

Teresa Ferreira de Almeida Alves

Universidade de Lisboa

WOMEN'S NARRATIVES AND THE SHIFTS FROM THE CANON

In the heyday of Postmodernism, three women authors, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston were gaining recognition on account of their fictional work, even if they were not, then, associated with the dominant literary tendencies of the age. They appeared to be quintessential representatives of the Seventies' so-called ethnic revival, since the universes they portray are energized by the discrete cultural traditions from which the three writers emerge and to which they were and still are manifestly pledging allegiance.

A first reading of *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975, 1976), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Ceremony* (1977) offers a bird's-eye view of singularities and differences in relation to «mainstream» American culture. As an ever-present definition of «otherness», they emerge from the reminiscences of Kingston's narrator about her immigrant Chinese relatives, or inform the story of the African-American family around which Morrison's fiction is woven, or frame Tayo's dilemmas, Silko's protagonist, who survives the war only to face the hazards of Pueblo Indian life in contemporary America.

Interestingly enough, however, and although the standards of differentiation depicted – in the three authors – contrast with the rampant materialism of the dominant white culture, it is their differentiating cultures that provide the duality at the core of the conflict from which stems the identity quest which is central to the three novels. In *Song of Solomon*¹, the virtually «dead» world of Macon Dead II, the protagonist's father, exists in opposition to that of Pilate, the aunt whose vibrant spiritualism is a source of imaginative energy throughout the book. In *Ceremony*², the spiritless conditions and contingencies of Pueblo life in the present are contrasted with a time of fabulous achievement which, enigmatically and often by means of legend, will trace out the routes of a legacy that brings meaning into existence.

It may be argued that the dominant culture is responsible, in both novels, for the evils that besiege African-American and American-Indian experiences. In Toni Morrison, the bourgeois standards of Macon Dead II appear to emulate those linked to a distinc-

tively American way of life. But it should be recalled that, searching for his true self, Milkman, the protagonist, goes South to discover not only the differences but also the similarities between his father and his grandfather; on such an account, the father's role is not confined to the mere aping of white standards and is further supported by Pilate's childhood memories. Slavery as the paradox reinforced by America's claim to freedom energizes the protagonist's search for his true self, without, however, plunging the narrative into the pervasive nightmarish condition of *Beloved* (1987). In the earlier novel, the journey southwards becomes a quest for the origins, leading as such into the world of legend and bringing it to bear upon that of history.

In Leslie Marmon Silko, the negative influence of white civilization is symbolized by the uranium pit, a reminder of the evil uses to which the land was put after the original inhabitants had been divested of it. In a sense, dispossession of the land is the historical counterpart to slavery, but it is similarly removed from the center of the depicted universe by the story of the evil sorcerer who plotted against both races to win the witchery contest. Tayo's healing from psychic disintegration, like Milkman's new sense of the self, becomes an inquiry into legendary cultural heritage that gradually marks him off from the standards and even the rituals of his contemporary Pueblo fellows. Silko, as much as Morrison, depicts change in the protagonist's identity through an increased consciousness of the mythical past that is called to salvage present experience.

A similar duality runs through Kingston's *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*³ but a slightly different slant is called into its interpretation. From the very beginning, the narrative foregrounds the flow of memories in which recollections of an immigrant child growing up in America are interspersed with stories from China, the intercultural identity of the narrator apparently defined by the alternating horizon of one culture or the other. Time and place boundaries are often erased in the process, but so is unfaltering opposition to the dominant culture which, here and there, emerges as the land of second opportunity. And, yet, despite the surface differences which obviously involve the personal history and patterning preferences of the three women authors, Kingston's autobiographic persona is as much engaged as Morrison and Silko's fictive characters in a quest where «otherness» defies linear oppositions and confining dichotomies.

Relying on the shifts from «old» to «new», the memoirs provide an exemplary instance of the achievement of a distinctive sense of the self in the face of conflicting emotions and world views. The successive flashes of life in «the country of Ghosts» offers a coherent, even if intermittent picture, of immigrant hardship and toil, not at odds with the usual representation of similar experiences. Disappointments – «My American life has been such a disappointment» (p. 55) –, difficulties with language at school, the threat of being underrated and of not being able to succeed are, nevertheless, subtly counterbalanced by the panic of being deported to China and by the cunning to escape the feared extradition – «There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China» (p. 213).

But in contrast with the ordinary sort of life in America, the colorful stories – being «talk-stories» – not only bring the overflowing of oral discourse into narrative, but along with it assert values and patterns of behavior that give shape to the old country. Immigrant America and emigrated China intertwine in the memoirs as opposing models, on-and-off resisted or accepted by the narrator, in a sort of deferred definition of the self so characteristic of the autobiographic mode upon which, from the very start, encroaches that of storytelling. One after the other, the various stories become a digression through the country left behind, which, in its ambivalence, surfaces both as the rejected place of history and the ever-longed-after land of legend.

Opening the memoirs with the account of the aunt who committed suicide in China, the narrator illustrates the doom of common womanhood before the communist revolution; in the following section, however, the sad episode is modified by the tale of Fa Mu Lan, the transvestite woman warrior who redeems her people as well as her genre. Intertwined with the events of the girlhood among the ghosts, the historical and legendary versions of women's fate in the «old country» reflect the complex legacy which flourishes in the reminiscences of Brave Orchid or, obversely, dwindles in the agonies of Moon Orchid. «Shaman» and «At The Western Palace» reverse and simultaneously reinstate the initial tension achieved by «No Name Woman» and «White Tigers». But whereas the last two allude to a situation removed from an immigrant girl's experience, the first involving close relatives, the mother and her sister, literally drive the narrator's dilemmas home.

Moon Orchid is an obvious illustration of the difficulties attending to the move from one culture into another. Too old to abide by the new ways, too young to fit into the old pattern, she stands in line with those feminine figures who, like «no name woman» or the «crazy lady», are unable to come to terms with their own lives⁴. In their own peculiar fashion, all of them highlight Brave Orchid's central role in the transmission of Chinese beliefs and values. She is the source of the «original talk-stories», and is therefore pivotal in terms of the duality assigned to cultural definition:

Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep... At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story (p. 24).

Following a recent argument, mother-stories function as a bridge between the old and the new world, bringing in, together with cultural continuity, warnings about life as in the case of the drowned aunt; they may also be a way of calming down fears before a strange reality or of controlling the present through the past. At worst they are a source of confusion, at best they trigger off the imagination⁵. There is an interesting point made by the narrator's mother who plays the central role in «Shaman»: «I had to cross a footbridge. In China the bridges are nothing like the ones in Brooklyn and San Francisco. This one was made from rope, laced and knotted as if by magpies» (pp. 102-3)

«Laced» and «knotted» are also telling images for the way Maxine Hong Kingston weaves the manifold strands of a narrative, where autobiography and storytelling come to be reconciled. Announced in the title of the book, reconciliation is a source of ambivalence which has not been dispelled by Kingston when, asked about the link of stories to personal and collective history, she replied:

Well, I guess I contain them all in my own individual memory, but some of the stories that I write began with memories that we all have. Those collective memories are the myths. For example, immigration stories about how you got through Angel Island – having four or five versions of your immigration – that's not just the way my head works, that's the way narration and memory and stories work in our culture. So, that's a gift given to me by our culture, and not something that I imagined on my own. I invented new literary structures to contain multiversions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who are storytellers⁶.

An interesting clue to Kingston's cultural indebtedness is conveyed by the articulation of the grandmother's story with that of Ts'ai Yen in the closing section of *The Woman Warrior*. It starts like this: «Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is *hers*, the ending *mine*.» (p. 240, my italics). The beginning is not only the mother's but also the grandmother's as a link in the chain to the culture of the old country. Focused on the threats that assailed the theater-loving lady, the episode suggests an odd sort of «immunity» which is a gift shared across generations by the family members:

By daybreak, when my grandmother and mother made their way home, the entire family was home safe, proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays. They went to many plays after that (p. 241).

After a brief comment by the explicit narrator – «I like to think that at some of those performances, they heard the songs of Ts'ai Yen, a poetess born in A.D. 175» –, the narrative moves on to the announced story, with which the memoirs conclude inviting the reader to the analogy of art as a bridge between cultures. «A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe» shows how captivity may become apprenticeship of a new musical idiom, modulation of song by an otherwise trained voice and, finally, translation into an altogether different culture. It is, above all, an expressive metaphor for Maxine Hong Kingston as storyteller.

Storytelling as a way of forging the idiom of cultural diversity is very much at the heart of both *Ceremony* and *Song of Solomon*. In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, it becomes a sort of ritual enacted by narrative and interacts with the memories that gradually expose the blighted condition of the protagonist. In fact, storytelling as ritual anticipates Tayo's own story, which only starts after the analogy between naming and creation is established, verbal dimension becoming essential to the very process of being:

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.

(p. 1)

Kingston's notion of intercultural translation also makes sense in Silko's case, since it applies to the shift from Indian oral tradition to the American written medium.

A character telling a story is a strategy by means of which oral language is represented, as when Tayo, under pouring rain and carrying his injured cousin Rocky on the muddy road to the Japanese prison camp, resorts to storytelling in an attempt to strengthen the exhausted American captives. On the following page, detached from the remaining prose narrative, there sits the story of Iktoa'ak'o'ya-Reed Woman that, in a tentative duplication of Pueblo Indian poetic rhythm, offers a fable about water as an essential element in nature. Located in the opening section of the protagonist's rambling thoughts, this is just a first instance of many others that, throughout the novel, bring alienated Tayo face to face with his cultural heritage.

Similar tales along the narrative suggest the presence of Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, as much at work as she ever was, in «a world made of stories» that resemble «the motion of the stars across the sky» (p. 95). And as with stars whose motion is often arrested into distinct patterns, the different versions of each story lend an oral-like rhythm to the written sequence of words that are drawn onwards by the train of individual memories. Many of the stories relate to myth and legend, like those of Corn Woman and Reed Woman, or Hummingbird and Greenbottle Fly, or old Buzzard, Fly and Hummingbird. They achieve a distinctive sort of coherence as «scraps» of a larger story that, web-like, is being spun while thought becomes word and words join in patterns that suggest the multilayered universe of creation.

Split between disturbing personal memories and meaningless experience, Tayo will gradually realize that beyond the fragments of his shattered existence lies another reality he must learn to know. The clues to knowledge are provided by the different storytellers – Betonie, the medicine man, Night Swan, the Mexican woman, or Ts'eh, who evokes the elusive Yellow Woman of legend. They steer the protagonist away from his nightmares, each of them becoming a surrogate figure for the mysterious narrator who, immediately after Thought-Woman, is introduced to suggest the deep kinship of ceremony and ritual with stories:

Ceremony

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,
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.

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.

(p. 2).

As presented in *Ceremony*, storytelling is a complex ritual whose hermetic nature also includes tales like those of Old Woman K'yo's son who fooled around with magic, or of Kaup'a'ta, the Gambler, another practitioner of black art, who in the end is defeated by Sun Man. Together with the ghastly participants in the contest of witches, they embody the worst sort of evil, denial of life, qualifying thereby for the role of destroyers. Their counterpart in Tayo's story is present in the recollections of World War II and of the atomic bomb, a symbol of mass destruction. Further references to the prejudices of Christianity or to the broken treaties with Indians give the white race a

good share in the evils that afflict humanity. The quest of the protagonist, however, leads into the duality of his own culture, which in a way duplicates that of the world of legend.

The memories from which Tayo is to be healed do not deal exclusively with his war wounds, but often take him back to his childhood and youth, the narrative bouncing backwards and forwards between present and past. Recalling the mother who deserted him and Uncle Josiah who fathered him, or the grandmother who personifies the spirit of ancient wisdom and the aunt who is ashamed of traditional ways, the divided Tayo offers a divided picture of the Pueblo world, which is epitomized in the two medicine men – Ku'oosh, helpless and outdated by the new order, and Betonie, wiser with the passing of time.

As the protagonist moves from alienation into a healed condition, the distance between himself and his former friends increases. Harley, Leroy, Pinkie and Emo, the untiring roamers of Highway 66, become the actual destroyers, the executioners of the «deadly ritual for the autumn solstice» (p. 253). Refusing to accede to the macabre ceremony, Tayo will complete his own ceremony away from the travelled road, into the hills and mountains, where he recognizes patterns and feelings that allow for a renewed perception of existence⁷. Journeying through the stories into collective memory, the protagonist achieves a sense of belonging into the landscape, which also signals the fulfilment of his heritage.

As Leslie Marmon Silko would some years later argue, landscape, history and imagination interact because the ancient Pueblo had an all-inclusive world view:

Location, or «place», nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives. Indeed, stories are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact place where the story takes place. The precise date of the incident often is less important than the place or location of the happening. «Long, long ago», «a long time ago», «not too long ago», and «recently» are usually how stories are classified in terms of time. But the places where the stories occur are precisely located, and prominent geographical details recalled, even if the landscape is well-known to listeners. Often because the turning point in the narrative involved a peculiarity or special quality of a rock or tree or plant found only in the place. Thus in the case of many of the Pueblo narratives, it is impossible to determine which came first: the incident or the geographical feature which begs to be brought alive in a story that features some unusual aspect of this location⁸.

Toni Morrison is as much indebted to storytelling as Silko and Kingston. But whereas in the case of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* and of the protagonist in *Ceremony* stories take both into alternate worlds, in *Song of Solomon*, they are very much part of common experience and provide a common ground to the otherwise separate worlds of male and female characters. Towering at the heart of each of them, Macon Dead II represents self-centered obsession with material success, while his sister Pilate materializes loving disinterestedness; between themselves, they steer the course

of Macon Dead III, also known as Milkman, from selfishness and idle rambling into awareness of his origins and the significance of human bonding.

The novel is structured in two parts. The first, shaped like a puzzle, is about the estranged brother and sister, who live in the same city and who on and off influence the protagonist; the second, takes Milkman journeying southwards, into the heart of his ancestors' country. Once again, both parts are unified by storytelling. It mostly fills out the gaps beyond the reach of Milkman, finally, drawing the novel to its mysterious ending. And because the stories bring into the central narrative the voices of different storytellers (point of view often emphasized by the different versions of a single episode), they literally expand the fictional universe of *Song of Solomon*, underlining the symbolic import of the quest to which the protagonist is driven.

In the first part of the novel, stories are the fundamental pieces of the puzzle whose mysterious nature and hidden significance is hinted at by the opening event of the narrative, the tentative flight of Robert Smith. In a foolhardy manner, he defies the laws of gravity on the day before Milkman's birth. Yet, in contrast with the hazardous enterprise ironically performed by an insurance agent, the stories of the protagonist's parents and of his friendship with Guitar Baines, of his maternal grandfather and the black community in the city, of his escapades into town or into Pilate's house where he finds romance with cousin Hagar, or even the more ambivalent story about the Seven Days organization and Guitar's involvement in it, are fundamentally connected with growing up in ordinary city circumstances: a well-to-do family even if tainted by the crises of a colorless marriage, the escape into the warmth of the not-so-well-to-do relative, the forbidden friendship and, ultimately, the awareness of marginal and dangerous activities.

Different ways of telling stories run through *Song of Solomon*. Sometimes an incident is narrated as a fabrication engendered by one of the characters, then it is taken up and retold by another as when Ruth Dead, the protagonist's mother describes her participation in a Catholic ceremony. Frequently, different versions of a story build up contradictory senses, their half-fictitious nature enhanced by the unreliability of the teller and the deliberate attempt at make-believe. This is the case with Macon Dead II and Ruth's accounts of the episode concerning the latter's behaviour on the night of her father's death. There are also more somber ones, like Guitar's revelation of the activities of the black avengers, which brings in second hand information on several characters outside the family but somehow related to it.

Even Macon Dead III's nickname has come to him by way of a story, in which his mother was caught nursing him when he was past the age. Milkman is at the center of a universe full of chatter and overlapping accounts, his passive behaviour suiting his role as a «listener» and his dominant attitude of self-centered immaturity. He will gradually develop a different character in the second part of the novel, after he leaves his family and goes South to search out the hidden treasure that, half a century earlier, Aunt Pilate had abandoned and, since then, had become his father's obsession to recover. The search does not afford the protagonist the expected material riches but, instead, takes him into the heart of a rural community where he awakens to a new sense of life that, like all the

important things in this novel, comes under the guise of a story, first introduced as a humming tune and repeatedly sang by Pilate along the narrative.

Aunt Pilate and music are inextricably bound, in the first part of the novel effectively establishing the link to the quest of the protagonist in the second. And as argued by Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., there is a classic blues feeling to the verse and chorus – «Oh Sugarman don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me...» (p. 49) – that, on different occasions, brings the memory of the rural past into the history of the city people⁹. In fact, Pilate plays the «ancestor», a role that Toni Morrison identifies with a specific literary tradition and describes as representing «timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective», providing «a certain kind of wisdom»¹⁰.

Born without a navel, Pilate is almost «ageless» and metamorphic in nature, much of her wisdom embedded in the stories that are intrinsic to her role. They may be shaped around an episode that is fancifully played upon as with the account of the white man's bones inside the sack. More often, they are introduced by some ordinary information, for instance the cooking of a perfectly soft-boiled egg, and then may grow into increasingly complex, even mythical tales, like the one that began as a humming song and, riddle-like, will take Macon Dead III into the history of his family.

As the nurturing teller of tales, Pilate is the guide of the journey into the origin. Her family stories in the first part of the novel trigger the protagonist's emotional response, which, in the second part of the novel, is connected to the legend of Ryna's Gulch in the woods of Blue Ridge country and to the sounds that convey a new mode of perception:

All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeee's* of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse. When a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran *with* wolves, not from or after them. And he was hearing it in the Blue Ridge Mountains under a sweet gum tree (p. 278).

Ultimately, the world of folk legend and myth provides the key to the old blues song Pilate sang all the time. Changed into children's sing-song «*O Solomon don't leave me here*», it will gradually be unriddled by the protagonist as the tale of the legendary great-grandfather who *did* fly away from the cotton fields of slavery. Like all mythical accounts, this is a story that defies understanding and prepares the reader for the inconclusive ending of the novel. Whether Macon Dead III is shot by Guitar or escapes is of little relevance, for what truly matters is the acknowledged kinship and willingness to accept the value of a given heritage.

When Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize, she delivered a lecture in the shape of a story which, as most stories, begins with «once upon a time...» and in a traditional way departs from trivial circumstances: some young people trying to fool an old blind wise woman ask her whether the bird they carry is dead or alive. After tarrying for a while the woman replies that the only thing she knows is that the bird is in their hands, emphasizing by repetition that it is in their hands. Then Morrison interrupts the narrative to assert that the story is an allegory for language and writing, briefly afterwards resuming the plot in which the different characters play around the central symbol, until the old woman ends the game with an enigma: «'Finally', she says. 'I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it'»¹¹.

At a unique moment of public recognition, Toni Morrison talks about her commitment to the art of writing in a lecture that is also a wonderful story, the choice underlining the significance of the genre in her previous fiction. Storytelling is no longer mere word-playing. It becomes a surrogate for literary creation in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* that, as mentioned, ends with the tale of the poetess Ts'ai Yen, a conceivable persona for the author of the memoirs. In Silko's *Ceremony*, it has been synonymous of ritual and a key to new modes of perception that, later, in *Storyteller* (1981) are redefined in terms of creative achievement. A link to the distinctive traditions of the three writers, the stories not only highlight the peculiarities of their cultural idioms but also offer a model upon which experience is shaped. At the same time, the several versions of the same story, the different ways in which they are told, cannot but foreground language, calling the attention to the role of the author and the nature of writing.

Self-consciousness, linguistic puzzles and charade-like narratives are dominant modes of the Seventies, which the three women authors share with Postmodernist writing, engaged as it is with the primacy of language and the patterning of reality upon the world of fiction. The same can be said about the recurrent mixing of forms and genres so characteristic of the prevailing trends, which is achieved through the blurring of boundaries between autobiography and storytelling, in Kingston, or between poetry, fiction and storytelling in Silko and Morrison.

There is nevertheless a world of difference between these writers' practice and what is identified as the canon when they start publishing their work. Shifts from one into another mode, reconciliation of the oral with the written word, emphasis on the differentiating ethnic idiom, stem not only from self-consciousness about writing but also from a peculiar sense of the historical moment and an aesthetic point of view which aims at differentiation by stressing the singularities of a given tradition.

In *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison takes up the issue when she claims for a new interpretation of American literature:

These chapters put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into what I hope will be a *wider landscape*. I want to *draw a map*, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the

New World – without the mandate for conquest. I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls¹².

By their distinctive practice, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko have also widened the landscape and drawn the map anew. In reality, their achievement suits the larger frame of American cultural identity, forever wavering between senses of «wholeness» and «otherness», in an «unending process of emergence»¹³.

Duality has indeed been experienced by a good number of Americans, whose roots, similarly to the narrator's in *The Woman Warrior*, belonged somewhere else and that, on coming to the New World, probably discovered the need to adjust and the hopelessness of memory. The New World was, however, an old one for the peoples who already inhabited it when the first settlers arrived. Bringing Indian tradition to bear upon the contemporary American scene, *Ceremony* records a singular way of responding to and integrating the older order which, instead of vanishing, might contribute to diversify and even mellow a technologically advanced way of life. Finally, *Song of Solomon* adds to the mosaic of differences a testimonial which, from the times of settlement to our age, has embodied unmitigated «otherness». It is a dramatization of the «alter ego» such as defined by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, the double without whom a distinctive cultural identity is no longer conceivable.

The central argument of this paper calls yet for a further reference to the fundamental condition shared by Kingston, Silko and Morrison. Womanhood has recognizably been engaged in self-definition which, at textual level, often translates into formal experimentation or into a self-consciously distinguishing perspective¹⁴. Both apply to the works under analysis and justify their author's association with the experimental mood of the Seventies. But against the prevailing Postmodernist defamiliarization of experience by means of parody, satire and indeterminacy in order to represent a world void of significance, the three woman authors under consideration chose to fall back into the communal legacy by means of a renegotiation of myth and folk legend. Their antipathy for the then established canon is a question of perspective, that Maxine Hong Kingston identifies with a specific way of thinking, a mental attitude she shares with Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko:

There is so much human emotion and richness and story and imagery and colors and things to eat. Nobody is alienated from life; everybody is warm. I feel that we write like that because we are warm, and even though we all – I hate to say master – we are all very good with words, words aren't the only thing that's important. We care about stories about people, and also that magical real place that we are all visiting. When I compare our work to some of the mainstream work, it seems as if many of them are *only* playing with words. The language people's world seems grey and black and white. Toni's and Leslie's and my aliveness must come from our senses of a connection with people who have a community and a tribe. We are living life in a more dangerous place. We do not live in subdivisions

without ceremony and memory; and if those other writers have to draw from that non-magical imagination, then of course, their writing will be grey and black and white¹⁵.

Community values and beliefs rekindle the imagination and simultaneously show these women authors' willingness to be defined by the relationship with the others, namely with the tradition to which they have pledged allegiance¹⁶. Their trust in communal convictions accounts, in fact, for the shift from a given canon into new modes of perception and aesthetic achievement. In the Nineties, they carry the mark of the age but, when Morrison, Kingston and Silko began publishing, they were literally eccentric in the defiance of «the greys and blacks and whites» that, in their view, compared poorly with the range of emotional diversity. Harking back to the resources of distinctive folk heritage, they all share the belief that stories vary with each new version and each new version is a gift of the storyteller who, through the tale, secures the perpetuation of the community.

Through the willingness to evoke different traditions, *The Woman Warrior*, *Ceremony* and *Song of Solomon* draw the widened landscape, to go back to Morrison's metaphor, and deny the notion of enclosure. Claustrophobia and the threat of entropy were very much present in those Postmodernist writers who, like Thomas Pynchon, show an obsession with historical issues and elect fictional surrogates to inquire into what, to them, is the lost meaning of experience. But America is a large umbrella under which sits all the variety in the world. Invoking memory without lacking in historical awareness, Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston add to our sense of wholeness by deepening our perception of otherness. Their translation of experience into art takes us to the edge of a New World.

- ¹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Pan Books in ass. with Chatto & Windus, 1989). Further references will be given in the text.
- ² Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986). Further references will be given in the text.
- ³ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), hereafter designated *The Woman Warrior*. Further references will be given in the text.
- ⁴ Cf. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian-American Literature. From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 192-93.
- ⁵ Cf. Babs Boter, «'The Great Power of my Mother Talking-Story' – Ethnicity and Identity in the Work of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston», in *Multiculturalism and the Canon of American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993), 148-50.
- ⁶ Paula Rabinovitz, «Eccentric Memories: A Conversation With Maxine Hong Kingston», in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, 1 (winter 1987), 185.
- ⁷ *Ceremony* as performance of all-inclusive relational agency has been extensively analysed by David L. Moore in «Myth, History and Identity in Silko and Young Bear. Postcolonial

- Praxis», in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 370-95.
- ⁸ Silko, «Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination», in *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. Ed. Robert Finch and John Elder (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1990), 888.
 - ⁹ For an insightful examination of Pilate's role see Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. «Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon», in *Conjuring. Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985)
 - ¹⁰ Morrison, «Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation», in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, ed. Mari Evans (Doubleday Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 343.
 - ¹¹ Morrison, *Lecture and Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Delivered in Stockholm on the Seventh of December, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-three* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 30, hereafter designated *Nobel Lecture*.
 - ¹² Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3, hereafter designated *Playing in the Dark*. My italics.
 - ¹³ In a Cultural Studies Week promoted by George Mason University (19-23 september, 1994), Lawrence W. Levine gave a talk entitled «All the Nations of the World: The Search for American Identity», in which he highlighted the on-going dialogue between the «mainstream» culture and the different cultures that coexist with and within it. The interaction, he concluded, results in a complex process of mutual transformations, and at the same time a wavering between senses of wholeness and otherness, that best describe America as a nation in continuing emergence.
 - ¹⁴ For a discussion of women author's «traditional» strategies in fiction, see Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories. American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
 - ¹⁵ Cf. Interview mentioned in note 6, p. 184. Compare Kingston's opinion with Morrison's in *Nobel Lecture*, pp. 13-17 and with Silko's in «Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective», in *English Literature. Opening Up the Canon*, eds. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 56-57.
 - ¹⁶ It is interesting to recall that according to Mary G. Mason, the distinguishing feature in the autobiographies of women writers is precisely the willingness to be defined by the relationship with the others, namely with their community. See «The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers», in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 207-35.