressions. (20)\textsuperscript{14}

*Storyteller* is definitely rooted in the communo-bio-oratory style intrinsic to the Native American autobiographical tradition that challenges and undermines the intrusive nature of Western or Eurocentric expectations and assumptions. Moreover, utilizing such an overtly experimental form directly challenges the traditional devaluing of non-traditional forms of Native American autobiography by Eurocentric assumptions that can be read as parallel to women's attempts to speak outside the male tradition and the subsequent devaluing of women's speech by men.

*Storyteller* has been described as a "polyphonic autobiography" that intertwines the memories and experiences of an entire people in order to demonstrate the importance of the past on the formation of the future (Wong 188). Polyphonic instead of polyvocal, sounds and images heard, not spoken: teachings so intrinsic to the formation of one's identity that affirming their existence affirms one's own. "What characterizes the oral text is its interactive, communal nature, which transgresses the author(ity) in the written text" (Godard 91). Silko herself says of the text that the "people, stories, poems, and

\textsuperscript{14}Wong defines the distinct nature of Native American self as being oriented around a communal or relational identity that will tend to be cyclical not linear, a self that is event-oriented and more inclusive than a Western or Euro-American sense of self (7-17).
pictures are a "way of knowing" that say to the reader, "find the relationships and the meaning yourself" because the interplay among the spoken prose, short stories, poems and photos "demonstrates the way remembrance work" (Bataille and Sands 139). Autobiography thus becomes a way of remembering one's inheritances, traditions and family; understood this way, Storyteller is paradigmatic of Native American texts that work to redefine a culture while they work to define both a tradition and a person.

Storyteller's emphasis on remembrance and non-linearity owes, in part, a debt to N. Scott Momaday's 1969 The Way to Rainy Mountain, a self-consciously oral attempt at textual autobiography. However, as Arnold Krupat explains in his chapter "Monologue and Dialogue," Silko is radically revising Momaday in that his style is monologue, based in part on his Western influences, while hers is dialogue and polyphony (The Voice in the Margin 181-2). His text transcends any expectation of Eurocentric autobiographical tradition by drawing on the "pre-contact" style of preliterate life-telling.\footnote{Pre-contact can be defined as Native American life as it existed before any interaction or influence by European or Westernized settlers.} In preliterate autobiography, the emphasis is on succinct stories of life episodes, not the recounting of an entire life. Thus The Way to Rainy Mountain is an amalgamation of Indian narratives that draws from an assortment of anthropological, historical, psychological and literary documents.
whose guiding principle is that Momaday's "sense of himself is determined not only by his own remembrances but also by all that his tribe (and his family, Kiowa and Anglo) remembers in its myths and its history" (H. David Brumble 175). His discontinuous style is echoed in Silko's text as is his attempt to "imagine the literate equivalent of preliterate autobiography" (Brumble 178). However, Momaday's insistence on monologue, an individual voice, differs greatly from Silko's recognition of the influence of the community, as demonstrated by her use of dialogue and polyphonic voices, an insistence seemingly inherent to the autobiographical writings of Native American women. The tripartite structure of The Way to Rainy Mountain "reflects three narrative voices: the mythical, the historical, and the personal, each accentuated by different typeface" (Wong 160). The use of clearly delineated, differing voices marks a direct contrast to the multiple voices that Allen and Glancy seemingly subsume into their own voices, in their respective texts. Although the entirety of Momaday's text is "testimony to the power of language to create and shape reality, to recreate myth, to recollect history, to recall personal responses, and to unify these imaginatively" it is somewhat ethnographically based. The discussions of tribal coup tales, Kiowa myth, songs, and history seem very deliberately structured for the un-informed reader. Despite its experimental nature, The Way to Rainy Mountain seems directed not to the Kiowa nation but to other, non-Native Americans.
Instead of asserting the identity of the individual, Marmon Silko, the opening lines of *Storyteller* assert its commitment to the oral tradition of Laguna culture: "there is a tall Hopi basket with a single figure woven into it which might be a Grasshopper or a Hummingbird Man" (1). She tells "her mythical, community, and personal narratives, continuing the Laguna tradition of spinning personal identity form communal stories. Just as Grandmother Spider (Thought Woman) sings creation into being, the storyteller spins words into stories like an autobiographer creating a present pattern from remembered forms" (Wong 188). Silko introduces herself through her acknowledgement of the important role the photographs hold in the formation of her identity, and their connection to the stories she ascribes to her selfhood:

It wasn't until I began this book
that I realized that the photographs in the Hopi basket
have a special relationship to the stories as I remember them.
The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories
and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs. (1)

Through this acknowledgement of the debt to the photographs
Silko is both anticipating her readers' response to the highly experimental style of the text and esstablishing the role played on the textual and the personal level by not only the photographs but by the combination of stories, memories, and poetry as well.
The first person Silko introduces is not herself but her great aunt as she was the person who instilled in Silko the importance of the oral histories of her tribe and her traditions. The great aunt had the wisdom and foresight to recognize the threat posed by the possibilities of assimilation and the imposition of a monolithic Western culture; moreover, she understood the cultural costs of non-Indian oriented schooling that separated the stories and the tellers from the next generation of children. Silko's great aunt must have realized

that the atmosphere and conditions which had maintained this oral tradition in Laguna culture had been irrevocably altered by the European intrusion—principally by the practice of taking the children away from Laguna to Indian schools, taking the children away from the tellers who had in all past generations told the children an entire culture, an entire identity of people. [sic] (6)

Separating the children from their cultural legacy divided and disempowered the Laguna people, in the same way that imperial powers that imposed their language and culture on colonized groups disenfranchised and weakened them. Moreover, her aunt's recognition of the importance of storytelling, of the oral traditions, reiterates the community-oriented culture of Native Americans that is perpetuated through the communal nature of storytelling, a practice radically different from Western practices of autobiography. Storytelling is understood then, as an example of
how language shapes the world, not merely reflects it, and how it represents an alternative discourse to the White man’s stories of Indians.

When Silko speaks of her experiences at the government school, she is echoing the experiences described by Sandra Cisneros and Cherrie Moraga who too felt trapped between two cultures by social institutions. Written into the short story "Storyteller" is the warning against the imposition of one culture over another. The inclusion of the warning in the form of a traditional tale demonstrates the continuing evolution/creation of the Native American culture, and the emphasis placed on the learning/teaching intrinsic to oral teachings. Silko writes that "she did not see what the Gussuck [white] school would do to her until she walked into the dormitory and realized that the old man had not been lying about the place. . . The dormitory matron pulled down her underpants and whipped her with a leather belt because she refused to speak English" (19). The warnings of the old man represent the warnings of the old ways of life, of traditions, and culture. His ongoing speech, that he talked "all night sometimes, not to anyone but himself; in a soft deliberate voice, he told stories" illustrates his reaction to the threat he perceived the Gussacks to represent: the death of the old ways and the end of the stories that contained and continued the culture (20). The tale itself tells of a young woman who has lost her parents because of some unnamed evil sold to them as alcohol.
by the white storekeeper and who now lives with an old couple, both close to death. She refuses to return to the "Gussuck" school and instead spends her time among the white men who work on the oilrigs. Ultimately she plots the death of the storeowner who she holds responsible for the death of her parents, and symbolically, the death of the old ways. Using her allure as an exotic "other" she lures him to his death on the partially frozen river; his ignorance about the dangers of the landscape reveal his, and the Gussuck culture's, inability to understand the Native American culture around them. The reader understands that the death of the white man is necessary to enable the telling of the girl's story, a story that warns of the treachery of the white culture. Speaking from the jail she refuses to leave, the girl states that "it will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any more lies" (26). The girl who tells the story and those who hear it learn the importance of the stories and of the old ways as a means to preserve marginalized peoples and cultures. Although the tale is told in the third person, and it is presented as an addition to the oral tradition, the reader is expected to understand the impact such a telling has on the life and identity of Marmon Silko, and to appreciate the communal experiences that link the identity formations of Native Americans.

The presence of the old man's warnings in Silko's tale represents her recognition of the need to preserve the old ways and the traditional teachings of Native American culture. The
autobiographical projects of Mary Crow Dog, Paula Gunn Allen, Diane Glancy and Leslie Marmon Silko share an understanding of the distinct and often tenuous positioning of Native Americans in contemporary America. The texts also hold in common a commitment to renew, not simply preserve, the legacies of each distinct Native American nation so that differences, whether cultural, political, or textual, are recognized and explored, and not negated by the discursive acts of the dominant culture. Thus I read autobiographical writings by contemporary Native American women as a reaction against an historically specific act of marginalization that almost resulted in the extermination of a culture and a people. Ultimately then, such texts represent the resurgence of interest and investment in Native American culture, ritual, oral teachings, and tradition, re-claimed, in part, through the medium of autobiography that gives voice to a culture long-silenced.
Conclusion:
Identity by Way of Alterity

To trust the power and vitality of my own words as they leave me and float out into the universe, and to respect my own voice as much as I do the voices of other creatures in the universe, are perhaps the greatest lessons of writing and survival that I have learned thus far. (Walters 27)

As suggested by my choice of epigraph, writing and survival are terms intrinsically linked to the process of autobiography. Whether they are struggling to overcome a history of racial or sexual prejudices, government-sanctioned acts of extermination, or socially-constructed barriers of language and cultural differences, minority women utilize the potential of the autobiographic act in the formation of their distinct subjectivity. Autobiography then represents a theoretical approach that recognizes and articulates both individual agency and the limitations that society places upon it. At the onset of this project I stated that I believe autobiography provides the access point that will enable increased levels of understanding between hegemonic and non-hegemonic groups. Thus, the study of autobiographic writings by marginalized women will dispel charges of essentialism that threaten to divide the power of a unified women's movement and, more importantly, will enable feminism to address concerns specific to individual groups.

My choice of the term alterity in the title of this section exemplifies my understanding of how minority women writers
position themselves in, and through, their autobiographies. Alterity is defined by the act of identifying oneself in relation to another, and, I argue, contemporary women writers make that alterity a strength, a position from which to write. Harriet Jacobs' creation of her alternate persona, Linda Brent, enabled her to critique the institution of slavery and the cult of true womanhood. The sense of community evidenced by the writings of Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston demonstrate these writers' commitment to not only themselves but to the African-American culture as well. Mary Crow Dog and Diane Glancy formulate their subjectivity based on a newly-discovered understanding of the rituals and traditions of their Native American past. Ultimately then, one of the defining elements of contemporary women's autobiographical writing is the writer's investment in the re-fashioning of her perceived self, and, by extension, the perceptions the hegemonic culture holds about her community.

Marginalized women's complex vision of identity, as demonstrated by their texts, reveal the multiple axes of discursive acts that contribute to the formation of subjectivity: race, class, sex, sexual choice, community. As this study has shown, autobiography provides the venue with which women may disrupt and re-write existing discursive acts that seek to identify them through oppressions. The evolution of autobiography, from

1Mary Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," 231.
the narrow focus of traditional male autobiographic practices to the transformational powers of contemporary women's texts, suggests that perhaps the fluid selves of poststructuralism are not limited to contemporary women but may enable marginalized men to write as well.

What I have explored in this project is more than simply a reaction against the limitations of the male autobiographic tradition, which provides too narrow a point of departure for men as well as women. Instead, what I have tried to demonstrate is the potential inherent in representations of the self. My study serves to locate differences in autobiographical form and content in order to expand notions not only of representations of the self, but of approaches to autobiography as well.

I hope the readings of the texts that I have presented will contribute to, or perhaps act as the catalyst for, discussions about these writers, issues of identity formation, and the study of autobiography as a genre. What I ultimately discovered in the writing of this project is the need to listen to the experiences and voices of those marginalized by the dominant culture's discursive acts, because their voices reveal a complexity far beyond the parameters of a purely theoretical study. The alterity demonstrated by these writers' commitment to their communities and cultures reveals their understanding of autobiography as much more than a literary genre. Moreover, alterity provides an access point for the reader to identify with, and understand, the
experiences and concerns of the writer. For those positioned on the margins and borders of the dominant culture, writing becomes a means of survival, a tangible counterpoint to a culture that threatens to subsume them.


Perry, Linda A.M., Lynn H. Turner and Helen M. Sterk, eds. Constructing and Reconstructing Gender: The Links Among


