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Author and audience across cultural margins: Narrative transactions between ethnic writers and outsider readers

Richardson, Susan Starr Bleyler, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1994

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AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE ACROSS CULTURAL MARGINS:
NARRATIVE TRANSACTIONS
BETWEEN ETHNIC WRITERS AND OUTSIDER READERS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School
of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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To the Memory of My Father
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For DPC
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INVISIBLE MAN AND RALPH ELLISON, ANTAGONISTIC COLLABORATOR</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context and Criticism</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ralph Ellison and Audience</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Antagonistic Cooperation&quot;</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Text</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invisible Man, Character</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative Strategies</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humor, Laughter, Irony</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Yes, Yes, Yes!&quot;</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Narrator and His Characterized Audience</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Implied Author and His Distrusted Audience</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Boomerang</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>TOSHIO MORI AND HISAYE YAMAMOTO, NISEI FABRICATORS</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context and History</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Texts</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOSHIO MORI</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Stories</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HISAYE YAMAMOTO</td>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Morning Rain&quot;</td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Wilshire Bus&quot;</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The High-Heeled Shoes, A Memoir&quot;</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Seventeen Syllables&quot;</td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Legend of Miss Sasagawara&quot;</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. THE SALT EATERS AND TONI CADE BAMBARA, AFRICAN-AMERICAN GRIOT ..........173

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context and Community</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Text</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Strategies</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel Form</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator as Medium</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinematic Techniques</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and Duration</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Music Matters</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction Techniques</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Grammar</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CODA: SIGNIFYING ON RALPH ELLISON .............215

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in Bambara and Ellison</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience and Rootedness</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. DONALD DUK AND FRANK CHIN, DIDACTICIAN .....244

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context and Manifesto</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Text</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Strategies</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Outcome</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heteroglossia (Nonetheless)</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. TRIPMASTER MONKEY: HIS FAKE BOOK AND MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, AMERICAN TALK-STORY DAEDALATOR ......................288

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context and Representation</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Text</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Strategies</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative as Fake Book</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Narrator's Fake Book</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Book</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CODA: TAI CHI CHUAN EXERCISING .................329

EPILOGUE .................................................333

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................341
INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of the narrative transactions between an ethnic writer and an outsider reader? How is a reader's understanding enhanced or blocked, how is meaning communicated or distorted when an author must also serve as a translator of culture, or a mediator between cultures?

The complex process of communication between author and audience through a narrative text depends upon the rhetorical strategies employed by the author to engage the reader and the interpretive strategies employed by the reader to fill in the textual gaps. Understanding depends heavily upon the prior knowledge and experience that a reader brings to an engagement with a text. When reader and writer belong to the same culture and share common values, experience, language, myths and so on, the text is more likely to meet the reader's expectations, and the interpretations by reader and writer are more likely to converge than when their culture and experience differ. Conversely, a text characterized by the unfamiliar is more likely to curtail a narrative's intelligibility and to strain or compromise a reader's understanding. In response, readers may impose meaning that distorts the narrative or fill in narrative gaps in ways that ignore or contradict the surrounding text.

Reading that occurs across a cultural boundary, in other words, carries the risk of a reader losing her way or of constructing meaning that diverges substantially from that of the author. To members of a mainstream American audience--that is, to white, middleclass, Eurocentric
readers--ethnic American texts can present puzzling obstacles to understanding. In part, the obstacles may be the result of content. In drawing on the resources of their particular culture, ethnic writers may incorporate culture-specific folk figures and forms, or refer to intra-group experience and stories, or employ ethnic-based humor. In part, the genre itself may undergo change (for example, the incorporation of orality, or the positing of mistrust between narrator and audience) that compromises intelligibility. Indeed, Werner Sollors claims that, "Ethnic writers, alerted to cultural clashes, may feel the need for new forms earlier or more intensely than mainstream authors" (Beyond Ethnicity 247). Language, too, may be richly textured with idioms, rhythms, and vocabulary that are foreign to mainstream, English discourse. For readers who are outsiders to the culture, such a text is marked by the strange and made difficult.

Furthermore, the bicultural experience of the ethnic writer and the accompanying, ever-present sense of a double--or divided--nature may defamiliarize the text and block understanding for a single-culture reader. The assumptions and values that undergird an ethnic narrative as well as the storytelling techniques that structure it are influenced by this bicultural matrix, and the very effort involved in mixing and merging diverse, often contradictory elements in a single narrative is itself part of a reality that contrasts dramatically with monocultural experience. In his often-quoted articulation of this doubleness, W. E. B. DuBois describes it as:

>a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (The Souls of Black Folk; qtd. in Chametzky Decentralized 4)
Extending DuBois's referent, Jules Chametzky describes the ontological effect of this internalized doubleness for anyone subjected to any variety of cultural dominance: "Every Jew in Christendom, every woman in a male-dominated world, every Southerner (or Westerner) in the United States, every person of color in a racist society, knows there are at least two answers to every question" (Decentralized 4). While this dividedness-doubleness may not be foregrounded in the content or theme of the ethnic narrative, it invariably characterizes the experience out of which an ethnic writer works. Doubled also is the writer's sense of the rhetorical situation in which the authorial audience consists of readers from both the ethnic and the dominant cultures. As Werner Sollors observes:

Ethnic writers in general confront an actual or imagined double audience, composed of "insiders" and of readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the writer's ethnic group. . . . [The result is that i]mperceptibly and sometimes involuntarily, writers begin to function as translators of ethnicity to ignorant, and sometimes hostile, outsiders and, at the same time, as mediators between "America" and greenhorns." (Beyond Ethnicity 249-50)

Power relations mark the particular cross-ethnic boundary I am interested in studying--the boundary between a privileged, white, middle class reader of the so-called mainstream culture and an author from an ethnic group that is further marked (and stigmatized) by race. Across this boundary, historical and social factors profoundly influence the form and success of literary transactions. When there is unequal access to cultural power or when a relationship of oppressed and oppressor obtains, then communication can be complicated in a variety of ways. Deliberate complication occurs, for example, when the more powerful group exerts censorship: either directly as in laws against literacy or internment camp surveillance, or indirectly by means of restrictive publishing or critical literary
practices. An oppressed group also may obscure meaning by devising code or by using ironic, doubletongued discourse as exemplified by slave songs and internment camp literary magazines.

Discourse between the dominant and subdominant groups can be interrupted from either direction. Readers who find a text too alien, or alienating, may refuse to continue reading, or they may dismiss the text with labels of "trivial," "unsuccessful," or "inferior." Others may, out of ignorance or on the basis of faulty assumption, misunderstand or misconstrue meaning. Writers, too, may compromise the transaction by complying, or being complicit, with the pressure to conform to mainstream expectations or to repress material that might disturb white readers; or writers may respond to such pressure by including a subtext and "subversive" material difficult for an outsider to decipher. Furthermore, an ethnic writer may deliberately exclude outsider-readers and address solely his or her own group. Writers of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, for example, explicitly espoused an "ethnic insiderism" (Lawrence Oliver's term) that excluded a white majority audience in order to celebrate blackness and create group cohesiveness. Ethnic writers may also--because they "know at least two answers" to every question--use their greater knowledge to reverse the dynamics of power in the transactions with their audience.

I am interested in the kinds and effects of artistic choices made by authors in the face of these social realities, and the kinds of responses made by readers to their choices. How does an ethnic writer placate or guide, defy or trick a privileged reader, and how is meaning either achieved or blocked between them? How and when does an ethnic author exclude a mainstream reader from the authorial audience, or try to educate--and possibly change--the audience? How, in turn, does the reader meet the
intellectual and emotional challenges from a text that alienates or an author that excludes that reader or her group? How does an outsider-reader become engaged with the text because or in spite of authorial strategies, and in that engagement, when do ethical and emotional commitments converge, when do they diverge?

Terminology

The terms that I use to denote dominant and subdominant cultural groups are elusive and controversial. "Mainstream" and "margin," "majority" and "minority" have all come under criticism for being both inaccurate and politically insensitive. "Mainstream" is not only vague, but suggests something that is normal, universal, and unmarked by ethnicity. The location of "the center" or "margin" is indeterminate for it shifts according to a subject's position and point of view. As descriptors of American society, "majority" and "minority" are rapidly becoming numerically misleading, and they are further burdened with honorific or pejorative connotations. Furthermore, a binary majority-minority (or mainstream-margin, dominant-subdominant) opposition privileges white-ethnic relations and thereby obscures the complexity of ethnicity and the multiplicity of inter-ethnic transactions.

However, despite the problems associated with these terms, it is difficult to find terms that avoid them—perhaps any vocabulary that denotes dominating and dominated groups is tainted by the realities it expresses. In this discussion, then, I will use "mainstream" audience and "majority" culture as synonyms with "dominant" to refer to the white, Euroamerican group (of which I am a member); "ethnic" will be more or less synonymous with "minority" and, as I explain below, will generally refer to people of color. My primary concern is with the narrative interactions between various other ethnic groups and my own
"majority" group; the audience from which I will operate is one made up of socially privileged outsider-readers. In almost all categories—race, and also class, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, even region (Northeast United States)—I read from a position of privilege, and the audience which I posit reflects, tacitly in some cases, this position. The single category in which I do not enjoy privilege is gender. So, out of the mesh of social categories that are inextricable from race in real life, gender is the only one that will seriously complicate my consideration of narrative transactions across race boundaries; and when it is appropriate to the author or narrative under discussion, I will address questions of female readership and the fictional treatment of women.

The terms "race" and "ethnicity" also elude tidy definition. Ethnicity scholars intentionally blur the nature of "ethnicity" when they maintain that "being American and being ethnic are part of a single cultural framework" (Boelhower 10) or that "ethnic writing is American writing" (Sollors, qtd. in Boelhower 3). An important corollary is that "American" (qua white mainstream culture) is also ethnically marked and not, as is popularly assumed, unmarked or universal. Werner Sollors defines ethnicity as the "acquired modern sense" of "belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group" (Invention xiii), and as "the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy. . . not a thing but a process" (Invention xiv-xv). Ethnicity is thus defined by antithesis or negativity—as the distinction between self and "other." According to Sollors, it "typically emerges not as a thing (let alone a static, permanent or 'pure' thing) but as the result of interactions" (Invention xix). Both Sollors and William Boelhower stress the constructed nature of ethnicity and the salience of real-world power relations in its construction: "It is always the specificity of power
relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act itself" (Invention xvi).

An issue that has generated much debate among ethnicists concerns the relation between ethnicity and race—whether race should be considered as a special subcategory of ethnicity or as an altogether separate category. Sollors views race as an aspect of ethnicity and calls racism a "virulent type[] of ethnocentrism" (Invention xvi). However, critics of the "Ethnicity School" (Alan Wald's term) contend that relegating "race" to a feature of certain ethnic groups glosses over crucial historical differences between people of color and Anglo-European immigrants. Lawrence J. Oliver, for example, cites the argument of Robert Blauner (Racial Oppression in America):

[T]he experiences of American racial minorities cannot be adequately interpreted within the framework of immigration and assimilation because the histories of dark-skinned groups in the US have more in common with those of colonized peoples of the "Third World" than with Anglo-European immigrants. (795)

Oliver also counters Sollors's argument by pointing out that racial minorities are consigned to their category in contrast to white immigrants who have exercised choice, and who can be said, in Sollors's terms, to have "invented their ethnicity" (801). Furthermore, as Oliver notes, throughout American history white society has indeed—de jure and de facto—made a sharp distinction between race and ethnicity (801). The harshest critics of the Ethnicity School contend that by erasing the differences between immigrant groups and colonized minorities, their theory "destroys history." E. San Juan, Jr. charges that the ethnicists' espousal of a cultural pluralism is merely a "refurbished" and "streamlined" version of the essentialist and discredited metaphor of the melting pot. Indeed, San Juan views those
associated with "the cult of ethnicity" as racist: "Clearly a sophisticated form of racism is resurrected here behind the mask of liberal tolerance and the celebration of cultural diversity" ("Cult" 221).

On the other hand, in a more balanced view, R. Radhakrishnan cites the paradox associated with race:

No sooner do we mention "race," than we are caught in a treacherous bind. To say "race" seems to imply that "race" is real; but it also means that differentiation by race is racist and unjustifiable on scientific, theoretical, moral, and political grounds. . . . "[R]ace" has been the history of an untruth, of an untruth that unfortunately is our history. (6)

Kwame Anthony Appiah likens race to witches: "however unreal witches are, belief in witches, like belief in races, has had---and in many communities continues to have---profound consequences for human social life" (Lentricchia 277). In tracing the consequences of racialist thinking upon literature, Appiah writes that "Race becomes important as the theme of a great body of writing in Europe and North America . . . [and] often plays a crucial role in structuring plot" (279) because of the emergence of European nationalism and its emphasis upon a national literature to forge a national culture (283). This intertwining of nationalism, racism, and literary production explains for Appiah the impact of socio-political realities upon literature at the juncture of race as well as the fact that "the major proportion of the published writing of Afro-Americans, even when not directed to countering racist mythology, has been concerned thematically with issues of race" [an observation that could be applied as well to other American racial minorities] (Lentricchia 286).

My own view straddles the two positions: in theory, ethnicity is the general category which subsumes race as a special subcategory; in practice, race has social implications that are qualitatively different from those
generally associated with ethnicity. While I treat racial
groups as ethnic, I am persuaded by the analogy between the
colonization of Third World peoples and the history of
people of color within the United States. The American
experience for racial minorities is characterized by an
absence of choice and accommodation as well as by an extreme
exploitation and reduction to subhuman "other" that is not
typical for European immigrants. The African American slave
experience of violence and violation is without parallel in
American history. Unique also is the hunted and herded
history of Native American peoples. Asian Americans arrived
in "Gold Mountain" in search of a better standard of living,
but unlike European groups with a similar goal, the legal,
economic, and political status of Asians in the United
States was, and in new ways still is, restricted because of
their race. A prime example is the Second World War
classification of Japanese Americans as "enemy" and their
internment in concentration camps--treatment unmatched by
the wartime treatment of German- and Italian-Americans.
Thus, while "race" may be chimerical, racism--however
unfounded or unfortunate--has real consequences for American
minority groups.

For this study, I have chosen narratives by writers
from ethnic groups which are distinguished by color and
whose American history has been defined by race. In my
discussion, therefore, the terms "ethnic" and "minority"
will generally refer to racially identifiable groups. I
have selected pairs of authors--a woman and a man (to allow
gender issues to emerge where relevant)--from each of three
groups: African American, Japanese American, and Chinese
American. All are twentieth-century narrative works
although their dates of publication range from the 1940s to
the 1990s and span the watershed decade of the 1960s during
which author-audience relations experienced some shifting
along with general social change. Specifically, the

**Narrative Theory**

My consideration of the interaction between readers and writers is influenced by the ideas of a number of critics. Reader-response theorists, especially Wolfgang Iser, have helped to delineate the role and creative activities of the reader. The rhetorical theories of James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz have guided my examination of the features of a narrative and the ways that author and audience engage with a text to transact meaning. M. M. Bakhtin provides a very useful model for discovering and sorting out meaning, both authorial and social, and his concepts of multiple, contending voices, and of centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in the text attest to the dynamic nature of narrative. Bakhtin and ethnicists Sollors and Boelhower foreground the encounter and clash of diverse groups and ideas, and their focus helps articulate for me the political and ontological impact of such encounters upon our thinking, upon our perception of reality, and upon the shape of our narratives. In addition, Bakhtin, Iser, and Rabinowitz advance the idea that narrative can effect change in the reader, and that a literary transaction has the potential for transformation in the real world; in other words, our stories and our reading have importance beyond themselves.

Reader-response critics focus upon the reader's active role in creating meaning and upon the collaborative nature of the narrative text. In Wolfgang Iser's communication model, reading is a dynamic process in which an "implied
reader" has the role of searching for the author's intention among the conventions and narrative strategies employed in the text, of assembling meaning from the varied perspectives of the implied author, the characters, and the plot, and of imaginatively bridging the gaps or indeterminacies that occur within the text. Unlike some reader-response theorists, Iser preserves the notion of a stable text that exhibits authorial intentions and at the same time focuses upon the necessity--and value--of the reader's effort to fill in textual gaps. Iser suggests that it is the imaginative work itself that produces meaning and satisfaction for the reader.

For this investigation, I too posit a stable text designed by an author for a particular narrative purpose. My effort as reader is to attend to the set of rhetorical strategies employed by the author to achieve that design and purpose, and to create a text that approaches the author's version as the most complete and most authentic to the experience and culture from which it emerges. At the same time, my membership in the dominant group puts me at a disadvantage in the attempt to achieve understanding, and so my discussion will include both the struggles and successes of cross-cultural narrative communication.

Central to my approach to ethnic writing is Iser's claim that when readers interact with a literary text, they come to question the thought systems of the actual world; from this questioning they begin to change within themselves. As Iser describes the process:

If the literary work arises out of the reader's own social or philosophical background, it will serve to detach prevailing norms from their functional context, thus enabling the reader to observe how such social regulators function, and what effect they have on the people subject to them. The reader is thus placed in a position from which he can take a fresh look at the forces which guide and orient him, and which he may hitherto have accepted without question. If these norms have now faded into past history, and the reader
is no longer entangled in the system from which they arose, he will be able not only to reconstruct, from their recodification, the historical situation that provided the framework for the text but also to experience for himself the specific deficiencies brought about by those historical norms, and to recognize the answers implicit in the text. And so the literary recodification of social and historical norms has a double function: it enables the participants--or contemporary readers--to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day-living; and it enables the observers--the subsequent generations of readers--to grasp a reality that was never their own. (Act 74)

What Iser describes as the double function of the relation between a text and readers of a different time can apply as well to a text and readers of a different culture. Through the text, readers are able to grasp a new reality; they reconstruct a cultural reality not their own and experience for themselves the "specific deficiencies brought about by those [cultural] norms."

Reed Way Dasenbrock focuses specifically upon multicultural transactions, and he makes the persuasive argument that a reader's struggle to make the unfamiliar in a text intelligible is essential to the very experience of multiculturalism. Indeed, he argues that a certain lack of intelligibility is desirable:

The difficulty experienced by a less informed reader, far from preventing that reader from experiencing the work justly, is what creates meaning for that reader. A full or even adequate understanding of another culture is never to be gained by translating it entirely into one's own terms. . . . [Barriers to intelligibility force] the reader to do work that then becomes part of the book's meaning. It is not as if the author could have made things easy but refused. Making things easy would have denied the reader the experience needed to come to an understanding of the culture. (18)

The distinction between intelligibility and meaningfulness is apt, I believe, and I agree with Dasenbrock that for an uninformed reader the sense of
defamiliarization caused by a culturally strange text and the consequent effort required to make it intelligible can approximate a multicultural experience. In subsequent readings, however, the reader will use the familiarity acquired through that initial, tentative reading to achieve a more complete version of the text and a more secure membership in the author's community. In this connection, Peter J. Rabinowitz examines the ways by which authors and readers collaborate through narrative conventions; he claims that "in the case of successful authorial reading, the author and readers are members of the same community, so while the reader does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes what the author intended to be found" (Before Reading 27-28). During the reading process, actual flesh-and-blood readers move in and out of diverse kinds of audience that they join more or less consciously, more or less successfully. Rabinowitz and James Phelan analyze the nature and function of various types of audience and trace the ways that readers negotiate within them as they assemble (or misconstrue) meaning during the reading process. In this study, I try to chart my own membership as a (female) reader from the majority culture in the audiences--narrative, authorial, characterized--of these multicultural narratives.

The political dimension of reading literature, a crucial matter for ethnic fiction, also interests Rabinowitz, and he examines the distribution of status and power between readers and writers in order to uncover "the political presuppositions behind our literary practices" (Before Reading 3). Rabinowitz's suggestion that "the analysis might not only change what and how we read, but might also encourage a change in the way we live" (Before Reading 9-10) echoes Iser's description of the potential for change in the reader and supports my own approach to--or hope for--the study of ethnic fiction.
The play of power relations within a narrative text is further, forcefully illuminated by the ideas of M. M. Bakhtin. The novel, for Bakhtin, emerges as a weapon for democratic ideology, and his description of the contending social forces within a text seems to me particularly relevant to the dynamics of ethnic American writing. Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and dialogism harmonize with the double-consciousness of ethnic authors; his concepts of double-voiced "hybrid constructions," of a many-faceted dialogism (between and within words, objects, characters, authors and readers), and of a struggle between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses help identify the multiple voices operating in ethnic fiction. Indeed, I believe that an ethnic novel emerging from a bilingual context offers a "showcase" for Bakhtin's contending centripetal and centrifugal forces. Furthermore, his treatment of the carnivalesque is particularly apt to the many ethnic texts that rely upon trickster figures or a rebellious, debunking kind of humor. Bakhtin describes the fool, the clown, the rogue and the raucous, rowdy spirit of the carnival as devices employed by those with less power or position to achieve greater parity; these are fitting devices for socially marginalized writers who are able, nonetheless, to effect a power shift through writing on the strength of their superior bilingual-bicultural knowledge.

The ideas of these various literary theorists provide general guidance and support for my investigation of ethnic fiction. While I do not uniformly apply one or another theory throughout the study, I make reference to certain critics in individual chapters when relevant to the work under discussion. In the analysis of Donald Duk, for example, Iser's description of a text's indeterminacies and gaps and the importance of a reader's creative work prove to be particularly helpful, while Bakhtin's analysis of the didactic novel illuminates the effects of Chin's choice of
genre. Phelan's conception of the characterized audience is especially pertinent in the chapters on *Invisible Man* and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and the double-voiced word are eminently, though surprisingly, applicable to the stories of Hisaye Yamamoto—surprising because Bakhtin developed his theories in connection with the long and sprawling narratives of the nineteenth-century European novel, and Yamamoto's stories are miniatures by comparison. Nevertheless, a Bakhtinian analysis has greatly enriched my understanding of the multiple layers of meaning in Yamamoto's stories, and I make frequent reference to Bakhtin in my discussion of her work. Throughout my investigation, moreover, Bakhtin's approach and the ideas of the other critics mentioned above have guided my negotiation of the narrative texts.

**Individual Narratives**

The narratives I have selected offer considerable variety in the kinds of cross-cultural literary transactions, and their authors employ diverse strategies as they approach their audience(s). The works are divided both according to the author's gender—half of the authors are male, half female—and to the time of their publication—half were written before, half after the decade of the sixties—so that the effect of gender and chronology upon author-audience relations complicates the discussion of the individual narratives and their particular dynamics.

*Invisible Man* was awarded the 1953 Pulitzer Prize and has established a secure place in the literary canon. A work in the *bildungsroman* tradition, its theme, content, language, and structure are influenced by African American elements such as the blues, the chameleon trickster figure, and the South to North travel motif. Ellison is an important figure for this study as an early target in the seemingly perennial literary/aesthetic controversy over
universal standards versus group-specific values. He has been castigated as disloyal for not espousing the black nationalist stance of Richard Wright. In his celebrated debate with Irving Howe over the responsibilities of an ethnic author, Ellison responded in part: "How does the Negro writer participate as a writer in the struggle for human freedom? To whom does he address his work? What values emerging from Negro experience does he try to affirm?" (Shadow and Act 113). Ellison's concerns with ethnic versus human identity, with the tensions between art and politics, and with the nature of the American audience impinge upon my study, while his choices of an invisible and elusive narrator, a narrative frame to his story, and a highly-characterized narrator's audience provide abundant material for the exploration of author-audience relations.

The short story writers, Toshio Mori and Hisaye Yamamoto, wrote much of their best work around the time of the Second World War. Their publication history, characterized by postponement and neglect, reflects the political treatment of their community; their difficulty in establishing a national audience foregrounds a central feature of the interaction between an ethnic author and the American mainstream. Their stories are not overtly critical of the white majority or of the racist policies suffered by Japanese Americans, and yet neither writer succumbs to pressure from white society by distorting the community's experience or by writing propaganda. Their fiction presents a balanced portrait (one that includes blemishes) of their community, and Yamamoto's stories in particular provide the attentive white reader with a complex subtext that, uncovered, presents a devastating indictment of the racist treatment of Japanese America. The quiet yet deliberate (pre-sixties) approach to a white majority audience of these two writers provides another kind of interaction between minority and mainstream.
Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, the recipient of the American Book Award in 1981, reflects Bambara's espousal of Black Nationalist goals and is more overtly militant than *Invisible Man*. However, the novel also includes a powerful feminist voice, and, like Ellison's work, *Salt* is not simply protest fiction. The novel's complex form of narration, its theme, and its point of view offer rich and various material for the consideration of majority/minority narrative transactions. Of great interest to my study, Bambara specifies the African American community as her audience and calls herself a medium, notions that have significant implications for the nature and interaction of the implied author and the implied reader—especially for an outsider-reader.

Frank Chin, the first Chinese American playwright to be produced in New York, helped edit the pioneering and pugnacious Asian American anthology, *Aiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeee!*. Chin's early work—his plays and short stories—bear comparison to Richard Wright's protest fiction for they are outspokenly angry and apparently bent on shocking and confusing their white mainstream audience. In his novel *Donald Duk*, however, Chin negotiates his philosophical positions with greater equanimity and makes narrative choices more solicitous of outsider readers in order to accomplish an agenda of enlightening white Americans about Chinese America. Chin's novel illustrates a possible approach for an ethnic author to adopt toward a white audience, a didactic approach designed to instruct and enlighten.

Like Ralph Ellison, Maxine Hong Kingston has secured a place in the American literary canon, and her novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, is known beyond her ethnic community. Until recently, Kingston has been for many white Americans the "representative" Chinese American writer, and she has had to shoulder what Deborah Woo calls "the burden of dual authenticity." Kingston's eloquence in
resisting this representative role, and her advocacy for erasing the hyphen from "Chinese-American" in the interest of clarifying her identity raise issues central to this study. *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston's first unambiguously fictional work, is a compendium of ethnic questions posed and modeled by its protagonist Wittman Ah Sing: the issues of double and divided identity, of insider-outsider status, of groups positioned as "other," of the responsibilities and liabilities of being considered representative. Kingston's earlier works pushed across generic boundaries---*Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are both history and story, both memory and invention; her novel *Tripmaster* pushes at the boundaries of narrative structuring and presents an extensive and inventive exploration of audience-author interactions. Audience in *Tripmaster* develops into an important character, part of the dynamics of the culminating chapter, part of the progression of the novel. Wittman and the novel's hovering narrator reach out to an ever-widening audience, alternately instructing and challenging (thereby illustrating Ralph Ellison's "antagonistic collaboration") and beckoning across the edge of the text as they attempt to merge Wittman's characterized audience with the narrator's flesh and blood readers, including especially--though not exclusively--white mainstream readers like myself.

**Method**

In my attempt to engage these narrative texts appropriately and sensitively--that is, to make what was unfamiliar intelligible, to gain full admittance to the authorial audience, to be attentive to the contending voices of the narrative's dialogism, and to fill in the text's indeterminacies meaningfully and in such a way as to create a narrative congruent with the author's--I begin with Maxine Hong Kingston's admonition that those readers and critics who want to understand her writing "will just have to do
some background reading" (Amirthanayagam 64). Thus, I try to read the text, the author, and the ethnic group into context--historical, literary, biographical. I also consider the authors' published comments about audience, minority group experience, and the writer's role and responsibilities. While authorial statements about the creation of a particular work can be highly unreliable and in conflict with the text itself, I believe that writers' statements about their ethnic experience, about the dynamics of balancing social and literary demands in their writing, and about their conception of the authorial audience are trustworthy--and germane to this discussion. Ultimately, of course, evidence and authority reside in the narratives themselves. As I read and reread the narratives, I attempt to bring together text, context, and author's articulation. Out of an ever-increasing familiarity with the text I try to unearth, unravel, puzzle out, chuckle at, savor, admire, disagree with, and be changed by all the meanings discovered--and, in the process, to create a text that--if not exactly contingent--is in harmony with the authorial version.

Finally, to the extent that my attempts to recognize and respond appropriately to the rhetorical strategies of these authors are successful, I am able to engage with the truths and beauties of their texts and to understand better the culture in which they are rooted and from which they take flight. For as Robert Scholes comments, "Learning to read books is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives" (Protocols of Reading 19). Undoubtedly, the most significant and striking result of an attentive and intense cross-cultural literary engagement is the greater understanding and transformation of oneself.
CHAPTER I
INVISIBLE MAN
and
RALPH ELLISON, ANTAGONISTIC COLLABORATIONIST

If the writer exists for any social good, his role is that of preserving in art those human values which can endure by confronting change. . . . the faith, the patience, the humor, the sense of timing, rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it which all go to define the American Negro.

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

It is both fitting and paradoxical to begin a study of rhetorical interactions between ethnic American authors and their mainstream American audiences with Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*. The novel is an appropriate starting point because it introduces elements--figures, themes, techniques, issues--that recur in the work of other ethnic writers. *Invisible Man* includes, for example, trickster figures and masks, characters with mixed blood and double consciousness, the narrative use of humor, ambiguity, improvisation, and paradox. Furthermore, the famous debate between Ellison and Irving Howe raises crucial extra-textual issues about the responsibilities of an ethnic author and the legitimate form for an ethnic novel which are repeatedly raised in varying ways by and about the work of minority writers. The choice is fitting also on chronological grounds: the novel is among the earliest works by a minority author to gain widespread and longstanding national recognition among white readers; moreover, Ellison is a prominent member of the group whose literary success has served as a model for other
racial groups including those in this study. Earlier, Armenian-, Italian- and, especially, Jewish-American authors produced important immigrant novels and ethnic fiction, yet African American writers comprise a pioneering group whose work has changed the shape of the mainstream literary canon. Finally, Ellison's work and Ellison's critics raise the questions that are central to this study: who does--who should--the ethnic/minority writer speak for? And who does the writer speak to?

Nonetheless, paradox also flavors the choice of Ralph Ellison as the benchmark figure for a study of ethnic writers. Ellison insists that he is an American rather than a Negro (Ellison's preferred term) writer, and he lays claim to all of American culture, not merely or primarily African-American culture. Indeed, certain of his critics trace his major flaws to the fact that he distances himself from his racial group. Ellison names mainstream, Euroamerican writers (such as Eliot, Joyce, Malraux, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, and Hemingway) as his literary models, and, indeed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. complains that Ellison "denies" black influence and "eagerly claims a white paternity" (Reading Black 3-4). Furthermore, Ellison strives for the "individual" (character or experience) rather than the "representative" in his fiction, eschewing both stereotypical thinking and "prefabricated Negroes."

For these reasons, and because he has attained the status of a classic American author, treating Ellison as representative of ethnic writers or his novel as typical of ethnic fiction edges into the paradoxical. Yet, in a further twist, the paradoxical is itself appropriate, for paradox is characteristic, perhaps definitive of ethnic fiction.

The critical response to Invisible Man, initially and over the years, and Ellison's own comments about his novel, the novel form, and American literature in general focus our
attention upon the important issues concerning audience and reception that surround an ethnic work. A brief survey of the critical opinion generated by the novel will provide an appropriate context for examining the dynamics between Ellison and his readers within the narrative text itself.

CONTEXT AND CRITICISM

_Invisible Man_, Ralph Ellison's only novel, appeared in 1952, winning the National Book Award in 1953. As testimony to its impact and longevity, the novel has never been out of print, and its initial acclaim and readership have remained steady over the decades. By 1982, when Random House issued its "Thirtieth Anniversary Edition," twenty hardcover printings, seventeen Vintage paperback printings, occasional special editions, and translations into at least fifteen foreign languages had accumulated. Although Ellison expressed some surprise at the novel's longevity in his introduction for the new issue, Robert O'Meally reports that "[a]gain the work was reviewed everywhere with approval, this time with even more of the hushed awe befitting a revered text." As an example, O'Meally quotes the 1982 Washington Post review which said "_Invisible Man_ has as much claim to being that mythical, unattainable dream of American literature, the 'great American novel,' as any book in our literature" (New Essays 4). Not only has _Invisible Man_ appeared on best-seller and Book-of-the Month lists, but the novel has regularly appeared on high school and college course syllabi, a standard choice in American literature, black studies, and ethnic literature courses--even, O'Meally notes, "in creatively constructed syllabi in the social sciences" (New Essays 5). In a 1965 poll by The New York Herald Tribune, some 200 authors, editors, and critics cited _Invisible Man_ as "the most distinguished novel written by an
American during the previous twenty years" (Mitgang 16). And on the cover of the latest (1990) Vintage International paperback edition, R. W. B. Lewis extols Invisible Man as "The greatest novel in the second half of the twentieth century . . . [and] the classic representation of American black experience."

As these quotations suggest, critics have lauded Invisible Man and linked it to the classical American canon although they recognize an African American twist. A "capacious" work (O'Meally), "the veritable Moby-Dick of the racial crisis" (F. W. Dupee), a novel "with everything in it" (student qtd. in Mitgang), Invisible Man has attracted criticism from its original publication until the present with a groundswell of critical response during the sixties. That interest in the novel continues to be strong is indicated by several recently published books: the 1987 collection of essays edited by Kimberly W. Benston, the 1988 volume in Twayne's Masterwork Studies by Kerry McSweeney, the 1988 volume on Invisible Man in the Cambridge University American Novel Series, and the 1989 Modern Language Association volume in the MLA Approaches to Teaching Series.

Criticism of Invisible Man is extensive and diverse. Critics have treated the novel's themes, language, characters, and humor; they have traced its connections to canonical American writers, to European culture, classical epic, and African oral tales and folk figures; they have applied music, myth, and modernism to its structure and plotted its analogy with the phases of American narrative history or with the chronicle of the American black experience; they have highlighted its use of Freudian psychology, Marxist historiography, and Existentialist philosophy. Indeed, Robert O'Meally concludes: "One could fairly chart the shifting course of critical history from 1960 to 1986 by reviewing the critical approaches to this novel" (New Essays 5).
Criticism has not, of course, been uniformly laudatory although critics have more often attacked Ellison's politics and poetics than his novel per se. Cushing Strout notes that in 1968 "a Negro Digest poll of forty black writers elected Richard Wright to first place and relegated Ellison to fourth" (79)—a ranking that reflects the writers' political stance as perceived by the black community. Indeed, a notable feature of Ellison's work, important to this study, is the way it has stimulated discussion about the political pressures exerted upon minority writers and about the conflicting demands of group solidarity and artistic standards. The related controversy over separateness and assimilation also has direct bearing on the subject of author-audience relations, and the contending arguments on these issues deserve some space in our discussion.

From the 1950s until the present, Ellison's ideological position has been the target of a variety of critics including Communists, social realists, nationalists, and black aestheticians. The much-publicized remarks by Irving Howe in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" initiated a debate about an ethnic artist's responsibilities to literature and to community (and Ellison's failure to meet them). Howe criticizes Ellison (along with James Baldwin) for not adopting "the clenched militancy" of Richard Wright, for shirking the ethnic writer's duty to advance group interests through protest fiction. Quoting Wright as his authority, Howe claims that "only through struggle could men with black skins, and for that matter, all the oppressed of the world, achieve their humanity" (70). Ellison, in Howe's argument, is "whistling in the dark" when he sounds his "note of willed affirmation" of American, democratic values, and therefore his work lacks authenticity. Though more qualified and muted than earlier charges, recent critics continue to express reservations
about Ellison's politics. In her 1988 essay, Valerie Smith complains that "[Ellison's] critical writing is replete with images of struggle, subversion, inconoclasm; yet he defends a dissociation of art from politics that is arguably reactionary" (26). In the 1989 MLA *Approaches to Teaching*, R. Baxter Miller charges that Ellison's "ideological conservatism . . . may have led to the important reassessment of his masterpiece during the eighties, as the national commitment to civil rights 'boomerangs' backward to the suppression of the early fifties" (51).

The claims by these critics that ideology should take precedence over aesthetics (or sociology over art) were first advanced, according to Addison Gayle, Jr., by Richard Wright himself. "Not until 1940," argues Gayle, were these arguments, first set forth by the proponents of the Negro Renaissance [of the primacy of artistic criteria for artists and critics], effectively challenged. The challenge came from Mississippi-born Richard Wright who . . . transformed a monologue into a dialogue by presenting, dramatically, forcefully, and persuasively, the other argument. Wright argued, in essence, that conditions in America had not changed to the degree that the Negro could desert the race question, engage in an art for art's sake endeavor, or wander free in the sunny utopia of abstraction in an attempt to desert the harsh reality of being black in the twentieth century. (xiii)

Gayle himself foregrounds "morality" as he "calls upon the Negro writer to dedicate himself to the proposition that literature is a moral force for change as well as an aesthetic creation" (xv). John Clarke echoes Gayle in somewhat more militaristic language in the December 1970 issue of *Black World* when he suggests that:

a writer should be both a creator and activist. He has to realize that literature is an instrument of liberation. In order to be able to use it as a weapon to effect dynamic change for freedom the writer must know who he is in relationship to his people. (qtd. in Gray 121)
Critics who find Ellison remiss on ideological grounds charge him variously with being an accommodationist to white culture, subjectively individual, or blandly universal— in each case a traitor of his black heritage and community. Donald B. Gibson, for example, charges Ellison with a damaging "individualism," calling him a "personal and subjective" writer "who denies his relation to the group of black people" ("Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin" 308-09). Hoyt W. Fuller denies the relevance of "universal values" in promoting "a black aesthetic" in which "revolutionary black writers have turned their backs on the old certainties and struck out in new, if uncharted directions . . . [that] cannot, by definition, lead through the literary mainstream" (Gayle 263). In contrast to Ellison's view of one American literature assimilating black and white American experience, Fuller insists upon separateness:

Central to the problem of the irreconcilable conflict between the black writer and the white critic is the failure . . . [to recognize that] the two races are residents of two separate and naturally antagonistic worlds. . . . The world of the black outsider, however much it approximates and parallels and imitates the world of the white insider, . . . [generates] values and viewpoints which threaten the insiders. (Gayle 266-67)

LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) argues in "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" that "an almost agonizing mediocrity" is the result when black writers strive for universality. Jones grants Ellison precedence among black writers, yet sweeps him into a general condemnation of blacks who try to "eradicate Negro-ness" in order to accommodate white literary values. Jones claims that black writers tend to come from the middle class, a group that cultivates mediocrity "as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, i.e. Negroes" (Gayle 194). Curiously, Jones cites the novels of Herman Melville
and James Joyce as a standard that relegates the work of Ellison (and Baldwin, Toomer, and Wright) to something less than "serious" writing (Gayle 194). Jones's conclusion is that black writers must write "black," or they will produce only pale imitations of the so-called "universal."

Ellison makes his own eloquent response to his critics. Paradoxically, Ellison's positions converge more closely with those of his adversaries than their charges would suggest. Ellison, for example, might have been the source himself of Richard Wright's statement that:

We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure, is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish. (12 Million Black Voices, qtd. in Gayle 226)

Ellison expresses this notion that black and white America are inseparable in both his fiction and his essays. When he concludes Invisible Man with the narrator's much-quoted, ambiguous question, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?," part of the thrust of the question is the identification of black with white Americans and the inseparability of their destiny. Earlier in the novel, the narrator asks himself, "Weren't we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (562); what the narrator and the reader are learning is that the answer is "yes." In his 1977 essay, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ellison reiterates Wright's observation: this little Afro-American underground-outsider would, when reading The Great Gatsby, "incorporate the inside-outsider Gatz-Gatsby's experience into his own, and his own into Gatsby's: a transposition that Gatsby would probably have abhorred but one that might have saved his life" (Going 13-14).

In spite of their celebrated debate with one another, Ellison and Irving Howe share certain points of view. The debate aired their differences about protest fiction, yet
Ellison himself places protest at the core of art. In "The Art of Fiction," he distinguishes the "proletarian fiction" of the thirties, which he "did not think too much of," from the phenomenon of "protest" itself, which he considers to be inseparable from art (Shadow 168-69). The problem of proletarian fiction is not its roots in protest, Ellison maintains, but its provincialism and poor craftsmanship (Shadow 168-69).

On several important points, Ellison is also in accord with one of his severest critics, LeRoi Jones. Ellison explicitly exempts himself from Jones's category of writers who try to reject who they "really are, i.e. a Negro." Far from denying his Negro-ness, Ellison affirms it--while still maintaining his individuality: "[B]eing a Negro American involves a.willed (who wills to be a Negro? I do!) affirmation of self as against all outside pressures--an identification with the group as extended through the individual self" (Shadow 132). Furthermore, Ellison concurs with Jones that black artists should write a version of America out of their own black culture, and that a defining characteristic (and strength) of black culture is its location on the border. When Jones writes that a Negro artist must write "from that no-man's-land outside the mainstream. A no-man's-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray" (Gayle 197), his language echoes Ellison's novel, and his images remind us of the protagonist, his border-land cellar, and Liberty Paint's "Optic White"--the paint that requires ten drops of the blackest graduate to produce the purest white. Ellison supports Jones's call for a Negro version of America when he writes that "negro writers and those of the other minorities have their own task of contributing to the total image of the American by depicting the experience of their own groups. . . . A people must define itself" (Shadow 43-44).
Like Jones, too, Ellison emphasizes the importance of specifically black contributions to American culture such as "the wonderful resources of Negro American speech and idiom" that serve as a corrective to the "embarrassingly austere" standard American language; in a celebratory passage, he writes that "Our speech I found resounding with an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scientific and the political" (Shadow 103).

An important overlap between Ellison and his critics occurs when Addison Gayle emphasizes the moral function of literature and John Clarke portrays literature as a weapon for freedom. "Freedom" and "morality" are frequent terms in Ellison's vocabulary, and he repeatedly describes the novel as having creative moral force in defining the American experience in essays such as these with the revealing titles, "Society, Morality, and the Novel" and "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy." Ellison explicitly advocates the expansion of human freedom and the use of literature in the struggle, although he would substitute "instrument" for Clarke's "weapon." "How does the Negro writer participate as a writer in the struggle for human freedom?" Ellison asks; his answer touches on several of the issues under discussion:

I started with the primary assumption that men with black skins . . . are unquestionably human. Thus they have the obligation of freeing themselves . . . by depending upon the validity of their own experience for an accurate picture of the reality which they seek to change, and for a gauge of the values they would see made manifest. . . . Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are "weapons." . . . But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject. (SA 113-14)
Ellison frequently writes of his conviction that art, democracy, and morality, are connected with one another, and that the negro is intertwined with them all. On the occasion of the National Book Award, he deemed "the chief significance of *Invisible Man*" to be "[i]ts experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to [a] mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy" (*Shadow* 102). Elsewhere he writes that "One function of serious literature is to deal with the moral core of a given society... [I]n the United States the Negro and his status have always stood for that moral concern. He symbolizes among other things the human and social possibility of equality" (*Shadow* 182). And the process by which literature performs that function is that "the values, ideals, assumptions, and memories of unique individuals and groups reach out across the divisions wrought by our national diversity and touch us all" (*Going* 55).

These quotes culled from essays that span a number of years indicate that Ellison's values and goals coincide markedly with those of his most vociferous critics. Where Ellison tends to diverge from his critics is in his insistence that fundamental social problems concerning identity or freedom, art or justice are too complex to admit of programmatic solution; life is complex and ambiguous, social progress is multilateral and heterogeneous. The artist's moral duty, then, is to strive to create the best art possible, to answer with effort and discipline the demands of the artist's craft. It is not the artist's role to simplify the complexities of life, nor to provide simplistic answers. "I was freed not by propagandists or by the example of Wright," Ellison asserts, "but by composers, novelists, and poets who spoke to me of more interesting and freer ways of life" (*Shadow* 116-17).

A charge frequently levied against ethnic writers is that their writing is not universal (see, for example, the
exotic label attached to Maxine Hong Kingston's work). In their recognition that the concept of universality is politically constructed and that so-called universal values usually correspond to the values of the person speaking, often to the values of white Euroamerican culture, black nationalist critics have turned the charge around and criticized Ellison for aspiring to the universal. Ellison would, I believe, plead guilty to support for "universal" values, yet he explicitly claims to balance and blend the artist's proper concern with human universals with the citizen's particular, minority interests; he also concentrates attention upon the fundamental American paradox of unity from plurality--the "mystery" of the one in the many--in which a (universal) mainstream culture absorbs numerous diverse subcultures. Along with his harshest critics, Ellison roots himself in the specific, unique characteristics of African American culture, but, unlike Fuller and other separatists, he balances that with the other part of the "mystery"--the one, or the universal. "All novels are about certain minorities," he writes. "[T]he individual is a minority. The universal in the novel . . . is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance" (Shadow 170).

As the foregoing discussion indicates, the conflict between political and literary demands upon a writer constitutes a major theme in Ellison criticism. Again, it is paradoxical that a writer so conscious of the social importance of his craft should be castigated as apolitical. From the vantage point of the nineties, it seems difficult even to try to separate the literary from the political. Much literary criticism today, influenced by the ideas of such diverse critics as Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, M. M. Bakhtin and Stephen Greenblatt, operates out of a broad(ened) definition of the political which incorporates fiction. While most contemporary critics are
unlikely to draw the harsh conclusion of Donald B. Gibson that "the public policy implications of *Invisible Man* are murderous" (my emphasis), many would concur with Gibson's subsequent observation that the novel is "a social document that supports certain values and disparages or discourages others, and as such it must take its place among other forces that seek to determine the character of social reality" (93).

Recently Cushing Stout has argued, countering those who lament the social implications of *Invisible Man*, that the novel has a positive, not negative, political force, and that Ellison is more politically astute than earlier critics perceived. According to Strout:

> To grasp the politics of culture in Ellison's novel is to see its kinship to his essays and interviews. . . . Ellison's subtlety has often escaped his critics, whether black or white, and his sharp and independent observations on the race problem have often been out of step with fashionable political tendencies. (Parr 79)

Ellison's own 1964 refutation of Irving Howe in "The World and the Jug" corroborates Strout although earlier critics seem not to have registered his point that:

> I agree with Howe that protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as protest against the human condition. . . . [I believe] the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself. (Shadow 137).

In summation of the debate over Ellison's political stance and influence, Larry Neal offers the viewpoint of an early opponent of Ellison's poetics who later reversed himself, admitting in his 1970 essay, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," that he "winces" at his earlier comments. Neal now calls it fortunate that Ellison rejected the "simplistic assertions" of literary Marxism, and finds that "of all the so-called older black writers working today, it is Ralph Ellison who
is the most engaging" (Benston 109-10). In a further reversal of earlier charges, Neal praises Ellison for his deep "spiritual roots" in the black American folk tradition and his creation of a black experience that goes beyond the "rats and roaches" approach of the social realists. Finally, Neal's essay offers an appropriate, "recanting," last judgment on Ellison's achievement. Neal concludes that "Invisible Man is artistically one of the world's greatest novels; it is also one of the world's most successful 'political' novels" (Benston 122). Neal's praise sweeps both politics and art into one sentence, yet attests to the complexity of the novel's impact upon readers and the opportunity it provides for a dynamic interaction between the author and his audience.

Ralph Ellison and Audience

A corollary to the attack by black critics on Ralph Ellison's "universalism" is that he writes to a white audience. Robert O'Meally cites essays by Lloyd L. Brown, Earnest Kaiser, and Addison Gayle (dating from 1952 to 1975) which make this charge explicit (New Essays 8, 21-22 n 27). But in a curious refutation footnoted by O'Meally, Ellison asserts the opposite:

In 1954, Ellison told his Salzburg seminar students that his novel actually was written for blacks: "There are lots of little things, sayings and folklore that whites can't really understand." (Sjoman, "En Val" 4; qtd. in New Essays 21-22 n 28)

There is evidence that (in apparent contradiction to his promotion of universal values) Ellison focuses his attention upon a black audience: "[M]y work is addressed primarily to those who have my immediate group experience, for I am not protesting, nor pleading, my humanity; I am trying to communicate, to articulate and define a group experience" (Shadow 266-67). Also, Ellison cautions black authors
against addressing whites as their primary audience on the grounds that it distorts or polemicizes the writing and excludes black readers:

Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience. By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience's presumptions of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead the Negro's humanity. You know, many white people question that humanity but I don't think that Negroes can afford to indulge in such a false issue. (Shadow 170)

Writing for the white reader--especially a resisting white reader--has led, Ellison contends, "to much of our failure" (Shadow 170).

Nevertheless, it is also true that Ellison's conception of audience is broad and inclusive, and in many places in his essays, he specifically addresses white readers. Robert O'Meally quotes F. W. Dupee that Invisible Man "passed from hand to impatient hand among friends of just about every race, place and every age beyond the first stages of literacy" in support of the observation that Ellison was able to find "just the frequency on which to 'speak for' . . . a widely diverse group of readers" (New Essays 7).

Ellison's statement to his Salzburg students that the novel was actually written for blacks sounds more like a defensive rebuttal to his critics than an accurate description of his rhetorical practice; his remarks as reported by O'Meally suggest to me the force of the pressures that are imposed upon a minority writer from within the group. In fact, Ellison regularly lays claim to the widest possible audience and repeatedly celebrates the profoundly heterogeneous audience that characterizes American society. His poetics claim that "writing is communication" and "books are social acts"; the writer's rhetorical task is to address the question: "How does one in the novel . . . persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic in man beyond all differences of class, race, wealth, or formal
education?" (Shadow 273); democratic principles "must be communicated . . . across the built-in divisions of class, race, and religion" (Going 128).

Ellison neither ignores the color barrier to communication, nor exempts the white reader from responsibility for a breakdown. But his primary concern is to bridge the gap between black writer and white audience:

[T]he Negro novelist draws his blackness too tightly around him when he sits down to write . . . but perhaps the white reader draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read. He doesn't want to identify himself with Negro characters in terms of our immediate racial and social situation, though on the deeper human level, identification can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically. (Shadow 170)

Fortunately, whites can learn to read the work of black authors, Ellison reports--albeit with some surprise--and the collaboration between readers and literature can indeed lead to a deeper human understanding:

I've been amazed to discover how much . . . appears to have been communicated to readers who originate on opposite sides of the color line. . . . It was as though my novel had become a lens through which readers of widely differing backgrounds were able to see elements of their own experience brought to a unifying focus. . . . I am aware that a novel can come alive only through the collaboration of its readers' imaginations, and it was quite evident that the students [at Brown University] . . . had been taught to read. (Going 128-29)

Ellison places high value on the interaction between readers and his text--he claims that "one of the highest awards of art is the achievement of that electrifying and creative collaboration between the work of art and its audience" (Going 12)--and he values as well the challenge from an audience made up of both white and black readers. He specifically charges the American writer to be aware of and to address both insiders and outsiders:

[E]ach writer has a triple responsibility--to himself, to his immediate group, and to his region. He must
convey each of these aspects . . . in such a manner that members of his own particular group can become aware of what has been happening in the flux and flow, the thunder and lightning of daily living, but in such a way that individuals belonging to groups and regions . . . other than his own can have his report. (Going 54; emphasis added)

An eloquent portrayal of Ellison's "ideal" American audience occurs in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and his Audience." The "quintessential" American reader, he writes, is an active, creative collaborator, who is also independent and ornery and so must be wooed by the writer. His "little man" is "connoisseur, critic, trickster," a self-taught, no-nonsense figure with common sense and vernacular taste. The little man disrupts the relation between writer and reader. Ellison describes his American audience as a "second instrument" upon which the writer plays, "arousing, frustrating, and fulfilling its expectations." Yet, he cautions, because of the little man:

this second instrument can be most unstable in its tuning, and downright ornery in its responses. . . . [T]he artist may . . . play fast and loose with modes and traditions, techniques and styles; but only at his peril does he treat an American audience as though it were as easily manipulated as a jukebox. (Going 12)

Ellison suggested, to the students at the Salzburg seminar, that there are things in his novel that the white reader won't understand, a suggestion that goes to the core of the problem of whether it is possible for meaning to cross an ethnic border intact. By the logic of definition, of course, an outsider reader, like myself, is not naturally privy to insider references, experiences, jokes, and may easily be (made) unaware even of the presence of culture-specific elements. On the other hand, for Invisible Man at least, the exhaustive scholarship on the novel provides ample explanation of textual references for anyone who reads it. Furthermore, my experience of reading Invisible Man is
that there is much intratextual help and that the author is solicitous of those in his audience who lack an African American background. Much in the novel is explained (for example, "c.p." glossed as colored people) or described (like the black preaching style behind the call-and-response interchange of the protagonist and his audience). Also, the reader receives instruction from Invisible Man's private "mentors" like Bledsoe and Mary Rambo on the actual and/or proper behavior of the black community and from public figures like Ras the Exhorter and the Reverend Homer Barbee about black aspirations and black experience. In this connection, it is significant that the protagonist's instruction (or indoctrination) in the ideology of the Brotherhood is missing, swallowed up in the four-month gap between chapters sixteen and seventeen; evidently neither author nor narrator considers it important for the reader to learn about these ideas in any detail. There are other examples where misunderstanding could but does not seem to lurk. While the references to jazz and blues songs and artists may depend upon a familiarity with their historical context for a full understanding, they are recognizable to white readers and so unlikely to create confusion. The black speech idioms are clearly vernacular and semantically comprehensible, and while they may be unfamiliar, they are not likely to be alienating for a white audience. The novel itself helps to establish even for the northern white the social significance of chitterlings and yams through the disdain exhibited by the central character.

The extensive commentary by black critics also deepens and refines our understanding of the novel. However, I would change the contention by Houston A. Baker, Jr. that "No analyst can understand the black literary text who is not conscious of the semantic levels of black culture" (163) to read "cannot fully understand," a qualification that absorbs knowledge of racial experience into knowledge of any
specific sort. R. Baxter Miller claims that "only a profoundly cultural understanding can reveal the brilliance here [of the bent Mason emblem seen among the evicted couple's possessions]" (Parr 54), but I believe that such understanding does not divide sharply along a color line; rather it is historical information that black readers as well as other readers may not possess. I agree with Miller that the brilliance of the passage in the novel is polished by knowledge of the First Independent African Grand Lodge of the "Masons" in 1847, but I would contend that the painful impact upon the protagonist of the objects as they conjure up the African American experience of slavery and false freedom is already well lighted by the text itself. My experience is that Invisible Man does not systemically use culture-specific material in a way that divides insider readers from outsiders.

"Antagonistic Cooperation"

"Antagonistic cooperation" is a kind of leitmotif, a key Ellisonian phrase for various types of collaboration. The oxymoronic phrase not only expresses Ellison's conception of his collaborative relationship with audience, but describes as well the dynamics within the text between the narrator and other figures: between narrator and implied author, narrator and his naive younger self, narrator and his characterized audience. Ellison first uses the term in the critic-writer exchange with Irving Howe in "The World and the Jug" where he suggests that their debate has been "an act of, shall we say, 'antagonistic cooperation'?" (Shadow 143). Later he chooses the same phrase to describe the friendship between two writers (1976 interview with Robert B. Stepto and Michael S. Harper, in Harper 453). He himself applies it in 1977 to the author-audience exchange:
While an audience is eager to be transported, astounded, thrilled, it counters the artist's manipulation of forms with an attitude of antagonistic cooperation; acting, for better or worse, as both collaborator and judge. (Going 7)

The oxymoron is particularly appropriate to a novel that is built on paradox and whose texture and context are infused with contradiction and inversion. As an American novel, *Invisible Man* partakes of the American mystery of the one-among-the many; as an African American novel, it exhibits the doubleness of dividedness and the fundamental contradiction between the American promise and practice of equality. Not only is the central question of identity one in which the protagonist must learn that he is non-existent before he can discover his existence, but the episodes by which he learns, the language in which he tells his story, and the metaphors by which he constructs experience are characterized by paradox and the yoking of opposites. The protagonist finds lightness in darkness as well as "the darkness of lightness"; he goes down to rise above and goes into confinement to be free; he finds sanity among the crazy, sight among the invisible, reality among dreams, and truth among lies; and, significantly, he learns to say no by saying yes.

The paradox extends to Ellison's conception of audience as a force that can be alternately antagonistic and cooperative or both at once. He writes about the historical reluctance of white editors to publish any but certain acceptable types of African American writing and about the psychological reluctance of white readers to encounter anything in fiction besides non-threatening, stereotypical black characters and situations designed to stave up a comforting social status quo. Yet even with socially antagonistic readers, Ellison is optimistic about the powers of art to enlist their cooperation and to elicit from them a
human identification with those who are socially or racially different.

Ellison's deep respect for the independence and heterogeneity of an American audience is connected to his belief in the fundamental link between art and democracy. His espousal of American democratic ideals includes his celebration of the common man--that little man behind the stove at an out-of-the-way train station--at the lower levels of society, the member of any one of the many groups and subgroups that together make up American society. The task of the artist is to manipulate forms, but the glory of a democratic audience is that it cannot be manipulated; it must be persuaded. John F. Callahan touches on the bond posited by Ellison between a democratic society and a persuadable audience when he notes that "[f]or Ralph Ellison, the struggle with form is bound up with America." Callahan calls *Invisible Man* "a patriotic novel" and maintains that:

As an American novelist and a Negro, he strives to influence the novel in somewhat the same way that the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s set out to change the social and political character of American society. . . . Who knows but that *Invisible Man* was a cultural catalyst for some of the energy and achievement of the civil rights movement? (89-90)

Ellison, who conceives of books as "social acts," would find natural the idea of his novel as "cultural catalyst" and would surely exult in any role it might have in extending the American promise by way of the antagonism and cooperation of its readers.

Within the novel, "antagonistic cooperation" describes Invisible Man's complicated relationship to his characterized readers/listeners--a relationship with immense import for the relationship between the author and the actual audience, issues which will be discussed later in the chapter. The phrase also applies to the interaction between
the memoir's narrator and the novel's author. As a matter of fact, Ellison describes the novel's conception as a result of antagonistic cooperation between himself and his narrator, an interaction, I believe, that marks the continuing relationship between implied author and narrator throughout the narrative.

In his introduction to the novel's thirtieth anniversary edition, Ellison describes *Invisible Man* as "a most self-willed and self-generating piece of fiction" (IM vii), one that insisted upon being written in spite of his own reluctance. Ellison was writing another novel when "taunting laughter" interrupted him and "an ironic, down-home voice" "announced itself in what were to become the opening words of its prologue, moved in, and proceeded to challenge my imagination for some seven years" (IM vii). Although Ellison was leery about writing "another novel of racial protest" (IM xviii), the voice seemed to promise something "more affirmative than raw anger" (IM xvi), and so Ellison decided to "see" what kind of individual would speak in "such accents" and to "coax[] him into revealing a bit more about himself" (IM xix).

Ellison describes the voice as "less angry than ironic," and as "a blues-toned laugh-er-at-wounds" who would laugh at himself as well as at the human condition. The voice began to take form as a young, powerless, ambitious but thwarted would-be leader. Most important in Ellison's view (in contrast to "too many [other] fictional Negroes"), the "laugher" had a mind and could "think as well as act." He would be able to assist the author's social-literary task of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region. (IM xxii)
Ellison's language incorporates the initial adversarial positioning of the author and the voice of the new novel. At first a gadfly and obstacle to the author's own projected work, the narrator becomes the author's collaborator in a narrative project that goes beyond the author's personal vision to a larger social communication.

Within the text, however, the collaboration between author and Invisible Man shifts decisively into an antagonistic mode that effectively governs the protagonist's stance toward his fictional world and the narrator's stance toward his characterized readers. The motivation of the narrator is mysterious, ambiguous—as is fitting to someone in this oxymoronic novel who is invisible yet hiding in a hole, who searches for identity but finds only a series of humiliating conventions. Ellison refers to his protagonist as a fool, yet we also know that he is intelligent, that "he has a mind," and that he learns from experience. This "self-generated" character persists in his independence, and while he cooperates fully with the implied author in the narrative tasks of creating the novel, he reveals an antagonism to Ellison's worldview. Whereas Ellison is primarily optimistic and affirmative, the narrator is pessimistic and negative; where Ellison is complexly honest and strives to render truth, the complex trickster narrator struggles to create fabrication; while Ellison is passionate in his efforts to communicate across barriers, the narrator urgently erects protective, isolating barriers. The fundamental differences between author and narrator are further revealed by their attitudes toward their respective audiences (a contrast that I will examine later).

R. Baxter Miller argues that "the deepest literacy would demand the imprint of one's own fiction on American history" (Parr 55), and he contends that Ellison's novel fails because it represses the truth "still coded in that history." Miller views the narrator's withdrawal as
"continued slavery" and a missed opportunity to achieve freedom through "literate engagement." Miller asks the question,

Is it better, in other words, [to view the text only as an admirable Afro-American fiction on Euramerican (sic) terms? or] to appreciate the text for its representation of a black American suspicion about American democracy, to face a truth that Ellison unsuccessfully tries to purge from his novel? (Parr 57)

The tension indicated by his question emerges, I think, not from the author's attempt at whitewash as suggested by Miller, but from the author's struggle with his narrator over control of the text. As a Negro, Ellison is fully aware of the frailties of American democracy (and has expressed his exasperation with those critics who seem to deny him this); of all truths he would be loath to purge this one from his novel. On the other hand, the narrator's tale of "abysmal pain" dictates a degree of "black American suspicion" that allows the narrative balance to tip more heavily toward antagonism and away from the affirmation than the author (of the essays, at least) on his sole authority might have designed. By dividing the narration, Ellison is able to delegate some of the unpleasant tasks imposed upon a minority writer (from both mainstream and in-group sources) to his narrator. Ellison has it both ways: the narrator is responsible for expressing the darker black American truths while the implied author can qualify or counter the narrator's version of truth from his elevated, more inclusive position.

Ellison's subtle division of tasks with his narrator initially belies the antagonistic quality of the narration. During my first readings of the novel, author and narrator spoke in chorus, their separate voices difficult to distinguish. I concurred, probably in a kind of white, liberal, knee-jerk manner, with what I supposed to be the
author's views: empathy for the protagonist and his predicament, support for his quest for identity, rage at the injustice of his treatment, expectation of an optimistic outcome. Yet my responses began, after subsequent readings, to diverge sharply from those of the narrator and to have more in common with the authorial voice of Ellison's essays. As I reread the Prologue, familiar now with the grandfather's philosophy and strategies and in full knowledge of the narrator's ultimate condition in the Epilogue, I began to hear a new tone in the narrator's voice, distinctive and distinguishable from the author's, dominating the text; the narrator's image began to shift and separate from the author's, to take a form no longer transparent to the implied author behind. The narrator's language also shifted, and words that I had understood one way twisted back onto themselves, realigned through irony. Once a crack occurred separating the narrator's nature, as revealed by his behavior and expression, from the implied author's, I began to read with new expectations, and language and irony wedged open the crack, wider and wide. In sum, the narrator revealed himself as much less sympathetic or attractive than he had first appeared, more ambiguous and more devious, and more complicit in his own condition. The narrator's own words describe the change: his nature "came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray" (IM 575).

The contentious relationship between the narrator and the implied author is analogous to the narrator's ironic relationship with his own inexperienced self. A similarly contentious relationship, and the most important one for this discussion, is that between the narrator and his audience(s). The narrator's complex and trickster-like treatment of his characterized audience has significant
implications for the relations between real readers and the narrator, real readers and Ellison. The key to these various relationships is the character of Invisible Man. In preparation for considering the way audience operates, then, we need to examine his behavior. As the central character becomes more familiar, his negative traits become foregrounded, congealed on the surface of his portrait. Behavior that had at first seemed fully justified by the events in his life begin to seem over-reactive, obsessive, often self-destructive—and rooted in weakness of character as well as injury from society. My claims about the narrator's attitudes toward his younger self and, more importantly, about the strategies he uses to manipulate his characterized audience emerge from this negative assessment of his character. The next section presents what I believe to be the narrator's salient character traits along with the textual evidence for my critique.

THE TEXT

Invisible Man. Character

The novel's central character is intelligent, imaginative, rhetorically gifted, and fairly resilient. But he is also fundamentally self-centered, arrogant, and impatient; he is quick to anger and has a predilection for violence. He shows little compassion for others, or friendship, or even personal loyalty—that is, he exhibits no behavior that provides a basis for his protestations of "love" in the Epilogue. He has no loves and no friends, and although he is the eldest son, he exhibits neither responsibility nor care for his family. On the contrary, he holds himself aloof and above others; when a human connection threatens to form, the central character moves
on. Without question, Invisible Man is the victim of a vicious racism and of all that racism implies, and his anger, violence, and alienation can be not only explained but justified on the basis of his daily dole of exploitation, injustice, betrayal, and so on. Furthermore (although it is unclear how long he has been underground), his impetuous behavior might be attributed to the intensity of youth if IM is still a young man with agitated hormones and much to learn. In any case, this is a story of a survivor whose nature from the beginning is self-serving and whose methods for surviving are, finally, questionable and unhealthy. With little in his nature or behavior that is generous or life-affirming to serve as balance, IM becomes defined by his negative characteristics. In consequence, the note of affirmation sounded in the Epilogue remains disembodied and without grounding in any previous pattern of choices. Is it the voice of the implied author? Or a trickster? In any case, since the narrator/character gives no evidence of the ability to transcend his situation through force of character or through breadth of vision, the voice of hope for the future sounds deluded--or, as I believe, deluding.

The weaknesses in IM's character are evident from the beginning, before, that is, life has exploited and disillusioned him. His self-centeredness, flavored by ambition, is already operating during the battle royal scene of the first chapter. As directed by the white authorities, the young schoolboy slugs it out in the fight with the other black boys and scrambles with them for the electrified money--hardly cooperative or harmonious action--but IM further isolates himself from the other boys by his superior airs. He attempts to make a deal with one of the others to "throw" the fight, but in addition to the interesting fact that he proposes deception as a tactic, the offer is inappropriate because he is an outsider and it is
ineffective because he doesn't know their code. They resent his usurping the (paying) place of one of their friends, and they cannot help but register his class-conscious snobbery. The protagonist, for his part, is primarily concerned to give his speech and garner attention and applause for himself:

I had some misgivings over the battle royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting, but because I didn't care too much for the other fellows who were to take part. . . . I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington. But the other fellows didn't care too much for me. . . . I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servants' elevator. (IM 18)

Later, IM tells us that "I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability, and now this stupid clown [his boxing opponent] was ruining my chances" (IM 25).

The battle royal scene and the feelings of IM the character are described in retrospect by the more experienced IM the narrator who reproduces the younger character's stuffy language and makes clear to readers his flawed judgment. Not only is the schoolboy priggish toward his "fellows" and unrealistic about his own potential, but he is mistaken about who his true opponents are. Guided by the narrator's more experienced judgment, readers reject both B. T. Washington as a viable model and the southern town's leading citizens as legitimate authority, and we understand together with the narrator that the young protagonist ought more properly to have distaste (or outrage) for being shunted into the servants' elevator en route to providing a degrading entertainment than for being crowded in with "inferior" lower class black boys. On the other hand, readers may divide from the narrator in their judgment of the character himself. Because he seems not to
have learned a better way to make connections with others (he is even more isolated and manipulative at the end of the novel), the narrator may not locate the problem in the younger character's aloof superiority nor judge his behavior as harshly as readers--at least after repeated readings--are apt to do.

_Invisible Man's_ surly readiness to strike out with violence is also established at the outset. The first incident narrated--though one of the last to take place--is the violent exchange with the tall, blue-eyed stranger whom the narrator nearly murders for a racist epithet. IM seems frequently to bump into people although he claims, being invisible, that they bump into him--an indication of his arrogant receptivity to insult. Earlier, in his pre-invisible days, he "bumped against a woman who called [him] a filthy name, only causing [him] to increase [his] speed" (IM 261); IM shows no inclination to offer an apology. On another occasion when a "short yellow woman" yells at him for dumping trash (the broken bank) in her garbage, he turns on her and curses: "'That's enough out of you, you piece of yellow gone-to-waste. . . .' My voice had taken on a new shrill pitch. 'I've done what you wanted me to do; another word and I'll do what I want to do--'" (IM 329). The reader (unless distracted by anxiety for IM to get rid of the bank) surely concurs with the woman's understatement--"I can see that you're no gentleman"--in response to IM's not-so-veiled threat. In fact, IM often behaves in an ungentlemanly fashion--not only bumping people but spitting, not only cursing women but seducing/using them.

The central character's propensity to anger is documented throughout the novel, both in the frame and in the narrative proper. While still at school, IM strives to control his feelings, but after being strapped into the electric machine in the factory hospital, he overtly embraces anger. Trapped and utterly vulnerable, he has been
shocked into unconsciousness and loss of memory. For a moment, however, in response to a denigrating racist jibe, he overcomes bewilderment and suddenly "want[s] to be angry, murderously angry," claiming that he "had seldom used [his] capacities for anger and indignation, [though he] had no doubt that [he] possessed them" (IM 237). His impulse lasts only momentarily before he slips back into bewilderment--"beyond anger"--because the electric current had "disconnected something." But in that moment he has tapped and exposed a source of emotional power for later use. After the hospital experience, his anger (reconnected and potent) corrodes his former inhibitions and henceforth characterizes his stance towards the world.

When, for example, he walks by a store that sells offensive items like black slave dolls and ointments for skin whitening, he has to suppress "a savage urge to push [his] fist through the pane" (IM 262). Again, when the steam pipes begin knocking at Mary Rambo's with a "brash, nerve-jangling sound" (though his nerves may also be registering the bourbon from the previous night at the Chthonian), the young man suddenly charges "across the room in a bound, pounding the pipe furiously with [his] shoe heel [and yells:] 'Stop it, you ignorant fool!!'" He explodes again when he notices the wide-mouthed Negro bank--"suddenly as enraged by . . . [Mary's] lack of discrimination . . . as by the knocking"; he snatches up the bank and hammers it against the pipes with such force that he breaks it (IM 319). His ill-starred stint at the paint factory is also studded with angry outbursts: IM "throbs[s] with anger" when Kimbro curses at him for his mistake (IM 204); he feels "biting anger grow inside" during his encounter with the union organizers (IM 222); he is "disgusted" and "sarcastic" with Lucius Brockway whom he judges to be "a foolish old man," "crazy," "a clown and fool" (IM 213), until something "uncoiled in [his] stomach." When Brockway prepares to
attack him, he snatches up an iron bar and threatens to "beat his brains out" (IM 225-26).

His anger frequently surfaces during his Brotherhood days, also. He leaves a Brotherhood meeting called to investigate his magazine interview "boiling with anger and disgust" (IM 403), and later, Jack cautions IM to "watch that temper" (IM 477). In response to the Brotherhood's condemnation of Tod Clifton's funeral, IM "trembles," "grows wilder and fights against the decision," and finally "sweeps a glass off the table onto the floor" (IM 477-78). In each case, anger is justified by the occasion, yet IM's tendency to treat all provocations as equal, his relentless reliance upon a single kind of reaction, and the volatility and intensity of his response suggest that he is possessed of poor judgment and a violent, perhaps unstable, nature.

Indeed, violence frequently accompanies IM's anger. IM first dreams of violent revenge when he learns the content of his recommendation letters from Dr. Bledsoe: "When I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race and to myself. I'll kill him" (IM 194). In another incident, IM grabs a beer bottle at the Jolly Dollar in order to fight his "friend" Brother Maceo; he is ready to "let him have it as brutally as possible" (IM 489). This time a fight is averted, but as the narrative continues, anger translates into fighting with some regularity: the battle royal; IM's counterattack on Lucius Brockway; the street fight with Tod Clifton against Ras the Exhorter; the race riot and spearing of Ras the Destroyer. Ultimately, the protagonist claims that violence is the answer. In the last chapter he concludes that "yessing them to death and destruction" has backfired, and he sets out in search of Jack because "[t]here was only one way to destroy them" (IM 564).

Nor does IM outgrow this propensity toward violence. An extraordinary display of anger occurs between the end of
the events of the memoir and IM's writing of it—the violence in this case directed against himself. After falling down the manhole and learning the truth about the anonymous letter—that the same person who had named him had set him running—he begins to scream and plunge about wildly:

[S]till whirling on in the blackness, knocking against the rough walls of a narrow passage, banging my head and cursing, I stumbled down and plunged . . . [and] continued to roll about the floor in my outrage. How long this kept up, I do not know. It might have been days, weeks; I lost all sense of time. And everytime I paused to rest, the outrage revived and I went off again . . . [until I reached a state between dreaming and waking] in which I was caught like Trueblood's jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes. (IM 568)

Once again, there is abundant cause for IM's outrage, but the extremity and self-destructiveness of his response indicate a violently unstable personality.

The protagonist's capacity for anger accounts in part for his alienation, and the indulgence of the one parallels the development of the other. After the hospital experience, IM returns to the Men's House "overcome by a sense of alienation and hostility" where he sees someone who resembles Bledsoe. IM abruptly and "without thought" stoops for a spittoon "shining, full and foul" and dumps "its great brown, transparent splash" on the unsuspecting Bledsoe look-alike (IM 256-57). As a result, the protagonist is barred from the Men's House for "ninety-nine years and a day," and he has to have his things sneaked out.

In this case, he is himself responsible for his abrupt departure, but his separation from the Men's House is typical of the abortive, often violent nature of his leave-takings. It is characteristic also that he leaves without looking back, without having established human ties. Earlier, for example, he is forced to leave college precipitously, but he shows no impulse for good-byes, and he
apparently makes no further contact with students or teachers with whom he has spent three formative years. He does not inform his family about going north (at first, it seems, out of shame for his expulsion), and rarely reports thinking of them. We witness a momentary regret that he has forfeited his grandfather's watch to a younger brother, and we observe a conclusion reached while underground that he cannot return home; he claims to write home at the time of his Brotherhood recruitment, but we never see any letters, and he offers no resistance to Brother Jack's directive to stop correspondence. On the rare occasions he admits to homesickness, IM pushes it away or indulges in a kind of generalized, non-personal nostalgia. Other departures, as well, follow a similar pattern. IM catapults out of the factory, and he staggers out of the hospital, in each case leaving behind no one; finally he plunges down the manhole, "outside of history," alienated from the Brotherhood, from Ras, and indeed from the entire surface society.

The exceptions to this leave-taking pattern actually reinforce IM's alienation. He says good-bye (without details, however) to Mary Rambo when he moves to the Brotherhood apartment, and he later entertains the idea of returning--once even unconsciously retracing his steps to her house. But in fact he does not return, even during the riot when he sets off for Mary's (as an escape haven)--in the wrong direction. Furthermore, even though Mary is one of the few candidates for friend in the novel (other possibilities are Brothers Tarp and Clifton), IM explicitly dismisses her from that category: "Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. Nor did I think of Mary as a 'friend'; she was something more--a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past" (IM 258). Later, in spite of Mary's rescue of him and her continuing financial support and personal care, IM further distances himself:
I might as well admit right now . . . that there are many things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of "we" while I have always tended to think in terms of "me"--and that has caused some friction, even with my own family. (IM 316)

"Some friction" seems hardly surprising. Even with potential intimates like Mary and his own family, IM shows himself to be ungenerous and egotistic, an individualist who puts himself first in a hierarchy that has no second place.

In another exception to his departure pattern, IM admits to feeling regret when he leaves Harlem for downtown and "the woman question" (although even here he uses a qualified double negative to do so):

Leaving Harlem was not without its regrets, however, and I couldn't bring myself to say good-bye to anyone, not even to Brother Tarp or Clifton--not to mention the others upon whom I depended for information concerning the lowest groups in the community. I simply slipped my papers into my brief case and left as though going downtown for a meeting. (408)

However, much of his regret has to do with losing control of his Harlem contacts (and in one reading of "not to mention," he rates the contacts as more important than his relationship to Tarp and Clifton). In any case he does not act upon that regret to reach out, but disappears trickster-like under a deceptive cover.

By the end of his memoir, IM has made some questionable choices in his struggle to survive. The reader observes him continually narrowing his options, narrowing his horizon, reaching a dead-end in his "comfortable" hole. Readers may take a lesson from IM's experience, but they are unlikely to take his behavior as model or his ideas for guidance. The remarkably few people with whom IM has made some kind of positive human contact are all unavailable to him: Brother Tarp (along with Frederick Douglass's portrait) has disappeared, Tod Clifton is dead, and Mary Rambo is
representative of a past now closed to him. At the end, he is an isolato adrift, unconnected by ties of organization, friendship or love. He takes defense in anger, in distance, and--combining these two--in irony. One of IM's survival lessons seems to be to learn how to temper his anger with irony. His mastery of irony along with the related instruments of humor and laughter serve as his strategies for living, narrating, and relating to audience.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Humor, Laughter, Irony

Laughter, according to Ellison, promises something "more affirmative than raw anger." Clearly, the author admires the person who overcomes oppression, pain, and anger with laughter, one who is "a blues-toned laugh-er-at-wounds."

Ellison is at pains to emphasize the humor of his novel: "Look, didn't you find the book at all funny?" he asks an interviewer (SA 180), and in the 1982 preface he tells us that "there was a great deal of fun along the way" (IM xxii). Invisible Man is indeed a comic novel with a wide variety of humor--verbal, situational, structural, metaphysical. Jokes stud the narrative--the narrator tells jokes on the protagonist, the protagonist's lessons may be framed in jokes, life itself is a joke in a novel told by an invisible alien hiding underground in a blindingly illuminated hole. There are outrageous puns and linguistic plays with words, names, songs, and images; there is parody with masking and clowning, as well as pratfall-slapstick and jokes about bodily functions. Between the younger character and the older narrator, there is the humor of the naif and the irony of the experienced observer. Most pervasive, however, there is a bitter irony escaping from the mismatch
between dream and reality, history and possibility, democratic promise and American experience.

_Invisible Man_, Ellison tells us, was conceived in "taunting laughter" and the narrator was first heard as "a voice more ironic than angry." Irony permeates the novel. The protagonist's basic situation and the American context out of which he operates are marked by contradiction, and IM adopts irony as a mode of narration and as a weapon in his struggle for survival. In telling his story, IM uses irony at the expense of his younger self and in response to the conditions of being a black man in America. For the listener/reader, the irony becomes inextricable from meaning. Paradox, yoked opposites, and reversals characterize life, we come to understand, as they characterize the narrative. But irony also complicates our understanding. Neither author nor narrator offers a clear guide for sorting out truths and deceptions, and the reader is left at the end with considerable ambiguity. While the irony is clear, its ultimate target is constantly shifting; we have difficulty determining which is "the most final reversal of all."

Before considering some of the implications of the narrator's ironic stance, however, I would like first to look at some examples of the novel's complexly comic structure and texture--the context provided by the author, out of which the narrator operates. For the novel's humor in all its variety and comedy is also part of the novel's meaning and therefore essential to our understanding of what the author and his narrator are telling us.

The dense verbal and aural humor includes puns by character, narrator, and author. The author's shameless naming includes Brothers Wrestrum and Tobitt (the protagonist rings the changes on their names at one point: "I'd out-Tobitt Tobitt, and as for that outhouse Wrestrum--well" [IM 515]); Sybil and the Chthonian (source and
sorceress); the northerner Norton; Bledsoe the bleeding; blind Homer A. Barbee, storyteller; the two "bros"--Hambro and Kimbro; Lucius-Lucifer Brockway-block way/break away. The protagonist utters his most celebrated pun while getting in touch with his Southern roots by eating a Southern root: "I yam what I am"; he also vows to emulate "rind and heart" the elusive B. P. Rinehart, and after Clifton's death, he puns bilingually on Tod Clifton's name (Tod's Tod). For his part, the narrator directs us to call him "Jack the Bear"---both folk figure and hibernator---and then ends his Prologue in order to begin his five-hundred-page memoir with a groan-inspiring "Bear with me." Many pages later, just as IM character restrains his temptation to play the dozens with Brother Jack, IM narrator puns on the reader by declaring that he is trying to "get [his] bearings" (IM 463). Punning on his castration dream in another passage, the narrator refers to "balling the jack," assuring us that he doesn't mean the new dance step--"although what they're doing is making the old eagle rock dangerously" (IM 576). The narrator brings us up to date at the end of his memoir with: "So I took to the cellar; I hibernated. I got away from it all"--an aural joke, like many in the novel, that depends upon tone and echo.

The novel's texture expands and coarsens with the broad humor of slapstick and with earthy jokes about belches, spitting, and bird excrement. The author includes grotesquerie for shock effect as in those startling moments when Brother Jack's glass eye pops out of his face in the midst of his haranguing and plops into a water glass; or when Reverend Barbee stumbles on stage and falls on his face, revealing his blindness to the assembled college after delivering a hagiography of the college founder; or when Lucius Brockway loses his false teeth-qua-weapon and his face caves in, after threatening to kill IM.
Humor also emerges from folk material and carries an African American flavor--jazz, blues, spirituals, Southern black sermon rhetoric, the dozens, folk songs. As Robert G. O'Meally (Craft 203) points out, Ellison draws on a common folktale pattern for IM's protracted series of failed attempts to get rid of the hateful and broken bank, a pattern paralleled later when he repeatedly tries to rid himself of Sybil; in both cases the unwanted "object" keeps turning up. The result for IM is frustration, but for the reader there is a comic echoing between the two events and a conflation of the demeaning widelipped Negro bank figure with the demeaned, lipsticked Sybil.

Jokes may be self-contained, part of the textual flavor, but usually they resonate with greater significance, and often they carry serious import. The narrator treats as joke a fundamental element of the novel: his invisibility. When suddenly "you discover that you're as transparent as air," he tells us, "At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the 'political situation'" (IM 575). At another point he turns his central concern with identity into a joke: "What's your name? I thought, making a sad joke with myself" (IM 334). Again, the paramount problem of racial identity in a racist society is labeled "one of the greatest jokes in the world": "[T]he spectacle of whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray" (IM 577). Note that this "greatest" joke about black-white relations and identity takes the form of a sing-song rhyming ditty.

An important issue in the novel is IM's struggle throughout to understand his grandfather's deathbed advice. Toward the end, as he meditates upon his grandfather's meaning, he comes to a "belated appreciation of the crude joke that had kept [him] running," and to a conclusion that takes the form of a pun: "Here's the cream of the joke:
Weren't we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (IM 573, 575). "Apart" and "a part" carry the contradiction at the core of existence--for the invisible man, for any minority American, and actually--since the novel insists that we are all in it together--for all Americans.

Jokes are frequently laced with cruelty. IM the character seems to take pleasure in making jokes at another's expense--such as the one about Tobitt and Wrestrum. Amid his "seduction" of Sybil, he makes a reference to "a new birth of a nation," and then, because the reference is beyond her understanding, brushes it off with a hint of superiority as "a bad joke" (IM 522). The ridicule of his lipstick inscription on Sybil's stomach is doubled by the fact that he knows, and she does not, that the rape in the reference is fake. Yet, as is often the case with those who freely target others with their humor, IM dreads being himself a target. When he gets his first Brotherhood assignment, he notes that Jack "looked at me as though he did not see me and I could not tell whether he was laughing at me or with me. I was sure only that he was laughing" (IM 359). Later, when he is assigned to the "woman question," he searches the committee's faces for signs of amusement, "fighting the sense that I had just been made the butt of an outrageous joke" (IM 407). IM again expresses his anxiety about being the object of their humor when the Brotherhood investigates Wrestrum's charges against him, at the same time conceding that it would be normal:

[C]ouldn't they see that they were dealing with a clown [Wrestrum]? But I would have gone to pieces had they laughed or even smiled, I thought, for they couldn't laugh at him without laughing at me as well. . . . yet if they had laughed, it would have been less unreal--Where the hell am I? (IM 403)

The implied author takes a turn at humor too. An example of a subtle authorial joke at the protagonist's
expense is the fact that after four months of instruction, IM (whom Ellison has called fool) begins his active work with the Brotherhood in a bar at midnight on April 1--April Fool's Day. The iconography of the bar also hints of a fool's quest: the two bullfight panels--one showing the man and bull as "one swirl of calm, pure motion," the other with "the matador being swept skyward on the black bull's horns" --encapsulate the playing out of skills and power between young IM the bull fighter and the bull Brotherhood. "I've worked pretty hard trying to master the ideology," says our young protagonist to Brother Jack (359), self-satisfied, already setting himself up.

The greatest joker, however, is the narrator who not only undercuts his younger self in their dialogics, but who tricks his audience with dissimulation and double-voicing. One of the funniest scenes, especially when read aloud, depends in part upon the double-voicedness of the narrator/character. It occurs when IM recapitulates his "qualifying-for-the-Brotherhood" arena speech later that night in bed, in his new apartment, "in the dark." The passage begins with "I wanted only to sleep, but my mind kept wandering back to the rally" and for two and a half pages IM protagonist alternates between analysis and fancy, self-doubt and self-promotion until, at the end of Chapter 16, he concludes confidently: "Sure I'd study with Hambro, I'd learn what he had to teach and a lot more. Let tomorrow come. The sooner I was through with this Hambro, the sooner I could get started with my work" (IM 352-55). Although the double consciousness of the younger character and the more experienced narrator operates throughout the memoir, on this occasion the narrator allows the words of his younger self to carry most of the narration. The confusion that governs the thinking and judgment of the newly recruited "brother" is patent--and funny--in the shifting, self-contradictory language of his internal dialogue. We also suspect, as the
narrator of course knows, that Hambro will be "through with" IM sooner than the other way around. The narrator's own voice intrudes minimally yet with devastating effect by punctuating the soliloquy with the refrain, "in the dark"--a phrase both comic in its repetition and accurate in description, for at this point the young man is still very much in the dark.

At another point in the novel, the narrator deflates the language and the stance of the younger protagonist by enlisting the comic storytelling of other characters--the fellows drinking in the hedge on the night of the Harlem riot. The protagonist overhears them recounting their observations of Ras the Destroyer shortly after his own life-threatening encounter with--and description of--his adversary. According to Invisible Man's version:

They moved in a tight-knit order, carrying sticks and clubs, shotguns and rifles, led by Ras the Exhorter become Ras the Destroyer upon a great black horse. A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream, than out of Harlem, . . . yet real, alive, alarming. (IM 556)

After trying "eloquence" to no avail, IM narrowly escapes lynching by throwing a spear through Ras's cheeks; when he flings himself exhausted behind a fence, he overhears--and the narrator lets us hear--another version of the scene. With a down-home accent and a no-nonsense attitude, the drinkers sketch a scenario of Ras challenging a group of mounted policemen in terms of a cowboy-and-Indians entertainment. (The assumptions underlying Hollywood's version of the American West are not here subjected to deconstruction.) In their parodic version, Ras becomes a figure of ridicule, his costume outlandish, and his antics absurd. In their words, "Stud" Ras is a "crazy sonofabitch" on an old black "hoss" who looks like "death eating a
sandwich," though it behaves like Man o' War; Ras charges the police, "riding like cowboys, man":

Here he comes bookety-bookety with that spear stuck out in front of him and that shield on his arm, charging, man. And he's yelling something in African or West Indian or something, and he's got his head down low like he knew about that shit too, man. . . . so he let fly with that spear and you could hear him grunt and say something 'bout that cop's kinfolks and then him and that hoss shot up the street leaping like Heigho, the goddam Silver. (IM 562-64; my ellipsis)

The parody (which gestures toward the dozens) both amuses and alarms the protagonist. He considers their words, "wanting to laugh and yet knowing that Ras was not funny, or not only funny, but dangerous as well. . . . Why did they make it seem funny, only funny? I thought. And yet knowing that it was. It was funny and dangerous and sad" (IM 564).

"Wanting to laugh" constitutes a refrain in IM's brain, an instinctive response to vulnerability or danger; it is an impulse that develops and darkens in the course of the novel. Laughter is handmaiden to IM's anger, and as his anger grows increasingly violent, his laughter becomes harsh and hysterical, crazed and even crazy. When we reach time present of the narrative frame, laughing has become second nature: habit, defense, and symptom of pathology. His laughter detonates anger and despair and punctuates the telling of his tale.

As early as his school days, IM uses laughter to check pain. During the scramble for coins at the battle royal, he finds that he can ignore the electric shock by laughing: "I could contain the electricity--a contradiction, but it works" (IM 27). When he learns the contents of Bledsoe's "recommendation" letters, he copes with his outrage and sense of betrayal by mentally composing a parodic exchange of letters: "Dear Bled, have met Robin and shaved tail," at which he:
sat on the bed and laughed. They'd sent me to the rookery, all right. I laughed and felt numb and weak, knowing that soon the pain would come and . . . I'd never be the same. I felt numb and I was laughing. (IM 194)

Remembering his rage later, he pictures Bledsoe as a "shameless chitterling eater" and relisher of hog bowels, and he lets out "a wild laugh, almost choking over the yam [he has just bought]" (IM 265). At the factory, he "represses a laugh" to counter the memory of a demeaning childhood jingle prompted by Lucius Brockway's paint slogan, "It's the Right White" (218); and later, in response to the more serious assault from Brockway biting him, "[a] wild flash of laughter struggled to rise from beneath [his] anger" (IM 227). In several other threatening encounters, IM responds with the urge to laugh: "I wanted to laugh [at the people surrounding Ras the Exhorter]. But they were in no mood for laughter" (IM 480); "I wanted to laugh [at Brother Maceo's challenge], but I told him to 'take it easy'" (IM 487); I lay in a cramp, wanting to laugh and yet knowing that Ras was not funny, or not only funny, but dangerous" (IM 564; emphases added). He indulges his desire to laugh after averting the fight with Brother Maceo; he leaves the bar "laughing with the sudden relief of the joke restored [wondering what kind of man Rinehart is]" (IM 490). His Brotherhood experience gives him plenty of opportunity for laughing. When a talk with his "fanatic" teacher (as IM had earlier described Hambro) finally makes clear the extent of the Brotherhood's hypocrisy and betrayal of Harlem, he responds with a typical combination of laughter and violence: "For a second I thought I'd laugh [at Hambro's talk of 'integrity']. Or let fly with Tarp's link" (IM 503).

Extended laughter delineates the importance of the Chthonian party scene where IM is first introduced to the Brotherhood and receives his new identity--a scene that
exemplifies "the end is in the beginning" for the nature of their collaboration is already evident. Everyone is mortified when a drunk member commits, in Jack's words, "an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism" by treating IM like a hired entertainer and insisting that he sing a spiritual or a "good ole Negro work song"—since "all Negroes can sing." The drunk is hastily shunted out of the room, and after a moment of intense embarrassment, IM responds in a way that proves infectious:

And suddenly I was laughing hysterically.... "He hit me in the face with a yard of chitterlings!"—bending double, roaring, the whole room seeming to dance up and down with each rapid eruption of laughter.... My eyes filled, I could barely see. (IM 313)

Nervously and cautiously, others adopt his tactic, their "silent tension... ebbing into a ripple of laughter that sounded throughout the room, growing swiftly to a roar, a laugh of all dimensions, intensities and intonations. Everyone was joining in. The room fairly bounced" (IM 313). Members of the Brotherhood and their women choked, pounded one another, honked noses, wiped eyes until the protagonist struggles to recover from what he describes as "painful": "I fought against the painful laughter, and as I calmed I saw them looking at me with a sort of embarrassed gratitude. It was sobering and yet they seemed bent upon pretending that nothing unusual had happened" (IM 313). But the laughter is not healing. What IM must learn, finally, is that nothing unusual had happened. It was in fact de rigueur for the brothers to view a black man as stereotypical, second-class, exploitable. What was mortifying to them was not the fact of their racism and hypocrisly, but that it had been publicly exposed at an inopportune time.

IM's pattern of response to racism (recognition, anger, laughter) is repeated at another important moment near the
end of his association with the Brotherhood when he vows to shift into "doing a Rinehart":

I leaned against a stone wall along the park, thinking of Jack and Hambro and of the day's events [the sell out of Harlem] and shook with rage. . . . [B]ecause they were blind they would destroy themselves and I'd help them. I laughed. . . . I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used . . . --except I now recognized my invisibility. So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag. . . . I didn't know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice. I'd overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I'd agree them to death and destruction. . . . Let them gag on what they refused to see. Let them joke on it. (IM 508)

Still later when his break with the Brotherhood is complete, IM wonders and laughs, with pain, about the anonymous telephone call warning him of the Harlem riot: "[H]ad that been the beginning, or had Jack simply dropped his eye? I laughed drunkenly, the eruption paining my head" (IM 550).

By the time we reach the narrative frame, IM's ironic laughter is honed and sharp, foremost among his defenses. Bitter, intense, and destructive, his laughter laces the incidents that take place in the Prologue and Epilogue. The narrator reins in his murderous attack on the blond stranger through "amusement"; he begins to think, from the victim's point of view, about a phantom out of the man's own head beating him within an inch of his life: "I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. . . . I ran away into the dark laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself" (IM 5).

He has controlled his rage through laughter and averted an action that would put him at external risk, yet his intense, mirthless laughing threatens internal damage, and the image of a figure disappearing into the dark, leaving behind only the sound of his wild laughing suggests derangement. His lexical choices are revealing: it is indeed a crazy discovery because it is a discovery made by a crazy man.
This kind of behavior persists in the Epilogue. In a parallel incident, IM again threatens the person he encounters—Mr. Norton—and again settles it with a laughterly self-destructive conclusion. When Norton asks for subway directions, IM first plays with him—challenging him with questions, making allusions Norton can't understand, turning his own words back on him—then laughs at his confusion; finally IM moves to intimidation:

"But I'm your destiny, I made you. Why shouldn't I know you?" I said, walking closer and seeing him back against a pillar. He looked around like a cornered animal. He thought I was mad.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Norton," I said. "There's a guard down the platform there. You're safe. Take any train." . . . [After he disappeared quite spryly inside the train,] I stood there laughing hysterically. I laughed all the way back to my hole. (IM 578-79)

Readers might wonder about the implication of IM's reference to the subway guard. Is IM merely heightening his intimidation? Or would Mr. Norton be at greater risk if there were no guards? What is not ambiguous, however, is that "the end is in the beginning." In this last episode as in the novel's first one, IM assaults another person, aborts the attack, and retreats animal-like "back to his hole." Once again he falls into hysterical laughter. Again his word choices are revealing: Norton looks cornered like an animal, and indeed Norton is cornered—by an animal; Norton thought he was mad, and readers may be inclined to agree with Norton's judgment.

We observe the narrator transforming his anger into laughter in accord with Ellison's notion that laughter is more affirmative than "raw anger." Yet, the "raw" persists because the laughter ringing in the Prologue and Epilogue mocks and wounds. IM's irony is not healing. At the narrative's conclusion, the protagonist is isolated and crazed—pushed to, into, madness. It is again oxymoronic that one of the clearest voices of reason belongs to the so-
called "insane" vet of the Golden Day; madness and sanity are confused and inverted. In a profoundly unjust world, madness offers itself as a reasonable defense. Yet IM's ultimate stance is nihilistic and self-destructive. His claim that staying in his hole, divided from all others, is "true health" is not convincing:

Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. Hence again I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern [by castrating them]. (IM 576)

Not only does the notion that health lies in division belie common wisdom that health, whether personal or social, is holistic, a mending and making whole (not a hole), but it is also not at all clear how much we can trust the narrator's words. IM has been struggling throughout the novel to determine how his grandfather's deathbed bequest applies to him. What stunned his family--the revelation that the grandfather had adopted (and was now advising them to adopt) a counterfeit role of calculated deception to survive life--is what the protagonist now comes to embrace. A major irony is that Invisible Man finally learns to say no by saying yes. Taking his grandfather's advice, he too will "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (IM 16); readers, as we shall see, are not exempted from this strategy.

"Yes, Yes, Yes!":

The Prologue and Epilogue contain the narrator's final report to his audience on the lessons he has learned in life. Ellison tells us that the Prologue was written "in terms of a shift in the hero's point of view . . . to throw the reader off balance-- . . . a foreshadowing through which . . . the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book" (SA 173). The Epilogue, he says
"was necessary to complete the action" of the book's series of reversals, and it is, as is appropriate to the ironic structuring of the novel, "the most final reversal of all" (SA 179-80). In the "torturing" process of writing his memoir, IM is able to review his experiences, assemble his lessons, and survey their applicability to his life; in the narrative frame he summarizes his conclusions.

By the time he reaches the Prologue, IM has rejected the positions of the novel's most admirable characters, each of whom maintains personal integrity. Mary Rambo promotes the black community; IM instead serves (later isolates) the individual--i.e. himself. Tod Clifton "resists reality," refuses illusions, and pays with his life while IM chooses survival and lets "reality club him into the cellar" (IM 572). Clifton had come to believe that a black man's only authentic choices (inside history) are violence or madness: "I suppose sometimes a man has to plunge outside history. . . . Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts" (IM 377); Clifton opts out of this dilemma, but IM is caught like a matador between the two horns. Brother Tarp non-violently but steadfastly stands up to injustice and says "no" at the cost of nineteen years of his life; IM converts Tarp's leg shackle into a deadly weapon and evasively, deceivingly learns to say "yes, yes, yes."

From numerous and diverse "mentors," IM learns over and over the same lesson: life is counterfeit; integrity and authenticity have no place in reality. In Susan L. Blake's summation, IM is offered "a vision of reality based on contradiction: yes is no, freedom is slavery, things are not what they seem" (128). IM watches Bledsoe sculpt his face in the mirror into a bland mask to present to Mr. Norton (IM 102), and listens to Bledsoe's incredulous reprimand that "[he doesn't] even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed to be" (IM 142). Bledsoe's scornful advice is that "we show
[these white folks] what we want them to see" (IM 102). The doctor-vet from the Golden Day advises him to "look beneath the surface." "Play the game," he says, "but don't believe in it. . . . Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. . . . play it your own way . . . raise the ante" (IM 153). And even Hambro, who is largely silenced, admits that "we [the Brotherhood] must sometimes appear as charlatans" (IM 505), in a statement that is itself equivocal since "sometimes" and "appear" convey meaning that is at odds with the truth.

Ras and Rinehart, figures who "just jumped out" according to Ellison (SA 180), present IM with ways to cope with a counterfeit world. They are the first characters mentioned in the novel, and they exert a strong presence to the end. What each stands for is ambiguous, vaguely sinister, yet persuasive, and IM appropriates something from each of them. From Ras he learns some brutal street-fighting maneuvers as we observe in the incident with the blond stranger: "I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out" (IM 4). The narrator learns a more basic lesson from Ras the Exhorter as well; he gives Ras six pages of text to present his eloquent and convincing case for black nationalism (only Trueblood and Rev. Barbee command more textual space). Although initially IM rejects Ras's ideas and pits himself against Ras's movement, he eventually reaches out to him during the riot in a moment of epiphany:

A new mood was settling over me as they came on, a larger crowd than Ras had ever drawn. I went calmly forward, . . . moving with a certain new sense of self. . . . I faced him, knowing I was no worse than he, nor any better, and that all the months of illusion and the night of chaos required but a few simple words, a mild, even a meek, muted action to clear the air. . . . "I am no longer their brother," I shouted. . . . "[T]hey used me to catch you and now they're using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. Don't you
see it?" . . . But even as I spoke I knew it was no good. I had no words and no eloquence. (IM 557-58)

After escaping from Ras's followers, IM continues:

If only I could turn around and drop my arms and say "look, men, give me a break, we're all black folks together. . . . Nobody cares." Though now I knew we cared, they at least cared enough to act--so I thought. If only I could say, "Look, they've played a trick on us, the same old trick with new variations--let's stop running and respect and love one another. . . ." (IM 560)

But his gesture is inadequate and too late, and language fails him. In another moment of irony he speaks about solidarity with Ras and black folks when he is least able to achieve it, when he is most separated from them.

Unfortunately, the fact that IM is unusually calm and sober (no wild laughter), that he finally speaks of "we" and reaches out to find for a community of allies (instead of manipulating crowds and sloughing off human contact), and that he uncharacteristically espouses sincerity and love is to no avail. This most expansive and affirmative moment in IM's development gives way--must give way to save his life. IM the survivor flees Ras and--putting Brother Tarp's leg chain to its new use--knuckles his way out of the riot and, shortly thereafter, into the hole. For IM the rest is a falling off of love and community as well as a "falling down." Finally he is a leader, he realizes, but leadership is reduced to "leading them . . . in the stripping away of my illusionment" (IM 559). He has succeeded in losing his illusions, but he has nothing to replace them.

B. P. (Bliss Proteus) Rinehart provides an even stronger resource for IM--ironically, because he never actually appears in the novel. Or rather, since IM assumes his identity--first accidentally, then deliberately--the protagonist becomes Rinehart, Rinehart appears as protagonist. Ellison has described Rinehart as a "master of
disguise, of coincidence" whose name combines inner and outer: "Rinehart is my name for the personification of chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the old theme of The Confidence Man" (SA 181-82). Rinehart, IM learns, "has to have a smooth tongue, a heartless heart and be ready to do anything" (IM 493). At first IM considers warning people that Rinehart is a fraud, but Rinehart's overwhelming, rapid-fire shape-shifting forces him into the following line of (punning, paradoxical) reasoning:

He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie. (IM 498)

The narrator has been searching for possibility and Rinehart provides it; he wants to shed foolishness and ignorance and Rinehart shows him how. IM too has encountered chaos wherever he sought home and identity; he now practices his American proteanism in his borderland hole. He has given allegiance to a succession of false beliefs, and Rinehart teaches him that only the unbelievable can be believed and that only lies are true. IM dons Rinehart's glasses, his role, his principles; he becomes Rinehart--a confidence man and trickster who survives by shifts and tricks, dissimulation and manipulation.

By the time he reaches the narrative frame, IM the trickster protagonist is finally able to understand and ready to adopt the modus operandi of his most important mentor figure—his grandfather. The grandfather's deathbed pronouncements begin the memoir and return boomerang-like at
the end of the narrative; in between they regularly surface in the narrator's mind. Initially, IM is haunted by his words and struggles to keep them at bay. At school, for example, he chooses to twist the notion of responsibility, adopting a reality-denying mea culpa rather than give credence to his grandfather's advice:

[to] admit that my grandfather had made sense... was impossible, for though I still believed myself innocent, I saw that the only alternative to permanently facing the world of Trueblood and the Golden Day was to accept the responsibility for what had happened. Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. (IM 147)

Of course IM-narrator is fully aware, and at some level even IM-protagonist suspects, that something is amiss. IM-protagonist knows also that his grandfather is shrewd (an ex-slave able to quote the entire United States Constitution in an attempt to get the vote), and he learns that life has an uncanny way of corroborating his grandfather's stance. Still callow at the time of his arena speech, IM again represses the grandfather's voice—"the dissenting voice, ... the cynical disbelieving part--the traitor self that always threatened internal discord" (IM 335)—perceiving it to be a threat to his "new beginning" with the Brotherhood. But in the end, IM-narrator adopts his grandfather's tactics, recognizing their efficacy in the real world as illustrated, for example, by Trueblood's capitalizing on his wretched story to gain advantage from the white world, or by the Golden Day's demonstration that truth and sanity are found clothed in madness and lies. Gradually, IM reaches the conclusion that his best hope for survival is the implementation of his grandfather's dictates. With help from Ras and Rinehart, he will overcome with yeses.

IM-character discovers, however (as IM-narrator tells us), that yessing takes practice. He makes a false start when he first takes on the Brotherhood:
Oh, I'd yes them, but wouldn't I yes them! I'd yes them till they puked and rolled in it. All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES! That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! All right, I'd yea, yea and oui, oui and si, si and see, see them too; and I'd walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots. (IM 509)

However, the outcome is not what he envisioned; in the midst of the Brotherhood-sanctioned riot he concludes that he has been used as a tool, and that his grandfather had been wrong---"or else things had changed too much since his day" (IM 564). His first try backfires because he is still too cocky and noisy and too enamored of his own rhetoric. He has misjudged the nature of "the lion's mouth" and miscalculated both his own power and the Brotherhood's sincerity; that is, he has retained his illusions and they have clouded his sight.

At the completion of his memoir, however, he has stripped away his illusions--about himself and his leadership, about the world and justice, about responsibility and trust--enabled finally to use his grandfather's advice to advantage. In spite of his losses, he is a survivor and a narrator. Very much like Trueblood, he will employ the strategies he has so painfully learned for his maximum benefit. As a smart and street-wise storyteller, Invisible Man will move into the narrative frame equipped to control his audience by telling them what they want to hear. Whether he can successfully extend his strategy--eminently successful with his own characterized audience--to the narrative audience is more problematic for him; as actual white readers are jolted into a recognition of self in the stranger, they may try to disassociate themselves from the narrator's characterizations and manipulations to flee to the more comfortable realm of the authorial audience.
The story IM tells is his life story. He tells it to listeners whom he creates and characterizes, but whom, ironically, he profoundly distrusts. (A consideration of the gender of his readers is included in the discussion of the treatment of women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters* in the Coda to Chapter III.) By the time the narrator completes his memoir and reaches the narrative frame, he has discovered that fraudulence operates everywhere and that truth is always lies. He has taken refuge in a hole, in irony, in narrative. In the process, he has gained a considerable degree of control over his life and over storytelling. He has enhanced his vision by stripping away blinding illusions; he may be invisible, he tells us (which is our problem), but he is not blind (in contrast to the many in his memoir who do not or only half see). Through his ingenuity (and he is acutely conscious and still proud of his mind), he has arranged both his physical and his existential positions. In his failure to find a match with any of the usual identities offered by the world, he riffs on Tod Clifton, opting out of history (at least everyday history) and opting for the protean nature of the trickster: that is, a figure without a stable identity, who manipulates but eludes being manipulated. This trickster-narrator takes a position of "agree-able antagonism" toward his readers, and he takes amusement from his ironic storytelling at their expense.

In the Prologue the narrator gives his readers--in a highly elliptical manner, to be sure--a preview of his memoir, revealing a number of pertinent details about his life and the formation of his character. Examples of the advance information include: that his life has always been violent, but that he used to deny it (*IM* 5); that he used to
assume he was visible but now accepts his invisibility with its "slightly different sense of time . . . never quite on the beat" (IM 8); that he tried to escape from Ras the Destroyer (perhaps without complete success) and was chased into darkness where he finally learned to see; that he feels alive when he fights; that he somehow still answers to Ras and Rinehart but not to Brother Jack and the Brotherhood (IM 13); and that he considers himself (to have been) an orator and a rabble rouser. He explicitly draws attention to the fact that the "end is in the beginning," and of course readers cannot truly understand the foreshadowing here until the end. But the most interesting revelation of the Prologue--which also depends upon what follows in the memoir proper to be fully comprehended by the reader--is the narrator's conception of and relationship to his audience.

In direct address to his audience, the narrator clearly delineates an adversarial position for himself, and characterizes his readers as outsiders unaware of other realities (especially his); they are also characterized as judgmental, probably white, and certainly afflicted by racism:

Since you never recognize me even when in closest contact with me, and since, no doubt, you'll hardly believe that I exist, it won't matter if you know that I tapped a power line leading into the building and ran it into my hole in the ground. (IM 13)

He establishes his control over his readers by outlining their deficiencies of perception and imagination, as well as their powerlessness to limit or punish his action.

IM addresses his readers again after describing his vicious attack on the tall blond blue-eyed man, a bit character who can nonetheless serve as representative of IM's characterized audience because he too is white, racist, unaware of other realities, and so forth. Just as the characterized readers are under the narrator's control, the
blue-eyed stranger is also at his mercy, in this case, under a life-or-death control:

I can hear you say, "What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!" And you're right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. (IM 14)

The narrator's "leap of agreement" is a challenge, an affront rather than an affirmation. The tone is adversarial, the namecalling—though grammatically addressed to himself—is in flavor with picking a fight, and the leaping action is energetically confrontational. It is as though the narrator has turned, with his heel still upon the blond stranger and his knife in his hand, ready to take on his readers next.

Subsequent information deepens our understanding of these comments. In the memoir proper we read that the protagonist self-destructively assumes responsibility/guilt and condones his own punishment for what he did not do and could not control. Thus responsibility—in one of the many reversals of meaning that take place in the novel—absorbs the coloration of the fraudulent, becomes irresponsible. The narrator further plays on the connection between responsibility and response-ability, between response and recognition. If, he argues, you do not recognize another's (right to) existence, then it follows that you cannot make a response to that person, and the notion of responsibility between the two does not apply. Significantly, the narrator foregrounds "agreement" in the first pages of his Prologue because the exploration of what it means to say yes, to give—or feign—assent is central to his experience and to his method of narrating. This passage, in keeping with the
narrative's characteristic yoking of opposites, ends by directly contradicting its initial sentiment. It retracts its leap of agreement with the claim that agreement is actually impossible, dependent as it is upon recognition (and its implication of equality). As the passage continues, the narrator gives the knife one more twist:

Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble. . . . But I shirked that responsibility. (IM 14)

He again reverses himself by making a new claim to agree with the reader. But now, apparently ingenuously, he has shifted the grounds of agreement and changed the meaning of responsibility. He calls his failure to finish off his racist victim irresponsible, a shirking of duty. He calls his restraint foolish and a prelude to future "tragic trouble," although his own experience with the Brotherhood suggests that it is not the restraint of violence, but violence itself that leads to (more) violence. Cunningly, the narrator has tricked the reader into an agreement that getting rid of socially powerful, racist individuals like the blond stranger is a social benefit and a personal obligation. The characterized reader, who closely resembles the blond stranger, has agreed to his/her own demise.

Here the narrator is signifying upon his grandfather, although the reader must read on to realize it. The grandfather's original words at the deathbed scene occur two pages beyond, in the first chapter of the memoir itself. For readers to "get in on the joke," they must first recognize the importance of the grandfather's precepts and witness the narrator's gradual acceptance of them. With that information, however, the Prologue's string of "yeses" becomes strikingly significant: the narrator is implementing his grandfather's technique by yessing his readers.
Moreover, by the time IM writes the Prologue, he has practiced the technique and so is more adept at yessing his readership than he was the Brotherhood, better able to tell his audience what they want to hear without it backfiring upon him. Once we realize that the narrator distrusts his readers and harbors few illusions about the possibility of reaching "true" agreement with them, we become sensitive to his language and the way he plays with it and us. His words begin to shift their shape, reversing and doubling their meaning, sometimes re-doubling and reversing the reversal so that a kind of vertigo sets in, making it difficult to settle upon a final meaning.

When, for example, the narrator refers to "higher interests," "higher" is packed with contradiction. Initially, "higher" denotes "better," "more noble" or "overriding." Then, the sense of "physically above" overlays the word since the speaker is speaking from underground for those interests on the surface above him. Yet those interests are also socially above him, and they are the very interests that have "clubbed him into his hole"--so, ironically, the physically "higher" interests are, from the narrator's point of view, in fact "lower"--or "lowering"--interests. The reversals continue. The narrator assures readers that "higher" interests dictate murdering the stranger although the stranger is one of their (socially advantaged) own, so the irony deepens and the phrase acquires a sarcastic tone and the sense of its antonym, "ignoble." But in yet another twist, the language insists on retaining the original notion of a hierarchy of interests, reminding the reader that a kind of interest exists that overrides those contingent interests of the social power structure and status quo (of which the stranger is emblematic); for example, ridding society of racism, class exploitation, and social violence is ethically desirable and intrinsically good. From the point of view of
ethics, then, the narrator is arguing that actions that help establish a moral order protect the higher interests of society and that, therefore, murder is a socially desirable, ethically sanctioned act. In this context, however, we readers who are persuaded by this ethical argument and who also share characteristics with the blue-eyed stranger are being "yessed to death."

Words revolve in the mouth of the adversarial narrator. He uses his rhetorical skills to say one thing and mean the opposite. Reading in the newspaper about his attack on the stranger, the narrator claims to feel "sincere compassion" (IM 5); the phrase doesn't harmonize with his tone, nor the two words with each other, at least in the ordinary way. In the first place, "sincere" signals its opposite, that he does not mean what he is saying. The narrator has in fact struggled to divest himself of the yoke of "sincerity"; from his grandfather he has learned that he must dispense with sincerity whenever it compromises his ability to manipulate others. Furthermore, the expression of compassion jars with the enraged and brutal execution of the attack itself. On the other hand, however, the narrator may indeed feel "compassion" in the root sense of "suffering with"--for he has had inflicted upon him pain unto death similar to that which he has in turn inflicted upon the stranger.

In another example of the forked tongue, the narrator claims, after describing his warm home/hole, that "I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead" (IM 6). First of all the negative of "incorrect" qualifies the assurance, for normally people do not want to be assured of their mistakes. Secondly, his adversarial readers might not be expected to welcome the news that he is alive and well, ready to attack another day. Finally, the notion of "assurance" itself drives to the core of the narrator's stance towards his audience; ironically, it hints of
reversing the reversal, negating the negation of assurance, and it carries therefore layers of contradiction. Like his grandfather, the narrator wants to assure his adversaries, to grin 'em to destruction. At the same time--because IM is, in my view, deranged but not entirely cynical--he wants to tell them "what they want to hear" in such a way that they sense what he wants them to understand. On the surface, he first assigns certain assumptions to his readers and then uses confirming language to preserve a climate of agreement while he also preserves his own safety in a hostile, oppressive world. Yet, of course, he does not actually agree with these assumptions, and at a deeper level, he wants to prod readers into questioning their attitudes and revising them in a process analogous to his own painful learning. Perhaps the influence of his author, Ellison, qualifies his grandfather's conclusions and allows him to imagine that not all of his adversaries have to be manipulated with hypocritical grins, but that some can be redeemed through education. But such readers may be few, and they must first clear away the manipulation practiced upon them to try to reach a foundation of sincerity; and the narrator does not dare make that easy for them to do.

Another place where language shifts with re-reading is IM's claim that the attack he has just described is atypical because he is usually "not so overtly violent" (IM 5). As IM's nature becomes clear, the emphasis shifts from the adjective to the adverb. It is not, as we might first assume, that he is normally not violent, but that he is normally not overt--for it is dangerous, he explains, "to awaken the sleeping ones." Similarly, when Louis Armstrong "innocently" asks what he did to be so black and blue, the "innocently" shifts and twists; it alerts us to its opposite and insists that we question the coloration of innocence in Armstrong's question, in his music---and in the narrator's memoir.
At one place in the text, the narrator explicitly admits taking advantage of his readers—"But that is taking advantage of you" (IM 6)—but the admission is designed to conceal, not cancel, the advantage that he actually takes. He uses the Empire State Building and Broadway for comparison (as the brightest spots in New York) to indicate the extraordinary amount of light he has in his hole. Then, in what he concedes "might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves" (IM 6), he corrects himself to say that "those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization." But the trivial advantage that he has taken—that he hasn't used good examples to illustrate how bright his hole is—covers up the larger maneuver: namely, that as part of his design to gain advantage over his reader he is camouflaging his generally evasive manner with candor about something insignificant. Ironically, his concession that his remarks sound like a hoax (meant of course to imply that they are not really a hoax) should instead be taken at face value.

In another of the Prologue's intriguing double-tongued assertions, IM declares: "I believe in nothing if not action" (IM 13). At first, readers are likely to interpret the first part of the assertion as hyperbole and infer that the narrator is on the verge of emerging from his hibernation. But re-reading yields an opposite interpretation. By the completion of his memoir, we observe that IM has concluded that everything is counterfeit and has in fact come to believe in nothing—including the possibility of his performing positive social action. The palpable ambiguity surrounding IM's future plans does not indicate his indecisiveness but emerges, I believe, from the tension between what he actually intends and what he wants his readers to understand. That is, the hints he gives that he retains confidence in the efficacy of democratic
principles or that he believes there is a place for him in American society, the hints that he will, therefore, end his hibernation soon--are a hoax. His memoir provides no evidence from experience or mentoring to substantiate such belief, and indeed, everything IM has related to us supports the contrary view. When, in the Epilogue, he concludes that perhaps his greatest social crime is that he's over Stayed his hibernation, "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (IM 581), the words have been emptied of meaning, an echo only of his former conviction or the reflection of others' sentiments (like Ellison's). By this point in the narrative, "possibility" and "responsible" have become hopelessly contaminated, and by choosing these words (and we should remember that he is a wordsmith, a self-styled orator and rhetorician), he renders his assertions suspect also.

There is also the relevant question of how long he has been underground. There are a number of clues that he has been "in hibernation" for a very long time. For example, he talks about how often he has tried to find out "the next phase": "Over and over again I've gone up above to seek it out" (IM 576). He has had time to collect and wire his 1,369 light bulbs--acquired (a few at a time?) from a junk man, and the description of his life underground indicates that he has made himself comfortable and has become quite accustomed to it--in fact he has ideas for future conveniences. Furthermore, Mr. Norton is described as "thinner and wrinkled now but as dapper as ever," a figure from "the old life." If he has indeed been underground for many years, then his professions about surfacing seem even more implausible, another instance where he is deceptively selective, concealing relevant information, including only what reinforces his readers' expectations.

"So there you have all of it that's important" (IM 572) is the attention-getting address with which IM begins the
Epilogue and resumes his conversation with his readers. Then, tipping his hand, the narrator adds a revealing qualification: "Or at least you almost have it" (original emphasis). The considerable distance between "having it" and "almost having it" highlights the narrator's treatment of his readers, for it is the gap between what he has discovered and what he is willing to reveal. In this part of the narrative frame, as he is about to conclude his association with his audience, he makes another admission:

Let me be honest with you—a feat which, by the way, I find of the utmost difficulty. When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time. (IM 572)

Once again, it is his candor that is deceptive. He is not being honest about being honest, or about who is in control of the discourse ("Let me" suggests that he is asking readers for permission). He is honest about the difficulty of being honest, but not candid. The implication is that he is being honest in spite of the difficulty, that he is making the utmost effort to overcome his difficulty in speaking the truth. But in truth, the difficulty of being honest comes not from a failing in him, but the failing that he perceives in his readers. His readers are unreliable, hostile, and dangerous, and he does not trust them. For him to be honest with them is neither wise nor desirable. As he has learned from his grandfather, his goal is to tell readers what they want to hear—and what they want to hear is usually contrary to the truth. Of course, they want to hear that he is being honest with them, so he tells them that (though they are also quite ready to believe that it would be difficult for the likes of the invisible man to be honest, and so he tells them that too). Neither is he candid about the degree of difficulty, for the feat of being (not) honest has become quite easy through practice of his
grandfather's technique and because he has come (finally, painfully) to accept that "he is what he is." He is candid when he admits that good and evil, honesty and dishonesty are shifty and confusing, for--as we have observed--he deliberately shifts the meaning of words and deliberately confuses his audience. Finally, there is an important truth that he professes here--that good and evil depend upon who happens to be looking. Not only is this true in the cynical sense that he will tailor his words to his audience, but there is also the deeper sense that there may be some among his audience able to sort out good from evil in a way that approximates truth; there may actually be some white readers who, in the effort to disassociate themselves from the uncomfortable characterized audience, are able to penetrate confusion and contradictions to find authenticity.

This warning then--about his (not) being honest with the reader and his confusing good with evil, honesty with dishonesty--prepares us for the narrator's concluding sentiments in the last pages of his narrative. Significantly, even as he is practicing the strategy, IM ends the narrative with a discussion of his yessing. He explains that he was hated when honest, even when "as just now I've tried to articulate exactly what I felt to be the truth." But he was loved whenever

I've tried to give my friends the incorrect, absurd answers they wished to hear. In my presence they could talk and agree with themselves, the world was nailed down, and they loved it. They received a feeling of security. But here was the rub: Too often, in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind. Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick. So I became ill of affirmation, of saying "yes" against the nay-saying of my stomach---not to mention my brain. (IM 573)

Besides being outrageously comic, this passage is puzzling for several reasons. For one thing, this is the first that
we have heard about friends or a desire to be loved. Since he belonged to a fraternity at school, and as he is clearly referring to the past, we might assume that this behavior occurred in those years. Yet at school he still clung to illusions and believed in saying yes, and IM specifically tells us he first adopted the strategy of yessing during his Brotherhood stint, long after his school years. On the other hand, when he first practices yessing the Brotherhood, the Brothers are no longer (if ever they were) his friends. Perhaps the explanation is that the narrator of the Epilogue chokes in retrospect, remembering his younger sickening behavior. Or perhaps, in retelling his experiences, the narrator can now recognize and name his earlier repugnance, although he concealed it from himself at the time. Or even, schizophrenically, perhaps he is describing his own divided self—the self that wanted a secure, nailed-down world joined to the one who knew that security was fraudulent and counterfeit. IM's clever yet crazed imagination is clearly evident in his creation of the dramatic choking-himself metaphor that is itself sickening. Not only does it evoke choking, but it casts IM in the image of the black Sambo figure with all that that figure signifies.

In any case, IM's cure for the illness of affirmation is not to stop saying yes; it is to stop believing in it—in the illusion that there is actually a principle to affirm. By the time of the Epilogue—in one meaning of Ellison's "the most final reversal of all"—IM has learned how to say yes to saying no by saying yes. He has cured his illness of affirmation by adopting his grandfather's philosophy that "our life is a war" and by accepting the charge to be "a traitor," to fight the "good fight" and live "with his head in the lion's mouth." IM has a home, an identity, a philosophy, and a strategy. By now, he is skilled enough in yessing to use the technique to protect himself from those who find security in hearing only what comfortably confirms
their prejudices. Yet, there are clues enough for receptive readers to catch the joke and question that security, to recognize the "incorrectness" and "absurdity" of the answers they have hitherto been soliciting, to abandon the narrator's characterized audience for the authorial audience.

So when the narrator, inexplicably and without previous grounding, speaks in the Epilogue about love and social responsibility and democratic principles, he is practicing telling his readers what they want to hear. Readers in general want a happy ending. Americans want a testimony to the value of democratic principles. White, middle-class readers want to hear that the invisible man will come up to meet them, on their terms. Yet—in another reversal—when the narrator suggests that "on the lower frequencies" he is speaking for them, he means (among other things) that he says for them what they should be saying themselves—on the higher frequencies, above ground, for those higher interests and from their higher, more powerful social position. When they speak about love and justice and social responsibility, and so on, there is a greater likelihood that principles will be translated into reality.

But, heretofore, it is only a poor, black, powerless isolato living underground who sees and speaks and is driven mad by the radical and oppressive paradoxes of American life. The narrator has little faith that his readers will hear anything but his hysterical laughter: "'Ah,' I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!'

(IM 581). They do not hear—do not want to hear—any underlying message, and their eyes continue to look through him. The narrator's final (comic) expression of emotion is fear; he is frightened because although we are all a part of one world and will live together or die—no one seems to be speaking on the higher frequencies.
The Implied Author and His Distrusted Audience

As we have seen, the reader of *Invisible Man* has difficulty sorting out the genuine from the counterfeit. The novel offers a rinehartian world of tricks with conflicting signals as to who is tricking whom, at what level, and for whose interest. The narrative mode (irony), the narrative method (an unreliable trickster-narrator in dialogue with his younger self, with the implied author, and with his characterized readers), and the novel's situation (the dilemma of a racially marked individual in a racist "republic") all contribute to the confusion. Part of the difficulty lies in knowing where to assign value and how to recognize who is espousing what. By the end of the narrative, according to my reading, we have come to recognize the obsessive, crazed nature of the protagonist and the unreliability of his language, and we do not believe him when he gives verbal allegiance to love and democratic principles. But irony cuts both ways. Or rather, irony doubles and redoubles as if the novel were a house of mirrors and the reader confused as to which direction the irony travels, which image is real and which is reflection. For although IM divests himself of illusions, including the illusions that love is real or democracy possible in America, and though we reject his espousal of those values and principles as mere lip-service yessing, the values and principles seem to persist nonetheless. The explanation for their tenacity and viability lies with the implied author. Perhaps the "most final reversal" is one worked upon the protagonist himself. Parallel to the irony with which the protagonist views his possibilities, is the irony with which Ellison views his "foolish" protagonist. As IM separates himself from his ideals, the implied author separates himself--and the authorial readers with him--from IM,
letting IM's conclusions drain away, but holding onto the ideals.

The implied author clears a space for readers apart from the narrator. Just as readers share IM-narrator's vantage point and greater knowledge when they observe the inexperienced IM-character in action, they share the author's wider view and greater wisdom as they listen to IM-narrator. For example, the author can slip in a detail that the narrator tends to ignore but that influences the reader's understanding. For instance, when the pipes start knocking at Mary Rambo's, IM character is furious because of the noise, because of his communal living arrangement that is its cause, because of Mary's conservatism as shown by her possession of the Sambo bank. The narrator, on his part, focuses our attention upon the humiliation represented by the Sambo figure (which he describes at some length) and--out of his retrospective knowledge--makes us suspicious (through his description of the Chthonian meeting) that the character's decision to join the Brotherhood may not be altogether wise. But the implied author gives us another--and quite practical--perspective by slipping in a single mention of the bourbon that IM had drunk the previous night. With this hint, the reader can step back from the character's emotions and the narrator's high-principled prophecy to assess IM's behavior in the simpler terms of a hangover.

The dialogic operating among narrator, character, and author is evident also in the episode of the downtown "Woman Question" lecture. The character is angered and humiliated by his demotion to this assignment, and he suspects that he is the "butt of an outrageous joke" (IM 407). Nevertheless, his overriding ambition keeps his "optimism growing," and he goes to his first lecture "with a sense of excitement." As the character declares: "The theme was a sure-fire guarantee of audience interest and the rest was up to me"
The narrator, on the other hand, already knows what "even [the character's] volatile suspicions hadn't allowed [him] to foresee"—that is, the kind of audience reception and the seduction of the white woman that will follow the lecture. The narrator's focus is upon the sleazy nature of the white women of the leisure class whose approach to "the woman question" is sexual and predatory, and upon the unsavoury seduction and the woman's demeaning references to IM's "primitive" vitality and the "tom-toms beating in his voice." In contrast to his character self who describes the seducing/seduced woman as "the kind of woman who glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility" (IM 409), and who is capable—even after the seduction—of "want[ing] to linger there, experiencing the sensation of something precious" (IM 417), the narrator shows his disdain by leaving her nameless (in contrast to the fact that we learn the name of her sister who appears only on the other end of the telephone). IM-character, "lost" to his physical desire, chooses to ignore the humiliation of the encounter that is painfully evident to IM-narrator. Yet the author provides still another element in the dynamics. When the narrator describes the character's frame of mind as he approaches his first lecture, he mentions his excitement and optimism and his fantasy wish (originating perhaps in the anxiety of facing a new situation):

If only I were a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, I could simply stand before them with a sign across my chest, stating I KNOW ALL ABOUT THEM, and they'd be as awed as though I were the original boogey man—somehow reformed and domesticated. I'd no more have to speak than Paul Robeson had to act; they'd simply thrill at the sight of me. (IM 409)

In reporting on the seduction, the narrator stresses the agency of the white woman and the naïveté of the protagonist, but this passage indicates the complicity of
the protagonist himself. It is IM who introduces the notions of body and body size and physical "thrills." We know that IM is unimpressed by the topic of his lecture and that in general he relies upon delivery more than ideas in his speechmaking. But in privileging body over word, he here imagines himself as a stock figure: the big, black stud, the scary, non-verbal "primitive." In the next chapter, IM is horrified by what he judges to be the degrading behavior of Tod Clifton with the Sambo dolls—he reacts angrily, speaks of betrayal. Yet he shows no similar repugnance at casting himself in a demeaning black stereotype. Neither the character in the acting nor the narrator in the telling draws a connection between IM's thought and subsequent events. It is left to the implied author to give the reader a more complicated, more ambiguous version of the episode by suggesting that IM must share responsibility for what happens to him.

There are other ways by which the implied author nudges the action and our judgment. For example, IM's final portrait serves as a cautionary tale. The unhappy deranged figure of the Epilogue who survives through cunning and violence does not provide a bildungsroman model of lessons well-learned, and readers are instead directed to see the sterility of his choices. In learning that life is counterfeit (so he cannot count on principles) and that his own life is held worthless by those with power (so he cannot count on getting his fair share), IM has gone underground. But by going underground, the narrator blocks the horizon from his vision. Furthermore, by telling his story to a restricted and hostile white audience, he eliminates the possibility for making human contact. In consequence, he is unable to imagine alternatives to violence and trickery, and he adopts instead a nihilistic point of view. In his memoir, he sneers and snarls at an audience he despises and distrusts. The repelling of readers from this figure
implies an attracting to its opposite. Just as the physical conditions of this wild-and-vicious-laughers-at-wounds (his and others') are barbaric, so are his philosophical conclusions. If alienation, isolation, purposelessness, and living animal-like in a hole (however warm and light it may be) are the outcome of the protagonist's ontological and moral system, readers are going to search elsewhere for answers. The author, by implying that other answers exist, tempers cynicism with possibility and raises our sight above ground to a wider horizon. He welcomes and respects—in contrast to the narrator—a multifarious American audience, including those white readers who come to an awareness of the racist nature of the American system and a recognition of their own complicity in that system and who wish to act so as to distinguish themselves from the narrator's ignorant, racist group. The author also retains (at least a qualified) faith in the possibilities of American democracy and the educability of the American mainstream, and he offers a hope that seems inaccessible to Invisible Man.

The implied author shapes the reader's judgment also through his narrative methods. The various kinds of humor already discussed provide distancing from Invisible Man and his dilemma. We laugh at him as well as suffer with him. The enjoyment of humor and comedy itself provides a counterweight to IM's nihilism. Furthermore, the author's structuring of the novel constitutes an important strategy by which the author creates space between the narrator and the reader—his use of the framed tale.

IM the narrator cuts a figure familiar in African American storytelling, and the construction of the novel with its framed tale and distrusted audience links Invisible Man to a rich African American cultural tradition. Robert B. Stepto (in "Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives") discusses the influence of oral storytelling techniques upon black fiction and traces what he terms a
"discourse of distrust" to slave narrative, autobiography, and literary essay. "The World and the Jug," for example, "is justly famous in part because it so eloquently expresses Ellison's distrust of Irving Howe as a reader of black fiction" (304). Stepto focuses attention upon the frequent "active presence" of "the distrusting American reader-- thinly guised as an unreliable story listener" (304). In this fictional model "distrust is not so much a subject as a basis for specific narrative plotting and rhetorical strategies" (305). These narratives "not only present voices as tellers and hearers but also coerce authors and readers (or, if you will, texts and readers) into teller-hearer relationships" (305). Stepto continues:

In Afro-American storytelling texts especially, rhetoric and narrative strategy combine time and again to declare that the principal unreliable factor in the storytelling paradigm is the reader (white American readers, obviously, but blacks as well), and that acts of creative communication are fully initiated . . . when the reader gets "told"--or "told off"--in such a way that he or she finally begins to hear. (309)

Readers of IM's memoir are being vociferously "told off" although the narrator is not sanguine about their ability to hear. To the end, he is afraid that he is speaking too low and too low down for them to pay attention. But the author of the novel is not so pessimistic. His audience is more heterogeneous; it encompasses not only black readers who hear the narrator out of their own experience, but potential outsider listeners who will finally begin to hear something new. The latter are the ones who get "told" as well as "told off"; that is, they actually begin to hear. Paradoxically, members of the author's audience most likely to undergo the transformation described by Stepto are precisely those who most resemble--in terms of race and class--the narrator's audience. They (we) may hear that which threatens our position and our self-image as we see our faces mirrored in the faces in the audience. However,
in the effort to distinguish ourselves from these racist, oblivious, and danger-flirting persons in the narrator's audience--of whom the blond, blue-eyed stranger is paradigmatic--we will start listening and trying to understand. And, possibly, changing.

In discussing the role of the distrusted reader, Stepto makes the following observation about the oral tale that is relevant also to *Invisible Man*:

Framed tales by their nature invent storylisteners within their narratives. . . . In tale after tale, considerable artistic energy is brought to the task of persuading the reader to constitute himself [sic] as a listener, the key issue affecting that activity being whether the reader is to pursue such self-transformations in accord with or at variance with the model of the listener found within the narrative itself. (312)

Ellison's authorial readers will (in addition to having a great deal of fun in the process) not only hear the tale, but will become transformed; specifically they will be inspired to re-form themselves in strict variance to the model provided by the narrator's characterized audience.

The author shows here his own cleverness and (after all) his control of the text. For in the effort to establish his much-valued partnership with his readers, Ellison has delegated some unpleasant tasks to the narrator. It is the narrator who must coerce readers into becoming listeners of his memoir, and then must goad them into reaction--and action. As a result of the narrator's adversarial attitude toward his audience and the nasty portrait he draws of them, readers will resist recognizing themselves in his characterization and will reject further association with his audience. Once readers escape from the narrator's company of listeners, they/we can seek higher ground and find place and welcome in the healthier, more heterogeneous audience of the author. Both modes of Ellison's paradoxical relationship with his readers are
thereby realized. The narrator performs the antagonistic-coercive role in rounding up readers and getting their attention, playing with and on them, and finally alienating them. The author is able to assume a cooperative-persuasive stance with readers already transformed and prepared to listen. Together, Ellison and his much admired independent, American audience can initiate the reader-writer collaboration he so often celebrates.

The Boomerang

Ellison allows the narrator to tell his own tale, yet he also provides the reader a vantage point at some distance from the narrator, one with a broader horizon than is possible from an underground hole. In his unobtrusive nudging of the narrative, the author offers the reader an alternative, correcting vision of the novel's events and implications. In the dramatic rendering of the narrator's limited, miserable existence, the author signals that he does not sanction the narrator's choices. Yet the author himself is elusive, perhaps a trickster himself. The novel includes notions about the possibilities for freedom and democracy and a heterogeneous America and about the roles and responsibility of Americans of all colors to turn possibility into reality. The novel itself is a testimony to the author's faith in the response-ability of others to hear and to act. But the novel is not a blind paean to American possibility. It is obvious that American principles are more compromised than supported, especially in black American experience. That is, although the author puts himself at some distance from his protagonist and invites us to join him in laughing at his foolishness, he never denies the causes for IM's behavior. In casting doubts upon his protagonist's responses, he is not (as his critics have charged) "purging his novel of the black
American's suspicion about American democracy" (Miller), or trying to "eradicate Negro-ness" (Jones/Baraka), or "deserting the harsh reality of being black in the twentieth century" (Gayle); rather, Ellison takes the misery and pain and loss that are IM's experience as given (an assumption that is itself cause for dismay). What the author purges from his novel is oversimplification. His white critics may have expected a clenched fist or a wallowing in the predicament of the American Negro; black critics may have condemned him for an unwarranted adherence to the possibilities of American democracy. But Ellison's subtlety may simply have "escaped his critics, whether black or white, [because of being] out of step with fashionable political tendencies" (Cushing Strout in Parr 79).

Ellison's novel insists on both parts of the oxymoron, on the possibilities of all sides of the ambiguity. To quote Ellison again:

> I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject. (Shadow 113-14)

The author of *Invisible Man*, with the antagonistic cooperation of his narrator, refuses to settle for less.
No, I still don't think of myself as a writer... I didn't have any imagination, I just embroidered on things that happened, or that people told me happened.

Hisaye Yamamoto, interview with Charles L. Crow

I did not originally set out to become a writer... [but] I became interested in books as an art...

I tried to present some of the life patterns of a Japanese Issei and Nisei of a community to reveal... the small details of living that would appeal to the reader of any nationality.

Toshio Mori, interview with Peter Horikoshi

The work of Hisaye Yamamoto and Toshio Mori provides an ethnic perspective upon American values and the American experience that both corroborates and complicates the positions taken by Ralph Ellison. Like Ellison, these two authors were writing during the first half of the twentieth century, before the crucial events of the sixties and the effect of the civil rights movements upon the attitudes and behavior of--and toward---American minority groups. Like Ellison, too, Mori and Yamamoto have experienced exploitation and racism and yet continue to evince a faith in American principles and a belief in the value of assimilation into the American mainstream. On the other hand, while all three writers share a similar race and class status, the Japanese American writers' individual experience and the impact of history upon their group provide some dramatic contrast with Ellison's. The institutionalized racism suffered by Japanese Americans, for example, takes a
very different form from that inflicted upon African Americans. And while Yamamoto and Mori have chronology in common with Ellison, they do not share geography; in contrast to Ellison's migratory experience in the American midwest, south, and urban east, the Japanese Americans' experience of American society was largely confined to farming communities on the west coast. These writers offer a contrast to Ellison also in the matter of audience; Ellison's novel was published promptly by a mainstream press, and it immediately reached a wide national readership, while the publication history of the work of Mori and Yamamoto is characterized by restriction, postponement, and relative obscurity.

The fiction by Yamamoto and Mori contributes views and voices that both overlap and diverge from those of Invisible Man. All three authors, their narrators, and the principal characters share a subordinate social position, and their narratives portray the pressures of political and economic oppression on their groups and in their personal lives. Yet the approach in the short stories of the two Japanese Americans is quieter and more understated than in Ellison's long novel. Their Japanese American characters internalize oppression rather than rebel against it in the manner of Invisible Man. Violence, anger, and hysteria occasionally hover at the edges of the text but are never foregrounded. Humor, also, is muted and diffuse in contrast to the concentrate of verbal puns, pratfalls, and oral jokes that fill and flavor Ellison's novel. Irony, too, is softened in Yamamoto's stories and replaced by paradox in Mori's.

The two Japanese American writers share their group's history as well as important values and attitudes. They do, however, also offer voices and views distinct from one another: Toshio Mori speaks in a meditative, philosophic voice even in the face of extreme external pressures; Hisaye Yamamoto tells her brief stories with an equanimity that
belies the ironies and conflicts embedded beneath the surface. The ideas of M. M. Bakhtin help to identify the multiple voices and contending points of view in their work and to clarify the meanings of their stories. Bakhtin’s focus upon the carnevaalesque figures of the fool and the rogue apply especially to the work of Mori, while the notions of hybrid constructions, the language of "character zones," and the struggle between "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourses open up the texts of Yamamoto.

Both writers, however, reach out to a white mainstream audience without rancour or deception. In part because of the era in which they wrote, in part because of traditional Japanese (and Japanese American) ways of behavior, and in large part, I believe, because of their individual vision, they appear confident that they will be able to tell their stories, portray their communities, and establish harmonious relations between themselves, as minority writers, and their mainstream readers.

In preparation for an examination of their relations with audience, I will first try to contextualize the two writers and their writing, historically and biographically. I will indicate some important ways--including such matters as language dexterity, political restriction and censorship, and their publication history--in which history has affected their writing and their access to a national readership. As part of the contextualizing, the views expressed by the two writers themselves in interviews shed light on their own aims and expectations for their writing and for their intended readers. In addition, as preamble to the examination of audience itself that will complete the discussion, I will analyze the narrative structure and strategies of each writer in some of the stories, selected for the material they contribute to an understanding of author-audience interactions.
Hisaye Yamamoto and Toshio Mori write stories that are delicate though strong, spare though resonant. Modest writers, they are also pioneers for they are the first Japanese Americans to publish work in mainstream publications and to gain deserved national recognition. As Nisei (American-born second-generation Japanese), they share a history which has had a powerful influence on their writing. They grew up during the twenties and thirties in the Japanese immigrant communities in agricultural California amid the social attitudes and political legislation that were the preamble to the events of the Second World War. As young adults during the war, they were "re-located" with their families from the West Coast to desert-land concentration camps in the interior: Mori to Topaz, Utah; Yamamoto to Poston, Arizona.

Their work is similar in subject and form. Both Mori and Yamamoto write about the American experience of the Nisei and their Issei parents, and both choose to write strongly autobiographical short stories. Mori worked on several novels, but only one--decades after it was written--has been published. Now out of print, *Woman from Hiroshima* is a chronological series of reminiscences told by a grandmother to her grandchildren; as we learn from Mori in his interview with Peter Horikoshi (474), Mori's mother is the model for the grandmother character, and the work is more like a fictionalized memoir than a tightly shaped novel. Mori's literary stature is based upon two collections of sketches and short stories: *Yokohama, California* (1949) and *The Chauvinist, and Other Stories* (1979).

Yamamoto's genius also is for the short form; her work includes essays, poems, and short memoirs as well as short stories. When asked if she had ever wanted or tried to
write a novel, she replied: "Oh, I don't think I'm that serious a writer, that I could, you know, that I could do it" (Crow 83). Discounting her characteristic self-effacement, we still note that Yamamoto's writing consists of short pieces; one of her finest stories, "Morning Rain," is only two pages long. She has regularly contributed work to several West Coast Japanese American publications, including pieces for the annual holiday edition of Rafu Shimpo for over forty years, and she published individual stories in national journals such as The Partisan Review and Harper's Bazaar during the 1950s and 1960s. The first American collection of her stories, Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories, appeared in 1988. (Earlier there had been a collection published in Japan).

Moreover, these two writers speak in similar accents. The tone of their writing is calm, their diction understated, and their spirit tolerant. In spite of the brevity of their fiction, its vision is wide, its subject deep. Their equanimity is neither cheap nor prettified, but takes into account the darkness of life.

In contrast to the clear, outspoken didacticism of Frank Chin's Donald Duk, the noisy garrulousness of Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey, or the sound-filled narratives of Ellison and Toni Cade Bambara, for example, the narrating voices in the stories by Mori and Yamamato are muted. It is not that their stories do not resonate—in fact they are richly resonant—but the implied authors and narrators speak with composure and quiet humor. Humor, according to Mori, is essential because

in life, to exist, human beings have to learn to have humor. Without humor man might lose his sanity. In some grievous [sic] circumstances, with humor sometimes, which is the most difficult to grasp, humor in the individual may be the saving grace. (Horikoshi 479)
Their humor—which-is-grace is not the irony of Ellison, nor the satiric, belittling humor of Chin, nor the dialectal, aural comicry of Bambara, nor the self-targeting mixture of wit, mimicry, and slapstick of Kingston. It is a bittersweet humor that is often paradoxical and riddling.

Silences, in fact, are important to the meaning and texture of these stories by and about Nisei. In his discussion of Asian American literature, Bruce Iwasaki suggests, "Sometimes what's more important is what is unsaid. The silences, the chasms of noncommunication among characters often grow and envelope the whole landscape, snaring all the actors—and the reader" (456). Mori's characters, according to Linda Sledge, "use a diction which conceals more than reveals... [and] speak a language that is eloquent not in words but in its silences and its gestures" (87). Yamamoto's work is also characterized by understatement and by a deceptively matter-of-fact surface that covers over, even belies the actual turbulence of her characters' feelings and experience. Both writers present meditations upon the fundamental questions of life: How should one live? What does it mean to be human? More particularly they ask: What does it mean to be Japanese in America? Yet neither writer spells out nor dictates the answers.

Similar also are the ways that Yamamoto and Mori view their writing and their audience. Interviewers have asked why and for whom they write. Both have claimed (as perhaps all writers do) that they write just for themselves, that their focus is on their craft, not on their audience. But, conversely, both writers acknowledge a desire to be heard outside of their own community, to present a picture of Japanese American lives to the world beyond. Diffident rather than solipsistic, they discount their own creative artistry in their concentration upon creating a truthful account of Japanese America. Mori has said:
Well, when I started as one of the Nisei thinking he could write, I was just writing for myself, hoping that it will interest some other readers. I didn't put too much value unless it was recognized by the American white people reading it. I didn't place much value to my contribution... I was hoping to introduce the Japanese characters to the white Americans as a whole and so by that I tried to stick to the familiar characters that I knew in my circle. (Horikoshi 476-77)

When Yamamoto was asked about the sort of audience she was seeking, she replied:

I don't know, I don't know if I had any audience in mind. I just wanted to be a writer, so I guess I was writing about the things that I knew. I don't think I envisioned any audience. I don't want anyone to see what I'm writing, until it's published, and then I don't care. It's over and done with. (Crow 81)

Subsequently, she brushed aside the interviewer's suggestion that her stories "were intended for the largest audience you could find, not just for the Japanese community in Los Angeles" by stating, "I don't even know that. I just wanted to write, and be published, that's all, you know. I wasn't very farsighted. [laughing]" (Crow 82). Elsewhere she comments on her purpose in writing:

I guess I write (aside from compulsion) to reaffirm certain basic truths which seem to get lost in the shuffle from generation to generation, so that we seem destined to go on making the same mistakes over and over again. If the reader is entertained, wonderful. If he learns something, that's a bonus. (qtd. in Kim, Asian American Literature 158)

These comments by Mori and Yamamoto reveal their combined compulsion to write and their need for audience. While each believes in the value of crafting a truthful portrait of Japanese America, Mori explicitly expresses the potentially contradictory tendency of seeking the external valorization from a white, mainstream audience, and Yamamoto implicitly exhibits a desire for a mainstream readership by sending her stories to prestigious, nationally circulated publications.
Literary and historical factors interweave in a tangle of cause and effect. That Yamamoto and Mori are Nisei has shaped their lives and their writing in crucial ways. Before the war, "the Nisei problem" was a common topic of discussion in the vernacular press, "a catchall term encompassing the social and economic limitations the Japanese Americans faced," a problem which intensified as war between the United States and Japan approached. (Matsumoto, "Desperately Seeking" 15, 19). Even their facility with language was affected by their bilingual experience. As children of immigrants, Yamamoto and Mori learned Japanese at home, English—as a second language—at school. Members of their Nisei generation were therefore the first to write in English, and they established the English sections in Japanese community newspapers in order to publish their work. Elaine Kim describes the situation that prevailed before the Second World War:

Japanese nisei comprised about half of the Japanese population in the United States by 1930, resulting in the publication of more Japanese American literary work in English earlier than those found in other groups. This work appeared first in ethnic print media. Addressed to fellow nisei, it unself-consciously attempts to appropriate the English language and literary forms for Japanese American use. The essential quality in these writings is a balance made possible by the writers' biculturalism, which gives them two pairs of eyes through which to see both their communities and their American context without distortion or romanticism. By the 1950's, some of this work was published outside the newsprint ghetto. ("Defining" 97-98)

Because of their bilingualism, then, the Nisei were the first Japanese Americans able to reach a mainstream audience. Yet their bilingual skills did not go without critique. William Saroyan sponsored Mori's writing and wrote the introduction to his first collection of stories, Yokohama, California, but in the introduction he apologizes for Mori's flawed language:
Of the thousands of unpublished writers in America there are probably no more than three who cannot write better English than Toshio Mori. His stories are full of grammatical errors. His use of English, especially when he is most eager to say something good, is very bad. Any high-school teacher of English would flunk him in grammar and punctuation. (Introduction to the Original Edition)

Although some recent critics have taken Saroyan to task for his paternalism, Yamamoto confirms the handicap that she and Mori both experienced because of their bilingual upbringing:

"I think Toshio, just as I, was trying to use the very best English of which he was capable, and we have both run aground on occasion. Probably this was because we both spent the pre-kindergarten years speaking only Japanese, and in such cases, Sprachgefühl [an instinct for language] is hard to come by. (Introduction, The Chauvinist)"

In fact, Yamamoto's "we" is too generous, for her comments do not apply to her own precise and polished prose. As for Mori's diction, Linda Sledge maintains that while Mori's style shows lapses in tense, syntax, and case: "these grammatical flaws do not measurably lessen his overall achievement, for the impetus of his language is cerebral, not discursive or colloquial. Mori's is the language of thought more than speech" (87). Indeed, for readers in the 1990s, Mori's linguistic lapses are not intrusive or awkward, but emerge from the Issei and Nisei subjects of his fiction. The "two tongues," added to the "two pairs of eyes" that Kim describes, in fact make possible both a rich bicultural vision and a bilingual voice that mediates between the two cultures.

The central--shattering--historical influence upon the Nisei is, of course, the Second World War internment. Neil Nakadate's description provides a concise summary of the experience:

"Internment itself was, of course, a political gambit, an economic scam, a military farce, and 110,000 [actually more than 120,000] individual nightmares--a
bizarre sequence of unconstitutional "administrative procedures" visited on citizens and aliens alike in response to an "internal security threat" that never existed. In the historical context, internment can be seen as the culmination of a century of anti-oriental feeling which had begun with the coming of the Chinese to California. (100-01)

While the concentration camp experience was traumatic for all Japanese Americans, its impact may have been sharpest for the Nisei. The Nisei were American citizens betrayed by their own, only country; they were sons and daughters coming of age and taking on responsibility just as their parents' dreams and authority were unravelling. Yamamoto notes the bitter irony of turning 21 in camp, the birthday when one presumably becomes "free, white, and 21" (Crow 75). Relationships within the family--between parents and children, wives and husbands--as well as the relationships of individuals to their nation, whether adopted or inherited, were profoundly altered--stretched, bent, and broken.

This "wholesale uprooting" (as Yamamoto has described it), the conditions of camp life, and the resulting paralysis of spirit had a dramatic impact upon Japanese American writing. In "The 'Pre-Poetics' of Internment: The Example of Toyo Suyemoto," Susan Schweik discusses the effects of internment upon writers and quotes the Nisei poet, Suyemoto: "During the mass evacuation of the Japanese in 1942, . . . my dated poetry notebook shows an abrupt gap in my writing" (89). Such a "gap" is hardly surprising given that internees lived under surveillance and censorship, had little access to books or privacy, and, in some cases, were denied writing materials. Internal dissension, as well, could "make publication even in the few available camp outlets, or even writing itself with its requisite self-assertion, risky or infeasible" (Schweik 92). The emotional toll was such that memoirs describing the camp
experience did not begin to appear until three to four decades later. A characteristic response by internees was to suppress expression of the experience.

In spite of these obstacles, however, internees produced numerous publications in the camps consisting of their own poems and stories, essays and drawings. Mori and Yamamoto continued writing and publishing in camp; Yamamoto contributed to The Poston Chronicle (in Arizona), and Mori was both editor and contributor for the Topaz ("jewel of the desert") publications, Trek and All Aboard.

The overt military censorship imposed upon Japanese American writers during the war years represents an intensification of the subtler limitations applied in the years before and after. The social climate of the thirties channeled Japanese American work to the ethnic press and limited their access to mainstream readers. Both Mori and Yamamoto wrote for West Coast Japanese newspapers before the war. Yamamoto contributed pieces to Rafu Shimpo from the time she was fourteen in 1935, and, amid "hundreds" of rejections, Mori's stories began to appear between 1938 and 1941 in the small journals open to ethnic writers such as The Coast, The Clipper, and Common Ground. After the war, Yamamoto continued to publish in Rafu Shimpo, and Mori contributed regularly to the Japanese American Citizen League's The Pacific Citizen. In addition, they began to publish their first pieces outside of the Japanese community. Mori's first book, Yokohama, California, was finally published in 1949 after being postponed by Pearl Harbor from the original 1942 publication date; during the interim, Mori added two new stories which include some allusions to the internment. Yamamoto's first nationally published piece, "The High-Heeled Shoes, A Memoir," appeared in The Partisan Review in 1948; other stories appeared in national magazines such as The Arizona Quarterly and Furioso during the 1950s and early 1960s.
Given the strong anti-Japanese feeling throughout the United States that outlasted the hostilities with Japan, it is remarkable that their work appeared so soon after the war. Yet it hardly established a precedent. Yamamoto had only a handful of stories published, even though four of them were selected for Martha Foley's yearly lists of "Distinctive Short Stories," and "Yoneko's Earthquake" was included among the Best American Short Stories: 1952. Mori had to wait thirty years before a second collection of his work was published even though most of the stories selected had been written much earlier, during the 1930s.

Thus, in the post-war period and through the 1950s, work by Japanese American authors was largely unpublished and unavailable to mainstream readers. The few early examples of contemporary publication included Mine Okubo's 1946 autobiographical notes and sketches of the internment, Citizen 13660, Monica Sone's 1953 autobiography, Nisei Daughter, and Shelley Ota's 1951 novel, Upon Their Shoulders. John Okada also published his novel, No-No Boy in 1957. Otherwise, outside of the ethnic press, Japanese American fiction first began to surface during the 1960s. Hawaiian writers Milton Murayama, Kazuo Miyamoto, and Jon Shirota published novels in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the 1970s and 1980s, fiction, drama, and autobiography by Yoshiko Uchida, Jeanne Wakatsui Houston, Edward Miyakawa, Momoko Iko, and Wakako Yamauchi--along with a spate of Asian American anthologies--appeared. More recently, novels by Cynthia Kadohata, Karen Yamashita, and Canadian Joy Kogawa have received wide literary notice.

In the early decades after the war, moreover, the content as well as the availability of Nisei writing was restricted. The stories that reached print had to survive the publisher's sanitizing scrutiny. As Mori informs us:

You see, I wrote quite a few stories and the stories in Yokohama, California were edited by the publisher to
reach a certain portion of the audience, especially the library audience, and so it is not complete. Some short stories are complete or maybe resumed again in another story which is still probably unpublished.

. . . [T]hey weeded out from about sixty stories and they weeded out the sordid, the rough side of life. There must have been about twenty stories left.

(Horikoshi 479)

In response to his interviewer's question, "So this (Yokohama, California) as a book was a little short of your expectations of what you wanted people to read?," Mori replied: "Yes, I would have, if it were possible, wanted to get some other conflicts that were portrayed at the same time" (479).

During these decades before the events of the civil rights movement and the consciousness-raising of the 1960s, mainstream readers were not prepared to be attacked or reminded of unpleasant truths about class differences, racist attitudes, or abuses of power. Nor were the impulses to demand civil rights or resist illegitimate authority commonplace in Nisei expression. Subsequent generations of Japanese Americans have in fact criticized the Nisei for what they perceive now to have been a deplorable lack of resistance to the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans. Sansei (third generation) writer, Lydia Minatoya, muses on the absurdities of the experience in her autobiographical

Talking to High Monks in the Snow:

Call it denial, but many Japanese Americans never quite understood that the promise of America was not truly meant for them. They lived in horse stalls at the Santa Anita racetrack and said the Pledge of Allegiance daily. They rode to Relocation Camps under armed guard, labeled with numbered tags, and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." They lived in deserts or swamps, ludicrously imprisoned--where would they run if they ever escaped--and formed garden clubs, and yearbook staffs, and citizen town meetings. They even elected beauty queens. (32-33)

Yet, like children of other groups of immigrants, the Nisei were raised with the same values, the same attitudes toward
authority, and the same expectations from the American dream as their mainstream counterparts. Until the war, Japanese Americans believed that one of them could become president of the United States. Assimilation was the goal for most Nisei, and they internalized the blame and frustration from their failure to achieve it. In a discussion of the "Nisei problem" (in the January 1, 1940 issue of the Japanese community newspaper, The New World Sun), James Sakoda comments:

The Nisei was spared much of the same [sic] the Issei had to go through [i.e. menial labor, discriminatory legislation, social stereotyping], but had not been able to escape. He graduated from school with top honors, only to find that the only work that he could find was in a little Japanese store.

Unconsciously, we were so steeped in the feeling of inferiority that we either shrank away from other Americans or went to the other extreme of trying to drop all traces of Japanese ancestry. (Rpt. in Hokubei Mainichi, 1 Jan. 1986, 4)

Later generations condemn the Nisei for their self-blame and their acquiescence in systemic injustice, but such political correctness, a product of the post-60s period, comes easily after the fact.

In any case, the stories of Yamamoto and Mori are neither lectures nor jeremiads. The racism and injustice of their American experience, real in their lives, is rarely overt and never foregrounded in their fiction. The explanation lies in part with the restrictive social climate of the post-war period and in part with the personal attitudes and world view of the two writers.

THE TEXTS

In their writing Yamamoto and Mori treat the subject of racism subtly and obliquely, but in their lives racism has been an incontrovertible and pervasive force taking the
forms of personal insult, economic hardship, and legal discrimination. How did these two Nisei writers manage to tailor their writing and mute their experience so as to gain access to the mainstream publishing world, and at the same time truthfully represent the reality of the Japanese experience in America? Yamamoto and Mori balance these two imperatives, with considerable success, through their choice of form and selection of emphasis. Because their stories are not overtly political--much less strident or militant--they gained access to a national audience and literary attention. Yet their success is qualified by the paucity of their publication and the sparseness of their readership. About the publication of *Yokohama, California* Lawson Fusao Inada comments:

By 1949, . . . the book had become less than literature. . . . It had been tarnished, not burnished, by time, and was lucky to have snuck into print the way it did. By its very nature, it was destined for obscurity; it had to be one of the most unwanted books in history. (1985 edition xx)

Nonetheless, the work of these two authors (at least in part) was--and is--accessible to those who seek it.

At the same time, the two writers do not compromise their writing by catering to mainstream attitudes at the expense of authenticity; they faithfully represent Japanese American experience. Recently, in fact, Asian Americans have been turning to Mori's work for its authentic portrait of an earlier time. Yamamoto comments in her introduction to *The Chauvinist* that:

But now, a later generation, hungry for its roots . . . has embraced Toshio Mori to its bosom. In the wave of militant ethnicity that followed the Watts riots and associated events, and the semi-awakening of a portion of the white majority to the fact that something was rotten, not only in the so-called underdeveloped countries, but right here under its own nose, first the Black, then Chicano and Native American, and the Asian American, in a me-too, domino effect, rediscovered those individuals in their past
who had managed somehow to write down their impressions of the world immediately about them. Thus, in Toshio Mori's stories, young Asian Americans have found a precious record of their heritage which few at the time deemed important enough to preserve. (Introduction 3)

Mori and Yamamoto achieve their balance between the truthful and the acceptable by eschewing the overt, the explanatory, and the dictatorial in favor of the hint, the outline, the silent. Mori's stories are philosophical meditations, or puzzles, or painterly reports on his community; they are not social manifestos or political diatribes. The reader is invited to ponder the paradoxes and fill in the silences that pattern his narratives. Yamamoto's stories focus, at least on first glance, upon personal lives rather than public issues, although a closer examination will unearth material that is obscured by the tone and method of narration. Both writers portray the everyday and the matter-of-fact.

The contrast between the two writers in their use of story forms can be described in spatial terms. Yamamoto's stories have a horizontal construction, layer stacked upon layer. The smooth, matter-of-fact surface of these stories does not threaten mainstream readers; the underlying layer incorporates more turbulent material that reflects the harsher aspects of life and the special woundings indigenous to a racial minority group. Narrative tension is created when these subtextual forces heave up and rupture the surface. As we shall see in the discussion of individual stories, M. M. Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and contending forces clarify the dynamics of Yamamoto's texts.

Mori's stories take instead a vertical configuration. The dynamics of his stories occur on the surface of the text, the contending forces arranged side by side. While the stories are not shallow, their content is all of a piece, one deep layer. A paradox is laid out for the reader's contemplation, an ordinary individual is presented
as extraordinary, or a mundane event is imbued with transcendental significance. While the stories are puzzling, they are not layered; there is reticence but not masking. In most of Mori's stories, external dramatization is minimal. Instead, the focus is upon the workings of a character's inner life. Yamamoto's narrator often distracts the reader from an underlying plot; the text's surface operates like a protective veil covering over unexpressed emotions and obscured events of characters' lives. Mori's narrator, by contrast, puzzles along with the reader about life and meaning; the enigma is life itself.

The audience for these two writers, as indicated by their own comments about their intended readers and by the publishing history of their work, includes readers from both the Japanese American community and the white majority culture. Before focusing directly on the nature and operation of their audiences, I would like at this point in the discussion to consider the writing of each writer separately.
Toshio Mori's work is better described as philosophical than as social or political. His collected pieces are short—typically they are five to eight pages long, some are shorter still, and no story is longer than fifteen pages. The stories tend toward the introspective and meditative rather than the dramatic. A few stories have a rudimentary plot, but Mori emphasizes character, not action; he concentrates more upon what a person is, than on what a person does. He unites the individual with the cosmic, the quotidian with the transcendent—and he bypasses an intermediate realm in which people act and interact with each other to accomplish social and political goals. The nature of this approach to life and to storytelling is antithetical to dividing people into insiders and outsiders, and so his stories accommodate readers without regard to color or group membership in his audience—although Japanese- and white-Americans attract the writer's special consideration.

With considerable blurring at the edges, Mori's stories fall into several overlapping groups. His aim, as he has told us, is to introduce the Japanese community to his white readers, and his method is "to stick to the familiar characters that I knew in my circle." All of his stories emerge from this impulse, but a major group consists of stories that are indeed like reports on his community. "Lil' Yokohama," which lends its title to Mori's first collection, provides a panaoramic view of a Japanese American "our town" from the point of view of an omniscient
third-person narrator. Readers are introduced to the everyday happenings in the lives of the people of the community during the course of a week. The citizens of Yokohama behave the same way as citizens elsewhere, everywhere—they are born, fall in love, marry, die, go on trips, watch baseball games. There is a Japanese flavor, since all the people have Japanese names, but their activities and interactions are "typically American." As the narrator tells us, "we have twenty-four hours every day... and morning, noon, and night roll on regularly just as in Boston, Cincinnati, Birmingham, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Emeryville" (Yokohama 71; ellipsis in the original). While we learn about a week's happenings in Lil' Yokohama, their significance is that they are indistinguishable from the everyday anywhere (at least anywhere in America). "Today" is "everyday" and is "here and is Lil' Yokohama's day" (76). For all the particularity of description, the individuals are representative--of Japanese in America, of people in America, of humans in the world.

The structure of "Lil' Yokohama" is unusual because of its omniscient narrative point of view; in fact only about a third of the collected stories are told in third person, and these normally include an individual focalizer. Most of the stories in what I call the "report" group focus upon one of the community's "Japanese characters," and they are narrated by a first-person observer within the community who is easily identifiable with Mori himself. Mori's philosophy and the character of Japanese America emerge from these mostly pre-war stories which center on the value of the everyday and the importance of individual persistence even against impossible odds. The various individuals are linked across their stories by their nature and their mode of existence; these figures are both non-descript and exceptional, foolish yet heroic, unique yet like all others. Some of his best stories, in my judgment, and some of his
most memorable characters come from this group which includes: Motoji Tsunoda, "The Seventh Street Philosopher," the nameless protagonist of "The Woman Who Makes Swell Doughnuts," the eponymous would-be prose writer, "Akira Yano," the self-fancying financier, Satoru Doi of "The Finance Over at Doi's," the self-labeled, "deaf" Takanoshin Sakoda of "The Chauvinist," Togo Satoshi, the dedicated amateur flutist in "The Distant Call of the Deer," and the perennial schoolboy and would-be Shakespearean actor, Tom Fukunaga of "Japanese Hamlet." The characters we meet in these stories are distinctive and recognizable with individual attributes, yet they are presented to us as representative of the community and typical of humanity. For example, the representational nature of the central figure of "He Who Has the Laughing Face" is made explicit by the story's "I" narrator. After repeated trips to the park in order to observe a "very common man" whose face is "not a handsome one but common and of everyday life," the narrator informs us that "His name does not matter, it makes no difference, although it is Tsumura" (Yokohoma 121). That is, Tsumura might be anyone for it is his essence--which is to be average, or everyman--that matters, not his particularity. Mori sketches individual Issei and Nisei men, women and children who both partake of the essence of humanity and contribute to a composite picture of life in the Japanese community. In assembling these portraits, readers sense the spirit of the community and witness their collective assignment of meaning and value--and are thereby introduced to the nature of Japanese America.

Mori's characters, then, occupy both individual and representative positions, and in representing the Japanese American community they also, since their community is like any community, represent humanity in general. Many of his idiosyncratic characters also have much in common with M. M. Bakhtin's carnivalesque figures of the rogue and the clown.
or fool. According to Bakhtin, the rogue and the fool are not part of our world, but apart; they "create around themselves their own special little world" (159). Numerous of Mori's characters are deemed foolish or crazy by others in their community, their obsessions derided, opposed, or in many cases, simply dismissed. Alone, resisting popular opinion and ignoring social precept and protocol, these individuals persist in following their own way. Bakhtin identifies the clown/rogue activities as places in a text where social norms are upturned, called into question. In their fierce dedication to their individually created quests, these characters turn their worlds upside down and illustrate Mori's theme that the heroic resides in the lowliest of humans (as defined by social or economic measures), and that the heroic is difficult to distinguish from the foolish and the crazy.

To a marked degree, the stories of Mori are autobiographical, and the characters are identifiable with the writer and his neighbors. Mori describes his habit of observing as a young man: "I used to sit aside with these Issei friends of my parents' and listen quietly. I didn't take notes because probably they would object, so mentally I used to take down all their characteristics" (Leong 98). It is remarkable that even during internment he exhibited a similar attitude; he treated the camp experience as an opportunity to observe his fellow internees and find out their "thousands" of stories. Of the forty-four stories in his two published collections, almost two-thirds are told in first person by a narrator only thinly separated from the author's own persona. The "I" is sometimes the focus of our attention, but more often he is an observer-character reporting on other characters. The extent of "I"'s characterization is fairly narrow. Sometimes the "I" has a name or a small part in the story, but usually his role is
observer and reporter, as in the manner of Mori himself who observes and reports on his community.

However, while virtually all of Mori's work is rooted in autobiographical material, several stories form another, rather fluid group whose focus is particularly upon Mori's own family and the family's immigrant history in America. In this group are several stories which Mori excerpted from his novel, *Woman from Hiroshima*. Some of the excerpts retain the third-person narrator, an Issei grandmother who closely parallels Mori's mother (Horikoshi 474), while others omit this figure; excerpts include "Tomorrow Is Coming, Children," "Three Japanese Mothers," "Nodas in America," "The Travelers," and "Slant-eyed Americans." Other family stories include "The Long Journey and the Short Ride" (a first-person version of "The Travelers"), "My Uncle in the Philippines," "Unfinished Message," and several early diary-like pieces about the writer himself: "1936," "Confessions of an Unknown Writer," and "It Begins with the Seed and Ends with a Flower Somewhere." One other, fictionalized "family" story is told in third person and has a provocative title: the protagonist is named "Teruo," the story is titled "Toshio Mori."

A third group of stories is most "narrative-like" in construction because of the gesture toward a conventional plot; these stories include an event that has a beginning and an end. Curiously, some of the least satisfying stories—for me at least—are located in this group, almost as though Mori's philosophical muse is reluctant to give way to a narrative voice. Included in this group is "The Loser," a story written in 1953 about a nameless, old, ungenerous woman that is one of the least autobiographical of Mori's work and the only story which contains no specific reference to Japanese or Japanese American. Hisaye Yamamoto surmises that this story was probably in Mori's "commercial" category—that is, stories he wrote for "slick" magazines.
rather than stories explaining the Japanese to the white reading public (Chauvinist 8). The author's profile and presence is also muted in "Operator, Operator," also told in third person, about Gunsuke Iwamura, an unemployed, impoverished 70-year-old Issei. Among other stories in this category, only a few have protagonists who are clearly distinct from the implied author. Distinctive central characters include the grandfather in "The Man with Bulging Pockets," the Issei man of "Miss Butterfly" who begs his friend's young daughters to perform traditional Japanese dances, and the children who appear in several stories: the nine-year-old son of a nurseryman in "Through Anger and Love," the eleven-year-old entrepreneur in "Business at Eleven," the dentist's two small yet territorial sons in "The Brothers," and the nurseryman's young nephew in "The Six Rows of Pompons." Relatively distinct from the author's persona are the young Nisei man and his white friend in "Four-Bits," and the young Nisei and his Chinese American friend in "1, 2, 3, 4, Who Are We For?" The remaining stories in this group, all told in first person, move closer to fictionalized autobiography: "The Chessman," "Say It With Flowers," "The All-American Girl," "Between You and Me," "Oakland, September 17," and "The Sweet Potato." Mori's reliance upon personal experience to describe his fictional community or to tell a story explains in part the meditative nature of his work; along with his fictional counterparts, Mori is working out a philosophy of life.

A final small group contains several stories that I believe embody and concentrate Mori's style and spirit; these include "Abalone, Abalone, Abalone," "Strange Bedfellows," "The Trees," and "The Eggs of the World." These stories have been called koans, riddles built upon paradox to promote meditation and enlightenment, and they draw the reader into contemplation. Mori has reported, in fact, that a Zen priest read and re-read his Yokohama
collection of stories twenty-seven times in order "to decipher the Zen angle" (Leong 102). These koan-like stories epitomize Mori's work, for the paradoxical is diffused throughout Mori's work. Through the consciousness of his characters and narrators, Mori explores the self-contradictions in life. For a hyphenated American, paradox is at the core of experience--one is double or divided, more than one, less than one; one is American by definition and not American by definition, and so on.

Indeed, we might expect to find paradox foregrounded in ethnic writing. In a discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's work, Elaine Kim comments on the efficacy of paradox to the ethnic writer:

One of the main points of The Woman Warrior is that a marginal person indeed derives power and vision from living with paradoxes. The narrator [of The Woman Warrior] says: "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." (Cultural Critique 93)

Mori makes his mind--and the minds of his readers--large by making room for life's contradictions: registering them, amalgamating them, rejoicing in them. In an article called "Toshio Mori's California Koans," Margaret Bedrosian draws attention to the Zen spirit that infuses Mori's work through his use of paradox. Bedrosian contends that

some of the most memorable stories in Yokohama, California are those which might be characterized as the most "Zen," or at least the most riddlelike in effect. . . . Considering the timing of the Beat movement, it is ironic that less than a decade before, Toshio Mori, born and raised in California, had expressed the spirit of Zen without fanfare in stories that authentically present this way of life. . . . [S]tories such as "The Seventh Street Philosopher," "The Eggs of the World," and "The Trees" are some of the most delightful tales in American literature, examples of an artless reflection of the Zen worldview cultivated in the soil of California. (Bedrosian 48-49)

In sum, Mori's fiction is brief and philosophical; its salient elements are the common and the representative, the
autobiographical and the paradoxical. Out of these elements, Mori constructs a world view and introduces his Japanese American community.

**Individual Stories**

_Yokohama, California_ opens with a story, "Tomorrow Is Coming Children," that exemplifies a number of the characteristics outlined above. The first-person narrator is an Issei grandmother who is recounting her immigrant experience to her grandchildren. In a rambling style appropriate to her oral and anecdotal reminiscence, she begins her telling with "long ago in a country called Japan" and describes the villagers' reaction to her plan to leave for California: "'America!' they cried. 'America is on the other side of the world! You will be in a strange country. You cannot read or write their language'" (15).

Thus the collection begins with the notion of America as the other, the strange. From the first, also, the importance of language and writing is emphasized even as it is compromised by the immigrant experience. Initially, the grandmother responds to the villagers by casting difference as desirable, turning "strange" into "strange, enticing food," and "strange faces and music." Grandmother sketches the difficult sea journey for the children, and her first glimpse of San Francisco, that was so "different from what [she] had dreamed, and [she] was speechless. . . . No child, it wasn't disappointment exactly, but I had a lump in my throat. 'This is San Francisco. My San Francisco,' I murmured to myself" (_Yokohama_ 17). In spite of the evaporation of her dream and the silencing of her voice, grandmother casts her lot with "my" San Francisco and, upon debarkation, casts off her "beautiful kimono" in favor of dress, coat, hat, stockings and shoes. But she has suffered a sea change; she now is the foreigner, the "other."
kimono, she is told, she looks like a foreigner; to belong she must dress like an American. Yet belonging does not come so easily, and American clothes do not cover her perceived foreignness. She encounters hostility in the form of rocks smashing through her windows, and she wonders why she has come to America. But her husband's response overrides her doubts: "Just a little more time. . . . a little more time" (Yokohama 18). The grandmother ends her tale with an optimistic declaration that "tomorrow is coming" which emerges from earlier sentiments about making the best of one's situation. She passes this message on to her Sansei grandchildren, the third generation and the future for Japanese America: "Yes, time is your friend in America, children. . . . But I am old. This [sic] where you come in. . . . This is your world. . . . Tomorrow is coming, children" (20-21).

This story is an amalgam from the first five or six chapters of Mori's novel Woman From Hiroshima, a fictionalized account of his mother's immigrant experience and the California life of his own family. It is a tale of seeking the American dream, of believing the American promise of welcome and new opportunity, of surrendering the familiar and accepting loss of voice and second-class citizenship for the sake of tomorrow. The delayed irony of the story is that grandma is telling this to her grandchildren within "a relocation center"--a fact given to the reader only in the last few paragraphs.

The story is cast as a bedtime story told by an ancestor figure, the source of family knowledge and wisdom, to a characterized audience made up of young and naive children. This construction both explains and complicates the narrator's stance and the sentiments she expresses. The optimistic conclusion and the balanced, positive admonitions, such as "life is harsh at times. War is painful. . . . But war has its good points too" (Yokohama
are appropriate to such a teller and such an audience. A grandmother and mentor would naturally minimize threat and emphasize promise in a story for her grandchildren. Readers are initially drawn into this characterized audience, and even outsider white readers are coddled by the optimistic spirit and the positive emphasis, on the one hand, and mollified by the muting of unpleasantness on the other. The description of the racist attacks, for example, is told in passive voice, so that no one, and no group, is directly indicted. Yet, the grandmother is telling truthfully as well, and in relating the family history, she does not omit the stress and struggle of the immigrant experience, nor the racism that permeates an Asian's American experience. With no earlier hint in the narrative, all readers are startled by the revelation that the teller and children are located in a relocation camp, the prime symbol of American racism for Japanese Americans, and they--but especially white readers--must therefore take into account a more complicated reality. As part of that account, adult readers will recognize the muting effect that children as listeners have upon the story and will reinterpret the story according to an adult's perception. Indeed, as readers separate themselves from the child's viewpoint in the characterized audience and review events as members of the authorial audience, the story's meanings will shift. From this new vantage point, the negative aspects of the story loom into the foreground: the racist attacks, the isolation of the immigrant woman (who after four years "first began to feel at home" when "the white American wife of a Japanese acrobat" befriended her, a woman with whom she could not speak and who was herself ostracized---we learn in the novel version--because of her mixed marriage), the horror of the camps, the irony of dividing sons between the camp and the U. S. Infantry "somewhere" overseas. With our adult perception, readers are able to discern the grandmother's
strategy, and white readers in particular must address their own position in relation to the historical events in the background of the story.

When, for example, the grandmother claims that "war has its good points too," she is not denying the evil of war but choosing to emphasize one's response to--rather than the cause of--evil. Grandmother does not make judgments. For example, she describes running to the mirror after she puts on her new western clothing "to see how [she] looked," but she never tells us "how." We have to guess at her value judgment. Again in this example, she neither assigns blame (for war or racism) nor glosses over the reality. By taking an existential stance, locating responsibility for oneself within oneself, and by instructing her children accordingly, she is also instructing the reader to take appropriate responsibility. For white readers, the consideration of responsibility together with racism introduces a new combination and a new perception, and it positions us within the text at a considerable distance from the children. White readers both take the point of view of the narrator and sympathize with her account, and recognize their own position as the "other," the oppressive force in her story. Forced upon white readers, then, is a larger, more complex, and more self-searching lesson than grandmother's lesson for the children.

Grandma's patriotic loyalty is a supreme example of paradox. The ambiguities of being a minority in the United States are multiplied for the Japanese by the internment experience. They have been imprisoned in a country proud of its freedom; sentenced because of identity not crime under a justice system founded on laws not men; required to swear allegiance to a government denying them citizenship; and forced to divide their sons between the American combat troops in Europe and the concentration camps in the American deserts.
Lawson Fusao Inada claims that this story—not part of the original manuscript—was added as the leadoff story by the publishers in order to "soften history" (Yokohama xx). Because it is the first story, Inada suggests, readers will conclude that "the bulk of the book takes place after the war, with the people having made a remarkable recovery" (xxi). Otherwise, he says, the story doesn't really belong in the collection since it was "written in the camps, for a camp audience (including, of course, camp administration)," and published in Trek, the camp magazine both in English and in Japanese translation (xxi). Inada makes the further point that grandma's pro-American message of perseverance would have satisfied the authorities, but that it has a double-edge. In his view, "Grandma is actually teaching history, interpretation, survival tactics—in the guise of a bedtime story. Pro-Japanese American, or pro-American, is not necessarily pro-white, or anti-Japanese" (xxii).

Mori was of course fully aware of the contradictions and ironies of this devastating history, and Inada's points are undoubtedly correct in their outline. His image of grandma teaching survival tactics in ambiguous terms so as not to alarm camp authorities resembles the approach of Invisible Man's grandfather. However, Inada's comments ascribe a more militant spin to the story than I think accords with the author's spirit of either fiction or interview. Mori, as Yamamoto reports with some awe, had an "offhanded" response to the relocation experience that was "traumatic for most of us"; Mori called relocation (merely) "a social experiment" (Chauvinist 10), and viewed it as a writer's opportunity:

Camp life was so fascinating to me because each camp had so many people (for instance, in Topaz, we had eight thousand people). I used to think there were eight thousand stories to be told and, each story, even by one writer, had different distinctions. (Leong 104)
Whatever the publisher's reasons for its placement, the story has the curious effect of presenting at the outset the paradoxical, mind-enlarging proposition that America is "other." The white reader who finds this a novel proposition will emerge from the story with other insights as well: admiration for the immigrant foreigner who prevails in the face of adversity, and a sense of being implicated in the forces of adversity.

"Slant-Eyed Americans" is the second addition to the original manuscript of Yokohama, California. This story documents the moment that "disrupted the destiny" of all Japanese Americans: Sunday noon, December 7, 1941. "'It cannot be true, yet it must be so,' Father said over and over" (Yokohama 128)--a declaration that points once again to the paradoxical nature of immigrant experience. The language of the title signals the change in attitude and social climate triggered by the historical event. While it is the only instance in the book (even within its own story) of the phrase "slant-eyed," it captures the wartime fracturing felt by those with the eye of the enemy, the heart of a patriot. Inada lists the new vocabulary of this war-era story: "Nisei," "enemy alien," "Japanese faces," "Caucasian Americans," and "American citizen" (Yokohama xxii). Earlier, the terms "American" and "Japanese" sufficed for white and ethnic Americans--terminology which, however, testifies to the unequal distribution of entitlement to America between the two groups. In this story of "Slant-Eyed," Tom Yamamshita is "the Nisei gardener with a future" who sees Pearl Harbor as "the end." Tom tries to convince himself: "You are an American... Devote your energy and life to the American way of life. Long before this my mind was made up to become a true American... We are Americans in thought and action" (Yokohama 130). But when Tom faces the fact that Japan is the attacking country, he wants to "bury [him]self for
shame." Counterbalancing Tom's response is the mother in the story, who like grandma puts forth a positive outlook. "Time will tell our true purpose. We remained in America for permanence--not for temporary convenience. We common people need not fear" (132).

In this story, the fact that the family is Japanese is not immediately evident. Only when the son remarks to his parents that "since Japan declared war on the United States it'll mean that you parents of American citizens have become enemy aliens" (Yokohama 128) do readers become aware; we must then readjust our thinking and assess the historical event from a very different standpoint than if the story concerned a mainstream white American family. The narrator quietly insists upon the bitter contradiction of the situation by referring to both "American citizen" and "enemy alien" in the same sentence so that the connection between the two is clear. Readers register the characters' frantic emotional fluctuations among shame, patriotism, fear, and hope; they should remember, also, that in spite of the mother's statement of confidence, the common Japanese people--the gardeners, farmers, laundrymen, truck drivers, domestics, bath house proprietors, shoe repairmen, flower sellers, and nurserymen that populate Mori's real and fictional worlds--were not in fact protected by law nor by American principles.

Yet when Mori expresses "foreboding thoughts" about human behavior, as he does in a 1944 story written during his own internment, he focuses attention on the behavior of people in his community who are as subject to human failure and evil as those outside who make up official America. The story, "The Man with Bulging Pockets," is set in the Tanforan Assembly Center where a grandfatherly figure gains fame and popularity by generously spending his time and funds distributing candies to the incarcerated children. Like Grandmother, he is an ancient figure of wisdom, and he
models and shares his wisdom with the children who follow him. He tells them how valuable they are: "Where the children live there is life. Do you know that, boys and girls? You are very valuable people" (Chauvinist 136). When, out of envy, a second Old Man spreads lies to malign Grandpa in order to become "the only popular man of the center," Grandpa treats the reports as rumors to ignore, another lesson he offers to the children. By the end, however, Grandpa is forced to acknowledge to himself (and the reader) the wickedness of the other man, and the story ends on a somber note. Grandpa's "forboding thought" in response to the other's behavior is that:

The Old Man and he belonged to one big circle where no ill feelings and furtive deeds need enter. They should join hands and rejoice in the heart of a child. They should inspire and sing in the oneness of hope, but no. They were partisans, and the split in their circle was the enigma and blot of all mankind. (Chauvinist 136)

But Grandpa does not share these dark thoughts with the children, so the narrative separates readers from the audience of children. With their greater understanding of the social complexities, readers are directed to contemplate the enigma and blot of human behavior.

An earlier reference by the narrator casts a shadow over the narrative and partially prepares readers for this dark ending to a story that seems initially to be about a Santa Claus figure. The narrator introduces Grandpa by telling us: "That was the beginning of his growing fame, perhaps unequaled by anyone at Tanforan with the exception of the most noted thoroughbreds of the prewar days" (Chauvinist 133). In addition to the ironical, insulting comparison of human to animal is the fact that at the race tracks hastily appropriated as "assembly" centers, people were actually "housed" in horse stalls which retained the imprint and the smells of their former bestial residents. Beyond the immediate discomfort to body and degradation to
spirit afforded by such accommodations, people in fact died later from diseases contracted there. This is a curious reference, remarkable because it is atypical of Mori's style. Both its implicit criticism of white authority and its employment of irony are unusual, and it qualifies somewhat my argument that Mori's thrust is paradoxical rather than ironical, that tensions in his texts occur on the surface rather than in layers.

But in spite of the shadows, characters in these war time stories continue to express faith in tomorrow. They follow the tradition of the perservering, "foolish heroes" of the pre-war stories. Tom Yamashita (of "Slant-Eyed Americans") and the narrating "I" shake hands on a promise to rebuild "all the gardens of America . . . as fast as the enemies wreck them. We'll have nature on our side and you cannot crush nature" (Yokohama 132). The narrator explains that the handshake confirms that Tom "was ready to lay down his life for America and for his gardens." The American promise, the value of honest work, the courage and tenacity of the common folk are somehow brought into alignment with their darker knowledge. For the white reader being introduced to this community, admiration for the loyalty and idealism of these characters has to be mixed with dismay at the nature and source of the pressures they have had to face.

Mori locates the strength of America in the common; the individuals in his work would recognize as one of their own Ellison's little man at Chehaw station. Many of Mori's stories focus on portraying the (un)remarkable characters in the Japanese community. Among them is the woman who makes swell doughnuts. Called Mama, she has lived a hard life raising six children, working for forty years with her husband in the field, "facing the summers and winters, and also the springs and autumns." The narrator supposes that "in every block of every city in America" there is such a
woman called Mama by friends and strangers alike. For him, the experience of her company and her doughnuts is "perhaps the only immortality that I will ever be lucky to meet in my short life" (Yokohama 22). Her doughnut is "just a plain doughnut just out of oil but it is different, unique"; in praise, the narrator sings a grateful song and dances "the dance that is still but is the roar and the force capable of stirring the earth and the people" (22-23). As testimony and contribution, the narrator gives the doughnut woman life by means of his story--"stopping the narrative here about her, about her most unique doughnuts," thinking it a shame to wait to talk of her doughnuts "after she is dead, after she is formless." He takes today to "taste the flavor, her flavor, which is everyone's and all flavor; . . . [to] keep alive what is alive in her, on earth and in man, expressly myself" (Yokohama 25). It is the reader's role, then, to acknowledge her uniqueness yoked to ordinariness, to join the dance to stir the earth--to assist in bestowing immortality upon the doughnut woman.

Many of Mori's (un)remarkable characters nonetheless act to upset the status quo and to unsettle their neighbors. They operate in the manner of the Bakhtinian clown figure to undermine the traditional and the conventional, to force questions and realignments. Although the loud, ill-mannered, and raunchy spirit of carnival is missing from Mori's depicted world, many of his most memorable characters fulfill the carnivalesque functions of the fool who lacks understanding of the world and the rogue who turns the world upside down. While the questioning and reassessment takes place in the particular society of the Japanese American community, the process of re-examining what is normally taken for granted has a larger application for readers, especially for white mainstream readers, to their own social order.
One such Bakhtinian character appears in the story "The Seventh Street Philosopher." Motoji Tsunoda is a "meek man," a launderer, a widower who works alone in a "sad washroom." Occasionally he comes out of the washroom--comes to life so to speak--in order to resume dignity and his philosopher role. "What is there for the individual to do today?" he will ask. On those occasions he creates "something like a furore, something that upsets the community, the people, and Motoji Tsunoda" (Yokohama 26-27). He affects the narrator too, who is "often carried away . . . [n]ot by [Motoji Tsunoda's] deep thoughts or crazy thoughts but by what he is and what he is actually and desperately trying to put across to the people and to the world" (27). Motoji Tsunoda sets his sight on the whole world. When the lecture he has arranged for the famous Japanese philosopher Akegarasu does not materialize, Motoji Tsunoda decides that he will give the lecture himself in "the beautiful hall, all decorated and cleaned and ready for five hundred people to come and sit down" (29-30). At the appointed time, Motoji Tsunoda speaks for more than three full hours on "The Apology of Living"--to an audience of eleven, "counting the two babies." Typically the people of the community tolerate or taunt or ignore Tsunoda, and their reaction to his project of giving a lecture is no different --they jeer at his plans, and virtually no one attends. Yet in spite of Tsunoda's humiliation, the narrator reports that

It was wonderful, the spectacle; the individual standing up and expressing himself, the earth, the eternity, and the audience listening and snoring, and the beautiful auditorium standing ready to accommodate more people. (32)

The narrator who tells us about the Seventh Street philosopher is young (although old enough to question Motoji Tsunoda) and sympathetic. He is a community member who serves as a bridge between the community and the philosopher, and between both of them and the reader. We
readers take our cue from the narrator because he appears to us as a "normal" member of the community and a trustworthy observer of Motoji Tsunoda; yet he also has a flexible mind and wide vision, and he sees beyond the "ridicule, the nonsense, and the misunderstanding" (32) of the other neighbors. The philosopher is not, we are made to see, "just a bag of wind," not just a sorry laundryman, but a figure of wisdom, however unrecognized by those around him. The auditorium and the philosopher are ready for—and worthy of—more listeners, when they (we) are ready. In standing up with courage against ridicule, in trying desperately to be understood, Motoji Tsunoda is a giver of wonder, of "something worth while for everyone to hear and see, not just for the eleven persons in the auditorium but for the people of the earth" (32). Not only the scorners or the ignorant from the community who are missing from the auditorium, but outsider readers in the lobby are included in the invitation to join the eleven inside because we are all among "the people of the earth." Although we hear nothing of the lecture itself beyond the title, the narrator has introduced us—as readers and as people of the earth—to a heroic soul for our recognition and admiration. Meeting him expands our understanding about the world as well as about Japanese America. The story provides a remarkable all-encompassing message from one lone ridiculed washerman, a speaker who must himself make his own introduction; and the narrator's description shows us the wonder.

Motoji Tsunoda's brother in spirit, Takanoshin Sakoda, is deaf—or takes the role of deaf—although, curiously, his story begins with a symphony of kitchen sounds. The narrator of this story, "The Chauvinist," informs us that Takanoshin Sakoda is "a man on Ninth Street with a great calling. A calling that may some day replace priests and theology" (Chauvinist 17). The narrator explains: "He isn't looking for immortality; so he denounces personal
immortality. He is looking for immortality of the man living today who is to die tomorrow. Call it as he does: Everyday immortality" (Chauvinist 17). Takanoshin Sakoda's deafness spares him the screams of his family, the pricks of "snoopy gossipers," and the "savages of dirty insults"; it frees him for "a new refreshment of life":

I endorse myself, my life, to the young mind--not for mischief and trouble making. I address to the suppressed, the futile, the jobless, the woman's husband, the lonely hearts. I also address the romanticist--here is something in your line. I am deaf. This is untruth but I'm not lying. (Chauvinist 20)

Being or pretending to be deaf, Takanoshin Sakoda is now more in tune to the essential in life; he places himself above common, insignificant irritations where he can attend to the significant. The paradox is extended; his sentient deafness is the "seed of a new vogue":

the specialist specializing with a lack of one human sense or more. Examples of possibilities: the blind artist painting on the accepted presence of a canvas; the deaf musician composing a fresh score--new tones, new scales, new instruments; the tongueless chef concocting a new dish for a connoisseur; the mouthless moralist discovering in silence the language of expression; the average man on earth smelling the presence of man on Mars. (Chauvinist 18)

Again, the oxymoronic characterizes the exchange between the one and the all. In the eyes of the community, Takanoshin Sakoda is being escapist and irresponsible. They would view his ideas, if they knew them, as nonsensical. But Takanoshin Sakoda, by withdrawing from his family and isolating himself in his deafness, has become freed from loneliness and connected to the whole world. His story concludes:

Turn the disk of the earth: . . . A dream is the reality in hope; and reality the nightmare of a dream reversed. . . . One man and one woman. One man and two women. One woman and two men. One man and many women. One woman and many men. The impatience of man.
The patience of man. He sleeps. He wakes. The sleep of a man and the disk of earth continues. (Chauvinist 23-24)

Once again the narrator has brought the reader into the company of a philosopher-fool who exists in the realm of absolutes and yoked opposites, of death and life, of repetitions and divisions and synthesis; and once again there is no resolution. Nevertheless, all kinds (and races) of readers--so long as they have flexibility of mind--are invited to contemplate the significance of human contact, of dreams, of immortality.

Another carnivalesque hero is Togo Satoshima whose brave obsession is playing the Japanese bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. He plays often, at length and with a concentration immune to distraction. When he practices the song of the title, "The Distant Call of the Deer"--his only song--the cats and dogs join in with their howls, and he gets the "undivided attention of the neighborhood" (Chauvinist 36). People call him crazy, too old "to go overboard like this," and his cavorting around at amateur shows causes tantrums in his wife and speechlessness in his neighbors. But nothing deters him from heeding his "call of art"--not the difficulty he has qualifying for contests ("he must have had dozens of auditions"), nor the fact that his fellow amateurs are children.

The narrator observes this man from a distance--he "is not my friend, but I know him"--but is awed by him. He reports with amazement that Togo Satoshima does his best even when competing with grade school children, although he suggests that when he wins third place, the audience applauds the player's determination rather than his performance (Chauvinist 37). But like the merry rogue standing aside from the world to turn it upside down, Togo Satoshima answers to himself alone, and nothing external deters him--ridicule, neighborhood irritation, family
distractions, matters of decorum, or absence of talent. A hero undaunted by any adversary, he carries on his shakuhachi practice with extraordinary discipline and mysterious self-confidence. For the reader, Togo Satoshima performs the contradictory roles of distinguishing himself from the others of his community and of representing that community. At the same time that his behavior shakes up community practices, his portrait provides a glimpse, especially important for the outsider reader, of the Japanese American community.

Two fellow "rogues" or "fools" have literary ambitions: Tom Fukunaga ("Japanese Hamlet") and Akira Yano ("Akira Yano"). Tom's ambition is to become a great Shakespearean actor, Akira's to be a published prose writer. In each story, the first-person narrator is a friend who acts as a mediator between the protagonist and the community, supportive of his goal yet convinced of its futility. Tom at thirty-one is still a schoolboy, and his family "warn and persuade him" to come to his senses and call him "a good-for-nothing loafer." The narrator confesses that, "There were moments when I was afraid that Tom's energy and time were wasted and I helped along to waste it" (Chauvinist 40). But Tom dismisses the narrator's concern by insisting, "I am improving every day. That is what counts. Our time will come later" (Chauvinist 40). When the narrator can no longer endure their seemingly profitless weekly meetings to recite Shakespeare, he discontinues them. But, he confides, "I knew he would never abandon his ambition. I was equally sure that Tom would never rank with the great Shakespearean actors, but I could not forget his simple persistence" (Chauvinist 41).

The narrator of "Akira Yano" has a similar relationship with the protagonist, a student whose field is electrical engineering, but whose passion is writing prose. When they meet by accident, Akira Yano is holding a copy of Sherwood
Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* which sparks an acquaintance between the pair, self-described as writer and reader: "I learned then and there he was a writer of prose, unpublished. He learned that I read modern literature." At one of their "countless" meetings to talk about prose, Akira Yano shows the narrator a story he has written. Although the narrator clearly wishes to give it the most sympathetic judgment possible, the best he can say is that he "thought it was fairly good but at worst it could be tripe. However, there were several passages in the story that gave hint of talent" (*Yokohama* 66). His review does not augur easy or early success for Akira Yano's prose. But Akira Yano perseveres no matter the obstacle that appears. Along with the narrator, readers watch Akira Yano fail in his engineering studies and try writing full time (expecting at any moment to "climb to the top," but instead collecting rejections slips); we watch him seek his fortune in New York, but have to publish his work at his own expense. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, he retains optimism: "It is a great feeling," he writes the narrator from New York. "I have nothing to bother me. I write without worry. I think I am improving" (*Yokohama* 67). Success continues to elude him, but until the end, when the two lose contact, Akira Yano remains dedicated to his calling, perpetually confident that he will soon succeed as a writer of prose. But narrator and readers understand Akira Yano in the same way we understand Tom Fukunaga, the "Japanese Hamlet"--as heroic and courageous figures engaged in foolish and futile endeavors. And yet, they testify to the human spirit; the human spirit, here, takes the shape of individuals from a particular, Japanese American, 1930s West Coast community.

Similar to this group of "bravely obsessed" figures are the rogue/clown characters of Mori's riddle-like stories. The characters in this group present lessons through puzzle,
truths through paradox. They upset the order, especially the order of logical argument. As the characters try their wits, so readers sharpen their thinking. An example of this kind of character is Tanaka, the illiterate Issei of "Strange Bedfellows." He is called "the local puzzle" and derided behind his back, but he is presented to us as the local sage, a wise man who never loses an argument. He attracts two younger Nisei men, the strange bedfellows of the title, to his company. One is a college graduate and an atheist, the other a community leader and a believer; the two men heartily dislike each other and each other's ideas. In paradoxical fashion, Tanaka instructs the atheist that "to you there is God" and advises the believer that "to you there is not God." Tanaka tells them both to "start all over again since they don't know their ABC" (Chauvinist 113).

But, instead of wisdom, the two young men hear only cracked logic. To them, Tanaka is "a case" and "a crackpot," and the evening is "wasted." The wisdom is left to the reader who is invited to ponder the words of the old man. For while the two young Nisei have not budged from their original thinking--and the story ends with them once again at loggerheads--through the somersaulting of metaphysical ideas and the transference of the seeming perversity of his argument to the actual perversity of their thinking, Tanaka stirs up readers' understanding and shows us a new way to think. Whatever our philosophy or position on the existence of God, we are forced to take another angle of vision, to consider multiple approaches to the question, and by extension, to behave so with other questions, with any situation.

One of Mori's most tantalizing koan-like stories is "The Eggs of the World," and one of his most potent rogue-like creations is Sessue Matoi, the heavy drinker who "was very clever when he was drunk and also very clever when
sober." People could never tell when he was which, and, as the narrator tells us, they may have held him in contempt, but did not say so because they were afraid of his wit. The narrator of this story is characterized as young and naive, "looking for fun," and he is drawn to the interaction between Sessue Matoi and his host, Mr. Hasegawa. Sessue loves sake, and Mr. Hasegawa has a supply imported from Japan--though he also dislikes drinking bouts or riotous behavior. Trickster-like, Sessue Matoi exchanges an "important" message to Mr. Hasegawa for numerous cups of the imported sake, and succeeds in destabilizing the solid and respectable Mr. Hasegawa. "You will lose your life [Hasagawa]," declares Sessue. "You are in an egg. . . . You have seen nothing but the inside of an egg and I feel sorry for you" (Yokohama 116). Seeing their mystification, Sessue Matoi tries to explain:

An egg is when you are walled in, a prisoner within yourself. I am free, I have broken the egg long ago. You see [me] as I am. I am not hidden beneath a shell and I am not enclosed in one either. I am walking on this earth with my good feet, and also I am drinking and enjoying, but am sad on seeing so many eggs in the world, unbroken, untasted, and rotten. (Yokohama 117)

Mr. Hasegawa calls the message "fantastic" and "silly," and takes offense; Sessue Matoi in turn calls Mr. Hasegawa "very absurd"; both men become impassioned at the other's lack of understanding. When Mr. Hasegawa cries, "Here we are getting all burned up over a little egg, arguing over nonsense," Sessue Matoi objects that it is of supreme importance: "Probably the only thing I know about. I study egg culture twenty-four hours. I live for it" (Yokohama 118). After he leaves, the narrator asks if he were drunk or sober; Mr. Hasegawa's answer touches on the ambiguity of Sessue Matoi's message and on the limitation of his own understanding: "I really don't know. He must be sober and drunk at the same time." This conventional, rather narrow-
minded citizen prefers his cozy eggshell and takes offense at his sake-drinking friend's threat to topple him out. At the end of this story, the character--Mr. Hasegawa--remains resistant to learning, the narrator continues to be distracted by ambiguity, and the reader alone has the opportunity to contemplate and learn. As readers, we have observed the dynamics among the characters and characterized narrator, we can relish the ambiguities of the riddle, and we can interpret the metaphor of the egg. Whether or not we in fact relish or absorb the riddle will depend upon how closely our response to Sessue Matoi and our resistance to his perspective resemble the stance of Mr. Haswegawa.

Mori's personal experience is never far removed from these stories and the portraiture that he presents of his community to his readership draws heavily on it. Among the two collections are several autobiographical sketches in which the narrator speaks in a voice identifiable as Mori's. Two early sketches written in 1936 are "Confessions of an Unknown Writer" and "It Begins with the Seed and Ends with a Flower Somewhere . . . ." "Confessions" is a personal account of Mori's struggle to write and get published, told from the inside, a mirror of the third-person portrait of the writer in "Akira Yano." Like Yano, this "unknown writer" is both frustrated and dedicated. His lack of success leads him to several conclusions including that he has wasted his mortal life: "With death I would be forever erased; with life I would be forever divorced. If I were to find myself alive tomorrow morning at eight I would still be a half-writer and a half-nurseryman" (Chauvinist 48). He castigates himself for being behind time (at 26) because his models (Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Feodor Dostoyevsky, William Saroyan, Ernest Hemingway) all began publishing during their twenties. When he considers the career choices of his friends--banking, sales, business, medicine--and their material and social successes, he
"kick[s him]self inwardly for being a fool." "What do I want to say to the world?" he asks himself. His answer is both a paradox and a whitmanesque catalogue:

It is a fine story. . . . It is a time like this (sure of myself and know I am not bragging) when I like to sit before a clean white sheet and put my story down. It is this: sometimes I am capable of murder; sometimes I can love; or I am a fanatic or the suppressed or a dreamer or the listless or a coward or any other traits of a being. . . . I believe in this capability of man; thus a saint is no different from a dissipator; a prophet no wiser than a disbeliever; a capitalist and a laborer are pals; a diplomat and a soldier are brothers; a Marian Anderson and an inarticulate are singing the same tune; . . . thus, an unpublished and an immortal are writers from the same heart. I believe in man and also disbelieve, and there is no harm. (Chauvinist 49)

He is continually haunted by the thought that he is "the biggest little sap," but he knows that he "will go on writing for life no matter what may happen for a few mad hours or days, that being a fool will not stop one from becoming what nature had intended him to be" (Chauvinist 50). In language and in approach to life, Mori is himself like his obsessed hero-characters; he too will embrace being a fool and will persevere.

"It Begins with a Seed" represents even more forcefully the schizophrenic passions of Mori's divided self and details a moment of suicidal depression that yields to commonplace demands. The structure of this piece is interesting for the way it incorporates the distress and dividedness of the narrating consciousness in its pronouns. The story begins and ends with "he" but in between shifts to "I," "you," and "who." "He" wakes one morning early to his "petty self" and "puny muscles," "you" are bewildered and lost, and "I" decide to quit, to give up everything. "He" would like to smash the furniture, "[a]ll the familiar are hideous," but "I" won't care if God takes away "my" life. In addition, a structuring refrain--"rejoice"--paradoxically
punctuates this story about a moment of crisis and despair. The piece is an extended contemplation of life's ongoing tribulations and of the temptation to be free of them. But the consideration of cosmic topics—of the meaning of life and death, and of terminating life—is interrupted by breakfast. Just as his mother's criticism of his carnations the night before had triggered his distress, his mother's uncharacteristic preparation of pancakes on a Tuesday morning prompts him to postpone momentous decisions about quitting, and to "fetch the package of snapdragon seeds for another try of a hundred boxes" (61).

In limning his Japanese American community for his readers, Mori includes himself, presenting himself as brother to his carnivalesque characters. Like Togo Satoshi and Tom Fukunaga, he is dedicated to a calling; like Motoji Tsunoda and Takanoshin Sakoda, he is contemplative and creative of a philosophy uniting the cosmic and the common; and like Sessue Matoi and Mr. Takoda, he is a teller of puzzles and riddles. For readers "of any nationality," Toshio Mori, Japanese American from Oakland, California, is indeed, like so many of his fictional people, a rogue, a "fool," a Zen thinker.

Audience

Toshio Mori has explained that he "tried to present some of the life patterns" and "the small details of living" of his California Japanese community in order to "appeal to the reader of any nationality," to readers unfamiliar with that community and, in particular, to readers from the white majority (Horikoshi 474). His stories and portraits bear him out. He introduces readers to a panorama of characters, lovingly detailed, and in sketching their habits, their interests, their interactions with one another, their aspirations, their approaches to the world and to meaning,
Mori provides outsider readers a glimpse of his community and a taste of the Japanese American experience. Mori, like his narrators and his memorable characters, is more philosopher than raconteur; consequently he finds questions about immortality and personal integrity and human essence of more interest and import than issues of social station or political power. Meditation about the meaning of death has more space in Mori's writing than narration of historical events. The transcendent is located in the quotidian; it is the humble and the habitual, the everyday repeatable— which might be considered inconsequential and insignificant—that Mori raises to consequence and significance. A layer of social actions and political events intervening between the transcendent and the quotidian is largely absent from Mori's texts.

As a result, Mori addresses his readers as fellow philosophers and neighbors or, in the case of white readers, as residents of a nearby community. He centers his work in his community, but he reaches out to readers who are outside, specifically to white mainstream readers, to give his report. In portraying the patterns of life of his community, Mori is confident of the interest of his audience. His aim is paradoxical; at the same time that he wants to explicate the particular Japanese configuration of these patterns, he wants readers to see their universality, their absorption by the general, and to understand that everyday in Yokohama, California, is the everyday of an American anywhere. Mori treats all readers with respect including potentially hostile outsiders; just as there is neither animus nor servility in his treatment of white characters or white authority in his work, such attitudes are absent as well from his transactions with his white readers.

When Mori addresses his audience, his tone is neither strident nor hortatory; he does not turn up the volume to
get attention. When we are ready to hear, his stories are ready to speak to us, just as Motoji Tsunoda's auditorium stands ready for his audience. In that case, some came and slept, others are still awaited, but the narrator came and listened, and he can report on Motoji Tsunoda for the people of the earth who were not in attendance. Readers are given his report, but they must perform the rest of the transaction—to hear properly and to work toward understanding. Mori does not require his outsider readers to come with knowledge about the Japanese; he provides that knowledge. Instead, he concentrates upon the human element in all readers and anticipates their willingness to recognize humanity in others who are different, including those he presents from his own circle. Neither implied author nor narrator dictates lessons to the reader. Readers learn along with characters through their struggles and meditation. A narrator like the grandmother directs her attention to outlining lessons for her grandchildren, but it is the reader's task to translate them into adult meaning. The third-person narrator of "The Man with Bulging Pockets" does not insist on a political message although there are hints in the text about the internment experience, nor does he suggest that the reader apply his dark knowledge about the split in spirit within the camp to the split outside between Americans of one color and another. Such expanded application is left to the reader. The many first-person, characterized narrators learn along with the reader even as they report to the reader; there is a collegiality and a collaboration between narrator and reader as they confront, and yet rarely resolve, the ambiguities of living.

Through his narrators, Toshio Mori reports on his community to an audience of equals whom he respects as he expects respect in turn. His reports celebrate the wonder of life and its curiosity without, however, denying the stress, the evil, the darkness. The wonder and the darkness
are placed side by side, for one requires the other. The paradoxical flavor that emerges is unlike the cutting or bitter irony of, for example, *Invisible Man*, for it carries a reconciling ingredient. Ambiguity is presented as the opportunity for contemplation and increased understanding. Contradiction is recognized as the nature of a world of wonder and variety. When the readers are ready, they are welcome, especially those from outside the community; the narrator (and implied author) stand ready to serve as hosts and fellow questers.
Hisaye Yamamoto's stories share many qualities with those of Toshio Mori. Her stories are short---some very short---and quiet. They are presented in understated language and characterized by a simple, relatively uneventful plotline, a serene (or at least matter-of-fact) surface, and an unfailingly courteous tone. The humor is of a gentle sort. Like Mori, she draws heavily on her own life, and her collection of stories includes several "memoirs" that are directly autobiographical. The characteristics and events of her fictional characters closely parallel her own life experience; all of her first-person, characterized narrators--who tell most of her stories--are Nisei girls and women who grow older through the stories along with their author. The third-person protagonists of the few remaining stories are also Japanese, including an Issei woman in "The Brown House" and male protagonists in "Las Vegas Charley" and "My Father Can Beat Muhammad Ali."

On the other hand, in contrast to Mori's work, Yamamoto's stories rely on irony rather than paradox, and where Mori's thrust is meditative and philosophical, Yamamoto's stories are more conventionally narrative; the plots are more developed, and in her layered stories, there is an intricate interweaving of the surface and submerged plots.

Along with this more consciously shaped, more dramatic, multilayered structure comes a richer blend of voices than occurs in the relatively monoglossic voicing of Mori's work.
The irony of Yamamoto's understated juxtaposition of incompatible elements and of the disjunction between a naive narrator's perceptions and a reader's more inclusive analysis ushers in a chorus—however quiet the text may sound at first—of clashing, contentious voices. Indeed, Yamamoto's miniature (twentieth-century, Asian American) texts exemplify the competing ideologies, the struggle within the word and between words, and the double-voicing of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, even though Bakhtin's dialogic theory "loves duration" (Gary Saul Morson's phrase) and is drawn from the lengthy, complex genre of the nineteenth-century European novel. Of particular application to Yamamoto's work is Bakhtin's emphasis upon language, upon its inextricable connection to ideology and its power to control behavior. "[A]ll languages of heteroglossia," Bakhtin writes, "... are specific points of view on the world" (291):

What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system. There takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness . . . . (365)

On the one hand, there is language that imposes the so-called "word of the father" with its authoritarian values and taboos and its tendency toward canonization. On the other hand, through parody or irony, language undermines those same values and taboos. Language, according to Bakhtin, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other where centripetal (official) forces and centrifugal (disunifying) forces "carry on their uninterrupted work" (272). It is a place of intersection, contention, and change.

Much of Yamamoto's work is explicitly concerned with language—literary, oral, interpersonal, or bilingual. The
fact that her characters speak two national languages and hold values from two distinct cultures makes overt the struggles between languages and belief systems that Bakhtin describes as operating on multiple levels in all novelistic discourse. The effect of bicultural conflict upon individual lives and behavior is foregrounded in these stories as are the concepts of encountering the "other" and of becoming "other."

Bakhtin's depiction of the carnivalesque figures of the rogue and clown applies to Yamamoto's work as to Mori's. Although Yamamoto's humor is wry rather than mocking, and she has sympathy rather than scorn for her misguided or miscreant characters, her characters still resist "the word of the father" albeit indirectly, politely, and even respectfully. Several of Yamamoto's stories include young, naive narrators or focalizers who fulfill carnivalesque functions. They see more than they yet understand, their narrating sounds neutral, and their behavior is accepting rather than resistant. But by reading between the lines, the reader comes to see hypocrisies and monstrosities that elude the character. Readers, therefore, augment the account of events and resist the official "word of the fathers" that naive characters like Kiku and Elsie, Rosie, and Yoneko accept.

Other characters offer more resistance and function rather like the "merry rogue." Examples of rogue-like figures in Yamamoto's stories are the mad Mari Sasagawara of the story named for her, and the marvelous Marpo "Humming Bird" of "Yoneko's Earthquake." These two characters operate according to a set of rules that disrupts and brings into question official values and procedures. Each is to some degree defeated, and both disappear from their stories but only after they have initiated a transformation in those they have encountered.
The transformation includes the sensitive reader. The role of audience and the notion of responsibility—in its radical meaning of responding—is also illuminated by the notions of Bakhtin:

To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding . . . . Understanding comes to fruition only in the response . . . . [O]ne is impossible without the other. (282)

Listening is frequently foregrounded in Yamamoto's stories—young girls heed the stories of their parents, or solicit gossip about fellow internees, or hear the adventures of a hired farm hand—and the reader overhears. By responding with an understanding that goes beyond that of the characters, the reader joins the writer behind the characters' backs. Out of a "respons-ibility to" the many voices within the text, readers develop a sensitivity to the hegemonic "responsibility for" attitudes and practices that are false or vicious and that jeopardize the lives of the marginalized people depicted in these stories.

These issues of speaking and listening, depicting and transforming that characterize the interaction between Yamamoto and her audience can be highlighted by a detailed examination of some of her individual stories.

"Morning Rain"

"Morning Rain" is a short short story, only two pages long, with only two speaking characters. Yet the two pages are packed with contending voices both personal and political. Not only is the story "about" speechlessness and powerlessness, but its discourse is made up of the languages of politics, history, gender, class, and race.

Sadako, a Nisei woman (whose point of view informs the story), and Mr. Endo, her Issei father, make the disturbing discovery one morning that he cannot hear the rain outside. The old man is already isolated by his monolingualism, and
now deafness isolates him further. We learn that Mr. Endo "never said much"; conversation with his daughter is limited by her rudimentary control of Japanese and is practically nonexistent with his employers or his son-in-law, Harry. As for the son-in-law, Harry is "tongue-tied" when he tries to use Japanese, and he usually falls back weakly on a "helpless" English when talking with his wife's father. The clichéd expression "tongue-tied" recaptures a freshness by its literal aptness. Harry's and Mr. Endo's tongues are bound up by an inarticulateness that renders them "helpless" to establish communication, and the cultural and generational distance between the two men is made unbridgeable by their lack of a common language.

Sadako tries to maintain what she terms a "digestible" conversation when the three of them are together, usually at supper, but she finds that conversation always becomes a tense monologue. Her choice of the word "digestible" seems to emerge naturally from a context of preparing food and eating dinner, yet it sets in motion other kinds of resonance as well. "Digestible," after all, need not refer to something pleasurable, nor even to something nutritious; it may refer only to that which can be swallowed without being rejected or causing sickness.

What have these three individuals to swallow? On the personal level, they must swallow their alienation from one another caused in part by their entrapment in separate languages. Sadako, in particular, must swallow the fact that full responsibility for communication rests with her. The two men make little effort to communicate, and when we read that "Harry tried, he really tried," we understand that Sadako would like to believe that Harry has tried, but that in truth he probably does not "really" try. Mr. Endo has a great deal to digest, beginning with the fact that the respect due him as elder and parent and the control he should have for his own life and for others younger have
been compromised by his tongue-tied-ness. Now (unlike Mori's Takanoshin Sakoda for whom deafness was an escape from restriction), Mr. Endo's autonomy is further compromised by his deafness. The story concludes with Sadako shouting at her father "at the top of her lungs," but volume cannot effect communication; she succeeds only in frightening the baby.

Graphics, punctuation, and foreign (Japanese) terms guide us in detecting the dialogic nature of the discourse and in laying bare the tensions that underlie the story. In her internal musing, for example, Sadako posits a value central to her and to the story--namely, the importance of human communication. The expression that carries this notion is placed in parentheses in the middle of a sentence: "... (and that was what living was, was it not, communicating with each other?) ..." It would seem that the notion is peripheral, a dispensable afterthought. Why would Yamamoto--or Sadako--relegate a central idea to parentheses? The answer, in part, seems to be embedded in the interplay of gender relations. Not only is the entire responsibility for conversation left to Sadako, but, since neither man makes much effort toward meaningful communication, the high value placed on communication is hers alone. In her roles as wife, mother, and daughter, Sadako is subordinate to both father and husband; by extension, her values are subordinate also.

The use of italics and a second parenthetical expression further underline this subordination and help expose the interplay of gender politics. As Sadako watches her father eat his breakfast eggs, she reflects that her husband "liked his eggs one way and not another; ... the underside, as she had learned from bitter experience, had to be tender." The italicized "had" is an example of what Bakhtin calls a hybrid construction: the word is part of Sadako's thought but the emphasis and tone are Harry's. It
signals previous discussion about his tastes and her cooking, and, deeper still, it uncovers assumptions about her position and her proper responsibilities as wife and mother. Her own tastes, in fried eggs, for example—"(She liked crisp bottoms herself.)"—must take second place to his, just as this expression of her preference is subordinated by parentheses.

A third parenthetical expression signals discourse about class and race. Almost offhandedly we learn that Mr. Endo is a gardener for a well-to-do family in San Francisco and that "(it was the same job he had held before the war)." There is no further mention of "the war," but the responsive reader is reminded that during the Second World War the jobs of all west coast Japanese Americans were interrupted by their wholesale transfer to concentration camps. Indeed, the camp experience did not simply interrupt jobs, but seriously disrupted lives.

History also suggests a reason why Mr. Endo held an unskilled, low-paying job before the war; immigrants typically enter the American economy at the lowest levels, and immigrants who are racially as well as culturally marked rise slowly. During the war Mr. Endo has grown older, but his status has not improved. Still at the lowest level, he is separated from his employers by a caste-like social placement, a caste constructed by xenophobia and racism. The unnamed, well-to-do, urban family have superiority of place and power far beyond their employer-employee relationship to Mr. Endo; they hold all the political, social, and economic chips because of the racist nature of the game being played. If, as the story suggests, communication among humans is of primary value, then from the family's point of view, Mr. Endo must be consigned to some category other than human. They cannot speak with their gardener beyond the minimal giving of orders about the gardening work, and doubtless it is their view that his
(perpetual) status of servant (probably at minimum wages) is appropriate. A human response of sympathy or outraged justice does not, it would seem, apply to Mr. Endo's situation. As for Sadako, her shouting is powerless to breach the moat of deafness that, like the barbed wire of the wartime camp, circles and isolates him.

"Wilshire Bus"

Not so much trickster as simple catalyst, the drunken white bus rider in "Wilshire Bus" unearths an unsettling truth for the story's narrator, Esther Kuroiwa. "Wilshire Bus" takes place after the war, although the historical events are not foregrounded. The war is mentioned only in passing, in a prepositional phrase--"his back, injured in the war, began troubling him again (34)"--as explanation for Esther's husband Buro being in the hospital, and the single reference to a concentration camp--"(This [incident] was not long after she had returned to Los Angeles from the concentration camp in Arkansas and been lucky enough to get a clerical job with the Community Chest)" (36)--is buried in a series of prepositional phrases and placed in parentheses, seemingly merely auxiliary information.

Yet Esther is riding the bus over a "stretch of territory" she knew "quite well" because she is once again separated from her husband, and he is once again confined. Although young Japanese American males who said yes to the loyalty oath were released from the camps to serve in the armed forces, the freedom Buro gained (from camp) was illusory: military service is hardly freedom, nor is disability and confinement to a hospital bed. Without being given any details, we know that he has sustained and is continuing to suffer from an injury received on behalf of a government that had, for its part, violated his human and civil rights, just as the injury has violated his body.
But the bus ride does not simply deliver Esther to her destination. In transit, she recognizes something about racism and about her own ability to divide people into categories. A loud-mouthed, narrow-minded, drunken man (whom Esther has earlier classified and dismissed as a somatotonic) insults an elderly Chinese couple (whose command of English is faint) and advises them to return with their "pigtails and bare feet" to the rice fields of China and to "take every last one of your slant-eyed pickaninnies with you" (37). There is embarrassment, some indigation, and efforts to disassociate themselves on the part of other passengers, but Esther discovers that the drunk is not the sole racist.

Initially she had smiled at the Chinese woman to signal togetherness, "(well, here we are, Orientals together on a bus)" (35), but the Chinese woman had not responded. Then, at the height of the abuse from the drunk, Esther found herself drawing a distinction between herself and the victims, between Japanese and Chinese; indeed, she discovered herself "gloating over the fact that the drunken man had specified the Chinese as the unwanted" (36). She catches herself betraying another person, another Asian, just as she had been betrayed by the "I am Korean" and "I am Chinese" buttons worn at the close of the war to deflect post-war, anti-Japanese hostility.

With Esther, we face the fact that polite and well-intentioned persons, including even those who have themselves been the victims of racism, are not innocent of racist feeling. We see that the drunken white man is simply less inhibited, or less in need of masking his feeling; whites are not necessarily more racist than other groups, nor this individual more racist than others on the bus (including Esther herself). The impact upon Esther of recognizing this is intense:
Her saving detachment was gone every bit and she was filled once again in her life with the infuriatingly helpless, insidiously sickening sensation of there being in the world nothing solid she could put her finger on, nothing solid she could come to grips with, nothing solid she could sink her teeth into, nothing solid. (37)

The surface calm of the story breaks up in this passage as anger and frustration and despair erupt, revealing (with the term "once again") the turbulence beneath that has been there all the time, reviving feelings appropriate, for example, to an internee in a concentration camp. In the subsequent paragraph, Esther breaks into sobs that "she could not control," but then, after the relief of tears, she resumes her well-mannered mask and covers up her unacceptable "weakness" by pretending a weakness that is acceptable for women--that is, their need for a "stronger" man--and agreeing that her tears were for missing Buro: "yes, weren't women silly?" (38). Yet for a moment she too has glimpsed a frightening vacuum where there should be solid, dependable support, not a soft core infected by a "dark sickness" that leaves none of us immune.

"The High-Heeled Shoes, A Memoir"

Like Esther, the unnamed first-person narrator of "The High-Heeled Shoes, A Memoir" reacts intensely when suddenly faced with unpleasant truths. The young print shop employee lives near a Chicana child, Margarita, who is out of school and lonely because the Catholic school is full. At first, the reference to "full" seems merely descriptive, explanatory of why a school-aged child is at home. Gradually, however, the reader begins to suspect what the narrator may have realized from the beginning--that the important fact about the "full-ness" is the child's ethnic classification.
Margarita brings a bouquet of flowers to the door just after the narrator has received an obscene call. The telephone interchange has triggered thoughts of the violence so often visited on women by men, a violence that paralyzes understanding or response. Even a position of non-violence seems to offer no resolution, for the narrator recalls Gandhi's evasion when questioned about women's vulnerability to attack or rape; she concludes that "Gandhi, in face of the ubiquitous womanly fear, was a failure" (5). The ring of the telephone has pierced the calm of ordinariness that routinely covers daily experience and has deflected her attention from the beauty of a garden or the pleasure of plucking flowers to the dark underside of human nature:

Whatever, whatever--I knew I had discovered yet another circle to put away with my collection of circles. I was back to what I had started with, the helpless, absolutely useless knowledge that the days and nights must surely be bleak for a man who knew the compulsion to thumb through the telephone directory for a woman's name, any woman's name; that this bleakness, multiplied infinite times (see almost any daily paper), was a great, dark sickness on the earth that no amount of pansies, pinks, or amaryllis, thriving joyously in what garden, however well-ordered and pointed to with pride, could ever begin to assuage. (6)

The language of this passage echoes the language of Toshio Mori's Tanforan racetrack resident, the grandfather with the bulging pockets, who recognized "the split in their circle" that was constructed by the same people it divided as "the engima and blot of all mankind." The discrimination against poor Margarita by the school, the trespass against the narrator by the obscene caller, and the internment of thousands of American citizens are actions of widely different magnitude. Yet they share some important features: each represents the objectification of one person or group by another; each exemplifies the seemingly basic human propensity to use power to subjugate others; all illustrate that this willingness to trivialize and to
violate other persons leads to oppression. Recognition of the "great, dark sickness" that underlies an apparently healthy surface of society is, unfortunately, "useless knowledge"—bleak, unproductive of joy, a process of adding "circle to circle."

"Seventeen Syllables"

The intertwining of speech (and speechlessness) with empowerment also informs "Seventeen Syllables," a story (like "Yoneko's Earthquake" and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara") that has a double plot. The narrative is told from young Rosie Hayashi's point of view, and the surface story is about her budding adolescence and the events surrounding her first kiss; in the final paragraphs, however, we discover a second plot about Rosie's mother and the mother's adolescent love in another time, another place. The intersection of the two stories is shattering.

References to speaking and writing thread both plots and stitch the story together. Yamamoto regularly informs us of the speech acts of her characters. Characters apologize, beg, promise, order; they are described as muttering, whispering, pronouncing, and yelling; they engage in mimicry and in recounting stories by memory. Haru is the "garrulous" Hayano daughter, Mr. Hayashi shouts at the misshapen Mrs. Hayano as though "he thought someone such as she must surely be at least a trifle deaf," Mr. Kuroda expounds a theory of haiku, Jesus Carrasco promises to tell a secret.

A central tension of "Seventeen Syllables" exists between the absolute need of individuals to express themselves—and thereby shape their lives—and the power of external forces to silence them. Both Rosie and her mother are shown struggling to find a voice either to understand or to assume control of their lives, yet Rosie's voice is
shackled by lack of experience and her mother's is violently suppressed by her husband and social norms.

Throughout the story, Rosie is rendered speechless by momentous events; her vocabulary is reduced to a few basic words, and her speaking is characterized by the repetition of words. When her mother, who writes poetry, tries to engage her in a discussion of her new poem—a haiku—Rosie does not really listen. "Yes, yes," she says, pretending to understand her mother. But the truth is that she does not understand Japanese, she does not understand the nature of haiku with its meaning packed into seventeen syllables, she does not understand her mother's passion for writing haiku or the culture out of which it emerges, and, finally, she does not yet understand the importance of understanding any of these matters. And so she answers, out of a desire to avoid confrontation, in a way that precludes understanding or communication with her mother. "It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no," she thinks.

Rosie is reduced to single words again when she meets Jesus Carrasco to learn the promised secret, and when he kisses her:

she could find no words to protest; her vocabulary had become distressingly constricted and she thought desperately that all that remained intact now was yes and no and oh, and even these few sounds would not easily out. . . . Rosie fell for the first time entirely victim to a helplessness delectable beyond speech. (14)

Loss of speech denotes helplessness; here it may be delectable, but it is also dangerous. Speechlessness, as the story demonstrates, can lead to a desperate isolation, to lack of understanding, thence to violence. In this case, Rosie and Jesus Carrasco are schoolmates who share the culture of an American high school, and they enjoy teasing and bantering with each other. Jesus is also one of the Mexicans Rosie's father has hired to help with the tomato
picking, belonging therefore, like the Japanese, to a group
marginalized by American society. It is typical of
Yamamoto's stories that the few non-Japanese characters
belong to other marginalized groups
--Mexicans, Filipinos, Koreans; only rarely do Caucasian
characters make an appearance. Rosie's first kiss occurs
with someone from a culture other than the two she is
already straddling, someone who speaks a different, third
language, so that speech between them--or communication--
takes on still more complexity.

The final momentous event of Rosie's summer also
assaults her speech. She joins her mother after her father
has angrily and viciously smashed and burned a painting her
mother has won as a prize for her poetry. Rosie is
reluctant to hear her mother's explanation; she resists the
telling that "would combine with the other violence of the
hot afternoon to level her life, her world to the very
ground" (18). But, unlike the explanation of haiku, her
mother insists upon telling Rosie about her loveless
marriage, the alternative to suicide after the shame of an
aborted love affair in Japan, and her illegitimate
pregnancy. Desperate to save her daughter from the mistakes
of her own life, she tries to exact Rosie's promise never to
marry. In response, Rosie says to herself, "Jesus, Jesus"
and then aloud, glibly, "yes, yes, I promise"; but both
answers are ambiguous. The doubling of the term parallels
the doubled meaning (a speech habit that Jesus and Rosie's
father also exhibit at significant moments in the story), one
term cancelled by its repetition. As King-Kok Cheung notes
(Introduction xx), "Jesus" may be the son of God or the son
of the Carrascos. The call to Jesus may be a prayer for
strength to comply or a recognition that the attraction of
her newly-found romantic love will make compliance
impossible. The sincerity of Rosie's "yes" is uncertain and
remains to be tested. Rosie herself cannot yet say for sure
what she means. The reader sees that she neither wants nor is able to understand what her mother is saying, and in any event, parents cannot save their children from making their own mistakes.

It is not that Rosie is shy or reticent. During recess at Japanese school her "wild mimicry" of Fred Allen, Rudy Vallee, Shirley Temple, and the gentleman soprano of the Four Inkspots moves her friend Chizuko to declare that she "ought to be in the movies!" Bakhtin notes that the novel's ability to incorporate other genres allows additional voices to swell its heteroglossia. The comic routines, the popular songs, and the hit recordings from mainstream American entertainment also carry mainstream values and attitudes into the narrative. Rosie's assumption of these voices contends with the legitimacy of that assumption. Rosie may be able to enthrall Chizuko with her rendition of "On the Good Ship Lollipop," but the reader is struck by the mismatch between Rosie and Shirley Temple, the symbol of true American girlhood with her blond ringlets and blue eyes. Unlike Mori's story "The All-American Girl" which presents without irony (with the possible exception of the title itself) a Japanese American girl as a model of attractiveness and an object of admiration, here the disparity between the two images illuminates the exclusion of American girls with Japanese features from the mainstream. Rosie's performance becomes a parody of Shirley Temple, calling into question the values that she embodies. The reader can no longer view Shirley Temple in quite the same way after imagining Rosie in her place.

The mention of the Inkspots inserts a black American presence into the story. The problematic status of this group is signalled by "gentleman soprano," a term which conflates questions of race and gender; it neutralizes the menace associated with the black male by the trivializing, possibly denigrating, term "soprano." As a member of a
marginalized group, Rosie's place is closer to the "gentleman soprano" than to Shirley Temple.

While Rosie responds to the pressure of events by losing her ability to speak, her mother responds by writing. As a poet, Rosie's mother takes on a new identity, another name; she becomes "an extravagant contributor" to a newspaper under the "blossoming pen name, Ume Hanazono." Rosie notes that she is living with two women--her mother Tome Hayashi and the poet Ume Hanazono. Poetry absorbs her mother's attention, makes her "rapt," and provides her a way to express herself. Stan Yogi suggests that

The haikus that Rosie's mother writes become metaphors of both freedom and constraint. Writing allows Mrs. Hayashi to transcend her mundane and harsh existence and ponder higher ideas. The haiku form, in which "she must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables," also becomes a metaphor for the constraints that force Mrs. Hayashi to find meaning in small ways. (172)

"Seventeen Syllables" begins with Mrs. Hayashi speaking to Rosie about her poetry, an action that she (obsessively?) repeats throughout the story: She talks haiku with Mr. Hayano; she talks haiku with her sister and sister's husband; on one occasion Rosie has time to take her bath and return to find her mother "still talking haiku"; she expounds poetic theory with the newspaper's haiku editor, Mr. Kuroda.

Tellingly, however, Ume Hanazono does not talk haiku with Rosie's father, just as Tome Hayashi had not told him her own story when they married. "The young man was never told why his unseen betrothed was so eager to hasten the day of meeting," she confesses as she now tells Rosie the story as explanation for her father's violence. "The story was told perfectly, with neither groping for words nor untoward passion." Rosie's mother has rehearsed this story so often that it is committed to memory, and she has become numb to its power to wound.
Mr. Hayashi's manner of expression vacillates between sullen silence and angry outburst. On a visit to the Hayano family, he removes himself from his wife's discussion of haiku. He reads Life magazine instead, occasionally shouting out a comment about a photograph to Mrs. Hayano. At last, ignored and irritated, he abruptly announces they are going home and, without explanation, leaves "saying nothing." On the way home he only grunts noncommittally when his wife tries to apologize for lingering. The father's abrupt, uncharacteristically rude departure, his withdrawal from his wife's poetry discussions, his unexplained absences, and his lack of enthusiasm for her poetry are recorded but not foregrounded; along with Rosie, the reader can at first overlook their significance although both Rosie and the reader gradually become uneasy. The cause for discomfort remains obscure until the moment when the ragged places in her parents' marriage unravel violently before Rosie's eyes.

When the San Francisco editor appears in the tomato fields with the first prize painting for his wife, Mr. Hayashi is initially silent, but after his wife and the editor retire to the house for tea, he sends Rosie to remind her mother that she is needed for the tomato picking. His wife's reply that she shall only be a minute (spoken, Rosie notices, in the elevated "language of Mr. Kuroda") infuriates Mr. Hayashi. He shouts, stalks into the house, dispatches Mr. Kuroda, and smashes the prize.

Out of jealousy, out of a sense of worthlessness, and out of his own inarticulateness, Mr. Hayashi's rage mounts and is directed against his wife. The reasons for his rage are not explored in the story, but the historical context suggests answers. The open hostility against "Japs," the restrictive Asian immigration policies, and the discriminatory laws regarding land ownership and citizenship that characterized the life of a Japanese American farmer in
California before the war may be explanation enough. Feeling himself the victim of subjugation, Mr. Hayashi in turn victimizes his wife by attacking her poetry and silencing her voice. If we add to these social pressures the personal inadequacies that the farmer may feel in the presence of a cultivated city editor in a business suit who drives a "very presentable black car" and is, according to Rosie, "a good-looking man" along with the knowledge that his wife had once loved another, nobler man, and--finally--the practical urgencies of tomatoes about to spoil on the hottest day of the summer, we can account for the explosiveness of the husband's response.

The narrator of "Seventeen Syllables," like the poet of haiku, packs a lot of meaning into its few pages, telling the reader a double narrative about finding voice and being silenced, using two languages that are themselves further divided by usage and style to tell it, and including multiple voices and double-voicing. Rosie is the story's focalizer, but the text presents a rich heteroglossia of contending personal and social voices that provide the audience with a wider view and a greater understanding than either Rosie or any of the other characters can command. We witness the limitations of each character and the incompatibilities between the ways of the old country and the new, between farm life and the life of art, between adolescence and maturity, between men and women. The reasons for the clashing and ruptures that conclude the story have become clear to the reader, seem even tragically inevitable. Communication is cut or frayed between husband and wife, between mother and daughter, between the young American teenager and her first generation parents. Each character is trapped in his or her own space unable to find speech to bridge the rupture that has occurred. The reader is able to observe all of the characters, to understand the reasons for their behavior, and to have sympathy for the
position of each of them: the father and his rage; the mother and her despair and her frustration with her daughter; Rosie and her resistance to her mother's story, her uncertainties about approaching womanhood, and her desire for a "typical" and harmonious American family.

In the final confrontation between mother and daughter, in an echo of their opening scene, Rosie yes, yeses her mother. Rosie's action has a curious overlap with the advice from Invisible Man's grandfather. Like the grandfather's strategy, Rosie is covering up her true attitude through agreement. Unlike the grandfather's, Rosie's family sees through her; her mother recognizes both her lack of interest in Japanese poetic forms at the beginning of the story and her more disturbing (to the mother) reluctance to see the world from her mother's point of view at the end. Thus, Rosie's "yessing" differs from Invisible Man's in that it does not achieve its aim; furthermore, she adopts the strategy out of laziness, not out of conviction. The cost to Rosie of using "yes, yes" when she really means "no" in the first instance is the loss of connection with her mother and her heritage; the cost at the end is that "the embrace and consoling hand came much later than she expected."

"The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"

Another story with a double narrative, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," is also about speaking, about how stories are created, and about who can (and who cannot) tell and listen to them. References to hearing, not hearing, overhearing, and out of hearing constitute a leitmotif in this text.

As its title suggests, this story creates a legend. The legendary figure does not speak in her own voice until the final coda. Yet, by having the last word, she alters the meaning of everything told before, and the reader is
impelled to return to the beginning to have the story repeated. The legend is pieced together out of the reports, hearsay, and gossip of the Arizona concentration camp where Yamamoto's story is set, and it is passed on to the reader by the young high school student Kiku with help from her friend Elsie Kubo. "Haven't you heard?" says Elsie when the narrator gasps at the first sight of an extraordinary fellow inmate. "That's Miss Sasagawara."

Miss Sasagawara enters the story in the first sentence, already out of place in "that unlikely place," walking as if walking were "a rather special thing to be doing," wearing a "costume" that is "generous" and "rich," and forming her extraordinarily long, shining hair into a "coronet." She is already the stuff of legend, and her excessive reclusiveness allows the legend to grow.

Kiku tells us the story as she hears it from Elsie who in turn has heard reports from others. According to Kiku:

It turned out Elsie knew all about Miss Sasagawara... Where had she accumulated all her items? Probably a morsel here and a morsel there, and, anyway, I forgot to ask her sources, because the picture she painted was so distracting. (20)

Elsie guesses that "that gal" is temperamental because she was a ballet dancer and "I hear people like that are temperamental." She guesses that she is crazy because "the Sasakis, the new couple in the neighboring barracks, think she's crazy." Miss Sasagawara is rarely seen even in the communal areas; she goes to the showers at off times, and her father brings back food from the mess hall for her. Indeed, in the whole camp, no one talks with her at any length, or at least Kiku "never heard of it." But, "if Miss Sasagawara was not one to speak to, she was certainly one to speak of, and she came up quite often as topic for the endless conversations which helped along the monotonous days" (22). And circularly, the monotonous tenor of camp
life nudges along the expansion of Miss Sasagawara's legend. Thus, the extraordinary nature of Miss Sasagawara (as everyone calls her rather than the simpler "Mari") is established by report and guesswork, and the absence of any actual interchanges with her protects the legend from ordinary details or deflating corrections. Moreover, the young narrators Kiku and Elsie think in terms of fairytales. As they tell each other, their mission in life is

first to finish college somewhere when and if the war ever end[s] and we [are] free again, and then to find good jobs and two nice, clean young men, preferably handsome, preferably rich, who would cherish us forever and a day. (21)

But an element of madness soon overlays the legend of Miss Sasagawara. Observation of erratic behavior and, later, reports of violent behavior--a neighbor hears wild banging on the wooden walls of her apartment with something heavy like a hammer--culminate in the camp authorities sending her away to a state psychiatric institution.

Madness is the source for--or result of--Mari Sasagawara's carnivalesque nature. From the outset, she breaks the rules--from washing her undies in the tub reserved for private dishwashing, to flaunting rules of sociability. She transgresses deeper social norms, too, such as the proper behavior for a woman. Kiku and Elsie--who worry about "pushing twenty"---find it remarkable that Miss Sasagawara at thirty-nine years old is able to say that she isn't sorry she never married. They go on to marvel at her lack of wrinkles and hope that they too will be in such good shape when they reach her (old) age. In choosing a career over marriage, a life of art instead of convention, Miss Sasagawara has already exited the realm of normalcy.

Furthermore, Mari Sasagawara refuses to heed orders. When she appears at the hospital desk claiming she has appendicitis, for example, she first ignores Kiku's instructions in the waiting room, and then, after it is
determined she does not have appendicitis, she stubbornly (though in considerable pain) walks home, rejecting the doctor's orders to ride in the ambulance. That she will not listen is a source of amazement to the hospital staff, and George, the ambulance driver complains: "Cripes, what a dame! . . . I never heard of such a thing. She wouldn't even listen to me" (26).

Miss Sasagawara's isolation, her unconventionality, her refusal to cooperate with or even listen to others are sharply contrasted to the behavior of Kiku and Elsie who behave like any "normal" American high school girls of the time--joining school activities, working at part-time jobs, worrying about marriage and college. But it is precisely in this contrast that the rogue's work begins to take effect, that the clash between centrifugal and centripetal forces is revealed.

The reader begins to heed the contending voices. Although the story does not provide a direct indictment of the internment, we hear more acutely Kiku's aside to Elsie ("when and if the war ever ended and we were free again"); we listen again to the doctors giving orders and note that in the outside world before the war one doctor had retired, the other had not yet finished his medical degree; we notice the origin of things: the (censored) source of news, the (authoritarian) source of camp policy, and the (external) source of permission to leave camp for college--from the nameless, white, U.S. government officials of the camp administration; we focus on the obligatory thank you notes to good Church people outside that are a condition to Santa Claus's "eleemosynary" Christmas packages for the camp children. For readers, the cumulative effect of the daily indignities of camp life that Kiku treats as mere inconvenience is a developing sense of the absurd. We hear "the word of the father" shifting, being dislodged. Therefore, questions arise. Does it make sense, for
example, for the internees to deal with incarceration by trying to duplicate the society that has incarcerated them? Or does Mari Sasagawara's rejection make more sense? What is truly normal, what abnormal?

Miss Sasagawara's final word (spoken "only for herself of course") is a poem discovered by Kiku some time after leaving camp. The "erratically brilliant" poem is about a man, "beyond censure," striving toward Nirvana, "blissfully bent on cleansing from his already radiant soul the last imperceptible blemishes." The poet identifies herself as "the other"--"someone else, someone sensitive, someone admiring, someone who had not achieved this sublime condition and who did not wish to"--and her poem testifies to her absolute isolation, to her frustrated "human passions," and to her "anguished silence." She who was deemed mad by her immediate society (a judgment that Kiku's authority encourages readers to adopt) reverses that judgment in her poem, calling her father's behavior "a sort of madness, the monstrous sort which, pure of itself, might possibly bring troublous, scented scenes to recur in the other's sleep" (33).

Only now, finally, does Kiku begin "to wonder seriously about Miss Sasagawara for the first time." That is, only now does she consider her as a human being rather than a diverting legendary figure--and only now does she (and the reader) move away from an easy acceptance of conventional, hegemonic thinking to allow herself to hear other, defamiliarizing voices and to acknowledge other, decentering values. Kiku's review of the camp events or a reader's review of the text can yield an alternate interpretation in which reality is turned upside down. On the social level, the resistance by Miss Sasagawara, called mad by the world, now makes sense. Her defiance of camp rules signals a refusal to accommodate to the existence of the camp system itself, or--more radically--to a society that could create
such a system. Compliance carries with it a sanctioning of the incarceration of thousands of innocent citizens, a justification of a monstrous injustice.

On the personal level, also, her response to others makes sense if we look through her eyes, as her poem has finally inspired us to do, and if we look at her as an individual rather than as a legend or a label like Elsie's "temperamental ballet dancer" (21). An artist and an unmarried woman, she is doubly marginalized in a society that has itself been pushed over the margin. She has been four times uprooted (to the assembly center, to a camp, to the Arizona camp to join her uncle's family, then--after "some trouble" with the family--to a second location in an empty unfinished barracks). Her mother is dead, she has no siblings, there is animosity with her father's brother's family, she has neither husband nor children--and her biological clock is ticking. Her sole companion--her father--has in the past considered her an obstacle to his quest for Nirvana, and he now ignores her. These converging circumstances leave her isolated and alone. Furthermore, her strikingly dramatic appearance and her regal, distant manner provide grist for the imagination of the people in camp who feel bored and useless. By preferring the legend of Miss Sasagawara to the reality of Mari, the internees promote her isolation. Her social skills may be underdeveloped, but the text offers evidence of her attempts to reach out to others.

Moreover, when we look again at the sources for our information on Miss Sasagawara, and the basis for our judgment, we discover that the sources are flawed and unreliable. For example, Mrs. Sasaki, who describes Miss Sasagawara's unnatural behavior toward the neighbor children and taunts her with being old enough to be their mother, is herself "a plump and giggling young woman who always felt called upon to explain that she was childless by
choice" (32). We also reconsider Miss Sasagawara's attempt to "escape" (a telling verb) from the hospital wearing only a hospital nightgown because the doctors had been "pawing her." Elsie pooh poohs the notion, but she also reports that "The orderlies chased after and caught her and brought her back" (26). Perhaps their action is as unnecessary as it is controlling. Perhaps they are the same orderlies who earlier were conferring on the best place to find whores when one of them has the rare chance to leave camp to go to Phoenix. We also know that Miss Sasagawara has a beautiful body, "smooth and spare and well turned" (22). Yamamoto does not treat sex explicitly; she does not use terms like "sex" or "whore," and she hints at rather than describes sexual longing or behavior. But sexual tensions are nonetheless close to the surface in this as in other of her stories, and the incidents, statements, and facts surrounding Miss Sasagawara admit of a sexual construction that is not solely or even predominantly a matter of Mari's own imagination. My belief is that the doctors—one old enough to be past retirement, one without full medical credentials and shown to be careless about medical procedures—were pawing her. Miss Sasagawara has been isolated and depersonalized several times over: for being an artist, for being Japanese, for being a dependent and burden, and finally for being a woman. In a way that reminds us of Invisible Man, though for a different mix of reasons, Mari Sasagawara has been driven mad by the madness of the societies within the camp and outside in which she can find no sane place.

Audience

Hisaye Yamamoto joins Toshio Mori in introducing readers to the Japanese American community through the portraiture of Issei and Nisei characters. Yamamoto's work
is more fictionalized, or "narrativized," than Mori's, but she too draws heavily upon her autobiography for material. As is generally true of Yamamoto's stories, all of the first-person narrators and central characters in the cluster of stories we have been discussing are reflective of the author's own life, and characters tend to age at a similar pace with their author. The congregate voice of the implied author is also clearly Nisei and female whether in stories with first-person authorial narration as in "High-Heeled Shoes," or with third-person narration told from the point of view of a young Nisei wife like Sadako ("Morning Rain") or Esther ("Wilshire Bus"), or in the more complicated voicing in stories with a young central character like Rosie ("Seventeen Syllables"), or a young narrator like Kiku ("The Legend of Miss Sasagawara") in which the younger perspective is thrown into relief by a wider, wiser authorial point of view. The double perspective of these stories allows readers to reach a wider understanding, often earlier, than is available to their protagonists. Yamamoto adds not only a social-political dimension to Mori's portraiture of the Japanese American community but also a gendered component—her stories are about women's experience; they are centered on female characters; and they are told in a woman's voice.

Indeed, identity as a woman may actually have contributed to Yamamoto's ability to write and be published. The disruptions in the traditional family structure caused by relocation were destructive in many ways, but according to Susan Schweik, they repositioned women within the family and so, paradoxically, made it possible for women to acquire a voice they had not had before (93). Furthermore, according to Stephen Sumida, women were more likely to be published during this period than men. Sumida compares Monica Sone, who published her autobiography Nisei Daughter in 1953, to Yamamoto:
Quite like Hisaye Yamamoto, whose short stories began to be prominently published in the postwar years when Sone completed her autobiography, Sone may have slipped by gatekeepers of convention and acceptability with the subversive, antiracist theme of her work because she as a nisei woman may have been thought safe, unthreatening, and thus acceptably readable. In Yamamoto's case, to this day readers have to be led to see certain plots and themes (for instance, sexual ones) underlying her texts, "hidden" there because common assumptions do not prepare readers to detect sex and politics within the stories of a nisei woman, even when she means these themes to be exposed. (222)

How do white mainstream readers relate to Yamamoto's stories? Although Sumida's comment blurs the difference, I believe the answer is partly contingent upon time. I think that Yamamoto's stories engaged white readers differently at the time when they first appeared than they do today. All of the stories discussed in detail here were published in the late 1940s and early 1950s when ethnic contributions to national magazines were the exception. In the particular case of Japanese American writing, the de jure censorship of the war years and the de facto censorship by publishers after the war, as well as the reluctance of Japanese Americans themselves to write about the internment resulted in a paucity of writing about these devastating wartime events. Ann Hayashi's study of internees' personal narratives reveals that the stigma of internment so stifled discussion that thirty to forty years passed before a significant number of narratives began to appear. In this context, it is remarkable that Yamamoto's work was published when it was. I believe that contemporary publishers and readers were neither prepared to hear anti-hegemonic messages nor likely to probe the stories for their underlying social indictment, and they were comfortably unprovoked by the stories' mild-mannered surface narratives.

White mainstream readers of the 1990s are more likely to scrutinize the writing from a minority culture for
contending points of view. In the case of Yamamoto's writing, for example, we have more knowledge of the events of the Second World War, a greater awareness of the ambiguities of social and political relations in the United States, and a more acute sense of our own complicity as members of a privileged group in social and political inequities. With a greater awareness that things are not always what they seem, or should be, and a clearer recognition of the hypocrisy that riddles the nation's observance of national principles, readers of the 1990s are more attuned to hear social indictment. Moreover, as a result of the post-fifties rhetorical and deconstructive approaches to literature, readers are also better prepared to be attentive to contending words and double-voiced discourse in subversive texts.

Yamamoto's spare prose is remarkable for its rich heteroglossia; underneath a seemingly unruffled surface, her stories, like Japanese haiku, are packed with psychological and socio-political meaning that readers--both insiders and outsiders--are invited to unpack. Yamamoto writes regularly for her community as well as about them, and, indeed, a majority of her published pieces are available only in West Coast Japanese American periodicals. Yet, while her stories take place primarily within the boundaries of her community and include few white characters, her texts neither exclude nor estrange outsider readers. On the contrary, for me--a white, female reader--Yamamoto's narrative world welcomes and exhilarates with its resonant texture and its myriad corners and levels that invite exploration. Yamamoto's fiction does not position white and Japanese, men and women against one another in any kind of polar fashion. Nor does she, any more than does Mori, assign blame or separate offenders from the offended. Subjugation in various guises thematically links Yamamoto's stories; characters, narrators, and readers together witness the variety of ways
in which people (within or across group boundaries) divide up and oppress one another. But what emerges from her fictional world is a recognition of the essential sameness of all oppression and its essential familiarity—lodged as it is within all of us. A prevailing message—which her stories also share with the work of Toshio Mori—is that human beings are very much alike whatever their race or gender—for good and for evil. Racism is not the monopoly of any group, and sexism damages exploiters as well as victims. Oppression is not pure, easily separated from the body politic because it is located within individuals where it becomes hopelessly entangled with complicating human imperatives and dreams. Yamamoto welcomes all readers into the narrative world she has created for their enjoyment; there also, if they wish, readers can learn along with (or perhaps sooner than) her characters about self and society, about human weakness and human possibility.
ENDNOTES

1. King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi use the terms "manifest" and "latent" to describe the double plot in their discussion of these stories in the Introduction to *Seventeen Syllables* xix.

2. Yamamoto usually translates Japanese terms or makes them clear from context, but in this instance she does not disclose the meaning of the pen name. The reader who doesn't know Japanese thus has a taste of monolingual exclusion. Stan Yogi translates Ume Hanazono as "Plum Flowergarden" ("Legacies" 172).
Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge--the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives.

Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation Is the Issue"

The names that Toni Cade Bambara calls herself reveal much about the writer and her vision of her work. It is, first of all, noteworthy that Toni Cade named herself Bambara in 1970 "when she discovered it as a part of a signature on a sketchbook . . . in her great-grandmother's trunk" (Deck 13). Not only does "Bambara" link Toni Cade to her own matrilinear forbears and, earlier still, to her West African roots--and the root work and conjuring tradition of African women that find their way into her fiction--but the name sounds good on the tongue. Indeed, Bambara is actually a tongue: the Mandigo language of the Bambara people, a West African lingua franca. It denotes, therefore, a language that both demarks and links, is both a culture-specific verbal resource and a cross-community means of communication--a double thrust that parallels the force of Toni Cade Bambara's writing.

Bambara, like her superwoman protagonist Velma Henry, takes on numerous roles, gives herself multiple names:
"relay storyteller," "word conjurer," "brazen messenger," "blues blower," "poison neutralizer," "cultural worker," "network builder," "bridge maker," "some kind of communicator," "neighborhood scribe"—all terms that imply mediation and others. Like her co-writer Alice Walker, Bambara takes also the name "medium"—an intermediary, a connecting presence in the process of narrating (and living) who "passes on" messages, meaning, spirit. From her storytelling counterpart in West Africa who, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, "perpetuates the oral tradition and history of a village or family," Bambara acquires another name: griot.

**CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY**

Like Hisaye Yamamoto and Toshio Mori, Bambara records and reports the stories of her community. As an "American Griot," she strives for her community's sake and her own integrity to set the record straight about black American experience, to winnow truth from myth. "First and foremost I write for myself," she claims. "Writing has been for a long time my major tool for self-instruction and self-development. I try to stay honest through pencil and pen" (Tate 18). And elsewhere, griot-like:

> Writing is one of the ways I participate in struggle—one of the ways I help to keep vibrant and resilient that vision that has kept the Family going on. Through writing, I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that argues that exploitation and misery are not inevitable. (Sternburg 154)

Concommitant with her intense concentration upon the African American "Family," its struggle and its strengths, Bambara writes deliberately and directly to a black audience. In contrast to Ralph Ellison and the two Nisei
writers, she expresses little interest (least among the writers included in this study) in the dynamics between her text and a white, majority audience, a position that of course problematizes my own place among her readers. The Salt Eaters neither speaks explicitly to white readers nor includes a significant white presence in its text. White characters, primarily notable for their absence, are excluded from the action and from the community. The few white characters who appear in the novel tend to be voiceless and nameless, and none is admirable: white males are depicted as fools, white females as bitches. Unlike the narrative strategies of other ethnic writers, neither the care for nor the challenging of white readers gets much of Bambara's attention. The many characters, the narrator-as-medium, and the author are speaking among, to, and for themselves and their community, neither explaining nor complaining to those who are outside. African American speech patterns, humor, and traditions fill the novel, and the fact that cultural references are not glossed is likely to slow down the understanding of white readers. On the other hand, these elements are not employed for the purpose of making the novel inaccessible to outside readers but to depict and celebrate the black community. Indeed, the noted difficulty of Salt—for both black and white readers—derives rather from its complex narrative structure and Bambara's experimentation with form and language than from a desire to divide insiders from outsiders. A white audience is not directly attacked as in the plays of Frank Chin or the narratives of Richard Wright, nor challenged by the kind of trickery and characterization practised by the protagonist of Invisible Man; whites are excluded by default. Bambara's attention is directed toward discovering truths about her community, and her energy is spent in pushing and stretching form to fit her understanding and vision of the world. In this project, she has little energy
to spare for defying/excluding white readers, on the one hand, or for making truths palatable and easy, on the other.

Bambara's response to a New York Times review of her short story collection, Gorilla. My Love, illustrates her attitude towards a white audience. The reviewer confides:

I am tired of being shouted at, patronized, bullied, and antagonized by black writers. If I've bought their books, it means I intend to give them my attention; if I've spent $6.95 to "hear" what they have to say, I dislike being told I'm an insensitive, arrogant honky who won't listen. Toni Cade Bambara tells me more about being black through her quiet, proud, silly, tender, hip, acute, loving stories than any amount of literary polemicizing could hope to do. (qtd. in Tate 26)

One implication of these comments by a reviewer with at least the shadow of a chip on the shoulder (the quotation marks around "hear" beg for deconstruction) is that Bambara's fiction does not draw an obvious chalk line of no trespass between text and white reader. And indeed, an active defiance of audience gives that audience a partial ownership of the text, and Bambara eschews that kind of relation. On the other hand, she also refuses to write in order to garner mainstream approbation, the approach that Frank Chin disparagingly assigns to "Christian autobiographers" like Jade Snow Wong and Pardee Lowe, or that Donald Gibson and LeRoi Jones lay upon Ralph Ellison. As she dismisses the Times reviewer's praise, Bambara claims another position:

I recall that the comment about being antagonized by black writers struck me as funny. There were other white reviewers who went off their nuts because I didn't get on their case, didn't seem to be paying them due attention. What the hell? . . . [F]inally, primarily and ultimately, I'm not at all concerned about whether white reviewers are comfortable or ill at ease with my work. (Tate 26-27)

The feisty tone of her claim tends to disinvite--though her words do not categorically exclude--a white reader which
problematizes my own membership in her authorial audience. In an earlier statement, moreover, Bambara is more adamant about the separation between white opinion and her work, and more exclusive of white readers. In a 1968 review of *The Great White Hope*, she identifies "two aesthetic traditions, Western and Black." Our tradition, she writes, tends to be dynamic. Our art is not a separate entity, reflecting the immortal aspects of the human condition, the "universality" of man; it is, rather, a literate attempt to offer up an ample moral vision, to articulate that life that fluctuates from day to day. (Cade 237)

Furthermore, along with life, the significance and relevance of (black) art changes over time. Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, for example, "was something of a powerhouse in 1964." But, in 1968, Bambara suggests that we might be a little impatient with the pitiful-po'-me intimations just beneath the stormy invectives. We might also be unmoved by the rally atmosphere that is provoked primarily because of the presence of the white witness. The impulse of *Blues* is to enlighten and move the conscience of white America. Very shortly, that motive will prove not only sickening, but thoroughly fraudulent as a dramatic thrust. (Cade 237-38)

To shape one's writing according to the dictates of a powerful and adversarial audience distorts the writing, demeanes the writer, and dooms truthfulness. Bambara rejects that kind of relation with a white audience which she charges to Baldwin. She does not see the point or profit of trying to combat what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism"--that tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness. (qtd. in Spelman 116).

The impulse to enlighten and move the conscience of white America is likely to be frustrated and frustrating, futile and depleting. As Bambara continues in her Baldwin review:
Of course it doesn't cost anything [for the white liberal] to cheer the innocent beast/transhuman archangel [of the play] in the dark of the theater. And it doesn't pay us much, I fear, to have the liberal conscience pricked (since the other white bastards let the lesson roll off their backs like so much molten lead which they ignore as they ignore their death). (Cade 242)

In practice, an ethnic writer (who is interested in publishing and reaching a wide audience) must face a white public that commands the power of numbers and position—and of money. An American audience includes mostly white readers who pay their $6.95 for books published, marketed, and reviewed by a mostly white literary establishment. It is tricky for an ethnic writer to chart a course ignoring that white presence—that steers clear of the Scylla of sycophancy and the Charybdis of defiance. Nonetheless, Toni Cade Bambara aims to find that route, to "do her own thing." When she discounts her own savvy, we might grab a handful of salt: "I've been told," she confides, "this [disregard of white readers] is a foolish attitude on my part. But while I may not be very shrewd about my, ah, 'lit-tur-rary car-rear,' I am quite clear and serious about my work in the world" (Tate 27). Nevertheless, in spite of her alleged lack of shrewdness and interest in the white world, Bambara's works have been published by mainstream publishers like Random House and Doubleday, and Salt won the 1981 American Book Award. This publication history, I would argue, complicates the notion of separate traditions and signals an invitation to white American readers to join her readership. In this circumstance, after all, the channel coursing between Scylla and Charybdis is heading toward the mainstream.

Historical circumstance of course affects Bambara's attitude towards a white audience. In a comparison of Frances E. W. Harper's 1892 novel Iola Leroy and Alice Walker's 1982 novel The Color Purple, Deborah E. McDowell
connects the differences between the two works to the disparate impact of their respective nineteenth- and twentieth-century white audiences. According to McDowell:

The Color Purple reflects Walker's awareness that the literary manifestations of racial uplift (or any social movement for that matter) are explained, in part, by the relationship between writer and audience. Unlike Harper, Walker could choose to ignore the fact that her audience was predominantly white, a choice strongly influenced, as was Harper's, by the social realities and literary circumstances of her place and time. We might pinpoint specifically the emergence of black nationalism in the 1960s and 70s and the rise of the woman's movement that followed closely on its heels. During this period, the writers and critics who formed the cultural arm of the larger political movement became convinced, as Houston Baker notes, that "their real audience, like the nation to come, was black."
Accordingly, they directed . . . [their voices to] a black audience which would include, as never before, ordinary blacks from ghetto communities. (Gates Reading Black 109)

Like Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara is heir to that history; she too can afford to ignore white readers and designate black readers as her real audience. The 1960s--that energetic-divisive, optimistic-disillusioning, transformative-limiting period in American social history--divides Bambara from Ellison. The Salt Eaters and Invisible Man face each other across that divide, and the shifting of attitudes about race and of black-white relations (including audience relations) between the 1950s and the 1980s is reflected in the two novels in significant ways that I will examine later. Not only has Bambara herself helped to shape and been shaped by the ideals of the time, but her novel registers the 1960s in numerous ways. Most immediately, The Salt Eaters takes the 1960s as its subject and theme. More profoundly, the novel exhibits a greater flexibility and choice in narrative technique than were available to earlier writers such as Harper, before the advent of the black and women's movements; Bambara herself explicitly cites the
"stunning possibilities" resulting from "the breakthrough achieved in the sixties by the Neo-Black Arts Movement" (Sternburg 167). Finally, the novel becomes itself a means for extending the liberating changes begun during that decade. That is, the subject of the novel is paralleled by its purpose. The Salt Eaters is about healing--of the individual, the community, the world--in a way that takes into account new attitudes about race and gender; it also advocates taking standards and measures from within the community, rather than reacting to values imposed from without. With the collaboration (and transformation) of black readers, the novel aims to implement such healing and to promote the integrity of the community.

Bambara clearly articulates her "work in the world," and she intends that work to be communal, political, and transformational. Writing, in fact, is only one of the ways to accomplish her aims, and it is not necessarily her best way. Alice A. Deck notes that among the African American writers of the 1960s who "became directly involved in the cultural and sociopolitical activities . . . across the country," Bambara is "one of the few who continued to work [in the 1970s] within the black urban communities (filming, lecturing, organizing, and reading from her works at rallies and conferences)" (13). Indeed, Bambara often mentions the pull of the camera:

Intimations that what I'm striving for--to work at the point of interface between the political/artistic/metaphysical, that meeting place where all seeming contradictions and polarities melt . . . can be explored more sense-ably in some language other than what I've been using, prompts me of late to experiment more with new kinds of writing materials and writing forms and to pick up another kind of pencil--the camera. (Evans 43)

Currently centered in Philadelphia, Bambara continues her work through community networking and video production. Her fiction has had to share her attention with this public
activity, although her long-heralded second novel about the
Atlanta child murders may soon reach publication.

Nevertheless, she calls herself writer and claims the
conviction that "writing is a legitimate way, an important
way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that
names me" (Evans 42). Moreover, an active, alert audience
is crucial to this aim and to her art. The terms by which
she labels herself, listed at the beginning of the chapter,
all describe interaction with others--neighbors, listeners,
readers. In fact, Bambara credits her (community-based)
readers with nudging her toward writing by "raising
questions, picking bones, offering amens and right-ons--
critical feedback and accreditation from the authenticating
audience" (Evans 42); and she readily acknowledges her
delight in and dependence upon readers:

I'm very fortunate in that my readership is not
anonymous and the feedback is personal. I meet readers
on the bus, in the laundromat, at conferences, in the
joint, damn near everywhere. . . . It keeps me going.
I've been told, of course, everything from A to Z [i.e.
conflicting advice]. . . . Of course, everyone has a
story that I should write for them. I appreciate all
the feedback. Keeps me going. (Tate 27)

In a letter to a colloquia of honors students, she
foregrounds the value of an active role for readers: "a
text is best interpreted by [the reader]," she writes.
"[W]hat the reader brings to the jam session, what the
reader experiences and takes away to use, to fashion their
own life technology is best measured by the reader" (Frye
letter).

In turn, she expresses her sense of the writer's
responsibility toward her audience by stating:

I start with the recognition that we are at war . . .
[and t]he war is . . . being fought over the truth:
what is the truth about human nature, about the human
potential? My responsibility to myself, my neighbors,
my family and the human family is to try to tell the
truth. That ain't easy. (Tate 17)
Bambara conceives of the "writer as medium" as a way to tell the truth. She rejects "the author as isolated genius" concept or what she calls "the text-as-private-property doctrine." Again to the students, she explains that such a notion is alien to the aesthetic traditions of the culture I try to stay centered in. Blues singers and griots demonstrate in their art practice that a text (song, tale) that derives from the community's cultural storehouse of sayings, and is occasioned by some community-based moment for the re-singing and re-telling, that the text belongs to the community it sprang from; it only seems to momentarily belong to any singer or teller bodaciousness enough to try a hand at it. (Frye letter).

Bambara makes the claim that "I don't know all my readers, but I know well for whom I write. And I want for them no less than I want for myself--wholesomeness" (Sternburg 157). However, I believe that the ostracism of a white audience, especially in the case of Salt, compromises her aim to promote transformation and wholesomeness in her readers. Even though the novel demonstrates that healing must begin with the self and that the African American community must not depend upon outside, white society for valorization, the promotion of wholeness is curiously at odds with the novel's division of readers and its maintenance of a racial segregation. Bambara pursues a collaborative exchange with readers that is similar to Ralph Ellison's in that she explicitly shares authority with her audience. But she diverges from Ellison's practice by her narrower focus upon the "core culture." While the emphasis upon the community healing itself is salutary, the exclusion of readers by race runs counter to the struggle by the characters to repair the shards and rents of fragmenting and to absorb the epiphany that "everything is everything."

Within the text of The Salt Eaters, the barriers raised against white readers are formidable: in a novel brimming
with complex, dynamic, vital characters, the flat and faceless white stereotypes offer a dramatic contrast. White women in particular appear in the text only to be dismissed as negative, cold, and life-diminishing. This unattractive representation of the nature and behavior of white women and of their impact upon the black community problematizes my status, as a white female reader, in the authorial audience. At the same time, however, "gender" and "genre" create chinks in the barriers. The narrative's complex, highly inventive, woman-centered text allows me to engage the text with a certain agency and comfort. The problem of reading as a white woman is, paradoxically, reduced by the insignificance of the white female presence. While demeaning, the representation is also sparse and dull, and thus it is preempted by more dynamic features and issues in the text. Reading as a woman (as distinct from reading as a white woman) is satisfying because the text represents women as vibrant and vital, and the novel treats gender issues as important, complex, and deserving of attention.

Genre, along with gender, provides another way for active interaction with the text. The fact of my racial identity is irrelevant to my engagement with the novel's complex, puzzle-like, experimental form and its varieties of poetic, incantatory, comic, and community-specific language. Thus, reading both as a female and as a post-modernist, I can approach the text of The Salt Eaters and establish a collaboration with its author. Bambara writes that she works to "establish a relationship between [her] productive work and the reader's productive work" (Evans 42) and that her novel is a location for her readers to do their work--a place to participate with her in a kind of "call-response, reader-writer-tradition-moment" (Frye letter). Before exploring further my own ability to participate in that "moment," I would like to examine some of the features of Bambara's text to discover how she sets up the "call and
response" with her core culture and how she elicits their "productive work." How, that is, does Bambara produce a text capable of transforming readers (possibly including outsider readers) through the strategies she employs and the issues she exposes in The Salt Eaters?

THE TEXT

The Salt Eaters emerges from Toni Cade Bambara's expressed political-spiritual mission in the world--it is a novel about political agendas and spiritual consciousness, and it is a means to help unite these aspects of African American life to make their life whole, make them wholesome. One of her working titles for the novel, "In the Last Quarter," signifies her concern with the state of the world in the aftermath of the 1960s "halcyon days." The novel grew out of her work as community organizer and began as a journal entry exploring the fact that our activists or warriors and our adepts or medicine people don't even talk to each other. . . . The novel, then came out of a problem-solving impulse--what would it take to bridge the gap, to merge those frames of reference, to fuse those camps? (Tate 16)

Disturbed by the problem of a split community, Bambara hazards writing narrative as a politically effective solution. "I'm exploring ways to link up our warriors and our medicine people, hoping some readers will fling the book down, sneer at my ineptitude, and go on out there and show how it's supposed to be done" (Tate 25). Bambara emphasizes the novel's own urgent agency and her authorial passivity in its inception. In a description curiously parallel to the experience reported by Ralph Ellison in which the voice of his narrator insists that the author interrupt the novel he was then writing to write his (the narrator's) story, Bambara tells us:
I began with such a simple story line—to investigate possible ways to bring our technicians of the sacred and our guerillas together. A Mardi Gras society elects to reenact an old slave insurrection. . . . All hell breaks loose. I'm sliding along the paper, writing about some old Willie Bobo on the box and, next thing I know, my characters are talking in tongues; the street signs are changing on me. The terrain shifts, and I'm in Brazil somewhere speaking Portuguese. I should mention that I've not been to Brazil yet, and I do not speak Portuguese. I didn't panic. It was no news to me that stuff comes from out there somewhere. I dashed off about thirty pages of this stuff. . . . [Then] I had to put the novel aside twice; but finally, one day I'm walking out in the woods . . . and I slumped down next to my favorite tree and just said, "okay, I'm stepping aside, y'all. I'm getting out of the way. What is the story I'm supposed to be telling? Tell me." Then I wrote The Salt Eaters. (Tate 31-32)

The story she is supposed to be telling is about making whole. The splintering of the political and spiritual is destructive of the individual and the community, and—by extension—the world. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, exhaustion and factionalism have come to characterize the community as is most clearly seen in the disharmony at the Seven Arts Academy and the fractiousness and empty rhetoric of the community's political meetings at the Patterson Professional Building. The forces of evil seem to be gathering strength, and the larger community is at risk from environmental poisoning, nuclear explosion, American imperialism, social bureaucratism; these are realized in the novel by the hovering presence of the Transchemical plant, the mutterings of industrial unrest, the rumblings about underground stockpiling of stolen weapons, and, more concretely, by the appearance of the self-centeredly unimaginative, dangerously inventive, mostly white engineers playing "how to break the fail-safe system" drinking games at the Avocado Pit Cafe. Personal lives and family relations reflect public dislocation as seen in the disintegrating dreams and marriages of Velma and Obie, Fred
Holt and Margie; the headshakings over the new disturbing ways of the younger generation by Doc Serge, Cora Rider, and Minnie ("What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before. Not sunned and sweet anymore" [44]); the disconnectedness of country/city redbone/outside Julius Meadows; the one-sidedness of Jan and Ruby. As a result of the general and chaotic divisiveness, the most committed, most adept individuals like Velma threaten to self-destruct. Velma had thought that

- the workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of range of the serpent's fangs so the workers of the seventies could drain the poisons, repair damaged tissues, retrain the heartworks, realign the spine.
- But amnesia had set in anyhow. Heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow. Time was running out anyhow. (258)

Velma Henry's internal struggle to mend her fractured self—to accept the weight of health—through acknowledgment of her spiritual gift/responsibility drives the main line of the novel's progression. The novel opens with Velma perched unsteadily on a stool facing Minnie Ransom, "the fabled healer of the district," and ends with her rising from the stool, steady, stretched and radiant, her shawl dropping down "a burst cocoon," her new self empowered and ready to assume the identity and tasks of seer and healer. In the pages between, Velma and Minnie do the important and difficult work of knitting back together this twentieth-century superwoman whose public and personal selves have come unravelled; until recently Velma has been a competent Academy director, civil rights activist, community organizer, feminist, computer expert, corporate "infiltrator," and even fill-in piano player for the Sisters of the Grain; also wife, mother, sister, lover. Her husband Obie observes that it takes eight people to fill her
numerous jobs after she collapses. Her healing is the key to general health.

The two figures on their stools are located at the center of the novel and form the innermost circle of an ever-widening pattern of concentric circles that structures the narrative. As the healing begins to take effect, Minnie's hands circle and steady the crown of Velma's head, and M'Dear "circl[es] overhead until the circles [are] in synch, drawing her to the center" (220). Velma's "centering" of self and reclaiming of roots sets in motion a healing that spreads outward contagiously, concentrically to gather and absorb other individuals and groups in the process. Velma's re-intégrâtion reverberates, finds echoes in the new awareness of other characters witnessing the healing, in the reaffirmation of the folk healing and humming of the "Master Mind," Minnie's auxiliary circle of twelve elders surrounding and supporting the two in their work, in the restoration of her marriage and the regeneration of the community converging at the spring festival, and, finally, all-encompassingly, in the rainstorm inauguration of a new age in the last quarter of the twentieth century.1

The important sociopolitical thrust of the novel is represented by the interaction between Jan and Ruby; these two characters operate on an intermediate level between the individual and psychological metamorphosis of Velma and the cosmic, public transformation of the world. The novel's political-spiritual dialogue is articulated and realized by their juncture and exchange in a second, reinforcing pattern of circles and circling. Friends of Velma, associates at the Academy of Seven Arts, Ruby (the political activist who coordinates the newsletter staff) and Jan (the spiritualist artist who runs the ceramics and sculpture division) share salad and conversation at the Avocado Pit Cafe. Their
exchange lasts through several chapters and forms a social, communal link between the individual and the cosmic. Eleanor W. Traylor describes Ruby and Jan as, respectively, one impatient, oversimplifying the crises of her present, aware though she is of the connection between her personal conundrums and those of the community--the other, understanding the complex convulsions of her present, of its relations to the past, yet dumbfounded, unable to summon the energizing force that triggers action--both searching for synthesis, desperate to achieve a center from which to flower. (Evans 63)

This pair of women in the cafe--heads together, face to face, working together and against each other, two halves of a whole--repeats the pattern of Velma and Minnie in the Infirmary. They describe another magnetic point around which revolve other conversations, other hypotheses and philosophies, other forces both positive and negative, emanating from within and around the cafe. Polar-apart world views come from the multiracial Sisters (all named) in no-nukes tee shirts at one of the two large round tables and from the mostly white (all nameless, all male) nuclear engineers from the sinister power plant at the other. Intersecting, circumnavigating, ultimately connecting these circles is the roving waiter-writer Campbell who grasps in a flash, in the flash of the thunderstorm, a transforming epiphany that "everything is everything":

Of course ... Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the law of time and is ... everything that is now has been before and will be again in a new way, in a changed form, in a timeless time. (249)

From the railing edge of the cafe, the biking trajectory of bigfoot Lil James (aka Jabari, Velma's son, who takes a chapter or two to lace up his oversized sneakers) physically traces the ways connecting the cafe, Academy, Infirmary, and park, and metaphorically laces together the factions of the community; also from beyond the railing, the deceptively drunken Hermit in green doing a "rope-a-dope number" swoops
in toward Jan's table, swoops away, and signals the existence of other, farther out, not-to-be-denied connections between cafe and cosmos.

The spatial structuring of the novel supports both the "how" and the "what" of the telling. The rather few events of narrative time present are located in this circular arrangement that begins with an individual mind and opens out to the universe, an arrangement that can capture in its expansion the dreams, memories, inventions, and forecastings of the characters. The projection of circles also testifies to the "nature of things"--everything is connected--and to the way to change things; an action by the individual such as the decision for health (or the writing of a novel) will launch rippling repercussions onto the body politic and the society at large. Attesting to Bambara's success in effecting political and personal change through her writing is Gloria T. Hull's claim that:

There are compelling reasons for studying the novel. It is a daringly brilliant work that accomplishes even better for the 1980s what Native Son did for the 1940s, Invisible Man for the 1950s, or Song of Solomon for the 1970s: It fixes our present and challenges the way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation; teaching it well can be a political act. (Pryse 216-17)

Hull, like Bambara, directs her remarks primarily to black readers; she compares Salt to other African American authored works, and presumably refers to the personal transformation and political action of African Americans. However, I would argue that a white reader also can experience personal and political transformation both because, as Ellison contends, black and white Americans are "a part" (of the same whole) as well as "apart," and because the narrative and verbal force of the novel is powerful enough to spur change in any reader. The narrative strategies employed by Bambara in Salt in order to effect
change (and that also affect the ease or difficulty of readability) deserve our attention.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Novel Form

The narrative choices by which Bambara accomplishes her political and transformational aims are organic to those aims and organic as well as to her African American heritage. The novel's methods of narration, its manipulation of levels and varieties of language, its deployment of space, time, and planes of reality are all both means and meaning of the narrative---mined from and correlative with African American culture. Bambara has chosen writing and the genre of the novel as best suited to her purposes, and she experiments with grammar, narrative progression, characterization, and the figure of narrator, in each case pushing against their limits. Although she has repeatedly expressed her "druthers"--as writer, reader, and teacher--for the short story, here she works within the novel form to try "to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade" (Sternburg 165). Bambara claims that The Salt Eaters gives her a setup that is "as close as I have at this stage in my development [for] coaxing the 'design' of the world I intuit and attempt to signify/communicate come through" (Evans 43). Her project needs the particular power of the novel form:

It will be a pleasure to get back to the shorts. . . . But the novel's pull is powerful. And since the breakthrough achieved in the sixties by the Neo-Black Arts Movement, the possibilities are stunning. Characters that have been waiting in the wings for generations, characters that did not fit into the roster of stereotypes, can now be brought down center stage. Now that I/we have located our audience, we are
free to explore the limits of language. Now that American history, American literature, the American experience is being redefined by so many communities, the genre too will undergo changes. So I came to the novel with a sense that everything is possible. (Sternburg 167-68)

Narrator as Medium

Central to her formal experimentation is Bambara's conception of narrator-as-medium. The narrator of Salt, she says, "had to be nimble, had to lend herself to different voices and codes in order to let the other characters through." Her narrator is unobtrusive because she is "trustworthy" and "a friend [who] genuinely cares for the people, so there's no distance":

It was a trip to find the narrator's stance. I didn't want merely a witness or a camera eye. Omniscient author [sic] never has attracted me; he or she presumes too much. First person was out because I'm interested in a group of people. Narrator as part-time participant was rejected, too. Finally, I found a place to sit, to stand, and a way to be--the narrator as medium through whom the people unfold the stories, and the town telling as much of its story as can be told in the space of one book. (Tate 32)

The narrator-as-medium provides a great flexibility of narration as she is able to move freely through space among the thoughts and wishes of all the characters of time present, and she can also mediate the consciousnesses of those in other times, past and future, and of those at different levels of being. This strategy also promotes reader collaboration for the narrator's mediation is directed toward the audience. Such a narrator is eminently appropriate to a novel promoting the need to regain touch with spirituality, whose author describes herself as "the medium for the storehouse of cultural stories," and whose major characters are represented as mediums. Velma's
healing is accomplished through the mediation of Minnie Ransom in concert with the prayer circle and her spirit allies—Old Wife, the loa, and assorted haints—and through M'Dear Sophie Heywood, Velma's godmother and spiritual guide, who first recognized and has subsequently nurtured Velma's gift. Health for Velma means acknowledging her own role as medium and exercising her spiritual gift to match the political skills she has already practiced. From childhood, Velma has been sporadically in touch with the cave Mudmothers who have nudged Velma toward her potential, delineating themselves (through dream and mirror) as a resource for developing internal strength, offering reinforcement to her spirit in the struggle that will inevitably be a part of her interceding for community and world.

The narrator "nimbly" shifts from mind to mind, sails effortlessly through time and space, transmitting both the dream and the actual, the thoughts and speech of spirit figures and dead characters as well as of the living; using metempsychosis to reach previous lives, telepathy to connect distant places, prophecy to relate the future, hypothesy to lay out what might have been. Narration of Salt progresses primarily by internal dialogues and streams of consciousness that are subject to interruption and intersection; competing or associated messages from manifold sources converge, flashing readers back in time, flashing us forward, doubling time or direction, multiplying point of view, posing supposes, streaming through the medium-as-narrator.

Cinematic Techniques

Another strength of the narration is Bambara's skillful application of cinematic techniques to the novel form. Despite her disclaimer of a camera-eye model (at least an "impermeable" one) for her narrator, Bambara's propensity
(even preference) for film, can be seen in her methods of narration. She employs rapid flashbacks and flashforwards as well as what Hull refers to as the novel's "frozen moments"—moments when action stops and Bambara exhibits her "penchant for drawn-out precision" and "exhaustively limn[s] every detail [of a scene]—for example, when Porter announces five minutes to Claybourne, or when the rumble of thunder is heard" (Pryse 223). The multiple vantage points from which to view a single action or character also parallel film technique. We see, for example, Ruby and Jan at the sidewalk cafe in close-up, from middle distance, from afar. We sit at their table with them and hear their conversation (though the novel form also enables us to hop back and forth from one mind to another to witness their unspoken thoughts); we observe them from other places in the cafe such as the large table with the troupe of women who recognize Ruby and Jan and invite them to join their table. We zoom toward and away from their table along with Campbell, who is alternately watching and waiting on them, attracted by Jan (whom he eventually marries). And we glimpse them from afar—"two good-looking women eating salad out of one plate with their fingers and talking, enjoying themselves" (125)—as Julius Meadows passes by outside the cafe.

The bus scene of chapter three is also highly visual and filmlike with its motley groups of passengers: the Sisters of the Grain in their "troublemaking" tee shirts, the drunken conventioneers in their spangled hats, the other group of whiteys—severe, righteous, Bible-toting Jesus lovers who looked "just like the ones in the lynch mob pictures," the jazz musicians whose unscheduled stop was putting the ride behind schedule, a pair of fat-woman garden-variety bus riders, and one "retarded" farmboy with a basket of snakes. The actions and interactions, plans, jibes, insults, threats of altercation, and offers of help
between and among the groups and driver all halt suddenly in one of Hull's "frozen moments"; the driver's announcement, "Claybourne in five minutes," silences everyone, and sets off an inventory of "might have been" that conjoins most of the novel's characters and their points in space and time, on the bus, in Claybourne, those who have appeared and those who will appear later in the narration--all points strung on that moment of announcement at 3:00, a moment that unfreezes four pages later with the appearance and acknowledgment of a flock of birds, "just" birds (for some), or a "fabulous apparition flying back from the concealed world in the far side of the mind." The narrator here--in a rare moment of coming forward--tries to find language to express that which is beyond language:

No one remarked on any of this or on any of the other remarkable things each sensed but had no habit of language for, though felt often and deeply, privately. That moment of correspondence--phenomena, noumena--when the glimpse of the life script is called dream, deja vu, clairvoyance, intuition, hysteria, hunger, or called nothing at all. (89)

The bus ride chapter is told primarily through the consciousness of the driver Fred Holt: readers travel with Fred Holt, observing the passengers from the driver's seat, thinking his thoughts, feeling his indigestion from the chili lunch and his disappointment from a loveless marriage, remembering past events with him, experiencing his imagined events. Later in the novel, however, when he finds his way into the Infirmary and, by mistake, into the healing session, the camera angle has shifted; now we see him from the outside, at the periphery of the room (and the scene) in third person; he is no longer the focalizing figure as in the bus scene, but a minor, bit-part character momentarily interrupting the main action.
Another technique by which Bambara expresses time in order to capture the accordion-like nature of our perception of its duration is the long drawing out of an action, the packing of memory, dream, contemplation in between the action's inception and completion. Obie, the focalizer in chapter four, spends most of the chapter sitting in the locker room, holding a shoe in his hand and "no mind to lift his foot" (90). He is cogitating the "on-the-sly gathering [that] was afoot" and the Spring Festival "designed as a holding action" (emphasis added), events related to the "splits widening" in both his management of the Academy and his marriage with Velma; indeed there is an internal split--"Obie felt the image of himself coming apart" (92). In mid-chapter, Obie drops his shoe, a device like Uncle Toby's pipe in Tristram Shandy that reminds the reader that actual narrative time has barely progressed; a few pages later, he "works his foot into the shoe," and still later lingers over the laces, pulling them too tight, an action matching his too tight thoughts about his current constricting relationship with Velma. When he hears, and does not answer, someone calling for him from above, he listens to "the footfalls overhead" and expects "other steps to sound" as a sign of a clandestine meeting, imagining that "when the time came for the [Festival] procession, he'd discover a palace coup had been effected while he'd sat in the basement with one shoe on" (95). Before the chapter ends, Obie manages to get on both shoes, roll down both socks, and move to the window to breathe and stretch, and look out. Yet he himself recognizes, and explains to us, that what has principally happened in this chapter while he puts on a pair of shoes and moves from locker bench to locker room window is:
selective memory, a chump way to excuse the self from the chaos of the moment, longing for a past or for a future as if there were no continuum, . . . as if time pieces ticked away in separate lockers he could open, close, lock up, climb into or fall out of. . . . Obie tossed the daybook into the locker and kicked it closed. (98)

In a similar way, though spaced across several chapters throughout the novel, people refer to their watches, and their action pinpoints the slow progression of narrative time. It is noteworthy that concommittant with the narrative's extreme flex-stretching of time and place, The Salt Eaters actually takes place during one "long hour"—that is, in less than two—and within one set of contiguous locations. The first watch-glance, in the first chapter, sets a base timeline as the point of view pans back from the two figures on the stools, past the prayer circle to the assembled Infirmary staff and the visiting interns, nurses and technicians ranged around the room. Some of the staff worry about Minnie Ransom "taking so long a time to get started" and about Doc Serge arranging such a "slapdash and sloppy" itinerary for the visitors; the visitors, shifting from foot to foot, are also worried:

There'd never be enough time to get through the day's itinerary. And the bus wasn't going to wait. The driver had made that quite plain. He would be pulling in at 3:08 from his regular run . . . then pulling out sharply with the charter bus at 5:30. . . . [T]he Infirmary hosts did not seem to be alert to the demands of time.

. . . [L]ess than fifteen minutes ago [the staff had been betting] . . . that the healing session would take no more than five or ten minutes. And here it was already going on 3:00 with what could hardly be called an auspious beginning. (9-10)

Here the clock time is pinpointed for the reader and certain attitudes toward time illustrated: schedule is king, time is a commodity to be utilized, not wasted, and alternative attitudes toward time are suspect, probably immoral. As the
novel progresses, the reader observes that these notions about time are psychologically constricting and sterile, unproductive and inaccurate. Several pages later, the lesson about time begins. Minnie Ransom's first movement toward Velma causes a flurry of watch checking:

[Her] hands went out at last, and the visitors, noting the way several people around them checked their watches, concluded that this was either the official beginning of the healing or the end, it was hard to tell. (16)

But Velma is not yet receptive, and Minnie settles back saying--to the consternation of many watching--"I can wait," and telling Velma "You gonna be all right . . . after while. It's all a matter of time. The law of time" (41). One visitor taps his own watch impatiently and mutters, "Far fucking out. So whadda we supposed to do, stand here for this comedy?" until he is roundly shushed by one of the old timers (17). Nearly one hundred pages later, a third watch check occurs as accompaniment to Minnie's singsonging question to Velma, "Can you afford to be whole?" Minnie has persisted in "ignoring the sighs of impatience that issued from the visiting doctors, nurses and technicians," and at her inquiry:

Several checked their watches, amazed that only five minutes of silence had ensued. It had seemed so much longer, that quiet moment broken by one of their members reciting the Hippocratic oath then exiting. Five minutes or not, there was still the lecture . . . [etcetera, etcetera]. (106)

The reader, too, is likely to be amazed that only five minutes of narrative time have elapsed.

The deep irony in this scene is that the visitors have trooped to the Infirmary precisely to learn about "the fusion of Western medicine and the traditional arts, about the drug rehab acupuncture clinic, about this healing business, and about the controversial liaison with agencies such as the Academy of the 7 Arts"; fortuitously, the group
has been given the remarkable chance to witness fusion in action. But they haven't the wit to perceive it, and instead they continue to shift their feet and worry about time, anxious to leave the healing to get on to the scheduled slide-lecture and question session about the history and aims of the Infirmary—a session which "was bound to take more than an hour." So they miss a demonstration of "the real thing" in their rush to get to its description. These characters are not yet ready to learn a new way, but presumably readers, aware of the irony, gain here some understanding that prepares them for the lesson about time and our "life script" that Velma first apprehends in the marsh:

It occurred to her that if [the colonies of bugs] slowed down, they would look at a glance, like what they were—bugs. And if they speeded up, they'd be not visible bugs looking like lichen, but the idea of bugs resonating in her brain. Time. Time not speeding up but opening up to take her inside. (171)

Transitions

Another characteristic of the narration of The Salt Eaters, and one that demands collaboration from the reader, is the absence of explicit transitions to signal shifts in time or space, whether by direct statement, transitional phrase, or typographical breaks. Section breaks occur, but they are not consistent with shifts in point of view, and even paragraph indentation does not provide a reliable signal for shift or progression. While these features account for some of the difficulty of the text, readers are able nonetheless to keep their bearings by way of scene-identifying details or objects. The first chapter, for example, ends with a synchronized chorus of three growls from Velma, one from each of three time/place sequences braiding this part of the narration; Velma is growling out
of the pain suffered during a civil rights march, out of the anger and resentment caused by Obie's betrayal, and out of the formidable weight of commitment demanded of her by Minnie Ransom. From her stool, Velma telepathically views her many selves: her self in the kitchen searching for the ultimate end, analogous somehow to "gathering" in the forest with M'Dear Sophie; her earlier coming-unhinged self in a restaurant booth eating and sparring with James Lee/Obie; her political self in a meeting at the Patterson Professional Building angling for control of the political agenda; and her exhausted sixties self on a civil rights march punishing her feet and taxing her energies and idealism. The scenes of these various selves shift and alternate without warning or transition, sometimes in rapid succession until braided together by the growlings at the end of the chapter.

In the braid, Velma keeps "losing the thread of her story" as when James Lee "was interrupting her story, breaking right in" (21), but readers can follow the threads by means of the repetition of characteristic details that both link the scenes by association and identify the place where we are pausing. For example, Velma mentions a pair of red silk Chinese pajamas at the restaurant as she tries to recount the march to Obie, and the pajamas subsequently establish our attendance at the scene of the march. The march is also signalled by references to Velma's painfully swollen feet and her exhausted, nail-hanging near-grasp of a hotel counter. In a similar way, the cowrie shells bracelet that Velma buys for her sister Palma during the march leaps from the march scene into the Patterson Building on Palma's wrist and thereafter helps to orient the reader to the scene of the political meeting. Meanwhile, the restaurant booth is signalled (and Velma's comic exasperation is sounded) by the shard of spinach that has snagged in Obie's teeth.
In the absence of more conventional methods, transition from scene to scene is frequently effected by music. Chapter seven, for example, opens in the Academy's massage room where Obie's knotted muscles are being tended by Ahiro, the "effusive Korean from Arkansas [who] owned every album his homeboy, Pharaoh Saunders, ever cut." The scene ends with Ahiro opening the window for Obie to "[b]reathe deep. Too bad the air's so bad in this town. But at least there's the music" (166). In this case, there is a section break, and the next section begins with the "raga reggae bumpidity bing zing" from the open windows of the dance studio in the Regal Theater, across the way from the Academy. After a visit to the dance class and a taste of its music from "drum, oud, finger cymbals, chekere and the pan," we move, this time without a break, from the Pan Man playing his oil drum "like a man possessed" to the Infirmary as if wafted there by the music: "The music drifted out over the trees toward the Infirmary, maqaam now blending with the bebop of Minnie Ransom's tapes."

As the paragraph continues, the finite verb is overwhelmed by participles in motion, and the musical mode begins to absorb the grammatical: "The music pressing against the shawl draped round Velma, pressing through it against her skin, and Velma trying to break free of her skin to flow with it, trying to lift, to sing with it" (168). Velma escapes the stool by lifting up to the roof, trying to sing, using the "would" of possibility and intention: "She would sing. Minnie would spin and she would sing and it would be silk," but, like her next escape to the marshes, it is premature, a false start. The Pan Man's dance music imparting meaning and wisdom "in this moment in time in human history" blends next into the incantatory rendering of the scene at the marsh:

She waited. And it was no different from the waiting most people she knew did, waiting for a word
from within, from above, from world events, from a shift in the power configurations of the globe, waiting for a new pattern to assemble and reveal itself, or a new word to be uttered from the rally podium, from a pamphlet picked up at the neighborhood bookstore. A breakthrough, a sign. Waiting. Ready. She waited as though for battle. Or for a lover. Or for some steamy creature to arise dripping and unbelievable from the marshes. She waited for panic.


Here the representation of Velma's thinking and experience in the marsh—"the site of metamorphosis" where transformation could but does not yet take place—is language changing into music. The rhythms of the elongated lines alternating with the broken, hammering lines of single words, and the repetitions of word and sound shed the verbal to reach toward musical form. But the moment is too soon, and Velma can find "no words," "no music" of her own. This section ends with Velma drawing the shawl more tightly around her shoulders (the shawl a detail that signals a return to the Infirmary music room) "and [sinking] deeply into the music" (172).

After another break, the next section begins: "The dumm tete tete tak tat diir tik piercing the wall between the dance studio and the one skinny roominghouse left on the Hill, jammed between the Regal and the Patterson Professional Building" (172). The sentence does without a finite verb to become an absolute construction, the participles breaking out of delineated time as the music breaks through walls. "Duummmm dah dah dum tete tete dii irrr." To the beat of the music, Campbell springs out of sleep, (checks his watch), springs and sings in the shower, sings and "Gene Kelly-s" down the steps to get on with his day, to end the chapter. Thus does music give shape to the chapter, making thematic, geographic, and grammatical connections, and thus does Bambara beguile and delight readers, perhaps to initiate their changing at the same time.
More Music Matters

Music is, in fact, a major presence throughout *The Salt Eaters*, and it works in a myriad of ways to instruct and delight, and to help show the reader "a new way to be in the world." Bambara uses music, like film, to augment her expressive capacity. Music permeates the novel's story, its texture, and its language, helping to determine both form and meaning. It provides setting and flavor for the scenes, inspiration, healing, and meaning for the characters. All sorts of music sound in the text (at times it's a rather loud book) that emerge from African American culture--blues, bebop, reggae, jazz. Musicians populate the novel. There are jazz musicians traveling on the bus to Claybourne to re-open the Regal Theater, some "ersatz" musicians playing all-purpose "latin" background tunes at the cafe, the Pan Man's group creating "wisdom and meaning" at the dance class, and bands for the festival competing with the apocalyptic thunder at the culmination of the novel. Dexter Gordon sings from the cafe jukebox, and blues and bebop emanate from Minnie's stereo.

Music also carries memory into the text: a rock concert, American musical comedy's "Singing in the Rain", and Nat King Cole's "golden oldie," "Nature Boy." At still another level of reality, Jan imagines the band of whistles and gourd rattles, drums and reed flutes able to entice the elusive "saving" spirits to gather and give welcome: "And found, [the saints, loa, dinns, devas] would open up and welcome one in . . . in time to wrench time from its track so another script could play itself out" (247).

Musicians and songs provide solace and direction for characters: Sun Ra for Jan, Ray Baretta for Iris, Pharoah Saunders for Obie, Dizzy, Coltrane, and Y'Bird for Velma. The Seven Sisters are an activist performing group, with Velma herself occasionally doing a skillful piano with them.
Music in motion is also thematic: the exotic dancing of Geula Khufu and her variously synchronized students, the hoofing of Campbell, the romantic dancing of M'Dear and Daddy Dolphy (contrasting with the "not dancing" of Velma and Obie). During the healing process, Minnie recognizes that Velma has to "dance her dance" and gives her space/time to find her own rhythm.

Music both signals health and aids in healing. Music--like wholeness--is returning to the community; Fred Holt thinks it great that there will be "live music again at the Regal after all these years" where "for a long time it had been dark" (157). At the beginning of her session with Minnie, Velma "still could not concentrate on the music" (220). But Minnie's tapes and the "long meter" humming of the prayer group both soothe and inspire Velma, prepare her to listen, force her to confront herself. Charlie Parker's "Now Is the Time" on Minnie's tape finally penetrates her hearing, "coaxing from her something muscular and daring," reminding her of her ability "to listen to linears and verticals at the same time, new time, rhythm bam" (263). Music urges her to flight, to dancing ("She could dance right off the stool, right off the edge of the world." [265]), and the music points Velma to her new song.

Finally, music enriches the novel's language. As the several quoted examples show, Bambara incorporates the very sounds of music in her prose, reproducing rhythms and tones, imitating instruments, devising an alternate, onomatopoetic language to tell the story. Since her pitch and timing are true, Bambara's language sounds music as it tells story.

Eleanor Traylor describes The Salt Eaters as "a modern myth of creation told in the jazz mode" (Evans 59), thus highlighting the organic connection between music and meaning in the novel, between form and message in which music carries meaning to the reader and is meaning that can be comprehended and assimilated at an emotional level first,
at a metaphysical level after. Traylor comments on the mode and effect of the novel's musical "grammar": "It is not a declaration; rather it is an interrogation. It is not indicative in mood; rather it is subjunctive in mood. . . . The Salt Eaters is a rite of transformation quite like a jam session" (Evans 69). For the reader, as for the characters, music is a way toward healing and transformation.

Fiction Techniques

Bambara manipulates conventional techniques of fiction to serve her social and philosophical purposes--showing her readers a new way of thinking and being in the world--and to enlist readers' active participation in her project. Conventional exposition is virtually missing from the narration of Salt, and readers must work to follow the narrative line. The narrator does not typically, on her own, fill in context or give description. Notable exceptions are two passages that Bambara specifically singles out as not originating "in some particular character's terms": namely, the rehearsal of the history of the Infirmary, and the projection of the future of Claybourne during the storm. In an earlier draft, Bambara reports, the tree told the history, the rain told the future, but that, she thought, "got to be a bit much" (Tate 32-33), and she added those (exceptional) bits of exposition. Nor does the narrator take it upon herself to explain the references made by characters, including references to characters and events that have not yet appeared in the narration; this is a feature of the novel's difficulty for the reader who must piece together all the scraps of information culled randomly from the various characters' thoughts, memories, and conversations. The narrator does not guide the reader nor make things easy, but
remains indeed a conduit, respecting both the integrity of the many characters, and the agency of the receiving reader --a way by which Bambara is assured of the reader's collaborative work.

Both characterization and progression reflect the narrative's multiple planes of reality. Gloria T. Hull notes that the list of characters includes people who, in her words, appear onstage in propria persona, or are offstage fragments of memory, or are quietly dead, or are roaming spirits. Hull concludes: "In many ways, these distinctions are false and immaterial for everyone we meet takes up essential space, and there is no meaningful difference between their various states of corporeality/being/presence" (Pryse 219). These various kinds of characters act and interact as if on the same plane, easily, without surprise on their part or the narrator's. In like manner, events of varying kinds of reality take place within or without time, ranged along one seamless continuum and stretching the concepts of time, chronology, synchrony, and timelessness. Again Hull comments: "Bambara is attempting to convey that everything happening is real, occurring merely on different reality planes (some of which we have been taught to discount as immaterial). The characters slip easily in and out among these levels while Bambara solidly captures it all" (Pryse 221). Like Campbell's "flash in the brain pan," the narrative demonstrates that "Everything is everything."

"Everything is everything" must apply to "everybody," and all of Salt's readers must be heir to the rewards and messages of the novel. Indeed, Bambara underscores the importance for readers (of "all cultural communities") to recognize the viability of alternative realities when she advises students that:

The wealth of this country, I would argue . . . is its peoples. That's plural. The presence of cultural
communities from all over the world--[gives us] a legacy that can teach us that logic coexists with intuition, rationality with magic, the material and the spiritual, analysis and synthesis or holism, etc. (Frye letter)

This valorization of the irrational, the instinctual, the otherworldly as a necessary counterpart to the Euroamerican categories of the rational and the pragmatic is a fundamental contribution from African America to general American health and well-being. Velma's experience provides a case history for this understanding. Velma's problem begins with her misguided attempt to rely solely upon logic, to withdraw "to a safe place where husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe." This strategy leads her into the oven: "Everything was off, out of whack, the relentless logic she'd lived by sprung" (5).

And so, as remedy (for Velma, for the reader), the novel teems with presences and figures, happenings, dreams, and talents that fall outside of rational categories: Old Wife (recently passed), ghosts, spirits, loa, haints, obeah, Mud Mothers, and Cleotus the Hermit have as much say and credibility in the text as its doctors, nurses, politicians, engineers, reporters, spies, barmen, factory workers, and so on. Diverse categories of actions command an equal assignment of reality--and also of significance and value. For example: interactions between human and spirit (Minnie joshing with Old Wife, Dr. Meadows trudging through the loa as he mutters the Hippocratic Oath, Velma covering up the Mudmothers in the mirror); or scenes of the imagination (Minnie's front porch tea-sipping tryst with attractive Dr. Meadows, Fred Holt's plunge with bus and passengers into the swamp); or telepathetic activity (Palma's knowledge of Velma's distress when her own menses halt, Velma's slam into the tree outside the infirmary window, Velma's memory of a previous life and her clitorectomy) are all actions with as much reality as Velma's civil rights marching, or Obie's
massage, or Fred Holt's safe arrival at Clayborne. The healing of Velma's "thick brown wrists no longer banded by narrow red and black bracelets of flaking flesh" (111) is no less real than their slashing; moreover, for Nadeen (as for us) the healing was "showing her another way to be in the world" (104). In my own reading, then, the power of the message and the depiction of a world of temporal, spatial, and ontological variety, of a multiplicity of possibilities and realities, command more weight and space and importance and effect than the ridicule/erasure of white women.

Language and Grammar

Bambara's exploration of film and music as alternate means of expression is matched by her experimentation with words and syntax, modes and voice to "explore the limits of language." She shapes and stretches language to match the many-faceted, multi-leveled experience she wants to express, trying to overcome the limitations she finds in the English language. As she complains in her letter to students:

... we are not encouraged and equipped to state the way we live. English is a mercantile language. It was devised for commerce in material things. To discuss states of consciousness, we either have to resort to Hindi, Gurdu, or some other more accommodating language, or risk sounding certifiable. (Frye letter)

In an interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara again vents her frustration at the inadequacies of language:

What is noticeable to me about my current writing is the stretch out toward the future. I'm not interested in reworking memories and playing with flashbacks. I'm trying to press the English language, particularly verb tenses and modes, to accommodate flash-forwards and potential happenings. I get more and more impatient, though, with verbal language, print conventions, literary protocol and the like; I'm much more interested in filmmaking. (Tate 25)
And yet, in spite of her impatience with English, one of Bambara's great strengths is her ear for language—her verbal wit, her skill at dialogue, her rendering of the black voice. Indeed, Bambara's description of Black English captures her use of language in *Salt*. In reviewing J. L. Dillard's *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*, Bambara commends the scholar for recognizing Black English as a "real" language, as—in her definition—"a network of cultural loyalties, group outlooks, verbal games, perceptual modes, lore, logic, structure, grammar, music" (Review, 3). It is a definition made manifest in her fiction.

Bambara also lauds Dillard for acknowledging "the degree of energy that has to be squandered continually code-switching . . . to meet the needs of the kinesthetically impoverished system of the noncolored instructor" (3). Yet Bambara herself is a master at switching codes as is evident in her review:

> Many academic problems could be traced to the understandable reluctance on the part of students of color to abandon the home tongue in response to teachers' resistance to abandon the school dialect. After all, when you jumpin up and down tellin Willy Johnson he speak weird, you talking bout that boy's mama. (3)

In one paragraph Bambara abruptly yet facilely shifts gears from academic, rational, grammatically standard, and colorless Newyorktimesese to a black idiom in which we can hear the tone change, feel the humor added, see folks in action, and sense the challenge of the dozens. Her short stories like "The Lesson" and "Gorilla, My Love" shimmer with this idiom, and her novel is filled with comic dialogue and kinesthetically rich language that is a treat to the senses as well as the imagination. Bambara modulates her voice with mastery, able to switch and combine a wide variety of tones and levels. She can be witty, colloquial,
"low down and nasty," rhetorical, mystical, musical, poetic. In Gloria Hull's judgment:

No one writing today can beat her at capturing the black voice--Cora "reading" Anna's whist playing (108-109); Ruby loud-talking the "blood" in the Blues Brothers T-shirt (200-210); the "Black-say" of "How's your hammer hanging?"; the marvelous encomium to black musicians (265) or Minnie "going off" on the wasteful bickering of the younger generation (46). (Pryse 223)

Furthermore, noting that "Bambara is more rhetorical than lyrical," Hull nonetheless cites a lyrically poetic passage, namely: "They send a child to fetch Velma from her swoon and fetch a strong rope to bind the wind, to circle the world while they swell the sea with song. She is the child they sent. She is the song" (273, qtd. in Pryse 223-24).

In her review of The Salt Eaters, Anne Tyler also focuses on the combined folk/poetic quality of her language:

What pulls us along is the language of [her] characters, which is startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note. Everything these people say, you feel, ordinary, real-life people are saying right now on any street corner. It's only that the rest of us didn't realize it was sheer poetry they were speaking. (qtd. in Contemporary Literary Criticism 19: 33)

Bambara's poetic voice shares place with her comic. She combines a wry, alert sense of people's psychology with verbal wit and impeccable timing to produce a wonderfully humorous novel. Though she has said that Salt is "not a comic book" (that is, not a cartoon), it is indeed a comic book. Charles Johnson describes her as "a truly comic writer, . . . a relentlessly funny 'rapper'--second to none," a stand-up comic who never "dies" on stage:

Her strength is snappy, hip dialogue and an ever-crackling narrative style that absorbs all forms of specialized diction. When need be, she is colloquial. Yet also scientific, folksy, or spiritual. Whatever's necessary to make her sentences boil and bubble over with a distinctive black woman's brand of humor and exuberance. (103-04)
Sound, music, movement, memory converge on the moment of healing in the novel's final chapter: the spooky singing of the prayer circle, the "sassy twenties" song on tape, "Wiiiiild women doan worreeee, wild women doan have no bluuuuuzzzzzz" that merges into Y'Bird's insistent sax, a siren-sounding message more shrill than Saturn's signal, Minnie searching for the rainbow, the loa messing with the electricity, the room shaking, all culminating in a thunderbolt ("the kind that knocked Saul off his steed and turned him into Paul"), a thunderbolt that coincides with, announces, causes or is caused by "the moment [Velma] started back toward life" (278). Language, too, rises to the occasion. Bambara enlists grammatical structure in the task of expressing new meaning, and the verbal constructions of the sections preceding and succeeding this moment point to the nature of the experience.

Leading to the critical turning point when Velma chooses life is a section dotted with a series of "might-have-beens," each introducing a paragraph of surmising, portraying possible reality--possible death: "She might have died, . . . have fried, . . . have bled to death, . . . have been killed" (271-76). Included in this section is an apocalyptic might-have-been depiction of a world with gas lines and enraged drivers, streets running amok, people (all save those who are white, male, and wealthy) at war and dying, bodies piled high and stuck at national borders, poisoned air, contaminated soil, beleaguered earth; a world quarantined in space by the dictates of a horrified universe (273-74). In the first chapter, appropriate to the novel's circular structure (and reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's "the end is in the beginning"), some "might-have-beens" presage this passage. As the healing session begins, Velma is inclined to resist Minnie but then thinks she might as well cooperate:
Rumor was these sessions never lasted more than ten or fifteen minutes anyway. It wouldn't kill her to go along with the thing. . . . She almost laughed. She might have died. I might have died. It was an incredible thought now. (7; original emphasis)

This modal construction of hypothetical possibility outlines the dire results of refusing responsibility and of holding on to the negative cocoon that Velma must shed to be well. As she approaches being healed, Velma wants to straighten up, away from Minnie, to "quit being some 'funnytime sandwich,'" and she begins to amass the bits of experience and advice she has already learned from Mamma Mae, 'Dear Sophie, the marshes, and the sisters of the grain. Grammar signals her move toward health for this passage concludes with a modal shift from "might" to "would": "She would run to the park and hunt for self. Would be wild. Would look" (267). But before she can run and hunt, or look for "a way of being," she must first clear away the detritus, divest herself of past habits--that is, like the passengers on Fred Holt's bus (whose experience is synchronized with Velma's), she must work through the might-have-been. Velma says it aloud--"I might have died" (267)--and thereby initiates the penultimate step toward health, away from death---the facing and rejecting of the might-have been.

The sounding of the thunderbolt is the climactic point, and "Velma would remember it as the moment she started back toward life . . . [a]nd years hence she would laugh remembering she'd thought that was an ordeal" (278). Her remembering leads to the final section of the novel which includes an inventory of the characters and their conversions, of where they were at "the-moment-when," and where they "would be" in six years' time (that is, in 1984). This final section is governed by "would," by a modal construction that indicates a contingent future. For indeed, health and conversion depend upon, will take place
if and only if the individual decides, makes a commitment, accepts responsibility. And the future of the planet depends upon these individual decisions and commitments.

For example: Fred Holt would remember that something miraculous had happened to him, that he had seen his dead friend Porter, that afterwards he started a new life, began humanitarian work, was reunited with his son. Campbell in the years ahead, an expert on "blue-ribbon panels," would say in a kind of "divinely egocentric association" (245) that something more than mere storm had happened, that the lightning and his enlightenment about everything being connected had converged, were themselves connected. Jan would remember that the second flash of lightning "marked her beginning" (248), and she would go into the street to trade stories with people, into the woods to trade with the old time spirits (247). Dr. Julius Meadows would describe his conversion in the Tip In Tavern, his new connections to others across class lines, his new understanding of medicine's connection to healing, his dedication to the public. And Obie, drawn magically to the Infirmary and Velma, falling on the way, unable to get up and (yet, so) getting up, would remember sharply the details of the scene enroute including the (third) eye poised, clarifying him, would say in the days ahead that silence is not the way, neither is glibness, and would recall saluting the future, "gold splashing in his eyes" (292).

For all of the limitations of verbal language that Bambara fusses about, she tends carefully to its quality and reach, making it sense-ably rich, stretching out its form and grammar. In the process, she endows language with the power to delight her readers and to show us "a new way to be in the world."

In sum, my discussion of the narrative method of The Salt Eaters tries to show that the novel's structure parallels its meaning, and that form, language, content, and
aim are intertwined each and all with what Toni Cade Bambara calls her "core culture." Her experimentation with grammatical structure and narrative form, the variety of language levels and modes, the employment of cinematic and musical idiom, her use of humor and verbal wit, the range of characters and events across multiple planes of reality, and her narrator as medium are inextricable from the story's meaning as well as from its telling, and all emerge from an African American sensibility. *The Salt Eaters* reports on and recreates African American experience; it draws on cultural resources to express the community's joys and miseries, to report on its political experience in the twentieth-century American republic, and to celebrate its ancestral and spiritual heritage. The novel is her means to tell the unique-representative, particular-universal stories of the Family and pass them on to the community.

And to eavesdroppers as well. While Bambara's statements exclude outsiders—at least white readers—from her authorial audience and her novel excludes a sympathetic or complex representation of white characters from the text, an actual white reader cannot be completely (nor logically) banished: race is not the only issue, the form (as discussed above) attracts readers of all races, and the message expressly includes "all" and "every." Perhaps, parallel to the novel's inception when the Portuguese-speaking voice gave directions to the author about the story she should be telling, the narrator-as-medium simply overrides the author's expressed sentiments about who and who does not constitute her "real" audience. On a practical level, and on the author's initiative, the novel has been made accessible to any reader of English. While the text is directed specifically to Bambara's African American community and requires a knowledge about African American history and culture in order to appreciate it fully, and
while those who have themselves experienced that history and culture have an authority in their engagement with the text denied to those who have not, non-African Americans who learn about that history and culture can read The Salt Eaters with understanding and appreciation. On a political-definitional level, and despite frictions, cacophonies, mixed miseries, and a history that positions blacks and whites in opposition, "African American" includes "American"--means American. The novel may ignore, denigrate, or ridicule white America and white Americans, but cannot exclude it or them outright. And, as outlined in the discussion of Bambara's narrative strategies, the text offers attractions and satisfactions to readers and eavesdroppers from outside the community.
In *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Cade Bambara is—in addition to all the other things I "think she is doing"—signifying on Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*. She is engaging in the complex African American practice of intertextual reference and revision whereby one (text, speaker, writer) parodies, undermines, realigns, insults, and/or honors another. Charles Johnson calls *Invisible Man* "something of the modern Ur-text for black fiction" (15), suggesting the power of its presence for subsequent novelists and their need to take Ellison's novel into account. Critics indeed connect the two works: Gloria Hull has paired the two novels according to their literary/political impact—"[*The Salt Eaters* accomplishes even better for the 1980s what *Invisible Man* [did] for the 1950s*" (Pryse 216); and Eleanor Traylor notes that "*The Salt Eaters* gestures to [other fabulous first novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*]" (Evans 69). In a recent essay, "He Speaks for Whom?: Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*," Ann Folwell Stanford discusses the ways in which Bambara revises *Invisible Man* with regard to the presence and treatment of women. In her own reference to Ellison, Bambara distinguishes between his novel and his essays, describing the relationship between author and novel as "dissonant":

I know of no other way to put it, dissonant. His lectures, remarks, interviews—most especially during the 60's—are not nearly so culturally respectful, insightful, lucid, and Afro-centric as the book itself.
Debates as to why... often resulted in sharp rights to the jaw, as I recall. Perhaps timing and intergenerational differences in regards to the 'art novel' vs. 'the protest novel'--a totally bogus distinction, I think--account for the fact that the general feeling among African American readers was to go for the text and to ignore the writer's version of what he wrote. (Frye letter)

Since Ellison celebrates the heterogenous American audience--characterized by the little man at Chehaw Station--in his essays, Bambara's dismissal of them is further evidence of her dismissal of white readers, while her employment of an African American practice further distinguishes between outsider readers positioned as spectators and insider practitioners. Bambara "goes for the text" by signifying on it in her own text: repeating certain themes, with variations; creating parallel characters who develop in different ways and reach alternative conclusions; borrowing some of its images and techniques and twisting and complicating them for new effect or to a different purpose.

The most explicit signifying on Invisible Man is performed by Bambara's character Porter on the central trope of Ellison's text--invisibility. It is entirely appropriate and surely deliberate that Porter never actually appears in the narrative--he has been killed by a woman wielding a pair of knitting needles before the novel begins--but he enters by way of Fred Holt's memory, and, as we have noted, spirits and the dead have as much presence in Bambara's text as living characters. Like Invisible Man's grandfather, Porter's last words exert a significant impact on text and character. Fred remembers, "That was what Porter had been beating his gums about those last days, being invisible" (158). As Porter had posed it:

They call the Black man The Invisible Man. And that becomes a double joke and then a double cross then a triple funny all around. Our natures are unknowable, unseeable to them. They haven't got the eyes for us.
Course, when we look at us with their eyes, we disappear, ya know? (158-59)

But Porter goes beyond Invisible Man. For one thing, he disallows "their" authority; unlike Invisible Man's frequent doubts that he really exists (IM 4), Porter refuses to adopt "their" view, refuses to be "disappeared." Further, Porter has learned a new way to look at invisibility through an encounter with the mysterious community figure, The Hermit, called Cleotus. As he explains to Fred, invisibility is "not just looking different, Fred, but being different. Your true nature invisible because you're in some incongruous getup or in some incongruous place or the looker's got incongruous eyes. Ya know?" (159). From The Hermit to Fred (and the reader), Porter relays the notion of invisibility as distinctiveness, protection, control, and he treats incongruity as relative, not essential, and assigns the problem--if it's a problem--to the other guy who's looking. Porter's understanding is not yet complete, for he intends to study further with the "fine old dude." When Fred asks him how long it takes to learn to be invisible, Porter's answer--and his last words--are, "Don't know."

Much in the manner that Invisible Man gnaws over the dying words of his grandfather, Fred tries to figure out the meaning of Porter's answer:

[Fred] still didn't know whether it meant nobody knows, or the wise man wouldn't say, or he, Fred, could never know, or that Porter didn't need to know cause the question was totally beside the point, ignorant. (160)

Although Fred is initially jealous of Porter's new quest and dismissive of the "gabby" town character--who'd irritatingly "changed status overnight from nut to wise man"---when the moment of Velma's healing approaches (in which he is caught up), Fred finds himself thinking "He'd like a chance to prowl around invisible. . . . Be invisible and free to search" (158), and he concedes that "Well, maybe he'd go see
The Hermit. Maybe the man had some answers. Fred was pretty sure he had some questions" (160). Porter had discovered a wise fool; he had listened and changed. Now Fred in turn is listening and will, we know, be transformed. He too will change his understanding of invisibility and of the black man's possibilities and will trade in his dead-end, dyspeptic job for something more rewarding, for humanitarian work. Ellison's Invisible Man is defeated by his invisibility; enraged and crazed by society's imposition of invisibility, he can only use it for revenge, as a cloak to hide his preying on society. By contrast, Fred will recognize the possibilities of invisibility and the maneuverability within incongruity, and he will act in a way to benefit others and ameliorate society.

The white reader, also, is positioned differently in the two texts by the matter of invisibility. Invisible Man rails against the condition imposed upon him by white society although he uses it as a cover to prey upon whites; as narrator, he enlists invisibility in his elusive, devious tricksterism to counter his hostile white (characterized) audience. However, the protagonist is, I believe, finally defeated by his own construction of and response to invisibility.³ In either case, the actual white reader can escape from the tricksterism and the nasty characterization into the authorial audience. In Salt, on the other hand, invisibility is an enhancement, an empowerment. Wise Cleotus enables his listeners to reposition themselves in the "double joke" and the "double cross," to turn them back against the oppressor. White readers in this instance have no place to escape; they are silenced in the text and made subject to (or butt of) the joke and the double cross.

Another character who signifies on Invisible Man is Julius Meadows. Like the "ginger-colored" Invisible Man, Meadows is a "blood," a "yaller nigger in costly clothes
with an Omega watch" (189-90). Again like Invisible Man, Meadows is alienated from other folk in the black community because of his middle-class status and superior attitudes. A country boy who prefers the woods, Meadows nonetheless finds himself strolling through one of Claybourne's poor neighborhoods. He reveals his middle-class repugnance for the poor as he recalls a supermarket scene of welfare men whining and begging for money from the shopping welfare mamas. Meadows's imagined response to them links him to Ellison's protagonist: "He [Meadows] wanted to turn and . . . [b]end the boymen into the stacks of frozen food and beat them with a rock cornish hen or a ten-pound carton of solid hard chitterlings" (184). Invisible Man entertains a similar fantasy of beating Dr. Bledsoe with a string of chitterlings. There are, however, significant differences between the two scenes. Meadows's chitterlings are packaged, frozen, and hard (barely distinguishable from the cornish hen)—that is, controlled and neat—and Meadows strikes out against someone who is less powerful because he is embarrassed by their shared racial identity. In contrast, Invisible Man's foot or two of chitterlings are "raw, uncleaned and dripping" and he uses them to embarrass someone who possesses greater power. Meadows's irritated presumption of superiority is more like the young Invisible Man's attitude in the battle royal scene, while Invisible Man's fantasy revenge against Bledsoe has the greater legitimacy since Bledsoe has in fact done him injury.

In both scenes, the chitterlings represent the characters' racial, regional, and class identification, and they function in a complicated way: on the one hand, chitterlings signal something familiar, nourishing, and communal—a connection with home; on the other, they represent something cheap, gross, and despised—a sign of inferiority. In either case, they mark the category of being black and American. An important difference between
Invisible Man and Meadows is that Invisible Man cannot reconcile his blackness with his American-ness; with the momentary exception of his yam-eating scene, he does not move beyond his fantasy analogy that being hit with chitterlings is worse than being accused of raping an old woman "of ninety-nine years, weighing ninety pounds . . . blind in one eye and lame in the hip" (IM 265). Invisible Man ends separated from his roots and his region, unable to return to the South or to the community represented by Mary's. Meadows, on the other hand, although fearful for his life, risks giving the high five to the factory workers he has actually bumped, his first step toward establishing connections with others in the black community. When Invisible Man is threatened by two white adversaries during the Harlem riot scene, he disappears down a hole into isolation. Meadows's confrontation with two threatening figures concludes differently; the factory workers, Thurston and Ml, lead him into the neighborhood bar, into fellowship, prepare him for epiphany. For the black reader, the two characters offer opposing models: Invisible Man models choices to avoid; Julius Meadows makes choices that black readers can emulate—choices that involve solidarity with the black community. Once again, the white reader is at a further remove than is a black reader from Julius's Meadows's struggle, but she can nonetheless applaud his decision to reach across class lines to face and engage with individual people. White readers will join black readers in distancing themselves from Invisible Man's situation and strategies although the affective experience for the two groups of readers will undoubtedly differ; the emotional response to the spectacle of Invisible Man in his hole by a white reader will mix in some guilt (for being among the pushers) to the pain and rage shared with black readers at his being pushed.
Another important theme from *Invisible Man* is introduced in Meadows's narrative. When Meadows inadvertently steps on a man he doesn't really see, he shows his propensity to type others: "[Meadows] had him pegged. He didn't have to look into the face. He never looked into the faces anyway... To look was not part of it... He always turned his face away" (183). Consigning those who are "other"--in this case by class--to a kind of invisibility signifies on *Invisible Man*, and the reference to face echoes the lesson on James Joyce by Invisible Man's English teacher about the obligation of "creating the uncreated features of his face"--of making oneself an individual (*IM* 354). Only briefly, at Tod Clifton's funeral, is Invisible Man capable of seeing individual faces; before that occasion he sees his audience as an undifferentiated mass; afterward he effectively isolates himself from all other individuals. In a direct contrast, Meadows reverses himself and moves toward accepting the wisdom of Minnie and Old Wife that "The face is a wondrous thing. You can go anywhere, anywhere at all with a human face" (56). The issue of "face" is raised in large part because of the denial of black individuality by whites, and again the two characters offer readers contrasting models. In this case, however, white readers are not so sharply divided from black readers. Not only does Ellison's text initiate the discussion by a reference to Joyce, a canonic mainstream text, but the celebration of the individual human face expressly rejects exclusion by group; along with blacks, white readers are invited to lament the choice of Invisible Man to remain faceless and are able, without irony, to ally themselves with the sentiments of Minnie, Old Wife, and Meadows.

Within the novel, Meadows himself is signified on by Thurston and M1 in a scene that recalls Invisible Man's exchange with Peter Wheatstraw. At first, aware of his
difference, the two brothers mistake Meadows for a honky, or a corporate spy, and advise him he is "on the wrong side of town." Defamiliarization brings insight to Meadows, who observes, "He was never more clear to himself than when Black people examined him this way, suspicious" (186). In their signifying, the two test him verbally and try out mutual connections. Their snappy "call and response" dialogue ("'Wish we could extend an invitation to grit, but the cupboard's Mother Hubbards's.' 'The larder is lean.' 'The refrig renigged.' 'The bones are picked clean'" [189]) sets up an echo of the mock funeral dirge, "they picked poor Robin clean," that Invisible Man hears and identifies with himself (IM 193). In the signifying exchange, Meadows, like Invisible Man, at first has trouble understanding Ml and Thurston; he can't quite get their names (Thirsty/Thurston, Nadir/M'Dear), and he is slow to play his part. But he does, finally, manage to pass the testing. The two factory workers show their acceptance of him by carrying the signifying a little farther, hinting at the dozens: "'You somp'n,' one says. 'Callin people out of their name. Didn't yo mama teach you nuthin? I won't embarrass you by asking you our names.'" They slap five together, and Meadows launches himself into their company, realizing that "[w]hatever happened, he wasn't stumbling aimlessly around the streets anymore, at loose ends, alone" --a description that instead fits Invisible Man.

Other pairs of characters link the two novels. Eleanor Traylor calls Doc Serge "a man of many parts (former pimp, numbers banker, preacher)--a resolved Rinehart whose sane balance of the atoms of his sensibility signifies a Salt Eater" (Evans 61). Like Rinehart, Doc Serge is chameleon and elusive; he is drenched in ambiguity--of form and of ethical authority. It is not clear, for example, whether his mysterious underground activity in the working class neighborhood is entirely defensible. Unlike Rinehart, who
never actually materializes in his novel, Doc Serge keeps company with characters that we admire--Minnie, Sophie, and Cleotus--and so mixes savoury with unsavoury activities. Although he is narcissistic and sexist, a womanizer and a manipulator, he runs the infirmary with extraordinary energy (fueled by his mantra of self-love), he is respected in the community, and he will in the future work with Dr. Meadows for good causes. Doc's paean to self-love (136-37) provides a place in the text where white readers are likely to divide from black readers. Although my interpretation of Doc's lengthy self-glorification after several readings was that it is emblematic of his fundamental ambiguity of character, my initial reaction was negative, and his behavior signalled an arrogant and egocentric individual. However, the impact of Doc's outburst is different for African American readers coming from a community where schooling in self-hatred is well-learned; for such readers, Doc Serge joins Minnie in modeling a better way to be in the world, and his self-love is illuminating and health-giving.  

Porter and Tod Clifton form another pair of characters linking the two works. Both characters come to see a truth, although partial--Porter through The Hermit, Tod Clifton through Ras the Exhorter. Both are killed prematurely, and in each case their death occasions some grappling for understanding by others. In Salt, Porter is presented as a character who gains enlightenment through his connection with Cleotus, yet Porter's sentiments cause more friction for my reading as a white woman than Clifton's; Porter excluded Fred's wife from his company--and thus prevented Fred from developing their friendship further--not because of her alleged nasty personality but because of her race. On the other hand, Clifton for me is admirable because of his willingness to recognize unpleasant truths and his courage in refusing to compromise his recognition.
While Clifton's traffic in Black Sambo dancing dolls strikes some black readers as demeaning rather than ironical, I don't believe the novel's implied author is among them.

Specific expressions in Bambara's text also signify on Invisible Man. A striking example is Ahiro's comment to Obie as he opens the window: "Too bad the air's so bad in this town. But at least there's the music" (166). Ahiro echoes almost word for word Invisible Man's comment in the epilogue about what "old Bad Air" Louis Armstrong used to say: "Open the window and let the foul air out." Leon Forrest explains this reference as meaning that you have to have the "liberating bad air, that riffs through the chamber of the good-bad horn of plenty . . . [or] you can't have the real music of life, nor the dance" (97). But Invisible Man only half believes this; his other half opts for the "good green corn" of innocence and non-involvement, of retreat from the real world with its mixture of good and bad. Ahiro doesn't necessarily make the connection between bad air and good (i.e. real) life, but Obie--in contrast to Invisible Man--emerges from the Academy's massage room, follows the music to the Infirmary where (shifting from sound to smell) he notes "the fragrance of newly turned earth, the sweet of sap, sap rising to renew, but activating the mold too as if there were no way around it" (298-90), and soon after he salutes the future in "a splash of gold." By embracing the real, the mold along with the sap, Obie is ripe for transformation.

Another comment that gestures toward Invisible Man is Cora's description of the thunderbolt as the kind "that knocked Saul off his steed and turned him into Paul" (278). Grandfather had often advised Invisible Man that, "'you start Saul, and end up Paul. When you're a youngun, you Saul, but let life whup your head a bit and you starts to trying to be Paul--though you still Sauls around on the side'" (IM 381). Conversion for Invisible Man remains
incomplete--by the end of his narrative, he has succeeded in stripping away his illusions, but has failed to put anything in their stead. The characters of The Salt Eaters, however, each experience epiphany and transformation. Invisible Man remains submerged to the end, still able to say in the Epilogue that he "now" knows that "men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health" (IM 576). In contrast, Velma ultimately rises from the stool truly healed; health for her means mending fragmentation, overcoming division, becoming whole--both within self and within community. Toward the end of their respective narratives, Velma and Invisible Man have correlative experiences—he dreams of castration, she rememories clitorectomy. The differences between the two are revealing. Whereas Invisible Man takes his surreal nightmare as a cautionary tale to hunker down self-protectively, to hold to his hole-in-hiding, Velma draws from her supra-real metempsychotic experience not simply pain but a way to get in touch with her roots, her sexuality, and her own gifts for transcending the constraints of common time and space, a way to release her energy. The white reader of Invisible Man who is separated by race from the protagonist, is enabled by the text to stay separated from his choices, and is also able to separate herself from the narrator's characterized audience of the Prologue and Epilogue. The white reader is relegated to the far side-lines of The Salt Eaters, to the outermost circle surrounding Velma and Minnie, and to silent observation even though Velma's healing is salutary to women readers. For the white woman reader, the experience is divisive (as the discussion of the intersection of race and gender in the next section will explore).

Several other points of similarity link the two novels. Ann Folwell Stanford mentions bird imagery, the role of memory and the use of dream/fantasy narrative, the jazz mode
as a form, and patterns of circles and cycles (19). I would point out an important difference in their use of circling, however; Ellison's boomerang image carries a threat and a sense of futility (the thrust of not getting anywhere) that is missing in Bambara's circular imagery. Still another link is embedded in Minnie Ransom's description of some of her "proud" patients. Minnie's advice to them applies also to Invisible Man; Minnie notes that her patients wore their crippleness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they'd been singled out for some special punishment, were special. Or as though it meant they'd paid some heavy dues and knew, then, what there was to know, and therefore had a right to certain privileges, or were exempt from certain charges, or ought to be listened to at meetings. . . . [and] were too proud and scared to get downright familiar with their bodies, minds, spirits to just sing, "Blues, how do you do? Sit down, let's work it out." (108)

Mary Rambo might have said something similar to Invisible Man, might have ended with an appropriate blues song--and, had he heard her, Invisible Man might have fared better, might have reached higher ground.

Women in Bambara and Ellison

Linking Minnie Ransom with Mary Rambo introduces a major intertextual signifying between these two novels. The principal way that The Salt Eaters revises and "corrects" Invisible Man is through its treatment of women. Women characters, women's values, and women's attitudes which are largely absent from Invisible Man are foregrounded in The Salt Eaters. Stanford writes:

Many novels written by black women since the publication of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man have (among other things) filled in gaps or given voice to the silences that have kept black women invisible. Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters is one such novel. Published in 1980, twenty-eight years after Ellison's Invisible Man, after the turbulent sixties and some gains had been made by the Civil Rights Movement, The
Salt Eaters moves beyond its own created work, engaging other texts like Invisible Man in a dialogic relationship. (16-17)

Stanford appropriately foregrounds the historical dimension because the dialogic relationship of the two novels is fueled by differences emerging from their location on either side of the decade of the sixties. The consciousness-raising of the sixties regarding issues of gender as well as race shapes the later novel and provides grist for its signifying on the earlier work.  

Consciousness of the double bind of gender and race that characterizes and makes invisible the experience of African American women, as well as the recognition that gender and race are socially constructed and inextricably intertwined with one another mark the post-sixties period and its literature. In the seventies and eighties, black women writers found and raised their voices amidst an avalanche of fiction, poetry, essays, and criticism by and about black women. Hortense J. Spillers writes about "the palpable and continuing urgency of black women writing themselves into history" (Pryse 249), and Michael Awkward refers to "[t]he remarkable recent [1989] outpouring of sophisticated, compelling literary works by Afro-American women writers." Awkward suggests that

If the early 1970s Afro-American woman reader, confronted by a literary canon overwhelmingly male in its focus and authorship, was unfamiliar with "the sound/of her own voice," she most certainly has achieved (re)birth and warm handling in recent texts by such novelists as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan. Indeed, the last decade alone has witnessed the arrival of such a remarkably sophisticated body of black female expressivity that the criticism devoted to its explication has only begun to analyze in full and illuminating ways the discursive power of Afro-American women's literature. (Inspiriting 2)
Among the titles in the bibliography for this paper is one that suggests the ways that black women have hitherto been erased: *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave.*

If not actually invisible, women are both peripheral and stereotypical in *Invisible Man.* Invisible Man as protagonist and as narrator imbibes and acts according to society's misogyny, a misogyny complicated by racism. Not only are women characteristically portrayed in the text as adjuncts and objects, but they are defined by a sexuality that is forbidden and destructive, a scourge made more virulent by the addition of race. Among the novel's wide cast of characters, few are women, and those few (either black or white) are characterized according to sexual type and ranged along an axis of power. Only two female characters approach even secondary status--one black (Mary Rambo), one white (Sybil); the rest are minor, many of them nameless. The white women characters are cast primarily as conduits to power; black women are distributed according to the mammy/whore dichotomy.

From the forbidden yet forced exhibition of the "magnificent" naked blonde in the opening battle royal scene to Sybil begging for rape in the "seduction" scene late in the novel, the possession of white women is associated with power, either as symbolic of the hero's exclusion from power or as a means to try to grasp at it. The Golden Day vet expresses this notion in terms of freedom, when he tells the recently expelled student bound for New York: "[Y]ou might even dance with a white girl! . . . [Because d]eep down you're thinking about the freedom you've heard about up North, and you'll try it once, just to see if what you've heard is true" (*IM* 152). Invisible Man is embarrassed and the vet's attendant Crenshaw objects: "There's other kinds of freedom beside some ole white trash women." But the vet insists that "any man's most easily accessible symbol of
freedom" is a woman, "of course" (IM 153). Both the vet and Cranshaw are correct; the white women in the novel are reduced to their sexuality, reduced to symbol and to trash. In addition to the naked blonde dancer and the habitually "tipsy" and "misunderstood" married Sybil with her cross-race rape fantasies are the downtown women attending Invisible Man's lectures on the "Woman Question" and the nameless woman he seduces "who glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility" (IM 409). There are also the Brotherhood women like Emma who insists on dancing with Invisible Man, "holding [him] tight, her bound breasts pressing against [him], looking with that teasing light in her eyes, saying, 'Ah, temptation!" (IM 512), but "far too sophisticated and skilled in intrigue to compromise her position as Jack's mistress" (IM 515). Even wealthy, sophisticated, white Emma is not above trashy flirtation, nor is she above the female's secondary status to the male.

Invisible Man's interaction with white female trash reveals his own complicity in society's misogyny although he neither recognizes nor accepts that complicity. In fastening upon his responsibility for his situation, I do not mean to absolve society of oppression or injustice nor to discount the degrading and devastating life experience of the central character. As a young black male raised in a racist society, oppressed by white institutions and individuals both male and female, Invisible Man's behavior is neither surprising nor unjustified. Rage, trickery, counter-exploitation, and violence are understandable, even reasonable (and possibly laudable) responses to the systemic oppression he experiences. Nonetheless, Invisible Man has space, however limited, within which to operate and make decisions, and my focus here is on the kind of choices he makes. A characteristic tendency for him is to slough off responsibility for the choices he can and does make. In the
case of the nameless seducer, for example, Invisible Man tells us that he "lost" himself to his biological desire, thus suggesting that his behavior was out of his control, yet a few pages earlier he had confided that he "wanted both to smash her and to stay with her and knew that I should do neither" (IM 415; emphasis added). Afterwards, he pushes all responsibility for the explosive combination of sex, race, and power onto others:

Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, goddamit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle . . . ? (IM 418; emphasis added)

That the downtown women attending to the protagonist's lecture respond hypocritically and sleekly to his physical presence rather than to his ideas is not debatable. But Invisible Man himself must be held accountable as well for the situation. In the first place, he himself demonstrates little esteem for the ideas he is presenting; his assignment to oversee the "Woman Question," as Rohrberger notes, is an obvious demotion in his eyes as well as the Brotherhood's, and one that he fears has made him the butt of a huge joke (Parr 131). Secondly, he himself concentrates on his body--its form and sensations. He tells us that he entered his first lecture "with a sense of excitement. . . . If only I were a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, I could simply stand before them with a sign across my chest, stating I KNOW ALL ABOUT THEM" (IM 409). So much for ideas. The women in his audience, then (who, significantly, are conceived of as "them"), are responding correctly to the signals he is sending.

In another instance, Invisible Man makes a calculated decision to exploit the class/ass confusion as a way to gain advantage over the Brotherhood. His plan "called for a woman. A wife, a girl friend, or secretary of one of the
leaders, who would be willing to talk freely to me." Even Emma is "fair game," he decides "and perhaps she'd find me black enough, after all" (IM 512). In this decision, Invisible Man demonstrates his own willingness to exploit his race and sexuality, and he reveals his view of women as objects, instrumental to gaining power.

Black women in Ellison's text do not fare much better. Their portraiture in the novel tends to subscribe to the conventional polarization of black women as mammy or whore. Mary Rohrberger notes that "[n]owhere in Invisible Man is there a woman not characterized as automaton--prostitute or mother" (Parr 130). The whores at the Golden Day, the girls arranging trysts with their boyfriends at the college, and the daughter of Trueblood are all defined in the text by their sexual behavior. At the other, sexless pole, mother figures include Susie Gresham at the college, the slave mother of the reefer dream, and Mrs. Trueblood; however, the latter two figures are also sexually compromised: the one because of her imposed slave status, the other because of her complicit enjoyment of the benefits accruing from her husband's story of incest. The primary mammy figure is of course Mary Rambo. Some critics point to the novel's excised chapter published later as "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar" for evidence of a strong and dynamic Mary Rambo. Melvin Dixon, for example, describes Mary of the story as "the hero's most eager antagonistic co-operator . . . inbued [sic] with folk wisdom and an impulse for rebellion" (100); he argues that "[f]ar from being a female stereotype, she is a female archetype, one whose character resonates among other courageous and resourceful women in history" (101). But, while Dixon encourages us "not to limit our critical perspective to the textual borders of the published version" (104), within those borders, Mary Rambo fits comfortably into the mammy stereotype. In the novel as published by Ellison, she has little scope for rising from
stereotype to individual character. She represents virtue, community values, uplift for the reader. When the protagonist rejects Mary's mothering and advice along with her house reeking of cabbage and ringing with nerve-jangling steam pipes, the reader understands that he is ill-advised to do so. But Mary Rambo has limited agency in the narrative and little influence on the protagonist who first leaves her residence and finally rejects her presence altogether.

Furthermore, there is no other female character that Invisible Man relies on, helps, or interacts with in any healthy way, including sexual. He sees only the rind of the female. Not only does he use the charged adjective "magnificent" to describe the brutalized white stripper at the stag party, but it would seem that being "beautiful" is a key attribute for black women as well: the slave mother's daughter on the auction block is described as "a beautiful [naked] girl the color of ivory" while the girl (friend? acquaintance?) who tells him about her nightmare is also described as "a beautiful girl"; in her dream—a reversal of forming the features of our face—she feels "her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney" (IM 6-7). I wonder if the nightmare would seem less horrible (to the protagonist, to the author) for a plain girl with a plain face.

Claudia Tate advises us to "remember Ellison's own witty admonition that the rind is not the heart and look for the concealed truth which lies beneath the stereotyped exteriors of his female characters" (Benston 163). However, Tate herself concludes her essay with the prediction that Invisible Man's efforts to leave his hibernation "though valiant, will be aborted . . . since he has no mother to give him birth" (Benston 171). The truth beneath the rind is not accessible to the narrator whose disregard for women
denies him mother and all other kinds of relationship with woman.

The Salt Eaters dramatically revises this situation. The novel includes not only a strong, individualized female protagonist, but a wide range of other strong, individualized female characters--Minnie, Old Wife, Jan, Ruby, Palma, M'Dear Sophie--none of whom fits either pole of the madonna/whore axis. The narrator-medium exhibits a female consciousness and a selectivity that funnels female experience into the narrative: clitorectomy, menstruation, root work, teenage pregnancy, the superwoman career-mother role. The feminist Sisters of the Grain--who, it should be noted, provided a working title for the novel--generate energy in Claybourne and in the text by modelling a cooperative multi-cultural community of women engaged in political and spiritual, "socially responsible" work. On a more transcendent plane, the principal spirit guide is Old Woman, and the collective wisdom of the narrative comes primarily from female figures--Old Woman, Sophie M'Dear, Minnie, and the Mudmothers (although Cleotus hovers on the periphery).

Nowhere in the narrative is there support for the idea that women are/should be objects or instruments. In fact the auxiliary nature of the socio-political role assigned to women is actively challenged within and by the novel--in the portrayal of the stark contrast between the male and female roles during the civil rights movement, in the dramatized efforts by Velma and the other women to seize control of the political agenda from the men, and more generally in the attitudes and behavior of the various women characters who populate the novel. Nor does Salt cast suspicion on female sexuality; on the contrary, the novel celebrates sexuality, and especially woman's, in theme and character. Part of Velma's healing is getting in touch with her own sexuality--to revive that "dormant nerve in the clitoris." As for the
character of Minnie Ransom, she may be old and motherly—a Mary Rambo counterpart—but she is also saucy, flamboyant, spirited; she has a roving eye as well as a healing hand. Ann Folwell Stanford draws a detailed contrast between these two characters (who—coincidentally?—share the same initials): Stanford notes that while Mary Rambo fits "a commonplace about women's roles as community networkers and caretakers [and] . . . enacts another stereotype, a permutation of woman-as-mother" (28), Minnie Ransom breaks the stereotype by "bringing together both sexuality and nurture"; her appearance "celebrat[es] . . . her own womanhood, history and culture" (25).

This then is the major way in which The Salt Eaters signifies on its predecessor: noting and resisting the place and nature assigned to women in the novel, and then telling a better story. However, Bambara's text does not simply reverse Invisible Man in the matter of gender. Claybourne also boasts a variety of multi-dimensioned, non-stereotypical male characters who take part in the narrative: Fred Holt, Porter, Cleotus, Obie, Marcus Hampden, Campbell.

Still, from the standpoint of a white female reader, the stereotypical representation of white women in Invisible Man is maintained, albeit in a muted manner, by The Salt Eaters. The scant white presence in the novel, a vague, undifferentiated "other" that is threatening and hostile but removed by generality, is associated with abstract power and faceless institutions—the nuclear power plant, the chemical company, the bus company—and consigned to the society beyond Clayborne. The threat is real, and Clayborne must contend with that society: Velma tries to undermine "De Enamee," and Fred tries to gain job equity with the white drivers. But in the narrative proper, those white individuals with even a minor voice are the nameless and silly engineers who frequent the Avocado Pit Cafe, and the
nameless, offensive conventioneers and religious fundamentalists riding the bus. No white female character actually participates in the narrative action, and the few references in the text to white women are uniformly unattractive. White female sexuality is a primary target of scorn and ridicule. The single named white character is Fred's bitchy second wife Margie who is self-indulgent, selfish, lazy, and slovenly; worse, she is cold and unloving, and she turns her back on Fred in bed (thereby making him "dangerous"). The novel also marks interracial marriage for disapproval (Porter is a race man; Minnie laments the mixed mating of the young generation), and so Margie is excluded from Porter's company as well as from the narrative's time present. A second white female figure with deficient sexuality is the unnamed but always mentioned wife of one of the engineers, a whining fellow who regularly complains about "his frigid wife" to the lunch crowd at the cafe. White female sexuality can be substandard in other ways also: cheap, for example, like the groupies of the civil rights leader "prancing . . . whinnying down the [hotel] corridor" (39). Or it is, as Lorraine puts it, "off": "Like being in bed with a Black trick who's been sleeping white a long time, ya know? . . . The beat's just off. . . . Way off" (116). (The group listening to Lorraine "howl.")

The unattractive portraiture of white women is mitigated by their limited presence and preempted by other matters of greater interest for the story, for the author, and for the reader. Nonetheless, the white female reader must take into account this unattractive element, an effort that taxes energy. She will either be made uncomfortable by the company of cheap groupies and cold wives and strive to separate herself from them, or cope with her indignation at the paucity of choices, or struggle to be colorblind, to let gender subsume race so that she may recognize representation
in Velma. The friction involved for a white female reader joining *The Salt Eaters'*s celebration of being a woman exacts an expenditure of energy that black readers are spared. Still, that celebration is worth the cost for this reader and, further, I believe my participation in it is legitimate.

In summary, Bambara's text signifies on *Invisible Man*, ringing changes on certain themes, adding new interpretations. In particular, *Salt* opens up the world of (black) women, giving us a cast of vibrant female characters and presenting alternative points of view, other ways of being. The ambiguity of *Invisible Man* yields to affirmation, and in a major gesture of signifying, *The Salt Eaters* superimposes probabilities upon *Invisible Man*'s possibilities. In spite of racism, sexism, and nuclear threat, Velma rises from the stool healed, and though we have no guarantee of how much Velma--or anyone else--can accomplish, the ambiguity lies there, with amount, not with whether anyone will try. Along with Velma, Julius Meadows, Fred Holt, Jan and Campbell, Obie, and (from the next generation) James Jr. will join the old guard of Minnie Ransom, Sophie Heywood, and (even) B. Talifero Serge in accepting their "socially responsible roles," and in performing the taxing and dangerous work to be done in the world. Meanwhile *Invisible Man* is probably mouldering in his hole.

**Audience and Rootedness**

Signifying emerges from African American tradition and the signifying between *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters* is appropriate to two works so firmly rooted in African
American culture. Both the subject and structure of the novels depend upon cultural material, and indeed, according to the formulation of critics like Toni Morrison and Cornel West, the two works embody the very definition of black fiction—"black" not because of author or subject, but because of the use of cultural resources. Morrison singles out the "oral art" of the black preacher and the black musician as an appropriate model for black writers, and she claims that ". . . it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance" ("Rootedness" 341). West also emphasizes the spontaneity of improvisation and the vitality of collaboration with audience in oral performance as the dynamic qualities that shape the black literary tradition ("Dilemma" 44).

Orality and audience, music and preaching figure prominently in both novels. Each one is brimming with songs and sounds, riffs and refrains, both feature oral performance (sermons, speeches, and harangues; jazz, blues, and spirituals), and both authors employ oral techniques and voicing (Ellison's prose often demands reading aloud and the novel is narrated by a speechmaker; Bambara captures the rhythms of regional and community and comic languages). Furthermore, Ellison and Bambara rely on improvisation and audience collaboration in their narration; they view writing as a social act that will change readers and effect an amelioration of community and world. In the transaction, active, participatory readers are essential.

Yet, what about readers who are not rooted in the culture? How do white readers establish an "affective and participatory relationship" with these "black" texts by and about African Americans? Extratextual factors (mainstream publication, national awards) for both novels suggest that a white audience is targeted, and Ellison's explicit statements about an American audience indicate that his
The case is different for The Salt Eaters. Toni Cade Bambara directs her novel to the African American community, and her text stereotypes its white characters, positing white women, in particular, as part of the problem, not part of the community. Paradoxically, however, reading as a white woman, I feel more affectively engaged by the text that tacitly excludes me than by the one that solicits my readership. The paradox is explained by the treatment of gender. My racial group is included in the audience of Invisible Man, but my gender group is sloughed off. The opposite is true for The Salt Eaters: whites are excluded, but women are celebrated. That Ellison's novel presents no sympathetic white women figures is not significant, for indeed, there are none in The Salt Eaters either. But the absence of individualized women and the toleration of misogynist attitudes in Invisible Man cause friction in my engagement with its text. Although we may assign major responsibility to the narrator for the reductive treatment of women in the novel, the implied author does not give us as much corrective breathing space in this instance as he does on others. I find no clear place where the author
counteracts or distances himself from his narrator's attitudes about women. A small detail that I attribute to the author suggests in fact that he subscribes to the traditional depictions of women. At the Chthonian party, one of the Brotherhood women approaches Invisible Man, the prospective member: "'What is your opinion of the state of women's rights, Brother?' I was asked by a plain woman in a large black velvet tam" (IM 311). This is the sole intelligent or substantive remark made to Invisible Man on this occasion, and she refers to "women's rights" rather than to the trivializing "The Woman Question." The author might be credited for this terminology, yet immediately afterward the woman is categorized and devalued by the single descriptor, "plain," upon which she disappears. Even if "plain" is the narrator's term, the author adds nothing to detoxify it. The atmosphere remains polluted, and the general ambience grows unhealthy; other female readers may feel, like me, out of their element.

Race provides a contrasting counterpart to gender in the matter of audience membership for Invisible Man. Numerous white characters appear in the text, all of them uniformly unsympathetic, and the nameless blue-eyed stranger attacked by Invisible Man in the Prologue is a thoroughly unattractive representative for white readers. In addition, the suspicion that the narrator may be successfully yessing me unawares, and the recognition that the novel's irony cuts and undercuts and boomerangs around unpredictably reminds me of the warning in the novel that one should be provided with a handy steel helmet. Nevertheless, I feel some confidence that the author is encouraging me to divorce myself from this construction of whiteness, that he wants me to augment his audience when the narrator shoves me out of his characterized audience, and that he expects as a result my transformation into something other, something better. But there is no comparable dynamic for gender.
By contrast, the narrative world of *The Salt Eaters* offers a white female reader an empowering treatment of the place and nature of women. Although the subset "white women" is outcast, I am not constantly forced to be cognizant of my place in that category or to view myself as part of the problem. The meager, unattractive presence of white women, hitherto detailed, is not in fact a major focus of the novel nor is their negative impact on the black community an issue that is extensively developed. The effect of the in-joke at my expense is more annoying than wounding, in part because I don't recognize myself in any of the individual figures depicted in the text. Perhaps my lack of privilege in the matter of gender explains why I feel more nourished by the exploration of socio-political issues in Bambara's text than by the issues in Ellison's. Salt's celebration of women enlists my interest and supportive collaboration and overshadows the jabs at my racial subset. Perhaps the jabs miss their mark because race is a category which I am able to take for granted and which does not divide me against myself. Thus, I am able to discount such attacks because they do not truly threaten.

Furthermore, the issue of racism must contend with many other attention-absorbing topics in the novel: healing and being healed, connecting the political with the spiritual aspects of life, recognizing multiple truths and multiple ways to approach truth, saving the planet, working out human relationships--to name several. The nature of the problems addressed, the approaches toward their solution, and the values assigned to attempts and solutions make important sense to me. Furthermore, the humor and art created by the narrative's manner of presentation are, sui generis, valuable. While my engagement with the text may be counter to the author's expressed intention to exclude or ignore me (or at most, suffer my presence), and while I do not claim understanding of the text commensurate with a black reader's
or collaboration equal to a black woman's, I do claim Velma
as my intimate and with her, her circle of associates.
Velma's interests, frustrations, experiences overlap with
mine; I admire her character and have a stake in her
struggles to be good; and her health and happiness are
important to me.

Another important demarcation between insider and
outsider readers occurs independent of a color line. My
supposition that a white male reader would feel doubly
disenfranchised by The Salt Eaters has found some tentative
support from limited, anecdotal evidence (i.e. asking my
colleagues and students); one white male professor attests
to his feeling marginalized by the novel. Nevertheless, he
participates in its audience because of his response to
Bambara's rich, resonant language. Also, responses to The
Salt Eaters from students in an upper-level ethnic
literature class at Denison University (taught by Prof.
Linda Krumholz, spring semester 1993) give further support
to the notion that white males in the audience who feel
marginalized will concentrate on formal matters as a way to
engage the novel. Curiously, in this class, white male
students expressed the most enthusiasm for the novel while
the most vociferously disaffected students happened to be
black women. In class, most students (of all categories)
responded primarily--and negatively--to the novel's formal
difficulty, and students seemed to find the narrative
techniques taxing enough to preempt focus on other kinds of
thematic or cultural-political considerations. Of the
approximately 25 students in the class, only two students
returned a(n optional) questionnaire their professor
distributed for me, and both were white males. These two
attested to the difficulties of the form and to their
struggle to read with understanding. Yet, as the "WASP"
junior wrote in answer to a question about his overall
response to the novel, he claimed to value it expressly
because of the difficulty: "I guess I liked it. It's just a struggle to read. However that difficulty makes the accomplishment of completion so much more valuable." In still another kind of demarcation (generational), the other respondent, a white senior, wrote, "I enjoyed the modernisms of *The Salt Eaters*. I think it is a book for our generation, those who grew up in the 70s and 80s. I did have difficulty in understanding cultural messages."

Thus, readers can be grouped as insiders or outsiders according to their "narrative literacy"--that is, according to their interest and ability to read written narrative, to apply reading conventions to complex narrative structures, and to engage the text for formal and artistic reasons. For example, the framed narrative and unreliable trickster narrator of *Invisible Man* and the dense, fragmented postmodern form of *The Salt Eaters* require attentive and energetic collaboration from their audience that not all readers are willing to give. In return, the texts provide their collaborative audience with aesthetic pleasure as well as a larger vision and an enhanced understanding of life.
1. I am indebted to the spatial analysis of the novel and the diagram that "maps" Clayborne in Gloria T. Hull's eloquent and helpful essay "What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyhow" for stimulating my visualization of the novel's circular structure.

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines "signifying" as "a uniquely black rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first. Its use as a figure for intertextuality allows us to understand literary revision without resource to thematic, biographical, or Oedipal slayings at the crossroads; rather, critical signification is tropic and rhetorical" (Figures 49).

3. It is possible, I have to admit, that in a final twist of unreliability, the narrator's description of himself as crazed and animal-like is fabricated, one more example of telling his white audience what they want to hear; the ambiguity of the novel's ending would allow such an interpretation. However, my reading is that Invisible Man will not come out of his underground hole and that a failure to come out is indeed a failure as a strategy and for the protagonist.

4. Trudier Harris is my informant on this issue and on the impact upon the black community of Doc Serge's mantra of self-love.

5. I am indebted to a conversation with my colleague, Dominick Consolo, who drew my attention to this pairing.

6. Issues of class and sexual preference do not here offer the same contrast as gender; in both novels, class is only peripheral; homosexuality is treated in neither. Presumably gay men appear in both texts (the younger Emerson in IM, the cross-dressers in Salt), but gayness is not treated; Gloria Hull notes the "glaring" absence of the lesbian/gay movement in The Salt Eaters (Pryse 227-28).
CHAPTER IV
DONALD DUK
and
FRANK CHIN, DIDACTICIAN

"Yellow men don't stand a chance."
Frank Chin,
"Come All Ye Asian American Writers"

Donald Duk, above all, is a didactic novel. Frank Chin, the master teacher, delivers a meta-lesson to a targeted audience consisting of white, mainstream American readers on the one hand, and misinformed (or, Chin might say, "brainwashed") Chinese Americans on the other. The crux of his lesson: it is not fair that "yellow men don't stand a chance." Chin wants to demonstrate the falseness of the public's popular images of Chinese Americans and the injustice suffered by his community within American society; the novel is his means of correction. Thus Chin and Donald Duk represent another variety of interaction between ethnic authors and their audience--instructor and instructed--for our examination. Furthermore, his link with and censure of Maxine Hong Kingston provide an opportunity to revisit some of the issues raised in the Ellison-Howe debate. While Chin's much-publicized denunciation of Kingston has its particular tone and target, it does echo the earlier charges made by Howe in promoting correct (or "real") writing and in privileging the sociopolitical interests of the group over the demands of craft or art. In addition, Chin's unambiguous prescriptions of what is and is not acceptable in the writing of Chinese Americans suggests that his didactic thrust extends beyond readers to writers; we might
justifiably infer that Chin presents his novel as a model for other writers—like Maxine Hong Kingston—to emulate, an inference that sets up a dialectic between his work and hers useful for our subsequent discussion of her novel.

Chin's lesson for his readers takes the sugar-coating form of a comic novel; we might even call it a "comic book" because of its one-dimensional, Disney-linked characters, its simple situation and progression, and its snappy, shallow humor. Chin has presented us with an amusing story told with wry humor, comic scenes of burlesque, and dialogue characterized by broad punning and the slangy, insult-laden bantering of young siblings. Donald himself is a boon, a new young protagonist to join the ranks of American literary characters, and the novel entertains readers with its coming-of-age account of Donald carping and spluttering his way to new understanding.

Yet the author clearly intends his narrative to instruct as well as delight, and his light narrative is weighted down by the serious goal of redeeming the image of Chinese America and replacing fake stereotypes with an authentic portrait. Curiously, however, in spite of the apparent single-mindedness and—I would say—overriding self-righteousness of this goal, auxiliary messages complicate and contradict Chin's mission. For example, Chin's indictment of the white establishment notwithstanding, the terms presented by the novel for an improvement in the Chinese American position are modelled upon the conventional white-male success story. His indictment, then, is not so much against a systemically unjust distribution of status and power as it is against the place assigned to Chinese Americans within the system.

In addition, the complaint that Chin articulates on racial grounds can be turned back upon him on grounds of gender. Chin exemplifies the behavior King Kok Cheung describes in her discussion of the "interlockings" of race,
gender, and culture in Asian American writing: "[M]en of color have been accused---and sometimes been guilty--of refuting effeminate stereotypes by embracing machismo, of reclaiming 'manhood' by muffling women" (Articulate Silences 171). Within the novel, and in his other writing as well, Chin not only muffles but scorns and trivializes women although--to continue Cheung's commentary---"[t]hose who have suffered 'emasculation' should know the frustration of women who have long been denied male perquisites. They could learn to dismantle white supremacy and male supremacy simultaneously" (171-72).

Furthermore, Chin's novel undercuts his mission in another, fundamental way. The narrative strategies that he employs as a master teacher ironically work to undermine the very lesson of cultural encounter he is presenting. Although he has repeatedly inveighed against Chinese Americans playing the role of the "tourist guide" and making the "exotic" safe and palatable for white visitors to "Chinatown"--thereby falsifying Chinese American experience--Chin's novel in fact works hard to "normalize" Chinese American life and to make it seem familiar to outsider readers; Chin thereby reduces the very elements of the strange and unintelligible that defamiliarize and so provide a multicultural experience for the reader. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong comments that Chin's didactic intent "sanitizes" experience in his novel: "It is as if, after struggling for years with raw and impossible contradictions, Chin has decided to settle for a defanged version of Chinese American history and the simple warm glow of ethnic pride" (Reading 153).

**Donald Duk** is a comic strip bildungsroman told from the point of view of its eponymous hero. Twelve-year-old Donald chafes at his ignominious association with Disney's cartoon figure, a creature exposed to the world in a sailor suit without trousers or shoes, condemned to quack foolishly in
response to life's pressures. Nonetheless, Donald learns a
great deal about Chinese American culture, history, and
identity during the course of the novel. The reader is
provided a "syllabus" for the novel even before it begins.
On the copyright page appears: "Summary On the eve of the
Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown, twelve-year-
old Donald Duk attempts to deal with his comical name and
his feelings for his cultural heritage." At the outset
then, Chin makes the reader aware of the novel's central
event and setting, the nature of its protagonist and his
quest, the importance of names and cultural heritage, and
its focus on the difficulty of fashioning an identity in
America within an ethnic culture.

CONTEXT AND MANIFESTO

These issues are central to Frank Chin's work. In his
essays, drama, and fiction, Chin inveighs against the legal
and social forces that victimize Chinese Americans: the
racist exclusion laws, the exploitation of Chinese labor,
the distortion of classic Chinese philosophy and literature,
the erasing of Chinese American history. As the self-
appointed spokesman for Chinese American interests, Chin is
vehement about the need for replacing mainstream America's
racist attitudes and practices with recognition and respect.

Chin is a pioneer in Asian American letters. He was
the first Chinese American to have a play produced in New
York City (The Chickencoop Chinaman in 1973), and he helped
edit Aiiieeeee! (first published in 1974), a ground-breaking
anthology of Asian American writing in which previously
unknown works like John Okada's No-No Boy were made
available to a national readership. Dorothy Ritsuko
McDonald claims that this anthology is responsible for
freeing writers and initiating a literary movement. "In fact," she writes:

the preface and introduction to Aiieeeeeel can be likened to Emerson's "American Scholar," written at a critical time in our national history when our fledgling republic, though politically free, struggled under England's cultural dominion. Similarly, Aiieeeeeel is a declaration of intellectual and linguistic independence, and an assertion of Asian American manhood. (xix)

In their introduction to Aiieeeeeel, the editors state that:

In the 140-year history of Asian America, fewer than ten works of fiction and poetry have been published by American-born Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino writers. . . . [although t]he truth is that Asian-Americans have been writing seriously since the nineteenth century, and writing well. (xxi)

Aiieeeeeel was designed to reverse this literary neglect and to substitute "fifty years of our whole voice" for the white American image of "the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering, whined, shouted, or screamed 'aiieeeee!'") (viii). They could reject the debilitating identity imposed on them from without and refashion their own identity:

Seven generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love have left today's Asian-Americans in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration. We have been encouraged to believe that we . . . are either Asian (Chinese or Japanese) or American (white), or are measurably both. This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. (viii)

According to Chin and his fellow editors, then, white America has either silenced Asian American writers altogether or appropriated their voices by demanding writing that supports white majority prejudices. To survive in America, Asians have had to renounce their own history and
accept ignominy. It is out of this context that Frank Chin takes his mission to disabuse white America and brainwashed Asian America of their false beliefs.

In his essays, Chin establishes a standard of group purity and castigates those in-group writers who fail to meet it. In "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin charges certain writers with betrayal for distorting the Chinese legacy and for accommodating their writing to white, majority expectations. Particularly offensive to Chin are the "Christianized autobiographies" by writers such as Jade Wong Snow and Pardee Lowe, and popular works by Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, and Maxine Hong Kingston who "boldly fake the best-known works from ... Asian literature," and who write history that is a "contribution to the stereotype" (The Big Aiiieeeeee! 2-3). According to Chin, Tan's Joy Luck Club contains a fake Chinese fairy tale that "is not Chinese but white racist," while Kingston "rewrites [a childhood chant] ... to the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization" (3). That Chin mentions David Henry Hwang (whose play M. Butterfly has a gay Chinese American protagonist) but does not subject him to the same kind of lengthy or specific charges levied against the two women writers supports my notion that Chin applies a double standard for male and female writers.

The stereotype perpetuated by these offending writers strangles Chinese Americans, Chin maintains, and the several myths underlying the stereotype must be dispelled. Chin lists these myths: that Chinese were sojourners not immigrants, interested only in getting rich; that the basically misogynist Chinese culture merits only rejection by Americans; that individual Asians are divided between the "pervertedly good" and the "pervertedly evil"; that Asian culture is incapable of competing with an individualistic
Western culture; and that Chinese males are ineffectual and effeminate.

The anger and bitterness that inform Chin's earlier work shock and shake up the audience in a way comparable to Richard Wright's protest fiction. Not only does Chin refuse comfort or guidance to his audience, but he chooses an aggressively antagonistic tone and a text filled with confusing references and discomfiting insults as his means for crushing stereotypes. Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald writes, for example, that *The Chickencoop Chinaman* "is a difficult, allusive play. . . . Like many other artists, he does not believe that he is constrained to explain his work. Therefore, some readers may be confounded when they do not find here the exotic, standardized comfort, say, of a *Flower Drum Song*" (xiv). McDonald points out also that the language of the play "abounds with slang, obscenities, and unusual grammar. The Cantonese terms may also make for difficult reading. But Chin would argue that he has captured the rhythms and accents of Chinese America without which its culture cannot truly be represented" (xviii).

However, Chin's stubbornly adversarial position goes beyond concern for linguistic or cultural authenticity. He maintains that he has been "chosen to write theater like making war" (qtd. in McDonald xix), and indeed he often uses war metaphor. In "Come All Ye Asian American Writers," Chin writes that "The soldier is the universal individual. . . . Life is war. . . . All behavior is strategy and tactics. . . . All relationships are martial" (6). Elsewhere ("The Asian Heroic Tradition in English"), he claims that Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is the key to all Asian literature, and he himself uses Sun Tzu quotations for the epigraph and the structuring of his story, "I am Talking to the Strategist, Sun Tzu about Life when the Subject of War Comes Up." Chin treats stories as cultural weaponry and presents storytelling as a tactic to defend oneself "against all
forms of oppression and exploitation" ("Uncle Frank's Fakebook of Fairy Tales" 79). With this combativeness added to his outrage, Chin virtually declares war upon his audience--primarily upon white mainstream readers and "fake" Chinese writers.

Like his plays and short fiction, Chin's novel emerges from an adversarial narrative position and an insistently ethnic context. Donald Duk's structure, theme, plot, and message are shaped by the same cultural issues as his other work. Chin's resentful sensitivity to the plight and place of Chinese America and his drive to register these injustices upon American consciousness at large remain keen, and the novel explicitly and exhaustively debunks the debilitating myths cited by Chin. The novel, too, invokes the metaphor of war: Donald's father instructs Donald that instead of railing against a history that excludes Chinese Americans, he should write his own history. "History is war, not sport!" says King Duk (123). At another point in the novel he instructs Donald that, "Poetry is strategy" (124).

However, the novel's transaction with its audience is substantially different from that of Chin's earlier work. Chin uncharacteristically solicits--and is solicitous of--outsiders in his audience; he exchanges the role of adversary for that of teacher. Instead of a jeremiad, the novel is a primer for Chinese American culture, its progression a series of lessons laid upon several layers of learners. Chin's narrative choices soften and deflect his polemic. At the outset, his use of a twelve-year-old protagonist and a novel-of-education structure creates a distancing framework that allows him to air and dispel anti-Chinese American sentiment without directly attacking the audience. These choices also accommodate the inclusion of large chunks of Chinese American history and lengthy passages of "setting-the-record-straight" exposition without
completely sandbagging the novel's flow or destroying narrative integrity—although we shall see that Maxine Hong Kingston's novel exhibits other, more sophisticated and more satisfying ways, including audience collaboration, of incorporating cultural information and establishing context.

THE TEXT

Donald Duk hates growing up Chinese American and hates even more his comic name—and he is not reticent about expressing his feelings. "'Only the Chinese are stupid enough to give a kid a stupid name like Donald Duk,' Donald Duk says to himself. 'And if the Chinese were that smart, why didn't they invent tap dancing?'" (2). (Donald's idol is Fred Astaire.) Donald dreads the approach of the Chinese New Year; his teachers make "a big deal about Chinese stuff in their classes" (2), and Chinatown is crowded with tourists who ask incessant, stupid questions about the funny things Chinese believe, do, and eat. At school during a history lesson on the Chinese in America, Donald "wants to barf pink and green stuff all over the teacher's teacher's book" because the teacher is professing the "[s]ame thing as everybody--Chinese are artsy, cutesy and chickendick!" (3). Donald is suspicious of his white school friend's interest in Chinese things, and he is reluctant to invite him home because he "hates to see his friend pretend to be so nice to Chinese with stupid names like Duk" (12).

In his protagonist, Chin has created a representative Chinese American male in need of instruction, whose embarrassed and self-deprecating grumbling expresses the stereotypical view of Chinese America that he has internalized. Although he is almost literally made sick by his teacher's history lesson, it is a lesson authenticated not only by the individual authority of his teacher but by
the institutional authority of school and university, and the textual authority of published history books. So Donald digests it. For example, his teacher tells the class that

The Chinese in America were made passive and nonassertive by centuries of Confucian thought and Zen mysticism. They were totally unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans. From their first step on American soil to the middle of the twentieth century, the timid, introverted Chinese have been helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans. (2)

Donald does not challenge the accuracy of this lesson, but instead tries to disassociate himself from such a weak, unattractive group. Donald embodies the self-hating Chinese American who takes the white majority measuring rod as his own.

For both insider and outsider readers, however, the ethnic edge of Donald's sentiments is softened by the fact that they are those of an inexperienced adolescent. It is, after all, appropriate for a twelve-year-old boy to exhibit a sophomoric ignorance about himself and his origins, and he is "acting his age" when he takes the stance of rebel and resists family and family values. For the adult reader, recognition of Donald's adolescence and of the limits to his experience places Donald at a distance. Such a reader takes Donald's negative judgments about himself, his family, Chinatown, and so forth, under advisement because of the narrative signals that Donald's reasoning is flawed. When we see Donald behaving in childish ways—quarreling with his siblings, sassing his mother, pinching one of his father's paper planes, scoffing at Chinese food, resisting his father's clearly more reasonable opinions—we understand that his values and assumptions are about to undergo some change. Adult readers (whether of the minority or majority group), then, neither embrace those values nor feel under attack from them.
"What does it mean?" Donald asks repeatedly, routinely. His questions create a refrain that appropriately fuels the progression of a novel of education. Chin has packed his novel with teachers, both real and fake, ready and willing with their lessons. Chin further heightens the instructional potential by doubling the number of naive twelve-year-old learners. Donald's best friend Arnold Azalea, a white classmate from Donald's exclusive private school, is invited to spend the two weeks of the Chinese New Year celebration (the duration of the novel) with the Duk family in Chinatown. The presence and questioning of curious, openminded Arnold occasion extensive lessons from various model figures and family members about Chinese custom and Chinese American history which incidentally inform Donald--and the reader--as well as Arnold. As Arnold gains understanding, Donald gains appreciation and, ultimately, pride; at the same time, presumably, readers learn along with Donald to divest themselves of racist stereotypes about Chinese America. The didactic structure of the novel is thereby impelled and naturalized by Chin's Chinatown Huck and Jim.

To instruct Donald and Arnold, the novel's implied author addresses his audience in the guise of numerous teacher-figures. He is the Crawdad Man who retells and preserves old Chinese stories by passing them on to Donald and his fifth generation of Chinese America, and to Arnold and his wider white world. He is Kwan Kung, the hero of Chinese legend and Cantonese opera who makes manifest (to audiences within and without the narrative) the strength and color and discipline of Chinese culture. He is Larry Louie, "the Chinese Fred Astaire," who not only teaches Donald to tap dance but articulates for him what it means to be a "minority race," extolling the gypsies for maintaining integrity by refusing to be defined and marginalized by outsiders. He is Uncle Donald--Donald's namesake from
China—a famous opera singer and his father's revered sifu (teacher) who represents both the wise elder and a myth-dispelling ambassador from China.

Other instructor figures in the novel include: Victor Lee, the Vietnam veteran who models the courage and patriotism of Chinese American soldiers (in contrast to other, "thumbsucking," non-Chinese Americans) and who testifies to the ferocity and power of the Chinese enemy; Mr. Doong of the White Crane Club who teaches tai chi to the boys and demonstrates the power of magic; and Police Sergeant Bullwhip, aka the "real Charlie Chan," who is a source of information about the legendary Chinese outlaw heroes, Soong Gong and Lee Kuey.

However, the primary teacher-figure at the moral center of the novel is Donald's father. King Duk is representative of the Chinese American (male) at his best: wise, powerful, successful. He is proud of his heritage, his identity, and his name. Not only is King Duk exemplary in his own character and accomplishments, but he is the ideal father. He teases Donald and prods him with germane questions at appropriate times, but (that there be no doubt about his manly authority) he also smacks Donald when necessary. In general, however, Dad shows remarkable tolerance for Donald's rotten attitudes about being Chinese as well as a wise patience in allowing Donald to learn better attitudes through his own effort. King Duk is a teacher in every best sense.

Chin provides his young pair with yet another source of instruction—a dream world counterpart to San Francisco's Chinatown. At night, Donald is transported to the High Sierras of the nineteenth century for the laying of the transcontinental railroad. There he meets and interacts with the historic railroad gang of 10,000 Chinese immigrant laborers. He learns about the stamina and heroism of the
Chinese workers as they battle severe winters, handle dangerous dynamite, and outwit and outface their "hatted and spatted" employers. In his dreams also, Donald joins the one hundred and eight legendary outlaw heroes of the Chinese classic, *The Water Margin*, and learns about the values of resourcefulness and self-control of Chinese tradition.

Among the crowd of teachers is one that offers an edifying contrast, a fake teacher who is, not coincidentally, the only actual school teacher of the novel--Donald's history teacher. Throughout the narrative's progression, Mr. Meanwright promulgates false knowledge until--in a culminating, coming-of-age scene--Donald interrupts his "drones and buzzes" about Chinese immigration to set the record straight. By exposing the teacher's information as false, Donald exchanges roles and redistributes authority; Donald's challenge extends even beyond Mr. Meanwright to the authorities credentialing him--school, scholars, texts, and university. In the exchange, Mr. Meanwright is bested outright and forced to admit weakly, "Gentlemen, boys, you have caught me completely unprepared" (152).

Chin thus outfits Donald Duk with a melange of teachers and learners to accomplish his didactic mission. Hovering above the various teachers, real and fake, within the narrative, speaking through them, is the author himself--a fluent, native informant and master teacher concerned about the safe delivery of truths to his implied audience. This audience made up of both white and Chinese readers may vary in their knowledge and experience of Chinese American culture, but all are assumed to have some amount of ignorance. In contrast to the position Chin takes in his plays and short stories, here he is solicitous of his audience, covetous of their understanding. Consequently, he employs a number of techniques to ease white outsider readers into the unfamiliar features of his culture, of the
text. Paradoxically, however, the success of his techniques in easing readers into his text may also ease them out of the possibility for a cross-cultural experience—since such experience depends in part upon a reader's efforts to overcome the strange and uncomfortable.

Narrative Strategies

One strategy to ease the reading (and sweeten the lessons) of Donald Duk is Chin's choice of a cartoon form for his novel. From the outset, the title heralds the novel's identification with Disney, while Chin's cartoon-like young protagonist has appropriately uncomplicated thoughts expressed in appropriately simple syntax. The simplification and flattening of experience that is characteristic of comic books make the narrative quick and comfortable for readers. Similarly, Chin's choice of a structuring metaphor—film—is characterized by a black and white polarity and a slick, glossy surface; like viewers of a classic Fred Astaire movie, readers bounce off the surface, unable (unconcerned) to penetrate it or probe an underlying depth. Along with this texture, vintage Hollywood and pop culture provide a message: Donald Duk is as American, as pop, as uncomplicated, and as non-threatening as Donald Duck—and as such merits our attention and valorization. Thus, Donald Duk, just like Disney, informs and entertains its audience. Like a cartoon, it clearly distinguishes good from bad, its progression is single and linear, and its characters are static and—in some cases—parodic. There is an economy about the form that allows readers to focus on Chin's didactic agenda.

The author's choice of the cartoon form has a number of consequences. It accommodates the merging of elements from American popular and Chinese classical culture; it presents the reader with clearly delineated values and easily grasped
lessons in a form that is humorous, non-threatening, and engaging. At the same time, however, the cartoon-like singularity, linearity, and one-dimensionality result in a thinness that is, oxymoronically, substantial enough to undermine the novel's transformational impact.

Another important easing strategy for white readers is the use of Arnold Azalea as their alter ego. Out of hospitality toward Arnold, the Duk family continually point out and explain Chinese values and customs--often at length or more than once--to ensure the comfort of their white guest. Thus, potential questions on the part of the audience are made explicit in the text by Arnold, and possible confusion is avoided by the answers Arnold receives. As soon as Arnold hears lay see, for example, someone is quick to translate the Chinese term; when the New Year's red envelopes are distributed, someone is sure to explain their purpose and describe the protocol for behavior. Explanations to Arnold are sometimes so detailed, in fact, that the author covers his tracks, so to speak, by having Donald react with embarrassment to the condescension Arnold might come to feel, a technique that deflects the suspicion of condescension on the part of the author toward his readers.

Donald himself occasionally provides guidance for Arnold and the reader by reviewing his own previous instruction about Chinese culture: "zap goes a memory," he notes. In the process, Donald concretizes his own understanding and recycles the lesson for the audience. For example, when Donald receives a detailed explanation of why King Duk distributes rice to his neighbors during the New Year, readers observe Donald's growing awareness of his heritage as he identifies his father's action with the Chinese tradition of lay see. In another instance, readers watch Donald absorb the Chinese notion of hospitality--first when Dad explains Donald's responsibilities as host to
Arnold, and later when Donald applies the lesson to the American Cong: "'You're on my roof,' says Donald, 'that makes you my guest. You can't refuse [to take a ten dollar bill]" (20).

Chin introduces a second white (male) initiate who signals the broad application of the lessons. Arnold's father is characterized, even caricatured, as a rich and successful California businessman. Mr. Azalea describes himself as "a crass businessman," and we note that Arnold attends an exclusive private school and the parents take expensive vacations to Hawaii. Beyond this information, and the fact that the Azaleas support Arnold's friendship with Donald, we know very little about Arnold's parents. When Mr. Azalea joins the narrative at the culmination of the New Year celebration, he becomes one more in the ranks of learners, taking his turn to ask King Duk and Uncle Donald about what things mean. Readers thereby understand that these are not simply children's lessons, but are valid for adults—including outsider adults who are successful, rich, white males. Although he makes a limited appearance in the narrative, Arnold's father serves the important function of directing the narrative's message to an adult audience.

Chinese terms and phrases flavor the narrative. Again, Chin gives his readers constant guidance. In general, terms are translated directly as they occur, and explanations are often repeated at several places. The term may be explicitly explained to a character in the novel (usually to Arnold or his father), or the synonym might appear in apposition: for example, "bok gwai, the white monsters"; or "'The mandate of heaven. Tien ming.' 'What's that?' Donald asks. . . . 'The Chinese say, Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go,' Dad says" (11-12). On the few occasions when Chin omits a definition, the context makes the meaning clear. For example, Goong hay fot choy, or "Happy New Year," is not defined when it first occurs, but
the sentence indicates that it is a greeting for the New Year celebration. However, in case we missed its meaning, King Duk explicitly defines the phrase later for Arnold. Occasionally, Chin expects the reader to retain the meaning of a term like lay see (lucky money) and sifu (respected teacher) which is used so frequently that the reader can be expected to have absorbed its meaning. Unless the reader is excessively absentminded, then, there are no instances when the meaning of a Chinese term is ambiguous.

Comparison is another device that Chin employs extensively to make the strange familiar in Donald Duk. Chinese figures, stories, and places are identified with or explained by means of mainstream American counterparts. Throughout the novel, Chinese-somethings are cited: the Chinese Fred Astaire, the Chinese Betty Crocker, the Chinese Frank Sinatra, and so on. There is the central identification of the hero and his family with the popular culture figures of Walt Disney--Donald Duk, of course, and Daisy Duk, and a strong Uncle character; references also are made to Huey, Louie, and Dewey, to Bugs Bunny and, (in Dad's confusion) to Br'er Rabbit. When the Crawdad Man tells what he calls "a famous fairy tale," The Candlewick Fairy, his listeners question whether it is a "real" story. Crawdad Man authenticates it by comparing it to a Euroamerican tale: "It's the real Chinese story, like 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears.' Everybody knows it" (164).

Chin promotes this same approach in his 1992 collection of Asian fairy tales, a project designed to introduce Asian American children to their Asian heritage. Yet Chin homogenizes the stories in order to make them palatable: "Here," Chin writes, "you'll find we try to use the fairy tales and myths of the west, the stories you're familiar with, to take the mystery and fear of fatal exotic Orientalia out of the stories [of] the immigrants"
("Fakebook" 72). But once the mystery and fear are taken out, one wonders how much of the Chinese folk material is left intact—either in his translations or in his novel.

In another strategy, Chin taxes his readers' absorption of foreign material as little as possible by introducing new elements gradually. Chinese elements central to the novel such as the 108 Outlaw Heroes of classical Chinese literature appear in steps. King Duk first mentions the heroes in a general way in connection with his 108 model planes, referring vaguely to a book he once read. The next reference comes when Uncle Donald challenges Donald's ignorance: "'You don't know the 108 heroes of The Water Margin, do you?' Uncle Donald says, smiling and glowering at the same time" (21). The reader is thus allowed to share ignorance with the protagonist. Later, Uncle Donald explains the Water Margin in terms of Robin Hood: "The Water Margin was a place like that [Sherwood Forest]," and "One of those 108 Chinese Robin Hoods is a hood name of Lee Kuey" (22). In instructing Donald, Uncle Donald suggests that it is all very much like Erroll Flynn, Little John and the rest of the Merry Men. By this means, the reader's ignorance is excused with the further implication that erasing such ignorance requires very little effort.

A familiarizing technique similar to such comparisons is the juxtaposition of Chinese with mainstream American cultural referents. By their constant references to old-time movies and Hollywood stars, and in Donald's self-identification with Fred Astaire, the novel's characters ally themselves with "typical" mainstream Americans by claiming the same popular culture. By showing themselves to be "not strange," they dilute the strangeness of their ethnic customs and allusions. Throughout the novel, the references to classical Chinese characters (Kwan Kung, Soong Gong, Lee Kuey, Doong the tattooed wrestler, Ngawk Fay), to Chinese culture (shrines, Confucian thought and the Mandate
of Heaven), to ethnic customs (New Year's firecrackers, parades, dragons, kung fu, tai chi, Cantonese opera), or to Chinese American history (laying railroad track in the High Sierras, detention at Angel Island) occur in tandem with references to American pop culture and name-dropping from the world of television and Hollywood: Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple, Frank Sinatra, and so on.

By these various means, then, Chin introduces his readers to Chinese American culture and informs them about relevant issues; as readers proceed through the narrative alongside the curious Arnold Azalea and the reluctant Donald Duk, Chin provides abundant signals for them to find their way to the proper conclusions. Most readers are likely to position themselves next to Donald and support his point of view—at least for the duration of the narrative. Therefore, mainstream readers may come to recognize their own stereotyping attitudes in Donald and try to disassociate themselves from them; Chinese American readers may follow Donald's example in taking pride in their culture. For both groups of readers, the initial views expressed by Donald have been discredited, and to the extent that readers share those original views, they are invited to go through a process of reexamination and reevaluation.

**Strategic Outcome**

Curiously, however, the author's painstaking guidance of the audience may fail to achieve its goal. At root, I believe, is the author's basic mistrust for his audience. Chin does not dare allow his readers to work out their own conclusions. Yet spoon-feeding the lessons probably sabotages the learning. By making the strange so familiar, by making the reading so easy, Chin has deprived the reader of the dynamic role by which meaning is created, or lessons discovered. Such reading is unlikely to change the reader.
In Wolfgang Iser's terms, Chin has filled in too many of the gaps, been too determinedly determinate, and has thus damaged the "pole of subjectivity" whereby the reader assumes an active role in assembling meaning from the text's guiding narrative conventions. When readers actively engage a text, they encounter a new reality and begin to question the thought systems of the actual world, Iser claims, and from this questioning they begin to change within themselves. Surely this is precisely the outcome Chin has intended for his audience. Yet, his narrative choices effectively block their active engagement. That is, it is counterproductive that Chin himself concretizes the meaning that he wants transacted, that he has already recoded the chunk of reality in a configuration that he has fixed. As a result, Chin has suppressed the dynamic of the reader's role by pre-packaging the message and preempting the reader's efforts in discovering meaning in the text.

It is particularly ironic that this self-consciously bicultural work undercuts the reader's experience of a cultural encounter. In spite of the novel's "hyphenated" Americans, ethnic community, foreign phrases, and matched pairs of Chinese and mainstream elements, the text's potential for transmitting a cross-cultural experience is short-circuited. As Reed Way Dasenbrock has argued in "Intelligibility and Meaningfulness in Multicultural Literature in English", the reader's effort to make the unfamiliar intelligible is an integral part of multicultural understanding. Yet Chin's narrative strategies work to relieve the reader of effort; paradoxically, by making the lessons easy (or readily intelligible), he makes the lessons inaccessible (or meaningless).

Such a lesson--that encountering the "other" is effortless or not really so strange or "other"--is also dangerously misleading. If readers derive, or have confirmed for them, the notion that "under the skin, after
all, everyone is just the same," then the writer has failed to represent an authentic ethnic experience. To call Larry Louie "the Chinese Fred Astaire" implies he is basically another Fred Astaire; it downplays the "Chinese" aspect of Louie's identity and blurs his distinctiveness as, for example, a fine flamenco dancer (in contrast to Fred Astaire who was "too light on his feet"). Instead of grappling with the strange, the white mainstream reader is allowed to conclude that "they are really just like us--a little off center perhaps, or just a little quaint, or exotic, or ignorant, or [whatever], but basically the same." A corollary is that the responsibility for changing is theirs, that it is incumbent upon them to move closer to center, to approach "normal," while we stay naturally and comfortably centered where we are.

Chin's narrative choices seem predicated upon a basic distrust of his audience. He apparently does not credit his readers with the willingness or ability to grapple with a difficult or defamiliarizing text. Although his readers are in fact reading an ethnic novel, Chin shows little confidence that they are willing to work toward understanding, much less willing to be transformed. Rather, he seems to attribute to them a "show me" stance that places the entire burden for the communicative transaction on the writer. But, by accepting that burden, Chin circumscribes the reading experience for his audience.

Furthermore, instead of "showing" his "show me" readers, Chin "tells" them. Since he does not trust readers to draw the correct conclusions on their own, Chin makes truth obvious in the world of Donald Duk: there is one set of answers, one set of values, one interpretation of history. Mr. Meanwright's answers are clearly wrong, for example, and Donald and Arnold do some research to find the "correct" ones. Yet, while readers derive both entertainment and an object lesson from their observation of
the boys' progression toward understanding, the lesson is too easy; they don't earn it. In sum, Donald Duk is a gloss on experience, or a translation of the strange, or a menu of "correct" views; readers are likely to be amused or edified, but not so likely to be transformed.

When we speak of an individual's transformation, we include an emotional dimension to the process. Yet several of Chin's narrative choices designed to render culturally new material familiar also have the effect of reducing the reader's emotional engagement with the text. The cartoon form, for example, which does not accommodate a complex development of character (as one might typically expect from a bildungsroman), does not invite an emotional commitment from readers toward characters. While Donald Duk may engage the reader's good humor, it is unlikely to excite passion on behalf of the characters' problems or aspirations. Neither do we embrace an illusion of living in Chinatown, celebrating the New Year, or eating at King Duk's restaurant as we might do in a more conventionally realistic novel. As a result, the text does not encourage readers to be fully engaged members of the narrative audience. Rather, the author's didactic agenda for his authorial audience distracts a reader's interest from the story, and the cartoon's distancing effect discourages re-engagement of interest in the narrative itself.

Chin's inclusion of naive characters as "readers' guides" also affects readers' emotional commitment. Donald, Arnold, and Arnold's father behave as surrogates for readers; like members of the narrative audience, they listen to the stories and lessons of the text and accept the world of the novel as real and believable. King Duk and Uncle Donald, in turn, supply a narrating voice; what they tell Donald, Arnold, and Mr. Azalea, they tell the reader as well, and, indeed, their message overlaps with the didactic message of the implied author for his authorial audience. As
characters usurp some of the functions of the narrator and
narratee, the narrative audience in Donald Duk becomes
etiolated.

Of course the characters are not always only narrators
and observers of their narrative world but are also agents
within it. There are moments in the novel when the
characters behave like persons endowed with their own
concerns, motives, and emotions so that readers are caught
up by the narrative and (re)join the narrative audience.
Donald's encounters with the American Cong, Arnold's
response to Donald's disowning of their friendship and his
decision to go home, the boys' research in the library and
subsequent confrontation of their teacher, and the
interchanges between Donald and his father are the actions
of individuals who develop, have emotions, and make
decisions.

Yet such moments are rare, and these characters
typically function as one-dimensional stand-ins for actual
readers—Donald for Chinese American readers, Arnold for
white readers, Mr. Azalea for adult readers. The magnetic
needle of our attention is continually drawn to the story we
are learning about the history and culture of the Chinese in
America and away from the story about Donald and Arnold. By
providing his audience with such efficient readers' guides,
Chin has created characters who frequently behave more like
readers of their narrative than participants in it.
Consequently, we are positioned at the side of these
characters, and our engagement with them tends to be
rational rather than emotional.

The question then arises: If Donald Duk emphasizes the
didactic at the expense of the emotional, if the narrative
text is primarily a lesson for its audience, how successful
is the novel on its own terms? Does it effectively give
instruction? In this regard, Peter Rabinowitz has suggested
that
According to his analysis, then, a cartoon format which separates audiences would not be an auspicious formal choice if the primary aim is to deliver a moral. While flesh and blood readers of Donald Duk undoubtedly receive a lot of cultural information and historical explanation from the text, their lessons will be primarily rational. The novel may indeed enlist audience consent for such propositions as people should not be racist; it is good for Donald Duk to learn about his family and cultural roots; and Chinese laborers were admirably strong, effective, and self-motivating. Yet the author's pervasive guidance (or control) of the text muffles the impact of these lessons and discourages an emotional response.

Yet in her discussion of how literature can provide ethical knowledge, Martha C. Nussbaum claims that a text must elicit emotions as well as present rational propositions in order for readers to gain practical life knowledge. She asserts that practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom; that emotions are not only not more unreliable than intellectual calculations, but frequently are more reliable, and less deceptively seductive. (40)

A narrative text, Nussbaum suggests, is eminently appropriate to this purpose because of "the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction" (46). Furthermore, good fiction makes the reader "a participant and a friend," and, by showing the mystery and indeterminacy of life itself, novels "engender in the reader a type of ethical work . . . appropriate for life" (46-47). Nussbaum further insists
that style and form are crucial to content and to the
presentation of truth:

Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense
of what matters. Literary form is not separable from
philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of
content---an integral part, then, of the search for and
the statement of truth. (3)

Nussbaum draws her prime example texts from the great
realistic tradition of James, Proust, and Dickens. With its
cartoon form and simplified content, Donald Duk falls
outside of that tradition, and without "the particularity,
the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety
and indeterminacy" that Nussbaum credits with eliciting
readers' emotions and energies, the text of Donald Duk is
handicapped in providing the conditions necessary for
ethical learning.

A conclusion to be drawn from Nussbaum's discussion is
that the kind of persuasiveness that arises from active and
affective learning must depend upon a healthier, more
engaged narrative audience than is nourished by Chin's
narrative. The emotional and aesthetic experience provided
by Donald Duk is not sufficiently robust to stimulate the
transformation of its readers.

The ideas of M. M. Bakhtin about didacticism in the
novel are also relevant as they illuminate several
interesting characteristics of the transactions between the
author and audience of Donald Duk. Bakhtin assigns the
didactic novel to his "First Stylistic Line" of development.
The primary characteristic of the First Stylistic Line is
the fact that it knows only a single language and a
single style (which is more or less rigorously
consistent); heteroglossia remains outside the novel,
although it does nevertheless have its effect on the
novel as a dialogizing background in which the language
and world of the novel is polemically and forensically
implicated. ("Discourse" 375)
As Maria Shevtsova points out, language for Bakhtin is always multiple, but the multiplicity can be intentionally curtailed. When one voice predominates, we have a monologic novel; one example of such monologic discourse is the didactic novel which is "made whole by, as it were, coercion. . . . It is . . . closed because it gives the reader--another voice interpenetrating the novel--little or no room for maneuver" (753).

In order to make his own voice and message sound clearly, Frank Chin strives to eliminate distracting or contradictory voices; the reader is given very little room to maneuver in the narrative world of Donald Duk. The price for clarity and univocalism, however, is a loss of vitality. Donald Duk is vulnerable to Bakhtin's charge against the chivalric romance, also a monologic genre assigned to the First Stylistic Line. Bakhtin claims that the "unity and self-consistency [of the chivalric romance are] purchased at the price of polemical abstraction and [it] is therefore inert, static and moribund ("Discourse" 385)." Bakhtin continues:

The way of perceiving objects and expressions peculiar to this novelistic discourse is not the ever-changing world view of a living and mobile human being, one forever escaping into the infinity of real life; it is rather the immobile pose, someone whose movements are made not in order better to see, but quite the opposite--he moves so that he may turn away from, not notice, be distracted. ("Discourse" 385)

While Chin's novel may achieve clarity of message, by sacrificing the vitality, ambiguity, and "infinity of real life," it loses persuasiveness. Paradoxically, then, the didactic novel is destructive of its didactic purpose by its effect of distracting the reader, of failing to empower the reader "better to see."
Heteroglossia (Nonetheless)

My claim is that Donald Duk is a didactic novel with a single-voiced text so controlled that it fails both to provide a cross-cultural experience for readers and to achieve fully its own didactic agenda. Nevertheless, the novel does not exist in a vacuum. As Bakhtin shows, the heteroglossia outside the novel always provides "a dialogizing background in which the language and world of the novel is polemically and forensically implicated" (375). Contending voices will penetrate the most controlled or univocal narrative, and Frank Chin's control of the text is not absolute. The novel's linearity is not after all so straightforward, nor its slick cartoon surface so completely impermeable. There are indeed voices in Donald Duk that clash with and compromise the narrative's surface messages.

The primary surface message of Donald Duk involves the documenting of American racism and the call for its dismantling. The implied author and mentor-characters confront various kinds of oppression from the white world, and the novel details the ignorance, historical distortion, and injustice that have characterized Chinese experience in the United States. An important part of Donald Duk's education is to divest himself of his own white racism as well as to distinguish between an institutionalized white oppression and white individuals taken one at a time.

Yet it seems that the "white" more than the "racist" is operative. While the novel clearly negates Donald's self-hatred and adopted white racist attitudes, it does not so clearly oppose other varieties of exploitation. The values of a socio-economic system that depends upon competition, acquisition, and hierarchy--a system that fuels class exploitation and exacerbates racism--are taken for granted. The text also includes instances of an unsettling racialist attitude as, for example, when King Duk jokes that Donald's
obnoxious behavior may be explained by white blood—that Donald may have been switched at birth and the Duk's accidentally raised a white boy. While King Duk's remarks are made jokingly, similar notions about the purity of blood appear elsewhere in Chin's writing. Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald quotes Chin's dooms-saying distress about Chinese American extinction by assimilation from his essay, "Yellow Seattle":

Chinese America . . . is historically doomed because so many Asians are "marrying out white." They're abandoning the race, giving up on a people they feel has no history, identity, culture, or art. . . . The process of marrying out faster than we can reproduce seems irreversible. (xiv)

The assimilation metaphor of the "melting pot" has long been repudiated by scholars, and the preservation of a minority group's history and culture is generally deemed valuable, even if difficult because of majority pressures. On the other hand, living cultures change, and cultural myths adapt to change or become ossified. Donald Duk itself cites the Chinese maxim: "Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go." Yet Chin's denunciation of "fake" stories in order to keep Chinese culture intact and his attacks against Asian women (like Maxine Hong Kingston) who "marry out white" in order to preserve Chinese American identity edge away from a legitimate pride of group toward a disturbing racial chauvinism. The notion of preserving purity of blood has ugly precedents.

The novel's depiction of whites also suggests a simple reversal of superior/subordinate roles in which white characters are denied complexity. In the world of Donald Duk, the defining characteristic of white characters is ignorance: they are ignorant and villainous, ignorant and foolish, or (at their best) ignorant and subordinate. Unquestionably there are legitimate reasons for a negative portrayal of whites. In the real world, white racism
exists: powerful, pervasive, ugly. In terms of genre, the novel's didactic design requires the presence of white racists for Donald to confront and manage. On both historical and generic grounds, the railroad barons of Donald's dreams deservedly serve as the new "black hats" in contrast to the new "good-guys," the Chinese laborers. Furthermore, officious librarians, insensitive and patronizing tourists, ignorantly authoritarian teachers--the white characters who populate the novel's Chinatown--are both stock characters and fair game. We can, moreover, share Chin's satisfaction at effecting a role reversal for white and Chinese characters given the history of the uniformly humiliating roles for Asian characters in American film and literature.

These unattractive white portraits also accomplish certain narrative functions. They provide amusement. Readers (including white) will undoubtedly appreciate the irony of a light-skinned librarian "with thin blonde hair" seeking a tan and achieving a look

like long dried out summer grass bending under the wind. [He] is suntanned dark. His scalp is peeling and showing many colors of many varieties of fish flesh between stalks of his straw hair. He wears a grey double-breasted suit and brown tie. (103)

Furthermore, unattractive white characters are essential to Donald's coming of age. "Strawhair" the librarian (otherwise nameless) provides an opportunity for Donald to confront--and best--the white world. The librarian is about to turn Donald away because the library is closing, and he adds insult to injury by commenting, "Not many Chinese are interested in reading about the railroad" (103). Donald counters with a witty rejoinder, a sarcastic aside, and a "sweet sugary 'Sir.'" He thereby successfully manages to get the information he wants in spite of the pretentiously and tastelessly dressed librarian whose defining
characteristic is not only grotesquely unappealing but is race-related— the quality and color of his hair and skin. Similarly, the nameless tourist couple who come to Chinatown for firecrackers provide Donald the opportunity to practice his skills at achieving a "one-up" status to their "one-down." The couple cannot parlay their customary advantages of age, class, and race into extracting information from Donald. Donald puts on a deaf and dumb show that reduces the man with his "face pouches dangling low" to paternalistic and ineffectual bumbling. Donald routs him and his wife from his Chinatown turf.

Donald's most important battle is with the history teacher at the exclusive, predominately white, private school. Unlike other secondary white characters, Mr. Meanwright has a name—one that resonates. He makes Donald feel mean when he lectures on the Chinese in America; he may mean well, but he is more wrong than (w)right. His instruction is misleading because his knowledge of history is meager and mean—until Donald brings in the information that can correct the record. Mr. Meanwright's classroom is the site of Donald's greatest triumph. Donald is transformed from a shamefaced, self-hating student who wants to throw up at history lessons into a standard-bearer of the truth. Donald meets the teacher on his own grounds—books, research, documented facts—and demolishes him. In the process, this modern-day David challenges the entire institutional basis for his teacher's authority, including propagandistic mainstream textbooks, selective private schools, appropriating scholars, and prestigious state universities. Donald emerges triumphant—with a little help from his (white) friend—while Mr. Meanwright is left deflated, stammering apologies for his ignorance. Once again the white man yields ingloriously to the young Asian hero.
There are some white characters--the members of the Azalea family--who escape a portrayal of being insensitive, patriarchal, and foolish; and their presence seems to qualify my argument about the simplistically negative treatment of white characters. However, I believe that Arnold and his parents are saved from harsher treatment (only) because the design of the novel requires a sympathetic white presence. The Azaleas, father and son, perform a necessary narrative function as white naive learners and reader's guides; the author has had to enlist some white "teaching assistants" to accomplish his didactic project of raising the consciousness of a white majority audience. However, even these sympathetic figures are kept carefully in subordinate position.

Arnold's mother has such a minor role in the novel--she contributes a few scattered utterances and evidence that Arnold's family is intact--that her force is neutral rather than positive. Arnold's father, on the other hand, has both an important role and a positive portrayal. He appears as well-intentioned, willing to learn, and worthy of welcome into the Duk family's New Year celebration. To fulfill his structural and psychological function as advance guard/representative for white readers, Mr. Azalea must attract readers to identify with him and to accept his monitoring of their enlightenment; a repellant Azalea could not perform this job. Yet at base his portrayal is condescending because the operative trait is ignorance. Mr. Azalea may be rich, he may be successful, he may have access to private schools and Hawaii vacations, but within the narrative, he is passive and dependent upon Donald's father. Mainstream white male he may be, but in Chinatown Mr. Azalea is not in charge; he is subordinate to King Duk.

The foremost positive white character is Arnold Azalea, Donald's best friend and fellow quester. Arnold has a large and important role and--in contrast to all other white
Chinatown characters--has a complete name. Even Mr. Azalea, for example, has no first name; his secondary status in the novel and his adjunct relation to Arnold are signalled by his having only a surname which is owed, in a kind of a reverse inheritance, to his son. Mrs. Azalea's name is twice-removed, tertiary and appropriate to her marginal status; her name comes by way of her husband by way of her son.

Arnold likes Chinese food and customs--initially to Donald's disgust--and is eager to learn more. Arnold not only earns the friendship of Donald, but the approbation of King Duk. The white eleven-year-old also provides the occasion for Donald's important lesson about racism. As Dad points out to Donald even as he is disowning his friend because of what he has discovered about the historical treatment of Chinese in America, Arnold is Donald's chief ally at school. Arnold also earns the admiration of readers for the dignity with which he meets being the target of Donald's newly minted racism and for his dogged loyalty to Donald and his history project. Arnold's privileged status, and exemption from the standard characterization of whites, is further signalled by his presence in Donald's dreams.

Nevertheless, Arnold remains second-class. He is only a passive dreamer, and does not join Donald in the events of the High Sierras. There is no place for Arnold among the Chinese railroad gang which is Donald's show alone. Absent from action at the Sierra level of the narrative, Arnold is relegated to sidekick status at the Chinatown level. He serves as Donald's assistant and as (white, authorizing) witness to the authenticity of Donald's research. In a reverse of the traditional coupling of white hero with non-white companion, Arnold is Tonto to Donald's Lone Ranger, and he is accorded the same kind of limited honor and prestige as Tonto.
Moreover, the distinctive honor of having a complete name is not unqualified. The alliterative indignity Donald Duk suffers is matched or surpassed by that of Arnold Azalea. "Arnold" is an old-fashioned, rather wimpish name, unlike forceful, single-syllable masculine names like Bob or Lance that are appropriate to virile heroes. But even more problematic than "Arnold" is "Azalea," a comic surname, strange and unlikely. "Azalea" is flowery in both denotation and pronunciation, and we are invited, it seems to me, to associate it with "pansy" or with something droopingly light-weight, shrinkingly effeminate. In the world of Donald Duk where virility and aggressive competitiveness are promoted, such a demasculizing moniker is a deflating put-down.

In these ways, then, even the positive white figures are kept in their proper (subordinate) places, a feature of the narrative that I believe obstructs the dismantling of racist thinking. Combatting racism requires a rejection of the categorizing of reality along racial lines. In the case of the novel, without the complexity of multiple combinations of characteristics and races—as in, for example, the world of Tripmaster Monkey—racist categories remain intact; Donald Duk simply rearranges them. In my view, a further flaw in Donald Duk's anti-racism is its failure to question the system that produces it, a system built upon a hierarchy of subordinate/superior relationships. In stark contrast, for example, to Ariel Dorfman's scathing analysis in How to Read Donald Duck (1971) of the Donald Duck comics as "imperialist ideology", Chin's Donald Duk incorporates the comic strip values without question, much less condemnation. Where Dorfman's Donald Duck connects and critiques the oppression of capitalism, militarism, and imperialism, Chin's Donald Duk implicitly endorses them in its celebration of the American system. While Chin's novel decries racist oppression, it is
the exploitation of the Chinese American rather than the exploitive nature of capitalism that he attacks; the implied author's bitter complaint is lodged against the place ascribed to the Chinese American within the American system, not against the system itself.

What makes Donald squirm about Mr. Meanwright's Chinese history lesson, for example, is its distorted description of the Chinese laborers as "passive and nonassertive," "timid and introverted," "unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans," and "helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans" (2). Donald's immediate reaction of wanting to vomit is as yet uninformed, but in the terms of the novel, it is the "correct" response. While the pairing of the negative terms "violently" and "victimization" with "individualistic," "democratic," and "competitive" seem to suggest a critique of the American system, the words that really stick in Donald's craw are: "passive," "unassertive," "unprepared," "timid," and "introverted." It is the charge of weakness or incompetence that Donald's research counters. At stake for Donald--and the novel--is not the repair of the capitalist system but the reconstruction of the Chinese American (male) identity.

This reconstruction of identity relies upon virility, physical strength, and combativeness--qualities that are valorized in both Donald's dream world and in the Chinatown part of the narrative. In his dreams, Donald learns about the brave band of legendary Chinese outlaws who fight for right in the manner of Robin Hood, who choose their battles wisely, and who exult in being fierce and feisty. At the Chinatown level, the Vietnam vet, Victor Lee, informs Donald about the courage and caliber of Chinese American "real" soldiers and describes the strength and ferocity of the enemy Chinese in a way to rend Western stereotypes about Asians: "'Nam was good for me," he revels, "I loved it,"
unlike the ineffectual (white) crybabies who "started sucking their thumbs again" (19); as for the enemy, "You don't want to fight the Chinese... [or let them] get you. They'll hurt ya" (17).

Remarkable is what is missing from Victor Lee's lessons. Neither the character nor the implied author questions the reasons for the Vietnam war, nor is there any suggestion of a racist or imperialist element to the American intervention in Asia. Lee, "the American Cong," proclaims the cause he fought for in Vietnam was "America" and "freedom" (20), and he reserves his censure for those cowardly mama's boys who shirked their duty. The text's only reservation about this notoriously controversial war is that the United States did not win. Arnold's father scoffs at the Joint Chiefs and the generals who "blundered with such humiliating consistency," and suggests that they might have done well to read Chinese fairytales like "The Candlewick Fairy" for a better understanding of the Chinese.

The novel also tacitly supports the American capitalistic system. There is no criticism, explicit or implicit, of the distribution of wealth or exercise of power. On the contrary, the acquisition of power and wealth is valorized. Donald attends an expensive private school for gifted, rich kids. King Duk--the moral center of the novel--is carefully described as neither rich nor poor but as a master at his job--the best chef in Chinatown. Significantly, it is emphasized that Dad learned to cook "in the kitchens of the most powerful men in the world." He "passed the war in the kitchens of presidents, prime ministers, premiers, lords and generalissimos," including Chiang Kai-shek (9). A "cosmic chef," King Duk is so successful at free enterprise, he can charge people "too much money to eat broccoli" (125).

There is a passing, rather patronizing lament by Donald's mother that "we millionaires believe one has to be
poor to produce great art" (166), but her comment is a witticism rather than an expression of either artistic or social concern. The poor in the world of Donald Duk exist to provide King Duk the opportunity to demonstrate his generosity when he distributes rice in his neighborhood for the New Year. The poorest characters, the Frog Twins, live in a crowded apartment and scavenge for food, yet they are portrayed as eccentric and set in their ways, not as miserable or deprived.

The society of Donald Duck is plagued by neither the existence of a poor class nor by its possible exploitation in a system based on profits. Mr. Azalea ruefully calls himself "a crass businessman," but adds a redeeming qualification--"a crass successful businessman with dreams" (166). The limitations of his character are keyed to his status as an outsider, not to his role in business. Indeed, his enterprise in the outside world is lauded, for the same measures of success--wealth and power--operate within the world of the Duk family and within Chinese America.

Thus the novel celebrates rather than indicts the American economic system. What needs to be changed is not the distribution of wealth nor the structuring of power, but the position of Chinese Americans within that structure and their access to wealth and success. Donald Duk promotes competition and extols efforts to become "the best." The only problem with a competitive system is being at the bottom, and the moral for Donald is to be more American than the (mainstream) Americans, to outwhite whites.

This moral, however, is restricted and falters at the gender line. In fact, the novel's insistently male-directed focus gives female readers little cause to feel included in its author-audience transactions. The novel's values--physical strength, virility, competitiveness, aggressiveness--are typically masculine; the major characters and most of the secondary characters are male;
and, without exception, those characters located at the moral center of the novel—Donald's exemplars and various lesson-givers—are men. Furthermore, no female counterpart to Mr. Azalea functions as a "reader's guide"—an absence that indicates that Donald Duck does not privilege women readers in its audience. Women readers are further distanced by the novel's portrayal of women as generally silly and naturally subordinate. In sum, Donald Duck's heteroglossia includes a strong sexist voice.

Several features of the novel support a claim of sexism. First, the female presence is striking for its paucity. Donald's mother, his twin sisters, the so-called Frog Twins, an unnamed woman in the magazine store, and the twelve-year-old girl twin of Donald's dream world comprise the total of the novel's Chinese women characters. Among white characters there are two women—both minor characters with little to say, both wives: Arnold's mother and the Chinatown tourist. Even in the dialogue, the references to male film stars and television personalities far outnumber the references to women, and in Donald's dream-world, the society ladies in white petticoats who come to watch the completion of the male-engineered, male-owned railroad merit a single line of text (75). Donald's mother does manage to tell a story about "the great woman fighter called Ten Feet of Steel," the general of a small army (my emphasis) who can fight off a thousand men with her two swords. However, she is the only woman mentioned among the 108 outlaws, and she takes no action during the course of the narrative. While she may be a strong and honorable figure, Donald ends his mother's story with a disparaging—and de-feminizing—comment as if to keep her in her proper place: "She sounds like she could hold off a thousand men with the smell of her sweat" (49).

The twelve-year-old girl in Donald's dreams, daughter of Doong the magic medicine man, is strong and adept like
her twin brother in twirling the super-heavy halberd. She is also "so pretty! [that Donald] wouldn't mind talking to her" (29), and she is later identified with a girl that the waking Donald notices with some interest in the New Year's Dragon parade. Yet even this attractive figure fulfills a male-validating purpose. That Donald shows interest in the girl demonstrates that he is a "normal" boy, and it counters the worry voiced in passing by King Duk about his having homosexual tastes. Moreover, the girl is a twin, a third example of female doubling. Evidently, in the world of Donald Duk females cannot stand alone: they are either wives or twins. In this case, her twin is male, and--to put her strength in the proper perspective--the brother handily out-performs her in the feat of halberd-twirling.

That Donald Duk is a boy's tale, a male's coming-of-age narrative, might account for an underrepresentation of female characters (although such a tale does not categorically preclude females). What is more telling and indicative of misogyny, however, are the characterization and treatment of the few women figures who do appear in the text.

For example, the white woman tourist in Chinatown is self-effacing and subordinate to her foolish husband. Although she may be credited with being the first to understand Donald's alleged speaking problem, her understanding is in fact mistaken, and, in any case, the principal effect of her behavior is to discredit her husband who is too insensitive to perceive what is happening. The other white female figure, Arnold's mother, has little character or force; she has only a few lines in the novel, one of which discredits her husband: "My husband is a frustrated artist. He knows what he wants to say, but he doesn't know what art to use to say it best" (166). Both women are adjuncts to their husbands.
The treatment of the Chinese female characters tends to be both more detailed and more negative than the relatively neutral portraits of the white women. The Chinese woman in the magazine store is nameless although the man in the same scene rates multiple naming: a nickname (Sergeant Bullwhip), his official family name (Chang Apana), and a metaphoric name (the "real Charlie Chan"). Bullwhip enters the scene just in time to settle a dispute being carried on between Donald and the woman; the woman apparently does not have enough authority for Donald to accept her answer to his question.

Penelope and Venus Duk have names (albeit comically pretentious ones), but they are so little individualized that they are indistinguishable even by their fellow characters; Uncle Donald gives them new silk minop jackets for the New Year, one red, one green, in order to be able to tell them apart. The reader, however, is hard-pressed to distinguish the wisecracking, teasing know-it-all twins. Their behavior fits their position as "older sister," and their dialogue adds verve and sparkle to the narration. They are given lines about being "merely daughters" and about the "insensitive, machismo, chauvinist pigs" who are "misogynists" (149), but we are not invited to take them seriously as rebels or feminists in part because they also indulge in more conventional female talk about marriage and doweries, in part because they are generally immature and silly.

The Duk twins' behavior also reveals the lines of respect in the Duk family. The twins not only torment their younger brother Donald, but are flippant and disrespectful toward their mother. They mimic Daisy Duk's manner of speaking, ridicule her pronunciation, and contradict her statements. Nor is this behavior reprimanded by either mother or father, though the parents periodically remind their children of their manners in other situations. It is
unthinkable that the children would treat their father or Uncle Donald in a similar way.

Daisy Duk is therefore presented as a legitimate figure for ridicule with her "excape" for "ess-cape," her "too dainty" use of her napkin, her "trilling, tra-la-la" love of romance. "'I love the way Mom speaks Spittoon,' Venus says" (105). Mrs. Duk is quite dense and deaf to mainstream ways: she pairs Robert Lowell and Norman Rockwell, and Donald must explain to her that a comment by Mrs. Azalea is only social repartee: "'Mom,' Donald Duk whispers into her ear, 'Mrs. Azalea was joking.' 'Yes, wasn't that nice of her?' Mom answers happily" (86).

Daisy Duk's inadequate understanding, which stems in part from her being Christian, makes her peripheral as well to much of what is important in Chinese culture. She understands less than a child does about the Candlewick Fairytale: "Ah-Daisy, you're born here, your folks are Christians. You don't hear the Chinese stories like Chinese children," charges the Crawdad Man (164). Nor does she truly understand the novel's central ritual of launching and exploding the paper airplanes. "[I]t sounds like a delicious pagan ceremony to me," Daisy Duk says. "Fun for savages, but after all the time we have spent putting together 108 of these things . . . [t]hen to just blow them up." Her husband has to instruct her "charmingly" (patronizingly) that "Life is war, Mommy" (157). As for the novel's culminating event, the highly valued Chinese art form that has brought Uncle Donald to San Francisco, the arena for Dad's prowess and power--namely, the Cantonese opera--Mrs. Duk airily confesses that "I understand the audience better than the opera" (171). The opera proceeds nonetheless without benefit of her understanding. Daisy Duk's trivialization is further demonstrated by Donald's attitude toward her. While Donald might go to his mother to intercede with his dad—as he does in the case of the stolen
airplane--he would never seek her advice or wisdom. Mrs. Duk's pronouncements must be taken provisionally until authorized by King Duk. She speaks for our amusement, not our edification.

The novel also suggests that Chinese women tend toward the grotesque. "Some old Chinese women get bald just like old Chinese men," Donald says (36). A full-blown example of Chinese female grotesquerie is the pair of Fong Fong sisters who scavenge in restaurant garbage cans. Donald describes them as: "Scrunched up old Chinatown women who have exactly the same eyes. Frog eyes. Their eyes seem to bulge out of their heads. . . . [T]hey look like they eat flies" (10). He dubs them "the Frog Twins"; they "wobble" and "creep," "gasp" and "squeak," and touch Donald with their "little froggy fingers" (57). Even King Duk chides them about talking too much and risking the loss of their false teeth (138). Although they perform a significant role in the novel's progression (they are witnesses for Donald in the American Cong case, and they rather miraculously provide Donald with the correct airplane kit at the very moment he needs one), the Frog Twins seem to an eleven-year-old to be merely old and ugly, comic and creepy.

Donald's adolescent point of view controls much of the narrative--and Donald shows himself to be fallible--but there are no corrective voices to his misogyny from other characters or from the implied author. Scorn for girls and for one's mother may be normal from an eleven-year-old American boy, but the unrelentingly negative portrayal of women in the novel cannot be attributed solely to Donald. These patriarchal attitudes come as well from the implied author.

Such attitudes match those expressed elsewhere by Frank Chin. The criticism in his essays of prominent Chinese American women also penetrates the novel. When Venus and
Penelope mimic their mother, they simultaneously savage Connie Chung, the television newscaster:

"Gee!" [Venus and Penny say], "Mom! You sound just like Connie Chung . . . doing her impression of Annette Funicello, . . . doing her impression of Shirley Temple, . . . saying Don't you dare hurt my grandfather, You!" (104-05)

Among the lessons that Donald, Arnold, and the reader learn, then, are that women are by nature silly or grotesque, that they become sillier or more grotesque as they grow old and/or refuse to stay in place, and that their proper place is to serve as accessory to men and as target for their humor.

In conclusion, the relation between author and audience in Donald Duk is primarily that of instructor to instructed. In a variety of guises Frank Chin acts as a didactician trying to dispel debilitating myths, trying to raise readers' consciousness. He employs certain techniques to effect his purpose—a naive protagonist with a sidekick, a novel of education format, numerous mentors for Donald and several "readers' guides" for the audience, and frequent comparisons and repetitions to render the strange familiar. Paradoxically, the implied author does not learn by his own example, for he ignores King Duk's effective instructional method of allowing Donald to discover truths for himself. King guides and gently chides, but Donald himself does the research in the library, dreams the dreams of history, and reaches his own conclusions. By contrast, the author allows his audience little scope for the imaginative work of discovering meaning; in his rage for the audience to "get it" and "get it right," the author fills up the spaces in the narrative with explanation.

Beyond the intended surface lessons, moreover, are less attractive messages that color the novel's impact in ways probably not intended by the author. In addition, Chin's
audience is restricted. While the narrative welcomes both younger and older, both white and Chinese readers, it relegates a major segment of the audience—namely women—to second-class status. Finally, in shortcircuited its potential for reproducing a cross-cultural experience, the novel ironically fails to promote the very kind of social and individual change that the text means to champion. Instead of a narrative that allows its audience to see better or to see more, Donald Duk curtails our vision and screens us from a potentially rich and contentious world. For these reasons, the transformative power of the novel's lessons is compromised. For a slim volume with a highly controlled voice, there is a substantial amount of static.
ENDNOTES

1. James Phelan points out that adding an "e" to "Duk" yields "Duke," which thereby doubles Dad's title to royalty and adds a decidedly different flavor to the family name than the addition of "c" for "Duck." Donald acts like a duck quacking at the beginning of the narrative; in the course of the novel, he must earn the status of duke, son of a king.

2. There is only one instance where I found a cultural allusion left unexplained. This occurs when King Duk tells Donald "a Chinese joke"—"Only in America can you run to any phone book, any town, look under C and L and W and find somebody to help you" (90). His father expresses disgust when Donald doesn't understand it. King leaves both Donald and the non-Chinese reader without explanation (90). It is not significant to the action or to Donald's major lessons, but it does serve as an insider joke that can prick white readers with the knowledge that this is a community where they are outsiders and not in control. This seems to be the only instance where readers are deliberately made aware of being "other," an awareness essential, as I argue later, to reproducing the experience of being positioned within or between two cultures.

CHAPTER V
TRIPMASTER MONKEY
and
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON
AMERICAN TALK-STORY DAEDALATOR

Language is important to our sanity. You have to be able to tell your story, you have to be able to make up stories or you go mad.
Maxine Hong Kingston, interview with Arturo Islas

I want my audience to include everyone.
Maxine Hong Kingston,
"Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers"

Maxine Hong Kingston places great value upon her audience, and a significant part of her talking-story is the invention of an audience who will share in her creative work. "Audience," the protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book* says, "makes the stories important." For Wittman Ah Sing, as for Kingston, the meaning of the storytelling transaction relies upon the creation and participation of audience. In the novel, notions about audience infuse theme and plot, and the propulsion of the narrative is fueled by the energy put forth by author and protagonist to find and fashion an audience--both within the novel and in the world surrounding.

As we have seen, the concept of audience is complicated for ethnic American writers by their divided/double bicultural experience and by the confusion of artistic and political demands placed upon their writing. As the first well-known Asian American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston's
work has served as a lightning rod for attracting explosive critical outbursts from various groups of readers within her audience. Kingston has had to contend with the contradictory demands from Asian American critics concerned with ethnic correctness, on the one hand, who charge her with not being authentically Chinese, and from uninformed or insensitive mainstream critics, on the other, who treat her work as not being authentically American. With wit and cogency, Kingston addresses these conflicting charges in her essays and interviews; in her fiction she goes beyond contention and factions to create a variegated narrative world and an audience that builds upon—glories in—diversity and factionalism to reach out toward the greatest possible inclusiveness. Like Ralph Ellison, Kingston is acutely conscious of the heterogeneity of her American authorial audience, although her protagonist diverges from Ellison's invisible man in his manner of approach—in his degree of trust and openness—to the narrative/characterized audience. Unlike Toshio Mori, Kingston is not primarily concerned with portraying Chinese America to a white audience, nor like Frank Chin does she aim to instruct white America about the injustices suffered within the United States by Chinese Americans. That her novel may accomplish both goals is secondary to her drive to tell her story to the widest audience possible, to merge myth and experience from both Chinese and American tradition to create a narrative that speaks to all, humans, of human matters, and that is both distinctively Chinese (American) and—following the tradition of her protagonist's namesake, Walt Whitman—solidly mainstream.
The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, published in 1976, was the first major work by an Asian American to receive wide public attention and critical acclaim. As a pioneer author, Maxine Hong Kingston has had to struggle with endemic ignorance, to clear away the brambles of mainstream stereotyping preconceptions, and to operate from an undergrowth of ethnic frustration and resentment. Critics from the Chinese American community (including most notably, Frank Chin) have castigated Kingston on several grounds. Their charges include: fictionalizing and thereby distorting Chinese experience in works that purport to be "non-fiction" such as The Woman Warrior or China Men; falsifying Chinese legend and history; mistranslating Chinese terms; and perpetuating negative stereotypes, especially of the (emasculated or misogynist) Chinese American male. In commenting upon the ethnic writer's "burden of dual authenticity," Deborah Woo notes that Kingston's harshest critics have felt violated by Kingston's very success because "outsiders" have validated the author and because she "manipulates" her cultural material for literary purposes at the expense of group interests (Woo 175). That is, her success is judged to be the result of catering to mainstream priorities--of "selling out"--and her creativity is seen to threaten, rather than preserve the foundations of Chinese American culture.

These readers look for a positive representation of Chinese American culture as a whole, "an ideologically correct version of Chinese-American history" (Wong, "Guided Chinatown Tour" 254), and free of anything that could be used to injure Asian America or to perpetuate stereotypes. According to this thinking, Kingston should be an "exemplar and spokesperson whose life will inspire the writer's own people as well as enlighten the ignorant about social
truths" (Wong 258). Yet when we strip away the language of "good example" and "inspiration," we find that these strictures at base simply shuffle stereotypes, replacing the old, externally-imposed set with a new, group-authenticated set. Either set restricts the writer and her writing, and renders them less effective.

Sau-ling Wong notes the disabling effect on minority literary creation of "a set of assumptions about ethnic literature that are grounded in a keen awareness of the sociopolitical context" ("Guided Chinatown Tour" 250). Wong cites the assertion that "the existing body of Chinese-American literature [is] small enough to justify a more stringent demand on the Chinese-American writer, especially the woman writer," and she quotes Frank Chin that "personal pain--merely a matter of 'expression of ego' and 'psychological attitudinizing'--must be subordinated to political purpose" ("Guided Chinatown Tour" 255). Because Kingston fails to adhere to their dicta, such critics brand her as traitor to her group--a polemical charge rather than a literary judgment. The thrust of this kind of pressure--hardly unique, and reminiscent of the charges lobbed at Ralph Ellison--is to harness, and therefore hamper, artistic expression to narrowly prescribed political ends.

Paradoxically the focus for such critics is upon the entity they construe as opponent or oppressor--a white mainstream audience. Wong underlines the significance that audience response holds for these critics, pointing out that "the projected reactions of the white audience are kept constantly in sight" (254). Yet, this conception of audience as a homogenized and monolithic mass is itself a stereotype, and one that posits readers whose ignorance and bad faith can be counted on. Critics operating with this conception of audience allow little possibility that a text can heighten readers' awareness or deepen their understanding. Furthermore, although the thrust of this
argument locates the "problem" of ethnic writing like Kingston's with readers, its solution falls wholly and heavily upon the author; Kingston, as ethnic writer, must create a narrative "safe for white consumption" (Wong 250).

Kingston attracts a different kind of pressure from mainstream readers. Out of a combination of ignorance and preconception, many critics writing for the national press have exoticized her work and imposed "an oriental inscrutability" upon the author; so, they conclude, both writer and writing are essentially unknowable. But "unknowable-ness" not only dehumanizes the writing, it also shifts the burden for understanding from reader to writer. If the work by nature is inaccessible, then the reader is excused from the effort required to comprehend the text and is justified in fixing a warped and warping grid of misconceptions upon it. In "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Kingston (hilariously) lists comments and headlines from the numerous reviews of The Woman Warrior to illustrate the propensity of her (fellow) American reviewers to

measur[e] the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental. . . . Pridefully enough, I believed that I had written with such power that the reality and humanity of my characters would bust through any stereotypes of them. . . . I had not calculated how blinding stereotyping is, how stupefying. The critics who said how the book was good because it was, or was not, like the oriental fantasy in their heads might as well have said how weak it was, since it in fact did not break through that fantasy. ("Mis-readings" 55)

In the last chapter of Tripmaster Monkey, Wittman Ah Sing expresses, in his own irascibly humorous manner, the same dismay at the Bay Area newspaper reviews of his opera extravaganza:

So. You were entertained. You liked the show, huh? . . . Let me discuss with you what the Chron and the Examiner said, and the Oakland Tribune and The Daily Cal and the Berkeley Gazette, and the Shopping News,
and the Barb. . . . You like the reviews? I am sore and disappointed. Come on, you can't like these reviews. Don't be too easily made happy. Look. "East meets West." . . . My mouth doesn't want to say any more wog-hater non-American Kipling. "Twain shall." Shit. Nobody says "twain shall," except in reference to us. We've failed with our magnificence of explosions to bust through their Kipling. I'm having to give instruction. There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West. This is The Journey In the West. I am so fucking offended. (Triomaster 307-08)

And further:

Come on. What's so "exotic"? We're about as exotic as shit. Nobody soo-pecial here. No sweet-and-sour shit. No exotic chop suey shit. So this variety show had too much motley; they didn't have to call it "chop-suey vaudeville." I am so pissed off. But. This other piece says that we are not exotic. . . . Do I have to explain why "exotic" pisses me off, and "not exotic" pisses me off? . . . To be exotic or to be not-exotic is not a question about Americans or about humans. (308)

How does--how can--the ethnic writer "break through the fantasy" or "bust through the stereotype" that congeals into a reading schemata which cracks the wrong code and strangles real understanding? The author, the artist, the playwright is called upon to explain--"is having to give instruction." We see, then, that for both groups of critics--the unenlightened and stolid mainstream as well as the restless margin--the failings charged to Kingston or her work emerge from a failure in reading; nevertheless, both groups turn to the author to redress their mis-reading.

Kingston herself is acutely conscious of her responsibility as writer toward those readers who do not share her Chinese American culture. "The artistically interesting problem," she asserts, "is: How much exposition is needed? There are so many levels of knowledge and ignorance in the audience" ("Mis-readings" 63). Elsewhere, she speaks of the difficulties in establishing what is and
what is not common knowledge; once the gaps are established, how does one fill them without stanching the narrative flow with static exposition (1991 PBS interview with Bill Moyers). When she finds herself caught between the artistic demands of the narrative and the dictates of uninformed or politically censorious readers, she responds actively and variably. To the demand that she try to be properly representative of Chinese American experience as a whole, Kingston replies,

The one thing about which I am absolutely sure is that I am a Chinese-American woman. . . . I know that what I have to say is what a Chinese-American person is thinking. I don't have to go out and make a survey, I don't have to get a committee of my peers to correct my work. (Pfaff 26)

Authenticity and truthfulness must emerge from her private vision, from her individual experience as shaped by her own particular artistry. Like any artist, Kingston cannot harness her art to someone else's political agenda nor can she speak in a common-denominator generalized voice.

On the other hand, Kingston acknowledges that her work is influenced by certain kinds of readers' response. The reaction to The Woman Warrior, for example, affected the structure itself of her subsequent book, China Men. She admits that

The mainstream culture doesn't know the history of Chinese-Americans, which has been written and written well. That ignorance makes a tension for me, and in the new book [China Men] I just couldn't take it anymore. So all of a sudden, right in the middle of the stories, plunk--there is an eight-page section of pure history. . . . It really affects the shape of the book, and it might look quite clumsy. But on the other hand, maybe it will affect the shape of the novel in the future. Now maybe another Chinese-American writer won't have to write that history. (Pfaff 25)

Here Kingston deliberately caters to her readers' ignorance in order to reduce the tension caused by their uninformed response; she meets their need for gap-filling and
contextualizing even though her catering may interfere with more purely artistic, formal concerns.

Kingston's hope, quoted above, that she has helped clear the way for future Chinese American writers has been at least partially realized. Since the publication of The Woman Warrior in 1976 and China Men in 1980, there has appeared a spate of Chinese American writers—Amy Tan, Gish Jen, David Henry Hwang, Gus Lee, David Wong Louie (even Frank Chin)—who have been able to follow in her wake. Both Tan and Hwang have paid public homage to Kingston's influence on their work, and Hwang specifically credits The Woman Warrior as giving him "a model by which I could begin to discover my own voice" (Talbot 8).

Mainstream reviewers, on the other hand, who seem to learn slowly, have benefited less from Kingston's example. As recently as 1992, for example, Gish Jen reports that she was "appalled" at the way critics treated her novel, Typical American. Jen laments that "she believes that there should be no distinction between works by Asian Americans and Americans, and that the ethnic identity of the author should not be used as the sole basis for judging a work" (Cheng 20). Yet, at the same time, Jen herself is susceptible to ethnic-connected pressure from audience response; she admits that when she writes she is "careful in her use of humor because of the effect it may have on how people see the Chinese" (Cheng 20).

Acutely conscious of who her readers are, Kingston lays claim to the largest audience possible: "I am really a megalomaniac because I write for everybody living today and people in the future; that's my audience, for generations" (Ilas 16). Concomitant with this notion of "audience as everybody," Kingston's place of publication is the world—now or hereafter. Had she not found an American publisher for The Woman Warrior, she tells us, she would have sent the manuscript outside the United States—"to Britain, Hong
Kong, Canada, Taiwan--anywhere--and if it did not then find a publisher, I would keep it safe for posthumous publication" ("Mis-readings" 65).

The issue of audience relations is complicated by the fact that Kingston does not treat her vast audience as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass. In her writing, she addresses particular groups of readers within the audience, sometimes implicitly, other times quite explicitly, shifting her focus and our attention from one group to another. As Kingston describes her position:

The audience of The Woman Warrior is also very specific. For example, I address Chinese Americans twice, once at the beginning of the book and once at the end. . . . I even write for my old English professors of the new criticism school in Berkeley. . . . There are puns for Chinese speakers only, and I do not point them out for non-Chinese speakers. . . . I've written jokes in that book so private, only I can get them; I hope I sneaked them in unobtrusively so nobody feels left out. I hope my writing has many layers, as human beings have layers. ("Cultural Mis-readings" 65)

Simultaneously--and non-paradoxically--she reminds us that her audience is also herself; her universal book is her book:

When I write most deeply, fly the highest, reach the furtherist, I write like a diarist--that is, my audience is myself. . . . So I do believe in the timelessness and universality of individual vision. It would not just be a family book or an American book or a woman's book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book. ("Cultural Mis-readings" 64-65)

Kingston's intended audience, then, extends from a single person--herself--to all persons everywhere, all times. Her audience is huge, multilayered and variegated; at the same time, it is differentiated--divisible into groups distinguished not only by ethnicity, but by age, gender, class, and generation. Kingston writes for everyone: for Chinese Americans and white Americans, as we have already seen, but also for survivors of the past (the
Yet, in addition to its diversity and magnitude, Kingston's audience is most distinguished by its creativity. Beyond its function--and value--as a receptacle for stories, or a receiver of truths, her audience has agency in the discovery of meaning. In her relations with audience, Kingston shifts back her own role and shares responsibility with her readers. When questioned about the wisdom of burdening readers with unfamiliar material, Kingston replied:

Of course I should put a burden on the reader, give them a challenge. Readers are people and all human beings have this burden of life to figure out what's true, authentic, meaningful, dross; figure out what's hallucination, what's a figment, what's madness. (1991 PBS interview with Bill Moyers)

Kingston deliberately leaves out what can be found in other books. In "Cultural Mis-reading," she delivers a challenge to her flesh-and-blood readers: "Some readers will just have to do some background reading. . . . Readers ought not to expect reading always to be as effortless as watching television" (64). Rather, Kingston invites her readers to share the burden, figure out what's meaning and madness, and join the intricate and inventive project of telling stories.

THE TEXT

Wittman Ah Sing, protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book*, finds neither reading nor life effortless. Throughout the novel we see this self-dubbed "reader of the tribe" grappling with the "figuring-out burden" of life, a
mind monkey boggling at questions of what is true or hallucination, meaningful or madness. Wittman, the word addict, talks himself through fear and into connections, uses words to construct a self and reality.

Chinese and American, ethnic and everyman, Wittman is caught in a morass of contradictions: He rages against his assignment--by ethnicity and physical appearance--to the margins of society, yet struggles as an artist, to reach the "cutting edge"; with embarrassment he scorns the "uncoolness" of the F.O.B.s (fresh-off-the boat Chinese immigrants) and eschews the company of fellow "ethnicks," yet he becomes spokesman for (and to) his Chinese American group; as poet his task is solitary, and he isolates himself in his room to write, but as playwright his need is social, and he plunges into company to find supporters and actors for his play.

Wittman is recently graduated, a male at the other end of adolescence from Donald Duk, but like Donald, an American striving to embody those traits of self-reliance, competitiveness, and independence that define American. At the same time, he is a 1960s beatnik-become-pacifist and (willy nilly) ethnic member-in-good-standing railing against those standard components of the American experience: racism, commercialism and militarism. Wittman daily contemplates suicide, yet each day opts for life: "He ought to let it come in, he decided. He would let it all come in" (4).

Kingston has created her character out of two literary traditions: Wittman is both the trickster Monkey King of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*--a combination humorous adventure tale and spiritual quest--and the new Walt Whitman, an exuberant, democratic, twentieth-century Singer of the American Self. He is both Chinese and American, and yet neither. In his effort to piece together
an identity, Wittman draws on both Chinese and American tradition yet at the same time distances himself from elements and behavior patterns in each. During the course of the novel, we see this young American, our fellow reader, undertake an apprenticeship to become trip-master---that is, to try, by stages, first to find his own way, then to guide others in theirs, to find his audience and provide wisdom through faking and riffing and telling life's tale. Through a series of lessons, some of them false starts, we watch Kingston's "evolutionary monkey" evolving into a good man.

Because Wittman is an aspiring playwright, he needs an audience. As American/Chinese/human, he needs community. In the course of the novel these needs merge. The narrative traces Wittman's tripping and questing to find an audience and fashion community, to gain enlightenment and chart a good life. By the end of the novel, Wittman is surrounded by his audience-community and he has indeed learned much--not everything yet, but enough to offer his guidance. Out of the complexity of his contradictions and the richness of his imagination, Wittman, this "Chinese-hyphenated-schizoid-dichotomous-American" (328) artist, is a suitable alter ego for Maxine Hong Kingston and a superb (as well as hilariously comic) tripmaster/guide for the rest of us.

Audience-qua-community in Tripmaster Monkey serves the novel's theme, progression, and truth value. Through its dynamic presence, audience appropriates the force of character--a character that develops an identity, interacts with other characters, and initiates action. Through Tripmaster, then, the author is able to explore in fiction some of the complex questions about the composition, behavior, and ontology of audience that she confronts as an ethnic writer.

Kingston's protagonist models a possible response to the challenge she outlined in the Moyers interview. We watch Wittman make a monkey of himself trying to sort out
the meaningful from the dross, the authentic from hallucination. We watch Wittman's gradual enlightenment about how to gain mastery over himself and his interactions with others and how, in other words, to become a better person. In addition, Kingston provides a narrator who hovers protectively and scoldingly over Wittman; the narrator adds her wiser perspective to Wittman's behavior and judgment. The narrator also enlarges the field of play. Analogous to Wittman's inviting everyone he knows to be part of his play and, then, simply everyone (without qualifications) to be part of his audience, the narrator of Tripmaster repeatedly offers a direct invitation to her readers to come along for the trip, to form a larger audience: "You're invited" (288).

The novel has barely begun before Wittman puts together a sort of audience. Riding a bus into San Francisco, he transforms the bus into theater and puts on a performance for his fellow passengers. He is "the only passenger sitting on a crosswise seat in front; the other passengers, facing forward, were looking at him. Had he spoken aloud? They're about to make sudden faces. . . . All right, then, all right" (8). And so Wittman obliges his fellow riders by hauling out a copy of Rilke and reading aloud to them from The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge as the bus proceeds. Wittman notes the behavior of his audience (as he notices everything): "Some of those present on the Muni were looking at the reader, some had closed their eyes, some looked out the window," and Wittman concludes (somewhat inconclusively) that "everyone perhaps [was] listening" (8). At the least neither driver nor passengers tell him to stop, and Wittman/Whitman dubs them "Walt Whitman's 'classless society' of 'everyone who could read or be read to'" (9).

This first, captive audience is artificial and short-lived, nor is it the only false start Wittman makes in his
efforts to find a genuine audience. When Wittman begins his play, for example, he writes all night long to the wrong audience, to Asian crowds gathering on the banks of Chinese rivers for the entertainment of a traveling music boat. In the morning, Wittman burns all his pages: "He had been tripping out on the wrong side of the street. The wrong side of the world. What had he to do with foreigners? . . . His province is America. America, his province" (41).

But his all night effort is not for naught. Wittman has solved "the block question" for the ethnic writer (when, and how, to announce the race of author and characters) by his choice of form. "By writing a play, he didn't need descriptions that racinated anybody" (34). He decides to cast blind. One blow against the block; one blow for de-racination. He also discovers a mode, from music, that will help shape his new form. "Let musicians rule," Wittman declares. "Play a--what kind of music? . . . and make the world spin in the palm of your hand" (35).

In the next stage of his trip-mastery apprenticeship, Wittman performs for several one-person audiences. Although his audience is scant, in each case he learns something useful. His first one-audience performance is for "the beautiful Nanci Lee," object of Wittman's desire. Over coffee in North Beach and poetry (his) in his "ah-pok-mun," Wittman performs (what he hopes will be) a dazzling series of characters: Marlon Brando, Hamlet, Kyuzu the samurai, Charlie Chaplin, the Monkey King. But Wittman monopolizes the "stage," and Nanci is only briefly and begrudgingly given a share of the conversation--"her turn to talk about her kiddiehood." Nanci is not very impressed by his monologue. She also reveals to Wittman how little he had succeeded during college--despite his plays-in-progress and his public readings--in reaching an audience: "He had talked for four years, building worlds, inventing selves, and she had not heard" (19). He is not more successful with
Nanci now. At the crescendo of his monkey antics, she hurries away commenting: "I'm an actress; I know about saying other people's words. You scare me. A poet saying his own words. I don't like watching" (33). So, in spite of his mimicry, zaniness, nostalgia, and inventiveness, Wittman loses both the girl and his audience.

However, Wittman learns something about the costs of being self-absorbed, self-promoting. With Nanci, also, Wittman first articulates the notion of community:

Well, the place that a Chinese holds among other Chinese--in a community somewhere--matters. It was a very personal question [i.e. Why don't you return to your hometown?] he was asking her. It would pain a true Chinese to admit that he or she did not have a community, or belonged at the bottom or the margin." (10)

In these ways, Wittman's session with Nanci prepares him for a similar interchange later, with Taña DeWeese.

As it turns out, there is a reversal of roles when Wittman first sees Taña; Taña is performing, and Wittman--uncharacteristically silent--listens. He tells himself that he is too shy to join Taña's recitation of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Instead, he joins her audience, clapping and whistling, approaching her only when she finishes her performance. This beginning augurs well for Wittman; he discovers that Taña is "melting my loneliness" (113), and indeed, unlike his interaction with Nanci, he gets Taña's attention, gets the girl and, eventually, gets married.

Wittman's obsession with audience has roots deep in his childhood. As a very young child, his vaudeville parents pushed him to perform, and his earliest memory is the moment when he is claimed by audience. As he confides to Nanci Lee, his parents put him out on stage dressed in his Baby Uncle Sam monkey costume, and

I got zapped all at once. That may account for why I'm uncommon. I saw: all of a sudden, curtains that rose and rose, and on the other side of them, lights,
footlights and overheads, and behind them, the dark, but different from the previous dark. Rows of lights, like teeth, uppers and lowers, and the mouth wide open laughing--and either I was inside it standing on the tongue, or I was outside, looking into a mouth, and inside the mouth were many, many strangers. . . . They wanted an important thing to happen. . . . I opened my mouth for it to happen. . . . But somebody swooped me up. . . . Sheepcrooked m'act. (15-16)

By this account, Wittman's first reaching out to audience is aborted (as is his more recent attempt at linking up with Nanci Lee), but he is hooked before he gets the hook.

In an interesting parallel (between Wittman's two encounters with eligible young women), Wittman recounts another childhood memory about audience to Tana DeWeese. In this case, his story about his family traveling around the U.S. with a European circus has disturbing ramifications. He remembers that the circus clowns looked at his childhood monkey outfit, and

warned him of the circus tradition of tossing enemies and wise asses off the train. Boys and girls in Europe were riding in cattle cars, and were trampled. That was why he had to give an anti-jap speech from the caboose. The men around the potbelly stove gave him a yellow flag. (177)

Wittman tells Tana this story at a party hosted by Lance Kamiyama, a Sansei (third generation Japanese American) who was interned with his family at the time of Wittman's caboose speech. Unlike the earlier childhood memory in which the child Wittman seems destined for great performances, this one centers on questionable behavior that makes the story more a confession than a boast. The cause and effect--the antecedent to "that was why"--is not clear, but it is significant, I think, that the anti-Jap speech is delivered from a train--the emblem from Chinese American history that is most closely comparable to the internment camp of Japanese American experience. During the party, Wittman envies Lance his stories (and group solidarity) from
the internment: "How to kill Lance and eat his heart, and plagiarize his stories?" (126). "If only he hadn't been but a toddler at the time," the older Wittman imagines, instead of abetting the divisiveness between Chinese and Japanese in America (for reasons of safety or convenience), he "would have gotten on the train that took people who looked like himself away" (126). The yellow flag awarded him by the European clowns for his actual behavior is also disturbing; the color resonates with negative associations—yellow for gold mountain (the Chinese name for the United States often interpreted to portray the Chinese as sojourning gold-diggers), yellow for cowardice, yellow for alien and unwelcome non-white people. The ambiguities of being Asian in America reverberate in this childhood remembrance.

At the unemployment offices, Wittman engages in more one-on-one performing. As he is waiting in line, an old Chinese lady appears, having "caught a whiff of Wittman's free time" (228). Mrs. Chew passes their time in line by talking-story, and Wittman practices some more listening. When she tells stories about Chinese detainees on Angel Island, Wittman exhibits that kind of Chinese American loyalty that has pricked some of Maxine Hong Kingston's own critics. He wants to cut and tailor Mrs. Chew's stories:

"I thought you were about to tell me a hero story. Didn't any of those guys try to escape through the trapdoor and swim to the Big City? I don't think we ought to spread crap stories about how tightass and clean we are, and how sneaky sly we are." . . . "Oh, but we have a tradition of shitting and pissing," said Mrs. Chew. "The reason we have war on earth was because of a fart." (234-35)

At this point, not only is Wittman's false and censoring loyalty debunked, but he helps and accepts help from his "fellow ethnick" (she tells him the "correct" answers for the form; he intercedes for her with the interviewer). In addition, Wittman's thinking is nudged by a new thought about the base nature of and proper attitude toward war--a
thought that will help effect an important monkey transformation (beee-e-een!) later.

After his give-and-take encounter with Mrs. Chew, Wittman resumes his monologic (though inventive) mode with the unemployment counselor, Mr. Sanchez. He piles story upon story about previous employment and current job goals until Mr. Sanchez finally interrupts, "I can't send you to interviews talking like this" (244). However, in spite of his exasperation, Mr. Sanchez remains protective of Wittman and tries to find a way to make Wittman and the system fit each other. He continues to advise Wittman to be "realistic" and insists on putting down something for "a fallback position that you can realistically get, such as retail clerk," but he also agrees to list "playwright job" even though "We have never had a call for playwright, I'm telling you" (244). But Wittman has made a human contact with the counselor, and Mr. Sanchez later joins his theater troupe. Even as he is bucking the system and monopolizing the conversation, Wittman is learning to make healthy connections, learning how, Whitman-like, to recruit others to his project. He has made progress, for example, from his earlier scornful put-down attitude toward Louise, his toy department co-worker; it is significant, I think, that Louise is one of the few characters we meet who does not show up for Wittman's play. Although Louise's happy immersion in the world of marketing and her enthusiasm for values that are at odds with Wittman's views might explain her absence, Wittman's callow behavior unmitigated by college or blood ties is more likely to have caused her disaffection and to have lost him her support.

Wittman continues his apprenticeship at Lance's party by observing a tripmaster in action. As the narrator informs us, "Those were the days when heads prepared their trips carefully, and chose a watchman who promises to remain straight. Just in case" (102). Therefore, a group dropping
L.S.D. ask Charley Bogard Shaw to be their guide, and Wittman is invited to assist Charley: "If called upon, the guide tells the tour group his wisdom, such as the reality he's seeing back in the straight world." In Wittman's judgment, Charley does so well as guide that "the visionaries will come away talking story" and making a crossover into the real world (104). Charley's performance serves as a model or rehearsal for Wittman, preparing him for his own future guidance of an audience of trippers—tripping on a natural high—at the end of the novel.

At the end of the party Wittman makes a breakthrough (although incomplete for he continues to exhibit certain blindspots). With the other "party winners" who outlast everyone else to share a rehash of the party and a breakfast of "oom-lettes" (i.e. "magic" eggs with special grass), Wittman builds his first real audience. Wittman begins by taking out his manuscript "that had been in [his pocket] all night all along" and subjects the others to a reading of part of his play:

Taking the stance of Gwan Goong the Reader, who read in armor during battle, who read to enemies, who read loud when no one listened, Wittman Ah Sing read. . . . Whether or not a listener sat with him knee-to-knee, Wittman sat bent-knee kung fu position. The man of action aggressively reads and talks. (134)

Surprisingly, his aggressive reading works, not because "lonesome Wittman was such a persuader" but because the group "had need to do something communal against isolation" (140). The others agree to try it out. Three unrelated people (Wittman, Charley, and Lance) take the parts of three unrelated historical Chinese rivals to reenact their famous oath in the peach orchard—the new "ritual of friendship." Alliances and families, they declare, don't need blood ties.

However, a serious limitation to Wittman's imagination emerges when Wittman directs that "Nanci Lee and the other women will be audience for the time being" (141). Although
the women outnumber the men (four to three), they are for
the moment excluded from the action. This audience does not
remain passive, however, and Nanci and the others object to
Wittman's proposed fat lady character. Wittman counters
that the women don't understand that the fat dancer "busts
through stereotypes. That we're puritanical. That Han
people don't dance. That a fatty can't hold center stage"
(147); but along with the women characters and the narrator,
we see that it is Wittman who doesn't understand about the
stereotypes operating here. The women declare that they
would refuse to play her, that she is a Fellini grotesque,
that she is "a cupcake pop-up," naked and vulnerable in a
crowd wearing armor (146). And the narrator warns: "You
play right or else, Wittman, we're going to get you, Monkey
King" (147). But for the time being, "[n]ot heeding a
goddess when he was face-to-face with one, with four" (147),
Wittman persists; for the moment, he doesn't get it.

The second of Wittman's blind spots has to do with the
play's martial theme and glorification of battle. Once
again the women voice objections: plays with "soldiers in
fatigued outfits" are boring as are movies "about guys who
don't shave digging out of some stalag" (147). Wittman does
not register these objections either, however, and the
narrator again adds her commentary:

Unfortunately for peace on Earth, the listening ladies
were appeased. . . . Nanci and Tafa and Sunny and Judy
thought that if they were allowed to play war women,
they were liberated. The time of peace women, who will
not roll bandages or serve coffee and doughnuts or
rivet airplanes or man battleships or shoot guns at
strangers, does not begin tonight. (148)

However, in spite of these flaws of imagination (could
he be impaired because of the artificial oomlette high?),
Wittman has made considerable progress in his understanding
of audience, and he has discovered the creativity of
improvisation. He acknowledges "audience participation"
(even if, so far, it consists of eating puppy dog), and he begins to take direction from the actors: "Players took the parts of the three brotherly friends, and improvised a ritual that made the playwright's sketch up-to-date and relevant, and showed him what happens next" (141). Wittman is excited by the discovery that his play will "leave room for actors to do improv" ancient as Chinese opera, far-out as 60s street theater.

Then dawn arrives and a miracle happens at the party after the party. "Sky poured pink through the windows. Everyone floated in pink air . . . . The friends moved toward the windows . . . . and saw everything . . . rose-blessed" (148). And Wittman sees his friends as family, as the core of his community. Nothing can go wrong, he feels, with these companions. "My chosen family. We're about to change the world for the better" (149). By the end of the party, then, Wittman has enlisted the commitment of a core of actors and chosen a family. He has sparked interest in his "long and continuous play that goes on for a week. . . . Because life is long and continuous" (149). And these steps toward building audience and community have been validated by the pink dawn.

Although initially Wittman's persuasiveness was not especially effective (his friends agreed to the play reading for their own reasons), by the time he approaches the manager of the Chinese community Benevolent Association, his skills at persuasion have improved. By performing an elaborate "tryout free sample story" for the "old fut," Wittman gets his permission to use the Association's facilities for his play. We also note some enlargement of Wittman's imagination: He tells Taña that he must write "theater without a war" for his mother and the other Flora Dora girls; furthermore, as he continues to spin out his play for Taña at their wedding picnic, using material from two Chinese classics filled with war strategy and military
philosophy, Wittman mentions for the first time the three mysterious Peace Books of Chinese legend, now lost. Wittman, draft dodger, is learning a more sophisticated stance about war.

By the time of the read-through, Wittman's Whitmanesque theater troupe has mushroomed. He has called everyone he knows and asked them to bring everyone they know. And, "Everyone came--friends, and friends' friends, and family." But, still, the reason they came was "Not because Wittman had charisma or leadership"; they came because "Everyone really does want to get into the act" (276). With only a few exceptions (like the toy department Louise), everyone we have met throughout the novel shows up. Wittman even lures the Yale Younger Poet out of the stockroom depths in order, he says, to integrate his play. (Curiously, in addition to some Chinese and barbarian hero roles, Yale Younger is cast as Rudyard Kipling; Wittman seems to falter here in his resolve to cast blind. Perhaps it is chance; perhaps it seems "natural"; or perhaps racialist thinking persists even amidst the efforts to root it out.)

Wittman--if not as the undisputed leader, then as the loudest one--announces at the read-through that they are embarking . . . on an enormous loud play that will awake our audience, bring it back. . . . We'll cook and blast again. We have so much story, if we can't tell it entirely on the first night, we continue on the second night, the third, a week if we have to. (277)

And he gives out scripts with lots of space for "ad lib and actors' gifts." The narrator muses, "The music boat [last seen on the Pear River Delta] has sailed into San Francisco Bay, and the boatman is reunited with his troupe. Write the play ahead of them to include everyone and everything" (277). After the rehearsal, Wittman spends the rest of the night:

looking for the plot of our ever-branching lives. A job can't be the plot of life, and not a soapy love-
marriage-divorce--and hell no, not Viet Nam. To entertain and educate the solitaries that make up a community, the play will be a combination revue-lecture. (288)

Play and life plots merge--which must not be soap opera or war. Wittman aims to instruct as well as delight. His instructees are individuals but also community members. And the chapter ends with a message from the narrator to us, her readers: "You're invited" (288).

Tripmaster Monkey culminates in the three-day explosive extravaganza that is Wittman's play about everything, for everybody. The two-parts, revue and lecture, coincide with the novel's final two chapters--a crescendo, followed by a coda. The troupe of all his friends and family do the revue, solitary Wittman does the lecture. And the enterprise is a huge success. The Chinese theater tradition is revived, Wittman's troupe bonds together, and Wittman completes his apprenticeship. After "taking it all in" throughout the novel, Wittman is now ready to let it come back out. Yet as he assumes his trip-mastery, he understands that his mastery is dependent upon his troupe of ad-libbing actors, upon the gifts of his chosen group. Wittman must depend upon his community.

Concurrently with the stage action, the audience is growing and evolving. While the actors are ad-libbing and Wittman is instructing, the audience is becoming important, dynamic, independent, powerful; it breaks through boundaries and merges with the players and with the community. In fact the community-audience gets the penultimate word of the novel when they give blessing to Wittman and his bride (the last word goes to the narrator).

On Hallowe'en, the crowd gathers at the Benevolent Association for "an opening night of their own making," and the first transformation takes place: "The crowd walked through flowers . . . and became audience" (289).
 Appropriately Whitmanesque, the audience is democratic and inclusive: all generations, male and female, in costume or dress up, employed or jobless, young millionaire and cannery worker; Asian, white, and Hispanic. From the beginning, the audience is prescient: "A sunseen man [i.e. "saint," "fut," "sky being"] opens his water gourd that cools water as the sun gets hotter; the audience looks inside, and sees--everything, the Earth, everything" (290). They are enthusiastic and become intrusive: "The audience whistled for encore after encore, drawing the aunties out amongst them, where they sat on laps, rubbed bald heads, gazed into eyes, vamped" (295). The audience keeps growing and by the third night, its composition has changed; it is no longer simply family and friends coming to see one another "be different from everyday," but includes the impersonal general public. Furthermore, the audience has acquired the power to confer value: "The public, including white strangers, came and made the show important" (296)

The audience next begins to take over territory, to intrude upon the domain of the players and the play: "The audience sat on the staircase and windowsills; there was no longer an aisle" (296). The defining lines that limit and configure audience are disappearing. At the same time, the play's action is also blurring boundaries:

As in real life, things were happening all over the place. The audience looked left, right, up and down, in and about the round, everywhere, the flies, the wings, all the while hearing reports from off stage. Too much goings-on, they miss some, okay, like life. (298)

Life is theater; theater is life. No one can understand everything; we should not expect to get it all. This is natural, and acceptable, in life or in (ethnic or Kingston's) fiction.
At the end of the production, during the "climactic free-for-all" in which "everybody fights everybody everywhere at once" (301), the differentiation between stage and audience is completely obliterated. The actors are in and out all entrances and exits, amongst the audience, outside on the street. For its part, the audience wants to get in on the action too: it hangs out the window, it gets to its feet "in participation" (301). The momentum builds. More audience, more action, more breaking through boundaries, more transformation. At the end, there are fireworks, and then:

The neighbors turned in four alarums. Fire engines were coming, wailing louder than Chinese opera. . . . The audience ran out into the street. More audience came. And the actors were out from backstage and the green room, breaking rules of reality-and-illusion. (303)

Assuring them that there is no real fire, that they are faking it, Wittman invites the San Francisco Fire Department and the crowd of alarm-ringing neighbors to join the audience: "The noisy part of our ritual is done. Would you like some tickets to the quiet part? You're invited to come in and see it" (303).

The quiet part is Wittman's "One-Man Show" talkstory, the novel's final chapter. The epigraph from The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge touches on two issues explored in this last chapter: the blurring of the theatrical and the real, and the audience's use of applause as a shield to ward off what might "compel them to change their life" (305). Wittman aims to blur theater with reality yet to circumvent the shield. His duty, he has come to understand, is to persuade his audience-now-community to change their lives, think differently, help create a better world. As an emerging tripmaster, he proposes to tell them how. He is "having to give instruction."
The audience for his lecture continues to grow, breaking beyond traditional boundaries, confusing and realigning the real and the theatrical. First, Wittman's twenty-four actors file out, take solo bows to "wild applause," and are transformed into audience; and actors, we learned earlier, "make the best audience." Then, "real" people arriving at the theater for reasons other than the show are absorbed: the city firefighters called by the fire alarm, and the neighborhood residents annoyed by the commotion are drawn in, and they too become audience. Wittman is succeeding admirably in creating his community, but Kingston's narrator stretches still farther. Not content with an audience extending across the footlights to absorb the theatrical troupe itself and into the street to absorb the surrounding neighborhood and the city beyond, the narrator pushes across the boundary of the printed page, beckoning flesh-and-blood readers into the text, and into Wittman's community of listeners. We readers form an outermost circle to Wittman's group, the narrator's parallel community-as-audience. In a Whitmanesque gesture of grand inclusion flavored by the antic humor of Monkey, Wittman and the narrator in tandem embrace all kinds, merge even the categories of the fictional and real, and invite all of us within hearing to join their creative, collaborative audience-community.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Narrative as Fake Book

"His Fake Book," the subtitle for Tripmaster Monkey, refers within the novel to Wittman's play manuscript and highlights its reliance upon improvisation. But at another level, the novel is itself a fake book, a new form: novel
as improvisation, collaboration between Kingston and her readers--via her narrator, "her" fakebook. The notion and performance of "faking" are organic to the novel's substance and flavor, and parallel the behavior of its trickster protagonist. Additionally, the multilayered "fake book" form complements the novel's multilayered audience. An oxymoron, "faking" signifies the mysterious relationship between fiction and truth. On the one hand, "fake" opposes "true" and "genuine"; on the other, "to fake" is to invent, to create a new reality. A fake book supplies bare-bones truth for practitioners to flesh out, bring to life.

Not only does Kingston draw on both Chinese and American sources for themes and content--especially her protagonist's double namesakes of Sun Wu-k'ung, the questing trickster Monkey King and Walt Whitman, the all-embracing American poet--but she has merged structuring elements from both Chinese and American tradition to create--fake--a new narrative form. In China, the marketplace storytellers used fake books in their trade:

Every story was paraphrased in word and pictures. The basic shape and the essential facts and famous quotes of every story were crunched and boiled down to the bare bones... The storyteller had a chart for every story and a strategy for storytelling to every kind of audience, on every kind of day or night. (Chin, "Uncle Frank's Fakebook" 75)

Similarly, the American jazz fake book with its grid of standard melodies and chord patterns provides both the common link for uniting members of a jazz group and the license for unique improvisation by solo musicians. In both the Chinese and American contexts, the fake book is a repository of traditional material, a core of elements shared by and connecting the community that can be reshaped by the individual into something new, something--when most inventive--that breaks tradition even as it builds upon it.
Our American Monkey Wittman laments the absence of a Chinese American jazz/blues idiom: "I want so bad to be the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America," he confides (27). In his way, of course, he is. Although not jazz per se, his play, based on Chinese opera and American vaudeville, not only incorporates music and dance, but uses the medium of words in a way that parallels a jazz idiom. Wittman's punning and word play, his experimenting with sounds, accent and translation, his mimicry, parody, joking and wit are the equivalent of musical chord patterns and jazz riffs. Furthermore, his play's fake script provides abundant space for the flight and fancy of actors; the play depends upon their improvisation.

Wittman sets out two rules of improv for the actors during the read-through of his play: 1) Don't say No to anything; and 2) It's okay to feel embarrassed by a new ritual (142, 145). The jazzman too must be open to everything, must let it all come in, even the negative stuff---a stance that Wittman himself has assumed throughout the novel. Faking is hard work since it works against one's natural resistance to the new, and breaking tradition implies breakage even when change is desired. As Maxine Hong Kingston has cautioned her readers, reading requires effort. That kind of creative reading, a counterpart to faking, breaks through lazy-thought stereotypes, gives up comfortable preconceptions.

In Tripmaster, Wittman's play (the Chinese opera-vaudeville) is a jazzy jam session that is followed by his "One-Man Show"--Wittman, the "bad jazz" word daedelator, talking story. Wittman, like his actors before him, wings it. He performs, for example, "an unpremeditated on-the-spot happening, unrepeatable tomorrow night" (309) by cutting off his hair; he gives out "[w]hat he thought was his craziest riff, the weirdest take of his life at the movies" (314) by describing the "Chinese eyes" of the Lone
Ranger and other Hollywood heroes. Somewhat to Wittman’s surprise, the audience follows his riff; they "stayed with him." Wittman discovers that "His community was madder than he was" (314). His loyal audience-become-community follows him as he moves from art into life, blurring the two; he begins faking autobiography, and the audience helps him out.

But the audience is not easily manipulated, nor passive. They do their own picking and choosing. At one point, when Wittman's "love story" turns into "a between-gigs story," some of the audience gets restless, and Wittman grumbles:

Go ahead, leave. . . . It's all right. Go. Go.
Squeeze out between the knees and the chairbacks. . . .
They love fight scenes; they love firecrackers. But during a soliloquy when a human being is thinking out how to live, everybody walks about, goes to the can, eats, visits. O audience. (333)

Ah Wittman! His audience gives him both "hungry ears" and loud advice; like Wittman, like the actors, they start doing improv. They match jokes with Wittman, they act out the kissing contest, they contribute money and red envelopes toward the show, they do name analysis and bestow a name on Wittman ("Most Laughable Kisser"). But most extraordinary is the fact that in the end, the audience takes over control from Wittman and insists upon an ending of their own creation.

Wittman has confided his marriage to his audience-community, and in his characteristically convoluted manner, he has detailed his marital problems: the unorthodoxies, his doubts, and their incompatibilities. But out of all that mess of talk, people heard "I love you" and "I’ll always love you" and . . . [they] took Wittman to mean that he was announcing his marriage to Taña, and doing so with a new clever wedding ritual of his own making. (339)
Here it is not trickster Wittman but his audience improvising a wedding ritual--faking on the age-old tradition of ending a story with a marriage.

The marriage of Wittman and Taña does not exactly fit the traditional marriage-as-ending: Wittman is not even certain about its status (was it a real or a fake wedding?). The sixties' ambience dictates a drastic refashioning of attitude toward the institution of marriage itself, and--although "mixed" marrying is very American and, according to Kingston, a promise for the future--their bi-racial union is likely to be more socially upsetting than stabilizing. Moreover, Wittman tries to distance his marriage to Taña from the fairy tale format by announcing that it is categorically neither "magic or fate."

All of this notwithstanding, the audience insists upon a wedding celebration. They push and pull "the shy bride" on stage, take photographs, explode firecrackers and champagne corks. They toast the wedding pair and their long life and--in a gesture to the future and the continuity of their community---many children. "Wittman's community was blessing him, whether he liked it or not" (340). The audience spontaneously and decisively transforms his show into an epithalamion.

The Narrator's Fake Book

The audience has created the culminating event of the novel, but the narrator has the last word. Wittman in the last paragraph is "starting to understand" and has "changed --beeen!-- into a pacifist." Observing and tracking him from above, the narrator concludes the novel with an affectionate, proud admonition: "Dear American monkey, don't be afraid. Here, let us tweak your ear, and kiss your other ear" (340). An elusive figure, the narrator speaks only intermittently in the text, but her hovering presence
gives a larger dimension to the novel that is important to its truth-value; in her relationship to the characters (to Wittman primarily, but also to others, especially Taña), to the audience, and to the author, the narrator performs important functions in the novel's progression and in its transaction of meaning. She is a counterpart or counterspeaker to Wittman, a supportive model/groomer for Taña, a spokeswoman for the author, and a guide for the audience.

Kingston has said that "Wittman's thinking is actually a representation of the way I think," and that in writing *Tripmaster*, she wanted "to write a book about the mind of an English major--how an English major looks at the world" (Denison class visit). But Wittman of the novel is young and callow, and his novel is an account of his maturing; the narrator provides a countering voice, experienced and wise. She ushers the reader into Wittman's mind to show us his perspective on the world, and she helps us to a higher, quasi-omniscient perspective on the world, Wittman's world, from where we can see his limitations and blind spots as well as his virtues, struggles, and illuminations. Her maternal attitude toward Wittman alternates among affection, tolerance, exasperation, and scolding. Like a parent giving a child both roots and wings, the narrator gives Wittman a great deal of control over the text, but she steps in to nudge the narrative along when necessary.

Wittman's one-man show exemplifies the narrator's chary exercise of control; Wittman seems in control of his show and talks on at his heart's content, at length--at great length (probably too much length); he has to "get it all out." In an earlier draft, Kingston reports, the "One-Man Show" chapter was much longer than our published version; (fortunately) she shortened the chapter and augmented the role of the audience. Indulging Wittman can go only so far. The narrator, characters, and the audience within the text
all speak up in the published chapter and— to their relief as well as to the audience outside the text—their participation breaks up the monologue. As we have seen also, Wittman is only at the verge of maturity at the end of the book, and by voicing the last words of affectionate teasing and encouragement, the narrator reasserts her control of both Wittman and the text. Yet her maternal-like control remains gentle, and the conclusion is remarkably inconclusive—suggestive as it is of more to come.

Wittman's most urgent need is to be educated about feminism and pacifism, and the narrator is most apt to scold or be patronizing when Wittman exhibits sexist or militaristic attitudes. His sexism usually surfaces in the presence of Taña; with the narrator at her shoulder, Taña's perspective tends to merge with the narrator's, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the narrator's voice from Taña's thinking. On their wedding picnic, Wittman tells Taña a story drawn from the Chinese classic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, that he will modify for his play:

"Wittman thought that with this story he was praising his lady, and teaching her to call him Beloved. Unbeknownst to him, Taña was getting feminist ideas to apply to his backass self" (175). In the sixties there was not yet a clearly articulated vocabulary for expressing feminist ideas, but the narrator is grooming Taña for the future.

Earlier, when Wittman describes the women's parts for his (militaristic) play in terms of witches and fat ladies, the narrator issues a warning: "You play right or else, Wittman, we're going to get you, Monkey King" (147). But Wittman persists, in spite of the four "goddesses," in keeping "his large lady" in the play. The four goddesses—Taña, Nanci Lee, Sunny, and Judy Louis—still depend upon the narrator to speak for them, but from the perspective that we share with the narrator, we understand that the future will bring changes in Wittman's behavior and in the
goddesses' exercise of their own voices. Even a few pages later, during the course of the one-man show, Taña responds to Wittman's attack on women with false eyelashes by thinking, "She will let that tactless husband of hers have it later in private" (312).

The narrator also acts as mediator between audience and text. She guides the reader inside and around the characters, making us privy to their thoughts and feelings; she moves us beyond and above their world, giving us a wider perspective, both spatially and temporally. In the process, she treats her readers as honored guests invited to share in the faking. The published *Tripmaster* in our hands is a book already fleshed out and painstakingly shaped. Yet the narrator continually tries to overcome its finished and final form, tries to establish a collaborative relationship with her audience. To the end, with its inconclusiveness and the use of the plural pronoun "we," she insists upon the importance and the role of her audience in the creative process.

Throughout the novel, the narrator has addressed readers directly, inviting them to attend Wittman's play, nudging them from one chapter to the next. In the last chapter, as Wittman is about to launch into his "One-Man Show," she makes a strong plea for our cooperation and indicates our role as audience:

> Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. Wittman was learning that one big bang-up show has to be followed up with a second show, a third show, shows until something takes hold. He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it. His community surrounding him, then, we're going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart's content. Let him get it all out, and we hear what he has to say direct. Blasting and blazing are too wordless. (306)
"We readers" are included in the community surrounding and blessing Wittman, and "we" must imagine and practice, create and re-create, in life as in reading literature.

The configuration of this last chapter is like a funnel, wide and narrow: the focus, the spotlight, our gaze is narrowed down, pointed toward a single figure, Wittman; the community of listeners surrounding him spirals outward concentrically, recognizing no limits, blurring the edge of the text, spreading across the boundary between fiction and reality in order truly to include "everyone." Kingston has said that Wittman's audience inside the text mirrors the narrator's audience outside the text--it includes everyone, all generations, and it is about building a community beyond family ties or blood relationships (Denison class visit). The narrator stands at the plane of the mirror and fosters the image that Wittman's audience is coterminous with hers, a continuum extending indefinitely.

As our tripmaster, the narrator brings to bear information and understanding earned anachronistically, information and understanding that we who are readers in the 1990s have earned also: for example, that "it's going to get worse" and "the U.S. will lose the war in Viet Nam"; that "we're going to have a President" in the 80s who will be less literate even than one in the 60s (325). As part of their collaboration, readers can add still another layer of anachronistic detail about desert storms and oil wars of the 90s--though not as of yet, alas, anything more than hints and wishes about the recovery or re-creation of the lost books of peace.

Parallels can be drawn between real readers of the narrator's audience and characters within the novel. When New York Times reviewer LeAnne Schreiber came to the part about "we're going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart's content. Let him get it all out," she thought: "Oh no." But then she read
on. In my own reading experience, I twice flagged at the
two-thirds mark of Wittman's lecture during the first two
straight-through readings (at page 328, when he launches
into yet another illustrative anecdote: "I've got to tell
you about this experiment. . . ."); and both times I, too,
read on. We--Schreiber and I---behaved like Leroy Sanchez,
the unemployment counselor who stays a loyal listener and,
in spite of weariness and impatience, endures Wittman's
seemingly non-stop barrage of storytelling.

We also reacted like some members of the audience in
the text--the Caucasians, for example, who "had tuned out
during the racial business." Like the Caucasians, I felt
relief at the shift (on page 329) away from a monologic
lecture to some interaction with the audience when Wittman
proposes a kissing contest. Volunteers immediately step up
to be contestants: PoPo, some old futs, Nanci and Taña
("the show-offs"), Sunny and Lance ("good at parties"), and
those Caucasians (who are now tuned back in). Real readers
and critics reflect and are reflected by the Caucasians,
actors, and friends of Wittman's audience-community.

Student reaction papers to Tripmaster Monkey provide
some evidence that readers understand the narrator's
invitation to join in, to help fake the novel, to change
lives. Several excerpts from a set of response papers
written for a Spring 1993 Denison University "Contemporary
Novel" course (by students who wish to remain anonymous)
include the following:

The reader is also an audience member as
Wittman explores what it means to be human. . . .
His story of the monkey who 'plunges through to
the other side' (135) is Wittman, and the reader
is challenged to plunge from observing the outside
to realizing the inside.

Not only actors contained in a tight relationship,
he [Wittman] also wants the audience to join this new
community.
The crowd . . . only listen for what they want to hear. . . . Hopefully Kingston's readers hear the entire message. She has definitely practiced her theory that language barriers aren't broken by shouting but by giving the other person more information than is probably necessary.

We who read the novel all face the same jungle of information in 340 pages. We have established a community of readers.

This book just opens one's mind to a new way of thinking.

A final, longer excerpt that touches on the issues of community, imagination, the collaboration between author and audience, and the connection between literature and life comes from the reaction paper of a student who interviewed Maxine Hong Kingston during her visit to Denison University:

Wittman's dream is his play, his production of a communal piece of art. . . . As readers, we then use our own imaginations and take things even further . . . to overcome biases, stereotypes, limitations of Western thinking. . . . to be open, to question and ask why, and then to imagine something more--a community. . . . Tripmaster Monkey is a novel about encouraging the move toward peace and community by using our minds. . . . If we can imagine as Wittman and Maxine Hong Kingston a world as a whole diverse community living in peace, then this image will influence our physical lives and become real.

Maxine Hong Kingston . . . gives the reader [freedom or encouragement] to participate in her novel, Tripmaster Monkey. . . . [She] uses Wittman's mind as a vehicle to paint . . . images and then encourage and stimulate us to create our own. She's not resisting or opposing this type of imaginative reader engagement, but instead welcomes it. Maxine Hong Kingston feels she achieves that much more if she has stimulated or triggered her reader's imagination. This is because it is the imagination which is a central part of her themes on literature and community in the world.

Kim Essaf
Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Book

Maxine Hong Kingston has called Tripmaster Monkey "a fake book in prose." Like her narrator, the actual author treats her readers as part of a community. While readers of any work constitute a kind of writer's community, Kingston's readers are more consciously identified and more explicitly addressed as co-creators of community. Kingston tries to give readers ownership in the text and to hold them responsible for "making the text important." Literature and life model each other, and the author invites her readers to help compose a better plot for life.

The author echoes her protagonist by inviting audience improvisation. Kingston has stated, for example, that she starts stories that she does not finish. "When you read," she advised students (Denison University, March 1993), "take a character, take an idea and run with it. Improvise." Why wasn't Louise included in Wittman's play? Kingston claims she forgot her, but advises us that Louise's story should be continued.

Kingston also shares the text with readers by minimizing the author's prerogative. She places responsibility with readers to decide what is important in her novel, to take what we need, leave what we do not. When students claimed that the density of references made Tripmaster "the hardest book [they had] ever read," Kingston reassured them that recognizing or decoding references was not the point of reading the novel: "If you get the references, it's fine; if you don't get them, that's fine too."

As she has stated elsewhere ("Cultural Mis-readings"), she deliberately writes to particular audiences--readers of Chinese language, Berkeley English professors, for example--but she is not interested in excluding anyone or creating
outsiders, and so she tries to keep her private jokes unobtrusive. While all readers will not feel equally in control of all parts of the text, by including different kinds of material for a variety of groups, Kingston hopes that all people in her readership "can see themselves somewhere." Or they may learn something new. As she explains:

When I quote from Chinese material--or Rilke, I know that most of my readers will not have known it, but it may encourage them to go look it up--[I'm giving them] a fake book for future reading. (Denison University visit, March 1993)

Each reader makes her own text, and Kingston celebrates the making.

Making a meaningful and truthful text is not easy. Kingston tells a story on herself. During a public lecture at Denison University (March 25, 1993), she told her audience that she had deliberately postponed visiting China until after writing Woman Warrior and China Men because she did not want new information complicating her imagined construction. Yet, when she eventually visited the country, she was amazed at the accuracy of her imagination. However, concomitant with this discovery was the realization that she had to guard against being blinded by her imagined China to the reality of the actual country. Although she did not give specific examples, Kingston used her China experience as testimony to the hard effort required of us all to push through one's preconceptions to see accurately and truly.

Kingston's book in progress is subtitled A Book of Peace. It is her attempt to imagine what was in the three legendary Chinese books of peace, now lost (cited in Tripmaster 170). Her description indicates that this book will push even further her notions of improvisation and collaboration, of joining with her reading community to create narratives about how to live. This book, the "fourth book of peace," is actually a fifth book of peace because
her original manuscript was destroyed (along with her house) in the 1991 firestorm that devastated areas of Oakland, California. When a hypnotherapist offered to hypnotize Kingston in an effort to recapture the lost book, she declined: "I don't think of recall as a very interesting process. I am always imagining something new, creativity taking place constantly" (Denison lecture, 25 March 1993). As Wittman knows, as jazz musicians know, improvisation is not repeatable. Kingston suggested instead that they use the heightened awareness of a hypnotic trance to develop resources for her to draw on: to imagine a quest and, through post-hypnotic suggestion, to be able to return to the place where her manuscript had been kept, along with her people, her characters. Her new book of peace may be built out of some of the same materials, but it will not—it cannot—be the same as the manuscript that was burned.

In several ways, Kingston is including others in the creation of her book. During her public lecture, she solicited titles to precede her subtitle of "A Book of Peace," and, in fact, people in the audience offered suggestions. Kingston also charged everyone in attendance to note and share any scraps of information they might have, or would discover, about the mysterious old lost peace books. Finally, she reported that the first line of her book—"If a woman is to write of peace, it is given to her to first know devastation"—was contributed by a friend. Since peace can only come about through community, Kingston says, it is proper that the first sentence be a gift from someone else. Thus, her forthcoming book seems to continue and intensify the collaboration established by Tripmaster Monkey between author and audience in the creation of meaning and community.

Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book, unlike The Woman Warrior and China Men, is unequivocally fiction and therefore not liable to the charges of inauthenticity or
historical distortion lobbed by critics at Kingston's previous "non-fiction" works. Within the novel, however, Wittman confronts the issue of authenticity as he tries to make sense of his identity and tries to define community. At the core of community is Wittman's "chosen family"--a group not dependent upon blood relationship; around this core, the community grows concentrically, absorbing all categories of people until it embraces everyone. In the novel, we witness the process by which community can form and grow without excluding or ranking humans by race or age, gender or class--that is, by social category; we watch how a group of people--an audience--can conjoin, interact, become unified, take control, and fashion their own reality.

In fine, audience is a dynamic figure in Tripmaster Monkey, a novel that challenges--even burdens--it readers at the same time that it relies upon them and reifies them. In the novel's quest for audience, both Wittman and Kingston are faking it and tripping, and taking us all along on the journey.
ENDNOTES

1. Patricia Lin describes *Monkey, or Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng-en: "In the Chinese classic, Monkey springs *sui generis* from a stone egg. On a dare from other monkeys in the forest he penetrates a water fall and discovers an edenic world. For his bravado he is made king of the monkeys and leads the other simians into the new kingdom. Monkey later seeks immortality by entering a monastery and acquires the Taoist/Zen-like name, "Aware of Emptiness." He masters the art of seventy-two transformations, which allows him to change his size and appearance, perform diverse magical acts, as well as cover great distances at a single leap. In the best known part of *Hsi Yu Chi*, Monkey accompanies the somewhat befuddled monk Tripitaka on a journey west to India to find the Buddhist scriptures." ("Clashing Constructs of Reality: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *Trimmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* as Indigenous Ethnography" 338.)

2. Noticing, according to Lisa Raphals, is characteristic of what she calls "metic" knowing, which is, in turn, a characteristic of the trickster.

3. Blacks, however, are underrepresented in both the novel and the audience. Wittman is uneasy about references to Black Sambo, black stand-up actors, and black playwrights as well as about the rapprochement he sees between black and white that excludes yellows, rendering them invisible and silenced. There seem to be no blacks in Wittman's theater troupe which tends to qualify his desire to cast blind.
Chapter V - Coda

Tai Chi Chuan Exercising

Wing Tek Lum has written a poem "for Frank and Maxine."
The poem, "Push Hands: Tai Chi Chuan Exercises," begins:

They square off, an arm's length apart . . .
now parallel . . .
She rocks forward back to him
he rocks back towards her
as if glued together
in a circular motion . . .
now ready to pounce.

In spite of their long and much publicized history of sparring, characterized mainly by Frank Chin's sharp thrusts at Maxine Hong Kingston, the two writers have more than their Chinese American background in common. Both writers have used material from Chinese American culture and history in their writing, extensively and inventively. They have each turned to fiction after experimentation with other genres, and their recently published novels each have young male protagonists who bear a striking resemblance to (none other than) Frank Chin himself. Both Donald Duk and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book are comic works, and both enlist the comic in the service of instruction.

These similarities of material, theme, and mode paradoxically highlight the considerable differences between the two works and what they accomplish. While both novels consciously embrace the classic aims of literature to instruct and to delight--each novel is entertaining and funny, each presents serious messages--by either measure, Tripmaster attempts more and accomplishes more. Tripmaster
is longer--more than twice as long as *Donald Duk* (and so could be said to have more time-space for accomplishment), but more significant are the greater complexity of ideas and density of texture that characterize Kington's novel.

*Donald Duk'*s cartoon format presents the reader with a shallow and impermeable surface, simplified events, and black and white values--good and bad are unambiguous and easily recognizable. The characters tend toward caricature, and even the primary characters are sketched in bold outline with little shading and scant development. The novel's narrating voice is mono-vocal, intent upon the safe conduct of clearly defined lessons.

By contrast the fake book format of *Tripmaster* fosters elaboration, variations on a theme. Ideas are presented, then qualified or matched with alternatives, and values emerge from rather than are superimposed upon context. Characters exhibit a blend of ignorance and understanding, and they must struggle to distinguish good from bad, the authentic from the dross. Not only does the protagonist develop, but readers are privy to his convoluted and self-revealing internal monologues, and thus we can track his emotional and mental development. Furthermore, the hovering narrator provides an additional perspective and voice to counteract and correct Wittman's attitudes and judgments.

Wittman Ah Sing and Donald Duk are young Chinese American males at opposite ends of adolescence, both of whom suffer from and learn to cope with American racism and their racialized identities. By the end of his novel, Donald has learned his lessons well about his Chinese American heritage and about pride of group, pride of self. Otherwise, however, Donald remains flat and unknowable, and his case is closed with the turning of the last page. Not much remains to say about Donald, nor is the reader very much interested in what will happen to Donald another day.
Throughout *Tripmaster* (which spans approximately two months, only slightly longer than *Donald Duk* 's three weeks), Wittman Ah Sing absorbs steadily some complex lessons. By the novel's end, Wittman has completed an apprenticeship, but has just begun to practice what he has learned. On the last page he is still making discoveries, still being transformed, and the reader wonders what he will do next, what kind of man he will become after the end of the novel.

The targeted audience for each work varies too. Chin directs his narrative primarily at uninformed white mainstream readers who are ignorant of the history of Chinese Americans and unaware of the pressures of racism, and at those Chinese American readers like Donald who are cowed by mainstream values at the expense of their own integrity. Chin's principal aim seems to be to rectify those two ignorant positions.

Kingston claims everybody for her audience. For young readers, it could be argued, *Donald Duk* is far more accessible than *Tripmaster Monkey*, a novel that is taxing even to college students. But if the two works are treated as adult fiction, then the audience for Kingston's work is more inclusive both in terms of groups of readers and in terms of the bundle of readers within one flesh-and-blood person. Whereas Donald is a young Chinese American, Wittman is a young Chinese American, English major, artist, word addict, 60s beatnik, and draft-dodger/pacifist. Wittman's greater complexity attracts a more complex interest from readers.

The language of Kingston's novel delights the lover of words, it offers richness and invention not incorporated in the (appropriately) simple language of *Donald Duk*. Chin's novel is more monoglossic than heteroglossic, excluding most notably an authentic female voice; Kingston's novel is richly heteroglossic and includes a wide range of women's voices (Chinese, non-Chinese; old, young; educated, working
class), while Wittman's male voice is contrapuntal with the narrator's female voice.

In my own reading, Donald and his novel are entertaining, and its joking and grotesquerie amusing; but Wittman and his novel prompted chuckle upon chuckle, in bursts and clusters, the same passages repeatedly funny through numerous re-readings. Furthermore, the humor of Tripmaster is much more varied and complex, and ultimately, more serious; it encompasses verbal wit and situational slapstick, as it exposes the frailties and ridiculousness of the human species. While Chin's humor is often petty or destructive, Kingston's humor refreshes our spirit and enlarges our perspective.

Finally, Kingston accords greater respect to her audience as well as greater responsibility. Chin treats his audience as an uninformed mass who must be given the right answers. His novel might be compared to a Cliff Notes designed to ease the reader into the truth. Chin's Donald Duk is quite like Wittman's one-man-show before Kingston cut his part and gave the audience more scope. Kingston, on the other hand, seeks a collaboration with her readers in which the reader truly shares in the labor. To the extent that active learning is more effective than passive, the lessons taken from Kingston's novel are likely to be understood at a deeper, more emotional level and to be retained longer than lessons made simple and distributed intact.

Whether in consideration of instruction or of delight, then, author-audience relations in Tripmaster Monkey are more complex, more collaborative, and therefore more satisfying. The reader's mind is made large to match the expansive horizon presented by the narrative. Even Donald's dreams do not save his Chinatown from being a constricting, narrowly-horizoned world. But Wittman Ah Sing's Berkeley, California is the hub of the universe.
EPILOGUE

[Through literature we are able to demonstrate] how we can traverse the boundaries of unity and diversity, and how we can "have it all" by claiming an infinity of layers of self and community.

Elaine H. Kim,
Reading the Literatures of Asian America

As with any instance of reading, each of the narrative texts in this study generates a unique set of transactions between the author and the individual reader during the communication of meaning. Yet for a reader from the dominant culture, negotiating the task of reading a narrative written by an ethnic American author requires heightened awareness of extratextual realities including the group's particular American history and such matters as the social construction of ethnicity and the relative social positioning and access to power of the (reader's) dominant and the (writer's) subordinant groups.

For the ethnic writer, this social hierarchization raises a particular set of obstacles between the text and a mainstream audience. Censorship, lack of financial sponsorship, and denial of access to publication represent some immediate external barriers faced by the minority writer. Shirley Geok-lin Lim observes that freedom of speech "means nothing if access to an audience is absent."

"Thus," she writes, "the human birthright of speech can be made mute, silenced by sociopolitical structures" (Reading 15). More pernicious is the internalization of standards and definitions imposed from without by an oppressive majority culture. Writers whose groups are marked by white
America for racial marginalization must cope with negative stereotypes and distortions of their reality, with the debilitating emotions of self-hatred or hatred for the oppressor; their writing, too, must in some way take into account these constructions and oppressions.

Cornel West recognizes four approaches available to an author operating out of a racially marked, marginalized social context: "There are four basic options for people of color interested in representation," West writes, "if they are to survive and thrive as serious practitioners of their craft." He outlines the attractions and disadvantages of each option:

First, there is the Booker T. Temptation, namely the individual preoccupation with the mainstream and its legitimizing power. . . . [It is nearly unavoidable, but most who adopt this option] tend to lose much of their creativity, diffuse their prophetic energy and dilute their critiques. . . . The second option is the Talented Tenth Seduction, namely, a move toward arrogant group insularity. This alternative has a limited function—to preserve one's sanity and sense of self as one copes with the mainstream. [But this is at best transitional; if] it becomes a permanent option it is self-defeating [and leads to parochialism and racial chauvinism]. . . . The third strategy is the Go-It-Alone option. . . . [This option is difficult if not impossible because] some semblance of dialogue with a community is necessary for almost any creative practice. . . . The most desirable option for people of color who promote the new cultural politics of difference is to be a critical organic catalyst. ("New Cultural Politics" 32-33)

This "critical organic catalyst" is for West the person "who stays attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer--its paradigms, viewpoints and methods--yet maintains a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism" (33). Citing musicians and preachers as appropriate models, West continues: "Openness to others--including the mainstream--does not entail wholesale co-optation, and group autonomy is not group insularity" (33).
The authors in this study cope with these special problems of marginalization in a variety of ways. Toshio Mori and Hisaye Yamamoto demonstrate a predominantly positive attitude toward mainstream American culture and an optimistic belief in the ability of their group to achieve full membership in it. Their efforts to portray the Japanese American community presuppose an ignorance on the part of their white readers, an ignorance which they take as their responsibility to address and which they expect, through their writing, to replace with an awareness that will foster understanding, openness, and change in their readers. While these two Nisei writers tend to accept the "legitimizing power of the mainstream" and have consequently (according to West) remained "marginal to the mainstream," Yamamoto and Mori maintain both creativity and integrity. They neither distort nor tailor their depictions of Japanese American experience to fit a false or externally imposed design. Yamamoto demonstrates a quiet awareness of the complexity of life and treats, for example, the subjugation of others as practiced within the community as well as the victimization from without. Mori rises, Zen-like, above the oppressions of the historical moment. He views the operation of racism, as in the incarceration of Japanese Americans in internment camps, as one of many varieties of human weakness, not something to focus on obsessively. Instead, he recognizes that the human condition is marked by darkness as well as by joy. Both writers lovingly and authentically tell the stories of their lives.

Frank Chin, on the other hand, adopts a strategy rather like West's "Talented Tenth Seduction," a move toward "arrogant" group solidarity. Chin is, in Sau-ling Wong's description, "a ruthless advocate of militant instrumentalism in literature" (Reading 208), and his earlier work presents an aggressive defiance toward its audience, similar to the stance of writers like Ishmael
Reed, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Lawson Fusao Inada, Janice Mirikitani, Shawn Wong, and Nellie Wong. While the thrust of his novel, *Donald Duk*, is tempered by its didactic design, Chin's suspicion and contempt toward his mainstream white (or mainstream-duped Chinese American) audience remains. Like Mori and Yamamoto, he is convinced of the ignorance of white readers, but Chin is less optimistic about the ability--or willingness--of white America to change. Instead, Chin is susceptible to what West calls a "reveling in a parochialism," a "narrow racialist and chauvinistic outlook" (33). Thus, in part a result of the novel's narrow aims and limited execution, readers who are entertained by the adventures of Donald Duk are nevertheless unlikely to be transformed by Chin's narrative.

Toni Cade Bambara adopts a variation of the group-oriented "Talented Tenth Seduction." Although fully aware of and angered by the oppression suffered by her community from the larger white society, Bambara scorns snarling or whining as a profitable response. Instead, she positions herself within the community to celebrate African American culture with wit and artistry, and she adopts a stance of ignoring the majority culture. Outsiders must meet her on her turf, and while white readers are not actually drummed out of the neighborhood, they are excluded from her targeted audience. White male readers, especially, are not made part of her narrative world, and they must participate as distant onlookers, spectators assigned to the outer ring of the theater. Yet many such readers hang on in the neighborhood, and Bambara avoids the narrowly parochial and chauvinistic outlook warned of by West because of the power of her language and the splendors of her craft. Bambara's language, wit, and visual insights attract readers from outside the community's periphery into her audience, winning their devotion in spite of racial and/or gender barriers.
My study begins and ends with two writers who adopt West's preferred option of promoting "the new cultural politics of difference"—or who, in Kim's phrase, "from their rootedness," take flight beyond politics and difference. Ralph Ellison writes to white readers without either placating or lambasting them; he neither distorts black reality by ingratiating himself with his audience nor expends energy in defying white oppressiveness. Drawing upon the resources and methods of his African American heritage, Ellison plays with and upon his white audience, tricking them and thereby establishing a parity of power with them. Celebrating the richness and color of his own community, respecting the intelligence and dignity of his authorial role, Ellison can respect and celebrate others as well and life in general. The author can balance his clear vision of the outrages of white racism (in part by delegating to his narrator the expression of angry defiance) with a respect for his white audience. Ellison is cautiously confident that white readers can be educated and transformed in a manner that will bring the American reality into a closer alignment with its ideals.

The boldest spirit and the widest vision of all of the writers in this study belong, in my view, to Maxine Hong Kingston. Firmly rooted in Chinese American culture—but not mired—she soars, her talk-story art taking readers along in flight, reaching out beyond boundaries, across color-and-gender lines, redefining margins. Like Ellison, Kingston is both clear-sighted and hopeful (and like him she vents racial frustrations through the agency of her protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing—though comically rather than hysterically). Yet her reach is more encompassing than Ellison's, for she includes women as well as men as full members of her narrative and of her audience. Like Bambara, Kingston has created a complex and stimulating narrative world and a vividly realized ethnic community with memorable
characters and funny situations; like Bambara too, Kingston awes and charms her readers by her gifts of language—which is by turns comic, poetic, eloquent. Unlike Bambara, Kingston freely gives those gifts to readers of all categories. As with Toshio Mori, Kingston achieves a higher vision, takes a point of view above the pettiness of racial squabble and group solidarity from which to treat with respect and parity readers from the whole world. Yet, Kingston's narrative world also includes a quotidian dimension about people's everyday concerns and relations that is missing from Mori's. Kingston meets her readers of whatever description with a modesty of pride and an authenticity of optimism. That is, she is able to level hierarchy by combining confidence of self with respect for others; she is able to face reality yet, optimistically, subsume it in the ideal.

Maxine Hong Kingston exemplifies the cultural rootedness celebrated by such critics as Toni Morrison and Elaine Kim for its power and its potential. Morrison claims the definition of ethnic literature depends upon rootedness in the folk culture ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"). Kim asserts that it is rootedness in the culture "that keeps us in touch with who we are. . . . thus grounded, we can work toward transforming hegemony, revising the very notions of culture and identity" (Reading the Literatures xv). However, even as she lauds the power of literature to transcend differences and ignore boundaries, Kim sounds a note of caution. She writes:

In the midst of rejoicing about these works and about the possibilities created by new social realities, we should remind ourselves that boundary crossing must not be merely an aesthetic and intellectual exercise: we must beware lest our texts cross boundaries that a majority of our people still cannot. (Reading the Literatures xiv)
Kim's cautionary message ought to be heard and heeded by all readers, especially by the white majority. For I believe that mainstream readers must not appropriate ethnic texts merely for their private enjoyment. Through exposure to other cultures and other ways of thinking and being, by gaining familiarity and taking delight in that variety, the mainstream reader is responsible for changing as well—for incorporating other ways and ideas into her own behavior and thinking, for achieving greater understanding of her self, as well as others. The power of texts—of ethnic texts, of these particular texts—gives cause for rejoicing and hope for the transformation of individuals and social realities. The power of texts to bridge gaps, to penetrate barriers, to mix up diversity helps clear the way for people to follow. Mainstream and marginal groups need to recognize their inextricability from one another or, as Ellison might say, their being "a part" of each other as well as being "apart." As "cultural pluralism" or the "politics of difference" becomes more "typically American," the definition (and location) of center and margin must shift and seek realignment. Russell Ferguson points out that, "Margin and center can draw their meanings only from each other. Neither can exist alone" (13-14). In his discussion he notes:

When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what. But this question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place when we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it. . . . [However,] as historically marginal groups insist on their own identity, the deeper, structural invisibility of the so-called center becomes harder to sustain. The power of the center depends on a relatively unchallenged authority. If that authority breaks down, then there remains no point relative to which others can be defined as marginal. (Out There 9-10)
Shifting from the spatial image of boundaries and center to the well-worn metaphor of the melting pot, George M. Fredrickson offers a comment that echoes an often expressed sentiment of Ralph Ellison, one that provides a hopeful conclusion to this study of ethnic fiction and multicultural issues:

Rather than the currently popular metaphor of a mosaic, or the old and discredited notion of a melting pot, I prefer the metaphor of a slowly simmering stew to describe the American multicultural experience. And the seasoning that can make the different ingredients harmonize into a good-tasting and digestible whole without losing their individual flavors is the democratic ideal that Jefferson, Lincoln and other "old majority" Americans venerated but could not fully put into practice because of the concessions they felt obliged to make to greed and racism. Pursuit of this ideal in its pure form—as articulated in our own time by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—and a willingness to remember and honor those of whatever race or ethnicity who lived by it in the past may be the best hope we have of making e pluribus unum a reality and not just a slogan. (17)

Elaine H. Kim puts it more succinctly: "We need to acknowledge and celebrate the dynamic nature of our communities, the humanizing valences of differences among us, and the vast interstitial spaces we occupy" (Reading the Literatures xiv). "Reading the literatures" is a means to that end.
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