CURING NARRATIVES: A CONTEMPORARY POETICS OF AGENCY

By

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by

Melanie Almeder
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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

CURING NARRATIVES: A CONTEMPORARY POETICS OF AGENCY

By

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This project examines a series of contemporary American ethnic novels by women authors who import folkloric oral and performance rituals into their texts to heal diseased bodies. Despite their wide-ranging cultural and structural differences, the novels I examine—Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony and Storyteller, Cristina Garcia’s Dreaming in Cuban, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands—have characters in common who are diseased because they have experienced cultural trauma. Because these novels diagnose larger “sick” cultural narratives through the diseased body, corporeal disease is as inseparable from mental illness as it is from the narrative structures of colonization, racism, sexism, genocide, and war. These novels attempt to write healing for both the diseased individual and for the diseased culture. And, importantly, healing then becomes inseparable from a radical refuguration of the body, of race, of gender, of history, of novel, and of the compelling question, to what
degree can a character narrate or act upon her or his own cure to transform the narratives inhabiting her or him? This study offers a history of the folkloric, oral cures these writers use. In addition, this study archives the ways in which these writers construct genealogies of disease and cure and the methods by which they assess cures to discover which ones work the best to create, within very historically specific contexts. newly scripted agencies. the methodological frameworks for reimagining liberatory narratives.
CHAPTER 1
CURING NARRATIVE: MYTHOPOETICS AND AGENCY

This project examines a series of contemporary American ethnic novels by women authors who import folkloric oral and performance rituals into their texts to heal diseased bodies. Despite their wide-ranging cultural and structural differences, the novels I examine—Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *Storyteller*, Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*—have characters in common who are diseased because they have experienced cultural trauma. Because these novels diagnose larger “sick” cultural narratives through the diseased body, corporeal disease is as inseparable from mental illness as it is from the narrative structures of colonization, racism, sexism, genocide, and war. These novels attempt to write healing for both the diseased individual and for the diseased culture. And, importantly, healing then becomes inseparable from a radical reconstitution of the body, of race, of gender, of history, of novel, and of the compelling question, to what degree can a character narrate or act upon her or his own cure to transform the narratives inhabiting her or him?

The narratives emerging from a post-genocide, post-colonial, post-slavery, exile American community hold in common a sense that a whole series of narratives have failed to save or to heal bodies. Furthermore, while these novels cross many cultures and
represent hybrid forms of culture. they all carry the sense that disease is the result.
initially, of the narrative logics of slavery, genocide, or war enacting through the body. In
addition, disease persists because the right kind of story has not been written through the
bodies to resist the disease logics. While there are poignant examples of the degree to
which narrative could not save or cure a body in each of the narrative traditions and
histories this study engages—the Flying Africans, the Talking Bones, Chango, Yellow
Woman, to name a few—perhaps the most poignant example among them of a narrative
failure to protect a body comes from turn-of-the-century Native American history.

By 1890, the Sioux had lost their hunting grounds, had been placed on
reservations, and were starving and sick (Neihardt 230-231). They had witnessed mass
genocide of all that was sacred: people, land, their culture, and the buffalo (Sayer 19-20).
During this time, Kicking Bear returned to what was left of Sioux lands to report to the
once-famed white resistor Sitting Bull that he had founded a pan-tribal religion based on
a voice he had heard in the wilderness (Sayer 20). The voice instructed him that it would
lead him to the spirits of dead Native Americans and to a world cleansed of white
murderers (Sayer 22). Kicking Bear traveled to the Paiute tribe and there was taken to see
the “Messiah”—Christ himself. According to Kicking Bear in his report to Sitting Bull,
Christ returned to earth as a Native American pointing to his scars and saying, “white
men had treated (me) so bad. I went to heaven and came back as a Native American”
(Brown 407). Christ promised that if the tribes learned the dance a dance that helped
them commune with their slaughtered relatives and ancestors. they would be bodily lifted
above the earth while Christ cleansed the earth of whites. Once cleansed, the earth would
be occupied by the Native American ghosts (returned to the living) and the contemporary Native Americans, who, by now, were completely conquered by the combination of white diseases, slaughter, and land-grabbing.

What is striking about the history of the Ghost Dance is the way in which an increasingly alienated and desponted group of Native Americans took up the story of Christ and recomposed it for contemporary relevance and promise of resurrection. Furthermore, the narrative became a collective, pan-tribal resistance. Those tribal people killed by the whites would be healed, resurrected, and would rehabit a just landscape. In most reports, Christ is not of one tribe, but is a representative "Native American." 1 The story provided a united resistance against and take over of white narrative as it positioned a pan-tribal identity of resistance. Furthermore, Ghost Dancing promised a narrative that, if well-sung and well-enacted, would not only render the dancers bullet-proof, but would also render the earth cleansed of the whites and their mining and land grabbing (Brown 407-409).

It is a poignant story not only because it would become almost desperately pan-tribal, but because it was a revision of the Christian narratives which supported white genocide in the first place. It seems no small coincidence that Ghost Dancing came at the time that the great resisters, the Sioux, had their land parceled out and opened up to colonizers, at a time that seemed the end of resistance, armed or otherwise. The U.S.

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1 For example, Black Elk sees the Messiah as bearing the long hair and feather identifying him as Indian, but he cannot tell which tribe the Messiah represents (245).
government saw the "numerous Indians spinning in the snow almost unto their death" a real threat of insurrection and outlawed the dance. hunted down numerous dancers. used the Ghost Dance to hunt down and kill the famed Sitting Bull who they saw as the central proponent of the dance. and. despite the promise from the "Messiah" that the dance itself would protect the Ghost Dancers from white bullets. U.S. soldiers slaughtered the Ghost Dancers (Neihardt 255-262: Brown 413-418).

The narrative crisis that the Ghost Dancers represent has haunted Native American literature and activism since. Wounded Knee itself became the historical narrative through which a Native American activism and resistance articulated itself in the seventies. It became the narrative through which activists attempted to revise legal and historical narratives. When Russell Means participated in the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee, he declared. "The white man says that the 1890 massacre was the end of the wars with the Indian. that it was the end of the Indian. the end of the Ghost Dance. Yet here we are at war. we’re still Indians. and we’re Ghost Dancing again" (Sayer 15).

Whether it is the Ghost Dance. the many stories of Chango. or the narrative morphings of the Flying Africans. the oral narratives the novelists in this study choose and transform historically resonate with the possibilities and dire problematics of hybrid. resistant agencies. At the root of these cross-cultural contemporary American novels is both the necessity and the difficulty of trying to compose a revivified agency in the aftermath of not only genocide and colonization. but of the narrative crises such history creates for thinking of narration as a site of agency construction. All of the novels construct. archive. and create genealogies for what kind of narrative acknowledges the
political reality of genocide or war or rape and can write a way through it so that characters not only survive but are able to return their knowledge to their communities in useful ways? “Knowledge” is redefined through the import of the folkloric healing rituals. They become the structures through which other methodologies, other logics, and thus other “knowing” of bodies and “knowing” of action come to pass. Importantly, they insist on using oral tradition to name methodological stances, but insist at the same time on historical, contextual specificity—a kind of “situated knowledge” of ethnic political orality. So, in many ways, my project is descriptive: it archives the ways in which contemporary novels across ethnic traditions utilize the mythopoetics of folkloric narratives and performances to rewrite agency through curing rituals. And, importantly, the way that utilization alters under historical circumstances.

The narrative of Ghost Dancing is emblematic for my study because it raises a question of agency narratives in post-genocide, post-slavery, exile America, in particular. how does a tribe or an individual, unavoidably existing in the post-colonial hybrid zone, re-imagine contemporary narratives to open up the possibility of a resistant body and a resistant narrative? Historically, Ghost Dancing is important because it is the turn of the century failure the twentieth-century writers must engage: it is important because it was a pan-tribal recognition (however unconscious) that the tribal stories had to change to

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2 I put “situated knowledge” in quotes here because, while Haraway and others, including Allen Feldman have used this notion to help construct contextually specific ways of knowing and rethinking agency, the texts I am studying, in foregrounding mythopoetic methodology, arrive at “knowing,” however “situated,” through an alternate set of logics. Or, more obviously, “situated knowledge,” even in its adaptability, varies greatly in historical-social context.
accommodate whiteness and its narratives in order to resist them and in order to cure ailing bodies. Finally, Ghost Dancing makes it clear that narrative matters: that the mishandling of a narrative of cure might just lead to more slaughter.

The ghost dancers also frame the necessity of my study because it emphatically makes the point that oral narratives are of the body in complex, essential, and political urgency. Oral traditions, especially when they are categorized as “folklore,” or “myth,” risk being reduced to useless categories of nostalgia as David L. Moore notes in “Myth, History, and Identity in Silko and Young Bear: Postcolonial Praxis”:

The ritual and healing aspects of traditional ancient stories, myths, and elder-wisdom may seem to the postmodern eye to be nostalgic and irrelevant in the late twentieth century. A brief context will be useful. According to Gerald Graff, the modernist literary climate of mythic allusion reduced a sense of the social urgency of the critic’s enterprise, and of literature itself. By Graff’s reckoning, that “literary dictatorship” of high modernism saw literature in trans-historical terms, the embodiment either of timeless verbal symbols or of the eternal recurrence of archetypal myths. . . . Another assumption behind this question of nostalgia in myth is the notion that history writes reality precisely in contrast to the “romantic longings and attitudes” of myth (Philip Rahv’s terms in The Myth and the Powerhouse). Yet more recent historians have admitted that mythic interpretations may not be separated discretely from history, nor from conflicted reality either. The binaries break down. As Arnold Krupat discusses Clifford Geertz’s term “blurring of genres”: “In both the social sciences and in the arts, it is actually on a return to that time when the line between history and myth was not very clearly marked” (Krupat “Native American Literature and the Canon” 59). (372)

In part, the dismissive attributing of unrealistic “nostalgia” to such narrative categories of “myth,” and the attendant “folklore,” is the outcome of the history of gathering and textualizing orality mired in however well-intentioned racism. “Folklore” as a term is problematic—it classifies, in an increasingly outdated category, a set of complex oral traditions as “lore” of the “folks,” and thus understates the ways in which oral traditions
are constituted by often very complex aesthetic and political logics. 3 This sort of framing not only restores the mythic and folkloric to its abstract, superstitious realm, it downplays the very complex engagement these novelists make with the questions of narrative, agency, and the material body. In addition, folklore and mythology is seen often as a realm of superstition, a realm of easy and unreal transcendence and rarely the realm through which corporeal agency might be reimagined. As literary studies such as The Sacred Hoop, by Paula Gunn Allen, The Signifying Monkey, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and a series of contemporary ethnographic studies of Navajo Healing, of Santeria ritual and the historical morphing qualities of oral narrative cures, all attest that indigenous oral healing narratives rarely, in fact, engaged or engage a simplistic transcendence; instead they rely on complex presence, material symbologies, morphing corporealities and morphing sensual arrangements of the body, and a structural dynamism which constructs an agency based in harmony, relationality, and the ever-changing but omnipresent interconnectedness between breath, language, image, and the political materiality of the body. 4

2As a number of contemporary theorists of oral tradition and the study of ethnography have noted, the gathering of oral traditions has been marked by a divorcing of narrative from its dynamic of performance to create an often two-dimensional textual "flat" representation of narratives. See "A Historical Glossary of Critical Approaches," by Rosemary Ley Zumwalt, "Contemporary Critical Approaches and Studies in Oral Tradition," by Mark. C. Amodi, and Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. relies on the structural, linguistic, aesthetic complexity of Afro-American oral traditions to define qualities of contemporary Afro-American literature in his seminal text, Signifying Monkey.

4See Kenneth Lincoln's first two chapters of Native American Renaissance.
The descriptive aspect of this project, then, is based in not only documenting the ways in which the complex logics of ethnic oral narratives and rituals refigure notions like disease, cure, and agency, but in a historical research on the narrative/oral healing rituals in order to understand not only the ways in which these authors are importing and transfiguring the rituals, but also to look at the ways in which certain narratives, like the Ghost Dance, gather, over time and multiple retellings, a historical and corporeal resonance and interpretive ability in and of themselves.

The historical research is important, finally, because the novels themselves insistently retell history through mythic, oral structures to archive the narrative nature of disease and to open up a space in which cure might be written as agency. Disease and cure alike must be understood by a history of narratives. Thus, these narratives create both an archive and a genealogy of history to transform the possibilities in the historical present-tense. I studied the ways in which these novels use myth and oral performance to write a revivified logic of history aimed at cure and aimed at refigured agency.

Because each novel insists on ethnic and methodological hybridity, my historical research also addresses the ways in which these narratives have adapted to contemporary historical contexts of genocide, colonization, and immigration. Integral to adaptation is hybridity—to take in and assimilate colonizer’s cultures is necessary in the first sense for ultimate survival: all of these writers attempt to mine ancient mythos and narrative, adapt them to contemporary linguistics and historical, social contexts to render former powerlessness into action. Hybridity defines almost every level of these texts—the narrative, imagistic and linguistic mix, and, often, the racial composition of the characters.
themselves. At the crux of contemporary agency is the promise that hybridity will open other logics of being and thus be liberatory all the time. Hybridity becomes very problematic in these novels—the willed hybridity colonization and war causes risks death and madness and even the inventive. willed hybridity of language and image risks losing the necessary audience support in curing ceremonies and in folklore collection/narrative assimilation. The problem of addressing the kinds of hybridities posed in these novels is the challenge of studying the curative narratives of any culture: how to study sacredness and risk the profaning of sacredness that anthropology is known for? After reading about Elsie Crews' unethical gathering of Pueblo "secret" stories. "Some Problems Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony." by Paula Gunn Allen. Hazel Carby's compelling critic of the genre of Afro-American women novelists. in particular "The Quicksands of Representation." I decided to try to resist the literary anthropology of a "revelatory" interpretation of the sacred in each of these novels. Instead. I have used critics like Gates. Silko. Allen. and Anzaldua to discuss how the sacred contributes to non-formulaic dynamisms and to focus on the ways in which the oral. ritualistic "sacred." resists interpretation. In addition. I have made sure to describe. for each novel. the ways in which hybridity is a problematic emblem for liberatory narratives. It is not surprising. that in the era of anthropology. part of what guarantees narrative cure is an untranslatable. or ever-shifting. non-documentable sacred.

Certainly. a number of other poststructuralist theorists have addressed the problem of agency as the problem of poststructuralism itself—once the unified. universal. humanist subject is necessarily gone. how does one imagine acting in the world? And.
poststructuralist theorists have arrived at a range of responses: for Haraway, it is the mythopoetics of a cyborg acting in situated knowledges; for Foucault, a certain fated lack of agency is alternately at hand, as is minor, local opportunities for resistance.

Importantly, poststructuralist theorists have deconstructed what Moore describes as the "imperial self." He cites Linda Alcoff's summary in "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." "Lacan uses pschoanalysis. Derrida uses grammar, and Foucault uses the history of discourse all to attack and 'deconstruct' our concept of the subject as having an essential identity and an authentic core that has been repressed by society" (163)." While this summary is problematic in its distillations. Alcoff hits on the difficulty in writing against essentialism and the imperial humanist "I," while holding onto some sense of a refigured agency.

It is important to note that these women novelists do not try to resurrect the "imperial I," the centered Cartesian actor. They, too, must reimagine notions of agency in a post-genocide landscape. For reasons varied in their historical and soci-cultural perspectives, the ethnic traditions these novelists write from are wary of that humanist "I" for other reasons—it represents the colonizing individualism that aided and abetted genocide. The goal of my project is not to set post-structuralist theorists against the ethos of the contemporary ethnic novels in this study: many of the concerns of the theorists and the novelist overlap. However, I have chosen the poststructuralist literary theorists—belle hooks, Paula Gunn Allen, and Henry Louis Gates—whose conceptions of agency seem to most rise out of the narrative traditions of these writers. in part, because they historicize agencies differently. I am compelled by both Lubiano and Moore's claim that if
postmodernism is marked by a certain fragmentation and fraught sense of agency. Afro-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Native-Americans—all those experiencing war zones, genocides and colonizations—have had to rethink agency from a different historical situatedness than Derrida. I am also convinced by Gates’ claim that Eshu Elegbara, the double-mouthed God, who survives in the grammar of Toni Morrison and the Santeria rituals of Garcia, was a master of meta-narrative and that some oral traditions themselves already spawned an agent who was decentered, non-humanist, relational, and dynamic (xxi-xxv).

In addition to utilizing these theorists to think through how agency is constructed as a methodology through disease/cure narratives. I go to these same theorists to explore the ways in which the ritual theaters of indigenous cures both deconstruct the “Imperial” subject and reconstitute a subjectivity and an agency that is to import Moore’s phrasings. “relationality without a center.” “agency without mastery.” and, in the silent sentience of ritual object and the untranslatability of the language of the sacred. “positionality without language.”

**Defining Agency as a Dynamic of Cure**

As much as these novels construct an agency through the myriad non-agencies that are the outcomes of the logics of genocide and war, these novels construct a series of agencies that arise just as much out of these novels’ methodologies of curing. Disease is very much political in these novels: it is the post-traumatic stress of war veterans and rape victims: the depression and internalized rage logic of survivors of slavery. Explicitly, the theorists Lubiano and Moore insist that Afro-American and Native American literature
must answer the post-humanist question of agency differently: for both theorists, these novelists must avoid the “authentic, humanist” self all the while creating viable survival identities. Moore’s description seems most useful to my project:

To elude the dialectical subjection of colonial subjectivity, which would merely mirror the oppression, postcolonial agents must find what I will call a relational rather than oppositional concept of identity. “Relational” suggests a multiplicity rather than a duality of directions for subjectivity. A postcolonial task of native discourse becomes then a redefining of the multiple possibilities of the subject to elude subjection to dualistic, self-other ideas of subjectivity. (373)

Moore’s prescriptive is very accurate for all of these novels: to become an agent in these narratives is to be communally acted upon by retold histories of the very events that incited disease: it is to allow oneself to be rethought in a communal web of relations in the name of resisting binaristic foreclosures of future narratives. But I want to further the claims Lubiano and Moore make by saying that perhaps the most important critique these novels proffer is the critique of the hybrid form (both in novelistic and folkloric curing) as a curing agent itself. As Anzaldúa’s Borderlands makes so poignantly clear in the final chapter here, half-breeds embracing the logics of the hybrid margin risk madness. And, as all of these novels insist, the binaristic has a way of making itself corporeally manifest even in the most relational projects. The ritualized moments of cure are the moments in which characters gain a momentary perspective and see the narrative performance that is disease, and see the possibility of “playing their part” differently: crucially, these moments of cure act as a meta-narrative and self-critique, and document, in their tellings, the telling of the telling—the possibilities and problematics of cures in a hybrid zone.
The Novel as a Theater of Cure

Silko, Morrison, Garcia, and Anzaldua use oral/performance healing rituals to critique the nature of relational, positional agencies and to assess hybridity itself. The multiple positions, possibilities, and problematics it creates for each character as a would-be healed agent. Binaries haunt the liberatory possibilities of the best wrought hybridities and these novelists use the methods of cure to try to construct other relations between essentialisms. The notion of racial purity must be cured into racial and ethnic hybridity: but its cure is inseparable from the binary of gender. Perhaps, finally, the binary that most resists curative agencies is male/female in all of its narrative connotations. It is this binary which, finally, sends Celia into a suicidal drowning. It repeatedly threatens the generative possibilities of narratives like Yellow Woman and The Flying African: it makes of the margin a risk of dissolution and madness for Felicia of Dreaming in Cuban and makes of the margin a risk for being murdered for Pilate of Song of Solomon.

Each character, to be cured, must somehow learn a culturally and ethnically specific form of gendered binaries to heal: she or he must learn to read and interpret what it means to be “female” or “male” within the symbolic geographies of myth and history essentialize enough to foreground binary and then to transform it. Tayo, the protagonist of Ceremony, must learn the ways of changing woman: Milkman must learn the ways of the healer “Pilate.” and he must learn the subjectivity of and his culpability in the narrative of the abandoned woman: Felicia must learn the ways of the daughter of Chango. They must literally learn to read themselves through the female narrative
geographies in their own cures. And then they must be able to corporeally translate that knowledge. In Storyteller, bone fixer regenerates coyote woman only to have her do what her body is prone to do: to run. The degree to which a woman can be saved through these narratives is the degree to which the novels provide a translateable survival knowledge that transforms gendered binaries and has a reading audience, a communal acceptance of such transformations.

Failed cures-as-agencies in these novels are ones which cannot be translated back into the community narrative structure—ones that cannot be known to the community. This is crucial to the assessment of agency and it leads to a final jumping off point of this project: oral performance, as imported to ethnic post-slavery, post-genocide narratives only works to cure agency if it can congruently exist or construct the necessary kind of reader: otherwise, in a hybrid culture, oral performance becomes the “paraphernalia of the sacred.” disembodied from its communally understood projections. Then, the mythopoetics of cure, which promises to revivify agency, risks becoming the medium through which a binary, in all its political, material enactments, is merely buried. Felicia and Celia literally drown in a lyrical imagism because its transformative powers cannot be communally read.

Chapter 2. “Narrating Cure. Narrating Agency” reads Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony as a culturally and racially hybrid series of oral/performance curing rituals that work to revivify a body and its agency. In the Native American oral narratives Leslie Marmon Silko mines in Ceremony, cure has always been a hybrid “mythic positionality.” at once genealogy and archive and method for reading. Tayo’s cure returns him to a
communal agency, where he can pass on the methodology to future generations.

However, like all of the novelists in this study, Silko does not merely invoke the oral curative performances, she critiques them. and, while they serve to save her male protagonist Tayo, they fail to reach another kind of character. Helen Jean.

Chapter 3. “Yellow Woman and Migratory Emergences.” discusses the methodologies of narration and cure in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Storyteller. Importantly, cure is inseparable from migrancy, emergence, and the ambivalence of a genealogy of bones resurrected through metaphor. Storyteller insists that healers are storytellers and vice-versa, that they create both genealogies and archives, and that to reach women diseased by trauma, the age-old rituals must not only be re-imported, they must be revised. Hybridity: racial and textual. itself must be an ongoing critique of its own methodology. Storytellers in this tradition are always telling the metafiction which critiques any method of hybridly reconstituted agency.

Chapter 4. “You Cannot Just Fly Off.” explores Pilate the healer and conjuror as the repository and methodological locus of the “other knowledge” necessary to the curing of Milkman Dead in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon. Integral to cure in this novel is a tracing of the genealogy of disease to uncover its structure. At the same time, a cure requires a historical tracing of the liberatory narrative, “the flying Africans.” But even as Milkman Dead is cured by journeying to both sites, and thus cured by Pilate’s knowledge into flight, his cure points out the very central problematic to imagining cure as agency: he flies into the “killing arms” of his brother. The deep ambivalence of a body in flight, a body open to change and beholden to cultural narratives of violence all at once, raises a
series of questions with which each of the following novels must contend: To what
degree can a body be rescripted or script itself? To what degree is the intimate and
complicit audience a formulator of cure, of agency?

Chapter 5. “What the Living Desire.” insists in its discussion of Cristina Garcia’s
Dreaming in Cuban. that curing rituals cannot help but become hybrid in shifting
political regimes and in exile. However. integral to the oral cure is the participatory.
understanding audience which is often lost in political shifts or exile. The novel
exacting documents these risks and losses. Without the participatory audience, the
performances lose generative power: an actor alone cannot shift community. The novel
tries but fails to cure Felicia and Celia. Both Felicia and Celia, despite their sense of a
new-found agency through curing, need an audience capable of participating in the new
script. Without a readership who understands the ways in which Celia and Felicia have
tried to rescript their lives, both women may “survive” imagistically, in a problematic.
heightened lyricism. but they die quite literal and isolated deaths.

Chapter 6. “Shaman at the Borderlands.” explores Gloria Anzaldua’s
Borderlands-- mix of autobiography, history, myth, and theory as the novelistic oral
performance designed to cure the first person. Borderlands is important because, as a
first-person cure, it implies the dilemmas of a shift in narration and a shift in audiences.
all of which must participate in an ongoing open-ended hybrid narration. Hybridity as a
narrative and linguistic cure is at once the generative locus of the margin and the risk of
madness or, simply, of not being read.
CHAPTER 2
NARRATING CURE, NARRATING AGENCY

The only cure
I know
is a good ceremony.
that's what she said (Ceremony 3)

Ceremony. Leslie Marmon Silko’s second book, placed her in the center of what is often termed “Native American Renaissance.”¹ In the tradition of novels such as N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn, Silko’s novel thematically engages the crucial questions of how Native Americans and mixed bloods, or “half-breeds,” are narrated and narrate themselves in post-genocide, post-colonial America.² Like House Made of Dawn, Ceremony compels itself forward with a will to heal individuals who have become, through the long history of violent colonizations, alienated and marginalized in dangerous set of narratives that spin bodies towards lonely and violent deaths in the midst of poverty, depression, addiction, and abuse. As the title of Silko’s novel insists, the

¹For an excellent discussion of the history of the Native American Renaissance, see Kenneth Lincoln’s book by the same title: for a critique of this grouping of writers, see Arnold Krupat’s Introduction in The Turn to the Native.

²When House Made of Dawn won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for literature, the term “Native American Renaissance” was first used (Native American Renaissance ix): it marks the resurgence of a contemporary Native American literature, which, despite its widely diverse population of writers and forms consistently addresses such postmodern, postcolonial concerns of powerlessness, agency, and hybridity.
narrative both begets ceremony and is itself a ceremony under way. On the most explicit level, the novel must create a cure for Tayo, a “half-breed” young Native American just back from World War II. But, as the novel progresses through the cure of Tayo, what becomes clear about his disease is that shell-shock, or war-sickness itself, is symptomatic of a much larger cultural disease also manifest in the characters and the landscape around him. By the time Tayo moves through his cure and into a sense of revivified agency, his disease has become inseparable not only from the alienation all “half-breeds” feel from both Natives and whites, not only from his mother’s rape/prostitution, but also from the uranium mining on his reservation, from the alcoholism and ritualized violence of the other war veterans, and from the potential deaths haunting other Native Americans. His disease is at once historically specific—he is a shell-shocked World War II veteran—and less historically specific in that he is a victim of “witchery” or white narratives set loose on indigenous bodies. The awful outcomes of witchery may be made manifest by whiteness, but their lingering logics and the sort of narrative foreclosures they create are the breeding grounds for disease.

In an architecturally complex structure, Ceremony tells the story of Tayo’s accumulated healings, which add up to his ultimate return to health and a refigured, revivified agency: Tayo goes from a state of unintelligible powerlessness into a state in which he begins to see himself in a mythic positionality and in the theater of action that folkloric cure creates. This performative/political theater allows Tayo the distance to become both reader and composer, and to resist, however momentarily, certain culturally-fated narratives. As Tayo journeys through the rituals, he journeys forward, toward
finding a composed self and towards retrieving the many losses of his history, including the lost hybrid cattle that will bring financial stability to his family. As he journeys forward in time, he journeys back through the narrative logics of disease to find the narrative logics of cure. He becomes both healed and healer: a vector and shaper of narrative. The half-breed hybridity that alienates him from his family in the first place becomes his greatest generative source for cure: finally, as a hybrid, he is able to find the stolen cattle, understand the narratives that write themselves through him, and side-step playing a role in a death narrative “for now.” This journeying through multiple temporalities, ceremonies, and narratives multiplies the possible subject positions Tayo can occupy. The novel’s structure mimics Tayo’s very hybridity: it begins with verse fragments and oral tradition framings and the prose sections throughout work through a complex flash-back circular structure made of verse stories, songs, ritual paintings, and even moments of silence, of untranslatable language.

As Ceremony moves through its hybrid forms, exploring at once the logics of the oldest indigenous stories of witchery and rejuvenation and the logics of war, Tayo finally becomes an example of disease as a logical disharmony—disease is a corporeal manifestation of archetypal dis-logics which must, through perpetual re-narration be made harmonious. Disharmony begets disease: harmonizing is the act of restoring a sense of position and readability to history. Essentially, the disease/cure model in this novel differs radically from westernized notions of disease. Disease is always political, always communal, and always an inflected and imbricated physical and mental manifestation. As the novel makes immediately clear, Tayo’s shell-shock has made him
violently, corporeally ill, and, while he has the option to return to the white doctors and the "white smoke" the army hospital made of him, his only real hope for survival within his community is that he and his community find a cure for what he has become. Just as the structure of disease in this novel is complicated and defies any simple categorization, a ceremonial cure must not only trace the genealogy of disease to arrive at its logical spawning fields sprawling through a body, but it must also catalog possible cures to create an archive of resistant narratives.

More complexly, as the inherent structures of Laguna and Navajo healing rituals insist, Tayo's disease is at once cultural and communally corporeal: thus a ceremony is not a discrete, singular, formulaic methodology of healing. A "good" ceremony must ritualize a cure for the history and culture that spawned Tayo's disease. His sick body becomes the locus through which such narrative ritual is composed. The novel takes Tayo through a series of cures in which he increasingly takes part. Tayo begins as a more passive recipient of healing but the cures and healers he meets insist that he must become a careful reader of disease and of the generative structures of ceremony to move forward. Implicitly, Tayo is "cured" not only when he can read the theater of narrative well enough to resist a fated cultural tragedy, but also when he can return to his tribe and translate the knowledge of resistance to them. This, indeed, is the final gesture of The Ceremony: Tayo returns to tell his tribe how to navigate new historical terrain.

In both the long histories of ceremonial cures and in the present temporality of this novel, cure is inseparable from a re-envisioned agency. Arriving at a possible agency in a post-genocide, post-war culture is no simple matter. As David Moore insists
in his essay “Myth. History and Identity in Silko and Young Bear: Postcolonial Praxis.”

*Ceremony* provides a model of a re-imagined agency that is neither mired in tragic powerlessness nor mired in an iffy, unreal humanism that promises a single identity/actor transcending social ill (371. 373. 375).

Myth and verse rituals allow an intermediary model of agency. The oral traditions and cures work on several levels: they trace the material and political genealogy of disease, and, in doing so, they retell the structures of history that spawned such postcolonial illnesses. They also act to compose the disease in relation to long histories of narrative logics: for example, whiteness is the early set of bodies through which “witchery” works. Witchery, mired in the logic of individual competitiveness, sets whiteness forth on the world. When the ceremony retraces a story, like the one in which competitive witches set whiteness loose in the world, it traces a certain kind of competitiveness and narrative structure to the root of the disease; and, importantly, the retelling of source narrative logics sets the disease in a knowable context. This aesthetic harmony—stories being located within a cosmos and history of narrative—makes experience a material, chartered object which then allows a readable distance for the healers and the healed. It is important to note, however, that “making object” of the body’s experience does not render it simply intelligible. The explicit ceremonial acts within the novel and the verse sections do not provide a one-on-one correspondence to the prose narrative of Tayo’s migration through cures and into agency. “Reading” the body as an object must be multiply layered. The rituals and the verse sections multiply the possible readings or formulations of Tayo and his disease, thus opening narrative
possibilities. Composing the disease within a material ritual cognizant of its own symbolic structure and tracing the relationships between this disease and a community trying to adjust to yet another form of ethnic hybridity, to war, and to Uranium mining, allows Tayo and his community an altered sense of cause-and-effect individuals and history as well. These sorts of rituals allow alternate chartings of past, present, and future. The altered sense of relation and the multiple possible subject-positions all are what lead Tayo to the moment, where, in the shadow of the Uranium mines, he sees himself as an actor in the political theater of fated narratives: the moment wherein he sees his own narrative inevitability, the very performance quality to his own acts and to those other acts, allows him a disassociation and a silence in which he chooses not to play out the old story of “witchery,” which would have him kill a fellow crazed veteran and complete the story of “the crazy veteran Indian” all over again. It takes nothing less than an entire novel of ceremonies in their will to multiply relations and positions and in their inherent political theaters to will this one moment of altered vision and of altered decision, one moment of resisting a tragic narrative inevitability.

In addition to creating mythic political positionalities, the novel further expands the realm of composition and action because the verse and ritual structures throughout ceremony “invite in” sacred beings, origin myths, symbolic and literal bodies, and such contemporary forms of mapping time and place such as phone books and calendars. In many ways, this is why the folkloric is so essential to revivified agency in Silko’s work—it multiplies possible subject positions, all the while keeping those subject positions firmly rooted in socio-political history and prophesy. In addition, Silko brings to the project of
the novel not only the sense of a novel by necessity being a hybrid ritual offering, but also a revisionist stance in which she both offers up hybrid structures and critiques their very parameters—what hybrid logics allow the better cure? What of the old stories logically revivifies? What combinations act to incite madness rather than an identity temporary enough to resist fixity? Not all hybridity, finally, is good hybridity. Finally, certain narrative methodologies associated with female figures both allow a generative hybridity and are, themselves, then potential victims to the very narratives to which they turn. Changing Woman, or Yellow Woman, the informing web-like composer of Ceremony, is, in one incarnation, the safe seed-spreader, and, in another, the dying rape victim.

Silko’s mining of folklore for the narrative structures of contemporary cure in order to accomplish the feat of reimagining survival and agency in the aftermaths of genocidal colonizations and wars is complex. Silko claims implicitly in the novel and explicitly in numerous interviews that the old stories, the old traditions are a life-line to reimagine the present and to cure a present trauma. Importantly, though, the old narratives must be remade by contemporary characters and all the specificities of their personal lives in order to cure the individual and communal historical bodies. The mythic must inhabit the historically specific present to have usefulness. Nothing less will address the myriad diseases of political trauma that send a body stuttering and unreal to itself into the state of accepting powerlessness to cultural narratives. What sort of narrative structure, this novel asks, what sort of “ceremony,” cures a body shell-shocked from war, a body hybrid and already “outsider” in its own community, a motherless, fatherless body
overwhelmed by the realization that some awful narrative is enacting itself through and among contemporary bodies? What sort of ceremony will return an individual to political usefulness in his community?

It Has Never Been Easy: History and Disease

It was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going on forever. (169)

The first prose passage of Ceremony begins with Tayo's insomnia, the state in-between dream-life and waking: he is a man without location, a man in between the world of the living and the dead. As such, he becomes the archetypal locus for narrative in Native American oral traditions--his is the body that must be called back to consciousness and community. He is the corpus that must be filled with the spiritus of a narrative to enact his survival, the landscape's survival, and his people's survival. The first scene of Tayo is a scene of his insomnia and it linguistically constructs his dislocation. Tayo has shell-shock and the language registers not only what cannot be assimilated in his war time experience but what was unintelligible and dislocating long before the war: his existence on the boundary of several cultures, his body as the product of one culture's overtaking another.

I base this claim on the recurrence in numerous tribal narrative traditions of the in-between people--the characters who go out into other worlds or who are abducted into other worlds and who then are narratively brought back into the tribe. Bear stories fit this structural model (stories of humans lost in the woods who are then raised by bears) as do Yellow Woman and Changing Woman stories (the stories of a tribal woman joining sunlight or Buffalo and returning to the tribe with these material goods. For a more thorough discussion of the Yellow Woman/Changing Woman story cycles, see Chapter 2. In some sense, these kinds of narratives are narratives of community members lost to other cultures, and/or retrieved from other cultures. One of the first cures Tayo goes through with Betonie is a Bear Cure and a Bear boy helps Betonie with this cure.
In his not-sleep, the myriad voices of loved ones and relatives are spliced with the hybrid voices of culture, the voice of Laguna, which might be the voice of his mother but. "when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand..." (5). The threads of images, disembodied voices, and narrative fragments are "tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket when he was a child" (6). In addition to their immediate temporality, the tangled histories are very corporeal: they enact his lived body.

He could feel it inside his skull--the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together. and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places. they snagged and tangled even more. So Tayo had to sweat through those nights when thoughts became entangled: he had to sweat to think of something that wasn't unraveled or tied in knots to the past--something that existed by itself. standing alone like a deer. (7)

Tayo has the same disease the other veterans have and community at large has. The disease is not only a result of genocide, but as a result of the colonizers also mining native land for bomb material. Disease is trauma made manifest in the body. Tayo's consciousness on the first few pages of this novel enacts the unintelligibility of trauma, the inability to assimilate cultures in the midst of hybridization but also it is the corporeal weight of the body trying to enact pattern and meaning in the midst of the cultural bodily trauma of war and insanity. Tayo is haunted not only by the Japanese dead, but also by his unrecoverable brother (8-9). The dead, the logic of war killing, is a mighty weight on a body. In a sense, the novel must make intelligible the relations all muddled and tangled in these first few sections. The ceremony to incorporate the dead killed in warfare, the dead at the hands of white sexuality (in the case of Tayo's mother) into the cycle of the
living is not yet present. So the re-narrativizing of Tayo’s war experience will proffer a new ceremonial cure for those who have been in the center of such a war narrative.

Tayo will be the one through whom the dead are rendered intelligible and useful purveyors of knowledge to the living. Even as Tayo’s consciousness is narrated as fragmented and impossible to contain. Tayo craves compositional clarity, a thing unto itself that means as it appears, singly, solely: however, the torn web of post-genocide, post-war narrative insists that the image is never pure and unhindered. Tayo tries to focus on a deer, but he is unable, initially, to hold that one deer in place in his mind’s sight because it unwinds into a former deer, a deer he and his brother Rocky hunted (7). Any image that might stand whole unto itself devolves into the unassimilable images of the last days before Rocky died (8-9).

It is essential to the narrative of Ceremony that Tayo’s disease is a disease to some extent of sanity in an insane world. The associational logic that haunts him and tortures his body is a logic that Betonie, one of his healers, will insist is a compositional logic of morality: the Japs were his kin in history: to have shot one of them was to have shot a kin like his uncle: so that, if Tayo saw, at the moment he was supposed to fire on the Japs, his uncle, he saw a logic of kinship which war insisted he break: to shoot, to have been in the kind of warfare where he may have killed kin without even knowing it, is to war against his own blood ties. He is not supposed to see the deer as a singular object unrelated to the narratives which surround it. War is fragmentary and unreal, a sort of not-logic that refuses an originary and clarifying unity.
Because Tayo cannot physically hold these tangled logics back, because he has no cultural narrative whereby to locate himself in these logics. Tayo’s body revolts. When he feels the ways in which the past and the present and the future all weigh upon one moment, he vomits (7-15). He cannot parse temporality and his body cannot bear the weight of a historical past on the present. The horror of the understanding that exists in those tangles (that his mother’s voice is lost to him, that he enacted war on kin, that Rocky was killed) and the ways in which those tangles are inseparable from the present tense, render Tayo immobile. He will literally be starved by the tangles occupying his head and belly. or, like so many around him, give in to the temporary oblivion of alcoholism (which always leads to those other knowable ‘Indian’ death narratives). The grief of what he intuits and has witnessed blocks all feeling “except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (9). This is the anti-pregnancy, the unbirthable history of the violently dead, the anti-narrative that must be made possible and fecund again. Not only must the story of the anti-narrative be told, but it must be staged and restaged, the threads untangled enough to give the actor a choice. an option of how to play out the scenes history flings upon the living and the dead in all their corporeal presences. Disease is a failed story. The cure must be a good story which is inseparable from a story that enacts upon a body an ordering through which it might survive.

The early disjunct Tayo felt culturally, which turns out to be inseparable from the violence and death his mother experienced, is only further accentuated by his war experiences. The logic of war destroys his understanding of kinship and in doing so.
make a sane vision into an insane one. War tells him that the "Japs" are the other who must be killed: but as he looks upon them, he sees the face of his uncle. In the corpses' skins he sees a universal humanity (8). But his inability to assimilate the two logics (their inability to coexist) make him untranslatable to himself or his community. Disease then becomes inseparable from insanity, however corporeally marked disease may be. Tayo may vomit uncontrollably, but it is because logics are at war in his body. The best his overwhelmed body can do is to attempt to dispel the unassimilable threads in a repetitive and compulsive reenactment.

Disease and insanity are both inseparable from narrative's occupation of a body. In a sense, disease is the result of a failed narrative, or of a narrative that must be amended and reenacted in order for survival to take place. A genealogy of disease as a historical narrative inhabiting the body must be accepted and delimited for cure to work. The novel must discover how it is Tayo came to be shell-shocked and full of nightmares. The representations of the traumas themselves further insist that a new logic of the body and of narrative must be discovered. Because Tayo is one player among many, the genealogy of his disease is never solely about him: it is about an entire landscape and community. and, finally, a cosmos. As such, the genealogy of disease is a re-enactment of history, a revisionist history and a reconstruction of logics and compositions of landscapes. In Ceremony, logical tracings become the web of relation which allows altered vision.

To tell the story of one man's illness is to talk about a world order, a communal necessity, a history of the landscape and people made manifest in the present. An altered
temporality is required in this genealogy. And the novel *Ceremony*, in its incantatory repetitions of archetypal fragmented oral traditions and imagistic theaters of prophesy composes an altered temporality: the old stories predict the present, which revises the old stories and the past present and future combine and are co-produced by a body in any given moment. Thus, as Tayo vomits and cannot hold food or water, as Tayo misses the hospital where he was just a white smoke, an “outline,” the landscape of his people is in drought. In the old stories spliced into the narratives of Tayo’s cure, drought is the result of people doing foolish things (13-15).

Furthermore, Tayo believes he has brought this drought on his people and the landscape because when he was on the Bataan Death March, trying to save his brother’s life, he prayed that all the rain and flooding would stop (11-12). The rain did not stop in time to save his brother or to save him from severe malaria. but back home, in the wrong context, the prayer worked. So Tayo’s failed narrative is not just the failure of a story to explain himself to himself and to his people. it is a failure of his ability to see himself as a storyteller who can heal as much as it is a failure of him to construct himself in some historical temporality that orders the clashing cultural corporeal logics at hand. He believes he is powerless: the narrative prayers he knew from his tribe could not stop death and disease: the narrative of war was greater. and. the narrative prayers he enacted in the jungles came back to cause destruction for his people.

Tayo possesses a communal/ cultural disease. It is not only the disease of his people in the post-traumatic shell-shock of colonization and genocide, it is also the disease of those estranged from themselves in the face of the “destroyers.” It is the
inability and the difficulty of hybrids to place themselves into cultural identities out of which they might stage possible agencies and map other corporealities. Tayo realizes this toward the end of the novel when he recalls that his grandmother herself witnessed the atomic bomb testing and that his very native landscape was used to mine the uranium ore necessary for building the bomb (245). It is important in this novel two logics are true at once: the violence enacted by whites is extreme, ruthless and cunningly infectious and, the novel argues, the greater evil is a logic or a pattern of thinking that anyone could adopt or resist. Integral to the evil from whence the world’s disease springs is the notion, finally, of racial separateness and all the binaries it implies. To argue that it is solely white men who are the enactors of illness, the breeders of the awful diseases of dislocation (despite the degree to which many of them have adopted the killer logic) and then to kill white men is part and parcel of the disease. The repetition compulsion of the disease produces and is spawned by colonial, genocidal binaries of race and gender: these binaries must be remade through a reimagined hybridity for the cycle to stop.

The Becoming Must Be Cared for Closely

As the novel traces the genealogy of Tayo’s disease, so is his “ceremony” scripted. Importantly, Tayo’s ceremony is not singular: it is multiple and it moves by accretion. Tayo is cured by an evolving set of ceremonies. Each of the healers and rituals of the larger Ceremony gives Tayo the ability to translate his experience and knowledge for himself and for the tribe. As discussed above, the novel begins in the middle of the disease/madness, but it also foregrounds the failure of certain cures for
contemporary trauma. The logical narrative inversion of the disease, as failed narrative, is itself, in failed cure. The “good ceremony” requires more than an individual trying to assert his will over the tangled threads: Tayo could not believe the logic that Rocky tried to explain to him: that the slain Japanese soldiers were not his relatives (8). The composition of cure must somehow account for disruptive logics which have insisted no relation existed. The cure itself cannot hold the single pristine image separate from its contexts: Tayo must be sung and spoken and mapped into cure by an entire novel of related images and texts that actively revise their singular readings into more multiple ones. and, in doing so, write Tayo as a reader and composer of the narratives as well. Importantly, while some of the ceremonies act to repeat, re-perform, and re-emphasize key narrative logics, they also insist on logical becomings and curing as a generative open-ended structure.

The first attempted cure was Rocky’s logic: Tayo was certain the Japanese soldiers they were killing were kin:

“They” (his comrades) “forced medicine into Tayo’s mouth and then Rocky, thinking that if Tayo looked more closely at the dead Japanese soldiers he would be convinced they were not Josiah. Tayo screamed because, in death, the body of the Japanese soldier was even more certainly Josiah. The medic put him to sleep: his illness was named battle fatigue and “they said hallucinations were common with malarial fever.” (8)

Rocky “reasoned it out with him: it was impossible for the dead man to be Josiah. because Josiah was an old Laguna man, thousands of miles from the Philippine jungles and Japanese armies” (9). Tayo can recognize and follow the logic of Rocky, but not
only does the logic fail to convince Tayo he is wrong: it makes him all the more sick.

Rocky’s logic is immediately followed by Tayo’s body becoming even more ill:

The facts made what he had seen an impossibility. He felt the shivering then: it began at the tips of his fingers and pulsed into his arms. He shivered because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference any more: he could hear Rocky’s words, and he could follow the logic of what Rocky said, but he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly: a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat. (8-9)

Importantly, the grief pushing into his throat, the anti-pregnancy, the disease of unending vomiting, commenced at the moment of logic’s failure in the war and it is collapsed into the present tense of Tayo’s illness: the anti-narrative of great swollen grief has not been cured by existing logic. Tayo learned just how context-dependent the logic of anything essential for survival was in the jungle. His uncle Josiah had explained to him when he was younger “Nothing was all good or all bad either: it all depended.” When Tayo was in the jungle rain, the rain that a landscape like the west of America prayed for and depended on for survival, rain became the killer of bodies. the awful landscape logic that turned wounds “green” “choked their lungs” (11). In the rain that fell on Tayo and his brother and fellow soldiers captured and marching the Bataan death march. Tayo prayed for what he never would have prayed for at home. the end of rain:

It was the rain which filled the tire ruts and made the mud so deep that the corporal began to slip and fall with his end of the muddy blanket that held Rocky. Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the Japanese grenade that was killing Rocky. He would blame the rain if the Japs saw how the corporal staggered: if they saw how weak Rocky had become, and came to crush his head with the butt of a rifle. then it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him. (11)
Tayo's attempted cure for the rain that was killing Rocky: his story he told to keep them all going. his story that "poured out of his mouth as if they had substance. pebbles and stone extending to hold the corporal up. to keep his knees from buckling, to keep his hands from letting go of the blanket" failed ultimately because the rain gathered into a flood that carried from each village "their sewage. their waste. their dead animals" and the Japanese soldiers saw how weak Rocky was and they smashed his skull with a rifle (12). Tayo loses his sense of the cause-and-effect of narrative: his prayers and storytelling not only were powerless to save Rocky, they seemingly brought one of the worst droughts in history onto his own people.

After surviving the march. during his stay in the prison camp and in the white man's hospital at the end of the war. Tayo became

\[ paper \text{white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital. because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls: it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke. He had seen outlines of gray steel tables. outlines of the food they pushed into his mouth. which was only an outline too. like all the outlines he saw. They saw his outline but they did not realize it was hollow inside. He walked down floors that smelled of old wax and disinfectant. watching the outlines of his feet: as he walked. the days and seasons disappeared into a twilight at the corner of his eyes. a twilight he could catch only with a sudden motion. jerking his head to one side for a glimpse of green leaves pressed against the bars on the window. He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries. (14-15) \]

The trauma of a failed cure. a failed story to save his brother. and the failure of logic to explain the inability for language to save made Tayo and everything around him an outline. He was not fleshed corporeality. Without narrative assimilability. he was the walking dead. The cure the hospital proffered only furthered this state:
Their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes. It was not possible to cry on the remote and foggy mountain. If they had not dressed him and led him to the car, he would still be there, drifting along the north wall, invisible in the gray twilight. (15)

In an important way, while the novel resists a temporal linearity, it stages all the possible cultural narrative cures that fail or that are only able to partially cure. The cure is a journey through and an understanding of the failures in former agencies to arrive at a tenable, temporary agency. One doctor, a new “doctor” penetrated the outline/fog that Tayo had become by asking him questions: “But the new doctor persisted: he came each day, and his questions dissolved the edges of the fog, and his voice sounded louder every time he came” (15). By asking Tayo to speak, to utter, to speak for himself, even if only to explain “nobody is allowed to speak to an invisible one,” the doctor insists that Tayo begin to hear himself and to take form: “The sun was dissolving the fog, and one day Tayo heard a voice answering the doctor. The voice was saying, ‘He can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue. they have no sound’” (15).

However disassociated, Tayo’s response to the unnamed questions of the doctor (presumably about what he feels/felt, has seen) drives him to feel his own tongue and to discover that he is not invisibility and substancelessness, not fog, but a walking carcass: “He reached into his mouth and felt his own tongue: it was dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent” (16). Only once he recognizes his corporeality as corpse is he able to report exactly what the new doctor asks him and to respond to the new doctor’s news that he is
going home by saying, again in the disassociative third-person. “He can’t go. He cries all the time. Sometimes he vomits when he cries.” (16). When the doctor asks him “Why does he cry Tayo?” Tayo responds. “He cries because they are dead and everything is dying” (16).

Utterance and awareness of death-occupied corporeality does not cure Tayo. It is part of what sets him in motion, towards a ceremony that might work for him. Once released from the hospital, Tayo can hardly occupy his body and when he does, it violently attempts to expel the language, the experience, the swollen grief he can neither occupy or enunciate. The new doctor has begun the process, but just as abruptly, sent Tayo home in the belief that there he will not be able to maintain the fog-like state.

While this same doctor is careful to recommend to Tayo’s family that they do not use ‘Indian medicine’, he begins the process of utterance, and in a theater of a body in trauma, the theater of the disassociative state. Tayo is able to only narrate himself as a distant object feeling: his body cannot yet contain and resolve those feelings nor can he resolve the logics, the temporalities that hold him even as he names them.

He remains corporeally haunted by logical associations and the ways in which the violently dead are forcefully alive in logical collisions. At the beginning of his journey home, Tayo is so sick in the train station, he collapses (17). And, in a narrative inversion, a Japanese family tries to help him. In the face of the family’s son he sees Rocky and this logical relation sends his body into expulsive vomiting again. The associational logic acting through his body shows at once how the “places” or positions, people used to have in relation to each other have become unmoored and the mooring of bodies and narrative
becomes at once the locus for his corporeal disease and the state from which a cure must be found:

He could still see the face of the little boy, looking back at him, smiling, and he tried to vomit that image from his head because it was Rocky's smiling face from a long time before, when they were little kids together. He couldn't vomit any more, and the little face was still there, so he cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time. (18)

Out of the hospital, Tayo's sense of powerlessness and corpse-like existence persists, punctuated by severe bouts of possession in which he vomits. Tayo's illness is an inability to locate narrative temporalities: he sees that the past persists in the present and creates a presence and a sentience, even, but he doesn't know how to account for the violent ruptures that have created death:

It didn't take Tayo long to see the accident of time and space: Rocky was the one who was alive, buying Grandma her heater with the round dial on the front; Rocky was there in the college game scores on the sports page of the Albuquerque Journal. It was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was still unburied. (28)

Other veterans returned to the reservation, including Tayo's friend Harley, have taken up alcohol with a vengeance for the oblivion it gives (32). Oblivion becomes another dead-end curative. But even early in the novel, even as Tayo continues to partake in alcoholic oblivions, he seems wary of the "cure" that alcohol and the barroom talk gives. He seems aware of alcohol as a curative that perpetuates the very ills it promises oblivion from: yet recognition cannot propel him into action, either.
Tayo's inability to heal traces back to long before the war: and Rocky's presence even in death leads to the narrative thread of Tayo's original dislocation: he is an adopted son to Auntie. His mother, sick with a desire to be white, caught between cultures, became pregnant by a white man and left the baby with her family (65). Auntie persists in hinting to Tayo that he is part of a cultural shame, part and parcel of a whiteness that can never be fully native or pure. and part of a sexual shaming and death of his mother (68-69). His mother was one of those girls lured by whiteness into alcoholism and morbid sexual relations with white men (68-69). It literally killed her and it was the context from which Tayo was born. To be at home for Tayo is also to be out of place, to be among the walking dead that he encountered long before the war. The house represents the loss of an original safe location for him, a loss of his mother. Josiah his uncle and his half-brother Rocky:

He lay there with the feeling that there was no place left for him: he would find no peace in that house where the silence and the emptiness echoed the loss. He wanted to go back to the hospital. Right away. He had to get back where he could merge with the walls and the ceiling, shimmering white, remote from everything. (32)

Tayo must find a way to locate himself or he must return to "merging" western cure. Grandma and Tayo both see at the same time that if Tayo does not get better, he will not be able to stay and will be drunk or dead like the others or returned to the hospital. Grandma calls on the first formal healer of the novel, old man Ku'oosh (36).

Interestingly. Tayo's mother might be another figure for Yellow Woman. When Auntie tells Tayo the story of his mother, she focuses on one scene where his mother returns from the river naked. The river is the meeting ground for Yellow Woman and whomever her suitor/rapist may be. So, subtly, Tayo's mother is at once a tragedy and the problematic regenerative site for hybrid fecundity.
Even Tayo’s hybridity might prevent cure—since he is not purely “native,” the community may gossip about his being allowed to be cured: Auntie does not want the gossip involved and claims that the Indian medicine will not work on someone who is “not full blood anyway” (36).

Ku’oosh ends up being more of a diagnostician of what is needed—he can temporarily provide a remedy of sustenance and he can invoke an origin and landscape of strength: however, Ku’oosh doesn’t have the ceremony that a man like Tayo needs. Some essential qualities/methodologies of ceremony and healing become clear in Ku’oosh and Tayo’s interaction: there will always be the unnamed, unintelligibility: a body comes to know itself through a relation to landscape (35-38). Ku’oosh educates Tayo. He reminds Tayo of the cave where Tayo and Rocky used to go to see snakes and bats (34). This is the cave where the scalp ceremony, a ceremony to heal warriors back from battle took place. Ku’oosh insists that memory and landscape was the stage already set. the recurring scene of curing. Ku’oosh also re-emphasizes the web-like relationality between every word and narrative and Tayo begins his process of hearing the narrative structures that will heal him. Ku’oosh tells Tayo that “the world is fragile”:

The word he chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process. and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku’oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said: and this demanded great patience and love. (35-36)
Ku’oosh asks Tayo if he was in the ‘white man’s war’ and when Tayo says yes, Ku’oosh said the “others” (meaning the elders) sent him to ask Tayo what he might need (36). Tayo cannot tell him: he cannot bring himself to explain the warfare to the old medicine man: in the old days, the evidence of killing was obvious, close to the body: but in this war Tayo may have killed, been part of a killing without even knowing it:

It was all too alien to comprehend. the mortars and big guns: and even if he could have taken the old man to see the target areas. even if he could have led him through the fallen jungle trees and muddy craters of torn earth to show him the dead. the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous. Ku’oosh would have looked at the dismembered corpses and the atomic heat-flash outlines, where human bodies had evaporated. and the old man would have said something close and terrible had killed these people. Not even old-time witches killed like that. (36-37)

Tayo will be a necessary element in the curing of the tribe because he can bring to the tribe not only the image and logic of that “torn earth,” but also its survival cure. The old war cures are not working for the young veterans: no one is able yet to script the proper cure.

Tayo grieves and feels deep hopelessness when Ku’oosh leaves: Ku’oosh confirms Tayo’s guilt without meaning to: that it takes only one man praying wrong, telling the story wrong to injure the fragile world and then there is no cure (39). But, this first encounter with the medicine man sets an important stage: Tayo must become a healer/curer himself. although he doesn’t realize it yet: he may just be realizing that unless some other narrative is scripted. he will die and his community will die. and that. for the cure to work. it must contain something of this new world gone wrong. a cure that can cure the aftermath of the atomic bomb and that can cure the alienated dislocation of
the "half-breed." While the Indian tea and the blue corn meal calm Tayo's vomiting, he is still the void that must be reenacted or he will be scripted in the usual cultural scripts.

Almost immediately after Ku'oosh's visit, the novel performs a series of scenes in which Tayo recognizes a sick logic and reacts, only to fulfill the narrative of drunken, insane Indian. After he gets well enough to eat, he goes out one night with the former vets. One man there, Emo, is infected with killer's powers. He was a torturer during the war and he always carries with him a bag of Japanese soldiers teeth. The drinking and the conversation itself is ritualized: the stories the vets tell of bedding women, of being great heroes, of killing the "Japs" is marked off in verse form just as the narratives of myth have been thus far (40-41). Tayo hates what Emo represents—a man who grows off each killing, who delights in death and torture and Tayo tries to kill Emo (42). His will to kill Emo is an attempt to kill or exile the narratives Emo pours forth. While others mistake Tayo's attempt to kill Emo as a personal gripe—Emo always teased him about being a half-breed—Tayo was attempting to kill everything Emo represented. Tayo is sent back to the hospital:

They all had explanations: the police, the doctors at the psychiatric ward, even Auntie and old Grandma: they blamed liquor and they blamed the war. . .

"Reports note that since the Second World War a pattern of drinking and violence, not previously seen before, is emerging among Indian veterans." But Tayo shook his head when the doctor finished reading the report. "No?" the doctor said in a loud voice. "It's more than that. I can feel it. It's been going on for a long time."
"What do you think it is?"
"I don't know what it is, but I can feel it all around me."
"Is that why you tried to kill Emo?"
"Emo was asking for it." (53)
Tayo knows that Emo represents the evil binaristic logics of killing: it is not just a white disease:

Tayo could hear it in his voice when he talked about the killing--how Emo grew from each killing. Emo fed off each man he killed, and the higher the ran of the dead man, the higher it made Emo.

"We blew them all to hell. We should've dropped bombs on all the rest and blown them off the face of the earth." (61)

Tayo's consciousness of evil is not enough: he needs a history, an archive of experience from which to script himself out of being just another veteran with anger disorders after the war. After he comes back from the second hospital stay, a long time after his "trouble with Emo" he offers to help his aunt's husband with the work. He tells Tayo that old Ku’oosh thinks he still needs help, needs a ceremony. Tayo is driven by the sense that his disease is his hybridity--is the shame of being half-breed: he blames the downfall of his community on his own hybridity and agrees to go to the next healer (110-114).

It is significant that Betonie, the hybrid healer, lives in Gallup--the town most know for its half-breeds, criminal population, and crass commercialism of Native Americans' sacred rituals. All tribes, Zuni, Navajo and Hopi warn their people out of Gallup after sundown: "The safest way was to avoid bad places after dark" (108). But this is the place, in part, where Tayo was raised, where his mother lived with all the other shamed women, prostituting and drinking. It is the landscape of sickness and above it, looking down upon it, is old Betonie (116).
Betonie is the great collector and archivist of the present and the past in order to heal. Like Ku’oosh, he mediates language: he is a word smith of landscape and corpus. He is also one in three generations of collectors who began the ceremony when they saw what diseases whiteness would inflict upon landscape and people. When Betonie sees Tayo look down at Gallup and when he intuits Tayo’s mistrust he tells him. “in good English”:

“I tell them I want to keep track of the people... They don’t understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here.” There was something about the way the old man said the world “comfortable.” It had a different meaning—not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills. But the special meaning the old man had given to the English word was burned away by the glare of the sun on tin cans and broken glass, blinding reflections off the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below. Tayo felt the old nausea rising up in his stomach along with a vague feeling that he knew something which he could not remember. (117)

The body contains a memory that oral ritual can invoke into utterance. Tayo is initially mistrustful of Betonie. Betonie is all that is suspect about hybridity: he does not talk like a medicine man “should”: he keeps a house full of phone books and calendars to “keep track” of things and people, of an evolving world and cure. Fundamentally, the hybridity Tayo mistrusts in Betonie and his method is one present in his own body:

Betonie also has the hazel eyes that mark him as a half-breed. When Betonie catches Tayo’s glimpse, he responds: “My grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes” (118-119).

The novel works through a staging and restaging of central images. The first woman whom Tayo made love with was a “half-breed” with green eyes who told him he
would have a place in the story he could not yet see. When Tayo recognizes Betonie’s eyes, he is able to see. Shortly thereafter, in the disordered boxes and herbs, a pattern: his conscious mind wanted to dismiss all of the materials as "an old man’s rubbish, debris that had fallen out of the years, but the boxes and trunks, the bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern: they followed the concentric shadows of the room" (120).

Betonie tells him to take it easy: that it is too much to take in at once—Betonie’s mother the healer was doing it before he was born and his father, long before that: the room contains the found objects of a great history. Betonie, in the tradition of healers archives all the material in a seemingly chaotic pattern which, set within the landscape, the house built in the "old style," set within the narrative of Tayo and war, follows the pattern of shadows.

Betonie clearly expresses a politics of assimilation if only to understand how to cure the diseases brought in colonizers language: “It is carried on in all languages now, so you have to know English too” (121). Tayo is initially afraid of Betonie: afraid that his family has sent him here to be killed because he believes he brought on the drought as a half-breed praying for drought in a war, but he gives in to the cure and begins by saying to Betonie that perhaps he could go back to the hospital where he does not feel anything.

Betonie classes that ending of the narrative with the other narratives of death in Gallup: the sleeping in mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women. The hospital keeps live corpses, according to Betonie (122-123).

Betonie, like Ku’oosh, insists on Tayo seeing himself as part of a broader cultural history: Tayo speaks of Rocky and Josiah, of what he saw in the jungle. Betonie simply
confirms his associational logic: at one time we all were kin: evil and what Betonie calls "witchery"--a powerful narrative" has altered the logics of relation so that kin seems enemy. When Tayo finishes. Betonie tells him "You've been doing something all along. All this time. and now you are at an important place in this story" (124). Betonie insists that Tayo see himself as a player and constructor of a narrative. And he insists that a"they" will attempt to keep Tayo from completing the "ceremony."

"Ceremony" then becomes the lived artifice and aesthetic of rescripting oneself. It is a revisionist history--not only is racial purity a myth, but methodological purity is a myth as well: survival and agency both require a dynamic hybridity. When Tayo says "I" need help. Betonie insists. we all do: "But it never has been easy. The people must do it. You must do it" (124-126). Once again. Betonie insists that medicine is never just individual: it is never disassociated from a socio-political context or a community:

...even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way. because the world didn't work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger. and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything. (125-126)

To be "inclusive of everything." according to Betonie, was always at the root of ceremony. It was never racially "pure." Ceremonies were always necessarily hybrid to adapt to influx and change and to allow for a survival of that change or a healing from the more obviously violent historical shifts:

The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done. maybe because one slip-up or mistake and the whole ceremony must be stopped and the sand painting destroyed. That much is true. They think that if a singer tampers with any part of the ritual. great harm can be done. great power unleashed. ...That much can be true also. But long ago when people were given these ceremonies.
the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle’s claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing. . . . At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.

She [his mother the healer] taught me this above all else: things which don’t shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people. to make them fear growth. But has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won’t make it. We won’t survive. That’s what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more. (126)

Tayo wants to believe the sort of hope this changing ceremonial cure holds for him. But he sees, also, this ceremony in the larger cultural narrative of white discards, of whiteness infecting and stealing a landscape and temporality such that those colonized have no power to heal. Betonie corrects him by insisting that the binary such narratives creates is a killing binary itself: native Americans have existed long enough in an us-them warring position: something else now must be done for survival (126).

Betonie is a model of the healer in flux: it is the healer’s duty to “keep track” of the evolving world, to incorporate contemporary political, temporal circumstances into the healing process. Betonie is also a model of reading what Lee Schweninger in “Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers” calls the “symbolic geography” of the narrative (85). After Tayo leaves Betonie, he is able to see the methods and objects of symbolic geographies: he sees one of those calendars marking the days and the image of the days is a woman with blank eyes like a hunted and stuffed animal (154). Crucially, Betonie teaches Tayo to interpret himself and culture as a way of mapping the symbolic
geographies and then generating multiple positions in relation to that geography—to literally map a number of ways a body might traverse the geography: after the ceremony. Tayo is able to see the object the woman on the calander has become: he is able to see her as emblematic of dead-end commercialized narratives. In addition, the mythic/symbolic and the real in the novel after Betonie’s curing becomes increasingly collapsed. The collapse of representations as distinctly “true” or “false” is part of what allows Tayo to see himself as an actor and creator of liberatory narrative.

What Betonie finally gives to Tayo is not a closed cure: it is a beginning of a methodology of reading and recognition and thus of multiple responses. This knowledge is not formulaic: when Betonie tells Tayo of a pattern of stars that will mark the next phase of his ceremony, he does not tell him how to read the map. Tayo’s reading of that map will be the interpretive knowledge he returns to Betonie and Ku’uush. Tayo’s job will be to recognize the geography and interpret himself through it.

**Placing Tayo**

It is a matter of transitions, you see: the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. (130)

The traditional cure that Betonie and his helper Shush take Tayo through to teach him recognition, reading, and the corporeal traversing of political geographies is the specific ritual methodology that teaches Tayo to read his own body culturally. This cure, known as the Bear Cure, is structurally important for many reasons in the novel. In part, what must be cured is a kind of dislocated hybridity even as the cure is for the powerless veteran. Bears are traditionally figures of power for healers and warriors: they give both
courage and the ability to dig roots. Bears are also traditionally a powerful clan of animals and they are central to so many stories of intermediary being. Just as Tayo begins his cure the narrative breaks off into its mytho-poetic fragment retelling of a bear story. When a child gets lost and is raised by the bears, finally believes himself to be bear to the point that he is one. A long ceremony of retrieval is required. Even then, once a child is brought back. “he wasn’t quite the same/after that” (129-130).

A bear cure does not promise a clean return to some former original state: people can never quite be brought back to what they were. Instead, a bear cure emphasizes the transition, the becoming, and the methodology of calling a lost body back. Betonie tells Tayo, just before he enters the ceremony:

But don’t be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain. It is very peaceful with the bears; the people say that’s the reason human beings seldom return. It is a matter of transitions, you see: the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for the seedlings as they become plants in the field. (130)

Tayo counters Betonie’s vision of caring for the becoming with the essential question of this novel and of all of these novels of contemporary “healings and cures”:

“All you have to do is look around. And so I wonder... I wonder what good Indian ceremonies can do against the sickness which comes from their wars, their bombs, their lies?” (132).

Betonie attributes the failure of faith in the literal, life-giving quality of narrative to witchery—witchery is the magic of anti-narratives: the narratives that kill and demoralize bodies. According to Betonie, and to the central myth of the novel, witchery
let loose the white genocide (whose aftermath is powerlessness, alcoholism, trauma) in the careless competition between witches. The old-time witches from all cultures ("some had slanty eyes/others had black skin") came to show off the worst of their deeds to impress each other with their dismemberments: "Finally there was only one/who hadn’t shown off charms or powers" (134). The gender and cultural identity of one witch in the group remained obscured but the lesson of the witch was the irretrievable quality of the historical narrative of white genocide. The witch warned the others that "What I have is a story," and that the story would be set in motion by the telling (134).

The story of witchery serves as both genealogical source of disease (the grandfather logic embedding itself in corpus and spreading) and an archive through which Tayo and others might read history and themselves. On one level, the story of witchery prophesies white invasion and genocide. And the story is the story that is already set in motion, in part by witchery, but more importantly, by the dismissal of the power of narrative. The story brings with it fear and destruction and "suffering...torment...the still-born, the deformed, the sterile and the dead." (137). When the witches, connoisseurs of corpses are themselves distraught and say to the witch who has loosed a story capable of terrifying even witches, take that story back. The mystery witch replies that it is just too late. "It is already turned loose./It’s already coming./It can’t be called back" (138). The hope for any cure existing within this historical witchery machinery is to interrupt the motion and the outcomes of the motion. The historical narrative, its machinery, cannot be called back entire.
As if to set a contrary course and motion, immediately after the novel retells the oldest story of witchery. Tayo. Shush and Betonie leave for the mountains to begin the bear cure. The narrative meant as part antidote for those who survive genocide. The travel already gives, as mytho-poetics gives, a sense of perspective. Even as Tayo readies for the Bear Cure, the possibility of mapping and the perspective of distance on political

timeline gives Tayo hope:

Tayo stood near the horses, looking down the path over the way they had come. The plateaus and canyons spread out below him like clouds falling into each other past the horizon. The world below was distant and small: it was dwarfed by a sky so blue and vast the clouds were lost in it. Far into the south there were smoky blue ridges of the mountain haze at Zuni. He smoothed his hand over the top of his head and felt the sun. The mountain wind was cool: it smelled like springs hidden deep in mossy black stone. He could see no signs of what had been set loose upon the earth: the highways, the towns, even the fences were gone. This was the highest point on the earth: he could feel it. It had nothing to do with measurements or height. It was a special place. He was smiling. He felt strong. (139)

From this moment the narrative cuts right into another mytho-poetic narrative of the Bear people bringing a man gone to coyotes back. Tayo is being narrated through this man’s story and materiality. The mythopoiesis of the folkloric ritual will allow the hybrid to return usefully to culture and will allow the hybrid a readable, useful mapping of the body. To bring a man back from an animal otherness, in this coyote narrative, is to “restore his mind.” Restoring a man’s mind is no less than recomposing a body in the cosmos: Tayo is painted with a representative cosmos. Tayo is at once the retrieved and the mythic pollen man at the center of the painting (141-144). He becomes narrated as the body moving through the history of time: through the beginning of being, through the inception of evil and as Betonie sings and narrates this movement. Betonie cuts Tayo’s
forehead and Tayo bleeds: as he bleeds onto himself and the painting (144). Shush and Betonie carry Tayo through the five hoops of the five worlds that the tribes had to travel through: he is literally taken through and painted into the center of a historical corporeal consciousness. Betonie and Shush ritually care for his "becoming."

While this is the first major ceremony/cure enacted on and through Tayo, his healing is by no means "done." He does have a series of narratives in which to place himself: an altered sense of temporality, and a series of symbolic narratives by which he might navigate himself (145-48). He is returned to "home"—a tribal/cultural/natural consciousness and a historical consciousness but "it wasn't over. All kinds of evil were still on him" (143-44). Tayo sleeps and dreams of the hybrid cattle the Mexican woman found for Josiah and that were lost while Tayo was away at war: Tayo dreams he is chasing them. The images of the animals that can survive drought and change, the hybrid providers. When he wakes, the past and present and future and the landscape and history occupy him at once but it is not the tangled, fraught, vomit-inducing mixed temporality of his post-traumatic stress: the composition of himself in the sand painting has given him a symbolic geography for composing himself:

He remembered the black of the sand paintings on the floor of the hogan: the hills and mountains were the mountains and hills they had painted in the sand. He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries: the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. The mountains from all the directions had been gathered there that night. (145)

The ceremony gives Tayo a corporeal architecture from which to think and act. A way to hold back the sick, hollow feeling. It also gives him the sense of the consciousness and life energy in the seemingly inanimate: the landscape. It is not the same gesture as an
anthropomorphism: Tayo is occupied by landscape as much as the landscape becomes his symbolic geography of sentience.

The Sacrificial Geography of the Feminine

"Hey Buddy--Meet Helen Jean." (155)

Paula Gunn Allan has written that for Tayo to be completely cured, he must retrieve the feminine within himself (Allen The Sacred Hoop 119-120). Perhaps Silko's most compelling critique of the hybrid cure in Ceremony is the critique of women's characters and women's methods of curing—the inherent critique of what "the feminine." The entire novel is informed by many of the matriarchal Laguna narrative structures Allen discusses in The Sacred Hoop. Ceremony begins:

T'sits'tsinako. Thought-Woman. is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears.

She thought of her sisters. Nau'tis'ity'i and L'tets'ity'. and together they created the Universe this world and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider. named things and as she named them they appeared.

She is sitting in her room thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking. (1)³

The narrative frame that begins Ceremony insists on several relations between narratives and the world, the narrator and the text, the text and the female archetype: thought produces object. thought produces subjects who then think objects (thought woman thinking her sisters and then she and her sisters thinking the world). and, in the logic of the above. thought is web-like, spreading in a non-linear inextricability of the internal and external/ of the mind/body. Profoundly, naming is the generative act of the world and narrating creates the world, creates history.

There is an essential eternal and unfinished quality to thought-woman here and in the myriad stories she utters. The world depends on her unending presence and it depends, too, on the story never finishing fully. This sort of syntagmatic shift or altered relation to narrative production takes the emphasis off a final cure. and it shifts importance, instead to the relations between the thinker/utterer and hearer, the objects. Silko said in a recent interview. “I write about relations” (“Narratives of Survival” Linda Niemann 5).

Each character, each locus becomes defined by relation. The story teller is both the witness to, the object of, the creator of. the amanuensis, to Thought-Woman. Spider Woman, weaving the world. Complexly, then, the storyteller is a sort of character of thought-woman, one who steps into thought woman’s shoes awhile: occupies her position

³For an excellent reading and range of variations on the thought-woman/spider woman stories, see Spider Woman’s Granddaughters, ed. Paula Gunn Allen and Yellow Woman, ed. Melody Graulich.
but never fully occupies her potentiality. And between/through their speakings the world is made and remade. woven and rewoven.

Furthermore, that the novel begins with structure of poetry insists both that ‘thought-woman tells the world’ is the methodological image at the heart of the many versions of narrative cures. Thought Woman is a figure at once of an eternal essentialism of narrative (she makes the world) and of an eternal and necessary shifting and corporeality. The poetic, in a stark contrast to the linearity of prosaic structures, leaves gaps on the page, a fragmented quality even as it speaks of the divine and unending creator of objects. The poetic structure also asks, formally, to be heard, to be located in not only thought but utterance, a little closer to the mouth and the breath of bodies and things, of bodies and text, and to be non-linear—thought woman is the nearer-to-the-flesh quality of voice, utterance, orality, the spinner closer to the place where language makes flesh and flesh utters its language in an inextricable world.

And then, as if perhaps the old story of thought-woman might seem too mythically distant, too abstract a narrative to have immediate political impact or corporeal impact. Ceremony qualifies the risky abstraction of mythology, the non-relevance of thought woman to an era of nuclear war: stories are never separate from the bodies/politics they tell: they are not to be used lightly:

They are not just entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have to fight off illness and death.

You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories.
Their evil is mighty
but it can’t stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

Narratives are the one way to fight off the evil of a “they.” And, as the narrator
reports thought woman’s narrative, the man speaking the warning of how to consider
ceremony/stories and their inextricability is pregnant with the narrative’s possibility:

He rubbed his belly.
I keep them here
[he said]
Here, put your hand on it
See, it is moving.
There is life here
for the people.

And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing. (2)

The non-specificity of the speaker, his lack of a name, makes him a character any
storyteller might occupy. And his pregnancy must be ongoing, just as thought-woman’s
thinking, thinking is ongoing. The moment or the momentum toward a birth of a single
ritual is denied, despite the incantation of the archetypal oral narrative modes. The point
is not to give birth but to engage in pregnancy and the nurturing of the stories that are a
communal life. And then, after a white space of a page, the storyteller reports a She
speaking who might be thought-woman, any woman on the street, a healer, and/or a
storyteller. That any woman might be giving the verdict on the necessity of a
ceremony/healing/narrative is important—all roles might collapse into one utterance from any given individual on the street:

What She Said:

The only cure
I know
is a good ceremony.
that's what she said. (3)

The novel exists in an ongoing present because thought-woman does—her thinking is the good ceremony she thinks to weave a tear in the web of her story that other narratives have made. As much as the novel is an enactment of a ceremony, the ceremony is the search for its own open-ended generative structure. a pregnancy of survival methodologies all uttered from the generative source of female archetypes. This “feminine” narrative logic exists against the destruction of the war machinery.

While it is rarely written about in the criticism, part of the failure of cultural narratives, the failure of narrative that at once creates Tayo as the ill one and as the necessary healer is the death of women cross-overs. In both this novel and in Storyteller—the narrative explored in Chapter 2—Yellow Woman is a deeply ambivalent figure because she is both generative possibility and potential rape victim, both the hybrid adventurer and the lost one. The oral narratives from the beginning of tribal life mirror such costs. Yellow Woman is not only the one who brings corn or buffalo through her tribe/animal crossing, she is the one abducted, raped and often murdered, sometimes at the hand of her own tribe who cannot accept that she has gone with the buffalo. or with
Sun Man or with another tribal man. say a Navajo. Yellow Woman is at once the great angel of survival. of generative landscape .and the sacrificial site for a will to maintain purity. Her’s is the site of great ambivalence.

Tayo’s mother Laura died crossing over into another culture. died as the result of a culture who just couldn’t account narratively for the postcolonial violence of her life. A Yellow Woman who is not consciously rewritten as such by her community risks. like other hybrids being the very violent inversion of her own narrative: instead of birthing corn or sun or the sort of hybridity that brings tribal survival. she is the inversion of yellow woman: she brings forward the still-born of witchery. When Tayo thinks he hears the women’s voices in the first prose passage of the narrative. he believes he shall here is mother’s voice. “but when he was about to make out the meaning of the words. the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand: and it was then that all the voices were drowned by the music—loud. loud music from a big juke box. its flashing red and blue lights pulling the darkness closer” (6). Tayo’s mother came back from Gallup long enough once to leave Tayo with her sister. Tayo’s aunt, who reminds Tayo of the shame he signifies being the half-breed son of a native woman gone to Gallup for the promises of whiteness. is a type caught in lacking narratives: like Tayo as a child. she had known her position. she had been handed down the old corporeal sensitivities of orality:

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6So many compilations of Laguna stories perform this split: see Elsie Parson’s The Pueblo; see Paula Gunn Allen’s Yellow Woman Stories; and see the Yellow Woman cycle of stories in Storyteller.

7For an exploration of her ambivalent position as generative site. see Silko’s Storyteller.
she knew how things should be. But this was in the fourth world, before industrialization and at the inception of reservations and in the fifth world, all the names and causes had become confused with whiteness and Christianity. The fourth world taught Tayo’s aunt that she must save her sister: the fifth world of hybridity made it impossible thus far.

Auntie’s “little sister” became the site of loss in the cross over between worlds:

When Little Sister had started drinking wine and riding in cars with white men and Mexicans, the people could not define their feeling about her. The Catholic priest shook his finger at the drunkenness and lust, but the people felt something deeper: they were losing her, they were losing part of themselves. The older sister had to act; she had to act for the people, to get this young girl back... It might have been possible if the girl had not been ashamed of herself. Shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people... She was excited to see that despite the fact she was an Indian, the white men smiled at her from their cars as she walked from the bus stop in Albuquerque back to the Indian School. (68)

Little Sister (a potential archetypal figure for Laura) becomes symbolic of the shame and loss with assimilation: “what happened to the girl did not happen to her alone. it happened to all of them”(69). She is what the people would retrieve if they could but they do not have the narrative for it. Nor does she have a narrative of return that could, for example, remake the Bear story into a story of a girl who has learned the “truth” in white men’s “fists and their greedy feeble love-making” (67). Once again, her loss. her disease is described as a possession, anti-pregnancy of the body: “the feelings of shame. at her own people and at the white people. grew inside her. side by side like monstrous twins that would have to be left in the hills to die” (69).

But it is “the girl” Laura and her family who must suffer and she who dies and leaves Tayo in the shame. Auntie is powerless to help her or to process the meaning of
her life, death and birth of Tayo: "But now the feelings were twisted. tangled roots. and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words. out of reach. And there would be no peace and the people would have no rest until the entanglement had been unwound to the source" (69).

As Tayo untangles his own disease and moves into cure. he moves through the story of his mother and Helen Jean, two would-be yellow women who die in this landscape. He moves through their stories to arrive into the physical body of Yellow Woman.

Because the memory of Laura is shaming. Auntie takes her picture away from Tayo. Her image is lost but for the one narrative Auntie gives Tayo of Laura:

Right as the sun came up. she walked under that big cottonwood tree. and I could see her clearly: she had no clothes on. Nothing. She was completely naked except for her high-heel shoes. She dropped her purse under that tree. Later on some kids found it there and brought it back. It was empty except for lipstick. (70)

The image. like the deer in Tayo's mind at the beginning of the novel. cannot stand alone. Everywhere loss and violence presses in on this naked woman and her purse empty but for the white sexualized accessory. lipstick. But. by the end of the novel it is possible that Laura died because her community simply did not have the narrative of survival for her: just like the scalp cures do not work for the new veterans. the old yellow woman stories may not be able to suffice.

In the narrative logic. a mytho-poetic fragment follows the opening scenes of Ceremony and continues a story about a mother. angry with her people for loving magic tricks over the magical properties. deeply ancient. of generative motherhood. This
fragment will continue to represent the ritual for which the people will have to atone to the lost mother for their superficial failures. Contiguously, as Tayo goes through the specific ceremonies of the healers, as he traces and restages the historical genealogy of his disease and begins to imagine himself as a character who might interrupt the motion of witchery, he also uncovers the geography of the lost girl, of the girl slaughtered by white culture. In the associational, circular logic of the narrative that stages the logic of one scene, set against another and only later interprets it, the image of Tayo’s mother is followed up by the scene of Rocky and Tayo signing up to go to the War: Rocky wants the white power, the American the heroic image and Tayo signs up to take care of him there (41). But like Auntie’s inability to retrieve her sister, Tayo lacks the song/prayer to save Rocky from the narrative machinery of war. It is only later, when Tayo and Betonie stare down at Gallup that Betonie proffers a reading: the hybrids dying in Gallup, the pure breeds gone culturally hybrid and dying of whiteness in Gallup are just like Rocky (124-125).

Just after Tayo agrees to go to Betonie, the narrative gives a third person rendition of the “them” hybrids of Gallup. The narrative takes on a third person tense: it is as if Tayo’s memory and his mother at this point can only be narrated in the more abstract terms. But the narrative stares hard at those hybrids lost in the drunken, prostituting narratives of Gallup as again prototypes for what the tribe lost as well as what Tayo lived in, lost and survived. The language ironically takes on the style of classification: “The best time to see them was at dawn because after the sun came up they would be hiding or sleeping inside shelters of old tin, cardboard, and scrap wood” (108). These are the ones
born in Gallup with “light colored hair or light eyes, bushy hair and thick lips—the ones the women were ashamed to send home for their families to raise. Those who did not die grew up by the river, watching their mothers leave at sundown” (108). The implication is that this description, this memory of a boy witnessing alcoholism and street living and a woman giving birth to a still life in the midst of it all, is, once again, that this is both the narrative of a group and the narrative of Tayo. This is also the symbolic geography of what would have eventually happened to Tayo had he not been brought home in the midst of shame and left there before his mother, the drunk prostitute, died like the others. The classificatory coldness of the description makes the narrative of what happened to the “those who did not die” all the more horrifying: children living on the periphery of white men sexually purchasing their mothers, beating them, verbally abusing them: a boy living in abandonment, eating cigarettes under a barroom table, running to the tamaric and hiding in refuse when the authorities came to raze the shacks all described in a classificatory coldness that denies individual sentience. The hybrids never speak: they remain other. The language tips, finally, into the voice of the boy, waiting in the refuse for his mother to return: He looked up at the stars, through the top branches of the willows. He would wait for her, and she would come back to him” (111-113).

Right before Tayo goes to Betonie and through the Bear ceremony/sand painting neither Laura or Rocky survived to have, he and Robert stop in Gallup. As Rocky and Tayo walk into Gallup, an alcoholic couple ask for money. Tayo throws coins to them in the “gentle arc” that he through coins into the water for wishes before he and Rocky went to the war. He watches the couple walk to a bar to wait for it to open:
They walked like survivors, with dull vacant eyes, their fists clutching the coins he'd thrown to them. They were Navajos, but he had seen Zunis and Lagunas and Hopis there too, walking alone or in twos or threes along the dusty Gallup streets. He didn’t know how they got there in the first place, from the reservation to Gallup, but some must have had jobs for awhile when they first came, and cheap rooms on the north side of the tracks where they stayed until they got laid off or fired. . . . The Gallup people knew they didn’t have to pay good wages or put up with anything they didn’t like, because there were plenty more Indians where these had come from. . . . It seemed to Tayo that they would go home, sooner or later, when they were hungry and dirty and broke: stand on 666 north of town and wait for someone driving. . . . But Gallup was a dangerous place, and by the time they realized what had happened to them, they must have believed it was too late to go home. (115)

The loss of his mother and Rocky and some part of himself to the culture of Gallup frames this ceremony, so that, after being inducted into a composition of historical consciousness and into interpretation, when Tayo leaves Betonie in search of the signs Betonie sees: stars and the cattle Tayo dreamed of and “a woman.” he sees a calendar in a shop and

He stared at that calendar for a long time: the horse’s mane was bleached white, and there was no trace of dust on its coat. The hooves were waxed with dark polish, shining like metal. The woman’s eyes and the display of her teeth made him remember the glassy eyes of the stuffed bobcat above the bar in Bibo. The teeth were the same. He turned away from the calendar; he felt sick, like a walking shadow, faint and wispy, his sense of balance still swaying from the ride in the cab of the tank truck. (154)

The image of the woman bleached white and dead (killed) and stuffed like a bobcat has the narrative effect of throwing Tayo’s body off because he sees the killing in the image of “woman.” Shortly thereafter his buddies see him walking on the highway and offer Tayo a ride. A woman is in the car. “Hey buddy.” says Harley, “—meet Helen Jean” (155).
Once again, in the associational logic of the narrative. Helen Jean is the bleached white stuffed bobcat of the girl gone across narrative. However, at this point, after Tayo’s ceremony with Betonie. Tayo is able to recognize her danger. to recognize that she and his buddies, out drunk and hell raising, represent the dead end narratives of people like him. Tayo sees the violence of me closing in around her in the bar: he sees her distraction and her illness and is afraid for her but unable to interrupt her narrative.

Importantly, the next section of the novel gives Helen Jean’s interiority. The only person who gets lengthy interiority in the novel is Tayo and for this reason, one critic has named Helen Jean as Tayo’s “shadow-other” or “shadow-sister.” It is once Tayo recognizes her consciously as such that we get an interiority narrating exactly what the narrative of Gallup in third-person at once outlined and silenced and what the one image of Tayo’s mother walking naked with only her lipstick in her purse narrated and silenced.

She, too, was seduced by white promise: she left the reservation for “a good job” and send money home. “She meant to do it” but the only job she could find was as a maid at the Kimo theater and the pay was seventy-five cents an hour. And that job lasted only until the day she saw her bosses’ shoes behind the stall door, waiting for her. The implication of this image is that she was raped or assaulted or harassed into leaving.

Helen Jean becomes an economy off of the Native American alcoholic men and the narratives of Native American war veterans. She talks to them, tells them her economic woes, they give her a few dollars, she listens to their ritualized narratives of the white women who slept with them and hopes that they will fall asleep before she has to have sex with them. (161-166).
There is a violence enacted on her in these stories: one vet. an Isleta. tells her all about this big chested blonde he slept with during the war and then says “hey. let’s go someplace where I can tell you about it” (164). She is the body over which these men bond: another man. an Apache. watches as the first man tells her about his blonde: when the Apache says. “she doesn’t want to go with you.” the Isleta slaps Helen Jean and yelled “You bitch! You think you’re better than a white woman?” Helen Jean learns to read these men enough to know that with the Laguna guys (the buddies of Tayo) she will not be hit. But. as they sit in the bar. she grows bored with reservation men. doesn’t want to have to go back to a place of boredom. “sand. arroyos and no trees.” and decides to go with the Mexican men winking at her from the bar. After she leaves. and Tayo realizes the same men she left with have beaten up Harley:

He was thinking about Harley and Leroy: about Helen Jean and himself: How long would they last? How long before one of them got stabbed in a bar fight. not just knocked out? How long before this old truck swerved off the road or head-on into a bus? (168)

Tayo vomits again. trying to exorcize the alcohol he drank and his realization that the few narratives his friends could live would end in corpse-like lives and brutal deaths and Helen Jean. a woman his age who is much like his mother was. is gone. running after whiteness driven by shame and false promise. sure to die drunk or raped and murdered.

The ceremony of the novel gives utterance to Helen Jean’s interiority but it does not save Helen Jean. the female other to Tayo. She “knows all the stories.” but lacks the story by which to read into those stories her own survival (165).
As soon as Tayo leaves Helen Jean he meets her female inversion, Ts’eh or Montano who is the figure fulfilling the lost female for Tayo. In her seed gathering and spreading (she tends to the “becoming” of the landscape and the plants), she is generative fecundity—such she is also the fecundity of the inseparability of the mytho-poetic lived in a specific history. She is the final healer through whom Tayo learns another symbolic geography and corporeality as a tender of “becoming.” It becomes clear in this section as well what is an integral part of the healing ceremony and what Ku’oosh intoned when he first visited Tayo: the healer and the healed need each other, learning from each other to complete the ceremony. Tayo will finally bring a knowledge of stars and light to his elders and it is no coincidence that the herb representing light is the one herb Ts’eh cannot collect and needs Tayo to collect.

Ts’eh seems to have some sense that Tayo was a sent one from the beginning: and Tayo recognizes her because he finds her on the search for the cattle when the stars are in the exact configuration Betonie drew in the sand. The same star configuration is left as a remnant on her war shield once she is gone (178). Ts’eh’s healing is the healing of the corporeal through the natural and through the coupling and mingling of male and female to regenerate narrative. It is not a typical white heterosexual narrative whereby the male impregnates the female to produce new narrative. The first sexual act between Tayo and Ts’eh is one of his total immersion in the landscape to become part of fertility and production: he literally loses one sense of himself and his body (the “tracks and voices” he tries to maintain) to become aware of himself as landscape crumbling (181). This final
connectedness gives him what is holy to Laguna healing and storytelling: he is able to breathe deeply (181). In Laguna cosmos, all things are connected by breath: after Tayo connects with Ts'eh, he is able to see himself connected by breath to all sentience.

Tayo becomes then, a keeper himself of becoming, which without the feminine insistence that he know his body differently, would be impossible. As he leaves to find the lost cattle, the sun is rising and he assumes the position of the healer tending to the becoming of the day: he sings the sunrise song. His singing itself wakes a corporeal ancestral “memory of the blood” of a relation to landscape that is pre-industrial and story was as powerful as believing that one sung the sun into its awakening and rest.

Tayo goes hunting for his cattle in the literal old hunting grounds of the Laguna hunters. The landscape has been bought up by white cattlemen and suddenly Tayo thinks of what seemed impossible before: that the white cattlemen had simply stolen Josiah’s hybrids. It is after his first encounter with Ts’eh and while he hunts the landscape for cattle that Tayo realizes he is himself an image in the making, a vision under way: “So he had gone, not expecting to find anything more than the winter constellation in the north sky overhead: but suddenly Betonie’s vision was a story he could feel happening--from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come” (186). After Tayo spots the Mexican cattle running southward toward the geographical direction of their “blood,” and after Tayo meditates on the white lie that the whites themselves had ingested (they will come back to devour their own bodies), he realizes himself again as a player in a cultural narrative (187-188:191). This time, however, he can occupy a narrative logic

See Navajo Holy Wind.
that is neither brutally linear nor tangled and sickening and that is embedded in a
temporality of a mytho-poesis as the central ordering anatomy of the present moment and
narrative making:

He knew then why the old timers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in
terms of the present moment: the only certainty: and this present sense of being
was qualified with bare hints of yesterday or tomorrow, by saying, "I go up to the
mountain yesterday or I go up to the mountain tomorrow." The ck'o'yo Kaup'a'ta
somewhere is stacking his gambling sticks and waiting for a visitor: Rocky and I
are walking across the ridge in the moonlight: Josiah and Robert are waiting for
us. This night is a single night: and there has never been any other. (192)

The ck'o'yo Kau'a'ta is a gambler figure who feeds off of human bodies because he can
predict their narrative decisions: the hero in the gambler stories is always the one whose
narrative out-tricks the trickster gambler and who is then able to set the clouds held
captive by the gambler free.⁹ What is present in this moment for Tayo is the narrative
gamble: the possibility of out-tricking the trickster of cultures' narratives. Tayo searches
for the cattle on the stolen land and at first when he does not find them. doubt enters his
interiority in the form of a wish to avoid the task and avoid confrontation: doubt also
arises. as his body gets tired. in the form of a flashback image of a white science teacher
scoffing at the Native Americans' resistance to dissecting frogs because the frogs could
cause floods (194). The science teacher yells. "do you see anything happening now." and
Tayo's body gives up: he fears that narrative strength to act on bodies and on the
composition of landscape is only superstition and this causes paralysis (195). He fears he
will die there until he sees the mountain lion. the animal guide to the hunter and the
healer: "Relentless motion was the lion's greatest beauty. moving like mountain clouds

with the wind, changing substance and color in rhythm with contours of the mountain peaks” (195-196).

Tayo again takes on the role of honoring the becoming of relentless motion and he whispers to the mountain lion a prayer to protect his becoming. He paints the mountain lion’s footprints with pollen as he finishes his prayer and renewed by the keeping of the becoming, goes forward himself (195-196). Tayo has become the ritual narrator: part reader, part composer. He finds the cattle and just as he is about to escape with them, the white security men ride him down: but they too spot the mountain lion tracks and, distracted with the hope of killing a mountain lion, leave Tayo injured in the snow to die. (197-201).

In his near-death state Tayo is even more continuous with the landscape: he feels it as an essential corporeality absorbing his physicality and he is able to literally trace his own skull in his mind: his near-death state is so much more present, corporeal and composed than the near-death state he is introduced to us in at the beginning of the novel (201). He knows his location by landscape markers and his bodily relation to him. He is in control of his own corpus—he is able to “guard his own skull” (201). When the security men leave him to die, he makes a leaf bed in the snow and lies protected there: the next day he walks until he runs into an old Indian hunter (who might have been, as the Laguna folklore goes, the mountain lion himself) who guides him back to Ts’eh. (206-208).

Tayo returns the hybrid-survivor cattle to his family and returns to the mountain to reconnect again in a sensual dream-scape landscape with Ts’eh. The ceremony might have ended there in a prototypical transcendence narrative: Ts’eh and Tayo being able to
retreat into the fecund landscape, their lives devoted to the becomings of plants and animals. But even before Tayo leaves, Grandmother insists that old Ku'oosh thinks Tayo will have something to report to the old men soon. The ceremony is not over or complete. Tayo must bring back some information to the tribal elders to further the knowledge of cure and the shifting of the ceremonies. In the landscape of Ts'eh, in nature, Tayo is able to feel that nothing is lost; all regenerates into lifeblood as love and tending to becoming. He feels full and complete for a time but he must himself be birthed into her tending and fecund role. (215-216).

Ts'eh teaches Tayo the knowledge of the herbalist. But in doing so, she teaches him visual composition as well: she teaches him again that the logic of arranging an image is the logic of composing a body and a world: “This one contains the color of the sky after a summer rainstorm. I'll take it from here and plant it in another place, a canyon where it hasn’t rained for awhile” (224). After this, as he is watching the cattle reproduce, the cattle that Josiah thought would be hybrid and tough enough to outlast droughts and provide for the people, Tayo is able to “see Josiah's vision emerging, he could see the story taking form in bone and muscle” (226). Tayo becomes so aware of the metaphysics of composition that by the time Robert comes to warn him, he hardly hears him at first, so focused is he on “memories and shifting sounds heard in the night, diamond patterns, black on white: the energy of designs spiraled deep, then protruded suddenly into three-dimensional summits, the depth and height dizzy and shifting with the eye” (229). Tayo is experiencing, hearing, and revisioning the potential patterns of the stories as geographies of the cultural body. What the eye can visualize can pattern the
landscape: what the hearing and vision can take in from the landscape can alter the eye: the two movements are inseparable.

Ts’eh prepares to leave. because, like Betonie’s grandmother-healer, she hears the whispers of other narratives at night: always moving and shifting; so she too must move and shift. Gone the static love story of transcendence: the methodology of the cure is to keep moving with the shifting (226). Shortly thereafter. Robert visits and tells Tayo another narrative is afoot that attempts to write Tayo into the walking corpse zone of the veteran’s hospital or worse, into death: Emo and the others are claiming that Tayo is a crazy man, living in caves: they are trying to get the white police to track him down and bring him back. Ts’eh warns Tayo that the ceremony is not over and that there are worse things than death:

The destroyers: they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other. . . . their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing. to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. When they finish, you watch yourself from a distance and you can’t even cry--not even for yourself. . . . They are all around now. Only destruction is capable of arousing a sensation, the remains of something alive in them: and each time they do it. the scar thickens, and they feel less and less, yet still hungering for more. . . . (229-230)

When Tayo and Ts’eh go to tend the ancient painted image of the she elk. Ts’eh warns Tayo further and her warning is the warning of narrative closure: these men will come for Tayo. men like Emo and Doctors and the BIA police: they will try to enact the only narrative closure they know, to track down the crazy Indian and bring him to the hospital or jail or kill him. But she offers this further interpretation of the ending: most of these people are tools or will grow bored: unlike Emo, a man infected with the witchery of
white torture, the BIA and doctors will not understand the importance of composing the
ending of a narrative—they are "too busy." "That leaves Emo and the others and that part
won't be easy," she says (232-233).

And it is not easy. The final stages of the ritual test Tayo's physical and mental
endurance. At first Tayo flees through his own landscape, expecting to tire out the BIA
and the white doctors. When he sees Leroy and Harley coming down a road in a truck, he
is fooled: he thinks, these are my friends and he gets in with them. Despite the clues that
they are part of the team looking for him. Tayo does not want to believe they would
betray him. The knowledge of the ceremony insists that he pay attention to "we drove
around all night" instead of imagining these are his buddies, just out drinking as usual and
happening to cross his path (240). He thinks he can hide out safely in the narrative of just
another drunk Indian lost on a bender with his buddies when they are discovered. By the
time Tayo realizes he has been set up. he was "in their place"--the landscape where
uranium was mined and Trinity Site, the place where the first atomic bomb was exploded
(240-243).

Tayo is able to suddenly see why his ceremony and the ceremony of his people
will be played out in this landscape and he is able to see the pattern, the structure of the
story:

... they had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid
them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only they could have
dreamed. ... He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the
stories fit together--the old stories, the war stories, their stories--to become the
story that was still being told. He was not crazy: he had never been crazy. He had
only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions
through all distances and time. (246)
Tayo then realizes his place in the story: he is to keep the story they have scripted out of their hands for just one more night—the last night of the star pattern Betonie predicted—and then witchery, in its own manner, would devour itself: by resisting witchery, he disrupts. for a moment in time, the ends to which witchery works:

The witchery would be at work all night so that the people would see only the losses—the land and the lives lost—since the whites came: the witchery would work so that people would be fooled into blaming only the whites and not the witchery. It would work to make the people forget the stories of the creation and continuation of the five worlds: the old priests would be afraid too, and cling to ritual without making new ceremonies as they always had before, the way they still made new Buffalo Dance songs each year. (249)

Tayo’s task is by no means easy and he looks down upon his friends and Emo acting the witchery out on a stage that compels Tayo’s entrance. Emo and Pinkie are torturing Harley, cutting out pieces of his body in the hopes that Tayo will drive forward and enter the narrative to defend Tayo and to kill or be killed by Emo and Pinkie. Tayo can see the blood: can hear the glass bottle smash Harley’s teeth. The whole scene is like some theater of the witches. Tayo feels driven to enter—not to enter the scene and try to save his friend is antithetical to all he is: he fears a loss of his own sanity. And Emo, like the gambler and anyone who steps into the role of destroyer is betting on Tayo’s moral anatomy to predict the outcome of his action. (249-252).

But something rather simple happens in the landscape and Tayo, attuned now to such things is affected by it: the wind shifts: the moon goes into a cloud bank: the theater of witchery for a moment is invisible. The landscape becomes the eternal essential to him at this moment—that the stars have always been there, beyond memory despite the shifting
of the world and of narratives promises Tayo an image which survives the war machinery.

the genocide and the myriad diseases that spring from witchery:

He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud: and the Army doctors would say that the indications of this end had been there all along. since his release from the mental ward at the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles. The white people would shake their heads. more proud than sad that it to a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn’t seem to make it. At home the people would blame liquor. the Army. and the war. but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies. reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves. for one of themselves they could not save. (253)

The torturer/witches throw Harley’s body into the trunk and off they go. Tayo decides he will return to collect the last herb that Ts’eh needed—the herb representing light and vision (254). Tayo has become the keeper of vision and composition. The narrative he has outlived and the narrative he has constructed as a result of doing so are textual. material knowledges he can return to Ts’eh and to his people—“his people” now are anyone resisting the destroyers. The plants he will spread will grow “like story. strong and translucent as stars” (254). “Story.” finally has the need for tending and becoming that plants do, but also the eternal immortality and strength and lucidity of star light.

Tayo realizes that his own “transition” has been completed: like the bear or coyote people. he is returned to home and rescued from any one of several cultural narratives of ‘Indian’ disease and death. In an inversion of the storyteller/healer’s relation to the landscape as element of form. Tayo sees in the very landscape the sentience and anatomy of story which is the sentience and anatomy of his and his own peoples’ survival: “The
ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs: the feeling was theirs: we came out of this land and we are hers" (255).

_Ceremony_ ends with a double ending and becoming. Tayo returns to the old men of the tribe to tell them the story: “It took a long time” (256). The old men healers want to know the patterns, the aesthetics and geographies of the story that mapped the arrival of Yellow Woman in the form of Ts’eh: they wanted to know “the color of her eyes” (257). The old men do not say specifically that they are asking for Ts’eh and it becomes possible, in the staging of this novel that Ts’eh has arrived in multiple myriad forms and even through the form of Tayo himself: she might have been the blue swan dancer who first told Tayo he and his green eyes would be part of the larger important story: “she” may be the knowledge of survival, the site of new narrative that Tayo learns. “She” may be the methodology of survival patterned through the numerous images accumulating web-like contexts in the narrative.

True to the notion that the narrative must always stay in flux, must shift as the whispers of the cultural narratives shift, the cure of Tayo and his community is only “for now.” Emo has moved on to California after killing Pinkie. California becomes the next potential Gallup-like landscape. As Auntie reports this news to Tayo and Grandma, grandma tiredly shakes her head and says that “It seems like I already heard these stories before. . .only thing is, the names sound different.”

Somehow Grandma’s sleepy commentary offers another reading of mythology: that mythology and mytho-poetics is at once as important and as daily as the “same old story” in a different form. Grandma’s comment may be that methodologically, narrative
has always had to adapt for survival to continue and that evil is never expelled or exiled; it merely moves on or tells another story that must be read, interpreted and recomposed for survival.

Finally, in the manner of keepers of the dawn, the novel is offered as sacred gift and support to the sunrise. a ceremony itself that "cares" for the "becoming":

Sunrise.
accept this offering.
Sunrise. (262)
CHAPTER 3
YELLOW WOMAN AND MIGRATORY EMERGENCES

Then go on as one who has long life.
Go on as one who is happy.
Go with blessing before you.
Go with blessing behind you.
Go with blessing below you.
Go with blessing above you.
Go with blessing around you.
Go with blessing in your speech.
Go with happiness and long life.
Go mysteriously. ("Emergence Myth" Sadner viii)

The World Was Breath

"Hozho" means "beauty" or "beautiful conditions": order, happiness, goodness, morality, aesthetic harmony, all at once...this term is rooted in the term for "breath." (Witherspoon and Peterson 41)

Perhaps one of the least theorized aspects of Leslie Marmon Silko's novels is that they engage centrally in rituals of cure. Not only do the novels undertake the subjects of contemporary curing rituals, they themselves become curing rituals and objects.

Crucially, in Leslie Marmon Silko's novels curing structures are intertwined with tribal emergence narratives. To become cured, in effect, is to emerge from one narrative state into another. Emergence is the oldest and most persistent narrative form in Native American Literatures. From the first recorded stories, through the novels of the Native American Renaissance of the 1970's, to the more contemporary novels of writers like
Leslie Marmon Silko. emergence narratives are the originary and central structures.\footnote{While I can cite any number of folklorists, ethnographers and/or anthropologist here, the best support for such a generalization is the oral narratives themselves. For an overview of emergence myths, see \textit{American Indian Myths and Legends} by Erdoes and Ortiz. For the Hopi cycle see \textit{The Book of the Hopi} by Frank Waters.}

They define bodily attributes and landscape formations, tribal and clan associations, and cultural identity; furthermore, they are the generative locus from which almost all oral narratives and characters issue forth.\footnote{Once again, \textit{The Book of the Hopi} details clan qualities as qualities of the animal and sacred figures of emergence. As ethically problematic as Elsie Crews Parsons' collections of Pueblo Indian religions remain, she, too, details clan identification with animals as identification with corporeal and narrative abilities: thus, for example, the Badger clan for the Hopi is the healer clan—Badger was the original herbalist (190).}

While an emergence narrative may function on one level as a linear movement forward through time, emergence is structurally complex. This formal complexity marks contemporary Native American novels of curing-as-emergence and it is within this structural complexity that a viable agency is produced. The performative, oral qualities of curing rituals allow characters to trace the genealogy of their diseases, to rewrite themselves into more liberated cultural narratives than the disease itself would produce, and to become actors in that rescripting. Oftentimes, a viable agency includes not only a recomposition of the individual's relationship to disease, but also a recomposition of the individual as narrator of self to the individual as communal actor. In Silko's novels, to be healed is to become a purveyor of survival knowledge for the tribe and for the world. To be healed is to reemerge and to rewrite the cosmos all at once: the two narratives co-produce. To be healed is to be a productive material and linguistic locus. In this essay, I
first examine the terms of "emergence" and "agency" as they are made manifest in healing rituals and narrative structures. The intersection of emergence narratives with recomposed agency serves as a framework for the close analysis of Silko's *Storyteller*, a novel which explores the possibilities and difficulties of reimagining an agency through telling another curative emergence story.

Emergence stories so inform the structures of oral narrative that even when they are not the explicit subject of narrative, they are often cited within narratives. Thus, both holistically and metonymically, many narratives speak through or recall emergence. For example, Coyote, who has come to typify trickster narratives, is, in Pueblo and Navajo traditions, one of the first figures peopling the world—he brought both the knowledge of witchery (the anti-thesis to curing) and fire (Sandner 115). To cite Coyote, even momentarily in a narrative, however distant the narrative may be from "emergence," is to invoke at once the "first people," the sense of migratory emergence, and to invoke the genealogy of "coyote." Thus, emergence as an *ongoing* becoming and a historical genealogy and emergence as something produced in and through language as it is produced in and through bodies, propels the narrative logics of an oral tradition which writers like Leslie Marmon Silko have imported in order to reimagine new agencies.³

³My use of "agency" here is informed by the way David L. Moore situates this term in his essay, "Myth. History, and Identity in Silko and Young Bear. Postcolonial Praxis." He defines "agency" as "without mastery," as something far more relational and complex than the Western individualistic concept of subjectivity, wherein, "the imperial self is born, with drastic consequences for native cultures" (386, 372). As he claims, "a definition of the 'postcolonial' might consist precisely in the distinction between agency growing out of subjection and agency growing out of subjectivity"(373). What I further suggest here and elsewhere in this book is that the logical structures of Hopi, Navajo, and Laguna Pueblo oral narratives of emergence and their quality of an open-ended political
“Agency,” as Silko constructs it, is inseparable from the quality of migration that marks all emergence stories. An agency or an agent is never a reified, static position. Bodies move from one world into another world, altering cosmos as they go and being written by the current cosmos as they go. Each novel, however different from the next, poses both failed agencies and liberatory agencies as the products of the interaction between vying narratives as they meet in a body trying desperately to compose itself out of or in reaction to trauma. Vying narratives never fully resolve themselves: they reach some temporary and mobile harmony. Thus healing is associated far more with an aesthetic and corporeal harmony than it is with an eviction of disease and non-death.

Additionally, each tribe has multiple emergences: they generally passed through multiple worlds, migrated into this world, and may be poised to migrate and translate themselves into the next.4 Emergence becomes a sort of historical, present, and prophetic state of narrative all at once. Because bodies are so literally occupied by the narratives they have previously inhabited, narrative must refigure history and the body in order to become viable survival. Narrative becomes a kind of characterized teller itself. Because

4I am depending on Laguna Pueblo, Hopi, and Navajo cycles of emergence here for my claims, in part because they are the tribal traditions Silko mines, and, in part, because each tradition, whatever their differences, insist on a literal relation between storytelling, survival, and the material world. Additionally, storytellers are healers, are composers of emergence in these traditions. See, as cited above, The Book of the Hopi; see also McNeley’s Holy Wind, Parsons’ Pueblo Indian Religions, and Sander’s Navajo Symbols of Healing—where the narration of symbols of healing is inseparable from a narration of emergences.
many tribes have scripted "this world." as the next-to-last. we have not arrived yet to the final world and thus, even the contemporary novels of a writer like Silko are marked by a kind of urgency and necessity to script a cure as a survival through and beyond this contemporary cosmos. Thus, emergence, even in contemporary novel form, is the very gesture narrative must manifest to create ongoing agencies. No single figure or formula will be applicable to all illness and cultural trauma, instead, certain narrative relations or principles will help direct a character into recomposition.

To emerge, for the characters in these novels, is to be narrated and to be an agent all at once: this act requires storytelling, reading, and the ability to translate survival knowledge to an audience. An agent needs a teller and must become one: to do so, he or she must be able to read rituals and signs. But this reader and speaker is not the western isolated self-constructing reader--this reader must be able to translate narrative into useful knowledge. A teller is only as good a healer as he or she is a translator. For example, to return to the discussion of *Ceremony*, Montano is a character written not only as a drifter American, living in the margins, she is also Yellow Woman, Ts’he, pollinator of the cosmos and one of the first people in the “world-level of first speech” (Sadner 3-5). Her appearance in the novel must be properly read by Tayo. She must be recognized as a narrative relation and methodology. Which means she not only performs the recognizable methods of Yellow Woman (redistributing seed), she is still knowable through a contemporary woman and through what narrative positionalities she might offer a specific, contemporary historical context. She also becomes the sign by which the old men will read the cures of the future. It is through the materiality of her body and the
insemination of her knowledge into landscape that the tribe will be revivified. They will
discover the knowledge they need to survive through certain cultural narratives. But it is
true, too, that integral to Yellow Woman is the reading of her—Tayo becomes here
interpreter. When Tayo completes his own cure, his accumulated knowledge is useful to
the tribe because he can narrate to the elder healers what the contemporary version of
Yellow Woman/Changing Woman looks like. He can translate a contemporary relation to
her.

The knowledge Tayo has accumulated in his ever-conscious ritualized readings is
a methodology of reading that Tayo can provide for future cures: importantly, it is not
classificatory, closed, or formulaic knowledge. Instead, Silko underscores the very nature
of the knowledge as navigational and interpretive: Tayo, now healed, knows how to
recognize a Changing Woman at the right place and time. He can recognize and translate
the act of moving through the world “like” or “as” her. It is the “how to,” the intelligible
translation, he shares with the tribe: and it is the revivified methodology that cites
originary figures but adapts them to an evolving present that brings well being and
harmony to the old men healers. A revivified methodology reimagines emergence
through the heretofore unimaginined impossibility of not only surviving the Bataan Death
March but also being able to narrate a self after surviving such trauma. The adaptive
methodology of Changing Woman, made contemporary, read and utilized, insures tribal
survival of a narrative world they didn’t yet know how to “cure.” Tayo, as the healed
one, can tell the elder healers not only what it means to be a tribal son returning from
World War II with shell shock, but also the narrative methodology it takes to cure such
men. He can tell them because he has, in part, scripted the ritual of his healing. In doing so, he is the emergent one, the one who is “cured for now,” the one who can stand on the testing grounds of the Atom Bomb and refuse to play the part of murderer.

While emergence always promises the transition and translation between this world and the next, cure prophesies more a relation to the next world than a literal, specific cosmology of that world. Or. to revise the usual linguistic relations to reflect more of Hopi or Navajo linguistic logic: cure is a relational cosmology. A cure by necessity exists in multiple temporalities: it revises history, the relations between the living and dead, the present lived relations between what accounts for realism and the mythic, the present somatic narrative of body, and the projected space of body in future history. It is no simple undertaking. As much as each of Silko’s novels differs structurally from the others, they all import curing rituals to write a novel as an emergence, and to write novelistic cure as a means of re-imagining a possible agency, even in the face of the most corporeally limiting realism: the atom bomb, late capital cannibalistic greed, and ever-shifting forms of genocide.

_Ceremony_ proffers a successful cure while concurrently insisting that cure is temporary, “for now.” that even as the novel closes, evil is headed for Los Angeles. In both title and explicit methodology, _Ceremony_ narrates Tayo’s “cure.” and thus the “cure” of World War II veterans. Veterans brought back new diseases from the war, and the novel must rescript these young men to return them and the tribe to a sense of agency. Because the novel has been both narration of and evolution into method, it itself is a sort of sand painting, a ritual object, artifact for interpretation.
While *Ceremony* engages the terms of "agency" and "cure" as the methodological
tropes of emergence, *Storyteller* more subtly poses the possibilities and problematics of
writing contemporary cures through a number of forms of recomposed emergences. The
narrative structures of emergence, in their varied forms are ultimately the meta-narrative
of cure-as-agency. As meta-narratives, the methodologies of emergence critique their
own possibilities as they undertake them. And again, folkloric ritual underscores this
sense of meta-narrative in its very insistent orality, materiality, and performativity.
*Storyteller* performs the difficult positions of storyteller/healers narrating agency in a
post-genocide, post-colonial, post-war zone. Importantly, as it performs these
possibilities and problematics, *Storyteller* returns to the emergence structures, insisting, as
the originary narrative logics of emergence did. that the world was always already hybrid
and becoming, and that any body and cosmos must "go" and keep going forth.

As with *Ceremony*, the cures of *Storyteller* prophesy agency in this world: or, if
agency seems impossible, cure prophesies agency as a witnessing and surviving the death
of one world via the composition of the world into which a cure might be imagined.
Curing maps a way an individual might survive the violence of this world *and* transgress
the boundaries of this world's limitations to be integrally composing and composed into
the next world.

Even when the next world can be composed, the cured individual within that
world is never the humanist agent gone transcendent. Curing and agency are fraught with
the violent corporeal limits of genocide and colonization and with the historical
impossibility of a humanist "I." The next world is always to some degree working with
the logics of the last. This is why hybridity is not the Edenic promise it might at first seem—in story after story in Silko, hybridity contains a series of risks.

Silko, like other Native American writers before her, goes to the “first world” to find a potential logic of cure that is at once individual and collective, historical and “present,” patterned and fluid. One of the best specific examples of tribal agency is found in the emergence myths of the Navajo, whose tribal structures and traditions Silko employs in *Story*. The Navajo, or Dine, emerged with wind, both unified and multiple: wind moved through their bodies and was produced by their wind-making breaths. The wind is at the root not only for the tribal name, but also for the gesture of telling or curing. ⁵ “Wind” roughly translates “the breath in all things” (McNeley 58). To breathe, then, is to be in connection with the sacred in all things and to be simultaneously in the state of becoming. This confluence of history, landscape, materiality, and the breath is the essential structure at the base of healing. and, as this chapter claims, at the narrative base of a series of contemporary American ethnic novels. Breathing is inextricable from storytelling and healing in two other tribal cultures from which Silko also draws, the Pueblo and the Hopi. For the Hopi, “storyteller” and “healer” are one word—-a word born of the world previous to this one, in which to survive the final migration the Hopi had to call on intermediary beings capable of singing arrow wounds closed.⁶ Importantly, all of

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⁵McNeley’s study of Holy Wind in Navajo philosophy attempts, as he says, to “resolve” the often contradictory reports that the wind was at once formed in Earth Mother’s bodies and itself formed the first people’s bodies: I would like to suggest that the unresolved contradiction is the heart of the generative locus of wind as it moves through and is moved by bodies and stories (5).

⁶See the migration narratives in *The Book of the Hopi*. 
Silko’s novels insist that breath itself is literal material and linguistic agency, capable of refiguring bodies and histories, inseparable from narrating and reading.

Just as narratives of tribal emergence move breath-like into corporeality, history, narrative, and healing, the metanarratives of oral traditions as they manifest themselves in the materiality of the body are associational and aggregate. For example, emergence myths will recur in curing ceremonies, in maps of the landscape, and in the structure of sand paintings. The very insistence in Hopi, Navajo, and Pueblo narrative on fluidity and interconnectedness, even as it manifests in a body or in a ritual, defies classification systems that insist on singularities or binaries or fixities. Breath is a "going": to be healed is to be in perpetual movement.

However, it is important not to collapse “indeterminacy” and the “ephemeral” with free form or whimsy. The Navajo, for example, insist on very specific structures within the healing narratives: to mislay or waylay one of these structures could kill someone (Witherspoon 67-69). Witherspoon and Peterson, in a more astute and complex reading of Navajo art than the usual ethnographic readings which attempt to “resolve” complexity, termed this tension between fluidity and very controlled composition as “dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry.” Their coinage attempts to embody an aesthetic that is complex, fluid and highly structured. Composition, even as it moves in

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7See Sandner’s explication of the relations between Navajo curing, sand painting, and refigured bodies.

8While Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry is an art theory text, Witherspoon and Peterson theorize the inextricable relation between the oral/aural and the visual. This seems a useful distinction for considering contemporary American novels which represent the “oral” in the visual of print.
perpetual flux, seeks a harmonic balance. To the Navajo, a well-balanced composition is termed at once "beauty" and "health" but the harmony of those terms would be destroyed if they were held in stasis. The narrative flux of the sacred and specifically harmonized ephemeral is further propelled by the structure of narrative time in Pueblo, Hopi and Navajo art: the temporality of the emergence myths is at once past, present, and future/prophetic. Furthermore, a sort of intertextual temporality is at hand: in the myriad citations within orality, one narrative becomes the interpretive map to reading the next narrative and to constructing a narrative space within that reading that imagines the structure of cure.

Orality becomes insistent metanarrative and intertextuality all at once: oral stories narrate the telling of the telling. They tell the story of how tellers "tell" and the struggles and triumphs of attempting to tell cure to recreate emergent agency. In attempting to produce this outcome, they perform and interrogate emergence methodologies. As becomes clear in the narratives of Storyteller, the body is as much a co-producer of narrative as language is: it is often the troubled and unruly locus of utterance, and it is essential trickster character in the meta-narration of cure.

**Curing Truth**

"It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies."

(26)

The dedication of Leslie Marmon Silko's Storyteller says much about the narrative methodology this collection will explore: "this book is dedicated to the storytellers as far back as memory goes and to the telling which continues and through which they all live
and we with them." The "telling" becomes at once a disjunct sentience and an essential consciousness to its own methodology. The dead are present and carried by telling: telling the dead properly, in a sort of inverted cause and effect, is necessary for the living to survive. The telling is the narrative methodology of survival in the present. In many ways. Silko's Storyteller is an archive of narrative methodologies of storytellers as they relate to a dead and to a moving present which they breathe into life. While it is alternately implicit and then explicit, the terminology of storytelling is inseparable from the structure of emergence and of cure. The first lines of the book. "There is a tall Hopi basket with a single figure/woven into it which might be a Grasshopper or/a Hummingbird Man." conjure cure and indeterminacy in the same gesture (1). More than one character or player or individual can step into the gesture Grasshopper and Hummingbird Man embody. To emerge into the final world, the Hopis needed the curative intermediary beings of Grasshopper and Hummingbird Man. Which being it might have been is uncertain and may change from story to story. But the final indeterminacy of the multiply evocative and multiply possible is generative itself of a healing space because it begets a theater of agency--who can step in? What being or image might function as a translator/intermediary being?

Furthermore, in Pueblo oral cycles. Hummingbird Man and Grasshopper both can transverse worlds--they function as intermediary messengers and pollinators at once. Images such as Hummingbird Man are just a few of the markers of the curative will to survival and the methodological will to indeterminacy which both define "the telling" of Silko's book. Indeterminacy should not be confused with a randomness: methodology
clusters through imagistic and associational patterning to construct intelligible structures.

all the while resisting the static and classificatory. The ability to sing a body healed is, in part, embodied. made material in the body and gesture of grasshopper.

In part, Story struggles with the loss of a kind of knowing audience that so many oral traditions produced. Early in Story Silko describes a familial storyteller. Aunt Susie, who was on the historical cusp of orality and literacy/textuality: she believed in books as an additional literacy that might carry what was once carried verbally, a generation.

that passed down an entire culture
by word of mouth
an entire history
an entire vision of the world
which depended upon memory
and retelling by subsequent generations.

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

Inextricable loss and the grief of genocide marks the small part that is left to tell:

And yet her writing went painfully slow
because of her failing eyesight
and because of her considerable family duties.
What she is leaving with us--
the stories and remembered accounts--
is primarily what she was able to tell
and what we are able to remember.

As with any generation
the oral tradition depends upon each person
listening and remembering a portion
and it is together--
all of us remembering what we have heard together--
that creates the whole story
the long story of a people.

I remember only a small part.
But this is what I remember.(6-7)

This invocation to a piece is an invocation and a will to construction an audience
of listeners/storytellers who will keep survival narratives. What follows in this novel are
gestures of stories, shards, and oral narratives made at once present tense and insistently
prophetic which, while they may attempt cure, are aware that part of hybridity and post-
genocidal story telling is the risk of an already-lost interpretive audience. This very loss
may be driving the repetitive, intertwined narratives all willing methodological
possibilities for narrative cure.

This chapter will discuss the narratives in Story that most explicitly deal with the
storyteller as healer and that work meta-narratively to describe the "telling" of healing as
Escape." and "Skeleton Fixer."

The first narrative in this book that explicitly defines itself as a "Storyteller"
narrative provides an example of how indeterminacy and patterning intersect and how a
storyteller is both fed and sustained by the telling and feeds and sustains history and
knowledge by the telling.
The first "Storyteller" is a young Eskimo woman whose parents were murdered by a shop keeper. The murder itself has gone legally unpunished and morally unavenged: from the girl's grandmother's telling, her parents tried to trade for alcohol, but were obviously given something else that poisoned them. Like Tayo, the girl's grief over her parent's death, and the loss that surrounds her and isolates her as a result is inseparable from a colonized landscape. The whites, or the "gussacks" are there for oil and, congruently, to exploit and reform the "savages." Her "grandfather," the would-be protector in her life, is not a blood relative, and, while he takes her in after her parents' deaths, he uses stories of the white colonizers to frighten her into incest. As she grows up, she is dragged off to a white school, where she is beaten for not speaking English. She chooses to go back to the sexually abusive grandfather rather than stay in the white school and be beaten into white language. (17-32)

Genocide and white disease haunt her landscape: the Eskimo girl witnesses whites arriving to mine the land: her grandmother tells her about the days when the whites shot everything that could be hunted. The whites, "the Gussucks" are there for "anything of value": animals, fuel, lives and women. So, the white store keeper who murdered the girl's parents by trading them kerosene for a rifle and promising them that it was drinkable alcohol, is a narrative embedded within these other narratives of whiteness. When the girl returns from the school, her grandmother has died—the narrative implies that the "anger" has killed her. And her "grandfather" has begun the process of his own death. In his increasing death, his narrating becomes compulsive, necessary: he tells the story of a hunter and a bear on the ice. He says "it must be told." (17-32)
As the old man narrates the dynamic of hunter and hunted to usher himself into death, his “daughter,” who will become the storyteller of emergence, returns to the store where her parents traded their lives. Like Laura and Helen Jean in *Ceremony*, the girl experiments with what it means to be a native woman in the Gussuck society—she goes back to the store, defies the storekeeper by sitting to drink, and is picked up by a Gussuck who can only have sex with her by posting a picture of a dog mounting a woman above her head. The very real threat to the girl is that she would become a raped and murdered victim as Laura did, or as Helen Jean certainly would. She returns to the old man, however, and in the manner of apprentice to the teacher, she insists that “she has a story now”(21-24).

It is then that the young woman becomes a reader and composer of landscape. As she begins her own narration, she takes the hammered tin pieces made from old discarded fuel cans to make of the red tin a boundary in the encroaching whiteness of the Gussucks and in the greater encroaching whiteness of winter (28). The girl begins her own narration, and using her knowledge of the Gussucks, she lures the storeman to his death (29-31).

As this story is narrated, the girl-becoming-woman-becoming-storyteller, recalls that she never trusted his narratives of the whites because her grandfather lied to her to scare her into sexual abuse (29). Her initial mistrust of the old man’s stories -- which rightfully derived from the manner in which he used them to perpetuate sexual abuse-- is slowly overcome by her growing understanding of the infectious violence of whiteness: he may have used narrative to abuse her, but his narratives of whiteness predict her life
and her inception as a storyteller herself. Disease in the novel is inseparable from the infection of white culture and their murderous mining. She must narrate (which means to literally compose and enact), the "true" story to usher in the greater whiteness—which is the end of the Gussuck-infected world.

The young woman, now storyteller, nails the red tin to her home and then waits. carefully reading seasons, returning to the site at which her parents drank the fuel and died. All she can remember of their death is "something red in the grass" and she feels that if she can recall what that red signified, she will know what her grandmother never told her about their deaths: she will be able to retrieve what her memory cannot give her (25). It is no coincidence, then, that she draws a boundary with the red of fuel cans, nor that the red becomes the driving boundary and indeterminacy of her composition, all the while resisting the easy signification of a retrieved and specific memory.

Like all Yellow Woman stories, the inception of hybridity, be it rape or coupling will take place by the river. But unlike other Yellow Women in Story, the girl is predictive interpreter. She is not taken by narrative: she spends days on the river's ice getting to know just what will carry her weight and just where the ice gives (30). One day when she stares at the landscape, reading it, she knows from its composition that. "It was time"(28). She goes back to the store, to the storekeeper, and laughs: he raises his fist to hit her but his desire to rape her, "to steal something of value." wins over hatred and desire to beat her. She runs from him and he follows: she crosses the river and then runs slowly in the drifts, predicting that he will take the shorter route to catch her. She has read his rage well. The storekeeper falls through the ice and dies (29-30).
When the woman storyteller is arrested, she refuses her white lawyer's interpretation of "truth."—he insists that she was being chased and the storeman fell through the ice and that this could not be murder—and instead she insists on her grandmother's version of truth and on her grandmother's version that "the truth must be told" (31). When the police come to question her about the store man, she insists that she will not lie: she has "murdered" the store man (30-32). Her confidence in her truth and in her role as a storyteller are supported by the knowledge that her correction and revenge for murder and disease are merely components to ushering in the emergence of the next world and that only those with the old knowledge of how to survive in the landscape without tin houses and kerosene will survive. Reader and composer that she is, she will be one of them.

When her lawyer reassures her that she could not have know the store man would run over the ice, and then insists he'll get her free because her mind is not right, she turns and begins telling him the story. "it began a long time ago." she intoned steadily. "In the summertime. Early in the morning. I remember something red in the tall river grass..." (31-32). At the end of the story, the woman is released to go and tend to her dying grandfather. He is telling the story he began a long, long, time ago, a story of a hunter on the ice, hunting a polar bear who is now hunting him. The old man dies narrating his own death: even death is not stasis: it is the moment of decision, of possibility, where the hunter's jade knife falls on the ice and the bear turns to the hunter. It is implied that the hunted shall win over the hunter. But the "storyteller" narrative ends in a moment of
This narrative summary may be a necessary prelude to discussing the very complex, cyclical, and circular narrative temporality and structure of "storyteller." But the narrative itself insists that this linear, explanatory summary is near murder. The entire structure works against the simply single layer and a classificatory linear temporality. The past is read through the prophesy of the present. The past is structured by a compositional recognition of the future. The girl, preparing revenge recognizes "this winter had been coming for a long time" (22. 26. 27).

And, fundamentally. "Storyteller" is the telling of the telling of the telling: it is at once third person describing the generation of a collectivity of first persons. The very telling of the telling of the telling becomes the methodology of composing emergence out of genocide and murder. Genocide and murder and the sort of horror to "truth" that they represent are adamantly at the center of composition: they are that which cannot be expelled or transcended but certainly recomposed and survived. Recomposition, like the story of the hunter and the bear (who is being hunted and who is the hunter?) is perpetual motion. It encompasses the binaristic hunter, hunted, but keeps them perpetually unresolved. Rather, in its myriad tellings, the bear and the hunter becomes important for all that might happen in the space between and among characters who are not themselves static individuals. It is through this narrative that the girl writes herself as a non-raped avenging Yellow Woman. storyteller of the end of this world and the necessary knowledge for the next. To achieve this feat, she takes full interpretive possibilities of
the mythic positionalities the bear/hunter story offers her. She is both the hunted and the hunter, both the orchestrator of the scene and the animal who knows the exact weight that ice can bear.

She narrates herself and history and the prophetic end as she maps the landscape. For the emergent storyteller, her red tin is a way to mark the boundaries between the intelligible and the unintelligible: it is a navigational image for a composed retelling. As indeterminant as that red in the grass on the day of her parents death is, the red tin she can gather will locate her position and allow her survival into an altered truth and world. Indeterminancy is marked imagistically and as a navigational image of survival, but it remains a material representation of the multiple unrecoverable losses of her mother and father, her culture, her grandmother, and her sexuality. She can materialize and construct the red but never fully retrieve the loss it signifies. Loss, however, becomes the sign of preparing for emergence.

The originary structure of narrative for this first "Storyteller" is an emergence myth prophesied in an earlier Eskimo narrative, the narration of post-genocidal white violence overcome by the landscape. It hauntingly resembles the Ghost Dancers in its promise of a natural disaster that will kill the whites and allow the natives to live: some day the landscape, violently mined, will simply completely freeze over. So the storyteller must position herself in relation to reading the landscape and to interpreting the visual structure of its images. The telling of the storyteller is the telling of reading and composing in a non-linear resistance to the mining and murdering structures of the Gussucks.
This narrative is structured by a multi-layered temporality and an ongoing dynamic between reading and composing. The narrative opens with the woman storyteller in jail, long since arrested for the murder, reading the landscape for the sign that notifies her this world is ending and white power is toppling:

Every day the sun came up a little lower on the horizon, moving more slowly until one day she got excited and started calling the jailer. She realized she had been sitting there for many hours, yet the sun had not moved from the center of the sky. The color of the sky had not been good lately: it had been pale blue, almost white, even when there were no clouds. She told herself it wasn’t a good sign for the sky to be indistinguishable from the river ice, frozen solid and white against the earth.

It is from this moment that she reads back to her parents death, the disease of anger that kills her grandmother, and relates the composition she maps for revenge and survival. The signs in the landscape represent at once a stasis and a boundarylessness that signify the story as she knows it already is about to occur. Her bodily experience, her interpretive abilities to navigate through story and landscape make of her a divining rod.

The girl arrives to herself as a storyteller/reader and woman by becoming a reader of landscape and an archivist of the knowledge her grandmother and “grandfather” passed on to her. She reads a narrative of prophecy onto white destruction and actually corrects the compositional lie that is white knowledge by killing the storekeeper and refusing the white legal interpretation that would free her (17-18). Inseparable from murdering to cure truth is telling this ending of a world and emergence into the next in which the tribe will survive and, like her correction of the white knowledge by murdering the storekeeper, the landscape will correct the white abuse and influx by freezing over.
Only those with the ancient narratives and the landscape born survival skills will live into the next world. It is the curative telling and knowledge correction that will create survival. The motivation in the images is the will to trace back the warning signs the woman could have read sooner, to know what she knows now as a constant and unaviodable present: the shifting of boundaries and landscape. The beginning of the narrative is the end of the world: the sun and the river and the snow. all elementals and potential essentials are represented as aesthetic constructs. The sky is solid "as the river with ice which had trapped the sun" (17). The ice. in the last moments before emergence. would "spread across the face of the sun like a mask" (18). To read the landscape, the woman must learn to read analogy. to read relationally. When the girl's grandmother told her that the origin of her chronic illness was anger in the joints. the old woman's voice was "whispering like wind across the roof"(25). She hears that same voice in the wind which helps to signify to her that it is time to act out her correction of "truth" and murder the storeman.

People and the landscape become interchangeable: the images from one narrative become interchangeable with another. or intelligible through another. The first scene ends with "This final winter has been coming even then: there had been signs of its approach for many years" (19). Associationally. the next scene reports a "sign" of the approach--the girl going to a white school: the grandmother dying from "anger": the stories she didn't listen to from the old man because he sexually abused her:

She did not see what the Gussuck school would do to her until she walked into the dormitory and realized that the old man had not been lying about the place. She thought he had been trying to scare her as he used to when she was very small and
her grandmother was outside cutting up fish. She hadn’t believed what he told her about the school because she knew he wanted to keep her there in the log house with him. She knew what he wanted. (19)

Immediately following the above implicit narrative of a loss of truth value in his storytelling due to sexual abuse. "The dormitory matron pulled down her underpants and whipped her with a leather belt because she refused to speak English" (19). Sexual abuse is imagistically associated with the school beating. And the beating is figured as a greater violence.

When the old man answers the girl that the Gussacks are here for what they began stealing. he also begins his story of the hunter that day. The narrative directs the logic: she remembers all of this clearly because he began the story that day. the story he told from that time on:

It began with a silent bear which he described muscle by muscle. from the curve of the ivory claws to the whorls of hair at the top of the massive skull. And for eight days he did not sleep. but talked continuously of the giant bear whose color was pale blue glacier ice. (22)

What immediately follows his telling without shift is the girl going to the store to meet the red-haired man and to gather the information for her story (22-23). It may be that she is the great bear stalking her prey---the prey being the prototype of the man who killed her parents. It may be the great bear is the inevitable winter ice coming to reclaim what the Gussucks abuse: it may be the great bear is diseased whiteness in the form of the Gussucks who must be hunted. All possibilities are resonant and indeterminate. The girl
will navigate her position as if she were a hunter and a hunted both, prophesy and present presence rewriting the past signs and the future survival both.

When the girl- becoming- woman storyteller finally sees the photo of the dog mounting a woman, the Gussuck is weakened, chattering in his bed (24). Her knowledge of his sexuality gives her power over him. The narrative moves immediately to her arrival home to the old man weak in his bed (24). The woman first goes and finds the whale bone and oil that will survive the kerosene’s inevitable uselessness or finiteness. She then tells the old man her story. What immediately follows her announcement of her storyteller status is more information on the death of her parents: she begins with the unreadable red n the grass. Her grandmother cannot fully answer what the red was. so difficult is it for her to speak after witnessing such an act. For her grandmother, the act of composition was exhausting for her body:

She made outlines in the air in front of her, showing how their bodies lay twisted on the sand: telling the story was like laboring to walk through deep snow: sweat shone in the white hair around her forehead. . . The wind came off the river and folded the tall grass into itself like river waves. She could feel the silence the story left. and she wanted to have the old woman go on. (25)

The old woman could not go on and the narrative moves immediately into the girl mapping her relation to landscape, and mapping the balance of truth to arrive at the knowledge her grandmother cannot give her. She cures silence. finally, as much as she cures truth. Her self-teaching provides her the knowledge to compose out of silence. This knowledge will be the further survival knowledge that will also carry her into the next world.
“Truth” in telling becomes inseparable from survival knowledge—both are a gathering and patterning—it must be multi-layered and be applicable to past, present and future all at once to be useful. The narrative of the storyteller is as much a narrative of her self-induction into reading and interpretation: her guides are her collected experiences and narratives overlaid by the originary map of emergence:

That was how the cold would come: when the boundaries were gone the polar ice would range across the land into the sky. She watched the horizon for a long time. She would stand in that place on the north side of the house and she would keep watch on the northwest horizon, and eventually she would see it come. She would watch for its approach in the stars and hear it come with the wind. These preparations were unfamiliar, but gradually she recognized them as she did her own footprints in the snow. (28)

Storyteller recognizes herself in the matching of the landscape to the prophesy of death and emergence as the old man recognizes himself and his death in the narration of the hunter and the bear. As the old man dies, he narrates the bear as increasingly close and corporeal. His narrative, in another layer, is read through hers: when she leaves the old man to walk out in the distance toward the horizon and then turn to the house with its red tin. she is chilled by how much the red tin looks like the wounded animal's heart about to escape the hunter. She is both the hunter and the wounded animal, composer and composed, and her self-recognition at the crux of the two is a matter of boundary markers.

It is when all imagist comparison, all formerly recognizable boundaries are swallowed by ice that she knows it "is time." After the storekeeper goes through the ice and she looks back to the red tin boundary she had constructed. “she saw something red, and suddenly it was as she had remembered it all those years” (30). While truth is righted
and avenged, the red never becomes specifically translated, only re-presented and recalled "as" it had been all those years ago in memory. Indeterminancy is the realm of memory and compositions. The loss itself insists that truth is more relational than determinate.

Her survival both of the Gussuck storekeeper and of the old man is triumphant: she will take the old man's place of storyteller, but with a new vision—the image of a sexuality that involves and exploits her but which she can murder. The girl's consciousness is finally insistent that the world is ending. But, she narrates from jail and from an audience of white interpreters who would generously call her mad. In a metonymic and metanarrative move the end of "Storyteller" ends with the bear turning to face the hunter. Interpretive closure is resisted.

**Curing Narrative**

While "Storyteller" gives one methodology of curing, curing truth, and some of the methodology essential to narratives that heal in the sense of reinscribing "truth" and positing survival knowledge, it is one piece in a cycle of narratives that all, in one way or another, invent a hybrid methodology between the oral and the visual and the textual, that critique white narrative structures, and that will survival. Survival is at the heart of cure. Healing involves reimagining an agency in the brutal aftermath of genocide, or, better put, in the myriad cultural genocides that follow the literal genocide. To story tell is an agency in and of itself. The Pueblo, Navajo and Hopi believe in a quite literal cause and effect between language and corporeality. The world was spoken and woven into being by Spider Woman.⁹ As we story tell, we speak the world into being. Distinct from a

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⁹See all of the emergence myth cycles recommended above.
western. Aristotelian logic of narrative, we speak even as we are spoken of and through.
Thus, a storyteller must be able to read the cultural narratives, to realize, as the woman storyteller does, that she is at once being written by the Gussucks and performing a part in their narrative, even as she tries to write a narrative of resistance.

*Storyteller* itself is a sort of archive of and critique of narrative methodology in a post-genocide hybrid zone. As Paula Gunn Allen insists, most Native American writing, particularly women's writing, is the contemporary zone of resistance—she calls it "war." As Allen further insists, the hybrid orality/textualities of contemporary Native American writers quite deliberately defies western Aristotelian logics or aesthetics of composition.10 Early on in *Story*, Silko relays a migration myth: the flood is coming and a girl and her younger sister return to find that all of their family had fled to a mesa top to escape the encroaching waters. The girls grieve because their mother has left them. When they reach the mesa top, they see others but not their mother. They sit down, and after "a little while," "they all turned into stone." The story then refuses or morality or logic or lesson: it lets would-be summaries haunt its insistence that sometimes a story just is:

The story ends there.
Some of the stories
Aunt Susie told
have this kind of ending.
There are no explanations (38-42).

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10See Allen's introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*.

11See Allen's excellent article "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*."
In another narrative. "A Geronimo Story." Native guides are hired and tell the story of helping the whites to track "the real Geronimo." The story, from its leading title forward explicitly mocks the notion of Geronimo in the white's eyes. The evil Geronimo is blamed for all kinds of murder: he is just on the next horizon. and Siteye, a storyteller who is a thorough reader of landscape, keeps navigating the white soldiers around and away from their mythic Geronimo. Siteye tells the young Laguna who is the storyteller here. "Anybody can act violently—there is nothing to it: but not every person is able to destroy his enemy with words" (222). Toward the end of the narrative. they find a camp and Siteye tells the white Captain. "some Mexican built himself a sheep camp here. Captain. that's all. . . .No Geronimo here. like we said" (222). Then Siteye and his fellow trackers go hunting for deer and the narrative ends:

We stopped. Siteye turned around slowly and looked behind us at the way we had come: the canyons. the mountains. the rivers we had passed. We sat there for a long time remembering the way. the beauty of our journey. Then Siteye shook his head gently. "You know," he said. "that was a long way to go for deer hunting." (223)

Siteye and company have out-navigated the hunters of which they are a part to avoid Geronimo. Or. more subtly even. to mock the white version of finding the single Geronimo and lassoing him in. On the surface, both of these stories seem to have little to do with healing and with cure. The first seems to have to do with the unintelligibility of some lived experiences. of loss and death as mute and altogether present as stone. The second is a sort of counting coup story--the guides know the language of the landscape and of the white men well enough to play into their fears and lead them all over the
country while "Geronimo" escapes.12 What each of these pieces hold in common though is an aesthetic of cure: an insistence on not explaining some things while presenting their material beings. an insistence on language and knowledge as the navigated landscape composed for survival. And. as Paula Gunn Allen and other Native American writers have explained. aesthetics and politics are inseparable ("Introduction" 3-6). The storyteller is the healer and rewriter of history and the transformer of bodily space: an agent.

The first Yellow Woman "Storyteller." is further reimagined and scrutinzed as a curative structure in a section mid-way through Story. In yet another "Storytelling." Silko invokes a Keres Pueblo narrative of Yellow Woman (54). As Gunn Allen describes this narrative cycle. the Yellow Woman stories are the stories of originary fertility. the stories that discuss resources. losing them. and finding them again ("Some Problems" 35). Traditionally Changing Woman. Yellow Woman. Pollen Woman and Buffalo Woman are variations of the same narrative. A woman strays too far from her home: she is at some physical boundary like a river and she is seduced or raped or abducted and raped by a man who is an animal or earth being (sometimes it is the sun). The seduction or rape returns as fertility to the tribe: Buffalo woman brings buffalo to her starving people; Yellow Woman brings corn. Both are elements crucial to the survival of a clan or tribe.

As with Silko's bear narratives. once the woman crosses over (in the form of

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12"To count coup" is originally a Lakota concept. Lame Deer. Lakota medicine man describes it in his book Lame Deer. Seeker of Visions (written in conjunction with Richard Erdoes) as this: A great warrior gets close enough in battle to kill the chief of his enemy's tribe: instead he taps the chief on the shoulder to let him know just how close he was: he laughs and he runs away (95).
sexuality or violence) to another world or consciousness she either comes back to the
tribe, enriching it, or she cannot return from the other world and stays there. In another
variation, her brother or former husband kills her for her new-found otherness. As Silko
employs this narrative cycle in Storyteller, the yellow woman stories become the method
by which she asks how origin myths can become contemporary and resonant with
survival information. And, as Gunn Allen interprets Silko's use of Yellow Woman, as
much as they insist that the origin myths of loss and return and fertility are alive in the
present, they also explore the alienation and loss of such narratives' implications.

The first three "Yellow Woman" narratives mix the oral/historical with the
contemporary real/mythic and insist that these categories' collapse. The first "Yellow
Woman" is almost a nightmare of hybridity--the sort of potential confusion that hybridity
makes for methodology. Its tone is deeply ambivalent. In much of Silko's work,
particularly Ceremony, hybridity is not only the physical and conscious landscape that
insures survival, it is the ongoing mining and critic of white racism. According to
Sanders, three hundred tribes with two hundred plus languages were present on this
continent before Columbus arrived, and, in mistaken navigation, dubbed them "Indians"
(xi). To engage hybridity as a political aesthetic of narrative structure is to critique the
white racist notion (alive and well) that there ever were pure or wholly unified "Indians."
However, when Silko rereads contemporary gender into her narrative critiques, a
narrative like Yellow Woman carries the threat of rape and unintelligibility even as it
ushers in potentially liberatory hybridities.
The first Yellow Woman narrative opens the day after a Pueblo woman meets a man by the river who claims she is Yellow Woman and he, the ka'tsina spirit she must follow to his mountain home (54-62). The man uses the myth to manipulate her into a narrative age-old passivity. The threat he is to her is explicit: he forces her into the sand (54). As he does so she thinks:

I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was—if she knew that she would become part of the stories. Maybe she'd had another name that her husband and relatives called her so that only the ka'tsina from the north and the storytellers would know her as Yellow Woman. But I didn't go on: I felt him all around me, pushing me down into the white river sand. (55-56)

When she insists, I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was really only then, back in time immemorial, like they say." he forces her by grabbing her wrist and pulling her.

She reassures herself that she.

...will see someone, eventually I will see someone, and then I will be certain that he is only a man--some man from nearby--and I will be sure that I am not Yellow Woman. Because she is from out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw. (56)

After she is at his mountain house, and he has raped her again, after her insistence that they could not be those mythic characters, she realizes her fear and articulates it: this man had "strength that could hurt me. I lay underneath him and I knew that he could destroy me"(58). She is not purely afraid and, somehow, becomes seduced by the narrative of Yellow Woman, feels some tenderness for him, and when she has the opportunity to leave she stays, realizing that she is replaceable to her family. She goes with him to sell the cattle meat he has stolen and a white rancher intercepts them (61). Silva tells her to
"go back home" (61). But, as she leaves, she hears gun fire and heads down hill until she recognizes her own terrain again and head home. She is seemingly placid about the violence she just witnessed and the implied murder she just heard and reflects as she approaches the river:

. . . . I saw the leaves and I wanted to go back to him--to kiss him and to touch him--but the mountains were too far away now. And I told myself, because I believe it, he will come back sometime and be waiting again by the river. (62)

She returns to her porch and sees her mother "telling my grandmother how to fix the Jell-O and my husband. Al. was playing with the baby." (62). She holds the mythic interpretation to herself and decides to tell them another version, a version she herself believed at the beginning of the abduction. that "some Navajo had kidnaped me. . . ." She adds. "...but I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best" (62)

The sounding note of the final few lines seems a nervous will that cannot interpret the rape or the lack of audience, or the lack of the Yellow Woman narrative to return her as fecund and necessary generative being to her home. It is a story for her alone and the imagined audience of a grandfather unfamiliar with pickups and with "Jell-O."

Importantly, the contemporary and the hybrid narrative act to read backwards through the old myths becomes integral to critiquing them for the sake of survival--perhaps they, too, were a code for a rape and alienation.

The second "Yellow Woman" immediately follows the first and marks itself as oral by being in poetry form. It begins, as the first, in medias res. with Yellow Woman
going to meet the Sun Man for a second time. The first time "His eyes (the light in them had blinded her)/so she had never seen him/only his eyes/and she did not know how to find him/except by the cottonwood tree" (65). Silko's retelling goes on to emphasize all she had to leave ("her home/her clan/and the people/(three small children/the youngest just weaned/her husband away cutting firewood)". The Sun gives her aesthetic directions to find his home: "you will know by colors" and "go until you find a tree distinct from all the others" and "In a canyon of cloudy sky stone" (65-66).

In the middle of this telling, the storyteller gives an aside to the audience:

(All this was happening long time ago. see?)
Before that time, there were no stories about drastic things which must be done for the world to continue

Out of love for this earth
cottonwood
sandstone
and sky. (64-65)

This narrative then, is the narrative that both begins those later, necessary narratives, marked by their genocidal will to survive and is read through them, such that, at the end, when Yellow Woman finds the Sun at his house and goes to live with him, and this is the manner by which the earth has continued." it impossible not to read the deep loss and sacrifice Yellow Woman, the first one, endured so that the world continued. The narrative ends. "So much depends/upon one in the great canyon" (67). The woman is fertile crux
and sacrifice to survival. In a gesture of honor, there is a nod, too, to a seeming inescapable violence.

Part two of this retelling only reifies the sense of violence (67-76). The tribe is starving and Yellow Woman travels far just to try to find water for her family. At this river she meets Buffalo man who ignores her insistence that she must return to her family to feed them and he abducts and rapes her. Her husband goes to Spider Woman who made the world and she gave him the means by which he could stun the Buffalo people's vision and steal his wife back. When he rescues her, he sees that she grieves the slain Buffalo, though their slaughter means her family and tribe will finally have food. When he asks her why she grieves and she tells him, "Because you killed them." he kills her:

I killed her
because she wanted to stay with the Buffalo People
she wanted to go with them
and now she is with them. (75)

So, again, rape and death and abundance all are narrated through the body of Yellow Woman. The ending of this retelling is even more tonally undecided than the other two: "It was all because/one time long ago/our daughter, our sister Kockinanko went away with them" (76).

Several other cycles of personal and mythic stories follow these three Yellow Women stories and then a poem/oral story addresses again the translation of this story to contemporary survival. "Storytelling" begins:

You should understand the way it was back then,
because it is the same
even now (94)
The poem continues to tell the original Yellow Woman in contemporary vernacular.

Buffalo Man is waiting by the river in "Buffalo leggings" (95). When she returns her husband says to her "You better have a damn good story... about where you have been for the past ten months and how you explain these twin baby boys" (95). The narrative cuts then into reporting local gossip. Someone saying, she didn't elope. She was abducted.

"You know/my daughter/isn't that kind of girl" (96). This narrative insists that it's all part of the same story: Sometimes a man or a woman "wanders" willingly. Sometimes he or she is abducted:

It was
that Navajo
from Alamo.
you know.
the tall
good-looking
one.

He told me
he'd kill me
if I didn't
go with him
And then it
rained so much
and the roads
got muddy.
That's why
it took me
so long
to get back home.

My husband
left after he heard the story
and moved back in with his mother.
It was my fault and
I don't blame him either.
I could have told
the story
better than I did. (97-98)

The final implication is not only that the well-told story keeps the audience and the home,
but it is the dividing line between what is rape and abduction and what is the old, fertile
myth. In Silko's telling, all of the contemporary Yellow Women return home. One buys
the narrative that her rape was the mythic writing her into her position and she uses this
narrative for comfort in her shocked alienation: the other woman: knows she was
abducted and raped by a Navajo man. None, however are the regenerative site that
Yellow Woman. hybrid pollinator of the world was.

All risk death in hybridity and great isolation. It may be the white culture shot
through the narratives. the language of pick-ups and Jell-O and leggings. that disallows
abduction to be framed as integral fertility as much as this methodology may be critiquing
which of the old narratives is useful in imagining curative agency. The tone remains
deeply ambivalent. But the metanarrative of the narrative. the "storytelling" begs and
then leaves the question. what would have been "the better telling"?

Curing Violent Death

"The Storyteller's Escape." a piece much later in Storyteller. while it doesn't
explicitly move in a contemporary landscape. certainly has the potential to be translated
into one and to become an intermediary methodological being. "The Storytellers
Escape" outlines. too. how storytelling itself. despite the reality of any act and the "real"
outcome might serve as a healing or survival agency that can be passed down to other
generations as a generative methodology.
"The Storyteller's Escape" begins with the materiality of the story—a materiality that can be used to instruct others in the future on how-to escape. Like an archivist, the storyteller keeps these stories:

The storyteller keeps the stories
all the escape stories
she says "With these stories of ours
we can escape almost anything
with these stories we will survive." (247)

This piece figures the storyteller herself as an archetype or a communal consciousness of history made into usable artefact knowledge: thus both story and teller become a collectible materiality, readable to future generations:

The old teller has been on every journey and she knows all the escape stories
even stories told before she was born.
She keeps the stories for those who return
but more important
for the dear ones who do not come back
so that we many remember them
and cry for them with the stories. (247)

The holding of the stories and the grieving that keeps the murdered and lost present is the method by which the tribe, the culture continues: "In this way we hold them and keep them with us forever and in this way we continue" (247).

Of all of the storyteller's collected stories, her favorite is the one of her own escape from the enemy. While the story harks to a time when the enemy could be hid from (implying that it is no longer possible), it still provides a theory of narrative as remembrance and healing survival. When the tribe would run from the enemy, the old and the sick couldn't always make it: the storyteller would record where the "dear ones stopped" (247). In this narrative, the storyteller herself is old: she knew that "sooner or
later" she would be the one that people looked back on. She begins to imagine their
telling of her and this act of composing leads her to imagine the story of her escape from
the enemy. The impetus for the evolving composition is her fear that there will be no
teller of her, that she will not exist in the future. So her act of telling her escape is also an
act of constructing the storyteller-audience who would look back. (248-49)

She begins by writing how she would want to be seen: insisting that the hot sun was
really a shawl on her back: that the landscape held her and comforted her. She was
thinking "There won't be any escape story this time/unless maybe someone tells/how the
sweat spilled over the rock/making streams in hills/that had no water" (250). She feels
she could give into death if there is just someone who could do for her what bonefixer
does for the body and vice-versa: to make of her body a gesture against that which kills
her.

To comfort herself while waiting to die, she makes up a story of the one who
looked back, who would be the next storyteller, a girl who would know all of the journeys
the storyteller had been on, who knew the storyteller was choosing to die in the shade.
was choosing to one up the enemy by already being dead by the time they arrived. But
the motion of the landscape takes a turn and the storyteller must revise the story of her
own remembrance: "About this time/the sun lifted off from her shoulders like a
butterfly/Let the enemy wear it now!/Let them see how they like the heat/wrapping them
in its blanket" (252).

She waits and better her earlier story: "the sun had been her hat/until she could
walk no more/the sun had been a shawl/until she had to sit down in the shade" (252). The
narrative flows into a convincing present: as the storyteller composes her end, the enemy doesn't come: night falls: she decides to go home and to wait for the others to return, so that she can tell them the best escape story of all--the one where the heat was too much for the enemy and they did not follow.

But then the storyteller, narrating the telling reports. "And it was the best escape story she had come up with yet": when the tribe came back four days later she was sitting in front of her house. "waiting for them" (253). The narrator then reports that all that was just given is the story of the girl storyteller, the one who did look back. The girl constructed the best story ever for the death of her mother storyteller. And the girl's story, part tragedy for the death the storyteller met, was not an alienated and solitary death. And then, in the third-person report, there is the third storyteller, made manifest as a cultural consciousness--the storyteller who tells the girl doing the telling.

The advancement of the enemy and the need to escape from them, to flee, was unavoidable for the people. But the way the girl constructed the narrative recomposed what could be composed and added another narrative to cultural cycles of narratives that might be employed for survival. The old woman was triumphant in the midst of genocide and this deep ambivalence haunts cure and narrative survival as it becomes disjunct from actual survival: the old woman's agency was to choose when to die and to have an audience/storyteller who would make an object of grief and memory that might be of use for survival in the future. Without audience, without the girl reader of the landscape, and without composition, all agency would be lost and the old woman storyteller would be
invisible, as the first storyteller was invisible in the landscape—she would be in the silent space of genocide.

Subtly, the narrative insists that the telling must go on for survival. Integral to survival is a kind of generative memory of the dead that must be adaptive to history and landscape. In an era of not being able to hide in the lava rocks from an enemy, how to narrate those who disappear and those who come back in such a way as to insure cultural survival? Each of these storyteller pieces makes a complete composition but insists on non-closure for survival. The agency of cure evolves, then, into a culling and patterning and performing aesthetics of survival in which sentience and consciousness continues through methodology.

Curing History

Grandfather.
a voice I am going to send
hear me
all over the universe
a voice I am going to send.
Hear me.
Grandfather.
I will live.
I have said.
--Red Bird. Lakota Sun Dance Prayer (Lincoln 1)

This power that moves the moving world, vast as the sky itself, can still be petitioned through Tate, or the wind, in a person’s own voice. The Niya, or “life-breath,” is the body’s soul in Lakota belief, and through this “life-breath,” the world’s powers can be called, prayed, sung, chanted, ceremonialized, even reasoned with or admonished, if the petitioner lives rightly... Such voices make up tribal cultures, past and present... (Lincoln 3)

In Storyteller, Silko juxtaposes the Yellow Woman storyteller cycles with the humorous trickster cycles of Coyote. “Skeleton Fixer” is an intermediary of the two
forms and highlights again the difficulties with writing a cure in a landscape littered with the violently dead. "Skeleton Fixer" tells the story of a man who can literally recompose the bones of the violently dead. His "fixing" is relevant to the discussion of how oral structures might be made contemporary and textual. He is certainly an agent: but he is an agent reconstructing a body in a socio-historical context full of other narratives, and he is an agent reconstructing a materiality in flight.

Skeleton fixer begins with an amorphous she/witness asking the questions into a historical void of murder:

What happened here? she asked
Some kind of accident? Words like bones scattered all over the place. . . .(242)

Subtly, the metaphor of long-dead bodies dismembered becomes the indistinguishable metaphor for post-genocide reconstruction of the body. A scattering and a disorder means some accident occurred. In this narrative, the root cause of the scattered bones of words is not named: but in the space of the ellipses, old man badger. "skeleton fixer." is introduced. Badger, as cited above, is the first healer among the Hopi and known herbalist among other Pueblo tribes. The intertwined relations here are very important: the healer is a fixer of bones. The frame makes words bones: thus, skeleton fixer is a fixer at once of bones and of lost narrative. His manner of construction is imbued with an ability to do what "only he could do with them" (to give form, composition, and thus, breath and life). Skeleton fixer to give life must narrate the corpus, reconstruct the narrative of bodies and history that made scattered bones of a live
body. He is a linguistic and corporeal detective. He must detect the historical genealogy of bones.

The bones, once gathered, are a "great puzzle" (242). He must learn to read them, and his methodology does not follow a causal narrative; he does not reconstitute a historical linearity. His method of reading is a metaphorical and imagistic aesthetic. It is bones' qualities of being "like" or "as" that moves him forward (242). He loves the metaphoric quality of bones. He begins with the toes because "He loved their curve/like a new moon./like a whisker hair" (242). Bonefixer (an interchangeable name for "skeleton fixer" and "old man badger") has knowledge that proceeds associationally—his knowledge arises more from his physicality than his intellect. It is anti-formulaic: the fixer fixes the body in the realm of motion. "Without thinking/he knew their direction/laying each toe bone/to walk east" (242). East is the direction of the rising sun, the central image of becoming and emerging. What bone fixer uncovers is an intuitive, imagistic relation to the former body in history: how it must have been "this way" (243). He reconstructs motion and linguistic, positional context instead of causal linearity. He assembles the body as he would a beautiful aesthetic object: "he strung the spine bones/as beautiful as any shell necklace" (243). But before aesthetic beauty reigns, the bones he constructs have a sentience bound by the situation they were in at the time death occurred: "The leg bones were running/so fast/dust from the ankle joints /surrounded the wind" (243). As the bone fixer constructs, the composition begins to have motion and context, a relation to those imagistic metaphors. The dust from only the ankle joints was big enough that the emotional quality of a will to flight was able to surround one of the
most essential and powerful elements. the wind (242-243). Badger-as-Bonefixer models the necessary methodology of reading as a means of constructing cure--the only way this body can be brought back is through metaphor, and a very literal relational metaphor at that. History and the body must be re-read through imagistic possibilities of relation. Furthermore, these relations. to breathe life into murdered bones. must be constructed as tenderly and carefully as kinship relations.

Bone fixer speaks to the bones as if they were his children: he has composed them enough to make them a kind of audience: he wills a reply:

> Oh poor dear one who left your bones here
> I wonder who you are?
> Old Skeleton Fixer spoke to the bones
> Because things don’t die
> they fall to pieces maybe, get scattered or separate (243).

The dead can be traced because their energy or sentience, their narrative does not “die”: it merely gets scattered. Aesthetics is political: a literal individual body may die: but the “thing” it is in relation to history does not die. A familial, tribal relation to any set of bones insists upon their ongoing sentience. A scattered body or narrative can be gathered and arranged. This sentience of physicality is not to be confused with matters of the "soul":

> Old man badger
> never heard of
> such things as souls
> he was certain
> only of bones (243).

And, integrally. he is equally certain of what context bones will retrieve under his familial reconstruction and incantation.
A kind of tenderness is at hand in his composition. though he is powerless. ultimately, over its outcome: although he does not know the bones personally, or "recognize" them. "he could not stop/he loved them anyway." His reconstruction of the rest of this body bears this aesthetic love, this kinship love of bones and the attendant will to revivify them and know them. As he reconstructs the body, he places/resurrects the dead one into the landscape: where the heart was, there is now sand: he intones that he will find a heart for this skeleton and a butterfly flies up from the grass at his feet.

This moment is integral to how a healer must read history and the lost corpus in genocide through the metaphorics of a present. The voice of the body is no longer there to tell history. The immediate nature of this imagistic response to find the heart is not kept--the butterfly cannot be the heart but it can represent, through the associational logic of generative narrative, the loss of life. The ability of the butterfly to represent a loss of life gives the Bonefixer a clue about how to read this body he composes:

Ah! I know how your breath left you--
Like butterflies over an edge.
not falling but fluttering
their wings rainbow colors--
Wherever they are
your heart will be" (244).

To locate the heart not back into a singular body, to locate it in movement of breath in a landscape is to give a sentience to the moment of death and to insist on an other-bodily resurrection and relation. Memory will be preserved metonymically in the gestures of butterflies, even if gesture does not tell cause and effect, even if what the butterflies' aesthetic tells is more of a "how." than a "why." The landscape will bear the
resemblance, at least, and the gesture of the one who died. The landscape, then, will provide a reading of history. This careful love and relation continues:

He worked all day
He was so careful with this one--
It felt like the most special of all.
Old Man Badger didn’t stop
Until the last spine bone
Was arranged at the base of the tail. (245)

When the rest of the body is constructed, the head arrives in implication, the last anatomical part, the part from which speech issues forth. When Old Man Badger finishes the skeleton, he does an incantation, calling to the skeleton in the words of kinship, with the tender vernacular of a parent calling to a child in the Pueblo language:

“An’ Moo’oh, my dear one, these words are bones” (245). The reading is doubled: bones are words as words are bones: language in post-genocide must be rebuilt as materially and associationally as a body is rebuilt.

It is this very constructive insistence that is life-bearing. Composing is elided with language, and bones and words are inseparable. Words, like bones, have the power to recall sentience and consciousness. It is important, too, that the words of the final incantation are representable, but they are not translatable: they are present and material, syllabic and sound, but they are sounds dislocated from direct genealogy as much as they are ritualistic and incantatory. Not all of the old narratives can be remembered to be translated but they can be represented and work somatically on a body or a narrative.

Emergence, then, relies on soma and mystery, as much as it relies on a careful metaphorical relational reading:
he repeated this
four times
Pa Pa Pa Pa!
Pa Pa Pa Pa!
Pa Pa Pa Pa!
Pa Pa Pa Pa!

And it works:

Old Coyote Woman jumped up
and took off running.
She never even said "thanks." (246)

So, after all the loving build up. in a humorous one-liner. the body runs from
whatever it was running from before. And this is no typical body. Bonefixer has been
rebuilding the most important body. the body of Coyote. trickster. the one who refuses to
be fixed. who refuses. traditionally. the usual story line. And. in the nature of bodies.
which may be the ultimate tricksters even in their insistent corporeality. Old Woman
Coyote keeps moving. and keeps running. This "ending of a "A Piece of a Bigger Story
They Tell Around Laguna and Acoma Too" is multi-layered: there is the humor of the
thankless job narrative. Here Bonefixer. with the tenderness of a mother brings the dead
back to life and he is not even thanked: he has done such a good job reconstituting the
narrative that he literally brought that body back to its willed flight.\textsuperscript{13} The running body
is the surviving body, or the body willing itself into survival.

Bodies in flight are so ungrateful, though, and there are other connotations here. too, in the hint of a "Bigger story." That the story is told in multiple pueblos insists on both its hybridity and its essential historicity. The "bigger story" is one of genocide and colonization. Of course, Old Coyote Woman would have the good sense to do what her body was last doing, to run from the male pursuer or composer or whatever it was that chased and caught her in the last incarnation. But there is more: Coyote was one of the first people, the bringer of the knowledge of how to resist witchery and evil. She is at once ancestor and image of the healed body, the image of what the dead come back to life to do. It seems that flight, even in narrative, is still good survival sense.

Old Man Badger's resigned quality of "It is surprising sometimes...how these things work out/But he never has stopped fixing/the poor scattered bones he finds." is a storyteller/healer's unbegrudging commitment to reconstituting corporeal survival.

\textsuperscript{13}Poignantly, Parsons reads running as a repeated sign of survival in Pueblo cultures. "In escaping from the enemy or overtaking him as in stalking game, fast running was necessary: even when horses were available, war parties went on foot" (31). This trope of the ability to run or to narrate a quick run marks stories of inter-tribal warfare. Spanish and Western colonizations and, in other moments of Silko's works, another integral gesture for the storyteller/healer ritualizing cure--see my later discussion of Silko's "Storyteller's Escape." The narrator of this piece is too old to run from the enemy, so she instead scripts a story of a good running escape to hand on to the younger generations. In resonant irony, her scripting of escape, even as she lies awaiting slaughter, and the ability of a younger girl to witness both the death and the telling of escape, insures potential rewriting of survival for the tribe. The narrative complexity and genealogy of running does not stop there: running becomes the site at which narrative remarks on cure: how does one write survival for a body on the run? How does one rescript escape for the already murdered?
whatever the outcome may be (245). Bones beg to be fixed. Emergence must keep going. A body must go “as if.” The composer must keep walking through the fields of genocide in history, loving bones with her or his methodologies of emergence, composing them into other outcomes.

There is a sort of "what has to be done, has to be done" will to the end of this fragment—an acceptance of powerlessness over the outcome of any "fixed" body. Because this section is insistently fragmentary, it narrates the irretrievable, even as the body comes back to life. There is the sense, too, that a fixed body, a body violently dead in a historical narrative void, is both retrievable and always somehow beyond our keeping. In the mode of mystery, it can be represented but not held static.

A bone-fixed skeleton can still run from whatever will there is to converse with it and ask it to sit still, give identifiable, utterable sense-making. Perhaps, too, as the myriad performances of emergence logics insist, the sign of a cured body is that it always be in motion. Perhaps the running, however laden it is with the connotation of a body running from violent death (why else would the bones be "scattered"?), is a gesture of rewriting death into escape, into emergence, into the next narrative space of becoming.

This narrative fragment does not worry the literal. Like the insistence on the material production of breath, this fragment insists at once upon a language as bones that can be brought to life with tenderness, metaphoric readings, and incantation. The bones of the dead become a kind of intuitively, corporeally known map of flight. Bonefixer's collecting, rebuilding, retelling the context of the body, and then breathing into the body, giving with his own breath, breath to the fragmented loss, is what matters. Finally--the
methodology of revivification. And revivification, turning into the wind, suggests running from fixity.

Old Woman Coyote’s flight marks a conflation of two different notions of healing and survival. As with Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, one form of “flight” is the quite literal ability to return the ill to conversant relations with the community and to return the ill with a knowledge that can help the community. The second flight marks movement as the necessary gesture of survival, even if movement risks a lack of return to the collectivity. Even when the body escapes, or is slaughtered. Silko insists, stories, like bones, can be material generators of a sentience at once historical and prophetic. The most disturbing possibility of a body surviving genocide is that it might be perpetually defined by its inability to utter experience and its attendant compulsion to run from any one “fixing” it. Stories must both keep moving and, in an archive of bodies surviving, collect the corporeal trails marking escape. The methodology of cure holds a body only long enough to give it breath and harmony, to let it rescript the narrative that holds it, and then to move one, teller/healer and the cured alike, into the next compositional moment. The most regenerative possibility of words, like bones, is that they just might move and keep on moving.
CHAPTER 4
YOU CANNOT JUST FLY OFF

If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West. it must centralize and animate information discredited by the west—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information described as “lore” or “gossip” or “magic” or “sentiment.” (Morrison “Memory. Creation. Writing” 386)

Song of Solomon, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony and Storyteller, while the socio-historical contexts of the novels are in many ways different. and while the novels usher forth from very different ethnicly hybrid communities, resemble each other in their wills to script a character into agency out of history of powerlessness. Furthermore, they are similar in their explicit import of the folkloric to do so. Nothing less than an entire retelling of history and an entire refiguration of a character’s relation to her or his own body is required to script a cure against all that says a body cannot envision other possibilities or cannot give in to flight when it is tethered to narratives which would, on some days, will it gravity-bound into the ready-made graves of so many narratives.

In another historical context. a young man born with a caul over his eyes would have been hailed by his community as a “seer.” a person able to interpret or envision what others, born clear-eyed, could not. However. Milkman Dead, born with a caul, the seeming protagonist of Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, who might, in another life. be visionary and revolutionary in his community. is born under the sign of aborted flight: his
mother is in the crowd watching Mr. Smith, a former Days' man, attempt a flight "home." off the roof of Not-Mercy hospital. Mr. Smith fails: Milkman Dead's mother goes into labor and Milkman Dead becomes the first black baby born in Mercy hospital (5-8). Milkman Dead seems destined, as the rest of the bodies around him are destined, to be gravity-bound by the narratives which made and make them.

Song of Solomon opens with a scene of failed theater. Mr. Smith's attempted flight, and constructs a narrative that propels the body of Milkman into flight. Initially, it seems Milkman will never fly. His family is fraught with the myriad diseases of racism: his father's response to his own father's murder at the hands of a white family for land and to racism's poverty is to become a slum-lord: his father abuses his mother and refuses her sex: his mother engages in almost necrophiliac fantasies to express her sexuality and loss: his sisters are chattel for the purposes of class-climbing in their father's eyes: Milkman's girlfriend. Hagar. grief-stricken by Milkman's desire to marry one of those red-haired light-skinned girls. has determined to murder him: and even his best friend. Guitar Baines. is slowly going mad with an altogether different response to the history of racist violence--he joins the Days. whose ethic is coldly number-driven. They will equalize the killing: if a church full of school girls is bombed and four girls die. the man whose day is Sunday will plan a church bombing of white children. and try to kill four white girls.

Long before he was born. Milkman was the near-aborted character of these narratives which surround him. His mother went to his aunt. Pilate. to conjure his father into having sex: when his father found out about the pregnancy. he tried repeatedly to
abort Milkman--the fetus is only saved by Pilate's herbal healing. Milkman begins to be born after his mother witnesses a man attempt to fly from Mercy hospital and plummet to his death instead: after Milkman is old enough to stop nursing, his mother continues to nurse Milkman for her own physical and psychological pleasure (hence the name "Milkman" by a neighbor who saw this act); and, once he is old enough to want to fly, to name his bodily desire to escape the confines of his Dead family. he realizes he can never fly.

But then. Milkman Dead is only the seeming protagonist of this narrative: he is more importantly the character through which folkloric logics script themselves. And the body that most represents the methodologies of the novel entire is Pilate. Milkman’s Aunt. the anti-thesis of his father. Milkman Dead may be the corporeal son of the Dead family. diseased by the myriad logics of American racism until they are so alienated from themselves and their communities. they have become the walking dead. However. Milkman Dead is also the son of Pilate–her conjure begot him.

When Milkman Dead feels caught by his familial abuse. his sisters’ profound alienation. his girlfriend’s will to murder and the growing murderous insanity of Guitar Baines. he decides to try to find escape. His father has told him. in an attempt to warn him away from his aunt Pilate. that she stole a bag of gold from a white man she murdered and carried the gold with her. When Milkman and Guitar (who wants half the gold to fund his bombing enterprise) go to steal the bag. they find instead a bag of bones. Milkman’s father then decides Pilate must have hid the gold on her journey north and
Milkman decides to journey south to find the money to liberate him from the narratives it looks like he must live.

As Milkman Dead moves away from his immediate family and community to find the gold, he traces the historical lineage of all that ails him. And, crucially, he congruently must trace the history of Pilate to learn what she has learned: that the folkloric allows a narrative locus from which to script a revivified sense of agency. The “gold” at the end of the adventure is both bones and what revivified histories of bones might instruct a body to do: to fly. The novel uses the moment of flight, in its main specific figures, as touchstone and, while the linearity outlined above is accessible, the novel moves by accretion: each consideration of flight and non-flight adds to the knowledge of what kind of flight must work. Flight then, is the generational image from which the novel creates its architecture. Flight is at once the generative edge of historical narrative, and the discursive edge of the body.

**Lineage and Disease**

The death of the “enchantment” of that would have interpreted Milkman Dead as a seer and a flier, coupled with the proliferation of racist and sexist binaries that represent the oppressively objective and bifurcating aftermath of slavery and ongoing abuse of the body by racism, disease all of the Dead family, and many of their community members. *Song of Solomon* is often cited as novel in which a young man, Milkman Dead, journeys to find his cultural roots in the landscape of the south, and, in doing so, finds a knowledge and a “transcendence” by which he not only heals, but also by which his community
might heal.¹ What is often left out of the criticism is the sort of structural analysis of the novel that Joseph Skerrett calls up but does not develop in his review of Morrison’s work: the relation of Milkman and Pilate as the relation between the student and the griot, the healer/teacher/storyteller (192-93). In the Griot tradition, the student must learn the healing knowledge of the teacher and then something in addition to contribute to the tradition (193-201). As a sign of his mastery, the student must return to the “griot.” and tell the story of the learning back to the teacher, thus adding to the teacher’s knowledge.

True to the Griot tradition, Milkman has information to add to Pilate’s knowledge. However, whether he is able to translate this information to Pilate and his community, and what it means that Pilate is shot dead at the very moment of Milkman’s singing and flight, is at the very central ambivalence of a body in flight throughout the folkloric history of “the flying African.”

Milkman must be cured to narrate, and in doing so, the narrative structure from which he emerged must be cured. The sort of agency and the discursive limit of that agency inherent in Song’s ending both point to the possibilities and problematics of a mythic positionality used to redefine agency. To name Pilate as both a healer and at the heart of the very narrative methodology of Song, is to raise the possibility that she is, in some way, the true subject of this novel. She is the herbalist healer who has learned to live on the fringes of community. She is the protector, mother, and teacher of Milkman, however little he realizes that at first. She is also the body who mapped a revivified

¹Wahneeba Lubiano rescripts the current critical tendency to see the end as transcendence in a context of postmodern agency and the need to see multiple possibilities in an ending that may or may not be a becoming (107-115).
agency first: her historical body-in-motion is the track Milkman must follow.

Problematically, though, while she may be "griot," she herself cannot transcend the discursive limit of violent narrative as it reaches her body.

As Milkman journeys south looking for gold, following the trail of his migratory family backwards into origin, he takes his body back into nature and into "roots" with all of their varying significances: the significance of getting back to a more corporeal sentience, of being able to be a body reading nature, of being able to love a "Sweetness," and of locating the stories of ancestors’ deaths and liberations. But the essential dynamic of this journey is that he travels the path Pilate took to become the healer she is, occupying a fecund marginal space. In journeying such a course, he learns how to read the landscape and his own body through the story of Pilate’s body. He both absorbs narrative and interprets it. Instead of the gold the linear narrative wills Milkman to find, he finds the other methodology impelling this narrative. Milkman finds curative "Song." "Song’s" methodology gives him flight.

To heal oneself and in the course of doing so, to gather healing knowledge, is always to participate in the oral in this novel, and in the sort of conscious awareness moments of theater create. The oral elements of curing always move by trying to alter the consciousness of a character—to open up multiple ways of reading any situation, and, in doing so, to try to open up the weighty and impossible narratives of sexism and racism to allow a body to take off in some other direction. Milkman is a man politically unaware who becomes aware of the historical politics behind a person’s name. Reading itself becomes agency: however, reading alone doesn’t create agency and the novel provides
many characters, savvy to the import of history and politics who choose to play dead-end parts in response. Milkman’s family, as well as Guitar Baines, the Days, and even the former mid-wife/curer Circe become models of failed cure-as-agency. Pilate alone becomes the model, however fraught, of possible cure because she has learned the theater of orality and multiple readings herself. She becomes the mode by which a corporeal freedom might be achieved for Milkman.

To follow Pilate’s path is to follow her genealogy and to create one at once—this sort of migratory mapping is the basis for a reading that allows agency. Following Pilate’s path backwards, Milkman learns the genealogy of disease, its basis in a capitalist materiality: he learns orality, listening, becoming communal—all elements of folkloric theater: he learns the necessary split of being a body attempting to generate community and open-endedness—that you “cannot just fly off and leave a body:” he learns the story of his great-grandfather through a song and performance game some children in Shalimar, Virginia play. He learns his great grandfather was one of those “flying Africans”--one of those so pure in his essential African identity he could just up and fly away from the oppressive strictures of slavery, leaving behind his grieving wife Raina and his many children.

All of this learning adds up to an essential enchantment the locus of his body holds: the possibility of flight. But the most essential knowledge he learns to interpret and translate is the knowledge that most revises the original tales—he learns the gendered grief of “the flying African:” he learns to become a reader of the woman being left.

“Becoming a Reader” involves not only being able to interpret the causes for his parents’
illnesses. Guitar’s insanity, and Hagar’s will-to-murder, it involves realizing the degree to which he is culpable in his relations to his family and community. “Reading” in the oral performative insists on culpability because it importantly insists that Milkman feel differently, experience sensual information differently. He learns to stand in Raina and Hagar’s subjectivity and grieve. Milkman must quite literally assume the narrative position of the woman left by a man in flight when Pilate is shot by Guitar Bains and dies. Milkman, must, like all women left to the ground sing “Sugarman don’t leave me” to Pilate. Just as Pilate could not sing Mr. Smith into flight off of the roof. Milkman cannot sing Pilate into life.

However, his curing has altered his body and sentience. Milkman, after singing the “Song of Solomon” to the dying Pilate, literally takes flight into the “killing arms” of “his brother.” Ambivalently, Song of Solomon ends with Milkman in mid-air. The novel refuses the closure of taking him skyward or earthward or deathward. It leaves him in media res a body on the cusp of an impossible freedom. The novel refuses to resolve the split through which Milkman becomes a remaking of the “Song of Solomon,” or its more recent blues version, “Sugarman,” or the remaking of the first failed flight of the novel where the oppressed and desperate insurance man who begins the novel attempting flight but becomes absurdist suicide. To read that first moment of flight through the ever circling, aggregate flights of the novel is to refine the sense that, whatever the historical specificity, flight is deep ambivalence. Even more poignantly, the novel refuses to resolve the split through which Milkman has become both the flying man and the woman
beloved. beholden to the ground: Raina. the wife of the original flying African. driven
grief-mad while watching Solomon fly off. carrying only one of his many brood.

"Cure" as this novel figures it. is far more than learning the song that sends a body
into flight: it is that which resists stasis. resists settling into one side of the binary or the
other: it insists that cure is a performing and rescripting of the singing of the body to keep
opening up the possibility of "life. life. life." Resisting the binary is not an easy business:
it risks madness and death. Cure becomes a meta-narrative altogether cognizant of its
own potential failures: the generative moment of flight is nothing without an audience
understanding its impetus.

The Center is Flight

While the novel works in the multiply layered linearities outlined above. it also
works through a perpetual re-performing of the moment of failed flight until it creates
cure. The very archiving of failed cure. of all that creates a failed flight. in part. is the
necessary knowledge to what creates flight: it must be both learned and un-learned. In
one interview. Toni Morrison described the structure of Song of Solomon's complex
narrative relations in a single line: "The center of the narrative is flight: the springboard is
mercy" (Valerie Smith New Essays on Song of Solomon 19). The necessary conjure of
this narrative is to discover mercy enough to spring flight out of the flightlessness of
trauma and disease. The novel opens with a failed flight. Mr. Robert Smith. Insurance
agent. tries to take flight "on his own wings" from the roof of all-white Mercy hospital.
The narrator announces that Mr. Smith. despite the fact that he tacked a notice on his own
doors announcing his impending flight. did not draw as much of a crowd as Lindberg did
four years earlier. The mock-journalistic style, in its arrogant "objectivity" disallows the possibility that Mr. Smith will ever fly. The fixity of the language is part of the awful weight that bears him down to the pavement. It does not understand the lineage, yearning, and need in his act. Nor does the style comprehend either what Guitar Baines explains later in the novel: Mr. Smith was one of "The Seven," a group of seven men committed to a mathematical system of murder retribution for racist killings, and that he cracked under the weight of living that killing set of logics.

In the busy and dis-unified crowd beneath Robert Smith--this disunification and lack of coherent self-recognition among the crowd is integral to the failure of his flight--one character understands the poignancy of his act and tries to sing a part in it, to help carry him into the air through voice (6). Try as she might. Pilate is unable to do what the folkloric teachers of flight could do: sing the body along into flight and out of death. Pilate is unable to conjure the necessary physical language. or Africa is too far away from the bodily memories of the crowd and of Mr. Smith. Or. Mr. Smith. despite his attempt. has not had the time or the contact with the right griot to be teachable. All of these readings are possible and they all insist that somehow the original narrative must be re-conjured. healed into a contemporary context in order to provide flight.

Pilate tries anyway. by singing the blues version of the "flying African tale." She sings it from a perspective Morrison insistently returns to in Song, the woman left by flight: "O Sugarman done fly away/O Sugarman done gone/Sugarman cut across the sky/Sugarman gone home" (6). The consciousness of the woman left on the ground must
be understood by this narrative as much as any understanding of the male psyche for flight to take place.

The power of Pilate’s contralto calls some of the crowd to listen to her as if she were “the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie.” Others mark her, and the narrative marks her as an outsider. Integral to the crowd’s distraction are the dropped petals they know might be “soiled” and therefore unacceptable to purchase. Commodity is the immediate distraction from a role that might bring meaning. But the all-white “Mercy” hospital, the “mercilessness” of a body used to mathematical retribution for racist death, and the mercilessness of the objective gaze are the anti-thesis of the springboard. “Mercy:” this narrative needs. They are the not-mercy that writes a potential liberation into incomprehensible and absurdist suicide. The first scene poses the not-mercy of non-flight that bears a body down onto the pavement.

Mr. Smith’s failed attempt and Pilate’s understanding and will to help him into flight, literally bears the body, the man who will fly. Milkman Dead, into this novel. In the crowd, a very pregnant Ruth Dead clutches her belly and cries as Mr. Smith hits the ground. Pilate then approaches Ruth Dead and whispers in her ear “a little bird is coming”: Mrs. Dead replies “no, no. it is too soon.” but the next day, under the mark of Sugarman and Pilate’s voice and under the sign of the blue silk wings of Mr. Smith. Milkman Dead is the “first colored baby” to be born in “Mercy” hospital (8-9). The narrator discursively marks Milkman’s lifelessness with Mr. Smith’s flight into death:

Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that
single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. (9)

What the novel does not "discover" in the first scene, and what it comes to discover, is "Mercy," which, finally, is a kind of relationality, a kind of communal culpability for the narratives communities and individuals produce. Mr. Smith's flight fails because the all-white "Mercy" is not mercy enough to be a springboard for something so seemingly impossible as flight. Ironically, Pilate, named for the man who killed God's son, a God who would not save her mother, is the sort of figure of relationality that is Mercy enough.

That Other Knowledge

When asked if her novel Song of Solomon was meant to recall Icarus' mythic flight. Toni Morrison replied:

If it means Icarus to some readers, fine: I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life: flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere--people used to talk about it...it's in the spirituals and the gospels. (Harris 85)

By responding in this manner, Toni Morrison instructively revises the relation between "realism" and "mythology" or "folklore" and "the body" in her novel. Her very grammatical structure asserts, as realistic, an inherent given of certain bodies, a quality that, in the languages of objectivity, seems only allowed in a mythic/folkloric realm of the body: flight. Flight defies the most objective of bodily properties in their relations to the basics of all properties, to the very givens of materiality--flight constitutes the seemingly impossible rebuttal of gravity. It is the bodily state most marked as an other knowledge
to objectivity. Furthermore, implicit to Morrison's claim is that the rebuttal of gravity is inherently socio-cultural: blackness and flight are ancestrally and inextricably linked.

"Flight" itself becomes a narrative methodology of using orality to attempt to liberate the fraught and heavy political materiality of an oppressed body. Flight inhabits the realm of the oral/aural in 'spirituals' and 'gospels'—the very forms that many theorists of black American literature cite as the foundation forms for the history of Afro-American literary tradition. Flight then, among other aural/oral tropes, has at once the literary preexistence and givenness of the body itself. In all its willed anti-essentialism, flight becomes an identifying theatrical moment to a literary tradition. It also exists, quite deliberately in Morrison's novel, as the moment in which the binaristic splits of mind/body, objectivity/subjectivity, the visual/the aural reconfigure themselves into some other more complicated relations.

In other formulations of her narrative strategy, Morrison complicates and specifies her vision of realism and the folkloric/mythic further to transform the sort of binary they pose in western criticism. She insists upon multiple corporeal knowledges of survival. In an interview with Valerie Smith, Morrison claims she dislikes being dubbed a "magical realist" because the term is so often equated with "using mythology to not talk about the political real" (111). In yet another interview, Morrison redefines her strategy as one of "enchantment":

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew. In addition to the very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities...
I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what "really" happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. . . . Without that, I think I would have been quite bereft because I would have been dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things and also I would have relied on information that even subsequent objectivity has proved to be fraudulent. (Davis 144)

Against objective "so called scientific" knowledge, Morrison constructs a knowledge that is elided within the bodily mode of perception, that exists as an "empirically unverifiable" knowledge. a knowledge integral to survival, and, finally, a knowledge that defines an aesthetic of her novels within a black literary tradition—"black ontologies" are inseparable from the perpetual writing/deconstructing of objectivities that are the diseased aftermaths and constructs of whiteness. Orality is integral to this methodology. because it is not only the means by which objectivity becomes rewritten. but it is also the means by which some "other knowledge" tries to script survival. The novel informed by enchantment and other knowledge becomes the novel defined much by qualities of the oral texts: perpetual theater and perpetual reformation. The oral theater of Morrison's novels represents an ethic of reading much like the ethic of listening in folkloric traditions.² To listen, in an antithetical relation to Western written traditions, is to create. to create is to conjure oneself as one helps to conjure the story: it is to hook into the narrative and come out of it all at once.

In yet another interview, Morrison is careful to define the terms of what holds a black literary tradition together as a literary aesthetic, historically unified as an opposition

²The 1998 Teaching Oral Traditions introduces such a frame for understanding the aesthetic complexity of oral tradition even when it is imported into print form.
to those who are trying to write Afro-Americans in delimiting ways (Smith 99). In her careful language, the Afro-American literary tradition is a question of writing a body out of discursive enclosures that anyone can create. but. importantly. whose generative ontologies come from the brutal whiteness of slavery and the racist commercialism of late capitalism (3). While it is clear that whiteness is the mass generator of alienation and disease, the diseases can be produced/co-produced in black communities--clearly. in Song. Afro-Americans can discursively reproduce the closed. alienated bodies of other Afro-Americans. Morrison's call to an aesthetics closer to the nature of song is to keep an aesthetics closely aligned with the lived materiality of the body without closing that production or without reproducing the bifurcation that racism so deeply relies upon: that anyone is purely white or black. purely male or female. Song, as it heals a body into flight. is a discovery of essential hybridity. Hybridity in the margin resists the awful reign of gravity.

Flight becomes important in Song of Solomon because it is a hybrid of languages all melded in conjure's willful drive to upend the late capitalist hierarchies of sensual knowledges: the visual. written text does not reign supreme. nor is it dismissed: it is refigured through the oral. Flight is the material body opening and being opened by its discursive limit. the writer and listener staging the possibilities for the open body: it is the revisionist body and importantly. in Morrison. it becomes the moment of staged gender reconfiguration.
The Word Enters the Body

One of the oldest tropes in black oral narratives is the narrative of flight. In one of the earliest versions of the flying African narrative, a slave could step into the air and fly home; something essentially African in his body gave him the ability, unlike slaves from other countries or slaves that were the product of white rape, to step into the air, break free of torture and bondage and return to her or his landscape of origin (Levine 86). Some versions of “The Flying African” report entire fields of slaves lifting off the ground and out of the grasps of their stunned masters and overseers (Levine 87). In some of these versions, slaves had to leave their wings back in Africa because the boats were “too crowded”: in still others, once ripped from Africa, and its “sweet air” their bodies simply forgot their inherent ability to fly. What was once an inherent, magical ability, becomes the one possibility of escape from death and torture. Furthermore, flight becomes a potential learned ability: those who are African slaves can teach non-Africans to fly. In a version of the story that is closest to the one Morrison re-stages in Song of Solomon, and a narrative Virginia Hamilton retells in her collected short stories, a body can be reminded of forgotten knowledge and former “magic” can have the very real corporeal effect of allowing escape.

In Hamilton’s version, “The People Could Fly,” one man, “say we call him Toby,” was a man who had been able to fly and he remembers and sings the old magic words to a young woman Sarah so she and her baby could escape the abuse of the overseer:

Yes daughter, the time is come.” Toby answered. “Go as you know how to go!”
He raised his arms, holding them out to her. "Kum. . . yali, kum buba tambe." and more magic words. said so quickly. they sounded like whispers and sighs.

The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather. (169)

The next day. Toby speaks the words to a man falling from the heat in the fields:

Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away. (170)

As more and more fall from the heat. Toby sings them into flight. until. finally, when the Overseer comes to kill him. he sings the last into flight and flies himself. "taking care of them. He wasn't cryin. He wasn't laughin. He was the seer. His gaze fell on the plantation. way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Free-dom" (171).

This version is the version closest to the one Morrison uses in Song of Solomon (she alters a few of the vowels in the song) and it traces a similar notion of bodily forgetting and bodily memory. of the relation between the corporeal and the mapping of potential escape. and. finally. of the ambivalence of flight. A seer knows how to fly. Hamilton doesn't translate the words Toby speaks to us. They are not meant to be translatable. They occupy that realm of "other knowledge" Morrison speaks of in interviews. While persistently untranslatable. they do have a sweet intimacy with the body: the sound of them becomes their physical ability to enter the body, alter the body. remind it of what it once was and what it could be. The Oral reconstitutes the powers of the Overseer. and the Seer. The Oral gives the Seer the ability to guide his people up and
out of the torturous clutches of slavery, of the Overseer. Just at the moment the narrative might be most "mythic" and therefore, in Western hegemony, most dismissable, the term for their goal is "Free-dom." The breaking of the word emphasizes its aural and oral qualities and rewrites the textual as multiple, unsettled and shifting meanings: freedom of return to a homeland, freedom of escape from the south into the north, free-dom as that promised land of biblical references, free-dom as the promised land of heaven in the spirituals, the land of death. free-dom as a kingdom of the free... 

The variation and multiplicity of the single word is a model for the closure, or lack thereof in this narrative, and in oral traditions in general. A lack of closure is integral to the generative multiplicity of orality, but, importantly, it defies an ideological closure at the same time. Many theorists have discussed Afro-American folktales as straightforward informational narratives (how to get free: how to find the freedom trail). Others have discussed the narratives as coded political critiques of slavery. Both kinds of interpretations are important, but delimiting, and, as contemporary seminal works on Afro-American literary traditions, like Gates' *Signifying Monkey* make clear, some of the discursive qualities attributed to the complex aesthetics of postmodernism were well under way in pre-slave cultures like the Yoruba, in their double mouthed god, Eshu Elegbara, who talked and talked about the talking all at once (ix. xx-xvii. 3-43). And this god was at once a god of great creative, generative power and of great destruction. He was inherently discursive and he was a form made in part by context. 

So, for example, while Hamilton tells the story of flight, it never breaks free from context, nor from its possible generation or destruction. The narrative ends with only
some of the slaves flying off to free-dom. Toby has not had time to teach the non-flyers to fly. He knows they: must wait for a chance to run... poor souls!” The narrative consciousness (that collective of “we” or “they” that is implied in the “say”) is altogether too conscious of the bodily threat of that kind of flight—of a body running away on the ground, victim to whip and gun of the overseer.

At the very heart of this narrative is the deep ambivalence of consciousness of the political real as it meets the will of the mytho-poetics to liberation: flight. for those who cannot remember it, or those who forgot it, is the risk of death. Lawrence Levine has theorized that these narratives themselves have served multiple, complex purposes in explaining the deaths of those who tried to run away and were killed. His theorizing is apropos for this narrative: when the people fly against the sky they are like “so many black birds” or “shadows” which implies an in transience of corporeality that may hint at a release only through death (170). Furthermore, even as these narratives may code escape, they may attendantly be writing a wish fulfillment in an awful torture nightmare of non-escape. In the latter level of interpretation, the narratives of flight grow all the more poignant: that, in a landscape in which bodily escape is almost impossible, people dream of a pure flight, in which, intoned by an older and more powerful music than the violence of slavery, a body that can just up and fly away.

Like other Afro-American oral narratives. “The Flying African” and its myriad versions that stretch from slave narratives through the spirituals and gospels, into the heart of contemporary black novel and short stories, this story has a complex and shifting relation to the histories of American political realities. “The Flying African.” in late
slavery and emancipation era American split off into versions of amazing running escapes and. congruently into a series of stories called the “flyingest fool” stories. In the flyingest fool. there is no escape outside racism. and racist structures. even in death. Heaven itself is white (Abrahams 280). What is possible as flight and “escape” is no longer the escape back to the essential heartland. Africa. what is possible is the sort of bodily and linguistic exuberance and panache of the trickster flyer who messes with the order. Even the black man gone to heaven who gets his “wings” can get kicked out “for flying around every which way and raisin’ hell” (Dorson 179; Abrahams 281) And. when St. Peter or God kicks him out for mis-behaving. his retort (that is consistently the punch line in this narrative strain): well. I was the flyingest fool while I was here (Dorson 179; Abrahams 281).

That the flying narratives persisted into contemporary culture speaks of their poignant writing of a body attempting to escape the gravitational pull of brutal racism. One narrative from Arkansas reported by Dorson talks of a man who can up and fly away from the police every time (279). Ellison wrote a short story version of the Flying Africans in 1941 in which one of the few black fighter pilots trained by the U.S. crashes in a racists’ field but is rescued by the verbal dodge and expertise of an old black man (2099-3008). In this contemporary narrative. despite its deep ambivalence. flight is. once again. inseparable from the methodology of narration. At the end of the narrative. some knowledge of an inherent blackness as flight seems to be implied. but. once again. as the long litany and variation of these novels implies. the mythic flight may be the mocked
body of someone resisting contemporary narratives more powerful than the willed liberatory ones—a man who tries to be a "Pilot" but who crashes into a racist's field.

Flight, in Afro-American oral and written narrative and in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is that fraught will mapping a liberated body, the narrative space where the body breaks from its original relation to gravity and to the political, historical specificity and remaps not only its own constitution, but also its relation to narratives of repression and liberation. The corporeality of a body breaking into another space becomes inseparable from the linguistic flight of its telling.³

The moment of the body in flight is the moment where a body might enter a liberatory narrative space and might die. As is clear in the history of the flying Africans and Morrison's contemporary restaging, multiple methodologies constitute this remaking: mythic positionalities are only as good as their cultural/historical specificity. They need to work, a sort of choral/community consciousness. Furthermore, in Morrison's case, to be successful in this era, a "flying African" must employ and gather, the griot gathers, the conjuror gathers. contemporary pieces of narrative and of corporeality to restructure the damaged, fractured psyche, to reconstruct the potential for community and healings of bodies into open-ended political subjectivities. Oral narratives, as incorporated in the novel form, are important because of this connection to community and because of their inherent, expected fluidity, reader-participation and perpetual open-endedness. They resist a permanent ideological closure and remain an adaptive survival technique, which

³For commentary on the ways in which folklore has been insistently divorced from its generative, shaping context, see Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* and Clifford's *Writing Culture*. 
in the hands of a narrator like Morrison, become the critiquing ground not only of western ideologies but also of oral narratives' ability to liberate bodies.

The Not-Mercy of Naming

Song begins with a theater of failed flight. with an orality unable to carry a body and it drives at an orality that might send a body into flight. To do so, it begins with the genealogy of disease, the root cause of flightlessness for Mr. Smith and Milkman: the myriad psychic and physical diseases that are the decedents of racism. And the “flying African” is the trope of both the failed flight and the probable flightlessness in the history of slavery. Hence the return, again and again, to the moment of flight. A long history of racial trauma, and the sort of violence and the memory loss done to lineage -- implicitly elided with the corporeal forgetting of the ability to fly-- has made everyone in Milkman’s family and circle of friends (with one exception) sick unto the point of being the “walking dead.” The cultural diseases, commodities, language of slavery and then the racism of whiteness has, in an inversion of the seer tale, entered into their bodies in the forms of language making power. and they, in turn, they have reproduced its violence.

When Macon Dead ponders the strange nickname of his son “Milkman.”

Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as can stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn’t have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army: A drunken slip of the pen handed to his father which he handed on to his only son and his son likewise handed on to his: Macon Dead who begat a second Macon Dead who married
Ruth Foster (Dead and begat Magdalena called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead and (when he least expected it) another Macon Dead now know to the part of the world that mattered as Milkman Dead. And as if that were not enough, a sister named Pilate Dead. . .(17-18)

Macon retells the same story to his son as a first attempt to keep Milkman away from Macon's sister Pilate. His version of the namings differs in part because Milkman reminds him of his father by asking him "Is that the way your father treated you when you were twelve?" That question switches Macon Dead back into another "scenery" and "feeling"--

The numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence: something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt. His father had sat for five nights on a split-rail fence cradling a shotgun and in the end died protecting his property. Was that what this boy felt for him? Maybe it was time to tell him things. (50-51)

The possibility of connection (however alienated --'this boy' in place of his "son") recalls some other relation to naming--a compassionate guess at why a man would keep a name like "Macon Dead" when it was acquired by the crass mistakes of a drunk man at the Freedmen's Bureau:

Papa was in his teens and went to sign up, but the man behind the desk was drunk. He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, "he's dead." Asked him who owned him. Papa said, "I'm free." Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon.' But Papa couldn't read so he never found out what he was registered as till Mama told him. They met on a wagon going North. Started talking about one thing and another, told her about being a freedman and showed off his papers to her. When she looked at his paper she read him out what it said. . .Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out." (53-54)
So the name, in Milkman’s grandmother’s vision, was a possibility to wipe out the past. It is highly unlikely his grandfather had that “original” name. It is clear from Macon’s narrative that his father did not even know his father’s name—he was, in one form or another killed by slavery before Macon could learn it. The name he currently held was probably the name his slave owner gave him and in Macon Dead the second’s narration to his son. his father never offered up this name to the Freedman’s bureau. The grandmother’s optimism did not hold. The name may have wiped out certain namings of the past, but it did not wipe out the death inherent in slavery. The rupture and lack at the center of the act of naming in an era of racism still marks the name. Nor did her optimism take into account one of the inherent claims of this novel, that history, however unselﬁshconsciously, and however much its inhabitants may will themselves forward and away, hands down the dead. In that mock-biblical “begetting” at the end of Macon’s first telling of the lineage of the “Deads,” the dead beget the dead and not the living, and certainly not the love and seriousness of the ﬁrst African, the lithe young man who knew himself because he was named in an atmosphere of “love and seriousness.” Thus begets a naming sick unto Dead.

After Macon tells Milkman the story of his father’s name. Milkman responds by asking what the real name was. Macon answers this question by discussing what his mother looked like. Genealogy, in this rupture of history and naming becomes a genealogy of the visual, of skin, of corporeality marked by sickened namings. Naming produces bodies and bodies in turn are the nodes for reproducing and resisting namings
all at once. Bodies bear the corporeal marks of those dynamics. Bodies carry the recall of a former state of narrative possibility as well. Macon tells his son:

I don't remember my mother too well. She died when I was four. Light-skinned, pretty. Looked like a white woman to me. Me and Pilate don't take nothing after her. If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too. Close his face up like a door. (54)

Macon insists on the mythic connections to Africans based on a faces, but also based on bodily abilities--the ability to 'close a face like a door.' While this is not flight. it is the ability to shut out a corporeal mastery or reading--to hold some thought, some being in privacy.

By the time Milkman turns to Guitar, as he discusses his former lover's death threat and proclaims, "she can't kill me I'm already Dead." "the already dead" is a joke of the novel as much as it is at the crux of the matter. The Dead have become the inherent quality of the Not-Dead. The dead. the lack. and ever-present sickness in the situation of Milkman and his family finally drives him to the cure, a cure inherent in the physicality of Pilate and a cure this novel in the tradition of oral conjuring constitutes.

All around him. Milkman's family and friends are attempting cures in the face of the dead begetting more dead. Milkman's father coldly and ruthlessly acquires property and makes money off of poor blacks: after his long narration to Milkman of the history of namings, and after warning Milkman off of Pilate because she can only help you in 'that other world. the world of the dead.' Macon says to his son. 'that boy' Milkman: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let
the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too”(55).

The lesson is a lesson in acquisition. In a yellow materiality that will then return to own a psyche not named in love and seriousness. Things will own things and then you will own yourself and others. In the language of this passage, capital collection is a slavery of self-ownership and owning others. As Guitar’s mother says of Macon Dead, her money-grubbing landlord “a nigger in business is a sad thing to see” (22). Long past the era of slavery, a slavery economy can be perpetuated by blacks on blacks because the economics of slavery proffers the cure of power: the promise of ownership offers identity.

Milkman’s mother is able to see him only as an extension. as the “playing field” between her husband and herself. Her cure is a warped, misunderstood use of mythology. Milkman acquired his first name (he was originally “Macon Dead the third”) from a neighbor who witnessed his mother nursing him incestuously well past the age he should have been nursed: it was her way to imagine herself in some sort of mythic escape space away from a rageful, loveless, and sexless marriage:

She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller’s daughter—the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. And that was part of her pleasure, a pleasure she hated to give up. (13-14)

Milkman’s mother uses him to see the potential mythic power of her own body, but it is a warped myth, as is the capital myth of his father’s “things owning other things.”—both
myths without 'mercy.' Milkman's mother's original name "Ruth Foster" is subsumed into her husband's name, as was her mother's before her. Macon married Ruth because she was "the first black doctor's daughter" and thus an image, symbol, body over which Macon might acquire things. After their marriage becomes sexless. Ruth's way to feel her own body as generative is through an incestuous act with her son.

The diseases extend well beyond Milkman's family into his community. They are the instructive "have not" diseases that the gentlemen at the barbershop attempt to teach Milkman (58). Milkman's best friend Guitar heaves at the thought or sight of candy or sweetness. He tells Milkman he can eat "fruit" and not sweets. and true to the model of disease in this novel. what might be diagnosed as a disease separate from a socio-historical context. becomes redefined in its racist context of arrival. Milkman looks for the "physical" cause and says "you must have sugar diabetes." But Guitar. the man who will become the merciless geographer of linguistics. tells him. no. "It makes me think of dead people. And white people. And I start to puke" (61). Milkman asks him how long he's felt this way and he replies. "Since my father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave us kids some candy. Divinity. A big sack of divinity. His wife made it special for us. It's sweet. divinity is. Sweeter than syrup. Real sweet. Sweeter than. . ." (61).

Guitar must step into an alley and "puke." The very narrative brings on the disease. Guitar. in an associational sanity. identifies divinity (read a methodology of faith or "higher order," spirituality as well) with his fathers split body. with disunity. that. poignantly cannot be put back together again even in death. The dead. the whiteness that
induced it. the inability for the body to tolerate “divinity” are all inseparable in the
corporeality of Guitar.

Milkman. too. sees himself as “deformed”--one of his legs is shorter than the
other and he has shooting pains in his leg:

By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter
than the other. When he stood barefoot and straight as a pole. his left foot was
about half an inch off the floor. So he never stood straight: he slouched or leaned
or stood with a hip thrown out. and he never told anybody about it--ever. . . .The
deformity was mostly in his mind. Mostly, but not completely. for he did have
shooting pains in that leg after several hours on a basketball court.(62-63)

More profound, however. in addition to the bereft imagination he has in a
flightless world. his minor and private scar. in the bodily language and sentience of
objectivity. is his inability to feel himself as any kind of unity or connectedness. Like
Guitar Baines’ father. Milkman is a kind of disunified “dead” (as his name and lineage so
insists): and even when he tries to further define himself as whole in the realm of women.
first by “fucking a woman” and then by hitting his father when his father hits his mother.
he cannot see himself cohering. Standing up to defend his mother does not unify him the
way he hoped it would. Right after he hits his father to intercept the domestic violence:

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at
his reflection. He was. as usual. unimpressed with what he saw. He has a fine
enough face. Eyes women complimented him on. a firm jaw line. splendid teeth.
Taken apart. it looked all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the
features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man
around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be. trying to make up his mind
whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely
important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless
haphazard. and uniformed. (69-70)
All of the people in Milkman’s community, within the realm of their agency, try to enact the ready-made available cures—cutting velvet, nursing incestuously, etc. None seem to work to shift the sense of a fragmented disassociated corporeally manifest trauma: Milkman’s mother finds refuge in an incestuous act with her son: the daughters remain delimited by the world of men and the rampant sexlessness of the women’s lives: the sexual disassociation of the males lives. Guitar Baines seems to refuse mercy (usually the quality of forgiveness and non-retribution) and finds definition, geographical location by becoming the Sunday Man of “The Seven” and enacting the Sunday murders of retribution—this “cure” is so damaging he becomes a crazy, irrationally driven “numbers” man and would-be killer of his best friend by the end of this novel. Milkman’s father continues rages and acquisitions, estranged from his family. Strung through these myriad diseases is a sexlessness, a male irresponsibility and violence toward women, and finally, the lack of the ability for men to define themselves through their acquisitions of women. The narrative lack reproduces damage in the form of would-be cures and drives Milkman Dead, finally, away from the temporary cures of “pussy” and booze and the illusory cure of gold to a cure that involves the historical reconstitution of self.

Conjuring Corporeality: Pilate

Toni Morrison concluded an interview she gave after publishing Sula, by saying the title of her next novel would be “Milkman Dead” (Davis 42). When the novel was published shortly thereafter, it was titled, Song of Solomon. Of course, another interviewer felt compelled to ask Toni Morrison why her title changed (73). Morrison replied that her character Pilate was mightily magnetic: once introduced to the narrative.
she threatened to “overtake” the novel (74). While many critics have certainly taken Pilate seriously enough to name her as integral to Milkman’s knowledge and growth. few have seen her as the primary mover of the novel--the one whose corporeality and knowledge, whose fecund marginality and open-ended methodology of scripting her own survival, whose “other knowledge” drives and feeds the body of Milkman Dead and, finally: the one whose methodology is the very conjuring of the narrative: most critics have focused their attention on the more explicit and linear journey embodied in Milkman Dead. the seeming protagonist of Song. Yet. as a character. Pilate was enough to insist the central character/method of the novel is a song that compels and documents and refigures flight, that generative space for opening up bodies.

The only one not among the “Dead”--despite her many abilities to commune with the dead--is Macon Dead’s sister. Milkman’s aunt. Pilate. She is the only one who has enacted a cure, who has constituted a home site and a spatiality, a series of relations to her people that are at once detached and deeply felt. She is at once a resident outsider and communal healer: the two states are interdependent. To take up belle hooks’ terminology of the margin. Pilate is a figure who bodily maps the space of marginality, the potential for its incredible communal, healing power (which is a power, finally, of naming, resistance and responsibility). She is the figure of the “other kind of knowledge” Toni Morrison cites. In Song of Solomon this “sweet other” intimate knowledge is an “other” corporeality--an unending shape shifting in order to survive hegemony.
Most critical attention attributes the leading and the teaching of Milkman to Guitar Baines. He attempts to instruct Milkman in political consciousness, which he dubs "geography." He attempts, further, to justify a numbers-driven revenge cure for racism. He is the "Sunday Man" responsible for retribution of any Sunday killings of blacks. Without a doubt, Guitar becomes the discourse that Milkman might choose in place of Pilate’s and Guitar’s vision, one powerful way to imagine corporeality and revisionist history. Milkman must, and does, in the scene where he and the men of Shalimar eviscerate a bobcat, understand the ways in which Guitar sees the actions of racist language on the body. But, early on, Milkman rejects the seeming irrationality of an "eye for an eye" logic in retribution. Milkman insists that the killings are only numerically just if you kill the men who. say. killed Emmett Till.

The gold becomes that holy grail to the path of not-mercy that Guitar, sickened by the logic of retribution, follows. And as mislaid as Milkman’s original drive toward cure may be. it is this drive that takes him across the geography that was Pilate’s journey into occupying the margin as conjuror. The figure of Pilate, the center of flight she represents is the deep revision of the old narratives of flight; she is the teacher/mother to Milkman, the mapper of the next bodily space. True to Morrison’s vision, the knowledge Pilate represents is not necessarily only inhabitable or produced by women’s bodies. but Milkman Dead must learn through women, through understanding and occupying a

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4 For an excellent overview of the critics who have made this claim. see Lubiano. p. 115.
female subjectivity: the men in his life proffer only dead-end options: the untethered
sentience of objects owning objects or the language of retribution gone madness.

Pilate as conjuror has produced a geography of her own body (at whose center is
flight, becoming, shape-shifting). Her geography and politics of marginality is not lack: it
is. as hooks theorizes. a great fecund space. a space not only generative of survival, but a
space co-producing a consciousness of how one’s body might co-produce (bear itself into
being talked. sung) into a coherence born out of its traumatic fragmentation (15:19-22).
This is the very site of a mythic positionality that can sing through the historical weight of
trauma bearing a body down. and sing that selfsame body into survival and into flight.

Pilate is given to us in far less of a narrative linearity than Milkman is: this is
significant because as the center of the narrative, she is the staging ground of its
methodology. The novel is a narrative in perpetual staging and revision, open-endedness
at its very core: even when we are given several pages of straight narrative, for example.
when Pilate narrates her geographical travels. her coming to a realization of her own
outsider state. the very passage is re-narrated, re-vised by the information Milkman
discovers in Shalimar (shalllleeemooon. Solomon) Virgina. Each staging of Pilate recalls
some earlier staging and reinterprets it. When we find out that Pilate gave Milkman’s
mother conjure herbs to make his father sleep with her and conceive him and that later.
Pilate gave his mother herbs and cure to keep the damaged fetus from dying. Pilate
becomes far more the maker/producer and healer of Milkman from the outset. When
Milkman is born. the narrator notes indirectly. he is born with a caul. Like Pilate. he is
marked as a bodily other. Because his mother did not know to boil the caul, or refused that tradition, the implication is that Milkman will be restless in this life.

Pilate quite literally “birthed” herself. A sort of typical narrative of a mother dying in childbirth is rendered all the more amazing by Circe’s account. the midwife gone gate-keeper/conjurer of failed fertility—a woman Milkman recognizes might have become a great healer in another narrative context. Circe intones that once Pilate’s mother died in childbirth, she thought the baby dead, too, but then the baby came crawling out. When Pilate lost her umbilical cord, she had no belly button (141). The lack of a belly button marks her as other-worldly or intermediary. She is not literally, physically connected to her mother. She birthed herself and is not tethered to one single knowable mother source or nurture for her survival. And when her father (who could not read), in his grief state, opened the bible to a name, he picked the name of Pilate because he was illiterate but saw in the writing a strong tree (19). When Circe told him that he was picking the name of the Christ killer, he responded, well Jesus did not save my wife (19-20).

Pilate’s father is the same man who, years earlier, accepted the naming of “Macon Dead” as a literal break from his slavery heritage tries to willfully break from the Christian faith that has failed him. This break then, in addition to the break with the mother cord defines Pilate, as does the alternate and multiple implications of “Pilate” as orally “pilot,” as a strong tree, as a seer and leader.

But a break is never a full break as long as bodies are involved. Language never fully breaks from the possibility of signification. Pilate’s body, like the state of flight.
signifies at once the will to break free and the discursive limit that corporeality puts on that body. Of course, as a motherless baby, she had to be fed and Circe, midwife to many babies in the area, fed her and her brother and father mothered her. The umbilical cord, while erased, arrives otherwise. She represents an intermediary world where source and nurturance must be reimagined. A comingling of the living and the dead that is the boundary site of corporeality and consciousness. She is communally marked as such. Traditionally, in both Afro-American and Native American oral narratives, those born with altered bodies have altered powers or have communion with the dead.

It is true Pilate needed Circe, and her brother Macon and her father to survive. But when, as a young child, she and her brother Macon Dead the second (Milkman’s father) witness their father being shot off a fence (because he didn’t know what the written language meant—was the literally justifications of the whites: but it may be that Macon Dead the first knew that the did not need language to justify their action). Pilate takes from the bible her naming and asks the midwife Circe to make it into an earring for her (19). As a child, Pilate knows the profundity of the name, of remembering the name. And it is her father, on his farm “Lincoln’s heaven” and Circe clearly who have fostered Pilate’s connection to landscape. The only time she cries is the first time, while Circe hides her in the killer’s house, she eats cherry jam and not the real cherry (167). It is this bond with the natural that sends young Pilate and Macon out in to the landscape to run.

When Pilate first retells this story to the restless child Milkman, she emphasizes the not-dead quality of her killed father. His ghost appears to guide her and Macon Dead through the landscape. Pilate learns to follow the dead to survive and this becomes an
important metaphoric for her relation to history and lineage. The children take refuge in a cave, and in a nightmarish-like sequence, an old white man (described as ghost-like as the dead father and far more nightmarish—a specter of white malehood hording a heap of gold) crawls at Macon and Macon kills him. Macon wants to take the gold, but Pilate refuses to let him; her early instinctual survival nature knows that gold will make them traceable. She and Macon fight and then separate. (168-171)

Macon and Pilate's literal splits in response to money profoundly differentiate the agencies they arrive into: Pilate will insist on a peripheral, insistently present-tense relation to money and will create home and haven and landscape as constructive surfaces, while Macon will see accumulation as itself a generative agency. After Pilate and Macon split. Pilate wanders, always ending up on the edges and boundaries of community: she cannot remain intimate and central to any community for long. The first time she must leave because the preacher who gives her a geography book to study is also a pedophile: her marked girl body as object of desire for his sickness, sends her out—the symbol of guilt. She keeps her geography book and it is the one book of “objective” knowledge that Pilate reads, and one of the few sacred belongings she has (140-145). While it is never stated explicitly. Pilate is astute in the geographies of bones. She learns geography as she experiences further abuse. She learns a further lesson in difference when the first man she lays with is appalled and repulsed by her lack of a navel (148).

Pilate learns from that experience that what terrifies men about her lack of a navel is that her body becomes a reflective surface, a surface that men are afraid to see themselves in. Pilate becomes that gaze back that they cannot handle: the mirror that
cannot be dismissed as deformed nor can it be accepted as central (148). Pilate is an other within a community already othered by racism. The double othering problematically gives her the vision and makes her both surface and methodology for Milkman’s journey into cure. Geography is not just an adaptive, survival movement through landscape, it is the construction of relations, symbolic and literal. Pilate thinks through her relations to keep moving to potentially more liberated spaces.

As Pilate continues to journey, she learns that the marginal space will be the only space she can safely occupy because her differences alienate her from whichever community she is in. Pilate’s next community knows she must have supernatural powers (which really translates into that she has the power to conjure their bodies). And she does communicate with the dead. She is an active interpreter of the dead signified, or the violent excess of signification. She interprets it back into a usable form. Her father returns to her and gives her moral injunctions: “sing” he says and she understands that singing makes her life less sad and lonely (147). Pilate further interprets her dead father’s injunction “you cannot just fly off and leave a body,” as a morality: one human is responsible for the next, particularly if that human has killed a fellow human. The living must always take part in the dead. The novel however builds and revises, in the form of Milkman’s accumulated knowledge, this moral injunction: “you cannot just fly off and leave a body” to challenge the very nature of that mythic flight: how hard it is to leave the political real, to reconstitute a political subjectivity, and, importantly, that you cannot just fly off and leave woman, women, and black women’s subjectivities—-they are the necessary factor to any contemporary conjuring (147-148: 208).
Pilate, as much as she is interpreter of the dead, form changer, is a character prone to interpretation. Something about her remains that closed face, that inability to pin down. When she arrives to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail. Milkman notes that she jives and shucks and crouches and plays the little old crazy black woman too well--he wonders if she is the Pilate he thought he knew (224). Even the narrator refuses Pilate some transcendent role as knower of all, completely outside the economy and racism and sexism that constitutes her. But the sort of transition in the reading of character here becomes important to the novelistic reading overall.

Pilate becomes the mythologized flyer to Milkman. This narrative voice cannot fully allow her power until the masculine vision and body does and by then she is slain. She is the dead signification insisting on itself. The narrative first explains Pilate to us (we have repeatedly heard her and seen her staged), by entering her former mental state when she decides to choose an asexual or androgynous boundary-zone. This zone is heavily marked by an agency of relationality:

Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world?... Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge, one conviction crowned her efforts: since death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead), she knew there was nothing to fear. That plus her alien’s compassion for troubled people ripened her and--the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired--kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people... She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships. (149)
Sweet Intimacy and Song

"Mercy?" Now she was asking a question. "Mercy?"
It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice, she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: "I hear you." (317)

Toni Morrison has stated in several interviews that she constructs a narrative methodology, particularly in Song, that attempts to create an altered readership or audience (Smith 6). This kind of audience seems integral to curing and preventing death in this novel: it is the audience Milkman becomes to Pilate. It is the audience Pilate tried to be for Mr. Smith: she tried to sing a spring board for him to fly, but she was to the crowd an old, frumpy crazy woman singing the blues song "Sugarman don’t leave me."

Integral to Pilate’s attempt to be an audience is the readings and misreadings she’s done of her own life: Pilate reads/interprets the geographies of her own survival/healing into moral injunctions on how to live a life at the margin—"sing" and "you cannot fly off and leave a body" are the ethics to the agency of relationality. Milkman, by journeying through Pilate’s history to find his own cure, adds another interpretation (in the tradition of the folkloric method), another—as opposed to a replacement—genealogy to flight: ways to arrive at the ability to hear even "nonsense" in the "sing:" the literal body that must be buried (Pilate’s father. Milkman’s grandfather), the body he is responsible for—the woman he "flew from." and, finally, what it means to be a "flying African" in contemporary America—an ethnic, linguistic, gendered hybrid in mid-air. not yet the murdered body, not yet the griot himself returning to community.
As Milkman journeys back through the landscape and the stories Pilate, years before, journeyed up through, he must unlearn individualistic model of relation that a class-climbing response to racism has inspired in him. As Milkman travels into the south, into Shalimar, he learns a deep concern for relation that allows him to hear the range and interpretation of the story of Song of Solomon, as embodied in the nonsense “lie” games of children.  

When Milkman heads south, he slowly sheds the items by which he maps himself and orients himself in the world: he cannot keep his suitcase, he cannot use a map to find Shalimar, or a phone book to find the relatives of his ancestors: he must talk to people, rely on people, and learn to approach other Afro-Americans without his individualist class values. He must also depend on narrative chance:

He `d had to pay close attention to signs and landmarks, because Shalimar was not on the Texaco map he had, and the AAA office couldn’t give a nonmember a chartered course—just the map and some general information. Even at that, watching as carefully as he could, he wouldn’t have known he had arrived if the fan belt hadn’t broken again right in front of Solomon’s General Store, which turned out to be the heart and soul of Shalimar, Virgina. (260)

Congruently, Milkman immerses himself in landscape and learns other ways of orienting himself and of reading. His body learns to read the geography of landscape and the symbolic geography of cultural narratives all at once: even his misreadings beget a new corporeality agility because the landscape acts somatically on him, even if he doesn’t yet understand its significance:

5Gates in Signifying Monkey and Hurston in Mules and Men and The Sanctified Church (see in particular “Characteristics of Negro Expression.”) both discuss the political aesthetics of the lie—fundamentally, the ways in which it undermines hegemony.
As soon as he put his foot on the first stone, he smelled money, although it was not a smell at all. It was like candy and sex and soft twinkling lights. Like piano music with a few strings in the background. He'd noticed it before when he waited under the pines near Pilate's house; more when the moon lit up the green sack that hung like a kept promise from her ceiling; and most when he tumbled lightly to the floor, sack in hand. Las Vegas and buried treasure: numbers dealers and Wells Fargo wagons. . . . Urgency, and the feeling "they" had been mastered or were on your side. . . . Milkman became agile, pulling himself up the rock face, digging his knees into crevices, searching with his fingers for slid earth patches or ledges of stone. He left off thinking and let his body do the work. He stood up finally. on level ground twenty feet to the right of the mouth of the cave. There he saw a crude footpath he might have found earlier if he had not been so hasty. That was the path the hunters used and that Pilate and his father had also used. None of them tore their clothes as he had. climbing twenty feet of steep rock. (268)

He learns to reread the roles that people play or might have played as the result of cultural narratives. When he meets Circe, rescuer of Macon and Pilate Dead, he realizes that in another life she would have been a "nurse at Mercy hospital." but she, like Guitar, has based her agency in demise: she stays on in the house of the Butlers, who murdered Milkman's grandfather for land (240). And she stays on to ensure that the things they cared for more than for human life slowly rot and are slowly degraded by the dogs living there (242-248). Circe becomes an other figure for female conjure in this novel—she conjures dissipation when she might have conjured further survival. Because the narrator presents her as both witch-like and ghost-like, and because Milkman insists that Circe must be long dead by now, and he must be seeing a ghost. Circe exists as a contemporary mythic prototype—the revenge urge which will keep a house well past the deaths of its owners.

Milkman also learns to read as the hunter and the hunted in his hunting ritual with the men of Shalimar. In the dark, unable to see, in the middle of the woods, having lost
the rest of the hunters. Milkman sits and questions his own motives: the logical cause and effect of the passage works so that his altered sentience and his interpretive questioning produce each other. and. in turn, produce an altered corporeality:

They were troublesome thoughts, but they wouldn’t go away. Under the moon, on the ground alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was “personality”—gave way. He could barely see his own hand and couldn’t see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people. by things. even by the sight of himself. There was nothing here to help him—not his money. his car. his father’s reputation. his suit. or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. Except for his broken watch. and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone: his suitcase. . . . His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here. where all a man had was what he was born with. or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes. ears. nose. taste. touch—and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out. of all the things there were to sense. the one that life itself might depend on. What did Calvin see on the bark? On the ground? What was he saying? What did he hear that made him know something unexpected had happened some two miles—perhaps more—away, and that something was a different kind of prey, a bobcat? He could still hear them—the way they had sound that last few hours. Signaling one another. What were they saying? “Wait up?” “Over here?” Little by little it fell into place. The dogs. the men—none was just hollering. just signaling location or pace. The men and the dogs were talking to each other. (277-278)

I quote this entire process because it is the curative reading. interpreting process by which Milkman both composes and is recomposed psychically and corporeally. This recomposition affords him, initially, the knowledge to survive: the narrative locates him in a familial hybridly gendered landscape and into a hybrid corporeality and ability to sense:

Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum’s surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather. Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him and he had just enough time to raise one hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat. It cut like a razor into his
fingers. tore into the skin so deeply he had to let go. The wire pressed into his neck then and took his breath. He thought he heard himself gurgling and saw a burst of many-colored lights dancing before his eyes. When the music followed the colored lights, he knew he dad just drew the last sweet air left for him in the world. Exactly the way he’d heard it would be, his life flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable. (279)

Milkman experiences Hagar’s intimacy and love and it is a relearning of relation that allows him to experience the “sweetness” of life and the will to live. Losing Hagar made him so sad to die, he shifted positions. Guitar lost his grip, and Milkman lives to continue reading, hearing, and sensing his corporeal possibilities and the narrative possibilities of Solomon and his wife Rayna.

After this scene, Milkman is capable of “sweet intimacy”/Mercy with women and will the untranslatability of song. He returns to Shalimar, to the bed of a prostitute and here he experiences the first real reciprocity: he gives “Sweet.” a bath: he makes the bed: he washes the dishes: he touches her: he gives her money... (288-9) The next day, when his thoughts return to Hagar, he is able to make the connection between his own abandonment of her and the “song of Solomon”; he is then able to interpret the song/game of the children that they have been playing near him since he arrived:

The children were starting the round again. Milkman rubbed the back of his neck. Suddenly he was tired, although the morning was still new. He pushed himself away from the cedar and sank to his haunches. (301)

Milkman has learned the ability to hear and interpret, to compose his familial history in the nonsense game of children, to recognize in that history a means by which to access his ancestor, the flying Solomon. He recognizes that the children are singing “Pilate’s” song:
Milkman took out his wallet and pulled from it his airplane ticket stub, but he had no pencil to write with, and his pen was in his suit. He would just have to listen and memorize it. He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang. . . . (323)

Milkman has learned the curative reading and interpreting and he traces his family lineage through the missing spaces. He is exuberant and feels the possibility of flight, and the possibility of returning this knowledge to Pilate and of returning to Hagar. But while Milkman is gone "flown" south, Hagar goes shopping. And the white, reproduced image of a higher-class woman that she can never be literally kills her (314-316). At her funeral, Pilate turns to the audience and asks, "Mercy?" (317). There seems to be enough cultural interpretive Mercy for Milkman, as there was enough to dub his ancestor the "flying African." but for Rayna and Hagar, the women left on the ground, there is not springboard enough for transformation.

Milkman returns home to Pilate, to give her the information about her relatives. He finds that Hagar is dead and knows, too, that he cannot fly off and "leave a body," because his is ethically culpable for her death and for her "remains." He and Pilate return south to bury the bones that Milkman once believed were gold, that Pilate thought was a murdered white man, and that Milkman found out are indeed the bones of his grandfather.

Milkman can neither save Hagar nor save Pilate, but before Pilate dies, he is able to offer information to her: that "sing" is Sing, her Native-American mother, and the bones she carries belong to her father, who she must bury—does not correct Pilate's methodology at the margins. nor does it subsume it: it somehow gives it a historical specificity and
validity. It is true to heal one must sing and learn to Sing and know the hybrid ancestor.

All the accretional interpretations of "you cannot just fly off and leave a body" are simply underscored by his literal, material discovery.

But the novel returns to a deep ambivalence: as Pilate and Milkman bury the bones, the revenge narrative that Guitar has become possessed with kills—Guitar murders Pilate. As she lays dying, she asks Milkman to sing to her and at first he cannot remember any songs. Then he remembers he can sing "song of Solomon," and he sings "louder and louder as though sheer volume would wake her." "Sugargirl don’t leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/Sugargirl don’t leave me here/Buckra’s arms to yoke me" (336).

Milkman cannot sing Pilate’s survival anymore than Pilate could sing Mr. Smith into flight, and it is only in rage or resistance or deep grief that Milkman turns and.

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (337)

Can you fly and keep a body at the same time? Can a body in flight, in discursive remaking, be more than a murder or suicide? Has the audience learn to sing Mercy enough? Or has it learned to answer the ethic of agency Pilate poses at her daughter’s funeral when she turns to the crowd and asks. "Mercy?"

Postmodernist Conjure

Pilate and the curative methodology she at once represents and generates is no simple matter of a formula for corporeal transcendence. Wahneema Lubiano claims in "The Postmodernist Rag: Political Identity and the Vernacular in Song of Solomon."
“Although the text asks how one might create a resonant political identity which encompasses one’s relation to time, history, and politics, it steers clear of the unhealthy polarities. . . (95)” Despite other critical claims like Lubiano’s that Song constructs an elastic sense of all that defines a self (history, family, etc.) in its constitution of a reconstituted political subjectivity, so much of the criticism on Song has focused on the final uneasy and exuberant moment of flight, attempting to resolve it. taking a stance on one or another side of a perceived choice in this moment: does Milkman live? Does he die? Milkman flies: however, the moment is inextricably intertwined with the political reality embodied in his best friend Guitar: he flies into the “killing arms” of his brother, best friend. Guitar who has shadowed Milkman southward because he, too, needs the gold: however, Guitar needs the gold to enact revenge on white racism. Guitar, mad with the fear that Milkman and Pilate have hid the gold from him. shoots Pilate. and Milkman sings the blues version of ‘the flying African’ back to Pilate. a song he first heard from her. a song through which he was born and through which he has become. To amend Joseph Skerrett’s reading, this is not just the grand “recitation to the griot.” this performance is the recitation to the murdered griot, violence, in the form of Guitar, hovering in the shadows, waiting. So, Milkman has arrived at the knowledge the people of Shalimar had. if you give in to the air, you can “ride it.” But, in a relational cosmology, the body is forever formed by the myriad political narratives and by the very limit of any body to transcend them. Milkman flies into his brother’s killing arms over the dead body of the person who most embodied the method of coming to know an alternate narrative space.
Interestingly, as brief as Skerrett’s sketch of Milkman’s relation to Pilate is, he is often cited in criticism for his interpretation of the moment Milkman sings to Pilate as she dies and as he completes his journey: Milkman is to Pilate as the student is to the teacher/healer. And in the case of the folkloric structure of “recitation to the griot” that Skerrett cites to describe Milkman and Pilate’s relation. Milkman must journey to return to the teacher and sing back to her what he has learned of her methodology. In addition, he must add to the singing and knowledge: he must offer a means to build upon her knowledge. Milkman finally realizes Pilate “could always fly” and that she was the center of his narrative, the center of a liberatory reconstitution of political subjectivity. Even more profoundly. Milkman realizes what Raina felt on the ground watching Solomon fly away: the deep grief of the one left on the ground in slavery and the double-othering of the woman left by a man who can flee while she remains in the murderous zone. In living and reconstituting the age-old narrative. Milkman is both actor and receiver in the ancient story of the flying African--this necessary state maintains the narrative’s viability as a song which a person might at once hook into and, at the same time, out of which that person might come. He only realizes that state when he has to be there. for that one moment left on the ground. while Pilate “flies” into death. The opening that flight can be. the curative to bodily restraint. still inhabits other narratives that will a body to the grave. Milkman is powerless to stop the murder of Pilate

That the narrative structure at once maintain its likeness to the earliest oral narratives of flight and that it must shift as well. and furthermore that it must shift to a female political subjectivity is deeply insistent in Song. What Song insists on. finally. is
not only the long and infecting diseases of racism, but specifically, the ways in which that racism has infected gender right back to the first moment Solomon stepped into the air and realized his good body recalled its African essential ability to fly and Raina screamed and went mad at the sight of him lifting up, carrying his youngest baby with him.

The essay collection *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* implicitly includes Pilate and Morrison both as conjurors (see “Introduction”). The griot Skerrett calls forth is certainly an ancestor of the conjuror: and “conjuror.” may be a more historically specific term to imagine for Pilate: conjuring is a more specifically American, and in particular, it has been an Afro-American methodology of agency for balancing power, healing, and causing death. Conjuring is more than a traditional momentary healing. Conjuring becomes a narrative methodology of making “the dry and disconnected bones of the past” live through the corporeality of the present. In the long history of oral narratives about conjurors, conjurors are at once essential and marginal—their bodies are often marked by an othering: a caul over the eyes, or some other deformity that makes them open to communication with the dead and to other temporalities. Both Pilate and Milkman have such marked bodies—something in their bodily boundaries is altered enough that they can commune with other visions, and commune with the knowledge of the dead.

The conjuror as intermediary becomes a node, a passage, between the living and the dead: a body at once acting and opening up itself to be acted upon by history. The conjuror makes the living relate to history/ the living dead in entirely new ways: the dead are the potential maps of other corporealities for the living. Conjuring, finally, is a collectivity—it insists that political subjectivity is not individually made: it is collectively
sung. Conjure, too, is fundamental theater---as a conjuror acts on a body, it performs the meta-narrative ruptures of "the body." To do so, conjuring must take pieces of the present landscape and recompose them to recompose the bodies that breath in them. Conjuring is that 'other knowledge' Morrison writes-- always existing alongside objectivity, alongside science.⁶

Pilate is a conjuror in the era of postmodernism. But, as both belle hooks and Wahneema Lubiano claim, if we define postmodernism as a disillusionment with the modernist ideals, as a fragmentation of subjectivity: the sort of trauma that slaves endured and the sort of trauma that people endure under persistent racism have already created the qualities of postmodernism long before that state was declared by white intellectuals.

Pilate conjures to make conjure which is to make the dead live disruptively among the insistences of western ontologies and to remap other lived possibilities for the bodies of

⁶In American history, female conjurors, ever morphing, exist with an amazing historical persistence. The female conjuror has become an arbiter of other justice, higher laws, alternately scorned and sought out. This image of the female conjuror remains quite contemporary as the presence of Minerva in the NY Times longstanding bestseller Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: even in the film, she is frame and hinted maker of the narrative. Thomas' From Folklore to Fiction claims that in the history of conjure, whites derided, feared and sought out the knowledges in conjuring. According to H. Thomas' history of conjure, conjuring and the figure of the conjuror spread through herbalist and narrative black oral traditions--that it becomes integral to the m.o. of the trickster figure in some cases and that it persists into novel methodologies. Zora Neale Hurston is a great case in point of the intersections between the oral conjure and the narrative/print conjure --she both collected narratives of conjure and used the narrative strategies of "conjure" to structure her own novels. At least in Afro-American literary tradition, it was through the image of the female conjuror that white culture experienced black orality without it being written explicitly as cutesy or innocent. As fraught as Chestnutt's Conjure Woman stories were with in the 1890's, they were the first widely read, seriously taken stories of "folklore"—The Atlantic Monthly published them initially as serial stories.
the living. She knows what Shalimar knows about some hybrid act of composing, ritualizing the body as a narrative object, and living through flight: it is the weighty ambivalence the already-fractured must inhabit. A curative agency, as much as it strives for kinds of linguistic and corporeal "flights," essentially insists that reading and interpretation must stay in motion.

Neither revision nor interiority arrives at the correct reading. Nor is it a matter of finding the right myth to overlay the political reality. Pilate is a figure whose methodology makes us read differently: she is the realization of the density of reading: of the layered possibilities in one word or one narrative. In the field of possible readings, the most recent reading might allow a more useful truth for survival (as Solomon discovers in discovering his name). However, even when a revision of Pilate’s "you cannot just fly off and leave a body’s” phrase occurs, it does not pre-empt the original interpretation. The power of healing is narrative generative possibility: it is multiplying the readings in order to restage the original dilemma. It is not purely guided, nor does the next reading claim essentialist ontology beyond the present.

This imbrication of reader and writer, this multi-layered generative “conclusion” is the ancestor prototype form that is so often dismissed as “magic” or “lore”-- qualities of orality in literary studies: orality insists on mulitiple, contextual reframings of single words. Pilate is also a “Pilot” of herself, is the contextual slaying of a Christ-like relation to naming and to the self. The ironies of “not” are always attached to any word in this text: in some sense, she is the not-Pilate. the Pilot and not-Pilot in her death and narrative resonances in between. More than any other figure in this novel she is the consciousness
of how to narrate/play. "pilot." a situation. Importantly, she is not the pure purveyor of the
correct version of knowledge herself. Like the oral tradition itself, there is no purity, no

clean originary root from which to transcend.
CHAPTER 5
WHAT THE LIVING DESIRE

She would not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival. (Dreaming in Cuban 42).

Dreaming in Cuban, Cristina Garcia's first novel, came into the American literary mainstream as a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award. It scripts the life experiences of the Pino family as they pass through the Batista years, the revolution, post-revolution in Cuba and immigration and life as first- and second-generation Cuban-Americans. While Garcia's novel undertakes the narrative of a diseased family under very different historical and socio-political contexts than the Dead family of Song, she writes against cultural narratives that infect a body, hybrid narratives of racism, sexism, and classist violences. And she works a similarly ambivalent ground as these other ethnic American women writers do: to write cure is to attempt a task no less than to rewrite the genealogy of family through the genealogy of historical circumstance, disease, migration, and attempted cures. To write a cure that lends each character agency without lapsing into the iffy promises of humanist narratives or of transcendence narratives is a similarly difficult terrain for these novels—it is nothing less than writing into a new narrative space. And like the other authors of this study, Garcia imports the mythopoesis of oral forms and rituals to do so. Her hybrid novel form is an attempt to write a liberatory aesthetics of healing. By far, her novel might be most instructive as novel in which hybridity risks as
much as it proffers, and in which, hybridity, for all its lyrical promises, is still inflected and in many ways bound by the insistent violent binaries that white capital and male violence spawn.

To attempt cure through binarist narratives, Garcia writes a form that is temporally complex, multi-layered, and multi-voiced. A linear narrative can be "pieced together" through the multiple points of view in this novel, in part because each of these women characters are actively reading the pieces and the signs themselves to script coherent selves and to map movement and action. In addition, the genealogical architecture the novel maps allows a sort of who and what begat who and what: Celia, the matriarch, was sent by her own mother to live with her aunt after her father deserted her mother. Her abandonment and loss is somewhat comforted by the aesthetics of her Tia’s house, the piano and the architecture. However, loss of intimacy begets more loss of intimacy unto madness for the women of this novel. Celia loses the man, Gustavo, who is her “sweet intimate,” her love. All that remains of him are the earrings he gave her and her will to perpetually construct him as a presence: throughout her life and the lives the novel documents, she writes him poetic letters (many are in iambic pentameter) as if he could respond. Celia almost dies when Gustavo disappears and all are sure she will die until she is cured by Santeria, the hybrid indigenous ritual working throughout these narratives. She is cured only to marry a man she doesn’t love who punishes her for her love of Gustavo by leaving her pregnant with his abusive family. She decides to leave her husband if she has a boy, but stay if she has a girl. She names her first child “Lourdes” in a will to create a miracle safety and survival for her girl. Celia goes insane during post-
partum, hand her child over to her family. and is sent to a sanatorium to rest. When she returns and has her second child. Felicia. she names her after the husband-killer she met in the hospital.

The novel traces. then. the lives of Lourdes and Felicia and the attempt of all of these women to read each other and to help each other survive. Each woman struggles desperately to cure a loss and violence inseparable from the history of war. class. and exile. Each daughter is traumatized: Lourdes is violently raped during the revolution and immigrates with her husband to America to work the immigrant "miracle" of business success: she alternately overfeeds and starves her body; Felicia marries an abusive man who tries to kill her. and. true to her name. she tries to kill him and spends the rest of the narrative slipping in and out of madness (in which she tries to cure herself) and in and out of husbands. True to her naming. she kills her third husband.

Both women have children—Lourdes' daughter Pilar becomes the narrative "daughter" to Celia: she is the one connected in dream life and in imagistic persistence. to her grandmother. She is the one. who. fed up with America. with her abusive and ill mother. her father who is having an affair with a blonde, her boyfriend who sleeps around on her. goes to a botanica and in a failed hybrid cure decides she and her mother must head south to Celia and to Felicia. to find the old curative Cuba. promised in blueness and ocean and the matriarch Celia. She is the great hope the novel rests on—that she will be able to connect to her grandmother and retrieve her grandmother's learning to help herself. her mother. and Celia.
The daughters of Felicia remain just that: after Felicia’s bouts with madness, induced by the abuse, her daughters refer to her as the “not-mama.” and their consciousness is not narrated. Felicia’s son tries hard to believe in his mother, even after she tries to kill him, but he is left, after her funeral, listening to the radio, trying to hear her voice in the chatter of the American DJ, Wolfman Jack.

While writing through the history of these women, and congruently, writing their journey towards one another, the novel insists on circular, imagistic structures which become the overlapping geographical symbols by which each woman tries to “piece together” her own life narrative and her own possible cure. The novel moves through a seeming chronology, covering roughly the years of 1972, 1974, and 1980. But, just as Milkman Dead moves forward in time, as the Pino family moves closer to a reunion, they travel back in history and across landscape to weave genealogy and to archive illness and cure. Fundamentally, the novel sections work through a over-arching interpretive image: “Ordinary Seductions,” “Imagining Winter,” and “The Languages Lost.” In this sense the novel, despite its myriad tenses and points of view, constructs in its ritual, a historical present that moves genealogically, that archives recurring images within the larger scope of the interpretive framings—the ocean, the moon, shells, blueness, hunger, tongues, silence. The images accumulate meaning as they are placed and then replaced in different narratives, so that, for example, when Celia drowns herself, because Lourdes and Pilar do not come home to stay and plan to take Celia’s only living relative back with them to America, the earrings that the narration lingers on have accumulated the sense of a lost Gustavo, a lost sweet intimacy, lost parents, lost children, lost languages, the poetry of
Lorca, capable of comforting, but little else. A lost wealth. A wealth of letters and interpretations that cannot be passed on—the earrings are finally an image, which, like other images of this novel, even the images of Santería, can embody a person but cannot save that person from the madness of isolation and the deaths that the narratives of male violence cause.

When interviewed about her literary influences, Garcia named Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon as one of the three books that “stayed on her desk” while she was writing Dreaming (Lopez 614). Clearly, the structure of Song informs the structure of Dreaming: both are journeys “south” to an originary source in an attempt to retrieve survival knowledge: both construct archives of failed cures as they trace the genealogical narratives of family diseases: and both insist on the possibility that survival knowledge can be passed down to other healers/characters/family through folkloric methodology. As with all of the narratives in this study, Dreaming insists that some form of “reading.” (whether it be textual, or the symbolic readings of divinations), some form of translating interpretation for the self and for others into action, and some way of passing survival knowledge on are necessary elements to the novel-as-curing ceremony itself.

In Ceremony, Tayo is able to return important methodological knowledge to his tribe, and while evil is never ousted—it has merely moved on to L.A.—the novel ends with a sense of a return to harmony. The deaths of those like Helen Jean are compositionally “put to rest.” “For now,” however problematically their repression is. While Song of Solomon ends in deep ambivalence and an unresolved moment of flight, it has scripted flight. The realism persists in the insistent grammar of the closure: Milkman does take to
the air and he does it because his body has acquired a certain kind of knowledge. Dreaming attempts a similar scripting of cure-as-agency. And, like the novels of this study, it does so by taking each character through a number of failed reconstructed agencies not only to reveal just how corporeally manifest and political disease is, how rooted it is in masculine wars and violent intimacies, but also, finally, to return to a hybrid, indigenous oral and ritual methodology for curing: Santeria. Grimly. Santeria, one of the most hybrid curatives, cannot survive translation between Spanish and English, a language which “seems an impossible language for intimacy” (Christie 108).

When Amelia Weiss praised Cristina Garcia’s first novel in her Time book review, she described Garcia as “Like a priestess, in passages of beautiful island incantation, she conjures her Cuban heritage from a land between ‘death and oblivion’ so that she, too, can fasten on Abuela Celia’s drop pearl earrings. . .” (67). Like Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko before her, Garcia the writer is elided with the figure of conjuror calling forth from the dead another narrative of the past. The act of conjuring then locates the storyteller within the centrality and agency of the lead character and generates a narrative locus for dreaming the future. Celia, one of Garcia’s main characters, re-narrates history and in doing so provides several modes of witnessing survival. She models all the would-be cures of the diseases that revolution and male violence caused. The novel itself becomes a theater-like present staging history as it stages possible cures for the violence of history. But, importantly, it becomes a document of failed healing, a document of what embodied image cannot do in all of its lyricism.
Like Morrison and Silko, Garcia becomes continuous with the very moment of theater: Garcia is presented in the reviews as the ritualized fastener-of-earrings, a novelist obsessed with remembering to survive, and to pass the narrative of survival onwards to descendants. Because Dreaming gives a theatrical present temporality that is always remaking the character's agency through the storyteller and vice-versa, it is not surprising then, that reviewers described this novel as imagistic, lyrical or "magical" and left it at that, or, if they went farther, to articulate the narrative methodology of Dreaming, they repeated the central generative metaphors of the novel and called it conjure.

Like Ceremony and Song of Solomon, Dreaming in Cuban constructs an almost obsessive staging of the metaphors of curing the multi-fold diseases of trauma and dislocation. Like those novels, too, the figures of storyteller and the methodological aesthetics are heavily informed by the logics of anti-linearity imbedded in orality and indigenous female curing rituals. So, while Garcia is currently touted as representative of an ethnic tradition of writing --she is housed in the "Cuban-American" section of the bookstore and most reviews are quick to label her as such--she is touted also as a contemporary purveyor of the new school of novel. As Thulani Davis said in her New York Times Book Review, Dreaming is "the latest sign that American Literature has its own hybrid offspring of the Latin American school" (14). "Hybridity" is multiply defined by the critics: Garcia has, in one critic's terms, proven that geographical lines do not determine the limits of a tradition (Torres 96). However, "hybridity" in the methodology of this novel, like the hybrid methodologies of Song and Ceremony, is far more complicated than a thematic commingling of multiple ethnic images or an
interrogation of gender: it is the integration and *transculturation* of the oral and ritual methodological will to survival and to cure into the contemporary American novel form. As such, the narrative logics by which it moves exposes the more dangerous aspects in the transcendent promises of "hybrid" schools.

Thus, it makes sense that some critics, like Merrihelen Ponce of *Belles Lettres*, would describe this novel as over-metaphoric while not acknowledging the potential that the laden metaphor becomes metonymy for a hybrid body generating itself out of a death space into agency (16). Others have described *Dreaming* as unresolved or "restless" (Davis 13). Garcia herself has described her central character Celia as over-stuffed with the metaphorical weight of her political history. She has also described part of the difficulty of the novel was to represent an 'elephant' history in a 'python' set of images: "I didn't know how to work so much history into the novel. I tried to judiciously fit it in, but the novel bulged with the weight of Celia's history. It was a 'python swallowing the elephant' situation" (Lopez 611).

"Agency" becomes a moment of the theater of the python self-willing construction through the elephant weight of cultural image. In the theater of these cures, there are many failed agencies. Celia kills herself; Felicia dies of syphilis; Javier is lost to alcoholic oblivion. The family never returns whole to itself: it is unable to rescue either Felicia or Celia. So the novel, in its will to archive a women's knowledge of survival for the cure, archives the failed cures and the failed agencies in the language of image. At the center of failed agency is something always already present that rises above, persists through socio-historical contexts of this migrating family and their would-be cures: male
violence and the ensuing female disassociation required for survival. To write agency from death and oblivion is difficult indeed—particularly if, despite a shifting socio-historical context, despite exile or a shift of the propagandistic narratives, male violence returns to enact further decompositions as obsessively as the female characters search for active speech and participation in their own lives.

The central methodology of survival-as-reconstituted-agency dies away at the end of the novel when the central character Celia, alone, without family, can no longer find a will to resist depression and oblivion and in a suicidal metonymy, becomes the earrings she drops into wet landscape that has defined her corpus and her relation to others. The many agencies she has attempted have failed to help her save her own children or break out of her myriad forms of loneliness. Because she is a kind of narrative center and inception point for the novel, an ambivalence lingers—she died in the solace of landscape, unafraid of death: but her final agency was to take her own life. The novel finally proffers a strange split agency, an aesthetics of comfort in which Celia chooses to step into the ocean and break from her role in the family, but an aesthetic of comfort founded on the failure of other agencies and the failure of a family and thus of an entire narrative to save Celia.

**Genealogy and Imagist Dreaming**

"I will not remember her name." (Celia 77)

The familiar is insistent and deadly. I study the waves and keep time on my wicker swing. If I was born to live on an island, then I’m grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable.
Don't you see how they are carving up our world, Gustavo? How they're stealing our geography? Our fates? The arbitrary is no longer in our hands. To survive is an act of hope. (99)

The first page of *Dreaming in Cuban* is a simple sketch of a family tree. "Jorge del Pino (b. 1897) m. Celia (nee Almeida. 1909)" heads the record of descent. Initially, this genealogical sketch announces what Michiko Kakutare said in “Dreamings and Yearnings of a Family of Exiles.” might be "the much abused form of the family epic" (39). However, the novel both moves within a straightforwardly temporal, linear outline of the family history and deconstructs that linear temporality with its more imagistic, aggregate and archivist structure. If it is a family epic, it is far more the epic of abused women trying to recompose themselves than the traditional epic of male characters journeying through the world. It is the epic of attempted imagist cure.

Each character is sick with a bodily illness that at once could be interpreted as, for example, the madness that is the late stage of syphilis. or. more metonymically. the madness that results from an inability to compose oneself out of the trauma of violent sexual abuse. A disease can be at once traced to its linear logical roots or to the spawning violence of men: Celia might have been suffering from postpartum depression on the one hand after the birth of Lourdes. or deep depression from a realization of her own powerlessness at the abuse of her husband on the other. One reading resists the symbolic. the other resonates with political narratives of revolution. poverty. and resurrected capitalism in the state of exile. And the two commingling are the nexus point for writing cure and agency.
While the novel insists, in its imagistic lyricality, on a constant and associative present tense, and an associational morphing of the characters’ voices, it is worth outlining the narratives of each of these women characters to see their patterns of disease and willed cures. Each character traces a genealogy of their own disease in an attempt to find cure. Each cure is offered as a refigured agency and as a moment of theater in which the character sees herself as an actor and sees also, herself as the audience to her own acting, as reader and actor and interpreter of her own narrative. Each female character’s narrative is an almost obsessive archive of would-be cures and failed cures and theaters of agency-as-cure.

For the sake of clarity, this essay takes each woman’s life, Celia, Lourdes, Felicia, and Pilar, and traces it chronologically through linear time documenting the images which make disease manifest in her body, and the images through which each woman attempts cure. Celia, the central character, is the matriarch of the Pino family. In an almost perfunctory irony, the first section of Dreaming in Cuban begins. “Celia del Pino, equipped with binoculars and wearing her best house dress and drop pearl earrings, sits in her wicker swing guarding the north coast of Cuba” (3). An implicit longing and denial is imbedded in the split between the image of Celia and her presumed agency: a woman all dressed up on her wicker swing/the locus of domesticity as the agent-guardian of a nation. In a sort of grim head-nod to the difficulty of imagining any serious agency for this woman, the images themselves speak to a kind of powerlessness, an ultimate non-soldier. Surely this crucial role must be Celia’s dreaming as opposed to any reality. Surely a bedecked housewife could not guard a country.
Celia's voice and the voices of the other female characters in this novel report as much a genealogy of violence begetting disease as an attendant morphology of survival. What Celia later calls the logic of the "columns of blood and numbers" masculinity is entangled with what Celia hopes she could have passed on to her fundamentally insomnial family. "the morphology of survival" (42-43). But the morphology of survival, a methodology of reading and interpreting bodies and of setting oneself into action is exactly what Celia lacks and searches for herself. The morphology of survival is rooted in active, shifting readings and archiving of experience that takes into account the blood and columns but that wills the logics of dreaming and prophesying in order to open up other narrative spaces.

The direct descent of lineage becomes, through the bodies of the women characters and tells of the story, an attempt to cure the diseases that are the result of male violence. And, male violence and the ensuing diseases are inseparable from a failed agency. By "failed agency," I do not mean a simple failure of the humanist model of agency: I mean a failure of composition, an inability to compose oneself into a narrative. In David Moore's terms, "failed agency," either cannot construct a position from which to script. or it lacks relational/communal architectures (390). A failed agency is a failure to imagine, for long enough to survive, a singular subjectivity interacting within a larger consciousness. The women in this novel become overwhelmed loci--their bodies transmitters of violent fragments they cannot contain. A failed agency is not merely a failure to compose one's own position in an arena, nor is it a failure to effect a presumed outcome: a failed agency is the inability to resist madness of over composition and
decomposition. It is the madness of the inability to separate out one's own voice from the myriad voices of the living and the dead and the tortured as they pass through the conduit that is body. It is also the failure of an audience, whether that be a mob outside the embassy or a family reading their own mother. Celia, to read a character, to interpret need. And Celia, the central matriarch of this novel becomes the ultimate figure of an aggregate failure of narrative agencies: she stages the madness of becoming a locus point for myriad cultural images and traumas, a conduit of loss: she stages the many forms of cure that might return her to an agency and a composition of herself to survive.

Finally, while she has learned to read, to interpret in order to survive, her family and her culture do not know how to read her. She remains unreadable even as she materializes in the earrings a first and long-lost love gave to her. Her loss is prophesied in the very first line, despite the insistence of the descent of her being through her family tree.

Thus begins a novel that, like Song of Solomon and Ceremony, poses various forms of cure-as-refigured-agency. To assume the agency position that propaganda offers is posed as a potential cure for trauma and all its myriad diseases as much as the cure of getting purified in a santeria ceremony, or of immersing oneself in the aesthetics of Lou Reed and the bass. The tension that exists between the very first sentence's assertion and the image it portrays, the ensuing ironic powerlessness that lingers as the aftertaste of this split, is at the heart of both the diseases of this novel and their would-be cures. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that Celia has taken up the agency that El Lider's propaganda proposes as a way to compose herself out of a deeply dislocating grief. She was
powerlessness to find her first love. to survive the abuse of her in laws and her husband:
and. most importantly. despite her promise to her self. she was powerlessness to teach
survival to her daughter Felicia or bring solace to her son Javier.

Her assumption of a posed agency is inseparable from a will to revise her
heterosexual desire as well--she dreams of a sensualized El Lider thanking her for her
integral role. Her political agency will bestow upon her a sexual agency as well: she
could be a historically important figure. spot and prevent another Bay of Pigs. be “feted at
the palace. serenaded by a brass orchestra. seduced by El Lider himself on a red velvet
divan”(3).

If there is any origin of disease in this novel. it is not necessarily where one might
assume it would be historically located--with violence of Batista. or with Castro. “El
Lider.” and the revolution. or with the failure of the revolution to stop the great poverty of
the country. The inception point of death and oblivion. of a character’s inability to
compose herself begins with a failure of heterosexual love set in the failure of patriarchal
political discourse. The origin of death and oblivion is familial. intimate male violence.

Male violence creates a rupture in which the female characters dream their
agencies. Celia 'nee Almeida,' who guards the horizon. was abandoned by her mother
when she was very young. She says of her own life that she “spent her entire life waiting
for others. for something or other to happen” (35). Dreaming became the attendant
pattern to waiting. Celia developed her own aesthetics in response to loss. in the rupture
loss created. “Dreaming.” then becomes the adaptive solace that leads to a generative
aesthetics of agency.
Celia deals with her first loss in an immersion of comforting aesthetics. Celia’s father had two families within the same town: two wives and two sets of nine children. and. when her parents divorced. in quiet shame and poverty. Celia’s mother scrubbed her, dressed her up and put her on a train. Her mother walked away and never looked back. She describes the last she saw of her mother: “On the long train ride from the countryside. Celia lost her mother’s face. the lies that had complicated her mouth. The life Celia was leaving seemed no longer significant. For hours she watched the rapid sequence of textures that flapped like streamers outside her window. . .”(92). The disassociation of grief makes of the world a ‘rapid sequence of textures.’ and that disassociation finds within that lack of unity or discernibleness. an aesthetic comfort.

When Celia’s mother left her at the train. Celia went to her great aunt. Tia Alicia. in Havana where she fell in love with the noise and the streets and balconies. “like elegant chariots” (93). Tia Alicia is an image of comfort and mothering for Celia: she is also an image of art: she took Celia to the movies. museums. orchestra and to the Ceiba tree. a tree which in indigenous culture is a female goddess able to grant healing and wishes. The Ceiba tree will return throughout Celia’s narrative as a sort of touchstone for wish and an aesthetics of healing composition: as a girl she must run three times quickly around the tree to request a miracle. As a woman she must pray and request permission to walk through its shadow. and later. she meditates on it to meditate upon the healing of her daughter. Felicia. Tia also gave Celia another aesthetic form of comfort and reading: music.
The story of loss is not comforted for long. As a young woman, Celia worked in a camera store selling cameras and she met Gustavo, the Spanish married man who was there to buy a camera to record the atrocities in his own country. He told Celia that when people saw the photographs of the murders taking place, they would no longer be able to deny murder had happened. Celia had an affair with Gustavo; he gave her the pearl drop earrings she never takes off until she kills herself. Gustavo becomes the early image for a political and physical liberation for Celia. But one day, while there was a riot outside, Celia woke in their hotel room to see Gustavo disappearing into the crowd. She never saw him again. There is a hint that Gustavo died or that he was on the run politically—he was attempting to record atrocities at the hands of his government. But, it is also possible that Gustavo fled his affair and his responsibility to Celia in a narrative typical of the men in this novel. All of these readings of Gustavo haunt the narrative of Celia because he becomes the next failure of would-be agency, would-be cure for loss and constriction: he also becomes another failure of audience. He is not there to read and interpret Celia, nor to respond to her readings and writings. (34-36)

The loss of Gustavo interrupts the healing that Celia has done in the home of her Aunt Alicia—it is another abandonment. Celia takes herself to the botanica and tells them she wants the potion that will bring her “a long easy solace.” She bought the prescriptive herbs and settled in to let them work:

She bought tiger root from Jamaica to scrape, a cluster of indigo, translucent crimson seeds, and, lastly, a tiny burlap pouch of herbs. She boiled teas and honeycombs, steamed open her pores, adjusted the shutters, and drank. (36)

Her cure looked as if it would kill her:
Celia took to bed by early summer and stayed there for the next eight months. That she was shrinking there was no doubt. Celia had been a tall woman, a head taller than most men, with a full bosom and slender, muscled legs. Soon she was a fragile pile of opaque bones with yellowed nails and no monthly blood. . .(36)

She basically lay down to die. and starved and aged. Standard medical science could not diagnose Celia. nor could it cure her:

The doctors could find nothing wrong with Celia. They examined her through monocles and magnifying glasses, with metal instruments that embossed her chest and forearms. thighs and forehead with a blue geometry. With pencil-thin flashlights they peered into her eyes, which hung like lanterns in her sleepless face. They prescribed vitamins and sugar pills and pills to make her sleep, but Celia diminished. ever more pallid. in her bed. (37)

Even the attempts of her neighbors to mix and conjure every previously known cure for such a state did not work and left the neighbors resigned to Celia’s own will to die:

Neighbors suggested their own remedies: arnica compresses, packed mud from a holy well. ground elephant tusk from the Niger to mix in her daily broth. They dug up the front yard for buried maledictions but found nothing. The best cooks on Palmas Street offered Celia coconut custard. guayaba and cheese tortes. bread pudding. and pineapple cakes. . .(37)

Finally Celia’s great aunt called in a santera who, after draping her with beaded necklaces, tossed the shells to divine the will of the gods. She offers image rather than prescription. “Miss Celia.” she says. “I see a wet landscape in your palm. . . .she will survive hard flames” (37). Celia’s actual recovery is not detailed. but the attempted cures for her ‘ruinous passion’ and attendant loss of will to survive are telling: the herb images. the traditional cures are not working. What works. finally. however temporarily. is the imagistic prophesy of Santeria. It makes her body and psyche inseparable from a quality
of landscape. It dictates her survival. The original hurt, despite the novels’ incessant searching for it, is never ‘healed’—it is merely recomposed.

While Celia recovers she begins her endless correspondence with Gustavo at the prompting of Jorge. He wants closure: if Gustavo doesn’t want Celia, let him say so and then Jorge will own her (37). Celia’s first letter is lyrically gorgeous for its displacement of her body and her pronouncement of commitment all at once. “Mi querido Gustavo,” she writes. “A fish swims in my lungs. Without you, what is there to celebrate?” (37)

It is clear that Gustavo, political casualty or philanderer, never wrote back. Celia kept the earrings. married Jorge and every month for twenty-five years wrote a letter to Gustavo that she never sent. The unsent letters end each section of the narratives of this novel. In doing so, they resurrect the lost would-be audience of the abandoning beloved: but, in an essential, generative split, they also liberate Celia to say what she does not articulate elsewhere. The unsent letter to Gustavo allows her to write a mythic heterosexual desire, even as the very presence of the unsent letter insists on its impossibility. Until her granddaughter Pilar is born, and Celia knows Pilar will be the storyteller/archivist/conjuror of survival. the lost Gustavo is Celia’s only real audience to her desire to be cured which is inseparable from her desire to have agency.

Jorge punishes Celia once they are married for her loving Gustavo. He wants to break her “will” (40-41). He leaves her alone for long periods of time with his abusive mother and sister. When Celia finds out she is pregnant with her first child, she
fantasizes of escaping to Spain and living a wild sexual freedom, roaming and dancing until Gustavo comes and finds her: she fantasizes herself an aesthetics of freedom:

She would dance flamenco, her skirts whipping a thousand crimson lights. Her hands would be hummingbirds of hard black sounds, her feet supple against the floorboards of the night. She would drink whiskey with tourists, embroider histories flagrant with peril, stride through the darkness with nothing but a tambourine and too many carnations. (43)

Celia dreams a sexual and historical agency for herself. What stops her fantasizing is her sense of responsibility for her daughter. If she has a boy, she decides, she will go to Spain.

If she had a girl, Celia decided, she would stay. She would not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men’s eyes, to understand the morphology of survival. Her daughter, too would outlast the hard flames. (42)

Jorge names the girl Lourdes for the “miracle-working” shrine of France. But by the time the baby has arrived, Celia can no more fulfill her promise than she can compose herself into anything but a landscape in which she and her girl child both have been absorbed and repressed beyond recognition:

In the final dialogue with her husband, before he took her to the asylum, Celia talked about how the baby had no shadow, how the earth in its hunger had consumed it. She held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, “I will not remember her name.” (43)

Much madness is divinest sense, and Celia recognizes the imagistic congruencies when she realizes a girl daughter may literally be devoured by the material of the world, and her sense of the congruence and interpretive logic of images continues even while she is in the asylum: she associates Jorge’s job as a salesman of electrical appliances with the electric-shock treatment they are giving her. She sees the very architecture of the asylum
as diseased: she sees the process there of ‘healing’ a matter of ‘eating ones own face.’ She reports in an almost monotone in one of her unsent letters. “Mi amor. The pills they watch me swallow make my thoughts stick like cotton. I lie to the doctors. I tell them my father raped me. that I eat rusted sunsets. scald children in my womb. They burn my skull with procedures. They tell me I’m improving” (51). Celia befriends a woman in the asylum who is guilty (and mad, presumably) for killing her husband. But Celia describes her as “unrepentant” (51). She plans with this woman, Felicia “to escape.” But Felicia dies and Celia returns to her husband. In a move reminiscent of the rest cure. the doctors tell Jorge that Felicia needs to live by the sea and to be unperturbed: she is not allowed to listen to challenging classical music. The doctors imply that she needs consistency for healing: her letters imply otherwise. Her desire for a long, easy solace has been replaced by the knowledge of the deadening habit of boundaries set by “priests and politicians.”

Celia’s will to agency seems to return in the naming of her second daughter. Felicia. No longer does she accede to the quasi-religious miracle longing of naming a girl Lourdes. She names her second daughter after the woman who was a husband killer. “Felicia.”

Celia’s entire life is the attempt to be an agent. all the while recognizing the interconnections of imprisoning narratives. In other of her letters. Celia reports that she continued living by the sea and had a son Javier. Jorge was ‘hard’ on Javier and Celia was powerless to stop it. Lourdes never really forgives Celia and runs to her father. In her letters. Celia began to locate her agency and her cure in the political narratives of the time: she organizes to oust Batista. She has great hope that the revolution. El Lider, the
“happenstance” of his arrival will bring an emancipation to women’s oppression and poverty. While she does not explicitly relate poverty to sexual violence and her own cry out against both as a cry to restructuring the narratives of women, she does report, in her unsent letters, of a trip she and Jorge took to the countryside. She saw that poverty makes “everything more visible.” She saw a poor girl begging in a crowd and then she saw a man ‘slip his finger’ in the girl. Celia cried out. the man ran away and she gave all of her food to the girl. Celia’s new-found agency became grounded in this image of girls’ survival and that El Lider promised her a sexual safety, agency and a move into a more liberated space for girls.

After Celia’s husband dies, she decides to “throw herself” entirely into the revolution. She goes to cut cane. Celia romanticizes her role in the cutting of cane as a political agency that makes her notions of a country work:

Celia imagines the cane she cuts being ground in the centrales, and its thick sap collected in vats. The furnaces will transform it to moist, amber crystals. She pictures three-hundred-pound sacks of refined white sugar deep in the hulls of ships. People in Mexico and Russia and Poland will spoon out her sugar for coffee, or to bake in their birthday cakes. And Cuba will grow prosperous. Not the false prosperity of previous years, but a prosperity that those with her on these hot, still mornings can share. Next season the can will regenerate, a vegetal mystery, and she will return to cut it again. In another seven years, the fields will be burned and replanted. (45)

She sees a productive logic of image related arising from landscape and a right relation to landscape and this gives her at once an individual and a historical hope. However, Celia cannot fully immerse herself in this curative agency: her body does grow strong: all she eats is sweetened by the stink of sugarcane. “she soaks her feet in balms of her water, plays cards past midnight. eats oranges under a full moon. She examines her
hands daily with pride” (45). This passage reads like another aesthetic fantasy of liberation--she is immersed in the bodily agency as she is immersed in a narrative political agency. She finds solace there. Her body strengthens. But this agency cannot hold--Celia’s daughters are lost to her. in search of their own agencies and Celia is haunted by a recurring dream of a girl in danger:

One dream recurs. A young girl in her Sunday dress and patent shoes selects shells along the shore. filling her limitless pockets. The sea retreats to the horizon. underlining the sky in a dark band of blue. Voices call out to the girl but she does not listen. Then the seas rush over her and she floats underwater with wide-open eyes. The ocean is clear as noon in winter. Bee hummingbirds swim alongside pheasants and cows. A mango sapling grows at her side. The fruits swell and burst crimson and the tree shrivels and dies. (45)

The girl she dreams of is not just the abstracted daughter-girl. the poverty stricken and sexually abused girl: it is also. quite specifically Felicia, her daughter. who. on the day the tidal wave hit their neighborhood. collected shells. Felicia as a little girl. was drawn to the shells. as a santera is drawn to shells for their divination properties. Celia watched the see for signs of shifting boundaries: Felicia gathers shells for what they might map of future narratives. What images do for both of these women is to allow the doubleness of symbolic presence and interpretation and historical specificity.

Celia must return to her home and landscape to try to pass some knowledge of survival and when she does. she maintains her revolutionary role by becoming a civilian judge. Tellingly. her courtroom is a theater. in which the number of fractured family narratives that must be “judged” increasingly undermines her sense that. “what she decides makes a differences in others’ lives. and she feels part of a great historical unfolding” (111):
Since the Family Code passed earlier this year, more and more people are turning to the courts with their problems. Women who claim their husbands are not doing their share of their housework or who want to put a stop to an extramarital affair bring the matter before a judge. Very few men, however, take their complaints to the People’s Court for fear of appearing weak, or, unthinkably, as cuckolds. Celia dislikes these cases. To her, such matters are private and should not be settled before a public hungry for entertainment. (112)

Celia is uncomfortable with the specific public performance and mis-reading of such failures of intimacy when just such a failure took her family from her. When it is her turn to judge the adulterous husband. Celia tries to judge fairly, differently, to alter the usual ‘soap opera’ narrative and calls the husband to the stand, finds HIM guilty and sentences him to one year of volunteer work at the state nursery--where he will have to do the usual women’s work. “changing diapers,” and “warming milk.” While Celia is aware of the way the soap opera of failed men recurs obsessively in the political theater of revolution. she still tries to ground her agency there.

However, an agency becomes more temporary than the heavily-laden bodies she cannot save or survive. Her inability to save Javier from alcoholism when he returns to her begins to corrode her agency. She even calls on a santera to come to the house. but the santera, at the sight of the house. at the sight of whatever she prophesies for Celia and her family. burns up and dies, leaving only a cloak behind. When Celia walks into her house after the santera self-combusts. her son is gone and she reaches to her breast. finds a lump that is cancer. and has a mastectomy. (160)

The logic of the images is haunting: the body of the one who can see the future cannot stand the knowledge of it. Even the gods cannot save her son and cannot save her.
The novel obsessively insists on the failure of Celia to find agency, in part because Celia is unable to find the narratives to interpret and to save her children.

**The Fire Between Them**

The oddu, the official santeria prediction for this year, is mixed. Yes, believers can accomplish many things because the dead are benevolently inclined toward the living. On the other hand, nothing can be taken for granted because what the living desire will require great effort. (147)

If Celia’s narrative of disease is rooted, as one critic noted, in a “ruinous passion,” her daughter Felicia’s narrative of disease and would-be agency is rooted in a kin ruinous passion (Reyes 25). Felicia is attracted to all that may heal her as a child: she just doesn’t understand the ritualist, performance rules of the healing rituals. Her friend Hermina, daughter of a santera, reports that Felicia was one of the few people who was truly color-blind as a child and as an adult. Felicia is not afraid as others are, of the racial roots of santeria or of its connection to landscape--she is drawn to the objects and images of santeria, but not to the blood. After attending a divination session at Hermina’s house when she was a child, Felicia was taken with coconuts. She was the same in her church: she collected forgotten veils or rosary beads, jars with holy water, crucifixes. As she said of her own fascinations, “the paraphernalia of faith had proved more intriguing than its over-wrought lessons” (150).

Like her mother, Felicia was restless for a bigger life, for movement and change. She dropped out of high school to “work in the city.” As Celia reports in her letters, there was really only one kind of work in the city for a young woman, prostitution. Felicia goes in to the escort service to be “interviewed” for a job: and she gets a lesson in capital
and body. Madam Thibaut tells her “buttocks are too large for Europe. but for here, they’ll do.” rents her a red sequined dress and Felicia goes out for the night with Merle Grady, a rancher from Oklahoma (67). He rubs her hips when he gambles and calls her “lady luck” (67). When she refuses to go back to his hotel with him. Merle tears at her dress and cleavage and demands a refund. It is a strange lesson in her body as tourist capital. and one she flees from: but. by the time she meets her abuser. she is so hungry for escape. she cannot read her own body-as-object for abuse.

Felicia returns to waitressing and there meets her future husband. the abuser Hugo. Felicia goes with Hugo simply because he asks if she’s eaten yet. if she’s hungry. This question alone has all kinds of resonances--in this single question. Hugo intones a desire for more. for freedom. for comfort. But. when Felicia goes to the hotel room to make love to him. he “bit Felicia’s breasts and left purplish bands of bruises on her upper thighs” (80). Hugo teaches Felicia “what he likes” --a sadomasochistic fantasy play where Felicia is his “bitch.” And then. in the tradition of the male characters of this novel. he leaves her (87).

Hugo returns seven months later when Felicia is in despair. pregnant. and working in a butcher’s shop. altogether too aware of her own relation to the slaughtered animals and her own body. “I’m red meat.” Felicia repeated.” Hugo marries her and then chokes her until near death and then leaves for sea the next day. Hugo brings back syphilis and other venereal diseases and infects Felicia. Pregnant again with her son. Ivanito. who almost dies from the syphilis as an infant. Felicia decides to kill her husband. True to her name. her agency. her survival. becomes her will to kill the man who has infected her and
who abuses her. She lights a rag soaked in skillet oil. finds her husband asleep on the couch. said to him “You will never return here.” and drops the flaming rag into his face (82).

Afterwards. Felicia is prone to “delusions” and. like Celia’s solace in textures. Felicia’s delusions are so very tactile--her senses go hyper-responsive. she becomes a synaesthesiac. She tries to cure herself with coconut ice cream.¹ She ritualistically feeds it to herself her daughters and her son. She recalls the cure she thought the escort service would be. she thought Hugo would be. She cannot separate out past from present. the music of Beny More from her grief. She cannot understand her son. His daily speech becomes indiscernible. In the midst of this inability to compose herself. to read. to distinguish.

Felicia feels herself getting younger in her sleep. so young in fact that she fears she will die. be driven beyond the womb to oblivion. She grieves in her dreams for lost children. for the prostitutes in India. for the women raped in Havana last night. Their faces stare at her. plaintive. uncomplaining. What do they want with her? Felicia is afraid to sleep. (82)

She becomes a sort of node of narrative. of trauma-bred cultural disease even as she enters the delusional state of syphilis. Her delusions. like her mother’s dreamings in the asylum. represent culturally what her husband’s abuse and the disease of syphilis is doing

¹Felicia’s attempt at self cure is persistent but it is also a mis-contextualizing and misreading of santeria rituals--she can identify the objects but does not know how to compose them and instead obsessively repeats them. She ingests the meat of coconuts made into ice cream. and. while coconuts are not only for divination. and are also for purification. ice cream represents the sort of ineffectual hybrid would-be sacred material that will not help Felicia clean her body of syphilis or the shock of abuse. Ironically. in santeria. coconuts are also the food fed “to the head” where orishas may enter and change what some santeras believe to be a “fatedness of character” (Nunez 51).
to her body. Like Tayo, she can offer up the images that make the relation. but, like Tayo, her madness is the result of being able to locate herself first among those images and then to script herself out of them.

The narrative reports all of this, but Felicia herself cannot articulate it. So immobilized is her body with the weight of the cultural diseases that occupy her:

She opens her mouth but her thoughts erase themselves before she can speak. Something is wrong with her tongue. It forms broken trails of words. words sealed and resistant as stones. She summons one stone and clings to it. a drowning woman. then summons another and another until she cries. "Mami. I grieve in my dreams." (83)

Felicia continues in her delusions caused by the her syphilis until, finally, she tries to kill herself and her son. One of the last things she says to her son Ivanito is “Imagination. like memory, can transform lies to truths”(86). If this is the case, the lie to truth is the awful weight that the cultural disease of abuse imposes on Felicia is too much and that the agency of propaganda. the logic of language cannot save her. Celia asked. in one of her unsent letters. if suffering and imagination were kin. Her daughter transposes the question to assert that the construction of history and memory--the association of dreams can tell the truth. But here. in the case of Felicia. truth is no agent to liberation: it is an agent to suicide. Recognition without transformation becomes a kind of mis-reading that begets suicide.

When suicide fails. the Government tries to impose a political agency upon Felicia as a sort of spiritual and moral cure: it sends her to a retraining camp. In the camp, Felicia cannot remember why she is there: or. rather, she has been told that she tried to kill her son. but when she searches the memory all she finds is a “white light that burned
in its place” (107). Importantly, images in the novel offer up at once an interpretive possibility or methodology, but also a displacement. The image offers the “long, easy solace” of forgetting the body’s pain. Felicia is required to tramp the same trails El Lider did. Her family and friends try to cure her by insisting she position herself as an agent for the revolution:

Everyone tells Felicia that she must find meaning in her life outside of her son. that she should give the revolution another try. become a New Socialist Woman. . . .Felicia tries to shake off her doubts. but all she sees is a county living on slogans and agitation. a people always on the brink of war. She scorns the militant words blaring on billboards everywhere. WE SHALL OVERCOME...AS IN VIETNAM...CHANGE DEFEAT INTO VICTORY...Even the lowly weed pullers boasted a belligerent name: The Mechanized Offensive Brigade. Young teachers are Fighters for Learning. Students working in the fields are the Juvenile Column of the Centenary. Literacy volunteers are The Fatherland or Death Brigade. It goes on and on. numbing her. undermining her willingness to fight for the future. hers or anybody else’s. If only her son could be with her. (108)

Celia cannot read a cure for Felicia and imagines Felicia is incurable: Celia is incapable of imagining the cure that would work. but she can weigh the agencies that haven’t cured Felicia:

If only Felicia could take an interest in the revolution. Celia believes. it would give her a higher purpose. a chance to participate in something larger than herself...Nothing shakes Felicia’s settled indifference. Not the two weeks she spent in guerilla training in the mountains. Not the day and a half she lasted cutting sugarcane. Felicia returned from the fields complaining of her wrenched back. her shredded hands...Felicia’s doctors recommended that she join a theater group. saying that many malcontents had finally made their peace with the revolution through acting. But Felicia showed no aptitude for the stage. Her daughter’s talents, Celia realized ruefully. lay in her unsurpassed drama for the everyday... (117-118)
Felicia, unmoved by the explicit political agency El Lider prescribes, decides a man just might bring her back to herself. So, she consults a santera to find out if it is in the divination. The santero "reads" Felicia's body:

Then, with sixteen cowries, he touches Felicia's forehead, her hands, and her knees so that the gods may learn of the aching between her legs, of the hunger on her lips and the tips of each finger, of her breasts taut with desire. The gods will tell her what to do.

The santero tosses and retosses the shells, but they foretell only misfortune. He enlists the aid of the sacred ota stone, as well as the shrunken head of a doll, a ball of powdered eggshell; and the eggun, a vertebra from the spine of a goat. But the reading does not change. (148)

Importantly, the santero makes symbolic ritual of her body in order to mediate with the gods. The satero tries every kind of symbolic intervention from materials of the landscape, but to no avail. The santero determines that for Felicia to have a husband is like a basket trying to keep water. She must cleanse herself first, rubbing a bag all over her body and leaving it at the cemetery for the dead cure her infection. Felicia does not complete the ceremony: on the way home she falls in love. The day after she marries her husband, Ernesto, he dies in a kitchen fire. She writes to El Lider believing it is a conspiracy. And there is a sort of narrative conspiracy against Felicia: shortly after the grief over her dead husband sends her into delusion again, she blacks out only to find herself married to a man she doesn't recognize. They are living in a traveling carnival. This big hairy, wholly physically unattractive man, promises Felicia that they will flee to America, that he has set up the boats. When they take an evening ferris wheel ride and her husband tries to initiate sex, she shoves him to his death and returns home, 'tanned and slender' as if she had been on vacation.
So, even in her oblivion, the narrative of a loving husband who protected her and who wanted to take her into wealth and freedom didn’t work as a curing agency. His sexual will repulsed her. She sent him and her potential narrative of living on an ice rink in America to death: she had to return home. Felicia has survived a litany of husbands promising a litany of agencies. She has survived being so full of image she is in silent oblivion. She acts as if propelled forward and fated by her name.

Once home, Felicia undertakes the agency of her own cure and studies and goes through the rituals to become a santera.\(^2\) It is as if, for awhile, Felicia becomes cured—she can compose herself; her body heals. In part, this may be due to the kind of possession she gives herself over to—on whose narration is distinct from the sort of violent sexual possession she has experienced. In part, it is because Santeria works through communal values (Nunez vii). There is an audience reading and well-versed in what it is she is to become. The woman who narrates Felicia’s final cure is Hermina, her old friend, the one

\[\text{As Michael Ventura describes it.}\]

\[\ldots\text{the purpose and heart of the Santeria ceremony is to invoke one or several gods and goddesses through ritual and music, especially drumming, so that the Orisha, as they are called, will visit and possess some participants in the ceremony. Through these people, the Orisha will answer questions, warn, advise, consecrate, or do whatever the god or goddess feels like doing. A god may possess a woman. a goddess may possess a man. without any sexual stigma or innuendo. Gradations and subtleties of sacred states and behavior are enacted not only before your eyes but within your body—or you watch your mother or brother go through it. That’s not at all like sitting still while a minister preaches about some far-off divinity or a therapist theorizes about one’s anima.}\]

\[\text{What, in the West would be called ‘inflation’ (at best) is an experience common to all in Santeria: the Orisha speaks through your very flesh. Which wouldn’t be possible if flesh were, by nature, suspect. (No Cartesian mind-body split here!). To be in your body is a beautiful thing. and the gods prove it by joining you in your body.}\ldots(vii)\]
who could “read” her best. the daugher of the santeria priest. Santeria becomes an important set of narratives within this novel for many of the reasons oral narratives and indigenous cures have been important in the other novels of this project.³ Hermina seems to claim that Felicia could not have been saved, despite all the cures people tried, because it was “fated” or “God’s Will.” At the same time, however, her narrative offers a reading of Felicia that santeria did cure her restless grief: it was unable to call her family back to her, unable to teach them to “read” Felicia as cured rather than mad. Hermina also insists that while the revolution changed many things and brought her race more freedom, “the men are still in charge.” and “Fixing that is going to take a lot longer than twenty years” (185). Implicitly, what Hermina’s theorizing insists is that Felicia could not be cured. even within the world of Santeria. as long as the country was still patriarchal.

³Some of the characteristics that Murphy points out in his history of Santeria. point to a similarity between this religion and other oral, ritual indigenous curing principles—the principles of both an absolute and a dynamism. of perpetual movement and of object or symbol or body as temporary manifestation of movement. In addition. this is why Santeria provides a sort of mythic. relational. positionality without center. per se. The center is possession and dyamism: “The sacred world of santeria is motivated by ashe. Ashe is growth. the force toward completeness and divinity. The Belgian missionary Placide Temples called this view of the world an ontology of dynamism. that is. a belief that the real world is one of pure movement. In fact. the real world is one not of objects but of forces in continual process. Ashe is the ground of reality. But we must remember that it is a ground that moves. and. so. no ground at all. To conceive this ground. in order to speak of it as something rather than nothing santeros speak of Olodumare. the Owner of Heaven. the Owner of all Destinies. Olodumare is the object of ashe. the ultimate harmony and direction of all forces” (130).
When Felicia came back from murdering her “bearish” husband, she came back asking for “La Madrina,” or, importantly, the mother figure of santeria. She began attending ceremonies, and Herminia reports:

For her, they were a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds. Worlds alive and infinite. Our rituals healed her, made her believe again. My father used to say that there were forces in the universe that can transform our lives if only we’d surrender ourselves. Felicia surrendered and found her fulfillment. She had a true vocation to the supernatural. (186)

Felicia found the hope for agency and for being part of a liberating consciousness in Santeria. The rituals treated Felicia “as if she were a newborn child” (185). In doing so, they rewrote a symbolic genealogy of family, birth, and cosmos for her, in which she could attain perspective and a liberation from the weight of her own bodily experience. The rituals allowed Felicia to see herself located within narratives, located within the planets and as a potential “voice” for other possible narratives:

. . . . La Madrina slipped the sacred necklace of Lbatala around Felicia’s neck. Felicia told me she grew sleepy, and felt as though she were drifting through the heavens. That she was a planet looking at herself from one of her moons. . . . After many more rituals and a final bath in the omiero, the santeras led Felicia to Obatala’s throne. The diviner of shells shaved her head as everyone chanted in the language of Yoruba. They painted circles and dots on her head and cheeks—white for Obatala, reds and yellows and blues for the other gods—and crowned her with sacred stones. It was then Felicia lost consciousness, falling into an emptiness without history or future. (187)

This ritual intones an important aesthetic composition for the rendering of refigured agency. Not only does Felicia see herself as an object in an arranged cosmos, she loses consciousness and returns to some originary void. It is from there that she will become a “purified” object, an object through which a god or gods will speak. She is possessed by the head God, a god sometimes equated in Santeria with the catholic god.
known sometimes as the ‘god who doesn’t really care about human affairs.’ The santeras made cuts on Felicia’s tongue that she may “divulge his words.” But Felicia’s body, purified and retold, cannot compose. cannot utter.

Felicia’s healing so mirrors her madness that it is impossible to know what images might have occupied her as she walked. Herminia could not see them or hear them. They were, finally, untranslateable into logical language. Their only materialization was Felicia’s void and “purposeful” walk. Herminia claims that Felicia found her cure and her peace. The narrative reports no imagistic or narrative logic of the “peace” attained. Despite her new found peace, the syphilis still kills Felicia. Herminia implies that it was Felicia’s family reading her healing as just more madness that estranged Felicia from the living. Despite all of the rituals the santeras did to try to save Felicia from dying once she was initiated. she still aged suddenly and grew listless and dull. She lost speech utterly and finally died. The santeras finally named her death as ‘god’s will’ and insisted that whatever else was to be healed would be healed by “the spirits of the dead.”

The narrative describes Felicia as healed in death--her skin heals, the lumps heal and she finally looks healthy and at peace. So even when Felicia finds a curative agency, the seeming lack of her most important community to acknowledge and trust that agency and attempt to rebuild a relationship with her leads to her decline. And her healing is untranslatable and ineffectual to heal her family. Her healing in death is prophetic of her mother’s imagist retrieval in suicide.

Felicia’s death, however magically described, leaves an orphaned mother who was unable to script an agency for her daughter’s survival or for her daughter’s sense of self
and peace. She reads her daughter's wishes too late. And in a slim fragment of a section, Felicia's son saying "how lonely he felt" turns an old radio skyward to try to hear his mother's voice and he doesn't hear it. Her experience is lost to him. What he hears instead is Wolfman Jack. and Wolfman Jack can "talk to a million people at once" (191). His own mother could never utter or compose her experience in an intelligible manner; she is left to the fecund dead for their remaking or for some other narrative's remaking.

**Rape and Hunger**

I asked myself once. "what is the nature of obsession?" But I no longer question it. (Celia in a letter to Gustavo 97)

It was not a question of control. Lourdes did not battle her cravings: rather, she submitted to them like a somnambulist to a dream. (21)

Lourdes, the first daughter of Celia, the one named for miracle-making, never forgot or forgave the moment her mother handed her by one leg to her father, saying "I will not remember her name." This was the moment of initial rupture for her and generates an almost incestuous bond with her father. Lourdes bonds with her father and has such a close relation to him, she is capable of making him "blush." While the novel never explicitly names their relation as incestuous, it is emotionally incestuous without a doubt. As a little girl, Lourdes dresses up for her father's return. Many years later, come back from the dead, Jorge admits to Lourdes he wanted her to be "all mine."

But she grows up and marries Rufino, a man from a wealthy Cuban family. As with Celia, her healing began only to be ruptured by a further trauma. The violences against women become almost obsessive in this novel. When Lourdes was out riding one
day. her horse fell and she was injured: she limped all the way home to find her husband held at gunpoint by "revolutionary soldiers." She yelled at them to leave with "such ferocity that the soldiers lowered their guns and backed toward their jeep" (70). But as they back off and leave, blood pools at her feet: she's miscarried.

And the soldiers return one day when Rufino is gone. They hand her the sheet that says the estate was now the property of the revolutionary government. She tears it in half and screams. "more fiercely than before," for them to "Get out of her house" (71). One of the soldiers rapes Lourdes. As the rape begins, Lourdes experiences what Celia and Felicia experienced in their moments of trauma: a heightened and re-arranged aural and visual sense. She tries to fight, to exert her will, but they overpower her. Lourdes sees her raper as disquieting object: her aestheticizing of him at once underscores her rape and distances its effect on her. She begins the imagistic narrativizing that at once reveals and composes a logic of horror, but which also displaces it.

She begins by looking the rapist directly in the eyes: "They were unremarkable except for the whites, which were tinged with the filmy blue of the blind. His lips were too full for a man. As he tried to press them to Lourde's mouth she snapped her head back and spat in his face" (71). Her repugnance helps her to fight back, but her will to agency, to power is crushed by these men. Initially, she can see the rapist's gums are "soft and pink, delicate as the petals of a rose," but once he begins to slice her clothes from her body, she no longer sees, but smells vividly. She smells an entire history of him: her smelling is at once diagnosis and prognosis: the milky clots of rot in his mouth, his face on his wedding day, the tears when his son dies: "she smelled his rotting leg in
Africa where it would be blown off his body on a moonless savanna night. She smelled him when he was old and unbathed and the flies blackened his face” (71-72).

Lourdes moment of trauma creates an altered sense, an altered imagistic survival--her prophesying gives her some kind of power over the soldier in her imagining even as he rapes her. The images are horrifying, but like Celia’s letters to Gustavo in the midst of her worst griefs and madmesses. the images of this soldiers life are lyrical, imabic even. When he finishes, he takes his knife and cuts language on her body. “A primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics” (72). The cutting of her body brings a kind of vision back to her eyes, but all she can see is “blood seep from her skin like rainwater from a sodden earth.” Like Celia, and Felicia, Lourdes is the landscape at once political and intimate in all its violences. Before the soldier leaves, he batters her with his rifle.

Lourdes, in a grim rupture from her naming, tries to bathe herself with everything used to clean her house, but she cannot clean off the cut language in her skin. Only then does she attempt to read what he cut into her body, but it is “illegible.”

The illegibility of that writing, the inability to translate the act on her body may be the very trauma that drives Lourdes, years later, into what may not be termed a direct “disease” (particularly in the land of capital and consumption), to eat herself into a size 26 at her bakery in New York, to then Starve herself into a size 4 (and love the “clean void” that her body seems to become), to binge again, and all the while, to abuse her daughter Pilar for any signs of budding sexuality. Lourdes especially abuses Pilar for her sexuality and creativity, but she also abuses Pilar for any form of independent thought. Pilar notes, “My mother reads my diary, tracks it down under the mattress, or to the lining
of my winter coat. She says it’s her responsibility to know my private thoughts...” (26).

and Pilar says, later in the novel, if it weren’t for her grandmother Celia talking to her in
her dreams, she would not be able to survive her mom’s violence: she would be “afraid”:

I might be afraid of her if it weren’t for those talks I have with Abuela Celia late at night. She tells me that my mother is sad inside and that her anger is more frustration at what she can’t change. I guess I’m one of those things she can’t change. Still. Mom can get pretty violent. In her hands, bedroom slippers are lethal weapons. (63)

In a sort of mirror relation to her mother Celia, Lourdes abuses her child from
over-control. over-kill and takes up the promise of capitalism to heal the violence of rape
(which she understands as the central violence of the revolution): she will own bakeries
all over America:

...Lourdes felt a spiritual link to American moguls.. to the immortality of men like Irenée du Pont. whose Varadero Beach mansion on the north coast of Cuba she had once visited. She envisioned a chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries stretching across America to St. Louis. Dallas. Los Angeles...Each store would bear her name. her legacy: LOURDES PUENTE. PROPRIETOR. (170-71)

She imagines herself as the great Cuban representative of an immigrant-made-good-in-
America. She dreams these dreams as she ingests sticky bun after sticky bun and
stereotypes other immigrants, particularly the Puerto Ricans. She demands repeated sex
from her husband. Her food compulsion and her sexual compulsion are meant to give her
something neither ever quite can: “Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something
he could not give her. she wasn’t sure what” (21).

Her compulsions also parallel her father’s dying. He has come to America to get
better medical care, but he ends up dying slowing of cancer anyway. As he shrinks. she
expands. So Celia seems to be eating and then starving the very locus of her losses. her
body; even as she claims power and agency over herself and others through capitalism and a moral certitude. Moral certitude and good business give her temporary senses of agency: she joins the neighborhood watch.

The inability to translate and to make connections undermines any real sense of agency that might persist for Lourdes. After her father dies, Lourdes begins to lose her grip on her agency. Her father comes back to talk to her and she wonders if she has tired out her imagination to the point where she has lost reality. She wonders if her mind, unbeknownst to her has been cultivating delusion. "What if she has exhausted reality?" (65). Lourdes "abhors ambiguity" (65) and her father returning to speak lucidly is ambiguous. The novel asserts Jorge's ghostly presence as a reality: it does not dub him a delusion when he first appears to his wife Celia after his death. Only Celia cannot translate his mutterings. She cannot read him or hear him. Lourdes can hear him clearly, and Jorge tells her that she must tell her mother Celia that it was his fault, that he left Celia alone to break her spirit and that is why Celia went mad, and handed Lourdes over. When Lourdes finally goes to Cuba. at her daughter's insistence. and just after the death of Felicia, her mother is still a stranger to her. even after the information her father gave her. She is unable to utter the libera tory message to her mother and instead focuses on the poor there. on getting Ivanito out of the country. despite what the loss of another family member will do to Celia. So even when the dead can speak in this novel, and utter a potentially liberatory narrative of origin. if a person cannot pass that knowledge on. it is lost. Lourdes cannot heal the moment her mother handed her over to her father. Nor can she heal the miscarriage or forget it. And the event that diseased Lourdes the most. the
rape, overpowers her so much emotionally that she cannot see or read her own mother's need or connect to her. any more than she can read her daughter's need. (222-227)

This novel is marked by not only by miscommunication and untranslatable knowledge. it is marked by the attendant inability to be cured or to save another's life. One night before she goes to Cuba, Lourdes is on her night beat and sees something wrong out of the corner of her eye: a shadow moving. It is the son of a Puerto Rican woman Lourdes fired for stealing fifty cents. Lourdes is so taken aback by the young man jumping in the river to die. she cannot radio "her location" (133). She dives in to save him. but. as the narrative reports. he dies. This chapter is titled. "Enough Attitude." And the report of the event is meant to tell the story of Lourdes realizing the limits of her own agency--and potentially of her realizing how alienating to the point of suicide it can be to be an immigrant in poverty in America. But while the narrative points out this flaw in Lourdes. this lapse in her certainty, she quickly returns to her moral certitude for her agency. And it is this certitude that keeps her from reading her mother's much needed cure.

Unlike the storytellers of Silko. and Pilate and Milkman. Lourdes fails to see her own culpability: she can see her own desire for agency, for her rape to be intelligible, but she cannot see her responsibility in her relation to her family; she cannot see or feel how her mother or daughter feels. Back in Cuba. returning to the house that was once her home (and now. in grim and certain irony) is a mental hospital. Lourdes worst fear is that her rape, her life, what made her diseased will go unmarked in history, will be absorbed into the landscape. She wishes something as powerful to mark or retaliate against the
landscape where she is raped: her worst fear is that, like other histories, her nightmare will simply be absorbed into the landscape:

What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby’s death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her. Lourdes studies the checkered linoleum, longs to dig for her bones like a dog. claim them from the black-hooded earth, the scraping blade. (227)

A mental hospital nurse stops Lourdes and asks her if she can help her. Poignantly, in the tradition of Celia and Felicia, she “cannot answer” (227). Her body does not have a language for its desire—the novel can narrate it, but cannot find for her that first body that is now buried in Cuban earth.

Lourdes turns her hunger and grieving into other agency. She turns instead to rescuing Ivanito. Felicia’s orphaned son: she repeats an almost incestuousness with him—a relation of over-image. ladenness that precludes possible agencies in this novel. And Ivanito he becomes an image of dancing, of what she was young and sexual before the rape, of what her Americanized, sexualized daughter will never be. She thinks only of getting Ivanito to the embassy and out of the country and she does so. She dismisses her mother as unintelligible.

**Ambivalent Daughters of Chango**

Pilar. Lourdes’ only daughter. Celia’s granddaughter, becomes the other central character in this novel. While she is young, Celia talks to her in her dreams. Pilar hears her grandmother as rays of light. Celia holds onto Pilar as her audience, as the bearer/inheritor of her knowledge of how to survive. Celia has, as a child, bruhita
powers—she can make her babysitter’s hair fall out. She is able to think an outcome and effect it. Like Milkman, she has the markings of a visionary and a santero, or a witch. She loses this power under the verbal and physical abuse of her mother and her demoralization at discovering her father’s affair. Like the women in her family, Pilar is an aesthetic and deals with her mother’s abuse by making art. She finds solace and survival in materializing her vision. One psychiatrist asks her why she desires to mutilate the human form. Pilar offers several explanations of why she uses art as her survival:

...what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I’d never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn’t everybody just leave me along? Painting is its own language. I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it. dilute it. like words going from Spanish to English... (59)

Pilar becomes the explicit character of art as cure. art as survival. She makes objects to witness her life and to carry her. She witnesses in her imagination both the failure of historical narratives and memory when she says. echoing the young Celia.

I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives. that dictate the memories we’ll have when we’re old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me. my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there’s only my imagination where our history should be. (138)

When she finds her first love in bed with another woman, and realizes the belittling crassness of his sexuality, she finds herself a bass and plays it. “...until I feel my life begin” (181).

Pilar’s art making is not finally enough of an agency, and she, too, desires to go back to the roots of her life. to Cuba where she imagines she will find a center and a
composition, where she will become revivified. When Pilar is twenty-one, she feels nostalgic for her youth in Cuba. Nostalgia is at the root of her wish for agency:

Still I feel something’s dried up inside me. Something a strong wind could blow out of me for good. That scares me. I guess I’m not so sure what I should be fighting for anymore. Without confines, I’m damn near reasonable. That’s something I never wanted to become. (198)

In a search for her self-materialization, for what she should be “fighting for anymore,” Pilar takes herself to the botanica. Her explanation of why this ritual of art and cure points to the more corporeal aspect of santeria: “I’m not religious. But I get the feeling that it’s the simplest rituals. The ones that are most integrated with the earth and its seasons. That are the most profound. It makes more sense to me than the more abstract forms of worship” (199). In the botanica, Pilar even traces herself to the moment where she felt she lost agency, the time when she was an adolescent, trying to flee back to Cuba and her grandmother. “After that,” she says, “I felt like my destiny was not my own. That men who had nothing to do with me had the power to rupture my dreams. To separate me from my grandmother” (199-200). Pilar intones the root rupture in agency as male violence—a violence of making a body feel dead inside, like it might be a vessel blown away by the next big wind.

In the botanica, Pilar picks a red and white bead necklace and a staff with “a woman balancing a double-edged ax.” The man who runs the botanica recognizes Pilar then as “a daughter of Chango.” Chango is the god of fire and lighting, of destruction who is transition into the next world or next narrative. In this one deity is the double-sided ax of destruction and recomposition: to be a daughter of Chango is to work within
this split. But Chango also represents a misled rage--a story goes that Chango, enraged with a lizard for accidentally swallowing a gem it was supposed to deliver to Chango’s lover, sent a lightening bolt at the lizard and henceforth the lizard’s throat is both “swollen and mute” (201). To be a daughter of Chango may be to be the lizard as well as the rager. After recognizing Pilar’s ritual position, after recognizing her as an actor in a cultural ritual, the old man tells her she must, “complete what she began” (200). He gives her both prophesy and prescription—the herbs with which to bathe for nine consecutive nights. And, in the truly transcultured, hybrid curative ritual that santeria is, he also prescribes ammonia and holy water. This ritual of cleansing will tell Celia what she is supposed to do to find agency, to complete the uncompleted ritual or performance.

But, true to the form of the novel, the herbs have made Pilar feel temporarily protected enough to take a shortcut through a New York City Park. There, she is raped by a group of three eleven year old boys. As hybrid and adaptive as Santeria is, it cannot protect her corporeally in a New York City Park. The boys surround her suddenly: like her mother, she sees a image in their eyes that offers the embodiment of their logic and of the story: “Their eyes are like fireflies, hot and erased of memory” (201). One presses a knife to her throat. “Its edge is a scar, another border to cross.” They rape her the way boys who don’t know yet about sex but are imbued with rage would rape: they rape her as a mother, taking off her blouse and sucking at her breasts. Pilar reassures herself by saying “they are children.” When they are done, they roll Pilar’s weeds and smoke them. The rape is an obvious metaphor for American culture “taking” the immigrant girl. What
should have been a clear prescription: to bathe in the herbs. now has become polluted.

The boys smoke the herbs in another white ritual and Pilar gathers the herbs that are left. While Pilar can compose the event into an image, an embodiment, she lacks a knowledge for making sense of it. After the assault, Pilar goes to the library, where "nothing makes sense": traditional knowledge and logic make no sense after her strange assault. Knowledge seems more disassociated from context, meaninglessly arranged, rather than archived into an useful apparatus. And Pilar, like Celia and Felicia and Lourdes becomes the overwhelmed conduit of fragmented and decomposing logic:

...The flourescent lights transmit conversations from passing cars on Broadway. Someone’s ordering a bucket of chicken wings on 103rd Street. The chairman of the linguistics department is fucking a graduate student named Betsy. Gandhi was a carnivore. He came of age in Samoa. He traversed a subcontinent in blue suede shoes. Maybe this is the truth. (202)

Pilar arrives at the linguistic/historical nightmare of hybridity—in the hybrid American culture. all might be profaned.

Pilar returns first to solace, to her room, to "a more complete solitude." and then, with the remaining herbs. she begins her purifying baths. She becomes aware of her body as a painted abstract: the ritual like other rituals of agency, gives her a moment of seeing herself as both actor and audience to her own narrative. The logic is not directly translatable but occurs more as an imagistic materialization: "I’m walking naked as a beam of light along brick paths and squares of grass, phosphorescent and clean" (203).

Like Celia, Felicia, and Lourdes, she goes to the ritual to bathe herself, to purify herself from images which have been mapping her direction. When Pilar finishes the ritual, she knows what to do: she calls her mother and tells her they must go to Cuba. The
rape. however, has interrupted the ritual: the boys smoked some of the herbs. suckled forcibly at Pilar’s breast. The ritual cannot exist in its first prescribed state. Is Pilar’s agency to return to Cuba as rape driven as it is driven by the will to agency? Are the two finally inseperable for any of these women characters because rape is the narrative structure of intimacy. of war. of becoming American?

The Non-Mamas of Relation

In the final section of *Dreaming*, the remaining living women. Pilar and Lourdes, converge on Celia in Cuba. The section is entitled “The Languages Lost,” and the subsection is entitled in a deliberately ritualistic frame “Six Days in April.” The section documents the final failed agency of Celia. It both asserts an aesthetically complete ritual for the novel and it asserts a failed ritual. a failed cure. It begins with Pilar and Lourdes finding Celia in Felicia’s old bathing suit: she has gone to the sea for her solace again and sits. mute with grief on her porch. The very landscape that was to have given her solace is long past the grimness of habit. it mocks her and it has become finally unintelligible to her: it refuses to read her as much as she cannot read it. The very image seems to mock her failed agency: “. . . a crescent moon mocks her from its perch. She strides toward the water. and swims with brisk strokes far out to sea. The sky is dimmed of stars and Celia cannot identify their milky lights. their waning conclusions” (215).

The return of Pilar, the girl she imagines as her final audience, brings her hope for the end of her solitude and failed agency. At long last, she will pass on that knowledge of survival. that ability to read the columns of blood and numbers in men’s eyes and to survive by dreaming. Pilar paints Celia and Celia tells Pilar the story of the important
ruptures and failed cures in her life: her mother leaving her; her madness. Felicia. Javier.

She asks Pilar to paint her as a younger woman, to paint her agency of bodily freedom and sexuality. Pilar is uncomfortable with this. she is “used to abstraction.” and has an easier time seeing Celia as a range of blues and hues of ocean that implicitly represent an aesthetics of comfort to Pilar. She has trouble with the realism of her grandmother’s life. She is too ready to think of her grandmother through a curative nostalgia, through abstraction. Even while she can reflect that she has arrived in Cuba, but perhaps “Cuba can never be reached at all.” she ingests an aesthetics in which she sees Celia as disembodied abstract, ocean blues and hues. In this way, she is complicit in her grandmother’s suicide.

The novel is so very ambivalent in this section. At once. Pilar absorbs the life-force of Celia. She feels “my grandmother’s life passing to me through her hands. It’s a steady electricity, humming and true” (222). Pilar reports Celia’s claim that she is an orphan and only her granddaughter can save her. yet. by all literal standards Pilar cannot save Celia. Lourdes. too. arrives with the information from her father to tell her mother. but she cannot do it. She denies her father’s responsibility for her mother’s depression and sees Celia as a “stranger” (223). Lourdes tries to keep her promise to her father. to apologize. but “The words refuse to form in her mouth.” all she can see and hear is the moment of her mother handing her over and saying “I will not remember her name” (238). Loss after loss and the corporeal madness that ensues works against cure and relation.
Once, while her mother Lourdes rages against poverty and communism, Pilar sees her grandmother underwater with her eyes wide open. “She calls to me but I cannot hear her. Is she talking to me from her dreams?” (220) Pilar has the vision of Celia’s upcoming suicide, but she cannot read or hear Celia in this vision. She cannot translate her to save her. She can identify that the language her mother uses to try to talk to poor Cubans is “another idiom entirely,” but she cannot identify the same language loss between her grandmother and herself. The “language lost” is the ability to relate that imagistic non-logic, that ritual grounded in earth, into survival.

And, when Celia hands Pilar the letters she wrote and never sent to Gustavo, the letters witnessing her life, Pilar reports:

Abuela gives me a box of letters she wrote to her onetime lover in Spain, but never sent. She shows me his photograph, too. It’s very well preserved. He’d be good-looking by today’s standards, well built with a full beard and kind eyes, almost professorial. He wore a crisp linen suit and a boater tilted slightly to the left...She also gives me a book of poems she’s had since 1930, when she heard Garcia Lorca read at the Principal de la Comedia Theater. Abuela knows each poem by heart, and recites them quite dramatically...I’ve started dreaming in Spanish...I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible...But sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know now it’s where I belong—not instead of here, but more than here. How can I tell my grandmother this? (235-236)

This passage is crucial for a number of reasons. Spanish, her grandmother, the letters, the poems can all be ingested by Pilar; she can “dream” in such languages. But her ingestion, her “magic” is read through “English,” too, and through a hybrid identity. All that represents her grandmother’s knowledge and agency becomes reduced to a list and description, a sort of decontextualized archive, memento-like. Pilar will be chemically changed, but she will eventually return to New York: it is “more” her than Cuba. She can
ingest and archive Celia: but can she make of Celia’s knowledge, the ability to “survive hard flames”? Has that been absorbed in the ritual and can it be passed through the letters and through Lorca? The answer seems to be that it’s possible, with the right reader, and the deep ambivalence of Pilar makes her only a partial reader—one who can report and catalogue but not assimilate enough to save her grandmother.

Pilar helps Ivanito. Celia’s last living familial connection to escape to New York. Lourdes, who sees El Lider himself announce that all who want to leave can migrate. sneaks Ivanito out in the early hours of dawn. When Celia hears of this she asks Pilar to drive her to the embassy to find Ivanito. She tells Pilar the great tragedy of reading without agency-like interpretation: “what good are all the years and the separation if it only leads to a more significant betrayal?” (240). Pilar cannot understand the words: she hears only her grandmother’s voice “thickened with pain” (240). And, when she braves the mob and is almost crushed by its will to escape the borders of the politics and the island, when she finds Ivanito and talks to him, she does not bring him back to Celia. She returns to Celia and tells her that she could not find Ivanito, that he must have escaped on the morning plane. Pilar can imagistically read the death on Celia’s skin when she tells her this—she can tell that Celia’s skin no longer smells of salt and violet water, but she does not attempt to save Celia from the death that will follow.

The next to the last section of the novel immediately follows Pilar’s report on Celia’s skin: it documents Celia’s suicide. Disturbingly, her suicide is described in an aesthetically pleasing, lyrical manner: “There is jasmine in the breeze, and the aroma of distant citrus trees. The sea beckons with its blue waves of light” (242). It’s as if the
narrator wills Celia a reprieve that the audience within the novel cannot. Celia recalls Tia Alicia and the agency of aesthetics that Tia taught her in teaching her to play the piano: “to make each note distinct from the others yet part of the whole.” In many ways, the curing ritual of this novel has created the task of a fabric. a whole, but it has not created a whole that saves or cures. A duende, a singer of death, calls to Celia through poetry: she calls to her through a poem of Lorca’s about a field that opens and shuts “like a fan.” Celia resists for a moment, recalling her early dream of agency, to travel to Spain, to stride through the night. . . But the duende, agent of death, calls Celia to sing with her and Celia, imagining agency even in suicide:

... steps into the ocean and imagines she’s a soldier on a mission—for the moon, or the palms, or El Lider. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin. she breathes through her wounds.

Sing. Celia. sing. . .

Celia reaches up to her left earlobe and releases her drop pearl earring to the sea. She feels its absence between her thumb and forefinger. Then she unfastens the tiny clasp in her right ear and surrenders the other pearl. Celia closes her eyes and imagines it drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas, imagines its slow extinguishing. (243-44)

As with Felicia, the narrative insists that Celia can breathe through her wounds, that she somehow imagistically survives her own death, or the trauma of her suicide. What the family cannot save, the image shall save, or absorb in an unresolvable split. The novel does not just lose Celia’s will to survive in her suicide: in her final gesture of agency, to drop the earrings that have symbolized her very will to dream, the narrative goes with Celia, focusing on the image of the earring as it drops. Metaphorically the passage makes the earring a living being and then has it. firefly-like “extinguish.” The metonymy is
imagistic comfort for the death of Celia. It takes the brunt of a death by suicide and absorbs it. as the house absorbed Lourdes rape and refused to give back the body of the woman she was before the rape. This. perhaps is the failure of dreaming and cure in a culture run by priests and politicians and violent men who have insisted on the limits of Celia and Felicia. Lourdes and Pilar’s bodies. It is perhaps. too. a failure in Celia’s composing of herself—she chose propaganda for agency and it could not save her family. It is finally. a failure of audience in the image of family—of people disassociated from their communal sense to the point where they cannot read the person they love enough to save her. so driven are they by their own tragedies and wills to cure.

The Failure of Reading

The very last section of Dreaming in Cuban is the last letter (left out of the box to Pilar or reported by Pilar?) Celia wrote to Gustavo, telling him “I will no longer write to you. mi amor. She (Pilar) will remember everything” (245). In a novel obsessed with dreaming other boundaries and thusly with enacting cure and agency. is remembering enough? Is imagistic embodiment a cure? Celia’s suicide seems to argue that while the image allows the abstraction of an aesthetic agency. it needs either the attendant cultural script to buoy it or it needs reading. The ritual of cure. to work. needs an active readership. reading “the morphology of survival.” Perhaps. hauntingly. the final image of suicide proffers some semblance of change. or shift—Celia can “breathe through her wounds.” without an agency having ever been dreamed successfully enough out of that void of death and trauma and the myriad diseases it spawns. The image makes Celia an immortal. transcending the boundaries of her body even as it insists on her wounds and
solitude. on the ultimate betrayal of her family readers and interpreters. They are left to their other country where they attempt other agencies of cure.

The presence of Santeria rituals in the novel and the figure of Herminia (who is always carrying her basket of curative herbs) makes of the other wills to agency attempted cures--Lourdes’ feed her hunger for violent revenge on the rapists, much as one ‘feeds’ any of the gods in a Santeria ritual. Propaganda enters the head much as the evocation of the orishas enters the head. The existence of the trope of cure raises the question of the novel as cure, of structure as a curative towards agency. Within the novel, the body itself becomes ritual artefact in a cultural performance. As imagistic material it is at once experiential and partially untranslatable--this is both its power and its problematic.

Characters are as delimited by the images meant to define them as they are by their other narratives: Celia. “wet landscape in her palm” literally drowns in the landscape that surrounds her as touchstone and solace. Such is the risk of images, so that even as the novel argues for the liberation of orality and ritual, for the liberation of other logics and poetry, it is through poetry that suicide calls to Celia–its lyricism calls a body to the false promise of agency. It may be that the novel, whether it intends to, begs for some other realism, for the images that can take the elephant fragments in a python’s body and make them digest into a composition capable of saving a life.

However, certain images accumulate throughout the novel, throughout the various contexts of cure to land, finally in what may be the aggregate body of diseased agency willing its cure: the cut tongue, the mute mouth, the inability to fully translate the cut text of trauma on the body, the ability to write or dream an aesthetics of solace. to see, on
some days, the self as an actor in a cultural theater making choice or being the result of happenstance, and to dream the reader as beloved or vulnerable girl even in the absence of a reader. And, in doing so, in attempting to utter with the cut tongue, to will curative narratives.

The ultimate argument seems to be one for readership as much as possible dreamings of the body: because the novel actively stages a series of agencies (and repeats a set of ‘theater’ metaphors at the moment in which a character attempts agency), the other argument of the novel seems to be for a staging of cures as a staging of agencies. Will the theater of failed cures beget a ‘better’ agency than the aesthetic solace?

In a necessarily hybrid culture, these novels attempt to construct the healed artefact—the agent in the world of rupture and its attendant diseases. The risk of any ritual outside of its initial culture is the risk that Felicia defines in her own attraction to the artefacts of religion: the paraphernalia without the sense of context. There is another risk, the risk Pilar learned, of the culture misunderstanding the artefacts or raging at them—smoking them or raping them: and then how must the ritual shift to accommodate the need for healing? What sort of hybridity works to create a morphology of survival, capable still of reading those logics of columns of blood and numbers. all the while dreaming what poetry and image proffers?
CHAPTER 6
SHAMAN AT THE BORDERLANDS

We transform the . . . apertures. . . . abismos that we are forced to speak from. Only then can we make a home out of the cracks. (Anzaldúa Making Face xxv)

Each of the novels in this study documents genealogies of diseases which, in turn, become crucial corporeal and narrative maps for curing. To “read” the literal and metaphoric lineage of diseases is to read their logical becomings. Tayo learns to read the signs of Changing Woman: Yellow Woman learns to read the signs that she is playing the mythic purveyor of hybridity. whether that be as fecund generator of thought and material or as shocked and dying rape victim in the midst of the colonial. Bone Fixer. through a metaphorics of construction. learns to read bones and restructure them into their contexts. His “fixing” is a kind of material genealogy-as-cure. Milkman learns to read the landscaped history of racism and, congruently, the method by which Pilate. the conjuror. survived. However. merely reading is not enough: Helen Jean reads for survival. but it is not the kind of reading that moves her out of or through the narratives which threaten her life. Certainly. as santera. Felicia learns to “read” the ritual objects and her own body as a ritual object: however, her family cannot read her. While it is never explicitly stated in the novel. she dies “of syphilis.” and part of the implication in her death is that the santeria rituals may be able to cure her psyche enough to clear her mind. but the very corporeal manifestation of sexual abuse cannot be cured.
In addition, each of these agents become cured, however temporarily, by allowing themselves to be possessed by knowledge, by archetypes or narrative methodologies. This giving over to possession (which implies choice) gives each character perspective, thus positionality, that is self-conscious. In each case, cure transfigures the sentience of the body: Tayo learns sensual immersion in the landscape and thus a transfigured vision; Milkman learns song and game, learns to “read” in the dark with his fingertips; Felicia learns to abstract her position in the cultural cosmos and to see herself as planet, void, a body as a vessel of narrative possibility. Each learns to read himself/herself as pattern and vessel. This act of reading then begets a different configuration of the body, thus a different set of narrative choices. It is because Tayo has spent time with T’seh and has himself become a purveyor of fertility/creativity that he can refuse to act, to stand in the shadows of the landscape mined for Uranium and not do battle, simply watch battle pass.

Perhaps the best argument against these novels being simply or nostalgically invested in the mythic as a transcendent method is that agency is no easy matter and it rarely means changing the larger cultural norms. The cures act to critique and refigure the mythic in order to arrive at an agency in the present tense. Certainly, the knowledge that cure archives, the genealogies and their would-be scripts, imply that the hybrid cure can be shared, and, importantly, that cure might create a fluid relationality, one governed by an ethos, whether that ethos be “you cannot fly off and leave a body.” or “sing.” But to create a persistent, disruptive, and/or transformative methodology of narration/cure, these
novels seem to insist on a necessary reader or set of readers to whom knowledge--can as it is constructed in the accumulated, aggregate archives of cures--can be imparted.\(^1\)

Always, the ethos of cure-as-agency must resist and survive larger cultural narratives to be useful, and the cures of this study are haunted by the contexts of their telling. The girl-going-woman storyteller of Silko’s first “Storyteller.” narrates the end of one world, the emergence of the next, the “truth” of the colonized landscape. from jail. Tayo arrives at a harmony in survival “for now.” Bonefixer fixes Coyote Woman only to have her keep running off. The body is always at once an uncontainable fluidity, always on the run, and always the material target. For example, the already always flying Pilate is methodology of multiple reading, of inhabiting a fecund method of margin when Guitar shoots her dead.

In each act of curing, however wide-ranging the histories and ethnic backgrounds are to each of these novels. “success” depends on someone witnessing and being able to either be one of the crowd saving a body, or a witness to translate the knowledge of the cure. In oral traditions, the sanctity and thus the efficacy of performed ritual is grounded in a methodology of transmission rather than, in Krupat’s terms, production (The Turn to the Native 3-29). While his categorizations are certainly useful, part of the hybridity of all of these novels, is not merely the hybridity of ethnic backgrounds, of gender, and of genre, it is the hybridity of all of these as they impact the hybridity of genres. The oral, the transmittable, becomes a marker in the novel for assessing and passing on non-

\(^1\)Oftentimes, this very structure between teller and audience is emphasized as one of the structures that marks oral traditions as distinct from text traditions. For example, see John Miles Foley’s introduction to Teaching Oral Traditions.
hegemonic knowledge: yet these markers/moments of theater are contained in "produced" novels. The second "Storyteller" of Silko’s Storyteller wills her metaphorical and perhaps literal escape through scripting the girl who will become a "teller" of her own survival/ending. She survives because there is someone to whom she can transmit the knowledge. Both the ends of Song of Solomon and of Dreaming in Cuban are deeply ambivalent, in part, because of this question of transmission in a hybrid culture: there were (among us) witnesses to Milkman’s flight, but will his body in flight survive? Will he be read, as the alienated insurance man Mr. Smith was read, as a strange, dismissable suicide or murder? Is he merely the contemporary morphology of the Flying African, at once the murdered and the corporeal promise of essentialism, both of which haunt this landscape of Song of Solomon? Milkman flies in the historical moment of Emmett Till and the four girls bombed in a church in Alabama. Perhaps "flight" only marks the discursive edge of a body? And if he survives, will this body be able to translate the knowledge, the methodology of flight back into the community, especially when the narrator of flight, Pilate/Pilot herself is shot by what Celia would certainly name the logic of "blood and columns"?

The act of reading and archiving the genealogy of disease, in each of these novels, has resulted in an archive of cures that worked or did not work to produce a revivified

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2As Yvonne Yarbro-Benjarano, in “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/La frontera: Cultural Studies, Difference, and the Non-Unitary Subject,” cites Chandra Talpade Mohanty when she claims a similar sort of claim about ethnic literature in general: “the proliferation of texts by women of color is not necessarily evidence of the centering of the hegemonic subject (34). Of crucial importance to Yarbro-Benjarano is the way the texts are read, understood, and located. (13).
sense of agency in the traumatic aftermaths of culturally produced diseases. It has also produced critiques of the very hybrid terrain it inhabits. As Dreaming in Cuban so poignantly performs, the very rubric of the hybrid image, the promise of hybridity can aid and abet murdering narratives. Celia, as she drowns herself, narrates what might be a good metaphoric for what it means to occupy a mythic positionality in order to create a relational, non-“mastered,” and “fluid” agency:

I remember my first day in Havana. I arrived precisely at noon and the air rang with a thousand church bells. My Tia Alicia was waiting for me in her wide skirt and petticoats. the peacock brooch at her throat. She comforted me after my long train ride from the countryside. She taught me how to play piano. to make each note distinct from the others yet part of a whole. (242-243)

Distinction in a myriad of notes working to comprise wholes are the risks of theorizing. The aesthetics of those first images of solace, allow poetry to call Celia into the ocean and into her death, where she drops the earrings that were once to her the promise of a sweet, intimate audience.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza performs a theory of hybrid consciousness, the new Mestiza, as it inhabits and transforms the borderlands. While Anzaldúa is historically and politically specific about what kind of “borderlands these are,” she also names the site of this theorization as itself culturally and psychically applicable to other “hybrids”:

The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (“Preface”)
La Frontera is divided into seven sections which trace a hybrid genealogy of mythology, autobiography, the history of the Americas, and imagist poetry to perform the borderlands as not only an individual and a collective consciousness, but a methodology of constructing survival and generative agencies. Even more explicitly than the novels of this study, La Frontera moves by an almost assemblage logic of composition and imagism: thus, paradigmatic discourses like ethnography or history seem as performed or imagistic or aggregate as poetry does. The novel centers in the body of the borderlands: not only the individual body as an archetype in this landscape, but the space as a corpus itself. Always the book returns to the space of the borderlands, refining it, mining its methodological and imagist possibilities. For example, in the first section “The homeland. Azlan/El otro Mexico” the borderlands become both a:

1.950 mile-long open wound
   dividing a pueblo. a culture.
   running down the length of my body.
   staking fence rods in my flesh.
   splits me splits me
   me raja me raja
   This is my home
   this thin edge of
   barbwire (2-3)

and:

   The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages

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3 In the section “Ni cuicani: I. the Singer.” which precedes “The Shamanic State.” Anzaldúa furthers the rationale for this narrative logic. a rationale based in suturing hybridity:

   An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge: words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words: the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness. (69)
again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. . . . Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed. the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal. (3)

Each of the seven sections works to, "create a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality. the way we see ourselves. and the ways we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness" (La Frontera 80).

Part of the new "consciousness" this hybrid form wills is the consciousness not only of the first person in a mythic positionality, at once individual and collective, but also a multiple readership who are culpable, performed in their many possible incarnations. Anzaldua's "Acknowledgments" begin:

To you who walked with me upon my path and who held out a hand when I stumbled: to you who brushed past me at crossroads never to touch me again: to you whom I never chanced to meet but who inhabit a borderlands similar to mine: to you for whom the borderlands is unknown territory:. . .(i)

This itself is a kind of monologue address to the myriad roles a readership might occupy in relation to the space Anzaldua occupies. With the repeated "to you's" it works as incantation as well, summoning up would-be readers as if they were characters themselves. whether the "know" it or not. More explicitly so than the novels of this study, La Frontera, as it assembles. chants. and wills hybrid genre of cure. self-consciously wills and resists certain kinds of audiences even as it multiplies both the position a first-person can occupy in order to generate cure out of disease. and the positions readers may hold in communally supporting this making. Anzaldua creates a methodology for this ambition through her insistence at once on "plain-speak." on
naming sexuality and violence in all of its specificity, and on a hybrid. “new” language.
spoken from the borders:

The switching of “codes” in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to
the North American dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of
all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the
Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are
revitalized: they die and are born. Presently, this infant language, this bastard
language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no
longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first
overture—to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos. apology blurring out of our
mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our
invitation to you—from the new mestizas. (“Preface”)

Walter Mignolo, in “Linguistic Maps. Literary Geographies. and Cultural Landscapes:
Languages. Languaging. and (Trans)nationalism." calls Anzaldua’s methodology.
“languaging.” and he cites the linguist Alton Becker’s definition of languaging:

Entering another culture, another history of interactions, we face what is
basically a problem of memory. Learning a new way of languaging is not learning
a new code, into which the units of my domain of discourse are re-encoded,
although the process may begin that way; and if the new way of languaging shares
a history with my own, the exuberances and deficiencies may not get in the way of
simple interactions. However, at some point the silences do get in the way and the
working gets slow and hard. A new code would not be so hard and painful to
learn: a new way of being in the world is. (189: 230).

Mignolo goes on to name Anzaldúa and other writers’ practices of languaging as a means
to fracture colonial language (193). But the problematic of readership recurs in
hybridity, even as it fractures: “Being tricultural. monolingual. bilingual. or multilingual.
speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition. the mestiza faces the dilemma of
the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?”
(78).
In part, Anzaldua figures the answer to this question through the figure of the native shaman. Her call to heal the splits of the borderlands, to transform paradigmantic knowledge and all the madness and death it induces in the people of the borderland, and her congruent call to summoning a narrative methodology and a readership all at once is answered in the figure of the shaman:

In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. Before the Conquest, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open-air places around the Xochicuahuitl, el Arbol Floridao, Tree-in-Flower. (The Coaxihuuitl or morning glory is called the snake plant and its seeds, known as olollituhqui are hallucinogenic.) The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a nahual, a shaman. (66)

Anzaldua's autobiography/mythos/invocation/history/ethnography performs both the figure and the method as shamanic. And, a "linguistic terrorism." is part and parcel of the shamanic method. Survival in the borderlands zone (with might be the Gallup of Ceremony, as well) requires just such a languaging methodology and because it does so, languaging, by necessity, curative.

Anzaldua certainly frames both her methodology and the act of writing as forms of agency themselves. In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers," Anzaldua engages the terms of orality and performance to figure writing as agency. She says that a language must have both "intimacy and immediacy" (both insist on a relational position that effects a historical present tense) (165). She insists that writing is performance and that utterance is inseparable from narratives which enact corporeal violence on 3rd world women writers:
Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? . . . The white man speaks: Perhaps if you scrape the dark off your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don’t cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world. (166)

She also says.

The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery [the mystery of internalizing “alien” and “exile”] but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. And those that don’t survive? The waste of ourselves: so much meat thrown at the feet of madness or fate or the state. (169)

Writing then is both maker of and made by the shaman in order to open up other spaces in narrative: the shamanic method of composition, according to Anzaldúa, becomes the locus through which a speaker opens “apertures . . . abismos that we are forced to speak from” (Making Face xvii). In addition, the “shaman” is one potential method/locus through which whites might heal their narrative logics that beget disease and death:

Let’s all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent. White America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it. Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. By taking up curanderismo. Santería, shamanism. Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people. Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases. Though in the conscious mind, black and dark may be associated with death, evil and destruction, in the subconscious mind and in our dreams, white is associated with disease, death and hopelessness. Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of “primitiveness,” can divert the indifferent, right handed, “rational” suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond. (68-69)

Like Betonie and Pilate, Anzaldúa becomes the hybrid shaman, but like the other novels of this study, hybridity is not an equal-parts kind of assemblage—however formally different these hybrid cures are. essentialism haunts them. Anzaldúa posits a left-handed
and right-handed logic/primitive illogic to gender in this section. as much as her figure of “Coatlalpeuh. She Who Has Dominion Over Serpents” is a hybridly gendered goddess figure herself. marked by her ambiguity and her ability to be a figure of mediation (29-31). As hybridly gendered as Coatlalpeuh is, she is mired in and transformed by Conquest narratives into, alternately, the Virgin and the Whore. Part and Parcel of Anzaldua’s vision of white’s healing through the mediation of spirituality, is healing through an essential femaleness transformed by its genealogical tracings to its more complex, primitive state. This essential femaleness has dominion over the most threatening aspects of masculinity and becomes a kind of radically essentialized female elided with the writer figure/shaman. In this radical essentialism, the wounding, the disease is caused by a masculinity represented by the “serpent.” and healed by a female who ingest the serpent, becoming immune to its poison. and who can then transform the logics and the poisons of serpents into a curative agency: “Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent” (50). The shaman/writer lets this methodology possess her body and alter it into a body which can see differently, feel differently and thus script differently:

I’ll take over now. she tells me. The alarm will go off if you’re in danger. I imagine its shrill peel when danger walks around the corner. the insulating walls coming down around me.

Suddenly I feel like I have another set of teeth in my mouth. A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the roof of my mouth. On my palate I feel a tingling ticklish sensation, then something seems to be falling on me, over me, a

*I agree with Diana Fuss’s argument in Essentially Speaking that the essentialist/social constructionist dichotomy is a false one and that we never transcend essentialism. Part of the motive in these last two chapters is to explore the ways in which essentialisms are constructed in the vernacular of hybrid cure and to what end.
curtain of rain or light. Shock pulls my breath out of me. The sphincter muscles tugs itself up. up. and the heart in my cunt starts to beat. A light is all around me—so intense it could be white or black or at that juncture where extremes turn into their opposites. It passes through my body and comes out the other side. I collapse into myself—a delicious caving into myself—imploding. the walls like matchsticks folding inward in slow motion. (51)

To allow the possession by all that Coatlalpeuh. in her many genealogical manifestations has become. to possess the body is to give into the bodily knowledge/recognition of danger. The recognition itself is simultaneously an act of corporeal refiguration and of reading the symbolic geography of the borderlands. This act of reading allows both perspective, distance. and. then. a sense of revivified agency:

I see oposicion e insurreccion. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock. releasing la Coatlicue. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands. and eventually. takes dominion over serpents—over my own body. my sexual activity. my soul. my mind. my weakness and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man’s or the colored man’s or the state’s or the culture’s or the religion’s or the parents’—just ours. mine.

And suddenly. I feel everything rushing to a center. a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. Completa.

Something pulsates in my body. a luminous thin thing that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance. my thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night. forever open. And I am not afraid. (51).

Thus Anzaldua is able to ritualize an identity at once centered and fluid, sentient, conscious and a collectivity unto itself. a “we.” that is not-heterosexual. not white in all its diseased reincarnations. and that is the consciousness of the specific borderlands. but also of that wounded body as it metaphorizes the borderlands and is itself the material of individuals.
Anzaldua, transformed, radically essentialized woman/shaman/storyteller locates the “primitive” possibilities of the shaman within a contemporary metaphorics. Her calling as a shaman is “to traffic in images” (69-70). Trafficking itself becomes a verb of crossing over boundaries, proffering the illicit from one culture into the hegemonic white other culture. Her metaphors of the shaman’s relation to image and narrative shift as she further explores what it means to traffic in images—the arise from the material of her body, of her body’s history and genealogy of images: therefore, some images can make her ill as she experiences them. Her experience of the images she will “traffic” as a writer/shaman works in a dynamic between detachment and total immersion: at first they are like images on a screen:

My body is experiencing events. In the beginning it is like being in a movie theater, as pure spectator. Gradually I become so engrossed with the activities, the conversations, that I become a participant in the drama. I have to struggle to “disengage” or escape from my “animated story.” I have to get some sleep so I can write tomorrow. Yet I am gripped by a story which won’t let me go. Outside the frame, I am film director. screenwriter. camera operator. Inside the frame, I am the actors—male and female—I am desert sand, mountain. I am dog, mosquito. . . . My “awakened dreams” are about shifts. Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air. heal from mortal wounds. I am playing with my Self and el espíritu del mundo. I change myself. I change the world. (70)

As insist as Anzaldua is in this shamanic agency of narration, that through this methodology, the world is healed in dreams. she immediately cites the difficulty in healing the very product and motive of shamanism—the consciousness:

Sometimes I put the imagination to a more rare use. I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them to impress them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system and reprogramming my consciousness. This involves looking my inner demons in the face. then deciding which I want in my psyche. Those I don’t want. I starve: I feed them no
I spend no time with them, share not my home with them. Neglected, they leave. This is harder to do than to merely generate “stories.” I can only sustain this activity for a few minutes. (70-71)

To traffic in images this way is to be a contemporary shaman: it is to acknowledge. “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. The word, the image and the feeling have a palatable energy, a kind of power” (71). The kind of already-ingested power of myth in its words and energies is corporeal. and, thus, while it can be performed and re-performed. shifting individual corpus and consciousness is an exhausting undertaking. it risks the body becoming the overwhelmed locus of cultural trafficking:

To be a mouth—the cost is too high—her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. Todo pasaba por esa boca. el viento, el fuego, los mares y la Tierra. Her cargo passing through it. She wants to install ‘stop’ and ‘go’ signal lights, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out. (74)

In Anzaldúa’s theorizing, the shaman/woman/storyteller/composer has learned other ways of reading/seeing:

Four years ago a red snake crossed my path as I walked through the woods. The direction of its movement, its pace, its colors, the “mood” of the trees and the wind and the snake—they all “spoke” to me, told me things. I look for omens everywhere. Stones “speak” to Luisah Teish, a Santera: trees whisper their secrets to Chrystos, A Native American. I remember listening to the voices of the wind as a child and understanding its messages. Los espíritus that ride the back of the south wind. (36)

Reading the visual symbology, hearing animate in the non-animate, sentience in stones, reading landscape as prophesy involves the body and other forms of sentience, as well:

We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal: intelligence dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to “real” events. (38-39)
The accretional presence in and through the shamanic ritual of storytelling is, as Anzaldúa names it, "consciousness." Like the method of the shaman in a borderlands, la facultad is an instance of letting the serpent beget the serpent’s cure. It becomes an ability to read as a result of the fractured state of the borderlands:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak. That communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings. That is behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.

Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females. The homosexuals of all races. The darkskinned. The outcast. The persecuted. The marginalized. The foreign.

When we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. We’ll sense the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street. Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people caught between worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us. (38-39)

La facultad, emerging from the wound, becomes a kind of intuitive navigational knowledge, aligned with a "primitive" or ancient corporeal knowledge of relation and distance in landscape: “Often I sense the direction of and distance from my people or objects—in the dark, or with my eyes closed, without looking. It must be a vestige of a proximity sense, a sixth sense that’s lain dormant from long-ago times” (39).

La facultad becomes not only the state before, after, during the shamanic ritual, it becomes the marker of an alternative, navigational knowledge, and all the risks and losses that knowledge is marked by in the hybrid zone:

Fear develops the proximity sense aspect of la facultad... This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people: the senses
become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld... We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. There is a prejudice and a fear of the dark, chthonic (underworld), material such as depression, illness, death and the violations that can bring on this break. Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic senses of reality increases awareness and *la facultad.* (38-39)

The chapter/section in which Anzaldua most theorizes *la facultad* is titled “entering the serpent”: the following chapter is literally to be in the state of dominion over serpents and it begins with a poem titled “protean being.” The figures here are not the figures of screenwriter/director dictator of mythology to the soul. The poem represents a fragmentation of the tear, through which Coatlicue becomes. The poem represents a kind of disembodiment which allows an altered sentience, “she listens to the/seam between dusk and dark.” but which also represents madness, disassociation unto the point where all that is left is the moon (41-42).

Much in Anzaldua’s theorizing of the new Mestiza moves through the state which is at once primitive, generative, open-ended, but which also risks madness and a mediation which kills sexual agency. In “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/La frontera: Cultural Studies. “Difference,” and the Non-Unitary Subject.” Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno contextualizes *Borderlands* in a wider feminist academic discussion on the conceptual difficulty in “theorizing difference”: “Of crucial importance is the way texts are read, understood, and located” (13). Yarbro-Bejarno cites two potentially “problematic areas” in the reception of Anzaldua’s work: “the isolation of this text from its conceptual community and the pitfalls in universalizing the theory of mestiza or border
consciousness. . ." (17). Yarbro-Bejarno is concerned with the use of and transformation of the essentialized primitive—and, fundamentally, the problematics of using the essentialized primitive and then generalizing from that state a collective, contemporary consciousness of the border. In some sense, this is one of the central questions/problematics in novels which are using, importing, mining the folkloric, divorced from its "conceptual community." placed in a hybrid zone: how does a writer both invoke that kind of essentialisms and avoid the sort of production of it that would contain or nullify its transformative powers?

Yarbro-Bejarno makes two interesting claims about this as a methodology in Borderlands: first. Anzaldua, in her theorizing of Aztlan, maintains a kind of context. even as she rescripts and assembles a hybrid mythos. She insists on the cultural specificities even as she deploys them into a more generalizable theorizing (26). In addition, integral to resisting all of the problematics of essentialism is the contextualization of readership—the insistence not only that the agent position be the writer, multiply positioned, but that the shamanic act involves the multiply positioned reader as well (14).

Crucially, the narrative methodology of radical essentialism as told through mytho-historical genealogy also resists the problems in universalizing, in part because the narrative methodologies of Anzaldua’s work and the narrative methodologies of the other novelists in this study engage what Yarbro-Bejarano cites as “the crisis [my emphasis] of meaning, representation, and history in terms of the possibility of the end of [Euro-]ethnocentrism” (15). I might rephrase the implication of novels such as these as the
crisis and becoming of memory, knowledge transmission, and ethos as it is performed in
the cures-as-agencies of the hybrid zone. To call this a “crisis” is important—hybridity can
promise an easy pastiche of agency—a little of this, a little of that, and you conjure
liberatory politics. The very real possibilities and threats in hybridity are performed in the
moments of oral theater in the novels of this study. On the one hand orality promises
transmission. on the other hand, the not-read moment of theater makes of the crowd an
ethic that would just leave a body going earthward toward suicide. Oral performance
rituals risk becoming all “paraphernalia” in contemporary hybrid zones. What kind of
cure can script agency must, in part, construct or raise the question/the relation to
audience—what kind of reader can archive and transmit cure?

5I would argue finally, to take up Henry Louis Gates’ terminology again, that the
moments of oral theater, right down to Anzaldua’s linguistic terrorism signify on all that
is not oral, even making the still image seem a theater of relation and cultural logic. In
this way, oral performance has an interpretive impetus, if only in its potential
doubling, de-masking, and distancing.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melanie Almeder was raised in Atlanta, Georgia and Goose Rocks Beach, Maine. She earned a B.A. in English at the University of Virginia and a M.F.A. in poetry writing at the University of Massachusetts. She currently lives in beautiful downtown Micanopy, Florida, a town known for its bird life, Neighbor Bob’s Key Lime pie, and the swapping of lies.
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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