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BATTLES WITH WORDS:
LITERATE AND LINGUISTIC RESISTANCE
IN MULTI-ETHNIC U.S. LITERATURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

by

MELISSA DENNIHY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, City University of New York

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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Abstract

BATTLES WITH WORDS:
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IN MULTI-ETHNIC U.S. LITERATURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

by

Melissa Dennihy

Advisor: Professor Ira Shor

Battles with Words analyzes the role of multi-ethnic U.S. literature as an alternative form of cultural production which critiques and challenges U.S. linguistic and literate hegemony and homogeneity. The texts comprising this field continually emphasize the ways in which words, through language and literacy, become tools of power and action used by the ethnically marginalized to negotiate everyday advantages for themselves and challenge the linguistic and cultural domination of Anglo America. Through their critiques of the culture of English-only monolingualism that has continued to dominate the national landscape of the U.S. throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these authors indicate their concern with the ways language intersects with and impacts literature, as well as their interest in using literature to explore and critique the relationship between language, literacy, race, ethnicity, and citizenship in the U.S. Using seven contemporary multi-ethnic U.S. novels, I examine how these novels

portray language and literacy as weapons of the dominant which maintain and reproduce racist, classist systems of power and bureaucracy *and* as tools for those who are positioned as ethnically, linguistically, and nationally unauthorized, subjugated, and illegitimate to resist their subordination and disenfranchisement. By examining these works through a rhetorical lens, my analyses attempt to elucidate what is (un)said, (un)speakable, and (un)recorded when subordinates confront authorities in various “public” and “private” contexts including classrooms, social services offices, immigration stations, neighborhoods, and homes. The high-stakes literate and linguistic exchanges these works portray offer a multitude of perspectives from which to consider the seemingly mundane, ordinary ways in which language and literacy are used by the marginalized and the powerful as they negotiate various everyday contexts and encounters. While these novels reveal the many problematic uses of literacy and language in power struggles in the U.S., especially as they relate to race, ethnicity, and citizenship, they also suggest alternative ways that language and literacy might be used less hierarchically and more democratically in everyday life, offering models for transforming bureaucratic, institutional, and social encounters. These alternative models should interest not only literary scholars, but also those in the fields of composition, pedagogy, language, literacy and education.

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Introduction

Battles with Words in Literature and Everyday Lives

“All political endeavors take place in the daily” – Ellen Cushman, *The Struggle and the Tools* (21)

“So long as speech occurs in any social situation it is saturated with power relations... we all measure our words” – James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (176)

“We do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of their skin, their religion, their gender, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny [their language,] the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world” – Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the U.S.* (63)

“How—in terms of the development of social relationships of power—was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being?; how is it sustained?; and how might it be changed to the advantage of those who are dominated by it?” – Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (8)

“As history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” – Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse” (52-3)

“The approach to culture begins when the ordinary man *becomes* the narrator, when it is he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its development” – Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (5)

“Literacy is valuable—and volatile—property” – Deborah Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* (2)

“I’m a careful writer. I am alert to the potency of, and possibilities in, language” – Bharati Mukherjee, interview with Geoff Hancock (35)

“Alice Walker... Tillie Olsen... Ishmael Reed... Denise Chávez.... All of these authors write in an American English that comes straight from their people. Their language represents and

validates their experiences and those of the people who inhabit their books” – Nicholasa Mohr, “Puerto Rican Writers in the United States, Puerto Rican Writers in Puerto Rico” (91)

“Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” – Celie, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (215-16)

“The old folks thought about it, had people explain to them what writing was. It dawned on them; it’s a tool. It’s a tool.” – Leslie Marmon Silko, interview with Laura Coltelli (253)

“Here is the house It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.... Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy” – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (3-4)

In his 1967 presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), “Where Do We Go From Here,” Martin Luther King., Jr spoke of the racism inherent within the English language that children learn in U.S. schools:

even semantics have conspired to make that which is black seem ugly and degrading. In *Roget’s Thesaurus* there are some 120 synonyms for blackness and at least sixty of them are offensive, such words as blot, soot, grim, devil, and foul. And there are 134 synonyms for whiteness and all are favorable, expressed in such words as purity, cleanliness, chastity, and innocence. A white lie is better than a black lie. The most degenerate member of a family is the “black sheep.” Ossie Davis has suggested that maybe the English language should be reconstructed so that teachers will not be forced to teach the Negro child sixty ways to despise himself... and the white child 13 ways to adore himself... The tendency to ignore the Negro’s contribution to American life and strip him of his personhood is as old as the earliest history books and as contemporary as the morning’s newspaper.

As King suggests, white privilege and racial oppression in America are (still, almost 50 years after his address to the SCLC) integrally related to how and by whom language and literacy are used and controlled. In *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt writes that literacy is “one of the sharpest tools for stratification and denial of opportunity” in the U.S., adding that the “protean character of literacy has always made it a useful tool in political control,” particularly for “preserving white skin advantage” (2, 106). African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities have often seen language and literacy used as “weapons against their liberties,” with examples from required literacy tests for voters in the antebellum era to linguistically discriminatory standardized school tests in our contemporary moment serving to demonstrate a national history in which “literacy has often served as a stand-in for skin color in the ongoing attempts to subordinate [racial and ethnic minorities]” (Brandt 106).

In her focus primarily on literacy in the twentieth-century U.S., Brandt also describes literacy as “a mechanism by which the great bureaucracies of modern life tight[en] around us, along with their systems of testing, sorting, controlling, and coercing” (2). As scholars such as Fairclough and Foucault have outlined (in, especially, *Language and Power* and *Discipline and Punish*, respectively), the history of power over the course of the twentieth century has involved a gradual shift away from control through coercion and use of force and toward control through consent, a transition from the use of violence and militarism to the use of ideology and hegemony in maintaining order in society (of course, the former have not been entirely replaced by the latter, but have arguably taken on more insidious forms). The flow of power has thus become more diluted, more subtle, more diffuse; it is played out through everyday affairs and through things we often believe to be innocuous or neutral, like language and literacy. Indeed, even the widespread use of linguistic euphemisms in mainstream media and institutions (for example, the frequent use of the term “casualties” to refer to the ever-increasing amount of civilians killed as a result of U.S. military interventions in the Middle East), which many of us hardly think twice about even as we are bombarded with them dozens of times a day, are

examples of how words are used to empower, oppress, legitimate, and delegitimize.

Euphemisms are used not only on the nightly news and in our nation's schools, however; they have also been deployed throughout our nation's history to cover up the many forms of violence and oppression inflicted upon marginalized people and to create sanitized, bloodless, romanticized accounts to serve as the "official" records of history: the genocide of native peoples is called "settlement"; imperialist warfare is called "manifest destiny"; the North-bound movement of African Americans in the early twentieth century in search of freedom from violence and escape from the terrorism of the Klan is called "the Great Migration"; the internment camps used to imprison Japanese American citizens in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor are called "relocation centers." The continued muting, silencing, invisibilizing, and erasing of national history through the use of such euphemisms in schoolbooks, mainstream media, political institutions, and other highly visible and powerful sources of "official" knowledge and history is yet another highly significant but often unrecognized way in which words contribute to legacies of inequality and oppression in the U.S.

However, though language and literacy are often used as tools to oppress and dispossess minoritized groups, words, both spoken and written, are also continuously used as tools of action and resistance by those very groups that the dominant culture seeks to oppress, silence, and marginalize. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston writes that the tongue is "the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks" (186). Hurston's describing the act of speech as a "weapon" and a "killing tool" indicates the frequent use of words as tools for the marginalized ("weak folks") to wage battle against the powerful ("white folks"). Her assertion that speech is the *only* weapon available to weak folks also suggests that language can function as a form of guerilla warfare, a subtle means of sabotage or resistance made possible, in part, by the nuances, metaphoric possibilities, and doubled meanings of language, which has both more subtlety and more flexibility as a tool for the weak to use in battles against the powerful than do more overt forms

of warfare or political action. Yet, precisely because of the subtle and subversive ways in which language and literacy can be used by the marginalized, many of these acts remain invisible, cast into the shadows of public life as individuals carefully mask their own forms of political activity behind seemingly insignificant words and actions. As Ellen Cushman argues in *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner-City Community*, scholars who study the relationship between “daily lives” and “language use” “too often demean, overlook, and underrate the commonplace tactics individuals use to name and challenge their sources of trouble.” Cushman emphasizes the need for scholars to be more aware of how “individuals perceive and critique hegemony from their own critical vantage points using their own vernacular” (xviii-xix). As she convincingly shows throughout her study of socioeconomically disenfranchised inner-city U.S. residents, individuals make use of “many complex forms of linguistic agency nurtured in subversive ideologies” (24).

Cushman’s study of the politicized nature of language and literacy usage in the everyday echoes the work of philosopher Michel de Certeau, who explores in *The Practice of Everyday Life* how marginalized peoples use what he calls *tactics* to “[turn] the actual order of things... to their own ends” (26). These tactics are small, virtually unnoticeable and untraceable transformations of the dominant order, “internal manipulations of a system” (24). Although these seemingly insignificant everyday “tricks” do not have the power to overturn the dominant order or displace the ruling class of a society (as de Certeau notes, those who employ tactics do so “without any illusion that [the order of things] will change any time soon”), they nevertheless speak to what de Certeau calls an “ethics of *tenacity*” on the part of the marginalized, who, far from merely accepting their status in a hierarchical society, instead find “countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of a law” (26). Because tactical uses of language and literacy are of greatest interest to this study, which examines how words are used as tools of the powerful, but, more so, how these tools are used oppositionally as resistance *against* power, my work is developed using the theories of de Certeau as well as those of political

scientist James C. Scott. Both of these scholars examine the everyday, especially the use of language in everyday life, in order to reveal the political implications behind the seemingly insignificant, innocuous, and even subservient behaviors of the marginalized. As de Certeau notes, these individuals are “commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules” (xi). However, while it is certainly true, as the coming chapters clearly show, that language and literacy are sophisticated tools of power which play central roles in establishing social control as well as what Foucault called “regimes of truth” and “disqualified discourses,” my argument *de-emphasizes* the role of language and literacy in maintaining power and hegemony, suggesting, instead, that power is unable to exert complete and total control over subjects, who are often far from passive, compliant, or powerless. In this regard, I focus on political activity in the everyday as a way of disputing the widely-purported idea that the oppressed and marginalized suffer from a “false consciousness,” a passive and resigned acceptance of their social position as simply “the way things are” or “must be.”¹ As Cushman notes, “when social theorists subscribe to a notion of false consciousness,” they “underestimate the day-to-day political insights and strategies that individuals deploy to deconstruct and obviate unequal political situations” (xix). In our focus on a bigger picture, on the larger structural systems where we often look to examine how power is produced and contained, Cushman argues that we “trample over the texture of everyday political life” (x). Such trampling is exactly the work this project seeks to avoid.

Instead, *Battles with Words* presupposes that there is a much more complex relationship between hegemony, subordination, and resistance than meets the eye, one which I explore throughout the coming chapters using de Certeau’s notion of *tactics* and Scott’s concept of *infrapolitics* (occasionally, I combine these two related concepts, referring to what I call *infrapolitical tactics*). In *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott looks to the everyday in both fiction and reality in order to demonstrate how “the process of domination generates [both] a hegemonic public conduct”—what he calls a *public transcript*—and a “backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of

power”—the *hidden transcript* (*Domination* xii). In the seven works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature that I examine throughout this project, language and literacy are frequently put to use in both “public” and “hidden” contexts, albeit in very different ways. Examining these different forms of literate and linguistic activity while assuming a “false consciousness” on the part of the marginalized would make one likely to misunderstand, if not completely overlook, the empowering ways that literate and linguistic tactics are used by the subordinate in these circumstances, especially in public contexts. In contrast to the disabling notion of false consciousness, Scott’s theory of infrapolitics and of hidden and public transcripts provides a framework for analyzing literate and linguistic activities which allows readers to interpret these tactics quite differently than we might if we assumed characters to be passive or powerless. Scott’s concept of the “infrapolitics of the powerless”—their “patterns of disguising ideological insubordination” in public contexts in order to *appear* compliant or even complicit with power—reminds us that public performances of compliance and complicity are often just that: *performances* which have their counterparts in the “hidden transcripts” of the everyday lives of the marginalized (*Domination* xiii). These hidden transcripts represent the spaces and contexts where individuals who *play the role* of the powerless and compliant in public or institutional encounters are able to express dissent and opposition to power openly. Analyzing literate and linguistic activities in multi-ethnic U.S. literature using the concepts of de Certeau’s tactics and Scott’s infrapolitics reveals that opposition to power, even in the “public” realm, occurs in myriad forms, some not immediately visible or recognizable. Indeed, Scott has shown—as do the novels I examine—that public deference to authority often functions as a covert disguise, a subtle art of sabotage which may only have the *appearance* of compliance or complicity, while allowing individuals to carefully and inadvertently skirt, stretch, or break the rules of circumstances and contexts they find themselves in.

Given my alignment with the work of Scott and de Certeau, I use the term “marginalized” throughout this project to refer to those racial and ethnic groups who are positioned as outside

or on the peripheries of the realm of the dominant (white) culture in the U.S., but do *not* use this term to imply that such individuals are simultaneously kept in positions of disempowerment or powerlessness. Quite the contrary, perhaps the central argument of this work is that the racially and ethnically marginalized find creative, adaptive, and subversive ways to exercise power and agency in a myriad of contexts on a day-to-day basis, especially through the use of languages and literacies. I thus use the term “marginalized” in a similar way as de Certeau uses the term “dominated”: to describe minority groups as occupying “a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile,” even as they are subject to the rules and constraints of those in power (xii). As de Certeau writes, despite the “illusion of [power],” which suggests that “the masses are transformed by the conquests and victories of [the powerful]... it is always good to remind ourselves that we mustn’t take people for fools” (176). Instead, it seems worthwhile to pay closer attention to the ingenious, but often unnoticed, ways in which the racially and ethnically marginalized in the U.S. exercise “agency within constraints” (to borrow a phrase from literacy theorists Kaestle and Tinsley), particularly with regard to their creative, adaptive, and often unpredictable uses of language and literacy in everyday life (225).

I title this project *Battle with Words* as a way of acknowledging the ongoing, often unseen, struggle for agency that the marginalized undertake against the powerful using the tools of language and literacy. I use the word “battles,” specifically, as a way of de-neutralizing language, challenging its assumed innocuousness and emphasizing its power and potency as a weapon of the marginalized in everyday life. In this sense, I follow many other scholars who have framed language and literacy as forms of (everyday) warfare and weaponry, as both the tools and the sites of ongoing battles for power: Foucault writes in “The Order of Discourse” that “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is *the thing for which and by which there is struggle*, discourse is the power *which is to be seized*”; Max Weinreich has famously described language as “a dialect with *an army and a navy*” (qtd. in Lippi-Green 43); literacy scholar Janet Cornelius describes literacy as a “*double-edged sword*’

of liberation and control” (144); critical educator Ira Shor writes that “because a *power struggle* surrounds the use of words in every institution of life, there are *tense rules and high prices to pay for talking*” (*Critical* 72); compositionist Geneva Smitherman describes the fight for linguistic diversity in college classrooms as waged by “language rights *warriors*” who seek to defeat the “*opponents* of linguistic democratization” (35); Cushman describes the “tension between structure and agency, between the structuring ideology of institutional representatives and the linguistic savvy of community members” as the “*duels* in the dualities” (xvii); and de Certeau writes that “the gap... institutions have opened between the artificial languages of a regulated operativity and the modes of speech of social groups has always been the scene of *battles* and compromises” (6) (emphases added). The very language used by scholars to discuss language, then, suggests the frequency with which words are associated with battles, weaponry, and warfare. This language is also used in everyday contexts by politicians, the media, and other public figures who call attention to the ways in which language and literacy are the sites of struggle and the tools of agency for many ordinary people. A *CBS Evening News* piece on “black” English and “standard” English, for example, features an African American woman who describes “black” English as a “survival mechanism”; her comment leads the (white) reporter to wrap up his segment by concluding, “Black English is not Standard English spoken badly—Black English is revenge” (qtd. in Lippi-Green 84).

Yet, even as language and literacy are frequently described as tools of power and agency, as sites and sources of struggle and resistance, the specific ways in which language and literacy are *used* as such in everyday life often go unnoticed and undiscussed by many of us, even those scholars who emphasize the importance of language and literacy to sociopolitical struggle. We hear of larger, ongoing battles with and over words—continued efforts to pass English Only legislation or to make English the official language of the U.S., for example—but what of the more routine and quotidian, yet often remarkable and remarkably political, ways in which language and literacy are used by individuals in the contexts of everyday life? How do the

ordinary places where individuals go to do things like apply for government assistance or a driver's license or a bank loan demand that these individuals use language and literacy? How do the institutional sites of everyday life—schools, social security offices, banks, hospitals, police stations, etc.—function as the spaces where significant but often unseen battles with words are waged? These spaces, all of which are settings in the novels I discuss in the following chapters, can be understood as what Mary Louise Pratt describes as *contact zones*, “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). In the novels I examine, the types of “clashes” Pratt describes as occurring in these “highly asymmetrical” contexts are crucially related to issues of language and literacy—what can and cannot be said, what is or is not recorded on paper, and how one can or cannot speak to another are some of the most frequent battles waged in these texts as characters negotiate the ordinary settings of everyday life.

The ordinary “contact-zone” contexts in which battles with words are waged are also, as the aforementioned examples suggest, frequently *institutional* contexts such as schools, social service offices, or government agencies. It is true that, to some degree, bureaucratic and state-run institutions (and the authorities that enforce their rules) use language and literacy to control and constrain all of us, regardless of our racial or ethnic identity. Many of us have likely been frustrated by a parking ticket which leaves no room for our written explanation as to why the meter ran out, providing only check-boxes for us to plead “guilty” or “innocent”; or by a prospective employer who asks only whether we were let go from or voluntarily left our last job, without inviting us to elaborate upon the circumstances. As Scott rightly notes, “so long as speech occurs in any social situation it is saturated with power relations... we all measure our words” (*Domination* 176). However, encounters with authorities and institutions that demand certain forms of language and literacy usage have a particularly constraining effect upon marginalized communities, including not only racial and ethnic minorities, but also women and the working class (among other groups). The forms of constraint that are imposed upon these

different communities are somewhat distinct, however, and the racially and ethnically marginalized face a unique and particularly challenging set of linguistic and literate barriers in their everyday lives. For one thing, many (though certainly not all) racial and ethnic minorities are raised in households and communities where standard English is not the primary or preferred language or dialect of everyday life; as such, these groups are often positioned by the dominant society as “nonnative speakers,” and their language and dialects are largely excluded or even forbidden from use in institutional contexts, including, especially, state-run institutions like schools and the military. As Linda Christensen, a leader of the “Rethinking Schools” movement,² writes in an essay on language and power, the “daily interactions that ‘nonstandard’ language speakers must negotiate when they enter the halls of power—schools, banks, government and employment offices,” etc., contribute not only to racial inequality but also “language inequality,” “whether it’s the marking down of essays because of ‘poor’ grammar or the conscious or unconscious way this lack of dexterity with the language marks a speaker/writer as ‘unfit’ for a position—a job, a college, or a scholarship” (12).

Christensen’s use of the term “speaker/writer” is a useful nod to the ways in which I define “literacy” throughout this project to mean not only reading and writing, but also listening and speaking. The oral/audial aspects of literacy are, for reasons relating to the privileging of the print form in Western societies, often given far less attention in studies of literacy than are the realms of reading and writing (see Part I for a further discussion of this history). However, while written forms of literacy are crucial sites and forms of power in the everyday lives of the marginalized, the spoken word, particularly through emphasis on linguistic standards and “deviant” accents, languages, and dialects, is also a particularly volatile site and form of power struggle in the U.S. Important to this project is the understanding that language and literacy are used together by the dominant in our society to construct the idea of a “standard” American English, a “correct” way both to write *and* to speak. The constructing and enforcing of the concept of a standard English used by all Americans is, in theory, intended to unify the nation,

at least on a mythical/metaphorical level; in practice, however, especially at the level of the everyday, the concept of a standard language is used to divide and discriminate.

Because standard English is the primary—sometimes the only—language used within the institutional bureaucracies of everyday life, ethnic and racial minorities who are also “nonnative speakers” or who speak in a dialect other than standard English often find themselves at a distinct disadvantage during institutional encounters (this is the central argument of Cushman’s *The Struggle and the Tools*, which focuses on urban residents’ encounters with institutions and bureaucracies which attempt to use language and literacy against them). Bureaucracies can often be confusing or difficult to navigate even if one is a “linguistic insider,” familiar with the type of language these institutions use. However, those who are “nonnative” speakers can find such encounters even more challenging. As such, the racially and ethnically marginalized in the U.S. often find that they are also the “linguistically disenfranchised,” to borrow a term from Paulo Freire (*Politics* 18). Because their native or preferred languages are often different from the primary language of the dominant culture, they find themselves at a disadvantage in those circumstances where application processes, forms, interviews, and other tools of bureaucracy assume, expect, or demand that individuals will read, speak, and write in standard English.

Beyond the realm of bureaucracies, however, standard English is also used to divide and discriminate even in the more informal and social contexts of everyday life, where speakers with certain accents and linguistic backgrounds find themselves marked as “other” in some way, whether the designation is that they are “nonnative,” non-American, non-white, or uneducated (or all of the above). Of course, all Americans—indeed, all speakers of language—have some sort of accent; the notion of a standard, uniformly spoken national language is a myth, an impossibility that refuses to acknowledge the myriad ways in which languages come to life and are reborn in new forms in the varied contexts of everyday life. Though many Americans continue to believe in the existence (and importance) of a standard language used by all residents of the U.S., we are indeed an incredibly multilingual and multidialectical nation.

Americans speak, among many other “foreign” languages that have been brought to our shores, Spanish, French, Italian, Japanese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean, Greek, Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Assamese, Urdu, Spanish Creole, French Creole, Hebrew, Russian, Yiddish, Scandinavian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Hmong-Khmer, Laotian, German, Polish, Tagalog, Hiligaynon, Portuguese, Portuguese Creole, Jamaican Patois, Ewondo, Wolof, Ilocano, Cebuano, Samoan, Indic, Hakka, Haitian Creole, Twi, and Igbo. We are also speakers of countless varieties and hybrid forms of English which further suggest the non-existence of a “standard” English: African American English, Appalachian English, Chicano English, Puerto Rican English, Nuyorican English, Cuban English, Hawaiian Creole English, Native American English, Spanglish, Konglish, Chinglish, and Yinglish are only some of the many Englishes that Americans speak and write in. We speak in dialects associated with places as diverse and distant from one another as Southern California, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, Honolulu, Southern Texas, Chesapeake Bay, Boston, and coastal South Carolina. And, of course, people residing within the U.S. also speak a number of indigenous languages and dialects, including Olelo Hawaii, Louisiana Creole, Chicano Spanish, Apache, Sioux, Laguna, Navajo, Nuahtl, Pueblo, Zuni, Hopi, Ute, Choctaw, Cochiti, Cherokee, Iroquois, Kiowa, and Ojibwe. Despite this diversity of languages, however—and despite our nation’s proud claims of multiculturalism—the dominant culture in our society continues to exclude and discriminate against those who do not meet expected and perceived linguistic “standards” in a number of problematic ways. As Lippi-Green writes in *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the U.S.*, although we are a nation that is “so proud of its civil rights legislation and democratic ideals,” we nevertheless continue to “so easily use *accent* [and other “non-standard” forms of speech] to exclude, to limit discourse, and to discredit other—very specific—voices, because they simply do not sound white enough” (228-9).

Certainly, as the above list suggests, it is not only the languages and accents of the racially and ethnically marginalized that are othered by the dominant culture—groups such as

Southern Americans and New Englanders are also regularly stigmatized because of the way they speak (comedian Jeff Foxworthy notes in one of his most popular skits, for example, that most Americans wouldn't want to be operated on by a surgeon with a Southern accent, given the association of this accent with a person who is uneducated, or, as Foxworthy puts it, "stupid" (see *Do You Speak American*)). As Lippi-Green observes, there are many varieties of English which are not valued by the dominant society, especially in educational and professional settings (18). Yet, as Lippi-Green also notes, those languages and accents which are most devalued or held suspect in our society are those associated with the races, ethnicities, and cultures which are deemed most different from or oppositional to the Anglo American dominant culture of the U.S. (239). There is no natural or physiological connection between one's language and one's race or ethnicity, all of which are constructed rather than biological aspects of identity, but there is a strong sociocultural belief in the myth that one's language is physiologically linked to one's racial or ethnic background. As such, those languages, dialects, and accents that are associated with the racial and ethnic groups who are most marginalized in U.S. society become deemed the most "nonstandard" ways of speaking, linguistic threats to the purity of both standard English and white America. Lippi-Green notes in her study of U.S. court cases involving lawsuits over language usage that there are "no documented cases of native speakers of Swedish or Dutch or Gaelic being turned away from jobs because of communicative difficulties," though U.S. residents have been turned away from or lost their jobs for speaking languages (or having accents associated with languages) such as Spanish, Rumanian, Urdu, Khmer, and Hawaiian Creole English (239, 67, 44-45). Lippi-Green's study suggests that, in general, Asian, Indian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European languages and accents are usually deemed unacceptable or even threatening by our dominant culture, while Western European languages and accents (French, British, Swedish, etc.) are not only accepted but often admired or revered, "regardless of the communication difficulties those languages may cause" (146).

The argument Lippi-Green makes throughout *English with an Accent* is well demonstrated all around us in everyday life. Individuals in America are constantly discriminated against, mocked, and humiliated for speaking in languages and accents perceived as “nonstandard,” especially those associated with marginalized ethnic and racial identities. Mainstream media offers one particularly telling site where language discrimination is practiced and, often, openly voiced. Newscasters, radio show announcers, sports broadcasters, and television hosts rarely speak in accents associated with marginalized racial and ethnic groups, and enforce the myth of standard English through both their speech and, often, the content of their material. Consider a recent segment of a popular New York City morning radio show, hosted by a group of individuals all of whom speak in what many Americans might call “white” or “unaccented” English (the lead host, Elvis Duran, is, perhaps unsurprisingly, both white and male). This particular morning’s show featured three different speakers who spoke in “accents” or “dialects” that would be perceived by most Americans as “nonstandard.” The first, a speaker with an Asian accent, called in in response to a question posed by the radio show hosts, who, as is typical on such shows, invited listeners to phone in with their own anecdotal answers. Though the caller’s accented speech was not by any means difficult to understand, after he finished making his comment, one of the hosts carefully and slowly paraphrased what he had said, seemingly both to check with him that she had heard him correctly and to clarify what he said for listeners who might’ve had trouble understanding him. After this, the call was quickly disconnected, with none of the usual ongoing banter or back-and-forth between hosts and callers that the hosts usually initiate when listeners call in. Seemingly, the accented speech of the caller made the idea of engaging in a longer conversation seem undesirable to the hosts, who were eager to move on to the next caller. Later in the show, the hosts played an extended clip of a newscaster interviewing Charles Ramsey, the Cleveland resident who heard the screams of Amanda Berry coming from his next-door neighbor’s house, eventually leading to the discovery that his neighbor had been keeping Berry and two other women imprisoned in his basement for

ten years. While playing the clip, which features Ramsey speaking in a form of African American English, the radio show hosts amusedly refer to Ramsey's speech as "colorful," and describe Ramsey as a "character." The obvious trivialization of Ramsey's way of speaking as comical, "colorful," and "character"-like stands in stark contrast to the ways in which the radio hosts romanticize and admire the French-accented speech of a guest they later have on air from Paris for an extended phone interview. Not only do the radio hosts continually comment on the attractiveness of the guest's accent, but they even ask him to speak a few sentences of French on air (the thought of asking the earlier Asian caller to speak in an Asian language on air seems unimaginable). Throughout the Parisian caller's airtime, which is significantly longer than the airtime given to the Asian-accented caller, romantic music plays in the background as the hosts comment upon how lovely it must be to live in Paris. The value that they associate with the speaker's accent, and, by extension, his culture and ethnicity, is markedly different from the way the hosts treat the other two speakers, and is reflective of the larger cultural tendency to respect and admire Western European languages and cultures, while excluding and marginalizing the languages and cultures of ethnic groups such as Asian and African Americans (*Elvis Duran and the Morning Show*).

While mainstream media may often reinforce and condone the concept of linguistic hegemony and homogeny in the U.S., alternative cultural productions, including, in particular, works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, serve as spaces where the idea of the U.S. as a standard English monolingual nation is both critiqued and challenged. The texts that comprise this field continually emphasize the ways in which words become tools of power, action, and expression used by the racially and ethnically marginalized both to negotiate everyday advantages for themselves and to challenge the linguistic and cultural domination of Anglo America. The opening lines to Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, for example, proclaim, "I will tell you something about stories / they aren't just entertainment / 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" (2). Like Hurston, who calls the tongue the only weapon left to weak folks, Silko figures stories—words—as a form of everyday survival and action for the marginalized. These writers, and many others in the field of multi-ethnic literature, use their writing as a lens for considering the ways in which ordinary encounters are the unrecognized sites of power struggles between the weak and the powerful, with the former using words, which are frequently the only tool available to them, as a way of resisting and circumventing the rules, requirements, obstacles and barriers imposed upon them.

Yet, despite the common exploration of such topics in multi-ethnic U.S. literature, which frequently portrays the amazingly polysemous ways that individuals use language and literacy in everyday life, there is a relative scarcity of discussion in literary criticism regarding the prevalence and importance of language and literacy in this body of writing. Shell and Sollors, curators of the *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000), note the irony of the fact that much contemporary scholarship on American literature has tended to “ignore language as a factor in American literary and cultural diversity” (1). The few book-length studies that do focus on language in multi-ethnic American literature, such as Martha J. Cutter’s *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity* (2005), focus primarily on language usage as it pertains to translation, rather than on the routine uses of language and literacy by ethnic minorities in everyday contexts, many of which necessitate that speakers/writers use English. Although an important topic in and of itself, analyses of the theme of translation in multi-ethnic U.S. literature, which frequently focus on bilingual speakers, often overlook the related theme of bi- and multidialectalisms, which reflect how English itself is used in myriad ways in everyday life by marginalized figures not only as a means of negotiating those circumstances that demand English, but also as a way of challenging and redefining what English is and what it can be used for. At the same time, the few extant

analyses of language in multi-ethnic literature are also problematic in that they often treat language as a metaphorical lens through which to examine and understand broader questions about race, ethnicity, and identity. Certainly, language is related to all of these things, but it is also a tool of power in and of itself, worthy of analysis for its literal uses in everyday life, not just its metaphorical value. Language is, in this body of work especially, not only a metaphorical portrayal of power struggles over race, ethnicity, and identity, but also part of what power struggles center upon, a crucial site of negotiation and contestation in and of itself. Even the best analyses of language in multi-ethnic literature, however, tend to fall back on the idea of language as a metaphor rather than a political tool. Cutter, for example, describes language as a “symbolic bridge” that represents the “fusion and permeation of cultures” (39). Cutter figures language as the symbol for cultural mediation, rather than as a tool of cultural mediation. The theme of language is also used metaphorically by scholars who refer to the racially and ethnically marginalized as “silenced” or “voiceless,” a metaphor for their disenfranchisement within the political and social realms of American society. In *Immigrant Acts*, for example, Lisa Lowe writes that “racial and ethnic differences are *silenced*” by state institutions (144 emphasis added). Such metaphors, though useful for understanding the marginalization of racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., overlook the more concrete ways in which language is used by and against these groups in everyday life.

In general, the roles of language and literacy have been overlooked by scholars studying issues of racial and ethnic identity and inequality in America both in literature and in real life. In recent years, scholars studying identity have expanded their foci beyond the categories of race, class, and gender to include sexuality, national origin, and generation, among other facets of identity; yet language is often either subsumed as part of these other categories, or ignored as too ordinary or neutral to be of interest. As Cutter writes, quoting Kurt Spellmeyer, “when we speak about the politics of language, what is *really* at stake is ‘a dialectic of... powerlessness and power on a scale so intimate and ordinary that our ‘politicized’ profession characteristically

overlooks it” (136). Scott raises a similar point: “until quite recently, much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political” (198). I argue throughout this project, however, that language functions not only as a metaphor for other modes of power, disempowerment, and cultural and political struggle, but, much more importantly, as itself a key player in the battles the racially and ethnically marginalized wage in their struggle for increased agency and opportunity in everyday life. Multi-ethnic works of U.S. literature offer us frameworks for considering the ways in which language is a tool used in the concrete, quotidian struggles these individuals undertake in ordinary contexts, many of which are related to issues of race, ethnicity, citizenship, power, and national belonging.

Despite significant overlaps between multi-ethnic U.S. literature and language and literacy studies, there are surprisingly few scholarly analyses which attempt to bring these fields together. Indeed, the topic of *literacy* almost never, oddly enough, makes its way into *literary* criticisms, while only a few studies of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, like Cutter’s, use theories of language to analyze literary works. There are a few recent works from the fields of composition/rhetoric, literacy theory, and linguistics which explore the intricate relationship between language, literacy and racial identity, such as Vershawn Ashanti Young’s *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* (2007), but there is as yet a study focusing on the intersections of literacy, language, and racial/ethnic subjectivity as they are brought together in works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature. To exemplify the connections I see between multi-ethnic U.S. literature and language and literacy studies, I supplement my analyses of the novels in the coming chapters with scholarship on language usages and literacy practices. To examine language and literacy in both the “formal” and “informal” contexts of everyday life, I complement my use of de Certeau’s and Scott’s theories of political activity in the everyday with ideas from the work of new literacy theorists such as Deborah Brandt, Ellen Cushman, Norman Fairclough, Harvey Graff, and Shirley Brice Heath, all of whom reject the study of language and

literacy in isolation and abstraction in favor of a situated exploration of language and literacy in circumstantial contexts. Since many of the novels I analyze in the coming chapters also explore what happens to language and literacy when formal and informal contexts and usages (as well as authorized and unauthorized individuals) *confront and conflict* with one another, I also use Pratt's concept of contact zones—"social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power"—to frame my discussion of battles with words between the dominant and marginalized cultures of the U.S. (34).

Battles with Words, then, uses fiction—specifically, seven contemporary multi-ethnic U.S. novels—to examine how language and literacy feature in the lives of the racially and ethnically marginalized as both “the struggle and the tools,” to borrow Ellen Cushman's phrase. I show how language and literacy function in these texts as both weapons of the dominant which maintain and reproduce racist, classist systems of power and bureaucracy *and* as tools for those who are positioned as socially, racially, and nationally unauthorized, subjugated, and illegitimate to resist their subordination and domination. While all power relations include linguistic conflicts, struggles between dominant and marginalized groups in the U.S. have been fought largely as struggles with words, as the texts that I examine make clear. Conflicts fueled by unequal power relations emerge regularly in everyday life around both speech and texts: languages, dialects, and accents; rhetorical dimensions of laws and regulations; and written documents ranging from property deeds to welfare applications to school textbooks all play a major role in struggles between the dominant and marginalized cultures in the U.S. Likewise, ordinary conversations and everyday discourses take place within rhetorical protocols governing who can say what, to whom, about what, in what kind of time and place, and in anticipation of what kind of outcomes. In public as well as private encounters, language and literacy emerge as tools for enforcing subordination while also providing agency for resistance. Multi-ethnic American writers frequently critique the culture of “English Only” and literate and linguistic hegemony that has continued to dominate the national landscape of the U.S. throughout the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, indicating their concern with the ways in which language trends intersect with and impact literature, as well as their interest in using literature as a space to explore and critique such trends. By examining multi-ethnic works of literature through a rhetorical lens, this dissertation draws out both what is said and unsaid, what is speakable and unspeakable, what is recorded and unrecorded, when subordinates confront empowered authorities in various contexts. In both “formal” settings—courtrooms, classrooms, social services offices, police stations, etc.—as well as “informal” ones—the home, neighborhood, and community—interactions and outcomes between the powerful and subordinate are determined largely by literate and linguistic factors such as one’s dialect, accent, or first language, familiarity with institutional discourses, and ability to provide “correct” answers or “valid” information using written documents and spoken language. As Jacqueline Jones Royster notes in her study of African American women’s writings, the stakes are high in such encounters, revolving around “lines of accreditation, rights of agency, and the rights to an authority to make knowledge” (3). Time and again in the seven novels I examine throughout this project, authors portray these sorts of high-stakes scenarios, offering us a variety of angles from which to consider the seemingly mundane, ordinary, day-to-day ways in which language and literacy are used by both the marginalized and the powerful as they negotiate various contexts and encounters. While these novels portray the problematic uses of literacy and language in everyday power struggles, they also suggest alternative ways in which language and literacy can be used less hierarchically and more democratically in everyday life. Characters’ tactical and creative deployments of language and literacy demonstrate how each can be used oppositionally in both the structured and casual settings of everyday life, offering models for transforming bureaucratic, institutional, and social encounters. These alternative models should interest not only literary scholars, but also those in the fields of composition, pedagogy, language, literacy, and education.

Part I of *Battles with Words*, “Paper(less) Trails: The (Un)Documented in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*” uses literacy theorist Deborah Brandt’s

notion of the U.S. as a documentary culture to examine Mukherjee's 1989 novel *Jasmine* and Ng's 1993 novel *Bone*, two narratives of illegal immigration from Asia to the U.S. Drawing upon Brandt's discussion of the ways in which written documents—forms, applications, contracts, leases, letters, lists, etc.—are the official basis for authorization, legitimation, and identification of subjects, I examine how undocumented illegal “aliens” in these novels nevertheless attempt to claim authorization and legitimation for themselves, despite not having the official documents demanded by the state for purposes of identification and authorization. Throughout Chapters 1 and 2, I analyze how language becomes enmeshed in power relations through documentation, requiring individuals to “define” and “identify” themselves using written texts designed by those in power. However, I also place particular emphasis on rhetorician Ellen Cushman's claim that the “disempowered” are nevertheless able to “augment... and offset the other representations of the self” which are imposed upon them by those in power through the use of documents and citations (86). In Chapter 1, “Untraceable: Invisibility as Autonomy in *Jasmine*,” I focus on how Mukherjee's novel traces one immigrant woman's ability to slip through the cracks of a politico-legal system which uses citations and documentation to identify both citizen-subjects and “alien” outsiders, allowing her to eventually define both her identity and her citizenship on her own terms. In Chapter 2, “‘America, This Lie of a Country!': Re-Writing the Archives in *Bone*,” I analyze how, in Ng's novel, similarly, we see how Leon—a paper son who tricks the customs guards into letting him enter the U.S. (il)legally—and his stepdaughter Leila create identities and histories (individual, familial, and cultural) which stand in opposition to those which the state assigns to them (or refuses to assign to them) through documentation. Characters in both novels not only challenge and subvert the hegemonic impulses of Documentary America by exhibiting awareness of the malleability and vulnerability of written documents, but ultimately, through their ongoing efforts to produce their own identities and subjectivities in opposition to official documents, also challenge and seek to re-define the very ways in which knowledge and information are produced and legitimized in the U.S.

While Part I analyzes the power of language as it is used in written documents, Part II, “Performing Ethnic Identities: Linguistic Passings in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*,” shifts to an analysis of the power relations inherent within spoken language. Chapter 3, “‘A Different English’: Bearing and Subverting the Standard in *Native Speaker*” and Chapter 4, “‘The Art of Changing’: Linguistic and Racial Passings in *Caucasia*,” focus on *linguistic passing*: situationally altering linguistic performances in addition to or *instead of* altering physical appearance in order to “pass” as a member of, or gain privileged “insider” status within, a particular racial or ethnic group. I begin with an examination of the significance of passing in U.S. history, both as a literary trope and a social reality, to call attention to the fact that much of the anxiety surrounding the concept of passing has been due to what Elam, writing on *Caucasia*, calls a tendency to “visual[ly] fetishiz[e]” race, to assume “that race, even mixed-race, is always optically available and decipherable” (*Souls* 99). The notion that racial identification is always based on what can be *seen*, however, is the very concept that Lee and Senna call into question in their novels by suggesting that, in certain contexts, one’s *linguistic* performance can trump one’s physical appearance in determining both how one’s racial/ethnic background is perceived by others, and, by extension, what opportunities or advantages one is (or is not) offered. At the same time that *Native Speaker* (1995) and *Caucasia* (1998) thus redefine racial passing by shifting emphasis from the visually/physically (in)detectable to the linguistically/audibly (in)detectable, these contemporary passing novels also revise the notion of passing as it is portrayed in many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American texts by representing the act not as one of betrayal of one’s racial/ethnic background or permanent assimilation into mainstream/dominant (white) society, but rather as a *temporary, tactical, situational* act performed by the “passer,” who often has an immediate short-term goal in mind when he or she chooses to pass. In the tactical acts of linguistic passing in these novels, characters engage in conscious *performances* of mainstream language which—representing a particularly powerful example of Scott’s infrapolitics—disguise these individuals

as, if not full-fledged members of, at least complicit with, the dominant racial and linguistic order, allowing them to gain access to certain advantages—economic, social, and political—that benefit themselves, and, often, their families or communities as well. By centering passing on the linguistic and (in)audible, rather than the physical and (in)visible, these texts show the power of language as a resistive and subversive tool for those subject to racist, classist constraints. At the same time, by demonstrating how characters are constantly “passing” in and out of a range of “contact zones” where different uses of language enable (or disable) access to certain opportunities, these texts dramatize how language is a tactical tool of everyday life, used as individuals perform identities to negotiate their circumstances. In this sense, linguistic passing, like the history of passing in general, is a survival strategy and a form of infrapolitics—a method for combatting racism using the tools of trickery and disguise.

If Part I of *Battles with Words* focuses on language in written documents, and Part II focuses on spoken uses of languages, then Part III, “Bad Subjects: Assimilative Schooling and Alternative Education in Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda*, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” brings together the realms of the written and the spoken to examine how demands for standard English language usage, especially in U.S. schools, influence how individuals are expected to use language and literacy, both in formal institutional contexts and in the informal arenas of everyday life. I begin in Chapter 5, “Circumventing Standard English and Formal Education: Everyday Uses of Language and Literacy in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*,” with Oscar Hijuelos’s 1989 novel *The Mambo Kings* in order to examine how ethnic minorities and newly arrived immigrants to the U.S. are able to subvert societal expectations that they acquire “mastery” over standard English language usage. Using de Certeau’s concept of tactics and Scott’s concept of infrapolitics, as well as new literacy theorists’ distinction between “formal” and “informal” literacies, I argue that the informal literate and linguistic activities portrayed throughout Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings* represent a challenge to standard forms of literacy and language usage as well as to formal

schooling—both their inequitable distribution within U.S. society, and, perhaps more interestingly, their limited relevance as compared to situated forms of literacy, language, and learning used in everyday life. I suggest that the informal ways Cesar, Nestor, and Delores gain access to literacy and language alert us to the diverse forms of tactical agency individuals use to acquire education outside of formal institutions. The myriad of ways in which these characters gain access to language and literacy skills without ever stepping foot inside a classroom remind us that in the informal settings of everyday life, literacy and learning patterns occur opportunistically, socially, and unpredictably, as byproducts of the social contexts and interactions forming the situated nature of events. In such contexts, interactions between family, neighbors, coworkers, and community members play important roles in when, how, and why people learn to read, speak, and write, transforming literacy and learning from socially-detached exercises, as they often function within schools, into tools that can be used practically and proactively to grapple with the routine activities, interactions, and problems of everyday life.

However, if the characters in Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings* are able to skirt the demand for standard language and literacy usage in the informal, non-institutionalized contexts of their everyday lives, what happens to those individuals who are forced to attend compulsory education in U.S. schools, perhaps the primary site for the production and enforcement of linguistic "standards"? Such is the question explored throughout Chapter 6, "'They Mustn't Take Your Mind and Use You': The Multiple Educations of Nilda Ramírez," and Chapter 7, "'It Depended on Whether You Knew the Story': The Re-Education of Tayo in *Ceremony*." I argue that Mohr's 1973 novel *Nilda* and Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony* both depict the consequences of what Angela Valenzuela calls "subtractive schooling strategies," which devalue the home and community life and languages of minority and immigrant children as deficits, rather than complements, to formal education in the school. In *Nilda*, this devaluing of the home and community of the schoolchildren of el barrio is most apparent through the prohibition of

Spanish in the classroom; in *Ceremony*, the battle between mainstream U.S. school and home life on the Laguna reservation centers on the languages, values, traditions, and beliefs of Tayo's family and community, which are shunned and ridiculed in the school setting in favor of "official" forms of knowledge, language, and history as these are canonized and legitimated by both the school and the state. Together, both texts speak to the continued role of U.S. schools as what Annette Lareau calls "arms of the state" which function to impose assimilation to national "norms" and "standard" language usage. Yet, to read these texts only as "episodes of cultural and ideological 'force-feeding,'" as one critic has described the school scenes in *Nilda*, is to miss how characters in both texts resist the school's efforts at assimilation and indoctrination (Rico 168). The creative, adaptive, and hybrid ways in which these characters are, instead, able to fashion their own alternative educations, both within and beyond the classroom, offer teacher-readers, especially, significant ideas for thinking about how we might transform learning, education, and the uses of language and literacy in mainstream schools. The conclusion to Part III, housed in the end of Chapter 7, is a consideration of those suggestions: I argue that *The Mambo Kings*, *Nilda*, and *Ceremony* all assert the need for further examination of subtractive schooling and advocate, in a similar vein as new literacy theorists, for situated and contextualized pedagogies which are culturally sensitive to students and which make use of home and community experiences, languages, values, and histories. The conclusion to this section also offers several concrete and practical ways for thinking about how to re-structure our classrooms so that they become sites of multilingualism and multiculturalism, rather than standard English-only spaces of linguistic and cultural hegemony and homogeneity.

Finally, the concluding chapter to *Battles with Words* shifts focus from fictional characters to the authors who created them. In preceding chapters, I focus on how dominant power uses language and literacy to control and constrain, but can never entirely limit—and, indeed, in some cases, helps to spark—the creative agency of those within its constraints. The final chapter, "From Margins to Mainstream: Battles with Words in Academic, Commercial, and

Cultural Contexts,” raises the stakes of that ongoing discussion by asking what happens when those who resist systemic constraints are not the fictive characters of multi-ethnic literature, but rather the writers of multi-ethnic literature themselves. I explore what it means to be an “ethnic” writer whose work—as it passes through publishing houses, high school and college classrooms, community and commercial book clubs, and various other reading publics, academic, commercial, and otherwise—inevitably enters the cultural marketplaces of “mainstream” America. I draw upon Cutter’s discussions of translation and “palatability,” in which she examines how ethnic American literature is (or isn’t) “translated” for “mainstream” American readers on both a literal and a rhetorical level. If we think of translation as both a linguistic and cultural process, several questions arise: which texts “translate best,” linguistically and culturally, into “mainstream” reads, and how does this vary within the different contexts of classrooms, book clubs, best-seller lists, national literary awards, etc.? What is lost or gained in these translations? Which works of ethnic American literature might be deemed “untranslatable” and why? Cutter argues that “what is chosen for translation is often a matter of what the translating culture decides to value” (18). In literary marketplaces, then, works of ethnic American literature become the sites for further battles between the dominant and the marginalized. Like the characters in their novels who struggle for representation, tactically negotiate encounters with gatekeepers, and find ways to be heard within systems that seek to silence them, ethnic American writers regularly encounter battles in telling—and selling—their stories to mainstream publishers and audiences. The conclusion offers several brief analyses of such battles including, in particular, how language usage itself—an author’s decision to stick to standard English or to make their work bi- or multi-lingual or dialectical—helps to facilitate or hinder the movement of a text from the “margins” to the “mainstreams” of our literary canon and larger national culture.

I realize that some readers of this text may object to one or both of its central approaches: the treatment of works by authors from incredibly diverse ethnic and linguistic

backgrounds together under the banner of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, and the use of literature as a lens for examining uses of language and literacy in everyday life. Let me briefly offer such readers justifications for these approaches, beginning with the former. As the conclusion to *Battles with Words* discusses at length, to categorize literature is always problematic, but is also deeply entrenched in the way in which we approach literary studies. In treating writers of various ethnic and racial backgrounds together in one work, I inevitably attempt to construct a category that can encompass the shared aspects of these diverse works, but do not wish, in the process, to collapse or ignore the distinct histories of various pan-ethnic racial groups, such as Asian Americans or Latino/a Americans, or the distinct histories of ethnic groups within these groups, acknowledging that the category “Asian American” is meant to encompass ethnic identities from North Korean to South Korean to Japanese to Chinese to Cambodian to Filipino to Bengali to Pakistani, just as the category “Latino/a American” brings together people of ethnic backgrounds as diverse as Cuban, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Mexican, El Salvadorian and Colombian. Nor do I wish to collapse the two distinct categories of immigrants who have migrated to the U.S. and citizen-minorities who were born in the U.S., or ignore the differences in the types of disenfranchisement and discrimination faced by these two groups because of their different backgrounds and experiences. As Young notes, there are many problematic risks in blurring the different histories of the subject positions of the minority and the immigrant, just as there are risks in blurring the histories of different racially and ethnically marginalized groups (110). However, I hope this project will make apparent that there are also important reasons for drawing connections among and across groups of various different marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds in order to see the ways that the dominant culture in the U.S. attempts to use language and literacy to oppress and disenfranchise all minority groups, who, in turn, use the tools of their oppressors in various (similar and different) ways to resist their own oppression, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. Even as I may draw somewhat “generalized” conclusions through the connections I see between these different texts, I also

always endeavor to explain why I think these connections and conclusions are plausible and important, as well as what the limitations of those connections and conclusions may be, how they may need to be qualified or further explained through closer and continued examinations of the specific histories and present-day realities of given groups.

In examining works by authors from various different racial and ethnic backgrounds in one volume, then, my intention is not to collapse together or ignore the distinct histories of the ethnic groups from which these authors come, but rather to explore the varied ways—sometimes similar, sometimes different—that members of these groups have *responded to* these histories. As my focus is on how racially and ethnically marginalized people in the U.S. exercise agency within the constraints imposed upon them by white power and white privilege, I am interested in examining the myriad ways individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds might respond similarly or differently to oppression and disenfranchisement as these unfold in ordinary circumstances and everyday contexts. Although my work is deeply informed by an awareness of the distinct and separate histories of oppression and disenfranchisement faced not only by Latino/a Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans, but also by ethnic groups within these groups, such as the Sioux and the Laguna Pueblo, whose interactions with white “settlers” occurred on different terms, my focus on the everyday also reveals a great deal of overlap in how individuals of various different racial and ethnic backgrounds respond to the constraints of power as they unfold in both ordinary and unpredictable circumstances. Race and ethnicity, and the histories of disenfranchisement that various marginalized groups in the U.S. have faced because of their race or ethnicity, always shape and are a part of how ordinary circumstances and battles with words unfold in these novels (for example, Leon’s attempt to claim social security benefits in *Bone*, a bureaucratic process which might prove difficult or complicated for just about anyone, is made even more complex by the fact that he is a paper son, having entered the U.S. with false documents during the years of the Chinese Exclusion Act). However, it seems problematic, reductive, and

essentialist to suggest that one's racial or ethnic background alone determines how one responds to power and situations of domination or constraint that one faces in everyday life. Rather, there are a variety of contextual and circumstantial factors, always interrelated with, but not wholly comprised by, one's race or ethnicity, which shape how, when, where, and why one can (or cannot) respond to power or exercise agency in different ways. This text's focus on how specific forms of power generate their own specific forms of resistance is highly attendant, then, not only to the specific forms of racial and ethnic oppression experienced by different groups, which make their way into even the most ordinary and mundane circumstances of everyday life, but also to other contextual and situational circumstances which both enable and constrain the agency or resistance one can exercise in any given situation. To suggest that specific histories of oppression alone dictate how all members of a given racial or ethnic group respond to power and oppression in their individual everyday lives, and to suggest, then, that comparative analyses of the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups are not useful, is to view race and ethnicity through the very essentialist lens that this project hopes to deconstruct in its focus on how resistance and oppression alike are also circumstantial and contextual, and thus ever-changing and adapting, specific not only to history and identity, but also to time and place in the present moment.

I use the term "multi-ethnic U.S. literature," then, to refer to the multiple ethnic groups whose literature has attempted to write back to and against traditional canonical U.S. literature, which has been produced largely by Anglo Americans. This is not to say that whiteness is not an ethnicity—indeed, whiteness contains within it multiple ethnicities, from Irish to Italian to French to Finish to Polish to Russian to Jewish—but whiteness has been figured as virtually invisible in national discourses of race, literature, and culture (see Part II for a further discussion of this topic). Therefore, the use of the term multi-ethnic literatures to distinguish these works from works of Anglo American literature is a way of acknowledging the diverse racial and ethnic groups that comprise the U.S, while also suggesting how whiteness itself,

particularly the distinct form of whiteness associated with Western European Americans, has somehow functioned as excluded from ethnicity, a non-raced, non-ethnic identity that sits powerfully in the center of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic America. The term “multi-ethnic” is also meant to indicate the ways in which categories of race and ethnicity—like the category of whiteness—are always mixed, messy, and not easily definable. In America today, we have African Asian Jews, people who identify as Irish-Bengali and Russian-Colombian and Cuban-Korean-Canadian, speaking to the increasing diversification of what race and ethnicity themselves mean. While I acknowledge that the very notions of race and ethnicity are not easily categorizable or definable, however, I do focus here on four bodies of U.S. ethnic literature—Asian American, Latino/a American, Native American, and African American works—while remaining mindful of the ways in which these communities are vastly different from one another in terms of their histories of marginalization in the U.S., as well as the ways in which these communities contain within them peoples of various different racial, ethnic, geographical, and linguistic backgrounds.

Finally, let me offer my justification for using literature as a lens for examining everyday life. For one thing, my project seeks to bridge what I perceive to be a falsely constructed divide between literary and literacy studies. Many English departments around the country are divided between these fields, with faculty often forced to identify themselves as either scholars of literature or of literacy/language/rhetoric. But the gaps between these fields of study are not as far apart as they have been constructed to seem, and they have important things to offer one another. By compartmentalizing literary and literacy studies as somehow two different things that scholars do, we miss opportunities to consider how literature explores issues of language and literacy, and how theories of language and literacy can help us to better understand literature. My project is an attempt to demonstrate what Singh, Skerrett Jr., and Hogan call the ways in which “sociological inquiry and literary inventiveness serve one another” (13). What might we learn about the sociological experiences of marginalized groups living in the U.S.

through looking at the literature of these groups—especially given that, in many cases, marginalized histories have to be “invented” or recovered in alternative cultural productions like fiction, since they are denied a place within the official archives of national history? Scott, who also uses literature as a lens for examining the subversive political activity that comprises everyday life, writes that in comparison to “the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum” (183). Literature is a useful source for encountering representations of the everyday experiences that we frequently fail to see the significance of, those actions and activities that become the “infrared rays” of everyday life. This was the claim raised in Terry Eagleton’s 1976 work *Criticism and Ideology*, in which he argued that literature is “the most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess. It is in literature, above all, that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive, and immediate fashion the working of ideology in the textures of lived experience” (101).

A number of the scholars whose work most deeply informs my project—including not just scholars of literature, but also of literacy, rhetoric, and linguistics, among other fields—have also emphasized the importance of literature in understanding everyday life, particularly the politicized aspects of ordinary experiences and the way languages and literacies are put to use in these everyday contexts. Linguist Rosina Lippi-Green, for example, writes that “the novel is one of the most interesting points of access to current language ideology, in that the way that characters in novels use language and talk about language can be revealing” (182). Noting that authors like Alice Walker “us[e] language issues to illustrate the emotional cost of assimilation,” Lippi-Green argues that it is in this way that “novelists provide insight into a cultural phenomenon which is otherwise inaccessible” (186). Michele Elam, whose work focuses on race studies and contemporary forms of racial passing, also argues for the importance of literature in

understanding issues of race in the everyday. Quoting Susan Koshy's "Why the Humanities Matter for Race Studies Today," Elam writes that

transformations in racial understandings frequently elude social science frameworks, for they "often erupt and are manifested in films, stories, theatrical and quotidian performances... before they assume a social density and critical mass that enable empirical analysis of these phenomena. In other words, they inhabit and operate in a dimension of the human and the social that the humanities are uniquely positioned to investigate and illuminate." (*Souls* xv)

Similarly, de Certeau argues that the "indexes of particulars—the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday—...enter massively into the novel or the short story... they find there a new representational space, that of fiction, populated by everyday virtuositities that science doesn't know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognized by readers, of... micro-stories" (70). Because it is the marginalized who are the most restricted by dominant systems of power, yet who, because of these very restrictions, are also arguably the most creative in their use of everyday tactics that help them to gain advantages and opportunities in the face of systemic constraints, an examination of multi-ethnic U.S. literature sheds light upon the amazing myriad of ways in which marginalized individuals resist political and social systems, rules, authorities, and discourses in small and subtle and often unseen ways on a day-to-day basis. By offering a look at the everyday, lived experiences that individuals have with language and literacy, literature makes up for a dearth of attention to the ordinary uses of these tools in everyday lives. As Brandt notes, "direct accounts about how ordinary people have acquired [language and literacy] and their motivations for doing so are largely missing from the record of mass literacy development" (10). Though the fictive stories presented in works of literature cannot, of course, be taken as factual evidence of ordinary people's experiences with language and literacy, they do speak to what Brandt calls the "missing record" of non-fictive accounts of ordinary literacy and language usage, offering much-needed *representations* of how ordinary

people *may* experience and use language and literacy in everyday life, allowing us to at least imagine and reflect upon a topic generally overlooked or ignored. This is not mere whimsical speculation, but arguably itself a form of scholarly activity. Royster's concept of "critical imagination" is useful here: Royster uses this term to suggest ways of *seeing possibilities* and connections as researchers, especially with regard to hidden or unrecoverable histories, such as are often portrayed in works of literature. As Royster writes, "this paradigm for the recovery and reenvisioning of experience recognizes not just the potential for knowledge-making but also the potential for an understanding that exists as the intersections of scholarship and creative imagination" (84). It is the work of the critic-scholar to uncover the everyday in the places it is recorded, including, especially, in the literature and cultural productions that function as alternative archives to official national history and knowledge. As literacy theorist Linda Flower puts it, "grand narratives... can blind us to the distinctive forms 'agency, capability, and ability' may take in nonheroic, ideologically enmeshed lives within the press of limiting situations." Flower claims that "when we fail to see the markers of agency... the problem may [be]... in us and the indicators we are looking for. Affirming others can mean teaching ourselves to see and represent what the popular scripts deny" (201). Such is the work *Battles with Words* attempts to do: to see and to represent that which has been hidden and denied within both the national archives and grand narratives of U.S. history and the fabric of everyday life.

The study of the particular works of literature that I examine throughout this project is also important because, alongside their representations of uses of language and literacy in power struggles, these works also suggest alternative ways of using language and literacy more democratically and less hierarchically, more creatively and less constrictively, in our society. The novels I examine offer models for how encounters with authority might be more communicative and dialogic; for how knowledge and history might be constructed differently in order to allow for multiple versions of a story other than just the "official" one; for how language and literacy education might be broadened beyond the site of school in order to encourage the

learning and use of alternate forms of linguistic and literate activity. Furthermore, the very form of these works are themselves ways of challenging standard languages and official discourses, themselves ways of playing with, adapting, and transforming how languages and literacies are put to use. By their very nature as works of *creative writing*, these texts offer us not only ways of thinking about how to use language differently, but also examples of how language already *is* used in different, myriad ways within our culture all of the time. The form of the texts I examine reiterates the messages their content contains about language diversity and literate creativity as they are deployed in everyday life.

Finally, let me say that, at times, the reader of this volume may feel that my positions are contradictory, that I emphasize both the oppressive and liberatory nature of language and literacy at different points and to different degrees. The form of the work, though, is meant to mirror the ongoing struggles between liberation and oppression that occur through and around language and literacy in everyday life—the continuous “push-and-pull” structure of this work is meant to reflect the continuously occurring microcosmic battles with words that are always taking place around us.

Part I

Paper(less) Trails: The (Un)Documented in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

“I have made emotional, social, and political commitments to this country. I have earned the right to think of myself as an American” – Bharati Mukherjee, “Beyond Multiculturalism”

“A body is itself defined, delimited, and articulated by what writes it” – Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

“The public transcript is not the whole story” – James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

In *Literacy and American Lives*, Deborah Brandt describes contemporary America as a “documentary” society where written documents—forms, applications, contracts, leases, deeds, citations, letters, lists, etc.—are the official basis for identification, authorization, and legitimation of peoples, events, and histories (48). Written documents serve the powerful function of writing into existence those rules, norms, and customs which support the dominant culture of the nation, while also seeking to write *out* of history those groups, events, circumstances, and individuals which seem to present challenges or threats to the dominant culture. Recent years have certainly attested to Americans’ strong belief in the power of documents to confirm, authorize, define, legitimate, prove, include, and exclude: the 2010 passage of Arizona’s Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (more commonly known as Arizona Senate Bill 1070), which made it a crime for immigrants to be in public without carrying the required documents, was a particularly telling example, as was the national preoccupation two years earlier with President Obama’s birthplace, which resulted in demands that he show his birth certificate to the American public in order to prove that he was born in the U.S. (ultimately, the certificate was posted to the White House website to allay concerns about whether or not there was any documented proof of Obama’s right to the presidency). Brandt notes, however, that documentation-based forms of power and control

have been steadily rising throughout the entirety of the twentieth century—that “more and more aspects of economic, political, and even social relationships [are now] being conducted through documents” than ever before as a result of a steady “growth in bureaucratic structures, interdependence, planning, restrictions on the flow of information, and other forms of control, all based largely on written and other symbol-based instruments” (48). As such, Brandt argues, “documents [have] become a site”—in fact, one of the most crucial sites—“on which struggles for rights and resources play out” (50). In *Documentary America*,

Documentary procedures of any organization [are] its “enforced linguistic resources”... the manner and substance in which organizational thinking and action occur. That which is unrepresented or unreported falls away as if it were not there or had not happened. When documents then become the basis of official decision making, their power grows even more profound. Written reports in schools, mental health facilities, credit bureaus, prisons, hospitals, divorce court, personnel departments, adoption agencies, and Social Security offices—in fact, documents in all modern organizations—control the way that decisions are made, justice is rendered, and resources are distributed. The dominion of documents in very real ways *constructs who we are and to what we are and are not entitled*. (Brandt 48-49 emphasis added)

Demonstrating Brandt’s argument through her ethnographic analyses of inner-city life, rhetorician Ellen Cushman has also discussed at length the ways in which documents structure, shape, and inform the very fabric of everyday life, particularly for the socially and economically disenfranchised. Cushman argues that applications and verification forms indicate the “domination of language” within written communication, requiring the individuals who are forced to use them—both the representatives of bureaucracies and those who must regularly deal with bureaucracy in their everyday lives—to acquire a certain level of “bureaucratic literacy” in order to effectively navigate such documents (67, 77). As in other battles with words, the stakes are high here: as Cushman notes, during institutional and bureaucratic encounters, “the

simplest of language activities—filling in the blank” becomes a very loaded, highly politicized, and rhetorically significant act (12). Indeed, one of documentation’s most central functions as well as one of its most obvious effects is the maintenance and reinforcement of structural inequalities in America, as those with what Pierre Bourdieu calls economic and cultural capital can more successfully navigate documents, paperwork, and bureaucratic encounters (and, as we see in the novels that are the focus of the next two chapters, can also more easily acquire the kinds of documents needed to prove one’s social, economic, or political legitimacy.). Individuals with greater economic and cultural capital are more equipped to use their “bureaucratic literacy” to fill in the blanks with “acceptable” answers about employment history, educational background, and financial income; are better able to provide legitimate and accredited references as part of a background check; and are more comfortable using the language of bureaucracy to successfully negotiate their way through bureaucratic interviews and encounters, better prepared to give the “right” answers to questions and to frame both their answers and *themselves* in the right way. Those without these forms of cultural and economic capital and their attendant literate and linguistic sensibilities often find their information, answers, and experiences discounted or deemed illegitimate (what Foucault famously called disqualified discourses), with no spaces available for their stories or histories within the official records and documents of institutional and state-run bureaucracies.

Even before what Brandt calls the rise of Documentary America throughout the twentieth century, the U.S. and its dominant racial/ethnic culture have had a long history of using documents, citations, legal forms, and records to oppress, dispossess, marginalize, and strip away the rights of non-dominant individuals and groups. Some of the earliest examples of this include the use of contracts, deeds, and other “authorized” documents written in English to justify white settlers’ theft of Native American lands. Settlers showed written documents to the natives which they could not read; as such, they were often unsure of how to defend their land against the documents’ supposed claims, and were frequently tricked into “giving” land away

when it was not forcibly taken from them. The need to be literate in the standard language of the dominant culture in order to exercise one's rights and protect one's self and one's community from those in power has thus been a feature of everyday life in our nation since its very inception. As Brandt explains, throughout the course of American history, "literacy [in English] came to be presumed of the citizen in both political and economic dimensions. Voting, serving on a jury, and seeking entitlements all required access to information that was embodied in writing. Likewise, under the rules of contract, signers were expected to know what they signing and were bound by it." Thus, although literacy in principle is "a foundation of American democracy," in practice it has often been "a troublesome source of inequity and disequilibrium in the administration of justice... staying informed, exercising rights, and claiming a fair share of public resources" all require "the negotiation of increasingly complex institutional systems and their thickets of documents" (48). Those without the ability to fully understand or negotiate the "thickets of documents" used to structure everyday life in America frequently find themselves at a noticeable disadvantage, economically, socially, politically, and otherwise.

That the written documents used by bureaucracies and authorities can have very real, significant impacts on the day-to-day lives of people is indicated quite clearly by the focus of the first national study of functional literacy undertaken in the 1970s. Entitled the "Survival Literacy Study," the project, run by a National Reading Council group appointed by President Nixon, sought to test the ability of people over the ages of 16 to read, understand, and complete *application forms*, effectively defining both literacy and survival solely in terms of people's ability to fill out bureaucratic documents. The study used five forms to test people's chances of survival in the U.S.: a personal identification information form and applications for a driver's license, bank loan, Medicaid, and public assistance. Respondents were then grouped into categories such as "low survival," "marginal survival," "questionable survival," and "likely survival" based on their abilities to navigate and complete the documents. This is both a

remarkably limited and remarkably telling approach to a national literacy study, powerfully indicating the extent to which our nation's leaders prioritize the importance of bureaucratic literacy as a means of negotiating—indeed, surviving—everyday life.¹

The impact that bureaucratic documents—seemingly simply “fill-in-the-blank” forms—have on our everyday lives is persuasively rendered in Cushman's ethnographic study *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*. In addition to demonstrating the ways in which these documents inscribe the “domination of language” into everyday forms of written communication, Cushman's study is also a portrayal of the “complexity of the linguistic resources needed to fill out these forms in the first place” (67, 10). Indeed, the individuals interviewed for her study frequently commented on these complexities, expressing confusion, anger, and frustration about the challenges the documents pose: “You seen how long those forms be? You answer one question wrong, and you ain't getting shit” (10-11). The inner-city residents that make up the focus of Cushman's study see themselves as taking a risk with every blank for which they provide an answer, often preparing beforehand for bureaucratic encounters, frequently in collaborative groups, so they can plan the best ways to fill out forms and decide which answers will yield the best results during interviews and other exchanges with authorities. Cushman repeatedly notes the “careful linguistic choices” city residents make when completing forms such as welfare and rental applications—they are well aware that “the amount and type of resources they receive depends upon the rhetorical selections they make when completing these forms” (12). Indeed, the extent to which bureaucratic documents structure the everyday lives of the residents in Cushman's study lends credence to the Nixon-era claim of bureaucratic literacy as crucial to survival: for many of these inner-city residents, access to food, shelter, healthcare, and financial income depends almost entirely on their ability to navigate the world of bureaucracy, including, especially, its endless range of forms and documents, each different from the next.

In a chapter from *Struggle* entitled “The Language of Eviction,” Cushman includes reproductions of a series of forms and letters which demonstrate the extent to which bureaucracies seek to limit face-to-face, spoken, dialogic communication through the use of written documents. A form regarding “Notice of Change in Payment for Social Security,” for example, makes clear that face-to-face interaction is not permitted for individuals seeking a case review; rather, the case will be evaluated and the outcome determined only through the written documentation the social security office has on file: “You have a right to review the facts in your file. You can give us more facts to add to your file. Then we’ll decide your case again. You won’t meet with the person who decides your case. This is the only kind of appeal can you have” (82). Cushman’s aim here, and throughout much of *Struggle*, is to demonstrate the ways in which a “documentary” society (to again borrow Brandt’s term, which I make use of throughout Part I) depends largely upon dehumanizing systems and structures which reduce both individuals and communication to mere blanks to be filled in. As we saw in the case of the Survival Literacy Study, to be literate in America means to be able to navigate one’s way through documentation, which very often means knowing how to simplify the story, how to give or get the “basic facts” and “correct” answers. Documentation’s attempt to capture situations, problems, and even individual and collective identities² using pre-determined blank spaces on forms and limited sets of basic information (name, gender, race, date of birth, birthplace, etc.) results in an omission of those details which create a more layered, contextualized, multidimensional portrayal of persons, situations, events, and histories. Bureaucracy’s forms, questionnaires, applications, and other forms of documentation serve to cut the story short—in other words, they seek only that information which the system deems relevant, legitimate, categorizable, and authorizable, often leaving out exactly those details or parts of a story which the individual *encountering* bureaucracy deems most significant. As Norman Fairclough notes, the very ways that these forms are set up and the structural elements they include dictate not only what gets written in the spaces and blanks, but also what does *not* get written, and, as a result, becomes

blocked from view and unrecorded in official records and archives (139). An employment application that asks for a job-seeker's educational background but only leaves spaces for institutions attended and degrees earned, for example, refuses to take into account other, non-institutionalized forms of learning, education, and experience that might prove quite useful to a job (in this case, documentation's inability to capture the "whole story" negatively impacts both employer and employee). Such a form not only denies the varied subjectivity of the individual, but also helps to further structural inequality, since those with Bourdieu's cultural and economic capital of "high distinction" can better fill in these sort of blanks with the required information; those who cannot deploy high-status linguistic tools, on the other hand, find their own varied forms of knowledge and experience discounted and deemed illegitimate through the simple exclusion of a space for such answers on the form. As such, the image of "identity" that such forms capture is often at conflict with the ways in which an individual would choose to portray him or herself, forcing the individual to conform self-representation to meet the spaces provided on the form. Fairclough calls this process the "routine insensitive manipulation of people in the interests of bureaucratic goals of efficiency" (41). As Sarah Evans notes in *Personal Politics*, an account of her involvement in the Civil Rights movement which focuses in part on the ways bureaucracy hindered the movement's development, such efficiency "suppresse[s] emotion and passion," providing sterile, dehumanized images of individuals and experiences which fail to capture more true-to-life representations³ (12).

While Brandt traces the rise of a documentary society in the U.S. primarily throughout the twentieth century, this development in fact belongs to a much longer and larger Western modernist tradition which has continuously privileged the written over and often in opposition to the oral. Western societies have historically valued the written as a sign of civilization, progress, and modernity, and, as such, have labeled indigenous and non-Western cultures that rely primarily upon oral forms of communication as both backward and illiterate. As de Certeau writes,

“Progress” is scriptural in type. In very diverse ways, orality is defined by (or as) that from which a “legitimate” practice—whether in science, politics, or the classroom, etc.—must differentiate itself. The “oral” is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the “scriptural” [the realm of the written] is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and traditions. A frontier (and a front) of Western culture is established by that separation. (134)

In the U.S. as in many other Western nations, the written word has come to hold a hierarchical position well above that of oral forms of communication. The continuum between oral and written forms of communication, as well as the ways in which the two often blend or collapse into one another, are denied within such a hierarchy, as the connections between the oral and the written are hidden or displaced by a dichotomous discourse. The written word becomes the utmost source of authority, such that things must be written, recorded, filed, and documented in order to be legitimate(d). In such a culture, the common saying “word is bond,” used to imply a mutual trust or agreement between two individuals based on a verbal exchange taken as an “oral contract,” becomes irrelevant, invalid—things only truly have validity or legitimacy when they are put in writing, never when they are merely spoken.⁴

If a documentary society privileges some forms of communication over others, legitimating the written while denying the oral, it follows that such a society also privileges and preserves some histories while hiding or erasing others: what gets written, what makes it “into the books” or “onto the records” is what is remembered, authenticated, and legitimated, while those unrecorded events, circumstances, and experiences that are not documented become the histories that are deemed illegitimate and unauthorized, and thus denied, silenced, or forgotten. While some histories (those that support and reinforce dominant culture and ideologies) become transformed into fact—into History with a capital H—others get re-positioned as stories, fables, or myths, if they continue to be told or preserved at all. Bharati Mukherjee, the Bengali American author of the novel that is the focus of the next chapter, talks in an interview about the

ways in which the oral storytelling culture of the Hindu people was denigrated and discounted by British colonists, who “forced generations of Indian writers to value British models [of writing]” and “managed to convince Indians that British literature was rational, realistic, and superior, that Indian [oral] literature... was childish” (Hancock 41). In a similar way, the dominant culture in the U.S. has denigrated and discounted the literatures, stories, and histories (oral *and* written) of its marginalized peoples and cultures, from Indian Americans to African Americans to Native Americans.⁵

Documentation, then, serves to maintain and reinforce racial, ethnic, social, and class-based hierarchies through the forms, papers, and applications that comprise the materials of our everyday lives. Yet, as with all attempts to constrain, conform, categorize, and count (or discount) individuals, marginalized peoples have continually found ways to resist, subvert, and challenge the control that Documentary America seeks to exert over everyday lives. Within many marginalized communities there is a long history of treating (bureaucratic) literacy as a collective resource to be shared and distributed among individuals, as a means of subverting the challenges posed to those individuals within the community who might lack the type or level of literacy necessary to successfully negotiate such encounters. In Cushman’s study, she describes the ways inner-city residents in the late twentieth century helped to coach and prepare one another for bureaucratic encounters with welfare workers, landlords, and other authority figures; a century early, in the aftermath of the Civil War and dawn of Reconstruction, those few freed slaves who were able to read and write were instrumental in helping their fellow freedmen to avoid being tricked into signing themselves into indentured servitude (Cornelius 143). In addition to using literacy skills collaboratively as a means of thwarting the challenges bureaucracy imposes on marginalized peoples, many individuals who find themselves constrained by bureaucracy’s rules—often because they don’t have the papers necessary to legitimate or prove themselves—find ways to circumvent these constraints, including through acts of forgery or the creation of fake documents. A well-known example is Frederick Douglass’s

forging of the note that allowed him to escape to freedom, a story which spread throughout the South, inspiring the forged escape notes of other slaves (Royster 134). Using his literate abilities (illegal for slaves to have at the time), Douglass created his own form of “freedom papers,” self-authorizing his right to be free. In a similar way, Richard Wright found ways around the restrictions of a segregated city while growing up in early-twentieth-century Memphis: he gained access to the whites-only public library, for example, by “forging requests from a white patron and pretending to be his illiterate servant” (Brodhead 112).

Just as these men and others found ways to “authorize” themselves, creating legitimate-seeming papers when no actually legitimate documents could be acquired, the members of marginalized communities in America have also historically found ways to record and preserve their own histories, even as those in power seek to keep those histories “off the record.” This is evidenced not only through more visible cultural forms such as the prolific number of novels, plays, poetry, stories, and essays that have been produced by multi-ethnic writers as a means of developing counter-narratives that respond to and reconstruct the “Official” narrative of U.S. history, but also through the more everyday ways in which individuals, families, and communities record their own histories and remember their own stories. Stanley James, one of the people interviewed in Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*, offers a useful example of the ordinary ways in which histories become recorded by everyday people. In the county that James grew up in during the early twentieth century, the government refused to issue birth certificates to nonwhite citizens until 1929. As James explains it, “the doctor kept a record... but if the doctor died, you had no record” (116). In order to “certify” themselves and their birthdates, then, people in James’s community creatively (mis)used the Bible as a text not only of religious doctrine, but of family history: each family bible had a family tree drawn into the front of it, and in that way, the birthdates, names, and places of these individuals were recorded by themselves, even if not by the state. James’s story speaks to the myriad of creative, tactical ways in which individuals preserve their own histories and claim their own identities in spite of—and because

of—the ways in which they are defined, included, or excluded by formal systems of documentation.

In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), two narratives of (illegal) immigration to the U.S. which are the focus of the next chapters, characters make creative (mis)use of documents in order to authorize, prove, legitimate, or record themselves, their identities, and their histories in ways similar to the examples described above. In these novels, however, characters' subversive activities are directly related to their status as illegal immigrants in the U.S. As such, both texts speak to the complicated histories of Asian immigration to America,⁶ which have included continuous attempts on the part of the U.S. government to use documentation to exclude or limit legal entry of Asian peoples into the country, both through the use of identification papers that determine who can or cannot enter, and by writing into law the racist policies of exclusion that determined who could and could not access such papers. In *Jasmine*, which traces a young Indian woman's (illegal) immigration to America, and in *Bone*, which explores the (illegal) immigration history of a multigenerational Chinese American family, the complicated relationship between immigration and documentation is made clear, revealing the bureaucratic ways in which documents themselves structure the very term of who enters (and doesn't enter) the country—and how. Certainly, the (dys)functional and (in)efficient nature of bureaucracy can have a particularly damaging impact on immigrants and immigrant-hopefuls to the U.S., as both texts show. The bureaucratic processes that structure immigration into the U.S. are ones that many immigrants, particularly non-English-speaking ones, struggle to understand or make sense of, even as they are aware that these processes determine whether they are accepted, deported, or left in limbo. For example, when a decision on immigration status is appealed and the case goes to trial, the process can take years, even decades; the slow pace of bureaucracy, with all of its attendant red tape, works to slowly delay—perhaps indefinitely—the granting of legal residency, even as the immigrant often continues to reside in America while he or she waits for an answer, thus setting

up a marginal, extralegal existence. Bureaucracy leaves these migrants and others like them marked as neither legal nor illegal—they inhabit an il/legal borderland, just as they often inhabit geographical, linguistic, and cultural borderlands. The documents that are used to tell the “rules of the game” with regard to acquiring citizenship or legal residency in America are often in a language foreign to those who seek to learn the rules, leaving many unable to successfully navigate the system.

However, the constraints, restrictions, and limitations of such a system have also encouraged (illegal) immigrants to find ways to bend, break, or circumnavigate these rules, to skirt or altogether avoid the constraints of a system that seems too unmanageable or irreproachable to face head on. In Mukherjee’s and Ng’s novels, characters mis-use, re-use, subvert, and challenge the forms of documentation that are meant to track, locate, identify, and define immigrant subjects. At the same time, these texts demonstrate that a documentary society—one which places its faith in the authority and permanency of that which is put in writing⁷—is an inherently vulnerable and manipulable society, one whose records are neither as accurate nor as secure as they seem. The astonishing number of immigrants in both novels who enter the U.S. illegally, whether by using false documents to claim citizenship, as is the case for many characters in *Bone*, or by skirting the system of documentation altogether by crossing the border into America undetected, as many do in *Jasmine*, suggests that those systems of documentation used by state bureaucracies to identify, authorize, and legitimize subjects are not nearly as totalizing or comprehensive as they may seem. While it is certainly true that the documents used by the state play a crucial role in defining, controlling, and constraining the lives of characters in these novels (and of many immigrants in the U.S.), largely determining the extent to which the characters are marked as “legal” or “illegal,” included or excluded, we also see that characters are able to beat the system in a surprising range of ways, not only resisting the controls and constraints documentation imposes, but also challenging and changing the ways in which their identities are captured and defined by the state through the use of

documents. Not only do characters use all sorts of fake and forged documents to pass themselves off as legitimate citizens or authorized residents of the U.S., but they also find ways to exist in America without any papers at all, remaining “off the radar” and undetected by the watchful eye of the law, thus eliding the systems of documentation and identification altogether. In addition, though many of the characters in *Bone* and *Jasmine* find themselves among those who are uncoun­ted, unre­ported, or unre­presented in “official records” (some because they *choose* to remain uncoun­ted and unre­presented, finding a certain security in invisibility), characters in these texts also find ways to write *back* against those systems of documentation that seek to define them and identify them in con­straining ways or to leave them altogether uncoun­ted and ignored. Characters such as *Bone*’s Leon, for example, find ways to re-write and revise the archives that are used to capture and record History and identities, creating their own counter-narratives which offer different forms and means of representation. At the same time, the counter-narratives that emerge in these novels help to redefine the very idea of what it means to (try to) document an individual, a people, or a nation. The stories told in *Jasmine* and *Bone* show how many individuals and histories go unre­presented in a documentary society, but also demonstrate the diverse ways in which individuals testify to, remember, and pass on their own histories, leaving their mark on America even as official records and archives seek to write them out of national History.

Before turning to a more in-depth discussion of *Jasmine* and *Bone*, it is worthwhile to mention the frequency with which critiques of and challenges to Documentary America emerge throughout other works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, many of which could have been included in Part I had I more time and space. Many multi-ethnic U.S. writers have portrayed the oppressive power of a documentary society—including the startling ability of documents themselves to define, control, identify, include, and exclude—while also using their literature to tell the stories of the invisible and the undocumented, those who are born in, or come to and remain in, America without those (legitimate) papers (green cards, birth certificates, property

deeds, etc.) needed to be counted or included, but who nevertheless lay claim to their own identities, experiences, and histories in ways which exceed and defy the documents used by state-run bureaucracies. Toni Morrison, for example has continuously depicted the ways in which the powerful use written documents to cheat, steal, and lie their way through encounters with the disempowered, a theme that runs throughout almost every single one of her major works. In *Jazz* (1992), we learn that Joe Trace was run off of his land “with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed” (126); in *Song of Solomon* (1977), similarly, Macon Dead laments that “everything bad that ever happened to [his family] happened because [his father] couldn’t read.” Macon tells us that his father, who “never read nothing... said he couldn’t remember those little marks from one day to the next,” was “tricked” into signing something, “I don’t know what, and they told him they owned his property” (53). Through the use of documents, Macon’s family loses not only their land, but also their name: Macon also relays the story of what occurred when his father went to register his name at the Freedman’s Bureau, an event which Macon sees as responsible for stripping the family of their ancestral identity and history. As Macon describes it, the family’s very lineage is lost simply because of something “scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness”:

Surely, [Macon] thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise... but who this young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. [Macon’s] own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a name 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 thoughtless by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army. (17-18)

Though in this passage Macon describes his parents’ attitude as one of “resignation” throughout this encounter, later in the narrative he tells us that his father did, in fact, make sure to give the

right information regarding their family name and history, but that “the Yankee wrote it all down... in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, whatever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, ‘Dead,’ comma ‘Macon’” (53). Through a simple accident of bureaucracy, the family’s name is permanently (mis-)recorded, an act of documentation which Macon fears results in the loss of a family history that is irrecoverable.

However, Morrison has also used her literature to depict the ways in which the disempowered—particularly the enslaved—have found ways of subverting or reappropriating those systems of documentation which seek to oppress and control them. In *Tar Baby* (1981), for example, Son uses false identities, some “authorized” through fictitious or forged documents and some not, in order to avoid having to reveal his real name:

in eight years he’d had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself. Actually the name most truly his wasn’t on any of the Social Security cards, union dues cards, discharge papers, and everybody who knew it or remembered it in connection with him could very well be dead. Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were... fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least. (139)

Just as frequently as they are controlled or constrained by a documentary society, then, Morrison’s characters are able to manipulate or appropriate the tools of such a society to work in their favor or to their advantage. It is also worth noting that, in frequently crafting characters whose voices speak from “unauthorized” places outside of the realm of official History, Morrison herself resists the function of formal documentation through her writing by representing counter-narratives and histories that have gone unrecorded. As Mathieson notes of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), “Morrison works through the voice and consciousness of former slaves recently freed in the upheavals of the Civil War. *Writing through the sensibilities of people who lacked*

means to record permanently their own thoughts, Morrison nonetheless pursues the emotional complexity of their inner experience rather than the documented historical events in which they are embedded” (217-18 emphasis added). Refusing to grant authority to those narratives that have already been documented in writing and legitimated by U.S. History or the American Literary Canon, Morrison resists a documentary society’s impulse to record and preserve some histories at the expense of others, instead choosing to preserve and record alternate histories and memories in alternate ways.

If Morrison’s works acknowledge and give voice to those individuals and histories that Official History has failed to document, Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel *Caucasia*, discussed in Chapter 4, shows the ways in which Official History and the records that comprise it obscure other histories from view. Birdie, the biracial daughter of a white mother and black father, literally sees her mother’s family history made visible in writing everywhere around her. A descendant of Cotton Mather, Birdie’s mother can trace her family history back for centuries, and Birdie, too, can trace this history in the stone monuments of Boston which commemorate the founding fathers, in the books she is given to read in school, and even on television. Yet, she observes that though there were “remnants of [her mother’s] family everywhere—history books, PBS specials, plaques in Harvard Square—[her] father’s family was a mystery.” Of her father Deck and his sister Dot, the only other relative of Deck’s that Birdie knows anything about, Birdie says “it was as if [they] had arisen out of thin air” (100). While documentation lends history, value, and validity to the side of the family descended from the Mathers, Birdie’s African American family history is almost an apparition, as untraceable as a ghost in the archives of Bostonian and American history.

In *Nilda*, the Puerto Rican American novel by Nicholasa Mohr which is the focus of my sixth chapter, we see a delicate balance of power similar to the type Morrison portrays in her fiction: representatives of powerful institutions and bureaucracies such as the school and welfare office attempt to use forms and documents to get the simplified (and often stereotypical)

versions of the stories of people in el barrio, but just as frequently, the people in Nilda's life use creative, tactical, and manipulative answers to control what these representatives are ultimately able to record on paper. For example, when a welfare investigator comes to visit Nilda's home, Nilda's stepfather tries to explain why they need temporary assistance while he is out of work due to illness, but his detailed explanation is cut short by the investigator, who implies that this information is superfluous and not necessary for her to conduct her investigation: "Yes,' the social worker said [in response]. 'Well now, I have to look around and just fill out a few forms. If you don't mind, I really have to get on'" (122). Her statement indicates that this is an issue of time and efficiency, important concerns of bureaucratic systems. The nature of bureaucracy doesn't permit the investigator to stay for long, nor does it allow for lengthy, in-depth conversations through which those being investigated can explain the reasons—the history—behind their current circumstances, or offer some insight into the complexity of situations like the one Nilda's family finds themselves in when they resort to applying for public assistance. Rather, the investigator's forms only leave room for a quick and simplified version of the condition of Nilda's home and family life, one which will nevertheless be used to determine if they "deserve" the public assistance they desperately need to continue to put food on the table. However, although the answers the investigator can put down are limited, and do not leave room for Nilda's stepfather's longer explanations, Nilda's mother Lydia nevertheless coaches the family before the investigator's visit on the ways in which they can control and manipulate the answers to the questions they *are* asked, in order to exert some agency over what ultimately makes it into the welfare agent's report. Their providing of misinformation—for example, telling the investigator that Nilda's brother's girlfriend and her child are only staying for a short visit, when they actually live with the family—allows Nilda's family some degree of control throughout this encounter, even if all of the details of their story cannot make it into the investigator's written account.⁸

Just as bureaucracy and documentation invade and pervade the everyday lives of the people in *Nilda*, so too does documentation play a critical role in controlling the lives of the characters in Gloria Naylor's short story cycle *The Women of Brewster Place*, which portrays the ways in which such systems stricture and structure the lives of the imprisoned and their families. When Mattie Michaels's son Basil goes to jail following an arrest, she is given a written document explaining the rules and regulations family members must follow in order to visit the incarcerated. She very quickly realizes that this document now exerts complete control over when she can and cannot see her own son. Visiting with Basil in jail for the first time on the day after his arrest, Mattie "had never felt so impotent in her life. There was no way she could fight the tiny inked markings that now controlled their lives. She would give anything to remove him from this horrible place—didn't he know that? But those blue loops, commas, and periods had tied her hands" (49). The court system, like the prison, is another place where bureaucracy and written documents have the power to determine the lives of people, especially prisoners, as shown in Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir *A Place to Stand*. Baca's narrative highlights the ways in which the bureaucracy of the court functions to get only the "basic information" of a story, keeping the human element to a minimum and leaving no room for subjectivity, emotion, or empathy:

These officials were not in the business of pardoning poor people. Their faces only reflected impatience, with no inclination for listening to convicts' explanations or litanies of regret. The process had a momentum all its own. For it to work, there could be no sentiment or discretion. To them, I was a criminal without soul, heart, or feelings. (101)

Baca links the insensitive and bureaucratic nature of the court to its use of written documents which are intended only to capture predetermined representations of individuals and particular versions of the "truth": "To my way of thinking, books had always been used to hurt and inflict pain. Books separated me from people like... detectives who used lawbooks to perpetrate... and from greedy lawyers, who used lawbooks to twist the truth" (100).

John Okada's *No-No Boy*, the story of Ichiro, a Japanese American man who is imprisoned in an internment camp after he refuses to serve in the U.S. army following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, similarly portrays the ways in which bureaucratic documents only allow for the basic facts or simplified version of things, leaving no room for a fuller, more embodied portrayal of the individual and his or her personal history. Not only is Ichiro unable to tell the whole story behind his refusal to serve in the army when he is sentenced in court, but his past as a prisoner in the camp continues to complicate his future later in the narrative, as he finds that documents leave no room for him to explain his time in the camp or the reasons behind it. When Ichiro goes out to seek employment after being released from the camp, intending to apply and interview for a job he is well-qualified for, he ends up walking out before the interview starts, because the application form leaves him baffled as to how to explain himself and his history within the limited spaces of the document. As Ichiro reads through the application, he finds "questions he couldn't answer. How was he to account for the past two years [spent in the camp] of the five for which they wanted such information as name of employer and work experience? What was he to put down as an alternative for military duty?... He put the form back on the stack and left... because there really was nothing to be said" (146). In fact, there is much Ichiro could *say* to a potential employer to explain the reasons—justifiable, understandable, and admirable—as to why he refused to serve in the army and ended up in the camp. But the document itself leaves no space for explanations, and Ichiro fears that the answers he is forced to fill in the blanks with will exclude him from consideration for the job before he even gets to the interview phase. Before he speaks a word to the interviewer, then—before any real dialogue or communication can occur—the processes of bureaucracy, and, specifically, the application form itself, determine the outcome of the encounter, marking Ichiro as ineligible for the position. Yet, the limitations of these documents also serve as a reminder of the inability of a documentary system to ever fully identify, define, or "capture" the complexities of experiences, events, and circumstances that comprise an individual's identity and personal

history, a potentiality which, as we will see, is one that characters in *Jasmine* and *Bone* frequently exploit to their advantage.

If *Battles with Words* argues that language is more than just aesthetic or performative, that language actually *does things* and serves *concrete functions* in relations of power, then Part I argues, as the above discussions suggest and as the analyses in the following chapters will demonstrate in more depth, that one of the most concrete ways in which language is imbricated into the fabric of power relations in everyday life is through the use of written documents. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the construction and consequences of a documentary society—what scholar James W. Kim, writing on *Bone*, refers to as a society steeped in “citationality”⁹—in Bharati Mukherjee’s 1989 novel *Jasmine* and Fae Myenne Ng’s 1993 novel *Bone*. I analyze in these chapters how language becomes enmeshed in power relations through documentation and citations, requiring individuals to define and identify themselves (albeit in limited, categorical, and non-comprehensive ways) using written texts designed by those in power. However, I also place particular emphasis on Ellen Cushman’s claim that the “disempowered” are nevertheless able to “augment... and offset the other representations of the self” which are imposed upon them in a documentary society, through both subversive use and creative re-fashioning of documents and citations as well as, on other occasions, through their abilities to elude systems of documentation and identification altogether—to construct paperless identities and selves that are untraceable and unidentifiable (86). *Jasmine* traces one immigrant woman’s ability to slip through the cracks of a politico-legal system which uses (or at least tries to use) citations and documentation to identify both citizen-subjects and illegal “aliens.” In *Bone*, we see how Leon, a paper son who purchases false citizenship papers to gain entry into America, and his stepdaughter Leila create identities oppositional to those which the state assigns to them and their family through documentation. Although at some points in both novels, it certainly seems that bureaucracies and the gatekeepers who run them exercise near-total control over the lives of the characters, readers are also made privy to the surprising and creative ways in which

characters tactically evade or manipulate the system, its gatekeepers, and official documents to their own advantage. These characters also challenge the seeming permanency and stability of Documentary America by exhibiting a keen awareness of the malleability and vulnerability of written documents: the documents they carry are forged, altered, and acquired illegally, containing incorrect information—both twists of the truth and outright lies—which suggest the limitations of a documentary system to capture the “identity” of its subjects. In these ways, characters in these texts make use of what James C. Scott calls *infrapolitics*, a concept that guides my analyses in the following chapters and throughout much of *Battles with Words*.¹⁰ Infrapolitics can be understood as “the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of... peril” (199). It is “well adapted to thwart surveillance,” as a form of resistance or subversive behavior that is not usually traceable or detectable, and, as such, is “always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible” (200). In *Jasmine*, the protagonist’s ability to evade the surveillance strategies of the INS depends largely upon her use of infrapolitical tactics which allow her to skirt the laws and strategies of the authorities, remaining largely invisible to them through careful measures she takes to leave no trace, no trail, wherever she goes. In *Bone*, the narrator’s stepfather, Leon, makes use of infrapolitics—a form of resistance that is a direct response to a specific set of constraints and restraints—in order to gain entry into America as a “paper son” during the era of exclusion of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. Once here, he stays in America for the rest of his life, and continues to use his false citizenship papers to fool and manipulate others into thinking he is a legal U.S. citizen. Both Jasmine and Leon, then, employ, albeit in somewhat different ways, what Scott calls the “arts of political disguise” in order to resist the domination of documentation. Especially for “illegal aliens,” political resistance is often of necessity, but must mean “somehow setting a course at the very perimeter of what the authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent” (Scott 139). This is precisely what both Jasmine and Leon manage to accomplish.

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe writes that “the liberal state discriminates, surveys, and produces immigrant identities” through the construction of categories such as “‘legal’ and ‘illegal,’ ‘citizen’ and ‘noncitizen,’ and ‘US.-born’ and ‘permanent resident’” (19). However, in *Jasmine* and *Bone*, the characters refuse the limitations of these categories, elide the fixed gaze of the government on immigrant identities, and re-define the very meaning of such concepts as citizen and noncitizen. Characters in these novels are able not only to survive in America, but to leave their mark on America, without having any official papers at all to “legitimate” them as citizens or to “prove” that they belong here. The counter-narratives and counter-identities they develop in opposition to those narratives and identities captured on paper can be read as challenges to the very ways in which subjectivity, history, and memory are produced and legitimized in the U.S. As Lowe writes, history is a “surplus of materiality that exceeds textualization.” In their critique of and challenge to documentary modes of power, history, and memory, *Bone* and *Jasmine* both offer what Lowe might describe as “not only a deviation from the well-documented, official account [of U.S. History] but also a transformation of historical understanding, a reevaluation of what is considered to be [historically] significant” (Lowe 111). Let us turn, then, to a discussion of the ways in which these novels seek to revise and re-write the archives.

Chapter 1

Untraceable: Invisibility as Autonomy in *Jasmine*

“The logic of infrapolitics is to leave few traces in the wake of its passage” – James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 in Calcutta, into an upper-middle-class Bengali Brahmin family, just before India’s independence from Britain in 1947. The daughter of an award-winning chemist and socialite father who was recognized among the Brahmin elite, Mukherjee has also described herself as the daughter of a woman “who ‘burned’ all her life for an education, which was denied to well-brought-up women of her generation” and thus “made sure that my sisters and I never suffered the same wants” (Hancock 31). As such, Mukherjee was educated at the Anglophone Loreto Convent School in Calcutta, as well as in Britain and Switzerland, and thus was fluent in both Bengali and English from a young age (Lauret 173). In 1961, four years prior to the Immigration Act of 1965 which would dramatically reduce restrictions on South Asian immigration to the U.S.,¹ Mukherjee left India for Iowa City to attend the University of Iowa’s International Writer’s Workshop. There, she met her future husband, Canadian writer Clark Blaise, whom she married at the age of 23 in “a five-minute lunchtime wedding” in September 1963, finalizing her rejection of the Indian nuclear physicist to whom her family hoped to arrange her marriage (Gabriel 128). Mukherjee went on to earn both an MFA and a PhD in English and Comparative Literature before moving to Montreal, Canada with Clark, where they took up faculty positions at McGill University. Blaise and Mukherjee lived and worked together in Montreal for a number of years, a period of time which Mukherjee has frequently discussed in interviews and non-fiction essays as one of intense and traumatizing racism for her as an Indian woman in Canada, eventually causing her to give up her post at McGill in 1980, return to the U.S., and become a naturalized American citizen, all within the space of a single year (see Mukherjee’s essay “Beyond Multiculturalism” for a fuller account). Since then, Mukherjee has lived and taught at colleges and universities across the

U.S., including Columbia University, Queens College, and Montclair State College. She is currently Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, where she has been teaching courses on world literature, creative writing, and narrative and the novel since 1989.

Jasmine, Mukherjee's third novel, was published in 1989, one year after the author became an American citizen.² However, because Mukherjee's career as a writer and teacher of creative writing took off while she was at McGill University in Montreal, where she began teaching in 1966 and eventually served as director of both the Creative Writing Program and Graduate Studies program, Mukherjee is sometimes treated as a(n) (Indian) Canadian rather than (Indian) American author. Interviews with the author and literary criticism on her work have frequently been published in Canadian journals and literary periodicals, and, indeed, a number of pieces of literary criticism on Mukherjee are written in French. *Jasmine*, set entirely in India and the States (excluding, of course, Jasmine's travels to get from the former to the latter), was the first novel that Mukherjee published as an American citizen, her first "American novel." This was not her first major publication, however, nor would it be her last—with a prolific writing career which has spanned over four decades, Mukherjee is also the author of novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (her first major publication, released in 1971) and *Wife* (1975) (both published in Canada), and short story collections *Darkness* (her first short story collection, published in 1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). After winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction for *Middleman*—making her the first naturalized U.S. citizen to do so—she later went on to write *Holder of the World* (1993), a historical novel set at the beginning of British colonization of India; the novel *Leave It to Me* (1997); and novels *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), and *Miss New India* (2011), a trilogy. In addition to her many works of fiction, Mukherjee is also the co-author, along with husband Clark Blaise, of two non-fiction books: *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, which follows her and Clark's year spent in Calcutta together while on sabbatical, and *The Sorrow and the Terror: The*

Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy, about the terrorist bombing of an Air India flight to Canada in June 1985.³

Jasmine is the story of a young Indian woman who travels alone from India to the U.S. after her husband's violent murder by a Sikh extremist, a member of the Khalsa Lions. Arriving as an illegal immigrant on Florida's shores with little more than fake documents and an address for an Indian man in Queens, New York, Jasmine eventually makes a new life—or, really, series of lives—for herself in America. As I will discuss in more detail throughout this chapter, much of the criticism on *Jasmine* is negative, and, at times, outright scathing, focusing on what appears to be Jasmine's (and, by extension, Mukherjee's) over-eagerness to assimilate to American norms and leave behind her Indian identity in order to become a full-fledged American (it is worth noting here that Mukherjee herself does identify as an American writer, as she emphatically states in an interview with Gabriel (128)). Yet, though Jasmine does, in many ways, become an "American" throughout the novel, this is largely a self-authorized identity which she claims for herself and on her own terms, not one that is defined for her or granted to her by the state, as would be the case in a more traditional (and uncritical) process of American assimilation. A consideration of Jasmine's refusal to be identified or legitimated on paper as a "real" American is critically important to understanding how and why her reconstruction(s) of her identity is neither an assimilative process nor a process that requires the authorization, legitimation, or recognition of the state. Yet, this is an aspect of the novel that has been largely overlooked in the voluminous amount of scholarship on *Jasmine*: as Bahri notes, the fact that Jasmine "never acquires an institutionalized 'American' identity through citizenship or any other modicum of civic recognition has not been deemed particularly important in much of the criticism of the novel" (139). Indeed, even when Jasmine has the easy opportunity to acquire legal citizenship by marrying Bud, she still chooses to remain only his common-law wife, turning down her chance at a green card. In ignoring or overlooking Jasmine's choice to remain a paperless, undocumented citizen of the U.S., however, many critics misunderstand what it

means for her to become “American.” In a similar way, critics have also criticized Mukherjee for writing only in English (a language she was raised with from youth) and have accused her of being generally uninterested in issues and themes of bilingualism, multilingualism, and language in general. Lauret writes, for example, that “it seems surprising that in the work of this first generation immigrant writer acquisition of English, loss of attrition of the native language, or bilingual games rarely figure as themes or as aesthetic features” (170). Yet, interest and concern with language can be reflected in ways others than through the themes of bilingualism or loss of native language, including through an exploration of how language is used as a tool of power and a tactic of subversion within *written documents*, which is a central focal point of *Jasmine*. Though the novel is indeed relatively unconcerned with issues of bi- or multilingualism, it expresses a continual interest in the ways language is used and mis-used by the powerful and the marginalized (particularly American immigrants and those who “authorize” or deny their belonging in America) through its emphasis on documentation. The legal citizenship that Jasmine refuses to acquire throughout the novel, despite opportunities to do so, is not only an indication that she is not as eager to assimilate as critics suggest, but is also her way of refusing the power and domination of language as it is used within written documents. Instead, Jasmine insists upon defining herself on her own terms, rather than being limited by the construction of the self that is created through linguistic descriptions (“fill-in-the-blanks”) used to identify individuals on such documents as birth certificates, citizenship applications, passports, and green cards.

In an essay on “Nation and Self” in *Jasmine*, Deepika Bahri argues that power seeks to make the “Other” “entirely knowable and visible” (137). Yet, Jasmine’s beating (or, at least, circumventing) of the system of documentation makes such knowability and visibility virtually impossible. Her many selves, her multiple locations and relocations, are also “escape routes from assigned subjectivities” (Bahri 137). These routes are forged through paths of both subversion and evasion, terms that I use throughout this chapter frequently, but not

interchangeably. Rather, each signals a specific form of resistance for Jasmine, a particular way of remaining unknowable and invisible. In her attempts to *subvert* the system of documentation, Jasmine makes use of fake documents and forged papers, especially in the earlier parts of the narrative; in so doing, she exposes the limitations of written documents as proof of authenticity or legitimacy. In her ability to *evade* the system, however, Jasmine eventually goes paperless altogether, becoming less and less concerned, the more time she spends in America, with having *any* documents at all, real or fake. Rather than trying to subvert the system from inside of it through attempts to “legitimate” herself in the eyes of the state by posing as someone else on paper, as the narrative progresses, Jasmine becomes increasingly confident in her ability to evade the system all together by making herself entirely traceless, with no papers—real or fake—trailing her and, more importantly, none needed to legitimate her identity as an American. Rather, Jasmine finds an unexpected form of freedom and autonomy in the invisibility and unknowability that result from being undocumented—and undocumentable—in America.

During an interview with *The Iowa Review* shortly after the publication of *Jasmine*, Mukherjee’s husband Clark Blaise, a native Canadian, spoke of his sense of belonging in and identification with Canada, to which Mukherjee responded, “That’s interesting, because I wanted to get away from that sense of belonging. I didn’t want anyone to know where I fit in, so I could be whoever I wanted to be, anywhere, and I could keep moving” (Collins et al 11). Her desire to elude a fixed identity and location mirrors the efforts of her protagonist to keep on the move, to escape and subvert authority and documentation as a means of being “whoever [she] want[s] to be.” As Roberts puts it, “like her protagonist, Mukherjee adopts new identities as a strategy to gain autonomy” (87-88). When asked during an interview with Hancock if she has “found where [she] belong[s],” Mukherjee replied, “I can make myself feel that I ‘belong’ almost anywhere... I was brought up to be adaptable” (35) This idea of adaptability—and of claiming belonging “almost anywhere”—is quite similar to the tactics which her protagonist adopts

throughout *Jasmine* in order to adjust to and make a life for herself in the various worlds she finds herself in throughout her journey(s) from India to America. Bahri describes Jasmine, with her continual reconstruction of identity in terms unrelated to the written or documented, as a “menace” to a system which is “always threatening”—but never fully able—“to stabilize, fix, and encapsulate [those within] its own hegemonic power” (138). Tellingly, Bahri’s statement suggests the ways in which the novel not only traces the invisibility and unknowability of Jasmine, but also hints at the unknowability of the nation itself. As Mukherjee told an audience in a speech on “Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties,” “The United States exists as a sovereign nation with its officially stated Constitution, its economic and foreign policies, its demarcated, patrolled boundaries. ‘America,’ however, exists as image or idea, as dream or nightmare, as romance or plague, constructed by discrete individual fantasies, and shaded by collective paranoid and mythologies” (29). Mukherjee suggests that there are many Americas in America, including many “shadow” Americas in the peripheries, the margins, the borders of the nation, which remain largely unknown and unknowable to many of those who are safely—and legally—inside of the nation’s “demarcated, patrolled boundaries.” It is one such alternate America, an America outside of the realms of location, documentation, and legitimation, that Jasmine makes a home (or homes) for herself, claiming herself as an American “citizen” despite lack of proof of this identity on paper.

Coming to America

The presence of many illegal immigrants in the U.S. and on their way into the U.S. is emphasized throughout *Jasmine* as almost commonplace, part of the everyday, as ordinary as it is extraordinary. The text suggests that “invisible” immigrants—particularly workers—are everywhere in America, not just in the major urban hubs of immigration such as New York City and Miami, but even in places like Baden, Iowa. Indeed, the novel portrays an entire international underground market (what the captain of the ship Jasmine sails to America on refers to as the “nigger-shipping bizness”) where people pay to procure fake documents and

unchartered forms of transportation in order to move unseen across national borders (111). This business world is as robust and accessible in rural India as it is in rural Iowa: as Jasmine tells us, “all over Punjab ‘travel agents’ are willing to advise” those seeking to go to America without the documents to do so legally (99). Once Jasmine herself leaves India after procuring her own illegal documents in this way, she becomes privy to—and part of—the existence of a “shadow world” of invisible migrants whose means of travel “do not appear in any directory” (100). In her narration of her experience in traveling to the U.S. illegally, Jasmine highlights the ways in which countless individuals can and do circumnavigate and subvert the systems which seek to track and document people as they cross into and out of international borders. However, she also portrays the vulnerability of those who make these extraordinarily risky shadow-journeys across continents without (legitimate) passports, identification cards, or boarding passes:

There are national airlines flying the world that do not appear in any directory... improvising crews and destinations. They serve no food, no beverages... There is a shadow world of aircraft permanently aloft that share air lines and radio frequencies with Pan Am and British Air and Air-India, portaging people who coexist with tourists and businessmen. But we are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges... taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our own language, a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, a *laissez-passer*. We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims... landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe... We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue. We sneak a look at the big departure board, the one the tourists use. Our cities are there, too, our destinations are so close! But not yet, not so directly. We must sneak in, land by night in little-used strips. For us, back behind the rope in the corner of the waiting room, there is only a slate and someone who remembers to write in chalk,

DELAYED, or TO BE ANNOUNCED, or OUT OF SERVICE... What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read. (100-101)

Jasmine's arduous trek to America is itself a powerful portrayal of the dangerous, often life-threatening risks that shadow-travelers take as they seek to acquire false documents and make "phantom" journeys across continents, but hers is hardly the only difficult journey readers learn of throughout the novel (101). While on *The Gulf Shuttle*, the shrimper boat which "cargoes" Jasmine and its other illegal passengers into the U.S. via the Gulf Coast of Florida, Jasmine meets many shadow-travelers, some of whom tell her of their past failed attempts to enter the U.S., both legally and illegally. She learns that Little Clyde, an "anxious Belizian," had "fell into vigilante hands in Texas... on his last crossing" (105). As Clyde's friend and co-traveler, Kingsland, tells Jasmine, "Dey cotched dat boy like a fish... and dey cotted him just like dey do fish. We find him like fish, guts dryin in de sun. Why de world go de way it do, girl?" (105). As Nishimura writes, the stories of Jasmine and the other travelers included in the narrative "signif[y] the era of complex global markets where immigrants are constantly reminded of boundaries and limitations imposed by international and American politics"¹⁵ (118-19). In the face of such boundaries and limitations, some of Jasmine's co-travelers have found that even seeking *legal* entry can leave one extremely vulnerable, perhaps even more vulnerable than can the risks of an illegal, underground-market entry into America. This is the case for one man, a "Ugandan [in a] Mickey Mouse T-shirt" who Jasmine travels with as human contraband on the boat into the States. At one point during their journey, the Ugandan "show[s] off his flesh wounds" to Jasmine, explaining, "When the American visa bastards turned me down, I tried to kill myself" (102). The desperation for entry into America, legally denied to so many of these invisible refugees and mercenaries, makes *illegal* entry seem a safer option for this man the second time around.

Thus the Ugandan in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt becomes one of many on *The Gulf Shuttle* who enter America unseen and unannounced, landing on Florida's shores at a fuzzy time somewhere between the dark of night and the light of day, and slipping away to begin their invisible, unauthorized lives in the U.S. Jasmine herself stays only a short while in Florida before heading to New York, where she finds even more people who, like herself, Clyde, and the Ugandan, are shadow-travelers living undocumented lives. As she rides in a cab from a Manhattan Greyhound station to what will become her temporary home in Flushing, Queens, Jasmine is surprised to find that she sees mostly "more people like myself. New York [is] an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140). Even at the home of Professor Vadhera, himself an illegal immigrant from India, Jasmine finds invisible workers, including "a grateful servant who took her pay in food and saris" (146). When Jasmine accepts a live-in position at Taylor and Wylie's apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, she become one of their building's many "day mummies—sorry, 'caregivers'—who descended on the lobby at eight o'clock every morning, down from Harlem or over from Brooklyn, and took over the children while the mothers went out to teach or study or edit or just do what they do" (34). Though Jasmine's position as caretaker of Taylor and Wylie's (adopted) daughter Duff is actually one which she enjoys thoroughly and which allows her a considerable degree of financial security and comfort, she nonetheless learns that most of the building's undocumented workers, the other "day mummies" included, are not so lucky. This is true of her friend Letitia, an undocumented Trinidadian woman and fellow caregiver: "Lettie would say of her boss, the interior decorator who'd traveled all the way to Paraguay to adopt a baby, 'What she t'ink? Slavery makin a big comeback? Jassie girl, minute my sponsorship come t'rough, we gotta unionize'" (179).⁵ Other undocumented workers in the novel are also shown to be in positions as vulnerable as Lettie's. When Gene Lutz, Jasmine's next-door neighbor in Iowa, chokes to death on a piece of food at a Mexican restaurant, the waiters who are "all illegals" go "into hiding as soon as the police [are] called," fearful of being exposed (8). Beyond the workplace, many of the

novel's undocumented and illegal residents are shown to be vulnerable and unsafe even in their own homes: when Professor Vadhera's father "cut[s] his head open on the bathtub faucet" while Jasmine is alone with him in the Professor's apartment, Jasmine finds herself uncertain of how to handle the situation because she "didn't know enough about the old man's immigration status and medical insurance, if I should rush him by taxi to a hospital or call the emergency squad" (151). Ultimately Jasmine does neither, and instead gets in touch with Professor Vadhera, who "said he'd call a doctor friend, an uncertified but still hopeful Delhi doctor... who lived three floors down, to come around and bandage the wound" (152). The everyday lives of these characters—vulnerable, marginal, uncertain, and "uncertified"—serve as representations of what Lisa Lowe describes as the ways that "the contradictions of capitalism with political democracy" result in "an officially disavowed and yet unofficially mandated, clandestine movement of illegal immigration, which addresses the [U.S.] economy's need for low-wage labor but whose dehumanization of migrant workers is politically contradictory" (21).

Overwhelmed, at times, even while living in Iowa, by her ever-increasing awareness of just how many undocumented people go unseen, unknown, and uncounted in America, Jasmine tells us, "I wonder if Bud [the Iowan farmer who becomes her common-law husband] even sees the America I do. We pass half-built, half-deserted cinder-block structures at the edge of town, with mud-spattered deserted cars parked in an uncleared lot, and I wonder, Who's inside? What are they doing? Who's hiding?" (109). One evening in Iowa, as Jasmine and her adopted son Du, a refugee from Vietnam, watch television together, their "favorite cable channel" runs a "reality" show in which "twenty INS agents raid a lawn furniture factory in Texas." At first, Jasmine's narration highlights the show's attempts at drama, suspense, and excitement: "we got to hear agents whisper into walkie-talkies, break down a door, kick walls for hollowed-out hiding places. They were very thorough" (26). However, her tone and portrayal soon shift to highlight the perspective of the pursued rather than the pursuing, the hunted rather than the hunters, making clear that, for her (as well as, perhaps, for Du, and certainly for many of the

other undocumented characters featured in the text), the show is not just entertainment or part of nightly network television viewing—rather, as she watches, she reveals that “[she’s] been there”: “There were only two Mexicans in the shed... One minute they were squatting on the floor webbing lawn furniture at some insane wage—I know, I’ve been there—and the next they were spread-eagled on the floor. The camera caught one Mexican throwing up. The INS fellow wouldn’t uncuff him long enough for him to wipe the muck off his face” (27). The obvious vulnerability of the furniture factory workers—socially, economically, and legally—is heightened by the fact that they are perceived as both a cultural and an economic threat to those American citizens who fear the presence of seemingly countless “undocumented” who they cannot see or pinpoint, but whom they know are “out there.” In an attempt to represent the “average” American’s reaction to the INS raid of the factory, the show features interviews with several women post-raid:

A woman in a flowered dress said, “I don’t think they’re bad people, you know. It’s just that there’s too many of them.”... The reporter...stopped a[nother] woman in an Olds. “To tell you the truth,” she said, “I don’t know what to feel anymore.” The reporter got ready to move off to somebody else, but she stopped him. “Steve, my husband, lost his job. That was last November. We were doing so good, now we can’t make the house and car payments. Are you listening, Mr. President?... The border’s like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes.” (27-28)

Both women’s comments speak to the widespread societal fear of “illegals” as both economic threats and cultural “aliens”—while the first woman’s concern about their being “too many of them” suggests a xenophobic refusal to accept foreigners—“them,” the Others—into the social fabric of America, the second woman’s attempt to equate her own family’s economic difficulties with the fate of the two furniture factory workers portrays the firmly entrenched, even if misguided and unfounded, societal belief that illegal laborers threaten the economic security of the country as a whole by “stealing” the jobs of “native” Americans.⁶ Listening to the television

interviews, Jasmine “want[s] to shout to the lady,” “What kind of crazy connection are you trying to make between Mexicans and car payments? Who’s the victim here?” (27). While these women (and many U.S. citizens) remain relatively ignorant of the vulnerability, victimization, and exploitation experienced by the countless undocumented people living and working in the U.S. (even as Jasmine’s narration itself seeks to tell the story of some of these “invisible” people, opening the eyes of *her* American audience to their experiences), their misguided fears of immigrants as social, economic, and political threats to the very nation—as “mice squirming through the holes”—are the very reasons why illegal “aliens” like Jasmine become subjected to such high levels of surveillance, and in turn, become extremely desirous of papers which will legitimate them, prove their belonging, mark them as accepted and invited Americans rather than mice squirming through the holes. As Nishimura notes in her essay on *Jasmine*, “th[e] need to classify, to separate and make distinctions... make[s] people... feel comfortable; the classification of others allows Americans to draw an imaginary finger on a map and configure a decipherable code in terms of location and identity” (123). Worried about all those who slip unseen into the U.S., who “squir[m] through the holes” of its penetrable, porous borders, Americans look to the use of documentation as a means of tracking, locating, and defining who is and isn’t allowed, who does and doesn’t belong (28).

Yet, for all its emphasis on the vulnerability of these illegal shadow-travelers, ever fearful of being spotted by the watchful gaze of a surveillance system that hopes to catch undocumented mice squirming through the holes, the text ultimately places *more* emphasis on the ability of immigrants to thwart this system, to elude surveillance and identification and successfully make it in(to) America without any (legitimate) papers to authorize their entry or guarantee their safety. As Jasmine concludes after watching the cable television program on the furniture factory raid, “So they got two. Which meant that there had to be scores more who scampered away at the start of the raid.” Counting herself and her son among those who go unseen both on the show and in everyday life, she adds, “Du and me, we’re the ones who didn’t get caught” (28).

Although there is, as the above examples and much of the text show, a certain vulnerability that comes with invisibility, Jasmine also learns quickly that there are forms of autonomy and even empowerment that come with being unseen and unknown, successfully circumnavigating the system which seeks to track and document people as they cross into and out of international borders. Of her own untraceable journey to the U.S., Jasmine explains that “the longest line between two points is the least detected,” “the zigzag route is straightest” (99, 101). These “zigzag route[s]” that she and other shadow-travelers take are arduous, frightening, exhausting journeys, but they also speak to the power that is an inevitable part of the subversive process of entering a country illegally and undocumented: though these “outcasts and deportees” carry “passport[s] and visa[s],” most, like Jasmine’s, are fake, only there to be offered up in a moment of emergency, for Jasmine and her co-travelers will not pass through Ellis Island or Angel Island (as Leon, a paper son, does in *Bone*), but instead “sneak in, land[ing] by night in little-used strips” (101). That they thus become among America’s undocumented, invisible and uncoun­ted, is both a form of disempowerment and vulnerability *and* a kind of safety, protection, and even success. It is with a tone of amazement and perhaps even some self-satisfaction that Jasmine tells us of her “phantom” journey “through three continents... landing always in the smaller cities, the disused airfields” (101). What seems to amaze and encourage her most throughout her travels is how many others are making similarly untraceable journeys across continents: “On the first leg of my odyssey, I sit between a Filipina nurse and a Tamil auto mechanic... Whole peoples are on the move!” (101-102). As her journey continues, Jasmine meets more and more people in the “business” of invisibly transporting undocumented immigrants across international lines; indeed, an entire network, a chain of businessmen and businesswomen, become responsible for her arrival in the U.S.: “In Amsterdam a railway porter, a Surinamese Indian who speaks a little bit of Hindi, puts me in touch with the captain of a trawler who cargoes contraband into Paramaribo, then outward to the States” (103). Becoming part of the “contraband” being cargoes on the ship, as not just goods but also people are moved illegally

across borders and into the States, the experience is both a traumatizing and fascinating one for Jasmine, as terrifying as it is incredible, as disempowering as it is empowering. On a larger scale, Mukherjee portrays the experience of illegal and undocumented immigration as one in which the dispossessed, oppressed, and exiled masses are nevertheless able to find ways of transport and means of entry which exist alongside, but are not entirely visible to, dominant systems of authorized travel and transportation. As Hoppe puts it in an essay on technology as cross-cultural hybridity in *Jasmine*,

the very technological/transportation linkages—international airlines, airports—that support, at one level, the global capitalism that centers the West and performs economic and ideological neo-colonial operations on the “Third World,” are also spaces of opportunity and re-fashioning for Jasmine and her fellow-travelers... [these] ‘phantom’ passengers are not written as being accepted into that system of legalized, valorized national citizenship available to the privileged subjects who can (like Mukherjee herself) afford it.⁷ Rather, they are “ghosts,” unthinkable and diaphanous entities taking advantage of the liminal, unauthorized and interstitial spaces that are the inevitable possibilities—the remainders, the excesses—of those pathways hurtled outward to draw global Others into the sphere of power of the modern West. (147-148)

Other critics have also acknowledged the ways in which Mukherjee’s text spotlights the continuous, if often unnoticed, illicit movement of marginalized people around the globe. Regarding the scenes which portray Jasmine and her co-travelers’ “shadow” journeys, Warhol-Down makes the interesting point that the narration shifts to present tense, whereas much of the rest of the novel tells of Jasmine’s past in flashbacks from her current location in Baden, Iowa. As Warhol-Down writes,

the shift from past to present tense here, in Chapter 15 [which chronicles Jasmine’s journey to the U.S.], lifts the trip to America out of the heroine’s individual history and into a more immediate moment, suggesting that such trips are not over once this

particular heroine gets from India to the United States. Her immigration is not singular, individualist; similar experiences continue to happen to countless people all the time. During her passage from India the narrator has no name at all, losing her specifically Indian identity and becoming part of a first-person plural that includes people in transit from everywhere in the world. (9)

In her depiction of “people in transit from everywhere in the world”—of “Whole peoples [who] are on the move!”—Mukherjee emphasizes those many people who travel undocumented, unseen and untraced, slipping through the cracks of a system of documentation which frequently imagines and presents itself as all-powerful and all-knowing.

The Vulnerability of Invisibility

While these early scenes speak in a myriad of ways to the countless uncounted who enter America, the story is, ultimately, Jasmine’s, and after her journey to America is over, the majority of the text focuses on her singular experiences as she seeks to elide and evade documentation in the U.S. Still, the narrative continues to harken back to and recall these earlier moments in which we see both the vulnerability and autonomy of countless other undocumented travelers by portraying Jasmine’s new life in America as one which continues to involve the same sorts of dangerous risks and exciting opportunities that she and her co-travelers face throughout their shadow journeys. However, what is interesting about Jasmine’s journey(s) to/in America is that it is increasingly marked more and more by feelings of autonomy and a sense of opportunity, which gradually begin to win out over, and even dissipate altogether, feelings of vulnerability and fear of danger or exposure. Certainly, there are many moments when Jasmine does feel quite insecure or altogether endangered by her lack of papers, especially earlier in the novel before she has settled more fully into life in America; but as the narrative progresses, so, too, does Jasmine’s confidence in her ability to safely reside in America—indeed, to claim her own Americanness—even as a paperless immigrant. Mukherjee portrays a delicate balance, ever-shifting, between security and vulnerability, invisibility and

exposure, but it is a balance which Jasmine is able to increasingly tip in her own favor the more time our protagonist spends in the U.S.

Interestingly, though Jasmine is always willing to take the risk of being undocumented in America, the earlier scenes of the novel portray her as desperately desirous of papers—even fake or forged ones—so that she might have *something* she can offer as “proof” of her authorization, written documents that seemingly testify to her right to be in the U.S., whether phony or not. At this point, Jasmine is already on her way to learning how to manipulate the system of documentation, as evidenced by her willingness to use fake papers, but her desire for documentation, even of an illegitimate and illicit form, nevertheless also suggests a sort of reiteration of and belief in the state’s insistence that one is only legitimated and authorized by the documents one possesses. Later, her perspective will begin to change, as Jasmine realizes that there are forms of self-legitimation and authorization that do need depend upon documentation; but this process is a very gradual one, and at first, Jasmine’s paperlessness plagues her. During her earliest days in America, while living briefly in Flushing, Queens with a Professor she knew in India, Jasmine describes herself as surrounded by

an imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire... [which] kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time. Without a green card, even a forged one (I knew at least four men in our building who had bought themselves resident alien cards for between two and three thousand dollars), I didn’t feel safe going outdoors. If I had a green card, a job, a goal, *happiness*, would appear out of the blue... I wanted a green card more than anything else in the world... a green card was freedom. (148-9)

The value that Jasmine ascribes to this one document serves as a powerful reminder of Brandt’s assertion that, in *Documentary America*, the papers we carry (or don’t carry) in very real ways structure the terms of our everyday lives. Jasmine’s belief that safety, employment, goals, and happiness will all “appear out of the blue” if only she had a green card suggests a fantastical, almost magical, faith in the ability of the document itself to change her very life. Without a

green card, Jasmine sees herself as unable to move freely, be in public spaces, have a steady economic income, or even have aspirations or dreams for the future. That such a document holds great power is also suggested by the fact that it is the (relatively) powerful, those with resources, who are able to get their hands on green cards, legal or otherwise. The professor Jasmine stays with tells her, “A green card... is an expensive but not an impossible proposition. For the rich, such a matter is arranged daily’... He quoted black-market exchange rates that weren’t outrageously unfair” (149). Legitimacy, authorization, and the security they provide are available, even on the “black market,” but only at great costs to those who seek them; ironically, beating the system in some ways involves the same sort of power inequalities that structure the system itself.⁸ Yet, Jasmine also becomes privy in this moment to the fact that the system *can* be beat—or, at least, bent—and becomes determined to have a green card of her own, even if a forged one bought on the black market. In response to the Professor’s comment that “such a matter is arranged daily,” Jasmine offers a plea that doubles as a command: “Then arrange it!” she cries, “Please! I’m dying in this limbo.’ I’d sign any IOU he wanted, at any interest rate he fixed, if he would advance the two or three thousand” (149). Her desperation to acquire the card suggests that, at this point, she still sees written documentation (even if of a forged sort) as crucial to a successful, happy life in America. Indeed, without the papers, she feels hers is no life at all, but rather a death-like state; she is “dying in... limbo” (149). Though later in the novel it is this very sort of limbo-state that Jasmine comes to exist quite comfortably in, finding peace and even a sense of autonomy in being paperless and undocumented, while in Flushing, she still seeks security through a green card. Her attempts to acquire one illegally are themselves indication of her willingness to try to beat the system—she knows that to get a card, she can make arrangements with “the master forger, another renter in the Khyber basement”—but her desire for the card is also an indication that she is still playing by the system’s rules even as she bends them, still seeking authorization and authentication through what is written on paper, even if by a “master forger” (153).

Before coming to America as an illegal immigrant, in fact, Jasmine already seemed to believe that written documents hold a special power, imagining (as many do) that whatever is recorded on paper is definitive proof, a certain guarantee. Indeed, it is a letter from the Professor in Queens, a promise of the good life written out on paper, which inspires Jasmine and her husband Prakash to come to America in the first place. Jasmine is seduced by the promise the letter offers, amazed by “how velvety the paper felt on my forearm and wrist!” and dazzled by the “sentences [on] the paper. CELEBRATE AMERICA, the American postal services commanded. TRAVEL... THE PERFECT FREEDOM” (83). In the letter, Professor Vadhera speaks of the opportunity for Prakash and Jasmine to “bloo[m] in the healthy soil of this country,” and, in turn, Jasmine begins to believe that going to America will guarantee her and Prakash the chance to “start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted” (84, 85). Her husband, too, is “tempted” by “sleek blue American aerograms,” and by images of palm trees and smiling students featured in brochures sent by Florida International Institute of Technology; ultimately, these documents persuade him to “leave the petty, luckless world of Jullundhar” to study at FIIT and seek his fortune in America (148). Though Prakash soon dies when a bomb intended for Jasmine hits him first, never getting his chance to pursue his dreams, the promises offered in these letters and brochures seem to him and to his wife to be completely guaranteed, utterly certain assurances of success, happiness and good fortune awaiting them in the very near future. What is *not* written in the letters and brochures that tempt them, however, are the frightening realities of life as an (illegal) immigrant in America: the most horrible stories, such as the raping of young undocumented immigrant women by the “businessmen” who facilitate their travels, remain untold here, as do the smaller, more everyday horror stories, such as that Professor Vadhera, an esteemed educator in India, is not actually a professor in America, but rather has a job sorting human hair.⁹ Such stories do not fit in with the narrative of travel, opportunity, and freedom in America that is espoused in both Professor Vadhera and Florida International’s portrayals of the nation, and thus, these stories do not appear in writing, and do

not become a part of Jasmine and Prakash's visions for their new lives in America. Rather, what they *do* see written on paper shapes their expectations of the U.S., creating an image of what life will be like that is quite different from the reality Jasmine later experiences.

Indeed, Jasmine's journey to America is hardly one in which travel functions as "the perfect freedom," as promised in the aerograms Prakash receives (83). In fact, her journey to the U.S. as well as her initial days and months spent in the country are so frightening, leaving her in such vulnerable positions, that it is hardly surprising that Jasmine longs, in these early stages, for some sort of documentation to legitimate, authorize, and, above all, protect her as an immigrant woman in America. Her journey to the U.S. itself speaks volumes about the risks that the illegal and undocumented—especially undocumented women—must face as they seek to find ways to enter the country. Roberts's description of Jasmine's journey to America as one in which she "relishes the role of the political exile, running like the hero in an adventure film, sexy, tireless, exotic," seems a gross mischaracterization of how much of the trip is actually portrayed—far from appearing sexy and tireless, Jasmine is actually portrayed as sexually vulnerable and absolutely exhausted throughout the duration of her travels from India to America (Roberts 89). She remains in constant fear throughout the entirety of the journey, terrified of being exposed and sent back to India before the journey ends. During one of the many legs of a days-long trip across continents, Jasmine is in "suburban Blankenese" when "the *Polizei* pull the Ugandan and me off a train and ask to see our travel documents." Undeterred, Jasmine "hand[s] over [her] forged, expensive passport," telling us, "the *Polizei* scrutinize my inscrutables, then let me go" (103). Though Jasmine escapes detection, her forged documents taken as legitimate, the moment brings her to a moving realization of just how vulnerable of a position she now occupies. She begins to "weep at the beauty of the visa stamps," telling us, "I feel renewed, the recipient of an organ transplant" (103). In this moment, she is hardly "the hero in an adventure film," as Roberts describes her; rather, she is aware that though her journey may be heroic, a valiant effort to defy the system and make a new life for herself without

papers, it is also one in which she remains incredibly unsafe without those papers. Jasmine describes her arrival in the U.S. in dreary, foreboding terms which suggest how unwelcome, unwanted, and unprotected illegal “aliens” are on American soil:

In the pinkening black of pre-dawn America caromed off the horizon. The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant... [once on land,] I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, sodden boxes... picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs. In a clearing by the cove, white men with sneering faces waited in panel trucks with engines running to transport us to points south and north.... My first night in America was spent in a motel with plywood over its windows, its pool bottomed with garbage sacks, and grass growing in its parking lot. (107, 109)

Her entry into the country is not one where she is greeted by the iconic image of Lady Liberty welcoming the tired, the poor, the huddle masses yearning to breathe free; rather, Jasmine is greeted only by men whose “sneering faces” seem an ominous sign of what is to come next for her.

And indeed, Jasmine is right to be wary of the men who greet her on America’s shores. The high price of entering the country illegally and without the proper documents—especially if one is a woman—is made painfully explicit to both Jasmine and her readers when, among other awful experiences, she is raped repeatedly by the various men who help to facilitate her illicit travels to and in the U.S.—“raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms” (127). In the most traumatic of these experiences, the only one which the narrative describes to readers in detail, Jasmine is raped on her first night in America by a man she names Half-Face, in one of the rooms of the abandoned motel she mentions above. Once Half-Face passes out on the bed, having had too much to drink, Jasmine murders him, leaving the hotel room “look[ing] like a slaughterhouse,” and then sets fire to the suitcase she has carried with her up to this point, containing the only possessions she brought from India (119). This scene is one of the first moments in the novel when Jasmine cognizantly attempts to leave no trace, no trail of

herself—she even wipes down the sink and shower taps in order to ensure that she leaves no fingerprints (120). Not wanting anyone to know who she is or what she has done, she meticulously destroys anything that could be documented as evidence against her, and then burns the suitcase containing all of her personal items—wedding photographs, her widow’s sari, Prakash’s suit—so that no one will have any sense of the person who might have committed the crime. Only one item survives the trashcan blaze: the forged passport Jasmine has journeyed from India with. Though this is perhaps the earliest scene in which we see Jasmine learning how to tactically position herself as invisible, unknowable and untraceable, she still hesitates to leave behind the document that she imagines might allow her to pass herself off as authorized to be in the U.S. should she be caught (by either the INS or those who might seek her out for her crime). Murdering her rapist, destroying the evidence of her crime, and burning the suitcase of personal effects are all moments of temporary empowerment for Jasmine which perhaps begin to embolden her, but at this point, she still experiences her status as illegal immigrant as one of vulnerability much more than of autonomy, and thus clings to the papers which might possibly be able to legitimate her, the only things she considers worth keeping.

The dangers Jasmine experiences as an undocumented immigrant certainly do not end once her journey is over and she is inside America’s borders. Long after murdering Half-Face, Jasmine continues to work constantly to keep her illegality a secret, even around family members, friends, and the man and woman who become her common-law husband and mother-in-law later in the text. She knows she “ha[s] to be careful about” telling any stories from her past; indeed, she admits that “I have to be careful about nearly everything I say” (16). At the same time, without papers, Jasmine is not only afraid of being discovered as illegal, but also lacks the basic protection provided to those who *are* recognized and authorized by the state, a situation which leaves her constantly vulnerable to a variety of dangers. This vulnerability is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated during the scene in which she realizes that Sukhwinder, the man who killed Prakash with a bomb intended for Jasmine, has been stalking and spying on

her in New York City. While at a public park with Taylor and Duff (members of the Hayes family, whom she becomes a live-in nanny for), Jasmine realizes that the “dark-skinned hot-dog vendor sitting under his umbrella” is Sukhwinder, and that he is looking right at her. Terrified by this realization, Jasmine tells Taylor, “That was the man who killed my husband... He knows... he knows me. He knows I’m here” (188). Taylor, one of the very few people who knows of Jasmine’s illegal status (though not the full story of her coming to America), immediately and thoughtlessly responds with “For god’s sake, we’ll call the cops,” to which Jasmine replies with frustration, “Don’t you see that’s impossible? I’m illegal here, he knows that. I can’t come out and challenge him” (189). As Bresnahan puts it, “Taylor’s instincts [in this scene] as a white man of comfortable status in this society are all wrong” (125-6). With no legal right to protection under the law, and fearing for her very life, Jasmine scoffs at Taylor’s suggestion and instead decides that she is left with no choice but to leave behind the happy life she enjoys with the Hayeses in Manhattan and move to Iowa, a location she chooses because it is the birthplace of the Hayes’s daughter, Duff, who is adopted. The extraordinarily abrupt and somewhat arbitrary decision to move halfway across the country to a place she knows nothing about is evidence of the ways in which illegal residents are often forced to live constantly shifting, changing shadow existences which require a willingness to adapt, adjust, and transform the ways in which one occupies a space in America. This scene also serves as a powerful reminder of the fact that the invisibility experienced by an undocumented person, however empowering it may be in some senses (as I hope to show next), is also always a position of vulnerability, one in which the individual is always without the rights and protections promised in writing to legally documented U.S. citizens and residents. The most Jasmine feels she can do to ensure her own safety once she learns Sukhwinder is in the U.S. is to “writ[e] an anonymous letter to the INS, suggesting they look into the status of a certain Sukhwinder Singh, who pushes a hot-dog cart in New York City,” something she does only years later while already living safely in Iowa (203). The fact that Jasmine cannot rely on the police as Taylor suggests, because this would, of course,

bring her more danger than it would safety, is a potent reminder of the fact that, as Bahri writes, “in the political economy... [Jasmine] is the Other always in danger of being enunciated by a discursive system anxious to place her” (150).

From Jasmine to Jazzy: Under the Radar

If Jasmine’s earliest days in America reflect her vulnerability as an undocumented immigrant, however, readers see that as Jasmine learns more about life in the U.S.—and about the tactics she can use to circumvent systematic attempts to trace, find, and expose America’s illegal immigrants—she becomes less attached to and desirous of papers, less fearful of being enunciated or exposed, and instead begins to crave invisibility, to find autonomy and even empowerment in her undetectability and ability to remain under the radar of Documentary America. Although she feels in Flushing like she is trapped by “brick wall[s]” and “barbed wire,” “dying [in] limbo” without a green card, Jasmine gradually learns not only to adapt to this limbo state, but arguably to embrace it, enjoying the freedom, power, secrecy, and even security that come from evading the system, being undocumented and thus untraceable (148, 149). This is a point noted by several other critics: Chetan Deshmane writes, for example, that Jasmine learns how to “transfor[m] the lack of a definitive identity into a potential asset” (63), while Bahri argues that “even within th[e] limited options [available to her as an illegal immigrant and woman of color in America], J. is allowed to exercise some choice and the freedom to chart a new course” (150). Bahri’s description of Jasmine as a “liminal, evasive figure” is useful for considering both the marginality *and* the potentiality of her position as an undocumented alien in the U.S., what Roberts calls the “freedom of dislocation” (Bahri 139, Roberts 80). As Jasmine herself puts it, expressing her desire for invisibility, “Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other.” Jasmine’s wish to play the “role” of “Plain Jane” is really a wish to appear utterly ordinary. Interestingly, however, as the narrative progresses, Jasmine begins to seek this ordinariness *not* through the acquisition of a green card which can legitimate her as “American,” but through invisibility, which doesn’t suggest a form of powerlessness, but rather the idea of

being *non-visible*, *non-noticeable*—*unsurveillable*, but also unworthy of being subject to surveillance, someone so seemingly “ordinary” that she is of no interest to the INS (26). Gradually, Jasmine becomes cognizant of the fact that she can achieve this ordinariness with or without papers by playing the right role(s), convincing those around her that she *does* belong, whether or not she is authorized to be here. After Jasmine flees New York when it becomes too risky for her, she ends up in Baden, Iowa, an (almost) all-white farming community where one might expect her to stick out or risk exposure (at least more so than in Manhattan). However, Jasmine tells us that, “In Baden, I am Jane. Almost” (26). Though never entirely free of the vulnerability that is always a part of her paperless status, Jasmine becomes more and more confident in her ability to appear ordinary, to become “Jane,” to remain undetected and unquestioned despite being undocumented in America.

However, even before Baden—in fact, before America—there are moments in the novel that suggest that Jasmine has always been attuned to the ways in which systems of documentation can be subverted or circumvented. As a young girl in India, Jasmine learns that not everything need be documented or accounted for on paper, early life lessons which she perhaps carries with her as she grows to make the decision to travel paperless to the U.S. Jasmine observes that Mr. Jagtiani, Potatoes-babu, and the other wealthy traders she knows growing up do “some of [their] business in black money that didn’t appear in the books and some in taxable white” (80). She also learns that the most successful people in her Punjabi village, like her friend Vilma’s father, the “Tractor King,” keep “illegal bank accounts all over Europe” (later in the novel, Jasmine, too, will keep multiple bank accounts in different names as a way of keeping her identity and location a mystery) (75). And from Prakash, Jasmine discovers just how difficult entry into America can be, even *with* the proper documentation, but also learns something of the ways in which subversive tactics—what Scott would call *infrapolitics*—can be used to alleviate some of these difficulties, to give the immigrant-hopeful a slight advantage in a situation where the odds are not in her favor. As a young wife eager to

share in Prakash's plans to go to America, 17-year-old Jasmine gets a dose of reality when her husband tells her, "You might be eighteen before this visa comes through. You think going to America is as easy as going to Bombay or Delhi?" Prakash then explains to Jasmine "about American visas, how he'd have to prove to suspicious Embassy officials that I was legally married to him and that he had enough dollars to support me." Yet, even as she is faced with the news of a set of constraints that surprise a naïve Jasmine, she is also shown by Prakash the ways in which these rules can be bent:

the foreign exchange was tricky because the arrangements... would have to be hush-hush, illegal, sleazy, unfortunately necessary, just like the black-money bookkeeping for Mr. Jagtiani. He'd also have to lie about my age. I'd have to be eighteen, at least, maybe nineteen, since they'd assume we were lying. Give them a year or two so they could take it away. (91)

Though Jasmine learns from Prakash just how powerful documents can be in their ability to determine who gets entry into certain places and who does not, she also discovers the many subversive ways in which these documents can be acquired illegally, forged, or faked, just the same way "black money" can be kept off the book by Prakash's boss. These early lessons are some of the first moments in which Jasmine begins to develop an *infrapolitical, tactical* approach to the constraints she faces in her everyday life, what Rao calls her "alertness to opportunities and the 'pluck' to seize them" (77).

Unfortunately, Prakash never gets the chance to lie about Jasmine's age or bring her to America, as he is killed by Sukhwinder's bomb before his plans can materialize. Determined to live out his dreams of opening a business in the U.S., Jasmine decides to make the journey on her own, illegally. A friend "arrange[s her] illegal documents," which takes "months, many trips to Chandigarh and Delhi, and... everything Prakash had saved," but nevertheless becomes a reality (98). Though her brothers are "stupefied" by her plan—"A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers? [She] must be mad!"—Jasmine becomes increasingly

confident that she can make it to (and in) America and fulfill her husband's dream of opening a shop there, with or without documents: "[I] would complete the mission of Prakash. [Open a store named] Vijn & Wife. A vision had formed. There were thousands of useless rupees in our account" and "all over Punjab 'travel agents' are willing to advise" (97, 99). Determination pays off: 17-year-old Jasmine gets her illegal travel documents and begins her journey on her own, carrying false "proof" of her identity in tow: "My passport name, officially, was Jyoti Vijn. My date of birth made me safely nineteen years old" (98-99). Though some critics have suggested that Prakash facilitates Jasmine's going to America—Lauret writes, for example, that "Prakash, the 'modern man' who wants a modern wife... duly (though posthumously) provides [Jasmine] transit to modernity and to the United States"—it is actually Jasmine herself who makes the bold decision to subversively acquire her own forged papers and leave India (Lauret 175, see also Bahri 146). Indeed, while still alive, Prakash was less concerned with securing Jasmine's papers than he was with his own, and only his visa, not hers, had come through at the time of his death. Afterwards, Jasmine makes arrangements to secure her fake papers entirely on her own. As Mukherjee notes in an interview, "My characters *choose* to uproot themselves from their native countries" (Hancock 37). For Jasmine, the decision to travel alone to the U.S. without legal papers, though seemingly a "mad" one in the eyes of her brothers, is an important choice that she makes for herself, a self-directed course of action and one of the first moments in which she envisions the possibility of autonomy through invisibility.

Jasmine's journey to America, though portrayed mostly as a traumatizing experience that leaves the protagonist sexually, emotionally, physically, and legally vulnerable, is nonetheless also an important part of her personal journey towards learning to circumvent the system, to evade the rules of documentation. As she and the other "human cargo" aboard *The Gulf Shuttle* approach the coast of Florida and prepare to enter America, the importance of maintaining their invisibility, their untraceability, is emphasized to all the passengers by their transporters. Half-Face, the ship's captain (and the man Jasmine will murder in the Florida

motel later this same day), tells them all, “After landfall, if the Border Patrol picks you up and hauls your ass off to the detention center, you don’t know us. You never sailed *The Gulf Shuttle*. You fucking walked on water, okay?” (106). And indeed, there is no written record that can prove that Jasmine and her co-travelers have sailed *The Gulf Shuttle*, no documentation of their arduous journeys, no itineraries that can be tracked. The idea that nobody need know how or why she came to America—that perhaps she did, in fact, “walk on water”—is one that becomes increasingly plausible to Jasmine as she begins to realize the ways in which invisibility and untraceability can keep her safe in the U.S.

After Jasmine murders Half-Face and sets fire to her suitcase, she flees the motel and sets out on foot into the forests of Florida. As she is walking, she is spotted by Lillian Gordon, whom Jasmine describes as a “kind Quaker lady who rescued me from a dirt trail about three miles east of Fowlers Key” (127). From Lillian, a white woman who aids illegal immigrants newly arrived to the U.S., Jasmine learns yet another series of important lessons about the possibility of remaining safely invisible and undocumented in the U.S., avoiding being recognized as an “illegal.” Lillian introduces herself to Jasmine by saying “My name is Lillian Gordon... I won’t ask yours because it’s probably a fake” (130). She then quickly points out that “those chappies from the INS would leap at the sight of you in those sandals,” and suggests that Jasmine come home with her instead of continuing to walk on (130). In the coming days, Jasmine finds a first home in America with Lillian, who helps her (and several other undocumented women who are staying in the house) to learn how to appear inconspicuous, to go unnoticed, to be looked at as American rather than illegal alien, so that she need never be asked to provide the INS with the forged documents that are the only “proof” that she is authorized to be in the country (130). Lillian’s lessons teach Jasmine that in order to avoid being spotted by the immigration authorities or asked for her papers, all Jasmine must do is simply *appear* American—a performance which, if executed successfully, makes her non-visible, ordinary, and thus unnoticed and unquestioned. In learning from Lillian, Jasmine discovers

that ordinariness—itsself a form of authorization, a legitimate claim to belonging—needn't come from a green card acquired after spending thousands of dollars or multiple years waiting to be designated as American on paper. Rather, Jasmine can convince others that she is authorized to be in America—indeed, that she is American—simply by wearing the right shoes, walking the right walk, talking the right talk, even having the right name. Lillian re-names Jasmine “Jazzy,” suggesting that this new name will help her to remain unquestioned and undetected (and that, conversely, the wrong name might expose her). As Warhol-Down notes, “‘Jazzy’ suggests a jauntily casual American-ness (what could be more American than jazz?),” which parallels the exact role Jasmine needs to play if she is to evade the INS: casual, comfortable, even jaunty in her claim to Americanness (10). To further help this performance, Lillian gives Jasmine clothes that belonged to her daughter in high school: “blouses with Peter Pan collars, maxi skirts, T-shirts with washed-out pictures, sweaters, cords, and loafers,” and teaches her to “beware the shoes... shoes are the biggest giveaway. Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels... ‘My daughter calls them Third World heels,’ Lillian said” (132). Lillian even shows Jasmine how to “walk American” and Jasmine “work[s] hard on the walk and deportment” (132, 133). All of the efforts pay off, as Jasmine soon sees her own performance as convincing enough to provide her safety, the security of invisibility. Her transformation is quick, pointing to the fluid and ever-changing nature of identities that documentation seeks to confirm and fix in writing: “Within a week... I’d lost my shy side... I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes” (133). Convinced that she can pass as ordinary, Lillian takes Jasmine to a public place to put on her first performance. Jasmine tells us,

we drove into a mall in Clearwater for the test. Time to try out my American talk and walk... [Lillian] had me try out my first escalator... At the bottom of the escalator she said, “They pick up dark people like you who’re afraid to get on or off.” I shut my eyes

and stepped forward and kept my eyes closed all the way to the top. I waited for the hairy arm of the law to haul me in. Instead, Lillian said, “You pass, Jazzy.” (133)

Shortly after passing this test, the same woman who is described as “mad” for daring to go to America alone and without legal papers gains the confidence to travel from Florida to New York by herself to begin a new—and undocumented—life in the nation’s largest city (97). Although still fearful of her illegal status and ever-conscious that she carries only phony papers, Jasmine gains increasing confidence through her time with Lillian that she can subvert the system of documentation altogether, appearing ordinary enough that she need never have to offer documents to prove that she belongs in the U.S. After only a week in America under Lillian’s tutelage, Jasmine believes in her ability to perform ordinariness, to evade “the hairy arm of the law”; she is confident that she can be without papers, but that, if she looks, sounds, and acts American enough, she will nevertheless be left alone (133). As such, she announces to Lillian, “I want to go to New York. I have an address there.” Two days later, she boards a Greyhound destined for Manhattan. Lillian’s parting words to her are reminders of how to remain undetected: “Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else” (135). When Jasmine arrives in New York “at ten in the morning on a Monday,” there are “scores of policemen swinging heavy nightsticks, but none of them pounced on [her] at the bottom of the escalator. They were, indeed, watching” (139). Though they are watching, however, Jasmine goes undetected—she is not the one they see, not the one they are looking for. In this moment, Jasmine realizes that Lillian was right: there is always surveillance, always someone looking for undocumented immigrants on dirt trails and escalators and in shopping malls and bus stations, but by carefully and continuously playing the right part, putting on an infrapolitical performance of sorts, Jasmine can remain unnoticed, invisible. Years after Jasmine leaves Florida, Lillian continues to reinforce to Jasmine the vigilance that invisibility requires by sending her care packages every Christmas which arrive care of others in the area, trusted family members and friends. Aware of how important it is

that Jasmine remain invisible and untraceable, her performance unquestioned, Lillian “made certain that my name and address never appeared in her files” (136).

Though a number of critics have read these scenes with Lillian as indications of Jasmine’s uncritical desire to aggressively assimilate and become American—Jazzy leaving Florida for New York in a T-shirt and cords—it is crucial to understand that this is less an assimilative process representing a desire to Americanize than it is a carefully staged *performance* of citizenship, national belonging, and “real” “Americanness” put on for the sake of safety and security. Lillian’s role is not assimilative agent, but rather infrapolitical instructor: she teaches Jasmine how to perform the role of an American so that she might remain undetected, under the radar of the documentary system. That Jasmine eagerly follows her advice does not necessarily suggest her desire for assimilation or citizenship, which she never in fact acquires; rather, performing “Americanness” is primarily a way for Jasmine to keep herself safe and unquestioned, especially during her earliest days in America. As Hoppe writes, connecting Jasmine’s performances of Americanness together with her need to remain unnoticed, “Lillian... helps [Jasmine] learn to pass as an American woman and evade the INS” (140). Bahri also supports this point, writing that Jasmine’s choice of clothing when she sets out for New York from Lillian’s is “as much a move toward *seeming* American as it is toward distancing herself from Other markings that might betray her illegal alien status” (148 emphasis added). Interestingly, Bahri’s essay on *Jasmine* is entitled “Always Becoming,” and the term “becoming” is one Bahri uses frequently to describe Jasmine’s many transitions and relocations throughout the novel; she is always “becoming” someone new. Here, however, Bahri chooses the word *seeming* rather than *becoming*—Jasmine’s departure from Lillian’s in American clothes, walking an American walk and talking American talk, is not an act of *becoming* American, but rather of *seeming* American. As Jasmine herself explains it, “[Lillian] wasn’t a missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old; she was a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute *ordinariness* we ached for” (131). For Jasmine, that ordinariness

comes through the ability to *seem* American enough to mask her illegal alien status, so that she needn't remain ever-fearful that the INS will discover her lack of papers.

In New York City, Jasmine's developing hunch that she *can* have a safe and happy life in America without real papers—or without any papers at all—is further confirmed through her experiences working as “undocumented ‘caregiver’” to the daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, an upper-middle-class couple (he is an academic, she a book editor) who live on Manhattan's Upper West Side (40). This position, which brings Jasmine considerable financial and emotional security and comfort, is one which never requires her to prove who she is or to identify herself to her employers on paper. Indeed, Jasmine doesn't need to make use of any written documents in order to find the job (help wanted ads, employment agency applications, etc., are not part of her job search), nor do Taylor and Wylie make use of any in their search for an au pair. Rather, the arrangement occurs by word-of-mouth, a paperless and undocumented arrangement that comes about when Kate Gordon, Lillian's daughter who lives in Manhattan, learns that her friends are looking for a caregiver and that her mother knows someone who is perfect for the job. With Taylor and Wylie, there are no I9 forms to fill out, nothing Jasmine must sign attesting to the fact that she is either a citizen or legal resident, no need to provide reference letters or résumé or driver's license or social security card. During the “interview,” it is immediately made clear that Jasmine will be given the job based solely on her affiliation with Lillian: Wylie tells her, “I'm not going to ask you for references... Kate already told us something about you. Lillian Gordon's word is solid gold with us. You will be part of the family. Families don't go around requiring references” (167). Although Jasmine herself wonders if she is qualified for the position, questioning whether a woman who is “illegal... murderer... raped... destitute” ought to be given the responsibility to care for a little girl, she realizes that “the person [Wylie and Taylor] thought they saw” is “humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate,” and therefore not someone whose references and background need to be checked or verified (171). In order to land the job, all Jasmine must do is simply withhold information about her past (a

relatively simple process since there are no reference requests or background checks) and allow Wylie and Taylor to think of her what they will. Her employers ask no questions, and, to add to her sense of relief, neither do her co-workers. There are a number of other “caregivers” working for the many families that live in Wylie and Taylor’s apartment building, and Jasmine refers to herself and these other “day mummies” as “a sorority that met in the laundry room and in the park” (178). As one of them, Jasmine can remain unidentified and feel totally ordinary: she notes that the other day mummies “assumed only that I was from ‘the islands,’ like they were... Jamaica or Trinidad or Santo Domingo” (34). As Wylie and Taylor’s undocumented au pair, Jasmine finds assurance that her illegal status will not be made visible by either employers or co-workers, that the whys and hows of her being in American can remain unknown, and in this way, she begins to find the ordinariness that she ached for, both in Florida and in Flushing.

Indeed, though Jasmine was willing to do almost anything to get a green card while staying with Professor Vadhera in Flushing (where she resides only briefly, after leaving Florida and before finding employment with the Hayeses), once she becomes Wylie and Taylor’s off-the-books, undocumented caregiver, she realizes that perhaps she might be both safer *and* more financially secure working and living off the books than she would be as a documented worker subjected to lower wages in an “on-the-books” position (179). Though Jasmine makes only \$95 per week as an au pair (the equivalent of about \$10,000 per year in current U.S. dollars), she also lives for free in Taylor and Wylie’s swanky Manhattan apartment, and has no other expenses: anything she needs—food, clothes, etc.—are provided for her by her employers, allowing her savings to start “piling up” (179). Over time, Jasmine can partake in luxuries such as ordering an endless stream of superfluous products off of TV infomercials simply because she has nothing better to do with her income; one critic goes as far as to argue that her position as illegal au pair allows her to live the life of “the middle-class American material girl” (Warhol-Down 10). In contrast, Jasmine tells us that “In Flushing, I had lived defensively in the midst of documented rectitude. I did not want to live legally if it also meant living like a refugee” (171).

Having seen what opportunities unfold for her when she seeks *undocumented* work, rather than being desperately desirous of having documentation as she was at Professor Vadhera's, Jasmine finds a sense of security, even autonomy, in the world of unlawful employment that she doesn't imagine possible if she had legal papers and a legal job. Far from feeling vulnerable or insecure in her new position, Jasmine quickly "f[alls] in love with [the Hayes's] world, its ease," and soon finds that she is no longer living like a "refugee," "destitute" and afraid (171). Furthermore, her job as "day mummy" is not the only one that Jasmine is able to land almost effortlessly, without any papers or written proof of background and identification. She also picks up other odd jobs, including answering the phones in the Math Department at Columbia University, an off-the-books position that Taylor, who works at Columbia as a physicist, arranges for her by word-of-mouth reference, just as Lillian Gordon did to land Jasmine the job with Taylor in the first place. Through this position, Jasmine finds even more off-the-books work in the Indian Languages Department at Columbia, both as a Punjabi reader for a scholar "making a linguistic atlas of the Punjab" and as a tutor for a Ford Foundation scholar heading to Punjab to study land reform (180). Once she begins working regularly for the academics in Columbia's Indian Languages Department, still more off-the-books work comes her way: "Professors would ask if I could help them with Sanskrit or Arabic, Devanagari or Gurumukhi script... They had things they wanted me to translate, paintings they wanted me to decipher" (33). Beyond the academic world, "executives being sent to Delhi came to me. They asked if forty dollars an hour was too insulting, given Berlitz rates, and I said no, not for a good cause. One executive brought me flowers and wine, another took me out to dinner... I paid back Professorji [the several thousand dollars she owed him] in a single check" (180). These experiences give Jasmine the confidence to believe that she can, in fact, not only survive, but perhaps also thrive in America—even in New York, America's most cut-throat, competitive city—without papers to prove her eligible or qualified for the type of work she does. As she tells us, "Now I saw how easy it was... Every day I was being paid for something new... Since I was spending nothing on food and rent, the money

was piling up” (179). Other advantages also come from these off-the-books jobs, and Jasmine learns how to work these advantages to her favor as well, even when she, again, doesn’t have the documented proof certain situations would normally require. We learn, for example, that “with Columbia employment [Jasmine] was eligible for free tuition in Columbia extension courses” (180). Of course, Jasmine has no high-school diploma, GED, test scores, or transcripts, from the U.S. or elsewhere, to prove that she is a legitimate candidate for college-level education, but she knows she can “convince them to overlook the fact that I was a sixth-grade dropout” (180). In these ways and others, Jasmine discovers that she is able to live freely and happily in America with or without the documentation she so desperately desired in Flushing. With pride, she tells us that “On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (185-6). No longer willing to define herself solely by her undocumented status, Jasmine now begins to claim a space for herself in America that is not dependent upon written proof of belonging.

After she makes the decision to leave the Hayeses for Iowa once she discovers Sukhwinder is in New York City, Jasmine again finds a new job in the Midwest which does not require her to present any papers or proof of who she is, what her background is, and whether she is legally eligible for employment in the U.S. Rather, she almost instantly lands a job as a bank-teller when she meets Mother Ripplemeyer in “the Personnel Office of the University Hospital.” As she tells us,

One minute I was begging a potato-faced woman behind the [counter] for a job, any job (telling her that I would do whatever needed doing, the psychiatric ward, the deathwatch, anything, because I was desperate and didn’t know anyone in Iowa) and the next minute a woman with the curtness and directness of Lillian Gordon, only older, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “You need a meal as well as a job, dear. I’m going to take you home for lunch; then I’m going to call Bud and see if he doesn’t need a pretty new teller.” (197)

Bud, Mother Ripplemeyer's son, runs the Bank of Baden, and is glad to take Jasmine on as his "pretty new teller" (eventually, the two also become romantically involved, causing a split between Bud and his wife, Karin). Interestingly, it is because Jasmine is pretty—an appearance that is *ordinary*, not threatening or suspect—that both Mother Ripplemeyer and Bud accept her so easily, asking no questions when they hire her, trusting her as effortlessly with the bank's money as Taylor and Wylie trusted her with their child. Again, Jasmine finds in this situation that her undocumented status goes unmentioned, that she *can* find a good job and still remain safely invisible, under the radar. Though, as I mentioned in the introduction to this section, scholars such as Brandt have suggested that documents have the power to define us, Jasmine has learned by the time she reaches Iowa to fashion her identity in other ways that do not require proof on paper—by being cautious of what she wears, how she talks, how she walks, how she looks, and what she chooses to say and not say, Jasmine can perform an identity that speaks for itself, no written proof required.

The more time Jasmine spends in the U.S., especially during her years in Iowa, the more she hones her ability to employ creative, adaptive tactics that allow her to beat the system of documentation, ensuring that she remains invisible and untraceable and that her paperless status never poses a problem for her. Her use of these infrapolitical tactics keeps her both safe and free. For example, she devises a plan to keep two bank accounts, both in fake names, telling us that "Jane Ripplemeyer [the new name she adopts for herself while living as Bud Ripplemeyer's common-law wife] has a bank account," but, "So does Jyoti Vijn, in a different city" (Jyoti is the name given to Jasmine at birth but which she never uses after her youth; Vijn is the surname of Prakash) (7). In Jasmine's case, a bank statement—one of the most common types of documents used to verify an individual's identity and history—becomes yet another futile attempt at capturing or confirming identity on paper: neither of the bank accounts she holds reflects her real name or identity, and a person accessing this information would not be able to locate her very easily. Banks are not the only institutions that Jasmine keeps her identity

hidden from, either; she also tells us that she doesn't "get or send out much mail" because "Why leave a paper trail for the INS to track?" (208). Never quite sure of where immigration authorities might look for, or find, illegal aliens, Jasmine ensures that her name is never recorded in the paperwork of banks, post offices, hospitals, and a variety of other public institutions; as such, she remains safely invisible and unknown throughout the entirety of the novel.

In fact, Jasmine becomes so skilled at maintaining her invisibility that even the lovers she has in America find that she is able to slip away from them without a trace. Years after Jasmine leaves the Hayeses in New York and disappears to Iowa, Taylor (who fell in love with Jasmine and split from Wylie while Jasmine was still employed as their au pair) makes the decision to go in search of her, to find Jasmine and reunite her with himself and Duff so that the three might live together as a family. Yet, it takes Taylor many months—perhaps even years—to find Jasmine again, as he is unsure of where to send his letters or how to figure out her address. When he finally decides to drive by car to Baden, Iowa, Duff's birthplace, he is unsure of where to head when he gets there, or even who to ask for, what name Jasmine might be using now. In a similar way, Jasmine also slips away from Bud, the man she lives with for several years as common-law husband and wife in Iowa, without leaving so much as a trace of herself behind—indeed, she doesn't even leave a goodbye note when she disappears abruptly one afternoon. Even before her spur-of-the-moment departure, however, Jasmine was already slipping away from Bud, as he could never get her to commit to be more than his common-law wife, despite proposing formal marriage several times. Though Jasmine never justifies her reasoning to Bud, it seems she refuses to marry him at least in part because this would mean she would have to be identified on paper. Rao writes that "Jasmine's practicality prevents her from accepting [Bud's] plea [to marry him]"; however, it is not only married life with Bud that would be impractical (since Jasmine doesn't love him and knows that staying with Bud, who becomes paralyzed after a gunshot wound, would essentially leave her in the position of a nurse-maid¹⁰), but also the very

process of marrying. Aware of the impracticality—indeed, the impossibility—of involving herself in the bureaucracy of marriage, which requires licenses, birth certificates, and other documented proofs of identity, Jasmine refuses Bud’s proposal and chooses only to remain his live-in lover, his “undocumented” wife. The fact that their relationship is never solidified on paper is also what gives Jasmine the freedom to walk out of Bud’s life without a trace once Taylor comes for her. Because she is not his legal wife, with no written contract obligating her to him, nor even any divorce or settlement papers to worry about once she leaves, there is nothing at all which stops her from going, and nothing which can connect her back to Bud after she is gone. In leaving Bud, one can see the dramatic transition Jasmine makes throughout the novel from wanting papers as a way out of a marginal position to, as Bahri writes, becoming someone “who eschews the status of marginal (read victim, powerless, morally superior) and explores agency” (142-3).

Jasmine’s playing the role of “wife”/lover of both Taylor and Bud, and then just as quickly slipping away from these men, is a reflection of the many roles she plays throughout the novel, the flexibility and adaptability that are required of her as she inhabits and uninhabits a variety of performative spaces that help to keep her safe, invisible, and undetected. In addition to finding a (temporarily) safe space in the role of wife/lover (as well as mother, to both Duff and her and Bud’s adopted son Du), Jasmine also—especially whenever she is newly arrived in a place—frequently performs the role of the student, another identity she finds she can adopt to keep her undocumented status a secret. Sometimes Jasmine deliberately performs this role herself; other times, she chooses not to correct others who assume as much about her. In both cases, she finds that playing the role of the student who has come (legally) to study in the U.S. is a way to mark herself as “legitimate” and “authorized,” eliminating the fear that she will be asked questions, or worse, asked for papers. When Jasmine first arrives in New York, the clothes Lillian Gordon dressed her in before she left Florida lead others to assume that she has come to Flushing, Queens to attend one of the nearby city colleges: “American clothes disguised

m[e]... In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student” (145). We also learn that Jasmine lands the job at Bud’s bank not only because she is pretty, but also because she can pass herself off as a student: recalling her first encounter with Bud’s mother, who introduces her to Bud and gets her the job, Jasmine says, “The first time she met me, she asked if I was good with numbers. Passably, I said. She assumed I was a student at the university; I didn’t disabuse her” (35). “My son is always looking for smart, reliable tellers,” Mother Ripplemeyer responds, “Let’s take a trip over there” (35). It seems that Mother Ripplemeyer relies upon Jasmine’s young age—as well as, perhaps, the myth of Asians as a “model minority”—to assume that she is a student as well as “smart” and “reliable.” All of these attributes simultaneously mark Jasmine as non-threatening, a “good” and “safe” immigrant/foreigner rather than an illegal “alien.” Rather than reveal the truth about her identity and illegal status in the U.S., Jasmine sees the opportunity to land a job without papers or proof of identification, and thus says not a word, allowing Bud’s mother to assume what she will about her (just as she did when she first met Taylor and Wylie). Through her ability to quickly adapt to the role presented by the situation, Jasmine lands both a job at the bank and, eventually, a comfortable home and life with Bud. Years later, even after she and Mother Ripplemeyer have become quite close, Jasmine continues to play the student role around her lover’s mother: she tells us that Mother Ripplemeyer continues to “wonde[r], I know, why I left. I tell her, Education” (16). Other people in Iowa also assume that Jasmine is a student (as people did in Queens and in Manhattan). When Jasmine attends social functions, she finds that she is frequently “asked what I am studying [at the nearby University]” and marvels at her own ability to wordlessly inhabit an identity without having to have any proof of it: “I, a dropout from a village school. America, America!” (123). Though Jasmine never pursues higher education throughout the novel (aside from her brief interest in the extension courses at Columbia before she flees New York), she continues to frequently play the role of the student-immigrant who came legally to America for education, as her own deceased husband had intended to. By inhabiting this role, Jasmine finds yet another way to circumvent questions

about her identity, past, history, and (il)legality. As a “student,” she draws no suspicion from others about who she is, where she came from, or how she got here.

The many roles Jasmine inhabits and discards throughout the novel suggest an identity (or really, series of identities) that exceeds what can be captured on paper. There is no birth certificate, green card, or identification paper that could document the transformations Jasmine makes throughout her journey/s, the many persons she becomes as she travels from India to Florida to New York to Iowa, and ultimately, at the novel’s end, west to California with Taylor and Duff. Jasmine—who transitions from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase to Jane throughout the novel—describes herself as “shuttl[ing] between identities” (77). Nishimura points to some of Jasmine’s many roles in describing her as “wife [to Prakash], immigrant, laborer, caregiver/day mummy, American wife [to Bud], American mother [to Du] and autonomous woman,” but leaves others still unmentioned: Jasmine is also murderer, rape survivor, runaway, widow, tutor, translator, interpreter, bank-teller, lover to Taylor, friend of Karin and Darrel, and nurse to Bud, among other roles (122). These shifting, changing identities afford Jasmine a sort of freedom, the ability to ensure that her past, her journeys, even her crimes, remain undocumented and unknown. As she thinks to herself one afternoon in Iowa, “Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff’s day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s *au pair* in Manhattan; *that* Jasmine isn’t *this* Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today. And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster[?]” (127). Jasmine’s question, asked with a certain tongue-in-cheekiness, tells us that nobody need know who she is or what her past has been; her undocumented status gives her the autonomy to continually create and re-create herself anew. This also allows Jasmine to escape the dehumanizing, reductive, systematic way in which Documentary America attempts to capture, fix, categorize and define individual (and group) identities. As Nishimura writes, the novel “situates the character as someone who notes the trappings, angst, and lack of identity within American institutions,” and indeed, Jasmine does not just note them, but actively resists and subverts

them (119). Her refusal to be identified and recorded on paper is also a refusal to accept the notion of a fixed, unchanging, and easily definable identity. Instead, as Deshmone writes, “Jasmine’s life, identity, name, place and even her husbands/lovers continue to evolve, never allowing the complacency that characterizes life for most people” (55).

Jasmine continually re-creates herself in large part because the diverse, sometimes conflicting, encounters and experiences of her everyday life both demand and invite such changes—she is teenage widow, homeless refugee, motel murderer, upper-west-side au pair, Ivy-League tutor, Midwestern housewife, and mother of an adopted teen from Saigon partially by choice, partially by chance, and partially by circumstance. In any case, it becomes clear that identity in practice and in context can never be as fixed or finite as it is on paper, but rather is remarkably fluid, malleable, versatile, adaptable, and *multiple*. Nishimura writes that “[Jasmine’s] identity is based on a skilled ability to move lithely among various experiences” (120). The notion of identity as experiential, as developing in response to various experiences and contexts, is itself a portrayal of the futility of bureaucratic attempts to define the individual permanently in writing. At the same time, Jasmine’s shifting identities also suggest Mukherjee’s attempt to create a character who does not inhabit or pander to audience expectations of a stereotypical “immigrant” identity: by being many selves, some secure, some insecure, some safe, some unsafe, some comfortable, some uncomfortable, and many somewhere in between, Jasmine cannot be easily categorized as “illegal alien” (read: threatening, criminal, living in poverty) nor as “model minority” (read: affluent, successful, assimilated, conformist). Though these are both identities that she does inhabit at times, neither is an identity she adopts for very long, as she quickly moves on to other identities, roles, and performances as circumstances demand or allow for them.

The continual reconstruction of identity that becomes possible through Jasmine’s undocumented status is not a painless process; even after being in America several years, Jasmine still sees “ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti” (21). Yet, it is nevertheless a

transformative process that also brings Jasmine a considerable degree of opportunity, freedom, and mobility. As Roberts writes, Jasmine “adopts new identities as a strategy to gain autonomy, although [she] does not glamorize the serious rupture involved in this process” (88). She resorts to “metaphorically killing herself” as a way of ensuring that her former identities and actions remain untraceable and unrecorded; but in so doing, Jasmine also “hones her survival instincts” and finds ways to claim a space (or spaces) for herself in America despite the lack of documented proof that she belongs (Roberts 89). As Jasmine herself tells us, “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (29). Deshmone suggests that Jasmine is “always kept in what Bhabha calls the ‘state of emergency,’” which is “‘also always a state of emergence’” (52). The dangers and anxieties that are attendant factors of her everyday life as an undocumented person are the result of the same set of circumstances and contexts that allow for her continual remakings of the self. Once Jasmine realizes this, she seems to prefer this state of emergency—which is also a state of fluidity and autonomy—to what Bahri calls the “fixity that would be indicated in the acquisition of civic identity” (139). Instead of opting for an identity fixed by the state on paper, Jasmine instead chooses a “kinetic, liminal space to evade ‘detection’” (Bahri 140). This allows her to be, as Bahri writes, “‘always becoming’ to escape ‘having become’” (141). The *liminality* of her position need not necessarily be understood as one of *marginality*—rather, I would agree with Bahri that Jasmine is in a state of “always becoming” because “it is the quest for agency and an inherent resistance to victimization that sets [her] in motion” (146). The possibility of continual self-(re)construction through undetectability becomes a form of opportunity and autonomy for this protagonist.

Of course, Jasmine remains “in motion” as a way of remaining invisible. Yet, again, invisibility is a liminal position which is not necessarily a marginal one. Though we generally conceive of a visible identity as an indication of power and status, and mark those who are socially and politically marginalized and powerless as “invisible,” *Jasmine* subverts this logic,

suggesting that to be visible is also to be identifiable and thus vulnerable to power. In contrast, the fluidity and instability of Jasmine's undocumented identity—her many shifting selves—allow her an invisibility that she herself desires and seeks out, one which she recognizes as a form of both agency and opportunity. Bahri writes that Jasmine chooses to “shift her borders and her identity at the very moment that they are in danger of crystallizing” (146). Suggesting the permanency and rigidity of a documented identity through the metaphor of crystallization, Bahri also notes the “danger,” the *risk*, in this rigidity, suggesting that Jasmine's many identities, her constant state of emergency and emergence, allow a form of freedom which the protagonist willingly embraces. Hoppe, similarly, argues that Jasmine's identity involves continuous “revisions and reconstructions” (145). His use of the word “revisions” in describing her identity/ies seems particularly fitting: while documents seek to permanently record identity on paper, to make one's identity permanently knowable and readable, Jasmine's identity-construction is instead an ongoing, revisionary process which never reaches a final state of completion. Through the continual revisions of self made possible by her undocumented status, Jasmine becomes the successful subversive, what Bahri calls the “eternal escapee from the exchange systems of legal, political, and societal economies” (154). Her illegal status means that she is unauthorized not only on paper, but also “unauthorized by Western narratives of power and possession”; yet it is precisely by remaining unwritten within these narratives of power and possession that Jasmine is able to successfully make her way in America (Hoppe 147).

Claiming a Space: Paperless Citizenship

Jasmine's life as an undocumented immigrant woman in the U.S. is not, for the most part, a story of struggle or basic survival; rather, by the novel's close, the protagonist has found a considerable degree of comfort, stability, and even acceptance in America despite not having the papers that “prove” she belongs or that designate her as an “insider.” Jasmine's work experiences alone are testament to the fact that there are still some arenas of everyday life which Documentary America cannot fully penetrate, expose, or record. For years, first as Taylor and

Wylie's "undocumented 'caregiver,'" and then as an employee at Bud's bank, Jasmine is able to find work that allows her to make a comfortable living without having to provide documentation of either her identity or her labor (40). While her employment experiences (and those of her co-workers) speak to the notion of an invisible class of illegal laborers in America, many of whom are paid low wages, taken advantage of by employers, and unable to secure the rights and benefits of legal resident workers such as health insurance and union membership, they also suggest that there *are* ways in which individuals can circumvent the system of documentation and identification that so permeates most businesses and institutions in our society.¹¹ Indeed, Jasmine is so adept at using infrapolitical tactics to effectively manipulate others, confirming their assumptions about her identity, background, and history, that she is repeatedly able to secure employment positions that usually would not be available to someone without references, background check, and written proof of employment eligibility, including jobs at financial institutions and prestigious private universities.

These positions bring Jasmine not only financial stability, but also social acceptance: in both New York and Iowa, work quickly blends together with family as Jasmine's employers unquestioningly accept her as one of their own. On the first day they meet, Wylie tells Jasmine that she "will be part of the family" (137), and a woman who thinks of herself as "illegal [and] murderer" is never considered by Wylie and Taylor as anything other than "humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate" (171). Jasmine finds belonging and acceptance with Taylor, Wylie, and their friends and family in New York, telling us, "I became an American in an apartment on Claremore Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory [while] I lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes for nearly two years" (165). Interestingly, "bec[oming] an American" has nothing to do with acquiring documented citizenship or legal residency; rather, Jasmine increasingly sees herself as an insider in the U.S. regardless of her paperless status. Though Rao argues that a green card, even a fake one, symbolizes "the road to the realization of [Jasmine's] American Dream," this becomes less and less true as the novel goes on—in fact, once

Jasmine leaves Flushing early in the narrative, we never see her desire a green card with that same sense of urgency ever again, and the acquisition of one goes virtually unmentioned throughout the remainder of the text (Rao 75). As Jasmine realizes that she is perceived by others as non-threatening and non-suspect, she becomes confident in her ability to remain undetected, and as such, begins to settle into life in America, finding acceptance and belonging not through a documented identity, but through the interactions and experiences of everyday life. Even in Baden, Iowa, a far less culturally diverse place than New York City, Jasmine is unsuspecting and unsuspected, and thus easily accepted. Even her voice convinces her neighbors that she is one of them, an American: as she explains, local Iowans “tell me I have no accent, but I don’t sound Iowan, either. I’m like those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing. Maybe Northern California, they say. Du says they’re computer generated” (13). Though her accent is not quite placeable, not quite traceable, it is non-threatening, an American voice even if not an Iowan one, “clear and soothing.” Du’s observation that her voice sounds “computer generated” suggests that she performs the “American talk” Lillian taught her so well that she can replicate the “standard” American English generally used in computer-generated voiceovers. This is but one way in which Jasmine manages to perform and acquire the ordinariness she previously feared could only come through being documented. No longer desirous of written proof of her belonging, Jasmine learns that she can prove this belonging in other ways, and still find the ordinariness and acceptance that she craves.

Indeed, even the odd, untraditional arrangement she has with Bud—the Indian girl shackled up with the heartland banker and very recent divorcee, carrying his child though she remains only his live-in girlfriend—is seemingly questioned only by Karin, Bud’s ex-wife, who is (understandably) jealous of Jasmine and eager to see her as the enemy. As Warhol-Down notes, “though pregnant with his child, [Jasmine] is not married to Bud, but the people in Baden, Iowa call her ‘Mrs. Ripplemeyer’ with no hesitation or qualms at all” (8). Not only is she accepted by them as legal resident—perhaps even American-born citizen—of the U.S., but also as traditional

Midwestern housewife and mother in this small farming community. As she explains, the people in Iowa

assume that I'm different from them but exempted from being one of "them," the knife-wielding undocumented immigrants hiding in basements webbing furniture... They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a "dark-haired girl" in a naturally blond county... as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I'm from a generic place, "over there," which might be Ireland, France, or Italy. I'm not a Lutheran, which isn't to say I might not be Presbyterian. (33)

Though dark-skinned, potentially able to be characterized as one of "them," the aliens, the terrorists, the mice scampering through the holes of the Swiss cheese borders, Jasmine is instead marked as ethnically and nationally unthreatening, her racial identity not of much interest and certainly not a cause for concern. As Warhol-Down notes, "the specificity of [Jasmine's] national difference does not matter to her Iowa neighbors"—they "acknowledge a difference, but they are not interested in what it might mean about who 'Jane' is" (11).

Seemingly, the lessons from Lillian have more than paid off, as Jasmine's performance of ordinary Americanness is utterly convincing, entirely unquestioned by her Iowan neighbors. Warhol-Down reiterates this point when she writes that, in Iowa, Jasmine "becomes Jane, Mrs. Ripplemeyer, Mom, the figure *who would appear* to embody the ultimate American identity" (10 emphasis added). Warhol-Down's implication that Jasmine's performance is partially one of deception is accurate: Jasmine is not, of course, Mrs. Ripplemeyer, Mom, or the traditional Midwestern housewife, but rather the occupant of a liminal, extralegal, and untraditional space in America. Despite this, however, others see her as embodying the "ultimate American identity." The performance is successful, and as such, Jasmine's invisibility and security are maintained.

A number of critics have argued that the fact that "Jasmine" becomes "Jane" by the novel's end, seemingly transforming herself from "Indian woman" to "American woman" as she

moves ever-westward throughout the narrative, suggests a celebratory view of assimilation in which the loss of Indianness is portrayed as a necessary and non-regrettable sacrifice in the process of Americanization. Lim, for example, writes that *Jasmine* is an “assimilation narrative” which “reproduces the hegemonic epic of the United States as a nation of limitless opportunity, freedom, and triumphant individualism” (307). However, it is critical to note that the opportunity, freedom, and individualism Jasmine experiences throughout the novel are not granted to her by the state, but rather come about through her own subversive ways of evading the state’s system of identification and documentation. Jasmine’s freedom is *self*-authorized and *self*-legitimated, never recognized or acknowledged by the state, never written into the nation’s “assimilation narrative.” The ways in which she acquires opportunity, freedom, and individualism suggest that the narrative is less a “hegemonic” celebration of the “epic of the United States” than it is a scathing criticism of the extent to which so-called “aliens” and “undocumented” are denied freedom, opportunity, and individualism by the state, and thus take their own subversive measures to acquire these things. In *Jasmine*, “assimilation” is about finding a way to belong, to be accepted as an American, *while still existing as an illegal undocumented alien*. Jasmine’s is not a total assimilation, but a *selective* one, in which she never opts to become “fully” American. Rather, her process of “assimilation” and “Americanization” is one which is resistant to the systematic procedures that becoming a “real” American normally requires. The option of legal citizenship is never once considered by Jasmine throughout the entirety of the text. As Bahri notes, “Jasmine never becomes an American legally; in fact, she does not interact with ‘systemic’ America at all. She remains”—*chooses* to remain—“undocumented, unmarked. The reality she engages with exists in the borders and limits of structured society as such” (141). It is from these borders and limits that Jasmine claims herself as an American, even as she remains detached from—indeed, invisible to—“‘systemic’ America” and “structured society.” In an interview with Hancock, Mukherjee claims that she can “make myself feel that I ‘belong’ almost anywhere,” and in *Jasmine*, she

creates a protagonist who can do the same (35). As Mukherjee explains, “my characters don’t see themselves as lost, marginal people in an unfamiliar city. On the contrary, my characters present an unexpected ‘insider’s view’” (Hancock 35). Jasmine insists upon her Americanness, her ordinariness, her non-alienness, and, as such, this becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy: exuding the appearance of who she claims to be, she is unquestioned, accepted as a U.S. citizen and American, her illegal alien status unknown to virtually everybody she meets. In this way, she not only subverts and challenges the power and authority of Documentary America, but also challenges and offers a re-definition of how we understand the very concepts of America and Americanness, of national borders and national belonging, of who can and cannot “count” as an American.

To say that Jasmine finds a certain degree of freedom and autonomy in her invisibility is not to say that hers is a life without risks or constraints; on the contrary, the continued vulnerability of Jasmine—and all “illegals” and “undocumented”—is made clear right up to the closing pages of the novel. In addition to accusing Mukherjee of being overly assimilationist in her writing, critics have also argued that her works, particularly *Jasmine*, offer an overly idealistic portrayal of the opportunities for immigrants in the U.S. As Nishimura notes, “one of the criticisms leveled against [Mukherjee] and her novel *Jasmine*... [is] that it supports the ideology of an immigrant who secures a seemingly happily-ever-after ending” (118). Yet, even at the novel’s close, when a “strange car,” which turns out to be Taylor’s, pulls into Jasmine’s driveway in Iowa, her first thought is to check that “it’s not a government car—that’s still my first anxiety—[but] immigration cops don’t come in Toyotas” (237). Right up to the novel’s end, Jasmine’s “anxiety” over being captured by “immigration cops” continues to plague her everyday life. As Lauret writes, challenging the idea of the novel as a “happily-ever-after” story, “[Jasmine’s] pursuit of happiness... remains a pursuit that is never concluded but always unstable, always unsafe... allow[ing] for [no] satisfying or comfortable conclusion” (182). And indeed, as many critics have pointed out, the novel does not conclude with Jasmine and Taylor

finally settled together, a typical “happy ending,” but rather with Jasmine heading out on the road again, future uncertain. The as-yet-unfinished story of Jasmine’s journey that readers are left with at the novel’s close is a reminder that her journey is “both repression and progression,” that America “may welcome immigrants, but, at the same time, provide[s] very rigid spaces for their identities to exist” (Nishimura 118; 126). The problematics of Jasmine’s position as an undocumented immigrant are perhaps most well demonstrated in the few scenes in which Jasmine actually *wants* to have an encounter with institutional and bureaucratic authorities, but knows that she cannot because of risk of exposure. We see this not only when she realizes that Sukhwinder has found her in New York and is unable to call the cops for help as Taylor suggests, but also later in the narrative, when Jasmine receives word that Lillian has been arrested, “busted” for “harboring undocumented, *exploiting* them (the prosecution said) for free cooking, cleaning, and yard work” (136). Though Jasmine desperately wants to help Lillian, who she believes exemplifies “the best in the American experience and the American character,” and whom she credits with “sav[ing] my life, after others had tried to end it,” there turns out to be little she can do to help (137, 136). As she explains, “I couldn’t testify for her [during the trial], given my own delicate status[, and] my anonymous letter of support was ruled inadmissible” (136). With none of the undocumented people she helped able to testify on her behalf, the odds are stacked against Lillian, who ultimately “[goes] to jail for refusing to name her contacts or disclose the names and addresses of the so-called army of illegal aliens she’d helped ‘dump’ on the welfare rolls of America” (137). Though Lillian’s decision to sacrifice her own freedom and choose incarceration keeps Jasmine and others like her safe (for now), the very fact that Lillian stands trial and is pressured to disclose the names and addresses of her contacts is a powerful reminder of the fact that the law is always looking, always watching, and always searching for undocumented.

Yet, despite her continued vulnerability, Jasmine is able to remain successfully unnoticed by the law throughout the novel. Though Documentary America seeks to trace, find,

name, and classify individuals through systems of documentation, her story shows how frequently such efforts are rendered futile by individuals' ability to slip under the radar, to remain untraceable, to never appear on paper or in the books. Bahri writes that "in the legal economy," Jasmine is "a murder, a forger, and a larcenist... a criminal," but, in fact, Jasmine is never recognized or documented by the law as any of these (149). Similarly, Nishimura argues that the immigrants in the novel are "always dealing with a government system that may or may not recognize them as citizens," yet Jasmine has not a single encounter with immigration authorities or government officials throughout the entirety of the text beyond seeing them in the New York bus station at a distance (126). While she does remain ever fearful of the "immigration cops," what is most significant is that they do not hunt her down, do not find her, do not even *look* for her. Though Bahri is right to note that Jasmine "must keep moving before she is sighted," it is through this continual movement that she, somewhat paradoxically, finds a way to settle in America, ensuring that she is able to stay within the nation's borders rather than being expelled from them (149).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that despite the "frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization," there exists a "proliferating illegitimacy" which "develop[s] and insinuate[s] itself into the networks of surveillance." As such, some national subjects are able to "elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised" (de Certeau 96). Such is the story of Jasmine. As Wickramagamage argues, Mukherjee's novel suggests that "underlying the bureaucratic process that equates legitimate immigration with the possession of valid visas and authentic documents there is another vision of cross-border movement," one grounded in a belief in the "subversive potential of life on the margins" (171, 172). Though ever-conscious of the insecurity and vulnerability of her position—and of the positions of so many others like her—Jasmine's fears plague her less frequently and less pervasively as she finds increasing freedom, opportunity, and possibility in

her undocumented status, which increasingly outweigh the risks she once associated with living paperless in America.

By remaining undocumented and invisible, Jasmine also finds the freedom and autonomy to transform and remake herself into many different versions, adapting her identity with each situation and context she encounters rather than remaining beholden to a fixed identity defined on paper. Her refusal to become a citizen or to participate in the bureaucratic process that citizenship would involve is a decision to *legitimate herself*, to claim *self*-recognition and *self*-authorization even if she is not recognized or authorized by the state. Nishimura writes that the “happily-ever-after” ending is denied to Jasmine because by the novel’s close she is still dealing with “the ongoing struggle to identify oneself within a multinational arena” (119). I would argue, however, that Jasmine is less concerned with finding a fixed way to identify herself than she is with learning how to continually reconstruct herself, to understand identity as something that is always unstable, in flux, in motion, and therefore not easily explainable. Jasmine’s experiences as an undocumented woman teach her not to cling to false notions of a stable or comprehensive identity, but instead to find both autonomy and security through transformation, through shape-shifting and adaptation. Jasmine describes herself as “a fighter and adapter,” noting that these qualities are critical to her survival both in India and in America (40). Describing her journey as one of “adventure, risk, transformation,” Jasmine also knows it is a continual process, one in which she will continue to create and re-create herself in ways which far exceed what might be captured and documented on paper (240). As Jasmine wonders near the narrative’s close, “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves[?]” (215).

Of course, it is not only Jasmine’s individual identity that the novel shows to be unstable and in flux, but also the identity of the nation itself. In an interview, Mukherjee explains that “My stories centre on a new breed and generation of North American pioneers... my stories are about conquests, and not about loss” (Hancock 37). As she elaborates later in the same

interview, “[I] want my characters to be seen as inventing their own Americas... the breaking away from rigidly predictable lives frees them to invent... In immigrating, my characters become creators” (Hancock 44). The idea of Mukherjee’s characters as inventors and creators of “their own Americas” suggests that the nation, like its subjects, is in a continual state of revision and reconstruction, its identity not easily definable or explainable but always changing, always being re-born anew as inventors and creators claim and create their own Americas. The aims of Documentary America are not only to identify and document individuals, but to then place and locate these individuals as part of nameable, definable groups and categories, such that the nation-state might claim some sense of order and control over the huge geographical land mass of disparate and diverse peoples that is the United States. Yet, such a process is shown in *Jasmine* to be impossible—not only is the protagonist herself in a state of continual reconstruction, but so, too, is the nation she comes to call home, ever-changing and changed by those people who come from around the globe to live inside its borders, both legally and illegally, in visible spaces and in invisible margins. As Bahri writes, “America is presented [in *Jasmine*] as a geographic and temporal state/space that is always in the process of becoming a new nation... each immigrant who enters its space, legally or otherwise, shifts and transforms its borders” (143-33). In this sense, nation mirrors protagonist—neither is proven to be fully identifiable, neither has a fixed identity that can be captured in writing and recorded on paper. Hoppe argues that Jasmine “separates ‘America’—as an ideal space/temporality of continuous self-invention—from America’s dominant citizens,” reminding us that America is in fact defined as much by its margins as its center, a space of many Americas within America (138). In remaining undocumented, Jasmine leaves her mark on the nation even as she remains invisible to it. Her claim of belonging as an American citizen is never legitimated on paper, and yet, America is changed by her having occupied a space—documented or otherwise—within its borders.

In *The Uprooted*, Oscar Handlin writes that, for the immigrant, “danger and insecurity are other words for freedom and opportunity” (241). Such is precisely how Jasmine experiences life in the U.S. Though never free of the dangers and insecurities that are a part of her undocumented existence, she learns to find freedom and opportunity in the invisibility, instability, and *flexibility* of this position, particularly in the multiple selves and identities she can claim for herself when her identity is not defined or restricted by the external forces of Documentary America. Though never an American on paper, Jasmine is free to call herself a citizen of America. Far from feeling “alien” or “identityless” without a documented existence in the U.S., she instead learns how to construct a self-authorized and self-legitimated identity which is not dependent upon or shaped by the system of documentation which seeks to locate, define, fix, and control who she is, where she goes, and how she is understood by others. The many versions of herself that she creates and invents throughout the narrative are all quite “real” to her—and to others—regardless of whether these selves can be verified or legitimated in writing. Though the danger of her position never subsides, it is, ultimately, a danger that she chooses as, also, a form of autonomy—the freedom to define the self rather than being documented and defined by the state. In Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*, Leon Leong and his step-daughter Leila engage in similar processes of identity (re-)construction as a means of resisting state-defined and documented identification. In the next chapter, I discuss the role that Documentary America plays in the lives of the characters in Ng’s novel.

Chapter 2

“America, This Lie of a Country!”: Re-Writing the Archives in *Bone*

“The half-understood message, the front page of newspapers, the voice on the telephone, the most anodyne conversation, the most anonymous man or woman, everything that speaks, makes noise, passes by, touches us lightly, meets us head on” – Jacques Sojcher, *La Démarche Poétique* (145)

“The approach to culture begins when the ordinary man *becomes* the narrator, when it is he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its development” – Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (5)

“No word exists alone... the story behind each word must be told” – Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (32-33)

San Francisco-born Chinese American Fae Myenne Ng published *Bone*, her first novel, in 1993 with Hyperion Press (parts of the novel also appeared in publications including *The American Voice*, *Bostonia*, *Harper's*, and *Home to Stay* before the work was published in full). A national bestseller and finalist for the 1994 PEN/Faulkner award, the novel also joined Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* as the second work of Chinese American fiction to be translated into Spanish. Following *Bone*, Ng released *Steer Toward Rock*, her only other novel, in 2008. *Bone* is the intergenerational, past-as-present story/ies of the Leong family, Chinese American immigrants Mah and Leon, and their daughters, Leila, Ona, and Nina.¹ Central to the novel is Leon Leong's history as a paper son who purchased false citizenship papers and access to a fake family history from another Chinese American immigrant, Grandpa Leong, in order to enter the U.S. during the nearly century-long restriction of Asian, and, in particular, Chinese, immigration to America. The novel thus serves as a testament to the histories of exclusionary immigration laws in the U.S., Chinese immigrants' tactics for circumventing these laws, and the unique societies and communities—American Chinatowns—that gradually formed in the U.S. as a result of both the former and the latter. The Leong family's complicated immigration history, which

begins with Grandpa Leong's coming to America to work as a migrant laborer, speaks to the national history of U.S. recruitment of Chinese men to build the transcontinental railroads, pan for gold on "Gold Mountain," develop the industry of U.S. agriculture, and provide other forms of needed labor, as well as to the subsequent history of restriction and exclusion that was a response to "native" Americans' rising anxieties about a perceived "influx" of Asian immigrants to the U.S. At the same time, in tracing Leon's history as a paper son, the novel is also a reflection on the domination of Documentary America in the everyday lives of immigrant families, as well as the ways in which this domination is everywhere resisted, circumvented, subverted, and challenged by ordinary people like Leon and Leila.

Bone is set in late-twentieth-century San Francisco Chinatown and, as virtually every critic writing on the novel acknowledges, place is integral to an understanding of the narrative and the Leong family history. Because Chinatown's everyday life and social structure reflect and carry the socioeconomic and political histories of Chinese American immigrant families like the Leongs, the setting itself becomes an integral part of the story, holding many stories of its own. Rocío G. Davis argues that *Bone* is one among a number of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian works of literature in which Chinatown is so important as to figure as a character, even a protagonist, rather than merely as setting or backdrop.² Pin-Chia Feng, likewise, notes that Ng's novel joins a "long tradition" of Chinatown literature, including Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Lin Yu-tang's *Chinatown Family* (1948), C.Y. Lee's *Flower Drum Song* (1957), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), and Frank Chin's *Donald Duk* (1991) (Feng 8). Yet, as significant as place is how temporality is configured in *Bone*, another point repeatedly acknowledged in criticism on the novel. *Bone's* chronology moves in reverse, beginning after middle daughter Ona's death, and jumping back in time to earlier moments of the Leong family's lives prior to Ona's suicide. Though all of the chapters are written in the present tense, each one takes us one step farther into the past than the chapter before it, so that readers are moving backward in time even as we progress forward

through the text itself. The effect is such that “past is always present” throughout the narrative, as Ta writes (154). Readers are clued in to the narrative’s reverse chronological structure in subtle ways: we learn of protagonist Leila’s relationship with her boyfriend/husband Mason in backward steps, for example, first reading of her marriage to him in the opening chapter; then, later, taken to the moment when he proposes marriage; and finally, in the closing chapter of the novel, told (in present tense) of their earliest days as a young couple beginning their courtship. This unique narrative structure has been the focus of much critical attention, with essayists frequently acknowledging the ways in which Ng’s novel challenges forward-moving, progressive temporalities and constructions of History, making room, instead, for previously unheard (hi)stories.³

The narrative structure—“text as palimpsest, as multilayered surface,” as Juliana Chang describes it—mirrors the ways in which the characters themselves write, re-write, revise, and preserve histories, which is the focus of this chapter. In her discussion of *Bone in Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe writes that the text’s backward-moving, layered representation of history “refuses assimilation to the dominant narratives” of the nation, “displac[ing] the representational regimes of the... official historical narrative by writing out of the limits and breakdowns of those regimes” (Lowe 101). In a similar way, characters in the novel, especially Leon and his (step)daughter Leila, construct their own (counter-)histories “out of the limits and breakdowns” of a documentary society which seeks to capture and define identities and histories on paper. Leon, in particular, refuses to be defined solely by his “paper son” status and lack of legitimate citizenship papers, instead choosing to document and archive his own alternative history/ies which both complement and complicate the ways in which he is portrayed in state-authorized documents and the “official historical narrative.” While Jasmine tries to build an identity that is entirely *undocumented* and *paperless*, Leon resists the system of documentation by compiling an alternative archive of himself, his family, and their history using documents and other artifacts that would not be considered legitimate or verifiable by those authority figures

who ask to see Leon's social security card or birth certificate as ways of affirming his identity and place in the nation. In constructing this counter-archive, Leon challenges the idea that authorized documents contain "the whole story" or "the facts," refusing to buy into what one critic writing on *Bone* calls the "sacralization of writing" (Sze 60).⁴ Instead, his efforts to recover a larger picture, a different history, a more layered and contextualized story of himself and his family, call our attention to the ways in which much of what is recorded in writing "offers an incomplete and dehumanized interpretation of identity or history—whether collective or individual" (Sze 60-61). Though oral forms of storytelling are often portrayed as perhaps the most common form of counter-narrative in works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature—in an essay on *Bone*, Gonzalez echoes this point, writing that the "'official' status" of History "with the capital letter" can be contrasted with the "oral, non-(institutionally)-legitimized 'story'"—Leon takes the interesting route of instead documenting his own journey on paper, in print, and through a range of multimedia documents, offering a counter-archive that is largely written and visual, not oral, but which nonetheless effectively challenges and contextualizes the forms of written record-keeping used by the state and its bureaucracies (Gonzalez 51). The novel's portrayal of these alternative ways of documenting, preserving, and representing (hi)stories is a rejection of the power of authorized written documents to define and construct (as well as exclude and ignore) both individuals and histories, instead pointing to the various other ways—written and visual as well as oral—through which stories can and must be told. Leon's alternative archive, which far exceeds the boundaries of representation that are possible/permissible on bureaucratic forms and documents, also demonstrates the limitations of Documentary America's attempts to capture, name, define, and know individuals, to make them describable and categorizable on paper.

Like Jasmine, Leon claims a space of belonging for himself in the U.S. despite being unauthorized as a paper son. His performances of legality—from telling a fictional family history to the immigration guard at Angel Island in order to pass the interrogation, to insisting

to a Social Security officer that he is entitled to benefits despite having multiple birthdates on multiple documents and being unable to verify his identity—sometimes allow him to access certain spaces and opportunities, social, economic, and otherwise, that might not have been easily (or at all) accessible to him otherwise. These performances of authorization, legitimacy, and belonging by an individual who is both unauthorized and un(officially)documented are forms of Scott’s infrapolitics, ways for Leon to “pres[s], tes[t], [and] prob[e] the boundaries of the permissible” (Scott 200). Over time, however, Leon begins not only to perform legality but to see himself as a rightful citizen of the U.S., whether legal or not. As such, he begins to document his citizenship as an American and his history in America as a counter-narrative to the system of documentation which has the power to mark him as illegal and unauthorized and exclude him from official narratives of national History. Resisting the domination of documentation and its attempts to define and construct his very identity, Leon claims and testifies to his belonging in America using his own alternative archive, a myriad of documents and artifacts which become his “citizenship papers,” ones which are not granted to him by the state but rather self-created and self-legitimated.

It is worth mentioning here that though there is a substantial range of critical work on *Bone*, a surprisingly meager amount of attention has been given to language usage in the novel, either its bureaucratic functions or its subversive potential, both of which are important themes in Ng’s text. As a paper son, Leon’s identity, both as it exists on (“authorized”) paper and as he constructs it in the (“unauthorized”) counter-archives he assembles, shapes the entirety of his everyday life, as well as the day-to-day lives of his family. Yet, the novel’s emphasis on the power of language as it is used in written documents, records, archives and assemblages—especially to construct and deconstruct “official” narratives of individual and national histories—has been given little attention in the scholarship on Ng’s novel. Though there are some interesting essays focusing on language usage in *Bone* (perhaps most notably, Gonzalez’s fascinating discussion of the ways *Bone* is (mis-)translated and (re-)rendered into a Spanish

language version—which, notably, is titled *Un Padre de Papel*), most of the discussions of language in the novel focus almost exclusively, and rather limitedly, on the fleeting appearance of the words “updaire” and “backdaire,” Chinese-English words used only briefly by the narrator in the final chapter of the novel.⁵ Discussions of Leila’s “bilingualism” (a term that is questionable given her almost exclusive use of English throughout the text, especially when addressing readers as the novel’s narrator) and related analyses of her role as narrative “translator” are usually situated within broader discussions about her conflicted identity as Chinese(/)(-)American. As such, language usage in the text is analyzed by most critics for its metaphorical rather than literal significance; these analyses give little, if any, consideration, to the important relationship between language and bureaucracy as it impacts the everyday lives of *Bone*’s characters. One exception to this is Thomas W. Kim’s excellent article “‘For a Paper Son, Paper is Blood’: Subjectivation and Authenticity in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*.” Kim’s focus on what he refers to as the authority of “citationality” in the everyday lives of the characters parallels my emphasis on the significance of written documentation in *Bone* (Kim 54). However, my analysis suggests that Kim overdetermines the extent to which state and bureaucratic documents define the individual, failing to devote enough consideration to the ways in which Leon and Leila construct their own identities in opposition to the state and its bureaucracies and, in so doing, create counter-narratives which contest and challenge the authorized documents, identities, and History produced and legitimated by the state. Kim sees individual identity as produced by the language of citations and other authorized documents, constructed in response to the demands and expectations of the state and its bureaucracies. He suggests that, though individual identity is multiple and ever-changing, these adaptations are not self-authorized but rather are responses to the conflicting demands of different forms of hegemony, which dictate in writing how individuals must construct their identities in different contexts. Kim reads Leon as shaping himself *in response to* demands from different hegemonic and bureaucratic systems, whereas I see Leon defining himself *oppositionally against* such

demands and expectations, especially through his construction of a more “authentic”—in the sense of true to Leon’s everyday life and experiences—archive of self-identity than could be captured through bureaucratic language and documents. Leon creates and constructs a multitude of “Leons” throughout the novel, but these are not (just) responses to the demands and expectations of bureaucracies, capitalism, and the nation-state; rather, they are self-authorized and self-legitimated identities which both exceed and defy the limited roles defined for him by bureaucratic and state systems. While I certainly agree with Kim that “the narrative explores various encounters with state-regulated procedures for legitimation,” I would argue that the heart of the novel lies in the ways in which characters *challenge* such procedures for legitimation by writing their own identities and histories into counter-narratives which become forms of alternative memory/history (42).

Before turning to an analysis of how *Bone*’s characters challenge Documentary America and construct their own alternative archives, however, a brief and necessarily incomplete account of the history of Chinese immigration to the U.S. is needed in order to contextualize and historicize the Leong family history.⁶ The Chinese began to arrive in America as early as 1849. Within the context of the history of exclusion laws, an often overlooked factor of Chinese American immigration history is that (certain) Chinese immigrants were, at least initially, actively recruited by the U.S. government and American capitalists who saw Chinese laborers as a cheap potential labor source for a burgeoning nation (see Takaki, Lowe). In 1848, politician Aaron H. Palmer proposed that Chinese laborers be imported to the U.S. to help build the transcontinental railroad (“Searching” 178). In the next year, at least 325 Chinese men came to the U.S. both to fulfill Palmer’s vision and to search for gold on Gam Saan, Gold Mountain, becoming part of the famous Gold Rush of 1849. Though recruited by the government for their labor and enticed by the chance to strike gold, Takaki also notes that there were a host of other reasons why Chinese men might have chosen to leave China for the U.S. at this time aside from opportunities for work and wealth: political instability resulting from colonialism, the Opium

Wars, and peasant rebellions drew Chinese migrants to America's shores, as did difficult economic climates resulting from Western imperialist influence on Eastern nations ("Searching" 178-9). Following the 1849 Gold Rush, the Chinese continued to come to the U.S. in increasing numbers, even as the frenzied search for gold began to taper off—only three years after the first 325 Chinese laborers arrived in the U.S., the Chinese in America boasted a population of over 20,000, and by 1870, over 63,000 Chinese people lived in the United States, over three-quarters of them in California ("Searching" 180). Along with Japanese and Filipino immigrants, these mid-to-late-twentieth-century Chinese immigrants became the backbone of the labor force that would build the transcontinental U.S. railroads, and would also prove central to the development of the nation's textile and service industries as well as the burgeoning of American agriculture.

However, while Chinese and other Asian immigrants were initially viewed favorably as cheap and efficient labor sources for a rapidly growing capitalist America, as the number of Chinese in the U.S. continued to increase throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the government recognized the need to regulate the flow of immigrants from Asian countries, especially China, both to avoid an overabundance of cheap labor and accumulating capital among these new populations, which would threaten white workers, and to allay rising fears about a national (Anglo American) culture, language, and identity threatened by the increasing presence of "aliens" from Asia.⁷ Immigration laws put in place throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries therefore worked to ensure that Chinese immigration to the U.S. was limited almost exclusively to the Chinese elite and a very small number of men who were willing and able to become part of a cheap, migratory workforce. These laws were incredibly specific and restrictive in their efforts to ensure that only the most necessary, useful, and "able-bodied" Chinese laborers were granted entry into America, and, for those granted entry, the opportunity for naturalized citizenship was not an option.⁸ Legislation including the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 played a major role in the legacy of exclusionary immigration

policies against the Chinese, particularly Chinese women. The Page Act was created to prohibit the immigration of Chinese prostitutes to America, but was applied so loosely that it came to exclude almost all Chinese women. The creation of the Chinese Exclusion Act seven years later marked the first time in U.S. history that the federal government set legal limits on immigration specifically on the basis of race/nationality, barring all entry or re-entry of Chinese workers over a ten-year period and denying naturalized citizenship to all Chinese already in the U.S. At the end of the first ten-year period, the act was renewed in 1892, and then extended again in 1902, this time indefinitely. Lisa Lowe—who titles her widely-read study *Immigrant Acts* in order to “invok[e] the history of Asian immigration to the United States since the mid-nineteenth century” and to “nam[e] the history of immigration exclusion acts that restricted and regulated possibilities of Asian American settlement”—emphasizes the impact that immigration legislation has had upon the Chinese and other Asian Americans when she writes that “the life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the U.S. state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies, through the enfranchisements denied or extended to immigrant individuals and communities, and through the processes of naturalization and citizenship” (6-7). While the severity of these exclusionary laws sought to exert complete control over Asian American immigrant lives that seemingly presented a threat to the U.S., Takaki notes that the passing of such legislation was rooted mostly in irrational, racist, and xenophobic fears about the cultural and economic state of America, with the Chinese and other Asian immigrants serving as convenient scapegoats for Americans looking for someone to blame recent changes in the nation on. In reality, however, the Chinese in America constituted only a mere .002 percent of the national population in the year the Exclusionary Act was passed, and therefore could hardly be considered a legitimate “threat” to either white workers or American culture (“Searching” 189). Nevertheless, legislation was passed not only to limit the number of Chinese laborers seeming to compete with Americans for jobs, but also to allay “native”/white Americans’ xenophobic paranoias about the settlement of an “alien” race

with the potential to enact a “takeover” of (white) America. The limited number of Chinese immigrants who were permitted entry into the U.S. were now offered workforce positions which were both temporary and migratory as well as undesirable, helping to eliminate Americans’ fears about long-term employment competition, and were also hindered from establishing families and communities, given the limitation of immigration almost exclusively to Chinese men.⁹

As a result of exclusionary laws that prevented Chinese men from settling and establishing families in America, these “sojourners,” as Takaki famously described them, came to seem even more foreign/“alien” in the eyes of Americans. The Chinatown communities in which they lived—insular ethnic enclaves which were created largely as a result of continuous violence against the Chinese during the late nineteenth century as well as the legalization of residential segregation—came to be described as “bachelor” communities, viewed with distaste and suspicion by mainstream/white/“native” Americans (Lowe 121). Although, as Juliana Chang notes, many of these Chinese laborers were not in fact bachelors, but married men with wives and children whom immigration law prevented from coming to America, the virtually all-male Chinatown communities that began to form in cities throughout the U.S., including, especially, San Francisco, the setting of *Bone*, resulted in mainstream stereotypes about Chinese Americans (men *and* women) as non-heteronormative, homoerotic, anti-domestic, and sexually perverse (Chang 129fn1). As Lowe notes, Chinese men, who quickly became limited to forms of labor such as laundry and restaurant work, were also feminized in relation to white men (representative of the ideal American masculinity) through their employment in jobs traditionally reserved for women, furthering the image of Chinatowns as places of sexual and cultural inversion and queerness (11, 169). These emerging Chinatowns were comprised mostly but not *exclusively* of men, however—a very small number of Chinese women, many of whom were forced into prostitution in the U.S. as a way to repay the debts they incurred in coming to America, also lived in these “bachelor” communities. Yet these women (whose occupations as

prostitutes further helped contribute to the image of Chinatowns as places of anti-domesticity and sexual perversity) were greatly outnumbered; as Takaki notes, there were almost 12,000 Chinese in California by 1852, but only seven were known to be women. Almost a half century later, the gap between the number of Chinese men and women living in American remained notable: even in 1900, women still comprised only 5% of the Chinese American population of almost 90,000 (“Searching” 191). Children were even less common in the Chinatown communities emerging throughout the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: as one Chinatown resident recalls, “Babies were looked on with a kind of wonder” in these largely all-male, virtually childless Chinese American neighborhoods (“Searching” 204). It would take until the mid-twentieth century for the American-born Chinese population to begin to grow significantly enough to gradually catch up to the number of Chinese-born people living in the U.S. These childless “bachelor” communities, marked by a lack of nuclear families and traditional domestic arrangements and denied the opportunity for intergenerational settlement and progress, further contributed to the idea of Chinese immigrants as aliens rather than settlers, permanently foreign and Other in the U.S. Yet, the idea of Chinese workers as “temporary” residents was also one which many Chinese themselves adopted, assuming that they would eventually return to China after a brief period of work and success in the U.S. Indeed, Takaki notes that, of the almost half million Chinese who came to America between 1849 and 1930, only about half made the U.S. their permanent home (“Searching” 180). The notion that many, if not most, of these sojourners planned (or at least hoped) to leave the U.S. is reflected in *Bone* through the novel’s discussions of the leased burial plots of Chinese oldtimers, Grandpa Leong’s lifelong wish to have his bones sent back to China after his passing, and Leon’s Going-Back-to-China fund, a stash he keeps safely in his bedroom. Because of unfair working conditions and a hostile environment, it was not only white Americans who hoped the Chinese would eventually leave—many Chinese hoped to leave themselves, and racist exclusionary

immigration laws which prevented them from bringing their loved ones to the U.S. made the idea of long-term settlement all the more unattractive.

It was only in the mid-twentieth century that changes in U.S. immigration law began to gradually permit entry of Chinese women in increasing numbers, allowing for the slow but steady establishment of traditional nuclear family structures within Chinese American communities.¹⁰ Even then, racist legislation continued to prevent Chinese Americans from feeling as if they could call America home. Citizenship continued to be denied to Asian American immigrants until a series of repeal acts beginning in 1943, and Chinese and other Asian immigrants were prevented from owning property through the Alien Land Laws of 1913, 1920, and 1923, which deemed non-citizen “aliens” ineligible for land ownership (Lowe 13). Though the history of Chinese Americans in the twentieth century does indicate a gradual transition from “bachelor” societies to family-oriented communities, exclusionary policies against Chinese immigrants and settlers would not come to a complete halt until 1965, when the Hart-Callar Immigration and Nationality Act repealed all immigration quotas on the basis of race or national origin. Prior to 1965, some of the exclusionary legislation against Chinese Americans was lifted through the Magnuson Act of 1943 (which repealed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act but set a quota on Chinese immigration, while also, significantly, making Chinese people eligible for U.S. citizenship for the first time since 1790) as well as the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. However, throughout the majority of the first half of the twentieth century, entry into America was still limited almost exclusively to family members of Chinese Americans who were, or could claim to have been, born in the U.S. In *Bone*, set in the late twentieth century, exclusionary laws have already been repealed for at least several years if not decades (we never learn the exact years during which the novel is set), but traces of the bachelor societies of yesteryear continue to linger in contemporary Chinatown, evidenced by the “fleabag” old men that Leon hangs around with down by the square, as well as by the inversion, on several levels,

of many of the traditional aspects of the American nuclear family structure, including the notion of father/husband as breadwinner and head of household (Ng 6).

However, as with all attempts by systems of power to exercise total control over national subjects and national borders, the strict immigration laws which sought to prevent Chinese citizens from coming to—and staying in—America were not entirely successful. As Sucheng Chan writes, “the Chinese did not simply suffer as victims and pawns [of exclusionary U.S. immigration legislation]. Rather, they actively and indefatigably challenged the injustice that the laws represented” (xi). Lowe acknowledges this history of resistance in her title *Immigrant Acts*, which refers not only to the exclusionary acts which barred the Chinese from entering America, but also to “the *agency* of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the *acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival” (9). Chinese immigrants denied legal entry to the U.S. found—or created—loopholes and cracks in the system which allowed a surprisingly high number to gain “legal” entry into the U.S. (or, at least, entry that *appeared* legal on paper) by buying or creating false citizenship documents that allowed them to claim themselves as U.S.-born citizens or as the wives or children of U.S.-born citizens. Even before the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco allowed for the possibility of posing as an American-born citizen, or as the “paper son” of such a “citizen,” to become widespread practices, as I discuss in more depth momentarily, Chinese in the U.S. who were denied citizenship as well as the opportunity for reunification with their families were constantly on the watch for loopholes that would allow them to skirt the constraints of immigration law. As Takaki notes, during some periods of the era of Exclusion, Chinese merchants and other elites were allowed to bring family members from China to the U.S., a privilege denied to Chinese laborers. As such,

Chinese laundrymen, restaurant owners, and even common laborers sometimes tried to pose as “paper merchants.” A Chinese who had sworn in his oath to the immigration authorities that he was a “merchant” turned out to be a hotel cook; another was actually

a gardener. Other Chinese would bribe merchants to list them as partners or would buy business shares in order to claim they were merchants. (“Searching” 200-201)

These loopholes and adaptations worked very well for some; however, immigration constraints still forced most Chinese in America to live a life without both family and citizenship—that is, until an earthquake struck San Francisco on April 18, 1906, “chang[ing] the course of Chinese-American history,” as Takaki puts it (“Searching” 201). The practice of acquiring false citizenship, especially by becoming “paper son” to a “paper father,” became popularized after the earthquake caused a fire that destroyed all the city’s municipal records. The destruction of the records in the aftermath of the natural disaster—a powerful testament to the impermanency of those written documents which state-run bureaucracies rely upon to record, preserve, organize and secure—allowed the many Chinese immigrants residing in San Francisco the unique opportunity to claim that they were in fact born there and were therefore U.S. citizens. Many forged their own birth certificates, listing San Francisco as their place of birth, and with no city records to prove or confirm the contrary, many of these immigrants, previously ineligible for citizenship, now became recognized as U.S. citizens. In turn, they were also able to bring their own children and wives to America to be recognized as citizens as well (citizenship was automatically granted to the children of U.S. citizens, even if born elsewhere). Most of the time, however, the “children” they brought over (usually “sons” and to a much lesser extent “daughters”) were not biological relations at all, but merely individuals posing as blood relatives. These paper sons, some as young as eight years old, paid for (or, in some lucky cases, were simply given) false documents enabling them to “prove” their biological connection to a Chinese American person already recognized as a citizen in the U.S.—a “paper father”—when no such biological connection actually existed. Connected only by documentation, not by DNA, these children were related to their fathers on paper, but not in fact. This was enough, however, not only to get them safely and “legally” into America, but also to get them citizenship status as

Americans—a remarkable feat at a time when entering America as a Chinese person was extraordinarily difficult, and becoming a citizen virtually impossible.

Given their obvious advantages during an era of exclusion, the practices of paper fathers, paper sons, and forged citizenship became widely adopted by Chinese men wanting to come to America and to be recognized as U.S. citizens. As one Chinese American explains in Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, “my father came in [to the U.S.] as a laborer. But the 1906 earthquake came along and destroyed all those immigration things. So that was a big chance for a lot of Chinese. They forged themselves certificates saying they were born in this country, and then when the time came, they could go back to China and bring back four or five [real or paper] sons, just like that!” (“Searching” 202). His account is in no way dramatized or exaggerated—indeed, the practice of acquiring false citizenship, whether by insisting that one was born in San Francisco prior to the earthquake, or by claiming a fictional relation to a paper father, was so widespread that it is estimated that if every person who claimed citizenship in the aftermath of the earthquake was legally entitled to that citizenship under U.S. law, every Chinese woman in San Francisco prior to 1906 would had to have birthed 800 sons.¹¹ Studies suggest that some 150,000 Chinese immigrants snuck into the country this way and that today almost a million people in the U.S.—as many as 1 in 3 Chinese Americans—are descendants of paper sons and paper daughters, some unaware of their complicated family histories (Lui).

“For a Paper Son, Paper is Blood”

In *Bone*, Chinese American immigrant Leon is just such a paper son, falsely claiming to be the child of Grandpa Leong, himself a Chinese immigrant who worked as a migrant laborer in the U.S. and was able to acquire citizenship, presumably by claiming to be U.S.-born in the aftermath of the earthquake (the text never makes this entirely clear, but it seems unlikely that Grandpa Leong would've been able to acquire citizenship in any other way, given the history outlined above). From Grandpa Leong, Leon “buy[s] the name Leong” as if it were a “black-market passport” and gains (il)legal entry into the U.S. as a(n assumed) citizen of the nation

(54). As Ta writes, “Leon’s transaction situates him in th[e] tradition of purchased citizenship,” a “not uncommon practice in San Francisco during the [early to mid-twentieth century]” (146). Leon pays a hefty price to Grandpa Leong in exchange for the papers, the name, and the false family history, and then, in order to pass himself off as Grandpa Leong’s legitimate offspring, spends his boat ride to America rehearsing the false history he will soon have to tell the interrogation officers at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, his port of entry. Like many paper sons, his interrogation at the Angel Island detention center will include questions about family history, his village in China, and his relationship to others who have passed through this immigration station before him. In his chapter on Chinese American history in *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Takaki discusses how gruelingly specific this interrogation process could be, and how much preparation went into readying oneself for the interrogation examination. Paper son immigrant-hopefuls came to America studying hau-kung, or “crib sheets,” which contained all of the necessary information (and then some) about the history of the paper father and paper family to which they were now tied and would be questioned about. One immigrant recalled being given a 200-page book about his new paper family to study during his journey to America (“Searching” 202-203). Though Leon and his travel companion You Thin successfully pass their interrogations, many others were less successful; indeed, Takaki notes that at least ten percent of all the paper son immigrants who made it to Angel Island were eventually forced by immigration authorities to return to China, their fake histories and invented pasts failing to seem legitimate enough to those who granted entry. Many of these unlucky immigrants were detained at Angel Island for extended periods—months or even years—throughout their interrogation or while awaiting deportation. In that time, some carved poems into the very walls of the detention camp where they were held, expressing their outrage and grief at being denied the opportunity to enter America.¹²

In addition to the poems carved into the walls of the Angel Island detention center, the history of paper sons has been addressed in contemporary works of Chinese American literature

including Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, the story of a fourth-generation Chinese American whose great-grandfather came to the U.S. as a paper son to work on the railroad crews, and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, which portrays the Chinatown "bachelor" societies which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and continue to linger throughout the late twentieth century, as we see in Ng's novel). Yet, there is perhaps no other work of Chinese American fiction in which the history of paper sons is as central to the plot as it is in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*. Leon's paper son history casts a shadow over the entire novel and the entire family history of the Leongs. Readers learn of this history almost immediately upon beginning the novel, told the risky story of Leon's coming to America in the narrative's very first pages: he and You Thin Toy, another of the older Chinese men who spend much of their time idly hanging around the Chinatown Square,

met on the S.S. Lincoln, coming over to America. Leon was fifteen, You Thin, eighteen, but their false papers gave them each a few extra years. On the long voyage, they coached each other on their paper histories: Leon was the fourth son of a farm worker in the Sacramento valley, his mother had bound feet, her family was from Hoiping. You Thin was the second son of a shoe cobbler in San Francisco, the family compound had ten rooms, the livestock consisted of an ox, two pigs, and many chickens. His older brother was a fishery worker in Monterey and his younger brother worked in San Francisco with their father.¹³ (6-7)

Like Jasmine, who is also given a "few extra years" and a new identity along with her false papers, Leon reconstructs himself as he journeys to America. As was also the case for Jasmine, acquiring the false papers that vouch for his phony history and allow this reconstruction is an expensive and risky process: "It cost Leon. Each time he told [his daughters], his eyes opened wide like he was hearing the price called out for the first time. 'Five thousand American dollars'" (47). Yet, unlike Jasmine, Leon's unique position as a paper son allows him to enter the U.S. "legally," through a legitimate port of entry—both have forged papers, but while Jasmine sneaks

into the U.S. through the Florida Coast in the early dawn (and is raped and nearly left for dead in the process), Leon and You Thin “pas[s] the interrogation at Angel Island,” “slapp[ing] each other’s backs” after successfully answering the questions that “prove” that they are who they say they are, tricking the guards into believing their false paper identities and histories (7). Leon’s success story as an (illegal) immigrant gives him a faith in documents (whether real or forged) that is much like Jasmine’s belief in the power of documentation in the earlier parts of Mukherjee’s novel, in which Jasmine weeps with happiness when her false documents prevent her from being hauled off a train on the way to the U.S., and imagines that a green card will save her from a suffocating existence in Flushing, Queens. In a similar way, Leon’s successful passing through Angel Island as a paper son leads him to believe that “in this country, paper is more precious than blood” (7). However, while Leon’s *entry* into America is a success, the burden of *living* as a paper son with no legitimate papers becomes an increasingly heavy one for Leon to bear as the years go by and he finds, time and again, that his (false) papers don’t always provide him the security or opportunity he had hoped for. Once Leon begins to realize that the illegitimate papers he has were enough to allow him authorized entry into the U.S., but are *not* always enough to authorize him as a U.S. citizen throughout his life, he begins to build his own alternative archive as a way of vouching for his identity and history as an American. While Jasmine increasingly gains the confidence to go “paperless” the more time she spends in America, Leon, instead, strives to re-make the role of papers, documents, and other written and visual artifacts as they are used in constructing both individuals and histories. Though Leon’s commitment to archiving his own identity could be (mis)read as a form of participation in and conformity to a documentary society which demands that individuals are defined and authorized on paper, it is critical to note that Leon never takes the opportunity to become legitimately authorized and documented by the state. When “the government offered a deal [to paper sons]: the confession program,” Leon decides not to take it, although “many of his friends went for it: Wong Min Fat, Jimmy Lowe, Lee Hoy.” The “exchange” was that “a confession of

illegal entry bought you naturalization papers. But Leon didn't trust the government" (54). Interestingly, then, Leon, like Jasmine, chooses to remain outside of the realm of documented citizenship, even when he has the opportunity to become a naturalized citizen and acquire legitimate papers. However, while Jasmine's way of resisting Documentary America is through a refusal to prove herself on paper and an insistence on remaining entirely paperless, Leon's challenge to Documentary America takes the form of legitimating himself on paper, but doing it with his own kinds of documents, with a multimedia archive that far exceeds that which immigration documentation could capture on paper, and which is self-constructed and self-authorized, rather than government-defined and government-granted. Instead of proving himself by "confessing" and becoming a naturalized citizen with legitimate documents, Leon chooses not to trust the government, and to remain undocumented and unauthorized in America—but then makes a lifelong project out of finding ways to document and authorize himself and his history in America.

Nevertheless, formal documentation—what is (un)recorded in the "official" archives—has a powerful impact on the everyday lives of both Leon and his family members, frequently marking Leon as unauthorized even as he seeks to authorize himself in other ways. Throughout the novel, Leon is often denied access to things (including legal citizenship, equal opportunities, steady and gainful employment, and even the cemetery where Grandpa Leong's bones are buried) because, as a paper son, he lacks what Kim calls the authority of "citationality" through which one's identity is recognized and legitimated in America (54). The nation-state and the bureaucracies that compose it are constantly requiring that Leon be able to "prove" that one coherent, singular version of his identity exists on paper, but Leon's paper son status is one which comes with multiple identities and histories, some "legitimate" and some "illegitimate," which occasionally conflict with each other, confusing the picture of who Leon "really" is. As Rocío G. Davis notes, "Chinatown histories of illegal immigration complicated relations [between] the official world of bureaucracy" and "Chinese oldtimers" like Leon, whose multiple

pasts and multiple papers often failed to satisfy government demands for “proof” of identity (91). Although Leon has an entire suitcase full of papers that testify to his life in the U.S., the (un)“official” documents he has are mostly faked or forged ones, and, when taken together, don’t always add up to produce a coherent picture of Leon’s selfhood or to prove that he is who he says he is. As such, Leon becomes wary of interacting with bureaucracies at all, afraid of being questioned about his past and exposed as an illegal alien, not rightfully authorized to U.S. citizenship. The fact that Leon’s life is structured in part by his attempts to dodge the authorities and the state-run systems that rely upon documentation means that his opportunities—economic, political, and otherwise—are inevitably limited and his day-to-day existence cloistered off in ways that it would not be for a legitimately authorized American citizen.

That Leon’s everyday life is always-already determined to an extent by his paper son status is continuously demonstrated throughout the narrative by the vulnerability of his employment and financial situations, the consistency with which he is unable to find consistent work. Because Leon “d[oesn’t] trust the government” and is always fearful that he will be exposed as a paper son and phony citizen, he, like Jasmine, works only off-the-books jobs that will not require him to show documentation or fill out paperwork in order to become employed (54). Unlike Jasmine, however, who finds it quite easy to save a large lump of cash working various off-the-books jobs, Leon struggles throughout the novel to hold steady work and to find jobs that will pay enough to support himself and his family of five (this is shown not only through his story, but also Mah’s, which is one of endless labor and exploitation as a seamstress and the family’s primary source of income). Because Leon’s paper son status prevents him from applying for regular, full-time work, he is constantly shown working a string of odd jobs, sometimes for cash, sometimes just for a meal or a place to spend the afternoon: he “sometimes help[s] sort vegetables... [at] the Shing Kee Grocery” (6); he “help[s] out” at Croney Kam’s Universal Café when Croney’s “no-good fry cook quit[s]” (8); he goes through a “period of odd

jobs” after Nina, his youngest daughter, is born, working as “a fry cook at Wa-jin’s, a busboy at the Waterfront Restaurant by the Wharf, a janitor at a print shop downtown” (49); he is briefly “the barbecue chef at Golden Dragon, a janitor in the financial district, the night porter at The Oasis” (157); and for a time, “work[s] the graveyard shift at Bethlehem Steel in Alameda” (157). Yet, Mah notes that “Something always went wrong for Leon,” causing him to remain in a perpetual state of motion: “suddenly here, suddenly gone” (49). When there are no jobs to be found in Chinatown and no business schemes to go in on with his buddies, Leon repeatedly makes the abrupt decision to ship out, finding work for several weeks or months at a stretch as a laundryman or cook or maidservant for a ship’s crew, sometimes leaving without as much as a goodbye note to his wife and daughters. His work life, and by extension, his home life, are thus in constant states of instability; he has none of the certainty and security of a full-time, salaried, on-the-books employee. He also comes to realize that, despite the countless hours he works struggling to support his family, there are no written records to attest to his years of labor as there would be for an “on-the-books” employee—not only is there no retirement fund, no 401k, and no documented financial assets kept safely in an established financial institution, but, for most of his jobs, there aren’t even any tax returns or weekly pay stubs to document his seemingly endless years of labor. This is part of the reason Leon begins to keep a personal archive of his own work, documenting even the most seemingly marginal, insignificant, and temporary off-the-books jobs. This archiving becomes a way of making visible the work that is otherwise invisibilized and uncounted within the national economy.

Mah, too, leads a life of undocumented, off-the-books labor as the wife of a paper son. She works for years in Tommie Hom’s sweatshop before eventually opening up her own baby clothing shop, where she leaves the old sign for an Herb Shop up in place of one for baby clothes, because, Leila and Mason assume, “she wants to hide” (18). Although Mah married Leon “for the green card”—“even Leon knew that was why she said yes”—they both know that his papers don’t guarantee much, leaving them in a perpetually precarious position where they are

able to be exposed at any time as unauthorized to live and work in the U.S. (179). Though Leila tells us that Mah married Leon for “convenience” (Mah tells a young Leila before the wedding that “he’ll make a suitable husband” because “one, he’s got his papers; two, he works at sea. He’ll be away a lot”), as well as for “survival,” the marriage doesn’t bring her the security, safety, or assurance that she hopes it will (181, 31).¹⁴ In fact, Mah seems even more fearful of being exposed than Leon is, rarely, if ever, venturing out of Chinatown, to the point that Leon says that she “do[esn’t] know” what it’s like “outside” of Salmon Alley (178). In the meantime, Mah’s remains a life of work, “passed under the stamping needle” in Chinatown’s sweatshops, where “every forward stitch marked time” (160). The exploitation and lack of protection under the law experienced by Mah and the other sewing ladies who work (illegally) at Tommie Hom’s shop recall the problematic and sometimes dangerous working conditions of many of the undocumented workers in *Jasmine*, particularly the other “day mummies” who work in Jasmine’s building. When Mah is injured while working at the sweatshop—a needle tip “fl[ies] up and lodge[s] so close to her eye that Luday and Soon-ping ha[ve] to walk her over to Chinese Hospital”—there is no insurance policy to cover the expenses, no paid time off, no worker’s compensation (176). As Ta notes, “Mah’s civic membership is constituted by her inclusion in the workforce, but she is simultaneously excluded from normative—and even legal—participation, as witnessed by the unregulated demands made on her labor, time, and health” (148). Ta’s point about the “unregulated demands” made not only on Mah’s body but also her time are well-demonstrated by the extent to which her work spills over into the Leong home, so much so that Leila tells us that “Mah sat down at her Singer with the dinner rice still in her mouth. When we pulled down the Murphy bed, she was still there, sewing... And in the morning, long before any of us awoke, she was already there, at work” (32). As Lisa Lowe discusses in her chapter from *Immigrant Acts* on “Work, Immigration, Gender: Asian ‘American’ Women,” *Bone* shows the ways in which, for illegal immigrants like Leon and Mah—especially illegal women workers—work penetrates the home, with capitalism and domesticity, labor and family life, fusing

together in the same space(s), becoming inseparable. Indeed, Leila tells us that, growing up, “My bedroom was also the sewing room” (77). She recalls that, sometimes, she “lay in bed, listening to all Mah’s worries” as she sewed through the night; other times, Mah was “impatien[t] whenever I tried to talk to her... she was sewing on a deadline” (77, 20). For Mah and for Leon, there is literally no separation between work and life, a point the novel makes again and again. Leila describes their marriage as “a marriage of toil—of toiling together”: Mah’s “whole life passed under the stamping needle,” while for Leon, “life was work and death the dream” (31, 160, 178).

In addition to impacting the family by causing Mah and Leon’s work lives to spill over into the home, Leon’s status as a paper son also reconstructs the Leong family tree, their ancestry, and the very way in which the Leongs are expected to understand the concept of blood relations. As Waller notes, paper sons became the new owners not only of forged documents, but also of “family narratives and bloodlines” inherited from their paper fathers (490). Grandpa Leong, who “sponsored Leon’s entry into the country by claiming his as his own son,” becomes a near-literal father to Leon in America (Ng 47). Though “Grandpa Leong was Leon’s father only on paper,” and though Leon paid Grandpa Leong \$5000 to sponsor him, Leon sees his debt to Grandpa Leong as more than financial, experiencing a sense of obligation to him that is that of a son’s to his biological father (Ng 47). As Gonzalez puts it, “the practice of illegal immigration through invented genealogies is central to the lives of many Chinese American[s]... who would otherwise not be in the States” (Gonzalez 60). As such, Leon agrees to take on the additional burden of sending Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China after he dies, a common wish of many of the “oldtimers” who never felt quite at home in America. However, Leon is away at sea when Grandpa Leong passes, leaving Mah (who feels no debt, familial or otherwise, to the old man) to take care of the expensive and complicated funeral arrangements. As such, the plan to send Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China fails to materialize in the face of all of the other funeral-related demands and stresses. Later, the bones end up being placed in a collective grave with

those of other “oldtimers” whose bones also remained unclaimed by the next generation. As a result of his failure to keep his promise to his paper father, Leon feels himself forever in Grandpa Leong’s debt, and his unfulfilled vow continues to plague him long after the old man passes on. As Leila explains, “Leon blamed himself [for all of the family’s misfortunes, including Ona’s death]. He had this crazy idea that our family’s bad luck started when he broke his promise to Grandpa Leong... to send Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China” (47). The illegitimate “paper” relationship formed between Grandpa Leong and Leon becomes a legitimate blood relationship in Leon’s eyes, and his unpaid debt to his (fake) father for facilitating his entry into America haunts him throughout the rest of his life and the entire narrative.

In these ways and others, Leon’s paper son status looms over the lives of the Leongs. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated, however, through two critical scenes in the novel which serve to show just how vulnerable of a position Leon’s paper son status leaves him in, how frequently he is marked as unauthorized or finds himself unable to prove that he is who he says he is. Both scenes portray Leon in an unpleasant encounter with an authority figure who is beholden to bureaucratic systems of documentation and authorization. Because Jasmine never has any such encounters throughout Mukherjee’s novel, it is significant to see in Ng’s text just how unsettling, humiliating, and frustrating such encounters can be, not only for Leon, but for those who accompany him to these encounters (in these scenes, as is often the case throughout the narrative, Leon is accompanied by Leila and Mason). The scenes occur almost back to back at the heart of the novel, in the fifth and seventh chapters, and are quite similar to one another: in the first, Leon goes with Leila to apply for Social Security; in the second, he and Mason attempt to enter a private cemetery in search of Grandpa Leong’s lost bones. In both cases, Leon is denied access to what he came for, deemed unauthorized by the authority figures present because he is unable to produce the right documents. The first time around, it is Leila’s idea to take Leon to apply for Social Security: as she explains to us, “Leon needed money coming in if he wanted to continue living at the San Fran [hotel, instead of with Mah on Salmon Alley]”

(52). But, Leon “didn’t like the word [Social Security] and gave [Leila] his noncommittal shrug” (52). Though Leila attributes his hesitance to apply to the fact that he takes pride in working odd jobs and doesn’t want to “collect” from the government without working, the idea is also likely off-putting to Leon because of the inevitable encounter with those who will ask him to prove that he is who he says he is and that he is entitled to the benefits he has come to claim. These are difficult and daunting tasks for Leon, who, as a paper son, is always re-creating and confusing his multiple histories. As Leila tells us, “Leon was always getting his real and paper birthdates mixed up; he’s never given the same birthdate twice. Oldtimer logic: If you don’t tell the truth, you’ll never get caught in a lie. What Leon didn’t know, he made up. Forty years of making it up had to backfire sometime” (52). Ultimately, Leila is only able to convince Leon to go with her to the Social Security office by presenting it as “an opportunity, a loophole,” not unlike the loophole by which he opportunistically entered America and claimed U.S. citizenship (52). She points out to Leon that because his labor is off-the-books, he can “take an occasional odd job and still collect from the government” (52). In this sense, even their seemingly mundane plans to go to the Social Security office mirror Leon’s conflicted position as an illegitimate citizen: he is ever-conscious of the vulnerability of his paper son status but, not unlike Jasmine, also welcomes certain opportunities to circumvent, beat, or fool the system of documentation.

Yet, when Leon arrives at the Social Security office, the joke seems to be on him, as the inevitable backfiring that Leila fears finally occurs. Leila tells us that “it was as if all the years of work didn’t count” (52). The man behind the desk, a “young white guy,” “asked Leon why he had so many aliases? So many different dates of birth? Did he have a passport? A birth certificate? A driver’s license? Leon had nothing but his anger” (52, 53). Desperate to find a way to prove himself and insulted by the man’s accusatory questions, Leon lets out a string of furious curses that are like “firecrackers popping,” and then “flashe[s] his driver’s license (expired) and then his social security card. His tone was final, ‘I be in this country long time!’”

(53). But, though Leon tries to authorize himself—to claim himself as a rightful member of the country, as someone who belongs in the U.S.—he doesn't have the necessary papers to substantiate his claims, and ultimately, “the guy suggested [he] go home and find the right documents and then come back for another appointment” (53).

Two chapters later, a similar scene occurs when Leon shows up at the auto body shop Mason works at and asks Mason to accompany him to the Chinese cemetery where Grandpa Leong is buried. Begrudgingly, Mason obliges, but when they arrive, they find the place is not open to the public: “they could see the grass and stones and long shadows of the cemetery through a locked chainlink gate” (69). As when he agrees to apply for social security because he sees it as a “loophole,” a way to defy the system, Leon again attempts to circumvent authority's rules and restrictions, making the quick decision to trespass in a space where he is not (officially) authorized. Scott argues that when one's rights, identity, and the sense of justice one feels entitled to “cannot be openly claimed,” there exist “a host of practices devised to exercise those rights in clandestine ways” (Scott 189). As the rightful “son” of Grandpa Leong, even if only on fictitious citizenship papers and in his own heart and mind, Leon insists on his right to enter the cemetery, legally or otherwise—he seeks to “creat[e an] autonomous social space for assertion of dignity” where no such space existed previously (Scott 198). At the same time, as Aldama discusses in an essay on spatial re-imaginings in *Bone*, Leon not only attempts to construct a space of dignity and autonomy for himself by entering the cemetery, but also “exposes the artifice behind constructing borders of privilege,” demonstrating that “artificial borders that segregate places are pocked with pores” (91, 92). His movement in this scene defies the idea that “with the right papers one [can have] access to the sacred, a privilege his family ties to those buried in the cemetery should provide for him” (Aldama 91). Making his own decision about who should or should not be permitted access to this space—authorizing himself, with or without documentation, to enter—Leon “le[ads] Mason along the fence until he found a torn section large enough to crawl through” (69). A hesitant and irritated Mason stays behind, and

moments later, his feelings prove justified as he sees “a security car cruising up the hill... ‘Cemetery’s closed,’ the guard said, as he got out of his car... ‘Cemetery’s not open to the general public’” (70). Trying to assert Leon’s ancestral authority to be there, Mason explains to the guard that “Leon wasn’t the general public, that he was looking for his old man,” but “the guard shook his head. ‘Can’t help you. This place is closed... You gotta have a piece of paper saying you got people buried here’” (70). Mason, insulted at the immediate assumption that he and Leon are unauthorized to visit Grandpa Leong’s grave, demands “‘What kind of paper?’” but, interestingly, Leon intervenes, sending the encounter with authority in a different and ultimately safer direction: “There would have been a bad scene if Leon hadn’t come up just about the time the guard said, ‘Hey! How’d you guys get in anyways?’” (70). Leon, who is familiar with fooling authority figures into accepting him as someone who belongs, despite not having the papers to authorize him, puts on a performance that convinces the guard that his is an innocent mistake, rather than a defiant attempt to get into a place that he knows he doesn’t have the documentation to access. His “deferential manner was just right. Leon got the guard off his asshole attitude by calling him Sir” (70). His actions are what Scott would describe as *infrapolitical*, a tactical (in the de Certeauian sense of the word), on-the-spot performance that allows him to skirt punishment despite not having the required papers to enter the cemetery he is caught in. By performing deference to authority, Leon masks his own act of disobedience, manipulating the guard into overlooking his transgression of the rules. Yet, although Leon and Mason get away unpunished, they still are not allowed to stay long enough to find the grave. As is the case for Leon and Leila at the Social Security office, they are sent home from the cemetery to return with the papers needed to prove themselves, papers Leon isn’t sure he has.

Recounting the incident to Leila, the usually even-tempered Mason is “pissed,” presumably because he is humiliated by the experience of being told he is unauthorized in a place he knows he belongs (an experience which Leon is subjected to much more regularly, and thus handles much better). In a moment quite out of character for him, Mason snaps at Leila,

“you deal with it. Get the papers, follow the procedure. Find out where this grave is before Leon really loses it” (71). But, unsurprisingly, the process proves to be far less simple than Mason makes it sound, given Leon and Grandpa Leong’s messy history as “father” and “son.” Interestingly, Mah “suggest[s] going to the Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association” to find the paperwork that might legitimate Leon’s connection to Grandpa Leong and allow him access to the cemetery (71). For this difficult task of sorting through Leon and Grandpa Leong’s convoluted past, it seems Mah thinks it best to go to a place that preserves a distinctly Chinese American history, an alternative archive to the records that form the “official” narrative of the nation.¹⁵ When Leila inquires about what to ask the people at the Benevolent Association, Mah wrote everything down: Grandpa Leong’s Chinese name (Leong Hai-koon) and his American name (Ah-Fook Leong), his village, his date of birth, and the date of his death. She handed me the information, remembering how nineteen years ago she’d written the same thing, but slipped that sheet into a glass jar to be buried in Grandpa Leong’s coffin. “Insurance,” the sewing ladies had advised. “In case of earthquake or war, people would know where the body belonged, where home was.” (71)

Yet, though Mah and the sewing ladies assume that a written record of this information will be enough to preserve proof of Grandpa Leong’s connection to the next generation(s) of Leongs, when Leila arrives at the Benevolent Association, authenticating her family history turns out to be far more difficult than she expects, as the demands for proper documentation, even at this “alternative” institution, recall her and Leon’s unsuccessful experience at the Social Security office. Mah’s “unofficial” record of Grandpa Leong’s history and identity, as well as Leon’s own version of documented family history, which includes pictures of his daughters in front of Grandpa Leong’s grave during the Ghost Festival, don’t count as legitimate enough “proof” to connect Leila and Leon to Grandpa Leong’s bones (83). Rather, the man behind the counter “ask[s] for a receipt [from Grandpa Leong’s burial]” and Leila has to admit that she “didn’t have a receipt”; instead, she is only able to “sho[w] him what Mah wrote” (73). Hoping that this slip

of paper will be enough to prove the Leong family history and get Leon authorized permission to enter the cemetery, Leila waits and watches nervously as the man “pull[s] out another sheet with columns of names that reminded me of the attendance registers used by my Chinese schoolmasters. I remembered standing at attention, waiting for my name to be read out loud. The schoolmasters chanted off our names so fast I was always afraid I wouldn’t get my ‘Here, I’m here!’ in before the next name was read” (74). Here, Leila reveals her fears of the ways in which the system of documentation used by institutions and bureaucracies has the power to leave individuals uncounted, ignored, forgotten, unheard. Her childhood anxiety is resurrected as she waits for the verdict from the man behind the counter at the Benevolent Association: “as I watched the man’s long nail go down the three columns[,] I found myself holding my breath, afraid again. What if Grandpa Leong’s name wasn’t on this list of abandoned dead?” (74). While Leila fears that her family won’t be found in the records, the scene itself speaks to the ways in which the system of documentation is an inherently vulnerable and unstable one, never able to capture the “whole story” or to guarantee preservation of histories. The precarious nature of the office’s archives—“Xerox boxes were stacked dangerously high for this earthquake climate” and it seems uncertain how many more records the space can hold—foreshadow the outcome of the visit, which is that the “insurance” papers the sewing ladies advised Mah to put in Grandpa Leong’s coffin haven’t been able to link him to Leon, have failed to preserve the proof of their shared past (72). Instead, Leila learns with some shock that the buried’s remains were moved the previous winter to make room for more coffins. Those bones that went unclaimed and were unable to be identified as belonging to a particular family, Grandpa Leong’s included, were grouped together and communally reburied by family surnames or stored away in warehouses (74). Leila is ultimately given the permit that is needed to get into the cemetery, but there is no way of knowing now which bones are Grandpa Leong’s—his remains have become unidentifiable, despite the “insurance” papers. The only advice the man behind the counter can offer Leila is to “bow to the family headstone, it’s all the same.” He tries to assure

Leila that “the right gesture will find your grandfather,” but without the right *papers*, Grandpa Leong’s bones end up lost and thus never returned to their rightful resting place in China (75).

These two encounters with bureaucracy at the center of *Bone*’s narrative are critical to readers’ understanding of just how influential a role Documentary America plays in the everyday lives of the Leongs, seeking to restrict and regulate even such seemingly mundane activities as visiting a deceased relative’s grave. However, at the same time, both scenes also suggest that a system of documentation inevitably leaves some room for subjects to skirt or resist its restrictions and to define their own identities and histories in terms beyond the parameters of the system. At the same time that Leon is frequently beat by this system, as both the Social Security office and cemetery/Benevolent Association scenes show, these scenes also both attest to the fact that Leon is simultaneously able to beat the system, every day, even if by no other means than his ability to reside in the U.S. as a paper son, even without the “right documents” (53). As Aldama writes, Leon is a “trickster-like” figure who “deftly sidesteps the rules of assimilationist game” even as he “remains caught up” in a socioeconomic and political system which continues to marginalize and exclude him (90). Aldama argues that even though Leon “remains economically confined” throughout the novel (which most critics tend to focus on, while overlooking his limited agency), he also “knows how to slide through holes into different social spaces,” allowing him some mobility even within the difficult constraints of his everyday life as an illegitimate citizen (90). Though Leila reflects upon Leon’s history after the Social Security office incident by lamenting that “fifty years later, here he was, caught in his own lie; the laws that excluded him now held him captive,” Leon also finds ways to fight that exclusion and captivity, and to claim and authenticate his own (various) forms of inclusion and belonging (54). While Leon is, to an extent, “caught in his own lie,” it is critical to acknowledge that he also exercises a tactical, infrapolitical, and politically significant form of agency within the constraints of this exclusionary context. Chin makes a similar point, writing that “like scores of Chinese immigrant men of his generation, Leon takes what he has been given—legislative

exclusion [in the U.S.]—and creates an identity [out of his status as] a paper son.” Chin describes this as a process of “reinvention... within a framework of exclusion” (367). Leon may be “limited by a system” but he is “not completely subordinate to it” (Chin 369). His acts of “reinvention” show the limitations of a system which seeks to fixedly define national subjects, calling attention to the not-quite-successful attempts of the state and state-run bureaucracies to identify, record, and preserve “official” information about both individuals and histories. Although Leon is sent home during both encounters because he is unable to produce the “right” documents from the many he carries, his multiple birthdates, papers, and claims and forms of identification—some “real,” some “forged”—nevertheless expose the instability of a system which relies upon documentation as written “proof” that one is who one claims to be. At the same time that figures of authority attempt to construct and confirm Leon’s identity using what Kim calls the written forms of “citationality,” their very means of using documents to create/construct/define individuals suggests to Leon the possibility of re-creating/re-constructing/re-defining himself in a similar but oppositional way (Kim 54). As such, we see throughout the novel that although Documentary America continually attempts to define and record Leon’s identity as that of an outsider, someone who doesn’t quite belong in the nation, Leon continuously *writes back* against that record, constructing an alternative identity—and an alternative archive attesting to that identity—which tell quite a different set of stories, not only about who Leon is, but who *all* of the Leongs are, portraying a contextualized, layered, and multifarious history of their lives in the U.S.

The lengths which Leon has gone to in order to (re-)construct his own identity and set of archives attesting to that identity is revealed to readers—and to his own daughter—through Leila’s encounter with Leon’s suitcase, which occurs just after their failed trip to the Social Security office. Frustrated and humiliated by Leon’s exchange with the desk worker, Leila leaves determined to find the documents the employee demanded, and heads to Salmon Alley in search of them. There, she dredges up “Leon’s brick-colored suitcase—the one he arrived on Angel

Island with—[and] lug[s] the heavy thing down[stairs]” (54). That the suitcase Leon brings with him from China is still a “heavy thing” all these years later could be easily misread as a sign that he sees himself as only a temporary sojourner in the U.S., ever-ready to head back to China when opportunity might afford, bags always packed. But an examination of its contents reveals, instead, that Leon’s suitcase is heavy with the past in order to lay claim to his history in the U.S.: it is filled with the documents and artifacts that prove that he belongs here, that he is as American as he is Chinese, that he has stayed—and will continue to stay—in America throughout his life, whether “authorized” or not. In her article “Traveling Light: Of Immigration, Invisible Suitcases, and Gunny Sacks,” in which she traces the motif of the suitcase/luggage in the writings of Edward Said, Salman Rushdie, and M.G. Vassanji, among others, Rosemary Marangoly George writes that from “cardboard boxes” and other seemingly “meaning-drained mementos,” “luggage is created, and repeatedly recreated, as an empowering back of tricks that tells the textured tale of who the immigrant is and where he or she belongs” (281). Such is also the case with Leon’s suitcase: the trunk holds a multilayered, multimedia (counter-)history of Leon’s life, and when Leila unearths the suitcase, she also unearths all the stories it holds.¹⁶ A bit too assumingly, Leila approaches the suitcase with a sort of loathing dread, expecting only to reencounter tales she’s heard too many times before: “I knew the story. One hundred and nine times I’ve heard Leon tell it. How buying the name Leong was like buying a black-market passport. How he memorized another man’s history to pass the interrogation on Angel Island... I lifted the suitcase up on to the kitchen table and opened it. The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture” (54). Leila’s description of the past as literally captured on paper, defined by documents, is, at the same time and paradoxically, also another indication of documentation’s inability to capture and preserve the “whole story.” Leon’s papers are “moldy” and “water-damaged,” the stories they hold beginning to rot and wash away, echoing the history of paper sons themselves, who found the opportunity to claim Americanness when municipal records were destroyed not by water or mold, but by fire. At the same time,

Leila's search for the "right documents" from within this suitcase is almost immediately revealed to be futile not only because some of the documents are ruined and illegible, but also simply because of the sheer number of documents the case contains. These capture a much larger and longer story—indeed, many multiple stories—that far exceed the basic information the Social Security worker was looking for, and even the information Leila assumes she knows about Leon. Indeed, as Leila sorts through the documents, an entire alternative and previously unknown history of Leon's life in America crops up before her very eyes:

The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: "We Don't Want You." A rejection from the army: unfit. A job rejection: unskilled. An apartment: unavailable. My shoulders tightened and I thought about having a scotch. Leon had made up stories for us; so that we could laugh, so that we could understand the rejections.... Now, seeing the written reasons in a formal letter, the stories came back, without the humor, without hope. On paper Leon was not the hero. (54-55)

Yet, though Leila assumes from the first few documents she sees that she now "know[s] the story," quickly reducing it to one of lies, humiliation, and rejection, as she continues to sift through the suitcase, she finds more and more that she did not know of Leon's past, of Mah's, and of her own. These memories and histories, which at first only upset her, soon begin to also excite her, confuse her, inspire her, and most of all, surprise her, in that they represent such a larger, more multifarious picture of her father and her family than she had gone into the suitcase looking for. Leila quickly realizes that Leon's lies, the "stories [he made up] for us," are actually mechanisms for Leon to reconstruct himself, orally as well as on paper, in ways that tell a different set of stories, challenging documents like birth certificates and driver's licenses and passports and citizenship papers by insisting that what one sees on paper isn't necessarily the whole story or the "real" Leon (54). While bureaucratic documents seek to compartmentalize, categorize, and define him (mostly as a failure, rejected and unwanted by the nation at large), he

uses the documents in his suitcase to represent himself as part of multiple, sometimes competing and conflicting, categories, creating a history of himself and his past that both exceeds and defies easy documentation and categorization. Leila's initial impulse when she first hauls the suitcase downstairs is to try to find the papers that will fixedly explain who Leon is, to emulate the job of the desk worker at the Social Security office who asks her to go home and find the right documents: she "sort[s] through the musty papers, the tattered scraps of yellowed notes, the photos[, and] kept going; I told myself that the right answer, like the right birthdate, had to be written down somewhere" (55). She "make[s] paper files, trying to organize the mess. Leon the family man. Airmail letters from China, aerograms from Mah to Leon at different ports, a newspaper picture of Ona graduating from the Chinese Center's nursery school, of Nina in her 'boy' haircut and an awful one of me and Mason" (56). Yet, Leila quickly realizes that her efforts at efficiency and organization are fruitless, and that finding a single "right" document to confirm who Leon "is" is impossible. Leon's patchwork portrait of identity is a collection of documents and artifacts that add up to much more than one simple recorded version of the self; the information he has stored away to explain himself bursts beyond the boundaries of what the desk worker would be looking for, as well as what a bureaucratic system, with its "fill-in-the-blanks" method of documentation, would even allow room for.

Leon's suitcase, his self-portrait and counter-archive, is what compositionists might call an "assemblage"—it is a multimedia, multilingual, transnational collection built using a diverse range of written and visual documents from around the globe and across decades (Yancey). As Leila sorts through the suitcase, she unearths a seemingly endless range of contents:

Leon the working man: [photos of him] in front of the laundry presser, the extractor; sharpening knives in the kitchen; making beds in the captain's room. Leon with the chief steward. Leon with girls in front of foreign monuments.

A scarf with a colored map of Italy. Spanish pesetas in an envelope. Old Chinese money. Dinner menus from the American President Lines. The Far East itinerary for

Matson Lines. A well-used bilingual cookbook that [Leila] flipped through quickly:
Yorkshire pudding, corned beef with cabbage, kidney pie. Had Leon been a houseboy?

Selections from newspapers. From *The Chinese Times*: a picture of Confucius, a Japanese soldier with his bayonet aimed at a Chinese woman, ration lines in Canton, gold lines in Shanghai. From *Life* magazine: Hitler, Charlie Chaplin, the atom bomb.

Leon, the business schemer: several signed and dated IOUs from You Thin Toy. Check stubs from Bethlehem Steel. A detailed diary of his overtime pay from Wa-jin Restaurant. Money-sent-back-to-China receipts. A pawn ticket from Cash-in-a-Flash on Fourth Street. (56)

The range of texts in Leon's suitcase is truly remarkable: aerograms, love letters, rejection letters, photographs, diary entries, menus, maps, recipes, travel itineraries, newspapers, magazines, job applications, pay stubs, IOUs, and receipts all feature as part of his attempt to (counter-)document his identity and history. His artifacts come from Shanghai, Canton, Italy, Spain, San Francisco; the contents confuse even his own family; his stepdaughter finds herself suddenly unsure of the man and father she thinks she knows, overwhelmed by the process of sifting through his paper past. Leila's efforts to find the "basic facts" about Leon amidst the layers of papers instead lead to her discovery of the many roles he has played, not easily transferable to a singular document or identity: Leon is family man, working man, business schemer, Chinese, American, Chinese American, immigrant, citizen, and world traveler.

Leila's attempt to sort and categorize his documents and identities leaves her "fe[eling] my eyes crossing. Leon's goal had been to confuse the authorities but all he did was frustrate me. I told myself to concentrate and only look for that document needed, the one with the right name and birthdate" (56). But when she finally finds the "right" document to legitimate Leon's identity at the Social Security office, even this is a fake one: it *will*, most likely, legitimate Leon, allowing him to beat the system yet again, but the "proof" it holds is a fictional one. Just as Leila is about to give up on her search and start "throwing everything back into the suitcase," she

finds what she needs for the Social Security application process: “a photo of a young Leon, it was right there, Leon’s affidavit of identification” (57). The text reproduces the information recorded on the affidavit for readers:

The photograph attached hereto and made a part hereof is a recent photographic likeness of the aforementioned Laion Leong, Date of Birth: November 21, 1924, Port of Entry: San Francisco, is one and the same person as represented by the photograph attached to Certificate of Identity No. 52728 showing his status as a citizen of the United States. (57)

Yet, we know of course that this document does not certify Leon’s “real” identity or offer valid proof of his right to U.S. citizenship; rather, Leon holds this document because he falsely claimed himself as the biological son of Grandpa Leong, a man who himself was not born in America as a lawful citizen but rather “came [from China] to mine gold and then settled into farm work around the Valley,” eventually managing to skirt the restrictions of exclusionary immigration and citizenship laws successfully enough to claim both himself and his “paper son” as U.S. citizens (81). Leon’s “real” self and “official” right to legal citizenship *should* be proven by this piece of paper, but instead, his identity proves to be ever elusive, never quite capturable, never quite what it appears to be. The unreliability of documents in capturing and recording identity is further suggested by the fact that the affidavit misspells Leon’s name: on this piece of paper, he is *Laion* Leong, though, to friends, family, and readers, he is always Leon. Even this certification of identity, then—the “right document” Leila has been searching for—is a conflicted, inaccurate, and unstable portrayal of who Leon is. That Leila knows it will suffice, despite its falseness and inaccuracies, shows the limitations of Documentary America’s power to capture identities on paper, while also demonstrating Leon’s ability to construct a more all-encompassing, multifarious portrayal of himself.

Indeed, the impossibility of capturing Leon’s identity and of fixing and recording that identity into permanency is suggested not only by the false information the affidavit contains,

but even by the affidavit itself, which writes the vulnerability of documentation into legibility through its very language. Most notably, the affidavit claims to offer only a “photographic likeness” of Leon, even as the photograph itself is intended to lend a crucial weight to the document’s aura of authenticity, legitimacy, and certification, proving that Leon is “one and the same person” (57 emphasis added). Phu writes that “Leon’s ‘affidavit of identification’ depends on the photo, this appeal to the visual record also affects the way citizenship is imagined, constituted, and recognized... hint[ing] at the pivotal role photography plays in determining the production, reception, and perception of citizenship” (60). But if photography is yet another documentary mode of determining how Leon’s identity in America is understood, defined, and recorded, then, again, the system of documentation falls short, its tools unreliable. The many changing appearances Leon sports in the various photos Leila finds in his suitcase show just how unstable a photographic “proof” of identity can be—while the photograph on the affidavit always remains the same, Leon continues to re-imagine and re-construct himself in new ways which modify both his identity and his appearance. To this singular photograph intended to capture and fix his identity, to define him as “one and the same person,” Leon again has a response, a counter-representation: *his* photographic construction of his own identity includes not just this one picture on his affidavit of identification, but also pictures of himself and Mah, of his daughters, of his travels, of Leon in front of foreign monuments with foreign women and on the decks of ships with sea captains (57). Each of these pictures, however much one may conflict with the next—Leon the family man photographed with Mah featured alongside/in conflict with Leon photographed with strange women in distant places—is nevertheless a “photographic likeness” of the person Leon is, or has been once, or will be again.

Leon’s suitcase is not only a portrayal of his changing selfhood, but is also a testament to his labor, a way of ensuring that his life of work is accounted for even as it remains off the books. In a memorable scene following Ona’s suicide, Leon mourns not only for the loss of his daughter, but for all that he has lost or been cheated of during his years in America, including,

especially, the fruits of his labor. Upon learning that Ona—his first biological daughter, and arguably his favorite—has flung herself off of a Chinatown housing project, Leon “look[s] for someone to blame.” He starts with “his old bosses,” “every coworker that betrayed him,” and “the whole maritime industry for keeping him out at sea for half his life,” and then turns his blame toward the nation itself:

Finally he blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking every one.

Where was the good job he’d heard about as a young man? Where was the successful business? He’d kept his end of the bargain: he’d worked hard. Two jobs, three. Day and night. Overtime. Assistant laundry presser. Prep cook. Busboy. Waiter. Porter. But where was his happiness? “America,” he ranted, “this lie of a country!” (100)

In the midst of grief over his daughter, Leon’s sadness turns to rage as he recalls all of America’s broken promises, all of the years of labor that kept him away from his family but left him nothing to show for all of his hard work; he “want[s] somebody to pay him back for all his suffering” (101). Leon’s rant indicates that he is well aware that his labor goes uncounted within the national economy and unwritten in America’s archives. As Chang puts it, “the history of exploited labor is covered over by narratives of progress and national equality so that... stories [like Leon’s and Mah’s] remain incomprehensible within these symbolic frameworks of modernity and the US nation-state” (118-119). Refusing to let this history be buried with his daughter’s bones, however, Leon lays claim to his life as a laborer, documenting it not only through his outpouring of grief after Ona’s death, which he “let[s] loose” like “a wild dog,” but also through the counter-archive in his suitcase, which comes to consist of paystubs and overtime diaries and photographs of Leon at work (100).¹⁷

Whether we realize it or not, readers have been watching Leon build this archival suitcase from the very first pages of the novel, when Leila tells us that “Leon was a junk inventor. Very weird stuff. An electric sink. Cookie-tin clocks. Clock lamps. An intercom hooked up to a cash register” (2-3). Like Du in *Jasmine*, who invents hybrid electronics that

“alte[r] the gene pool of the common American appliance,” Leon uses the seemingly useless scraps around him to create new things that are hybrid, adaptable, and functional (Mukherjee 156). In much the same way, he also collects the seemingly useless scraps of everyday life as a way of constructing (and re-constructing) an archive of his identity in a way that adapts and hybridizes how that identity is portrayed in official documents. Alongside electric sinks and cookie-tin clocks, Leon preserves other pieces of the world around him that speak to his ongoing attempts to document his life in the U.S. Leila calls him “a collector, too. Stacks of takeout containers, a pile of aluminum tins. Plastic bags filled with packs of ketchup and sugar. White cans with red letters, government-issue vegetables: sliced beets, waxy green beans, squash.” “Newspaper piles” fill his room and “the best stories [are saved] for his personal collection” (3). In a way, Leon’s collecting is almost a form of hoarding, an earnest attempt to save as much as he can, since he knows the scorebooks have not been kept fairly; the records don’t reflect what he is owed from America after years of hard work. As such, his seemingly senseless accumulation of newspapers and plastic bags and vegetables and condiments is itself another way of documenting the labor that is unrecognized and invisibilized elsewhere. Like his suitcase, which “reveal[s] a lack of correspondence between writing and speech, facts and story, and history and memory,” the other pieces of junk and scraps that Leon save also become testaments to the gaps between official History and counter-histories (Chin 370).

This archiving of counter-histories also becomes a way of redefining the very concepts of identity and identification. That Leon’s suitcase is not just a collection of government-issued documents such as the affidavit of identification, but also of personal records and beloved memories as well as scraps and souvenirs—pictures of his children and letters between he and Mah, small trinkets from foreign countries he has visited, Chinese and Spanish coins, IOUs, diary entries, stories snipped from newspapers—suggests a refusal of the singular portrayal of identity captured in government documents, as well as a critique of the very concept of identification as it is defined through systematic documentation. Leon’s identity is multiple and

changing: his suitcase attests to his lives as migrant worker, family man, inventor, capitalist, U.S. citizen, Chinese immigrant, and paper son, offering a self-representation that unapologetically refuses to “melt into standard Anglo-American cultural or social representations or stereotypes” (Ho 211). Ta notes that Leon keeps the “random memorabilia” that comprise his suitcase as “as version of citizenship papers that signal his time as a member and participant of the American civic body.” Leon’s archive speaks to his status as a “concerned [U.S.] citizen” through, in particular, both the newspaper clippings he keeps and the application for military service which is found at the top of his suitcase (Ta 155). Yet, though Leon’s suitcase certainly (and perhaps mostly) attests to his identity as a U.S. citizen, it is also an archive of his history as a Chinese native, and of his identity as a Chinese American immigrant. Leon’s room is stacked with copies of newspapers written in English and in Chinese, *World News* as well as *The China Daily News*, *Wah Kuh*, and *Ming Bao*; his suitcase contains *Life* magazine clippings alongside clipipings from *The Chinese Times*; “Money-sent-back-to-China receipts” alongside “Cash-in-a-Flash” receipts, and a picture of Confucius alongside a photograph of Charlie Chaplin (3, 56). At the same time that the various documents and artifacts reflect Leon’s many roles and identities, virtually every item in the suitcase is also shaped by, connected to, and a reflection of his immigrant identity and his paper son status. As such the archive exposes, portrays, and records into history what Lisa Lowe calls “the *contradictions* of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity” (8).

The impressive range and amount of documents that fill Leon’s suitcase testify not only to Leon’s many roles and identities, however, but also to the lives and identities of his family, lovers, friends, coworkers, and community. That his archive is primarily a self-portrait while also striving to act as a (necessarily limited) collective history and collection of histories reminds us that the vast range and types of memories and (hi)stories that make up the lives of both

citizens and immigrants in the U.S. consist of more than could ever possibly be represented by “Official” History or by an authorized national narrative of the so-called “immigrant experience.” Though Leila wonders as she sorts through the suitcase why some of the items “[aren’t] even Leon’s,” asking herself with confused frustration, “what was he doing keeping other people’s stuff?,” it becomes clear to readers (and, eventually, also to Leila) that Leon’s suitcase is intended to document not only himself and his history, but also his loved ones, his community, and their shared history: it is a Leong family history and a Chinatown history as well as a personal one (57). Davis argues that in *Bone*, Chinatown is figured as “plac[e] as tex[t], waiting to be read and written or rewritten” (85). Through his archiving, Leon takes on these jobs, reading and writing his Chinatown community into history. The diversity of ways in which this community is portrayed in Leon’s (and, as I will discuss later, Leila’s) narration—as ethnic enclave, tourist trap, space of capitalist enterprise, site of exploitative labor, bachelor society, and family-oriented community, among others—challenges stereotypical assumptions and definitions of what Chinatown is “really” like, as critics such as Rocío G. Davis and David Li have also noted. While Leila worries about what outsiders and tourists see from “inside those dark Greyhound buses” as they pass through the place she calls home, Leon counters stereotypical assumptions of Chinatown as a marginalized and ghettoized space “othered” from the rest of the nation, instead portraying it as a multilayered, multifarious site, with a changing and adapting identity much like his own (141).

Juliana Chang’s description of *Bone*’s backward-moving structure as “text as palimpsest, as multilayered surface” can also apply to the ways in which Leon writes, revises, and records the archives of history—his own, his community’s, and the nation’s—using multimodal forms which both exceed and redefine the boundaries of documentation as it is used by the state (Chang 111). Just as the novel’s reverse chronology serves to “criticize the overdevelopment of temporal contextualization as a source of meaning,” so, too, does Leon’s jumbled, chaotic suitcase of archival memory (Lowe 122). Though Leon has seemingly not “progressed”

throughout his many years in America from illegal alien/paper son to naturalized/authorized U.S. citizen, his suitcase attests to a different sort of progress, a non-linear history which allows him to nevertheless lay claim to his belonging as an American. As Ta writes, Leon's suitcase "functions as a kind of archival crypt that not only contains proof of his transformation [in identity], but... also preserves his systemic denial from inclusion of the body politic" (147). While the forward-moving and progressive narrative of History might leave Leon's story untold, Leon himself ensures that this history is nonetheless recorded and attested to somewhere, even if only within his own archive. Ironically, however, by writing himself into this counter-archive even as he is excluded from the grand narrative of American History, Leon allows himself a more diverse, rich, and textured self-representation than would have ever been possible otherwise. Noting the diverse types of documents that are among Leon's papers and the powerful portrayals of Leon(s) that these provide us with, Lowe writes that through his archival suitcase, "we are offered an ethnological, bibliographical, and demographic space, a record of the everyday life within which Leon has lived, worked, dreamed, and remembered... a material archaeology of Leon" (124-125). Though, in his everyday life, Leon is frequently made to suffer what Scott would call "public injury to [his] dignity and standing as a person" when bureaucracies and institutions seek to identify, define, and (un)authorize him without having the "whole story"—as the scenes at the Social Security office and cemetery both powerfully demonstrate—he nevertheless takes pains to restore and reassert this dignity by constructing his own "material archaeology of Leon" (Scott 112, Lowe 125). Through his multimodal, multilayered archive, Leon records and validates not only his identity but also his accomplishments in the U.S. While the national narrative—and even Leila's narrative, at times—may deem him a failure, unauthorized, unrecognized, and unwanted, his (counter-) narrative tells a different story, one of both failures *and* successes, a life of love and happiness and accomplishment as well as one of sadness and struggle and misfortune.

Inheriting the Archives: The Next Generation

Leila initially wonders why Leon has kept the papers, scraps, and junk that fill his suitcase, thinking that most of these items only testify to the ways in which his life in the U.S. has been a series of failures and rejections: “We Don’t Want You” (54). As she begins to rifle through the suitcase’s seemingly endless array of artifacts, overwhelming feelings of confusion, frustration, and shame lead her to consider “gathering all Leon’s papers, burning his secrets and maybe his answers, and then scattering the ashes into the bay” (57). Beginning to lose any hope she had of finding the document the social security worker wants, she “start[s] throwing everything back into the suitcase,” “want[ing] to get everything out of sight” (57). Yet, as she begins to repack all of Leon’s “scattered sheets”—“letters, official documents, pictures, and old newspaper clippings”—reflecting on Leon’s identity as a paper son as she does so, she comes to a new conclusion: “Leon was right to save everything.” Her earlier desire to burn what she calls Leon’s “suitcase of lies” now dissipates in the wake of her realization that “I’m the stepdaughter of a paper son and I’ve inherited this whole suitcase... All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all” (58). Leila lays claim to Leon’s archival suitcase, acknowledging that its contents and its history are real and true—are *her* history and her memories—even if they might not be legitimate within the realm of official documentation. Sorting through the suitcase’s documents, Leila gradually realizes that

Leon kept things because he believed time mattered. Old made good. These letters gained value the way old coins did; they counted the way money counted. All the letters addressed to Leon should prove to the people at the social security office that this country was his place, too. Leon had paid; Leon had earned his rights. American dollars. American time. These letters marked his time and they marked his endurance. Leon was a paper son.

And this paper son saved every single scrap of paper. (55)

By accepting and claiming the suitcase as a whole, even with all of its rejection letters, fake papers, and seemingly useless documents, Leila rejects the false binary constructions of true/false, fact/fiction, history/myth, and legitimate/illegitimate, instead coming to realize that there is no document, record, or narrative that can singularly determine what counts as significant and what is worth remembering, nor capture one “official” or “factual” version of a story or a person. Her rejection of the idea of an “official” history is facilitated by her encounter with the suitcase, which demonstrates that “History” can be reconstructed, renegotiated, and revised by those individuals willing to look for meaning and memory where the powerful claim that none exists, in the spaces documentation leaves no blanks for. By refusing to deny Leon’s suitcase as a rightful source of meaning, Leila and her stepfather take significant steps together toward subverting the fallacies contained within Official History, not only by proving that Leon *has* occupied a space in a nation that seeks to invisibilize him, but also by suggesting that identity, meaning, memory, and history can be found in places other than the official documents of bureaucracy and the official narratives of national history.

That Leila makes this transition to naming herself as the rightful and proud inheritor of Leon’s suitcase is significant given that throughout much of the novel, she seeks to differentiate herself from her parents, to insist that her life will not be like theirs—which includes, in particular, her insistence that her life will not be defined by documents (or lack thereof) the way her parents’ lives seem to have been. On the opening page of the novel, Leila proudly tells us that she and her boyfriend Mason have just been married in New York. Although the wedding was unplanned and “hush-hush,” done without the knowledge of either of her parents, Leila insists on telling us that she and Mason “didn’t marry on a whim—don’t worry, I didn’t do a green-card number. Mason Louie was no stranger” (1). Here, she references her own mother’s history: after being abandoned by Leila’s biological father Lyman Fu, who left Gold Mountain to seek new dreams and fortune in Australia, promising to send for his young wife soon, Dulcie Fu was forced to find another husband, and chose Leon because he had papers—their marriage *was*

“a green-card number,” a chance for Mah to become authorized by the state. Leila finds this “shame[ful],” and insists that her marriage to Mason is different: they marry one another for love, not for papers (20). Yet, if things have changed for Leila and her sisters (Leila tells us that “we’re lucky, not like the bondsmen growing up in service, or the newborn daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes... Nina, Ona, and I, we’re the lucky generation”), it is hard to say how much they have changed, or if the three sisters can necessarily escape the world of documentation that has structured so much of their parents’ lives (33). When Nina meets a guy in China while on a visit there and becomes romantically attached to him, Leila, ever the over-protective older sister, immediately asks Nina flat out, “Are you thinking of marrying this Zhang guy to get him out [of China]?” (26). That this is the first question that pops into Leila’s head raises some uncertainty about how easily the next generation of Leongs will be able to live lives that are different from Mah and Leon’s. Though Leila and Mason may have married for love, her younger sister finds herself in a romantic situation with the potential to mirror their parents’ marriage, a powerful reminder of the ways in which documentation continues to influence the everyday lives of the marginalized, even those second-generation Chinese Americans, like Nina, who are rightful U.S. citizens and very much consider themselves American.

Yet, even as she seeks to mark herself as different from her parents, the novel makes clear to us in many ways that Leila is undeniably Leon’s daughter, even if she is not his blood relation (just as he is Grandpa Leong’s son on paper and at heart, but not by blood). From a very young age, Leila is already beginning to become just like Leon, inheriting not only his past, but also his personality, the same adaptive, rebellious, defiant, and creative spirit. Even as a little girl, Leila is always learning from Leon how to survive and claim a space for herself within a society that will often seek to marginalize and exclude her (as both the daughter of a paper son and as an ethnic minority). This includes lessons about how to defy authority, how to skirt punishment for breaking the rules, and how to beat an unjust system. When a 9-year-old Ona is caught shoplifting from Woolworth’s and Leon and Leila go to pick her up, for example, Leon

quickly becomes annoyed with the store manager's attempt to claim the role of authority, insisting that Ona's transgression (stealing a tube of lipstick) is not really a punishable one: "He jutted his chin at the man, practically shouting, 'What's the big deal? It's only lipstick. No big deal.' He kept calling the manager names: White Devil, Crooked-Nose, Liar" (136). After Leon gets Ona off the hook with only a warning from the store manager—"Don't let me catch you again"—he not only fails to discipline Ona for stealing, but even seems to take pride in a daughter who attempts to defy authority and beat the system in the same way her father does, whose face remains "calm and rested" throughout the ordeal, "Little Miss No-Big-Deal" (137). In fact, Leon goes as far as to reward Ona's behavior, taking her and Leila out for ice-cream sundaes after the incident and telling them, "Don't tell Mah. Our secret. It was only a little thing. Only lipstick" (137). By telling his young daughters that it was "only a little thing," Leon teaches them that Ona has done no wrong—that, in fact, hers is an action to be rewarded rather than punished, given that it is a sort of survival mechanism, a form of infrapolitics, a "little" way to get a small slice of the larger capitalist pie so often denied to the Leongs.

As Leila grows older and often takes on the responsibility of a parent in situations where her own parents—illegal immigrants who speak a limited amount of English—are wary of filling that role, she also learns for herself, not just second-hand through Leon, how overwhelming encounters with authority can be, how invasive their questions are, and how inaccurate their portrayals of individuals and situations tend to be. Interestingly, we learn of the Woolworth's incident in a flashback, as the memory returns to Leila while sitting in the Vallejo Street Police Station with an officer following Ona's death. She tells us that "the cop's questions," which are intrusive, uncomfortable, and even accusatory, "reminded me of the time Ona got caught shoplifting at Woolworth's" (136). In both situations, the Leongs are represented unfairly by those in power, who don't have time for or interest in the "whole story." But while the shoplifting incident leaves no official record, as Ona is let go with just a warning, the cop at the police station wants to write into permanency the details of Ona's suicide, a bureaucratic

procedure which Leila finds unjust and painful. As she begins the process of filling out the paperwork and responding to the cop's interrogations, the usually composed and level-headed Leila loses control of her emotions, not from the pain of losing her sister, which hasn't quite set in yet, but because she "had to see too much... had too much to do. My hand shook when I signed where the policeman pointed. Pen. Paper. Press down" (119). Leila is not in a mental or emotional state to be filling out numbing paperwork about her sister's life and death, but the impersonal, dehumanizing, efficiency-based nature of bureaucracy requires this of her despite the immediacy of Ona's passing—the body must be identified and the facts recorded; therefore, Leila must respond to authority's demands for verification and documentation.¹⁸ The already overwhelming situation is exacerbated by the fact that the police officer questions Leila's relationship to Ona, since the two are technically half-sisters and the officer "couldn't understand why Ona and I had different last names" (though Leila thinks of herself as a Leong, she is Leila Fu on paper) (136). Moments after Leila has lost her little sister, the girl whom she was raised alongside and helped to raise, she finds a policeman questioning whether they are even related, insulting and infuriating Leila by asking for "more forms and verification, identification" that will prove she is a relative, even as he simultaneously burdens her with the task of identifying Ona's shattered body (137). Finally, Leila is perhaps most infuriated by the fact that the exchange with the police officer seems rather futile, given that the answers she has for him are too complex and convoluted to fit neatly within the spaces of the forms he will use to write his report. Though Kim argues that Leila "seek[s] legitimation by turning towards [the] official documents... [of the] police records" in this scene, Leila in fact makes clear to readers that it is impossible for the police officer's records to legitimate Ona's death; the evidence they have on file will not lead to any "proof" or understanding about why Ona chose to jump (42). This is primarily because Leila's responses to the officer's questions don't provide the simple cause-and-effect explanations that the police are used to looking for and documenting in their records. Leila tells us:

I had ready answers for everything. No, there were no previous attempts. No, I had no clues about this coming on. Yes, I knew about the drugs. There was a boyfriend, Osvaldo Ong, but they broke up. A while back. No, he wasn't involved in a gang. She was taking some classes at City College. She worked nights at The Traders. Yes, the same one that had been in Oakland. She lived on Salmon Alley. No fights. No problems out of the ordinary. No hints. Nothing.

He didn't get it. He was looking at the typical stuff. He was looking at now. Maybe I could have said something about how Ona felt stuck. In the family, in Chinatown. Ona was the middle girl and she felt stuck in the middle of all the trouble.

I could have given him Leon's explanation that it was because Grandpa Leong's bones weren't at rest. Or Mah's, that it was as simple as Ona feeling betrayed no one came to her rescue about Osvaldo, that she had to suffer the blame for Ong & Leong's failure.

But I didn't say any of this; it wasn't anything he could use for his report.

Besides, [he] started to get on my nerves... I mumbled that it was a long story. (135-136)

Leila tells us, her readers, that there are multiple version to this "long story," many possible explanations for why Ona jumped, none of them necessarily accurate. But a police officer trying to write up a report of the incident does not have the space to include Leila's version and Leon's version and Mah's version of the story the way that Leila can relate these versions to us. As Chang puts it, "Leila realizes [in this scene that] family narratives are unrecognizable within a framework of modern rationality" (115). The scene thus indicates the ways in which documentation imposes its own rules and its own form(s) on individuals, demanding that they fit their stories to its format. Yet, at the same time, that fact that Leila tells us much more than she is willing to "mumbl[e]" to the cop is also a nod to the futility of bureaucracy's attempts to get the whole story down on paper, as well as to the perseverance of individuals who will find their own ways to tell their stories, whether documentation allows space for them or not. Those

who are interviewed are expected to provide the “right” kinds of information, facts that can be recorded on forms and used in reports, but they can also make the choice to withhold that information, refusing to say anything at all, or, as in Leila’s case, refusing to say anything useful. While the cop’s questions remain largely unanswered by Leila’s refusal to fit her story to his format, however, the fact that *we* learn stories that he never hears suggests that such stories *are* told and remembered and recorded, even if not within the official realm of documentation.

Indeed, Leila uses (counter)narration to keep Ona alive even after death. Though the police officer who interviews Leila for his report is intent on filling in the blanks of the questions that surround Ona’s suicide and wrapping up the case, Leila’s narration throughout the novel produces an ongoing (counter-)narrative of her sister’s life that keeps Ona alive, preventing her from becoming a closed case filed away on the Vallejo Street Police Station shelves. As Martha J. Cutter notes, echoing my point above, Leila “eventually tells Ona’s story,” not to the police officer who asks all the wrong questions, but to us, her readers (46). In this version, Leila can give the details the officer’s questions leave no room for; she can tell the type of story that couldn’t be captured by his report. Through Leila’s narration, which “lives and breathes with Ona’s very personality,” Ona’s life becomes “a living story,” even after death (Cutter 46). As such, Cutter argues, “Leila’s narration of the novel must be read as an attempt to ensure that Ona is not lost”—it is, much like Leon’s (counter-)archives, a way of self-documenting and self-preserving an unauthorized (hi)story. Leila realizes, through Ona’s death, Leon’s suitcase, and a variety of other sources and encounters, that the selective memory which becomes defined, authorized, legitimized, and canonized as Official History is not the same as the memories she holds in her heart, those that carry the past of her family, loved ones, and community. As such, Leila’s narration is one in which History becomes one of many histories, losing the authority that comes with the capital letter H as room is made for other stories. Her narration of her experiences in Chinatown and beyond it is a reminder—much like the diverse histories contained within Leon’s singular suitcase—that there are many multiple Chinese American

histories and stories, experiences which cannot be captured within the space of one official narrative of and for the nation. Though readers might think at first that *Bone* is Ona's story, as the novel's plot appears to be centered around her death; or Leila's story, given her role as narrator; or, even more broadly, the Leong family's story, it is in fact all of these stories and many more—Leila's, Ona's, Nina's, Leon's, Mah's, but also Tommie Hom's, Rosa's, Luciano's, You Thin's, Grandpa Leong's, Mason's, Zeke's, Dale's, Osvaldo's, the sewing ladies'. That none of the stories are quite the same—that many of them, in fact, clash or conflict with one another (this is seen to be especially true when storytelling turns to Ona's death and the possible causes of her suicide, as Sze effectively demonstrates in her essay on gossip in *Bone*)—is yet another testament to the impossibility of capturing stories on paper and unifying histories into History. Rather, as Rocío G. Davis writes, Leila's narration “blend[s] individual voices... to expand the cultural significance of their stories and build multidimensional images of Chinese American [identity]” (97). In *Bone*, there are many voices heard, and many others yet to be heard, stories as-yet-untold lingering at the margins of Leila's narration even as she engages in the act of telling.

As the (illegitimate) daughter of a paper son, Leila learns as she grows older to find new sources of meaning, memory, and history in unexpected places like Leon's seemingly useless mess of a suitcase, realizing that authorized documents, official narratives, and legitimated archives don't hold all the (hi)stories within the nation's history. Though she considers burning Leon's “suitcase of lies” upon first finding it, thinking that it only reveals that “on paper Leon was not the hero,” she comes to realize that each of the documents in Leon's suitcase is a powerful source of history in its own right (58, 55). The feeling of her “shoulders tighten[ing]” as she first sorts through Leon's suitcase is later replaced by a “lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw... our inside story is something totally different” (141). Other critics have read Leila's choice to preserve and inherit Leon's documents differently. LeBlanc, for example, argues that “her decision to preserve Leon's fragmented American identity suggests

[Leila's] conflict between being an obedient daughter blind to Leon's failing and admitting her independence from a man emasculated by race asymmetry" (13). However, such arguments seem problematic given their portrayals of both family and history as structured by binaries such as past/future, loyalty/independence, and patriarchal obedience/feminist rebellion. On the contrary, Leila realizes through her own messy family history that (hi)stories and circumstances are not so simply portrayed, explained, captured, or understood. As such, she willingly accepts and inherits Leon's paper history, his assemblage-archive, because she knows that it represents stories and histories that documents can never contain, whether "fact" or "fiction." His way of remembering counts for something important: as she says, "remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up" (85).

Interestingly, toward the end of the narrative, which moves us ever-farther back in time, we see that even before Leila encountered Leon's suitcase and learned from it the power of memories, of personal archiving, and of (counter-)documenting histories, she herself was already building her own personal archives and engaging in her own counter-documenting, something she seems to have learned from both Leon and Mah. In the final pages of the novel, Leila discusses her time as a young girl when it was just her and Mah, before Mah's second marriage to Leon. Leila tells us how, after Lyman left Mah for Australia, "Mah saved all his letters" (184). Hoping to capture some sense of her father, and also of herself and her history, Leila, too, becomes a saver of personal documents, just like Leon and her mother: "I grew up waiting on the [letters], too, collecting stamps; Australia was the biggest part of my collection. I held the miniature pictures in my palm: the big rock, the koalas, Queen Elizabeth. The scalloped edges pieced together the faint world [Lyman] lived in, but the more I had, the more of him I felt I owned" (185). From a young age, then, long before she inherits Leon's suitcase and realizes that "memories do add up," Leila has already begun to build her own multimedia archive of who she is, who her family is, where they have come from, and where they are going (85). As undocumented and illegal immigrants whose movements remain largely off the official records,

the journeys of characters like Lyman and Leon are nevertheless documented by those counter-archivers who preserve the forgotten pasts and hidden histories of the marginalized in America. Like Leon, Leila uses a diverse range of sources, some quite unpredictable, to trace these histories and to stay connected to her lost relatives, not only Lyman, but also Ona and the “oldtimers” like Grandpa Leong. Leila recalls and preserves the memories of these loved ones not just through conventional methods such as storytelling and narration, but also, as Phu has noted, through such unexpected means as the photography of German American artist Arnold Genthe, who himself captured images of Chinatown for American audiences, and whose photograph *Their First Photograph* reminds Leila of her childhood growing up in Chinatown with Ona (Phu 57).

At the novel’s close, Leila tells us about the word “UPDAIRE,” painted on to “an old blue sign” at the bottom of the steps of her parents’ apartment on Salmon Alley to tell visitors where to find apartment #6: “#2—4—6 UPDAIRE” (180). Though other characters seem to find the sign strange—Mason laughs aloud at it the first time he sees it, using the “half-embarrassed tone” he sometimes has about “having been born and raised in Chinatown”—Leila treasures the word that is inscribed into her family home, aware that, though “updaire” doesn’t appear in any American English dictionaries, it captures a part of her family’s past, as well as their present (180). Just as she is glad at the end of the suitcase scene that she decides not to burn, but to preserve, Leon’s papers, she finds happiness, even “reassur[ance,]” in the fact that “no one has ever corrected [the sign’s spelling,]” that “someone repaints it every year” (190). The old blue sign is, like so many of the other archival artifacts that make up the Leong’s lives and histories, a form of counter-documentation. It is also, as Ta, LeBlanc, and others have noted, a “neologistica[l] re-appropriat[ion] of dominant language forms,” quite similar to Leon’s re-appropriating the concept of citizenship papers (Ta 157). Ta points out that although “the word ‘updaire’ may not be legible to those on the outside... Leila calls attention to the legitimacy of this word in representing her place of residence, her home” (157). Indeed, Leila tells us that the

sign represents “my address; it was home, where I lived.... Like the oldtimer’s photos, Leon’s papers, and Grandpa Leong’s lost bones, [the “UPDAIRE” sign] reminded me to look back, to remember. I was reassured. I knew what I held in my heart would guide me” (191).

Significantly, these are the closing lines of the story, and they shift the narrative from one of anger and uncertainty on the part of Leon and Mah, who often worry that their time, labor, and efforts in America will be unacknowledged, will count for nothing, to one of (re)assurance on the part of Leila, who knows that what she holds in her heart—and what is preserved in the world around her by the everyday archiving of people like herself, Mah, and Leon—will be enough to guide her, to help her remember, and to preserve the past.

Documenting (Hi)Stories: A Revisionary Process

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott writes that “escap[ing] detection” is a common goal of subordinate and marginalized groups, but one with a catch: “to the extent that they achieve their goal, such activities do not appear in the archives” (87). *Bone*, however, turns this idea on its head, suggesting that one can escape detection and documentation while also keeping a visible, legible, record of one’s self and one’s history, a counter-archive which can be passed down to future generations, as Leila inherits Leon’s suitcase. While, for Jasmine, escaping detection and therefore not appearing in the archives is a form of freedom, a liberation through invisibility and undetectability, Leon and Leila want to write themselves, their family, and their community into history, and do so. As Juliana Chang writes, “for racialized subjects, like those represented in *Bone*, [the] battle is not to opt out of the social but, as subjects who are persistently stripped of social, political, and economic legibility, to write themselves in” (106). This is precisely what Leon and Leila do—they become the authors, creators, and assemblers of counter-histories that allow them to write themselves both into and against national narratives. Though documentation is meant to literally spell out the terms and agreements between powerful and less powerful stakeholders in every situation from signing a legal contract to submitting an application for citizenship, Rosina Lippi-Green notes in *English with an Accent*

that “the hidden costs of democracy, of assimilation, are not spelled out in the papers [immigrants] file to live here.” That information can only be found in “the stories of [these] people” (239). Even with citizenship status, Chinese Americans and other marginalized groups continue to face discrimination and exclusion in everyday life, especially from and by American bureaucracies whose languages and documents seek to further the marginalization of these individuals, as Leila’s experiences alone attest to. Lisa Lowe has famously argued that “the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before,” that, “even as a citizen, [the Asian American] continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation” (6). Because the Leongs are aware of the precarious positions they inhabit as Asian Americans located outside of the nation’s boundaries, and because they are cognizant of America as a nation which buries, erases, and ignores certain histories and identities—a “lie of a country,” as Leon calls it—they work to find ways to testify to and record their own citizenship, their own stories, and their own ways of belonging in the U.S. in everyday life (100). Certainly, some critics have been dismissive of the alternative documentation and archiving the characters undertake throughout the novel, marking these histories as illegitimate or without value, just as the state and its bureaucracies would. Waller, for example, describes Leon as a collector who “collects only garbage” (496-7). Yet, a closer look at the “garbage” and junk Leon collects and hoards reveals a multimodal assemblage of stories which in fact are a valuable preservation of the histories of individuals, communities, and cultures. The development of these new counter-narratives, in turn, allows for the slowly emergent process of finding new ways of being and belonging in the nation, ones which challenge the idea of a unitary and singular Americanness, what Lowe calls the “abstract citizen” “defined by the negation of the material conditions of work and the inequalities of the property system” (2). In constructing their archives, Leon and Leila do not simply mark themselves as “Americans” devoid of a specific (illegal immigrant) history, but rather provide alternative versions and visions of American history, memory,

identity, and experience. As Cutter memorably puts it, “these characters finally realize that it is precisely their divergent cultural/linguistic heritages that engender the ability to produce new meanings [and] new stories... that break down the binary opposition between the ethnic and the American, enriching and finally re-creating both cultural terrains” (33). *Bone* not only offers a challenge to the official narrative of the nation, but also invites readers to begin to envision how we might exist differently within that nation, how we might produce “new meanings [and] new stories,” and how we might begin to negotiate new and perhaps less restrictive spaces for ourselves and others within a more inclusive, representative, and meaningful “cultural terrain.”

In producing archives that are not only representations of individuals, but also of families, neighborhoods, and communities, Leila and Leon also remind readers that the making of historical knowledge is—or, at least, should strive to be—collective rather than individualist, the stories of many “ordinary” people rather than a singular narrative spotlighting a handful of heroes and villains. The artifacts of others which make their way into Leila and Leon’s archives, such as the affidavit of marriage between Mah and Lyman that Leon keeps in his suitcase, or the “backdair” sign that Leila holds in her heart and her memory, remind us that individuals are everywhere and constantly collaborating to both produce and preserve histories, their own and others’. Even the gossiping sewing ladies of Salmon Alley help to preserve the history of the Leong family and of Chinatown in general with their constantly whispered exchanges of stories and information. As Lei acknowledges in the very first paragraph of the novel, “In Chinatown, everyone knew our story,” even if that story can’t be found or traced in any official documents (1). And indeed, as mentioned earlier, Leila’s story becomes not just “our story,” the story of the Leongs, but rather the story of all of Chinatown—the sewing ladies, Tommie Hom, Rosa, Grandpa Leong. However, even in telling (or attempting to tell) these stories, Leila inevitably leaves some stories untold, as is suggested most powerfully by the fact that we never learn Ona’s version of why she took her own life, even as we get the speculative theories of many of her family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Both Leila and Leon treat history as Lowe describes

it—"not as a continuous narrative of progress, maturity, and increasing rationality, not as a story of great moments and individuals, but as a *surplus of materiality that exceeds textualization*" and demands a "reevaluation of what is considered to be significant" (111 emphasis added). Yet, the very notion of history as a surplus of materiality which exceeds what can be documented and recorded also speaks to the inevitability of remainders or excesses (to borrow terms used by Juliana Chang in her article on *Bone*), stories and pieces of stories that never make their way into any archive, official or otherwise, even as they wait on the margins of history for their chance to be heard, to be told (116). The multiplicity of stories we encounter through Leila's narrative simultaneously hints at those stories and histories that remain as-yet-unwritten. As Yoonmee Chang writes, the "leftover subjects" in *Bone* whose stories we only learn fragments of—characters like Ona and Osvaldo, for example—are "also illegible as imperfect vehicles of th[eir own] counter-narratives. They not only mark the continuing need for counter-narratives but also ask us to consider the impediments to creating them" (100). If *Bone* is primarily a "story about storytelling," as Yoonmee Chang argues, then one of the major messages it imparts to its readers is the "failure... of the narratives we have relied on to tell our stories" and the need for a wider diversity of narratives and histories, constructed and preserved in varied ways (111). The close call in which Leila stops just short of destroying Leon's counter-archive and the artifacts of her own history is an eerie reminder of just how easily stories can become—or remain—lost, buried, discarded, silenced, denied, and refused. At the same time, however, Leila's decision to ultimately preserve and inherit Leon's assemblage of histories signals the ways in which stories potentially lost to us can be recovered, recognized, heard, and legitimated through individual and collective acts of agency, acknowledgement, memory, and recognition which challenge the ways in which information and history are produced and preserved by the state and its bureaucracies. In *Bone*, Ng provides us with some sense of the "inside story"—indeed, of many inside stories—while at the same time testifying to how much work remains to

be done if we are to recover, recognize, and preserve more of the lost and silenced histories and stories yet untold (141).

Part II

Performing Ethnic Identities:

Linguistic Passings in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Danzy Senna's

Caucasia

"My identity is not what I am but what I am passing for" – Samira Kawash

"[Identities] can be deployed to serve a variety of interests" – James C. Scott

"I had always thought that I could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once" – Henry Park,
Native Speaker

In an article in the April 1950 issue of *Negro Digest* entitled "Fooling Our White Folks," Langston Hughes describes passing as a process whereby racially marginalized subjects acquire by "guile" what should be rightfully available to them as citizens of the U.S., but is denied to them through white supremacy. Hughes compares passing to the tale of an African American house servant whose mistress denied her the right to eat any of the biscuits she made as part of her work; as such, the servant began a habit of trimming off a bit of each biscuit she baked, taking some of the accumulation for herself and sharing the rest with the other household slaves. As Hughes saw it, passing can be similarly understood as a way of "'trimming off the biscuits of race prejudice'—a method of 'redistributive justice'" (Wald 144-5). Hughes's anecdote is of particular interest to this chapter in that it suggests that "passing," while a form of "redistributive justice" with the potential to play a role in altering the structural inequalities of American ethnoracial society, is nevertheless also something that can, and often necessarily must, occur within the everyday and as part of the ordinary, in the form of subtly subversive acts comparable to trimming off the edges of the biscuits one bakes. Indeed, Hughes's idea of "trimming off the biscuits of race prejudice" is a reminder that passing, as a means of acquiring by "guile" what is denied to one normally, might take many temporary and tactical forms within the context of one's everyday life, which might not be immediately noticeable or decipherable to those who are not the passer. In order to understand the myriad ways in which passing can

function as a violation of and resistance to white supremacy, we need to look to the ordinary, everyday, and perhaps unnoticed forms that passing—and redistributive justice—can take in various contexts.

Before examining the myriad forms that passing might take in everyday life, it is useful to first consider the relationship between passing and the history of racial formation in the U.S. The very existence of passing, as both a literary trope and a historical reality, is testament to the anxiety which has always surrounded the notion of race in U.S. culture, resulting in continuous efforts to police, define, and categorize racial identities through measures ranging from the “one drop rule” popularized in the late nineteenth century to today’s continued uses of censuses, surveys, and other bureaucratic methods which seek to categorize and classify individuals by race. Efforts to label and classify each individual with a specific racial identity are, of course, also efforts to construct stable categories of race and between races—to systematically name and classify both races and individuals are mutually reinforcing forms of racial “gatekeeping.” Although it has been suggested in both academic and political spheres that twenty-first century America (or, as some have gone as far as to suggest, even post-1965 America) is a “postracial” society in which we have moved beyond questions of race and racial policing,¹ the commonplace, ordinary ways in which we are still asked, expected, or demanded to categorize ourselves according to racial categories in fact reflects a national culture—and an empowered racial elite—that continues to fixate on the supposed relationship between individual subjectivity and a stable, homogenous racial identity. Indeed, those who choose to identify themselves in ways which supersede the boundaries of racial categories or defy the efforts of racial gatekeeping are in fact viewed as a threat to the order of a society that seeks to maintain rigid and fixed constructions of racial identity. A recent *New York Times* article discusses, for example, how the “sharp disconnect between how Latinos view themselves and how the government wants to count them [in censuses]” has become “a problem” for government officials—the decision of more than one third of Latinos to check “other” as their race on recent Census Bureau

questionnaires has left officials “wrestling with how to get more Latinos to pick a race” (Navarro). The ongoing existence of bureaucratic operations which classify U.S. subjects by race and which reject the notion of the “unclassifiable” or the “other” as problematic and imprecise speaks to the continued demand for racial categorization and boundary-keeping in a contemporary society that is far from “postracial.”

Yet, the very idea that those in charge of the recent census were grappling with—the question of how to get Latinos to “pick a race”—suggests that racial identity is not determined *solely* through social systems of classification and categorization, but also through individual choice. The very creation of categories and boundaries of and between races also creates the possibility for circumventing such categories and for crossing said boundaries. Such are the conditions that have allowed individuals to pass, both historically and in our contemporary moment: the very attempt to construct racial boundaries also produces these boundaries as constructed, and as sites which thus allow the possibility for struggle, contestation, and negotiation. When passing was first popularized in the late nineteenth century, it was in response to the “one drop rule,” which designated any person with even a single “drop” of black blood in his or her ancestry as black. While seemingly a quite rigid means of classifying individuals with any black ancestry as definitively black, the rule in fact proved useful for blurring the boundaries between black and white, allowing individuals to “cross the line” (see Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line*, especially pages 10-15). Because many people legally designated as black were in fact of largely mixed-race and Caucasian ancestry, thus *appearing* white or very light-skinned, the opportunity for “passing” as white became viable for many people who were technically classified by the state as “black.” Since one “drop” of black blood was not necessarily detectable in many who could pass for white, the attempt to construct racial boundaries using the “one drop rule” ironically led to the possibility, for many, of crossing the boundary between blackness and whiteness.

What the popularization of passing in the late nineteenth century revealed is that racial identities, like racial boundaries, are fluid and constructed, contextual rather than comprehensive. Attempts by the state and the racial majority to fix and define racial categories and identities often serve to reveal the instability and fluidity of race; far from a natural and innate facet of one's identity that is automatically detectable, locatable, and fixable, the anxiety surrounding the need to classify and define race proves it to be something questionable, elusive, and beyond definition—and thus, also, open to the possibilities of re-definition and “mis”-definition. In this sense, we can understand racial identity not as fixed or stable, but as multiple and performative, always shifting by context. Despite existing within the structures of an ethnoracial society that demands classification and categorization, individuals have continuous opportunities to perform various racial identities to and for their own ends and purposes in their everyday lives. Thus individual racial identity can never be fully defined or fixed via a census or a law, as it is always also contingent and in flux, changing as circumstances and contexts demand and as opportunities arise to cross, challenge, or renegotiate social and racial boundaries. While the notion of “picking a race” raised by the census officials is perhaps too simplistic, as one's racial identity must always necessarily be defined within the context of preexisting racial codes and expectations, the possibility nevertheless exists for individuals to choose how they will perform race—even what race they will perform—in a given context, and, in so doing, to influence how they are “categorized” by others. As I hope to show throughout this chapter, “passing” can best be understood in this way—as a social and political tool or tactic whereby individuals perform racial identity—in fact, perform multiple racial *identities*—as ways of negotiating the various inequalities of everyday life and the myriad demands for a range of racialized behaviors in different contexts.

To understand passing as multiple, contextual, and performative is to emphasize that it is *not* a permanent crossing of a “color line” undertaken by an individual who attempts to adopt a “false” racial identity in place of his or her “natural” one, but rather a series of ongoing acts

which an individual engages in in order to access opportunities, negotiate the tricky terrain of unequal power relations, or, to recall Hughes's anecdote, seek some form of "redistributive justice," however minor. For the ethnically minoritized in the U.S., especially, passing is a temporary means to an end in ordinary circumstances, a "survival strategy" for the everyday. Despite the perhaps more widespread view of passing, and particularly of passing literature, as concerned primarily with a permanent alteration of one's "natural" identity, many passing protagonists in fact engage in the types of multiple, contextual passings that this chapter focuses on. As literary critics such as Ginsberg have noted, some of the earliest and most influential passing novels, including James Weldon Johnson's 1912 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's 1929 *Passing*, portray the act of passing as "brief, situational, or intermittent" (3). Even prior to the popularization of passing literature, nineteenth-century works of American literature portraying the slave experience, not least among them Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, depicted passing as a temporary and situational tactic of the weak, in particular as a form of disguise used by slaves en route to freedom.² Beyond the realm of fiction, passing has also historically been used as a tactic of the racially marginalized in much the same way. Civil rights organizations of the mid-twentieth century, for example, used passing as an "undercover" expose strategy which allowed them to investigate banks, real estate firms, and other public agencies with histories of discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities. In a similar way, Walter White's 1948 autobiography *A Man Called White* recounts the experiences of a "blond-haired, blue eyed civil rights leader" who temporarily, situationally passes for white in order to investigate lynchings for the NAACP (Wald 39). Thus, while it is true, as Joo writes, that acts of passing "have often been used to reveal the constructed and fragile nature of racial categories and to critique the hypocritical and discriminatory system of US democracy that equate[s] white skin with freedom and citizenship," acts of passing have also frequently served a more immediate and personal purpose for the passer, whether that be to escape to freedom in the era of slavery, to access a white-only restaurant or water fountain during the era of Jim Crow

segregation, or to seek to redress the discriminatory practices of one's bank or local real estate agency.

The reality of passing as a temporary and situational tactic used by the racially marginalized to and for their own ends has been largely overshadowed by both works of literature and literary criticism which portray the act primarily as a tragic one in which an individual permanently hides or denies his or her "true" racial identity, from both others and the self, in order to fulfill a self-deprecating desire to be white. Gayle Wald argues that the "common tropes of desire" in many works of passing fiction express "the protagonist's relationship to 'whiteness' [as] defined... by envy or longing": whiteness is portrayed as desirable in and of itself, rather than because of the social and economic privileges it brings (140). Such depictions of passing imply that the passer has internalized the racist ideology of white America, believing the Anglo race to be naturally superior to others. Understood in this sense, passing is read as a permanent attempt to adopt a "new" identity, rather than as a situational tactic used in multiple and varying ways in different contexts for the passer's own purposes. I would argue, however, that this is a limited and problematic understanding of passing, and a misreading of the intentions of many who choose to pass. In order to better understand how passing often functions not as an act of permanence representing a belief in the superiority of the white race, but as a temporary tactic which allows the marginalized to better negotiate the strictures and structures of racism, I would like to turn to a discussion of the work of James C. Scott, particularly his interrogation of the notion of "false consciousness" and his concept of *infrapolitics*.

False consciousness is typically understood as a sort of self-destructive assimilative process whereby a minoritized or colonized subject, seemingly capitulating to hegemonic "norms," adopts the perspectives, ideologies, and values of the dominant culture or race of a society as his or her own, despite the fact that doing so is usually not in his or her own best interest. In the case of passing, viewing the act as a permanent desire to "become white"

suggests that the passer exhibits a false consciousness, having adopted the dominant culture's belief in the superiority of the white race over all other racial identities, including the passer's own racial identity. Scott, however, questions the assumption that those who appear to conform to hegemonic norms and ideologies must necessarily do so as a result of false consciousness, pointing out instead that individuals often have a "self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances" (xii). As he writes,

Deference is one of the *consequences* of a stratification system rather than its *creator*.

We are in danger of making a serious mistake, therefore, whenever we infer anything at all about the beliefs or attitudes of anyone solely on the basis that he or she has engaged in an apparently deferential act. (23 emphasis added)

Instead, Scott offers the concept of infrapolitics—a form of "political action [which] is studiously designed to be anonymous or to disclaim its purpose"—as a better way of understanding such seemingly deferential acts (200). Scott's definition of infrapolitics as a form of resistance which "make[s] use of disguise, deception, and indirection while maintaining an outward impression, in power-laden situations, of willing, even enthusiastic consent" to dominant racial and cultural norms is, I would argue, a much more useful way of understanding the notion of passing than is false consciousness (17). Maintaining the *appearance* of a deferential act in which a "non-white" person seemingly acknowledges the superiority of the white race, passing in fact functions as a social tactic used by the racially marginalized as a way of disguising efforts to resist or circumvent forms of racial stratification and discrimination in everyday life. Viewing passing as a form of infrapolitics allows us to consider it as a way of *performing* whiteness—rather than ideologically embracing whiteness—not because one has a desire to *be* white or views the white race as superior to all others, but because one is seeking access to the social, economic, and/or political opportunities associated with having white skin. As Adrian Piper writes of passing, in language which echoes Scott's notion of the infrapolitical as a disguised form of resistance, "if you are not inclined toward any form of *overt* political advocacy, passing

in order to get the benefits you know you deserve may seem the only way to defy the system” (244 emphasis added). Priscilla Wald, similarly, has argued that whiteness can be considered a form of property, and passing therefore “analogous to, if not synonymous with, stealing something—here, a reputation for whiteness” (228). Like Hughes’s notion of trimming the edges off of biscuits in order to rightfully access food one is otherwise denied, an infrapolitical view of passing suggests that it is a way of attempting to “level the playing field” of a racially hierarchically and oppressive society. Rather than representing a form of conformity to white society and acknowledgement of white racial superiority, passing might be better viewed as playing a “practical joke on white society,” as the narrator of Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* tells his readers (803). While the act may have the *appearance* of deferring to a racist ideology of white superiority, it is critical to acknowledge that such acts of “deference” may in fact be temporary and tactical performances used by individuals to gain advantages and opportunities for themselves within the contexts of racial disenfranchisement, and to negotiate the systemic constraints of racial stratification that they face in everyday life.

Scott argues that “the theater of power can, by artful practice, become an actual political resource of [the marginalized]... to see the performance as totally determined from above [is] to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends” (34). Yet, the ability to appropriate a performance for one’s own ends nevertheless necessitates that one’s audience is convinced of the legitimacy of that performance. In the case of passing, then, is one only able to successfully “perform” whiteness if one appears to be visibly white, or, at the very least, can alter one’s physical appearance in order to look white? Are those whose physical appearances mark them as decidedly “not-white” unable to make the same sort of use of passing as an infrapolitical tool? Undoubtedly, race has long been assumed to be written upon the body: as Ginsberg writes, “cultural logic presupposes a biological foundation of race visibly evident in physical features such as facial structures, hair color and texture, and skin color—what Frantz Fanon has called the ‘epidermal schema’ of racial difference” (14). Indeed, both the construction

and the policing of racial categories have focused on “detecting” race through the bodily and the visual. The act of passing, in fact, has often been perceived as so threatening precisely because the passer’s “true” race is not revealed through his or her physical features, allowing the individual to circumvent and render futile what Wald has called the “visual protocols of racial classification” (3). Because narratives of race in the U.S. have implied a “stable relation between identity and that which is knowable through the ‘evidence’ of the body,” the passer’s success, then, would seem to depend upon the “whiteness” of his or her skin, hair, and other physical features (Wald 186).

Yet, in contradiction to cultural myths which assume that race is legibly written upon the body, suggesting its biological basis, there has emerged what Wald calls a “multidisciplinary project of anti-essentialist racial critique” which focuses instead on the idea of race as inherently fluid and unstable, shaped by social and cultural constructions and thus consisting of much more than merely the physiological (Wald 6). An “anti-essentialist” critique of race emphasizes that race is performative, not biological—indeed, it acknowledges that race is “impossible to define biologically” and that “there are no physical characteristics that occur in all the people of one race” (Wall 8). This acknowledgement of the limitations of reading race upon the body prompts us to consider the other ways in which race might be performed—that is, how racial identities might be constructed not only through how one looks, but also through a range of other factors. These might include one’s behaviors, how one walks, what job one holds, where one lives, and—what I would like to argue is a particularly important aspect of racial performance—how one talks. As Ludwig writes, although “United States notions of ethnicity and ethnic identity are still mainly based on a person’s origins as they manifest themselves in physical features,” we are “not simply what our body is... We are more than that, and our daily negotiations therefore happen in terms of rules that can go beyond these... aspects of ‘ethnicity’” (221, 223). Much more than just a matter of how one’s racial identity may seem to manifest

itself through one's physical features, racial performance often supersedes the body itself, and passings take many forms, appearance-based and otherwise.

This chapter focuses specifically on what I call *linguistic passing*—situationally altering one's way of speaking, in addition to or *instead of* altering one's physical appearance, in order to “pass” as a member of, or gain privileged “insider” status within, a particular racial or ethnic group—by analyzing language usage in two contemporary works of ethnic U.S. literature, Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). The notion that racial identification is always based on what can be *seen* is the very concept that Lee and Senna call into question in their novels by suggesting that, in certain contexts, one's linguistic performance can trump one's physical appearance in determining how one's racial/ethnic background is perceived by others. These novels propose that if one is able to talk the talk convincingly enough, one can gain access to certain groups one might otherwise be excluded from if “insider” status were to be determined solely through the visual indications of one's racial/ethnic background. At the same time that Lee and Senna's texts broaden popular understandings of racial passing by shifting emphasis from the visually/physically (in)detectable to the linguistically/audibly (in)detectable, these contemporary passing novels also resist the idea of passing as one of “false consciousness” or capitulation to dominant white views and norms. Instead, both works portray passing as a *temporary, tactical* act on the part of the “passer,” who often has an immediate short-term goal in mind when he or she chooses to pass. In the tactical acts of linguistic passing that occur in these novels, characters engage in conscious *performances* of “white rhetoric” which disguise these individuals as, if not full-fledged members of, at least complicit with, the white race, allowing them to gain access to certain advantages—economic, social, and political—that benefit themselves, and, often, their families or communities as well. By centering passing on the linguistic and (in)audible, rather than the physical and (in)visible, these texts show the power of language as a resistive and subversive tool for those subject to racist, classist constraints. Demonstrating how characters are constantly passing in and out of a range of

“contact zones”³ where different uses of language enable (or disable) access to certain opportunities, these texts dramatize how language is used as a tactic in everyday life, especially for minoritized subjects faced with racial and ethnic stratification and required to perform a range of identities to negotiate different circumstances and contexts. In this sense, linguistic passing, like the history of passing in general, is a survival strategy and a form of Scott’s infrapolitics: in these texts, language becomes a means for combatting institutional and social racism using the tools of trickery and disguise.

The often underestimated role that language plays in the performativity of race has recently been acknowledged by scholars in a variety of disciplines, some arguing that language in fact *supersedes* the significance of one’s physical appearance with regard to racial identity. Echoing Scott’s suggestion that “linguistic codes, dialects, and gestures” function as ways of “fooling” others as to whom one is, with whom one identifies, and how one submits to power, scholars of literature and language alike have begun to emphasize the crucial role that language plays in allowing one to “pass” for, or perform, a variety of racial identities (121). Literary scholar Martha J. Cutter has noted, for example, that “perfect” English can allow one to “efface [one’s] ethnic identity” as a racial minority (“Sliding Significations” 85), while rhetorician Ellen Cushman has similarly argued that “one can be identified as White solely through speech alone” (136). Linguist Rosina Lippi-Green, likewise, has suggested that language is “the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities” and that “the way we use language is more complex and meaningful than any single fact about our bodies” (5). In one of the most compelling studies to recently examine the relationship between language and racial performance, Vershawn Ashanti Young—who writes in an autoethnographic introduction that, from a young age, “verbal skills were the primary means I exploited to perform race”—argues that language is in fact the most important tool one has for performing racial identity, the “touchstone for racial performance and consequently for being placed on the imposed identity spectrum” (2, 7). Young’s *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*

(2007) suggests not only that racial performances rely primarily on the linguistic, but, likewise, that language and literacy can themselves only be understood as racialized acts: as he writes, choices about language are primarily choices about “different ways to perform racial identities through language,” and literacy is “not chiefly about matching pronouns with right antecedents or comprehending why Willie and Janet went up the hill,” but rather “is first and foremost a racial performance” (142). Significantly, Young argues that visual appearance is far less important to passing than is linguistic performance, noting that it is “not just... blacks with light skin and ‘good hair’” that pass, but also “those with nappy hair, wide noses, and skin so black you think maybe it’s blue.” Indeed, he goes as far as to argue that “physical traits don’t matter” and that individuals who “could never literally look white” can nevertheless pass in a variety of ways—particularly linguistically—which allow them to be marked as white despite their physical appearance (43). Passing, Young emphasizes, does not “mandate” that one looks white, but rather “requires instead that you be black” (or, I would add, Asian American, or Hispanic, or of any other racially minoritized background) but “*act white, erasing the requirement of racial concealment* and stressing racial performance” (45 emphasis added). While the visual is, as Michele Elam and other passing scholars have shown, still an important means through which both individuals and dominant institutions attempt to “detect” race, language and other non-visual means of racial performance exist as viable strategies for allowing one to pass despite one’s appearance—they are ways of making the visible, if not invisible, at least not as “hypervisible.” In other words, the extent to which one’s race seems to be visually detectable becomes less relevant if one is able to affirm or claim “whiteness” (which, in *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia*, is often synonymous with “Americanness”) in other ways. As anthropologist Signithia Fordham writes, “becoming white [through a transformation of one’s physical traits] is not *the* issue”; rather, “acting white” or “looking white on paper—behaving in ways and displaying the skills, abilities, and credentials that were traditionally associated with White Americans” is what ultimately determines one’s acceptance as white/American, regardless of

one's appearance (Fordham qtd. in Young 42-43). Skin color, then, is no longer the sole determinate of who can climb the socioeconomic ladder in the U.S.: speech, writing, and social performances of language and literacy all now count as much as, if not more than, one's racial appearance in determining one's place and path in society.

I would like to briefly note here that to emphasize the relationship between linguistic and racial *performance*, as Young and myself do, is quite distinct from suggesting a natural or essential link between language and race. The relationship that exists between the two, though mutually reinforcing, is not natural but rather constructed, shaped by context rather than dependent upon genetics. Not surprisingly, though, language has been used as a way of establishing and reinforcing cultural myths about biological and physiological differences between races. It is frequently suggested that one's language is somehow innately bound to one's race, so that we speak of "white English" and "African American English."⁴ As Young points out, such tendencies are emblematic of the "larger cultural phenomenon of equating race with language," which "exaggerat[es] the differences between... languages [and dialects]" as a means of "exaggerating and reifying the differences between races" (4, 6).⁵ To maintain constructions of race and racial difference, boundaries and borders between racial identities must be continually (re)constructed and (re)defined, and language has functioned as an important means of establishing a (false) cultural belief that differences between races are natural, fixed, and irrevocable.

However, the relationship between race and language is not a natural, but a *naturalized*, one, and thus it is possible even for non-white people to "pass" as white by learning to use the right (white) language. The mutually reinforcing relationship between the linguistic and the racial does not indicate a fixed relationship between how one speaks and how one's race is defined, but rather makes it possible for one to use language to perform different racial or ethnic identities. As scholars such as Smitherman have argued, "White English is the price of admission into [White America's] economic and social mainstream" (Smitherman qtd. in

Cushman 14). By implying that those who would be otherwise excluded from white America might gain “admission” into this exclusive society through their use of language, Smitherman calls our attention to the fact that people can—and quite regularly do—alter their speech to fit new demands, settings, and circumstances. Because language is not a natural reflection of who one “is,” but rather something that one learns through culture and context, it would follow that somebody who has learned to speak “black English”—or, for that matter, “Spanglish,” or “Hispanic English,” or any other form of “nonstandard” (i.e., non-white) English—might also, through a similar process, learn to speak “white English” (just as an individual who grows up in America might, for example, learn to adopt a British accent or use British slang while living across the pond). Learning to perform the linguistic “standard” of any group, Smitherman suggests, can allow one to become a part of that group—or, at the very least, to access some of the privileges associated with that group, which in this case, includes the social and economic privileges of White America.

In a discussion of how racial performances are learned and constructed, Samira Kawash uses the term *studious spectatorship* to describe the process whereby an individual watches blackness (or, I would add, any other racial identity) performed by others and thus learns how to construct and perform his or her own black identity according to social and contextual norms. In this sense, Kawash argues that “blackness is almost a bodily discipline, acquired through study and repetition” (64, 66). I would like to modify/extend Kawash’s idea of studious spectatorship by emphasizing the importance of learning to construct one’s own racial identity not just through *watching* others perform race, but also through *listening* to others perform race.⁶ As both *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia* powerfully demonstrate, successful racial performances depend as much upon the audible as upon the visible, as much upon what is heard as what is seen. Learning how to successfully perform racial identities through language is essential for the protagonists in *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia*. Both Lee’s Henry Park and Senna’s Birdie Lee become adept at listening to how others speak, and, in turn, at linguistically

negotiating and manipulating multiple different languages, dialects, and discourses. Their abilities to use language as a form of infrapolitical action is what ultimately allows them to make multiple passings, not just from not-white to white, but in many varied “directions.” Through linguistic performance, Henry and Birdie perform not just whiteness, but a range of ethnic/American identities, using these performances as temporary and tactical ways of negotiating various circumstances in their everyday lives and accessing the privileges—social, economic, and otherwise—of various different racial/racialized groups.

In portraying passings as multiple, tactical acts that use various types of performances—not just visual performances, but also audible and linguistic ones—to negotiate the tricky terrain of a racially hierarchical society, Lee and Senna’s novels also revise and challenge several other ways in which passing is commonly, but problematically, portrayed. For one, these “millennial” passing novels, published on the brink of the twenty-first century and both set in the contemporary U.S., offer a stark challenge to the notion of passing as an outdated act, undertaken only in a bygone era or previous chapter in our national history. Scholars such as Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter have argued that the act of passing is “extinct,” part of a past that makes its way into our present only through the existence of passing literature which survives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Indeed, as Elam has noted, many scholarly discussions treat passing as merely an “historical footnote” from “before the civil rights era... given an easeful death by *Loving v. Virginia*,” the Supreme Court case which overturned anti-miscegenation laws (96). Yet, such a view of passing considers it to be literally a matter of black and white, an act undertaken only when the “color line” of the Jim Crow era dominated the structure of American society, forcing some to permanently conceal their non-white ancestry and literally try to “become” white.⁸ I would argue, instead, that we consider passing, especially in our modern moment, as connoting something quite different from a permanent crossing of a color line. Rather, passing is better understood as a series of temporary, tactical acts used to gain privileged access to communities one might not normally be considered

a “member” of otherwise, what Wall has called a means of “creat[ing] a layering of racial identities that can be adopted on an as needed basis” (5). In order to successfully “blend into” or be viewed as a “part of” different contexts we find ourselves negotiating in everyday life, we have *all* learned different ways to “pass” to some degree. This occurs not necessarily or exclusively through altering our physiological appearances, but also through altering and adapting our language, paralinguistic gestures, and behaviors to fit different contexts and circumstances. Far from extinct, passing is a continually occurring part of everyday life—particularly for the marginalized in the U.S.—but one which is perhaps not always recognized or acknowledged, since, as a form of Scott’s infrapolitics, it is a type of “resistance that avoids any open declaration of its intentions” (220).

In their shift in focus from the visual to the linguistic/audible, Lee and Senna’s novels also challenge much of the scholarly criticism on passing which, despite acknowledging the falsity of race as biological or legibly written upon the body, nevertheless continues to examine passing by focusing exclusively, or at least primarily, on the visual and the appearance-based, neglecting to give adequate attention to other forms that passing might take.⁹ Julie Neraud writes of the need to “investigate how continuing misconceptions of race as a biological imperative influence our readings of novels about racial passing, despite our acknowledgement of race as performative” (814). Often, the same critics who read passing novels as challenging the notion of racial identity as biologically determined nevertheless often limit their analyses of passing/racial performativity to the realms of the bodily and the visual, thereby reinscribing the notion of race as tied to the body and the visible, while at the same time overlooking the myriad other forms that passing might take. For example, in the otherwise quite comprehensive 1996 volume *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, the role of language in passing narratives goes virtually unconsidered, with the exception of a very brief discussion of how voice helps to facilitate Clare Kendry’s passing in a chapter on “Passing in Nella Larsen’s Fiction.”¹⁰ Even those scholars who do acknowledge passing as having a more multi-dimensional nature

nevertheless often overlook the role of language in racial performance. Wald, for example, emphasizes that “the figure of ‘passing’... is [often] produced and mediated not only through race, but through a variety of social discourses, especially class and sexuality” (*Crossing the Line* 29). Rightly acknowledging the significance of class and sexuality, Wald nevertheless fails to mention the role of the linguistic in passing literature or to point out the importance of language as one of the primary “social discourses” through which race is mediated and produced. Thus, while this chapter seeks to follow the work of literary scholars such as Cutter, Elam, Ginsberg, Wald, and others who “contribut[e] to the emerging, multidisciplinary project of anti-essentialist racial critique [by focusing] on the *instability* and *fluidity* of racial representation,” I wish to do this by examining *linguistic-based*, rather than visually-based, forms of racial representation (Wald 6). A focus on language—itsself performative and contextual—as a way of understanding the performativity and contextuality of race is also a way of refusing to read race as locatable upon the body or as defined by biology.

At the same time that Lee and Senna’s works help to redefine the notions of race and racial passing by shifting emphasis from the visually/physically (in)detectable to the linguistically/audibly (in)detectable, these novels also challenge two major trends in critical scholarship on passing, which I will refer to as the “tragic” interpretation of passing¹¹ and the “postethnic”/“postracial” interpretation of passing. Both *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia* portray the act of passing not as one of ultimate betrayal or denial of one’s “real” or “natural” race/ethnicity in favor of permanent acculturation and capitulation to whiteness (the “tragic” interpretation), nor as a total “transcendence” of race whereby one is able to find self-authorized freedom to define one’s identity as one chooses (the “postethnic”/“postracial” interpretation), but rather as a series of temporary, tactical performances on the part of the passer, who passes not just for white, but into and out of a variety of identities and identity groups as different social expectations demand, require, and invite the opportunity for varied racialized performances and constructions of the self. The “tragic” interpretation of passing, in contrast,

suggests that an individual who passes enacts a betrayal of his or her “real” race and “true” people, resulting in a psychological instability which causes the individual to eventually either try (often unsuccessfully) to return to his or her “original” race, or to undergo a traumatic psychological crisis (as many understand to have been the tragic fate of Clare Kendry in Larsen’s *Passing*, whose death at the end of the novel is frequently interpreted as a suicide). Analyses of passing novels which employ the “tragic passer” interpretation are problematic in that they, like the dominant ideologies of race and racism they seek to critique, rely upon essentialist discourses of race which assume it to be an innate, stable, and “natural” facet of one’s identity, rather than something that is continually constructed and reconstructed in different contexts. Instead of viewing racial identity as a fixed definition of the self that one tries to deny and then, after a psychological crisis, ultimately attempt to return to in order to restore the “true” self, racial identity is better understood as an ongoing series of constructed and negotiated performances shaped by context. I would like to suggest that *Native Speaker’s* and *Caucasia’s* attentiveness to language—in particular to how linguistic performance changes by context—offers us a way to better trace and underscore how racial identifications also shift by context, as individuals “pass” into and out of a variety of performative roles dictated and shaped by different social circumstances.

Since I have been suggesting throughout this chapter that race is primarily performative, it is worth noting here that the term “performance” is sometimes used by scholars who subscribe to the “tragic passing” interpretation in order to suggest that the passer’s “true” self remains intact internally while he or she externally performs or wears the mask of another “fictitious” or “phony” racial identity. I do not use either the term “passing” or “performance” in this sense. Valerie Rohy, for example, writes that “the term ‘passing’ designates a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is not” (qtd. in Nerad 817). Rohy’s use of the phrase “what one is not,” however, falsely implies that there is an originary, stable self that one “is,” and that this “essential” self is the one that one hides while passing and performing another racial identity. In

quite a different way, I use the terms passing and performativity not to imply that an originary self is buried as one performs another, foreign identity, but rather to suggest that passings, like identities, are multiple, varied, and continuous, reflecting the fact that the “self” is not stable, but is something that shifts, changes, and adapts depending upon context and circumstance. Critics of *Native Speaker* who would argue that protagonist Henry Park’s “true” self is Korean, and that he falsely dons the “mask” of a white American from time to time, would do well to remember (as I will show in the next section) that there are many circumstances in the novel in which Henry feels as unable to “pass” for Korean as he does for white/American, revealing that Koreanness does not come any more “naturally” to him than does whiteness. Likewise, those who would argue that *Caucasia*’s Birdie Lee is “truly” black and only “faking it” as a white girl during her years in New Hampshire would do well to remember that she struggles just as much to learn how to perform “blackness” as she does to learn how to perform “whiteness.” As Phillip Brian Harper usefully notes in “Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility,” “readers of the racial passing narrative... tend to see [passing] in psychic-orientational terms, as signifying only the protagonist’s disavowal of an identity that proper race pride and healthy self-regard would lead him or her enthusiastically to embrace.” Yet, Harper adds, “there are other modes of racial masquerade than the one in which a light-skinned black ‘passes for’ white; and there are other functions typically served by racial passing” (381). In *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia*, the protagonists do not limit their passings to using white English as a way to pass as white; rather, they learn to use a range of Englishes, as well as other languages, in order to perform myriad racial identities for a range of different purposes and motivations. Their performances are not permanent passings or crossings of a line (from black to white in Birdie’s case, or from Korean/foreign to white/American in Henry’s case), but rather are temporary, continual, multi-directional passings—perhaps better described as “crossings”—which themselves show that there is no stability in race, racial identity, or racial identification.¹² Like language, which one alters constantly to fit context, race is continually constructed and

reconstructed in these texts depending on where and for whom one is performing, and for what purpose or motivation. The manipulation of language as a way of performing multiple racial identities serves as a reminder that race is “an object of negotiation, not a static ‘essence’” (Wald 15). While it is easy to read Birdie Lee and Henry Park’s usages of “white English”¹³ as representing both linguistic and racial conformity to white norms, and thus to read these protagonists as “tragic passers,” the linguistic and racial passings that occur in the novels are better understood as tactical and complex ways of negotiating and adapting the self to fit a range of circumstances. Indeed, these novels suggest that the “self” is multiple and fragmented, always in motion and never stable, because of—and in response to—the various, often conflicting and contradictory, demands and expectations as to how one should perform one’s race and one’s “selfhood” in different settings and contexts. In order to negotiate a variety of social settings and circumstances, one must continuously construct and reconstruct the self in response to different categorical demands and expectations—and so, performing whiteness through the use of white English, as Birdie and Henry Park frequently do, may not represent a tragic attempt to “become white,” but rather may signal that this is only one of many multi-directional and multi-functional racial performances an individual engages in in his or her everyday life.

The idea that passings are themselves responses to different social demands for racialized performances brings me, lastly, to the ways in which *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia* also challenge the “postethnic” or “postracial” interpretation of passing. While this view of passing rightfully refutes the notion of one’s racial identity as fixed or stable, it simultaneously suggests that race and racial identity in a post-civil rights and multiracial U.S. are no longer matters of social or political concern subject to policing, thus allowing individuals the subjectivity to pass for whatever they choose, whenever they choose, entirely free of the constraints of racial categorization and classification that dominated the pre-civil-rights U.S. Following arguments advanced by scholars such as David Hollinger in *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (2000), this view of passing suggests that, since one’s racial identity is

no longer suspect or made the object of scrutiny in a “postracial”/“postethnic” society, individuals can choose to be any race they wish to be (or not to be) at any moment in time. Implying that individuals in modern America are free of the burdens of racial performance and representation, the “postethnic”/“postracial” interpretation of passing literature views the adoption of multiple racial identities as completely voluntary and self-initiated, never assigned, expected, demanded, or negotiated, but always adopted at will by the individual. As I have been arguing, however, racial identities are not just a matter of personal choice, but are also contextual and circumstantial, always developed at least in part as responses to the expectations and norms of one’s environment and audience. Although individuals can, to an extent, choose the racial identities they perform and how they perform them, such individual agency is, as Wald writes, always “negotiated in the context of prevailing social imperatives and restraints” (18). Although passers can manipulate identity by performing multiple “selves,” these performances nevertheless occur within the frameworks of social and institutional demands and expectations for particular types of racialized performances and behaviors. While postethnic/postracial readings of passing literature rightly suggest that there is nothing fixed or permanent about race, the suggestion that one is free to choose to be any race at any time problematically overlooks the ways in which external forces continue to require individuals to perform and define their racial identities in various, often conflicting ways. Although race is indeed a construction, it is not constructed by the individual alone, but rather is continually constructed and reconstructed in response to a variety of different situations, circumstances, and audiences encountered in everyday life. The possibility of performing multiple racial identities through passing does not mean that one can adopt any racial identity at will or that racial classification no longer matters. Rather, passing occurs in response to social and institutional situations that expect or demand certain performances of us—linguistic, racial, and otherwise—while also allowing the individual a degree of creative subjectivity with regard to how he or she performs different identities within the contexts of various power-laden situations.

. The following chapters seek to further explore, through analyses of linguistic passings in *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia*, the relationship between what Gayle Wald in *Crossing the Line* describes as “race’s power” and “the possibility that subjects may undermine, question, or threaten this power through practices that mobilize race for various self-authorized ends.” As Wald puts it, race is “both authoritative and unstable, dominant and yet *usable*” (5); there exist many means of “using race to challenge and complicate the social mechanism of racial definition” and to “respon[d] to the exigencies of racism, segregation, exploitation or vulnerability” (5, 52). In *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia*, linguistic passings serve not only as the primary means through which race’s power is undermined and questioned, but also as a reminder of the fluidity and flexibility of racial definitions. By analyzing passing through the lens of the linguistic, my discussion of these novels demonstrates that it is not just language, but also race and identity, that are unstable and contextual, deployed in particular ways in response to specific circumstances and contexts. At the same time, by emphasizing through a focus on the linguistic that passing and racial performance involve much more than just the visual and the biological, my discussion of these texts seeks to broaden our conceptualizations not only of what passing is, but also of who can pass, and how and why one might do so.

Chapter 3

“A Different English”: Bearing and Subverting the Linguistic Standard in *Native Speaker*

“The possibilities [of what one might pass for]... are much more numerous than we might expect” – Phillip Brian Harper, “Passing for What?” (381)

“Perhaps we who appropriate English are more aware of the language’s powers than are native-speakers” – Bharati Mukherjee, Interview with Geoff Hancock (35)

“This is a city of words... the constant cry is that you belong here, or you make yourself belong” – Henry Park, *Native Speaker* (344)

Chang-rae Lee was twenty-eight years old when he published *Native Speaker*, his first novel, in 1995. The novel was a first not only for Lee, but also for Riverhead Books, a new publishing conglomerate launched with the intentions of “diversifying” the literary market. When Riverhead chose *Native Speaker* to be its first published work, the novel also became one of the first works of Korean American literature to be published by a major U.S. trade press. Rising quickly to success within the literary marketplace, *Native Speaker* won the Hemingway Foundation/Pen Award, the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, the Oregon Book Award, the QPB’s New Voices Award, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; simultaneously, Lee was christened one of the best American writers under the age of forty by both *The New Yorker* and *Granta*.¹ The novel, which has been compared to both Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,² enjoyed further fame when it was selected as one of two finalists for New York City’s 2002 One Book, One City campaign, which was sponsored by organizations including the *New York Times* and the New York Public Library.³ Yet, despite the novel’s widespread commercial success and the plethora of critical and scholarly attention that has followed (see my works cited for a non-exhaustive list of some of the many articles written on *Native Speaker*), what is perhaps one of the most interesting and noteworthy features of *Native Speaker*—the fact that it can be classified

not just as Korean American literature or Asian American literature, but also as *passing* literature—still remains largely unexplored almost twenty years after the novel’s release.

I would like to use *Native Speaker* as a way of challenging the idea that the passing genre is comprised strictly of works of African American literature that follow protagonists’ transitions from “black” to “white.” Instead, Lee’s novel convincingly demonstrates that passing is used as an everyday strategy by *many* marginalized subjects who are constrained by their status as racially or ethnically “other.” Certainly, one might argue that the idea of passing is not plausible for Asian American subjects like Henry Park, the protagonist of *Native Speaker*, since, unlike light-skinned African Americans who might actually appear white, Asian Americans are always marked as physiognomically “foreign” or “nonnative.” As Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts*, “the Asian [in America] is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before” (5-6?). Echoing this argument, Corley argues that *Native Speaker* portrays the U.S. as a “domestic visual economy” in which only white citizens can be “visually constructed as ‘native,’” while Asian Americans are subject to an “*a priori* construction... as inescapably foreign” (63). In contrast to the idea of the visual economy as “inescapable” for Asian American subjects, however, I want to argue that *Native Speaker* portrays *language* as a means for subjects physically marked as “other” to nevertheless circumvent or subvert the authority of the visual economy in the U.S., proving, as Eric Liu writes in his memoir *The Accidental Asian*, that “you don’t have to have white skin anymore to become white” (162). Torn between the constructions of Korean and American, white and Asian, nonnative and native, throughout much of his childhood, Henry Park gradually learns that linguistic passings allow him to negotiate the terrain between these identities and to perform a range of selves, both “Korean” and “American.” By examining the ways in which Henry and other Korean Americans in the novel sometimes—but not always—use white English as a way of performing whiteness or trying to convince others that they are “native”/American, we can understand passing as not limited only to those light-skinned blacks

who might physically pass as white (a somewhat antiquated notion of passing which relies upon the binaristic notion of a color line), but rather as a form of infrapolitics used by many racially minoritized subjects in the U.S., who perform whiteness in various forms not as acts of assimilation or ideological subordination, but as tactics for circumventing racial, ethnic, social, and economic disenfranchisement and stratification in ordinary circumstances. Though the Korean American characters in Lee's novel cannot alter their appearances to literally *look* white, it is nevertheless possible for them to successfully pass as white/American in certain circumstances by performing whiteness in other ways, particularly linguistically. As Wald notes, the performance of passing may sometimes "contradict or otherwise exceed the socially produced 'text' of the body" (186).⁴ Understood in this way, it is not only plausible, but indeed quite logical, to suggest that passing might be a viable strategy not just for African Americans, but for any racially or ethnically marginalized subject who finds him or herself wishing to temporarily access the privileges associated with whiteness in the U.S.

Because so much of the scholarship on passing continues to portray the act as the crossing of a black/white line, African American works of literature have been characterized as comprising virtually the entirety of the traditional passing genre, while the possibility of reading passing in Asian American, Native American, Latino/a American, and other works of ethnic U.S. literature has remained largely unexplored. Although my essay will show the important similarities in how both *Native Speaker's* Henry Park and *Caucasia's* Birdie Lee use language as a way to pass, only the latter text has been characterized as a work of "passing" fiction in commercial and academic contexts. The persistent treatment of passing literature as distinctly African American literature has arguably limited opportunities to look comparatively at how passing is portrayed in works by authors of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. The closest we have come to doing this sort of comparative work occurs in studies that have compared passing in African American literature to the trope of assimilation in other works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature. Hee-Jung Joo, for example, in an essay comparing George Schuyler's passing

text *Black No More* to Eric Liu's memoir *The Accidental Asian*, has argued that "in many ways, Asian American assimilation embodies a narrative of Asians passing for Americans" (176). In a similar way, Crystal Parikh suggests that the success of Henry Park's passing for white in *Native Speaker* depends upon his ability to assimilate, particularly by using English: as she writes, "while his face registers him as the other of the national body that is the minority immigrant, his voice links him to a class that has 'made it,' has successfully assimilated to the dominant language and culture" (276).⁵ Joo and Parikh's treatments of assimilation as a parallel to or form of passing are useful in that they allow us to consider how both African Americans and Asian Americans have been culturally and legally denied the opportunities afforded by whiteness in the U.S., and thus forced to find ways to negotiate and circumvent cultural and legal constraints in everyday life. Nevertheless, I am hesitant to consider passing and assimilation as similar forms of political activity, or to describe assimilation as "the contemporary version of racial passing," as Joo does, because of the ways in which the term "assimilation" suggests not a *performance* of whiteness, but a permanent adopting of whiteness, a crossing-over into (white) Americanness which might also be described as a form of false consciousness (Joo 170).⁶ In contrast, I have been arguing that passing is a more temporary and tactical form of political activity, a short-term, provisional performance of whiteness often used as a way to negotiate circumstances that may be challenging, unfavorable, or disadvantageous. I find it problematic, therefore, to equate passing with assimilation, and, in the case of *Native Speaker*, to suggest that the passings undertaken by Henry Park can be considered evidence of his assimilation to white America. Quite the contrary, Henry's use of English as a way of *appearing* "successfully assimilated to the dominant language and culture," as Parikh puts it, is only a performance, one of many types of language he uses to perform a variety of identities as his circumstances change. *Native Speaker*, then, is best understood not as a narrative of social or racial assimilation, but rather as a part of the passing genre of American literature. Through language, Korean American Henry Park is able not only to successfully pass for white in

America, but also to perform multiple ethnic identities in different contexts and circumstances, challenging the notion of a unified and stable ethnic identity that is legibly written upon the body. Ultimately, Lee's novel suggests that passings are not just one-directional crossings of a black/white line, but rather a continual criss-crossing of the lines between "nonnative" and "native," "alien" and "American," and other boundaries and borders that are constructed between the powerful and the marginalized in everyday life in the U.S.

The importance of language as a means of defining and negotiating racial identity is emphasized continually throughout *Native Speaker*. In one of the earliest scenes in the novel, protagonist Henry Park attends a party where he meets his future wife, Lelia, a speech pathologist and self-described "average white girl" who, in their first moments of conversation, finds herself "looking at [Henry] closely... wondering what a last name like Park meant ethnically" (10). Lelia is confused about how to "classify" Henry's ethnicity because he speaks a perfect "standard" English without any trace of an accent (or what Lelia, given her profession, might describe as a "speech impediment"). Implying that Henry's ability to sound like a "native" speaker is somehow surprising given his appearance as Asian (recall Lowe's discussion of how Asian Americans—even those who are born in the U.S.—are often marked as foreigners by the dominant culture), Lelia tells Henry in this first encounter, "you speak perfectly, of course... if we were talking on the phone, I wouldn't think twice" (Lee 12). Lelia's implication that one would unquestionably identify Henry as a "native"/white American if one heard him speak on the phone demonstrates the ways in which language can, on its own, mark one as white. Yet, Lelia also suggests in this statement that because she is speaking to Henry in person, she is less convinced of his linguistic/racial performance than she might've been had they been speaking over the phone. As a self-described "standard-bearer" of English, Lelia struggles to accept that the standard English of America could come "naturally" to a man like Henry Park, whose appearance marks him as of Asian descent—she assumes that standard American English is usually spoken only by people like herself, an "average white girl" (12, 10). Implying that she

sees through his performance, that his attempt at a linguistic “pass” is unsuccessful with her, Lelia tells Henry, “Your face is part of the equation, but not in the way you’re thinking. You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you’re doing. If I had to guess, you’re not a native speaker” (12). Significantly, Lelia reveals here that her definition of a native speaker is somebody who doesn’t have to concentrate on performing the language, but who can speak it naturally. Although Henry’s performance of whiteness/Americanness is convincing—herself a speech “expert,” Lelia admits that she wouldn’t be able to detect anything “foreign” about Henry if she were talking to him on the phone—Lelia suggests that the very fact that he needs to perform the language at all exposes that he cannot, in fact, be a “native speaker.” A standard-bearer, an authority of the dominant culture who is able to lay claim to both whiteness and a mastery of English, Lelia deems Henry’s performative use of the standard as “false,” suggesting that those who *truly* speak the standard can do so effortlessly, without the concentration and attention that using English seems to require of Henry.

Implicit in Lelia’s words is her belief that, as an upper-middle-class, educated, white American woman, she *naturally* speaks a standard English which Henry, as a Korean American man, can only attempt to parrot. But, when Lelia tells Henry that he is “very careful” with his use of the language, Henry quickly responds with “So are you” (12). His retaliation offers one of the first places in the text where readers are reminded that *all* uses of language are performative and constructed, and that “standard” English is no more natural a form of speech for Lelia (or for white Americans) than it is for Henry (or non-white Americans). Indeed, as the “standard-bearer,” Lelia must be just as conscious and cognizant of the “rules” of the language, just as attuned to her performance and execution of the standard, as she claims Henry is. In fact, although Lelia is first to openly accuse Henry of trying too hard to sound like a native speaker, Henry observes Lelia from across the room of the party before the two even speak, and notices the effort that she, too, puts into bearing the standard. He tells us that

before I took measure of her face and her manner, the shape of her body... I noticed how closely I was listening to her. What I found was this: that she could really speak... but I soon realized that she was simply executing the language. She went word by word. Every letter had a border. I watched her wide full mouth sweep through her sentences like a figure touring a dark house. (10-11)

Although at first, Henry is struck by what seems to be her effortless mastery of the language—he thinks she can “really speak”—the labor that goes into constructing her speech quickly becomes apparent to him as she listens to her go “word by word.” Despite her fluency, there is no fluidity in her language; instead, a “border” separates each letter from the next as Lelia carefully constructs her words and sentences. The image of her mouth as a “figure touring a dark house” suggests an unfamiliarity with the language she has supposedly mastered, reminding us that the use of a linguistic “standard” is learned—not innate—even for “native”/white Americans like Lelia. As a “standard-bearer” and cultural-linguistic representative of the dominant culture, Lelia assumes a fixed relationship between race, nativity, and language which is proven to be false by the very constructedness of her own speech. Believing that she speaks a standard English which comes naturally to her because she is white and American, Lelia likewise assumes that Henry’s use of standard English must be performative because he is Asian. Her perspective reflects a failure to understand not only that her own use of language is also performative, but that all languages, like racial identities, are shifting and contextual, rather than fixed and permanent. One speaks a “standard” form of English not because of one’s race or nativity, but because of one’s context. Although Lelia wants to treat languages as stable and defined by fixed borders—one either is a native speaker or one is not, she seems to believe—she overlooks the ways in which language is much more fluid and adaptive than this, used in a variety of ways by individuals as they negotiate a range of contexts. As she sits with Henry the night they meet and discusses her professional work of upholding the standard, Henry tells us that around them “I heard [people] speaking Spanish, and I heard English, and then something else that Lelia said

was called *mixup*. Its music was sonorous, rambling, some of the turns unexpected and lovely. Everywhere you heard versions” (12). Henry’s observations remind us that, in the lived spaces of ordinary experience, individuals do not restrict themselves to the use of one form of language, but rather use a variety of different languages and dialects in various situations and for various purposes. Viewing Henry’s use of standard English as a “false” performance, Lelia underestimates the ways in which individuals constantly change and adapt how they use language and what languages they use, speaking many different standards and nonstandards, as well as creating their own linguistic “mixups,” as ways of negotiating the contexts and constraints of everyday life.

Despite the fact that Henry appreciatively describes the various languages being used around him and Lelia in this scene as “music,” “sonorous” and “lovely,” he, too, struggles throughout much of the novel to understand that language, like racial identity, is multiple, fluid, and adaptive, rather than natural and fixed (12). The son of Korean immigrants to the U.S. and a speaker of both Korean and English, Henry finds himself constantly conflicted as to whether he is truly “Korean” or “American,” and fixates from boyhood on mastering English as a way of convincing both himself and other Americans that he is truly a “native” of the U.S. Yet, even as an adult, Henry remains fearful that his fluency in the language might still not be enough to prevent other Americans from viewing him as non-native. On the night that he meets Lelia, he confesses to her that he is “always thinking about still having an accent,” a concern that continues to plague him throughout much of the novel (12). Henry’s fears that others will detect an accent in his speech—that he will be “exposed” as Korean/nonnative despite his ability to speak like an American—reflect his anxiety that, as a person of Korean descent, his performances of English/Americanness must be phony, forced, and contrived, masking an “authentic” Korean self that he will never be fully able to hide or rid himself of. From a young age, and no doubt in large part because of his experiences as a racial minority in the predominantly white, English-only American school system (a point I will return to later),

Henry struggles to understand that identities are not fixed and unitary, but rather multiple and contextual. Literally unable to look beyond his own physical appearance as Asian, as well as the way in which this appearance can lead the dominant culture to mark him and others like him as foreign despite their status as citizens, Henry struggles to imagine that he can be—indeed, is—American *as well as* Korean. Feeling that the physical evidence of his body marks him as definitively Asian, Henry fails to understand that neither Korean nor American is his “true” identity; rather, each is an identity that he constructs and performs contextually and provisionally, as opportunities afford or as situations require. Henry also fails to understand, at least for much of the novel and of the earlier years of his life, that *all* identities are constructed in this way, and that the performance of whiteness/Americanness comes no more naturally to “average white” American “standard-bearers” like Lelia than it does to Korean Americans like himself.

Because Henry believes he can only have one ethnic identity, rather than realizing that he can (and already does) perform different identities to negotiate different circumstances, he spends much of his life obsessed with trying to sound like a “native speaker,” which he becomes convinced is the best and perhaps only way to prove that he is truly American. Yet, when he listens to himself speak a perfect English, Henry often fears that it sounds fake, like an impersonation, and that others will be able to detect that his “true” identity is Korean—in short, he assumes that his linguistic performances of English/Americanness must be “inauthentic,” not as real or convincing as the use of English by a white person would be. Recalling his childhood, Henry tells us that “when I was young I’d look in the mirror and address it, as if daring the boy there; I would say something dead and normal like ‘Pleased to make your acquaintance,’ and I could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking” (179-80). Feeling like an imposter when he uses English while confronted with the visual image of himself (and his race) in the mirror, Henry assumes that the language cannot sound natural coming from the mouth of someone who is physically marked as “foreign.” His fears are validated when he begins formal

schooling and is placed in Remedial Speech classes for those with language “abnormalities,” his status as a “nonnative” speaker of English earning him a place among “the misfits... the school retards, the mentals, the losers” (235). Yet, despite the ways in which these experiences mark Henry as “other,” both among his classmates and his fellow Americans, Henry himself fails to fully realize that these are also his first lessons in how to adapt and change one’s language in order to perform multiple identities. Describing his experiences in public schooling, Henry recalls Alice Eckles, a girl with “oniony”-colored skin whose ability to speak a “perfect” English gave her a status of “supremacy” over Henry and the other Remedial Speech students; she “sneer[ed]” at them as they left the classroom each afternoon for their “special daily period upstairs.” Although a young Henry feels Alice’s treatment of him is just another indication that he can never be viewed as a native speaker, he nevertheless tries to “invoke how... [she] would speak” when practicing his own “words and sounds,” indicating the possibility of adapting his speech in order to perform the English standard the same way she does (234). Henry’s continued efforts to practice using language as a way of performing different identities—whether he is “rewhisper[ing]” the words of Alice Eckles to himself during school recess, or standing in front of the mirror trying out different phrases until he “could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking”—suggest that his fears of being permanently marked as “foreign” are unfounded (234, 179-80). Rather, from a young age, language offers Henry a way to construct and perform different versions of himself, even as he continues to view his ethnic identity as fixed/stable across contexts and to fear himself a perpetual “outsider” in the U.S.

Henry’s fears are, unfortunately, only exacerbated by his relationship with Lelia, who, like Alice Eckles and the school authorities that place Henry in Remedial Speech classes, continually attempts to “otherize” Henry and to mark him as foreign/nonnative. A speech therapist and self-proclaimed English language “standard-bearer,” Lelia’s job is to help children with “all kinds of articulation problems”—physiological defects, hearing defects, learning disabilities, and, of greatest interest to Henry, the “problem” of being a “nonnative speaker”—to

learn to speak English “correctly” (2). The central role that Lelia and her occupation play in both the narrative and in Henry’s life serve to stress the importance that (white) American society places on its citizens’ ability to properly speak the “standard.” As Betsy Huang notes, the fact that Lelia makes a living by correcting the “imperfections” in others’ speech, which includes their accents and dialects, suggests the extent to which the dominant culture devalues linguistic diversity (Huang 257). In contrast to the myth of the U.S. as a multicultural society that is linguistically diverse, Lelia’s professional and cultural role remind us that all linguistic “abnormalities”—whether a stutter, a hearing impairment, or a “non-standard” accent—are viewed by the dominant culture as problems to be eliminated.⁷ Linguistic diversity becomes linguistic deviation, and those who speak differently, like Lelia’s clients and Henry, become marked as linguistic and cultural deviants. Indeed, Lelia views her position as a linguistic “expert” as granting her the authority to scrutinize and question Henry’s use of English as somehow less natural or authentic than her own. The novel opens with readers learning that Lelia has just left Henry after years of a strained marriage; in her absence, he finds a note she’s left behind, a list of Henry’s flaws and weaknesses. Among other things, Lelia’s list accuses Henry of being an “illegal alien, emotional alien... Yellow peril: neo-American... stranger, follower, traitor, spy” (5). Shaken by the list of accusations, Henry thinks he has seen it all when he finds one additional scrap of paper, the icing on the cake of his wife’s hurtful words, which reads simply “false speaker of language” (6). The list’s contents, particularly the final item, reveal to us the ways in which Lelia sees Henry as “essentially” and unquestionably Asian, faking both his Americanness and his use of English: he is not only “Illegal alien,” “yellow peril,” “stranger,” and “spy,” but also, most disturbingly to Henry himself, a “false speaker.” Failing to understand the shifting nature of identity, as well as how one’s linguistic performance changes across contexts, Lelia not only marks Henry as an outsider in America (a “spy” and a “traitor”), but also insists upon the idea that language usage can be designated “true” or “false,” right or wrong, correct or incorrect. Her itemized list of what one critic has called “stereotypical clichés

about [Henry's] identity" symbolizes her attempt, as a standard-bearer of the dominant culture, to fix and define Henry's identity, to offer both him and herself a comprehensive picture of who he "really" "is" (Ludwig 224). In so doing, however, Lelia overlooks the ways in which his identity and language are, like her own, performative and contextual—not comprehensive or unchanging, but consisting of what Wall calls a "layering" of identities that "can be adopted on an as needed basis" (5).

Just as Lelia and Henry both mark Henry as foreign and, by extension, his use of English as unnatural or inauthentic, so, too, do both seek to naturalize Lelia's role as a speech therapist and "standard bearer," assuming that her whiteness marks her as both a "true" "native" of America and as someone whose use of the English standard is both natural and authentic. However, moments abound throughout the novel which demonstrate the extent to which Lelia's use of English is learned and performed, a constructed and concerted effort rather than a natural part of her identity as a white American. Before meeting with her speech patients, for example, Lelia "practice[s] in a hand mirror being the Tongue Lady, to make sure she's doing it right for the kids" (347). In the moments before she encounters the linguistic and cultural "others" she is to "sav[e] from the wild" (232), Lelia fears herself to be like them, wondering about the authenticity and mastery of her own linguistic performance, questioning her ability to truly "perfect" the language and to make this seem to come "naturally" to her as "standard bearer." One critic goes as far as to argue that there is "significant evidence throughout the novel that the most careful performer of American identity... is Lelia herself" (Corley 77). In these moments, readers are reminded that there is no natural use of language, no authentic speakers of English, and that all languages are learned and performed and, like identities, constructed and socialized. The fact that even the standard bearer performs the standard so carefully suggests the possibility that Henry, too, can pass as a standard English speaker by constructing his linguistic performances accordingly.

Indeed, Lelia's insistence on Henry's use of language as "false" or inauthentic suggests that she overlooks the rather obvious fact that her own role as speech therapist is not only to model the norms and standards of the English language for others, but also to teach others to successfully perform these norms themselves. As a linguistic and cultural "gatekeeper,"⁸ Lelia not only upholds the boundaries that define "standard" English from "nonstandard" forms of speech, but also simultaneously helps those classified as "nonstandard" speakers to *cross* these boundaries, learning to speak standard English as a gateway into privileged social and cultural spaces. Narrative descriptions of Lelia spending "all day... [helping] children manipulate their tongues and their lips and their exhaling breath, guiding them through the difficult language" serve to dramatize the manipulability and constructedness of language itself. Even as Lelia insists that Henry's use of English is "false," implying that he can never change his "true" identity as a "nonnative" speaker, her profession as a speech therapist underscores the possibility of altering one's language in order to access certain opportunities for one's self (including, in the case of her youngest charges, avoiding remedial speech classes like the kind that so humiliated Henry as a child), and construct different version of one's self. Unlike the unalterability of one's bodily and physical appearance (which Lelia and Henry both misunderstand as tied to one's language usage), how one uses language is changeable and adaptable, as Lelia's line of work clearly demonstrates. Yet, while the narrative itself emphasizes the performativity and manipulability of language (and identity) through scenes such as these, Henry and Lelia both remain committed throughout much of the text to the idea of Lelia as the "correct" speaker of language and of Henry, by contrast, as the foreigner, the nonnative speaker, the "false speaker of [the English] language" (6).

Henry's inability to conceive of language and identities as multiple and contextual, and his continued tendency to see himself as Korean-posing-as-American, rather than Korean/American/Korean American, also carries over to how he understands others' racial performances and identities, particularly those of Korean American politician John Kwang.⁹

Henry becomes personally acquainted with Kwang when the latter, as an “ethnic pol,” becomes the former’s newest assignment in his profession as a corporate spy in an “ethnic firm.”¹⁰ Kwang, a Korean-born City Councilman for the district of Flushing, Queens rumored to have hopes of running for New York City’s mayoral seat, is of interest to Henry’s firm because of his rapidly rising political power as well as his close-knit relationship to the Korean immigrant community in Queens, New York. Professional interests aside, however, Henry becomes deeply interested in Kwang on a personal level, albeit for somewhat different reasons. In addition to being a rising political star in New York, Kwang holds a “JD-MBA from Fordham” and is a “self-made millionaire,” all of which Henry attributes to his ability to speak a “beautiful... formal English” (23). It is this mastery of the English language, the ability of a Korean-born man to successfully “pass” as both an American and a native speaker, that captivates Henry, leading him to spend increasing amounts of time with Kwang beyond what is necessary for his work assignment. Yet, the more time Henry spends with Kwang, the more he begins to question the “authenticity” of Kwang’s performance, wondering if underneath a “mask” of Americanness and a mastery of English, Kwang is hiding his “true” Korean self, as much an impersonator of U.S. nativeness as Henry fears himself to be. When Henry gets the opportunity to dine with Kwang in an intimate, informal setting, he devotes much of the evening to scrutinizing Kwang’s speech (in a manner not unlike how Lelia scrutinizes his own speech throughout much of the narrative, including on the night they meet). As Henry listens to Kwang speak in a fluent, unhalting English, it becomes clear to readers that he believes Kwang’s speech to be—much like his own usage of English—somehow “false,” incongruous with his Koreanness. Henry thinks to himself as the two men eat that although they appear “like regular American men, faking, dipping, juking,” he cannot avoid “listening to us. For despite how well [Kwang] spoke, how perfectly he moved through the sounds of his words, I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race” (179). Henry’s belief that Kwang has—and hides—an “original” race indicates that he still understands identities as fixed and stable, rather than

contextual and changing over time and across circumstances. He is unable to fully acknowledge that there is no “original” identity, no “authentic” Koreanness, that defines Kwang, but only a series of racial and linguistic performances which both allow and require him to continually redefine himself. Comparing Kwang’s linguistic performance to what he fears are his own suspicious attempts at impersonating English and Americanness, Henry tells us that despite Kwang’s “beautiful” English, “there was something I still couldn’t abide in his speech. I couldn’t help but think there was a mysterious dubbing going on, the very idea I wouldn’t give quarter to when I would speak to strangers, the checkout girl, the mechanic, the professor, their faces dully awaiting my real speech, my truer talk and voice” (179). Unable to see the use of English as anything but inauthentic and contrived for Koreans like himself and Kwang, Henry believes that Kwang must hide a “truer talk and voice”—indeed, a truer self—underneath his performances of Americanness and English. Yet, Henry fails to see the way in which both his and Kwang’s Korean identities are shown throughout the narrative to be just as constructed and performative as their American ones. Henry’s discomfort with himself, his sense of himself as the “traitor” and “false speaker” Lelia decries him to be, stem in large part from this inability to realize that no stable self can exist given the shifting and often contradictory demands for, and possibilities to perform, a variety of selves in different contexts, particularly through the use of language.

What Kwang’s character so convincingly demonstrates, however, first to readers and, also, gradually, to Henry himself, is that there is no authentic ethnic identity one always has hiding under one’s linguistic performances, and because one is Korean does not mean one cannot also be—or, in different contexts, alternatively be—American. While Henry fears that language, if not used carefully or “correctly,” will expose him as inauthentically American and definitively foreign, it is in fact the use of different languages and dialects which is precisely what allows Kwang to perform and negotiate different identities, rather than to be defined or fixed as having one identity or another. Kwang’s public reputation makes a particularly persuasive case for the idea that one can pass as white, despite one’s appearance, if one is able to

convincingly perform the linguistic standard of (white) America. Early in the narrative, before Henry becomes personally acquainted with Kwang, he suggests this exact idea when he tells us that “John Kwang was Korean; slightly younger than my father would have been, though he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English. He had a JD-MBA from Fordham. He was a self-made millionaire” (23). Henry suggests that it is because of the formal English Kwang speaks that he has been successful in America, his language functioning as a form of cultural capital which allows him access to the privileges of white society, despite being Korean. Kwang’s appearance—the way in which his body physically “marks” him as Korean—become less significant as his ability to speak the standard of America helps him to pass as white in the eyes (and ears) of others. Henry notes that Kwang “looked impressive on television. Handsome, irreproachable. Silver around the edges. A little unbeatable” (23). While “the pundits sp[eak] of his integrity, his intelligence,” the general public admires “Kwang’s youthful grace, his grinning eyes, the tiny new wrinkles” (23, 84). What is notable in all of these descriptions is the fact that Kwang’s ethnicity—his “Koreanness”—is unmentioned, suggesting that his race has become, like whiteness itself, invisible.¹¹ Kwang is not marked as foreign by either the public or the pundits, but rather remains ethnically *unmarked* in these descriptions, suggesting that he successfully passes as white/American—as native, not “other”—in the eyes of his fellow Americans. Interestingly, in the few cases in the novel where others *do* focus on Kwang’s appearance or speak of him in ways which mark him as “ethnic,” his ethnicity is fetishized or exoticized rather than demonized. One of Kwang’s campaign workers, for example, tells Henry that Kwang is “sexy,” adding that it is “definitely... his skin,” with its “beautiful glow” and “nice color” (94). Her comments suggest the ways in which Kwang’s non-white appearance becomes “acceptable,” perhaps even desirable, to much of the general public given his ability to perform whiteness in other ways. Mostly, though, when others speak of Kwang, they focus on his language, leaving his ethnicity unmentioned altogether—even the mayor of New York, Kwang’s potential competition in the next election, describes Kwang as a “fervent *voice* in the wide

chorus that is New York” (36 emphasis added). The seeming invisibility of his Koreanness when matched with his ability to speak white English suggests that Kwang’s language is not determined by his ethnicity (as Henry seems to believe language is), but, quite the contrary, that Kwang’s ethnicity—or, at least others’ perceptions of it—is determined by his use of language.

It is tempting to read Kwang’s mastery of English and ability to pass as white as indicative of his assimilation and capitulation to white American norms, both linguistic and racial. In this sense, one might consider Kwang’s passing “tragic,” evidence of his willingness, even determination, to rid himself of his “ethnic” identity in order to be successful as a politician in (white) America. Yet, as we see more and more of Kwang throughout the narrative, it becomes apparent that the “beautiful, formal English” Henry describes him as using on television is far from the only language or dialect he speaks; likewise, passing as white/American is a temporary, circumstantial performance for Kwang, one of several ethnic identities he performs in different contexts. Vershawn Ashanti Young uses the phrase “public English” to suggest the ways in which minoritized subjects consciously alter their speech, word choice, and intonation in the presence of a dominant culture that may be closely listening to and scrutinizing their language as a way of determining their status or degree of belonging within that dominant culture (Young 109). This is a *temporary* performance, however—a deliberate modification of one’s speech to fit the context, which, in turn, suggests that in other contexts, one may speak differently. And indeed, we see that Kwang uses a variety of dialects and languages other than “public English” depending on where he is and who is watching and listening to him. When “the public” consists of mainstream media viewers, Kwang uses what Young calls “public English” in order to meet the linguistic, racial, and cultural expectations of a predominately white American television audience. However, in other “publics”—such as, for example, the largely non-white immigrant public that makes up Kwang’s constituency in Flushing, Queens—Kwang uses what the text refers to as “a different English,” and sometimes does not use English at all (304). These scenes reveal to us that using formal English to pass as white is not the *only* type of

linguistic passing Kwang does throughout the text; in fact, to be truly successful as a politician in as diverse a city as New York, Kwang cannot permanently pass as white/American, but rather must perform a variety of different racial/ethnic identities depending on who he interacts with. Much of Kwang's campaign paraphernalia, for example, seems to cater to the white mainstream public by emphasizing his mastery over the English language: "flyer, pamphlets... buttons, ballpoint pens, keychains, lapel pens.... Every last piece of it [is] stamped with his perfectly angled script, simply signed, John" (and notably, not John *Kwang*) (83). But while Kwang uses standard English to gain the trust of certain (white) voters, he also uses Korean and other languages to gain the trust of voters who are less familiar with or committed to that standard. Critics such as Huang have argued that "everything Kwang says is decidedly in the American grain," but using standard English to perform whiteness is actually only one of the ways in which Kwang passes, a tactic he deploys only in certain contexts (Huang 254). At other times, Kwang ignores this standard altogether, even subtly refusing its existence, as he "greet[s] his citizens in Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, Thai, Portuguese" (268). Indeed, by the novel's close, Henry attributes Kwang's success not (only) to his ability to speak a "beautiful, formal English," but rather to his ability to speak many languages, to perform many linguistic identities. As Henry admiringly observes, Kwang "would stride the... stages with his voice strong and clear, unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinamen and like every boat person in between... [to use] a different English" (304). While at times, Kwang does perform whiteness/Americanness remarkably well—as Ludwig notes, "certain aspects of Kwang turn him into a Kennedy figure"—he does not privilege this as the only identity worth performing (Ludwig 227). At other times, Kwang also performs Koreanness, as in when he invites several Korean friends to "come have drink and good food," trading in his use of "public" or proper English to speak with what Henry calls a "foreigner's simplicity" (178). These different types of performances—of Americanness, of Koreanness, of standard English and of a "different English"—are not meant to portray Kwang as a wholly inauthentic character, a hollow politician

with no true identity as either American or Korean, but rather suggest the ways in which Kwang is required, encouraged, or compelled to perform a range of identities and to use a variety of languages as circumstances, contexts, and audiences allow or demand.

Certainly, one might suggest that Kwang's linguistic/ethnic passings are just part and parcel of his role as a politician, that he puts on staged or "canned" performances because the political sphere demands this of public figures in a way our own everyday lives do not. I would argue instead that Lee includes the element of the ultra-scripted and staged life of the politician in his text as a way of dramatizing the extent to which we all script and stage performances of ourselves in a variety of ordinary contexts. Scenes such as the ones in which Henry tags along with Kwang's campaign crew as part of his undercover spy work are particularly effective in illustrating how Kwang's performances are prepared in advance through careful efforts. This calls to mind my earlier discussion of "studious spectatorship," which suggests that we all carefully observe and study our surroundings in order to know how to play the right "part" in different places. In one scene, Kwang and his campaign crew prepare for his upcoming public appearance in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn by visiting the neighborhood in advance and literally staging and scripting what will happen on the day of the event. Henry, tagging along, describes them as "a small troupe of performance artists staging an imaginary event": they "scout out the area... practicing a walk-through of the exact paces Kwang would take the next day," while the Scheduling Manager approximates the "twenty seconds that Kwang would stand there and converse... [trying] to measure all his talking and stops in that same interval." The Scheduling Manager wants to ensure that Kwang speaks only "in lines that were difficult to sound-bite, discrete units of ideas, notions. You have to control the raw material, she said" (87). Rather than reading this only as a portrayal of the staged life of a politician, I would instead suggest that this scene is intended to dramatize how we all attempt to "control the raw material" of our language to fit different contexts, scripting our words for different occasions just as Kwang does. The tactic of pre-planning how one will use language (and space) during an

important event or encounter is certainly not used by politicians alone. Ellen Cushman, for example, discusses the ways in which African Americans in an inner city community prepared in advance for meetings with white welfare agents, landlords, and other figures of “authority” by repeatedly practicing both what they would say and how they would say it, the goal being to successfully use “white English” (See *Struggle*, especially chapters 4, 7, and 8). Lee’s novel hints at this same idea, suggesting that linguistic and racial passings are tactics used by the marginalized as well as the elite, that we all perform different versions of ourselves in different contexts.

This desire to dramatize the performativity of everyday life seems also to inspire Lee’s decision to give Henry the profession of corporate spy, a position which requires him to construct a new “legend,” an “extraordinarily extensive” autobiography, for each new job that he takes on (33). Henry describes his work as a “string of serial identity,” but while Lelia has difficulty accepting his job, believing that it effects Henry’s (and her own) ability to know who he “really” is, the reader is easily able to identify with Henry, to follow him through his journey as he plays multiple roles, perhaps because the narrative portrays Henry’s varied performances as ordinary rather than extraordinary. Although Lelia thinks that Henry’s job is solely responsible for his “serial identity,” casting Henry as a spy actually serves to dramatize the ways in which he and many others perform multiple identities in everyday life.¹² Readers quickly realize that this is not a spy story, but rather the story of an ordinary man: Henry’s “serial identity,” the ways in which he is required or enabled to play a variety of different and sometimes conflicting roles, are meant to suggest the extent to which performativity is a part of everyday life for many, if not all, individuals, not an experience restricted solely to spies or politicians.

This idea is perhaps best demonstrated through the character of Henry’s Korean-born father who, although neither spy nor politician, but rather an owner of small grocery stores, also manipulates language in order to perform a variety of identities in everyday life, just as Kwang and Henry do. Indeed, Henry himself fails to fully acknowledge through much of the narrative

that, before he even grows up to become a spy, his father plays a critical role in teaching Henry about the manipulability of languages and the multiplicity of identities, even requiring Henry to perform multiple identities himself. Like Kwang, Henry's father is tactical about speaking English, aware of those circumstances when it is advantageous for him to do so. As a businessman, Henry notes that his father makes use of English "when he wanted to hide or not outright lie," particularly when dealing with white customers (63). Interestingly, however, certain business situations make it more advantageous for Henry's father to play the role of a non-English speaking foreigner, talking only in Korean even in the presence of white customers. Henry recalls, for example, working in his father's grocery as a young boy and seeing a white woman take a bite out of his father's produce and then put it back. Heading over to confront the woman, Henry remembers that "my father intercepted me and said smiling in Korean, as if he were complimenting me, 'She's a steady customer'" (54). His use of Korean is tactical, purposeful, performative—it ensures both that Henry never gets a chance to confront his father's "steady customer," and, more importantly, that his customer is unable to understand the exchange that occurs between father and son, perceiving it as something pleasant rather than realizing that Mr. Park is trying to spare her of embarrassment. Advantageous as using English may be for Henry's father in some circumstances, he is also aware that performing "foreignness" and pretending to be *unable* to speak English have their benefits as well.

Performance, then, has as prominent a place in Henry's father's shops as it does at Henry's spy firm or Kwang's campaign headquarters. Indeed, a young Henry gets his first lessons in linguistic performance and its use as a form of cultural capital through the performances his father demands that he puts on for white customers. As he explains to readers, "my father, thinking that it might be good for business, urged me to show them how well I spoke English, *to make a display of it*, to casually recite 'some Shakespeare words.' I, his princely Hal" (53 emphasis added). Henry's "mastery" of English, demonstrated for his audience through his ability to recite Shakespearean soliloquies, is a way for his father to

establish a sense of connection, of shared culture, between himself and his customers. By emphasizing that his son is, as evidenced through his language, obviously American and “native,” Henry’s father hopes to “pass” as native too (and to pass both himself and his son off as “Anglo-ized”), and, in turn, to do better business with other “natives” as a result. Though we could read Henry’s father’s demands that his son play the role of a “princely Hal” as the ultimate symbol of capitulation and assimilation to white cultural standards, I would argue instead that these scenes are better explained by Young’s concept of “public English” as a tactical, temporary performance by minoritized subjects when in the presence of members of the dominant culture. In fact, while Henry’s father seemingly pays homage to both standard English and Anglo culture during these Shakespearean storefront performances, readers become privy to the fact that, behind the scenes, when there are no white customers around, he often mocks the English language and the white people who speak it when they come into his shop. Henry recalls how his father would “make [us] all laugh with... his impressions of Americans who came into his store, doing their stiff, nasal tone, their petty annoyances and complaints” (50). The dissonance between Mr. Park’s behavior and linguistic performances in the two separate spaces of the store—the front, where he is in the presence of white customers and members of the dominant culture, and the back, where he is among only Korean American family members and friends — calls to mind Scott’s notion of how our language, behavior, and performances are shaped by what he calls hidden and public transcripts. Scott uses the word “transcript” to refer to the “complete record of what [is] said”—both through speech itself and through “nonspeech acts such as gestures and expressions”—in a given situation, but emphasizes that this record is always comprised of multiple parts (2). While the “public” transcript establishes authority and subordination (racial, cultural, class-based, or otherwise) through “rituals of hierarchy [and] deference,” the hidden transcript comprises the “responses and rejoinders to that public transcript,” the “portion of an acrimonious dialogue that domination has driven off the immediate stage” (111). The Shakespearean performances Henry’s father has him put on for

white customers, then, are intended to give the *appearance* of the Parks as Anglicized/Americanized Asians who have adopted the high-status cultural capital of their white customers, but Scott emphasizes that such “public rituals” of deference may be “highly routinized and shallow” (24), “unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations” (2). Although critics such as Huang have suggested that Henry “subscribes uncritically... [to] American cultural standards,” and scenes like the Shakespearean performances would suggest this to be true of both Henry *and* his father *if* these performances were the “whole story” (Scott 2). The mockery of these white customers and their language in the “hidden” transcript, however, reveals to us that Henry learns as much from his father about *critiquing* whiteness and English as he does about performing them. The Shakespearean performances are not evidence that the Parks subscribe uncritically to white cultural standards, but are rather linguistic/racial passings that are, like all forms of performance, “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic,” to borrow the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (108).

This combination of subversive and hegemonic behavior is something that Henry learns well from his father; in fact, as he continues through public schooling, we see him begin to mock the English his schoolteachers make him perform there in just the same way his father mocks the white customers’ speech, suggesting that his linguistic passings in the classroom are only temporary. Although Lelia believes that Henry’s education allowed “language experts” to “sav[e] him] from the wild,” flashbacks of Henry’s childhood schooling reveal the limitations of his school teachers’ attempts to force him to conform to a standard English, showing that the linguistic hegemony of the classroom is resisted even as it is performed (232). Henry recalls, for example, his schoolteacher Mrs. Albrecht, an “ancient chalk-white woman [who] taught me with a polished fruitwood stick,” requiring Henry to recite verses of Romantic poetry which she “struck in sublime meter on my palms and the back of my calves” (233). Although Henry does get up in front of his teacher and classmates and recite verses by Shelley, seeming to conform to the school(teacher)’s linguistic and cultural standards, this recitation is accompanied by Henry’s

subtle mockery of the poetry he recites: “*Till, like one in slumber bound, Borne to ocean, I float down, around,/Into a sea profound, of ever-spreading sound...* Peanut Butter Shelley, I’d murmur beneath my breath, unable to remember all the poet’s womanly names” (233). Like his father, Henry “passes” as someone who has conformed to the dominant culture, performing the standard in front of his white schoolteacher, but he also subtly expresses his disdain for that culture by “murmur[ing]” mockeries “beneath [his] breath.” Supporting Scott’s assertion that public performances of deference and assimilation may not tell the whole story, Henry’s murmurings become part of the “hidden transcript,” those expressions which cannot be “openly avowed to the other party in the relationship,” but which nonetheless allow minoritized subjects to voice a “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (Scott 2, 14). The fact that such critiques emerge in these scenes serves as a useful reminder that performances of English and whiteness are often situated tactics of the marginalized, rather than signs of full-on assimilation to dominant cultural and linguistic norms.

To suggest that these characters use English as part of the public transcript in order to situationally perform whiteness in front of members of the white culture is not to suggest, however, that the languages and behaviors that become part of the hidden transcript or take place “behind the scenes” are the “natural” or non-performative languages and behaviors of the characters. The fact that Henry’s father, for example, often uses Korean in the back of the store or with his family when white customers aren’t around does not signify that Korean is his “authentic” language/identity and English and whiteness/Americanness his only performances. Emphasizing that language and behavior are *always* dependent on context and audience, and that we are always performing, albeit in different ways, Scott argues that “the hidden transcript is produced for a *different audience* and *under different constraints of power* than the public transcript” (5 emphasis added). The notion of the hidden transcript is not meant to imply that there are spaces and contexts outside of “public” view where we can be our “real” selves, entirely free from the burden of performance. Rather, different contexts and circumstances allow for

different behaviors and the possibility of different *types* of performances, but in all contexts, our language, actions, and behaviors are shaped by unequal power relations and by our interactions with others, who comprise our audience, and whose authority or status influence the particular version of the self we attempt to construct in any given situation.

That all contexts—not just those that seem to call for a “public” performance of deference or assimilation to white cultural norms—require individuals to perform in different ways is well demonstrated in *Native Speaker* through what I call the “multi-directional” passings/crossings undertaken by Henry, Kwang, Henry’s father, and other characters. Throughout the novel, we see that these characters pass not *only* as white/American, but also as “foreign”/“nonnative,” using Korean (along with tactical uses of silence) to perform these latter identities just as they use standard English to perform whiteness/Americanness. Their passings in various different “directions” remind us, as Ginsberg has written, that there are a “multiplicity of racial or related identity categories into which one might pass” (3). As we have seen, John Kwang is known for his effective use of standard English; indeed, I have argued that it is the most important factor of his successful passing as white. Yet, in certain contexts, particularly when among the immigrant and minority constituents of his district in Queens, we also see Kwang instead choose to perform “foreignness,” to try to pass as *not* American. Henry notes that there are times when Kwang speaks with a “foreigner’s simplicity,” his linguistic performance quite different from other moments when he speaks in standard English, sounding like a “regular American m[an]” (178, 179). Likewise, though we have seen that Henry’s father frequently uses (or requires his son to use) a formal, proper English in front of white customers in an attempt to pass as “American,” we also learn that he sometimes finds playing the role of the foreigner equally as advantageous. As Henry puts it, “Knowing what every native loves to hear... he would [say] that he started with \$200 in his pocket and a wife and baby and just a few words of English... [offering] the classic immigrant story” (49-50). While in certain contexts, Mr. Park is eager to establish himself and his family as American/native, just as his white customers see themselves, at other times he

deliberately positions himself as immigrant/foreigner, trying to pass not as an “insider,” but as an “outsider,” in order to perk the interest and evoke the sympathies of the “natives” that comprise his audience.

Although Henry often believes his identity to be authentically Korean, viewing his attempts at whiteness/Americanness as the performative aspects of his identity, he, too, passes as both “foreign” and “native,” “Korean” and “American,” depending upon the context or circumstance. Certainly, the narrative puts more emphasis on Henry’s attempts to use standard English to pass as native/American—in his childhood classrooms; in front of teachers, friends, and coworkers; in his father’s shop; in his relationship with Lelia—but there are also plenty of moments in the narrative when Henry abandons his efforts to speak a standard English in favor of performing other types of identities by using language in different ways. Even as a young boy, Henry realizes that just as his father can have him use proper English to get the attention of white customers, he can also use Korean to discourage white customers from interacting with him while he works. As he puts it, so long as he “just kept speaking [Korean] the customers didn’t seem to see me. I wasn’t there” (53). Though critics such as Tina Chen have read these scenes as signs of Henry’s invisibility and lack of agency within the dominant culture, of his inability to “break out of the preconceived ideas about who he was and might be,” it is critical to note that Henry *chooses* to play the role of a nonnative speaker here, just as, in other contexts, he can shatter others’ “preconceived ideas” of him as foreign/nonnative through performative uses of English such as his Shakespearean soliloquies (Chen 647). As an adult, Henry continues to tactically perform both nativeness and foreignness, finding, as he did as a child, that both types of performances can have benefits and advantages in different situations. Interestingly, despite the importance of English to Kwang’s success as a politician, when Henry volunteers as a member of Kwang’s campaign crew, he finds that performing foreignness by pretending *not* to be able to speak in English is a particularly useful tactic with advantages not only for himself, but also for Kwang (who Henry becomes increasingly loyal and devoted to as he gets to know

him, despite having initially “volunteered” on his campaign in order to spy on him as part of the work for his assignment). After an arson at Kwang’s campaign headquarters leaves two people dead, including Henry’s friend and fellow campaign worker Eduardo, Henry watches from inside the headquarters as the media swarm “thick on the ground... wait[ing] outside the yellow police tape... want[ing] to know if [staff workers] personally knew the dead” (250). Hoping to avoid having to answer any questions when confronted, Henry quickly decides to “pretend I don’t speak English” (250). His decision to tactically play the role of the “voiceless” foreigner is an example of what Scott describes as the “active manipulation of rituals of subordination to turn them to good personal advantage” (33). Later in the novel, Henry again engages in this type of advantageous performance of subordination, passing as foreigner/outsider by speaking in what he describes as a “choppy English” in order to get information from a doctor about a hospital patient to whom he is not related (324). After an intoxicated Kwang (who is married with two children) crashes his car in the middle of the night and is found to have an underage Korean girl—an “illegal alien” from Seoul—in his passenger seat, the girl, who is seriously injured in the crash, is taken to the hospital. Trying to “get information on the chances for the girl, what we should expect,” before the media get word of the breaking news, Henry uses this “choppy English” to convince the doctor that he is a cousin of the victim—that he, too, is an “illegal alien” from Seoul. Persuaded by the performance, the doctor gives Henry information over the phone, even encouraging him to come visit the patient. Scenes like these serve as a powerful reminder that passing for white/American is not the only desirable form of passing, nor even the most privileged one; rather, individuals pass in a multitude of directions depending upon circumstances, motivations, and potential outcomes.

The possibility of passing for a multitude of identities, however, also necessitates that one knows when and where to pass for what. Passings are as likely to carry detrimental consequences for the performer as they are to result in advantageous outcomes *if* the passer is unaware of, or misjudges, the type of passing/performance a given context invites, allows for, or

demands.¹³ This is well demonstrated by a scene in the novel in which Henry, during an argument with his father, makes the (ultimately disadvantageous) decision to put on a performance of Americanness using a formalized English—to pass himself off as “authentically” native, an identity he is often quite uncomfortable claiming elsewhere in the novel—in an attempt to shame Mr. Park into feeling “foreign”/“un-American” (and thus inferior) by contrast. Henry tells us how he tries to outdo the older man by “yelling at him, making sure I was speaking in complete sentences” (in contrast to his father’s “broken” English), and “using the biggest [English] words I knew, whether they made sense or not, school words like ‘socioeconomic’ and ‘intangible,’ anything I could lift from my dizzy burning thoughts and hurl against him” (63). Although in other contexts, such as his storefront performances, Henry’s Korean-born parents praise and encourage his use of an elevated/educated standard English, here, Henry’s attempt to pass as native is perceived by his parents to be done for the wrong reasons, and thus comes with consequences: midway through his rant, Henry’s mother, “who’d been perfectly quiet the whole time, whacked me hard across the back of the head and shouted in Korean *Who do you think you are?*” (63). Her deliberate decision to shift the language of the shouting match from English to Korean serves as a reminder to Henry that English is not appropriate for this particular context, particularly because it has been used to disrespect and shame his own father. Likewise, her charge against him—“*Who do you think you are?*”—serves as a reminder that who one “is” must always be determined, at least in part, by one’s audience and context. Although in other situations, his parents might find it acceptable for him to speak in this way, here, his mother suggests that he has forgotten not who he but rather who he is *among*, in turn causing him to also forget the role he is to play. To successfully pass in a multitude of directions requires a constant awareness of what types of performances, linguistic and otherwise, are appropriate and inappropriate, advantageous or disadvantageous, in any given situation. That this “blunder” of Henry’s occurs in his own home, among only himself and his parents, is also a reminder of Scott’s assertion that one is never entirely free from the burden

of performance or the presence of power relations—even in seemingly “private” or “hidden” settings like the home, one must be cautious both about how one speaks and about what role one chooses to perform through one’s speech.

The fact that Henry and others in the novel pass as both “native” and “foreign,” “American” and “Korean,” ultimately serves to destabilize these very categories, heightening our awareness of how the concepts of nativity and Americanness, foreignness and Koreanness, are themselves continually defined and re-defined by the varied contexts of everyday life and the ever-changing audiences one encounters in different circumstances. Although throughout much of the novel, Henry understands the concept of a “native” speaker to mean somebody whose native language is English, scenes such as the one described above, in which Henry argues with his father and is chastised by his mother in Korean, position the native speaker as one who speaks Korean—in this context, using English is not only disadvantageous for Henry, but also situates him as an “outsider.”¹⁴ Yet, even Henry’s father is not permanently marked in the novel as Korean or as a Korean speaker—at times, his Americanness, too, is emphasized, demonstrating the ways in which he is perceived as, and plays the roles of, both foreigner and American. Although, as I described earlier, certain scenes in the novel show Mr. Park mocking the English language and the white Americans who use it, or performing the “classic immigrant act” for white Americans, other scenes show the ways in which he adopts the role of the (white) American in his everyday life. Henry tells us, for example, how his father uses his profit from his grocery stores to join “neighborhood pool and tennis clubs” and “mak[e] drinking friends with Americans” (51). Although critics such as Betsy Huang have argued that “Henry’s father is a model of repudiation against the dominant culture’s demand for cultural consent,” while Kwang has “wholeheartedly embraced all that Henry’s father has resisted” to reduce either character’s behavior to that of simply repudiating or embracing the dominant culture is to imply, by extension, that one must identify *only* as “Korean” or “American,” national “insider” or “outsider” (Huang 249). Yet, as I have been arguing, to understand identity in this way is to

fail to see the ways in which both Mr. Park and Kwang, like Henry, play a variety of roles—some of which repudiate the dominant culture and others of which embrace it—depending upon the changing circumstances and contexts of their everyday lives. Indeed, even as minor a character as Ahjuhma, a woman Mr. Park unexpectedly “imports” from Korea to live with the family after Henry’s mother passes away, serves to destabilize the categories of Korean and American, “foreign” and “native,” by playing both roles on a day-to-day basis. Although she is described in certain scenes as “a total alien” who “never learned three words of English” (78), we are also told that she can make “instant American inventions [with] her tongue” (304), and that, like an “average” American, she spends her free time heading to town to buy “a glossy teen magazine and a red Popsicle” from the local newsstand and to window-shop in nearby stores (78). Like Henry, Kwang, and Mr. Park, Ahjuhma plays multiple roles—certain scenes portray her as “total[ly]” and utterly “foreign,” but other scenes reveal the ways in which she speaks and acts like an “ordinary” American. In this way, the narrative emphasizes that the gulf between “native”/American and “foreign”/Korean is not as wide as a character like Henry often imagines; one need not (indeed, *cannot*) choose between these two identities, but rather adopts these (and other) identities provisionally, depending upon circumstance and context.

Critics have suggested that the multiple roles that Henry himself adopts throughout the novel—as “native” American/native English speaker, as Korean/non-English speaker, etc.—cause him to suffer from some form of psychological instability and/or cultural “lack,” unable to determine who he “truly” is. Lori Jirousek argues that Henry is forced to “divide himself into two persons, observer and observed, ‘Americanized’ and ‘foreign,’ voiced and voiceless” and, as a result, “can hardly reconcile the two disparate aspects of himself” (12), while Rachel Lee has gone as far as to argue that the varied performances Henry puts on are akin to “being inhabited by an alien body snatcher” (343). Jodi Kim, similarly, laments that Henry has no “real” sense of who is, arguing that “by the end of the novel, Henry has not established a coherent sense of self” (134). I would argue, however, that establishing a “coherent sense of self” is impossible, not only

for Henry, but for all of us, given the ways in which different contexts and circumstances necessitate or demand various different—and often conflicting—performances and versions of identity. The fact that Henry learns to successfully negotiate several different linguistic and ethnic identities is not tragic, but rather dynamic, adaptive, tactical, and, at times, subversive and resistant. Through its emphasis on the performativity of both linguistic and racial identity, the novel challenges, subverts and redefines not just normative notions of whiteness and English, but also of Americanness. Henry ultimately comes to realize this, stating toward the close of the novel that “when you are someone like me, you will be many people all at once... the most agile actor this land has ever known” (293). As a marginalized individual in a power-laden society, Henry realizes that the ability to “be many people all at once” is both necessary and advantageous in order to negotiate the myriad social and institutional expectations and challenges of everyday life.

As I have been arguing, this negotiation of several different identities happens primarily through the use of language, specifically through linguistic “passings” that allow characters to temporarily and provisionally claim or perform one identity or another. The various different uses of language that we see throughout the novel, however, serve to demonstrate not only the instability and flexibility of identity, but also of language itself. In this sense, the novel challenges Lelia’s (and many Americans’) belief in an English “standard,” suggesting that there is no one “right” or “correct” way to use the language. Rather, English, like identity, is adapted, altered, changed, and modified by characters throughout the novel in a myriad of ways as they negotiate their way through different contexts; furthermore, English is shown to be only one language among many that individuals in America use in everyday life. Characters frequently adopt not only a range of Englishes, but a wide range of different languages. We learn, for example, of a daily ritual between Henry and his friend Eduardo (before the latter becomes one of the casualties of the fire-bombing at Kwang’s campaign headquarter) in which each adopts the “native” language of the other by way of greeting: “each morning Eduardo tipped his head to

me and said in a convincing accent, *Ahn-young-ha-sae-yo*. I greeted him back in Spanish” (142). Similarly, the staff on Kwang’s campaign committee quickly learn that in order to target a multi-racial urban voter population like that of New York City, it is in their best interest to be able to adopt a variety of languages, to perform a variety of cultural identities. Thus, the staffers participate in “hit and run seminars” offering them a “rudimentary knowledge” of a variety of languages which enable them to “say *hello* and *goodbye* and *please wait a moment...* in a tone of respect” (142). The value of being able to use these other languages to communicate with voters reminds readers that, though Kwang’s mastery of the linguistic “standard” helps him rise to the top in the America, so, too does his (and his staffers’) use of a variety of other “nonstandard” languages. The ability to use and adopt a multitude of languages in ordinary situations—for Henry and Kwang to regularly speak in their everyday lives not only in Korean and English, but also in Spanish and Hindi and Thai—is also a powerful challenge to the idea that “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (Anzaldúa 81). Instead, *Native Speaker* suggests that language usage and “linguistic identity” are dependent not upon race or ethnicity, but rather upon context.

Although Henry often struggles to understand this, believing throughout much of the novel (and his life) that identity and language are both unchangeable reflections of a “true self,” by the close of the narrative he does ultimately seem to realize that it is context, rather than who one “really is,” that determines both language usage and identity performance. In the process, he also comes to realize that speaking how Lelia, Alice Eckles, and his white schoolteachers speak is not the only “correct” way to use language; rather, he learns to understand the advantages of being able to use a multiplicity of languages in everyday life. Though some critics have suggested that Henry’s linguistic models are exclusively those who speak the English “standard”—Crystal Parikh, for example, argues that Henry “finds the opportunity for his assimilative survival and success embodied in the figure of the white teacher, in particular the speech therapist” (275)—Henry *also* learns how to survive and succeed in America from

listening to those who speak English limitedly and provisionally, and who adapt it to their own ends, speaking “English, and then the phrases of English, grunts of it to get by” (Lee 344). His transformation from privileging and trying to uphold a linguistic standard, to understanding and appreciating the need for a range of different Englishes and languages, is well demonstrated through several scenes which show how his views of language usage gradually change as he grows older. In one scene, Henry recalls how, as a child, he would “cringe and grow ashamed and angry at those funny tones of my father and his workers, all that Konglish, Spanglish, Jive. *Just talk right*, I wanted to yell, just talk right for once in your sorry lives” (337 emphasis added). Yet, as an adult, we see that Henry learns to appreciate these “broken” Englishes and “nonstandard” forms of expression, even recognizing that, at times, such languages are more advantageous, useful, or appropriate than “talking right” would be. In a particularly powerful scene, Henry visits the home of a grieving Mrs. Fermin, mother of Eduardo Fermin, the campaign worker who is killed in the fire-bombing at Kwang’s headquarters. Throughout the visit, Mrs. Fermin speaks to Henry in a “broken” English, asking him upon arrival “What d’you wan, Mr. Park?” and later expressing her gratitude for the fact that “[Kwang] helpin Eduardo always.” Describing her deceased son, she tells Henry, “Now, me Eduardo, he gon make everyone happy. Jus like Mr. Kwang. Eduardo gon make everyone happy and rich. He’s a beautiful boy” (257). As Henry listens to her speak, he thinks to himself, “I know what she means, despite her tenses... I know this Mrs. Fermin. Half the people in Queens talk like her. Half the people I knew when I was a child. *And I think she’s saying it perfectly, just like she should*” (257 emphasis added). No longer shamed or angered by the sounds of Spanglish or Konglish, Henry recognizes something both familiar and valuable in this woman’s speech, realizing that many New Yorkers (indeed, many Americans) speak as she does, using “nonstandard” Englishes, variations of the language. Though her words may not measure up to the linguistic standards of a character like Lelia, Henry recognizes and admires the meaning and humanity in her language and expression, understanding that, in this context, the use of a

“broken English” is what allows Mrs. Fermin to express herself “perfectly” (257). However, perhaps the best evidence of Henry’s gradual rejection of the standard in favor of the idea of linguistic flexibility and adaptability comes when he tells us of his desires for his own son, Mitt, the only child resulting from Henry’s marriage to Lelia. Henry admits that, when he first became a father, he feared he might “handicap” his son linguistically, assuming that Lelia, the “standard-bearer,” would be the one to “provide the best example of how to speak.” As he grows older, however, Henry realizes that these ideas were “my silliness,” and that what is best for his son is *not* to learn to speak one language, one standard, but rather to use a range of languages adaptively, creatively, and situationally (239). Henry admires the fact that, growing up around Lelia, Henry, and Henry’s father, Mitt learns to “mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean,” successfully performing both languages from a young age. Far from expecting, demanding, or even hoping that his son will adopt the English standard, Henry instead wants Mitt to learn that “our truest world” is one “rich with disparate melodies” (239-40). By the novel’s close, Henry no longer wishes his son to become a standard-bearer, like Mitt’s mother, but instead hopes that his son will learn to use a diversity of languages, to “mimic” (which, in this context, might mean to successfully perform without fully embracing) and move between languages and identities as different situations require or allow him to do so. From his own father, Henry tell us, he learns that “daily survival” requires “the need to adapt, assume an advantageous shape”; by the end of *Native Speaker*, he realizes the importance of passing these same lessons on to his son (319).

Lelia, who calls herself “the English lady,” tells Henry on the night they meet that “Everybody in this town wants to learn English” and that her job is to “help them say what they want” (11). Yet, by the close of *Native Speaker*, English is shown not to hold the privileged status that Lelia assumes it to have among New Yorkers, and the reasons and circumstances that explain why people desire or choose to use English (or to not use it, or to use an adapted or modified version of it) are more myriad, complex, and complicated than Lelia, in her role as

standard-bearer, can conceive of. Critics of the novel, likewise, have often failed to realize the ways in which the text demonstrates how linguistic “standards” are everywhere undermined, challenged, and redefined by the marginalized of America. Betsy Huang, for example, has argued that the text “exposes the ideological and material imperatives of US citizenship for its ethnic and immigrant subjects, and the kind of cultural consent it uncompromisingly demands of them” (246); similarly, Jodi Kim writes that “through the trope of speech, Lee gives narrative form to the pressures and perils of assimilation into a dominant culture and the consent that is demanded of citizen-subjects by the US nation-state” (133). What such arguments overlook, however, are the ways in which ethnic and immigrant subjects in the novel are able to subvert, challenge, and circumvent demands for cultural consent and assimilation through their use of language. While Lee does use the trope of speech to point to the assimilative pressures of the nation-state, he *also* uses the trope of speech to show the ways in which minoritized subjects negotiate and resist such assimilative pressures through linguistic passings and tactical performances of identity.¹⁵ Ultimately, the novel’s emphasis on speech serves less to demonstrate the conformity of the characters to English language norms and standards than it does to highlight, as Ludwig has described it, the idea of the individual “as a *user* of language who is constantly dialogically challenging the linguistic impositions of a public discourse” (223). To read those instances in the text where characters like Henry perform the English standard as evidence of their willing cultural consent is to see only one side (and, indeed, the far less interesting side) of Lee’s story.

At one point in the narrative, Henry tells us that if Ancient Rome was “the first true babel,” then “New York City must be the second. To enter the resplendent place,” he adds, “the new ones must learn the primary Latin. Quell the old tongue, loosen the lips. Listen, the hawk and cry of the American city” (237). While his insistence that “the new ones must learn the primary Latin” indicates his awareness that standard English is expected or demanded in many contexts in America, his description of New York as a “babel” also suggests his awareness of the ways in

which linguistic hegemony and homogeneity are everywhere challenged and resisted by Americans in everyday life. To truly “listen [to] the hawk and cry of the American city” reveals, as the text shows us and as Henry learns, that both the “babel” and the “standard” exist together—that the “standard” is in fact only one of many languages that Americans speak. The use of the “primary Latin” even as New York simultaneously remains a “babel” suggests that the former is only one linguistic performance among many that individuals adopt in their day-to-day lives. By using different languages, then, we play many different roles, invalidating the very notion of an “authentic” or stable identity, ethnic or otherwise, and resisting the ways in which individuals are defined and labeled as “foreign” or “American,” “native” or “non-native” speaker. Ultimately, *Native Speaker* earns its place as a passing narrative through its ability to destabilize these notions of identity. Like language, the text shows that identity is not fixed and stable, but shifts and changes by context. Questions such as who is “native” or “nonnative”—who can speak the standard “naturally” and who “fakes it”—become irrelevant once we realize that all identities and uses of language are performative: there is no question of whether one is truly Korean or truly American when we acknowledge that individuals perform multiple identities, just as they use multiple languages, Englishes and otherwise. Despite Lelia’s belief in the importance of her job as standard-bearer and “English lady,” the text shows that there is no true “standard” to bear, since the English language is not pure and homogenous, not used in one stable and unchanging way, but rather constantly adapted, transformed, altered, and changed as it is used by individuals in different contexts. Languages, like racial identities, are performed and enacted in a variety of ways in everyday life, and English takes a myriad of forms as individuals manipulate the language and use different versions of it to construct different selves. Through this emphasis on the performativity of both linguistic and racial identity, *Native Speaker* challenges and, in many ways, redefines not just normative notions of English, but also of whiteness and Americanness. A similar effort to redefine such categories is also evident in Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel *Caucasia*.

Chapter 4

“The Art of Changing”: Linguistic and Racial Passings in *Caucasia*

“So long as speech occurs in any social situation it is saturated with power relations... We all measure our words” – James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (176)

In Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, as in *Native Speaker*, the concept of race as innate and unchanging is destabilized; instead, we see that how one identifies and is identified racially depends largely upon context and circumstance, and is crucially related to how one uses language. Like Lee, Senna illustrates how racial identity (both how one identifies one self and how one’s racial identity is perceived by others) is constantly changing: just as Henry performs the roles of American and foreigner, native and non-native speaker, in different settings, we see that *Caucasia*’s protagonist, the mixed-race Birdie Lee, performs identities ranging from black to white to Jewish as she moves in and out of contexts such as an all-black school or an all-white neighborhood. Both novels suggest that these multiple racial identities are possible precisely because race in America is not defined (only) by what is visibly detectable. Rather, language can allow one the ability to tactically move among different ethnic/racial groups and adopt different racial identities. What is audible—how others *hear* one perform race/identity—is as important, if not more important, than what one’s visual features might suggest about one’s race. The ability to “pass,” then, is portrayed in these texts as largely dependent upon one’s ability to play multiple different linguistic parts as one moves through different spheres and situations of everyday life. The range of languages Birdie uses in her everyday life remind us, as do Henry’s varied linguistic/racial performances, that there is no one “standard” or dominant language used by all Americans, just as there is not one race that most Americans permanently identify themselves with. Race is shown to be a series of changing performances, more than an innate set of qualities or characteristics, and the different languages Birdie uses circumstantially and contextually are crucial to the success of these performances.

Caucasia, which received widespread critical acclaim following its publication in 1998,¹ has also been widely acknowledged to be a “passing” novel (unlike *Native Speaker*, which continues to be excluded from the passing genre presumably because it is a work of Asian American literature, as I discussed in Chapter 3). The protagonist, Birdie Lee is, like the author herself, of a “mixed” racial background, the daughter of a black father and a white mother. Bird’s long-term attempt to pass as white when she and her mother separate from her black father and darker-skinned sister have led critics to situate the text within a long tradition of African American passing novels,² including James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Walter White’s *Flight* (1926), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933). *Caucasia* is also one of a number of contemporary or “millennial” passing novels, including Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2001) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (2000).³ Together, these more recent portrayals of passing in a post-civil-rights society serve as a useful reminder of the fact that passing is far from extinct in the contemporary U.S., and in fact remains a relevant part of everyday life for many Americans.

Set in Boston and New Hampshire in the 1970s, *Caucasia* follows the disintegration and eventual breakup of the Lee family: African American father Deck, white mother Sandy, and “mixed” daughters Cole and Birdie Lee. When Deck and Sandy decide to separate permanently due to both an increasingly strained marriage and their involvement in a precarious political situation in Boston, Cole, who looks much darker than her sister and is referred to several times throughout the novel as the “black child,” moves with her father to Brazil, while Birdie, the “white” child, goes with Sandy, “passing” for white for a number of years while living in a virtually all-white New Hampshire town. While this quick summary of the plot might seem to suggest that the novel treats matters of race rather simply—Bird “becomes” white because she looks more like her white mother, while her sister “stays” black because she looks more like her black father—*Caucasia* actually presents race and identity as much messier and more complex than merely a matter of appearances; indeed, the most obvious thing readers realize from

observing the family break-up is how impossible it is for Birdie to identify with any one racial identity, white *or* black. Although Birdie may look white (or, at least, whiter than her darker-skinned sister), the novel quickly reveals that race is made up of much more than what can (or can't) be read upon one's body: Birdie learns that one can claim, affirm, or hide one's "blackness" or "whiteness" through factors such as one's professional activities, social circles, ways of dressing, and, most importantly, through one's uses of language, just as one can through (modification of) one's physical features. The narrative portrays race and racial identity as defined not (only) by a set of physical characteristics which are visible upon the body, but also through performance—or, to put it more precisely, through a series of different performances, many of which are particularly dependent upon how one uses language in the role one is playing.

In fact, in *Caucasia*, as in *Native Speaker*, it is often the case that one's linguistic performance matters *more* than visual markers in determining how one's racial identity will be perceived by others. Although critics such as Elam have argued that "meditations on sight... dominate [*Caucasia*]," it is actually through the realm of the spoken, rather than the seen, that the novel most frequently portrays the ways in which individuals shape and negotiate their racial identities (*Souls* 153). In certain contexts of her everyday life, we see that Birdie doesn't *look* white enough to convince people she is (part) white, and, in other contexts, doesn't look black enough to convince people she's (part) black. But, she can nevertheless perform both "whiteness" and "blackness"—the very meanings of which themselves also change by context—by altering her use of language to fit different situations and circumstances. Like *Native Speaker*, *Caucasia* emphasizes that language usage is an important *nonvisible* way in which racial identities are constructed and understood. And, like Lee's text, Senna's portrays a variety of different Englishes which characters use to perform a range of racial identities and to enact multiple racial passings or "crossings" in their everyday lives. The text's focus on linguistic performance as the key to successful passing reminds us that race cannot be understood as

simply that which appears upon the body, but also as something which is, like language, shaped by context, circumstance, and audience. Although an individual's physical characteristics may remain unchanged (as Birdie's do, for the most part, throughout her journey from "black" to "white"), how an individual performs race—largely through the use of language—in response to different circumstances makes racial identity itself something which is perpetually changing, always in motion.

In *Caucasia*, characters do not speak one version of English, nor can usage of the language be simply understood as divided across racial lines into "black English" and "white English." Rather, we see that within these linguistic categories, many variations of English emerge—not only within English itself, but even within so-called "black English" and "white English." The complex, constantly changing world that Birdie Lee lives in is made up of a variety of environments with a diverse range of "discourse expectations,"⁴ implicit rules that guide one's behavior—particularly one's verbal behavior—in a specific setting, but which do not necessarily carry over to the *next* setting, where one might easily find oneself among a different audience and in a context with quite different implied expectations about discourse usage. Birdie's ability to successfully navigate these various environments, and to understand and meet the "discourse expectations" of different social settings and of different racial/ethnic groups, is precisely what allows her to "pass" into and out of many different racial identities throughout the novel, gaining critical insight and awareness about the role of race in America along the way. The diversity of languages and dialects that Birdie speaks—"white"/"standard" English, "black" English, several local/regional New England dialects, the language of the Black Power movement and of civil rights activists, even Elemenó, the invented language she uses with her sister Cole—are a result of the ever-changing circumstances and contexts that she finds herself in, each of which also redefines the way she understands racial identities, including her own. Quickly, Birdie learns (just as Henry does in *Native Speaker*) that she can use multiple languages to play different parts, allowing her a degree of fluidity and malleability with regard to

how she defines her own racial identity and how it is defined by others. She also learns that “outsiders” of a particular racial or ethnic (or social or professional) group can often gain entry into that group, becoming full-fledged “card-carrying” members, if they can meet the group’s discourse expectations—that is, if they can prove that they use language in the same ways the group’s insiders do. Birdie’s understanding of the importance of linguistic performance helps to facilitate her successful passings while also gradually helping her to acknowledge and accept that she has no fixed or unitary racial identity; rather, her race and identity (as well as her use of language) are constantly changing as she responds and adapts to the various different worlds she inhabits. The many roles she plays throughout the novel, racial and otherwise, are also a useful reminder of the fact that passing is not merely a simple crossing from black to white (or vice versa), but rather is much more multifarious, messy, and complex than this. Birdie performs not only “blackness” *and* “whiteness,” moving back and forth across the “color line,” but also different *versions* of blackness and whiteness in different contexts. That her identity cannot be defined as simply “black” or “white” not only because she plays both roles, but because these roles themselves vary and change by context, reveals the instability of race and the impossibility of defining exactly what “blackness” or “whiteness” is. Instead, we see that in Birdie’s everyday life there are a range of racial identities that she performs and claims, a variety of “blacknesses” and “whitenesses” that she chooses to or has to perform depending upon the circumstance.

From a very young age, Birdie exhibits an awareness of the ways in which the concept of racial identity constrains, confines, and dramatically influences others’ understandings of, as well as one’s own construction of, the self. Birdie resents the attempts of others, especially social and institutional authority figures, to classify or explain her race through the use of lexicon—she is disturbed both by their attempts to define her racial identity as a singular, unitary category, and by the fact that they rely primarily upon visual clues, making her body the object of scrutiny in their efforts to describe or pinpoint her race. Even Birdie’s own family members, fully aware

of what her racial identity is, try to find ways to define and explain it, to give a label or name to the ambiguous visual features that comprise her mixed-race appearance. When Birdie's mother tells her she looks "like a little Sicilian," Birdie immediately notices the ways in which this labeling of her race also prompts an examination of her appearance. She tells us that she could feel her sister Cole trying to "place" her in light of this new description, which makes her feel "dirty": "I could feel Cole beside me, studying me, struggling to see something [Sicilian] on my face" (27). For Birdie, others' attempts to define her race by examining her body and coming up with a label that seems to best fit its visual attributes are not only constraining but often humiliating experiences. The humiliation is only greater when it is those outside of her family who are attempting to define and name her race. Throughout the text, dominant institutions and their agents are portrayed as having an impulse to fix and classify racial identity. As Scott notes, labels are forms of "rhetorical strategy," and the figures of institutional authority in the text use labeling as a way of insisting upon unitary and singular, rather than multiple and fluid, definitions of the self—what Gayle Wald calls the "disciplining of the racially defined subject in the name of national interests" (Scott 206, Wald 21). In one scene, Birdie and Cole go to City Hall to sign up for public school after being homeschooled by their mother up until this point. Bird's first encounter with a representative of the school is with "the woman behind the desk," who "took one look at Cole and me and assigned us to different districts." Reading their bodies and constructing Cole as black and Bird as white, the woman informs them that "[Bird] would be bused to a predominately black school in Dorchester; Cole to South Boston, the Irish section, 'in the interest of dahvesetty'" (37). The scene embarrasses and upsets Bird (not to mention enraging her mother), who is frustrated by the ways in which others use her body to make (false) assumptions about her identity and to box her into constraining spaces—both literal and metaphorical—based upon their ideas about her race. In an even more humiliating brush with institutional authority, Birdie is at a public park with her father one afternoon when she notices a couple "watching them, frowning" (59). Eventually, the couple approaches two police officers

patrolling the park, assuming that what they are witnessing is not a father and daughter enjoying the afternoon together, but rather a black man trying to kidnap or perhaps sexually exploit a young white girl. The police approach Birdie and her father, asking Birdie whether she has been hurt or harmed by Deck and what her relationship to him is, while requiring Deck to prove his identity as an upstanding member of society (rather than a kidnapper or rapist) by producing his Boston University ID card, which testifies to his post as an Associate Professor there (and, by extension, his affiliation with both white people and whiteness, which makes him seem less threatening in the eyes of the officers). The ways in which the couple and the officers use Birdie and Deck's bodies to assume both their racial identities and their relationships to one another is a particularly traumatizing experience for Bird: as she tells us, being subjected to the scrutiny of all of those people "eyeing me with concern... made me feel ashamed... sick and a little dizzy" (60-61). These constant attempts to read and define Birdie's race through her body are not only humiliating and upsetting, but also make her hyperaware from a young age of the constraints and restrictions of racial categorization—she learns quickly that others' expectations or demands about who one is or should be constantly inform what one is able—or unable—to do in certain situations.

Yet, all of the different ways in which others (mis)define Birdie's racial identity also make her aware of the fact that her appearance makes her race visually undetectable. It is precisely the *ambiguity* of her visual features that prompts others to constantly try to place her race. Though critics such as Dagbovie have argued that Birdie's frustrations throughout the novel stem from "other people's expectations [about her race], which always derive from the *whiteness* of her body," characters in the novel actually assume or expect Bird to be not just white, but an incredibly vast range of races and ethnicities, seeing much more than just whiteness when they study her visual appearance (94 emphasis added). Indeed, throughout the novel Bird is variously perceived by others to be, or to be capable of passing as, Sicilian (27, 130), "Rican or something" (43), white (43), Cape Verdean (63), Hispanic (66), Italian (107), French (107), a

“guinea” (209), Puerto Rican (130), Pakistani (130, 378), Greek (130), Jewish (130), Indian (185, 378), Native American (192-3), and “Byzantine” (195), among other racial and ethnic identities. The various different ethnic categories Birdie can seemingly fit not only indicate the visual indetectability of her race, but also suggest the possibility of performing/claiming any one of these given categories through the act of passing. As one reviewer of *Caucasia* writes, Birdie can “look and act like anyone” (Schmidt). However, although she can look like anyone, the novel puts much more emphasis on her ability to act like anyone—and, more specifically, to *speak* like anyone—than it does on the ways in which Birdie’s ambiguous visual features allow her to pass for a range of ethnicities. In fact, if anything, the ambiguity of Birdie’s appearance often leaves others unsure of how to categorize her racially, which they tend to find unsettling, confusing, or threatening; *but*, if Birdie uses language in the right way, she finds it allows her to confirm or claim a given identity with virtually no questions asked about the ambiguity of her appearance.⁵ Her awareness that language can allow her the power to define for others how they should understand her racial identity—rather than allowing them the power to (mis)define or question her racial identity by scrutinizing her body—simultaneously teaches her the value of using language as a tool to circumvent racial categories and the restrictions they can impose. It is precisely because her race cannot be definitively read upon her body that she learns to use language as a means of convincingly performing the many different possibilities her body suggests. Her varied linguistic performances throughout the novel serve to demonstrate the instability of race and to destabilize ideas of easy racial categorization and identification.

As a young child, even before she fully recognizes the power and potentiality of linguistic passing, Birdie already demonstrates that she is adept at linguistic play and able to move with relative ease between different languages. Interestingly, Birdie’s first language is arguably not English, but Elemeno, a language invented by her older sister, Cole, who speaks it to her while she is still “just a translucent ball in my mother’s womb” (5). After Bird is born, she quickly learns the language herself, and she and Cole continue to speak it to one another throughout

much of their childhood and adolescent years. Birdie describes Elemeneno as “a complicated language, impossible for outsiders to understand—no verb tenses, no pronouns, just words floating outside time and space without owner or direction” (6). Her emphasis on the fact that this is a secret language used only by herself and her sister—“impossible for outsiders to understand”—indicates her awareness, from a young age, of how language has the power to include and exclude, to mark an individual as belonging or not belonging. At the same time, Birdie and Cole’s use of Elemeneno as an alternative to English also indicates their awareness of how to use language tactically, as a tool which can provide specific opportunities or resources, not the least of which for the young sisters is privacy, the ability to share their childhood and teenage secrets with one another in a language no one else can understand. As Bird puts it, “When Cole and I were alone in our attic, speaking Elemeneno... it seemed that the outside world was as far away as Timbuktu—some place that could never touch us” (6-7). Yet, at some point, Birdie and Cole have to come down from the attic, and when they do, it is often to return to a tumultuous family life and to a household literally divided by race. These divisions within the family are yet another way in which Birdie learns to move between languages, speaking not only English and Elemeneno as a young child, but also picking up on the different kinds of English used by her black father and her white mother. As the lighter-skinned child in the family, Birdie often feels desperate to win the attention and love of her father, who seems to prefer Cole because her appearance more closely mirrors his own. In order to “play up” her own blackness in front of him and thereby attempt to win his affection, Birdie tries to show her father that she speaks his language, using phrases like “stay black, stay strong, brotherman” because her father is involved in the Black Power movement (74). At the same time that Birdie tries to use her father’s language to improve her relationship with him, her sister’s relationship with their mother also suffers for similar reasons—Cole, perceiving herself as a black child because of her darker skin and “blacker” features, often feels disconnected from and unable to relate to her white mother. As the gulf between Cole and her mother widens during Cole’s pre-teen years, Birdie acts as a

linguistic negotiator and translator for the two of them, telling us that “[Cole] didn’t seem to want to talk to my mother, so I acted as the go-between, shouting out messages between them like a translator of foreign tongues” (84). The fact that all of the family members literally speak their own language (each of which has some connection to how they perceive and perform their racial identities) gives Birdie plenty of opportunity to practice speaking in different “tongues,” even within the singular space of her own home. The ease she experiences in the role of the “translator,” and the frequency with which she switches the languages she speaks while growing up in a divided household, foreshadow the ways in which language will become, later in her life, a key tool for allowing her to pass, to move between and around the boundaries of racial and identity categories and definitions.

Birdie first becomes truly cognizant of the idea of linguistic performance by carefully listening to those around her, including the many adults that come into and out of her life through her parents’ involvement in underground political activism in Boston. Recalling my earlier discussion of Kawash’s concept of studious spectatorship, and my suggestion that this concept be expanded to include not just watching but also listening to others in order to learn how to perform one’s own racial identity, we can see how Birdie studies both the appearance and the speech of the different adults she encounters as a young child. When Birdie meets Redbone, an acquaintance of her parents who has “gray-blue eyes” and looks “almost like a white man, barely a trace of black at all, except for his tight reddish-brown curls,” she struggles to understand his racial identity and place in the black community (14). Interestingly, though, Birdie focuses less on his “whitish”/ambiguous features (which are not unlike her own) than she does on how he uses language; to her, his attempt to speak like the other black men she knows is suspicious and unconvincing, marking him as an outsider—someone not to be trusted—in her eyes. While listening to Redbone talk, Birdie tells us:

his slang was awkward and twisted. It didn’t seem to come naturally to him. Even I could see that. It reminded me of an old black-and-white plantation movie my father

had forced Cole and me to watch... the slave characters in it had been played by white actors who wore some kind of pancake makeup on their faces. My father had laughed whenever they spoke in their strained dialect. Redbone sounded as if he had graduated from the same school of acting. (14)

Unconvinced by Redbone's linguistic performance, Birdie decides he doesn't belong among the other black men her father hangs out with—that he can't "pass" for black. Had he been able to speak their language convincingly, it seems Birdie would've overlooked his "whitish" features—the "freckled skin" and "orange-brown" hair—and considered him one of them. Ultimately, then, it is not how he looks, but rather his inability to successfully use the language, that makes his claim to blackness unconvincing in Birdie's eyes (108). Given her own ambiguous and "whitish" appearance, Redbone's failed linguistic performance offers Birdie an important lesson about the necessity of practicing and perfecting her own linguistic performances (something we see her doing frequently in later scenes in the novel) if she wishes to convince others that she is (or isn't) a certain racial identity.

Interestingly, though, although we do see Birdie diligently practicing her linguistic performances later on in the novel, at this point she doesn't seem to fully recognize Redbone's use of language as a failed or unconvincing *performance*, as indicated by her comment that his speech "didn't seem to come *naturally* to him" (14 emphasis added). Instead, she reads his use of black English in this scene as a sign of racial inauthenticity, assuming (as do Lelia and a young Henry in *Native Speaker*) that there is a natural, rather than learned or constructed, link between one's language and one's race. Even as she herself is simultaneously engaged in the process of studious spectatorship by watching and listening to Redbone, thereby learning how to use language to construct and perform her own racial identity, she fails to fully understand at this young age what she will become more conscious of later in her life: that all languages and identities are performative and learned, rather than natural or innate. At this point, Birdie still assumes that if one is "truly" black, one will be able to "naturally" speak that way—but she fails

to realize that Redbone is hardly the only one in the novel whose use of language is performative. Indeed, almost all of the characters in the text, regardless of whether their racial appearances are ambiguous or unambiguous, their racial makeup “mixed” or “singular,” use language as a way of affirming the racial identity/ies they wish to claim. It is not only those like herself and Redbone, whose bodies do not clearly mark them as black or white, who use language to claim a given identity or to “prove” themselves and their race to others. Rather, as Birdie grows older, the narrative places increasing emphasis on the ways in which *all* of the people in her life use language to perform racial identities and to “pass” into and out of a variety of race-based roles and contexts.

This is perhaps best demonstrated by the ways in which Birdie’s black father, Deck, and white mother, Sandy, themselves use linguistic performance to affirm or claim “blackness(es)” and “whiteness(es).” Birdie’s father, an African American man married to a white woman and employed as a university professor, experiences acute anxiety about his own racial identity and “authenticity” throughout the novel. Deck’s theoretical and abstract ways of speaking, his high level of education, his preference for writing about racism rather than fighting against it, and his white wife and whitish-looking daughter(s), are all viewed by others (and, often, himself) as indications of his own whiteness: through his affiliation with the white world, particularly academia and its attendant cultural capital, Deck is seen as trying, and, perhaps, succeeding, to pass for white. Yet, at the same time, even as Deck is often viewed as somewhat of an outsider in the black community—sometimes even more so than his white wife—he also struggles to feel fully accepted in the white world, and frequently imagines himself as stranded between the worlds of blackness and whiteness, unable to fully lay claim to either identity. His fears are compounded by his sense that he doesn’t look as black as he “ought” to, while also not looking white, which prompts him to do things like try to grow an afro as a way of trying to claim/prove his blackness. Interestingly, his efforts to look black while already *being* black suggest that it is not only “mixed race” characters like Birdie and Redbone whose race may be hard to name or

place through visual means; indeed, despite being “all” black, Deck is described as “not very dark, and his features were not very African—it was only his milk-chocolate skin that *gave his race away*. His face spoke of something other...it reminded Sandy of... half-nude natives at the first Thanksgiving. His hair wasn’t so woolly either. It was more like some of the Jews[’]... afros” (34 emphasis added). The idea that his features may not immediately be read as signs of blackness, but also, perhaps, of Native American or Jewish ancestries, reminds us that it is problematic to assume that race will be legibly written upon the body, while also suggesting to us why individuals of any race—mixed or not—might be prompted to perform, claim, or affirm that race in other, non-visual ways. The novel suggests not only through “mixed race” characters like Birdie and Redbone, but also through characters like Deck, that race is more than just what can be seen and that the body doesn’t always speak for itself.

Despite his anxieties about his appearance, occupation, and family, however, all of which contribute to his sense of himself as inauthentic and only able to occupy a space of racial “in-betweenness,” we see that Deck is in fact neither black nor white but both, to borrow a phrase from Werner Sollors.⁶ Although he fears that he might not look, act, or talk black enough in the eyes and ears of others, Deck frequently succeeds at performing blackness in ways which earn him an accepted place in the black community. Not surprisingly, his primary tactic for performing “authentic” blackness around certain audiences is to modify his language, no doubt in part because his educated, formalized way of speaking as an academic can play as much of a role—if not more—in causing others to question his blackness as does the fact that he is “not very dark [looking]” (34). Young argues in his study of the intersections between masculinity, literacy, and racial performance that a “certain sociolinguistic performance of masculinity” is required among black men, one which is “incompatible with literacy”; in Deck’s case, it would seem that his overly literate, overly academic identity makes his claims to blackness precarious (Young xvi). Yet, as the young Birdie constantly observes, her father is aware of this very fact, and thus consciously alters his speech—“blackening” or “whitening” it—depending upon who his

audience is; it is through listening to these performances that Birdie herself gains some of her most powerful knowledge about how to “play up” or “play down” her own blackness. As Birdie tells readers, “my father always spoke differently around Ronnie [an African American friend of the family who is involved in Boston’s Black Power politics]. He would switch into slang, peppering his sentences with words like ‘cat’ and ‘man’ and ‘cool’” (10). Birdie, who finds herself frequently bored to tears by her father’s near-incessant use of academic discourse inside their own home, notices the ways in which her father’s use of language changes when he wants to affirm his “insider status” in the black community and to distance himself from both his personal and professional affiliations with white people and whiteness. As Grassian puts it, despite being “all black,” Deck becomes “conscious of race and concerned with his own perceived authenticity as an African American male [when he is] around others of his ethnicity” (323-4). In other words, it is in those contexts where Deck finds himself among an all-black audience that he becomes most concerned with proving his blackness through language. At places like Bob the Chef’s, a soul food restaurant, Deck is formally greeted as “Professor Lee” by the black workers and patrons, marked by this title as something of an outsider, someone relatively less familiar in this type of setting; but, he is nevertheless able to perform blackness and to convince others that he is one of them by “slap[ping] palms and slip[ping] into the slang he used” in “all-black establishments” (88, 90). After Deck splits from his white wife and starts seeing a black woman named Carmen, he frequently brings her to these establishments, where he insists on publicly referring to her as his “brown sugar”—interestingly, again, Carmen’s *appearing* black cannot just speak for itself here; rather, Deck uses language to reaffirm Carmen’s blackness to others and to call added attention to it (90). It is not only among other blacks, however, that Deck changes his language to perform “authentic blackness.” He also uses this tactic in certain circumstances as a way of placing distance between himself and a white audience. While fighting with his wife, Deck emphasizes the racial (as well as socioeconomic) backgrounds that separate them, not only through what he says, but also how he says it. After

telling Sandy that “no matter how much you try to fight it[, y]ou’re a Harvard girl at heart,” Deck “pause[s] to light up a cigarette then continue[s], *changing the tone of his voice slightly*, ‘And I need to go to Roxbury.. Find me a strong black woman. A sistah. No more of this crazy white-girl shit’” (25 emphasis added). Often worried that his career and marriage have made his passing into whiteness permanent, Deck in fact regularly performs and claims his identity as a black man; his changing use of language by context indicates that he is not permanently black *or* white, but rather able to identify with and become a part of either racial community depending upon circumstance and motivations.

Indeed, it is largely through his own motivation and diligent efforts that Deck first finds a way to pass as white and thereby gain insider status in the (white) academic world. Like John Kwang in *Native Speaker*, Deck earns himself an “honorary” place in the white world, one where his appearance as non-white doesn’t seem to matter to his colleagues, primarily by mastering the use of a certain type of language. We learn that to gain entry into the elite white world of academia, Deck “spent years perfecting his irony and stale wit in order to distinguish himself from the poor black blokes scuttling around the outskirts of the city” (56). Foreshadowing the ways in which his own daughters will also “spen[d] years” learning to speak in ways that challenge others’ assumptions about their racial identities, Deck, like Kwang, succeeds in mastering a discourse which allows him to be accepted into the world of the educated white elite, despite not necessarily looking the part. Deck finds the use of this type of language to be advantageous for him in contexts beyond the realm of academia, though, learning the hard way that there are some circumstances in which he needs to use language to “offset” the blackness of his body and the attendant racist assumptions that come with others’ readings of that body. In the previously discussed scene in which Deck and Birdie are confronted in the park by two police officers, for example, Deck uses his language to “play down” his blackness and affirm his affiliation with whiteness, thereby alleviating the officers’ concerns that he may be trying to harm his white-looking daughter. Although the officers approach Deck asking “all right,

brotherman... who's the little girl?," Deck does not respond by using this same lingo—instead, he responds formally, using the language of his professional life by answering, "She's my daughter. Is there a problem?" (60). Had Deck been greeted in this same way—"all right, brotherman"—by his black friend Ronnie or one of the patrons of Bob the Chef's restaurant, we can assume he would have responded using a similar informal linguistic style. Here, however, Deck responds by "passing" or crossing over into the role of the educated academic—the "whitened" black man—in order to avoid a problem with the police. It is critical to note that Deck's performance of whiteness here is not only successful, but also temporary, provisional. Fearing himself capable of occupying only an "in-between" zone, neither black nor white, Deck actually "passes" for both black and white, and does so primarily by altering his language in response to specific contexts and circumstances. The shifting racial roles that Deck plays as an "all-black" man suggest the difficulty of classifying racial identity in a singular or unitary way—as Ibrahim puts it, there are "a range of black subjectivities not easily united under a single banner" (165). This range of subjectivities exists and develops in response to the demands and expectations of certain audiences and contexts, which play a critical role in determining how and why one alters one's racial performance and identity. The pressure that Deck feels to emphasize or deemphasize his blackness in different settings exemplifies Young's idea of the burden of racial performance, which requires individuals to be "this kind of black here, that kind there" (50). As Birdie also eventually learns, it is through language that Deck can successfully become the many different "kind[s] of black"—and white—that he needs, wants, or is expected to be in different circumstances. It is not the color of his skin, but rather the way in which he communicates, that changes as Deck passes into and out of a variety of racial identities, suggesting, as Young has argued, that "racial performances are most often carried out through language [rather than through the visual]" (xiii). The fact that he always remains (relatively) "black-looking," while still performing multiple racial roles, also reminds readers, again, that it is not only "mixed race" characters like Birdie who play many parts; rather, the text suggests

that we all perform our racial identities in various ways which sometimes exceed, challenge, or complicate the “texts” of our bodies.

Deck’s wife, Sandy, however, fails to recognize or acknowledge the multiple, provisional nature of Deck’s identity, calling him out on what she perceives to be his “inauthenticity” and falseness as a black man in much the same way that Lelia, Henry’s white wife in *Native Speaker*, labels her husband as inauthentic and falsely American/native. Birdie tells us that whenever her mother heard Deck use words like “cat” and “man” and “cool” she would “laugh and say it was his ‘jive turkey act’” (10). In the scene when Deck threatens to leave her and go to Roxbury to find a “sistah,” she laughingly replies, “oh my God... ‘A sistah.’ Don’t blacken your speech around me. I know where you come from [here she refers to Harvard, where she and Deck met when he was a student in a course taught by her father]. You can’t fool me” (25). But the idea of “blackening” or “whitening” one’s speech in order to “fool” others is shown to be a totally plausible one for both Deck *and* Sandy—she, too, uses language to construct multiple versions of herself, performing not just whiteness, but a number of different variations of whiteness, through her own linguistic passings.⁷ In fact, although she critiques Deck’s linguistic performances of blackness as attempts to “purge himself of his ‘honkified past,’” she also uses language as a way of distancing herself from her own past, particularly the formalized and stuffy white world of academic and social class privilege in which she grew up as the daughter of a Harvard professor (10). When playing the role of the counter-cultural revolutionary, an identity she adopts throughout much of the novel, Sandy speaks in an abrasive, profanity-ridden language that is a far cry from the reserved, soft-spoken, and “proper” way that she speaks when trying to perform an upper-class, elite whiteness. In an argument with Deck about her involvement in Boston’s counter-cultural political scene, for example, she yells out “Fuck off, Deck. All right? ‘Cause your ass sure isn’t helping out with the cause. I mean, there’s a war out there. A fucking war... Shit, Deck. The FBI is trying to destroy everything we’ve fought for. And all you can think about are the origins of the word ‘Negro’” (18). In a way, Sandy’s performing

the role of the revolutionary can be understood as her attempt to pass for black—or, at the very least, to gain insider status in the black political community (and indeed, Sandy often seems to be more of an “insider” among Boston’s Black Power activists than her husband is). Yet, in other scenes in the novel, we see shifts in her language and behavior which indicate that she plays the role of both the counter-cultural revolutionary sympathetic with—and passing as part of—the black power cause, and that of the white woman who grew up “in a big old Victorian house in Cambridge, had been educated at one of the best prep schools, [and] had spent evenings reading Sartre aloud to her father, [a] Harvard classics professor” (76). At times, Sandy performs the role of the “standard-bearer” in much the same way Lelia does in *Native Speaker*; contrasting this performance with her use of an unconstrained, improper, and even vulgar English at other points in the novel clues us in to the fact that Sandy’s speech and behavior shift and change as she constructs herself as various different kinds of “white.” In certain scenes, particularly right before they leave the city to visit Sandy’s mother, a descendant of Cotton Mather, in the suburbs, Sandy not only prepares to change her own language, but also tries to “whiten” her daughters’ speech, scolding them for saying things like “I don’t see nothing,” shouting back “Anything! You don’t see anything!” (75). Her attempts to change the way her daughters speak reflect her awareness of the fact that whether or not one uses English “correctly” can influence others’ perceptions of one’s race.

In those scenes when Sandy returns to visit her mother, using correct English becomes a particularly important part of racial performance, as she tries to convince her mother that both she and her daughters are (despite her marriage to Deck) not only “white,” but the right kind of white. When Sandy heads back to the white, upper-class, elitist environment in which she was raised, both her language and her construction of her racial identity change, as she morphs from a counter-cultural activist aligned with—indeed, a part of—the black community into a white “blue-blooded” New Englander. Just prior to the point in the novel when she and Deck separate permanently, each taking one daughter with them, Sandy makes several trips back to

her hometown to visit her mother, which are mostly desperate attempts to secure some cash from the wealthy woman before she and Birdie head out “on the lam.” Although we know that Sandy feels the pressure to gain approval from her mother if she wants to get the money, and that this approval depends in large part on her ability to perform the “right” type of whiteness in her mother’s presence, we see, interestingly, that Sandy makes no effort to change her appearance or even her mode of dress when she travels back to her mother’s formal, proper New England home. Her language and way of speaking change noticeably, however, suggesting that her acceptance by her mother, and in this town more generally, hinges more on her ability to talk the talk than to look the part. Although Birdie thinks that her mother looks, in Concord, Massachusetts, like a “strangely garbed woman—corpulent... boisterous,” and out of place with “a Mexican scarf around her neck and her hair in twin Indian-style braids,” her language nevertheless marks her as an insider, despite her odd appearance and the questionable addition of her “glowering dark daughters” who “stunk” of “urban fiasco” (79). In Concord, Sandy becomes an increasingly whiter version of herself, not because her appearance changes at all, but because of what she says and how she says it: in this Anglo-Saxon, upper-class, all-American New England town, the same woman who rants to her daughters about how the Feds are “pigs” and “fascist monsters” and of how the racist U.S. is a “sick, sick country” now speaks tranquilly of how “lovely” it was when “Daddy used to take me on the canoe here [on the Concord River]” and of how her father was a “good, decent man, in the best tradition of [white] America” (86, 79). In the upper-class, all-white, segregated town of 1970s Concord, it matters not that Sandy hardly looks like a “proper” upper-class white woman, nor that her dark-skinned daughters, the proof of her interracial marriage to a black man, are by her side, precisely because she, the daughter of an Ivy League professor, can convincingly speak of “what a world it must have been” when “Emerson, Hawthorne, [and] Louisa May Alcott” were “all in the same vicinity” (79). The final time the girls return to Concord with their mother in an attempt to secure cash before the family split-up, Sandy stresses that it is not only her own performance that matters

now, when the stakes are especially high, but also her daughters'; as such, she coaches them in advance on how to speak around their white grandmother during the visit. Bird tells us that "as we drove over the bridge that led from Boston to Cambridge, my mother... shouted to us over her shoulder about what we could and couldn't say in the old woman's presence" (98-9). The same girls who have spent months practicing how to say "nigga" the way their black classmates say it (a point I will return to momentarily) now prepare themselves to switch from "black English" to "white English" in order to meet their grandmother's demands that they "speak proper English in [her] house" (103). Likewise, their mother also has to be careful of what she can and can't say in Concord: when Birdie's grandmother wistfully comments that Birdie "could be Italian. Or even French," Birdie "expected my mother to bark something back like 'Well, she's not, crackerjack. She's black!' But instead she just smiled kind of sadly and said, 'Yes, mother, she could be'" (107). The narrative's emphasis in these scenes on the ways in which linguistic demands (what Royster calls "discourse expectations") change by physical context, as the girls and their mother travel back and forth from (black) Boston to (white) Concord, also serves to foreshadow how later, when Birdie moves from a largely black world to a largely white one for a more permanent period, it will be language—what she can and can't say in the presence of others—that becomes of utmost importance to her success in passing.

Just as much as from Deck and Sandy, Birdie also learns about racial passing and linguistic performance—what she calls "the art of changing"—from her sister Cole, and from the many experiences the two share while growing up together in Boston before their parents separate them (63). It's interesting that it seems easy to forget at times that Cole, too, is biracial, that *both* girls put effort into passing for both black and white. The fact that Cole's efforts to pass—especially her efforts to pass for black, despite being repeatedly described as the darker-looking of the two sisters—are largely unmentioned in critical discussions of *Caucasia* illustrates the rather widespread, and arguably somewhat unconscious, tendency in our culture to still assume that the physiological defines racial identity. Cole's passings seem to not be fully

recognized or acknowledged in many readers' minds because we know that she looks blacker than Birdie and is viewed as the "black" child of Deck and Sandy, and so we assume she has no occasion to pass as Birdie herself does. Yet, by perceiving Cole as definitively and permanently black just because she is less "mixed"- or "white"-looking than her sister, one assumes that her racial identity is somehow stabilized by, and reflected through, her appearance (something we have already seen to be untenable even for "all-black" characters like Deck). Quite the contrary, just because Cole looks blacker than Birdie does not mean she is unquestionably viewed by others as black—indeed, in some contexts, she seems to look "too" black, while in others, she does not look black enough. Although we are told repeatedly that Cole looks much more "black" than Bird does, her appearance also has hints of "whiteness" just as her sister's does, and she can look more or less "black" at different times. As Bird explains, "[Cole] turned honey-colored over the summer, though later, in the winter, when she lost her tan, she would turn closer to my own shade of beige." And though Cole has her father's "kinky hair and small, round nose," her eyes are those of her mother's, "the color of sea glass, forever shifting between blue, green, and gray" (42-3). The ambiguity of Cole's appearance, like that of her black father's, is another indication of how all of the characters in the text, not just Birdie, serve to heterogenize and diversify definitions of race, challenging the concept of static, unitary, or easily definable notions of "blackness" and "whiteness."

Indeed, although there are times when Cole is described as even "blackier" looking than her "all-black" father, her curls "nappier than his" and her "full pouting lips... fuller than his," when Birdie and Cole enroll in the all-black Nkrumah school, it is not only Birdie whose appearance makes her suspect to questioning from peers trying to "figure out" her race; Cole, too, finds her racial identity and belonging in the school questioned by those who think she looks white (42-3). Like Birdie, Cole finds that aspects of her appearance such as her un-cornrowed hair and her ashy knees make her racial identity hard for others to place or determine, and thus, she learns to perform and assert her identity, particularly her blackness, in

other, non-visual ways. In fact, it is together at Nkrumah—long before they separate and Birdie begins her long-term passing as white—that the two girls first begin to cognitively engage in the act of passing, learning to use language, in particular, as a means of negotiating, manipulating, and constructing identities for themselves that are not determined primarily by their bodies. As Birdie and Cole grow older, *both* girls find themselves constantly unsure as to where they “belong” racially and in what contexts they will be marked as racial “insiders” or “outsiders”. Though this causes them some unease, it also offers the girls an increased awareness of both the fluidity and malleability of identity and the possibility of “passing” for multiple different racial identities through the careful and practiced use of different types of language. Interestingly, in an early scene in the novel, Deck tells Sandy that “in a country as racist as this, you’re either black or you’re white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass” (27). But his comments oversimplify the very notion of racial identity, which the novel shows to be much messier and more complex than this, while also overlooking the ways in which his own daughters—both the darker-skinned Cole and the lighter-skinned Birdie—will learn to (and, indeed, often be required to) perform racial identities as both “black” *and* “white” (27).

As mentioned, at Nkrumah, both Birdie and Cole struggle to “prove” their blackness to their black classmates: on her first day, Birdie’s classmates wonder if she is white or Puerto Rican and ask what she is doing in an all-black school, while Cole doesn’t fare much better, finding herself the subject of teenage taunting during her first few weeks there because she has “white knees” and because her hair will not cornrow like Keisha Taylor’s, instead looking “like a bird’s nest” (49, 51). Quickly, Cole realizes that if they want to be accepted among their black peers, she and Birdie must find other, non-visual ways to prove or claim their black identities. Though she is afraid that things like her ashy knees and unmanageable hair will “expose” her as white, she also recognizes that there are other means through which she can both assert her blackness and minimize her “whiteness.” Shortly after her plan to become a “blacker” version of herself by having her hair cornrowed fails miserably (the attempt goes wrong, Cole implies,

mostly because her white mother doesn't know how to style "black" hair), Cole makes the decision to switch from trying to modify her *appearance* to, instead, adapting her *language* to fit her new environment—and she begins to teach her younger sister to do the same. While thumbing through an issue of *Ebony* at home in their bedroom after the failed cornrow attempt, Cole announces to her sister, "We talk like white girls Birdie... We don't talk like black people. It says so in this article." Pulling examples from the magazine that are intended to demonstrate for black readers how black people (should) talk (the very irony of which suggests that there is no natural or innate relationship between race and language), Cole advises Birdie, "don't say 'I'm going to the store.' Say, 'I'm goin' to de sto'... And don't say 'Tell the truth.' Instead, say, 'Tell de troof.'" Taking the advice of her sister and the magazine quite seriously, Birdie nods and "whisper[s] to [herself] 'Tell de troof,'" and in that moment, both girls undertake their first fully-cognizant attempts at linguistic passing (53).

Birdie's first act of passing, then, is an attempt to pass for black, not for white. As I will discuss in more depth toward the end of this chapter, critics have argued at length that Birdie gives up her "real" identity as a black girl to pass as white when she moves with her mother to New Hampshire, but blackness is no more her "real" race than whiteness is—both are learned, constructed, performed identities that she employs provisionally throughout the novel. In the many scenes where the two sisters experiment with their racial identities by trying to emulate "real" blackness, Birdie's relationship to blackness is shown to be as unnatural and performative as is her relationship to whiteness.⁸ Neither racial identity is Bird's "real" one; as Dagbovie writes, "while Birdie 'passes' for something she both is and is not (white), she also passes for something she is and is not (black)" (105). Although, at times, Birdie experiences her multiple passings as evidence of her racial "inauthenticity," fearing (as her father also does) that she is neither black nor white, as the novel progresses, we see Birdie become increasingly adept at moving with ease between different types of languages and discourses, skillfully employing linguistic resources to construct different, provisional versions of her racial identity. In fact, the

lesson she learns with her sister while reading *Ebony* in their bedroom—if you talk a certain way, you can be a certain race—is one that she learns again many times over at Nkrumah, long before she leaves with her mother to pass as a white girl in New Hampshire.

On Birdie's first day at the all-black Nkrumah school, her peers' inability to confirm her blackness through her visual features causes an immediate stir: her new classmates wonder, "who's that?' 'She a Rican or something?' 'I thought this was supposed to be a black school.'" When Ali, one of the more popular male students, asks Birdie in front of the entire class, before the teacher has arrived to intervene, "What you doin' in this school? You white?," the narration notes that a "terrifying silence" fills the room as Birdie "trie[s] to think of *something to say*" (43 emphasis added). Interestingly, Birdie knows in this moment that her body cannot speak for itself. Because her blackness cannot be proven through her appearance alone, she immediately tries to think of how to use language to prove that she belongs at Nkrumah. Though she is at a loss for words then, she doesn't make the same mistake again—Birdie quickly realizes how to use language to "play up" her blackness and to detract attention from the "whiteness" of her features. After enrolling in Nkrumah, she begins to spend "many nights in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say 'nigger' the way the kids in school did it, dropping the 'er' so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: *nigga*" (these scenes are an interesting parallel to the ones in *Native Speaker* in which Henry practices his language in front of a mirror in much the same way) (63). Her efforts to "authenticate" herself as black demonstrate what Young calls the pressure or burden to "adjust [one's] speech and behaviors" so that they "cohere" with the particular racial identity one wishes to claim or perform in front of a given group (1). This "adjustment" involves, as I have argued, careful practice—not only studious spectatorship and carefully listening to others, but also careful and repeated efforts at mastering one's own linguistic performance(s). The preparation and practice that are required in order for Birdie to learn to "talk black" and thereby be accepted among her black peers serve as an equally potent reminder of both the flexibility of language (Birdie *can* change her speech)

and the inflexibility of the discourse expectations that structure the different settings of everyday life. Though Birdie's adaptive use of language indicates that one can change how one speaks in order to perform different racial identities, it also shows that this doesn't just happen automatically, but rather requires a good deal of effort in order to successfully meet the specific discourse expectations of others. Recalling the ways in which Birdie doubts Redbone's linguistic performance, finding it unconvincing even though he tries his best to use "black slang," readers understand the importance that Birdie get her words "just right" if she wishes to be accepted at Nkrumah. Indeed, like Henry in *Native Speaker*, who feels himself a phony when he practices using English while looking in the mirror, Birdie's nights in front of her own mirror aren't enough, on their own, to convince her that she is able to pass as black. Even after practicing how to "talk black" both on her own and with her sister, we see that when Maria, a classmate at Nkrumah, asks Birdie "So, you black?," she is as unsure of how to answer as when she is asked by Ali on the first day of school if she is white: in response to Maria's question, Bird "nodded, slowly, as if unsure of it myself" (63). Able to perform blackness linguistically at this point, Birdie still hesitates to claim blackness entirely, because she isn't yet sure how her linguistic performance will be received by Maria and her other new classmates. Once Maria indicates that she accepts Birdie's language as trumping her appearance, however, Birdie proudly tells readers that she is "knighted black by Maria," and the kids at school who previously doubted her blackness come to see her "in a new light," her appearance literally altered in their eyes by her ability to confirm her blackness non-visually (64). The extent to which Birdie's linguistic performance requires the approval of her classmates, who must be convinced by her use of language if they are to accept her as "one of them" despite her appearance, speaks to what Elam calls the "social theatricality of race—the tacit recognition of an always present audience in racial formation, and of the collaborative construction of racial identity" (*Souls* 159).

Birdie's awareness of an "always present audience," and her willingness to consistently practice and perfect her ways of speaking to meet a given audience's expectations, pay off

dramatically, as she quickly progresses from being the “white girl” and outsider at Nkrumah to one of the most popular “black” girls at the school. Yet, interestingly, what it means for Birdie to “be” “black” during her Nkrumah years itself constantly changes depending upon context and circumstance. Even within the singular space of the school, Birdie uses language in a variety of ways to perform different *versions* of blackness. Although she frequently plays the role of the “hip” black girl among her peers by speaking in the same informal, slangy English that they do (“Aw, Birdie! You was about to beat your record!” shouts a friend during a game of jump-rope at recess), Bird is also insightful enough to realize that this way of speaking, though appropriate and even advantageous in the hallways and on the playground, might not be the best way to speak in the classroom itself (108). Thus, she also hones her ability to mimic her academic father and speak like an intellectual in order to impress her teachers: in the classroom, Birdie “found myself repeating some of my father’s ideas,” such as his theories about “America’s ‘love affair with castrated, blind, and crippled black boys,’” to “an amused and surprised Professor Abdul, who blinked at me and said, ‘Very astute, Birdie’” (72). As mentioned earlier, Birdie also learns to adapt her language in different ways to try to earn the attention and respect of her father—around him, she doesn’t use the word “nigga” as she does with her black peers, but instead speaks in phrases she picks up from teachers at Nkrumah and from the other black adults around her, greeting him with “Salaam Aleikum” or bidding him goodbye with “Stay black, stay strong, brotherman” (74). And, lest we forget, even as Birdie’s time at Nkrumah is spent learning how to perform different versions of blackness, she also continues to be expected to act white in certain situations, including when she is at her grandmother’s home and even, at times, when she is in her own home. Indeed, during the same night in which Cole and Bird practice talking black with *Ebony*’s guidance, Birdie learns a lesson about the importance of appropriately changing one’s language to fit the context and audience. When the girls come downstairs from their bedroom to eat dinner with their mother and her white friend Jane, Birdie asks Jane to “pass de butta,” attempting to try out her new ability to “talk black.” But instead of

gaining her sister's approval, Cole only "gigg[es]" at the awkwardness of the situation; the same language that they diligently practiced moments earlier in their bedroom seems silly, even ridiculous, in this new context in which they dine with their white mother and her white friend (54). The many different ways in which Birdie adapts her language to perform a range of identities—blacknesses *and* whitenesses—reminds us of the instability and contextuality of the very concept of race. As Elam puts it, "who is black enough, who decides, and what is the basis for the decision are assessments that are as unstable among black people as among white people." Birdie therefore learns, like the rest of her family members, to negotiate racial identity with "attention to its relation to community" (*Souls* 92-3, 150).

As these early scenes in the novel show, before she ever begins the long-term passing as white that critics frequently discuss as "*the*" act of passing in the novel, Birdie has already frequently engaged in passings, both linguistic and racial. As she puts it, herself acknowledging that her passing began long before leaving Boston with her mother, "I learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to me. *Maybe I was always good at it.* Maybe it was a skill I had inherited from my mother, or my father, or my aunt Dot, or my Nana" (and, indeed, it is a skill she "inherits" from all of these people and others) (63 emphasis added). Both "insider" and "outsider" at Nkrumah, in Boston, and even among her own family, Birdie finds upon arriving in New Hampshire that her appearance does not confirm her "whiteness" there any more than it confirmed her "blackness" in her old town, but that *language* still offers her a way to become an "insider" in this particular racial community, just as she could among other black people back at home. Let us turn now to a discussion of Birdie's "long-term" passing as white, and to an analysis of how her changing use of language throughout this section of the novel indicates the ways in which she passes not just for white, but for many different versions of whiteness.

When Birdie and Sandy split from Deck and Cole, it is not only because of the increasing distance between the family members themselves, but also because of Sandy's involvement in

some sort of underground political activity which is only alluded to, never fully explained, throughout the narrative. Sandy believes that she is wanted by the FBI and needs to go “undercover,” but that it will be impossible to do so with a black husband and blackish-looking daughters by her side—she fears that a mixed-race family would call too much attention to itself, making it impossible to go “incognito.” Instead, she and Deck decide to split the family in two: Deck takes Cole, the darker-looking daughter, with him and his girlfriend Carmen to Brazil, and Sandy takes Birdie, the whiter-looking daughter, with her on the road, eventually settling in New Hampshire. As Birdie explains, “The FBI would be looking for a white woman on the lam with her black child. But the fact that I could pass, [my mother] explained... would throw them off our trail.” Yet, although Birdie’s mother convinces her upon their departure from Deck and Cole that “my body was the key to our going incognito,” this actually proves to be far from true (128). In fact, Birdie’s less-than-lily-white features often make others suspicious about her race during her years on the road and in New Hampshire, while *language*—not Birdie’s body—proves to be the key to successfully allowing both Birdie and Sandy to perform the right type(s) of whiteness. In the scene in which Birdie and Sandy plot their long-term passings, the importance of the linguistic, more so than the visual, in enabling their “transformations” is emphasized through their focus on changing their names rather than their appearances—they are more concerned with having white-*sounding* identities than with actually *looking* white. Birdie’s name is traded in for the new name of Jesse, after Sandy’s great-grandmother who was a suffragette; Sandy notes that this new name is one with “a lot more dignity” than her daughter’s old one (129). Sandy, too, seeks a new name for herself as a way of creating a white(r) identity, and, in so doing, clues readers in to the fact that Sandy and Birdie aren’t just trying to pass for white, but for a very particular kind of white. Already white-skinned, Sandy now wishes to become a whiter version of herself—a “blue-blooded,” upper-class New England kind of white which will allow her to disassociate herself from her more “off-white” history as a counter-cultural political activist, supporter of the black power movement, and wife/mother of a black man and “black”

children. Her choice in names, therefore, is not only raced but also classed, gendered, and sexualized, reflecting her desire to pass not just as white, but as an upper-class, heteronormative, feminine kind of white. After trying out a “series of ‘dyke names’... Toni, Bobbi, Pat, Jordy,” as well as several “‘trailer park names’ that she thought fun for their white-trash flavor—Donna, Candy, Flo,” Sandy decides that “none of them seemed good enough for her to keep” (129). Aware that the very sound of her name will reflect a certain background, a certain history, and a certain kind of whiteness, Sandy decides that she wants this to be a “purer” whiteness. Thus, after seeing an article in the morning newspaper featuring a picture of a woman named Sheila Dorsett who “was blond, and looked the way [Sandy] might have looked if she had more control over her appetite, if she never met [Deck], if she had stayed in Cambridge, gone to Radcliffe, married a doctor,” Birdie’s mother is rechristened as Sheila (130). Interestingly, once both characters have chosen their new names, Sandy immediately begins to actually look different to Birdie/Jesse, furthering the narrative’s emphasis on the power of the linguistic to trump the visual. Birdie tells us with surprise that “she looked different already, in those few seconds as Sheila. She looked sensible, the kind of mother I had seen before on television but never known. The kind who lived in the suburbs of Boston and drove their kids to soccer practice and ballet lessons... she looked mild” (130). In effect, Birdie sees her mother, now rechristened as Sheila, as a whitened (or whitewashed) version of herself. Always as white-looking as she has ever been, a change in name makes her seem to both sound and appear more white to her daughter.

After this, Birdie and her mother have to find a new last name for themselves, and Sandy settles on Goldman—Birdie, now renamed Jesse Goldman, is to pass for both white *and* Jewish. Interestingly, though, Sandy decides that Birdie is the only one of the two who will pass for Jewish. In her new role as Sheila, Sandy will play only the widow of a Jew, while Birdie is to pretend to be the daughter of a Jewish father, the deceased David Goldman, thus allowing Birdie herself to claim Jewish ancestry. Sandy seems to choose a Jewish identity for her daughter as a

way of explaining the ambiguity of Birdie's "off-white" features: she says that, if anyone asks, Birdie/Jesse can tell people that her father had a "mop of curly black hair, an Afro, the way Jews have sometimes" (131). Jewishness becomes, then, a way for Birdie to answer others' questions about her appearance by claiming whiteness rather than blackness—but it seems that Sandy *also* chooses a Jewish identity for her daughter because this is one that she can emphasize linguistically, calling attention away from her daughter's ambiguous features all together. The scene in which Birdie and Sandy prepare to undertake their long-term passings ends with Birdie telling us that, despite just being renamed as Jesse, her mother decides instead to call her "my little *meshugga* one" (131), and, throughout their four years of long-term passing, continues to call Birdie/Jesse her "*meshugga nebbish* with exaggerated relish" if she was "feeling particularly paranoid in public places" (140). Sheila knows that making her daughter *sound* Jewish through the nicknames she calls her will help to alleviate others' concerns about her ambiguous appearance, ensuring that they see Birdie's "off-white" features as indications of Jewishness rather than blackness. Using language, then, becomes a means—perhaps the primary means—for "Sheila" and "Jesse" to hide their previous selves and to "authenticate" their new racial identities, proving that they are who they say they are, despite the ways their appearances might suggest otherwise.

The first time their passing is put to the test, requiring Sandy and Birdie to prove themselves through their language, occurs when the two women begin to seek permanent lodging in New Hampshire. Since they have recreated their identities anew, Birdie is worried about the fact that her mother lacks the references and other documentation that landlords will require, but Sandy assures her daughter that she can "play the part when she needed to" (143). Indeed, this is a part that Sandy knows well, since the New Hampshire family she chooses to contact about lodging is of the same upper-class, "blue-blooded" New England background as was her own family growing up. Sandy therefore puts on a linguistic performance for her future landlords that is quite similar to the ways in which she uses language to put on a performance

for her own mother in Concord—in both contexts, the “milder,” less abrasive, less profane Sandy emerges, her speech much more “proper” and reserved than it is when she plays the role of the revolutionary. Before heading to a payphone to inquire about the place available for rent, Birdie again reminds her mother that “we didn’t have references, that they probably wouldn’t even bother meeting with us. But she hadn’t seemed worried” (146). Sandy is unperturbed because she knows that calling ahead—getting a chance to *speak* to the landlords before she and her daughter are *seen*—will actually help their chances of getting the place. Confident in her ability to put on a linguistic performance that will convince the landlords of her good background, references or not, Sandy places the call about the potential rental, the text emphasizing the importance of the words she speaks: Birdie waits nervously outside the booth, watching her mother as “her lips [move] silently to somebody on the other end,” until Sandy emerges from the phone booth triumphant, telling her daughter with a wink, “I think they bought it. I think I got ‘em” (146).⁹ Once they meet with the landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Marsh, in person, Sandy’s use of language becomes even more tactical. As the interview takes place, Birdie’s narration of her mother’s performance tells readers more about what Birdie hears than what she sees: “I followed [Mr. Marsh] and my mother over the spongy grass... listening to her lay it on thick.” In her efforts to win over Mr. Marsh (who, interestingly but perhaps not surprisingly, is an English professor at the local university), Sandy transforms herself into a conservative, blue-blooded woman in the same way she does when she visits her mother in Concord; and, as in those visits, what Birdie notices most during the interview is how her mother’s language changes as she shifts from performing the role of a revolutionary to performing a more reserved, “dignified” type of whiteness. Evidently, the performance works right from the start: before Mrs. Marsh and Sandy have even formally met one another, Mrs. Marsh comes forward “smiling approvingly,” her approval stemming from the fact that she had “spoke[n] to [Sandy/Sheila] th[at] morning on the phone” (148). As the interview continues, Birdie realizes that Mr. and Mrs. Marsh never ask for the references she worried about, but instead “asked my mother

inconsequential questions” which Bird “could see... was a way of proving that she spoke their language” (149). Sandy “answer[s] their question like a pro,” but Birdie also realizes that they are hardly hearing the content of her answers—instead, what Mr. and Mrs. Marsh do hear is “an educated voice. They heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she would do just fine” (149-150). Indeed, Birdie notes that she had “never seen [her] mother so appropriate” and that the performance is “paying off” (149). Not only does Sandy’s performance get them the rental cottage on the outskirts of the Marshes’ abundant property, but what the Marshes hear literally affects what they see. Although Birdie wonders to herself throughout the interview, “what did they see?,” worrying that the Marshes might detect her blackness, she realizes at the end that she already knows the answer: they do not see a half-black girl or even a half-Jewish girl, but instead a “tall, statuesque, blue-blooded woman... never mind that thin, glowering, dark adolescent by her side... They saw a woman and a child... They knew she was one of them” (149-50). Birdie becomes aware here that her mother’s linguistic “insider status” is able to override her own physical appearance which, with its hints of “blackness,” might otherwise have been enough to earn them outsider status in this small town. The “dark adolescent” that Sandy/Sheila brings with her is not questionable—or rather, does not need to be questioned—because the proof that Birdie and her mother “belong” has already been offered through Birdie’s mother’s speech. Here, language trumps appearance in defining the race/ethnicity of the “Goldmans.” Birdie’s appearance, particularly the color of her skin, *may* have marked her as a (racial) outsider in this small, white, New England farming community, but the speech her mother uses definitively marks *both* of them as white in the eyes of other white New Hampshireites right from the start. Sandy/Sheila’s ability to “talk the talk” becomes their “references,” their proof that they belong on the Marsh land.¹⁰

The encounter in which Birdie and her mother first meet the Marshes also functions as one of the most powerful ways Birdie comes to learn that passings, tactical and temporary though they are, are also always constrained by the specific situation; they are determined

largely, if not entirely, by context and audience, and are not just identities that one can whimsically shed or adopt at one's choosing, unaffected by circumstance and without respect to community (a lesson Henry also comes to learn in *Native Speaker*). Passings and performativity, Birdie begins to realize in New Hampshire, can be opportunistic, advantageous, and even liberating, but also painful and constricting; passing can be variously and even simultaneously both an act of resistance and of complicity. Indeed, part of what is required in order for Sandy to convince the Marshes that she speaks their language is for her to be able to hold her tongue at certain moments when, in her role as a counter-cultural revolutionary, she might have verbally exploded under similar circumstances. For example, when Mr. Marsh explains, in an accent intended to mock that of the area's working class residents, that he sends his son to boarding school in another state so that young Nicholas Marsh isn't influenced by the local "trailah pahk cultcha," Birdie can "almost hear [her mother's] thought: *Fuck you, you elitist pig*" (148). But, to Birdie's surprise, Sandy/Sheila "said only, agreeably, 'Oh, of course. Jesse may have to start thinking about boarding school at some point'" (148). Her restraint in this scene is indicative of Scott's idea of the "public transcript" discussed in Chapter 3; the context requires of Sandy that she follow a certain "script," putting on a performance that she might not put on in other, safer situations (recall, similarly, Mr. Park from *Native Speaker*, who has his son perform Shakespeare for white customers in the front of the store while he mocks these same customers and the way they speak from the sheltered space of the back of the shop). As Scott notes, ideological resistance—such as the type Sandy is used to partaking in as a political activist—must, in certain contexts, be "disguised, muted, and veiled for safety's sake" (137). Birdie realizes in this scene between Sandy and Mr. Marsh that although passing allows her and her mother a relative degree of freedom to negotiate racial categorization and social constraints, it also requires them to play along with the rules of their new social setting, which, for Sandy, means toning down her feisty political discourse if she wishes to be accepted and welcomed by her new landlords.

After spending months living out of their car while on the run from the FBI, Birdie knows that her mother's decision to rent out the Marshes' cottage means that this is where they will finally settle down and begin their new lives as Sheila and Jesse Goldman. Thus, Birdie resolves to fit in in her new town by "becom[ing] white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me" (1). Yet, this is virtually the complete opposite of what occurs—far from speaking for her or offering others a clear "answer" as to her racial identity, the ambiguity of Birdie's body and physical appearance leaves the white people in New Hampshire as uncertain of how to determine her race as were her black classmates in Boston. It is this uncertainty, this inability to "place" Birdie, that leaves open the possibility for her to perform through language those racial identities that cannot be "detected" or "proven" through her body alone. Rather than assuming that her body will speak for her, Birdie quickly learns, just as she did at Nkrumah, to *speak for her body*: how that body is detected, observed, read, and understood by others is shaped largely by the language Birdie uses to perform a given racial identity. Both "insider" and "outsider" at Nkrumah, in Boston, and even among her own family, Birdie finds upon arriving in New Hampshire that she is no more accepted as "white" there than she was as "black" at her old school. Indeed, her foreignness in the small town is emphasized right from the start: upon first seeing her, the local whites girl wonder "what the fuck kinda zoo" the new girl "escap[ed] from," doubting that Birdie/Jesse even "speaks English" (169). The girls' assumption that Birdie's seemingly odd appearance will be further reflected in the language she speaks, however, also cues our attention to the reverse possibility, which is that Birdie can manipulate her language to gain "insider status" with these girls and prove to them that she is not as different from them as they think. In short, if Birdie shows the girls that she *can* in fact speak English—and, in particular, the specific kind of English spoken by teenage girls in this New Hampshire town—she will appear less like a "zoo animal" to her new classmates. And indeed, this is exactly what Birdie learns to do: echoing her experiences at Nkrumah, she quickly learns to adapt her

language to fit her new context(s) and, subsequently, alters the opinion of her peers and other locals regarding her ability to “belong” in the town. In one of her first encounters with her new white classmates in New Hampshire (a scene which also closely mirrors the way her appearance marked her as suspect and subject to mistreatment from her new black classmates when she started school at Nkrumah), Birdie emerges from a bathroom stall on her third day of school to find a group of girls “all... staring at me with pinched smiles,” trying to figure out what to make of the “fuckin’ freakazoid” who “looks like she’s from another planet” (221, 220). Adept, at this point, to using language to both deflect attention away from her appearance and to mark herself as an “insider” among different groups of people, Birdie decides to talk to the girls using “some lingo I had picked up,” referring to the local marijuana she recently smoked as “Maui Wowie,” which causes the girls to “exchange impressed glances” (221). By the end of that day, Birdie has become one of them: she “sit[s] around a cafeteria table with a huddle of gossipy girls, popping French fries in my mouth and gabbing about who was who, what was what” (222). Though Birdie is “surprised at how easily they had let me in,” readers are likely to find her quick acceptance among the girls rather unremarkable as, at this point in the novel, we have been continually made privy to how linguistic passings allow Bird and other characters to convincingly perform a range of identities which gain them acceptance among different racial communities (222). Indeed, only a few pages later, Birdie herself describes how completely she has been able to take on the role of “one of those New Hampshire girls. I talked the talk, walked the walk, swayed my hips to the sound of heavy metal, learned to wear blue eyeliner and frosted lipstick and snap my gum” (233). The change she describes here prioritizes “talk[ing] the talk” as perhaps the most critical aspect of her transformation—Birdie doesn’t mention any physiological or psychological changes involved in her passing for white, but rather only superficial changes in appearance and, most importantly, a dramatic change in language (the word “nigga,” for example, practiced for so many long nights in Boston, is, perhaps needless to say, no longer a part of her vocabulary in New Hampshire).

Yet, interestingly, to be successful in her passing(s) means that, even in this small town in New Hampshire, Birdie must play multiple different roles in which to be “white” means a variety of things depending on the circumstance. Though Mr. Marsh calls the same young people Birdie comes to befriend at school “trailah pahk cultcha,” marking them as distinctly different and “othered” from the area’s upper-class white landowning elites like himself, Birdie successfully passes as “white” among *both* groups, the “trailah pahk” locals and the white elites, performing not just whiteness, but also different classed and cultured forms of whiteness. The way she performs differently around the Marshes than around her working-class friends is significant not only because it stresses the many continuous ways Birdie passes into and out of a variety of identities, but also because it emphasizes that whiteness itself is varied, not a singular identity or quality based on natural or inherent characteristics, but a construct whose meaning is altered and enacted differently depending on factors such as class, gender, location, and context. Around the Marshes, Birdie performs a “blue-blooded” whiteness comparable to the type of whiteness she has seen her own mother perform around her grandmother. Birdie tells us that when she is with the Marshes she “start[s] talking differently, affectedly, trying to imitate Libby [Marsh’s] long nasal drawl, and using expressions I heard Nicholas [Marsh] use, as if they were my own... When I came home talking that way... [my mother] would sneer and say ‘What the hell’s got into you?’” (194). Yet, while Sandy mocks Birdie’s way of adapting her speech around the Marsh family, suggesting that her daughter’s new way of speaking is indicative of her “blue blood [ancestry] coming back to haunt [her],” Birdie’s linguistic performance is no different than Sandy’s own ways of altering her language once she arrives in New Hampshire (193). While Sandy’s linguistic performance in the scene when they first meet the Marshes is what secures them their tenancy on the property in the first place, Birdie’s changed speech is an integral part of the *continued* success of that performance, stamping out any doubts that her ambiguous appearance might otherwise raise in the minds of the Marshes. Although Nick Marsh starts to affectionately call Birdie “Pocahontas” after her first summer in New Hampshire

reveals that she “turn[s] all brown in the sun [l]ike a little Indian” (indicating the ways in which her appearance still has the ability to “give away” her mixed-race identity), the Marsh family nevertheless fully accepts “Jesse” as one of them, noting that though she is “‘funny’ and ‘eccentric,’” she is also “‘awfully well brought up’” and “‘reek[s] of class’” (192-3, 194). Birdie’s ability to imitate Libby Marsh’s “nasal drawl” and Nicholas Marsh’s prep-school-inspired expressions overrides any questions her “Pocahontas”-esque appearance might raise, serving to secure her “insider” status among this “blue-blooded” white elite family. Indeed, the Marshes tell Birdie to “consider their house [her] second home, and g[i]ve [her] permission to enter without knocking,” treating her like “the daughter they never had” (193, 194).

Birdie’s multiple passings in New Hampshire make clear to readers that authentic, “pure,” and unchanging whiteness and “white” English are fictions (as are blackness and “black” English). In the same way, the narrative also emphasizes the fiction of a fixed, stable identity or of the idea of a “true” or “real” self; instead, we see that identity is multifarious, made up of many different ways of identifying as “white” or “black,” and constructed through the use of many different versions of English—many Englishes—that aren’t dependent upon race but rather upon *context*. In New Hampshire, Birdie performs, both linguistically and racially, not just one uniformly defined version of “whiteness,” but rather a range of classed, cultured, gendered, and contextualized forms of whitenesses. While critics such as Boudreau argue that “by ‘becoming’ white, Birdie is stripped of the agency to define herself,” I would note that while passing for white, Birdie makes a number of conscious choices about her identity, including first passing as white and Jewish, and then later as distinctly white and non-Jewish, as well as passing for both a working-class white and a white elite (60). In her discussion of *Caucasia*, Lori Harrison-Kahan makes a similar point, arguing that the text makes an “important innovation in the traditional passing story” by refusing to portray whiteness as a “monolithic category,” instead emphasizing that there are “specific kind[s] of white” (21). Yet, Harrison-Kahan’s analysis stops short by focusing primarily on the fact that the novel “reinscrib[es] the

biracial binary of black and white in terms of more complex categories of identity: black, white, *and Jewish*” (22). I would like to take her analysis one step further by arguing that *Caucasia* addresses an even larger range of racial identities and complexities than merely these three: Birdie performs not only blackness, whiteness, and Jewishness, but different variations of these identities and others. Though I agree with Harrison-Kahan that the novel “affirm[s] that race—even whiteness itself—is not clear-cut and fixed, but multiple and ‘in motion,’” I want to emphasize, more so than her article does, that whiteness is diversified in the novel not *only* through the fact that Birdie passes as Jewish, but also through the ways in which she and her mother both pass as “blue blood” and “trailah pahk,” “pure white” and “off-white,” etc. (24). Harrison-Kahan’s argument that Birdie “perform[s] blackness, whiteness, and Jewishness, thus bringing together all three identities into a single body” is, although valid, still too simplistic, a triangular explanation of her racial identifications that is, in many ways, as limiting as a binary one (24). The novel shows that Birdie’s identities-in-motion actually bring together much more than “three identities [in] a single body”: Birdie inhabits and performs a multitude of identities, always shifting and changing, which include, not just black, white, and Jewish, but also black daughter of a white woman, white daughter of a black man, black girl who looks white in an all-black school, black girl with blacker sister who makes her look white, half-black-half-white girl passing for Jewish, blue-blood white, trailah pahk white, black-looking white, white-looking black, and mixed-race-girl passing for Jewish passing for “pure” white, among other identities.

Harrison-Kahan also argues that passing as Jewish is Birdie’s way of resisting a complete immersion into whiteness and remaining somewhat affiliated with blackness. However, this analysis fails to acknowledge that in some circumstances, Birdie is eager to deny or hide the Jewish identity she has adopted in order to pass as a “fully” white, rather than “off”-white, girl. In the moments when she is asked by her girlfriends if she is Jewish, for example, or when popular boys throw pennies at her from a passing car while she stands with her non-Jewish white friends, Birdie *does* desire full immersion into whiteness, longing to be perceived as “pure

white,” not othered in any way. While Harrison-Kahan reads Birdie’s passing as Jewish as a sign that she privileges her black identity and doesn’t want to become “fully” white, it is important to remember that this Jewish identity was chosen for Birdie by her mother, somewhat arbitrarily, and that Birdie herself is invested in the performance *only* to the extent to which it is necessary to keep herself and her mother safe from the FBI and from others’ questions—that is, because the identity is *useful circumstantially*, not because it represents a tie to her black identity. Later, as the circumstances change and fear of the FBI begins to fade, performing Jewishness becomes less important and, at times, even inconvenient: Birdie tells us that she and her mother “played up my Jewishness only some of the time; other times we nearly forgot about it” (140). Indeed, although “play[ing] up” her Jewishness seems advantageous when Birdie first begins to pass as white, since it provides a way of explaining the darkness of her appearance, once Birdie has been accepted as white by her New Hampshire friends, she finds it is more advantageous to downplay her Jewishness in an attempt to perform the “purest” whiteness possible. Thus, after several years in New Hampshire, Birdie eventually removes the Jewish star she has worn since her mother rechristened her as Jesse Goldman, deemphasizing her Jewish identity more and more as the circumstances of her life increasingly suggest that it is best for her to not be “othered” in any way. It would seem, then, that Birdie’s identity is not defined by a “core” blackness which she tries to stay true to by adopting an “othered” Jewish identity, as Harrison-Kahan and others have argued. Rather, Birdie’s (racial) identity is shown to be “more plural than dual,” to borrow Cutter’s words: it is defined externally, by circumstances, context, and audiences, and therefore involves a wide range of different blacknesses and whitenesses (82).¹¹

Birdie’s ability to successfully perform this range of racial identities, and to negotiate her way into and out of a variety of racialized spaces, allows her to gradually develop the critical insight that comes with a multiplicity of perspectives. DuBois discusses the “double consciousness” of the black man who passes as white as affording a form of social insight: as

Elam writes in her work on passing, DuBois “believe[d] that mining the critical possibilities of double consciousness—with its gift of ‘second sight’ into a racist social order—could bring clear critical vision to the nation as a whole” (*Souls* 131). In a similar way, Birdie is able to gain valuable insight about the “social order” of 1970s America through her passings; however, I would suggest that hers is not a “double consciousness,” but a *multiple* consciousness, which allows her to see all racial constructions and performances, including her own, from a critical distance (indeed, as the novel goes on, Birdie increasingly describes herself as viewing her own racial performances from above or outside herself). Birdie learns not only to constantly examine the performances of herself and others (rather than taking them for granted as something “natural”), but also to examine her own role in a racist social order and her resistance against—along with her complicity with—different types of racism. When Birdie finds herself forced to listen to the racist rants of her white friends in New Hampshire, particularly her friend Mona, she has no choice but to remain silent or risk exposing herself as (part) black. Like her own mother, who has to hold her tongue at times when she would like to call Mr. Marsh out on his racism and classism, Birdie learns that her successful passing as white often requires uncomfortable and even painful acts of restraint. Speaking of her experiences encountering white racism in New Hampshire while passing as white, Birdie tells us “When I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth, Mona’s mother’s mouth, [Mona’s brother’s] mouth—nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie—I only looked away into the distance, my features tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping. Strange as it may sound, there was a safety in this pantomime” (233). There is safety in Birdie’s silence not only because she risks exposing her black identity if she speaks out against their racism, but also because she risks becoming the target of those racial slurs if she lets her hidden blackness be known. We cannot necessarily mistake her silence as consent or approval of white racism—certainly, Birdie does not agree with the racist diatribes espoused by Mona and her family, but rather maintains her silence as a way to keep herself safe in this all-white town. While this silence *can* be seen as a form of complicity

with the white racist “social order”—if Birdie chooses not to speak in defense of black people, nor to claim her own black identity, then she is, in some ways, complicit with white racism—it is also crucial to understand how moments like these allow Birdie to stay safe while also being both complicit *and* resistant, simultaneously. As she tells us, “as [Mona] and her mother and [brother] referred constantly to niggers and spics and dykes and gooks... I would smile weakly and avert my eyes... I was a spy in enemy territory” (269). In her role as “spy,” Birdie uses these moments to gain valuable insight about racism, including the ways in which white people behave when (they think) black people aren’t around. To borrow Wald’s words, Birdie’s ability to silently sit in on these racist conversations “disrupts the conventionally unilateral ‘looking relations’ of white supremacy, according to which white people are designated as subjects of the gaze, black people as its simultaneously marked (and thus hypervisible)... ‘others’” (146). Even as her silence signals complicity, Birdie also learns about white racism by studying the behavior of the whites she passes among, and imagines using these moments as opportunities to expose the racism of white people: “I used to fantasize that once I got back to Boston, I would write it up as a report to hand in to the Nkrumah School. I even thought up a series of potential titles... ‘What White People Say When They Think They’re Alone’ ‘Honkified Meanderings: Notes from the Underground’ Or something more casual and funky—‘Let Me Tell Ya ‘Bout Dem White Folks’” (189). Even as Bird’s silence in these scenes becomes a way of “passing” as a white racist, it also functions as an act of subversion whereby she “infiltrates” one racial community on behalf of another, learning about the ways in which racism both constructs and denies, hides and reveals, itself.¹² This infiltration of the white community, afforded by both her uses of language *and* her uses of silence, allows Birdie to develop what Scott might call a “critique of power [which] hid[es] behind anonymity [and] behind [others’] innocuous understandings of [one’s] conduct” (Scott xiii). The performances of complicity Birdie puts on around her white racist friends may be “possibly only a tactic”: rather than indicating Birdie’s false consciousness and complete assimilation into whiteness, her silence in these scenes can be read as a form of

subversive, if subtle, resistance (Scott 3). As Scott emphasizes, we should be careful not to overlook the “key roles played by disguise and surveillance in power relations”: the marginalized and less powerful, Scott argues, often offer “a *performance* of deference and consent while attempting to discern, to read, the real intentions and mood of the potentially threatening powerholder” (3). In the scenes when Birdie holds her tongue around her racist friends and their families, she is both performing complicity and gaining critical awareness about the function and existence of white racism in America. Far from buying in to white racist ideology and culture, Birdie’s passings provide her with a framework through which to understand and *critique* the systems of race and racism she is a part of. Her interest in exposing the racism of those around her indicates her desire to do more with her passing than just remain complicit; she also wishes to share her insights about racism with the rest of the world, in a way similar to DuBois’s suggestion that double consciousness be used to “bring clear critical vision to the nation as a whole” (Elam).

It is worth acknowledging here that it is not only when she is among whites that Birdie remains silent as a form of safety or as a way of sparing herself humiliation. Rather, Birdie is also exposed to racism when she is among blacks, and, as we have seen, must hide/deny her whiteness around them just as she is forced to hide/deny her blackness around whites. As Grassian puts it, “when she is amidst ethnically homogenous groups, Birdie becomes a chameleon, taking on the attributes of the majority in order to protect herself from being ostracized or from social scorn” (322). Among both groups, black *and* white, Birdie is at risk of becoming the target of racial prejudice if she does not play the appropriate role. The fact that Birdie’s passings are not merely arbitrary or whimsical choices, but primarily identities she adopts to keep herself safe in a society that is severely segregated by race and separated by racism, again reinforces the ways in which passing and performances are determined by external contexts and audiences. Birdie does not begin the novel as “truly” black, nor does she become “truly” white by its end; rather, she moves back and forth continually between these and

other identities, passing as both black and white temporarily and provisionally as circumstances require her to do so. Understanding this is particularly important in light of critical discussions of the novel, which tend to see Birdie's passing(s) as either "tragic" or "post-ethnic," concepts which I discussed in the introduction to Part II (see pages 198-203). Falling in line with recent scholarship on passing that "continues to allow the rhetoric of biological difference to seep to the surface, failing to disrupt the idea that the pre-passing identity is true and the passing identity is assumed," critics writing on *Caucasia* have frequently characterized Birdie as a "tragic" passer or tragic mulatta figure (Nerad 816). Such analyses view blackness as Birdie's "originary" or "authentic" identity, arguing both that she "loses" or "abandons" this identity by "becoming white," and that she ultimately longs to "return" to blackness, to give up passing and go back to being her "real" self. Boudreau, for example, writes that Birdie "betray[s]" her "true identity" while passing for white in New Hampshire (67, 68); Harrison-Kahan argues that *Caucasia* "casts blackness as the ideal, desired identity" (20); and Dagbovie writes that Birdie "stay[s] especially connected to 'blackness' throughout the novel" (93). Yet, as my discussion has shown, there is very little evidence in the novel to suggest that Birdie identifies solely or even primarily as black, and, in fact, she deliberately *distances* herself from her black identity throughout much of the text. Interestingly, critics have made much of the fact that Birdie eventually decides to leave New Hampshire in an attempt to reunite with her sister Cole, reading this as indication of Birdie's ultimate desire to "refuse" whiteness/passing and "return" to blackness/a "true" identity.¹³ But Birdie's "return" to blackness—her reunion with her father and sister at the text's conclusion—is hardly a "homecoming" for her, nor does she find herself feeling finally "authentic" or restored to her "real" self. Rather, when Birdie is finally reunited with Cole and her father, the long-awaited reunion is anti-climactic for both her and for readers: she (and we) feel the distance between herself and her "black" family members, and realize that there is no "innate" or "natural" connection Birdie has to either the black community or to her black identity. Instead, it seems that Birdie doesn't truly identify with either whiteness *or* blackness,

but rather comes to view race as a social construction, a position one adopts differently in the shifting contexts of everyday life. Critics who emphasize the significance of Birdie's eventual return to Cole at the novel's conclusion also overlook or ignore the fact that Birdie voluntarily stays in New Hampshire for *several years* (and enjoys much of her time there!) before finally deciding to give up passing for white and to go in search of her sister. Although Wall writes, in an argument that perfectly represents the "tragic" passing camp of criticism, that *Caucasia* "uses the more conventional form of passing (black for white) where the mixed-race protagonist Birdie is guilt-ridden over her loss of racial identity as she is forced, by her mother, to pass for white," such an argument fails to acknowledge the extent to which Birdie *likes* the person she becomes in New Hampshire, and in fact *chooses* to pass as white long after she is past the age when her mother can "force" her to do so (3). Indeed, far from offering evidence that Birdie's "true" identity is her black one, the large chunk of the novel throughout which Birdie passes as white serves to demonstrate that she is *just as at home* as a "white girl" in New Hampshire as she was as a "black girl" in Boston, and, in fact, maybe more so.

In an argument similar to that of Wall's and others from the "tragic" passing camp of criticism on *Caucasia*, Grassian suggests that the novel's most "tragic" outcome is that Birdie becomes permanently white through passing, thus losing her "true" black identity—or, as he puts it, "if one passes long enough, one's staged identity becomes more real than one's previous identity" (331). Grassian's choice of words implies that Birdie's "previous" identity as black was her real one while her identity as white later in the novel is her "staged" one; yet, the novel shows that this could not be further from the truth: Birdie's black identity is shown time and time again to be as constructed and provisional as her white one, and, as my discussion has shown, she is not free to "be herself" in all-black communities any more than she is in all-white ones. Blackness and whiteness alike are both inhabitable and uninhabitable spaces for Birdie at different moments throughout the novel. By the narrative's close, she doesn't experience passing as a tragic occurrence which creates a psychological or spiritual split between a "staged"

identity as white and a “real” identity as black; rather, Birdie views her passings as opportunistic, subversive, and tactical, indicating her awareness of both the requirements and possibilities of racial performance in a society that is dependent upon the false sense of social order provided by trying to racially classify and identify individuals. Nor does Birdie feel “empty” or without a sense of self throughout her many shifts in identity/identification; instead, she notes that “for me, there was comfort in that state of incompleteness” (137). Like *Native Speaker*’s Henry Park, who learns the usefulness of being an “agile actor” in everyday life, Birdie ultimately comes to appreciate the ways in which passing offers her opportunities to try to circumvent and resist racist and racialized social constraints (Lee 293). She tells us that she admires the Afro-Brazilian god Exu-Elegba because of his ability to be a “trickster,” “always shifting his form, always at the crossroads,” and thus representing both “potentiality and change” (242). In a similar way, Birdie’s own ability to “shift forms” and to “cross roads” offers her some possibilities for resisting and eluding systems of racial classification and stratification which she can never *completely* circumvent or escape.

The fact that Birdie is never entirely free from racial categorizations and constraints, even as she learns to inhabit these multiple roles, leads me to my disagreement with “postethnic” analyses of *Caucasia* which suggest that Birdie ultimately develops an identity “divorced from race.”¹⁴ Such arguments align themselves with the larger field of post-ethnic scholarship which suggests that in a post-civil rights, capitalist era, identities are completely chosen and voluntary, not tied in any way to factors such as gender, ethnicity, or race. In perhaps the founding work on postethnicity, David Hollinger argues in *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (2000) that the contemporary U.S. is a post-ethnic/post-racial society in which identities are not assigned or prescribed to the individual based on socially constructed categories, but rather adopted—and discarded—by the individual at will. Though my analysis of *Caucasia* works to show the ways in which linguistic and racial passing allow individuals to *move between* different racial categories, thereby giving them some ability to negotiate, resist,

and circumvent assigned or prescribed identities, I part company with postethnic readings of the novel in that I do not see the text suggesting that Birdie has the ability to *supersede* or *overcome* racial categories all together. There are very few, if any, moments in the novel when Bird is entirely free to choose how to perform her identity without regard to the racial norms of given contexts and the racialized expectations of particular audiences. Though critics have argued that the novel suggests that race may be “gradual[ly] efface[d],” my reading of the text in fact shows the impossibility of effacing race; instead, *Caucasia* suggests only that we might try to subvert or move between racial constraints and categories, to find ways of resisting them through strategic forms of passing and performance., but ones which must always be attendant to how race is expected to be performed in a given context (Grassian 321). As Elam writes, “one way to understand the relation between passing and racial performance is to see better how both are not a stepping out of the social field but an immersion in it” (*Souls* 105). Contrary to some readings of the novel, *Caucasia* does not portray the existence of or even the potential for a postethnic society, but rather depicts an America where identity is still intimately connected to race, space, and context. Birdie moves between different racialized spaces and contexts, negotiating them by using language as her tactic, but is still constricted by them and forced to alter her performance to fit those spaces—there is no way for her to exist “outside” of them. Though she may indeed *long for* a world where one’s identity can be chosen at will and divorced from race, she knows this is as yet impossible: the text ultimately shows that identity can only be “chosen” and constructed within the constraints of contexts that impose an array of different, and sometimes conflicting, racial scripts.

Interestingly, though, despite the fact that they themselves are required to perform their identities differently in different contexts, both of Birdie’s parents suggest to her, at times, that identity/ies *can* be “postethnic,” uninhibited by racial categorization and adopted on a voluntary, chosen basis. When Birdie and Sandy first attempt to create new “undercover” identities for themselves, Sandy tells Birdie that she’s “got a lot of choices” and “can be

anything”: “Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really.” Both Sandy and Birdie imagine the transition into their new identities as full of options and relatively effortless: Birdie tells us she is “simply relabeled as white” and that she and her mother have become “new people overnight” (128). But, as both women quickly learn, successful passing isn’t just a matter of “choosing” from among a range of identities and “relabeling” themselves as such; rather, the audiences they perform *for* also have to believe the performance they put on, and so even their “voluntary” or “chosen” identities become shaped and prescribed by those around them. Convincing others that they are who they say they are takes careful practice and concerted effort on the parts of Sandy/Sheila and Birdie/Jesse—although Birdie thinks they will become “new people overnight,” their transformations are more complex and demanding than this. Sandy tells Birdie that “it doesn’t matter what your color is or what you’re born into... it matters who you choose to call your own,” but the novel shows quite clearly that what matters is not *only* who Birdie chooses to call her own, but also whether or not those people choose to *accept* her as their own, which depends primarily upon whether or not they are convinced by her linguistic and racial performance (87). The external factors that shape Bird’s identity performances indicate the impossibility of a “simple ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities,” to borrow Lisa Lowe’s words (qtd. in *Souls* 105-6).

Yet, Deck, too, gives Birdie advice that undermines the reality of racial categorization and stratification, and fails to fully acknowledge the ways in which racism itself determines who can (or has to) pass, for what, how, and under what circumstances. Upon reuniting with her father at the novel’s conclusion and telling him that she has been passing as white for the past few years, Deck tells Birdie, “But baby, there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That’s just the absurdity of the whole race game” (391). Deck’s reducing racial passing to the simplicity of a costume change, however, overlooks the practice that goes into Birdie’s—as well as his own—linguistic and racial performances. The effort

required of Birdie in order to convincingly play the part of not only a white girl, but also a black one, indicates that ethnicity is not just a costume one can quickly and easily change, but rather can be a painstaking performance mandating that the individual be critically cognizant of and attendant to the different rules and norms that structure behavior in various different settings (as both Kawash's notion of "studious spectatorship" and Royster's notion of "discourse expectations" imply). The terrible anxiety and fear that Birdie experiences on the few occasions when she "slips up" while passing as a white girl in New Hampshire, saying something she knows she shouldn't have said (such as when she refers to black people as "us" in a conversation with Nicholas Marsh) (204), reminds us that "in power-laden situations... a misplaced gesture or a misspoken word can have terrible consequences" (Scott x). The pressure to successfully perform—to not "slip up" or make a mistake—demonstrates that individuals are not free to adopt identities independently and as they choose, but rather are forced to structure their performances in ways that allow them to successfully and convincingly fit into various different contexts.

The impossibility of existing outside of racial categories and the contexts that demand such categorizations is well demonstrated by the fact that Birdie uses less and less Elemenó (the language invented by Cole and spoken by the two sisters as young girls) as the novel progresses. What Birdie seems to value most about Elemenó is that it is a language that exists outside of context, "just words floating outside time and space" (6-7). Yet, though Birdie longs to be able to use language in this way—and, by extension, to create an identity for herself that is also uninhibited by contextual demands for particular performances—she recognizes Elemenó as a sort of linguistic utopia, realizing that the contexts of her everyday life demand situated, cognizant uses of contextualized forms of language, not the use of words "floating outside time and space." As it is demanded more and more that Birdie leave Elemenó behind in order to use the appropriate languages of her everyday life, she gradually begins to forget how to speak it altogether. However, even as Elemenó slips away from her, Birdie still frequently expresses her

longing for the temporary escape the language provided: a way to speak—and to exist—outside of social structures that impose racial scripts and require racial performances. Telling readers of the “gypsy life” she lived while on the run with her mother, Birdie admits that she “had begun to savor... that moment upon waking when I had no idea which city we were in, which day of the week it was, even where we had just been the day before. I felt somehow more lucid in that half-waking state, as if that place of timelessness and placelessness and forgetfulness was the only space one could possibly inhabit” (155). Here, long after she has left Cole and stopped speaking Elemeno, Birdie still longs to exist in a space beyond time and place—in other words, to exist *outside of context*. As she sees it, this is the only way in which one can truly “inhabit” a space, or, to put it differently, just exist—just *be*—without having to perform a situated identity. Yet, Birdie also knows that, like the utopian world of Elemeno, such a state of existence is impossible, a “half-waking state” that exists only in a dream world, never in reality. As Wald succinctly puts it, “the novel denies Birdie and the reader th[e] fantasy of boundarylessness”: existing outside of contexts, categorizations, and constraints is only a utopic fantasy (189).

Ultimately, then, postethnic readings of *Caucasia* do not seem to be fitting interpretations of the novel. Birdie does use language and passing to elude or escape racial categorization, but never *entirely*—she can shift in and out of one group or another, but must always construct herself, and her speech, in relation to where and with whom she is. Her experiences echo Young’s argument that “while racial performances may vary... the requirement to perform race is pervasive” (3).¹⁵ While some postethnic scholars are eager to view an increasingly mixed-race and multiracial society as one which has diluted or all together eliminated the concept and significance of race in contemporary America, it seems instead that boundaries and categories of race have not disappeared or ceased to matter, but have become increasingly complicated and myriad, as the varied performances of blackness and whiteness in the novel attest to. Hardly a “post-ethnic” or “post-racial” nation, everyday life in the modern U.S. may in fact increase the demand for racial performances, as a world of greater racial

complexities and mixed-race identities multiplies the range of ethnic and racial selves one may be expected or commanded to perform.

To say that Birdie is forced to shape her identity in response to contexts, and therefore cannot have one stable, unchanging version of herself, is not to say that she is merely a blank slate to be written on or determined by others, nor that she is “identityless” as a result of her many passings. Though critics such as Grassian have argued that Birdie ultimately concludes that “some form of identity is crucial for emotional stability,” I would suggest, instead, that she learns that the notion of identity as something that can be stabilized is a fiction, a utopia. The many racial categories she is expected or demanded to perform in her everyday life make the idea of a coherent or stable self impossible. Instead, Birdie learns—like Henry Park—that to survive, one must successfully negotiate a path for one’s self within the constraints of social structures, learning to change, shift, and adapt in order to move between contexts. Rather than stabilizing her identity, it is Bird’s ability to successfully perform so many different identities that makes her a subversive, resistant character. Neither identityless nor committed to performing one singular identity, Birdie is best described as a series of identities in motion, responding to contexts which shape when, how, and why she both speaks and identifies in certain ways, but also carefully choosing how to act in and negotiate her way through those contexts. Although she is described in the novel as a “gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping” (which may seem to be a sort of painful limbo for one to inhabit), as Elam notes, Birdie “does not have, nor does she need to have, a static seamless identity... the novel suggests that it is precisely the moving target of her social location that uniquely positions her to critique colorism and classism” (Senna 137, Elam 4). Birdie’s constantly shifting positionality does not suggest that she is a mere puppet playing demanded roles in different contexts, without any “true identity,” but rather allows her a heightened consciousness and an increased awareness of how to negotiate her identity in a racist, racialized society.

Regarding the complexity of the concept of passing in this narrative, we can turn to the work of Jackson and Jones, who usefully define passing as

denot[ing] not social artifice but social absoluteness: the degree to which all identities are constituted through routinized and repeated actions. One passes for what one purportedly is... everyday, *in thousands of miniscule and major ways*. Passing is less about faking prefabricated social identities than it is about demanding appreciation of the idea that all identities are processual, intersubjective, and contested/contestable... it highlights the performative scaffolding fundamental to any understanding of self and other. (qtd. in *Souls* 98, emphasis added)

Jackson and Jones's insights here closely parallel the conclusions that *Caucasia* ultimately seems to come to about passing. Throughout the novel, Birdie is partially responding to required performances which have been forced and imposed upon her, but is *also* adapting herself—by choice and through concerted effort—to fit different environs and to be better able to relate to different people in different contexts, allowing her to “pass... for what [she] purportedly is” in a variety of situations. Her very refusal to perform only a unitary, singular racial identity is itself significant, indicating *some* degree of personal choice with regard to identity, the ability to exercise agency within constraints. As Senna herself puts it, Birdie's identity is both “a question of circumstance, and, in the end, her own personal choice. There is no given, no ‘always and already’ in terms of her identity” (Arias 449). Not stable or fixed, Birdie's self is comprised of a series of provisional identities shaped both by context *and* by how she manipulates that context, most notably through her varied uses of language.

Both *Caucasia* and *Native Speaker* suggest that, in some ways, we all pass. As Adrian Piper puts it, “the fact is that the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately” (268). We are all defined—our races, our identities, the very notions of “who we are”—by others as much as by ourselves. This is both restrictive, in that we are constantly interpellated by others' expectations and assumptions about

ourselves, and potentially resistant and subversive, in that if we have no “fixed” identity, no one person we are always expected or assumed to be, then the possibilities exist for us to constantly change ourselves to best fit situations and circumstances and to best meet—or upset—others’ definitions and expectations of who we are. As Wall rightly notes, there are “specific differences in the manner in which different groups pass as others,” but “we are all passing as one thing or another, whether we desire it or not”—everyday, in a multitude of ways, each individual “pass[es] as and for oneself” (8, 10, 13). Though some critics have suggested that certain passings in *Caucasia* are more “legitimate” or perhaps more ethical than others (Elam, for example, describes Sandy’s “slumming in New Hampshire when trying to pass as working class” and her “dilettante experiments as a lesbian” as “form[s] of indulgent experimentation”), it seems perhaps a bit too simplistic and somewhat problematic to suggest that Birdie’s passings are “real” and other characters’ aren’t, which would carry with it the implication that only those of mixed or minority races engage in passing. As both *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia* clearly show, however—and as other recent narratives of gendered, economic, and sexuality-based passings have also demonstrated¹⁶—passings occur in a variety of circumstances and contexts, and are driven by a range of motivations, sometimes related to one’s race, and sometimes not. In a myriad of ways, we all pass in our everyday lives, but for different reasons and in different situations, some of us with more at stake than others, both personally and/or politically, and some with more hurdles to cross in the process than others. Lee and Senna’s novels suggest that many Americans, regardless of their race, can and *do* pass, but that not all passings are equivalent in degree, type, form, risks, consequences, or level of subversiveness—and this is true as much of linguistic passing as it is of racial passing. As Brandt notes, “although the racism of our society often invites [those in positions of power] to hear and inscribe aspects of the most stigmatized dialects (for instance Ebonics or the ‘broken’ English of second-language speakers), the speech of the nonstigmatized is not so closely scrutinized for its deviations from the accepted standard” (13-14). In this sense, linguistic passings are not all “equal” or equally demanding—

the socially and racially marginalized in society are always already more likely to find themselves and their speech scrutinized than are the powerful. Similarly, Young notes that “the burden of racial performance... is always imposed on (and often eagerly accepted by) blacks in ways that it could neither be imposed on nor accepted by whites,” while Wald notes that “white people (especially white men) traditionally have enjoyed a greater liberty than others to play with racial identities and to do so in safety, without permanent loss or costs” (Fof I 162). Their arguments can be well summarized by a statement by Scott, in which he reminds us that “power means not *having* to act or, more accurately, the capacity to be more negligent and casual about any single performance” (29). Though we all pass in some ways, the need to be extremely cautious about one’s passing in order to avoid negative outcomes is usually of greater necessity for the socially and racially minoritized than for the powerful.

The fact that not all passings are equivalent, however, also means that different passings have different sorts of power and potentiality—and for the racially and ethnically minoritized, those most affected by a racist social order, passing seems to have the most subversive and resistive potential. Cutter argues that “only when ‘passing’ becomes a subversive strategy for *avoiding* the enclosures of a racist, classist, and sexist society does it become truly liberating,” and of course, the marginalized are the most constrained by such enclosures (“Sliding Significations” 75). Their acts of passing also seem to have the most potential for exposing, challenging, and revising a racist social order: as Wald puts it, “where racial designation is a means of social exclusion and oppression, racial self-definition becomes more than an abstract or superficial practice; rather, it acquires political significance as a critique of racial ideology” (*Crossing the Line* 20). This is exactly the way in which passing functions for both Birdie Lee and Henry Park: their “multiple consciousnesses” (to again revise DuBois’s idea of double consciousness to include room for the insight gained through performing *many* racial identities) situate them in unique positions to both understand and challenge the ways in which race and racism function in the U.S. Elam eloquently explains that because passing “requires an

adjustment of perspective, recognition that norms can be generated anew,” it is “always politically implicated in the larger possibilities for social change” (*Souls* 119-20, 118). As boundaries are crossed by passers, they are continually redefined, challenged, and changed, resulting in new types of racial formations as well as, perhaps, new ways for the self to “be” in society. As a form of infrapolitics— an “art of political disguise”—passing requires “an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes... available” (Scott 138). As these loopholes are tested and exploited, new definitions and constructions of both self and society become possible, as *Native Speaker* and *Caucasia* powerfully demonstrate. Beyond individual identity, these novels also emphasize the constructedness of such notions as racial authenticity and linguistic hegemony, as well as the very ideas of nationhood and citizenship. Through their interrogation of such constructions as standard and non-standard Englishes, whitenesses and blacknesses, and nativeness and non-nativeness, *Caucasia* and *Native Speaker* also ultimately challenge the very concept of Americanness. Through the diverse ways in which we see what it means for Birdie Lee and Henry Park to be “Americans” and to live in America, we learn to question not only the categories of individual and racial identity, but also of national identity itself.

Part III

Bad Subjects: Assimilative Schooling and Alternative Education in Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

“There is no such thing as a neutral education process” – Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (34)

“[The American people] are not satisfied with English as it lives and breathes, English with a Cuban accent, the English spoken off the coast of South Carolina, or Hawai’ian Creole English. We want good English, the one correct English... [we] pursue this mythical beast as if it were the solution to all of our societal ills. One Good English, we feel, is the right of our school children, and the responsibility of their teachers” – Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent* (122)

“That girl was schooled so good, she wouldn’t admit there was such a word as ‘ain’t’ in the English language, even if a hundred million Americans yelled it in her face every hour of the day” – Mezz Mezzrow, *Really the Blues* (54)

“Education... always has had, and will always have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent” – W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (35)

In 1974, in the wake of national civil rights actions and massive social and political change spawned by concerns regarding racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S., the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published its groundbreaking position statement on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (hereafter referred to as SRTOL), affirming that students in U.S. high school and college classrooms should have the “right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” CCCC’s statement also addressed the organization’s belief that “the claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” and that “a nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects” (Smitherman

and Villanueva xv). The publication of the controversial and highly contentious position statement,¹ which triggered outpourings of both praise and outrage, support and resistance, from English language and literacy teachers across the country, was groundbreaking in part because it advised teachers of English to do exactly the opposite of that which has been the legacy of U.S. schools since the founding of the nation: it encouraged them to use their classrooms to foster linguistic and cultural diversity and flexibility, rather than linguistic and cultural assimilation, homogenization, and standardization. The SRTOL called for *truly* multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual classrooms, rather than classrooms that seek to acculturate multicultural students to the norms and values of the dominant mainstream U.S. culture and language. For many at the time (even some teachers who may have considered themselves liberal or even radical), this transformed and transformative vision of learning—a significant departure from traditional cultural understandings of the function schooling serves in our society—was unsettling, if not downright disturbing (see Smitherman, “The Historical Struggle”). The shock, concern, and outrage expressed by educators and critics in the months and years following the publication of the SRTOL is a powerful testament to the widespread acceptance or even expectation in our culture—arguably as prevalent in 2013 as it was in 1974—that the school’s role is to turn young students of all races and ethnicities into assimilated citizens, members of a relatively uniform national culture and users of a “standard” English language.²

As the most assimilative and nationalistic of all American institutions, the school’s role throughout U.S. history has been to acculturate subjects to national norms—racial, linguistic, cultural, economic, political, and otherwise—and to inculcate values such as patriotism and love of country. Like all dominant bureaucratic institutions that structure everyday life in the U.S. (the legal system, the media, welfare and social service agencies, etc.), the school demands that subjects conform to the dominant culture in particular ways; however, the school is unique among these institutions in that it also plays the additional and crucial role of *teaching* subjects

how to conform “appropriately.” It is through the school that students first receive formal instruction about the socio-political, racial, economic, and cultural roles that will be expected of them and assigned to them by other dominant institutions throughout their lives. Though we often think of the school, in the simplest sense, as the place where our nation’s youth learn the basic intellectual and cognitive skills they will need to carry them throughout adulthood—particularly reading, writing, math, and critical thinking skills—the school is also responsible for the highly politicized tasks of teaching history, civics, and government, reminding us that its *primary* function is to serve as an “arm of the state” (to borrow a term used by Annette Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods*, her excellent study of how schooling intertwines with and works to reinforce dominant mainstream values and ideologies). According to this theory of schools as functioning to reproduce the status quo, the main goal of state-run schooling in the U.S. is not to educate and enlighten, or even to teach basic skills, but rather to discipline (and, when necessary, punish) in order to ensure proper “acculturation.”³ As Angela Valenzuela argues, schools are best defined not as spaces devoted to true learning but as “aggressively assimilationist” institutions (30). More so than any other U.S. institution, schools strive to continually (re)produce a nation of like-minded citizens who accept and support the dominant values and ideologies of the state and the dominant (white) American culture.

As the history and controversy of the SRTOL demonstrate, the school’s goals of assimilation and acculturation place particular emphasis on policing and controlling how students use language. Even in our current age of globalization, mass immigration, and multiculturalism, our society considers a student’s ability to speak and write in “standard” English as one of the most important indications that he or she has been properly and successfully educated. Likewise, many Americans believe that schooling plays a critical role in safeguarding and upholding national linguistic “standards.” In *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the U.S.*, Rosina Lippi-Green discusses the dominant cultural belief that “something as important as language cannot be left to itself...

There must be experts, persons in charge, structured authority” (58). Though she emphasizes that there is, in fact, no such thing as a “standard” American language—such uniformity would literally be impossible (not to mention undesirable) to achieve—Lippi-Green notes that the “*myth* of standard language persists because it is carefully tended and propagated” (59 emphasis added). It is in the school, more so than any other place in our society, that the tending and propagating of this myth occur: functioning as the “heart of the standardization process,” the school strives toward the impossible goal that all students (and national subjects) speak the same language, the same unaccented English (Lippi-Green 65).

The use of schooling as an indoctrinating and aggressively assimilationist mechanism of the dominant culture is overlooked or accepted by many Americans because of the myth of the “promise of education” as a guarantee of success and upward mobility in society—a myth that has been powerfully dispelled by, among other studies, Harvey Graff’s well-known work *The Literacy Myth*. Many marginalized individuals, particularly new immigrants to the U.S., are eager to participate in the assimilative process of schooling because of the “promise” American education misleadingly offers its students. As Valenzuela puts it, schooling is *supposed to* (but rarely does) “function... as a conduit for the attainment of the American dream” (3). Many individuals buy into the ideology that schooling can make one successful, or Americanized, or both (with the two often viewed as being integrally connected to one another), and thus embrace the opportunity to receive a “free” public education. Yet, as scholars such as Graff and Valenzuela have repeatedly shown, schooling does not necessarily fulfill the promises it makes to its pupils, particularly those who experience education as *subtractive schooling* (a term used by Valenzuela which I will discuss in more depth momentarily), where much is sacrificed in an attempt to be “successful” in school and society, but little is gained. Though many students do become “Americanized” through their participation in the U.S. school system, this assimilative process doesn’t always lead to success (economic, social, or otherwise), and also often comes at the cost of loss of one’s native or home language, culture, and values.

Indeed, if the primary function of the school is to assimilate students to the so-called norms and standards of the dominant culture, then, by necessity, the flip side of this coin is that schools also play a crucial role in suppressing, rendering invisible, and attempting to altogether eradicate the languages, values, histories, and belief-systems of non-dominant U.S. cultures and peoples. As Moss writes in “Informal Literacies and Pedagogic Discourse,” “questions about education and the role of pedagogic discourse are fundamentally questions about the unequal distribution of social power” (15). Valenzuela, similarly, argues that schools are the “key sites for the production of minority status” in our society (4). Indeed, since attendance at school is often the first time that young people interact with others outside of their immediate family or local community, it is often the first place they become aware of their minority status, the first time they see themselves as “other” (an experience poignantly portrayed in many works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, as I will discuss in more depth momentarily). At the same time, however, schools also function as sites of “de-ethnicization” which, Valenzuela argues, occurs most powerfully through the loss of home languages, which are treated in schools as perhaps *the* primary “marker for ethnicity that can serve as a basis for exclusion” (26).

The school’s tendency to denigrate and devalue cultures, histories, and, in particular, languages other than those deemed “mainstream” or “standard” by the dominant culture is the subject of Angela Valenzuela’s excellent ethnographic study on *Subtractive Schooling*. Valenzuela argues that compulsory education in the U.S. is, for minoritized students, primarily a *subtractive* process.⁴ Schooling divests these youth of important social and cultural resources, most significant of which are their abilities to speak languages and dialects other than standard English. Emphasis on “subtractively assimilationist policies” such as the use of English Only in classrooms leaves students *more*, rather than *less*, vulnerable to academic failure, Valenzuela’s research suggests: “Rather than building on students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge and heritage to create biculturally and bilingually competent youth, schools subtract these identifications from them to their social and academic detriment” (25). English as a Second

Language (ESL) programs, for example—now commonplace at every level of schooling from elementary school to college—are forms of subtractively assimilationist schooling. Such programs are designed to gradually (but permanently) transition students into (standard) English Only classrooms and lifestyles, while failing to reinforce or leave room for students’ native languages and cultures. Indeed, the very name of the program is misleading, since ESL courses do not actually encourage English as a *second* language, but rather expect (or even demand) that students steadily make English their Only language.⁵

Although the school’s attempts to mold and change the language of the majority of the nation’s students in order to fit a certain ideal/mythical “standard” seem to be taken as natural or as a given in our culture—the fact that we educate students across the country in both English language arts and ESL courses is widely accepted or even expected by most U.S. citizens—it is actually a curious expectation or demand that we should ask students to change the way they speak, write, and express themselves in order to conform to the standards established by elite members of the dominant culture. Lippi-Green puts it in a useful context: referring to language, she writes, “we do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of their skin, their religion, their gender, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world” (63). Such suppression happens, she adds, first and foremost through our schools:

what our schools do, for the most part, is to insist that some children forego the expressive power and consolation of speech in that variety of English [or in a language other than English] which is the currency of their home communities. This gesture of denial and symbolic subordination is projected as a first and necessary step to becoming a good student and a good citizen. (132)

Echoing Valenzuela’s notion of subtractive schooling, Lippi-Green makes clear that the process of Americanization through education—“becoming a good student and a good citizen”—frequently requires sacrificing one’s home language and culture.

Widespread cultural acceptance of the school's role in linguistic assimilation and subordination is due at least in part to what Richardson describes as the "dominance of the ideology of English monolingualism in America, the belief that it is not normal for citizens to be bilingual or multilingual and that once one learns English, it should be spoken all the time, given the superpower status of English worldwide" (48-49). As I discuss in the conclusion to Part III, such assumptions are misguided as well as detrimental to both our youth and our nation as a whole, but are reinforced by the myth of the "promise of education," which contains within it the implicit idea that one needs to speak "good" English in order to cash in on success, and can learn to do so at school. Lippi-Green argues that the promise of education (what she calls the "unfounded promise," extended to all U.S. schoolchildren but guaranteed to only a few), is paired with the school's use of "explicit threat" regarding language usage (182). Schools justify their demands that marginalized students conform to linguistic standards by warning students that if they continue to speak their home language/dialects and do not conform to the use of standard (white) English, they will have limited choices and opportunities in their careers and professional lives—the "explicit threat" (as I show in my next chapter, Oscar Hijuelos's novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* challenges this idea, suggesting people can get by, and even be quite successful, without the use of standard English). Simultaneously, schools offer students the "unfounded promise" (proven by Graff and others to be rarely fulfilled) that if they do succeed in learning to speak standard English, doors will open for them which will provide "automatic access to the rewards and possibilities of the white middle-class world" (Lippi-Green 182). Yet, while conformity to linguistic standards (and, by extension, dominant cultural values) does not guarantee economic success or acceptance in the cultural "mainstream," either socially or professionally, it *does* guarantee the perpetuation of the dominant culture through the suppression (and, in some cases, gradual eradication) of non-dominant cultures and languages.

Despite the generally successful efforts of the school to assimilate subjects and to reproduce the dominant culture, however, the history of education in the U.S. has in many ways

been a series of battles between racial and ethnic minorities, on the one hand, and the dominant white American culture, on the other, over who learns what, from whom and how, in what sort of contexts, and for what reasons and uses. As the following chapters all attest to, there is a vast and long-standing history of marginalized and minority groups establishing their own forms of schooling, both formal and informal, in order to educate themselves and their children in their own languages and about their own cultures and histories. Such efforts have been undertaken because of perceived needs to supplement what students learn in state-run schools with alternative forms of knowledge, or because no such opportunity for formal schooling in state-run schools existed, as was the case for African Americans throughout much of U.S. history. Examples of alternative schooling and systems of education throughout the nation's history abound, with informal and illicit forms of learning, both individual and collaborative, offering some of the most compelling of history's frequently untold stories about the struggle for and over education in America. Scholars such as Jacqueline Jones Royster and Janet Cornelius, who have studied the acquisition of literacy and education among enslaved African Americans, note that slaves ran secret schools on their masters' plantations at night, sometimes teaching and learning together until 2 or 3am after a 12 hour workday, and even using moonlight or stolen bits of wax to provide light for reading and writing (Royster 134). Slaves frequently made use of what James C. Scott calls *infrapolitics*, or disguised forms of resistance and subversion, to conduct schooling and offer or acquire education in contexts that appeared to serve other functions (in many pro-slavery states, teaching a slave to read or write, or being a slave who knew how to read or write, were serious social and/or legal offenses, often warranting terribly violent punishments, including the frequent amputation of the hands or arms of literate slaves). Royster writes, for example, of a woman in Charleston in the 1800s who was remembered for using a sewing class as a "cover" for a school for slave children (134), while Cornelius describes slaves who learned the alphabet or how to read through their interaction with the white children that their masters left in their care (see her chapter "Slave Testimony: 'We Slipped and Learned

to Read”). In addition to countless everyday forms of informal education that have been documented by scholars such as Cornelius and Royster (and portrayed by writers like Hijuelos, Mohr, and Silko), minoritized groups throughout the nation’s history have also worked to establish their own formal systems of education that have resisted the assimilative efforts of the dominant culture and state-run school systems. The legacy of historically black colleges is one example of such efforts; as Deborah Brandt notes in *Literacy in American Lives*, these institutions continue to serve as the “oldest legacies of self-determination and education designed as service to the race” (108). In more recent decades, marginalized racial and ethnic groups have also pushed back, with significant impact, against efforts to deny equal access to higher education to people of color and of lower class status, and have also worked to force schools to address the needs and interests of a culturally and racially diverse student population, rather than a dominant white elite. Programs such as open admissions, affirmative action, and Educational Opportunity Programs have, as Smitherman puts it, allowed for a “new and different brand of student” to fill the seats of college classrooms, changing the historical legacy of limited educational opportunities for minority students beyond compulsory K-12 education (13-14). At the same time, the enrollment of these students within colleges and universities across the country has simultaneously changed higher education itself, most notably through expanded curriculum and course offerings such as the burgeoning of Asian American, African American, Africana, and Latino/a studies, fields which have often taken root at individual institutions in response to interest or demands on the part of students.

Beyond working to change educational institutions on a larger scale, however, Part III argues that individuals can—and do—frequently resist or circumvent assimilative and subtractive forms of schooling from both within and beyond the school’s walls, in a variety of ordinary (but often extraordinary) ways that are frequently overlooked or unmentioned in studies of the historical battles over education and schooling in the U.S. Valenzuela writes that “success in school means consenting to the school’s project of cultural disparagement and de-

identification” (94), while anthropologist Signithia Fordham has argued that “acting white” is an “unavoidable” result of participation in American schooling (qtd. in Young 43). But are these claims necessarily true, or are there ways of avoiding the assimilative processes of schooling that Fordham claims are unavoidable? What happens to those students and subjects who refuse to “act white” or to “consen[t] to the school’s project of cultural disparagement and de-identification”? When and to what extent might students’ performances of whiteness (through, for example, the use of a standard English while inside school walls) be exactly that—*performances of*, rather than *assimilation to*, the so-called “norms” and “standards” of the dominant culture? How might students who *seem* to “act white” in front of teachers and in classrooms find ways to resist both whiteness and subtractive schooling on their own terms? What kinds of alternative education do students—and non-students—construct for themselves and acquire through interactions with others inside as well as outside of the school?

Such are the questions Part III explores by examining portrayals of formal schooling and alternative education in three works of contemporary multi-ethnic U.S. literature: Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda* (1973) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977). Though fictional, I argue that these novels offer important perspectives on schooling and learning—including the ways in which individuals resist assimilative schooling and fashion their own alternative educations—that complement and expand upon the perspectives offered in scholarly studies of education, pedagogy, language, and literacy. In fact, Hijuelos, Mohr and Silko are only three of many multi-ethnic U.S. writers whose works directly address issues of schooling and education in ways that are worthy of examination not only by literary scholars, but also by scholars of literacy, language, pedagogy, and education. I lament that I only have room in this section to focus on three of these works at length, and have chosen these particular novels largely because their sustained emphases on the relationship between language and education make them particularly relevant to my larger project. Before turning to a discussion of these texts, however, it seems worthwhile to first

briefly discuss some of the many other works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature that portray the school as a “battleground” between members of minority and majority cultures, highlighting the contested and complex conditions in which many individuals learn (and unlearn) languages, literacies, values, and histories. Each of these works could easily have been a more substantial part of this section, and each is worthy of analysis by those who are interested in portrayals of literacy, language, learning, and education in works by multi-ethnic U.S. writers.

The experience of formal schooling as one of embarrassment, humiliation, punishment, and even violence is an extraordinarily prevalent theme in multi-ethnic U.S. literature, apparent in works in virtually every genre—short stories (including Mohr’s “The English Lesson”), novels, memoirs, plays, autobiographies, poems, and non-fiction essays by ethnic American writers have all testified to the school as a site of discipline and punishment, denigration and disparagement. As I discuss in more depth in the next chapter, Oscar Hijuelos’s novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* portrays Delores’s formal education as a “course of terrified learning”: “she’d learned her English after a long and humiliating struggle” in which she was “literally beat[en over] her head with a dictionary when she misunderstood or could not remember certain words,” her “chronic mispronunciation ma[king] her the butt of many a joke” (92). The fear instilled in Delores while attending school comes not only from the physical punishment she experiences, but also from the humiliation of being judged by teachers and fellow classmates as inferior, incapable, or downright stupid, specifically because of her language, accent, and ethnicity. Such experiences are echoed in Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*, in which Dallas, a second-generation Dominican American, dreads thinking about her grades because she knows that “it didn’t matter how hard she worked, all semester she floated somewhere between a D and an F, the Doomed and the Fucked... Dallas reached out to the D like a harp, reaching out to its beautiful round belly, believing that if she could just touch the other side of it, she would no longer be Fucked. Just Doomed” (197). Dallas’s grades are a great source of anxiety for her primarily because she feels that her teachers, along with her report

cards, have the power to define not only her intellectual abilities, but her very identity: a grade of D, though better than an F, still signals that she is “Defiant, Devious, Dicked, Dwarfed, Deranged, Damaged, Desperate, Damned” (197). Dallas perceives her teachers’ assessment of her performance in school as a reflection of her whole person and even of her future, and the verdict her teachers serve is that Dallas is and will be a failure, Doomed if not Fucked within American society—and deservedly so, given that she is “Defiant,” “Devious,” “Damaged.”

In addition to being a site of humiliation, fear, and punishment for many students, the school is also the place where many children of color first become aware of themselves as “minorities” or as racially/ethnically “other” in U.S. society, an experience which, as I mentioned earlier, is portrayed in many works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, both fiction and non-fiction. These works frequently depict the ways in which formal education causes marginalized students in the U.S. to think of themselves, their families, their languages, and their cultures as abnormal or inferior, a process which often starts from the very first day of school. In the opening pages of her memoir *Funny in Farsi*, which begins with a chapter entitled “Leffingwell Elementary School,” Iranian American writer Firoozeh Dumas tells us that “until my first day at Leffingwell Elementary School, I had never thought of my mother as an embarrassment, but the sight of all the kids staring at us before the bell rang was enough to make me pretend I didn’t know her” (4). Before she even begins to participate in the school curriculum—indeed, even “before the bell rang” on her first day—Dumas experiences schooling as something that makes her both hyperaware of her own foreignness and ashamed of her family for the first time. It is not only the teachers that make Dumas feel out of place and Othered (by, for example, asking the entire class to locate Iran on a map so that they can all see where Dumas is from), but also those students whose racial and cultural identities she perceives as markedly different from her own. Experiences of otherness through interactions with white peers in compulsory schooling are also described by Mexican American poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, who writes in his memoir that “I was out of place [at school]. The students were not from my world and I was not part of theirs”

(27). Carmen Lomas Garza's *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de Mi Corazón* similarly focuses on her experiences of otherness as a Chicana in a predominantly white U.S. school.

The sense of self as other that is a frequent result of being a marginalized student in U.S. schools is perhaps most poignantly portrayed by multi-ethnic U.S. writers through their descriptions of struggles with and over language usage in formal schooling. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes how "At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents." Anzaldúa equates this form of subtractive schooling, which demands that students "get rid of" their own ways of speaking, with an act of physical violence upon the body, writing that "wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (76). In a similar portrayal of an attempt to "tame" "wild tongues" through formal schooling, Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker*, discussed in Chapter 3, highlights the struggle that protagonist Henry Park, a second-generation Korean American, experiences when trying to speak English "correctly" in predominantly white classrooms. Describing his earliest encounter with formal schooling in a lengthy flashback, Henry tells readers:

It was my first year of school, my first days away from the private realm of our house and tongue. I thought English would be simply a version of our Korean. Like another kind of coat you could wear. I didn't know what a difference in language meant then. Or how my tongue would tie in the initial attempts, stiffen so, struggle like an animal booby-trapped and dying inside my head.... In kindergarten, kids would call me "Marble Mouth" because I spoke in a garbled voice, my bound tongue wrenching itself to move in the right ways.

"Yo, China boy," the older black kids would yell at me across the blacktop, "what you doin' there, practicin'?"

Of course I was. I would rewhisper all the words and sounds I had messed up earlier that morning, trying to invoke how the one girl who always wore a baby-blue cardigan would speak. (233-34)

Despite his desperate attempts to fit in among his classmates, to “master” the English language and control his “garbled voice,” the school continues to mark Henry as an outsider through much of his youth, particularly by forcing him to attend remedial speech classes. Henry describes these “special daily period[s] upstairs” as filled with students who “were misfits... dumb as the dead. By association, though, so was I. We were the school retards, the mentals, the losers who stuttered or could explode in rage... or who just couldn’t say the words” (234-5). As critic Jodi Kim puts it, Henry’s schooling demands that “racialized and ‘ethnic’ Americans like himself... become good Americans by eschewing and erasing any signs of their ethnic difference,” a process that Henry finds both traumatizing and humiliating (and one which he becomes increasingly resistant to, as I discuss in more depth in Chapter 3) (Kim 117).

As *Native Speaker* also makes clear, minoritized students in U.S. schools are made to feel othered not only through their experiences with language, but also through their lessons in history, which are often taught from a nationalistic if not jingoistic perspective which portrays non-white and non-American peoples as inferior to white Americans. Recalling the truncated, stereotypically racist version of Korean “history” that he found in his school textbooks as a child, Henry tells us that these books “didn’t mention any Koreans except for Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung, the Communist leader. Kim was a *bad* Korean. In the volume there was a picture of him wearing a Chinese jacket. He was fat-faced and maniacal. Bayonets were in the frame behind him. He looked like an evil robot” (225). As do Mohr and Silko in the novels that are the focus of Chapters 6 and 7, Lee calls attention in *Native Speaker* to the ways in which minoritized groups and their histories are both misrepresented and unrepresented in the version of “official” history typically taught in U.S. schools.⁶

However, as frequently as one finds portrayals of painful and denigrating schooling experiences within works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, one also finds depictions of resistance, rejection, and opposition to formal U.S. schooling and its assimilative efforts. In Gloria Naylor's story cycle *The Women of Brewster Place*, Kiswana Browne's narrative focuses largely on the differing value systems held by herself and her mother; perhaps the most contentious point of disagreement between the two women concerns the value of education for African Americans in the U.S. Kiswana's mother, who lives in the affluent neighborhood of Linden Hills and looks down upon Kiswana's working-class apartment on Brewster Place, tells her during a visit that "you could afford a lot better... if you hadn't dropped out of college and had to resort to these dead-end clerical jobs." Kiswana, who finds formal schooling irrelevant to the concerns and needs of her everyday life, feels "rings of anger begin to tighten around her lower backbone," as she responds to her mother, "you'll never understand, will you? Those bourgie schools were counterrevolutionary. My place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community" (83). While Kiswana's mother believes in the "unfounded promise" of education, suggesting that a college degree would have guaranteed her daughter such luxuries as a steady income and a nice home in a middle-class (white) community, Kiswana not only refuses to buy into this promise, but also criticizes the school as a place that divorces individuals from their communities and fails to contribute to the "figh[t] for equality." Her refusal to stay in school also encompasses a refusal to participate in the school's assimilative processes: as she questions her mother, "What good would I be after four or five years of a lot of white brainwashing in some phony, prestige institution, huh? I'd be like you and Daddy and those other educated blacks, sitting over there in Linden Hills with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia" (84-5). Kiswana believes education in white mainstream schools will inevitably lead to forgetting where one comes from and to turning one's back on one's racial or ethnic community; as such, she decides to reject such schooling altogether.

Rejections of formal schooling and its assimilative efforts are also seen, in particular, through the many frequent criticisms of “standard” English that emerge within and throughout works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature. One of the most powerful condemnations of the “standard” comes from Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, whose voice has captivated millions of American readers despite the “incorrectness” of her speech. Celie’s formal education ends when she is a young girl, but years later, a woman she sews with tries to teach her how to talk “properly.” Celie explains:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk... You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb... What I care? I ast. I’m happy. But she say I feel more happier talking like she talk... Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can’t think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down... [Darlene] Bring me a bunch of books. Whitefolks all over them, talking bout apples and dogs. What I care bout dogs?... Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind. (215-16)

Celie’s insistence that she is happy with the way she speaks, whether or not it is “dumb”-sounding, is an outright rejection of the standard and the idea of linguistic “correctness.” Her own language is familiar, comfortable, and useful to her; in contrast, the language Darlene wants her to speak confuses her thoughts, troubles her ability to express herself, and “feel[s] peculiar to [her] mind.” Celie deems not only Darlene’s language, but also the literacy materials she brings her, as irrelevant to her own everyday life—dogs, whitefolks, and “correct” speech are all uninteresting to Celie, who prefers her own language and sees no need to assimilate to cultural expectations of correctness and standardization. Her critique of standard English and of the merits of being “properly” educated is one that is echoed throughout many other works of multi-ethnic U.S. language, including, in particular, Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, as my next chapter shows.

As scholars studying education in the U.S. have argued, and as many works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature have alluded to, “struggles over educational policy reflect deeper ideological debates about cultural forms that define, or should define, America” (Valenzuela 26). Through their portrayals of such struggles within their works, the authors of multi-ethnic U.S. literature have not only illustrated the impacts of subtractive schooling upon individuals and communities, but have also articulated different visions of the “cultural forms that... should [or could] define America.” Their representations of the school illustrate both its disciplinary, assimilative, subtractive functions, *and*, conversely, its potentialities for being a space where new cultural forms could come into existence *if* schools were able to make room within their walls for a greater multiplicity of languages and cultures. Focusing on Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, the following three chapters argue that these texts depict the consequences of what Valenzuela calls “subtractive schooling strategies” which devalue the home and community life of minority and immigrant children, and fail to consider how experiences and languages of the home/community can be used to complement formal education in the school. All three authors demonstrate how the home values, languages, practices, and traditions that students bring to the classroom are treated as stumbling blocks, not stepping-stones, on the path to education and “success,” causing students to resent and resist their formal educations. In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, this is portrayed through Delores’s traumatizing experiences with a school system that tries to literally and metaphorically beat her Cuban American accent out of her, causing her to become so fearful of formal education that she chooses to fashion her own self-directed education largely outside of formal classrooms (as do her husband and brother-in-law, the Mambo Kings, who also comprise a part of the discussion in Chapter 5). Similarly, in *Nilda*, the devaluing of the home and community of the Puerto Rican schoolchildren of *el barrio* is made most apparent through the prohibition of the home language of Spanish and the denigration of Hispanic languages and cultures within the classroom. On the brink of World

War II, protagonist Nilda and her classmates are educated in a highly patriotic, almost jingoistic environment where they are constantly warned that they will never be a success or a service to their country if they continue to speak and act like their parents (Lippi-Green's "explicit threat"). In *Ceremony* (which is, like *Nilda*, set in the years surrounding and during WWII), the battle between mainstream U.S. schooling and home life on the Laguna Pueblo reservation centers around the language, values, traditions, and beliefs of protagonist Tayo's family and community, which are shunned and ridiculed in the school setting in favor of "official" forms of knowledge and history as they have been legitimized and canonized by both the school and the state.

Though, in many ways, an attempt to examine the educational experiences of Cuban American, Puerto Rican American, and Native American protagonists alongside one another might seem problematic, given some of the drastic differences in the histories of schooling for Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and Native Americans in the U.S., these three texts in fact have many interesting parallels and connections in their treatment of schooling and alternative education for minoritized subjects in the U.S. Their similarly scathing depictions of the ways in which the protagonists' native/home languages become forbidden in U.S. classrooms speaks to Joel Spring's observation that, although many non-English languages and non-"standard" dialects have been kept out of our nation's schools, Spanish and Native American languages have been the most frequently and fervently outlawed (Spring 4). These texts also raise important implications for considering the flaws and potentialities of our contemporary schooling system: the battles between home/community and school that take place in each novel mirror larger social and political battles that have been fought, and continue to be fought, over the education of minorities in the U.S.: *Nilda's* and *The Mambo King's* (and, to a lesser extent, *Ceremony's*) focus on the devaluing of the home language has clear connections to contemporary debates about the role of bi- and multilingualism in U.S. classrooms, while *Ceremony's* emphasis on educating Native Americans in an "official" U.S. history which is at odds with their own histories, traditions, and beliefs is not only an attempt to expose the

shameful (and often unacknowledged) legacy of U.S. Indian Boarding schools, but also an indication of the importance that we continue to move away from subtractively assimilative schooling (as many Indian Boarding schools gradually have since their development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries). Together, all three texts speak to the continued role of U.S. schools in our contemporary moment as “arms of the state” which work to uphold and reproduce the hegemonic structures of the dominant culture, enacting forced assimilations, both cultural and linguistic, of ethnic and racial minorities toward national “norms” and “standard” language usage.

Yet, to read the school scenes in these texts only as “episodes of cultural and ideological ‘force-feeding,’” as one critic has described Nilda’s schooling, is to miss the ways in which characters in all of these novels find their own ways of resisting the school’s efforts at assimilation and cultural/linguistic domination (Rico 168). Hijuelos, Mohr, and Silko portray the school as a *contact zone*, to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s term, a space where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). Though the power relations that influence Delores, Nilda, and Tayo’s formal educations are indeed “highly asymmetrical,” with white schoolteachers and administrators exerting their role as cultural and educational “authorities” who claim to know—and enforce—what is best for non-white students and communities, Pratt’s idea of the contact zone leaves room for negotiation and contestation—a contact zone is not a site where the dominant exercise total power or complete control, but is, rather, a space where the powerful and the marginalized can engage in contestatory dialogue and interactions with one another, in which the marginalized may be able to “tip” the scales of power in their favor to some degree, however minor or temporary. In these novels, especially Mohr’s and Silko’s, the school is portrayed both as a space of subtractive assimilation, *and* as a crucial site of power struggles and negotiations, with language functioning as a critical tool in such struggles. Hijuelos’s novel also portrays the school in this way; however, his text focuses primarily on resisting the school through self-directed

education that takes place *outside* of it—schooling is irrelevant to the lives of the characters and features very minorly in the text, despite its focus on education. Though he does focus, to a lesser extent, on how formal schooling is reappropriated by students, especially through the character of Delores, this topic is explored in much more depth in Mohr and Silko’s novels, which focus on the years of compulsory schooling that Nilda and Tayo are subjected to. However, rather than reading Nilda and Tayo as students who passively accept the ideologies and values that are “force-fed” by teachers and schools, I would argue that we can instead understand both protagonists’ relationships to their schooling using the Althusserian concept of “bad subjects.” In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe draws upon Althusser to define bad subjects as “inadequately interpellated subjects, who resist domination by deviating from the normative and whose misbehaviors ‘on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the... State apparatus’” (146). In *Nilda*, such resistance to domination occurs most notably through the regular and continuous use of Spanish by Nilda and her classmates for a myriad of purposes—to write notes and headings, communicate with one another, and even make fun of their teachers—despite the fact that this language has been strictly forbidden in the classroom by teachers who encourage students to learn standard English and to give up their “dialects” altogether. Despite the teachers’ efforts, we see throughout the text that Nilda, her classmates, family members and neighbors, and many of the other people that make up the fabric of Nilda’s everyday life, all resist the use of “standardized” languages, both English *and* Spanish, in favor of their own “nonstandard” and hybridized ways of speaking and writing. In the larger world outside of the school, Nilda has teachers whose uses of language are at odds with the linguistic “standards” held up as models in her classrooms and, as such, her education takes place as much through informal lessons outside of the classroom—learned from her stepfather, her mother, her Aunt Delia, and others—as it does within the classroom. Not only does she learn different ways of speaking from these non-school teachers, but she also learns to question the discourse and ideology that are “force-fed” to students in the classroom. While her teachers, particularly Miss

Langhorn, posit that there is one American culture with a distinct, unified history encapsulated within the story of a few men and a single language, Nilda's educational experiences throughout the novel teach her that there are many Americas within America, many cultures within the culture, and many Englishes within English (as well as Spanishes within Spanish).

For Tayo, whose immersion in mainstream U.S. culture and institutions at the outset of *Ceremony* is much more thorough than Nilda's, resistance to domination ultimately comes through a ceremonial healing process which takes place outside of the school. This process involves re-learning how to see the interconnectedness in various facets of life and how to understand the world around him through a direct and situated engagement with it, rather than through a sterilized and decontextualized engagement only with the "official" texts, discourses, and forms of knowledge found within the school. Tayo's healing process—his "ceremony"—is, I argue, also a *re-education process* in which Tayo learns that "history" is constructed of multiple narratives, multiple histories, which are simultaneously connected with and competing against one another. The various stories, voices, and languages that make up the different histories Tayo encounters throughout his re-education teach him to question the idea of "knowledge" as defined by a limited number of sources or a given set of authorial voices. By the close of the novel, Tayo learns from teachers who have no connection to a school, gradually causing him to redefine his sense of what counts as knowledge. Learning to submit to uncertainty and to acknowledge that there are some situations that have no "factual" or scientific explanation, Tayo ultimately rejects the idea "force-fed" to him in school that Laguna beliefs and practices are mere "superstition." Instead, he learns that things that cannot perhaps be proven by science or explained by logic can, in fact, be real and true—and can be *felt*, even if they cannot always be defined (especially in English). Those forms of knowledge, history, and language which the school has constructed as the only "legitimate" ones are, Tayo learns, not the only forms of knowledge, history, or language that exist and that have meaning and value. Recovering that

which has been deemed *illegitimate* by the school (and, by extension, the state) and thus left out of school lessons and textbooks is an integral part of Tayo's ceremonial re-education.

In *The Mambo Kings, Nilda, and Ceremony*, it is assimilative schooling, *not* education, that is rejected and resisted: The Mambo Kings, Nilda, Tayo, and, especially, Delores, are incredibly eager to learn, and, more importantly, to use that learning to better understand and negotiate the worlds in which they live. However, each of these characters realizes that schooling alone is an inadequate form of education, particularly because it rejects and marginalizes their own languages, cultures, and histories (their refusals to accept this rejection and marginalization are what make them "bad subjects" in the eyes of their teachers and the state). As such, all of these characters undertake sustained, ongoing efforts to provide themselves with alternative educations which are broader and more inclusive than what they have been exposed to in U.S. schools. Let us turn, first, to a discussion of the out-of-school learning strategies portrayed in Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings*, before looking at how the protagonists in Mohr's and Silko's novels negotiate their way through compulsory schooling while also fashioning their own resistant and subversive educations beyond their classrooms.

Chapter 5

Circumventing Standard English and Formal Schooling:

Everyday Uses of Language and Literacy in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*

“Language is an incredibly flexible and responsive social tool; we make or borrow what we don’t have” – Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent* (11)

“My first language was Spanish; my first English was the English of the neighborhood, Black and Spanglish, or even a Black Spanglish” – Victor Villanueva, *Language Diversity in the Classroom* (1)

“The city was a place of sights and sounds more than of print and text, with structures both obvious and hidden, to be ‘read’ and explored with all of the senses” – Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth* (310)

“Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of ‘making do’” – Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (29)

In 2011, the *New York Times* featured an article on the emerging trend of “cybercoyotes,” smugglers who use text messaging to help illegal immigrants from Mexico evade U.S. border patrol authorities. These “spotters” guide the progress of migrant groups as they cross the U.S./Mexico border and travel across the Arizona desert, using binoculars to monitor the territory from lookout points in Mexico and sending text messages to migrants in the U.S. to warn them of approaching authorities. According to border patrol agents, using cellphone technology to dodge patrollers is just one example of how smugglers and migrants are “constantly innovating to elude the authorities”: “‘they always come up with new, clever ways of trying to avoid us,’ said T.J. Bonner, past president of the National Border Patrol Council” (Lacey). Bonner’s observation speaks well to an idea explored at length by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which he demonstrates how subordinate and marginalized people regularly improvise innovative, creative, and ingenious tactics to outwit authorities and to circumvent the rules, regulations, and restrictions of everyday life imposed upon them by

those in power. However, while the presence of “cybercoyotes” represents an increasingly visible threat to U.S. immigration authorities, de Certeau emphasizes the often *invisible* or unnoticed ways in which ordinary individuals “make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests” (xiv). The tactics of “cybercoyotes” and the migrant groups they aid have attracted the attention of national authorities and major media outlets precisely because their impact is *not* infinitesimal, but great enough to warrant concern among those who seek to regulate and control national borders. In contrast, de Certeau highlights the countless virtually unnoticed ways in which individuals, particularly those of subordinate groups who are forced to “make do” with the resources available to them, find clever and innovative ways of eluding the rules and restrictions that seek to structure and control their everyday lives, while creatively adapting the world around them to suit their needs.

Oscar Hijuelos’s 1989 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* demonstrates these strategies of furtive resistance, portraying through a subtle emphasis on literacy, language, and learning how the Cuban American protagonists use what de Certeau would call “tactics” and acts/arts of “bricolage” to help themselves get by in New York City as lower-class immigrants with limited familiarity with the English language and limited access to formal educational opportunities. de Certeau defines the tactical as that which “is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” and involves “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’” (xix). Acts of bricolage, similarly, are defined as creative ways of making do with what is available in one’s environment: bricolage combines the individual’s “artisan-like inventiveness” with what can be “made with ‘the materials at hand’” (xviii, 174). That tactics and acts of bricolage are perhaps most relevant in the everyday lives of subordinate groups, such as immigrants and ethnic Americans living in the U.S., is also emphasized by de Certeau. As he writes, “the space of a tactic is the space of the other... it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (37). In

Hijuelos's novel, tactics and acts of bricolage serve as ways of attempting to briefly "level the playing field" or "beat the system"; characters creatively use these methods to gain opportunities and advantages for themselves in a country where the rules and odds are often against them, economically, culturally, and linguistically.

The three main characters in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*—brothers and "Mambo Kings" Cesar and Nestor, and the latter's wife, Delores—use tactics and acts of bricolage primarily to acquire literacy, language, and education in informal and creative ways within their everyday lives. Throughout the novel, their opportunities for acquiring literacy and learning the English language are seized at the moment and taken as they come; many of their learning experiences are unplanned, incidental, or circumstantial. In its emphasis on how literacy and language can be used and acquired outside of formal school settings, in quotidian but often unexpected contexts and in ways which serve practical purposes in the characters' everyday lives, the novel functions as a narrative exegesis of the everyday forms of negotiation and resistance that de Certeau theorizes. At the same time, it also closely parallels the ideas of new literacy theory, which examines the significance of reading, writing, language, and learning as they occur and are used in various contexts beyond the classroom. New literacy theorists emphasize the significance of linguistic and literate activities that take place in *informal* educational settings such as the home, workplace, neighborhood, or community—the places where language and literacy are used contextually, in relation to the everyday lives of individuals and their particular needs and desires.¹ Their works, like *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, explore how literacy and language are situated constructions invented in and for the rhetorical setting of the moment, and thus often put to use in surprising and unpredictable ways which may not correlate with formal educational idea(l)s about how these tools should be used. While schools characterize literacy as something that can be measured on various scales, new literacy theory is interested in literacy as an everyday discourse which provides individuals with various ways of working within—and against—the limits and constraints of different contexts and

situations. It is these contextualized uses of language and literacy which “give reading and writing their purpose and point” (Brandt 3). Although in some settings, particularly in institutionalized schooling, literacy can become an abstract or decontextualized activity separate from other aspects of our everyday lives, new literacy theory, like Hijuelos’s novel, underscores that, for the most part “acquiring literacy [is] like acquiring other basic staples of life”; that is, it is situated within the ordinary contexts of day-to-day activities (Brandt 1). As Brandt found in her study of *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), literacy has a “practical meaning” for most residents of the U.S. (5). Literacy and language usage are best understood as context-bound social practices that also function as adaptable tools which individuals—both the powerful *and* the marginalized—can learn to manipulate in order to get things done or to negotiate tricky circumstances to their own advantages.

de Certeau’s theories of the everyday relate to the ideas of new literacy theorists in several important ways worth discussing briefly before turning at length to *The Mambo Kings*. For one, the former’s notion of tactics closely parallels the concept of *informal literacy*, which new literacy theorists have emphasized is a significant but overlooked form of learning. Distinguishing informal literacies from formal literacy and education,² new literacy theorists view the latter as characterized by “standard” language usage; prescriptive approaches to linguistic and grammatical “rules”; and isolated, self-contained learning experiences in “neutralized” classroom environments. These forms of learning rely upon curricular requirements, regulated standards, and pre-determined outcomes which treat education as a hierarchical and mechanized process and literacy and language abilities as decontextualized skills. Commonly used by state-run institutions, formal literacy is characterized by controlled reading and learning practices: texts and their usages are determined by a teacher (or, increasingly, an even more distant administrative figure such as a principal or superintendent) assumed to have greater power and knowledge than the “subjects.” In contrast to these pre-determined and controlled forms of education, *informal* literacies and forms of learning are

frequently “tactical” in nature. As Moss writes, in language which echoes de Certeau’s description of the tactical, informal literacies are “tied to the exigencies of the moment” and consist of “temporary conjunctions of texts, contexts, and readers which coalesce at particular moments in time” and are constantly “in flux” (10). Informal literacies are social and collaborative, rather than individual and isolated, and are situated and relevant, not “neutral” in context. Perhaps most importantly, informal forms of learning and uses of literacy/language are relatively uncontrolled and frequently unplanned, occurring incidentally and unpredictably, rather than within the structured setting of a teacher-centered classroom. In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, informal learning experiences and environments are featured as the primary ways in which characters learn, with almost no attention given to formal education. The tactical nature of literate and linguistic activity in the text places emphasis not on the educational discourses and strategies authorized by those in positions of institutional power, but rather on the everyday, “informal” ways in which the characters choose where, when, why, and how to use language and literacy to serve their own needs and interests.

In their emphasis on the importance of the cultural and social environments one inhabits day to day, de Certeau’s theories of the everyday and new literacy scholars’ theories of language and learning both prove particularly useful for analyzing works of multi-ethnic literature like *The Mambo Kings*. As studies by Graff, Brandt, Heath, Lareau, and others have repeatedly shown, it becomes virtually impossible to truly examine the ordinary aspects of everyday life or to be attentive to the contextual nature of reading, writing, speaking, and learning without also giving consideration to the ways in which one’s everyday experiences are always shaped to some extent by factors such as one’s race, class, and ethnicity. While de Certeau’s theories show that even the most seemingly mundane actions and activities can in fact be indicative of the ways in which racially, ethnically, or economically marginalized people attempt to exercise their own forms of “antidiscipline,” new literacy theorists have been even more attentive to how the ordinary and the everyday are reflective of, and largely determined by, one’s race, class,

ethnicity, and access to cultural and economic capital (de Certeau xv).³ Scholars in the field have “provided persuasive evidence that literacy abilities are nested in and sustained by larger social and cultural activity” and “ten[d] to recognize... [that] as social groups differ in their cultural expressions or class locations... so will preferred ways of reading and writing differ” (Brandt 3). Together, de Certeau’s work, new literacy theory, and *The Mambo Kings* all speak to the ways in which opportunities for formal education are unequally distributed among individuals of different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes in the U.S., necessitating the creative and adaptive forms of learning and ways of accessing literate and linguistic resources that the characters employ throughout the text and that many Americans employ in their everyday lives.

In this chapter, then, I will be using de Certeau’s theories of the everyday, particularly “tactics” and “bricolage,” alongside new literacy theory to analyze language and literacy and forms of learning in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. I will argue that the myriad of informal ways in which Cesar, Nestor, and Delores learn English and use language and literacy in their everyday lives demonstrates the context-bound plasticity of language and literacy acquisition and usage, as well as the linguistic and literate opportunities for resistant agency within larger social restraints. The varied forms of literacy and means of learning in the text (familial, vocational, community-based, etc.) serve to contrast with the isolated, decontextualized, and autonomous ways in which language and literacy are used inside formal classrooms, reminding us that because language use is rhetorical in nature—in other words, because it is situationally adapted for different contexts—there is not one singular, standard or universal literacy, but rather a range of multiple literacies. In a similar way, the novel also shows that beyond expectations or demands for “correct” or “standard” usage which dominate institutions and formal social settings, there are a variety of powerful, informal “Englishes” at work in ordinary circumstances and contexts. Delores and the Mambo Kings’ resourceful acquisition of English demonstrates that reading, writing, speaking, and learning all occur in

multiple contexts beyond the site of the school. In fact, throughout *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, we see surviving and thriving *without* formal literacy, formal schooling, or “standard” English. The novel’s depiction of everyday literate practices suggests that non-native speakers and the linguistically marginalized can and do get by without formal education, standard language usage, or grammatical correctness. The text also implies, as I will argue throughout this chapter, that an incidental, contextualized learning can actually be *more* useful than formal education. In fact, “informal” education in *The Mambo Kings* is portrayed as more productive and beneficial than a formal course of education in a classroom precisely because it is a more applicable and practical form of learning, one that is contextualized within the everyday lives of the characters. *The Mambo Kings* thus not only portrays the importance of tactical literacy in everyday life, but also offers a critique of the standardized, assimilative, and decontextualized nature of formal education in the U.S.

Literacies in Everyday Lives: Tactics of the Mambo Kings

Literacy ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath emphasizes the “positive and sustaining power of incidental as distinct from intentional learning” (“Learning Language” 340). Much of the learning for Cesar, Nestor, and Delores is incidental, especially for the brothers, who less actively seek to further their language and literacy learning (in a later section, I will discuss Delores’s more devoted and sustained efforts to self-educate). These incidental, unintentional learning contexts have been described by Gere and by Cushman as “extracurricular literacy”—learning that takes place outside of the formal school setting, in contexts and ways we might not normally associate with reading, writing, or language instruction (Cushman 233). However, although quite useful for understanding the varied contexts in which learning occurs, the phrase “extracurricular” also contains within it the implication that learning outside of the classroom is extra, or supplementary to, education received through formal schooling. This, in turn, suggests that institutionalized schooling is the standard or most traditional way for individuals to obtain literacy and language abilities, and that education takes place first and foremost in classroom

settings, and then, additionally, in other contexts such as the home or neighborhood. In *The Mambo Kings*, however, Cesar and Nestor circumvent the need for a formal classroom education altogether, instead relying solely upon “extracurricular” forms of learning to further their linguistic and literate abilities. In narrative genre, then, *The Mambo Kings* offers a complement to new literacy theory by challenging the notion that literacy and knowledge can only be acquired through formal education in standard English.

The Mambo Kings chronicles the lives of two Cuban brothers and musicians, Cesar and Nestor Castillo, as they immigrate to New York City from Havana during the height of the mambo music era. Upon arriving in the U.S. in 1949, Cesar and Nestor speak a “rudimentary” English, and have even less mastery of reading and writing in this language (37). Indeed, Nestor hardly speaks at all, while Cesar, the more talkative of the two, is described as having a “thick accent”: he “rolled his rrrrrrrs, said ‘jo-jo’ instead of ‘yo-yo’ and ‘tink,’ not ‘think’—just like Ricky Ricardo.” But the brothers’ limited English skills and heavy Cuban accents do not inhibit them from getting by in their new homeland; in fact, they can exist quite comfortably in Manhattan without “mastery” of the formal rules of standard English taught in U.S. schools.⁴ Indeed, with little knowledge of English, the boisterous Cesar “got along well enough to charm the American women he met... to sit out on the fire escape in the good weather, strumming a guitar, crooning out in English ‘In the Still of the Night’... [and to] walk down the street to the liquor store and say [to the proprietor], ‘One Bacardi’s dark, please...’ And then, after a time, with bravado... ‘How the hell are you, my friend?’” Yet, because the brothers understand the linguistic capital that English carries in the U.S.—“it was a mark of sophistication among the Cubans of New York to speak English” and “the better one’s English, the higher his status”—they eventually develop an interest in improving their English (38). Instead of gaining English skills through a formal course, however, the brothers mostly learn English through informal means in diverse everyday contexts. Although they do use one formal text to help them, *A Better English Grammar for Foreign Speakers*, they study this text “w[earing] sleeveless T-shirts and s[itting] in the kitchen”

during the spare moments “when they weren’t out sightseeing or visiting friends” (37). The brothers also complement *A Better English Grammar for Foreign Speakers* with everyday sources such as “Captain Marvel and Tiger Boy comics, the *Daily News*, the *Brooklyn Herald*, the racetrack ‘blue’ sheets, and the golden-spined storybooks about enchanted swans and whorled trees in the Black Forest that [their cousin] Pablo’s kids would bring home from the parochial school” (37). Cesar’s and Nestor’s literate activities are tactical and adaptive, making use of “formal” texts in informal contexts, while also utilizing informal texts that would be deemed “inappropriate” for learning standard English in U.S. classrooms (the racetrack sheets, for example), but which nevertheless help the brothers enhance their language abilities. The unpredictable and incidental ways that formal and informal texts are used by Cesar and Nestor is a reminder of de Certeau’s observation that we cannot assume the passivity of readers, as we never know how they utilize or “consume” reading materials in their own everyday lives. As de Certeau provocatively asks, “the thousands of people who buy... [a] magazine... the consumers of newspapers, stories, and legends—what do they make of what they ‘absorb,’ receive and pay for? What do they do with it?” (31). What individuals “do” with texts in *The Mambo Kings* speaks well to the idea of the unpredictability of literacy “consumers.” The unexpected ways in which Cesar and Nestor acquire and make use of children’s storybooks, Marvel comics, and racetrack sheets to learn English suggests that texts, as well as literacy and education, are consumed in a myriad of diverse ways in everyday life, many of which resist or challenge standard school practices.

In addition to their use of a variety of printed texts, much of the brothers’ informal, everyday, and incidental education occurs through means of orality. In fact, their acquisition of English(es) occurs *primarily* through oral interactions with others, more so than through the use of reading or writing. The brothers’ use of orality as a means of acquiring English literacy challenges the traditional view of orality as diametrically antithetical to reading and writing (see the introduction to Part I). Instead, we see that in everyday contexts, the brothers’ acquisition of

literacy involves a combination of oral and written forms, which often blend together and mutually reinforce one another. Cesar and Nestor gradually begin to learn English not only through reading comic books and racetrack sheets, but also “while working as busboys and waiters in the Havana chapter of the Explorers’ Club” and attending parties for musicians “where only English was spoken” (37, 38). Cesar, who is “a good listener” would “pass... entire evenings [at these parties] with his hand on his chin, nodding and repeating, ‘Ah, yes?’ and later, on his way home with Nestor, reciting the new words he had learned like a poem” (38-9).⁵ Cesar’s awareness of the opportunities for learning language through both oral and written means, even in unexpected contexts like these parties, shows his astute perception of how to harness the literate and linguistic resources available around him, circumventing the need for a more formal and assimilative course of education. Brandt uses the term “literacy opportunity” to refer to “people’s relationships to social and economic structures that condition [their] chances for learning and development,” but, as Cesar and Nestor’s persistent attendance at these parties shows, access to literacy is not determined *entirely* by external forces—to some extent, one’s own tactical courses of action can shape the social (and, less so, the economic) structures through which one comes into contact with literacy and language (7). In this case, Cesar is aware of the value of attending these parties not only for social reasons, but also for educational purposes, and he adaptively makes of the resources of his surroundings to meet his immediate needs, including his linguistic ones. His language and literacy acquisition involve “accept[ing] the chance offerings of the moment, and seiz[ing] on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (de Certeau 37). Cesar is hardly depicted as a passive learner who is dependent on accessing literacy resources only when opportunities present themselves to him. Rather, he ingeniously places himself (and his brother) in situations where he knows they will be able to harness the linguistic resources available, demonstrating how “the art of ‘pulling tricks’ involves a sense of the opportunities afforded by a particular occasion” (de Certeau 37). While it is true that Cesar and Nestor’s admission to these “English-only” parties

has something to do with their status as well-known, fun-loving, and handsome musicians, speaking to the ways in which access to language learning is often determined to an extent by one's social and economic status⁶ (while also speaking to the ways in which the school's emphasis on linguistic hegemony is widely reproduced in the contexts of everyday life), it is primarily their tactical resourcefulness and ability to harness linguistic opportunities—more so than their (relatively) privileged positions as New York City musicians—that facilitates their language learning at these parties.

The brothers' oral and literate tactics pay off, as their familiarity with English quickly improves, conferring a higher status upon them within the local community. As noted earlier, "it was a mark of sophistication among the Cubans of New York to speak English"; but, interestingly, the *type* of English valued in Cesar and Nestor's social circle reminds us that there are a variety of Englishes—some "standard," many nonstandard—that circulate and have currency (social, economic, and cultural) in different contexts of American life, even as public schools seek to enforce the idea of one "standard" English (38). In this case, the particular type of English that is valued gives the brothers' *informal* acquisition of the language more social currency than they could have gained if they had learned "correct" usage and pronunciation in formal classrooms. The English that is most valued by Cesar and Nestor's immediate community, and thus what the brothers most eagerly endeavor to learn, is not a "standard" or "proper" English, but rather a local dialect which incorporates the popular slang and colloquialisms. While hanging out in Greenwich Village, Cesar "pick[s] up the words 'jive' and 'crazy!' (as in 'Crazy, man, give me some skin!')," and we see that such oral skill pays off: at parties, Cesar "convers[es] rapidly in Spanish," but is able to "offer proof of his linguistic facility by throwing in a phrase like 'hep cats at a jam session'"—a phrase we can safely assume he did not learn from *A Better English Grammar for Foreign Speakers* (38). Critically important here is that such a local dialect of English *requires* that the learner is situated within the local contexts in which it is used. Though, as Gallego and Hollingsworth note, the school's formal

approaches to language learning often treat literacy as a uniform, universal skill derived from dominant usage, the “unquestionably defined... ability to read and write, read and speak, *standardized* English,” Cesar is not going to pick up words like “jive”, “crazy,” or “hep cats” from a teacher in a formal English class the way he does by hanging out with the “Greenwich Village crowd” (Gallego and Hollingworth 3 emphasis added; Hijuelos 38). As such, the novel implies that formal education is not as useful, practical, or relevant for the brothers than that which can be learned in the informal contexts of their everyday lives. Among the people of Cesar and Nestor’s immediate community in New York City, informal variations of English provide greater linguistic capital than the standardized English the brothers could acquire in a classroom. Given Cesar and Nestor’s line of work as musicians who get gigs largely by reputation, this linguistic capital arguably serves the brothers economically as well as socially and culturally.

What matters most to Cesar and Nestor in their everyday lives, then, are not the types of language and literacy that are sanctioned by the school and the institutional authorities of the country they are newcomers to, but rather the locally and “socially sanctioned” ways of speaking that earn the brothers the respect, admiration, and comradeship of their peers in a largely working-class immigrant neighborhood and in the social circle of New York City musicians (Brandt 3).⁷ The brothers know what they need to know in order to get by in these particular social and cultural contexts, as well as to speak in ways that earn them status and prestige among the locals. Indeed, Cesar becomes “famous for impressing even the driest Cuban professors with the exuberant variety of his speech” (38). Significantly, none of this requires that the brothers use “proper” or “standard” English. Circumventing the need for standard English usage in their everyday lives, Cesar and Nestor find that that their literacy and language acquisition and usage relate more to “process[es] of socialization” whereby they are “inducte[d]” into a specific “community of literacy practicers” whose practices are determined not by rules or standardization, but by context and culture (Resnick 29).

However, despite the variety of Englishes currently in use and circulation in the U.S., certain contexts and circumstances nevertheless continue to demand the use of a formal “standard” English, as the novel occasionally shows. Though Cesar and Nestor’s use of the language remains primarily “informal,” when they do find themselves in contexts where formal English is required, the brothers again employ creative tactics to acquire the necessary literate and linguistic resources for handling these situations. Smith has coined the term “enterprise” to describe the type of learning that involves “real... problems to anticipate and solve,” in contrast to the types of decontextualized “problems” or simulations students are often given to solve in schools (“Learning Language” 340). One of the most pressing problems that Cesar and Nestor face in the novel is their separation from their family and their fear for the safety of their loved ones still in Cuba. Much of *The Mambo Kings* portrays Nestor and Cesar’s nostalgic longings for a land they can no longer call home, as well as for the relatives they have left behind, particularly their mother and other brothers. One of the ways in which the trauma of the brothers’ diasporic experiences is dramatized is through Cesar’s habit of sending letters to the Cuban and U.S. governments on behalf of his family. Cesar spends hours “with Delores’s *Webster’s Dictionary* open before him... carefully draft[ing] letters to the government, inquiries as to the procedure for getting his family out [of Cuba].” Although in his day-to-day life Cesar rarely uses standard English, since there isn’t much necessity or incentive for him to do so, he is also aware that different Englishes have different forms of cultural and linguistic capital depending on the context, and that in dealing with political authorities, standard English will carry the most capital. Thus, after Cesar finishes his painstaking drafts of these letters, he “show[s] these to one of the smarter tenants, a certain Mr. Bernhardt, who had once been a college professor. Reading through bifocals, Bernhardt, a portly and distinguished-looking fellow, made the proper corrections and then he’d redo the letters carefully on an antique British typewriter” (254).⁸ Indicating awareness of how literacy’s value shifts with its context, Cesar knows that his slang and jive talk—linguistic abilities which make him a hit among fellow Cuban

immigrants and New York City musicians—are not appropriate when writing letters to the government on behalf of his family. Thus, he sits himself down with a formal text to guide him and “carefully draft[s]” letters in a standard English he has little use for or interest in on most occasions. Even with the aid of a *Webster’s*, though, Cesar is aware that he still may not be familiar enough with this type of English to successfully complete the task at hand, so he handles the situation tactically, circumventing the need to fully “master” this type of English by taking advantage of a neighbor’s greater familiarity with “standard” language usage. Recalling Smith’s concept of learning as enterprise, this scene aptly demonstrates how individuals learn what they need to know in order to solve the real problems they face in their everyday lives—and do it without participation in formal schooling. When Cesar’s own knowledge of correct usage is not enough, he nevertheless circumvents the need to learn standard English, a language that is of little interest or relevance to him. In fact, standard English and formal education are *both* circumvented in this circumstance: Cesar does not need to have a perfect mastery of standard English to get his letters written and sent, and he also does not need to *gain* this mastery through participation in an assimilative course of formal education in order to accomplish his task. Rather, all he needs to achieve the immediate goal of letter-writing is, first, the awareness of what type of English is required here, and, second, the tactical resourcefulness to know where to access it—in this case, by finding someone nearby who can help him (free of charge) to put standard English into writing on a page. His collaborative letter-writing with Bernhardt should not be read as evidence of his own “illiteracy” or linguistic “incompetence,” but rather as indicative of his impressive rhetorical and social resourcefulness.

In addition to demonstrating his own linguistic and literate facility, Cesar’s collaboration with Bernhardt also speaks to the highly social, communal, and interpersonal nature of “literacy events,” as Heath names them—everyday contexts in which reading, writing, and speaking become the occasions for cooperative work. Cesar and Bernhardt’s letter-writing is a particularly apt example not only of how individuals frequently acquire language and literacy

through social interaction with others, but also of the power and potential of socially collaborative linguistic and literate activities. While the colloquial phrases Cesar picks up at parties help to earn *himself* prestige on the New York City music scene, in this case Cesar uses literacy and language to try to help others, indicating how one person's literate activities often have far-reaching—in this case, even transnational—impacts that also effect that person's family and community more broadly.⁹ Similarly, Bernhardt, as Cesar's neighbor, is more than willing to collaborate with the latter and to be a "literacy resource," perhaps out of a sense of personal commitment or moral obligation to his neighbors and immediate community. The fact that Bernhardt is willing to help Cesar, seemingly without expectation of compensation of any sort, monetary or otherwise, suggests his awareness of "the importance of a collective effort toward learning," something which literacy scholars have suggested that marginalized communities in the U.S. are particularly attuned to and invested in (Brandt 122). As Franklin notes, historically, in communities where access to literacy has been limited, "anyone who acquired literacy or advanced training often recognized the obligation to pass that knowledge on to others within their family, community, and cultural group" (qtd in Brandt 124).¹⁰ A similar sense of obligation can be observed here, as Bernhardt's willingness to help Cesar is depicted as part of what it means to be neighborly: making use of a fellow tenant's literacy "resources" (from his knowledge to his typewriter) is depicted as as ordinary and acceptable as knocking on a neighbor's door to borrow a cup of sugar or an egg.

This scene is one of many throughout *The Mambo Kings* which emphasizes the ways in which informal literacies are often social literacies, both in that they are enacted and utilized communally and collaboratively, and in that people's literacies are enhanced, altered, and changed by others they come into contact with in various circumstances of everyday life. These creative, collaborative, and even coincidental exchanges of literacy are quite different from literacy as it is often experienced in schools. As Ward and Wason-Ellam write, "schools have most typically espoused the autonomous view of literacy, with teaching organized into

hierarchically arranged, decontextualized activities... literacy skills, in this view, are neutral and unaffected by their context”(93). Citing new literacy scholars including Street, however, these authors point out that “researchers who have studied literacy from a sociocultural perspective do not consider it to be a formally learned series of autonomous skills, but... as demonstrated in *interactions between people*” (emphasis added). These interactive forms of literate and linguistic exchange suggest, as does the scene with Bernhardt, that individuals can exist comfortably in the U.S. without “mastery” of standard English partially because they acquire and experience literacy communally and collaboratively, rather than autonomously and in an isolated sense. Throughout the novel, we see continued evidence of these social, collaborative, and reciprocal forms of language and literacy learning and usage not only through exchanges between members of the community like that between Cesar and Bernhardt, but also through interactions between the Mambo Kings and their family members. In the households in which Cesar and Nestor live with immediate and extended family (they move several times throughout the novel, from crashing at a cousin’s apartment when they first arrive in the U.S., to eventually having a place of their own), learning is far from individualized, isolated, or autonomous. Nor is literacy among members of the family one-directional, transmitted only from parents/adults to children, but rather collaborative and reciprocal, with the children’s learning experiences impacting how their parents and adult relatives come to learn as well. In one of the first scenes in the text in which we see the brothers learning English, they are reading “golden-spined storybooks about enchanted swans and whorl-eyed trees in the Black Forest that [their cousin] Pablo’s kids [brought] home from the parochial school” (37). Even among family, the brothers are constantly on the watch for learning opportunities, making use of all of the people—including the children—that surround them in their everyday lives. In this case their tactics also have economic benefits for the brothers: too poor to prioritize spending money on either formal instruction or their own books, the brothers circumvent the need to pay for these things by

making use of the books which make their way into their homes through the American-born and -educated children with whom they live.

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words*, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, and Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* all demonstrate how literacy materials parents bring home influence their children's language and literacy use and acquisition. In an interesting reversal, though, we see in *The Mambo Kings* how the literature children bring into the home can also influence parents or older relatives, especially in immigrant families where members of the younger generation may more easily come into contact with English, particularly because of compulsory schooling in the dominant culture and contact with bilingual and English monolingual peers at school and in other social contexts. While Brandt, Heath, and Lareau all consider how reading and writing are passed from one generation to the next, their examinations are mostly one-directional, suggesting that the older generation does the bulk, if not all, of the "passing" of language and literacy to the younger generation. Bi- and multi-directional forms of access to literacy materials and exchange of literacy knowledge, however (for example, from child to parent or older relative, or from sibling to sibling), have been discussed in more depth by scholars who study immigrant families. For example, Becky Wai-Ling Packard's article "When Your Mother Asks for Another Book: Fostering Intergenerational Exchange of Culturally Relevant Books" focuses on a Chinese American immigrant woman's reading of Chinese American novels including Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, "literacy events" that were facilitated by her daughter. As such, Packard also explores the complex interactions at play in such seemingly simple activities as parents reading their children's books (or, in Cesar and Nestor's case, reading their cousin's children's books. Packard's article begins with the preface that "while parents can play a vital role in their children's literacy development, it is important to think about the bi-directional benefits in the family literacy practice" (627). Family literacy—often overlooked in analyses which treat literacy as an individualized and autonomous process—is a complex, multi-directional and often

reciprocal system of learning, in which the learning process is not restricted to a hierarchical model whereby the parent is defined as the “teacher” and the child as the “learner.” Citing Smallwood’s research, Packard notes that children’s texts can in fact be particularly useful in “help[ing] encourage adult ESL learners to read” (627). Indeed, in multigenerational immigrant families like Cesar and Nestor’s, in which the older family members have lived much of their lives outside of the U.S., while younger family members are American born and/or raised, it seems likely that younger children, who are more immersed in and familiar with literacy as it is lived in the U.S., might be a particularly important source through which older relatives can access reading materials and learn English. In addition to the storybooks Cesar and Nestor get from their cousin’s children, the brothers also read Marvel and Tiger Boy comics to learn English; and, although never explicitly stated, it seems likely that these are children’s comic books which were laying around the apartment they share with their cousin and his family—materials which, like the storybooks the kids bring home from the parochial school, are ones that the brothers might never have come across if they hadn’t been living with extended family members much younger than themselves (37).

Historically, scholars and educators have often failed to “recognize[e] the rich cultural resources and practices that families and communities bring” to education and formal schooling, instead “only noting the deficits” (Packard 626). Embedded within *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, in scenes such as the one between Bernhardt and Cesar and in exchanges among family members in Cesar and Nestor’s household(s), are representations of these cultural resources and practices which families and communities harness and make use of to help one another learn. Literacy tactics in the novel are portrayed as shared among families and communities, whose experiences with learning include learning how to connect with and help one another, how to collaborate and reciprocate. As the novel shows, collectivity and collaboration are especially valuable—perhaps vital—tactics in immigrant neighborhoods, where family and community function as critical forms of social, educational, and linguistic support.

Thus, it is not surprising that scholars such as Packard and Auerbach have emphasized the prominence of collaborative literacy tactics in many immigrant families' everyday lives (Packard 627). In concrete, everyday contexts, people's experiences with literacy and learning are much more collaborative than in the individualized and hierarchical frameworks of formal education. *The Mambo Kings* depicts family and community literacies as having important, often central, roles in determining when, how, and why people learn to read, write, speak, and make practical everyday uses of language and literacy, while also suggesting that narrative genre offers a valuable place to see fictional renditions of the tactical practices which mark literate and linguistic activity in everyday life.

Although my discussion thus far has focused primarily on Cesar and Nestor's literate and linguistic activities, the real "bookworm" in the novel is Nestor's wife Delores. While Delores's literacy activities are similar to Cesar and Nestor's in many ways—tactical, social, collaborative, communal—Delores's more passionate interest in reading and her greater hunger for learning result in a more aggressive and determined use of infrapolitical tactics on her part than the brothers engage in, warranting a separate discussion. I turn now to a consideration of how—and why—Delores actively fashions her own education (primarily) outside of the sites of formal schooling using tactics of bricolage.

The Self-Education of Delores Fuentes

Like the brothers, Nestor's wife Delores acquires English-language skills mostly in informal contexts in her everyday life. In her first appearance in the text (which is also the first time Nestor, whom she eventually marries, sees her in person) she is described as "standing by a bus stop on 62nd Street and Madison Avenue carefully reading a book, her lips barely moving, but moving just the same" (59). That her reading is tactical, seized at the moment by making use of the time and space available (in this case, a few spare moments spent waiting on a street corner during her commute to work) is characteristic of how Delores practices literacy in everyday life and fashions her own education throughout the novel. Her literacy habits are

largely “extracurricular,” a term used to describe literacies that “take place in stolen moments of privacy in the daily lives of people,” rather than in the contexts of institutionalized school settings (Cushman 233). Yet, in contrast to Cesar and Nestor, who generally use reading, writing, and standard English only for specific purposes or to accomplish particular tasks, Delores *loves* reading and greatly values literacy and learning for personal and intellectual reasons, believing each to have their own inherent worth. Unlike the brothers, who never seek access to, nor appear to have any interest in acquiring, formal schooling, Delores uses infrapolitical tactics as a way of accessing institutional education partly because she is aware of, and frustrated by, the limited opportunities she has to access this education otherwise (a point I will return to in more depth later). Delores’s deep love for literature and powerful longing for learning, combined with the relatively limited opportunities (social, economic, educational, and otherwise) that she has as a lower class woman of color, make her everyday efforts at acquiring formal literacy more consistent and persistent than the brothers’. Less incidental and even *more* tactical than Cesar’s and Nestor’s ways of acquiring literacy and language, Delores’s literate and linguistic activities are, as I will show throughout this section, motivated in no small part by her awareness of the structural inequalities of educational opportunity in the U.S. As such, Delores more actively works to “make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to [her] own interests,” bending the “rules” of the world around her in an effort to settle the score by acquiring the literacy and learning opportunities she feels she and others like her have been denied (de Certeau xiv).

Though much more interested in acquiring a formal education than the brothers ever are, Delores’s tactical uses of literacy still closely parallel those of the brothers’. Like Cesar and Nestor, Delores’s reading and learning habits are typically opportunistic snatches of time, involving stolen moments in available, and often transient and unpredictable, spaces. Delores makes long daily commutes between her workplace in Brooklyn and her home in the Bronx but

“didn’t mind the long trip because she always carried a few books to read” (61). Her selections range from educational texts such as *A Simpler English Grammar* to popular novels such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (61). Like Nestor and Cesar, Delores reads a wide variety of texts, gaining access to reading materials in incidental and often unpredictable ways. A housecleaner for wealthy families, Delores thinks “one of the nice things about her job... was that [her employer] always gave her books. The rich man who lived on 61st street and Park always gave her some time off during the day to do as she pleased, saying that she could help herself to any of his books, and he had hundreds in massive shelves that rose up to his... ceilings” (61-62). Delores uses the free time to “sit happily by a window overlooking Park Avenue, eating rare-roast-beef sandwiches and salad... with a book open on her lap” (62). Busy as her days (and nights) are—Delores works several jobs, takes night classes, and, after she marries Nestor, runs a household of five and raises two children—she nevertheless remains committed to finding ways to devote multiple moments of each day to reading and learning. In addition to making use of her Park Avenue employer’s personal library, Delores also finds other resources in her immediate environment, avoiding the need to spend money on expensive new books by “forag[ing] through... bins and used-book racks” at the nearby University bookstore and acquiring second-hand books “at the church bazaars.” She comes home from these neighborhood treasure hunts “with shopping bags of novels” which she later devours during her snatches of spare time (195). These “joyful discoveries,” as de Certeau might describe her ability to locate cheap and interesting reads in various places, are also acts of bricolage whereby Delores smartly maximizes her access to literature using only “the materials at hand” (de Certeau xix, 174).

Like Nestor and Cesar, Delores also complements written texts with oral tactics to further her linguistic knowledge. In addition to studying her books, Delores becomes increasingly familiar with English(es) by “listening to the radio” and “visit[ing] with neighbors, with whom she would talk” (67). These rare moments of leisure and relaxation also double as

tactical opportunities for learning. Like Cesar's seeking out literacy opportunities in the most ordinary of circumstances, Delores has a similar capacity for "pulling tricks," transforming the everyday world around her into an environment that can meet her learning needs. Even when Delores lacks a radio of her own, she "sit[s] by the window listening to a neighbor's radio in the courtyard," effectively making do with the resources at hand, and transforming these into tools for language acquisition (68). As Brandt notes of literacy and language acquisition, "literacy often blend[s] with other activities [including, especially, activities that take place outside of the school]... some people lear[n] about writing, for instance, while drawing, calculating, reading, listening to the radio, watching television, talking" (9). For Delores, learning is not separate and indeed cannot be separated from the other activities that fill her day-to-day existence. Her self-education is not constrained solely to the spatial and temporal boundaries of a classroom, and there is no one site or source which is solely or even primarily responsible for directing the course of her learning. Rather, Delores learns through oral interactions with a variety of people in a variety of places, all of whom likely speak a range of Englishes: "Between her job at Woolworth's, her high-school classes, and her friendships in the building, she became quite good at speaking English" (67). Although the formal adult education courses Delores takes at night are mentioned in this list, they are not of any more significance than any of the other circumstances through which Delores learns, including her friendships with fellow tenants and her work as a cashier. The blending of literacy with other day-to-day activities in Delores's daily life—and the ways in which these activities together provide her with many useful learning experiences—is a powerful reminder of the limitations of assuming that literacy and language acquisition can (or should) only occur in formal classroom contexts.

Delores's friendships and employment fulfill the new literacy notion that language and literacy are socially situated and socially acquired. In fact, her access to wide-ranging books is enabled by others in her community, who come to know her as an avid reader and eagerly supply reading materials. Similar to the collaborative letter-writing of Cesar and Bernhardt

described earlier, Delores's everyday relations and interactions furnish literacy resources; and, like Bernhardt, these neighbors are more than willing to share their resources in the spirit of community (and in contrast to formal education, which involves hierarchical relations with authorities and superiors and competitive interaction with peers). We learn that "neighbors who knew about her literary bent of mind rained books down on her" so that "a pile of them were stacked beside her bed," demonstrating how her education is hardly an isolated or autonomous enterprise, but rather an activity that takes place within the context of her ongoing interactions with neighbors, friends, coworkers, family, and peers (195). And, just as Cesar benefits from seeking out those people who have a specific type of literacy knowledge that he needs access to, Delores also interacts with others who give her access to more "formal" forms of literacy and reading materials, including developing a relationship with a schoolteacher who, "touched by [Delores's] efforts to improve her reading, would "leave [books] for her by the door" (68). Delores's access to such literacy resources are not determined or facilitated by a state curriculum or a distant panel of educational administrators, but rather are drawn from her local community and from the people whom surround her in her everyday life, what we might call her *literacy network*. This network is comprised in part of co-workers (such as the people she works with at Woolworth's), wealthy employers (such as the Park Avenue mansion owner who gives Delores access to his personal library during lunch breaks), family, friends, and neighbors. Reading, writing, language, and knowledge circulate in a variety of forms and contexts within Delores's everyday life, and her interactions with others help to open up a world of options for her with regard to reading material and literacy resources.

As is also true for Cesar and Nestor, the ways in which Delores's literate and linguistic abilities are valued is dependent upon context; and, rather unpredictably, it is her ability to demonstrate her literacy in *informal* settings, rather than in classroom or workplace contexts, which ultimately proves most useful to advancing her social standing. Just as the brothers find that they don't need to learn standard English to gain respect among their peers, but rather that

a phrase like “hep cats” carries distinctive linguistic capital in their everyday lives, Delores also finds that her linguistic and literate skills can be surprisingly valuable in ordinary situations, conferring unexpected benefits and advantages upon her. In a particularly interesting scene, one which again emphasizes the regularity with which literacy and language are put to use in informal and social settings in everyday life, a man approaches Delores in a dancehall and invites her to participate in a beauty contest at Coney Island which his company is sponsoring and which offers “a first prize of one hundred dollars” (71). Delores writes down her name for the man, who notes that she has “really beautiful handwriting,” prompting Delores to quickly offer up the additional information that she “can write down poems... I write my own, and I learn poems in English.” She then proceeds to “meticulously wr[i]te out the poem ‘Annabel Lee,’ by Edgar Allen Poe” which she gives to the man; clearly impressed, he keeps the poem and tells Delores she is “really classy” (71). Interestingly, we never see Delores’s literate and linguistic abilities directly benefit her in any other setting—her avid reading habits and “really beautiful handwriting” don’t help her to land a better job, for example, or even get a pay raise at Woolworth’s (at least we’re never told as much). However, in the rather unexpected social setting of a dancehall, where one might be surprised to find that literacy is even being put to use, Delores uses her literate abilities to transcribe a poem by a famous author in her “beautiful handwriting,” earning her the respect and admiration of a fellow member of her community as well as a guaranteed spot in a contest with a \$100 first prize. Perhaps more importantly, the opportunity to use her literate abilities to impress this stranger brings Delores a deep sense of satisfaction and accomplishment: she leaves the dancehall that night “no longer... angry or anxious” but “happy” to have been “paid... compliments” (72). Significantly, this positive experience stands in stark contrast to the feelings of humiliation and shame Delores has felt in the past when required to perform her literate and linguistic abilities in institutionalized (and assimilative) classroom settings, a point I will discuss in more depth momentarily (72).

Just as the brothers often find informal English more advantageous than standard English, Delores's exchange with this businessman in the dancehall also shows how her own informal learning experiences ultimately prove more valuable to her than a formal course of education. Instead of depicting Delores using her reading and writing abilities to excel in the school setting or to advance in the workplace, the narrative portrays how Delores uses her knowledge to her advantage within more atypical and informal circumstances. Although her literacy abilities may not do much to help her get a promotion or gain admission to an elite institution of higher education after she finishes her night classes, the narrative portrays the real, practical, ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) ways in which Delores's literate and linguistic abilities are nevertheless relevant and valuable, showing how, in everyday lives, literacy and language are employed randomly, unpredictably, and as needed, for a myriad of different "nonstandard" reasons and purposes. Uses of literacy such as Delores's writing down her own name and transcribing a Poe poem "serv[e] a function in the immediate present" and "emerg[e] in relation to a particular set of circumstances" (Moss 9). In a school setting, Delores might have been asked to demonstrate her beautiful handwriting or her knowledge of Poe in order to prove her competence on an exam or to move on to the next grade level; but in the context of the dancehall, Delores's "written recitation" of Poe is not part of an exam she must pass or a curricular requirement which will determine whether or not she progresses to the next step. Rather, this incidental use of literacy occurs in the moment, tactically, and not in response to a strategic plan or a set of institutional learning requirements. Delores was hardly expecting to use her literacy knowledge in this way, but when a circumstance arises in which she wishes to make herself memorable and impressive to a stranger, she quickly thinks of how literacy can be employed to her benefit. Delores is remarkably quick on her feet when it comes to when and how to use her literate abilities, as a result of having learned to use literacy and language in unpredictable and diverse ways in her everyday life. The successful outcome of her exchange with the stranger in the dancehall can be read as yet another way in which the novel makes a

case for the greater value of contextualized and situated learning which transcends the spatial and temporal limitations of the classroom, defying the ways students in such classrooms are often taught to use language and literacy in limited, specifically defined, and relatively non-adaptive ways.

While Delores's literate and linguistic activities mirror the Mambo Kings' in many ways, particularly in their tactical and social natures, her passion for literature and her unquenchable hunger for learning make Delores's experiences with—and efforts at—education distinct from her husband and brother-in-law's. Delores's literacy activities are more continuous and more deeply woven into the fabric of her everyday life than those of the brothers'; hers are driven less by circumstantial necessity and more by a genuine love for reading and knowledge. Early in the novel, we learn that reading is not just informational or practical for Delores, but also an act of pleasure, a personal hobby bordering on a passion, comparable to the Mambo Kings' love for music. Even though Delores's "live wire" sister Ana Maria is "always trying to get Delores to go [out dancing] with her," Delores "prefer[s] to stay home and read" because "it t[akes] her mind off her loneliness, g[ives] her feelings of both solitude and companionship," and distracts her from "the terrors of the world and the sadnesses that ran madly through her heart" (61, 62). At the same time, reading and learning also provide Delores with a sense of self-fulfillment and accomplishment: that she "prided herself on reading at least two books a week" indicates both her steadfast commitment to devouring literature and the inherent value she finds in education (62). As much as Delores reads for pleasure, however, indulging in popular fiction, she is also diligent and disciplined in her studies, much more so than the brothers. Although Delores "prefer[s]... detective novels" more than any other genre, she nevertheless "ma[kes] her way slowly through the direst landscapes of biological, agricultural, and historical prose," spending "two or three hours a day with these books, propelled forward by a dictionary and the simple desire to possess more knowledge" (195). Delores desires education largely because she views it as valuable in and of itself; in contrast, although the brothers also diligently labor with

dictionaries at times, they do so with an immediate short-term goal in mind, such as writing a letter. Delores, however, eagerly works her way through book after book simply because she wants to—because she hungers for knowledge and finds pleasure and comfort in reading. Her efforts echo other education and literacy bildungsroman narratives which portray individuals who, unable to fully access the benefits of formal education, find ways to informally educate themselves.¹¹

This insatiable hunger for knowledge, combined with the demands and limitations of a more traditional work life than that of the musician brothers, seem to be what leads Delores to seek access to a formalized course of education by enrolling herself in adult education classes (something the brothers never do). While Cesar and Nestor don't value formal schooling as necessary or desirable, Delores does, viewing night classes as one route among many for furthering her education. Since the brothers read, write, and speak standard English only when necessary, formal classrooms which privilege standard English are of little use or interest to them, especially since their vocations as New York musicians encourage the use of a "nonstandard" local English. While Delores's career trajectory differs significantly from the brothers', she also values formal knowledge for its inherent worth; she seeks more knowledge in *all* places she knows it to be available, and in the process, makes more active use of tactics and arts of bricolage to secure further education, including structured or "formal" learning, for herself. Whereas the brothers' literacy tactics are almost entirely circumstantial, deployed on an "as-needed" basis, literacy plays a much more central role in Delores's daily life, causing her to seek access to it through a variety of both formal and informal means.

Yet, Delores's interest in learning and education nevertheless spills beyond the realm of schooling itself. The text depicts Delores's formal adult education classes as only one of many paths through which she seeks to further her knowledge. Her GED courses are not deemed more valuable or important than any of the other means by which she fashions her self-education, including borrowing books from the wealthy and from schoolteachers, working at

Woolworth's, listening to the radio, and talking with friends and neighbors. In fact, despite the text's continuous emphasis on the reading, writing, and learning habits of the characters, particularly Delores, there is never a scene in which we actually see her in the adult education classes that we are told she takes. While Hijuelos portrays Delores busily devouring literature and learning English in spaces from home to work to the bus stop to the dancehall, he leaves out the classroom setting altogether (in this sense, the text is quite distinct from *Nilda* and *Ceremony*, which both include memorable (and multiple) classroom scenes as parts of their narratives). Omissions of scenes depicting her formal education suggest, as the text does elsewhere, that even for the more academically-oriented Delores, classroom learning is less meaningful than her informal learning practices and tactics, which Hijuelos spotlights repeatedly. Interestingly, the only detailed description we *do* get of Delores in a classroom is a flashback from her youth, in which we learn that, as a girl in a Catholic school in the Bronx, she had "learned her English after a long and humiliating struggle... where the nuns literally beat her head with a dictionary when she misunderstood or could not remember certain words...ma[king] her the butt of many a joke" (92). This experience with institutional education is described as a "course of terrified learning,"¹² and, in stark contrast to the prestige that "nonstandard" Englishes earn the brothers in informal linguistic contexts, Delores's "chronic mispronunciation" casts her as a linguistic and ethnic outsider in the classroom (92). This may explain the marginal profile of formal schooling throughout the narrative, given its nature as a punitive, humiliating site for many ethnic minorities in the U.S. Mirroring Foucault's representation of the school as a site of institutional discipline and punishment, Delores is literally beaten into (linguistic) submission by her teachers, forced to adopt a course of learning that is quite ill-suited for her (92). By contrast, the self-education which Delores fashions for herself outside the classroom is marked by freedom, relaxation, and pleasure, making this self-constructed learning and the knowledge gained from it much more valuable and meaningful. While Delores does not give up on formal schooling completely, what she takes away from these

classes is compromised by the harsh assimilative regimen, and becomes not nearly as important, valuable, or memorable to Delores as what she takes away from her own everyday reading habits and literacy interactions. Her formal schooling as an adult is a curious absence in the text that is only alluded to, never portrayed, while the frequent depictions of Delores *informally* reading and learning outside of the classroom come to play a crucial role in how readers understand and envision her character. Formally, then, the narrative structure marginalizes her adult classes analogously to the way she herself has marginalized institutional education in favor of self-designed learning.

Becky Wai-Ling Packard's discussion of adult literacy programs offers a useful context for understanding why formal adult education appears to be of little value and relevance to someone like Delores. Citing Wrigley, Packard notes that in many adult language classes, "literacy is still taught as a set of isolated skills instead of as a practice of 'meaning making' about [students'] personal experiences or social issues in general" (Packard 627).¹³ This lack of concrete connection to the everyday lives of students and the worlds in which they live is portrayed in the novel when we see Delores laboring through "historical" and "biological" texts, books like *A Simpler English Grammar*, and other materials she feels she "ought" to read, ones which might be categorized as required reading in classroom contexts (195, 61). But we know that her favorite indulgences and moments of deepest pleasure come from reading the fictional works she chooses for purposes of enjoyment, particularly her detective novels. For Delores, the type of reading that matters—enough to work its way into the narrative and into readers' understandings of her character—is the self-chosen literature she devours on her own time, outside of the spatial, temporal, academic, and generic constraints of the classroom. Delores's delight in reading books she has picked out for herself lends weight to Packard's assertion that adult literacy programs need to find thematically and culturally relevant texts and other reading material that is of interest to students. It also supports Packard's argument that many adults enrolled in ESL classes may be functionally literate, but unable to find sources of inspiration for

this literacy within the classroom. Packard writes that adult learners may be more eager to read “literature that they might not have the opportunity to read in school” but which is “relevant to them”; in Delores’s case, this certainly seems to be true (632).

Interestingly, though we constantly see Delores reading and teaching herself throughout the novel, largely by harnessing the resources available to her within her immediate community, we never see her (nor Cesar or Nestor) in a public library, despite the fact that the novel is set in the city which houses the second largest public library system in the U.S.¹⁴ As I will discuss in more depth in a moment, Delores views institutionalized learning in the U.S. as exclusivist and assimilationist, marking people of her ethnicity, class, and linguistic background as educational others, largely unfit for intellectual pursuits or scholarly lives. It seems possible, then, that Delores’s wariness toward the school and classroom settings, as well as her awareness of the exclusivity and elitism of supposedly democratic institutions of learning, may also extend to the public library as well, explaining her lack of use of the institution throughout the novel. The notion of the *theoretically* public and democratic library as a less-than-democratic institution in practice has been discussed by scholars examining the ways in which institutional forms of literacy and sites of learning—even supposedly democratic ones—often block marginalized groups from access. For lower-class and immigrant families like Delores’s, who make several moves from apartment to apartment throughout the novel, use of the public library can become much more complicated than just having a library card: as Ward and Wason-Ellam note, “bureaucracy [including fines for overdue books] can be a barrier for some potential library users” and “if you don’t have a fixed address and are forced to move every two months, returning library books may not be high on your priority list” (97). It is also possible that, for a character like Delores, the more formal (and less social) setting of the library simply has less relevance—her busy lifestyle may not permit her to visit the library during its hours of operation, and it may be both preferable and more convenient for her to get knowledge and information tactically, from neighbors and the radio, and to get access to books by allowing neighbors’

unwanted ones to accumulate outside her door. Elaborating on the limitations of the public library as a democratic institution, Ward and Wason-Ellam add that “the rules for borrowing and returning books may exclude the poorest members of society, transportation is often an issue for those with young children, and the physical organization of the library can be intimidating to those unfamiliar with its operations.” Not only might the library not be readily accessible to Delores and her family, but its spatial and temporal structures and restrictions might make it a place of little interest for a woman like Delores, who regularly and actively uses the arts of bricolage to reconfigure usages of time and space in order to adapt these to her own literacy habits.

As mentioned earlier, the wariness Delores exhibits toward educational institutions intersects with her awareness of the unequal opportunities for access to formal education in the U.S., as well as the discriminatory and assimilative nature of formal institutions of learning. In some of the most interesting scenes in the novel, Delores wanders around the perimeters of the elite Columbia University campus in Manhattan, interested in the intellectual activity taking place there, but aware that she is unwelcome—indeed unauthorized—at this private learning institution where “the severe librarian with the bifocals pushed down low on his pointy nose watch[es] her with suspicion” (172). The portrayal in these scenes of inequitable access to the less-than-democratic institutions of learning in the U.S.—particularly through the increasing privatization of institutions of higher education—further the critique of formal schooling which emerges throughout *The Mambo Kings*.¹⁵ By reflecting the classist and racist systems of power which structure access to higher education (and by portraying U.S. schools’ demands for linguistic hegemony through the flashback to Delores’s childhood education), the novel demonstrates why immigrant, working-class, and racially marginalized people like Delores might want to—or have no choice but to—fashion their own self-educations outside of these racist and classist institutions. Yet, despite her overwhelmingly negative experiences with formal schooling in the past, Delores continues to feel the sting of exclusion from higher

education, motivating her to find her own tactical ways to “beat the system” and to access formal education without having to acquiesce to either its linguistic rules and expectations or its temporal and spatial constraints. In the moments when Delores lingers around Columbia University, her acts of bricolage take on an especially transformative nature, as she actively “manipulate[s] events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’” (de Certeau xix). Supporting de Certeau’s assertion that even certain patterns and routes of walking can be tactical acts that lend a political dimension to everyday life, Delores deliberately “go[es] walking down Broadway with her kids, among the students and professors of Columbia,” where she and her children will be able to overhear the conversations of intellectuals and pick up on tidbits of knowledge. Other creative and adaptive tactics allow Delores a more “illicit” form of access to the privatized education she covets, enabling her to take direct advantage of Columbia University and its intellectual community without being an “authorized” member of that community. On several occasions, she pretends to be a Columbia student, “sneak[ing]... into the big libraries of the university” and “thumbing through their books” (such activities would likely be impossible today, given the ubiquitous use of student identification cards on college campuses). She also “wander[s] around Columbia University with [her two young] children... peer[ing] into classrooms or stand[ing] outside a window, listening to the summer-session lecture” (170). In a way, her tactics here are no different from the brothers’ tactical means of listening in on conversations at parties to pick up on English phrases, but it is also critical to note that it is her inability to gain *permitted* access to the University (as a working class woman of color without a high school diploma or the economic means to pay for classes, and with few relevant credentials or connections) which prompts Delores to resort to furtive tactics such as eavesdropping outside the lecture hall, sneaking into the library, and pretending to be a Columbia student (170, 172). The illicit behaviors that Delores resorts to are direct results of the social, educational, and financial constraints within which she must operate. Her actions here demonstrate what linguist Norman Fairclough might describe as creative forms of agency developed as a result of a

specific set of restrictions. As Fairclough notes, “part of what is implied in the notion of social practice is that people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice... However, this makes social practice sound more rigid than it is... being socially constrained does not preclude being creative” (28). Indeed, Delores’s creative tactics of gaining access to the university—standing on tiptoe outside an open window where a professor is lecturing, or performing the role of a student so she can interact with Columbia attendees—are prime examples of what de Certeau calls the “ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices” (xvii). Impersonation and eavesdropping both function as clever tactics which enable Delores to forage forbidden territories where she can accumulate educational assets not intended for her.

The range of tactics Delores uses to fashion her own education are both impressive and significant, but equally important is Delores’s critical awareness of the inequalities and patterns of gatekeeping associated with education, especially at the collegiate level. It is this awareness which both motivates and justifies her everyday acts of “educational bricolage.” As Delores lingers around the Columbia University campus and surrounding neighborhoods, she wonders, why were they students, and not she?... She would daydream about the nature of the world and the way it was set up. Why was it that her father dropped dead on a stairway, in the midst of an exhausting work day, his heart sad from all his troubles? Why did the severe librarian with the bifocals pushed down low on his pointy nose watch her with suspicion? Why wasn’t her Papi standing in one of those classrooms, lecturing about the rise of the Popes of Avignon, instead of rotting in the ground? (172)

Although the narration describes these reflections as “daydreams,” they are in fact much more than that—they are indignant expressions against her exclusion from higher education and from “high culture” more generally. Believing that people like herself and her father are as deserving of access to formal education as anyone else, these “daydreams” function as Delores’s protests

against the elitist and exclusivist nature of higher education. Delores resents the premature death of her highly intelligent working-class father, wondering whether he might still be alive had he been able to acquire a college education and a white-collar job, “lecturing about the rise of the Popes of Avignon” rather than doing physical labor. Linking her father’s experiences as a working-class man without a college degree to her own unfulfilled desires for access to higher education also indicates her awareness of intergenerational class status and its impact on access to educational opportunities, what Brandt calls the “patterns of past economic competition [which] install themselves in the makeup of reading and writing and linger in the foundations on which succeeding generations of learners encounter the puzzles of literacy” (105). The fact that Delores takes her children with her as she wanders around the university also suggests that she is trying to make them, too, aware of the inequalities and discrimination they will face in seeking access to education. While they are still very young, Delores endeavors to teach her children what has been, perhaps, the most important lesson she herself has learned: in order to acquire the full range of educational opportunities they are likely to be denied, they must learn to use tactical methods of self-education and to access learning opportunities using the arts of bricolage. Refusing to let formal structures of inequality bar her and her family from educational opportunities, Delores finds ways to circumvent the institutional rules and constraints of the university, successfully gaining access to some formal education through a variety of informal means, while teaching her children to do the same.¹⁶

Educated and literate enough to “make do” in her everyday life—and, perhaps more importantly, to exercise a passion for reading which brings her much joy—Delores’s struggles to acquire the full range of literacy and education opportunities she wants are reminders of the fact that the U.S. continues to limit accessibility to higher education even as it purports to provide equal educational opportunities under the banner of democracy. Delores stands by the window of a private Ivy League university “eavesdropping” on a professor’s lecture precisely *because* she is a lower-class Cuban American woman and native Spanish speaker without the resources,

capital, or connections to gain *permitted* entry to that lecture. While, like Cesar's and Nestor's, Delores's tactics exemplify how excluded individuals can "snatch" or "steal" what is not intended for them in order to acquire literacy and learning informally in everyday life, circumventing the limitations which the dominant society attempts to put on their educations, her experiences also allude to the flip side of this coin, which is that many marginalized subjects are self-taught "auto-didacts" because they are denied opportunities to acquire knowledge formally. As Brandt writes,

the diversity and multiplicity of literacy practices may rightly bear witness to cultural variety and human resourcefulness. But that is not all they tell. Multiple literacy practices are also a sign of stratification and struggle. Their variety speaks of different and often unequal subsidy systems for literacy, which often lead to differential outcomes and levels of literacy achievement. Literacy practices trail along within themselves histories of opportunities granted and opportunities denied. (8)

Despite the promise of education in America—the idea that there exists an “ostensible democracy in educational chances”—Delores's story reminds us that “stratification of opportunity continues to organize access and reward in literacy learning,” and that battles continue to be waged against that stratification (Brandt 24).

Indeed, *The Mambo Kings'* portrayal of unequal access is, in the end, not quite as powerful as its portrayal of the persistent abilities of those who are denied this education to find ways to “make do,” to “*bricolent*.” In calling our attention to the everyday in such detailed ways—causing us to consider, for example, what it really means for a lower class woman to eavesdrop outside the window of an elite private University lecture—the narrative alerts us to the ways in which ordinary acts often contain within them extraordinary forms of political agency and resistance. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues that “alternative cultural forms,” although perhaps not offering “havens of resolution,” nevertheless function as “eloquent descriptions of the ways in which... [factors such as] labor exploitations, racialization, and

gendering work to prohibit alternatives” (x). Nestor, Cesar, and Delores’s language and literacy tactics are “alternative cultural forms” of access to learning and education—tactical forms which, although they do not undo the systemic prejudice in the unequal distribution of literacy and education, enable the characters to use personal forms of agency to acquire some unauthorized assets of literacy, language, and learning.

The Mambo Kings as Model: The Value of Multiple Literacies in Everyday Lives

For several decades now, certain educators and politicians have declared a literacy “crisis” in the U.S. However, the nature and causes of this “crisis,” and, as such, approaches to “solving” it, have been greatly misunderstood, in no small part due to a focus on literacy *only* as it exists in and is defined by formal educational institutions. As Resnick writes, “to understand the literacy crisis and imagine possible solutions, it is essential to examine the nature of literacy practice outside school as well as within. Schools are too isolated from everyday ways of using the written word to serve as the only source of literacy competence in society” (27). *The Mambo Kings* offers readers, especially students and scholars of literacy, language, and education, a useful model for considering the role that various “social forces, institutionalized and not,” play in literacy and language acquisition and usage (27). By calling our attention to the myriad ordinary ways people engage with literacy and language, this text provides a useful starting point for examining the personal agency which the subordinate deploy in order to cope with and resist their own dispossession. Providing what Gallego and Hollingsworth call the “personal perspective on multiples literacies as part of lived experiences,” *The Mambo Kings* shows ways to “connect literacy learning for school and literacy learning for life” (3, 1). In this sense, it echoes new literacy theorists who have argued that educators must treat literacy and language learning as contextualized and collaborative processes situated in the everyday lives of learners. As Brandt writes, schools and formal literacy programs “must teach toward these contextual and contextualizing dimensions of literacy if they are to be successful and just” (4). Indeed, Delores’s and the Mambo Kings’ linguistic tactics suggest that the most effective pedagogical

approaches to language acquisition in formal contexts will contextualize learning within the lives of learners.

Perhaps equally important, *The Mambo Kings* also suggests, particularly through Delores, but also through Nestor and Cesar, that the forms of language, literacy, and learning most valued are not only those which are relevant to their own lives, but also those which allow them to experience agency as well as pleasure. As I discussed, the books Delores enjoys reading most are not the ones she might be likely to encounter in classrooms—the “biological, agricultural, and historical” texts that she “make[s] her way slowly through”—but rather the works of fiction which “[take] her mind off her loneliness [and give] her feelings of both solitude and companionship” (61). Understandably, Delores prefers those texts she has emotional reactions to or personal experiences with. Like Delores, Cesar and Nestor also prefer those forms of language and literacy which are most familiar and enjoyable to them. Despite their reputation as extremely talented and semi-famous musicians, Cesar and Nestor “never really learned” how to read music and “presented their songs with simple chords and with the melodies worked out on instruments in their heads.” Although some of the other musicians they work with are skeptical of their lack of formal training, Cesar “tell[s] them, ‘What I’m interested in is a man who can really feel the music, instead of someone who can only play the charts” (25). His statement implies that the emotional experience one has with music is inhibited by focusing too closely on the sheet one plays from—Cesar cautions students and fellow musicians alike against relying too heavily on the need to read the music, especially if this stands in the way of one’s ability to *feel* the music. Interestingly, the passion and emotion that the brothers feel when playing and listening to music is also contrasted with the dissonance they experience when speaking and listening to “formal” English: “the twisted hard consonants and terse vowels of the English language never fell on their ears like music” (37). Throughout the novel, wordless melodies frequently become the most effective forms of communication for the brothers, especially for the brooding and taciturn Nestor, but when the brothers *do* write music with

words, they prefer Spanish language lyrics to English ones. During their appearance on the *I Love Lucy* show—their greatest moment of fame and arguably their most passionate musical performance ever—the narration pointedly notes that brothers sing their song “as it had been written—in Spanish” (7). By contrast, Cesar finds the English language incompatible with the language of music, describing English as merely “*ruido*—a noise... whirling, garbled... complicated and unmelodic to his ear” (37-8). The brothers’ attempts to circumvent standard English, formal literacy, and the contexts in which they are used are related, then, not only to the lack of relevance that these have in their everyday lives, but also to the lack of feeling, passion, and expression that the brothers associate with standard English and formal literacy, especially in comparison to other forms of expression. Their perspective is useful for considering how schools might benefit from a move away from “standardized” forms and usages of English, and toward an acknowledgement and appreciation of the variety of ways in which individuals communicate using both linguistic and artistic forms.

Yet, as Gallego and Hollingsworth note, “standard English is still the communicative basis on which [the United States] measures its citizens’ worth”: our “societal values and practices still favor the dominant community language over all others” (6, 13). While it is unfortunately true that in many contexts of American life—especially institutional contexts such as those of formal schooling—standard English and formal uses of language and literacy continue to be “measures [of] citizens’ worth,” *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* serves to critique the notion of one linguistically and culturally homogenous nation where literacy and language are used uniformly and held to one set of standards defined by the dominant culture. Instead, the text continually demonstrates the multiplicity of ways in which language and literacy can be—and are—used in everyday lives in the contexts of what community literacy theorist Linda Flower has called “local counterpublics”: spaces which exist in opposition to controlled and dominated public spaces, functioning as “local, intercultural publics... circulating new models of dialogue” (6).

The idea of “new models of dialogue” offered by *The Mambo Kings* prompts me to return by way of conclusion to de Certeau. At one point in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau’s consideration of how individuals constantly adapt and transform the world around them leads him to offer a challenge to the generally accepted definition of “assimilation,” arguing that it is a “misunderstanding” to assume that “assimilating necessarily means ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, and not ‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one’s own, appropriating or reappropriating it” (166). In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, “assimilation” with regard to language and literacy fits much more closely with de Certeau’s revised definition of the term. Like the brothers’ music and performances which, rather than “assimilating” to mainstream American cultural expectations of music, gradually bring a bit of the Mambo, and of Cuban culture, into the Anglo-American neighborhoods of the U.S. (the brothers’ “cross-country Mambo U.S.A. tour” helps to “spread the mambo across the nation,” as “Pennsylvania folk who were used to country dancing” dance the “rumba and mambo and cha-cha-cha”), their literate and linguistic activities are less about assimilating into their new society than they are about adapting that society to their needs, desires, and day-to-day circumstances (155, 157). In this sense, the emphasis on language and literacy in *The Mambo Kings* also has broader implications for considering the process of “assimilation” as less of an “acculturation” of “subjects” to national “norms,” and as more of an altering or remaking of local environments by the individuals and communities that inhabit them. Understood in this way, the idea of assimilation shifts from a demand for national homogeneity to an ongoing process of adaptations and hybridities; it suggests the value of continual mixings of people, cultures, and places, and the inevitability of constant re-makings of the uses and forms of languages and literacies within the various contexts of the everyday. In *Nilda*, characters also demonstrate the ongoing adaptation and recreation of languages and literacies, despite the public school system’s efforts to acculturate Nilda and her classmates into a world of English Only. This is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 6

“They Mustn’t Take Your Mind and Use You”: The Multiple Educations of Nilda Ramírez

“Language is a dialect with an army and a navy” – Max Weinreich

Paralleling Delores’s experiences in *The Mambo Kings*, Nicholasa Mohr’s experiences with schooling are testament to the ways in which ethnically minoritized children in the U.S. are offered limited opportunities for advancement through formal education, thus often seeking to self-educate themselves in other ways. Born Nicholasa Golpe Rivera in 1938 in Spanish Harlem (Manhattan’s “el barrio,” also the setting of *Nilda*) to migrant parents who died early in her youth, Mohr was raised in the Bronx and educated in New York City’s public school system. Although her exceptional artistic abilities were apparent from a young age, she was put on a vocational track in high school and “told by administrators that she should train to become a seamstress.” Ignoring these suggestions, Mohr fashioned her own, more challenging self-education outside of her vocational schooling, by, for example, using the New York Public Library as what she has called “her university” (Rico 163). She eventually went on to attend and teach at Pratt Institute, pursuing a successful career in graphic arts before becoming recognized as a writer (see Miller, Flores). Of her education, Mohr says:

I learned in the New York City public schools that the Americans saved us [Puerto Ricans] from the cruel Spaniards, that they, in a sense, adopted us. We in turn had to be grateful, speak only English, and strive toward total assimilation... My knowledge about myself, the history of the Puerto Rican people, was to come later, much later, when I was able to travel and read books that held the truth. (qtd. in Flores 51)

The inability to learn about “[her]self,” as well as the “history of the Puerto Rican people,” while attending U.S. schools seems to be in part what prompted Mohr to become a writer. As she explains in her essay “Puerto Rican Writers in the United States,” “when I started to write back in 1972, I realized that... there were no books in United States literature that dealt with our

existence, our contributions or what we as Puerto Rican migrants were about. I, as a Puerto Rican child, never existed in North American letters” (89). Recognizing the absence and invisibility of Puerto Ricans (particularly Puerto Rican women) within exactly the types of works that Puerto Rican students might be likely to encounter in U.S. schools, Mohr, in her own words, “proceeded to record who we were” (89).

Nilda, Mohr’s first novel, was published by Harper and Row in 1973, making Mohr the first Puerto Rican woman writer to have her work published by a major U.S. publishing house.¹ Shortly after her first novel’s release, Mohr published the two other works for which she is best-known, *El Bronx Remembered* (1975) and *In Nueva York* (1977). She has since published two children’s books (*Felita* and its sequel *Going Home*); short story collections *Rituals of Survival* (1985) and *A Matter of Pride and Other Stories* (1997); and a memoir entitled *Growing Up in the Sanctuary of My Imagination* (1994). A prolific writer and artist who has also written non-fiction essays as well as scripts for radio and television, Mohr’s many creative contributions were honored by the White House when she was named the recipient of the 1997 Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature. Her literary work has been classified as part of the field of Nuyorican literature (written by Puerto Ricans living in New York, this field also includes works such as Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Edward Rivera’s *Family Installments* (1983) and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993)), while Mohr has also been recognized as part of an emerging “canon” of Latina writers that have published in post-1965 America, including, among others, Mexican American author Sandra Cisneros (best-known for her widely-read *The House on Mango Street*) and Cuban American author Cristina Garcia (author of *Dreaming in Cuban*) (see Muniz; del Río).

Nilda itself has an interesting history of garnering both critical praise and condescension (if not outright dismissal). In the year of its publication, the novel won the *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year Award and the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, and was named a Best Book of 1973 by the American Library Association and the Best Children’s Book of

the Year by the *School Library Journal*. At least one critic has argued that Mohr has since become “among the most widely read, and perhaps more importantly consistently taught, Latina writers” (del Río 117). Yet, if Mohr has made her way into the academy through inclusion on class reading lists and course syllabi, there is still a relatively limited amount of critical scholarship on *Nilda* written in English.² As the novel’s award history alone attests to, *Nilda* has frequently been read as a work of children’s literature, a label the author rejects, noting in an interview with Kevane that she “didn’t consciously write [*Nilda*] for young adults,” but rather that “it was marketed that way” (91). Nonetheless, the novel has continually been (mis)represented by reviewers and critics as children’s literature, which perhaps explains what one critic has called the “condescending and dismissive” attitudes that tend to emerge in analyses of Mohr’s work (Rico 173). Though this same critic’s assessment that Mohr’s oeuvre has suffered from “critical neglect” and a “nearly total critical silence” seems somewhat exaggerated (there are at least a dozen interviews and scholarly articles on Mohr and her works, including several published in the new millennium), it is true that critical analyses of *Nilda* have been limited in focus and scope (Rico 160). In accordance with the view of the text as a work of children’s literature, most scholars discuss *Nilda* as a feminist and/or ethnic *bildungsroman* in which Nilda “comes of age” by learning to understand her gender and/or ethnic identity; it is read as the story of “the formation of a young Latina’s identity in the inner city,” as del Río puts it.³ As such, other aspects of the text which deserve more focused and sustained critical attention—such as the critiques of linguistic hegemony and formal schooling which continuously emerge throughout the narrative—have gone largely unmentioned. It is my intention here to resist the idea of *Nilda* as a work of children’s literature which focuses only on the maturation of a singular protagonist in order to, instead, consider some of the socially and politically significant issues with which the work seriously engages, not the least of which is the problematic role of assimilative schooling in a culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse society.

Throughout *Nilda*, many of the characters profess their faith in what Nilda discovers to be the false promise of education. Nilda's mother, Lydia, in particular, views the opportunity to be educated in the U.S. as the path to success for her children. Near the close of the novel, Lydia dies a premature death after spending most of her life doing hard labor in a factory, what she describes as "sweating like an animal on that machine" (220). Throughout the text, Lydia constantly warns Nilda to avoid the same fate by seeking opportunity and mobility through schooling: "I don't want to hear no complaints [about school or Nilda's teachers], because it'll be much worse for you here with me," she warns her daughter. "Comprende? I only got to the fourth grade; I never had the advantages you got here in this country. You want to be a jíbara when you grow up? Working in a factoría? Cleaning houses? Being a sucketa for other people?" (60). Nilda's mother also emphasizes the importance of education as a way of avoiding the strenuous work that comes with (single)⁴ motherhood, telling Nilda, her only daughter and youngest child, "If I could have had your opportunity for school and your privileges, never—lo juro por mi madre—never in a million years would I have had so many kids" (190).

Lydia's belief in the false promise of education is also suggested through a number of scenes which hint at the extent to which she values and prioritizes her children's schooling. Throughout the text, we frequently see Lydia telling her children to do their homework, and, indeed, readers who pay attention will notice that the children are often shown doing their homework, suggesting that it is a regular and important part of everyday life in Lydia's household (see, for example, pages 124, 127, 259, 263). The ways in which Lydia values schooling are also indicated in scenes where she expresses pride in her children's academic accomplishments. When she visits a welfare office to seek government assistance and is asked about her children, Lydia "proudly" responds, "They are all in school. My son Victor will be graduating high school this June" (118). When Victor becomes the first in the family to graduate high school, Lydia works hard to find the time and money to turn the event into a "special occasion": the family's only relatives in the U.S. are invited to "come down from the

Bronx” for a day to celebrate, something they usually do only “during holidays,” and Lydia “manag[es] a small dinner for the family, and a cake,” which, in contrast to the obvious shortage of food the family lives with throughout most of the novel, serves to heighten the reader’s sense of just how special an occasion this is for her (145).

Interestingly, though, while Nilda’s mother emphasizes the value of schooling and continually instructs her children to stay in school and to do their homework, the school itself remains entirely the world of the children throughout the novel. Despite the prominence of the school as a setting in the text, we never see Lydia enter the school to act on her children’s behalf—even when Nilda is humiliated and mistreated by her teachers, and tries to tell her mother as much—or even attempt to acquire information about her children’s education. Even when a situation directly calls for Lydia’s participation in her children’s schooling, she still remains uninvolved. When Nilda needs a note to excuse her multiple days of absence from school after her stepfather’s passing, for example, Lydia leaves Nilda to write the absence note herself, which ultimately lands the girl in a good deal of trouble with her teacher and principal. How can we understand this seeming contradiction between Lydia’s emphasis on the importance of schooling when speaking to her children at home, and her unwillingness to become actively involved in her children’s educations and school lives? In *Unequal Childhoods*, Annette Lareau argues that there is a more permeable boundary between the home and the school for middle-class parents who are part of the dominant culture than there is for working-class and poor parents, particularly those who, like Nilda’s mother, may not have had access to the same types of education their children do. Lareau suggests that while middle-class and “mainstream” parents may feel able and, indeed, obligated, to facilitate or even intervene in their children’s schooling, working-class and poor parents who feel more culturally, educationally, and linguistically separated from the world of the school are less equipped to make these sort of interventions, and may even feel less entitled to do so, assuming that it is not their place to intervene. In Lydia’s case, her continual underscoring of her own lack of

education suggests that she feels Nilda's teachers are the "experts" when it comes to her daughter's schooling, that Nilda's education is best left in their hands and that she herself has little to contribute. This is only one way in which Mohr demonstrates how the school denigrates and marginalizes the home life of minoritized students—it is not only the students themselves that are made to feel inferior and incapable by teachers and schools, but also their parents, as the narrative shows.

Lydia's willingness to relinquish authority to the white schoolteachers who she assumes have the power to make Nilda's life better than her own suggests that she buys into what Valenzuela calls the "out-of-the-*barrio*" motif (95). Echoing Lippi-Green's concepts of the "unfounded promise" and "explicit threat" discussed in the introduction to Part III, the "out-of-the-*barrio*" motif suggests that Latino/as and Chicano/as can achieve social mobility through schooling, but simultaneously implies that success in schooling (and throughout life) can only be achieved by removing one's self from the Latino/a/Chicano/a community—one has only "made it" socially, economically, and educationally if one is able to ultimately get out of *el barrio*, which is the very hope Lydia has for Nilda (and, indeed, for all five of her children). As Valenzuela notes, minoritized children in U.S. schools frequently "get socialized into the belief that leaving their communities through upward and outward mobility is the standard against which their self-worth should be measured," and indeed, it is not only Nilda's mother that buys into the "out-of-the-*barrio*" motif throughout the novel; several of her children are deeply invested in it as well (Valenzuela 264). The notion of *el barrio* as at odds with, or as a stumbling block on the path to, success through education, is interestingly explored through a comparison of Nilda's brothers Jimmy and Victor and their differing attitudes toward schooling.

Lippi-Green's concepts of the "explicit threat" and "unfounded promise" of education are embodied in the novel's dichotomous portrayal of Jimmy and Victor, Nilda's two eldest brothers. The school's role in molding, or failing to mold, students into "good citizens" who contribute to their economy and country by following the "rules" of the social/racial order is

suggested by the different paths taken by Jimmy and Victor throughout adolescence and early adulthood. We learn at the start of the novel that Jimmy, Lydia's first-born child, has "quit high school and left [home]" and that "Nilda's mother lit candles for him every day" (27). The contrast between Jimmy and Victor is first established in a scene where Lydia nervously waits for her two oldest sons to get home so they can accompany her to the hospital to visit Emilio; while nobody knows Jimmy's whereabouts or why he is late, Victor isn't home yet because he is "still in the library" (27). Throughout the novel, Jimmy's situation increasingly worsens—he starts using drugs, is sought after by the police for gang involvement and criminal activity, and becomes wanted by the government for draft dodging. He is nowhere to be found during his girlfriend's pregnancy or the birth and infancy of his son (whom Lydia shelters and provides care for), and ultimately ends up in a penal institution for criminal drug addicts. It would seem that Jimmy's story is proof of the "explicit threat" that Lippi-Green sees schools as presenting their students with: in failing to disassociate from the life of el barrio and immerse himself in the culture of the school, Jimmy forces himself down a path of damage and destruction. In contrast, Victor's devotion to education seemingly pays off, as he not only graduates high school before the novel's end (the honor he receives as the family's first graduate contrasts sharply with the shame that Jimmy, the oldest child and first "drop out," brings to his mother and other relatives), but also becomes the "model citizen" in the text, both an ideal son and a service to his country. Constantly seen studying and "carrying his books," Victor makes everyone in the family proud (30). As the narrator explains:

Even though Jimmy was the oldest, they all looked to Victor for advice. He very often made decisions and was respected as the older brother. [Nilda's] mother would say, "I can always count on my Victor. Thank God for such a son." ... Nilda would brag about him to her friends. "He's real smart," she'd say, "always reading books and always in the library. He got the highest mark in his whole class. When he graduates, he's going to go to college someplace and be something big, like a lawyer or even a bookkeeper. You

know, something like that. Mami says he's not going to be a sucketa working in no factory." (84-5)

In contrast to his older brother, Victor represents the school's "promise" to its students: "always reading books and always [being] in the library" is supposed to be his ticket to "be[coming] something," a belief that is shared by Victor, his mother, and many (though not all) of the members of his family and community.

Yet, upon graduating high school in 1942, Victor does not go on to college or to the career opportunities promised by his education, as Nilda had predicted he would. Instead, he decides to join the army and heads off to war. Suggesting the success the school has had in molding him into the ideal citizen, Victor explains his decision to his shocked family by telling them, "I believe in my country and I believe we should defend it" (132). When Jimmy responds incredulously with "Man, you wasn't even born here; you was born in Puerto Rico. What country? What country you talking about?", Victor answers his brother not only by expressing his patriotism, but also his belief in the promise of education: "Puerto Rico is part of the United States. And anyway, what if I was born there! I've been here since I was six years old and I am an American... If that's the way you want to think about things, Jimmy, then I really feel sorry for you. You got no feelings for your own country. In this country, if you work hard, you can be somebody, get an education and accomplish something!" (132). However, while Victor's schooling has clearly made him into a "good American," as Nilda's rarely-complimentary teacher refers to him upon finding out that he has enlisted, it is not apparent how, or if, the education that he professes so much faith in will fulfill its "promise" to him in the future (145). Headed off to fight in a war in which hundreds of thousands of American men died, Victor's future is left ominously uncertain at the novel's close. Thus, while characters such as Victor, Lydia, and others profess their faith in the promise of education, the narrative itself hints at the idea that this promise is, as Lippi-Green argues, "unfounded." Furthermore, scenes such as the one in which Victor announces his intention to join the army also serve to complicate the idea of

Jimmy as an unsuccessful “drop out” who is proof of the school’s “explicit threat.” Instead, this scene suggests that Jimmy’s decision to reject the world of the school and the “out-of-the-*barrio*” motif may be related to his skepticism that people like himself and his brother can call America “their” country or can “make it” in the U.S. Aware of the ways in which he and Victor are marked by their ethnicity and class as “outsiders” and as “other,” Jimmy does not see the same promises or opportunities in schooling (or in military service) that his brother does—indeed, he believes the path of criminality will take him farther, suggesting that he is aware of the limited options for mobility available to lower-class Latino men in a largely white society, whether educated or not. Instead of reading Jimmy as proof of the school’s “explicit threat”—failing to conform to the school’s culture and expectations, he inevitably becomes a criminal and failure in life—we can instead read his decision to drop out of school as suggestive of the *school’s* failure: Jimmy rejects the idea that he will be able to “cash in on” the school’s promise, given his position as a Puerto Rican from *el barrio*, and thus is unable to see the relevance of schooling in his everyday life. Valenzuela’s observation that “some students’ clear perception of the weakness of their position [in both the school and the larger society] politicizes them into deliberately conveying an uncaring attitude as a form of resistance not to education, but to the irrelevant, uncaring, and controlling aspects of schooling” can clearly apply to Jimmy. Although his “uncaring” attitude is read by others in his family and community—especially Victor and Lydia—as a sign of laziness or misguided rebellion, the narrative itself suggests that Jimmy’s detachment from school may actually signal a form of politicized resistance, a refusal to believe in the “opportunities” offered to ethnic minorities, by both the school and the country, if they follow the “correct” path of assimilation.

Although Nilda stays in school throughout the novel (even as some of those she is closest to, including Jimmy and her best friend Petra, drop out or are kicked out), her attitudes toward schooling more often mirror Jimmy’s skepticism and defiance than they do Victor’s faith in

education and willingness to assimilate to the school's norms. In fact, Nilda seems to hate school, describing her classroom as a place of fear, humiliation, and violence:

On [the teacher's] desk sat the long, thick wooden ruler for all to see. Everyone knew that today someone would get rapped on the knuckles with that ruler... Nilda looked at the ruler on the desk, recalling that feeling she got when she had to hold her arms outstretched. She always shut her eyes because she knew she would run away or cry out if she saw the ruler coming down to strike her. She hated when the skin broke and the knuckles swelled; her hands stayed sore all day and hurt for a long time. This was especially upsetting to Nilda when she looked forward to working on her cutouts and drawings... at home. Miss Langhorn [Nilda's teacher] had a high stool placed in the back of the classroom, off to one side, and a large white cone-shaped cap made of cardboard. On this cardboard cap was written the word "dunce" in large black letters. Any student who refused to take the punishment had to wear the dunce cap. Nilda had worn the cap three times this term. (52-3)

Regarding the reasons for Miss Langhorn's use of the dreaded ruler, the narrator explains that "students were hit for talking, lateness, and coming into class unwashed. Sometimes it just depended on Miss Langhorn's mood" (53). Though some of Miss Langhorn's punishments are indeed arbitrary, the mention of *talking* as punishable relates to one of the teacher's strictest rules: the use of English Only in the classroom. This rule reveals the ways in which Nilda's school is not only a place of fear and humiliation, but also a space where her language, home life, family, and community/culture are denigrated and otherized. In particular, we see that the languages and literacies that are authorized as permissible in the classroom are not the ones that people in el barrio use and speak. Nilda tells us that

Miss Langhorn had a strict set of rules everyone in the class knew by heart. One of her most strict rules was that no Spanish was allowed in her classroom. Anybody caught speaking or even saying one word of Spanish had to put out both arms and clench his

fists. “None of that,” she would say, “if you are ever going to be good Americans... You will never amount to anything worthwhile unless you learn English” (52).⁵

It is not simply “talking,” then, that is punishable in Langhorn’s classroom, but a certain *type* of talking—the language of Nilda’s home and community becomes a violation in her classroom, as well as the justification for much of the violence and humiliation that the teacher inflicts upon her students.

The novel makes clear, through scenes set both inside and outside of the school, that there is a glaring conflict between the way Nilda uses language among friends and family at home and in the neighborhood of el barrio, and how she is expected to use language at school and in the other “official” sites of discipline that she occasionally finds herself in (such as the welfare office or the strict religious summer camp she is sent away to). Whereas “improper” English (“don’t tell me no lies”) and frequent mixings of Spanish and English (“Mira! Mira! There they go!”) are commonplace in el barrio, at school, Spanish is forbidden, students are discouraged from speaking how they speak at home and with parents, and an emphasis is placed on speaking “correct” English if one wishes to get ahead in the U.S. (the “out-of-the-*barrio*” motif) (2, 3). When Miss Langhorn presents students with the “explicit threat” that they will “never amount to anything worthwhile unless [they] learn English,” adding, “You’ll stay just like your parents. Is that what you people want? Eh?,” she suggests that progress and success (educational, economic, and otherwise) are signified by becoming less like one’s parents, and, above all, less like them *linguistically* (52). Miss Langhorn’s derision of the children’s parents, homes, and communities is in fact a frequent part of her pedagogy, signaling a *subtractive* approach to schooling—she consistently reminds the children that much of what they learn in school is “counteracted” by the negative influences students encounter in their homes and in el barrio. As she tells Nilda’s class,

“I have nothing to do with it [their success or failure in school]. You are responsible for what happens and you bring it down upon yourselves. Good behavior and progress go

hand in hand indeed. It all stems from the home. Why, I hear them on the Madison Avenue bus coming to work... Yapity yap yap. How are they ever going to learn to speak English? When I was a child we could look up to our parents.” (54)

Suggesting that the best role models (linguistic, educational, and cultural) for her students are not their own parents, but people such as herself and her parents, Miss Langhorn makes clear her belief in the “out-of-the-*barrio*” motif. Her approach to teaching marks the cultural backgrounds of the students, particularly the languages they speak at home and with their parents, as liabilities in the classroom, viewed as stumbling blocks on the path to educational success and cultural/linguistic assimilation (which are, from the perspective of the school and the state, critically interrelated). Even more disturbing, her suggestion that her students’ parents’ use of Spanish makes them people not worth “look[ing] up to” implies that Miss Langhorn equates one’s language usage not only with one’s chances for success, but also one’s *worth as a person*. As Vershawn Ashanti Young notes, the “language, dialect, and accent” of the minoritized are often marked by the dominant culture as “outward signs of inward flaws, as verbal manifestations of inherent inferiority, as faults of character,” and such is certainly the experience of Nilda in her encounters with her white schoolteachers (74).

The association of students’ home languages, cultures, parents, and communities with failure in school and inability to successfully assimilate continues to be a defining feature of Nilda’s schooling throughout the novel. Several years (and chapters) after being a student in Miss Langhorn’s class, we see Nilda under the tutelage of Mrs. Fortinash. Requesting in one scene that the students bring back their report cards with their parents’ signatures on them, Mrs. Fortinash lectures, “I hope you all have them... Remember what I said about lateness. There is never any excuse for lateness in this class. *Mañana, mañana* is all right in another country, but not in America and not in my classroom” (209). When one girl, Carmela, returns the next day with a report card that her mother has signed with an X, Mrs. Fortinash “hold[s] up” the card in front of the class, asking, “What am I supposed to do with this?” When Carmela

points to the place where her mother has signed, explaining that that is her mother's signature, Mrs. Fortinash responds, "that's not a signature, my dear; that's an X" (210). Although Carmela insists that her mother's way of writing her name is legitimate—"My mother said that is her mark... That is how she makes her mark all the time. She signs checks and everything like that"—Mrs. Fortinash exercises total authority over what counts as literacy in her classroom, declaring that she is "going to have to talk to the Vice Principal because I will not take the responsibility for accepting this. Anybody can make an X and imitate that!" (211). Not only is Carmela told that her mother's form of literacy is illegitimate, but she is also humiliated in front of her peers, as her teacher demands, "Can't your mother read or write?... How about somebody in the house who can read and write? Carmela, you will have to come with me to the office. You can tell them all about it" (210-11). The fact that nobody in Carmela's family can read or write *fit to Mrs. Fortinash's standards*⁶ becomes a cause for punishment and the source of public humiliation: Carmela is taken to see the Vice Principal while the rest of the girls in the class "beg[in] to giggle; then everyone laughed [at her]" (211).

Mrs. Fortinash humiliates Nilda and her mother in much the same way she goes about humiliating Carmela and her mother. When Nilda returns to school after several weeks' absence due to her stepfather's death, she writes her own absence note because her mother is "still... upset after the funeral" (211). In the note, Nilda asks her teacher to "please excuse my daughter Nilda Ramírez for being absent from school. Her father died and she got lots of things to take care of at home. That is our custom." Upon reading the note, Mrs. Fortinash responds with a memorable tirade worth quoting here at length:

"What custom is that?... How dare you return to class after almost three weeks and hand me such a note! You just walk in, like it's nothing; perhaps you were away on a picnic!... You people are the limit!⁷ No wonder you don't get anywhere or do anything worthwhile with these kinds of customs. People pass away every day—you are not the only ones, you know! That does not mean that one stops meeting responsibilities! Your mother will

have to come in and explain that custom and what tribe you belong to!... Irresponsible, that's what you people are. Then you expect the rest of us here to make it easy for you. Well, you are not the first ones to be allowed into this country. It's bad enough we have to support strangers with our tax dollar; we are not going to put up with..."⁸ Mrs. Fortinash had turned beet red and was screaming... "Don't you look at me like that! You should be ashamed!" (212)

Nilda is terrified throughout the entire ordeal, described as "shaking," "not know[ing] what to say or do," and thinking to herself "Dear God, make her stop! Please make her finish" (212). Ultimately, Nilda is (like Carmela) taken to the Vice Principal to explain her family's "customs," and the incident causes her to decide that she "hate[s] [Mrs. Fortinash] worse than Miss Langhorn almost" (213). Nilda's hatred of both of her teachers stems from the ways in which the women use their institutional, cultural, and linguistic authority not only to terrify Nilda and to inflict violence upon her, but also to devalue her way of speaking, her family, her culture, and her customs, making Nilda feel a sense of shame and humiliation that is much deeper than that which comes from a low grade on a report card.

When Nilda complains to her mother about her teachers, Lydia tells her, "You do as the teacher says and learn, so you can be somebody someday. Amount to something" (60). But although Lydia keeps telling Nilda to do as she is told, to behave, and to strive to learn from the teachers' lessons, we see that Nilda and her classmates constantly resist their teachers and their schooling, from both within and beyond the classroom. Critics have argued that the schoolteachers represent "Anglo Villains" representative of "repressive and abusive power" and that students in their classrooms are "force-fe[d]" the ideologies of the dominant culture, but to see *only* the domination teachers exercise over students is to miss some of the small, everyday ways in which the students at Nilda's school, and, in particular, Nilda herself, exert agency and resistance (Miller 544, Rico 168). The battle between teachers and students is never fully one-sided, but students' acts of resistance are perhaps overlooked because they are mostly forms of

Scott's infrapolitics, "low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (19). Students in the classroom learn how to get away with things (not the least of which is speaking/writing in Spanish), breaking and resisting the teachers' rules while still managing to skirt punishment. With regard to avoiding Miss Langhorn's dreaded ruler, for example, we learn that "the lucky students only got threatened; however, *real luck meant you didn't get caught*" (52 emphasis added). Not getting caught, however, is less a matter of luck than it is strategy—students develop their own careful tactics that allow them to get away with rule-breaking and to attempt to re-align the power dynamics in their classrooms.

Interestingly, the students' tactics for resisting their teachers are not only forms of infrapolitics, but can also be read as examples of what Pratt calls the *literate arts*. These are the tactics that the marginalized bring to contact-zone confrontations and negotiations with the powerful—Vershawn Ashanti Young usefully describes the literate arts as forms of "linguistic martial arts"—and include (among other forms of resistance) denunciation, critique, and bilingualism, each of which Nilda and her classmates make use of within the contact zone of the school (Young 118). Denunciation occurs in Nilda's classrooms through students' communal mockery of their teachers: for example, readers learn (though Miss Langhorn herself never does) that Nilda and her classmates have "nicknamed [their teacher] 'Foghorn' because "her voice had a loud sandpaper tone" (51). It is interesting that the students' denunciation of their teacher focuses specifically on mockery of her *voice*—it would seem that, in their attempts to shift the power dynamics of the classroom, the students pointedly attack the teacher's speech as a way of seeking revenge for her own continued denunciation of *their* ways of speaking. Their name-calling is not just child's play, then, but a focused and deliberate form of retaliation against a specific type of oppression: nicknaming the teacher "Foghorn" becomes, in this context, a "literate art" which deliberately calls attention to—and turns the tables on—the teacher's attempts to denigrate the students' ways of talking.

Alongside denunciation, critique of the teacher, her pedagogies, and the assimilative environment of the classroom emerges in other, less obvious ways which again point to Scott's assertion that resistance in power-laden contexts often takes a "muted or veiled form" (138). One way in which Nilda expresses her critique of assimilative schooling is through a silent but significant refusal to absorb her teacher's lessons. In an attempt to teach the version of "American history" legitimized by the state and the dominant culture, Miss Langhorn repeatedly tells the class a triumphant tale of the nation's founding: a group of brave men dared to go where "man had never ventured," and, because they would "[not] permit the Indians to stop them," "this nation was developed from a wild primitive forest into a civilized nation" (52-53).⁹ Though Miss Langhorn takes pride in the story and obviously considers teaching it to be one of her most important responsibilities, Nilda sees this history lesson as part of the boring, routinized nature of the classroom, something of little interest to her: "it was always more or less the same speech that preceded the Pledge of Allegiance" (52). Her critique of Miss Langhorn's way of teaching American history—which excludes teaching any history about Nilda's Puerto Rican culture or heritage and its place in America—emerges in her refusal to see the same significance in the lessons that her teacher does. When she should be attentively listening to the tales of the nation's founding, Nilda instead finds that "Miss Langhorn's voice was far, far away" (54). Like the children's name-calling that becomes a form of denunciation, Nilda's wandering mind is not indicative only of a child's short attention span, but is also readable as a form of critique which speaks to the ways in which she perceives her schooling as uninteresting and irrelevant to her own life. By deliberately "tuning out," Nilda refuses to absorb the ideology her teacher attempts to "force-feed" her and, in so doing, effectively resists the impacts of assimilative schooling.¹⁰

Yet, perhaps the most significant form of resistance to schooling that students engage in—an ongoing form of resistance that occurs both within and beyond the classroom—is their bilingualism, their continuous refusal to stick to English Only and to conform to the classroom's

demands for linguistic standardization and homogenization. Despite the teacher's rules, Spanish inevitably makes its way into the English Only classroom in a variety of ordinary but important ways. Indeed, even Nilda's name is itself made up of Spanish words, and so, paradoxically, writing it out becomes both one of the requirements of the classroom *and* one of its forbidden rules, speaking to the complex, conflicted nature of schooling for students like Nilda. A heading in Nilda's assignment book, reprinted in the text of the novel, unapologetically reads "Nilda Ramírez, Class 5B-2, P.S. 72 Manh., November 19, 1941" (55). Through the use of something as simple as an accent mark over the letter "i," Nilda's name—and, by extension, her very identity—becomes a violation in the classroom: to be Puerto Rican, to have a last name such as Ramírez, is to violate the rules of authority in this context. Yet, ironically, because the documentary nature of the classroom demands that she write her name out as part of a formal heading required by her teacher—and, of equal importance, because Nilda herself refuses to "Anglicize" her name by dropping the use of the accent mark over the "i"¹¹—the forbidden Spanish language nonetheless makes its way into the classroom on a daily basis, demonstrating one of the many problems with and limitations of attempting to construct schools as linguistically homogenous spaces. The rather ordinary act of writing her name becomes both a violation and an act of resistance within the classroom—a written "rupture" in the linguistic hegemony that Miss Langhorn attempts to enforce. This linguistic hegemony is also challenged by the very fact that Nilda and her classmates continue to use Spanish (and hybrid mixes of English and Spanish) throughout the entirety of the novel, a point I will discuss in more depth later. Their continued bilingualism, despite the repressive nature of Miss Langhorn's English Only rules, indicates that their teacher's attempts to "subtract" their languages from them have been unsuccessful. Their frequent use of Spanish *outside* of the classroom, though seemingly not as significant a form of resistance as using Spanish in a context where it is explicitly forbidden, is also an important way of subverting the teacher's authority—as Young writes, the use of nonmainstream languages in *any* context is always "synonymous with expressing that

which [nonmainstream speakers are] required to suppress in white contexts” (64). Nilda’s insistence on speaking in Spanish, or in a hybrid English/Spanish, in her home and in el barrio becomes a significant way of ensuring the continued use and preservation of the very languages that her schooling and teachers seek to silence and eradicate.

Ironically enough, though, the same course of education that demands English Only of Nilda and her Spanish-speaking classmates in the earlier years of their schooling later requires these students to speak and write in Spanish as part of a *foreign* language curriculum; however, readers quickly see that these classes, too, are about learning to speak a “standard” language “correctly”—in contrast to the “proper” Spanish her teacher demands, Nilda and her classmates learn in the foreign language classroom that the type of Spanish they speak is a mere “dialect.” Their Spanish teacher’s emphasis on eradicating the use of *Puerto Rican* Spanish suggests, interestingly, that it is not the Spanish language itself that Nilda’s teachers associate with failure and even unAmericanness; rather, it is the use of certain *types* of Spanish, particularly those used in Latina/o and Chicana/o cultures, that become demonized as stumbling blocks on the path to academic success and cultural assimilation.¹² As was the case in Miss Langhorn’s classroom, Miss Reilly makes clear to her students that the Spanish they speak at home, with family and neighbors in el barrio, is both inappropriate and unacceptable while at school; she also emphasizes that this “dialect” is an inferior version of the “real” language she will teach them to speak. As Miss Reilly tells the class, “[in Spain,] they speak Castilian, the real Spanish, and I am determined, girls, that that is what we shall learn and speak in my class... none of that dialect spoken here. If only you could hear yourselves chat chat chat! Like a bunch of Chinamen!... Spanish is a language of drama... inspiration... love. Not to be slaughtered, young ladies, as some of you do to it!” (214). From Miss Reilly, Nilda and her classmates learn that the Spanish they already speak is a lesser version of the “real” thing, a “slaughtered” form of something that is supposed to signify “inspiration” and “love,” but falls terribly short when coming from their mouths. Miss Reilly’s privileging of Castilian Spanish over Puerto Rican

Spanish and other non-European Spanishes speaks powerfully to the standard language ideology that dominates Nilda’s schooling, no matter *which* classroom she is in. Standard language ideology establishes Castilian Spanish as the “standard” in the foreign language classroom just as it establishes English as the “standard” in Nilda’s elementary school classroom—and, in both cases, Nilda’s language is characterized not only as nonstandard, but as inferior, detrimental, punishable, unspeakable.¹³

It is significant that the inclusion of Spanish in the students’ curriculum ironically does *not* provide an opportunity for native speakers of Spanish like Nilda to excel within in a school system that, in general, makes achievement difficult for people of non-English speaking backgrounds. Instead, the Spanish language curriculum becomes yet another stumbling block for Nilda and her Spanish-speaking classmates as they struggle to do well in school. Miss Reilly’s pronouncements that the students’ “dialects” are “slaughtered” versions of the Spanish language are made all the more insulting by the fact that Miss Reilly isn’t even a native speaker of Spanish herself—in fact, she “sp[eaks] to the class in English most of the time” and, when she does speak in Spanish, has an “American accent... so thick that Nilda had a hard time understanding what she said” (214). Yet, despite her own obvious lack of “mastery” over the language, Miss Reilly continues to insist upon “correcting” her students’ speech, much to their dismay and frustration. Schooling is subtractive in Miss Reilly’s classroom, just as it was in Miss Langhorn’s; students are encouraged to abandon the Spanish they know from their parents and their homes, rather than being able to build upon this knowledge at school. At one point, Nilda is so frustrated with how her use of the language fails to match up with Miss Reilly’s demands for linguistic correctness that she “swear[s]” to her brother Paul that she is “gonna take French if I have her again next year” (262). A particularly powerful example of the effects of subtractive schooling, we see here that Nilda considers giving up the study of her native language altogether in order to try to find an easier path for herself in school.¹⁴ However, perhaps the best example of the ways in which Miss Reilly’s subtractive pedagogy takes its toll on her students can be seen

not through Nilda herself, but through the experiences of her friend and classmate Edna. Edna was “born in Puerto Rico [but] found it very difficult to speak Spanish with the accent Miss Reilly required.” Despite the fact that Edna regularly reads newspapers in Spanish, and is even able to help the other students in the class with Spanish grammar, she “had [been] given a low mark on her report card... [because] she could not manage to imitate Miss Reilly’s Castilian accent” (215). In the Spanish classroom, Edna’s fluency in Spanish and regular use of the language at home and on her own are viewed not as skills or positive examples for other students to learn from, but as sources of anxiety and embarrassment. Nilda notes that Edna is often “nervous” during class, “straining to get the accent and trying to lisp in the right place” (215). Like Miss Langhorn, Miss Reilly encourages Edna to stop speaking the language she uses at home and in el barrio if she wishes to succeed in Spanish class (the “explicit threat”): after Edna finishes reading aloud from a Spanish-language text in front of the class, Miss Reilly comments, “Very well, Edna, you are doing a little better. However, you must practice and stop speaking that dialect you speak at home; it is not helping you” (215-16). As her demands indicate, it is of equal importance to Miss Reilly both that her students speak in “proper” Castilian accents and, conversely, that they *stop* speaking with other accents and in other dialects altogether. Her subtractive approach to teaching focuses as much (if not more) on stamping out “incorrect” ways of speaking as it does on teaching students what she deems the “right” way of speaking. In her classroom, the particular type of Spanish the students already know is to be “subtracted,” viewed as a stumbling block, rather than an advantage, along the way to learning to speak the Spanish “standard.” Miss Reilly’s attempts to eliminate some types of pronunciation while enforcing others can be situated within a much longer and larger history of attempts on the part of state-run schools to eradicate “erroneous” variations in language, accent, and pronunciation as part of their assimilative efforts.¹⁵

However, as in Miss Langhorn’s class, Nilda and her classmates resist Miss Reilly’s subtractive schooling and her demands for a linguistically “correct” classroom. As the teacher

chastises the girls for “slaughter[ing]” the Spanish language or tries to perk their interest in “proper” Spanish by telling them stories of her “trips to Europe,” the girls “loo[k] at each other and giggle... ‘She’s got a boyfriend in Spain,’ someone whispered. ‘She got the hots!’ one of them almost shouted, and everyone began to laugh” (214). The students undermine Reilly’s authority by making fun of her romanticized tales about Spain and Europe and refusing to invest the same seriousness in learning to speak the language “properly.” Even more significantly, although the girls are discouraged from using their own “improper” forms of Spanish in her classroom, they nevertheless continue to do so (as they did in Miss Langhorn’s class), subverting Miss Reilly’s power over language usage in the classroom and even mocking her knowledge of and “authority” over the Spanish language. In one scene, for example, we see that “someone had written something dirty in Spanish between the lines of the homework assignment [on the blackboard]: *Miss Reilly is in love with a Spanish matador who fucks with a Castilian accent!*” (214-15). The “unrefined” and “improper” non-Castilian Spanish of Nilda and her friends not only makes its way into the classroom, then, but right on to the blackboard! This is not the first time this sort of minor rebellion against Miss Reilly has occurred, either; rather, we are told that “very often one of the students would write profanities in Spanish on the blackboard, mostly about Miss Reilly. [Nilda] often wondered if Miss Reilly knew what these dirty words meant” (215). The teacher’s seeming inability to understand the form of Spanish her own students use to speak and write suggests the limitations of her knowledge and fluency, despite her emphasis on “proper” pronunciation and accent. Indeed, it is perhaps *because of* her fixation on pronunciation and accent that Miss Reilly fails to gain full competence in the Spanish language. As Lippi-Green usefully points out, “accent has little to do with what is generally called *communicative competence*, or the ability to use and interpret language in a wide variety of contexts effectively” (48). Miss Reilly’s communicative competence, as well as her linguistic “expertise,” both reach their limits in the classroom, allowing the girls to subtly retaliate against her, or, at the very least, to enjoy humor and camaraderie through their shared mockery of her as well as, perhaps,

a shared sense of superiority over her in that they know some Spanish words that she seemingly does not. Their anonymously scribbled blackboard notes, not fully interpretable by the person they are intended to mock, are excellent examples of what Scott calls the skills with which the oppressed find ways to “disguise the[ir] message[s of mockery and contempt] *just enough to skirt retaliation*” (152 emphasis added). Although hardly an incident which will tip the classroom balance of power permanently in the students’ favor, the students’ use of their own forms of Spanish to mock their Spanish teacher allows them to push back against and refuse to comply with the teacher’s demands for a monodialectal Spanish classroom. Their successful attempts to diversify the language variations and dialects used in the classroom—even if their own varieties of Spanish must literally be written between the lines of their teacher’s—are an important reminder that language, especially in institutional spaces, “*seems* hegemonic but is actually made up of multiple other discourses” (Cutter 113 emphasis added).

Critics such as Miller have argued that Nilda’s encounters with authority figures throughout the novel show that “humiliation and degradation are the fate of the oppressed” (546). However, scenes like the ones in Miss Reilly’s classroom demonstrate that although it is often Nilda and her classmates who are humiliated in front of their peers by the teacher, in other cases, the tables are turned, as Nilda and her peers embarrass their teachers in front of one another. After the students write “improper” (and, to Miss Reilly, indecipherable) messages on the blackboard, Miss Reilly struggles to restore order and authority by hurrying to “eras[e] what was written in Spanish,” telling the giggling students “Shhh. Stop being silly... That’s enough nonsense girls” (215). In moments like these, it is not Carmela’s mother’s signature, Edna’s pronunciation, or Nilda’s absence note that become the cause of classroom laughter; rather, it is the figure of authority who becomes the butt of a joke, and, significantly, one she can’t even fully understand. In this sense, the students succeed in undermining not only Miss Reilly’s disciplinary authority, but also her *linguistic* authority. The students’ shared mockery of their teacher, as well as their resourcefulness in tactically using their own “dialect” to mock her,

become indicative of the students' resistance to their teacher's subtractive schooling. Their classroom behavior—impertinent, infrapolitical, resistant—is markedly different from the reverence and appreciation for teachers and schooling that is demonstrated by characters like Victor and Lydia, demonstrating the various range of responses to schooling among minoritized individuals in the U.S.

By the novel's end, Nilda learns to resist assimilative and subtractive schooling not only through classroom tactics, however, but also by listening to and learning from the people around her (not just Langhorn, Fortinash, and Reilly) to use multiple languages and to speak in varied ways. In everyday life, the people of el barrio speak a mix of English and Spanish; neither language is privileged as the "standard." Nilda is just as likely to hear someone on her street yell out "Mira! Mira! There they go!" (3) as she is to hear neighbors cry "La jara!" "La policía!" "The cops are here, man" (5). The people that surround Nilda even invent their own hybridized Spanish/English ("Spanglish") words, such as when Nilda's brother Paul calls their mother's séances "probably some fakeria" (179). Despite being educated in English Only classrooms, bilingualism and linguistic hybridity are everywhere in Nilda's home and neighborhood. Her Aunt Delia reads the *Daily News* aloud to Nilda in English and *La Prensa* aloud to her in Spanish (she also reads in Spanish to Jimmy's Russian girlfriend Sophie, who, in turn, learns some Spanish of her own, while also introducing Nilda and Aunt Delia to *her* native language) (27). On the night that Pearl Harbor is bombed, Nilda attends a storefront church service with her friends and neighbors where the congregation "st[ands] up with their hands over their hearts, singing in English, 'Three cheers for the red, white and blue,'" but "s[inging] the second chorus in Spanish" (109). Similarly, during a war rally in el barrio, cheers can be heard in both English and Spanish: as Vito, "the most popular politician in the neighborhood[,] step[s] onto the platform," he is greeted from the crowd with both "Hi, Vito. Here's Victory!" and "Viva Vito y la patria! Arriba la libertad!" (188-9). Miss Langhorn's insistence that patriotism and

English Only go hand-in-hand is challenged in these scenes by Nilda's friends and neighbors, who express their love of country in multiple languages.

The (Standard) English Only ideology of Langhorn and Fortinash's classrooms is also challenged by those people in el barrio who speak in "broken" Englishes, refusing to "master" a "standard," as well as by those who insist on using the English language as minimally as possible. While Nilda and her school-age friends do in fact use English frequently (or, at least more frequently than do their older relatives, such as Lydia and Aunt Delia), they avoid using a "standardized" form—in a typical line of dialogue, for example, Nilda tells her best friend Petra "Don't tell me no lies" (2). Nilda's older relatives, even those who encourage her to learn English from her schoolteachers, are themselves resistant of using English, often avoiding it altogether unless a context necessitates its use. Indeed, though Delia reads aloud from the *Daily News*, we learn that this is "the only time she ever spoke English," as she experiences a sense of urgency in relaying the paper's stories of crime and danger to her family members (28). Nilda's mother also frequently speaks in Spanish, and, in an interview with a social worker while applying for rent assistance, Lydia defiantly explains that she speaks just as much English as she needs to: when the social worker begins the interview process by turning to Nilda and addressing her with "My name is Miss Heinz. Does your mother understand or speak English?" the usually mild-tempered Lydia "replie[s] quickly... 'I speak English... Maybe not so good, but I manage to get by all right'" (65). Subverting the social worker's stereotypical assumptions about her language and ethnicity, Lydia insists she *does* speak English, and that her form of English, whether "correct" or not, is sufficient in order to "get by all right." Scenes such as these attest to the observations of linguists who define "standard" English as a "vernacular based on the language norms of middle- and upper-middle class white people" and therefore only a "standard" for a very limited number of people in the U.S. (Young refers to this form of English as, instead, White English Vernacular, or "WEV") (Young 91). The many "nonstandard" linguistic varieties used throughout *Nilda* aptly reflect the racial and ethnic

diversity in both el barrio and in the U.S. at large. Similarly, struggles over language in Nilda's classrooms speak to the increasingly diverse populations that make up U.S. schools and to the ever-changing forms and varieties of language that are created and used by these speakers. As Mohr herself puts it, "the rhythms of our American language are ever changing, representing the many cultures that exist in the nation," and the ever-changing ways in which language is used in Nilda's everyday life reflect these many cultures (91-2, "Puerto Rican Writers in the United States").¹⁶

The authority figures that Miller calls "Anglo villians" do not disappear from Nilda's life by the close of the novel; complicating the idea of the text of as a *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist finds resolution and fulfillment as she "comes of age," the same problems that plague Nilda's everyday life as a child follow her into adulthood, which is no less fraught with such rules and restrictions. This is clearly portrayed not only through Nilda's experiences, but through her mother's, which both mirror and foreshadow her own—Lydia, too, is frequently seen throughout the text in linguistic negotiations with authority figures including doctors, welfare officers, and the police, all of whom expect or demand that she follow a certain "script" or speak in a certain way.¹⁷ What *does* change as Nilda grows from a girl into a young woman, however, are not the authority figures (representative of the dominant culture) who attempt to impose their own rules upon her—linguistic, institutional, cultural, and otherwise—but rather the ability with which she is able to negotiate her way through such encounters without having to entirely succumb to others' rules. As a young girl in Miss Langhorn's class, Nilda still fears speaking in Spanish because it means punishment by the dreaded ruler or an afternoon wearing the dunce cap in the corner, but by the time the girls reach Miss Reilly's class several years later, they have become bold enough and smart enough not only to use their own "forbidden" language in school, but to use it to make fun of their teachers, while still managing to skirt punishment. Similarly, as Nilda grows older, she becomes more and more resistant of others' attempts to denigrate her language and culture and increasingly committed to using her own

forms of linguistic expression, whether “right” or “wrong,” “correct” or “incorrect.” While away at summer camp, for example, another camper (who, although not an “authority figure” of the dominant culture, nevertheless represents a form of authority to Nilda by virtue of the fact she is a few years older than her and is a veteran camper), tells her after briefly conversing with her in Spanish that “what [she] speak[s] is a dialect.” Like Miss Reilly, the older camper informs Nilda that “In Spain they talk Castilian” and Nilda is “saying it all wrong!” After asking Nilda to say various words so the older girl can scrutinize and mock her pronunciation (much like Reilly does to Nilda and her classmates), the girl, herself of “real” Spanish descent, assumes the role of linguistic and cultural authority, concluding that “Puerto Ricans ain’t really Spanish.” As such, she warns Nilda “[not to] let me hear you calling yourself Spanish around here when you can’t even talk it properly, stupid” (157). Although as a younger girl in Miss Langhorn’s class, such a denouncement would have been a great source of anxiety and humiliation to Nilda, here she decides that others’ assessments of her speech (as well as her ethnicity and identity) as lesser than theirs do not affect her: she concludes that she “didn’t care about being Spanish; she didn’t know exactly what that meant, except that it had nothing to do with her happiness” (158). Ultimately, the methods of resistance Nilda employs in linguistic battles and negotiations with others take many forms—some more “public” and some more “hidden” than others, to borrow Scott’s terms—but they are all characterized by her refusal to fully give up her own ways of speaking in order to conform to the linguistic and cultural standards demanded by authority figures of the dominant culture. At the same time, as Nilda grows older, she learns to value her own ways of speaking rather than internalizing the denigration her language has been subject to by others, itself a significant and politicized perspective to adopt. As Lippi-Green writes, “language subordination is about taking away a basic human right: to speak freely in the mother tongue without intimidation, without standing in the shadow of other languages and peoples. To resist the process, *passively or actively*, is to ask for recognition, and acknowledgement. It is a demand for the simple right to be heard” (243 emphasis added). As the novel goes on and

Nilda grows older, she is never *entirely* able to escape the demands that authority figures make of her, particularly with regard to language usage, but she becomes increasingly capable of expressing that she deserves the “simple right to be heard” by finding ways to use her own language(s) regardless of others’ rules and restrictions.

Beyond the realm of language, Nilda also learns through her “alternative education” process to question the ideological discourse and doctrine that her teachers attempt to “force-feed” her and to compare what she learns in school with the lessons that non-school teachers offer her. Though we see Nilda “tuning out” when Miss Langhorn teaches her version of American “history,” she listens with great interest and careful reflection to her stepfather Emilio’s impassioned critiques of society, including his “constant blasphemy” against powerful institutions such as the U.S. government and the Catholic Church (11). Frequently aware, when being taught by other authority figures such as Langhorn and Reilly, that her stepfather would likely disagree with their teachings, she learns that there are multiple sides to every story and that it is worth questioning what one is taught is fact or truth. Emilio constantly complains to Lydia that Nilda’s schooling is “‘Bunch of shit, filling her head with that phony stuff. Fairy tales in order to oppress the masses. Teaching them that to be good is not to fight back, is to take crap...’” (20). As these disagreements unfold within Nilda’s earshot, she “listen[s] to the voices arguing and wonder[s] at all the possibilities of truth set before her” (21). Recognizing her parents’ arguments for what they are on a deeper level—competing views of reality, of society, of right and wrong—Nilda learns to take it all in, to fit these varied perspectives alongside the teachings of Langhorn, Fortinash, Reilly, and others, in order to come to her own understandings about herself and her society. Perhaps the most valuable thing Nilda learns as she grows is how to think on her own two feet and for herself, sometimes playing along with the rules and expectations of others, and sometimes defying them, depending upon what exactly is at stake for her. Her use of language, in fact, indicates not only her resistance against the rules of “standard” usage, but also her frequent refusal to follow social “scripts” that dictate what she

should say (or not say) in different situations. During an interview with a social worker, for example, the woman humiliates Nilda in front of her mother, telling her she has dirty nails and asking how often she bathes. At first, Nilda answers with a defiant silence, refusing to offer any response at all despite having been directly addressed by this figure of authority. After the social worker asks “‘Cat got your tongue?... Why doesn’t she answer me, Mrs. Ramírez,’” Lydia prompts her daughter to play along with the “script,” saying “without turning her head... ‘Nilda, answer the lady.’” Rather than playing along, however, Nilda gives an unexpected, angry response in which she disregards the rules of respect for both elders and authority figures: “‘I take a bath when I need it! And I clean my nails whenever I feel like it’ Nilda exploded in a loud voice.” Her verbal “explo[sion]” is a refusal to play along with the demands of authority, and her act of resistance is noted by the social worker, who describes Nilda as “impertinent” (69). Such scenes are increasingly characteristic of Nilda’s behavior as she grows older and continues to question and seek to circumvent the (frequently humiliating) rules and demands that she sees herself, her family, and her friends and neighbors constantly subjected to.

On his deathbed, Nilda’s stepfather warns her of the school’s power while also hinting at its potential, telling her to “‘Be smart, Nilda! Go to school; learn something important, no fairy tales. They mustn’t take your mind and use you’” (205). After he has passed, she continues to recall his words, and it seems she does just what he suggests: though she continues to attend school throughout the novel’s close, she is realistic about what this education is worth, and she doesn’t allow her teachers or her schooling to “take [her] mind and use [her].” Instead, she comes to fashion her own hybrid education, one which is most aptly reflected in her hybrid ways of speaking. Though many critics agree that the novel is about “the education of a young woman,” it is important to acknowledge that most of what Nilda learns—and, more importantly, the lessons she finds most valuable—are learned outside of the school (Miller 544). Despite the fact that the narrative includes several major scenes that are set in the classroom and centered around Nilda’s interaction with her teachers, her education—both the practical and

philosophical aspects of it—is acquired primarily through means other than formal schooling and from linguistic, educational, and cultural role models other than her schoolteachers. Her varied, multiple ways of speaking and using language are a reflection of the multifarious education(s) she is a product of, in which her teachers include neighbors, friends, family members, and strangers who all have their own ways of speaking and thinking that frequently defy cultural and linguistic “rules” and “standards.” In *Ceremony*, Tayo’s re-education occurs through a similar process. Let us turn now to a discussion of Silko’s novel.

Chapter 7

“It Depended on Whether You Knew the Story”:

The Re-Education of Tayo in *Ceremony*

“Knowledge is imminently cultural rather than neutral” – Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling* (269)

“I renounced finally my bow and arrow for the spade and the pen... I put into use every English word that I knew, and for the first time permitted myself to think and act as a white man” – Charles A. Eastman, formerly Oheyisa, 1880s

“When I was a child I was taught certain things... don't stand up to your elders... life is precious, the earth is precious, take it slowly, enjoy it. And then you go to [school] and you learn all these other things, and it never fits” – Native American college student, 1990s¹

“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.” - *Ceremony* (2)

“I literally wrote *Ceremony* to save my life” – Leslie Marmon Silko, interview with Robin Cohen

Conflicts between Native Americans and the dominant white culture over language and literacy have been integrally related to the conquest of land. The forced colonization and assimilation of native peoples who found their land suddenly colonized and re-claimed as “U.S. property” makes the history of battles with words between these two groups somewhat distinct

from cultural conflicts experienced by immigrant minority groups who come to the U.S. from abroad. U.S. schooling has the objective of assimilating all racial and ethnic minorities to the same national norms of the white majority culture, but the histories of power struggles over education between minority and majority cultures are, though similar in many ways, certainly not identical or collapsible. While many immigrants to the U.S., particularly those who come voluntarily in pursuit of economic success, may welcome the opportunities to assimilate, learn English, and be educated, or have their children educated, in the U.S. school system (as Lydia ardently wishes for her children in *Nilda*), the history of Native American education in U.S. schools is largely one of forcible removal and relocation, part of a larger history of colonization and conquest. Efforts throughout the nation's history to assimilate Native Americans in U.S. schools have been crucially related to government interests in destroying tribalism and ensuring "integration" of natives into white American culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, in particular, legislation from the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 to the Dawes Act of 1887 sought to find ways to "civilize" and acculturate native peoples as an alternative to the costly approach of "exterminating" natives through full-on warfare. Education came to be viewed as a critical part of that civilizing and acculturation project. White Americans believed that the fact that natives did not make use of formal school systems like their own was itself an indication of their savagery and lack of civilization. Overlooking the variety of ways in which natives taught their children and incorporated education into everyday life (discussed in, among other sources, Tsianina Lomawaima's excellent article "The Un-Natural History of American Indian Education"), white Americans wrongly assumed that without *institutionalized* schooling, native children were not being educated at all.² As such, the nineteenth century saw a rise in efforts to educate Native Americans in U.S.-run schools in order to ensure their successful assimilation to the customs and habits of white Americans and to stamp out any sense of native peoples as a "problem" or "threat" to the emerging dominant white culture. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1868-1887 described the relationship between education and integration in a way

which exemplifies this ideology: “The white and Indian must mingle together and jointly occupy the country, or one of them must abandon it... by educating the children of these tribes... these differences [in customs, habits, language, and ways of thought] would have disappeared, and civilization would have followed at once” (qtd. in Lippi-Green 115). Through education in U.S. schools, the Commissioner suggested and most believed, the native was to be transformed from savage Indian to civilized American.

Though the nineteenth century saw a sharp rise in state-run efforts to educate Native Americans, Indians were educated by whites, particularly Catholic and Protestant missionaries, in what is now considered the contemporary U.S. from as early as the 1600s.³ Education and schooling offered by missionaries and religious groups frequently allowed Indians to study the same curriculum as white students alongside them in the same classrooms, and continued to be the main form of white-run education for natives for several centuries after the arrival of the first white settlers. However, in the aftermath of the Civil War, particularly during the two-term presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877), the Federal Government together with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) began more aggressive efforts to use schooling as a means of assimilating Indians into white American society. Changes in views on how to educate natives began to occur both as a result of increasing concerns among the American public about the type of education natives were receiving (and whether or not they could be effectively “civilized” by such education), and a new interest on the part of the U.S. government in avoiding violent conflict with native tribes (motivated by both the bloody outcome of the Civil War and several native victories against the U.S. Army in battles on the Great Plains). The establishment of the Peace Policy in the aftermath of the Civil War encouraged the use of education, rather than warfare, as a way to solve the “Indian Problem,” but perceptions of this “problem” as increasingly pressing in the late nineteenth century led to widespread agreement that schooling for natives needed to be more centralized, institutionalized, and militarized than had been the schools run by religious missionaries in pre-Civil War decades. The result was the rapid rise in the establishment of

Native American boarding schools, off-reservation schools that forcibly removed native youths from their families and homes in order to educate them in distant environments which historians describe as sites of “institutionalized assimilation” (Collins 467). The distance of the schools from the reservations where students lived emphasized the system’s dual objectives: to turn native youth into “real” Americans (which could only happen if they were taken away from their homes and families) while gradually breaking up native familial and tribal units (Lippi-Green 115).

The first boarding school for Native Americans was Carlisle Boarding School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which enrolled its first set of students on October 6, 1879 (Lippi-Green 16). The school was conceived and designed by U.S. Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt, who developed his model for the school while in charge of Native American prisoners of war at Ft. Marion prison in Florida. Pratt’s famous philosophy, widely adopted by those who established and ran Indian schools throughout the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was that boarding school education was a means to “kill the Indian” in order to “save the man.”⁴ Often viewed as the more humane alternative to physical extermination of native peoples through warfare, the fact that Pratt advocated for education of Indians (what one scholar has called a “cultural rather than physical genocide”) ironically allowed him to claim the status of an ally, rather than enemy, of the nation’s indigenous peoples (Smith 90).⁵ At a time when, according to then Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Indians had two choices—“extermination or civilization”—men like Pratt were viewed as the bearers of civilization, saving natives from the fate of death and destruction (Smith 89-90). In reality, however, Pratt’s “civilizing” school, and the many schools that followed from this model in the coming decades, were usually sites of aggressive, often violent assimilation which used militarized forms of discipline and punishment to “mold” Indian students into Americans, physically, psychologically, culturally, ethically, and linguistically. Pratt, in particular, was known for his ability to successfully and completely “transform” his pupils, which he demonstrated in his infamous before-and-after photographs of

students, used to “sell” white audiences on the idea of educating (rather than exterminating) native peoples.

Pratt’s “sells” were successful and his influence vast: by the turn of the century, at least 25 more Indian boarding schools had been opened throughout the country; by 1909, only 30 years after the first set of pupils entered Pratt’s Carlisle school, at least 100,000 Native Americans had been educated in over 500 white-run Indian schools throughout the U.S., institutions profoundly influenced by Pratt’s philosophies.⁶ Foucauldian in nature, off-reservation boarding schools followed Pratt’s strict military-style methods of discipline and punishment in order to achieve their main goals: indoctrination, acculturation, and deference and obedience to white authority. School rules frequently included strict emphasis on posture, the requirement that students wear military-style uniforms, and the use of systems of rank and competition among students, with pupils given roles such as “sergeant” and “corporal.” Mandatory haircuts—a tactic made famous by Pratt and his before-and-after photos—forced male students with long hair to have this chopped into a shorn, crew-cut style. The native tribal significance of long hair was a driving force behind mandatory haircutting (not to mention the dramatizing effect such haircuts had in before-and-after photos circulated to the public); the haircuts were viewed as an effective way of quickly enforcing both physical and cultural assimilation to white norms.⁷ The regulatory nature of the schools was also emphasized through the physical grounds of the campuses, including the use of high fences and barbed wire that literally caged students into the schools. Attendance at the off-reservation schools was mandatory for many native youth, whose parents often tried to hide children when it came time for them to be taken away. Attempted escapes from the schools were frequent, despite the fences and barbed wire—but runaways were frequently caught as well, which often resulted in their being sent to boarding schools even further away from their reservations, so that it would be impossible to even attempt traveling home from the school on foot.

In contrast to the relatively less oppressive environments of the religious-run schools of earlier decades, the federally-run off-reservation boarding schools popularized in the late 1800s emphasized vocational training, discipline, and aggressive assimilation not only through school curriculum and military-style school cultures, but in the living conditions of the schools and the day-to-day lives students were forced to lead outside of the classroom. Since the government lacked the funding necessary to properly support the schools (the first annual allocation from Congress for Indian education came in 1870; in the amount of only \$100,000, it hardly set a precedent), student labor—including baking, washing, ironing, cleaning buildings, repairing furniture, growing and harvesting crops, and tending livestock—as well as profit from products made by student labor and sold by the schools (clothes, shoes, etc.) were essential to keep the schools running. In essence, the students spent much of their “school” time providing labor that allowed for their own captivity and indoctrination to continue (see Aruchleta et al 35). Student labor at most boarding schools continued even in summer months. Pratt, who believed that successful assimilative efforts undertaken during the school year would be “reversed” if students were allowed to return to their reservations during the summer, advocated that students be kept at or near their schools all year round. As such, many schools used “outing” programs during the months when classes were not in session, in which students were “leased” to nearby white families for whom they performed menial labor (usually without pay) throughout the summer. It was even believed that short day or week-long visits to the family and reservation could be detrimental to the schools’ objectives; as such, students were usually not permitted to take any trips home at all throughout the duration of their school years. On the rare occasions when visits were permitted, parents’ efforts to arrange for their children’s travel were complicated by school policies that required families to prepay for children’s trips in advance (Child 89). The disciplinary, controlling nature of the schools, as well as their aggressive efforts to separate native children from their parents no matter the costs, were further emphasized through the unhealthy and even abusive conditions in which students were forced to live (and die). Though

schools claimed that education of natives was a way for them to *avoid* death, many students died while away from their parents at boarding school, and their lives were frequently treated by whites at the schools as expendable. In order to run the schools with as little cost as possible, students were given inadequate medical attention and dietary provisions, and many died of disease, starvation, neglect, and physical abuse. In fact, deaths were so frequent that most off-reservation boarding schools had their own cemeteries for students' bodies.⁸ Despite Pratt's claims that the school was a way to "kill the Indian" but "save the man," off-reservation schools took the lives of many native youths in their efforts to usher these students into a new way of life.

Classroom curriculum complemented the schools' culture and living conditions by further assimilating students into a way of life quite different from their own. Most off-reservation teachers were white Americans who had no prior interaction with natives and little to no awareness or understanding of native and tribal cultures; as such, students' ways of life and worldviews were largely ignored (if not forbidden) in most classrooms. Many white teachers were recruited in Eastern U.S. cities and, upon being sent to teach in schools on the Western frontier, expected their students to "act like the Indians they had encountered in captivity accounts, newspapers, and novels" like Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, in desperate need of the acculturation and civilization provided through their services (Andrews 414).⁹ Their teaching focused more on discipline and vocational skills than intellectual pursuits, and rarely exceeded that of the early high-school level. Natives were given a "practical" education—girls were taught the domestic skills appropriate to the white American culture, such as instruction in home economics classes which taught them to discard Native American methods of food preparation and to prepare and cook mainstream American meals; boys were taught farming and manual labor skills. Both groups of students were educated in specific and limited skill sets meant to usher them into their places on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder of U.S. society. Native Americans were not viewed as meant to pursue a college education, and were

rarely encouraged by their white teachers to do so.¹⁰ Indeed, the “unfounded promise” of an American education is particularly prevalent among the Native American community, perhaps even more so than among other minority groups. Wright and Tierney note that the Native American population of the U.S. is poorer, more subject to unemployment, and less formally educated than the rest of the nation, while Smith argues that “of course, because of the racism in the U.S., Native peoples could never really assimilate into the dominant society. Hence, [the purpose of schooling] was to assimilate them into the bottom of... the larger society” (Wright and Tierney 18, Smith 90). Andrews raises the equally important point that those boarding-school educated natives who were unable to find (worthwhile) employment in white society found themselves equally unable to use their school-related skills by returning to the reservation. As he notes, “well-publicized reports [noted] that Indian boarding school graduates failed to flourish upon returning to their reservations... returned students had trouble conversing with relatives and neighbors who spoke only tribal languages, adjusting to tribal lifeways they had been taught to despise, and applying knowledge and skills learned in school to reservations blighted by poverty and underdevelopment” (412). In many ways, then, the curriculum of the school not only indoctrinated students into white American society, but also created a permanent separation between native students and their homes and families—one which continued to be felt even after these students graduated and returned home.

Andrews’s mention of students’ difficulty in conversing with relatives and neighbors who spoke in native languages raises one of the most important points of interest about boarding schools as they relate to the larger focus of this project: the ways in which these schools actively and aggressively sought to regulate and control the languages used by students through the implementation of English Only rules. The crucial importance of language in civilizing and assimilating native students was frequently emphasized by federal officials. Edward P. Smith, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1868-1887, the crucial period during which the first boarding schools were established, stressed the centrality of linguistic assimilation as the key to

“obliterat[ing]” the differences between Natives and whites: through “sameness of language,” he argued,

is produced sameness of sentiment, and thoughts; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated... in the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble... schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted... There is not an Indian pupil whose tuition and maintenance is [to be] paid for by the United States Government who is permitted to study any other language than our own vernacular—the language of the greatest, most powerful, and enterprising nationalities beneath the sun. (qtd in Lippi-Green 115-16)

Echoing the Commissioner’s perspective, Pratt viewed the adoption of English as the logical starting point for “killing the Indian,” describing the use of native languages as the “first great barrier to be thrown down in all work of assimilating and unifying our diverse population” (qtd. in Andrews 410). Pratt argued that the distance of the boarding school from the reservation was especially important in acculturating students into the permanent use of a new language, and Commissioner Smith agreed, writing in an 1873 report that “[it is] well-nigh impossible to teach Indian children the English language when they spend twenty hours out of the twenty-four in the wigwam, using only their native tongue” (qtd. in Trazfer, Keller, and Sisquoc 12). Most boarding school administrators followed Pratt’s lead and outlawed the use of native languages on school premises. Students were severely punished for speaking in their native languages, both in classrooms and in day-to-day conversations with one another outside of class. At the Rainy Mountain Boarding School, for example, the most frequent “infraction” for which students were punished was speaking in Kiowa; as Ellis notes, “getting caught meant enduring a variety of punishments, including soapy toothbrushes, extra drill duty, carrying stepladders on the shoulders for several hours, or restriction from social events” (75). Other schools were

known for punishing male students' linguistic infractions by forcing them to wear dresses (Ellis 75) and washing students' mouths out with lye when they used their native languages (Archuleta et al 42). An Ojibwe man who arrived at a North Dakota boarding school in the early 1930s able to speak only his native language recalls that BIA teachers "beat that out of you in a hurry, boy" (qtd. in Bloom 110). Among the most aggressive forms of assimilation experienced by boarding school students, then, were attempts to assimilate students linguistically—only once native languages were left behind and English permanently adopted was it believed that native "savages" would be able to begin the civilizing process into becoming "real" Americans.

Scholars and historians writing on Indian boarding schools have repeatedly emphasized their extremely disciplinary and militarized nature; as Collins puts it, the federal government sought to make Indian schools "'total' institutions, in which virtually every aspect of students' lives are regulated and controlled" (467). Yet, despite the schools' attempts at total control—and, in particular, total control over the assimilative process which students were subjected to—Native American youth (and their families) found a multitude of ways to resist the schools' domination and aggressive efforts at assimilation. Parents hid their children when school officials came to reservations to take students to boarding schools, in some cases opting to be hauled off to prison rather than give their children up to the white-run schools. Students themselves ran away from the schools extremely frequently, risking disease, danger, and death in attempts to return to their reservations (like military escapees, these runaway students were referred to by federal officials as "deserters" or as "AWOL"). Native American communities throughout the country sheltered and hid runaway students making their way home as authorities tried to hunt them down and force them to return to school.¹¹ Students who stayed at the schools also found everyday ways of exercising resistance and engaging in subversive behaviors. In *Boarding School Blues*, the authors describe students at BIA schools who "dawdled in their tasks, stole food to supplement a diet of mush, smoked cigarettes, and played pranks," creating a series of "small rebellions [which] supplied a large arsenal in the daily war

against [teachers]" (46). Students actively rebelled not only against the disciplinary and regulatory nature of the schools, but also their teachers' efforts at cultural assimilation and elimination of students' ties to their native cultures and communities. In addition to using aggressively assimilative classroom curriculum, teachers sought to Americanize their Indian students through extracurricular activities such as pageants, bands, and clubs, which were intended to eradicate students' interest in and commitment to their own native cultures and customs, particularly the song, dance, storytelling, and ceremonial activities that are of importance to many native tribes. Songs and music quite different from that which native students would have been exposed to on their reservations were used to reculturate students and to instill a sense of American nationalism in them (Green and Troutman, 60-61). One student described dancing the "boogie-woogie" and other "white man's dances" at the Riverside Boarding School as "like [having] our feet in two paths" (Ellis 83). In addition to using patriotic songs, dances, and activities to instill a sense of national pride in native students, schools frequently required students to express their patriotism by celebrating holidays such as Thanksgiving and Fourth of July (demands that students acknowledge such holidays were made all the more insulting by the fact that Native Americans were not considered U.S. citizens until 1924). Yet, despite the schools' efforts to make assimilation a continuous process both inside and outside of the classroom, students made a point of finding ways to escape from the watch of teachers and other supervisors in order to devote both time and space to maintaining and practicing their own cultures and customs. Some students got together to cook and eat Indian foods on secluded parts of school grounds, usually after the sun had set. These daily acts of resistance often continued throughout the evening, as students "t[old] stories after lights out" and "even h[e]ld peyote meetings in their dorm rooms" (Trafzer, Keller, and Sisquoc 48). Not only were such acts strictly against the behavioral rules of the school, but they were also important ways for students to resist the schools' efforts at cultural assimilation and their teachers' demands that they abandon their native cultures and customs.

In some cases, smaller acts of daily resistance crystallized into larger forms of action, as in the 1912 petition sent by Haskell Boarding School students to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, asking him to close the school. The circulation and sending of this petition created quite a stir on campus: the superintendent of Haskell denounced the petition as the work of students who “did not appreciate their opportunity” to get a Haskell education and conducted interrogations to try to figure out which students had been behind its creation (Child 93). More violent forms of resistance and rebellion also occurred, such as acts of arson in which schoolboys set fire to their schools’ dormitories or other buildings (Child 93). Students also engaged in collective forms of resistance inside the classroom itself, actively and collaboratively rejecting—or remaking—the curriculum they were taught in BIA schools. As Trazfer, Keller, and Sisquoc argue, native students frequently managed to “turn the power” with regard to their boarding school educations, often in unpredictable ways (1). Among other examples, students regularly refused to answer their teachers’ questions in class, rejecting the values of competition and individualism which they associated with the white world of their teachers. Silence when asked a question was not only a way of refusing to learn school curriculum, but also a form of solidarity and collaboration with other students in the face of attempts at divisiveness and domination. Many boarding school students also “turned the power” by using the “American” history they learned in schools to celebrate their native communities: as Trazfer, Keller, and Sisquoc put it, students “embrac[ed] their American heritage in a heightened manner, communicating their strength in being the First Americans in ways that preserved Indian identity” (1). Ellis makes a similar point, arguing that “as with so many other culturally loaded encounters, Indian education could be—and often was—used by Native people to serve multiple ends that included maintaining identity” (67).

Students who were away at boarding schools also maintained their native identities and resisted assimilative schooling in critical ways through their use of language. Although native languages were strictly forbidden at the schools, they were regularly used anyway. Students

used Indian nicknames to mock and belittle teachers behind their backs, and found time and space to converse with one another in their native languages without allowing their teachers to find out. A former BIA student quoted in *Boarding School Blues* fondly recalls sneaking off campus to enjoy “Indian time” with friends, which centered around talking in “forbidden” native languages (18). In addition to finding ways to speak and converse in their own languages, students also used written forms of native languages to circumvent the authority of their teachers in the classroom. Archuleta, Child, and Lomawaima note that boarding school students “devised elaborate codes of slang and became expert note-passers to circumvent schools rules that impeded communication” (26). Ellis, similarly, notes that students at the Rainy Mountain Boarding School in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries learned to pass notes written in Kiowa as a way of ensuring that their English-speaking teachers couldn’t humiliate them by reading these notes aloud to the class. These notes were not only subversive ways of resisting authority; they were also, Ellis adds, likely some of the earliest written forms of the Kiowa language. In their insistence on using their own forbidden languages within the walls of the schools, students both preserved their own individual attachments to their cultures and communities, and found new ways of preserving and using the languages that their teachers (and the federal government) sought to eradicate. While the damaging legacy of Indian boarding schools as forces of assimilation and cultural annihilation is undeniable, assimilative processes were not accepted by students unquestioningly, and in fact were actively resisted, rejected, and re-formulated by many. As Child puts it, “rebellion was a permanent feature of boarding school life” (94).

Over the course of the early to mid-twentieth century, over half a decade or more after the first Indian boarding schools were established, state-run schools for native youth gradually began to change from white-run, aggressively assimilative, and often violent institutions to spaces where tribal leaders and other members of native communities were increasingly permitted to play a role in determining school curriculum and culture. The 1921 Meriam

Report, which documented the findings of a government-funded study of conditions on Native American reservations and in Indian boarding schools, called attention to the need for changes in the schools through its scathing critique of the BIA's insensitivity to native students (indeed, the report was entitled "The Problem of Indian Administration"). Gradually, the oppressive environment of the schools began to lessen while, at the same time, enrollment in BIA schools began to drop as native students throughout the twentieth century increasingly chose to enroll in mainstream public schools instead. In the later decades of the twentieth century, off-reservation boarding schools across the country began to close in rapid succession; today, only a few schools, such as Haskell, continue to operate, albeit in markedly different and improved ways than they have in the past. Still, the lasting impact that the cultural, linguistic, and educational colonization of so many Native American youth by the federal government and white American schoolteachers has had, and continues to have, on Native American communities has been emphasized by scholars and historians, who have argued that the boarding school era legacy remains "one of the most contentious aspects of Indian-white relations in the United States" and the cause of "much, if not most, of the current dysfunctionality in Native communities" (Collins 467, Smith 91). Scholars and activists alike have called for reparations to Native American communities in acknowledgement of the ongoing impact of boarding school policies and experiences, while organizations such as the Boarding School Healing Project have worked to document the history of abuses of native youth in boarding schools and have sought reparations from both U.S. government and churches (Smith 91). In addition to the lasting impact that Indian Boarding Schools have had on Native American communities, the schools' aggressively assimilative strategies also helped to set the tone for future educational policies that would seek to "reculturate" other minority groups including African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latina/os.

In the recent decades since the majority of the schools' closings, a number of fictional and non-fictional works by Native Americans have addressed the damaging impacts of the

Indian boarding schools (including the emotional, physical, cultural, psychological, and sexual abuse experienced by many students) while also acknowledging the legacy of native resistance to the schools' efforts at cultural and linguistic genocides. As Denise Low notes in her essay on "Boarding School Resistance Narratives," "as time passes and ameliorates the experience, more Native writers declaim the boarding school experience in written texts" (117). One of the most powerful of these texts is Joe Suina's short autobiographical piece "And Then I Went to School" (1985), in which he tells of education he received from relatives on the reservation, and of the drastic ways his life changed once he began compulsory education in federally-run Indian schools. Of his childhood, Suina writes:

Grandmother taught me... Through modeling she showed me how to pray properly. Barefooted, I greeted the sun each morning with a handful of cornmeal. At night I'd look to the stars in wonderment and let a prayer slip through my lips... I learned to appreciate cooperation in nature and with my fellow men early in life. I felt very much a part of the world and our way of life. I knew I had a place in it, and I felt good about it.

And Then I Went to School. (231).

In a section of his piece entitled "Leave Your Indian at Home," Suina emphasizes the centrality of linguistic assimilation in Indian schools and the pain of what Valenzuela would call a "subtractive schooling" experience:

My language... was questioned right from the beginning of my school career. "Leave your Indian at home!" was like a school trademark. Speaking it accidentally or otherwise was punishable by a dirty look or a whack with a ruler. This reprimand was for speaking the language of my people which meant so much to me. It was the language of my grandmother, and I spoke it well. With it, I sang beautiful songs and prayed from my heart. At that young and tender age, it was most difficult for me to comprehend why I had to part with my language... I couldn't understand why or what I was caught up in. (233)

Among other notable examples, Tim Giago, renowned Lakota journalist and founder of both the first independently operated Native American newspaper and the Native American Journalists Association, openly addresses the abuse he experienced at boarding school in his book of poetry, *The Aboriginal Sin: Reflections on the Holy Rosary Indian Mission School (Red Cloud Indian School)* (following the book's publication, priests at the school denied that Giago had attended). The boarding school experience is also the focus of Pauline Ormego Murillo's autobiographical *Living in Two Worlds*, and the acclaimed author Louise Erdrich addresses the topic in one of her lesser-known works, a poem entitled "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways." Yet, in its role as one of the most (if not *the* most) canonical works of Native American literature, written by an author who enjoys near "celebrity" status as one of the most famous Native American writers, *Ceremony* offers a fictional critique of the impact of white American schooling on Native Americans which has had the unique power and positionality among texts on boarding school experiences to reach an especially large number of American readers—particularly in, of all places, the U.S. high school and college classrooms where the novel is frequently assigned.¹² The school scenes and alternative education experienced by the novel's protagonist are particularly worthy of examination by scholars and students alike; yet, although the text is widely read by both groups, these scenes are given scant attention in the voluminous scholarship on *Ceremony*, and the usefulness of the novel not only as a classroom text, but as a text that offers us ways of re-thinking our classrooms, is a topic that deserves further discussion.

Like Nicholasa Mohr, who began to write fiction in part because she found her people's experiences unrepresented within the literature she encountered in school, it seems that Leslie Marmon Silko's own educational experiences, as well as of those of her relatives and ancestors, may have played a role in inspiring her focus on schooling and education in her first novel, *Ceremony*. Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1948. Of mixed racial ancestry—Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white, as is *Ceremony*'s protagonist, Tayo—Silko was (like Tayo) raised on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation and educated in BIA schools. As she recounts in

interviews with Coltelli and Perry and in her 1981 work *Storyteller*, Silko's relatives and ancestors were students at some of the nation's most infamous off-reservation Indian Boarding Schoolings, including the Sherman Institute in California (the same school where the fictional Betonie, one of Tayo's teachers/healers, is educated as a youth) and the Carlisle Indian School founded by Pratt himself (see also Akins 1-2). In interviews, Silko describes her own aggressively assimilative education in BIA schools as "hideous," "traumatic," and "full of anxiety" (Perry 316), but also somewhat enlightening, noting that it was in elementary school that she "learned to love reading, and love books, and the printed page [a significant departure from the traditional oral storytelling of the Laguna Pueblo people] and therefore was motivated to learn to write" (Coltelli 247).¹³ Her ambiguous responses to her BIA education suggest what many other narratives and histories of students' experiences also imply, including Tayo's own narrative—that Silko experienced a "splitting," both an aversion to the school's attempts to get students to reject their native cultures, and a desire to assimilate and Americanize, to embrace the Western teachings of the school and to excel in the school system and the white world beyond it. However, it was not only her education in BIA schools but also her later learning experiences, especially as a teacher at a school for natives, that helped to prepare Silko to write *Ceremony*.¹⁴ For two years, Silko lived and taught at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, which provides higher education primarily to residents of the Navajo Nation and was founded in 1968 as the first tribally-controlled college in the United States. Silko credits her time at Diné as integral to the writing of *Ceremony*, stating that the novel's title comes from "healing ceremonies based on the ancient stories of the Diné and Pueblo people," and adding that her time at Diné was "important to my understanding of the healing ceremony's relationship to storytelling," a central theme in *Ceremony* itself (Preface xv).

Ceremony, much of which Silko says was "written on the back side of discarded legal services letterhead," came about after an editor at Viking Books read Silko's short stories in the anthology *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* and requested that she write a novel for Viking (Preface

xiii).¹⁵ Silko, who describes herself as a writer who “neglected to take that course the English Department offered on The Novel,” felt unsure about transitioning into novel-writing, hesitant to “mess with success” by attempting to emulate the works of the great American novelists, and more comfortable with the genre of short fiction (xi). Yet, within constrained time and space, and with limited materials, working largely with a Hermes typewriter, a fountain pen, and the recycled letterhead mentioned above, Silko wrote what would become her first novel and a work that many would proclaim a masterpiece. Originally intended to be a “comical short story about Harley [the close friend of the protagonist] and his drunken exploits,” *Ceremony* ultimately went in a very different direction, becoming Tayo’s tale of trauma, loss, healing, and recovery (xvi). What Silko calls the “false starts and the short story beginnings that developed into *Ceremony*”—including, interestingly, two attempts to write the novel using a female protagonist—are now housed in the Yale University library (Preface xvi). Following the publication of *Ceremony* in 1977, Silko’s early work (which also includes poetry and short stories published prior to her first novel) was quickly recognized as comprising a new and significant contribution in American literature. Among other honors, her early literary success led the MacArthur Foundation to include Silko in one of its first groups of fellows to receive the prestigious “Genius” award, providing her with a 5-year grant to continue working on her writing (Preface xxi). After the publications of *Laguna Woman* (a book of poems published in 1974, three years prior to *Ceremony*) and *Ceremony*, Silko went on to publish *Storyteller* (1981), a short story collection; the epic, 700-page *Almanac of the Dead* (1992), which one critic has called “one of the most ambitious novels of our time”; a book of essays entitled *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1996); and the novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (2000); however, she continues to remain most well-known for her first novel (indeed, her other works have received scant attention in comparison, as I discuss in more depth in the concluding chapter) (Preface xxi).¹⁶

Ceremony is set on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, and many of its characters seem to be modeled in part off of people that Silko knew while growing up on the reservation, particularly her father's cousin Robert Leslie "Les" Evans, who provides some of the inspiration for both Tayo and his cousin Rocky.¹⁷ The novel is primarily (though not exclusively) the story of Tayo, a mixed-race "half breed" Indian who returns to his home on the Laguna Pueblo reservation after serving in WWII and spending an unspecified amount of time after the war in a Veterans Hospital in Los Angeles. Just prior to his enlistment, Tayo had completed his education at the Albuquerque Indian School during the era marked by the aggressive efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to "civilize" and assimilate Native American youth through off-reservation schooling. Upon his return to the reservation after the war, Tayo is ill, both physically and spiritually, with what the white doctors at the Veterans Hospital have (mis)diagnosed as PTSD. When his condition continues to worsen following his discharge from the hospital and return home to Laguna, Tayo's family members enlist the help of traditional native healers in an attempt to save him. Thus begins the path towards Tayo's ceremony, the process of healing and rejuvenation which Tayo completes throughout the novel and to which the novel's title refers. Though many on the reservation see Tayo's quest to complete the ceremony as a way of curing the insanity that has come to plague him since the war, Tayo himself, as well as his healer-teacher-guides, sense that his sickness is part of something larger and more complex than just his wartime experiences. I would like to argue that we can understand Tayo's ceremonial experience not only as a healing process, but also a *re-education*, as much a recovery from his traumatic experiences in white-run BIA schools as from his war traumas. Indeed, the ceremony is not about forgetting what he has experienced in war, but *remembering* what he learned and experienced prior to both the war and his schooling. In order to fully heal, Tayo must re-learn the language, values, and stories of his people and re-connect with that which the white world has attempted to sever his connection with.¹⁸ In doing so, it becomes apparent that Tayo is afflicted by traumas that have been suffered not only by

himself, but shared by other members of the reservation and by the Laguna community at large; these include not only the traumas of war, but also the legacy of off-reservation schooling and other attempts by whites to indoctrinate Indians into their world and to obliterate native languages and cultures.

In order to understand what Tayo loses through his education in BIA schools, how this contributes to his sickness, and why this loss must ultimately be recovered through the alternative education that is his ceremonial healing, it is useful to first consider the significance of storytelling in both the novel and the Laguna Pueblo culture itself. The power and possibility in words and language, particularly their ability to convey and create histories, is emphasized throughout *Ceremony* through the theme of storytelling. Stories are seen as forms of survival in Tayo's Laguna culture, providing rootedness, guidance, and healing. Though we meet Tayo at the start of the novel in a confused, disoriented, and disconnected state as a result of his time in BIA schools, the U.S. army, and the Veterans Hospital, he still has a lingering awareness of the power and potentiality of what his people's stories can do. In one early scene, he thinks to himself, "if a person wanted to get to the moon, there was a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions—exactly which way to go and what to do to get there; it depended on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone" (17-18). Tayo's suggestion that knowing the story is a crucial part of what makes getting to the moon possible illustrates one of the novel's most central themes: that stories have the power not only to convey history but also to *create* it, to make things happen through the very act of telling (this idea is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated through a story interwoven into the narrative which tells how white people themselves were created by a witch's story, an attempt to conjure up the most powerful of evils). As Flores explains, "both the novel and the culture in which it is rooted are deeply committed to the conviction that story-telling is creation, in the most literal sense. For Tayo, for the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, and for Silko also, to tell a story is to make a reality; to act out a story is to create a world" (54). Yet, as Tayo finds throughout his healing/re-education, and as

Silko herself makes clear, storytelling is as much a way to *re*-create as to create, to *recover* that which one fears is lost or stolen or forgotten, but which remains alive or available through the telling and re-telling of the stories (as another critic puts it, storytelling in the novel acts as “retrieval of what has been silenced or forgotten” (Cummings 74)).¹⁹ Silko explains this idea frequently in interviews and in her own writings, many of which focus on the power and significance of storytelling. In the preface to *Ceremony*, the author directly acknowledges the ability of storytelling to make things happen, to create, re-create, transform, and recover. On writing *Ceremony* in Ketchikan, Alaska, in the midst of a deep depression caused partly by homesickness for her native Southwest, Silko tells us that

as the main character, Tayo, began to recover from his illness, I too began to feel better, and had fewer headaches. By this time, the novel was my refuge, my magic vehicle back to the Southwest land of sandstone mesas, blue sky, and sun. As I described the sandstone spring, the spiders, water bugs, swallows, and rattlesnakes, I *remade the place in words*; I was no longer on a dark rainy island thousands of miles away. I was home, from time immemorial, as the old ones liked to say to us children long ago. (Preface xv emphasis added)

In an interview with Cohen, Silko describes the transformative and recuperative power of the storytelling process in similar terms: “when I started *Ceremony*, I was as sick as Tayo was... I literally wrote *Ceremony* to save my life. That is why it’s called *Ceremony*, because I know that I could not have made it if I had not been writing *Ceremony* [at that time]” (Cohen 258). For Silko, as for her protagonist, stories “aren’t just entertainment”; rather, they are crucial weapons in the fight for survival and preservation of both self and culture (*Ceremony* 2).

Yet, despite the significance of storytelling among Tayo’s people and in Laguna culture, the novel makes clear that many on the reservation where Tayo lives have begun to forget the stories, as well as the lessons, guidance, and warnings they contain within them, as they become increasingly immersed in white mainstream American culture. Schooling plays a major role in

this—despite the known power of the stories and the native languages they are told in, we learn that many of the characters on the reservation, members of both the younger and older generations, have come to value and prioritize white/American forms of education, knowledge, and language over their own histories, stories, and languages. This is particularly well-exemplified through the character of Rocky, Tayo’s cousin with whom he is raised from youth. Prior to his untimely death while marching alongside Tayo as prisoners in WWII’s Bataan Death March, Rocky believed fully in the value of an American education, viewing it as the key to success and as his entryway into the white world. An all-star athlete and strong student, “the best football player Albuquerque Indian School ever had,”²⁰ Rocky was the pride of the family and much of the reservation because of his success at boarding school (40). Most assumed that his athletic and academic accomplishments would allow him to go on to college and a successful career—he would be “the first one [from the reservation] ever to get a football scholarship, the first one to go [to college] with no help from the BIA or anyone. [His mother] could hold her head up, she said, because of Rocky” (84). By far the most committed to formal schooling of any character in the text (his devotion paralleling that of Victor’s in *Nilda*), Rocky also represents what one critic calls the “ideal (white) male, American teenager”: “handsome, athletic, patriotic, and well-schooled” (Bassett 37). That Rocky is indeed a successful product of BIA schools—as Cummings describes him, the “produc[t] of a pedagogy which discriminates, reforms, and regulates... reproduc[ing] the relations of domination and subordination”—is made clear through his patriotic desire to become an American at any cost (and there are many costs, as his story shows) (561). Rocky’s patriotism is made evident in several key scenes in the novel, particularly the one when he and Tayo are recruited to enlist in the army. Rocky is eager to sign up for the war; it doesn’t take much at all for the recruiter to persuade him to enlist, and as he makes his decision, Rocky’s face is “serious and proud” (59). In contrast, Tayo is hesitant about enlisting, and immediately regrets his decision afterward because he remembers that he has already committed to helping Josiah tend cattle over the summer. Unconcerned about *his* place

on the reservation or his role in the family, however, Rocky is unambiguously attracted by the opportunity to enlist, particularly because of what he perceives as the material and social mobility that enlistment will bring him—he imagines that service will not only take him away from the reservation, but “all over the world” (60). Scenes like this one are typical of Rocky, whose BIA education has successfully acculturated him to behave as a patriotic, assimilated (white) American (even as if he is not always accepted as one in the white world), eager to try to cash in on the opportunities the U.S. seems to offer.

The “success” that Rocky’s assimilative schooling has had in molding him into a new man is made evident not only through his desire to Americanize, but also through his staunch rejection of and disdain for his own people’s customs, languages, stories, and practices, attitudes which are apparent in Rocky even before he finishes school and enlists in the army. Rocky’s all-star student-athlete status goes hand-in-hand with his decision to increasingly distance himself from the reservation and those he was raised with as he grows older. As Bassett has noted, it is through his schooling, in particular, that we as readers come to conceptualize Rocky as a fundamentally different character from Tayo, despite their many similarities and shared experiences. In every other regard, they share virtually the same background and upbringing—Bassett points out that throughout the novel, we see regular flashbacks of them together, “sleeping in the same bed... hunting deer with Uncle Josiah, learning how to ride a horse, drinking alcohol for the first time, enlisting in the army on the same day,” etc. (36). It is through their different experiences in and reactions to their BIA schooling that the two boys’ paths begin to markedly diverge as they approach manhood, with Rocky becoming an all-American athlete and local hero, while Tayo struggles to make sense of the conflict between the school’s teachings and the learning he has acquired through Laguna reservation life and from family members. After the two boys complete their final year at boarding school and return home to the reservation, Rocky becomes “more anxious than Tayo to stay away from the house,” frequently leaving the reservation to play sports with friends or visit his white girlfriend (62). During the

summer months, “[Uncle] Josiah and Tayo watched the cattle and the sheep camp, and Robert [Rocky’s father] worked in the fields each day, [but] Rocky read magazines and ran laps at the baseball diamond twice a day... Auntie [Rocky’s mother] made it clear to everyone that it was all necessary if Rocky were to keep his football scholarship to the university” (84). Buying into the “promise” of an American education, Rocky dreams of schooling as the key to a better future, one off of the reservation: he spends his time “thinking of the years ahead and the new places and people that were waiting for him in the future he had lived for since he first began to believe in the word ‘someday’ the way white people do” (67). As he becomes increasingly educated, “what village people thought didn’t matter to Rocky any more. He was already planning where he would go after high school; he was already talking about the places he would live, and the reservation wasn’t one of them” (71). Rocky’s “off-the-reservation” mentality parallels what Valenzuela calls the “out-of-the-barrio” motif apparent among Hispanic/Latino/a populations and discussed in my earlier chapter on *Nilda*—each suggests that success comes not only through mainstream schooling, but also by “escaping” or disassociating from the family/community in which one was raised and the culture and language(s) one was raised with.

As Rocky becomes increasingly enamored by the white man’s ways throughout the course of his schooling, Tayo gradually comes to see how his cousin exchanges Indian views and values for American ones as he spends more and more time at school and immersed in his schoolbooks. When Tayo, Rocky, and Uncle Josiah go hunting together, Tayo notices that Rocky chooses not to participate in the ritual to honor the hunted deer. As Tayo and Josiah cover up the head of the deer they have hunted and sprinkle cornmeal on its nose as signs of respect, Rocky “turn[s] away from them... embarrassed at what they did” (47). Tayo knows Rocky’s embarrassment is a result of his schooling—as the narration explains, “Rocky was funny about those things. He was an A-student and all state in football and track. He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So he listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him. They told him, ‘Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at

home hold you back” (47). As in *Nilda*, we learn in this scene that teachers and other school authority figures encourage students like Rocky to break from the homes and families that hold them back in order to achieve “success.” However, unlike Nilda, who actively resists her teachers’ efforts at assimilation and resents her formal education, Rocky embraces the advice he receives from his teachers and coaches, and begins to shun not only the native traditions and customs he was raised with, but also the people he was raised among. His actions are motivated by his perception of “what he had to do to win in the white outside world. After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque, Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old Grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition, and he opened his textbooks to show her” (47). As Rocky becomes increasingly educated, he doesn’t hesitate not only to repudiate the wisdom inherent within native traditions such as those which honor the hunted deer, but also to challenge and even mock the knowledge and opinions of his elders within the family, literally “schooling” them on the legitimacy of the white man’s ways, and the illegitimacy of their own, on several occasions. In one scene, Rocky challenges his Uncle Josiah’s knowledge of how to raise cattle on their land, scorning him for distrusting the information he finds in books on cattle-raising written by white men. As Josiah, whose dream is to raise a new breed of hybrid cattle that can thrive in desert climates, reads through one of the books on the topic, he tells his nephews that the advice therein “seemed like such a stupid idea I wasn’t sure if I was understanding it right” (69). The problem is that the books were “written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which [Josiah’s] cattle had to live with.” Uncle Josiah concludes that, in their own cattle-raising endeavors, they will “have to get along without these books... do things our own way. Maybe we’ll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land.*” The moment is an important one in the narrative in as much as it helps to establish Josiah as one of Tayo’s teachers, even if he is not one of the ceremonial guides. As Ganser notes, Josiah offers his nephews an informed critique of “white science[’s]... claim to universality” in this scene by pointing out what the writers of these books have failed to

consider—that some cattle “don’t eat grass or drink water” (Ganser 154; Silko 69). Yet, Rocky sees no lesson to be learned from his Uncle, and instead is quick to reestablish the authority of white science and knowledge and to discredit Josiah’s perspective with his own school learning. While Josiah’s idea to write a book of their own is met with amusement and appreciation by Tayo and Robert, Rocky becomes “quiet.” As he “look[s] up from his books,” he addresses his Uncle: “Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. That’s the trouble with the way people around here have always done things—they never knew what they were doing” (69-70). Tayo observes that Rocky is comfortable speaking so confidently—and disrespectfully—to his elder because his words have the weight of “official” knowledge behind them: “he did not hesitate to speak like that, to his father and his uncle, because the subject was books and scientific knowledge—those things that Rocky had learned to believe in” (70). Indeed, Rocky’s immersion in his schooling does not only create a rift between himself and the customs and culture he was raised with, but also creates a sort of “inverse” relationship between him and his elders. Rocky becomes “expert” in the family, unafraid of shaming and ridiculing his uncle, grandmother, father, and other elders for what he sees as their superstitious and backward ways. In the face of his book learning, their years of knowledge, experience, and wisdom—as well as the knowledge, experience, and wisdom that have been passed down for generations through the stories they know and tell—seem to count for nothing.

Still, Rocky is far from the only one on the reservation to abandon Indian ways in favor of the white world, nor is he even the first in the family to embrace white schooling and, in turn, come to express a sense of shame in the Laguna culture and people. Auntie, Rocky’s mother, is also the product of BIA schools, and her education has made her “ashamed of herself. Shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people... [the teachers] urged her to break away from her home” (63). Like her son, Auntie becomes infatuated in her youth with the idea that her education will bring her admiration, success, and access to the white world, and, like Rocky, is more than willing to listen to her teachers to get

ahead: as a schoolgirl, we learn that she “was excited to see that despite the fact that 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... she looked at her own reflection in windows of houses she passed; her dress, her lipstick, her hair—it was all done perfectly, the way the home-ec teacher taught them, exactly like the white girls” (63). Auntie’s admiration of the white world and her desire to assimilate into it continue throughout her life, long after her school days end—like Lydia in *Nilda*, once Auntie becomes a parent herself, she offers a supportive stance of assimilative education and immersion in the white world, encouraging her son to make himself a part of it at any cost. Indeed, while Tayo questions Rocky’s curious behaviors as the latter becomes increasingly devoted to white ways, Auntie “valued Rocky’s growing understanding of the outside world, of the books, of everything of importance and power. He was becoming what she had always wanted: someone who could not only make sense of the outside world but become part of it” (70). Auntie encourages Rocky’s role as “expert” in the family, even allowing or overlooking his disrespectful tendency to “school” his elders. During the scene in which Rocky uses his textbooks to try to prove to Old Grandma that the old-time ways are superstition, Tayo notices that Auntie remains silent: “Auntie never scolded [Rocky], and she never let Robert or Josiah talk to him either. She wanted him to be a success. She could see what white people wanted in an Indian, and she believed this way was his only chance. She saw it as her only chance too” (47). Ironically, the loss of her son to the white world becomes the ultimate mark of success in Auntie’s eyes. His embracing of white culture through his education is Auntie’s sign that her son—and herself—have “made it” as Indians in the U.S., even though Rocky’s path toward assimilation is arguably what leads to his death. Like the academically successful Victor in *Nilda*, who heads off after high school not to college, but to fight in WWII, Rocky’s college scholarship is never put to use, as his education is cut short by his decision to enlist in the war, which ultimately costs him his life. Even after losing Rocky, his family and others on the reservation continue to believe in the “promise” education was *supposed to* afford him. Even

Old Grandma, who was skeptical of Rocky's growing attachment to the white world before his death, "continued on [after his death] about the things Rocky was going to do for her [had he become a success]. They all mourned Rocky that way, by slipping, lapsing into the plans he had for college and for his football career" (25). Tayo, too, grieves for what might've been, for the unfulfilled promises of Rocky's education: "in the dark, he [would] cry for all the dreams that Rocky had as he stared out of his graduation picture" (28). Yet, although Rocky represents the image of success and promise to many on the reservation, even after his death, it is significant that it is Tayo, not Rocky, who is chosen to participate in a healing ceremony with ramifications for the entire Laguna community. Despite playing the role of the "hero" in earlier sections of the text, Rocky is ultimately eliminated from the narrative altogether, except as an ongoing memory in Tayo's mind. As Eppert writes, "Rocky's tragic death in combat makes clear the limitations of the American dream"—and, I would add, particularly the limitations of the dream of assimilative education as a promised pathway to success in the white world (730).

While Rocky's character and his death represent the impact of a complete immersion in BIA schooling and the white world, Tayo is more ambivalent and conflicted about his education right from the start; yet, he, too, succumbs to an extent to the school's indoctrination and assimilation (it is for this reason that his ceremonial healing must also be a re-education). Tayo's forcible relocation to Indian Boarding School,²¹ where he is expected to use the language of his teachers and to learn to believe in the history, values, and knowledge of white America, inevitably causes him to experience a sense of detachment not only from his family and community, but also from the stories of his people which he has carried with him throughout his life. Like Rocky (though to a much lesser extent), Tayo becomes skeptical of Indian stories and ways while he is in school, wondering if they are merely superstitions, as his teachers tell him. As he sees his own people's values, beliefs, customs, practices, languages, and ways of living denigrated and mocked by his schoolteachers (much the same way Nilda does), he begins to experience an intense internal struggle with regard to which stories, which versions of history

and reality, he accepts as the “true” ones: those of his native Laguna culture, or those of his white education. At one point in the narrative, Tayo recalls the painful memory of a schoolteacher who brought in frogs for the class to dissect and, upon realizing that the Navajo students in the class had left the room in protest, having heard stories from their elders that killing frogs would cause flooding of the land, “laughed loudly, for a long time; he even had to wipe tears from his eyes” (181).²² Moments like these ones cause Tayo to doubt the validity and legitimacy of his people’s ways, a feeling which continues to linger long after he has completed his schooling. As Powers puts it, and as the scene aptly illustrates, “the educational system [that Tayo is a product of] embodies... active forgetting by disengaging Native Americans from traditional views... In school cultural aggression wears the thin disguise of useful knowledge” (69-70). Still, however thinly disguised this cultural aggression may be, Tayo does fall victim to it to an extent, coming to question the way of life he has known and beginning to wonder if the white man’s ways are not only better, but perhaps the only legitimate or knowledgeable way of doing things. That his schoolteachers dismiss his worldview, holding up their own as the only valid one, is reflective of the ways in which aggressively assimilative education has been exercised throughout our nation’s history. As Delpit, author of *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, writes, “the worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality [in schools], while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential” (xxv). This is precisely how Tayo experiences his education in BIA schools, and the struggle to make sense of these competing worldviews, both as a student and after he has finished his schooling, is an integral factor in Tayo’s sickness and, eventually, his healing.

The internal struggle Tayo experiences in trying to make sense of what he has learned both at home on the reservation and away at Indian Boarding School can be usefully explained using Prillaman and Eaker’s distinction between *technical* and *expressive* discourses. Technical discourses, such as the kind of pedagogical logic which insists that no harm can come from dissecting frogs, are impersonal and objective, whereas expressive discourse is characterized as

“a broad and loosely defined ethic that molds itself in situations and has proper regard for human affections, weaknesses, and anxieties” (qtd. in Valenzuela 22). The fact that the Navajo students’ belief in the potential danger of dissecting frogs is mocked and denigrated by their teacher, rather than taken into consideration as a legitimate perspective of its own, suggests that expressive discourses have no place in the classrooms Tayo is schooled in. Instead, the technical discourses Tayo encounters in school offer him only an objective and impersonalized way of understanding the world around him, which is quite different from how he was taught to understand the world from his early childhood teachers, including Josiah and Old Grandma. As Tayo becomes increasingly “fluent” in this type of discourse as he spends more and more time in white-run institutions—including not only the school but, after he graduates, also the army and the Veterans Hospital—he becomes less and less able to feel a sense of connection to his people and even to himself, these being some of the earliest symptoms of his sickness. Indeed, at the start of the novel, one of our earliest images of Tayo shows him returning to the reservation after several years of immersion in the white world, feeling hollow, empty, and lost as a result of the dehumanizing, technical discourses he has been continuously exposed to. He is “convinced” at this point that he is nothing more than “brittle red clay, slipping away with the wind, a little more each day” (25). His education has not only caused him to question the stories and ways of his people, but has also left him struggling to understand who he is and what his place is in the world.

Tayo’s experiences of dehumanization and disconnection also have to do with his loss of language, which is alluded to by his continual silence throughout much of the novel, particularly during the earlier scenes before he begins his ceremony/re-education. Though the doctors at the VA Hospital assume his silence is a result of PTSD, it in fact stems from his education in BIA schools, where he was first taught to exchange his native language(s) for English. The transition to English is a crucial part of what leaves Tayo feeling lost and disconnected from himself and those around him. As he struggles to understand his symptoms and explain them to others, he

finds that “the feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names... were buried under English words, out of reach” (64). Once he loses the ability to speak or understand the native languages he was surrounded by in his youth, Tayo prefers silence to English words—the English language seems to be, for him, a “technical” discourse, not capable of capturing or expressing what he feels (and does not feel) inside himself.

It is this silence, this seeming loss of both voice and identity, that leads many—both the white army doctors and those on the reservation—to deem Tayo crazy, insane, mentally ill and unstable from his time at war. Yet, though his military experience certainly contributes to his trauma and state of emotional dysfunction at the start of the novel, it is actually during his time at war that Tayo’s recovery begins, in a sense. It is while fighting alongside Rocky in the war that Tayo first realizes how little he can *feel*, how objectively he has come to view the world, and how disconnected he is from others, all of which he begins to attribute to his BIA education. Only when he begins to question this education while at war, to see the holes in the “official” version of history he was taught in school and the limitations of the school’s “technical” discourses, does Tayo begin to show symptoms of his sickness—he literally becomes ill through the realization of how his schooling and assimilation into the white world have affected him, and, in turn, affected others. Paradoxically, then, the start of his illness is also, to some extent, the beginning of his recovery, as it signals the dawning of a new awareness, a heightened critical perspective, and a refusal to buy into his American education any longer. While at war, Tayo becomes disturbed by his and other soldiers’ lack of capacity for emotion, their inability to experience empathy or affect when faced with orders to harm or kill other human beings. Increasingly, he begins to question the type of “logic” or “reasoning” that would justify the killing of other people in face-to-face combat, and searches for an answer as to how this way of thinking was instilled in his own mind in the first place. Gradually, he becomes cognizant of the ways in which his American education has taught him to think objectively, to embrace dehumanization and detachment, to stifle feeling with a sterile emotionlessness.

Tayo comes to this awareness not only through self-reflection, however, but also through observing Rocky's reaction to war as the two fight (and later march as prisoners) alongside one another. Just as he fit the mold of the A-student and all-state athlete, Rocky turns himself into the embodiment of the ideal citizen-soldier. Unlike Tayo, who becomes increasingly unable to cope with the expected duties of the soldier, Rocky is unperturbed by orders to kill or by the sight of the dead bodies of enemy soldiers, even when one of these corpses bears a startling resemblance to Uncle Josiah, a circumstance which shocks and disturbs Tayo. Rocky is so much a product of his American education (and of the discipline and patriotism that it instilled in him) that he has become a "docile body," to borrow a phrase from Foucault: he is trained through both his schooling and his military experience to unthinkingly obey and carry out orders dictated from above, relying on a seemingly "objective" logic and never stopping to question what he is told to do. Tayo, in contrast, becomes increasingly critical throughout the war of a logic that instructs him not only to not think or question, but also to not *feel*—indeed, to kill other human beings without feeling anything at all. Though at least one critic argues that Tayo's schooling makes him "unable to deal with experiences that do not fit within the boundaries of a Western... perspective on reality," it is during war that Tayo in fact begins to question Western perspectives and to re-embrace the version of "reality" he used to understand the world while growing up on the Laguna reservation (Akins 9). Unable to embody the ideals of patriotism, nationalism, and discipline as fully as Rocky, Tayo struggles more and more to embrace or even understand a "logic" that sees only one side to conflict, warfare, and history, and discourages feeling toward or even awareness of the enemy as a fellow human being. Indeed, "It was there [in the jungle of the Philippines while serving in WWII] that Tayo began to understand what Josiah had said [when Tayo was younger]. Nothing was all good or all bad either; it all depended" (10). Unlike the singular, one-sided version of history taught to Tayo in schools, he begins to realize at war that stories, histories, and realities are multiple, subjective, and contextual—in short, he begins to "un-learn" the types of technical discourses and objective

perspectives that he was taught in BIA schools. In this way, Tayo initiates his healing and re-education on his own, before he even returns home or encounters any of the teachers who will later become his ceremonial guides. As Kennedy acknowledges, Tayo develops the ability while at war to draw upon the “alternative” education he received outside of BIA schooling in order to consider other perspectives, something which Rocky does not have the same ability to do. It is this adjustment in his thinking that causes Tayo to experience empathy while in combat, seeing the face of Uncle Josiah in a dead Japanese soldier when Rocky sees only an enemy corpse. Kennedy puts it similarly: “Tayo sees his Laguna relatives in Japanese people because *in his consciousness is the knowledge, learned from Josiah and Laguna community traditions*, that linking evil to any particular race, rather than to human potential, ultimately destroys both the oppressed and the oppressor” (78 emphasis mine). Seemingly, this same knowledge has been erased from Rocky’s consciousness, despite having been taught from the same people and community. Never doubting for a moment that killing is their duty as American soldiers, he assures Tayo during combat that “we’re *supposed* to be here. This is what we’re supposed to do” (7). Yet, despite his cousin’s insistence that this is the right thing to do—and, despite the lifelong trust and confidence that Tayo has placed in Rocky up until this point—Tayo still questions and ultimately rejects his cousin’s level-headed, pragmatic, and unfeeling approach to war:

He examined the facts and logic again and again, the way Rocky had explained it to him... 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. (7-8 emphasis added)

This moment represents one of the earliest turning points in the novel, much more a sign of Tayo’s impending recovery/re-education than a symptom of his sickness. Though, on the surface, war seems to make Tayo “crazy,” it is in fact Tayo’s wartime realization of the conflict

between “official” school knowledge and other forms of knowledge which creates an internal struggle within him that manifests itself outwardly in physical and psychological symptoms.

Tayo’s struggle to make sense of this conflict continues after he returns home to the reservation after war, where he is left to spend much of his time alone trying to understand the experiences of his recent past. In one of the earliest scenes in which we see Tayo at home after the war, he is thinking to himself about how “he had believed in the stories [of his people] for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of ‘nonsense.’ But they had been wrong” (18). At this point, Tayo no longer doubts what he has learned in school, as he began to do during the war, but rejects it altogether. Though his sense of conflictedness does return many times throughout the novel, even in some of the moments when he is closest to completing the steps of the ceremony, Tayo’s belief in his own people, and especially in the stories of his people, grows increasingly stronger throughout his re-education and recovery, as does his skepticism about what he was taught by his schoolteachers. Unlike Rocky, who searched for knowledge only in texts deemed “legitimate” or “official” or “scientific” by white America, Tayo becomes more and more aware of the knowledge which his people’s stories contain within them as he re-immerses himself in life on the reservation after the war. His school experiences still haunt him, but he is strong enough to recognize the school’s teachings as only one version of reality, no more legitimate or illegitimate than any other way of viewing the world. He

knew what white people thought about the stories. In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations. [Tayo] had studied those books, and he had no reason to believe the stories any more. But old Grandma always used to say, “Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things happened.” He never the lost the feeling he had in his chest when she spoke those words, as she did each time she told them stories; and he still felt it was

true, despite all they had taught him in school—that long long ago things *had* been different, and human beings could understand what the animals said. (87)

Though Tayo acknowledges here that his schooling tried to take away his “reason to believe [in] the stories,” he also demonstrates that his faith in them is far from entirely shaken. His growing willingness to accept the stories of his native culture back into his life is a crucial first step in his healing and re-education.

As his awareness of his own need for “un-learning” and re-education grows, Tayo also begins to notice the ways in which his formal schooling was inadequate, insufficient, leaving him lacking those forms of knowledge he sees as most crucial to his everyday life. At this point, Tayo begins to reverse the logic of his former schoolteachers, who labeled native cultures and forms of knowledge as “backward,” by instead decrying *their* teaching and knowledge as inferior. Cognizant of the opportunities he has missed to learn about the people’s relationship to the earth while away from the reservation at Boarding School, Tayo “wishes” in one scene that they had “taught him more [at the BIA schools] about the clouds and the sky, about the way the priests called the storm clouds to bring the rain” (45). In addition to being inadequate for Tayo’s own everyday needs, he also becomes more and more aware of the failed promise of education for the Laguna people more generally, especially as he sees his friends become increasingly depressed, violent, and prone to alcoholism after they return from war, unable to hold steady jobs or even take care of themselves (by the novel’s close, one of Tayo’s friends is killed in a bar fight; two others die in a drunk-driving car accident). After spending only a short amount of time at home after the war, Tayo realizes that

reservation people were the first ones to get laid off... they were educated only enough to know they wanted to leave the reservation; when they got to Gallup there weren’t many jobs they could get. The men unloaded trucks in the warehouses... or piled lumber in the lumberyards or pushed wheelbarrows for construction; the women cleaned out motel rooms along Highway 66. 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. (106)

Despite his teachers' demands that he assimilate into the white world, Tayo realizes that the school's promises of social and economic mobility (and of football scholarships, wealth, success, and beauty) are illusory; in fact, for those BIA-educated Indians living on the reservation, even basic economic stability and steady employment are not guaranteed from an American education. Unwilling to be idealistic, Tayo notes that there are few, if any, exceptions—even Rocky, despite being a star pupil and athlete, could not achieve the promises of wealth and success, ultimately unable to have his chance to “make it” in the white world. As Tayo laments, “this was where the white people and their promises had left the Indians. All the promises they made to you, Rocky, they weren't any different than the other promises they made” (117). Linking Rocky's death to the difficult conditions faced by the people on the post-war reservation, Tayo gradually opens his eyes to the ways that BIA education has failed them all.

Once Tayo realizes the ways in which American education has affected himself and his community, he becomes increasingly committed to voicing his critiques of white culture and assimilation. Though this, too, is an integral early step in his re-education and healing (especially given his refusal to speak at all in earlier sections of the narrative), his friends and relatives view this as further indication of his illness and insanity. Akins argues that there is an “uneasy relationship between cultural memory and the formal education system in *Ceremony*,” but while this is certainly true, very few of the characters in the novel are aware of or experience the unease of this relationship to the extent that Tayo does. When he tries to broach the topic with friends or relatives on the reservation, including the other war vets who are his drinking buddies, he realizes he makes people immediately uncomfortable—when he speaks, the others suddenly “[a]ren't laughing and talking any more” (38). Yet, as he becomes increasingly cognizant of what has happened to himself and the others on the reservation through BIA schooling and other forms of aggressive assimilation, he becomes unable to stop himself from

publicly voicing his critiques of white America and of natives' participation in the white world. Eager to expose the falsity of America's promises, he tries to re-educate his vet friends about what he himself has come to realize, pointing out to them that although they want to believe they are "MacArthur's boys," "real" Americans because "white whores took their money same as anyone" during the war, things have changed again since the war ended. Now that "the[ir] uniforms [are] gone," he tells them, "All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she's real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change. You watch it slide across the counter at you, and you know. Goddamn it! You stupid sonofabitches! You know!" (38-39). Tayo's insistence that his friends "know" the same things he does and are only being "stupid" is seemingly a way of imploring them to reject the teachings of their American educations and to learn to re-see the world(s) around them, to re-educate themselves. Although they continue to believe in America's false promises, imagining that a BIA education or a Veteran's badge will make them "equal" to and accepted by white Americans, Tayo encourages them to see a different truth, however uncomfortable that truth may make them. His efforts to teach them signal the strength his own re-education is giving him—as he begins to un-learn and re-learn, he is able to become a voice of reflection and opposition among his friends, adding a new perspective and dimension to everyday conversations on the reservation, many of which only echo the dominant, technical discourse of white American culture. It is at this point that he is ready to begin his ceremony, his journey through an alternative education that results in his healing and restoration.

What I refer to as Tayo's *re-education process*—the period in the novel during which he participates in a traditional native ceremony that both heals him and helps him to re-learn what he knew before BIA school—allows him to reconnect with his past, to re-learn the stories and the language of his people, and to remember the lessons he learned as a child before his formal schooling. In so doing, Tayo gains a broader and more encompassing understanding of his

world than his BIA schooling had suggested to him was possible. The ceremony Tayo participates in, though intended to be primarily a healing ritual, is just as much a re-education and even re-induction process: Tayo (re-)learns the languages, stories, songs, places, animals, herbs and plants that he was familiar with in his youth as he carries out the steps of the ceremony. Guided primarily by Ku'oosh, Ts'eh, and Betonie, Tayo has multiple teachers throughout his re-education; his is a holistic educational experience, in which he encounters many different stories, perspectives, languages, and people. Though few critics focus directly on the role of schooling and education in the novel, many nevertheless acknowledge that the ceremony is also an educational process by referring to Ts'eh, Josiah, Betonie, and Ku'oosh as “teachers,” “instructors,” and “educators” (other characters in the novel, including Old Grandma, Night Swan, and even Shush, Betonie’s young helper, can also be considered among Tayo’s teachers, though they are given far less attention in the literature on *Ceremony* than are the four characters mentioned above). Likewise, Tayo is referred to by critics as a “student” and his ceremony described as a “learning process.”²³ In the only other essay on *Ceremony* that I have come across to discuss Tayo’s healing entirely in terms of re-education, Eppert describes Tayo’s ceremonial guides as “unorthodox teachers” (a perfectly fitting term) who practice what she calls a “remembrance/pedagogy”—a “process of unlearning and relearning” that allows Tayo to “unlearn colonizing discourses and exercise Native ancestral memories that he had abandoned or repressed” (727). It is in this same sense that I understand and explore Tayo’s ceremonial experience.

Yet, it is not *only* ancestral memories that Tayo must re-learn during his ceremony—re-learning the native *languages* he knew before BIA school is also a crucial part of his re-education process. As Weso writes, “[Tayo’s] healing begins with words,” particularly the “Laguna ceremonial dialect” (56). Indeed, Tayo not only begins to re-learn languages that were lost to him during his boarding school years, but also acquires a different and more expansive way of using and understanding words—both Laguna and English ones—throughout his

ceremony. Used to the technical discourse of the dominant culture, in which the symptoms of his sickness are explained as simply “PTSD” or “sunstroke,” and the dead bodies of his cousin Rocky and the man who resembles Josiah described as mere “casualties,” an important step in Tayo’s healing is his ability to re-learn how to use language to connect rather than to compartmentalize, to feel rather than to sterilize, and to understand the meaning of things *in relation to one another*, rather than through objective, singular definitions such as Tayo finds in his school science textbooks (26). When Old Ku’oosh, the traditional Laguna healer who initiates Tayo’s ceremony, first comes to visit Tayo in his home, the conversation the two men have together is one of the first—and most important—steps in Tayo’s re-education process. The conversation resonates with Tayo not only because of the words Ku’oosh uses, but *how* he uses them—to communicate and connect, to create a sense of feeling and emotion shared between the two speakers. As they converse, Ku’oosh comforts Tayo (afraid, at this point, of just how sick he has become) by telling him, “But you know, grandson, this world is fragile” (32). Moved by his words, Tayo observes that

the word [Ku’oosh] 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 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. (32-33)

Through his conversation with Ku’oosh, Tayo begins to re-learn how to use language as an expressive, rather than technical, discourse—how to infuse language with emotion, expression, feeling, and meaning. Later, during a conversation with Betonie (who is perhaps Tayo’s most

important teacher and ceremonial guide), Tayo has a similar experience, noticing the way in which Betonie infuses the word “comfortable” with new meanings and feelings, just as Ku’oosh had done with the word “fragile.” As he listens to Betonie speak, Tayo thinks to himself, “there was something about the way the old man said the word ‘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 the hills” (108). Betonie’s ability to use the word in a way which makes it relevant to Tayo’s own cultural context and everyday life helps the latter to better understand the importance of the relationship between language, context, and community. It is for this same reason that Tayo begins to sense the urgency of re-learning native languages if he wishes to truly re-connect with his native culture. He knows that, in the past, the elders sought healing by “gather[ing] the feelings and opinions that were scattered through the village,” but realizes that, if he doesn’t know the language(s) of the people in the village, he cannot “gather... [their] feelings and opinions” the way his elders did: “[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... no rest until the entanglement had been unwound to the source” (64). Recognizing that re-learning the native languages lost to him at BIA school is crucial to his healing, Tayo learns some of his most valuable lessons simply by listening to his teacher-healer-guides as they talk.

In addition to re-learning native languages, Tayo’s re-education also involves replacing the curriculum he was taught at BIA schools with the lessons taught to him by his ceremonial teachers as well as by those “unorthodox teachers” who raised him as a boy before his schooldays. His re-education is simultaneously a remembering process (a “remembrance-learning,” as Eppert calls it) in which Tayo learns many new things from Ku’oosh, Ts’eh, and Betonie, but also recovers the lessons he learned in his youth (and subsequently forgot or repressed during his school years) from Josiah, Old Grandma, and others on the reservation (Eppert 727). Refusing to believe any longer in what his schoolteachers taught him—that native

stories are “nonsense” and “superstition”—Tayo begins not only to recall the stories he was told growing up, but also to consider how to apply the lessons contained within these stories to his own efforts to complete the steps of the ceremony (18). In one scene, Tayo has a flashback of killing flies as a young boy, something which seemed both logical and necessary to him at the time because, as he explains to Josiah, “our teacher said so. She said they are bad and carry sickness” (93). Tayo’s uncle offers the young boy a different lesson, however, telling his nephew the story of what the greenbottle fly means to their people: “Well, I didn’t go to school much, so I don’t know about that, but you see, long time ago... It was the greenbottle fly who... ask[ed] forgiveness for the people. Since that time the people have been grateful for what the fly did for us” (93). Scared of the consequences of killing the flies after hearing the story, the young Tayo wonders what will happen, but Josiah assures him, “I think it will be okay... People make mistakes... Next time, just remember the story” (94). His words foreshadow the ceremonial process that later brings about his nephew’s healing: by remembering—re-learning—the stories and languages of his people, Tayo realizes in the midst of his sickness that “it will be okay” (94).

Tayo’s re-education also involves (re-)learning histories and (re-)adjusting the way in which he understands the world(s) around him. The lessons and stories Tayo learns and re-learns throughout the ceremony are markedly different from those he likely encountered in BIA school. As Bauerkemper points out, the ceremony allows Tayo to learn from “nonsequential histories and chronologies” that “fundamentally depart from modern-state nationalism and the underlying ideologies of progressive, linear history” (28). Although his American education exposed him to facts and explanations in textbooks that, at the time, seemed authoritative and comprehensive enough to leave no room for alternative forms of knowledge or versions of history, Tayo’s healing and re-education are largely about understanding the many versions of stories, the different competing realities, that truly comprise history/ies. Upon visiting the home of Old Betonie for the first time (who himself was educated at the infamous Sherman Institute, a boarding school in Riverside, California), Tayo is overwhelmed by the extent to

which this singular space contains within it so many histories, so many narratives, so many people's stories, all from different times and places: he "[ca]n't take his eyes off" the "cardboard boxes that filled the big room," the "bundles of newspapers, their edges curled stiff and brown, barricading piles of telephone books with the years scattered among cities—St. Louis, Seattle, New York, Oakland," and the "layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost as if occasionally the oldest calendars had fallen or been taken out from under the others and then had been replaced on top of the most recent years" (110, 111). Almost immediately, Tayo senses that all of these items together comprise an alternative, more encompassing, set of histories which exceed that which can be captured within the limited space of his school textbooks. Looking around at all of the stories and histories, times and places, captured together in one space, Tayo

began to feel another dimension to the old man's room. His heart beat faster, and he felt the blood draining from his legs. He knew the answer before he could shape the question... He wanted to dismiss all of it 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.

The old man smiled... "Take it easy," he said, "don't try to see everything all at once... We've been gathering these things for a long time—hundreds of years. She was doing it before I was born, and he was working before she came. And on and on back down in time." (110-111)

Tayo takes to heart what the old man tells him next—that "all these things have stories alive in them"—and learns from Betonie how the piles of seeming "rubbish" and "debris" that crowd the room have the ability to capture stories, voices, and experiences that official versions of history inevitably exclude, overlook, or ignore (112).

Old Betonie also offers Tayo an alternative version of the history of white conquest of Native American lands, as well as a new way of understanding the very concept of land

“ownership.” For Tayo, who has long been deeply troubled by this history, plagued by the idea of Indians as “losers” in the power struggle with whites, this lesson provides an important sense of comfort and belonging which proves integral to his healing. Betonie tells Tayo, ““They only fool themselves when they think [the land] is theirs. The deeds and papers don’t mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain”” (118). By the end of his ceremony, after these conversations with Betonie, Tayo becomes cognizant of—and able to critique—the ways in which his “mis-education” in BIA schools had indoctrinated him into denigrating his own people and culture and viewing whites as superior, capable of outwitting and defeating the foolish, “uneducated” Indians. He “knew then he had learned the lie by heart—the lie which they had wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted” (177). Though Tayo did indeed learn this lie while in BIA school, he unlearns it during his ceremony, as he realizes the missing gaps and silences in the “official” version of history he was taught during his school years. Able to see through the historical narrative which “legitimizes” the theft of Indian lands by white people who were culturally and intellectually “superior,” Tayo learns another history of the land from Betonie which can’t be found in U.S. school textbooks. Betonie’s teachings are furthered by Tayo’s remembrance/recovery of the lessons Josiah taught him about the land when Tayo was a child. As Kennedy notes, Josiah is the one who first teaches Tayo that the land is both “where we come from” and that which “keeps us going,” and, in so doing, becomes the first to introduce him to a conceptualization of the land which “provokes evaluation of Western perceptions of property ownership” (79). From both Betonie and Josiah, then, Tayo learns that the land cannot be stolen or taken because it is not property—people do not own the land, but rather belong to it and exist as part of it. Tayo’s new understanding of the land also includes an awareness of the relationship between the land and storytelling, what Holm calls the “direct relationship between oral narrative forms” and “a tribally specific geosacred relationship with the land” (243). He realizes that Betonie was right to say that deeds and papers signify nothing; rather, the people’s

relationship to the land survives in and through the stories, as a spiritual as well as physical connection—one which both exceeds and defies the concept of ownership of the land as personal or national property.

Toward the end of his ceremonial journey (which involves much physical journeying as well), readers witness what might arguably be considered the climax of Tayo's healing and of the novel itself. At this point, Tayo reaches what he knows is "the highest point on earth." He knows this not because he can measure the mountain in feet or meters, or assess his altitude or distance from the ground, but because "he could feel it. It had nothing to do with measurements or heights. It was a special place" (129). Tayo's realization is not the result of the type of science or logic he encountered in school, but rather is about what he can *feel*. At this point, his re-education has reached a critical juncture: he understands fully that some things cannot be taught through schooling, nor explained through science or facts in textbooks. Instead, Tayo realizes that there are multiple kinds of "truths" that might exceed the knowledge contained within classrooms and books. In coming to this understanding, he is able to learn (and re-learn) a multitude of ways to describe, experience, and make sense of both the world around him and the history within him; this new knowledge culminates in his healing and recovery.

I do not wish to suggest that Tayo's education itself comes to a finish by the close of the story, since, indeed, the novel makes clear that learning and education are lifelong, continuous processes; however, by the time the specific re-education process that occurs through Tayo's ceremony reaches its completion, there is much that Tayo has learned. One of the most important, if simplest, lessons Tayo takes away from his re-education is the need to accept uncertainty as part of the learning process, to give in to the occasional willingness to *not* know. Throughout his time at school and in the military, Tayo was exposed to easy answers and simplistic explanations for nearly everything: flies carry disease and so they should be killed; Tayo has been at war and therefore suffers from a standard case of PTSD, etc. Yet, as he struggles through the difficult and often confusing process that is the ceremony, he learns that

sometimes there aren't easy or immediately obvious answers, that some experiences exceed or defy logic or explanation. Though at first this makes him fearful, he gradually becomes comfortable with the idea of uncertainty: as he heals, Tayo knows that "What [he] could feel was powerful, [even if] there was no way to be sure what it was" (114). Significantly, Tayo remains uncertain of how exactly to carry out the steps of the ceremony right up to its very last moments—there are no specific instructions for him to follow from a textbook or lab manual as there are for raising cattle or dissecting frogs in a science classroom, and his teachers leave the process largely in his hands. Flores makes this same point, writing that Betonie "gives [Tayo] the pattern... that will guide him through the ceremony, teaches him the history of the ceremony and the curers, and tells him that he must complete the ceremony himself." But, she adds, "Tayo has no idea how he is to do that" (53). Yet, it is Tayo's uncertainty—his lack of understanding about how to carry out the ceremony—which allows his re-education to be largely his own, a learning journey that is *self*-directed just as much, if not more, as it is guided by his "unorthodox teachers."²⁴ Being able to take control of his own education allows Tayo to transform learning from an experience of indoctrination, humiliation, and subordination, as it was at boarding school, into one of empowerment. As Eppert writes, Tayo "must not only learn to negotiate two divergent discourses but also, and critically, learn how to learn and take responsibility for his education" (731). By the close of the novel, Tayo has the confidence to learn from himself as well as other teachers who have no connection to a school, and the knowledge he gains is valuable to him not because it comes from a place of intellectual or cultural "authority," but because it is a knowledge that *feels* right to him, one which contains within it stories and histories that can be felt and understood—even re-experienced anew as one hears them or learns them—even if they cannot be confirmed or validated by a schoolteacher or a textbook.

Tayo also recovers his ability to speak and understand native languages throughout his re-education process, not only re-learning the languages themselves, but also learning the

significance of their power and value, of the histories, voices, and knowledge they hold within them. By the novel's end, he has not only regained a voice after being silent and silenced throughout much of his school years and subsequent illness, but has also regained the ability to use the languages of his people. In a powerful scene toward the end of the narrative, Tayo "breathe[s] like [he had not breathed] for a long time" and realizes that "being alive was all right then." This moment of clarity, of utter relief, is followed by Tayo being spurred into action and, more significantly, into *speech*: "He stood up [then]. He knew the people had a song for the sunrise... He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones, but *feeling* they were right" (169 emphasis added). In this moment, we see Tayo submit to uncertainty—as he gradually recalls his people's song for the sunrise, he isn't sure if his words "[a]re the right ones," but knows that he needn't speak this language with authority or correctness, but only with *feeling*. By using language as a vehicle for feeling, Tayo's song becomes a way not only to re-establish his voice, but also to re-connect with his people as well as the earth itself. No longer are his feelings and the feelings of his people "buried under English words, out of reach"; rather, Tayo's new understanding of how to use native languages brings him the connection to self and others that he has long been yearning for (64).

Tayo's recovery of languages other than English is, like the rest of his re-education, also a remembrance process which allows him to recover memories, stories, and histories. Throughout his life, Tayo has been exposed to (and, we might also say, willing to *listen to* and to *hear*) a multiplicity of languages and dialects. Indeed, the novel opens with Tayo, at the height of his illness, remembering "Spanish" and "Japanese voices" and "Laguna voices" that he has heard in the past (5).²⁵ Although he is haunted by these voices at the time, unable to make sense of the multilingual cacophony he hears in his head, by the end of the novel, Tayo no longer desires to drown out such voices. Though his American education taught him to discount the languages and stories of others—to listen to and believe in only one official version of history—Tayo's recovery of languages other than English is significant to him largely because it allows

him to learn multiple histories, to listen to multiple stories, to communicate and connect with others through a multitude of languages. As he learns these multiple histories, readers do the same: *Ceremony* itself is comprised of multiple voices, perspectives, and languages which we encounter as we follow Tayo through his healing process. Though the work appears, through a cursory reading, to be an individualized narrative about a single protagonist, it actually contains within it many stories, histories, and memories, told in a variety of ways and using multiple languages. As Kate Cummings notes, the “novel” (a generic label which itself seems questionable for this work) is in fact made up of “anecdotes, individual histories (such as Helen Jean’s), war-stories (swapped by Emo, Pinkie, and other vets), popular folklore (of which Josiah and Betonie [as well as, I would add, Old Grandma] are the repositories) and quasi-documentaries (like the footage on Gallup)” (556). Cummings argues that “storytelling is thus a collaborative event” in *Ceremony*, rather than the work of an individual—the stories told and recovered in the novel are not exclusively Tayo’s or even Silko’s, but belong to and are shared by many, and are preserved in many different languages. For this reason, Tayo’s recovery of languages other than English is absolutely critical to his healing, for it is also a way of recovering a diversity of stories and histories.

Tayo’s re-education process also teaches him to develop a broader, more varied and multifarious understanding of history and of the world around him than he had ever learned in school. No longer does Tayo accept one specific and simple answer for how to explain or understand something; rather, by the novel’s close, he learns to build his knowledge and his worldview from a variety of sources. In *Subtractive Schooling*, Valenzuela notes that schools and teachers have a responsibility—which they often fail to live up to—to “openly recognize,” and help students to recognize, that the standard curriculum taught in U.S. classrooms is a “dominant and exclusive” one (270). Tayo’s schoolteachers, however, continuously fail to acknowledge their curriculum as dominant and exclusive, instead presenting it as objective and factual, despite the fact that this curriculum leaves Tayo little room to understand his own

world, his own people, and the languages and customs he was raised with. It is through learning a new “curriculum” with Betonie and his other “unorthodox teachers” that Tayo’s experiences in BIA schooling begin to be challenged and *counterbalanced*, to borrow a term from Valenzuela (270). As Akins puts it, “[Tayo’s] BIA teachers... present scientific explanations of natural phenomena as the only true reality,” but the novel itself “challenges the conception that Western science has a monopoly on truth”—instead, both Tayo and readers are exposed to “various ways of knowing” (7-8). Bauerkemper, similarly, argues that Tayo’s journey is about learning to “convey, theorize, and activate understandings of history that can account for complexity, contradiction, and multiplicity” (50). And indeed, by the end of his journey, Tayo is able to see (and hear) realities, truths, and complexities that he was less attentive to before, privy now to the multiplicity of histories and stories that surround him always in his everyday life: “everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving” (88). At this point, Tayo knows that despite what he learned at BIA school, history is not static or changing, cannot be relayed within the singular and official version told within a textbook; rather, it is a series of stories always unfolding, changing, and growing.

Though Tayo learns a new “curriculum” throughout his re-education process, which requires unlearning much of what he learned at boarding school, not *everything* he learned at BIA schools becomes excluded, unlearned, or discarded throughout this process. Rather, some of the knowledge he acquired at boarding school becomes included as part of the more multifarious, multi-perspective worldview that Tayo comes to adopt. To say that Tayo’s BIA education becomes “counterbalanced” (to again borrow Valenzuela’s phrase) by the learning experience of his ceremony suggests a blending, a combining, of various forms of knowledge and perspectives, rather than a countering, opposing, or replacing of one ideology with another. Though Tayo learns the most from those “reservation Indians” whom his schoolteachers warned him would be stumbling blocks to his education, he does learn *some* things from his teachers

and from his time in BIA schools, and his re-education helps him to understand how to make use of this knowledge. As Roberts writes, “the results [of the ceremony] are not a rejection of Western [culture and knowledge] as much as an empowering recognition of its limits” (87).²⁶ Betonie teaches Tayo to understand this very idea, warning him to not to “be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies, always shifting, always necessary to maintain” (120). Though his schooling had tried to teach Tayo to categorically label things as “good” or “bad” (for example, Western science as “good” and native “superstitions” as “bad”; civilized Americans as “good” and savage Indians as “bad”), his re-education teaches him how to give more careful consideration to the competing worldviews and forms of knowledge he is presented with. As a result, he is better able to understand and make sense of the world around him, an enlightenment which proves integral to his healing. In a moving scene near the close of the novel, we see him “cr[y] the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their [white people’s] 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, no transitions through all distances and time” (229). Rather than fully rejecting what he has learned in BIA school, Tayo comes to understand it as one *possible* worldview, one *possible* way of understanding reality—which, when considered alongside *other* worldviews, offers him an enhanced and more encompassing understanding of himself and others, of history and memory, and of the stories he has heard and encountered in different contexts throughout his life. Ultimately, he comes to learn not only the way narratives and histories compete and conflict, but also how they combine and connect, coming together as part of a larger story as frequently as they diverge.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson Tayo learns from his ceremony is that education has a critical connection to community—ultimately, Tayo’s re-education process is not just about healing himself, but also helping his people to heal and recover from the cultural traumas that have been inflicted upon them by white America. As nearly every critic writing on

the novel acknowledges in one way or another, one of the most important lessons Tayo (re-)learns through the ceremony is how to give and accept love from others; after a period of detachment and dehumanization, Tayo is re-humanized by the novel's close, able to fully connect and communicate with others, to feel for them and with them. This connection to and with the people around him is also meant to symbolize the ways in which Tayo's completion of the ceremony was not just an individual quest, but rather a way of recovering stories, languages, histories, and memories that were temporarily lost not only to Tayo, but to many of the Laguna people on the reservation. Tayo knows that the knowledge he has acquired throughout his re-education is not only for his own benefit, but rather is of significance to the entire community he is a part of. Even while still sick, Tayo already understood that "his sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (116). Once he has healed, Tayo understands how to use the knowledge that he acquired throughout the ceremony not only to help himself, but also to help heal others, a point acknowledged by many critics. Weso, for example, writes that "Tayo begins the novel in a state of confusion, but at the end, he realigns not only himself, but also the balance of earth and his people" (54). Likewise, Holm argues that the ceremony is not primarily about the healing of an individual, but rather "correction of the historical deficit" through "the reiteration of historical, mythic, and ceremonial Native (Laguna and Diné) narratives" (250). The novel makes clear that Tayo's re-education has wider implications than merely the way it affects his individual psyche—rather, the knowledge Tayo acquires has the potential to bring healing and recovery to the people of the Laguna Pueblo reservation as a whole.²⁷

Though *Ceremony* demonstrates that the legacy of U.S. Indian boarding schools has had a profound—and profoundly damaging—impact on Native American communities, the novel's depiction of resistance to and recovery from the indoctrination and aggressive assimilation encountered in these schools is even more powerfully rendered. Much more significant than what Tayo learns from his BIA teachers is what he unlearns and re-learns through the self-

directed and collaborative education process that follows his formal schooling. The fact that this re-education takes place entirely outside of formal classrooms, guided by teachers who never set foot within school walls, is a powerful testament to the ways in which dominant institutions and ideologies are everywhere resisted in everyday life, even as they seek to be totalizing in nature.

* * *

In/conclusions: From Texts to Contexts

Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings*, Mohr's *Nilda*, and Silko's *Ceremony* all painfully illustrate the impacts of what Valenzuela calls *subtractive schooling*—efforts by the dominant culture to use formal education as a way of eliminating minoritized students' uses of home languages and attachment to their ethnic cultures. Yet, in their portrayals of the alternative educations that their protagonists acquire *outside* of the formal school system, these texts also offer teachers and educators some suggestions for re-envisioning and revising our own classroom pedagogies and practices so that they are more inclusive and less subtractive. I would like to devote this concluding section of Part III to a brief discussion of the alternative approaches to learning and education that these novels suggest to us (many of which, interestingly, echo the ideas of progressive scholars of literacy, language, and pedagogy). Perhaps above all else, all of these texts demonstrate the ways in which students would benefit from school curricula that is more culturally, linguistically, socially, and contextually relevant to their own everyday lives, needs, and interests.

Valenzuela has suggested that schooling can actually be an *obstacle* to education when it disables students from learning those things which are most important to them intellectually, personally, and culturally (258). In Delores's, Nilda's and Tayo's cases, this is exactly how formal schooling is experienced—what each character *really* wants to know and to learn about is generally excluded from their schooling, and, as such, they all end up fashioning their own (largely self-directed) educations outside of school, allowing them to seek and find that knowledge elsewhere. Their stories suggest the need for schooling to be more inclusive and

dynamic with regard to the texts, languages, histories and perspectives that make their way into U.S. classrooms. As Valenzuela writes, the presence of multiple languages and cultures within the classroom on an everyday basis is “precisely... what it means”—or, at least, *should* mean—“to be educated in U.S. society” (270). Though this remains an as-yet-unachieved ideal, *The Mambo Kings*, *Nilda*, and *Ceremony* all speak to the importance of continuing to strive for just such an educational system.

Yet, although characters in these novels are forced to look beyond their formal schooling in order to learn much of what they really want to know, none of these characters ultimately rejects or refutes *everything* that is taught to them in U.S. schools. Rather, they exhibit a flexibility, an adaptability, which allows them to combine some of the knowledge and language learned in their classrooms with what they learn outside of the school. Their willingness to make their educations “hybrid,” careful and practical combinations of what they learn at home, in the classroom, and in other everyday contexts, stands in stark contrast to their teachers’ inflexible demands that students leave their home lives and languages entirely behind if they want to succeed in school. The rigidity of the teachers’ strategies, when contrasted with the creative and adaptive forms of learning used by Delores, Cesar, Nestor, Nilda, and Tayo, suggests that it may be teachers—rather than students’ parents, communities, or home environments—that can become the greatest obstacle for students. As Kermit Campbell argues, it is often teachers, much more so than students, who bring to the classroom a belief in a fundamental divide between the “formal” languages and literacies of mainstream schooling and the “informal” languages and literacies used by students outside of school. As Young notes in his discussion of Campbell’s work, “when teachers operate from an assumption that the[se] two codes are mutually unintelligible, they promote academic failure rather than success” (5). Echoing these ideas, *The Mambo Kings*, *Nilda*, and *Ceremony* all suggest that teachers need to be able to “hybridize” their approaches to learning and education—the schoolteachers who tell Delores, Nilda, and Tayo that what they have learned at home has no place in their classrooms

could take a lesson from these characters about how to combine various forms of knowledge in ways which can lead to more productive and fulfilling learning experiences.

The need for hybridizing approaches to schooling and learning becomes particularly apparent when we reflect upon the troubled relationship between language, schooling, and education that runs throughout each novel. Delores, Nilda, and Tayo all find themselves expected to exclude their home languages entirely from their speech and writing in the classroom, and Tayo suffers the temporary loss of his native language throughout his experience with English Only education while at boarding school. The central roles that linguistic subordination and homogenization play in each of their formal schooling experiences—and the upsetting and even traumatizing impacts these experiences have upon the protagonists—suggests that teachers and educators need to give more careful and frequent consideration to the ways that languages are (and are not) used in our classrooms: which languages are included and excluded, permitted or forbidden, encouraged or discouraged—and *why*—are topics that require our continuous attention and reflection if we are to avoid using subtractive forms of schooling. The same questions raised by the SRTOL in 1974 continue to be just as relevant to educators today: as the background document to that resolution states, “we need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually *rejecting the students themselves*, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins” (qtd. in Smitherman 21 emphasis added). Suggesting the potentiality in moving toward new uses of diverse languages in the classroom, that 1974 resolution lamented that “Our major emphasis [in U.S. English classrooms] has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing,” asking instead, “would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect?” (qtd. in Smitherman 21). That question still remains largely unanswered—what *would* be the outcome if students were able to regularly write and produce academic work in the language(s) or dialect(s) of their choosing, those with

which they feel most comfortable, confident, and connected? Although the English Only policies that restrict Nilda, Tayo, and Delores's classrooms are, for the most part, gone from our schools today, the seemingly more liberal language policies and practices that now dominate U.S. schools are, in many ways, just as racist and aggressively assimilative (though perhaps more subtly so) as these characters' English-only educations. Common classroom terms such as "non-native speaker" and programs such as English as a Second Language (which is designed to gradually phase out students' use of their first/home languages in favor of a transition to English) reinforce the idea of English-speaking white Americans as culturally and linguistically superior to those non-white, non-English-speaking, and/or non-American born students and speakers that comprise a large population of our nation's students today.^e Even code-switching, a seemingly progressive practice advocated by many teachers, is an inherently racist approach to language usage, one which "ranks" standard English as superior to other languages and dialects. Code-switching encourages students to use English in some contexts (especially in the classroom) while using their own languages/dialects in other contexts (at home, in the neighborhood, etc.); but in so doing, it sends virtually the same message to students that English-only classroom policies did: in some places, including the school, the language you prefer to use is unwelcome or discouraged, even if it is no longer *explicitly* forbidden.

Scholars in the fields of education, pedagogy, literacy, and linguistics have recently begun to acknowledge and critique both the limitations of code-switching as a practice and, more importantly, the inherently racist assumptions that guide the logic behind that practice. Rosina Lippi-Green argues that code-switching is essentially a linguistic version of the "separate-but-equal" doctrine that structured the U.S. school system until *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (109-111). Echoing this point, Young writes that code-switching is a form of "de facto segregation" that "appears to be egalitarian" but is actually "racially biased, requiring [students] to separate the codes that bespeak their identities from those they use at school" (7). As many scholars have noted, however, such a separation is only required of *some* students—as

Linda Christensen asks, “who has to code switch and who doesn’t and why[?]” (11). The answer centers around myths about linguistic “correctness” and “standard” English which permeate not only our schools, but the entire culture in which we live. Code-switching is only demonstrative of a wider cultural tendency to, in Lippi-Green’s words, “divide... socially stigmatized and sanctioned language[s]... along very predictable lines” (109). So-called “nonstandard” languages and dialects—in other words, *all* languages and dialects aside from that which the dominant culture labels “standard” English—become “restricted to the home and neighborhood, to play and informal situations, to the telling of folktales and stories of little interest to the *wider* world” (Lippi-Green 109). Languages and dialects other than standard English become framed as “limited” forms of communication, appropriate only to certain restricted settings such as the privacy of one’s home. “Standard” English, in contrast, is positioned as the *lingua franca*, the universal language, the language one must use in public places and institutional spaces if one wishes to open doors to opportunity and success. In this sense, code-switching is one of several language programs and policies used by schools which offer what Valenzuela calls an “illusion of inclusion” which helps to soften the blow of the underlying “institutional message” that languages other than standard English are “second-rate language[s]” (162). Such policies are far from egalitarian or progressive—rather, as Lippi-Green writes, they are “policies of patronage and tolerance rather than acceptance” (185). Though certainly *more* tolerant than the English Only classroom policies of the past, code-switching and other similar approaches to language usage in U.S. schools are still divisive and discriminatory.

As an alternative to code-switching, ESL programs, and other assimilative language practices, the aforementioned scholars and others in their fields have called for U.S. schools and classrooms to become more multilingual and multidialectal, making use of a range of languages as part of the everyday learning process, just as many students use a variety of languages and dialects on a daily basis in their everyday lives. Vershawn Ashanti Young suggests that schools should transition from teaching code-switching to, instead, encouraging

“code meshing,” which he describes as a “combining of dialects, styles and registers” that more closely parallels “how people actually speak and write anyway” (I would argue that Nilda and Tayo both grow up hearing “code meshing” used around them in everyday life, and both eventually learn how to code mesh themselves, despite their immersion in English-only classrooms) (7). Suresh Canagarajah, similarly, writes of the need to teach “multiliteracies,” arguing that “we cannot teach [students] English literacy without relevance to the other languages they use in their everyday life” (x-xi). As he suggests, “rather than judging divergence [from “standard” English] as error, we should orientate to it as an exploration of choices and possibilities. Rather than teaching *rules* in a normative way, we should teach *strategies*—creative ways to negotiate the norms operating in diverse contexts” (xiii). How are teachers to teach such strategies, though—in other words, how are they to teach students to creatively negotiate a variety of everyday contexts using a diverse range of languages and dialects—especially when such teachers may themselves be monolingual or monodialectal speakers? While it would certainly be advantageous for teachers to acknowledge our own linguistic limitations as frequently as we do our students’, I would like to suggest that it is not at all necessary for teachers to be “fluent” in a variety of languages and dialects in order to explore a diverse range of linguistic varieties together with students in the classroom. Teachers can offer students powerful demonstrations of linguistic variety in U.S. culture and literature by, for example, including multilingual and multidialectal works in their classrooms and on their syllabi, while also including works that, through both their form and content, resist or reject the myth of a “standard” English. This might include everything from the prose of Nicholasa Mohr, Leslie Marmon Silko, Oscar Hijuelos, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker, to the poetry of Gina Valdés, Carolyn M. Rodgers, Tino Villanueva, and Victor Hernández Cruz, to the scholarly essays of academics such as Geneva Smitherman and Vershawn Ashanti Young, among many, many others. Likewise, students can also offer teachers and fellow classmates the opportunities to learn, read, or listen to the languages and dialects most familiar and comfortable to them. In

my own classes, I leave aside a few days for students to bring in works by writers they enjoy or admire as complements to the readings I have selected for the semester; in the past, students have brought in and shared poems, short stories, and essays written in Jamaican Patois, Hindi, and Puerto Rican Spanish, among other languages. Such activities help to show students that there *are* nonstandard and non-English ways of writing and speaking which are, in fact, acceptable and accepted not only in their own homes and communities, but also in U.S. classrooms, schools, and other institutional and public places. At the same time, these activities also help teachers to begin to reject the racist logic behind practices like code-switching, instead helping to empower students to use multiple languages and dialects in creative and adaptive ways.

Teachers might also help students learn to use multiple languages and dialects creatively and adaptively by having them read “standard” English texts and then offering them the opportunity to translate or re-write these texts in the language or dialect of their own choosing (the inspiration for this idea comes from a former student of my own, a young African American man who told me how he taught himself to understand Romantic poetry by re-writing it in his own words). This classroom practice allows for a multi-directional translation process, in which students are no longer being asked only to translate their home language into “appropriate” school language once inside the classroom, but instead are given the opportunity to read and write in “standard” English, but also to re-transcribe and re-create “standard” English texts using the languages and dialects of their own everyday lives, those which feel most comfortable and expressive to them. At the same time, this sort of activity allows for teachers and students alike to be exposed to a diversity of languages and dialects, without having to be “fluent” in—or even familiar with—any of them. If all classroom members are given the opportunity to share their translated texts with one another, to listen and learn about how and why others went about the act of translating a text from one language or dialect to another, and to consider the challenges and potentialities that different translators encountered in the process, then each

learns a little about languages or dialects they may have been unfamiliar with before. Other scholars and teachers have suggested the use of similar assignments—Theresa Malphrus Welford’s excellent essay on “Code-Meshing and Creative Assignments,” for example, discusses the ways in which she encourages students to “mesh” a variety of languages (academic and non-academic, “standard” and “nonstandard”) in *all* of their written work for her courses, an exciting idea which speaks to just how much more multilingual/multidialectical our classrooms might still become.

The idea of meshing, combining, and translating a variety of languages and dialects, both inside and outside of the school, brings me back, again, to the educational experiences of Delores, the Mambo Kings, Nilda, and Tayo. Neither Silko nor Mohr’s novel dismisses or denies the value of standard English as a necessary tool for negotiating one’s way within U.S. society (indeed, in *Ceremony*, old Betonie explains to Tayo the value of having learned English as a student at the Sherman Institute, telling him, as he was once told by an elder himself, that “[storytelling] is carried on in all languages now, so you have to know English too”), and Hijuelos’s novel, though perhaps a bit more dismissive of standard English’s value in immigrants’ lives, still acknowledges that it *is* necessary in certain contexts (such as when Cesar writes to the government on his family’s behalf) (*Ceremony* 112). These novels do not argue for the replacing of standard English with other languages, then, but instead suggest that (standard) English should be only one language among many that we are *all* able to use and understand—that it is not only the racially, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized who should become bi- or multilingual through their experiences in schooling, but, instead, that we should all be educated in multiple languages, particularly because these function as critical ways of communicating with one another, as well as preserving, conveying, and learning about the multiple cultures and histories that comprise our nation and the world beyond it. In this sense, these novels echo the arguments made by compositionists, linguists, rhetoricians, and others who have called for the need to “address linguistic diversity throughout the body politic, not just

among those who have historically been on the margins” (Smitherman 33). As Smitherman puts it, it is of critical importance that teachers and educators (as well as the larger culture) begin to “recognize that the ability to speak many tongues is a necessity for *everybody*” (32 emphasis added). In teaching students the importance of “speak[ing] many tongues,” including the form of English labeled as “standard” by the dominant culture, teachers not only make a more multilingual classroom possible, but also invite opportunities for students to consider when and how the different languages and dialects they encounter in the classroom are and aren’t put to use in different power-laden situations and everyday contexts—which includes learning to understand when and why standard English might be expected or demanded of them, as well as when and how such expectations or demands might be negotiated, subverted, or resisted (lessons that the Mambo Kings, Delores, Nilda and Tayo learn quite well).

Though the potential benefits of a multilingual education for students in the U.S. school system seem vast and diverse, many teachers and educators (not to mention most of the dominant culture at large) remain skeptical if not outwardly critical of this idea. A handful of schools throughout the country have begun to put multilingual education into practice—for example, La Escuela Fratney, a Dual Language elementary school in Milwaukee’s public school system where students are educated in both English and Spanish—but critics continue to question why such an approach to learning is necessary or beneficial. Yet, in response to those who ask why students should encounter multiple languages throughout their school years, many have begun to ask why they should *not*. A Spanish-language teacher quoted in Valenzuela’s *Subtractive Schooling*, for example, was asked why she thought students needed to take Spanish courses at all; her response was simple: “For the same reasons you take English every year throughout middle and high school” (175). A popular argument against teaching two or more languages in U.S. schools is that this would lead to demands or requests to teach or make use of *all* languages spoken in the U.S. in U.S. classrooms, a situation which most imagine would be either totally chaotic or completely impossible. However, the idea of multiple languages being

taught and used in schools throughout one nation is in fact in practice in countries all over the world. In Papua New Guinea, for example, a country with over 800 languages and dialects, elementary education is provided to students in more than 380 different languages (Cangarajah xii). Indeed, in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, U.S. students might do well not only to become familiar with more than one language, but also to become more familiar with the literatures, histories, and cultures associated with these languages.

Certainly, one could argue (and many do) that despite an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, English is still the lingua franca, the global language of money and power, and teachers therefore have a responsibility, both practical and ethical, to teach students to speak and write in standard English. Many teachers believe that “mastery” of standard English will open doors for racially and ethnically marginalized students that will lead them to successful futures (what Lippi-Green calls the “unfounded promise”), while still others fear that if they *don't* teach and enforce the use of standard English in their classrooms, they will doom their students to lives of academic and professional failure (Lippi-Green’s idea of the “explicit threat”). However, an increasing number of scholars and professionals in the fields of education, literacy, composition, and linguistics have begun to recognize these sorts of concerns as part of a circular logic whereby teachers and schools help to teach and reproduce language discrimination, and then send students out into the working world having learned this language bias themselves, thereby perpetuating the system that justifies the need to teach standard English in the first place. As early as 1974, the authors of the SRTOL acknowledged this problem—as well as the potentiality for correcting it—writing that

Since English teachers have been in large part responsible for the narrow attitudes of today’s employers, *changing attitudes toward dialect variations does not seem an unreasonable goal*, for today’s students will be tomorrow’s employers. English teachers who feel they are bound to accommodate the linguistic prejudices of current employers

perpetuate a system that is unfair to both students who have job skills and the employers who need them. (SRTOL 14, qtd. in Lippi-Green 131, emphasis added)

Though linguistic prejudice is as apparent in our culture today as it was in the 1970s, contemporary scholars still point to the possibility of the school as a starting point for changing language attitudes within the larger culture. As Smitherman writes, “those who (whether consciously or unconsciously) display the negative effects of linguicism are products of the schools... the classroom, then, is a major player in shaping language attitudes” (34). Though U.S. schools continue to shape language attitudes in ways which reproduce racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination and divisiveness, teachers and educators *do* have a choice: the classroom can play just as much of a role in *changing* broader social, cultural and professional attitudes about language as it can in reproducing them.

In order to truly transform schools into the potentially multilingual, egalitarian, and democratic spaces they might be, teachers will have to learn not only how to change their students’ attitudes and assumptions toward language, but also their own. Valenzuela argues that the fact that “teachers and counselors more often lament their students’ linguistic limitations than they do their own” suggests that “teachers see the differences in culture and language between themselves and their students from a culturally chauvinistic perspective that permits them to dismiss the possibility of a more culturally relevant approach [to teaching racially diverse students]” (66). Her point is demonstrated even in the language that we use to talk about languages in schools: students who speak languages other than English are labeled as “non-native” or as having “limited English proficiency,” when, instead, Valenzuela suggests that these students might be described as “Spanish [or Russian or Mandarin, etc.] dominant” or as “potentially bilingual” (173). More importantly, Valenzuela argues, re-thinking the terminology we use in schools should only be a starting point for teachers and administrators to begin to “reposition [themselves] as *students, rather than as teachers*, of culture” (266 emphasis added).

This idea of repositioning speaks to the work of Paulo Freire, suggesting that, in many ways, our schools would benefit from moving toward a more Freirian pedagogy. Freire, an educator from Sao Paulo, Brazil known for founding the field of critical pedagogy and the idea of a “pedagogy of the oppressed” (explored in his groundbreaking 1970 book of the same title and in many subsequent studies by Freire and others), frequently distinguishes between *humanistic* and *humanitarian* impulses when discussing educators in his works (see, for example, his chapter on “Humanistic Education” in *The Politics of Education*). Freire believed that a *humanistic* education is one that is genuinely mutual, with both teacher and student learning from one another, whereas a *humanitarian* education is one in which the teacher sees him or herself as embodying a superior position, as having a “gift” to bestow upon the learner, who in turn should be grateful (Delores, Tayo, and, especially, Nilda are all victims of a “humanitarian” education). Freire argued that teachers must constantly reflect upon themselves and their own positionality within the classroom in order to consider how their own senses of cultural, linguistic, and intellectual superiority might influence how they teach, whether consciously or unconsciously. Instead of seeing themselves as humanitarians bestowing gifts upon their students, Freire advocated that teachers learn to reposition themselves so that they and their students are involved in a mutual exchange of teaching and learning. As he writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (72). His definition of a pedagogy *of* the oppressed—not *for*—is one which is “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (48). Freire believed that any act of learning should be a reciprocal one: mutually instructive and mutually transformative, so that all parties involved teach, learn, and change, making the designations of “teacher” and “student” irrelevant; instead, all are teacher-learners and learner-teachers.

The idea of mutual teacher-learners and learner-teachers suggests, also, that teachers might begin to learn more not only from our students, but also from the families and

communities from which our students come, the same families and communities to which they return when they leave school each day. In the foreword to Valenzuela's *Subtractive Schooling*, Christine Sleeter asks us to question the "assumption... that monolingual Anglo members of the general public are perfectly capable of deciding what kind of educational programming is best for non-Anglo language minority children... and are better able to make such decisions than are bilingual education teachers or the communities the children come from" (xvi). Sleeter's statement suggests the possibility and potentiality of looking to our students' communities to play an active role in—rather than to be marginalized and excluded from—the education that students receive in U.S. schools. For example, New Mexico has made progressive efforts to include Native American tribal leaders, particularly those of the Pueblo Indian community, in decisions about bilingual education programs in New Mexico schools (Lippi-Green 116). Rather than convincing minoritized students to believe that they can only attain upward mobility and the American Dream by leaving their families and communities behind (the "out-of-the-barrio" and "off-the-reservation" motifs critiqued in Mohr and Silko's novels, respectively), schools should both foster their own connections with students' communities *and* help students to maintain their individual connections to their cultures and communities throughout their formal educations. Other scholars have frequently emphasized the importance of this same point: Delpit writes, for example, that "the linguistic form that a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity" and therefore should be both protected and nurtured (53). As Valenzuela eloquently puts it in the conclusion to *Subtractive Schooling*, "marginality evolves when children are socialized away from their communities and families of origin"; as such, "the goal of an education should be compatible with love of family and community" (264, 265). Indeed, so long as schools continue not only to fail to draw upon the resources of students' home and communities, but also to exclude or restrict students' families and communities from playing a role in schooling, they will continue to play a central role in creating and maintaining structural and racial inequality in the U.S.

In the introduction to Part III, I argued that schools function as what Mary Louise Pratt calls *contact zones*—spaces where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (34). Pratt suggests that a *pedagogy of the contact zone*, one which seeks to avoid the domination of one culture by another, might include:

exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories)... [and] a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*. (40)

In many ways, Hijuelos, Mohr, and Silko have articulated just such a pedagogy in their novels, but this pedagogy is not practiced by Delores, Nilda, and Tayo’s “formal” schoolteachers, but rather by the characters themselves, as well as by those alternative teachers the protagonists encounter in contexts outside of their classrooms. Though able to envision what a more multifarious, inclusive, pluralistic education might look like, these authors seem unable to imagine such an education occurring within a state-run school, and thus choose to have much of their characters’ educations take place elsewhere. The challenge for readers of the novels, especially those who are also educators, is to pick up where these texts leave off—to imagine how to reformulate education within schools so that it might more closely resemble the kinds of learning that these characters experience outside of school. This is no easy task. Cultivating and encouraging a diversity of voices, histories, and perspectives, rather than allowing for the classroom to become a place of linguistic and ideological hegemony (one which is dictated by the teacher as representative of institutionalized power and the dominant culture) is a challenge for teachers and for students, but a worthwhile one. As Pratt writes, “along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there [will be] exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone” (39). Moving toward

more multilingual classrooms might be one of the greatest challenges faced by both teachers and students, but, as I mentioned earlier, multilingual and multidialectal texts themselves offer a starting point for introducing linguistic diversity into classrooms. Through their uses of multiple languages, dialects, and discourses, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, *Nilda*, and *Ceremony* are all, in their very forms, embodiments of the type of multilingualism and code meshing that we might hope to begin to replicate in our classrooms. The inclusion of many languages within these narratives is also, importantly, the inclusion of many voices, many perspectives, many stories and histories. By allowing a wider range of voices to be included in our classrooms, we only allow our nation's stories and history to become richer. On writing *Ceremony*, Silko says, "I was conscious of constructing the novel out of many different kinds of narratives or stories to celebrate storytelling with the spoken as well as the written word" (xv). It is in a similar way—"out of many different kinds of narratives or stories"—that we might hope to also construct our classrooms, our curriculum, our language "standards," and our nation's histories.

As literacy and education scholar Linda Flower writes, "we are all working with limited but complexly different and valuable interpretations of reality. The rhetorical challenge is to *use* difference to build a more expansive representation of that reality" (59). Schooling and education should allow spaces and opportunities for both students and teachers to encounter "complexly different... interpretations of reality"—different languages, dialects, discourses, perspectives, histories, and cultures. In *The Mambo Kings*, *Nilda* and *Ceremony*, we see that the school system in its current form and function does not provide the multicultural and multifarious education sought by the characters, and they therefore seek their educations both within *and beyond* the school site. In order to engage students in learning experiences that are more meaningful, relevant, and inclusive (rather than subtractive), schools will need to strive to more fully engage difference—to "*use* difference," in Flower's words—as part of the learning

process. Hijuelos, Mohr and Silko's novels, in both form and content, offer three interesting and useful starting points for considering what exactly this might mean.

Conclusion

From Margins to Mainstream: Battles with Words in Academic, Commercial, and Cultural Contexts

“Why is it that hyphenization is imposed only on non-white Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are ‘problematized’ if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms?” – Bharati Mukherjee, “Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman” (33)

“It seems our fate to be incorrect... And in our incorrectness we stand” – Alice Walker, *Interviews with Black Writers* (207)

“History is a storying” – Gayatri Spivak, interview with Alfred Arteaga

“A tale twice told but seldom written” – W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (4)

In 2011, the Freshman Text selected for incoming students at Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY), one of the most racially and ethnically diverse college campuses in the U.S.,¹ was Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a best-selling work of post-9/11 literature. Among the other recommendations for 2011 Freshman Text submitted for consideration to a board that ultimately chose Foer’s novel was another work of post-9/11 literature, a collection entitled *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America*, written by Moustafa Bayoumi, one of CUNY’s own esteemed professors. Foer’s is the fictional story of a boy who loses his father in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001 and searches for traces of him around post-9/11 Manhattan. Bayoumi’s is a non-fiction collection of the traumatizing and shocking experiences of Arab American young adults living in New York in the aftermath of 9/11; it includes, among others, the story of one family who found themselves taken in the night to separate detention centers and kept there for weeks for interrogation about their roles in the 9/11 attacks, although most of the family members were American citizens, born and raised in the U.S., and none had any involvement in the attacks. Why was Foer’s text chosen to be the Baruch College Freshman Text over Bayoumi’s? Although I did not sit on the board (comprised of a mix of college faculty, staff,

and students) and cannot speak to their selection process, as the faculty member who submitted Bayoumi's work for consideration, I can easily imagine why it was not chosen (and why Foer's was), despite the case I tried to make in my rationale for what I think is an important, maybe essential, text for freshmen to encounter—especially freshmen living in the very U.S. city that has been most defined by the events of 9/11. The choosing of *Extremely Loud* over *How Does It Feel*—that is, the choosing of a text by a white, male author which features a white, male protagonist and deals with personal themes of grief and loss of a loved one over that of a text which features a number of Arab American youth as its primary set of voices and deals with politicized topics such as Islamophobia, institutionalized racism, and the stripping of civil and human rights of U.S. citizens—is hardly surprising in our current academic, commercial, and cultural contexts. While choosing Bayoumi's text, which privileges the voices and experiences of members of an ethnic group which has been both marginalized and villainized within post-9/11 America, likely represented a risk that the board at Baruch was unwilling to take, selecting Foer's novel—which was also made into a major motion picture that same year, and had already been selected to be read at a number of other colleges throughout the U.S.²—was an obviously safe choice, a pick that remained securely within the realms of the literary, academic, cultural, and political mainstreams. As such, thousands of Baruch College students and faculty purchased, read, and discussed *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* that year; the text became not only a common topic of conversation on campus, but a visible presence, with copies stacked on bookstore shelves and in department offices, carried in the arms of students and professors, and lying on the desks of classrooms, offices, and cafeterias. In contrast, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem* remains a text that most of my CUNY students have not only never read, but never even heard of, despite its authorship by a CUNY professor and its spotlight on individuals who are of the same age group and geographic location as the majority of these students.

The outcome of the Freshman Text selection process at Baruch College is a microcosmic portrayal of the ways texts can be pulled into the mainstream or pushed to the margins—of the

literary canon, academia, and our national culture—depending on who their authors, characters, or speakers are; what their content is; what language(s) they are written in; and what the sociocultural, political, academic, and commercial conditions are that surround their distribution, circulation, consumption, and reception. The choosing of Foer’s text over Bayoumi’s is but one example of the myriad ways in which written works are selected or not selected (for publication, readership, canonization, adaptation, acknowledgement as works of literary or cultural significance, etc.) not only by academics and educators, but also by agents, publishers, critics, translators, book reviewers, librarians, book club organizers, booksellers, feature film makers, and the general reading public. The conclusion to *Battles with Words* considers these processes of selection and un-selection in a final chapter which raises the stakes of my project by shifting its focus from how battles with words are represented thematically in multi-ethnic U.S. literature to, instead, examining how such battles are also embodied in the writing, publishing, distributing, and consuming of these works. I consider how the production, distribution, and reception of works by the seven authors discussed throughout the previous chapters mirrors the power struggles with and over language and literacy that these authors portray in their writing, including, especially, the constraints and challenges faced by the marginalized with regard to language and literacy usage in everyday life, as well as the ongoing efforts of the marginalized to control and define their contributions to national narratives and to revise these national narratives to better reflect the histories not only of the empowered in America, but also those who have been traditionally disempowered and silenced.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that “nations themselves *are* narrations” (xiii). His statement reminds us of the powerful ways in which nations construct their own histories—what I refer to as dominant narratives—that serve the present interests and image of the nation’s dominant culture. At the same time, these dominant national narratives also have “the power to... block other narratives from forming and emerging,” especially when those narratives offer alternative or competing representations of the nation and its history

(Said xiii). In the U.S., as in other Western nations, the literary canon has been a particularly important site for producing, maintaining, and reinforcing the nation's dominant narratives while also blocking other narratives from emergence. As Toni Morrison emphasizes in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," "canon defense is national defense" (8). That the nation strives to defend its dominant narratives through control of the canon is evident by the extent to which minority literatures and languages, like minoritized peoples, have frequently been excluded, ghettoized, and invisibilized throughout U.S. history, relegated to the margins of American literature and culture and rarely allowed to cross over into the literary mainstream or to claim places in the American literary canon. Despite the fact that racial and ethnic minorities have been writing American literature—not only in English, but in a multitude of languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Polish, and Yiddish—throughout the entirety of the nation's history (and, indeed, even before its inception), the majority of multi-ethnic and multilingual works of American literature continue to be excluded from the American literary canon and thus unknown to the majority of mainstream Americans readers. When Americans think of "foundational" American writers and texts, we often think of Whitman, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau, but not, for example, of Gaspar Perez de Villagra's "Historia de la Nueva Mexico," a Spanish-language text written in 1610, or the 1831 autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, a Muslim African who wrote his text in Arabic while enslaved in North Carolina, though both of these can be considered among the earliest works of American literature. Instead, multi-ethnic American literature is often viewed as a relatively new or "emergent" body of writing which many assume began to develop simultaneously with the occurrence of the Civil Rights movement and other major social and political changes occurring throughout the late twentieth century. Overlooked in this erroneous assumption is the fact that multi-ethnic and multilingual American literature have *always* been in existence throughout U.S. history, but have only been permitted to enter the American literary mainstream over the past few decades—for centuries prior, these alternative national

narratives were blocked from view, and thus assumed by many to be non-existent. Thus we hear misguided claims of “firsts”—the “first” Native American woman writer, or the “first” work of Latino American literature—that silence, invisibilize, and erase those multi-ethnic and multilingual works of American literature which have always *existed*, but have rarely been *acknowledged* in the literary and cultural mainstreams.

What changed with the dawn of the Civil Rights era, then, was not who the writers of American literature were—since so-called “ethnic” Americans have been producing American literature in multiple languages since before the U.S. itself existed—but rather whose writing was being acknowledged, circulated, and consumed: suddenly, works by writers from a diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds were being made visible and accessible to mainstream American readers for the first time. Organizations like MELUS (The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.), which formed in 1973 and published its first volume of the now well-established *MELUS* journal in 1974, were intended to not only represent but also *recover* multi-ethnic works of literature that had been previously unacknowledged or unknown in academic, commercial, and cultural contexts. However, the development of such societies where none had existed previously has ironically only helped to fuel the misconception that works of multi-ethnic American literature did not exist prior to this point. As the nation’s political, social, and cultural fabric began to change dramatically in the late twentieth century, so too did its literary canon, but this process of gradual acknowledgement and acceptance of works of multi-ethnic literature was simultaneously a process of continued marginalization and ghettoization: *some* works of multi-ethnic literature were allowed to enter the American mainstream, but many others were not, and those that were granted entry were positioned as new, emergent, and different from, rather than always already a part of, the Canon of American Literature. While the late twentieth century did mark the beginning of the crucial process of redefining the American literary canon, making way for dominant narratives to be complemented and challenged by a range of previously unheard narratives, this process

nevertheless simultaneously marked these previously unheard narratives as both “new” and “other,” as not *just* American literature like Emerson’s and Thoreau’s, but as *ethnic* American literature, somehow different and distinct from those works which defined the canon. In other words, multi-ethnic American literature was only able to emerge as a “field” in the late twentieth century by assuming the position of a “subfield” of American literature, marked by its temporal, thematic, formal, and linguistic distinctions from mainstream definitions of American literature. As such, the overdue acknowledgment of these works was simultaneously and ironically an othering and denying of their legitimacy as national narratives—though allowed to be heard and read in mainstream contexts for the first time, multi-ethnic U.S. literature was not immediately able to assume canonical status alongside the “greats” of American literature, was not considered part of how American literature is defined.

However, over the more than 50 years that have passed since the Civil Rights era and its accompanying sociocultural and political changes, multi-ethnic literature has gradually begun to make its way into the canon, slowly moving from margins to mainstream and asserting its legitimacy as part of the field of American literature. Works such as Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, among others, have arguably become American “classics,” included on classroom syllabi and required reading lists as regularly as traditional canonical texts like Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. At the same time, an increasing number of works of multi-ethnic American literature have also become markedly mainstreamed in cultural and commercial contexts outside of and beyond the academy, where they are regularly featured as book club selections, promoted by Oprah Winfrey and other celebrities, discussed on popular websites like *Amazon.com* and *Goodreads.com*, and, as in the cases of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, among others, even made into major motion pictures. Given that “canon defense is national defense,”

as Morrison reminds us, how and why has this gradual movement from margins to mainstream been able to occur, and how have the dominant narratives of the nation been changed as a result of the emergence of alternative narratives within both the literary canon and the wider realm of popular culture? Given that many works of multi-ethnic literature continue to be excluded from the canon even as others have been granted (semi-)inclusion, which works of multi-ethnic American literature are most easily incorporable into the mainstream, and what features of a text might *prevent* it from being welcomed into the mainstream? How do publishers, literary agents, academics, critics, reviewers, teachers, booksellers, and filmmakers attempt to alter, adapt, or frame multi-ethnic literary works in order to make them more “palatable” to mainstream U.S. audiences and less threatening to the dominant narratives of the nation? And who *are* “mainstream” readers? When, where, why, and how do they encounter “marginal” texts moving into the mainstream, and how do they interpret and engage with such texts? In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe writes that “with the emergence of print culture as an institution of modernity in the ‘West,’ the Anglo American novel has held a position of primary importance in the interpellation of readers as subjects for the nation” (98). What happens, then, when (some but not all) multi-ethnic texts are permitted to move from the margins to the mainstream, when novels by non-Anglo American writers are able to cross over into the American literary canon and take their place alongside novels by Hemingway, Hawthorne, and Melville? Are the readers of American literature “interpellated” differently? Do they imagine the nation—and their space in it and relationship to it and other national subjects—differently? Do multi-ethnic writers hope that this is what their work will do, or do they have other agendas, intentions, motivations, and complications as they seek to circulate their literature in and among mainstream contexts? Such are the questions this conclusion explores, offering few answers, and mostly more questions, about the complex process that is the movement of multi-ethnic U.S. literature into literary, commercial, and cultural mainstreams.

Let us begin with a simple question: what is so-called ethnic American literature? What marks ethnic American literature as distinct from Anglo American literature, and when and why might the boundaries between these two categories begin to blur or collapse? Certainly, ethnic American literature has been excluded from the canon partially as a form of national defense, since many ethnic American writers use their work as a space to voice critiques of the dominant national narratives and the dominant racial and socioeconomic groups that construct and reinforce these narratives. Frequently, ethnic American literature is literature with a political purpose, on a mission to call attention to racial, sociocultural, economic, and linguistic inequalities that have been ignored in or erased from dominant national narratives and mainstream American literature. Consider, for example, the ending to W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*: "Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world wilderness... Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth" (255). Addressing his white audience, Du Bois calls upon them to acknowledge their own "guilt" and to encounter the "truth" of racism in America through his work. Like many works of ethnic American literature, Du Bois's *Souls* reflects what Lisa Lowe describes as the ways in which "minority or colonized literary productions are at different distances from the canonical nationalist project" (100). As Lowe explains, "Unlike either American national culture or 'high art,' forms of... racialized minority cultures emerge differently from those of traditionally conceived aesthetic projects... appropriate to their condition as minority artists with responsibilities to their community" (31). Certainly, like Du Bois, many ethnic American writers do make evident their sense of responsibility to their racial/ethnic communities, using their literature as a space to articulate alternative national narratives and modes of understanding America and Americanness, and to recover and expose previously unwritten histories. But does ethnic American literature *have* to be political or different from a "traditionally conceived aesthetic project"? Must a so-called ethnic American writer *always* use his or her work to fulfill a perceived responsibility to a racial/ethnic community, privileging the political over the

aesthetic? What happens to those writers—like Bharati Mukherjee and Leslie Marmon Silko—who are accused of failing to meet their “responsibilities to their community,” or even of betraying these communities through the act of writing /“telling”? When and why might ethnic American authors choose to use their literature to mediate rather than to confront or challenge—and if they choose mediation over confrontation, have they necessarily failed to live up to their responsibilities as ethnic Americans? In an essay on *Native Speaker* and Chang-rae Lee, Parikh asks if “academic and institutional pressures overdetermine the responsibilities of representation to which ethnic [writers are] obligated” (250). Her question prompts us to consider both when and why ethnic authors engage in politicized writing and when they do not. It also asks us to consider whether these authors are free to define themselves and their writing on their own terms, or whether they are always already expected to produce a certain type of writing based on the demands or expectations of the dominant national culture and the elite groups within it that play the most central roles in canon formation.

In the introduction to *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, the editors suggest that many ethnic writers in fact reject the idea of a responsibility to their racial community in favor of, instead, embracing a sense of responsibility to act as cultural and racial mediator or negotiator “between ethnic and white audiences” (Singh, Skerrett Jr., and Hogan 16). Parikh, similarly, suggests that “minority discourse” is not concerned solely with representing the ethnic community of the writer, but instead “attempts to achieve representation on a multiracial, multicultural terrain, engaging and negotiating the minority *and* dominant cultures simultaneously” (251 emphasis added). Writers often enact such negotiations through the use of thematic and linguistic hybridity, combining the “ethnic” with the “American” in their writing in an attempt to recreate both. Consider, for example, Maxine Hong Kingston’s discussion of her own writing in her essay “Personal Statement,” in which she challenges accusations that she “mis”-tells or misrepresents Chinese myths, failing to meet her responsibility to her ethnic community: “Sinologists have criticized me for not

knowing myths and for distorting them: pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. They don't understand that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across the oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American" (58). Rather than seeing her responsibility as primarily to her Chinese identity and community, Kingston suggests that cultural negotiation and recreation are crucial to her work. While Du Bois prioritizes a sense of responsibility to the "black folk" he represents through his work, Kingston suggests that her responsibility as a writer lies, instead, in cultural fusion, mediation, and negotiation, prompting us to consider how we might redefine the very notions of ethnic, racial, and national community.

Yet, even as Kingston seeks to write American myths (and even as she has been criticized for failing to meet her responsibility to her ethnic community), she has been repeatedly positioned as a founding figure of *Asian* American literature, suggesting that even as she claims her own writing as American, it is nevertheless marked, marketed, and marginalized as ethnic American, as not-fully-American literature. This asks us to consider what the constraints of being defined as an ethnic American writer might be, as well as, perhaps, what unique potentialities there might be in this position. While some writers see their work as a crucial space to articulate alternative national narratives and histories, others find the idea of a responsibility to their ethnic community burdensome, and, instead, seek to define themselves differently and to pursue other literary agendas. To what extent is either option fully possible, though? Are those writers who attempt to articulate alternative national narratives and challenge traditional representations of America able to move as successfully into the mainstream as those authors who reject the burden of racial representation or responsibility to racial community? On the other hand, are "ethnic" American writers who claim their work to be simply American (as do both Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee) free to be accepted as such, or do they find their work nevertheless marketed and received in different ways than intended, always-already marked as ethnic? As Norman Fairclough has written (and as we have

seen throughout this dissertation to be true in a variety of contexts, from social security offices to classrooms to police stations), “power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (46). How, then, might “powerful participants”—those who make the decisions that most influence and shape our literary canon, our publishing industry, and our nation’s classrooms, among other sites—seek to control and constrain, in a myriad of both mutual and conflicting ways, the types of contributions to literature that ethnic American writers can make? These writers frequently find themselves in a double bind, a paradoxical condition in which they are expected to write literature that is both “ethnic” and “American,” while being constrained from striving too far towards either the former or the latter. Publishers, critics, reviewers, and mainstream audiences alike expect this body of work to have a touch of the exotic, the unfamiliar, and the “authentically” ethnic, but not to become *too* unfamiliar or too ethnic. Perhaps most importantly, even as these writers are expected to write about “ethnic issues,” they are also expected not to be too political, not to openly challenge the nation’s dominant narratives or to overtly expose the legacies of oppression and injustice that dominant narratives attempt to mute or block from view. As Srikanth writes, “artistic productions of all kinds, when they feature minority Others, are expected to conform to certain tacit codes; they must be decorous and gently titillating, not confrontational or militant” (54). Consider, for example, that Zora Neale Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (which is not very well-known among mainstream Americans due, in part, to the hypercanonization of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) was originally titled *Big Nigger* by the author. The whys and hows of the book ultimately ending up with the title that it did speak to the concerns of white publishers who were likely aware that Hurston’s white audience did want to confront topics of race and racism too directly. Instead, early-twentieth-century white Americans were seeking pleasurable, guilt-free encounters with “local color life” when they chose to read African American literature. Texts that too overtly addressed issues of race and racism—by, for example, using a title like *Big Nigger*—would not be

as successful in the commercial sphere, publishers knew. Richard Brodhead makes a similar argument about the constraints Charles Chesnutt faced as an African American writer in the late nineteenth century. Brodhead suggests that in order to be commercially successful, Chesnutt had to “lear[n] the terms set for his debut”: “he could win access to the ranks of authors on the condition that he do one kind of literary work and not another: on the condition that he... write the fiction of black life—local color fiction—that his audience was interested to hear” (209).

Though Chesnutt did, Brodhead argues, have a desire to represent his racial community in ways that defied white audiences’ expectations, he knew that “the literary door would be open to a black author to the extent that he helped maintain preferred fictions of racial life” (210).

However, while this chapter seeks to acknowledge the ways in which ethnic American writers and texts are always constrained by publisher and audience expectations (among many other factors), I also emphasize the ways in which these writers negotiate and manipulate (sometimes openly, sometimes subtly or secretly) the spaces available to them in order to use their work to and for other ends. James C. Scott’s notion of *infrapolitics*—a muted or veiled form of resistance that appears at one level to be non-threatening and even subordinate, while engaging in subversive critique or active resistance on another level—is a concept that has guided my analyses of the novels discussed throughout the previous chapters, but this concept can be used to understand not only the behaviors of fictional characters, but also the writers who create them. I would like to suggest that many ethnic American writers engage in what we might call *infrapolitical authorship*, whereby their texts serve multiple functions and have multiple agendas—some “subordinate,” some subversive—that emerge at different levels of their writing and through different modes of analysis of this writing. Indeed, *infrapolitical authorship* is arguably one central way to understand what “ethnic American” literature “is” and how it serves functions distinct from mainstream American literature. Critics discussing a range of ethnic American authors from various time periods and ethnic backgrounds have emphasized the ways in which these writers produce literature that can be described as *infrapolitical*.

Brodhead's discussion of Chesnutt, for example, goes on to explain how, despite learning the terms that were set for him as an African American author expected to meet white audiences' expectations, Chesnutt was "nevertheless [able to] aim to further black causes with those audiences" by "enter[ing] the minds and remodel[ing] the mental habits of white readers as they read" (195). The idea of entering readers' minds and remodeling their habits suggests a sort of sneakiness, an unacknowledged form of power over others—on one level, Chesnutt's work gave white American audiences exactly what they were looking for, but at another level, he was able to manipulate the minds of these readers, subconsciously engaging them in discourses of race and racism. Susan Meisenhelder, similarly, has argued that Zora Neale Hurston, though obviously controlled and constrained to an extent by white publishers' and audiences' expectations, was nevertheless able to use her writing to subtly discuss issues of both race and gender inequality. Meisenhelder's book-length study of Hurston's work is entitled *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick*, a phrase she uses to describe the author's infrapolitical approach to including "veiled" discussions of race and gender in writing that often appears apolitical at surface level. Deborah McDowell makes a similar argument about Nella Larsen's *Passing*, noting that, like many African American and women writers, Larsen was forced to use "safe themes, plots and conventions" as a "protective cover" for masking the more "dangerous" story her work tells (qtd. in Wald 32). Thus, a surface-level reading of *Passing* suggests that it is primarily the story of a vexed relationship between two women, rather than a story about the constraints of race and racism for African Americans in the U.S. (the fact that Irene and Clare's relationship has elements of the homoerotic further serves to detract attention away from Larsen's focus on race, as many critics have noted). Hinting at what I call the infrapolitics of authorship, McDowell argues that in *Passing*, "[as] in so many novels written by women, blacks, and other members of 'literary subcultures,' indirect strategies and narrative disguise become necessary covers for rebellious and subversive concerns" (qtd. in Wald 32). In an essay which echoes McDowell's idea of "narrative disguise," Padilla discusses Mexican American

autobiographers writing in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. Padilla argues that these autobiographers used “doubled layerings” and “form[s] of rhetorical camouflage” to appease white audiences with the use of “ideologically subordinate speech” while simultaneously expressing “anger and opposition” toward this same audience (305). Padilla suggests that the seemingly subordinate rhetoric of these works was intended to mask mockery, defamation, and villainization of “los Americanos,” which white audiences would not necessarily be able to recognize, but which would be clear to Mexican readers (305). Werner Sollors calls this textual strategy the idea of “double audience,” whereby ethnic writers compose works directed both at “insiders” and “readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the writer’s ethnic group” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 249). Interestingly, Sollors argues that the task of composing for a double audience is less one of constraint than it is potentiality: “far from stifling American ethnic authors,” Sollors suggests that confronting a double audience “alerts them to possibilities of playfulness in establishing their voice” (252).

The above are only a few examples of the ways ethnic American literature is produced within a complex set of circumstances and constraints, as writers attempt to write to and for multiple audiences, meet the expectations and demands of various groups and communities, and negotiate the publication of their work with agents, editors, and publishers. The notion of disguised textual subversion that these critics see present in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works of ethnic American literature is, as I hope to show throughout this chapter, one that is still very much a strategy of late twentieth and early twenty-first century ethnic American writers, even as the need to “veil” racial and political topics in one’s writing is obviously less urgent for contemporary authors. Situations like Chesnutt’s, Hurston’s, and Larsen’s demonstrate how, as Wald writes, the “social context and formal exigencies of literary production combine to determine the available cultural models” that ethnic American authors can use to tell their stories, something that remains true even today (18). But, as the above cases simultaneously demonstrate, these models are also subject to negotiation, contestation, and

manipulation, as authors use infrapolitical approaches to skirt or subvert the constraints that are inevitably imposed upon their works as they are written, published, marketed, and consumed. Before turning to a consideration of how these issues have affected the authors whose works I have analyzed throughout this project, I would like to briefly give some attention to some (but not all) of the individuals and groups that exert considerable influence over how ethnic American literature is produced, circulated, consumed, and, ultimately, either mainstreamed or marginalized: publishers, critics, reviewers, and mainstream readers.

Let us begin with publishers, who play perhaps the most crucial role in what Brodhead calls the “commercial management of a book’s public life” (57). Interestingly, for a number of now well-known ethnic American authors—including Nicholasa Mohr, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Bharati Mukherjee, three of the authors discussed throughout this work—solicitation from a publisher played a crucial role (often *the* crucial role) in establishing the writer as a serious literary presence, with the publisher putting the author “on the map” of American literature, so to speak. Publishers who read shorter works by these as-yet-unknown authors, including, especially, short stories published in literary magazines or journals, have frequently solicited novels from them, suspecting a larger market for their work. Often, mainstream readers and even literary critics are unaware of how these writers got their starts, prompting us to consider the relatively unknown, behind-the-scenes ways in which literature becomes accessible to the public. Consider the way in which Zora Neale Hurston was launched to literary “fame”: although Hurston had already published as early as 1921, it was in 1933, while enrolled as a student at Rollins College, that a professor submitted her short story “The Gilded Six-Bits” to *Story*, a literary quarterly. The quarterly’s publication of the piece subsequently attracted the attention of several publishers and editors, including Bertram Lippincott, who requested a novel from Hurston. As such, she wrote *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, her first novel, over a very short period of time; shortly thereafter, the work was published and Hurston’s literary career took off.³ Almost forty years later, Bharati Mukherjee would get her start as a writer in a very similar way (as

would Nicholasa Mohr and Leslie Marmon Silko at about this same time, as I discuss later). As the author explains in an interview,

When I was a [graduate] student in Iowa, I wrote a story called “Debate on a Rainy Afternoon” for one of my fiction workshops. The workshop seemed to really like that story. Well, Clark [Mukherjee’s husband, also a fiction writer] sent off a copy to *The Massachusetts Review*, and my story was published. The story then won an Honorable Mention in the Best American Stories for that year. About the same time, editors from three major American publishing houses wrote me, asking to see a novel. The editor from Houghton Mifflin was the most persistent, so I wrote her back that I was terribly busy finishing my PhD dissertation—and teaching full-time, and raising two kids—but that as soon as I had a summer break, I’d get to work on a novel. And that’s what I did. (Hancock 41)

Like Hurston, Mukherjee’s first novel is the product of a publisher’s solicitation, not an author’s inspiration, and is written in a very short block of time in order to meet the publisher’s demand, despite the constraints that such a time limit puts upon the author and the writing process.

Once a book has been solicited or selected for publication, publishers continue to exert influence over nearly every factor of the text, down to such seemingly minor details as the cover art or the photograph used for the “About the Author” section, as even these can have a profound impact on how books are marketed and consumed. Frequently, authors are entirely excluded from such decisions. The front cover of Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, for example, features a large, close-up image of the protagonist, who appears simultaneously sexy, exotic, and vulnerable. In an interview with Mukherjee, Field questioned the cover art, noting the problematic ways in which “female bodies are used to market the paperback editions of Indian novels, including [Mukherjee’s].” In response, Mukherjee explained that she played no role in the process: “the art directors and marketers decided—I have nothing to do with it” (248). She goes on to describe other aspects of her work that were controlled by the publishers and

marketers, including the works' titles (again recalling Hurston and her first novel's transition to *Jonah's Gourd Vine* from *Big Nigger*). Explaining that her original title for her novel *The Tiger's Daughter—Tara, Bowling*—was meant to be a reference to a T.S. Eliot poem, she elaborates, “But the editors said, ‘No one has read T.S. Eliot; the readers will not understand. We’ll call it *The Tiger's Daughter*, because the father figure is called the Bengal Tiger by the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce.” Revealing that the publishers controlled the cover art for this novel as well, Mukherjee continues, “And then they stuck a Taj Mahal on the cover! I said, ‘That is not the same city!’ But that image was the shorthand for India” (Field and Ticen 249). The publishers' need to make these texts marketable, in terms of both title and cover art, trumps the creative decisions of the author as well as her concerns about the cover art's inaccuracies.

In another interview, however, Mukherjee quite rightly notes that publishers play a critical role in making possible much-needed spaces for diversification in literary and cultural marketplaces. As she explains, “I remember some years ago reading about... the senior editor at Penguin Books... she was looking for Canadian writers who were also international. I remember thinking to myself with relief that finally, thanks to editors like her, Canadian literature... can now accommodate writers who write of the ‘other’ Canada” (Hancock 40). However, publishers also frame and market these “new voices” in ways which are both exclusionary and exploitative, even as they simultaneously help to make national literary canons more inclusive. “Ethnic” American writers are almost always positioned precisely as such by publishers, rarely as “just” American writers, speaking to publishers' awareness of the opportunity to construct a profitable niche market out of ethnic literature.⁴ Even when included in anthologies of American literature which position them alongside “mainstream” American canonical writers, ethnic American writers still find their works otherized and marginalized due to the ways in which editors and publishers frame these collections. As Elam notes, “ironically, incidental representation of marginalized literature in an anthology can function to highlight and heighten the status of the traditional literatures, which dominate it in terms of page numbers and length of selections”

(*Souls* 52). How ethnic American literature is thus encountered and consumed by readers is determined in large part by how that literature is packaged, marketed, and situated alongside canonical works. Interestingly, and even more ironically, similar processes of inclusion and exclusion, domination and marginalization, occur through the publishing of ethnicity-specific anthologies, such as collections of Asian American or Latino/a American literature. That publishers are interested in releasing such anthologies alongside or even in place of traditional anthologies of American literature is often taken (perhaps rightly) as a sign that ethnic writers have truly “made it” in America, moving successfully into the mainstream. del Río argues, for example, that the recent publication of a number of Latino/a American anthologies, including *The Prentice Hall Anthology of Latino Literature* (2001), *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States* (2003), and *Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature* (2006) indicates that a “canon” of U.S. Latino literature has now been established. Similar arguments have been made about the role of the Asian American anthology *Aiiieeee!* (1974) in establishing Asian American literature as a field. But even in these anthologies, some works—those deemed by editors and publishers to be most marketable to a mainstream audience—are included, while others are inevitably left out, and the very notion of a “canon” of Latino/a or Asian American literature suggests the same processes of exclusion and marginalization that the mainstream American literary canon produces. Indeed, del Río himself points out that Cuban American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican American works dominate the “canon” of Latino/a American literature (recall my earlier mention of Mexican American author Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, which is perhaps the text most commonly used in U.S. high school and college classrooms to introduce students to Latino/a literature). Likewise, Asian American literature is often figured as primarily Chinese and Japanese American literature. Korean and Filipino American literatures are included to a much lesser extent, while works by other Asian Americans—for example, Vietnamese American and Cambodian American writers—are virtually absent in most representations of this field. The production of such “mini-canons”

through the publication of a select handful of works as “stand-ins” for an entire “field” of literature (itself comprised of works by authors of various different ethnicities) has a substantial impact on how mainstream readers come to understand what “Latino/a American” or “Asian American” or “ethnic American” literature “is.” Consider Frank Chin’s claim that “what seems to hold Asian American literature together” is “the popularity among whites” of only four works by three authors, notably all Chinese Americans: Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, David Henry Hwang’s *F.O.B.* and *M. Butterfly*, and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. Selections from these works—especially Kingston’s and Tan’s novels—have frequently been chosen to be anthologized in collections of both Asian American and American literature, and thus become among the few Asian American texts that mainstream readers are most likely to encounter.⁵ Though anthologies of minority and ethnic American literature may “quite literally institutionalize and commercialize an alternative literary history,” as Elam notes, they also “only rarely flag the limits of their comprehensiveness,” contributing to misguided assumptions that Asian American literature can be understood through the works of three authors, or that the work of one Mexican American writer can be representative of all Latino/a American literature (*Souls* 39).

Of course, publishers alone cannot be blamed for this—academic critics and mainstream book reviewers, who are usually among the first to read and write about newly published works, also play crucial roles in determining which texts mainstream readers do and do not encounter, as well as how readers approach such encounters. How academic critics read, assess, and respond to texts—and help to make texts known and accessible to other scholars and teachers, as well as to students—is crucial to the ways in which texts become circulated, consumed, and canonized (or not). Jonathan Arac uses the term “hypercanonization” to describe “the excessive investment by criticism in a very small number of texts from a literary period or tradition that leaves a multitude of their contemporaries to languish” (Medovoi 56). His pointed connection of criticism to canonization begs the question of whether works become canonized on their own,

or whether it is the criticism surrounding a work that facilitates its canonization (a sort of chicken-or-egg conundrum: what came first, the canonized work, or the flurry of critics discussing it?). If we can call Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* a work that has been canonized (a point I debate later in this chapter), then, as Y. Chang has also noted, the novel's canonization is partially the result of existing criticism on the text, specifically the fact that *Bone* features in two chapters of Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, itself a work that has been canonized in the fields of Literature, Cultural Studies, Asian American Studies, American Studies, and Immigration/Migration Studies. It seems highly possible, in fact, that many readers only come into contact with *Bone* through reading Lowe first; in this case, criticism about a text is likely to reach audiences before the text itself and to facilitate audience interest in that text. However, inasmuch as critics' assessments of texts help to facilitate readers' encounters with them, it is worth acknowledging that critics also tend to develop assessments based upon their own expectations for what ethnic literature "should do" (and of course, these myriad expectations frequently conflict with one another). As Ambreen Hai writes in her discussion of Jhumpa Lahiri's work, which critics have frequently accused of being "not ethnic enough," critics should be "cognizant of what an author's work lacks or fails to do," but should also "question the critical demand that an author must do what a critic wants" (206).

Though critics play perhaps a more central role in determining which texts are chosen or unchosen for canonization, mainstream book reviewers—those who publish not in academic journals, but in mainstream media sources like *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *People*, and *Cosmopolitan*, all of which reach a significantly larger audience than do academia's publications—arguably have more of an influence on whether readers do or do not encounter works of ethnic American literature in the first place. More so than academic critics, who often privilege voices of the "Other" and the alternative perspectives they bring to literature, mainstream reviewers are quick to be scathing in their treatment of ethnic American works that are too confrontational or even too "ethnic," and potential readers can be put off by such

reviews, more likely to instead pick up the latest Agatha Christie or Stephen King novel, something that “everybody” likes. Texts that exceed the boundaries of mainstream readers’ “comfort zones” often face consequences, including, especially, condemnation in mainstream reviews, with reviewers frequently setting up an us/them dichotomy between ethnic writers and mainstream audiences. For example, a review of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* in *Newsweek* claims that “Silko isn’t keen on fairness. In her cosmology there are good people and there are white people... This vivid, preposterous, splinter-under-the-fingernails book is guaranteed to make you mad and just as sure to make you squirm” (Jones Jr.). The “you” here is clearly intended to be “white people” and—despite the fact that, as I argue later, Silko’s novel actually attempts to mediate between Native American and white cultures as much, if not more, than it engages in confrontation—the reviewer sees the text as antagonistic, one directed toward mainstream readers with the deliberate intention of making them “mad.” Mukherjee is another author who has been perceived by reviewers as trying to make white audiences angry. Frequently accused of “(deliberately) negative portrayal[s]” of white women, especially “upper-middle-class white feminists,” Mukherjee was described in a book review in *Ms. Magazine* as “impartially nasty,” with the reviewer claiming to “hate” her novel (Shankar 63). Interestingly, Mukherjee herself has claimed that reviewers and critics alike “choose to misread [her works], because they have agendas of their own” (Hancock 41). Inevitably, such (mis)readings influence the ways in which mainstream audiences select and engage with multi-ethnic American literatures.

This brings us to readers themselves, many of whom are largely unaware of the high-stakes circumstances through which they come to encounter multi-ethnic literature in classrooms, book stores (actual and virtual), libraries, book clubs, and other sites of reading. What are the diverse and sometimes unexpected ways in which ethnic literature reaches mainstream audiences? And what do mainstream readers make of ethnic texts—which texts get a “stamp of approval” and which are rejected by mainstream audiences? In *Lost and Found in*

Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity, Martha Cutter analyzes translation acts in multi-ethnic U.S. literature as they occur on both a literal level and a metaphorical one, arguing that writers “translate” not only their words but also their culture and ethnicity into something that is understandable to mainstream American readers. But if ethnic writers are expected to translate aspects of their works both linguistically and metaphorically, which works translate best? And when might the act of “translating” on a metaphorical level fail, with readers perceiving the gap between their own culture and the author’s too far to bridge? Cutter argues that multi-ethnic writers that wish to succeed in the act of metaphorical translation must make their culture and ethnicity “palatable” for American audiences, just as, she suggests, Desi Arnaz and Gloria Estefan helped to make the conga palatable to Americans, Cutter’s concept of palatability recalls my earlier mention of the double bind faced by ethnic authors: they must include some “ethnic” or “exotic” elements in their text to meet mainstream audience’s expectations, but, in order to be palatable, they must ensure that there is only a touch of the ethnic, that the text doesn’t become too exotic or unfamiliar, but rather remains mostly “ethnic lite”—exotic but still recognizable, different but still comprehensible. As Bruce-Novoa argues in his discussion of Oscar Hijuelos’s work, a text’s ability to “maintain [a] distinctive character of *marginal* otherness” while situating itself “in the center of the dominant cultural discourse” is “the traditionally accepted form of entre into dominant culture, a rite of passage of sorts” (11 emphasis added). In order to be granted this rite of passage, ethnic American authors must engage in a careful balancing act, satisfying mainstream readers’ conflicted demands for both otherness and sameness, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Certainly, the extent to which a text is perceived as familiar, understandable, or palatable has as much to do with what the reader brings to the text as it does with writerly acts of translation. Frequently, mainstream readers encounter multi-ethnic texts in classroom contexts, where literature, “ethnic” or otherwise, is always already framed in ways which

reinforce the agendas of our state-run schools, including, especially, assimilation of students toward national norms. As Elam writes, “the literary canon—what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ literature, what texts should be validated and taught or not taught in schools... is related to the racial politics of literacy and cultural education... literacy is not just the acquisition of language but also the internalization of cultural and racial norms” (*Souls* 28). Echoing the argument I make throughout Part III, Elam argues that U.S. schools “powerfully canonize or delegitimize particular images and scripts in the national conversation about [race]” (*Souls* 27). What images and scripts are U.S. students encountering in classroom literature, then, and how are these images and scripts framed, interpreted, and engaged with? In *Clueless in Academe*, Graff notes that “works by [Alice] Walker and other multicultural writers are now prominently displayed in the Cliffs Notes racks, perhaps the ultimate sign that multiculturalism has made it, but hardly in the way its advocates hoped” (8). The notion of students skipping over assigned texts in favor of reading the Cliffs Notes suggests that they are unwilling to fully engage with works of multi-ethnic American literature, which my own students often describe as “depressing,” “weird,” or “too hard to understand.” Teachers, too, often help to facilitate limited or surface-level student engagement with multi-ethnic literature, passing over opportunities for students to learn about cultures, histories, and languages different from their own in favor of, instead, using multi-ethnic literature as a framework for students to engage in their own acts of self-reflection or self-expression. Maloney-Mangold has noted, for example, how Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* is frequently used in K-12 classrooms not to introduce students to Mexican American literature, culture, or history, but rather to allow students to draw (distant) parallels between the protagonist’s experiences and their own, with assignments offering prompts like the following: “Esperanza often feels out of place while at school. Describe a time you felt different from those around you. How did this experience make you feel?” Such assignments situate the student, rather than the text or protagonist, as the center of the encounter: students learn more about themselves, not others, by completing the task. As such,

though classrooms are perhaps the primary site where mainstream audiences come into contact with multi-ethnic literature, the extent to which students engage with these texts in ways which facilitate learning and growth—or even engage with them at all—remains questionable.⁶

Though classrooms are perhaps the primary site where mainstream readers encounter and engage (however limitedly) with ethnic American texts, they are certainly not the only contexts in which they read ethnic literature. Libraries, book stores, book clubs, and, increasingly, blogs, social media websites like *Facebook*, and online sites for readers such as *Goodreads*, are only some of the many myriad ways in which readers encounter a sometimes surprising range of texts. And, like critics and reviewers, mainstream readers talk and write about these texts during and after reading them, sharing their reactions to the texts with others who are then influenced about what and how to read. How do mainstreams readers' selections—and, perhaps more importantly, their reviews, ratings, posts, and comments on these selections—help to determine the ways in which ethnic American works become recognized, canonized, marginalized, or demonized? Literacy theorist Gemma Moss writes that “it is through talk about texts that what it means to read and to be a reader are jointly negotiated... the social competencies to ‘read’ particular texts are therefore established between people” (1-2). How, then, do mainstream readers help one another both to select and to “read” ethnic texts, not only through activities like book clubs and library discussion groups, but also through virtual discussions where thousands or even millions of individuals may be influenced by one reader’s post, comment, review or rating? Consider, for example, three customer comments on Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* posted on *Amazon.com*, a site which has millions of visitors each month, and which features customer reviews, ratings, and comments for nearly every book it sells. Featured in prominent speech bubbles on the site’s page for the novel, the three comments read as follows: “Reading Leslie Marmon Silko’s CEREMONY is a stirring, mystical experience”; “I felt that this was a bit too cliché and heavy-handed”; “My daughter really liked the book, great for her high school english class.” The first comment

exoticizes Silko's novel, seeming to promise readers who are looking for an "authentically" "ethnic" experience that they will not be disappointed. In contrast, the second reader-reviewer portrays the work as *inauthentic*, guilty of pandering to mainstream audience expectations with stereotypical "cliché[s]." The third reviewer, however, legitimates the book's value as a teaching text, an important route to achieving (and maintaining) canonicity. How will potential buyers and readers of *Ceremony* interpret these comments in making their choice to buy or not buy, to read or not read? And what does the lack of consensus among the three reviewers about the novel's "value" (commercial and literary alike) tell us about the diverse and perhaps unexpected ways in which ethnic American literature might be received differently by different "mainstream" readers?

An *Amazon.com* customer comment on Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* raises one final question about how readers engage with multi-ethnic literature, one that is particularly important given my project's continuous focus on battles with words: how does language itself affect the ways in which mainstream readers encounter and assess ethnic texts, particularly the use of languages and dialects other than (so-called) standard American English? The *Amazon.com* customer comment on *Bone* praises the fact that the novel is "written beautifully and poetically." As I discuss in my section on Ng in this chapter, critics, reviewers, and readers alike all seem to mark her work as one that is written in "beautiful" language. Notably, unlike a number of other ethnic American authors, Ng uses standard English as the primary language of her text (consider the difference between this and a text like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which is written primarily in the "non-standard" English "dialect" that Celie uses). Cutter emphasizes, and my below sections will show, that all ethnic American writers make choices about the extent to which they do or do not include words in languages and dialects other than standard English in their work; but upon what pressures, demands, expectations, obligations, and motivations are these choices based? And what are the choices that mainstream/English-only readers make—to engage with or ignore, to keep reading or to "give up" on, texts written partially or fully in

languages/dialects other than standard English? What chance does a work that deviates from standard English-only usage have at moving from the margins to the mainstream? Consider Marc Shell and Werner Sollor's incredible 750-page *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000), which makes a powerful case for a centuries-long body of multilingual American writing whose existence has been largely ignored, both by mainstream readers, and, even more discouragingly, by many academics and scholars of American literature. Why have the works included in this anthology not enjoyed the same popularity or recognition as other works of ethnic American literature written only or primarily in standard English? What can readers' reactions to texts written in languages other than standard English tell us about the extent to which audiences are (un)willing to accept multilingualism, not only in American literature, but as a part of our nation's very identity and history? Let us explore these questions, and some of the many other questions raised throughout this chapter thus far, through brief examinations of the seven authors whose works I have discussed throughout *Battles with Words*.

Nicholasa Mohr

"I decided that if I as a woman and my ethnic community did not exist in North American letters, then we would now" – Nicholasa Mohr, "The Journey Toward a Common Ground"

Nicholasa Mohr is an interesting case of a writer who seems to have been marginalized within the margins, or, at least to have missed her opportunity to move into the mainstream and achieve canonicity. Like Bharati Mukherjee and Leslie Marmon Silko, Mohr's literary career got its start when a publisher solicited a novel from her. Originally a graphic artist, Mohr wrote *Nilda*, her first novel, after "a collector who was also a publisher had requested that I write about my experiences growing up" (Rico 162). Mohr set out to do so, but interestingly, as she has recounted in numerous essays and interviews, what seemed authentic to Mohr as she tried to write about life growing up in New York City's barrio was deemed inauthentic by the publisher, who wanted something "more authentic," "more sensational"; he "expected me to

write about gang wars, sex, violence, and all the negative stereotypes imaginable” (Flores 53, Natov 116, Rico 164). Ultimately, Mohr called off the arrangement with the publisher after continued failed attempts at negotiation, frustrated with his demands that she resort to clichéd portrayals of urban Latino life. She eventually turned, instead, to Harper and Row, who offered her a contract for *Nilda*.

With the release of *Nilda*, Mohr became the first Puerto Rican woman writer to be published by a major U.S. publishing house. Since then, she has also won numerous literary awards and honors, and has written over a dozen works of fiction and non-fiction. Yet, there is nowhere near the amount of scholarship on Mohr that there is on some of the other writers discussed throughout this project, including, especially, Bharati Mukherjee and Leslie Marmon Silko, both of whom published their first novels in the same decade Mohr published *Nilda*. There are, for example, multiple casebooks on Silko and her debut novel *Ceremony*, two special issues of academic journals devoted entirely to *Ceremony*,⁷ and dozens and dozens of individual essays and interviews in scholarly journals and book collections of all sorts, in fields ranging from history to literature to cultural studies. Yet there are no book-length works focused on Mohr’s writing, no special issues of journals devoted to her work, and, indeed, a relative lack of scholarly interest in her writing altogether. What makes one writer soar to fame and canonicity while the other remains in the margins, when both are “firsts” of their kind (Mohr as first Puerto Rican woman writer to publish a novel with a major publishing house; Silko as first Native American woman writer to do the same), and when both published their first novels during the same critical decade following the Civil Rights movement? How does a lack of serious critical attention in Mohr’s case—or an “overdose” of it, in Silko’s case—contribute to the cycles of marginalization and canonization, inclusion and exclusion, that ethnic texts are subject to?

Mohr envisioned her own writing as a mission to put Puerto Rican Americans—especially women and children—on the “map” of American literature. As she puts it,

when I started to write back in 1972, I realized that, except for a book or two that concentrated on the Puerto Rican males' problems and misfortunes, there were no books in United States literature that dealt with our existence, our contributions or what we as Puerto Rican migrants were about. I, as a Puerto Rican child, never existed in North American letters. Our struggles as displaced migrants, working class descendants of the *tabaqueros* (tobacco workers) who began coming here in 1916, were invisible in North American literature. As I proceeded to record who we were, I addressed myself to both adults and children... and, of course, women. ("Puerto Rican Writers in the United States" 89)

As Rico puts it, Mohr uses her writing to "asser[t] her ownership of the margins" and "represent[t] herself as... 'writing back' to a canon of literature (and worldview) from which she felt not only marginalized, but altogether excluded" (172). Yet it seems that her efforts to write to and for Puerto Rican women and children, especially, have contributed to her marginalization, her failure to soar to the center of the multi-ethnic literary canon (itself marginalized in the broader field of American literature) the way that Silko has. For one thing, does Mohr's novel become less successful than a novel like Silko's because she uses a female protagonist (whereas Silko's *Ceremony* has been occasionally characterized as the story of a male on a quest, an archetype of the Western literary tradition)? Rico notes that, with *Nilda*, Mohr became "one of a very few writers in the 1970s to make the woman of color—whom Alice Walker had listed as 'missing' from the canons of American literature—the central focus of her 'artist portrait'" (170). Mohr also seemingly took a risk in trying to include children among those she wrote about and for: in using a Latina youth who comes of age as the protagonist of her first novel, Mohr found her work thereafter cloistered off as children's literature, suggesting the problematic ways commercial and academic spheres exert influence over a text or even an entire oeuvre in ways that can ignore or defy the author's intentions. As Rico notes, the classification of Mohr's work as children's literature has affected "the choice of reviewers, the

horizon of expectation brought to their assessment of the works, and by extension the kind of reviews that have been written” (162). Mohr herself has emphasized that she “didn’t consciously write [*Nilda* specifically] for young adults. It was marketed that way” (Kevane 91). With this marketing strategy, however, comes the designation of an “‘appropriate’ audience age range” for Mohr’s work, a particularly restrictive form of constraint for a text to face (Rico 162). In addition, Rico suggests that it is the text’s categorization as children’s literature—and the “horizon of generic expectations that often accompany th[is] categor[y]”—that causes many critics and reviewers to “treat Mohr’s fiction in condescending and dismissive ways” (173).⁸

Mohr’s writing has also been subjected to criticism and raised eyebrows regarding her use of mostly (though, as my sixth chapter discusses, certainly not entirely) English in works which thematically critique linguistic hegemony and assert the validity of Spanish as an American language. Yet Mohr, who was born in New York, has justified her use of English by explaining, “I can’t write creatively in Spanish... I don’t have the formal education in Spanish [as a person educated in U.S. schools] and sadly am unable to do that” (Kevane 88). As when she refused to fill her first novel with sex, gangs, and violence in order to meet a publisher’s expectations for “authenticity,” Mohr suggests that her use of English might be read as a subtle refusal to fulfill ethnic stereotypes or meet critics’ expectations by writing in Spanish. At the same time, Mohr emphasizes that English has “been a vital component in the struggle for my very survival” (“Puerto Rican Writers” 88). Her comment suggests the ways she uses English tactically, as a means to negotiate a largely English-only society and publishing industry. Mohr sees a certain subversive and recreative power in her use of English, what we might read as one form of infrapolitical authorship. As she puts it, writing in the language of the dominant culture positions her as “an ‘intruder,’ an ‘outsider’ who has taken on a foreign language. Perhaps even taken it on much too forcefully, using it to document and validate [Puerto Ricans’] existence and survival inside the very nation that chose to colonize us” (“Puerto Rican Writers” 87). Mohr aligns her work with that of writers such as Denise Chavez, Tillie Olsen, Ishmael Reed, and Alice

Walker, whom she describes as “not necessarily in the mainstream of the Anglo-American Writers Empire, but who nonetheless get published and speak about the realities and complexities of the varied ethnic groups who share our nation” (91). She adds that “All of these authors write in an American English that comes straight from their people” (91). Mohr’s work, too, though written mostly in English, uses a particular *form* of English, one which offers a challenge to and even a possible redefinition of U.S. linguistic standards.

Mohr’s sense of a shared language with other ethnic American writers parallels her views on shared space within the literary canon, which inherently critique notions of exclusion and competition in the construction of canonicity. As she explains in an interview, “whenever a Latina writer is published it just makes everyone else’s work stronger. There is plenty of room, plenty of room for more, the more the better” (Kevane 94). Expressing a sense of shared discourse, purpose, and community with other ethnic American authors who, together, have gradually worked to redefine the American literary canon, Mohr writes that “Those whose works speak to and about the peoples of color, and the other marginal communities that continue to struggle for equality in the U.S., are the writers I identify with... who we are and how our culture will continue to blossom and develop is being recorded right here, by our writers, painters, and composers, here, where our voices respond and resound loud and clear” (92).

Oscar Hijuelos

Oscar Hijuelos, the first Latino writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, was born and raised in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights neighborhood, the son of Cuban immigrants who came to America in the 1940s. He was educated in New York City public schools, graduating from Louis D. Brandeis High and obtaining Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from City College, CUNY. When Hijuelos passed away unexpectedly at the age of 62 while playing tennis in the fall of 2013, obituaries and media reports on his death eulogized him as an “American-Cuban” rather than “Cuban-American” writer, as one *New York Times* obituary put it (Weber). The same piece described Hijuelos as “a New Yorker,” and as an author who wrote about

“immigrants adapting to a new culture” in works that are “rarely outwardly political.” Is Hijuelos a writer who, by the end of his career, is characterized as having moved into the mainstream, his Cuban ethnicity parenthesized or muted? Is he perceived as “American Cuban” rather than “Cuban American” because his writing offers just the right balance of exotic and American to satisfy mainstream audiences, a touch of the “ethnic” within stories that nevertheless remain comfortable and familiar?

The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, the subject of Chapter 5 and Hijuelos’s best-known work, seems to have been categorized as an ethnic text that has made its way from margins to mainstream, just as Hijuelos, by the time of his death, had become categorized not as a Cuban American writer, but as an American Cuban writer. *The Mambo Kings* not only won Hijuelos the Pulitzer, but was also made into a 1992 movie starring Antonio Banderas (arguably, the latter might be read as an even more telling sign of the text’s success in the commercial mainstream). Nicolas Kanellos argues that the text is successful because of its “evocation of the period when one segment of Hispanic culture... danc[ed] its way right into the [American] mainstream” (qtd. in Shirley 69). However, the “segment” of Hispanic culture that Kanellos refers to and that Hijuelos’s text helps to introduce mainstream audiences to is that of music and dance: the text is the story of two musicians who teach Americans around the country—both their fictive audiences and their real-life readers—to know and love the mambo. Yet the text invites readers to engage much less with other “segments” of Hispanic culture, such as its language or its history, than it does with the musical and dance styles the brothers bring with them from Cuba. In this way, the text is made more palatable for readers, less threatening than other ethnic works. Readers’ encounters with “Cubanness” through this novel are nonconfrontational and comfortable, mediated by two Cuban American men who are eager for American audiences to love them and their music. At least one critic even reads the Cuban/Latino elements of the novel—for example, the hypersexualized Cesar’s Latin “spiciness,” which allows him to effortlessly seduce the most beautiful of women (even white ones!)—as

almost a form of pandering to mainstream audiences, writing that “mainstream readers will find many of their stereotypes fulfilled” (Bruce-Novoa 15).

While I find “stereotypical” to be perhaps a bit too reductive a charge to hurl at Hijuelos’s novel, *The Mambo Kings* is filled with what we might call comfortable, if not quite stereotypical, expressions of Cubanness and Latinoness, elements that mark the text as decidedly “ethnic” but not *too* ethnic to put off, discourage, or confuse mainstream readers who desire a reading experience that is familiar and recognizable even as they also expect a dash of difference. The idea of the text as offering mainstream readers “comfortable” representations of Cubanness is perhaps best demonstrated through Hijuelos’s use of the wildly famous *I Love Lucy* show as part of the novel’s plot, and of Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball as characters in the novel, something that critics and reviewers alike have fixated on in their discussion of Hijuelos’s work. During one of their nights out performing and drinking in Manhattan, Cesar and Nestor meet Desi and Lucy, and are later invited by Desi to appear on the *I Love Lucy* show to perform a number, a moment which becomes the brothers’ “60 seconds of fame.” Though their appearance on the show remains one of the proudest moments of the Mambo Kings’ lives, a tale told and re-told to others again and again throughout the novel, the appearance does not launch them to the long-term success (and wealth) that they hoped it would. Nevertheless, the brothers continue to take pride in their one-time appearance on the show merely because it links them, permanently, to the extraordinarily famous Arnaz, another Cuban American who *has* achieved the American Dream, even if Cesar and Nestor have not. By associating themselves with a Cuban American who has succeeded so markedly in the American mainstream, the brothers’ seem to believe they have achieved a form of success of their own, however minor. Arguably, Hijuelos uses Arnaz and the *I Love Lucy* show in a similar way as do the Mambo Kings: by coopting the show and Arnaz as features for his own work, Hijuelos helps to facilitate the movement of *The Mambo Kings* from margins to mainstream through a sort of piggy-backing, whereby the text is able to be deemed familiar and palatable to American audiences—and thus, to become successful—

through its association with a television show that stars a Cuban American man who is already familiar to and, indeed, beloved by Americans. Shirley argues that Arnaz is a “cultural hybrid, ethnic but not too ethnic... which explains his acceptance by American popular culture” (74). In drawing upon another cultural production that is “ethnic but not too ethnic”—one that is, in fact, squarely mainstream American, but has, through its inclusion of Arnaz, a palatable dash of the ethnic—Hijuelos invites audiences to situate his novel and its characters (and indeed even himself) in the same way: Nestor and Cesar are not threatening or illegal immigrants who are “different” from or “troublesome” to Americans, but rather are, like Arnaz, jovial entertainers whose music and presence in America is as unthreatening and as pleasurable as Arnaz coming into Americans’ living rooms through their television screens every night.

If Hijuelos himself uses Arnaz and the *I Love Lucy* show as a way of helping to ensure that his novel is a commercial and cultural success, how do critics and reviewers of the text come to participate in and even further that process, and when might they, perhaps, overemphasize the significance of the show as a feature in the text, shifting focus away from Hijuelos’s literature and directly on to the show itself, and thereby potentially discouraging mainstream readers’ engagement with, or even awareness of, other, perhaps less “hybrid”/palatable/comfortable, elements of the text? Much of the literary criticism and, even more so, mainstream media reviews on Hijuelos’s work, spotlight the text’s use of the *I Love Lucy* show. Even those critics and reviewers that rightly note that the show does not play a central role in the novel still tend to make a discussion of the show’s inclusion in the text central to their own work. A review released shortly after the novel’s publication, for example, accurately describes the *I Love Lucy*/Desi Arnaz scenes as only “momentary glimpse[s]” in the novel; yet, curiously, the reviewer places undue emphasis on these scenes even as he acknowledges their relatively insignificant role in the text, entitling the review “Books of the Times; Cuban Immigrants in the ‘50s of Desi and Lucy” (Kakutani). What readers learn from this review title is that this Cuban American novel is somehow related to a pop culture icon—the *I Love Lucy* show—that American

audiences already know and love; but the focus on Desi and Lucy comes at the expense of acknowledgement of other aspects of Hijuelos's work. This is a recurring pattern in the criticism and reviews on Hijuelos's writing: the minor, brief scenes that include Desi and Lucy become the scenes repeatedly subjected to analysis and discussion, with other important elements of the novel (such as its critique of linguistic hegemony, which I discuss in Chapter 5) underdiscussed or ignored altogether. Likewise, virtually every obituary and press release on Hijuelos's death found room to mention the inclusion of the *I Love Lucy* show and Desi Arnaz in *The Mambo Kings*, as if, by the time of the author's passing, these few scenes are the ones, out of all the scenes in all of his many works of literature, that have become "canonized," represented as somehow the "heart" of his oeuvre and the most significant aspect of his life's work as an author. A brief piece on Hijuelos's death in *Entertainment Weekly*, for example, which truncates his passing, his life, and his decades-long literary career into a mere seven sentences, manages to find room to mention the appearance on the *I Love Lucy* show as the "high point" of Mambo King Cesar Castillo's life (and, seemingly, also the "high point" of Hijuelos's entire oeuvre, as no other specifics from any of his other works feature in the article) (Lee). Through the inclusion of the *I Love Lucy* show and Arnaz, it seems, Hijuelo's novel is made palatable and memorable to American audiences—both by the author himself, and by those who write about and promote his work. As such, at the time of his death, he is celebrated in the mainstream media as an "American-Cuban" writer, successfully immortalized in the realm of the mainstream.

If the inclusion of the *I Love Lucy* show in *The Mambo Kings* has functioned as a way to "mainstream" Hijuelos's novel, the fact that text is written almost entirely English, with very few Spanish words making their way into Hijuelos's writing, is perhaps another reason the work has been able to successfully move from the margins to the mainstream. However, what are the reasons why Hijuelos writes in English rather than Spanish, and, does his language usage necessarily have to be read as yet another "mainstream" element of his work? Scholars have criticized Hijuelos for making Spanish "invisible" in his writing, accusing him of constructing

the “ideal” reader as non-Spanish speaking (Shirley 75-78). But do these critics put too much pressure on Hijuelos to use Spanish, revealing their own expectations about what “ethnic” or “Latino” literature should do and be? Why should Hijuelos, born and raised in New York and educated in the city’s English-monolingual public schools, be expected to write in any language other than English? Hijuelos was born and raised in a Spanish-speaking household; however, he became fluent in English by the age of 5, after being separated from his family for a year while hospitalized in Connecticut with a severe illness. In a 2011 *New York Times* essay entitled “Lost in Time and Words, a Child Begins Anew,” Hijuelos describes the pain of returning home from the hospital as a boy to find himself completely disconnected from his parents and older brother, who spoke almost exclusively in Spanish, which Hijuelos suddenly found to be a “foreign tongue.” Confined largely to his family’s Morningside Heights apartment in the years after his illness as his immune system continued to recover, Hijuelos began to find his home a “prison” where his mother, disappointed in her “muy Americano son,” demanded of him repeatedly, “Por favor, por que no hablas español?” Hijuelos describes this abrupt, unexpected transition from Spanish to English as one which left him as “an outsider within my own home,” lost in a “stranger’s solitude” (“Lost”).

Given the painful loss of the Spanish language that Hijuelos describes, as well as the fact that this loss was due largely to circumstances beyond his control, why do critics continue both to expect Hijuelos to use Spanish and to criticize him for not using it? Perhaps more importantly, if the assumption latent within critics’ expectations is that Hijuelos conforms to mainstream demands for linguistic conformity and homogeneity in U.S. literature by failing to use Spanish in his works, what are the ways in which these critics might overlook how Hijuelos challenges linguistic conformity and homogeneity through his use not of Spanish, but of “nonstandard” Englishes, as I discuss throughout Chapter 5? In her 2011 essay “Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature,” Bharati Mukherjee, author of *Jasmine*, writes of a new literary generation in the U.S. which she calls “Literature of New

Arrival”; she identifies authors such as Edwidge Danticat, Amy Tan, and Jessica Hagedorn as part of this new generation of American literature. Mukherjee claims that “Danticat’s generation of non-European immigrant American authors” are “changing the contours of a national literature” not only through the alternative histories they articulate in their works, but also through the language their works use—Mukherjee argues that these writers are “creating an expanded, elastic American English vocabulary capacious enough to embody the fusion of languages in which they live.” Their Englishes are forms of “language fusion” meant to demonstrate that standard English is everywhere challenged by U.S. languages like “Spanglish, Chinglish, Hinglish, Banglish” (683-684). Notably, Mukherjee also includes Hijuelos among this list of writers engaging in linguistic fusion, even as other critics have argued that he excludes “Spanglish” from his text. I would argue, too, that Hijuelos does fuse languages in his text, not just Spanish and English, but also various forms of Englishes, which he combines and meshes together to indicate that standard English is in fact only one of a variety of forms of English used in everyday life in the U.S. In so doing, he raises an especially important and frequently unacknowledged point about English in America—that it is not the homogenous, monolithic, “standard” language that we often mythically believe it to be and describe it as—that allows him to reflect on linguistic dominance in the U.S. in a different way than would using Spanish as a major feature of his text. Unfortunately, however, critics who allow their own predetermined assumptions or expectations that Hijuelos will or should use Spanish to guide the ways in which they read and assess the novel problematically overlook the significant ways in which Hijuelos’s work in fact resists mainstream and dominant ideas about English and monolingualism in America.

Danzy Senna

Almost 20 years after its publication, there remains relatively little critical scholarship on Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, the subject of my fourth chapter. If discussion of Senna’s work has been limited, even less attention has been given to the role of Senna as writer—only one literary

journal that I have come across has featured an interview with Senna (as compared to, for example, the dozens and dozens of interviews with Mukherjee and Silko that have been published), and Senna's positionality as a multiracial American author engaging issues of race through her work is not the topic of focus in most critical essays on her writing. In fact, Senna seems to be figured by critics, reviewers, and the general reading public as primarily an American novelist, the daughter of "ethnic lite" parents who herself seemingly lacks a racial identity worth mentioning, suggesting that she is viewed in the mainstream as white (whiteness being marked by its invisibility with regard to race, as I discuss throughout Part II). On the site *Goodreads.com* for example, where readers rate Senna's literature a 4 out of 5, the "About this Author" section begins with a paragraph which states: "Danzy Senna is an American novelist, born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts in 1970. Her parents, Carl Senna, an Afro-Mexican poet and author, and Fanny Howe, who is an Irish-American writer, were also civil rights activists." Interestingly, it is Senna's parents, not Senna herself, who are marked as "ethnic"; Senna, like her writing, is "just" American. What allows Senna to be marketed and accepted as an American, rather than ethnic American, author, even as her texts openly address issues of race and racism? (Indeed, her use of the title *Caucasia* arguably suggests a similar sort of head-on, no-nonsense approach to addressing race as Hurston attempted almost 80 years earlier by entitling her first novel *Big Nigger*.) Like Birdie, *Caucasia's* protagonist, Senna herself can "pass" for white, as photographs on her website and book covers obviously demonstrate. Is her literature therefore not marketable or interpreted as ethnic because Senna herself doesn't look "ethnic enough" to "cash in on" that angle? Do the battles Senna's literature seems to wage against the dominant culture—by, especially, critiquing its notions of both linguistic and racial purity—become undercut or muted by the circulation in the commercial sphere of the image of Senna as a woman who appears to be white? Do photographs of the author work to silence or negate the politicized work she tries to do through her words?

Or, is it possible that Senna's status as an "American" rather than "ethnic American" author is attributable not (or not entirely) to her ability to pass for white, but rather to the fact that African Americans, and, perhaps even more so, biracial African American/European Americans, are themselves now understood as "mainstream" Americans, no longer figured as "ethnic" in the same way that Asian Americans, Latino/a Americans, or Native Americans are? At a 2013 Northeast Modern Language Association discussion panel on contemporary multi-ethnic American literature's movement from the margins to the mainstream, panelist Cristina Cheversan, who teaches American literature courses to college students in Romania, explained that in contexts outside the U.S., where the extent to which students study American literature is necessarily more limited than it is within the U.S., ethnic literature figures much less frequently on American Literature course syllabi than it does in U.S. classrooms—there literally is not time or space for it in these courses, the primary goal of which is to introduce students to *canonical* American texts. Cheversan noted that African American and Jewish American literature are the only fields of "ethnic" literature that have successfully been able to make their way into these courses and to be introduced to students in countries outside of the U.S. as part of what American literature "is." Writers of other ethnic backgrounds, including Asian American, Latino/a American, and Native American writers, continue to be excluded from these courses, as yet unrecognized in transnational contexts as part of the American literary canon. In a similar way, I would argue that Americans themselves have come to accept African American literature as part of American literature in a way that they have not been able to accept other ethnic American literatures. If pressed to name an American writer of color, I would imagine that many Americans would name Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, or Alice Walker before they would Nicholasa Mohr, Fae Myenne Ng, Bharati Mukherjee, or Chang-rae Lee. In general, Americans seem to be more exposed to African American literature than literature by writers of other ethnic backgrounds, encountering this literature not only in high school and college classrooms, but through more commercial venues like book clubs and online sites.

Consider, for example, that, although none of the many works by the seven authors I discuss throughout this project are included among the 70 selections that have become part of Oprah Winfrey's famous Book Club, four of Toni Morrison's novels—*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*—have been included among Oprah's picks (meaning that Morrison's works alone make up over 5% of all of Winfrey's selections).⁹ Is Senna, then, as a writer of mixed African American and European American racial identity, able to be identified as “just” an American writer partially because “powerhouse” African American authors who have preceded her, like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker (and, before them, Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, among others), helped to set the stage for African American literature to become “just” American literature?

Or, is Senna herself responsible for the ways in which she has been framed as an American rather than ethnic American writer? It seems possible that we can read the ways in which Senna positions herself in the public sphere as evidence of both the author's hesitance to “cash in on” her ethnicity as a way to market her work, as well as, perhaps, her refusal to be defined as an author by her race rather than her writing. Senna's website, for example, currently features a replication of the cover art for her most recent work (a short story collection entitled *You Are Free*) which consists of images of the backs of nine women's heads. The women are seemingly of various different (bi or multi)racial identities, but having their backs to us serves as a way of emphasizing the impossibility of determining their racial identities. Race is present, if subtly, as a message in the images, but it functions as more of an absence, not able to be named, described, categorized, or gazed upon. By using these images for both her homepage as well as her book cover, Senna seems to suggest that her own racial identity might be understood in the same way: not as something which needs to be hidden, but as something which does not need to be emphasized, revealed, or made the subject of scrutiny. The biography on Senna's website suggests this same idea, never characterizing Senna as a “multiracial” writer or “writer of color” but rather as simply “author.” Perhaps, then, Senna succeeds in defining her identity as a writer

on her own terms—or, at least, seems to have more success in this difficult endeavor than do writers like Chang-rae Lee or Bharati Mukherjee, as I discuss next.

Chang-rae Lee

Chang-rae Lee was born in Korea and immigrated to America at the age of three. *Native Speaker*, his first novel and the subject of my third chapter, has been the subject of much critical acclaim since its publication in 1995: the work has been thoroughly analyzed by scholars, some of whom compare it to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and was also marked as a literary and commercial success when it won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, the Oregon Book award, the QPB's New Voices Award, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Following the publication of *Native Speaker*, *The New Yorker* magazine named Lee one of the best American writers under the age of forty, as did *Granta* (James Lee 231-2). *Native Speaker's* success was important not only in establishing Lee's literary career, but also in establishing the reputation of the text's publisher, Riverhead Books, as the novel was the first title Riverhead released. Corley describes Riverhead as established "in response to the economic imperative to incorporate potentially subaltern multicultural aesthetic... productions into the dominant national economy of entertainment commodities. Part of the salability of Riverhead's offerings required a grounding of 'new ideas and points of view' in the recognizably other bodies of racially constructed minorities" (70). The language Corley uses to describe Riverhead emphasizes that the newly-emergent publisher was relying upon the idea of ethnicity as packageable, marketable, and able to be mainstreamed, transformed from a "subaltern" production into an "entertainment commodit[y]." Yet, if Lee himself had to be "constructed" as "other" and as a "racial minority" in order to meet Riverhead's needs and help to move both himself and his publisher into the eye of the commercial mainstream, how did this construction occur and, in turn, shape the trajectory of Lee's literary career and future publications? Corley's statement that the "marketing strategies engaged to bring about [*Native Speaker's*] success

merit close attention” suggests that the text didn’t “make it” on its own, but rather was successful because it entered the market at a critical moment and through a critical niche. Yet, it seems this was not a process whereby the publishers/marketers merely molded Lee and his work into the image of their own expectations, but rather one in which Lee also used this available niche to sell himself and his work in a particular way, positioning himself as an Asian American writer in order to ensure his text’s marketability and commercial viability. Though this can arguably be read as a form of “selling out” or “pandering” to mainstream audiences, it can also be interpreted as a form of infrapolitical authorship—at one level, Lee knows how to pass himself and his work off as “ethnic enough” to satisfy the expectations of mainstream publishers and readers; but, as I discuss in more depth momentarily, at other levels, Lee uses his text to engage with audiences in other, sometimes not-as-predictable ways, and to position himself as a writer who can be defined and categorized in ways other than Riverhead perhaps intended.

Yet, if Lee intended to make use of the literary marketplace for his own purposes, he was soon to find that, once available on the market, his text would no longer be in his control, but rather would be read and used by audiences with their own myriad intents and purposes. In 2002, *Native Speaker* was selected as one of two finalists for New York City’s One Book, One City campaign, which was sponsored by organizations including the *New York Times* and the New York Public Library. The other finalist was James McBride’s memoir *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (which, incidentally, had also been one of Riverhead’s early publication successes). The campaign’s goal was to get millions of New Yorkers to read the winning book by assigning it in New York City public schools, featuring it at library reading groups, and promoting it in book stores. Interestingly, however, although *Native Speaker* initially emerged as the winner over McBride’s text, ultimately, neither of the two finalists was selected to be New York’s “One Book,” as the committee was unable to reach an agreement. Although, as Wu notes, the majority of the committee “commended [Lee’s] novel for

its deft urban characterization, praising Lee's exploration of the relationships among the city's diverse populations," *Native Speaker* was nevertheless opposed on various grounds, not only by a few of the committee members, but also by members of New York's Korean American community, who scathingly criticized Lee for including what they called stereotypical representations of Korean Americans in his text (1460). McBride's text was also ultimately deemed unsuitable for the program, as some committee members feared the memoir would offend New York's Hasidic Jewish community.¹⁰ Interestingly, then, the committee's failure to decide on One Book for New York speaks to the ways in which texts are subject to pressure not just to meet the demands of a mainstream audience (such as the committee itself, an all-white, largely female group of educators and professionals), but also those of different ethnic audiences, Korean Americans and Hasidic Jews alike, who bring their own diversity of expectations to the "ethnic" texts they read. At the same time, the incident also speaks to the burden of representation Lee faces as an Asian American, and, more specifically, Korean American author: recalling my earlier discussion of a perceived responsibility a writer has to his or her ethnic community, it seems that the Korean American community charges Lee with failing to meet this responsibility. In this case, the charge is one that comes with serious consequences, as the community that sees itself as unfairly represented in Lee's text seeks to limit the extent to which that text circulates in mainstream contexts. When the stakes are high—high enough that an entire city of eight million people will be encouraged by major media and social institutions to read a certain book—the ethnic community that Lee is categorized as belonging to and representing through his literature speaks back against those representations, exerting pressure upon and ultimately limiting the ways in which his book is marketed and consumed. In *Native Speaker*, Korean American politician John Kwang is admired for his efforts to act as the representative of a minority community within the realm of the dominant culture. Yet, Kwang ultimately betrays the people he cares deeply about and sets out to represent. Beyond the realm of fiction, Lee's own experiences as an ethnic writer show how

tricky inhabiting a “public” position like Kwang’s can be. In fact, it seems possible that Kwang’s conflicted role throughout the novel is used by Lee to reflect his concerns about his own ability to act as representative of and for the Korean American community, a position which, as the One City One Book incident shows, can quickly become one of both burden and betrayal.

The conflicted position Lee inhabits is made clear not only through the One City One Book debacle, but also through the ways Lee has been categorized as a writer, both by others and himself. Corley argues that market pressures have “force[d]” Lee to “collaborate in his own commodification as an Asian American author,” adding that “certain autoexoticisms within the text insure that *Native Speaker* is read as a novel with a commodifiable difference” (75, 72). Beyond the text, representations of Lee himself also work to position him as a writer marked by “difference.” Currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University, Lee’s faculty profile on the school’s website describes him as an author whose “experience of crossing a great cultural divide haunts his fiction, which typically explores themes of identity and assimilation.” The profile works to mark Lee as not “just” a writer, but rather as an immigrant writer, something that arguably makes him more marketable not only as an author, but also as a member of Princeton’s faculty. Other representations of Lee are seemingly intended to have the same effect: the photographs used in the “About the Author” sections of his books, for example, have been interpreted by critics as deliberate attempts to portray/construct the author as part of a “distinctly Asian American literary tradition” (Corley 71). However, given my discussion in Chapter 3 of the role of passing in Lee’s novel, one is forced to consider if Lee, like his characters, is deliberately *performing* Asian Americanness—*passing* for, rather than *defining* himself as, Asian American—not (or at least not primarily) in an attempt to conform to mainstream audience expectations, but rather in an attempt to ensure his own success as a commercial and literary figure, to put on a performance that undeniably works to his advantage.

Support for this idea is offered in the fact that Lee attempts to “pass” not only as an “Asian American author,” but also as an “American” one, suggesting that, like his characters, Lee

learns to use infrapolitical tactics to pass for and claim different identities at different times, depending upon the opportunities available or advantages offered. Indeed, after using the niche of the ethnic American literary market to get his start, framing himself and allowing himself to be framed by others as an Asian American author, Lee seems to have increasingly attempted to re-position himself as, instead, an American author. In an interview with Reuters, Lee stated that he does not define himself as an Asian American writer, a category he “deems limiting” (Corley 74). Perhaps more notably, in his later work, Lee refuses to inhabit the Asian American position, instead making the voice of the protagonist in his third novel, *Aloft*, that of a white man who lives in suburban Long Island. The fact that Lee transitions from speaking for the Korean American urban community in his first novel to, instead, speaking from the position of a white male suburbanite in his third novel, suggests the multiple identities Lee feels he can take on as an author as he seeks to bring about his own literary and commercial success. However, the extent to which Lee attempts to “pass” as “American” author just as much, or perhaps more, than he does as “Asian American” author is perhaps best demonstrated by his language usage, which, in all of his works, is almost entirely that of standard English, despite the important role that immigrants, Korean Americans, and other “nonnative speakers” play in his novels, especially, of course, *Native Speaker*.

As I discuss in more depth in my next section on Chinese American author Fae Myenne Ng, Lee and Ng share a curious similarity in how they use language in their writing: both writers stick almost entirely to using standard English in their novels, making readers aware that characters in their texts resist linguistic assimilation by speaking in nonstandard forms of English and languages other than English, but rarely *including* any nonstandard or non-English words or phrases in their works. The content of their texts, then, often seems to be at odds with the form: while their plots emphasize the personal and political importance of resisting linguistic standardization and homogenization, the authors themselves exhibit a seeming hesitation to resist linguistic standards in their own writing. The dissonance between plot and

form prompts us to give careful consideration to the ways in which their language usage may be a response to both publishers' concerns about the (un)marketability of languages other than English within American literature, and larger cultural anxieties about linguistic standards and the importance of English-only monolingualism (the same anxieties that mark Henry Park, *Native Speaker's* protagonist, as a cultural, national, ethnic and linguistic outsider in America because he is a "non-native" speaker). It seems that, as Asian American writers, Lee and Ng are both aware that the inclusion of languages such as Korean or Cantonese would be "uncomfortable" for mainstream American audiences (perhaps even more so than the inclusion of a "foreign" language like Spanish might be, given the ways in which mainstream readers are increasingly exposed to Spanish in their everyday lives). As such, both writers seem to err on the side of caution, opting to "trans-mute" languages other than English in their texts, to borrow a term from Maria Lauret (170). These languages are alluded to, but rarely included: the words of other languages are not written and then translated for readers, but rather function as the sounds of silence in Lee and Ng's texts: we know they are there, but we do not hear them or see them.

That Lee does not include much Korean at all through *Native Speaker*—despite the fact that he clearly wants readers to understand, on a number of occasions, that characters are speaking in Korean, often for important reasons—is a very interesting move, especially given his thematic emphasis throughout the narrative on the problematic ways in which "nonnative" speakers are silenced in American society, especially in the political realm. As are the first-generation immigrant "old-timers" in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, the first-generation immigrant characters in Lee's text, especially Henry Park's parents, are frequently shown speaking in a "broken" English rather than in their native Korean. This English is portrayed as a limited and limiting one, an English that is shameful, a sign of isolation and alienness; it has none of the sexy hybridity of the English(es) spoken by Hijuelos's Mambo Kings or the street-smart savviness of the Spanglish used by Nilda, her brothers, and her friends in Mohr's novel. In one

of the few scenes in which we see Henry's parents deviate from this "broken" English to, instead, use their native Korean, the Korean still does not make an appearance in the text. During an argument with his father, Henry uses a formal standard English in an attempt to shame Mr. Park into feeling "foreign"/"un-American," and thus inferior, by contrast. Henry tells us how he tries to outdo the older man by "yelling at him, making sure I was speaking in completely sentences," and "using the biggest [English] words I knew, whether they made sense or not, school words like 'socioeconomic' and 'intangible,' anything I could lift from my dizzy burning thoughts and hurl against him" (63). Midway through his rant, however, Henry's mother, "who'd been perfectly quiet the whole time, whacked [Henry] hard across the back of the head and shouted in Korean *Who do you think you are?*" (63). Her deliberate decision to shift the language of the shouting match from English to Korean serves as a reminder to Henry that English is not the language of authority in their household. However, simultaneously, the text itself suggests that English is the language of authority in Lee's novel and in Henry's narrative, of which his mother's voice is only a small, marginalized part. Instead of Korean itself, italicized English indicates to us that Henry's mother is speaking in Korean, while simultaneously silencing and invisibilizing the language she uses, a stylistic move which detracts from the scene's attempt to portray her use of Korean as a powerful and memorable moment in which she reclaims (cultural, linguistic, and parental) authority from her Americanized son. In short, Lee's standard English wins out over Mrs. Park's Korean; her language appears only as the sounds of silence in the narrative.

Yet, what other intentions might Lee have in using language(s) in the seemingly conflicted way he does throughout *Native Speaker*? Even if Lee doesn't use Korean very frequently in his text, one could argue that he still challenges standard English language hegemony through his inclusion of "broken" Englishes which exemplify the myriad of "nonstandard" but true-to-life ways in which people in America speak in everyday life. Do we perhaps fail to see the linguistic manipulations and challenges to language standards that Lee

does build into his work in our focus on the ways in which Korean is excluded? In their chapter on language re-appropriation in *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the use of untranslated (in this case, non-English) words is “the most obvious and most common authorial intrusion in cross-cultural texts,” constituting a “political act” (61, 66). But are ethnic American texts *without* untranslated non-English words necessarily *non-political* then? If the use of untranslated non-English words is the “most obvious” form of “authorial intrusion,” what might be the *less* obvious ways in which writers use language—English included—to “intrude” upon the cultural mainstream? I would argue that it is possible to read Lee’s use of standard English to tell an “ethnic” story as itself a “political act,” one of both subversion and reappropriation. Like his characters Henry Park and John Kwang, Lee arguably makes use of standard English not to conform to demands for linguistic and cultural assimilation, but rather to facilitate his own advantages and opportunities as an ethnic writer in a largely English-only publishing industry and society. Offering a potent connection to my discussion of linguistic passing in multi-ethnic literature in Part II, Lauret has suggested (in an essay on Bharati Mukherjee’s use of English, interestingly) that the use of standard English by ethnic American authors whose native languages are not English is itself a form of literary/linguistic passing—as she writes, “what counts is mastery of that border-crossing language, English, and one’s ability to adapt to it... to be able to pass—if not as a native speaker, then as an American writer, ‘foreign’ accent muted” (175). Seemingly, this is precisely what Lee has accomplished: he uses standard English to “pass” as an American author, even as others seek to define his identity and literature differently; as such, he helps to facilitate his movement into the mainstream and to resist categorization as an “ethnic” writer, demanding that his literature earn attention based off of his craft rather than his race. In so doing, Lee not only claims a space for himself as an American author, but also arguably paves the way for other Korean American writers to use standard English as a way to tell their own stories and facilitate their own movement from margins to mainstream. As Park argues, Lee’s *Native Speaker*

“inaugurates the visibility of ‘crossover’ Korean American writers who are able to claim an audience based upon the merits of their writing rather than the market premium of being a writer of ‘color’” (8). Less an act of subordination and conformity than one of infrapolitical reappropriation, Lee uses English—the language of the dominant culture—to position Korean American literature as part of that dominant culture and its literary tradition.

Fae Myenne Ng

Like Danzy Senna, Fae Myenne Ng has been positioned by the mainstream media (as well as a number of academic critics) as an American, rather than ethnic American, author. Her debut novel *Bone*, the subject of Chapter 2, has often been read as an aesthetic work, not a political one (as if the two are somehow mutually exclusive), and, accordingly, Ng has been treated as “just” a writer, assessed on her craft and style, rather than on her ethnic identity and a perceived obligation to it. Mainstream reviews of Ng’s work frequently leave her ethnicity unmentioned altogether, and when she is categorized, it is as an American writer, a label which mainstreams rather than marginalizes her (in contrast, many ethnic American writers have had to fight to be recognized in the mainstream as “just” American writers, devoid of hyphenation, and have then found themselves marginalized among intellectual and creative communities which scorn them for adopting unhyphenated Americanness. Such has been the experience of Bharati Mukherjee, as I discuss in the next section). There are a few reviewers who position Ng as an ethnic American writer—a *San Francisco Bay Chronicle* review quoted in the front of the paperback edition of *Bone* writes that “Ng raises the stakes for Asian-American literature,” for example—but most mainstream reviews of her work seem much less focused on her ethnicity or “hyphenated” Americanness than are reviews of Mohr, Mukherjee, Silko, and Hijuelos. Consider Rosellen Brown’s review of *Bone*, in which she writes that she “learned a lot from *Bone* about the high cost of living in two worlds—but first I enjoyed the freshness of its voice.” Brown does hint at Ng’s status as an ethnic American writer by mentioning “two worlds” (presumably meant to refer to the struggle the narrator feels to identify with both American and Chinese

culture) but quickly relegates this facet of Ng's work to a lower place on the scale of assessment than Ng's voice, her artistry itself. Brown then concludes that "Fae Myenne Ng is on her way." But on her way to what, exactly? Others offer answers in their praise of Ng as comparable to canonical American writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and even to artistic geniuses such as Mozart: she is on her way from margins to mainstream, ethnicity becoming invisible as reviewers focus solely on the craftsmanship of Ng's work, rather than on the ways in which her work reflects or represents her ethnic identity.¹¹

What, then, sends Ng on her way? What it is about her writing—and/or the ways in which mainstream readers receive her writing—that allows her to be so easily mainstreamed and proclaimed an American author? One answer seemingly lies in her language usage: Ng (mostly) writes not in an American English that comes "straight from her people," to recall my earlier discussion of the prose of Mohr, Alice Walker, and other ethnic writers, but rather in a standard English that sounds elegant, eloquent, and, most importantly, familiar to mainstream American audiences. Among the excerpts from reviews that are included in the front pages of the paperback edition of *Bone*, three different reviewers refer to Ng's writing as "spare" (*Washington Post Book World*; the *Orlando Sentinel*, and Hannah Green); others describe her language as "grace[ful]" (John Leonard, National Public Radio), "eloquent," (Edmund White) and "simple" (Sau-ling Wong). Why exactly are these adjectives used? What prompts three different reviewers to describe Ng's writing as "spare"? Certainly, the ability to use few and simple words to create images and stories as moving and profound as the ones Ng relays in *Bone* is an admirable skill for any writer to aspire to or possess. But is this the "spareness" that these critics refer to, or is the idea of her language being "spare" more related to the fact that she literally "spares" mainstream monolingual readers from having to engage with languages other than standard English in her work? The *Orlando Sentinel* writes that "Sometimes the best, most artful stories are those told in the simplest language. Such is the case with *Bone*... a novel as spare, clean, and lovely as its title." Is the subtext to this review that the "simplest" and "best"

language for an ethnic American writer to use is one which sticks to the standard, rather than experimenting with or hybridizing multiple linguistic forms? Is the reviewer subtly praising Ng for keeping the novel “clean” by not “dirtying” it with nonstandard forms of English or with languages other than English?

It seems this may be the case, but a closer reading of the language in *Bone* actually complicates the idea of Ng’s prose as cleanly spared of languages other than standard English. Ng actually *doesn’t* stick to standard English throughout the text. Her language isn’t quite as spare or simple as reviewers praise it to be, and, in fact, she may more frequently use languages other than standard English in *Bone* than do a lot of other ethnic American writers (in fact, I would argue that she uses far more Cantonese words and nonstandard English words than Lee uses Korean or other Englishes). Over two dozen Chinese words and phrases appear throughout Ng’s short 191-page novel, starting from its very first pages. Her work is also notable for its frequent use of nonstandard English as a way of demonstrating the limited relevance of the language in the lives of first-generation immigrant characters. This is a textual strategy not utilized by many other American authors, and one that certainly marks Ng’s work as written not entirely in standard English or spare, eloquent, graceful prose. On the contrary, so-called “broken” English abounds throughout the text, especially in the speech of “old-timers” like Leon and Mah. Leon refers to Mason as “him grandson”; tells Leila, “I took the subway be the wrong direction”; asks her, “You be the eat already?”; and questions Mason, “How you guys know?,” to give just a few examples (10, 8, 91, 62). Yet, ironically, Ng’s incorporation of both Chinese and nonstandard English arguably works to make the rest of her prose even more “standard sounding,” suggesting a hesitance to truly deviate from linguistic standards even as she cannot resist creating characters who speak in nonstandard Englishes and in other languages. Ng’s incorporation of these languages makes it so that they do not create too much of a disturbance or disruption in the text. Readers don’t have to stop, translate, try to figure out sentences, look for answers in clues or context, or feel lost if they can’t interpret or understand the languages

they encounter. Rather, the nonstandard Englishes Ng employs, as well as the Chinese words she includes throughout the text, are mostly background noise, white noise, the sounds of silence. As such, they arguably serve to bolster up the idea of standard English as just that—the standard, the norm, the right way to speak and write. Like Lee, Ng minoritizes the other voices in the novel even as she includes them, using Leila, a second-generation Chinese American who speaks in the same standard English Ng writes in, to tell the majority of the story, even as much of it centers on Mah and Leon.¹²

The first time we see the use of Chinese in *Bone* is as early as the seventh page of the novel, when we are told the story of Leon and his friend You Thin successfully passing their interrogation at Angel Island despite having false papers. Afterward, the two friends “predicted the good life, ‘*Hao sai gai!*’” (7). This is frequently the way that Chinese is used in Ng’s text: rather than putting the Chinese words first and then translating into English, the Chinese comes after the English, so that there is literally not even a second of confusion or uncertainty on the part of mainstream readers in having to read Chinese first and then receive its translation. As is true of almost every usage of Chinese in the novel, the language here is also italicized, marked as different and other—it is not the regular language of the text, the “simple” and “spare” prose that Ng uses most of the time. Furthermore, while in this instance we do get a side-by-side English/Chinese translation (even if English comes first), when the translation is less precise or exact—when the words cannot as easily be rendered into a simple, graceful English—Leila opts for not confusing or frustrating English-only readers with an in-depth discussion of how to understand Chinese words, instead hurrying over the act of translation, marginalizing and silencing the language. For example, we see Chinese again on page 12 of the novel, when Leila tells us about the Nam Ping Yuen housing project that her sister Ona jumped off of to commit suicide. After mentioning the project, Leila quickly throws in for readers that “*Nam* [again in italics] means south and *ping yuen*—if you want to get into it—is something like ‘peaceful gardens’” (12). Leila’s translative act here is extremely interesting, and indicative of how

Chinese is featured throughout the narrative: it's almost an apology; her "if you want to get into it" can be read as a way of telling English-only readers, I know you *don't* want to get into it, don't care that much about languages other than standard English, and for *this* novel, you don't have to. Suggesting that the Chinese words aren't all that important, she dismissively tells us that the phrase translates as "something like" peaceful gardens, and leaves it at that. In the next sentence, Leila moves quickly on to telling us the English names for the Nam Ping Yuen, explaining that "We [and here we can assume she means herself and other second-generation, native-English-speaking Chinese Americans] call it simply The Nam or The Last Ping or The Fourth Ping." Interestingly, the English names for the housing project are of more interest to her; she spends more time telling us those. In *Lost and Found*, her study of translation acts in multi-ethnic U.S. literature, Martha Cutter writes that even when "translation may seem 'impossible' in a pure sense," it is, for some characters and narrators, "also absolutely necessary" (32). Such is not the case for Leila, however; translation is not necessary, urgent, or prioritized in her text, but rather falls by the wayside, something she doesn't want to get into and assumes her readers don't want to get into either. Leila is mostly unwilling to play the role of translator—she is the *facilitator* of the English-only-speaking reader's encounters with Chinese, but I would argue that this a different role than translator: as facilitator, she keeps the reader's interactions and encounters with the Chinese language to a minimum.¹³ Cutter argues that translation can only succeed when the translator believes that there is "something useful and relevant to communicate" (54). In contrast, Leila's apathetic, muted translations—"if you really want to get into it"—suggest that she doesn't see the act of translating as relevant or useful for her mainstream audience (12).

Furthermore, though Ng does include a number of Chinese words in the novel, these are dominated by the ways in which Chinese is mostly silenced and invisibilized throughout the narrative, made an absent-presence. This occurs both when we are told that characters speak in Chinese but see only English dialogue ("Where else?' [Leon] said in Chinese"), and when

dialogue is glossed over altogether: “In Chinese, Mah asked about Leon” (91, 96). Interestingly, in a lot of important scenes, Leila herself chooses to speak in Chinese rather than in English; but, as in the examples above, we don’t see it, don’t hear it, don’t read it. In a scene when she reflects upon her relationship with her biological father, Lyman Fu, who left for Australia while Mah was still pregnant with Leila, Leila tells us: “I’ve never seen him. When I say ‘never seen,’ I’m thinking of the Chinese term, ‘seen his face.’ I’ve seen his picture and read his letters” (184). Though Leila thinks of a specific Chinese term here to best capture how she feels about her father, she excludes the term itself from what she tells us, something that is characteristic of how she simultaneously includes and excludes Chinese throughout her narration. Leila also frequently resorts to Chinese in critical scenes when she has important conversations or arguments with Mah and Leon, but again, we don’t see or hear the Chinese words either she or her parents use in these scenes. After marrying Mason behind her parents’ backs, Leila prepares to tell Mah the news, a moment she knows will be an awful one. The scene is described as follows: “as soon as the [customer] and her child walked out the door [of Mah’s shop], I went up to Mah and started out in Chinese, ‘I want to tell you something’” (19). The Chinese is not featured, though, and in the next second, Leila “switche[s] to English.” It is easier for Leila to use English, especially when arguing with her mother (who Leila admits has “a world of [Chinese] words that were beyond me”), but it is also easier for *readers* (20). Just as Leila’s mainstream, largely English-only-speaking audience starts to grow fearful that they will have to try to follow this important argument as it unfolds in another language, Leila reassures us otherwise: she will speak in Chinese to her mother, but this will literally remain off the books. She will give us only the English version of the argument, and, what’s more, will switch quickly back to English, seemingly as much for readers’ comfort as for her own. In the same scene, even Mah’s Chinese, her preferred language, the one that is easier and more comfortable for *her*, is excluded from the text. Significantly, this is a scene in which Mah chooses Chinese over English not automatically, as she does throughout much of the novel, but rather as a deliberate linguistic

strategy—like Mrs. Park’s use of Korean during her fight with Henry, the use of the language functions as a way of emphasizing her child’s distance from her, reminding her Americanized and rebellious daughter how far she has strayed from familial and cultural tradition. Despite this, readers are once again not given the opportunity to learn the Chinese words Mah uses throughout the fight. When Leila accuses her mother of being angry about the sneaky marriage because perhaps she doesn’t like Mason, Mah responds, “Mason... I love.” Immediately after this, Leila tells us, “for love she used a Chinese word: to embrace, to hug” (21). Yet readers have already experienced the moment in English—we read and hear the scene as if Mah used the English word for love, and then, almost as an afterthought, Leila fills us in on the fact that Mah uses Chinese. Despite the fact that the word Mah uses is a carefully chosen one, an emotionally felt one, Ng still excludes it from the text. Following the colon, where the Chinese word should appear—“for love she used a Chinese word:”—there is an absence, a silence that is filled, instead, by the English “synonyms” Leila uses to explain Mah’s word. Cutter argues in her analysis of *Bone* that this is a successful moment of translation for Leila because she “translates her mother’s Chinese term for ‘love’ into an English word that is meaningful to herself and her readers,” but what of the *Chinese* word that is meaningful to *Mah*, carefully chosen by her during this emotional and important moment (43)? Is it possible that Ng withholds and mutes Chinese words throughout the novel, even in the most intimate and emotional scenes, because she fears that some of the intimacy she shares with readers through using *their* language would be lost by sharing with, or “imposing” upon them, the intimacy of words spoken between characters in Chinese?

Certainly, this is one way to read Ng’s use of English throughout the narrative, but why else might the author choose to largely exclude Chinese from her text? Is it possible that using standard English and excluding Chinese is a way of challenging stereotypical expectations about Chinese American literature, refusing to “pander to tastes for the exotic,” as Gonzalez puts it in her essay on *Bone* (62)? Rhee, too, argues that the novel parts ways with other Asian American

texts by refusing to feed into mainstream audiences' expectations or desires. And indeed, why would we expect Ng, born and raised in San Francisco, to write in any language *other* than English (likewise, why would we expect Lee, who came to the U.S. at the age of three and has made a career out of writing and teaching others how to write in English, to use Korean in his work)? Does Ng, as a native English speaker, perhaps see the inclusion of Chinese as an "autoexoticism," to borrow Corley's term, rather than a genuine contribution to the telling of her story (71)? In an interview, Ng explains that she wrote *Bone* largely to honor and remember the "old-timers," first-generation Chinese American immigrants who took the risk of starting new lives in America while knowing they might never be able to return to China. Interestingly, however, Ng explains the importance of using English, not Chinese, to tell the old-timers' stories and to honor their memories: "As I wrote *Bone*... I wanted to create in the language of the book an English that could serve as the fertile and final resting place for my memories of the old-timers" (Brostrom 88). In honoring the old-timers, Ng chooses a language that they themselves would not have been likely to use, but which allows her to create a space for *her* memories of them—memories which she might have been unable to preserve otherwise. Describing the language she tries to "create" in the novel as a site of both birth and death—a "fertile and final resting place"—Ng hints at the ambiguity, the dying and (re)birthing, the loss and preservation, inherent in the process of choosing languages to tell stories and preserve histories, a complicated process that is itself one of contradictions and complexities.

The idea of language usage as complex and contradictory brings me back to Scott's idea of infrapolitics, a veiled form of subversive or resistant action, as perhaps another way to understand Ng's writing. It seems possible that Ng silences or mutes Chinese in her work not to conform to mainstream audience expectations, but rather as a way of writing to what Sollors calls a "double audience," allowing mainstream readers to experience the text as familiar and comprehensible, while also inviting Chinese American readers to become the "insiders" of her storytelling process, able to hear and understand the words she alludes to but does not actually

include. As Gonzalez notes, Ng makes frequent references or allusions to Chinese words, phrases, expressions, and cultural practices which are “understood principally by those familiar with the history and culture of the Chinese American community”; as such, Gonzalez questions how much research the “average reader” would have to carry out in order to gain the “cultural literacy” required for a “deep understanding of the work” (57). Does Ng limit English-only-speaking and mainstream American audiences to a surface-level encounter with a novel that Chinese American audiences are invited to engage with on a “deeper” level? Is the Chinese American story Ng tells to mainstream audiences also in some ways “off limits” to them? Just as Leila finds comfort, relief, and even a sense of advantage in the realization that those riding through Chinatown on tourist buses will never be able to know the “inside story” of her neighborhood, does Ng, too, perhaps take comfort in, or even experience a sense of power from, telling an “inside story” to her own ethnic community and a different story—a more “sparse” and “simple” story—to mainstream audiences who do not know the Chinese words, ideas, and concepts to which she refers, but does not actually include (Ng 141)?

Finally, perhaps Ng’s inclusion/exclusion of Chinese is meant to be a veiled way of confronting mainstream readers and writing back to a largely monolingual mainstream society that often refuses to engage with or try to understand languages other than English. It seems possible that, in alluding to Chinese words while choosing not to actually include them in her work, Ng is not conforming to expectations for linguistic homogeneity in American literature, but rather *critiquing* them, asking American audiences to consider why it is that they fail to regularly encounter or engage with other languages in their own everyday lives, even as we know that hundreds of languages and dialects other than standard English are used on a regular basis in the U.S. By making Chinese the sounds of silence in her work, it seems possible that Ng may be asking readers to consider how and why other languages are silenced within our largely English-only society, as well as how they might participate in or contribute to that process of silencing. In this sense, the dominance of standard English over other languages in her text

becomes a reflection of linguistic dominance in real life, one which perhaps asks mainstream U.S. audiences to look in the mirror and consider their own role in that process of dominance and subordination.

Bharati Mukherjee

If Fae Myenne Ng is a writer who seems to have been exempted from expectations of ethnic representation and constraints of literary categorization, Bharati Mukherjee's experience as an American author has been quite the opposite. Publishers, critics, and reviewers have frequently marketed and portrayed Mukherjee as a hyphenated American, a mix of the exotic and the familiar, even as she herself has openly and continuously rejected the concept of hyphenation with regard to both her literary and cultural identity. On the back cover of *Jasmine*, for example, Mukherjee is described as follows: "Born in Calcutta and now a distinguished professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Bharati Mukherjee was the first naturalized American citizen to win the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction." This biography is a careful balance between the exotic and the American, portraying Mukherjee's life as that of an immigrant's "rags-to-riches" journey from Calcutta to the Ivy Tower, from "East" to "West." Mukherjee is also positioned as an exotic American, an "othered" American, by the cover's description of her as a citizen, but not a "natural born" one. Portrayals of Mukherjee as a mix of exotic and American have led to expectations on the part of academic and mainstream audiences alike that Mukherjee's writing will be in some way distinctly ethnic—expectations that have seemingly not applied nearly as much to writers like Senna and Ng. Is the mere fact of Mukherjee's birthplace what leads writers to expect that she will write immigrant or ethnic fiction rather than American fiction such as Senna and Ng write? Notably, the latter two authors are born in Boston and San Francisco, respectively, two distinctly "American" cities. Is birthplace alone, then, enough to lead a writer to be categorized as ethnic or American, and as beholden to the expectations of either the former or the latter? What

happens to writers like Mukherjee, who proclaim themselves as American even as they are positioned as ethnic by others?

In Mukherjee's case, attempts to define herself and her literature on her own terms have led others to treat her writing as anathematic, a disgrace to what ethnic American authors "should" do in their work. The opening sentence to Warhol-Down's essay on *Jasmine* states bluntly, "Practically everybody hates *Jasmine*," adding that although the novel initially "sold well and drew the attention of many critics interested in multicultural literature," "critics who looked at the text—especially from [feminist and] postcolonial perspective[s]—were often disgusted with what they saw" (1). Warhol-Down's claim is well substantiated by Drake's discussion of Mukherjee's work as "rejected" from a seminar on women writers of color organized by postcolonial feminist scholar Gail Ching-Liang Low. The academics participating in the seminar decided that they "could not fit [Mukherjee's] writing into the model of... texts that [they] had collectively mapped out as important," deeming her work unworthy of a place alongside writers like Toni Morrison and bell hooks. What exactly do these critics expect from Mukherjee that she apparently fails to deliver? It seems that, in writing a novel whereby an immigrant character finds a way to settle into a new life in America (though, as I argue in Chapter 1, *Jasmine* does this not by assimilating to American norms, but rather rejecting the concept of recognized citizenship in favor of identifying as American on her own terms), Mukherjee is automatically labeled as an assimilationist writer, one who fails both to meet her responsibility to her ethnic community and to articulate a critique of the U.S.'s problematic treatment of immigrants, women, and racialized others. Critics have accused her of writing "happily-ever-after" immigrant novels, of having had a forty-year-long "romance with the United States," and of "pandering to a cosmopolitan audience while leaving aspects of cultural memory and diaspora to the periphery," suggesting a "camouflaged 'hegemonic' agenda" (Nishimura 118, Gabriel 126, Nishimura 118, Field and Ticen 248). Mukherjee, however, has argued that critics and reviewers tend to "choose to misread [her works], because they have

agendas of their own” (Hancock 41). What are the ways in which Mukherjee’s works have been “misread,” then, and how might we understand her identification as an American author as perhaps not “hegemonic,” but rather a position of resistance to mainstream standards and expectations for ethnic writers?

Suggesting the important (and sometimes problematic) role that critics play in shaping how a text is received by others, Mukherjee argues in an interview that many of the scholars that have been critical of her work “have actually not read my books. But they have read each other on Mukherjee” (Gabriel 127). As such, she suggests that they reinforce one another’s expectations about what her writing should do without giving enough (if any) consideration to what it *does* do and what purposes that might serve: “Postcolonial scholars would like me to dramatize all white people as villains and oppressors and all non-white characters as the oppressed and victimized. I refuse to do that because it is not the way my characters respond to circumstances in life, it is not the way I see people around me respond necessarily to circumstances” (Gabriel 128). As we saw with Mohr, whose prospective publisher found her work not “authentic” enough to meet his desires for portrayals of violence and crime, Mukherjee is also accused of inauthenticity when she does not write about race relations and immigration the way that others expect her to. The idea of Mukherjee as expected to portray “all white people as villains and oppressors and all non-white characters as the oppressed and victimized” suggests that critics themselves reinforce the dichotomies—“American” versus “immigrant,” “white” versus “non-white,” etc.—that they accuse Mukherjee of failing to deconstruct and critique in her own work. Their expectations that Mukherjee “pick a side” leads one to wonder how their own one-sided readings of her work might in fact overlook ways in which Mukherjee *does* deconstruct and challenge power relationships between the powerful and the marginalized. Western feminists, for example, both academics and mainstream critics alike, have continually portrayed Mukherjee’s work as reinforcing, rather than resisting, concepts of male dominance and female subordination. But Mukherjee herself has argued that “What is regarded as passivity

[in her female characters' behaviors]... by feminist *Ms. Magazine*-type readers... was meant to be read very differently... I did not build, deliberately build into the center of [my novels], the *Ms. Magazine* way as the 'right' way with everyone else defective in their ways of fighting domination, whether it is male or class or poverty" (Connell 21). She goes on to explain, "I think a resistance does run through my work. For some non-white, Asian women, our ways of negotiating power are different. There is no reason why we should have to appropriate—wholesale and intact—the white, upper-middle-class women's tools and rhetoric. Especially rhetoric" (Connell 22). Mukherjee figures her struggle to use her own rhetoric as a battle with words between herself and critics; the ways in which her words and intentions are misread, misrepresented, and manipulated by others makes this an especially fraught battle indeed.

While critics have (mis)read Mukherjee's insistence on being understood as an American writer as evidence of her assimilation to dominant literary and cultural norms, Mukherjee herself has tried to explain in numerous interviews and essays why and how she chooses to inhabit the role of American, rather than ethnic American, author. For one thing, Mukherjee sees the role of the marginalized or hyphenated American writer as one which severely constrains what kind of literature that writer can produce—or, at least, what kind of literature the mainstream public will expect or accept from that writer. In an interview with Field and Ticen, Mukherjee laments that mainstream American writers like David Eggers are free to be "experimental" in their work, whereas if hyphenated American writers try to "write edgy material" or "pla[y] with form or points of view, then the reading public gets uncomfortable" (251). Mukherjee's adopting of an American authorial identity, then, actually functions as a way of refusing to do what mainstream America expects of her, refusing to fit the "niche" that is offered as the only space available to many ethnic American writers. At the same time, proclaiming herself as an American author even as publishers and critics seek to categorize her in other ways is also an insistence on defining herself and her work on her own terms, a form of self-authorization and self-legitimation that is much like the form of self-authorized

Americanness that her characters negotiate for themselves (see my Chapter 1). In her essay “Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman,” Mukherjee asks, “Why is it that hyphenization is imposed only on non-white Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are ‘problematized’ if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms?” (33). Suggesting that her identification as an American is actually a form of resistance, rather than conformity, to national norms, Mukherjee explains that “to reject hyphenization is to demand that the nation deliver the promises of the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens” (33). Yet, Mukherjee also writes that her attempt to reject the hyphenated author position is a “lonely campaign,” suggesting that embracing hyphenization has become a sort of norm of its own among marginalized and minority writers, a required way of fitting one’s work into a particular niche.

Instead of writing within the niche of ethnic American literature, Mukherjee seeks instead to redefine and expand what definitions of American literature might mean. In her 2011 essay “Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature,” Mukherjee writes that “the *story* of my life has no ready-made models in the works of iconic Anglo-American writers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, T.S. Eliot, and Henry James are probably cringing at their first literary encounter with first-generation immigrant experience” (684). This, is, perhaps, Mukherjee’s intention, though—to make others uncomfortable by offering them “American” stories that are unlike those they already know, so that, from this discomfort might emerge a broader sense of how we might define not only American literature but American identity itself. As Lauret writes, “it is well known that Mukherjee sees herself not as an exile or expatriate... she insists—like Richard Rodriguez—on being read as an American writer.” Yet, “Mukherjee’s ambition... is rather greater than to make a contribution to the multicultural tapestry that American literature has avowedly become since the 1970s: it is to teach ‘*them*’ [Americans] something new. Although herself an American citizen... [Mukherjee] ‘expos[es]’ the fact that Americans are her Others, ignorant of the rest of the world, and of the rest of the world that is in its midst” (Lauret 178). Echoing Lauret’s point, Mukherjee herself has written that, “as a writer,

my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America” (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 34).

In striving to produce a new form of American literature, and, by extension, of Americanness, Mukherjee also strives to create a new American English, reappropriating the language to tell her own stories. When asked in an interview about the role of language in her works in relation to content and form, Mukherjee responded, “I’m a careful writer. I am alert to the potency of, and possibilities in, language. English is a language that I have appropriated... Perhaps we who appropriate English are more aware of the language’s powers than are native-speakers” (Hancock 35). Like the writers I have discussed before, Mukherjee’s use of America’s “mainstream” language serves resistant and subversive purposes; however, in Mukherjee’s case, the reappropriative and resistant aspects of her work, language usage included, have been largely overlooked or ignored by critics who refuse to consider the myriad reasons why Mukherjee might adopt the seemingly “assimilationist” authorial identity that she does. In no small part because of the ways in which she has been categorized and subject to others’ expectations of ethnic representation, Mukherjee feels that her writing has been largely misunderstood: as she tells an interviewer, “no one g[ets it], you see” (Connell 22).

Leslie Marmon Silko

In an essay on “Ethnic America Undercover,” Crystal Parikh writes that “the anxiety that the minority insider might come to serve as a traitorous informant on his or her community is one commonly found in the texts of writers of color and often comes accompanied with a mandate to ‘not tell’” (249). Parikh gives Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* as examples, but Leslie Marmon Silko is another writer who has found herself positioned as a traitor for “telling”; her novel *Ceremony*, the subject of my Chapter 7, has been viewed by other ethnic “insiders”—as well as by mainstream critics—as a betrayal, an offering up to mainstream audiences of a sacred, inside story. Critics have lambasted Silko’s

“deliberate use of one culture’s form for another’s content,” with perhaps the most outspoken critic being the late Paula Gunn Allen, a fellow Laguna Pueblo writer and academic who has called *Ceremony* a “violati[on of] the traditional ethic” (Flores 55; Allen 85). In an essay in which she agonizes over the publishing, analyzing, and teaching of *Ceremony* and the “insider stories” it contains within it, Allen explains, “the story [Silko] lays alongside the novel [through the poetic verse embedded in the text] is a clan story and is not to be told outside the clan. I have long wondered why she did so” (88). Allen positions Silko as both a traitor and a sellout, describing the sharing of the clan story as a “security leak” (88).¹⁴ Other critics have been equally as scathing of Silko’s “telling,” not only because it lets outsiders in on an inside story, but also because it renders the traditionally orally-told stories of the tribe into written form, an act which many view as yet another way in which Silko “violat[es] the traditional ethic” and sells out (Allen 85). As Peacock writes, “contemporary Native American novels are to traditional oral stories as contemporary commercially sold Pueblo pots and Navajo blankets are to their prototypes: they are produced in order to satisfy modern market demands... for something original or at least new and different,” a way of making Native American storytelling “publishable and saleable” (301). Silko herself admits to a sort of exploitation of Laguna oral storytelling traditions for her own individual purposes. Describing her first experience in a college creative writing class, she recalls: “the professor gave us little exercises. Then he said one day, ‘We want a character sketch’... and I thought, oh no! I had thousands. And so I did it. And then he said, ‘We want a story,’ I thought, Is he serious? Is this all it is? I just *cashed in on all those things I’d heard*” (Coltelli 247 emphasis added). The idea of “cashing in on” the traditional stories of her tribe to advance her own academic and literary career seems problematic—especially when we consider that Silko would go on to make thousands and thousands of dollars off the publications of her works while many of the people in the places she writes about continue to struggle with economic disenfranchisement and immobility—but must this necessarily be read as an exploitative act, a traitorous decision to coopt an insider story in

order to render it into a publishable, sellable, consumable print form? While many critics have read the novel in this way, others have suggested that Silko's act of writing is less a cooptation and transformation of the oral into the written than it is an attempt to infuse the written with the oral, to modify the standard with use of the nonstandard, to combine the official with the unofficial, the central with the peripheral. Denise Cummings, for one, argues that Silko "combine[s] ethnohistorical and tribal oral traditions with the literary conventions derived from American and Western European literatures," and views the "turning of Native American story into English as a method of appropriation and reappropriation" in which Silko "us[es] the dominant forms [of Western art] to rewrite [American] history" (66, 65, 73). Silko herself also questions and attempts to undermine the dichotomy that positions the oral and the written as distinctly "Native American" and "American" storytelling forms, respectively, noting that she has been deeply influenced by Southern American writers, particularly William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, whose work is developed from an oral storytelling tradition not unlike that of the Laguna people (Cohen 261-2).¹⁵

Nevertheless, accusations of Silko as "cashing in on" Laguna stories in order to facilitate her own mainstream success continue to circulate long after the publication of *Ceremony*, and perhaps even more so as the novel moved rapidly from margins to mainstream, becoming almost an "instant classic" in the field of Native American literature. That *Ceremony* came about in the same way Mohr's and Mukherjee's first novels did—by solicitation from a white publisher—certainly helps the argument that Silko coopts Native American oral stories in order to feed the desires of a white mainstream audience; but what else, aside from her "cashing in on" these stories as material for her work, allowed Silko to move so successfully from margins to mainstream in such a short amount of time? Silko has perhaps become "*the*" Native American writer; her works have not only successfully entered mainstream American literary, commercial, and cultural contexts, but have also become the "mainstream of the margins," representative of the entire field of Native American literature. With occasional competition from N. Scott

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn, Ceremony* has been figured as the single most important Native American novel, what one critic calls the "zenith" of the field (Bauerkemper 38). What has allowed this particular text—and not the works of so many other lesser-known Native American writers, from Francis Washburn to Sherwin Bitsui to Ofelia Zepeda—to achieve such success? For one thing, though Silko gets her start as a novelist through solicitation from a white publisher, just as Mohr and Mukherjee did, Silko had already launched a considerably successful literary career through the publication of numerous short stories prior to the release of her novel, something that was not the case for the latter two writers. In the preface to *Ceremony*, Silko writes that her book contract with Viking Press came about after editor Richard Seaver saw her short stories in Ken Rosen's 1974 anthology of Native American literature, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (xi). The history to this is actually more complex than Silko lets on, however. As Roemer notes in his essay on Silko's rise to canonicity, Rosen was Silko's classmate at the University of New Mexico, where she had already begun to establish herself as a serious writer by publishing short stories in student publications and regional journals. Roemer stresses the "key roles of academic and publishing connections in canon formation" by pointing out that, when seeking contributors for his anthology, Rosen turned to his former classmate not only to contribute to the anthology, but to play the seminal role in it (226). The title of the anthology itself comes from the title of one of Silko's stories included therein, and, with seven out of the nineteen stories in the anthology written by Silko, including "Yellow Woman," a now-canonized work itself, her pieces "dominat[e] the book," as Roemer puts it (226). This Silko-centric collection, then, not only helps to establish Silko as a major Native American writer even before the release of her first novel, but, given the text's significance as the first major collected volume of Native American literature,¹⁶ also helps to establish the field of Native American literature as defined by Silko herself. In other words, if the anthology played a critical role in establishing Silko as a major Native American writer, it also played a critical role in defining Native American literature as, predominantly, literature by Silko.

The publishing of the anthology as simultaneously helping to establish both Silko's career and the very field of Native American literature also begs the question of how crucial timing is to canonicity and commercial success. With the release of *Ceremony* in 1977, just three years after the release of Rosen's anthology, Roemer notes that the novel was published "just as Native American literature was beginning to gain acceptance in English departments," adding that the first book-length study of Native American fiction, Larson's *American Indian Fiction* (1978) appeared less than a year after the publication of *Ceremony*—and, of course, included a section on the novel. The novel's publication in the wake of both the Civil Rights and feminist movements has also seemingly contributed to its widespread success and canonicity, perhaps offering a reason for why Silko has arguably been even more successful than her male "counterparts," the well-known Native American authors N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie. As Roemer argues, the ways in which rising mainstream awareness of Native American literature coincided with Civil Rights and feminist concerns led scholars and teachers of literature to wonder about the absence of Native American *women* writers within the newly developing field:

in the popular (and much of the academic) mid-twentieth-century imagination, Indian identity was typically a masculine identity, with the obvious exceptions of the squaw and princess stereotypes, and the specific "simulations" (to borrow Gerald Vizenor's use of the term) of Pocahontas and Sakajawea, both celebrated for serving non-Indian males. "Where are the women?" demanded literature teachers and scholars. Silko's *Ceremony* was an exciting answer to this question, one that was enhanced by the incorrect assumption voiced by some scholars that *Ceremony* was the first novel written by a Native American woman. (225)

Interestingly, however, Silko nevertheless uses a male protagonist in *Ceremony*—women are largely absent from the novel, and, when they are featured, are often over-sexualized (as in the case of Ts'eh) or demonized (as in the case of Tayo's Auntie). Silko admits in the preface to the

novel that she tried to write *Ceremony* using a female protagonist twice, but ultimately changed her mind because she felt “too self-conscious,” raising the interesting question of whether a Native American woman writer using a female protagonist to tell a Native American story might have perhaps been “too much” for mainstream American audiences, too precarious of a position for Silko to put herself in (xvi).

If anthologists, publishers, editors, critics, academics, political activists, and even mainstream celebrities¹⁷ were all, to a degree, responsible for helping to bring Silko’s *Ceremony* into the literary spotlight, what happens to the novel once it achieves its transition from margins to mainstream—how is the text then read, analyzed, and used by others? For one thing, a continued outpouring of scholarship on *Ceremony* has helped to further cement the text’s place in the mainstream American literary canon, recalling my earlier discussion of how criticism on a text can contribute as much to its canonization as the text itself. As I noted earlier in this chapter, there are dozens of published essays and multiple book-length studies on Silko and her work, including two special issues of academic journals devoted solely to *Ceremony*. The first of these, a 1979 *American Indian Quarterly* special issue on the novel (5.1), was, as Roemer notes, released within two years of the novel’s publication, making it so that “interested scholars and teachers had [almost immediately after the novel’s publication] a convenient guide to numerous ‘backgrounds’ and ‘sources’ for *Ceremony*.” As such, he adds, “one of the primary barriers to teaching and writing about Native American literature—an ignorance of tribal cultures and literatures—was quickly, conveniently, and convincingly diminished” (229). Roemer argues that the publication of this special issue, along with the inclusion of analyses of Silko’s work in Larson’s *American Indian Fiction*, as well as in Velie’s *Four American Indian Literary Masters* (1982) (of which Silko was the only female writer included) and Kenneth Lincoln’s *Native American Renaissance* (1983), helped to establish a “precedent that made unthinkable (or at least academically suspect) a book-length study of fiction or a special Native American literature journal issue that did not include discussion of *Ceremony*” (229). In other words, a flurry of

early criticism surrounding the novel led to more criticism on it, and then still more, with all of these critics helping to fuel the image of Silko as “the” Native American writer, founder and center of the field.

But what are the analyses that critics of Silko’s novel offer to mainstream readers? If critics have helped to establish the importance of the text, how have their readings and misreadings of the novel contributed to the text’s reception in larger literary and cultural contexts? One of the major things critics have done with the text is to try to make it understandable and less “foreign” to mainstream audiences. As such, much of the criticism on the novel focuses less on close reading, analysis, and interpretation of the text than on explaining elements of Native American culture and history to white/mainstream readers, as is the case in essays such as Thomas Weso’s “Shamanism and Medicine Plants in Silko’s *Ceremony*” and Valerie Harvey’s “Navajo Sandpainting in *Ceremony*.” Bauerkemper makes a similar point, noting that, despite being the subject of dozens of works of Native American literary criticism, including some of the most important critical works in the field, the text “remains paradoxically understudied” (38). Some critics have gone as far as to literally try to rewrite the novel in a form that makes it more comprehensible for mainstream/non-Native audiences, both in terms of content and genre. As Bauerkemper points out, the text’s structure resists the typical form of the novel by “highlighting an indefinite cycle of beginnings rather than a determinate progression from beginning to end,” but some critics have sought to locate and fix progress and completion in a story that deliberately resists these features (42). In Beidler and Nelson’s essay “Untangling the Narrative Threads in Silko’s *Ceremony*,” the authors break down *Ceremony*’s narrative structure in a way completely oppositional to how Silko writes the text: their essay offers readers a chronological narrative timeline of the jumbled, multi-layered histories Silko weaves into the novel, reshaping these histories into a linear, rather than nonlinear and cyclical, form. Western methods of narration and timekeeping are imposed upon the text, and the segregation of different elements of the novel into categories the authors label

as “present action,” “past action,” and “mythic” suggests the ways that these critics seek to re-impose the very boundaries between Native American and American cultures and storytelling forms that Silko works to muddle, blur, and undercut throughout the novel (Biedler and Nelson 6). The authors acknowledge in the conclusion of their essay that it is “always dangerous, of course, to try to untangle a work of fiction whose very brilliance is its interconnectedness,” but that is exactly the work their piece attempts to do (13). The implication behind the idea that Silko’s novel needs “untangling” is that, while it may be “brilliant,” it is not *understandable*—that is, the “average” mainstream American reader needs a literary/academic guide or translator to enable them to decode and make sense of the text. By positioning themselves as the text’s translators, timeliners, and untanglers, Biedler and Nelson not only assume American readers are unwilling to “untangle” the text on their own, but also position Silko’s novel as “not American,” as different from novels mainstream American readers are familiar with, even as the text has undeniably moved into the mainstream by the time the critics publish their essay in 2004.

I would argue that critics who criticize the novel as the traitorous telling of an “inside” story are also among those who misread/misunderstand/mis-analyze the text, failing to see the ways in which Silko keeps much of the story hidden from mainstream readers even as she tells it to them. Eppert points out that Silko “assumes readerly knowledge of oral Native history, and does not explicate the myths, supernatural themes and sacred symbols that she introduces in her work” (736). As such, it is arguable that Silko envisions her primary audience as Native American, rather than mainstream American, and that her telling of the myths in written form might thus be read as a preservation, rather than a violation, of the sacred. Though Silko does invite mainstream readers to listen in, Eppert describes the novel as a “struggl[e] to articulate... boundaries”: on the one hand, readers are asked to participate in the sacred ceremonial process through the act of reading, but at the same time, Silko limits and constrains the extent to which they can participate (742). This is made evident not only through her refusal to explain certain

elements of Laguna culture and tradition to readers, but also through her use of language—like Ng, Silko withholds Native languages from the text, replacing them with English, seemingly as a way to keep English-only readers at a certain distance. For example, when Old Ku’oosh, the traditional Laguna healer, first comes to visit Tayo and initiate the Ceremony, the two men have a conversation which is figured as highly significant to Tayo’s eventual healing and to the narrative itself. Critical to the value of this conversation is the language itself: the words Ku’oosh chooses to use, and the way he says them, reconnect Tayo with forms of communication that have been lost to him through his immersion in the white man’s world. As they converse, Ku’oosh comforts Tayo by telling him, “But you know, grandson, this world is fragile.” Moved by his words, Tayo observes that

The word [Ku’oosh] chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs... It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way... 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. (32-33)

Despite this long and moving description of the power of the word Ku’oosh uses for “fragile”—and despite Tayo’s insistence that there be “no mistake in the meaning of what had been said”—we, the readers, never see this word written out in the text. Although the narration clues us in to the fact that Ku’oosh uses a Laguna word to express the concept of fragility, the dialogue itself reads in English. Only Tayo, not the (English-speaking) audience, is a linguistic insider in this scene—we are made aware that he and Ku’oosh converse in a language that we are not made privy to, a language which we are aware expresses much more than the English translation readers are offered. The use of English, then, is, like Ng’s use of English, a subversive and subtle way of keeping mainstream audiences at a distance, positioned as outsiders. Silko herself acknowledges the importance of using such subversive tactics as a way of enacting resistance

through her work: as she tells an interviewer, “I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation... in America, when you confront the so-called mainstream, it’s very inefficient, and in every way possible destroys and disarms you. I’m still a believer in subversion. I don’t think we’re numerous enough, whoever ‘we’ are, to take them by storm” (250).

Silko’s claim that “whoever ‘we’ are,” “we’re [not] numerous enough,” begs one final question: to what extent has Silko’s hypercanonization as “the” Native American writer limited the range of other writers who might be included among the “we” that “confront[s] the so-called mainstream” (Coltelli 250)? While Silko has been represented as the “voice” of Native Americans within mainstream literature, historians and other scholars of Native American history and literature have critiqued the lumping of the many incredibly diverse Native American tribes into one ethnic group, what Bauerkemper calls the “Euroamerican effort to capture varied and complex tribal cultures within the simplistic fiction of ‘The Indian’” (29). In what ways has the use of Silko’s novel as the representative work of Native American literature helped to contribute to the continued marginalization and exclusion of other Native American writers from the mainstream literary canon? In her excellent text by the same title, Jacqueline Jones Royster uses the idea of “traces of a stream” to speak to the ways in which a handful of works of writing by African American women have become spotlighted as exceptional, rather than being understood as part of a much larger history of African American women’s writing, only traces of a larger stream that we do not fully see or recognize. Her analysis invites us to think about the ways in which a small handful of “ethnic American” works become canonized or celebrated at the expense of other texts. Bauerkemper describes *Ceremony* as the “zenith of American Indian literatures” and as a work that is a “ubiquitous presence on high school reading lists and undergraduate syllabi[,] plac[ing] the book before thousands of new readers each year,” while Larry McMurty argues that *Ceremony* can “easily stand as one of the two or three best novels of [Silko’s] generation” (38). But Roemer, like myself, wonders how the work’s “early internal canonization can also work to keep new authors or even subsequent works by the

‘masters’ out of Indian and American canons” (233). His point is well-taken, given the fact that more recent works of Native American literature, such as Ofelia Zepeda’s 2008 poetry collection *Where Clouds are Formed* and Luci Tapahonso’s 2008 work *A Radiant Curve: Poems and Stories*, continue to be excluded from the canon, as do later works by Silko herself, including *Almanac of the Dead* and *Garden in the Dunes*. Perhaps the mainstream literary canon’s celebration of *Ceremony* suggests, problematically, that one is enough—that we have our Native American masterpiece in Silko’s novel, and needn’t make any more room in the American canon for other marginalized Native American writers or texts. Interestingly, Silko herself has rejected her status as “the” Native American writer on two counts: for one, she argues that using her work as representative of the entire field of Native American literature overlooks the vast differences among different Native American writers and their varied ethnic backgrounds, histories, cultures, and languages (Cohen 260). Secondly, Silko rejects the label of Native American author because of its suggestion that her work, and the work of other native writers, cannot be read as simply American. As she explains, “It bothers me... scholars and teachers are saying that there is not room for you because you will not be studied [unless your work is designated Native American literature].” Silko argues that American literature “means white male, maybe a few females... MLA perpetuates it with their little subcommittees; I don’t know. I understand why they do it, but I am not really at peace with it at all... There should just be American literature” (Cohen 260-261). Her lamentation suggests the continued struggle, even among those “ethnic” writers who have most successfully moved into the mainstream, to define one’s literature on one’s own terms within academic and commercial contexts that continue to shape individual works and the larger American literary canon in limited and constraining ways.

Throughout Part III, as well as in an earlier section of this chapter, I argued that U.S. schools are one of the most—if not *the* most—significant sites through which dominant national narratives are circulated, absorbed, and reproduced. I have also suggested that schools have the

potential to become a key site through which students and national subjects encounter alternative national narratives through, among other sources, the reading of multi-ethnic and multilingual U.S. literature. Yet, as the experiences of the seven authors discussed above show, literatures, languages, writers, and readers are all constrained and limited by commercial, academic, and societal demands for categorization, classification, definition, and identification. How might literature, especially multi-ethnic U.S. literature, be positioned, understood, categorized, and defined differently, in ways which leave more room for writers to articulate new narratives and for readers to encounter such narratives? The authors discussed throughout *Battles with Words* certainly suggest, through their very works themselves, how the field of American literature might be redefined and understood in different, more encompassing ways—especially as a multilingual rather than monolingual body of writing—but these authors have also articulated, in interviews and essays, their own visions of how American literature might be constructed differently in schools and classrooms in order to broaden students’ understandings of the field and of literature itself. Interestingly, these authors have also suggested that we move away from categorizing literatures as national altogether, instead learning to think about how literatures (and, by extension, cultures and languages) can be understood as transnational. Silko, for example, has said that she dreams of literature classes in U.S. schools where students read Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* alongside Henry James’s *The Ambassador* and the works of Gertrude Stein, a course she envisions as “just all kinds of potpourri” (Coltelli 261-2). Mukherjee, too, has questioned why teachers of literature in the U.S. tend to isolate works and fields from one another and into constraining categories, such that, for example, a course is taught on South Asian writers and called “postcolonial literature,” without any nod to the many other postcolonial works that are coming out of countries from all around the globe. Mukherjee wonders why there aren’t more “global literatures” courses which teach South Asian writers alongside Canadian, British, Australian, African, and U.S. authors (Field and Ticen 257-8). Mukherjee adds that *Jasmine* is perhaps her most frequently taught novel, but that she would

love to see her text *Holder of the World* taught alongside Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* because, she says, the former is a "reimagining" of the latter—"Hawthorne did his Puritan number and then I came and did Pearl's story" (Field and Ticen 258). Silko's and Mukherjee's visions of alternative literature courses in the U.S. ask us to consider what we miss when we teach literature compartmentally, as "American literature" or "ethnic American literature" or "literature by writers of color," while also inviting us to consider how teachers and students can together play a crucial role in helping to re-shape and redefine the American literary canon by making it more inclusive, diverse, multilingual, and even multinational. With schools continuing to function as one of the major sites where battles with words unfold and where linguistic, cultural, and racial discrimination are learned, their suggestions seem especially important. I close this work, then, by arguing that the battle remains unfinished, that work still remains to be done, and that it can begin, perhaps, with the teachers and students of literature, who have an urgent responsibility to consider what remains marginalized when we teach, cater to, and reinforce the very notion of "the mainstream."

Notes

Introduction: Battles with Words in Literature and Everyday Lives

1. The idea of the false consciousness of the disempowered has been argued by scholars from Fanon to Freud to Foucault to Freire. See Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*; Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*; and Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This idea can also be traced throughout the works of Freud: as de Certeau notes, Freud "weds his discourse to the masses whose *common* destiny is to be duped, frustrated, forced to labor, and who are thus subject to the law of deceit" (3).

2. Christensen co-edited *Rethinking School Reform*, a text that has captured the attention of many educators, and is also a regular contributor to the widely-read *Rethinking Schools* blog (in addition to writing and editing a number of other works on education, including *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* and *Teaching for Joy and Justice*). Other titles in the *Rethinking Schools* series include *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volumes 1 and 2*; *Rethinking Multicultural Education*; *Rethinking Columbus*; *Rethinking Globalization*, and *Rethinking Mathematics*.

Part I: Paper(less) Trails

1. My discussion of the Survival Literacy Study is indebted to Lawrence C. Stedman and Carl F. Kaestle's "Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States from 1880 to the Present," from the collection *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880*. For a more in-depth discussion of the study, see pages 95-96 of Stedman and Kaestle, which include a sample document from the study itself.

2. Censuses, for example, are meant to record and document "comprehensive" representations of both the nation at large and the ethnic, racial, educational, and economic groups that are said to comprise it, though, inevitably, certain groups are excluded from or made invisible by such a survey system.

3. Evans's discussion of the ways in which bureaucracy limited the potentiality of movement groups during the Civil Rights era is one that is echoed by many others writing about this historical period, including Malcolm X. Evans notes that the bureaucracy that was inevitably required to organize civil rights groups on such a widespread scale also resulted in "efficiency, forced cooperation, and mass organization [which] won out over critical thinking and intellectual community" (106).

4. The exception to this would be those oral conversations or communications which are recorded, itself an increasingly common form of documentation in our contemporary society—and one, which, interestingly, uses the audial rather than the written, suggesting the extent to which documentation continues to pervade the various realms of everyday life, including those spaces beyond the realm of written communications. Increasingly, the documenting of oral communications has been used to capture conversations that individuals thought to be safely "off the (written) records." Consider, for example, the case of Elisa Chan, a Councilwoman for the city of San Antonio, Texas who was secretly recorded expressing blatantly homophobic sentiments during a private meeting in her City Hall office. The staffer who used his iPhone to record her comments then released the recording to a major media source, severely damaging the reputation of the politician who allegedly planned to run for Mayor in 2015 (see Chasoff, "Elisa Chan Reveals Homophobic Views in Secret Recording"). Documenting of spoken

conversations is also used as a means to provide an auidial transcript of an oral exchange when no written transcript can be provided. The most common example of this is perhaps the frequency with which we are told that our call is being monitored or recorded when we call a customer service hotline.

5. As part of my argument in Chapter 6, on schooling and education in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, I discuss the ways in which the dominant culture in the U.S. has continuously denigrated and marginalized Native Americans histories, including those passed on through the native tradition of oral storytelling, as part of the process of authenticating and legitimating the particular version of history that best serves the interests and protects the reputations of those in power.

6. I acknowledge that it is somewhat problematic to lump these two novels—one being the story of an Indian girl who immigrates to America, the other of a Chinese American family's immigration history—together under the banner of "Asian American" literature or to suggest that both can be described simply as narratives of Asian immigration. Certainly, Asian immigration to the U.S. is, in some ways, a shared history among those nations—including China and India—that found themselves subject to the racist exclusion policies put into place in the U.S. in order to limit the number of Asian peoples coming to America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, different forms of U.S. immigration legislation that targeted, excluded, or set quotas on the admission of specific national or ethnic groups to America during specific time periods, including, again, both Chinese and Indian peoples, diversify and specify the history of Asian immigration to the U.S. into one of varied histories that overlap at certain points. Indeed, to speak of "Asia" at all, whether referring to Asian peoples or Asian immigration histories, is an inadequately broad and overly generalized term which leans toward the orientalist typography that assumes all Asians to be "the same," overlooking the incredible diversities of nations, ethnicities, languages, histories, and geographies that comprise "Asia." Bharati Mukherjee, for example, was born a Brahmin Bengali in a nation comprised of Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Brahmans, Bengals and Punjabis; in India alone, then, there are numerous histories, languages, and peoples that cannot adequately be captured under the category of "Indian." The term "Asian American" is therefore a problematic one to begin with, whether referring to literature or to history; in addition, while a useful way to speak to the shared themes of illegal immigration in *Jasmine* and *Bone*, it is also a somewhat problematic term for describing/categorizing these two texts. In literary criticism, Mukherjee, herself an immigrant to the U.S. born in India, is variously categorized as an Asian American writer, South Asian American writer, South Asian American *woman* writer (in this case, she is often treated alongside writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, and Meena Alexander), Indian Canadian writer, and Indian American writer; Ng, an American-born person of Chinese descent (as is her novel's protagonist) is often characterized by literary critics as either a Chinese American or Asian American writer, and is often compared to earlier Chinese American and Japanese American writers including Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, and John Okada. Therefore, while I occasionally use the terms Asian American and Asian immigration throughout this section in order to indicate a shared history of exclusion from and denied entry to the U.S. among Asian peoples, including those from China and India, I am nevertheless conscious of and strive to be attendant to both the different histories of Chinese American and Indian American immigration *and* the different positionalities of Mukherjee and Ng (and their protagonists) as Indian American and Chinese American women, the former born in India and the latter in the U.S.

7. To give just one everyday example of the ways in which our society assumes the permanency of that which is put in writing, consider a common threat meant to invoke fear among students and employees alike: “This is going on your permanent record!”

8. For a continuation of this brief analysis of the role of documentation in *Nilda*, see my sixth chapter, which discusses how the school Nilda attends attempts to regulate and control what does and doesn’t count as “legitimate” written proof, denying the authenticity of such documents as notes and signed forms from students’ parents.

9. What Kim refers to as “citations,” Cushman terms “literacy artifacts”—both refer to those literate documents that the disempowered come into contact with routinely as part of their interactions with institutional bureaucracies and the gatekeepers therein.

10. Scott’s concept of “infrapolitics” can be compared to Michel de Certeau’s idea of “tactics,” which he argues are used by marginalized individuals in everyday life in order to “cheat... the terms of social contracts” and find ways of beating the system(s) that constrain them (18). As such, I occasionally combine these two terms together throughout the coming chapters, referring to what I call *infrapolitical tactics*. See de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as well as Chapter 5 of my project, which discusses the use of tactics in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, for more in-depth discussions of the concept of tactics.

Chapter 1: Untraceable

1. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, the open-door immigration policy America had throughout the first century of the nation’s existence was dramatically curtailed beginning in the late nineteenth century, most notably with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first piece of U.S. immigration legislation to deny entry specifically on the basis of race/national origin. Although the Chinese were the first national/ethnic group to be specifically targeted by changes in U.S. immigration law, additional legislation was quickly passed to keep other Asians from coming to the U.S. as well. The Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 was an arrangement in which Japan agreed to bar its citizens from immigrating to America, while the U.S. Immigration Act of 1917 created the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” barring immigrants from India, Afghanistan, Arabia, parts of Russia, Persia (present-day Iran), Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and other Asian-Pacific islands (exceptions were made for certain elites or “desirable aliens”). The ban would not be fully lifted until 1965. Interestingly, the Immigration Act of 1917 was also the first federal law to require a literacy test of immigrant-hopefuls, who had to be able to demonstrate the ability to read (notably, in any language, not just English) in order to gain entry. For more information on changes in immigration policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in general, and on the Immigration Act of 1917 and the Asiatic Barred Zone in particular, see Bill Ong Hing’s *Defining America Through Immigration Policy*; Desmond King’s *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*; and Erika Lee’s *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*.

2. Mukherjee also published a short story entitled “Jasmine,” included in her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*, published one year prior to *Jasmine*. The story, a fascinating work in and of itself, follows a somewhat different Jasmine than the one we encounter in the novel: in “Jasmine,” Jasmine is a Trinidadian Indian who is smuggled into the U.S. via Canada, riding in the back of a van for a black market fee of \$3000. Once in the U.S., she works for a match-making service that arranges unions between legal and illegal Trinidadians in America, performing credit checks on potential matches. Like Jasmine in *Jasmine*, the Jasmine of “Jasmine” is also sans papers, and also has success getting a job as an

upper-class family's au pair without having any written references. In these ways and others, both the short story and novel exhibit similar preoccupations with the role of documentation (or lack thereof) in the life of an illegal immigrant woman, even as the plot lines differ somewhat.

3. On June 23, 1985, Air India Flight 182, traveling from Bombay to Toronto, was struck by a bomb while flying over Canadian soil. The aircraft exploded and all 329 people aboard the plane were killed. The attack was later revealed to have been carried out by Sikh extremists. In writing *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Mukherjee and Blaise did a good deal of their own research about the tragedy and its aftermath, uncovering some surprising information. In a rather disturbing example to back Mukherjee's claim that "Canadians of color [are] routinely treated as 'not real' Canadians"—a reason she frequently cites for leaving Canada, coming to the U.S., and becoming an American citizen—Mukherjee notes that although 90% of the passengers killed in the bombing were Canadians of Indian origin, the Canadian Prime Minister cabled the Indian Prime Minister after the event to offer Canada's condolences for India's loss ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 31). Interestingly, Mukherjee and Blaise also discuss in an interview with Collins, et al. how "nobody [would] publish *The Sorrow and the Terror* in the United States," because, as Mukherjee explains, "there were no American victims on that flight" (after making this statement during the interview, she emphatically adds to her interviewers, "I want that in the interview, please. That Americans publishers have rejected that book because they have asked again and again if there were any American citizens involved.") (28).

4. Though the "global markets" that Nishimura refers to continue to exert a vast influence on immigration opportunities and restrictions today, Mukherjee describes *Jasmine* in a 2010 interview as a "1980s American immigration narrative," adding that "the current millennium is very different—we have so many different kinds of visas now!" (Field and Ticen 254).

5. In an interview with Gabriel, Mukherjee says that she is interested in portraying many immigrant experiences, not just the singular experience of an Indian woman coming to America, adding that she recognizes that not all immigrants will experience the U.S. in the same way her protagonists do. As she explains, her decision to include Letitia and Jamaica (Manhattan day-mummies from Trinidad and Barbados, respectively) as characters in *Jasmine* was a way to show how "Caribbean day-care workers... have to leave their children behind in the islands in order to be underpaid housekeepers so that white American women can become professional directors and lawyers" (Gabriel 134).

6. "Native" American hostility and xenophobia toward immigrants, especially Asian and South Asian immigrants, was particularly rampant around the time of *Jasmine*'s publication in part because of changes occurring in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Immigration Act of 1965. Changes in immigration law allowed for a sudden mass migration of Asian and South Asian immigrants to America post-1965 such as Americans had not seen since the nineteenth century. As Bahri notes, 2.5 million immigrants came from Asia to the U.S. in the 1980s; in 1990, the year after *Jasmine* was published, over 300,000 Asian immigrants arrived on American shores within a single year (145). American citizens responded to the rapidly increasing Asian American community in the same way they did in the nineteenth century: by expressing fears about the ways in which Asian "aliens" would bring unwanted cultural, economic, and linguistic changes.

7. Hoppe is quite right to note the differences between Mukherjee's and *Jasmine*'s journeys to America. Mukherjee describes her own trip as one in which she "flew into a placid,

verdant airport in Iowa City on a commercial airliner” to study Creative Writing at a prestigious International Writer’s Workshop (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 29).

8. Prakash, the man Jasmine weds in India, had planned to take them both to America before his untimely death cut that dream short. Interestingly, though, Prakash had planned to enter the U.S. legally, on a student visa to study at the Florida International Institute of Technology in Tampa, prompting questions about who is forced to pay for forged documents and other illicit forms of entry into the U.S. and how this relates not only to race and nationality, but also to such factors as gender, class, and educational status. Men, far more likely to receive education in India at the time of Jasmine’s youth (as is portrayed in the novel itself, particularly in scenes when Jasmine’s mother subjects herself to brutal physical abuse from Jasmine’s father as punishment for supporting her daughter’s right to an education), also become more likely to be able to legally enter the U.S., whether for higher education or for employment opportunities, particularly in the fields of science, technology, and engineering. Wickramagamage raises a similar point in his discussion of the distinctions between the protagonists in *Wife* (Mukherjee’s second novel) and *Jasmine*: as he notes, Dimple, *Wife*’s protagonist, is “allowed to arrive upon the shores of America using the ‘official’ route because she has the ‘proper’ credentials as the dependent wife of [an engineer] in the ‘desirable’-aliens category, whereas, after her husband’s death, Jasmine can no longer lay claim to that ‘proper’ designation” (184).

9. When Jasmine learns that Professor Vadhera works for an importer and sorter of human hair, a fact she uncovers after calling every college in Queens and Manhattan trying to reach him at work, she promptly offers to sell him her own hair—Indian women’s hair being highly desirable in his line of work—in exchange for the forged green card she cannot afford.

10. As Michelle Favis writes in an essay with an interesting and refreshingly different focus on Bud Ripplemeyer and the portrayal of disability in *Jasmine*, “[Jasmine] feels pity, not love, for Bud” (70).

11. For an especially eloquent and moving depiction of the experiences of the “invisible” or “shadow” class in America, see Kiran Desai’s 2006 novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, particularly her portrayal of the life of the cook’s son in the U.S. For a discussion of how this novel situates the role of the “shadow class” within the context of U.S. capitalism and modern day globalization, see my article “Reading Modernity Through the Shadows,” in the collection *Critical Responses to Kiran Desai*.

Chapter 2: “America, This Lie of a Country!”

1. Leila, the novel’s narrator and the oldest of the three sisters, is the child of Mah’s first marriage to Lyman Fu, and, as such, is actually neither a Leong nor Leon’s daughter. However, throughout the novel, Leon treats Leila as his daughter and Leila treats Leon as her father; her actual father features very marginally in the text, and never as a father figure.

2. Other texts which Davis argues feature Chinatown as “protagonist” include Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea*; Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*; Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk*; Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Daughter*; and Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*.

3. Among the many essays which address the novel’s backward-moving structure, Lisa Lowe’s discussion in her chapter on “Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Writing

and the Question of History,” and Juliana Chang’s essay “Melancholic Remains: Domestic and National Secrets in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*” are particularly memorable. In an analysis which brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s idea of the Angel of History, Chang argues that *Bone* “reveals what is in excess of the national symbolic, what remains after national history and national subjectivity are narrated through modern trajectories of development and progress” (111).

4. The “sacralization of writing” is undermined and challenged in a variety of ways throughout the novel, not all of which I touch on in this chapter. Sze’s essay focuses on the ways in which oral forms of communication, particularly Chinatown gossip, are used to challenge the authority and hegemony of what is recorded or confirmed in writing.

5. Of those essays which discuss Leila’s use of the words “updaire” and “backdaire,” most notable is Diane LeBlanc’s “Neologism as Oppositional Language in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*.”

6. For more information on Chinese American immigration history, including, especially, the history of exclusionary Chinese immigration laws and the foundation of Chinese American societies in the face of these laws (including the often overlooked history of Chinese women in America) see, among other sources, *The Chinese in America: A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium*, edited by Susie Cassel; *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, edited by Sucheng Chan; Bill Ong Hing’s *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990*; Madeline Y. Hsu’s *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943*; Erika Lee’s *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*; Nayan Shah’s *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*; Judy Yung’s *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*; Lucie Cheng’s “Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America”; and Ronald Takaki’s “Searching for Gold Mountain” in his *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*.

7. A more detailed discussion of the history of capitalist and cultural forces which regulated the flow and barring of Asian immigrants to the U.S. in the mid-to-late nineteenth century can be found in Lowe’s chapter “Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization” in *Immigrant Acts*, especially pages 11-14.

8. The 1790 Naturalization Act deemed all non-white immigrants ineligible for U.S. citizenship. In 1870, in the aftermath of the Civil War and the dawn of reconstruction, the nearly century-long legislation that had deemed white male immigrants the only Americans eligible for naturalization was modified to allow men of African descent the opportunity to become naturalized citizens. Asian immigrants, however (and all immigrants who were not of Caucasian or African descent), remained ineligible for citizenship until the mid-twentieth century.

9. Chinese men were also hindered from establishing families in America through U.S. anti-miscegenation laws which prevented them from marrying outside of their race, as well as legislation which made it legal to revoke the citizenship of any female U.S. citizen who married someone ineligible for citizenship.

10. In her essay on *Bone*, Juliana Chang argues that changes in immigration legislation from the nineteenth to the twentieth century have come to form the very basis of how we frame and discuss Chinese American history: “we conventionally narrate Chinese American history in terms of domesticity, as a trajectory from ‘bachelor’ to ‘family’ sociality” (113).

11. This statistic is one which several different sources confirm: in *American Chinatown*, Tsui notes that the estimate was first reported in a 1957 *New Yorker* article; however, Takaki notes the same numbers in *A Different Mirror*, and a 2009 CNN segment on paper sons cites this statistic as well. See Tsui 20; “Searching” 202; Lui.

12. Photographic reproductions and translations of some of these poems/carvings, which were (re-)discovered by a park ranger in 1970, thirty years after the Angel Island detention camp was closed due to a fire, can be found in Te-Hsign Shan’s section on “Angel Island Poetry” in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, and in the collection *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, compiled by descendants of Chinese immigrants who landed on Angel Island. As Shan notes, these poems are perhaps the earliest extant works of Chinese/Asian American literature.

13. Leon and You Thin were right to focus on such seemingly insignificant details as how many pigs or chicken their paper families had. As Takaki notes, such were exactly the sorts of questions that interrogation officers asked of immigrant-hopefuls arriving on Angel Island. Paper sons quoted in Takaki’s text recall being asked how many steps there were in their (supposed) family’s house, if the house had a clock, or if the family had a dog. Those paper sons who came over together, both claiming to be related to the same paper father, found themselves in especially precarious positions, as immigration officers tried to catch tiny discrepancies in the details of their answers. As Takaki writes, these immigrants had to “think quickly”—and, I would add, infrapolitically—in order to successfully pass their interrogations (“Searching” 203).

14. The documentary culture that structures life in the U.S. actually complicates both of Mah’s marriages. While her marriage to Leon occurs because of her need for a green card but then fails to provide the stability a green-card union seems to promise, her first marriage to Lyman Fu is marked as illegitimate when they come to the U.S. by virtue of the fact that the union was never documented in China. In order to legitimate their union in the eyes of the U.S. government, Lyman and Dulcie have to get a new affidavit of marriage in America, which states that “In accordance with the marriage custom and practice long established, approved, and legally recognized in China; that no license or official recordation thereof at the time was required by the Chinese Government and therefore no marriage certificate is now available; and that in lieu thereof, affiant executes these presents thereby and solemnly swears to the bona fides and validity of his marriage to the aforesaid” (57).

15. As Gonzalez notes, Chinese American Benevolent Associations have been perceived as “ethnocentric” organizations that are largely unauthorized within the realm of official state-run bureaucracies; they have even been suspected as “source[s] of organized crime” (60).

16. The motif of a suitcase containing counter-narratives and alternative archives which challenge or exceed the dominant version of History is a quite prominent one not only in *Bone* and the works discussed by George, but in many works of multi-ethnic U.S. literature, from Stephen Stepanchev’s poem “Voyage” to Danzy Senna’s novel *Caucasia*.

17. Because he “d[oesn’t] trust the government” and knows that there is no documented record of his pay, Leon also keeps hidden money—untraceable funds—stashed away, just as *Jasmine*’s protagonist does (54). Since he works off the books, has no retirement fund, cannot easily claim social security, and is unable to safehouse his untaxed income in a legitimate financial institution, Leon “ke[eps] his private stash of money... in a brown bag tucked into an old blanket of Ona’s” (4).

18. The immediacy with which bureaucracy feels the need to document events and make them legible in writing is also suggested by the fact that some Chinatown neighbors and friends read about Ona's death in *The Chronicle* before they hear about it firsthand, despite the close-knit nature of the community (114).

Part II: Performing Ethnic Identities

1. The conclusion to Part II, found at the end of Chapter 4, offers a more sustained discussion and critique of the idea of the U.S. as "postethnic"/"postracial."

2. See, for example, Julia Stern's chapter on "Spanish Masquerade and the Drama of Racial Identity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" and Ellen M. Weinauer's chapter on "Passing, Possession, and Transgression in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," both in the collection *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*.

3. I am drawing here upon Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34).

4. As E. Patrick Johnson argues in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, racial "authenticity" is determined—or questioned—depending "not solely on phenotype but also on the symbolic relationship between skin color and the performance of *culturally* inscribed language or dialect that refers back to an 'essential' blackness or whiteness" (7 emphasis added).

5. In a particularly interesting discussion of how language has been used to construct false boundaries between races in the U.S., Young argues that the Jim Crow laws were designed to construct social separations between both races *and* languages. Drawing upon Gavin Jones's essay on "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Language of the Color-Line," Young argues that the laws "were instituted just as much to outlaw integrated language habits as they were to outlaw integrated race relations... at stake was whether to separate black language from white language or *consider them versions of the same*" (Young 116 emphasis added). The social constructedness of black English and white English as two "separate" languages which must be kept segregated from one another reflects the anxiety of a national culture, in both the Jim Crow era and our own, desperate to find ways to clearly define the ever-blurring boundaries between races.

6. My argument here parallels Young's notion of the "sociolinguistics of racial performance," what he refers to as the "simultaneous study and staging of racialized language habits in social contexts" (3).

7. See Elam, "Passing in the Post-Race Era," page 3.

8. This permanent crossing of the color line is dramatically portrayed in Nella Larsen's well-known novella *Passing* (1929), in which Clare Kendry, a "mulatta" woman, attempts to mask her African American ancestry from her racist white husband, convincing him that she, too, is of "all white" origins. The danger Clare puts herself in by needing to permanently conceal her blackness from her husband is revealed in a scene in which he exposes his racist hate for blacks, declaring "No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be," and later, at the conclusion of the novel, when Clare's husband discovers that his wife is passing and storms into a party in an angry rage in search of his wife, a scene which ultimately concludes with Clare's death (40).

9. In shifting focus from visually-based to linguistically-based passings, Lee and Senna's novels also differ from a number of twentieth-century works from both the passing genre and the field of African American literature more generally which suggest that those who cannot physically pass cannot pass at all. As Bennett argues, citing Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* as two examples, such works frequently portray protagonists who, because they are unable to pass for white physically, are able to cross the color line only in their own psyches ("Toni" 206).

10. This collection is edited by Elaine K. Ginsberg; the specific chapter to which I refer is written by Martha J. Cutter. See works cited.

11. My use of the term "tragic passer" draws upon the term "tragic mulatto/a," which has been used to describe individuals of mixed-race identity who make the "tragic" decision to pass as white, only to find that doing so causes them to lose their "true" selves and their attachment to their "true" racial communities (this is a common interpretation of Larsen's *Clare Kendry*). I use the term "tragic passer" rather than "tragic mulatto/a," however, in order to emphasize that it is not just protagonists of mixed race, like Senna's Birdie Lee, whose passings are subject to the interpretation of "tragic." Rather, as I will discuss throughout the essay, a character like Lee's Henry Park, who is Korean American, is also often interpreted as "tragically" attempting to hide his Korean identity and to pass as white.

12. I use the terms racial identity *and* racial identification in order to imply that one's race is both a matter of how one defines the self in relation to others *and* how one is defined *by* others in different contexts.

13. Throughout Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss the limitations of the idea of "white English" as a singular, homogenous language, instead showing that there are many different white Englishes which are shaped by class, geographic location, gender, sexuality, and other factors; for now, I use the phrase "white English" while acknowledging that is both problematic and over-simplified.

Chapter 3: "A Different English"

1. For more details about the commercial publication history of *Native Speaker*, see articles by Arac, Corley, and James Kyung-Jin Lee.

2. See Wu and Chen, respectively.

3. Ultimately, neither of the two finalists was selected for New York's One City, One Book, as the committee was unable to come to an agreement. The choice of *Native Speaker* was opposed on various grounds, not only by committee members, but also by members of the Korean American community who criticized Lee for including stereotypical representations of Korean American culture in his text. The other finalist was James McBride's memoir *The Color of Water*, which some committee members feared would offend New York's Hasidic Jewish community. See my concluding chapter for more details.

4. Gayle Wald suggests that Jewish jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow (who passed for black even though *Ebony* magazine insisted that "his skin [was] too white" to do so) is one example of the idea that racial performance can "exceed the 'text' of the body" (*Crossing the Line* 186).

5. Paralleling Joo and Parikh's discussions of African American passing as comparable to the efforts of other racial/ethnic minorities to assimilate, a recent article on Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* entitled "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish" argues that "the story of Jewish assimilation in America can be read as a narrative of successful passing for white" (Harrison-Kahan 26).

6. I am thinking here of assimilation as it is exemplified in Henry Ford's *Melting Pot*, where immigrants of diverse racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds enter a boiling pot clothed in their traditional cultural garb, and emerge from the pot literally and physically transformed into Americans.

7. In thinking about how linguistic "abnormalities" are defined and understood, it is interesting to note that linguists have found that stuttering, commonly viewed as a "speech impairment," has been found to be common in cases where the influence of racism upon the subject is extreme. Noting that these subjects can speak without stammering in other situations and contexts where racism is less prevalent, linguists suggest that stuttering may actually be the result *not* of a speech "defect" on the part of the subject, but of a context-based "fear-induced hesitation over producing the correct formula" (Scott 30).

8. I borrow the term "gatekeeper" from Norman Fairclough in his *Language and Power*.

9. Although Kwang is a first-generation Korean American immigrant born in Korea, whereas Henry is the son of Korean-born immigrants to America, I use the undifferentiated phrase "Korean American" to describe them both, since I see both men as engaging in similar performances of Korean, American, and Korean American identities.

10. For an insightful analysis of the significance of the corporate/ethnic spy firm in *Native Speaker*, see Crystal Parikh's article "Ethnic America Undercover: The Intellectual and Minority Discourse." For an article on John Kwang's role as "ethnic pol," see Liam Corley's article "'Just Another Ethnic Pol': Literary Citizenship in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*."

11. The interdisciplinary field of Whiteness Studies, established in the early 1990s following, in particular, the publication of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), has focused on exploring and critiquing how whiteness—itsself both a nonhomogenous category and a fictitious construction of a "pure" racial identity—is invisibilized, unscrutinized, and unracialized in Western societies, treated as the raceless race. Along with Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, this topic has been fruitfully explored in (among many others) Richard Dyer's *White* (1997); Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998); Lipsitz's "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness" (1995); and Adrian Piper's "Whiteless," which appeared in *Art Journal* in the winter of 2001.

12. Other critics have made similar arguments: Chen, for example, writes that "[Henry's] professional opportunity to enact the spy's 'multiple roles' [is] a logical extension of his personal history as a Korean American struggling to negotiate the divide that separates how others perceive him and how he sees himself" (638).

13. Here, it is useful to recall Kawash's notion of studious spectatorship described earlier in this essay as the careful watching and observing of others as a means of learning how to perform one's race. As I have argued, the idea of studious spectatorship might be expanded to also include the importance of observing how others talk in particular contexts.

14. Several other critics have discussed the ways in which the novel destabilizes the ideas of what it means to be “native” and a “native speaker.” Corley notes, for example, that the novel is deliberately ambiguous with regard to who the “native speaker” is to which the title refers: he asks, “[is the ‘native speaker’] Park? Lelia? Kwang? Lee the author?” (62). And, I would add, what is the “native” language that the speaker speaks? Rachel C. Lee has also pointed out the ways in which the text reveals the instability in the very concept of nativity: she argues that by calling attention to “America’s blindness to its immigrant roots,” the novel offers readers a reminder of the fact that “the conventional understanding of a ‘native speaker’ in the contemporary US is not the speaker of Nuahtl, Navaho, or the myriad of other native languages, but the speaker of an immigrant tongue (English)” (352n4).

15. Interestingly, the novel closes with a scene in which the ideas of Lelia as “standard bearer,” and of her speech patients as being acculturated to national linguistic norms, are challenged/inverted: the last time we see Lelia, Henry describes her to us as she teaches her speech class, but this time, rather than performing the standard, she is a “pale white woman horsing with the language... mess[ing] it all up” (349). As her students leave at the end of the session, she bids each goodbye by name, and Henry hears “a dozen lovely and native languages calling all the difficult names of who we are” (349). The text ends, then, with the inverted image of the English “standard bearer” as a multilingual speaker; likewise, the languages and identities that were previously “othered” and “nonnative” in depictions of speech classes throughout the novel have become “native”—not foreign, but languages that belong and have a place in an American classroom.

Chapter 4: “The Art of Changing”

1. *Caucasia* was awarded the American Library Association’s Alex Award, the Stephen Crane First Fiction Award, and a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year Prize, among other accolades.

2. See, for example, Arias; Ibrahim, especially 159; and Brody, especially 736.

3. *Caucasia* can also be considered part of the field of “mixed race” literature, which has seen a recent proliferation of works including Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice* (1995), Obama’s *Dreams from my Father* (1995), McBride’s *The Color of Water* (1996), Derricotte’s *The Black Notebooks* (1999), and Rebecca Walker’s *Black, White and Jewish* (2002), all of which join earlier mixed race narratives such as Fran Ross’s 1967 novel *Oreo*. As scholars such as Elam and Brennan have noted, American literary history has been considerably inattentive to the prevalence of literature written by “mixed race” authors, tending to categorize writers under a singular racial identity, ie, “African American writer.” See Elam, *Souls* 48.

4. Here I borrow from Royster, who uses the term “discourse expectations” to describe the set of assumed guidelines about speech and other forms of verbal and nonverbal communication that guide our behavior in different settings, situations, and encounters, particularly those where we find ourselves outside of our own ethnic or social group (12).

5. Senna herself discusses how, like Birdie, she has also used language as a way of “clarifying” or challenging the ambiguity of her appearance. Senna notes that, growing up as a light-skinned child with a darker-skinned sister, language was a way for her to assert that she was black, even if she didn’t seem to look that way: “At a young age I made the decision that if the kids around me were going to call my sister a nigger, they had better call me one too. I feel

now that this choice was not so much one between black and white, but one between *speech and silence*. It was how I learned to find my own voice, *rather than letting my body speak for me*" ("Passing and the Problematic" 85 emphasis added). Senna's awareness that she defined her racial identity not through the terms of black and white, but through the terms of speech or silence, emphasizes the critical role that language plays in allowing one to construct or define a sense of self. Her emphasis on the idea of using her voice, rather than letting her body speak for her, also suggests that her words can trump her appearance, that language can allow her to "convince" others of a racial identity that is not clearly legible upon her body. Throughout *Caucasia*, Birdie continually uses language in the same way Senna describes using it here.

6. Here I refer to the title of Sollors's well-known text *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations in Interracial Literature*.

7. Several other critics have also noted the ways in which both Deck and Sandy pass. As Grassian puts it, "Sandy and Deck... both are involved in the process of passing and are, to a large extent, changelings like Birdie." Grassian argues, and I would agree, that Senna portrays Deck and Sandy, as well as Cole and Birdie, as passers in order to demonstrate that passing is "more of a general phenomenon; it is not necessarily race-specific" (323).

8. Grassian raises the same point, arguing that contrary to "traditional" passing narratives, Birdie (and Cole's) first attempt at passing is an attempt to pass for black, *not* for white—and, Grassian adds, she has "a difficult time doing so" (324).

9. Sandy's "trick" of calling ahead and using a particular way of speaking to give herself a better chance at securing tenancy is a tactic commonly used by those who face racial and ethnic discrimination when seeking housing. In *The Struggle and the Tools*, Ellen Cushman describes how inner-city black women in the city her study is based on practice talking "white" before going for housing interviews, finding that this makes the landlords more likely to lease to them. In an even more direct parallel to this scene in *Caucasia*, a scene from the PBS documentary film *Do You Speak American* discusses the ways in which the use of different types of accents during phone inquiries about rentals often yields different responses from landlords as to whether the space is available: the same man, placing separate calls about the same rental—speaking once in "white" English, once in "black" English, and once with an Hispanic accent—finds that speaking in white English tends to yield the most positive responses from landlords about rental availability.

10. Sandy's use of a deliberate, careful, and practiced type of language which allows her to succeed in winning over the landlords is not unlike some of the tactical linguistic/discoursal moves made by Lydia in Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda*. See Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

11. Cutter notes that protagonists in earlier passing novels, such as Helga Crane in Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), have also served to pluralize rather than merely dualize racial identity. Cutter writes that "in America, Helga's 'black self' [plays] a variety of roles," just as Birdie performs a variety of blacknesses and whitenesses ("Sliding Significations" 82).

12. In an interview with Arias, Senna discusses the ways in which she, too, has acted as a "spy" in white communities, in turn gaining "behind-the-scenes" insight about white racism. As she explains, "I also have acted as a spy in my life. I am usually seen as 'white,' Italian, Greek, Jewish, and because of this optical illusion, so to speak, I have been witness to what white people say and do when they think they're alone... I was struck even at a very young age by the two faces I saw white people wear: the faces they wore in mixed company, and the face they

wore when they thought they were alone” (Arias 450). Interestingly, Senna’s idea of the passer as a “spy” in white territory is one that has also been noted by black political activists, including Malcolm X. In his own autobiography, X writes, “I will tell you that, without any question, the *most* bitter anti-white diatribes that I have ever heard have come from ‘passing’ Negroes, living as whites, among whites, exposed every day to what white people say among themselves regarding Negroes—*things that a recognized Negro never would hear*. Why, if there was a racial showdown, these Negroes ‘passing’ within white circles would become the black side’s most valuable ‘spy’ and ‘ally’” (qtd. in Piper 264 first emphasis original second added).

13. See, for example, Ibrahim’s summary of *Caucasia*’s plot, page 56 of her article.

14. This quotation comes from a statement by Grassian, who writes that the novel “envision[s] alternatives to racial categorization by championing post-ethnic identity divorced from race” (321).

15. Young goes as far as to argue that only through death can one escape the incessant burden of racial performance. Young is among those scholars who reads Clare Kendry’s death at the end of *Passing* as a suicide, the only possible way for her to find the freedom to “refus[e] to choose either blackness or whiteness,” to “*refus[e] to perform*” either one race or the other—or both—any longer (50 emphasis original).

16. See, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich’s 2001 *Nickel and Dimed*, a class-based passing narrative, or Norah Vincent’s 2006 *Self-Made Man*, a story of gendered passing.

Part III: Bad Subjects

1. Interestingly, the writing of the SRTOL was as much a source of controversy as was its publication, as battles with and over words occurred among the multiple co-authors of the document. Smitherman notes that the statement was originally called “Student’s Right to *His* Own Language,” with many heated discussions and disagreements occurring before the group of authors eventually settled instead on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” in order to give the position statement a more gender-inclusive and pluralist tone. Smitherman also notes that many of the authors resisted writing the document strictly in Standard English, instead proposing that they “make the medium the message” and write the resolution in a mix of languages including Black English, standard English, and Spanglish (22-23). Such internal debates among those who were “on the same team” with regard to broader institutional, educational, and political debates speak to the contentious nature of language nearly as much as the SRTOL itself does, and are testament to the frequency and intensity with which battles with and over words occur in everyday lives.

2. Elaine Richardson has effectively demonstrated the ways in which cultural beliefs about the role of the school as an institution of assimilation have continued to endure in the decades since the Civil Rights Movement and the 1974 publication of the SRTOL. Her survey of high-school and college-level English language, literacy, and composition teachers, conducted over 20 years after the original publication of SRTOL, shows the extent to which school teachers continue to buy into a national ideology which suggests that part of their job is to produce “standardization” among students with respect to language, culture, and values. Richardson notes that 96.1% of respondents agreed with the statement that “students need to master standard English for upward mobility,” while only 3.9% disagreed; likewise, 89.5% of teacher-respondents agreed that “students who use nonstandard dialects should be taught in standard English” while only 10.5% disagreed (42-46).

3. As Harvey Graff argues in *The Literacy Myth*, attainment of literacy and education is less indicative of one's intellectual or cognitive abilities than of one's social status in, and conformity to, the dominant culture: "those without the experience of education and without its badge of literacy, have been perceived as *inferior* and pathetic, *alien to the dominant culture*, subversive to social order" (51 emphasis added).

4. Valenzuela's research focuses specifically on a group of Mexican American youth whose Spanish language abilities are gradually subtracted from them during their years as students at a public school in Houston, Texas. However, the experience of compulsory schooling as linguistically and culturally subtractive is, I would argue, applicable to virtually every student who enters a U.S. public school speaking a language or dialect other than so-called standard English.

5. Valenzuela notes that schools often respond "additively," rather than subtractively, to the languages and cultures of immigrant students who speak what are considered "high-status" languages or dialects (i.e. French or Castilian Spanish), but that "the same does not hold true for members of historically subordinate groups" (26).

6. For a more in-depth discussion of how *Native Speaker's* Henry Park learns about the Korean War in American public schools, as well as how this influences his own conceptions of himself as a Korean American, see Jodi Kim's article "From *Mee-gook* to Gook: The Cold War and Racialized Undocumented Capital in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," especially pages 117-120.

Chapter 5: Circumventing Standard English and Formal Schooling

1. For several seminal works by new literacy theorists and scholars studying uses of language and literacy in informal and everyday settings, see Harvey Graff's *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*; Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*; Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*; and Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power*.

2. While I prefer the terms "formal" and "informal" literacies, other literacy scholars have used similar terms, including "vertical" and "horizontal" literacies (Kaestle et al); "school" and "community"/"personal" literacies (Gallego and Hollingsworth); and "institutional" and "local" literacies (Flower) to differentiate between the two forms of literacy I describe.

3. I use the terms cultural and economic capital as they are defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. For studies by new literacy theorists that are especially attentive to factors of race, class, and ethnicity, see Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*; Linda Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*; and Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*.

4. The idea that individuals can get by or even become quite successful in modern Western societies *without* being literate (at least in the "formal" sense of the word) has been explored by a variety of literacy theorists, most notably Harvey Graff. While institutions such as the school and government have long emphasized that formal schooling and literacy acquisition are crucial to survival and success in American society and Western societies more generally, in *The Literacy Myth*, Graff demonstrates that literacy is not actually crucial to economic success

in North America. Graff found that not only does one not necessarily need to be literate in order to find gainful employment or to enjoy a middle or even upper class lifestyle, but, furthermore, that being literate does not guarantee gainful employment, steady income, or social and economic security. Rather, Graff found that factors such as ethnicity, class, and family background were much more important in determining one's socioeconomic stability and success.

5. Literacy acquisition through oral means, including sitting in and eavesdropping on the conversations of others, has a long history in the U.S. among those groups denied access to a more formal education. Some of the most powerful examples of orality as a means of literacy acquisition come from slaves' testimonials about how they learned to read and write while forbidden to do so by law and/or custom. Many slaves acquired literacy (as well as important news and information) by sitting in on or "overhearing" the conversations of their masters, which often concerned political matters such as abolition and news of slave rebellions. Slaves also frequently sat in on or "overheard" the lessons of white school children educated on plantations. In a particularly powerful example of what de Certeau would call "bricolage," or the ability to "manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities,'" a enslaved African American named Thomas Johnson recalled "t[aking] advantage of his young master in his efforts to learn more" by suggesting that his master might benefit more from his spelling lessons if he read aloud (de Certeau xix, Cornelius 60). Once the boy began to do so, Johnson would compliment his master's reading and spelling skills and pretend to be in awe of his abilities, asking him to read the lessons aloud again and again. In this way, Johnson explains that "each week I added a little to my small store of knowledge" (Cornelius 60). In another extraordinary account of the uses of orality and "eavesdropping" as means of literacy acquisition, John Sella Martin described his childhood as a slave in Georgia, where his work as an errand boy in a hotel allowed him to listen to white employees as they used their downtime to hold informal spelling matches in which they placed bets with one another on how to spell certain words. Through listening in on these matches, Martin recalls that he "learned to spell by sound before I knew by sight a single letter in the alphabet" (Cornelius 69). For more examples of orality as a means of literacy acquisition among enslaved African Americans, see Cornelius's chapter "Slave Testimony: 'We Slipped and Learned to Read'" in *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*.

6. The benefits Nestor and Cesar enjoy as musicians relate more to social status than to economic status (in as much as the two can be separated). Though the brothers are popular, well-liked, and have a reputation for their talent as well as their personalities, their musical careers do not leave them financially affluent; in fact, they struggle financially throughout the majority of their lives in the U.S.

7. Ellen Cushman has also discussed how "socially sanctioned" languages and literacies carry a different value than standard English in her study of uses of literacy in an inner city African American community. Cushman argues in *The Struggle and the Tools* that African American community members used "white English" when the circumstances necessitated it (for example, when they went for an interview about a housing rental in all-white neighborhood), but maintained a prestige and value for black English as the primary and most respected dialect within their neighborhood.

8. Cesar's awareness of the types of literate and linguistic "formalities" called for in this situation is also emphasized by the fact that he has Bernhardt type up the letters on "an antique British typewriter" (254). Despite his limited familiarity with using standard English, especially in written form, Cesar is nevertheless cognizant of the fact that "formal" literacy in this context

is as much about the *appearance* of formality and properness as it is about formal and proper language usage. Astutely, Cesar picks up on the fact that a nicely typed letter probably counts just as much here as does the use of the right words from the dictionary.

9. That individuals' literate activities can have transnational and far-reaching impacts on others is demonstrated not only by Cesar's efforts to get his family out of Cuba by writing letters, but also by the fact that Cesar and Nestor themselves are encouraged to come to the U.S. when they "receiv[e] letters" from fellow Havana musicians living in New York describing "money, dance halls, recording contracts, good weekly salaries, women, and friendly Cubans everywhere" (33).

10. In addition to Brandt and Franklin, several other literacy scholars have emphasized the significant power of a few formally literate individuals within a marginalized and largely "illiterate" community. Cornelius discusses the incredible speed and distance with which news of events such as John Brown's execution and the writing of Frederick Douglass's narrative spread throughout slave plantations, helped along by those few slaves who could read. In one case, she notes that a slave who was given newspapers by his master to wipe down machinery instead used these materials to read news of slave executions, slave rebellions, and abolitionist efforts to the entire slave population of the plantation. These informal but powerful forms of shared and collaborative learning are also potent examples of the ways in which people—even those deemed "illiterate"—are able to access literacy within the contexts of their everyday lives in order to gain knowledge and information about that which is directly relevant and of interest or import to them. These types of knowledge and information, and the tactics that are available for marginalized groups seeking to access it, often exist and occur primarily outside of the boundaries of formal institutional sites of schooling

11. One of the most well-known accounts of informal self-education is Malcolm X's description of his own "homemade education" while in prison, where he gradually learned to write in formal English by copying out all of the words in the dictionary one by one. See *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Delores's hunger for literature and devotion to reading a certain number of books a week also mirror Francie's efforts at literacy and self-education in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

12. Paralleling Delores's "terrif[ying]" encounter with schooling in the Bronx, a range of contemporary works of multi-ethnic American literature portray characters and individuals whose experiences with formal education in the U.S. are overwhelmingly negative (92). See, among others, Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda*, Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, Angie Cruz's *Let it Rain Coffee*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*.

13. Treating literacy as a skill-set, rather than a "practice of 'meaning making,'" is commonplace not just in adult education courses, but at all levels of formal education (Packard 627). As Brandt notes, this "narrow, technical approach continues to influence literacy instruction and assessment in schools"; Gallego and Hollingsworth add that, even at the graduate level, literacy continues to be treated as an "empirically based, objective, individual, cognitive psychological activity, distinct from its social and political contexts" (Brandt 4; Gallego and Hollingsworth 3).

14. The Library of Congress is the only institution in the U.S. with more holdings than the New York Public Library.

15. In light of the novel's use of the elite Manhattan Ivy League institution of Columbia as a lens through which to critique higher education in general, it seems interesting to note that Hijuelos, like Delores, lived near Columbia for much of his life but did not take classes there. Hijuelos grew up on West 118th Street in Manhattan, not far from the elite institution (located on 116th Street and Broadway), but attended the City University of New York, earning his BA from the public institution in 1975, followed by a Master's Degree in Creative writing in 1976. Interestingly, Hijuelos graduated from CUNY in the same year that the institution first began to charge tuition. This occurred in response to increasing enrollment, which itself was a result of CUNY's radical open admissions policy, begun in 1969 after minority students seeking access to largely all-white campuses occupied various CUNY colleges, forcing the CUNY system to change its policy to admit any high school graduate living in New York City. Given *The Mambo Kings'* subtle critique of the exclusive nature of college campuses, it seems interesting to note that, in the years that Hijuelos was attending CUNY, the institution was making history in its attempts to change the ways in which race, class, and ethnicity impacted access to higher education. For more on the history of open admissions at CUNY, see LaVona L. Reeves's article "Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York's City College"; Suri Duitch's 2010 dissertation "Open Admissions and Remediation"; and *Closing the Open Door: The Fight for a College Education*, a documentary featuring former CUNY students impacted by the rise and fall of open admissions. Ira Short also discusses his experiences teaching at CUNY during the era of Open Admissions in his text *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. See, especially, his chapter "Monday Morning: Critical Literacy and the Theme of 'Work.'"

16. In *Unequal Childhoods*, new literacy theorist Annette Lareau's study of the different experiences of middle class and working class/poor families with compulsory schooling, Lareau finds that working class and poor parents are less likely to intervene in their children's educations than middle class parents, who often take an active role in ensuring that their children get exactly the education that the parents perceive the children to need (see my sixth chapter for a further discussion of this theory and how it applies to Lydia in *Nilda*). Interestingly, though, Delores's habit of taking her children with her to the Columbia campus suggests that perhaps working class and poor parents take a more active role in facilitating their child's education than is apparent to researchers, choosing to further this education outside of the formal school setting, and thus without teachers' and administrators' (and researchers') awareness.

Chapter 6: "They Mustn't Take Your Mind and Use You"

1. A second edition of *Nilda* was published by Arte Público Press in 1986. This is the edition of the text that I cite throughout this chapter.

2. Much of the scholarship on *Nilda* has been published in Spanish. See, among other essays, Pilar Bellever Sáez's article "*Nilda* de Nicholasa Mohr, El Bildungsroman y la Aparición de un Espacio Puertorriqueño en la Literatura de los EEUU," published in *Atlantis: Revista de la Asociación Española de Estudios Ingleses y Norteamericanos* 28.1 (2006): 101-13; and Luz Marina Rivas's chapter on "La Mirada Infantil en *Nilda* de Nicholasa Mohr," published in *La Mirada Femenina desde la Diversidad Cultural de las Américas: Una Muestra de su Novelística de los Años Sesenta Hasta Hoy*. Ed. Laura Febres and Matilde Daviu. Mexico City, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2008. 215-233.

3. See, for example, Margarite Fernández Olmos's "Growing Up Puertorriqueña: The Feminist Bildungsroman and the Novels of Nicholasa Mohr and Magalí García Ramis" and

Ismael Muñiz's "*Bildungsroman* Written by Puerto Rican Women in the United States: Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda: A Novel* and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*."

4. Although married to Emilio throughout the text, the novel makes clear that all of Lydia's five children are fathered by a different man, Leo. The fact that Leo contributes virtually nothing to the family, either economically or emotionally, combined with the fact that Emilio is unable to work throughout the entirety of the novel due to ailing health and eventual passing, essentially puts Lydia in the position of a single mother, responsible for providing emotionally and financially for all five of her children as well as for her ailing husband. When her eldest son Jimmy impregnates his girlfriend and then disappears, Lydia also becomes temporarily responsible for taking care of Jimmy's girlfriend and the couple's newborn son.

5. Miss Langhorn's No Spanish/English Only rule is an accurate depiction of how a 1940s U.S. classroom might have enforced linguistic hegemony. As Valenzuela notes, "No Spanish' rules were a ubiquitous feature of [U.S.] schooling through the early 1970s" (172).

6. The use of an X is in fact a commonly used and widely accepted way of signing one's name.

7. Mrs. Fortinash's continuous use of the term "you people" when speaking to Nilda, as well her statement that "mañana, mañana is alright in another country" (failing to specify what country or countries that might be), speaks to what Zentella describes as the dominant culture's "construction of a homogenous 'Hispanic community'" and of attendant stereotypes about that community, one of the most prominent of which is the assumption that "they" refuse to learn English (qtd. in Lippi-Green 232).

8. Mrs. Fortinash's characterization of Nilda and her "people" as "strangers" suggests one place that Jimmy may have learned to question the idea of Puerto Ricans as American.

9. Langhorn's version of U.S. history aptly reflects Sleeter's claim that "public school curricula proclaim the 'triumph of democracy' to the virtual exclusion of any serious analysis of... U.S. conquest" (xvii).

10. Theorists of education would likely agree with my interpretation of Nilda's withdrawal as a sign of her rejection of classroom curriculum. Valenzuela has argued that "psychic and emotional withdrawal from schooling are symptomatic of students' rejection of subtractive schooling and a curriculum they perceive as uninteresting, irrelevant, and test-driven" (62). Shor reiterates this point in *When Students Have Power*, writing that "although subordinate, studenthood is hardly passive... students are actively constructing their passivity and withdrawal" (16). When students withdraw from the classroom, they are not necessarily rejecting education or learning, but rather the specific type of schooling they are being subjected to. As Valenzuela notes, teachers and school administrators "typically misinterpret the meaning of these challenges" (62).

11. Nilda's continued use of her Hispanic name within Miss Langhorn's English-only classroom becomes an even more significant act of resistance when we consider Valenzuela's observation that white U.S. schoolteachers frequently modify their non-white and non-native students' names, whether by giving them American-sounding "nicknames" or by changing the ways in which students' names should be pronounced. Valenzuela argues that "casual revisions that faculty and staff make in students' first or last names"—so that "Loreto' becomes 'Laredo'" and "Azucena' is transformed into 'Suzy'"—are powerful examples of the "routine way[s] in

which the everyday flow of school life erodes the importance of cultural identity” (173). Andrews discusses a similar history of modification of students’ names by white schoolteachers in Native American dayschools, noting that teachers referred to their students by American first names and Anglicized versions of their native names which were not used by the students’ relatives or other natives on their reservations. Archuleta, et al, speak to this same history in their work on Native American boarding schools, noting that “students who came to school with Native language names were given appropriately ‘civilized’ English names such as those of noted American citizens such as Ulysses S. Grant or George Washington” (26).

12. Miss Reilly’s demands that her students speak “proper” Spanish, coupled with her devaluing and even mockery of what she deems the students’ “dialects,” offer support for Lippi-Green’s assertion that “the language arts classroom is one of the best places to watch the way the languages outside the mainstream are subordinated by means of misinformation, trivialization, and a carefully constructed set of threats and promises” (114).

13. That Miss Reilly (herself an American and a native speaker of English) privileges Castilian Spanish over other varieties of Spanish speaks well to Lippi-Green’s observation that “language ideologies are not restricted to the English-speaking world” and that “discourse around ‘good’ and ‘lesser’ language, ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ varieties can be found wherever people care to look” (231). Lippi-Green notes that Americans tend to characterize different varieties of foreign languages as “good” or “bad,” “correct” or “incorrect,” just as reductively as we characterize our own versions of English: in a survey of Americans’ views of foreign languages, respondents characterized the Italian spoken in Florence as “good” and that spoken in Sicily as “bad,” and the Hindi of Delhi as “cultured” and that of Calcutta as “uncultured,” among other examples (231). Of course, the tendency to “rank” language variations is not unique to Americans, either; rather, ideologies about language standards and “correct” usage influence countries and cultures all over the world. As Lippi-Green suggests, it would be a fascinating and worthwhile pursuit to conduct a comparative analysis of the ways in which standard languages are enforced and challenged through linguistic power struggles and battles with words in different cultural and national contexts.

14. Although Nilda and her classmates find Spanish to be a difficult subject because of their teacher’s demands for “proper” pronunciation, Valenzuela notes that Spanish foreign-language courses can also be too *easy* for native Spanish speakers in U.S. schools, a significant problem that is frequently overlooked when teachers and administrators design course curriculum. Valenzuela argues that Spanish language programs are rarely designed “with the school’s... native [Spanish] speakers in mind,” despite the fact that, in many schools throughout the U.S., native Spanish speakers make up a large portion of the student-body population (176). Instead, course curriculum for Spanish classes generally does not go beyond the beginning or intermediate levels, insulting Spanish-speaking students’ prior abilities while also denying them the opportunity for more advanced study of the language and its literature (itself a form of subtractive schooling). Rather than building upon the language abilities that native Spanish-speaking students already bring to school, Spanish foreign-language programs literally subtract this knowledge from the classroom and the students, subjecting the latter to courses designed for English-only speakers with no prior knowledge of the language. For a more in-depth discussion of the problems with offering Spanish as a “foreign” language in schools with high numbers of Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Hispanic students, see pages 175-77 of Valenzuela’s *Subtractive Schooling*.

15. This history dates back to at least the nineteenth century, and probably much earlier (missionary education of Native Americans, which likely included attempts to alter speech,

began as early as the 1600s). See, in particular, Graff's discussion of the emphasis on correct pronunciation and elimination of certain accents in nineteenth-century North American schools, in his chapter on "Literacy: Quantity and Quality." As he notes,

one significant use of training in literacy was to homogenize the speech of the pupils. When schoolmen sought to foster natural patterns of expression, it was not the language of the streets or of the homes of the pupils that was to be instilled in the classroom and practiced in drill. The stress upon proper articulation was an aspect of the socializing function of the school, for the drawls, twangs, and slurring tones of children resulted from more than inattention to pronunciation. In an immigrant society, *these were the distinctions of culture, class, and ethnicity...* reformers move[d] to Canadianize or Americanize the children of the immigrant and the laborer. (290 emphasis added)

Pronunciation and proper speech were regarded by these schools as perhaps the most important indications of one's literate abilities: "to advance, fluent or *good-sounding* reading was required" (282 emphasis added); or, as one school superintendent put it, "a careful regard to distinctness of pronunciation... [and] enunciation is of the highest importance" (289). Significantly, Graff notes that nineteenth-century North American schoolchildren were frequently promoted to the next grade level if their pronunciation of English was deemed accurate enough, *even if* the children could not actually read or write in English.

16. In this essay, in which Mohr discusses the differences between Puerto Rican writers in the U.S. and Puerto Rican writers in Puerto Rico, the author defends her decision to write (mostly) in English rather than in Spanish, arguing that she views her work as aligned with that of other American writers, including Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, and Ishmael Reed, who "write in an American English that comes straight from their people" (91). Mohr's comment suggests that while she writes in English, she uses a particular *type* of English, not necessarily representative of the "standard" ("white") English of the U.S., but rather of *her* people—the people of el barrio whom she dedicates *Nilda* to, and the people of Nueva York, where she was born and raised.

17. See, for example, the scene in which Lydia is interviewed by a social worker at the Welfare Department (62-71), as well as the dramatic scene when an investigator comes to visit Lydia's home to determine if the family should qualify for welfare assistance (114-126). During both of these high-stakes encounters, Lydia is careful to follow a script that she conforms to because she knows it is the best way to get the assistance she desperately needs; in the days before the investigator comes to her home, she coaches all of her family members on how to do the same, and together, they stage a carefully scripted performance to convince the investigator that they meet the qualifications for welfare assistance (when, in fact, they don't).

Chapter 7: "It Depended on Whether You Knew the Story"

1. The statements made by Charles A. Eastman and the Native American college student are quoted in Wright and Tierney, pages 14-17 and 18, respectively.

2. The widespread cultural assumption that formal/institutionalized schooling is the only place where "real" learning takes place is analyzed and critiqued in more depth in Chapter 5.

3. Education by white missionaries or schoolteachers was often the first interaction natives had with white Americans, white literacy, and white culture; however, values, literacy materials, and popular culture of the white world did reach natives in other ways aside from their education in white settlers' schools. Joe Suina writes, for example, of how comic books became a part of life on his reservation long before compulsory schooling did:

ten-cent comic books were finding their way into the Pueblo homes [before schooling became a part of reservation life]. Exchanging 'old' comics for 'new' ones was a serious matter that involved adults as well. Adults favored mystery and romance stories. For us children these were the first links to the world beyond the Pueblo. We enjoyed looking at them and role-playing our favorite hero rounding up the villains... It seems everyone preferred being a cowboy rather than an Indian since cowboys were always victorious. (230-31).

4. This quotation comes from one of Pratt's written reports, in which he states: "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (260-61).

5. Though many of Pratt's contemporaries heralded his approach to the "Indian Problem" as more humane than warfare and physical extermination, Smith notes that the decision to educate and assimilate Indians was an economic, rather than moral or ethical, position: late nineteenth-century Commissioner of Indian Affairs Carl Schurz concluded that it cost about a million dollars to kill an Indian in warfare, but only \$1,200 to educate an Indian in a school for eight years. See Smith 90.

6. This included a combination of off-reservation boarding schools as well as some on-reservation or "day" schools. Although off-reservation boarding schools had the most profound and lasting impact on the destruction of native cultures and communities, and, as a result, have been the focus of most of the historical research on Native American education in U.S. schools, on-reservation day schools also played a significant role in the systematic education and assimilation of native youth. As Andrews notes in his essay on the education of Oglala Lakotas in the Pine Ridge Day Schools, "Boarding schools represented the largest and most heavily publicized component of the government Indian school system, but they hardly comprised the sum total of government efforts to educate Native American children. Federal officials built more than a hundred day schools throughout the Indian reservations of the American West in the late nineteenth century" (407).

7. The cultural significance of long hair among Native American men in many tribes led a number of young boys at boarding schools to vehemently resist the mandatory haircuttings. See Wright and Tierney 14.

8. For an interesting discussion of the ghost stories that continue to be told about former Haskell Boarding School students who died while at the school and now haunt its grounds, see Low's essay "Boarding School Resistance Narratives: Haskell Runaway and Ghost Stories."

9. Some of these white teachers wrote their own narratives of their time at Indian schools. See, for example, Albert Kneale's 1950 memoir *Indian Agent*.

10. Federal funding to assist Native Americans in obtaining higher education was not available until the New Deal era of the 1930s. Among the first in a series of changes was the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which provided \$250,000 in federal funds for college education loans for Native Americans. A year later, in 1935, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported 515 Native Americans enrolled in U.S. colleges (see Wright and Tierney 17).

11. For a more detailed history on boarding school runaways, see Child's chapter on "Runaway Boys, Resistant Girls" in *Boarding School Seasons* (87-95).

12. Along with Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, and James Welch, Silko is one of the most well-known and widely-read/studied Native American authors. Her works (and many of the works of the other authors mentioned above) have been examined at great length by critics and scholars, with dozens upon dozens of essays and book-length works of scholarship written on *Ceremony* alone. Arguably, critical and scholarly focus on a small handful of Native American writers/texts, among them Silko/*Ceremony*, has led to a "canonization" of these texts as representative of the "field" of Native American literature and, subsequently, to an exclusion of lesser-known Native American writers and works (such as Frances Washburn and her intriguing novel *Elsie's Business*) from this emerging "canon." See my final chapter for more on *Ceremony's* status as a hypercanonized work within the fields of both Native American and multi-ethnic U.S. literatures.

13. In her interview with Perry, Silko also emphasizes the ways in which language was used to maintain the divide between the Indian world of the reservation and the BIA world of the school: "It was when I started [at Indian school], at five years old, that I first learned about these invisible borderlines that authoritarian figures use. When you crossed the line and stepped onto the school grounds, you weren't to use the Laguna language anymore. If you were caught using it, you got in a whole bunch of trouble" (316).

14. Akins has suggested that Silko was attentive to and influenced by not only the history of BIA education during her own youth and the youth of her relatives and ancestors, but also the history being made with regard to Native American education at the time when she was writing *Ceremony*. It was during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s that some of the nation's most important advancements in Native American education were made, including the Indian Education Act of 1972. Akins argues that Silko, a former law student who likely paid attention to educational policy, might've been influenced to address the topic of schooling and education in *Ceremony* not only because of the history of her own family's education in BIA schools, but also because of the groundbreaking changes in Native American education occurring around her at the time that she was writing the novel. See especially 4-5.

15. *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, edited by Kenneth Rosen and published in 1974, was one of the first anthologies of Native American literature to be published by a major press. Silko's "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" is the eponymous story in the collection, and several of her other short stories are also included.

16. For two essays that treat Silko's multiple works together, see Denise K. Cummings's "'Settling' History: Understanding Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, *Storyteller*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*" and Paul Beekman Taylor's "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy."

17. For discussions of the autobiographical elements of *Ceremony*, see Beidler and Evans.

18. Though the majority of critics see Tayo's war experiences as the catalyst for his illness, at least one agrees with my argument that education is central to both his sickness and his recovery. As Eppert writes in an essay on "Rhetorics of Ethical Reading and Composition" in *Ceremony* (one of the only other works of scholarship that I have come across to forefront

Tayo's schooling and education as I do), "education lies at the original heart of Tayo's trauma and provides the only means for his healing" (729).

19. Scholars of Native American literature frequently discuss the ways in which storytelling functions as a form of recovery of lost or silenced voices and experiences. In a particularly interesting essay on the power and purpose of storytelling among Native American communities, Denise Low argues that ghost stories exchanged and passed down among students at Haskell Indian Nations University, founded as an Indian Boarding School in 1884, are more than just a pastime or a school tradition; rather, they are ways of keeping alive the spirits of the many students who died from malnourishment, disease, abuse and murder while attending this and other boarding schools. As Low puts it, "These ghost stories have a subversive purpose. They allow the painful experiences of turn-of-the-century Native peoples to remain alive in memory, despite their omission or elision in official history books. In English or tribal languages, Native people were able to use ghost stories for cultural preservation" (106).

20. That Silko chose to make Rocky not only a successful student but also a football star is likely no accident. As I discussed briefly in the introduction to Part III, Native American boarding schools made frequent and strategic use not only of educational curriculum, but also extracurricular activities, especially sports, in seeking to Americanize their students. As Bloom notes, "mainstream sports, such as football, were first introduced at boarding schools as part of a larger effort to erase Native American culture and history from memory" (100). Through participation in sports, Native American students at federally-run schools came into contact with white students from around the country, playing against teams from schools such as Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania. Sports were also introduced at boarding schools as a way of proving to the white public that Native Americans could be assimilated through participation in schooling (in this sense, athletics served the same purpose as the infamous before-and-after photographs that Pratt and other boarding school administrators became famous for circulating). Because many Native American students enjoyed the success and admiration that participation in athletics often brought (as we see in Rocky's case), sports "ironically... became a source of pride for students... an instrument through which they creatively constituted and reformulated their identities" (Bloom 100-101). In one historical account, a former boarding school student recalled playing shortstop for his school's baseball team and dreaming of being recruited by the New York Yankees (Ellis 85). Similarly, it seems that football, as much or perhaps more so than his good grades, allows Rocky to reformulate his identity by claiming Americanness (and, more specifically, American masculinity) and disassociating with his Native American identity and culture.

21. The historical circumstances of the Laguna Pueblo tribe are somewhat unique in that they are one of only a small handful of native tribes who were not forcibly removed from their land by the U.S. government; however, the Laguna people do share with other Native American peoples the history of forcible removal of their children from the reservation to attend U.S. boarding schools.

22. Given the somewhat autobiographical nature of the novel, it is possible that this scene is based in part on Silko's own experiences with teachers in BIA schools. In an interview with Perry in which she discusses her schooling at length, Silko recalls that she was "acutely aware [as a BIA student] of how the teachers made fun of Pueblo beliefs about animals and plants. It was really shoved in the faces of Native American people how backward they were and how white man's science was just so great and wonderful" (317-18). Interestingly, Silko also notes in this interview that her BIA teachers were not usually white themselves, but rather

African Americans or Native Americans who had been trained in the “wonderful[ly] racist” white-run BIA system (317).

23. See, for example, Weso, especially 58-9; Flores 53; Akins, especially 8-11; Evasdaughter 87; and Eppert.

24. Silko’s emphasis on the value of uncertainty in learning and education is one that is echoed in the scholarship of literacy and pedagogy scholars from John Dewey and Paulo Freire to Ira Shor, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Linda Flower. All of these scholar-educators emphasize the importance of *inquiry* in the learning process, of seeking without necessarily finding—or expecting to find—specific answers or outcomes. In many ways, this is precisely what Tayo’s educational journey is about. See my works cited for a non-exhaustive list of works by these scholars.

25. One of the voices Tayo hears in this scene is a Spanish speaker singing the phrase “y volveré,” which translates in English as “I shall return.” Beidler has speculated that this is intended to be a reference to the famous words of General MacArthur upon abandoning his troops in the Philippines during WWII (32fn5). These soldiers were later captured by the Japanese and forced to hike over 50 miles in treacherous weather conditions in what came to be known as the Bataan Death March. Survivors of the deadly march were then kept as POWs. In the novel, both Tayo and Rocky are among the prisoners captured and forced to complete the march. Tayo survives, albeit with haunting memories of the experience; Rocky, who marched alongside him, dies along the way.

26. Akins also agrees with this point, writing that the “teacher figures presented most positively in *Ceremony* are those elders who encourage the integration of stories and lessons from multiple cultures in the learning process” (8).

27. In as much as it suggests that education should not be an individual quest, but rather a collaborative process that benefits an entire community or society, the “pedagogy” in *Ceremony* can arguably be described as Freirean. Critical educator Paulo Freire believed that education in isolation—as an intellectual pursuit by and for the individual—is without value. Instead, Freire argued that education should be used only as a means of transforming the larger society by liberating its oppressed peoples. *Ceremony* makes a similar argument by suggesting that the knowledge Tayo has gained through his completion of the ceremony is useless if he cannot use it to help heal the people around him.

Conclusion: From Margins to Mainstream

1. According to Baruch College’s website, the school’s 17,000 students speak more than 132 languages and hail from 174 different countries. The 2014 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings listed Baruch as the fifth most ethnically diverse college in the U.S.

2. Amarillo College, Brooklyn College, Georgia State University, Michigan University, and SUNY New Paltz are among the other colleges to use Foer’s novel as a campus-wide text, as noted in a list of “Other Colleges That Have Read or Are Reading This Book” included as part of Baruch’s online guide to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

3. For a more thorough discussion of these events, see Hurston’s chapter “Books and Things” in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, particularly pages 209-210. See also

Maurice O'Sullivan and Jack Lane's chapter on "Zora Neale Hurston at Rollins College," in the collection *Zora in Florida*.

4. The idea of ethnic literature as a profitable niche market also raises questions about how ethnic writers and even ethnicity itself also become commercialized and commodified. Consider, for example, that Junot Diaz was used as the spokesperson in a radio commercial for New York City's 2013 mayoral race which ran on all of the city's top stations, with campaign strategists capitalizing on his well-known status as an ethnic American writer in order to use him as the "voice of the city," capable of speaking to and for New York's millions of immigrants (his commercial was in support of then-mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio and in opposition to then-mayor Michael Bloomberg; it encouraged New Yorkers to vote for a candidate who would represent the city's immigrants instead of its millionaires. de Blasio won the election.). Beyond individual texts and authors, ethnicity itself is also increasingly subject to commercialization and commodification, as Bonnie Tsui's *American Chinatown* demonstrates at length. Discussing the ways in which Chineseness has been "sold" to Americans, Tsui argues that "the appearance of [San Francisco's] Chinatown today is due in large part to Chinese merchants who, after the 1906 earthquake, paid white architects to come up with an Oriental look that would be appealing and acceptable to a general public that had come to view the Chinese with racist eyes" (21). The many other Chinatowns that have since emerged throughout the U.S.—not only in California, but in Honolulu, Las Vegas, New York City, and elsewhere—have all been constructed in similar ways, marketed and created (often by whites) to present an "authentic" Chineseness that nevertheless "appeal[s] to the Americanized vision of Chinatown" (204).

5. Works like Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* are also prime choices for inclusion in anthologies because, though generically categorized as novels, they can also be (and frequently are) read as short story collections. Many of the individual chapters of these works can easily stand alone as short stories when removed from the larger contexts of the novels that house them, thus simplifying what can otherwise be the difficult process of choosing an excerpt from a novel for inclusion in an anthology collection. This speaks to yet another factor that influences whether texts are granted or denied entry into the mainstream: genre, too, can help to determine when, how, and why a work is or isn't selected for publication, readership, and canonization.

6. Certainly, college level courses are likely to demand a more sustained and less surface-level encounter with these works than are K-12 classes. However, even at the college level, engagement with multi-ethnic literature can be superficial and markedly truncated, as evidenced by my earlier discussion of literary anthologies which use a small sample of excerpts as representative of an entire field. Courses, too—even those specifically intended to introduce students to marginalized and non-canonical texts—often ask students to engage in "sampling" of a variety of ethnic texts rather than a sustained engagement with the works of a particular writer or group of writers from a particular ethnic background. Courses specifically on Haitian American literature are extremely rare, for example, but a sample of Haitian American literature might (or might not) be briefly included as part of a course on Latino/a literature, ethnic American literature, or even world literature.

7. See, among other book-length works devoted to Silko, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1999); *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko* (2000); and *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook* (2002). Volume 5 Issue 1 (1979) of *American Indian Quarterly* and Volume 28 Issue 1 (2004) of the *American Indian Culture & Research Journal* are both special issues on *Ceremony*.

8. Though Mohr's writing has been largely dismissed by scholars of literature, a few critics have argued that hers are widely-used classroom texts. del Río claims, for example, that Mohr is one of the most "consistently taught[t] Latina writers" (117). Yet, as I noted earlier in this chapter, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* is perhaps *the* most consistently taught work of Latina literature in U.S. schools. Interestingly, Rico notes that Cisneros's works were "also once classified as 'children's literature' or 'young adult fiction,' but are recognized as subsuming such reductive categories" (162). What allows Cisneros to overcome the boundary of the children's literature classification while Mohr cannot? Is the continued use and re-use of *The House on Mango Street* by teachers—who draw upon one another's reading lists and syllabi and thereby confirm one another's ideas about what "good literature" is—more responsible than anything else for allowing the text (and, by extension, Cisneros's entire oeuvre) to make this transition?

9. Notably, *Beloved* is not one of the four Morrison novels chosen for Oprah's Book Club, despite the fact that it is perhaps Morrison's most widely-read work, and is considered by many literary scholars to be not only the author's masterpiece, but one of the most important works of twentieth-century American literature. My earlier discussions of the need to make mainstream readers comfortable in their engagement with ethnic literature offers one possible explanation for *Beloved's* exclusion from Oprah's list—Morrison's concerns in this novel are far from that of how to make the story "palatable" to or comfortable for mainstream/white audiences.

10. See Wu, Haberman, and Kirkpatrick for more information on the One City One Book debacle and the objections raised about Lee and McBride's texts.

11. The opening pages of the paperback edition of *Bone* include excerpts of a number of reviews of the novel. An excerpt from a *Trenton Times* review writes that "Ng invites comparison to F. Scott Fitzgerald and... *The Great Gatsby*... and, in *Bone*, stands up to it." An excerpt of a piece by Sau-ling C. Wong, a professor of Asian American studies at UC-Berkeley, hails the novel as "an instant classic... It is simple in the way that Mozart's music is simple... artless-seeming art."

12. I would argue, in fact, that Leon is the protagonist of *Bone*, even as Leila is the narrator. As my second chapter suggests in its focus primarily on Leon, and only secondarily on Leila, the story is perhaps his more than anyone else's. Yet, Leila is given the role of narrator and serves as the one to tell his story, perhaps because she speaks in a standard English that he does not—if Leon were narrating the story in his "broken" English, it would likely be far less comfortable and palatable to mainstream American audiences.

13. My own experience suggests, in fact, that one encounters and learns as much, if not more, Chinese from reading criticism on *Bone* than one does from reading *Bone* itself.

14. John Peacock has pointed out that despite her criticism of Silko, Allen has also incorporated Laguna myths and story-telling into her own fiction, including, especially, her novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (301).

15. Silko also undermines the dichotomies between the oral and the written throughout *Ceremony* itself. For example, Betonie, the Native American healer Tayo seeks help from, makes use of phonebooks, calendars, and other modern Western texts alongside traditional oral storytelling in order to come to a fuller understanding of the world around him. He also tells

Tayo the importance of using English as a way to pass on Native American stories, ensuring their survival in new cultural forms and contexts.

16. As Roemer notes, Rosen's was the not the first collection of Native American fiction. *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* was preceded by, among others, *The American Indian Speaks* (1969) and *American Indian II* (1971), but Rosen's was the first collection published by a major commercial press that had what Roemer calls the "advertising and distribution power to alert many teachers to Silko's talents and to supply private and university bookstores with sufficient numbers of copies" (226).

17. As Silko notes in the preface to the novel, *Ceremony* was promoted by Geraldo Rivera and featured on a segment of *Good Morning America* (xviii).

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