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Between fact and fiction: Writing by American women in a transnational context

Hilary Jennifer Marcus
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Between Fact and Fiction:
Writing by American Women in a Transnational Context

Hilary Jennifer Marcus
Palo Alto, California

Master of Arts, The College of William and Mary, 2004
Bachelor of Arts, University of California at Berkley, 2001

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Hilary J. Marcus

Hilary Jennifer Marcus

Approved by the Committee, January, 2010

Nancy Gray
Committee Chair
Associate Professor Nancy Gray, The College of William and Mary

Timothy Barnard
Assistant Professor Timothy Barnard, The College of William and Mary

Maureen Fitzgerald
Assistant Professor Maureen Fitzgerald, The College of William and Mary

Marcy J. Douglass
Assistant Professor Marcy Douglass, Shippensburg University
ABSTRACT PAGE

Drawing on poststructuralist theories of gender, nation and modernity, this dissertation is an interdisciplinary exploration of American experimental women’s writing and their linkages to and explorations of colonial and U.S. imperialist histories. “Between Fact and Fiction: Writing by American Women in a Transnational Context” considers experimental literary texts by women writing from diverse spaces across places and times as cultural texts that can provide important insights for understanding transnational politics of power and possibilities for disrupting power. The project examines a broad range of experimental literary texts by women including Gertrude Stein, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Iranian-American women writers from the first literary anthology of Iranian-American women’s work entitled *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writings by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*.

Each author, in her own way, produces nuanced readings of power and domination on a structural (macro) level. Power and domination work both in terms of a culture’s official narratives about itself, for example its history and its politics, as well as the literary stories it cherishes. These readings of power often remain unacknowledged in critical discourse because they are bracketed as aesthetic only. However, through an examination of American experimental writing by women, I argue that the aesthetic, the historical, and the political are all part of the same kind of discursive structure. And, for this reason, it is imperative to make known those discursive structures which masquerade as only historical or only aesthetic when basic discursive structure is left intact. I argue that together, these writings provide new ways of understanding U.S. culture and studying “America” within a transnational historical framework.
For Fred Marcus

Mentor, Friend, Doctor, and Father Extraordinaire. Your love, support, and encouragement have made all the difference.
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observing him be an advocate for patients who were unable to afford treatment or were being given “the run around” by insurance companies taught me important life lessons. It taught me to figure out the work you love, no matter how difficult that work is, and commit to do it to the best of your ability every day. It was in those early days that I was inspired to become a doctor of some sort. In many ways, our walks behind his practice between patients or lunch breaks to discuss politics, social justice, college, grad applications, and then graduate school on holiday breaks when I could get home to California are present in the pages of this dissertation. For these reasons and others, I dedicate this dissertation to my dad.
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INTRODUCTION:

Points of Departure

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.

— Gloria Anzaldúa

The existence of Third World women’s narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance. After all, the point is not just to record one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant.

— Chandra Mohanty

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.

— Audre Lorde

“Between Fact and Fiction: Writing by American Women in a Transnational Context” is an interdisciplinary exploration of American experimental women’s writing and their linkages to and explorations of colonial and U.S. imperialist histories. This dissertation reads experimental literary texts by women writing from diverse spaces across places and times as cultural texts that can provide important insights for understanding transnational politics of power and possibilities for disrupting power. The project examines a broad range of experimental literary texts by women including Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Gertrude Stein, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Iranian-American women writers who are included in the first literary anthology of Iranian-American women’s writing entitled Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New
Writings by Women of the Iranian Diaspora. Each author, in her own way, produces nuanced readings of power and domination on a structural (macro) level. Power and domination work both in terms of a culture's official narratives about itself, for example its history and its politics, as well as the literary stories it cherishes. These readings of power often remain unacknowledged in critical discourse because they are bracketed as aesthetic only. However, through an examination of American experimental writing by women, I will argue that the aesthetic, the historical, and the political are all part of the same kind of discursive structure. And, for this reason, it is imperative to make known those discursive structures which masquerade as only historical or only aesthetic when basic discursive structure is left intact.

I use the term "experimental writing by women" to gesture towards assiduous disruptions of categories (of identity, truth, meaning). I invoke it to signify writing that engages language not to master or claim but to enact dynamic interactions of subject, context, and word. The critical history of American experimental writing by women has been erratic at best. Experimental women's writing tends to be read as primarily an aesthetic project, as opposed to a political one. This happens largely because American experimental women writers continue to be read in isolation from one another. Currently, American experimental women's writing is not considered a formative "body of literature." To form a "body of literature" of American experimental women's writing is to connect these texts and to examine how they each complicate notions of power and expose American hegemonies. These texts perform rigorous analyses of the discursive constructs that establish and maintain America's
"official stories" and do so as literature. Official stories that circulate transnationally, such as the “American Dream” narrative, simultaneously perpetuate the story of America being a truly “democratic” nation with endless possibilities for all of its citizens, and “forget” histories of American imperialism that allowed for the geopolitical formation of contemporary America. American experimental women’s writing breaks open these "official stories," calling attention to and interrogating the reality of what Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease have called “the cultures of United States imperialism.”

The Cultures of United States Imperialism is also the title of Kaplan and Pease’s edited anthology, which takes as its focus an interrogation of American Studies. They argue that American Studies, as an academic field, has historically been complicit in establishing America as exceptionally democratic, while being forgetful of its histories of imperialism that ground contemporary America. To study the cultures of U.S. imperialism is to interrogate traditional conventions of American historiography (the official stories of U.S. history) that are usually conceived as neutral and “objective.” It is to recognize literary conventions, in conjunction with historiography, as political practices that legitimize some subjects and discursive practices while delegitimizing others.

In this essentially cultural studies project, working at the intersections of at least three fields—Women’s Studies, Literary Studies, and American Studies—I follow Chandra Mohanty’s project that calls for opening up borders within feminism and drawing on diverse sites of struggle and activism informed by transnational
feminist practices. This project draws upon feminist theory for its critical framework. A feminist (theoretical) lens provides an excellent way to look at always already destabilized (experimental) literary texts and stabilized (conventional) historiography together because its primary function is to question the structures that define (normative) categories. Feminist theory is the most useful critical framework for this project because it has a long track record of unpacking gender and recognizing gender as a constructed, even discursive, category among a multiplicity of other constructed identity categories. This is a method that can also be applied to genre because genre, like gender, is a categorization that “enforces” particular kinds of identity.

Specifically, this project works to forge linkages between experimental literary and cultural texts and histories of U.S. imperialism, global networks of neocolonialist politics, transnational capital, and national boundaries. It thus participates in recent American Studies scholarship that moves towards “transnationalizing” the field.

George Lipsitz argues that:

At one time, the uneven activities and plural practices conducted under the name of American Studies could be thought of as cohering around a common set of questions about national culture and national identity, about the congruence between place and culture in the United States. At this moment in history, however, we face new conditions and circumstances that demand new ways of knowing. (Lipsitz 32)

In order to produce new ways of knowing in this globalized world, the field of American Studies must “decenter America,” as Jessica Gienow-Hecht suggests. Decentering America, as it were, in American Studies “seeks to move the United States away from the center of the historical narrative” (Gienow-Hecht 6). Moving beyond the bounds of nation, revisionist American Studies scholars such as Amy Kaplan are
invested in reexamining America and American culture through a reciprocal model in which contemporary imperialism and historical colonialism function.

For example, Kaplan argues that American Studies must move away from celebrating what she calls “American exceptionalism” into a more complicated negotiation of how international histories shape and reshape America and American culture. She defines “American exceptionalism” as the continued disavowal of imperial histories on the part of American historiography and American Studies. In a continued ideological forgetting of American imperialism, the study of American culture has been, and continues to be, performed in isolation from, rather than in relation to, other cultures and places. Kaplan insists on the necessity of “foregrounding culture” within an international framework and points to fundamental methodological problems for doing American Studies:

American Studies today, still under intense debate, emphasizes multi-cultural diversity and scholarly ‘dissensus’ and analyzes American society and culture in terms of internal difference and conflicts, structured around the relationship of race, gender, ethnicity and class … yet the new pluralistic model of diversity runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly on the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating their formation. That is, American nationality can still be taken for granted as a monolithic and self-contained whole, no matter how diverse and conflicted, if it remains implicitly defined by its internal social relations, and not in political struggles for power with other cultures and nations, struggles which make America’s conceptual and geographical borders fluid, contested and historically changing. (Kaplan 15)

My dissertation project not only grapples with Kaplan’s methodology of locating American imperialism in culture and history but also extends it to the contemporary transnational postcoloniality that Mohanty theorizes. I work to push
Kaplan's framework to address transhistorical and transnational literary sites for locating systematic and discursive modes of domination and imperialist practices at "home" in America and abroad. To understand American imperialism as always already in a struggle for power transnationally and transhistorically then requires a rigorous analysis of the discursive constructs that continue to "make Americans' conceptual and geographical borders fluid, contested and historically changing" (Kaplan 15). Rather than working to define imperialism as such, this project considers how ideological formations of domination are performed through hegemonic language-use and cultural texts in flexible and always changing ways. I argue that it is necessary to read experimental literary texts by women, texts that use the flexibility of hegemonic language-use against itself, as a forceful collective "body of literature" and as cultural texts. In doing so, questions regarding the production and maintenance of boundaries and borders, metaphorical, literary, and lived, must be considered. For example, how are myths of American democratic nationhood contingent upon the repression of violent and imperialistic histories? How do discursive constructions such as "democracy," nationhood, citizen, and alien produce specific knowledge(s) and identities in a transnational context? And what happens to these questions and their impacts when they are taken on also in/as art?

These are questions that my authors' "bordering texts" (must) engage. Combining art and politics, they generate a new way of seeing. It is imperative that I look at literary texts, then, because literature is a discourse that embraces language-use(s) that do not "pin down" but, as it were, let loose, compared to "factual" texts
that try to explain. Art enacts rather than simply explains. And we need that (enacted) discourse to inter-act with the fixative discourses, in order to reveal the discourses of Anglo-American (centric) politics. Quite contrary to their claim of embracing (American) plurality, these politics continually refer to “plurality” as if it could be contained within the borders of the United States. By deconstructing, exposing, and re-configuring borders, producing alternative cultural communities within borderlands, these authors reconfigure the study of U.S. culture.

Through a variety of literary experimental forms, each author’s work participates in a collective process of “writing into the gaps of history” as Cha says (Cha “Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard” 11). Each text provides new ways of understanding U.S. culture and studying “America” within a transnational historical framework. This “collective” of borderland authors and their “bordering texts” all participate in the project of “mak(ing) America’s conceptual and geographical borders fluid, contested and historically changing” that Amy Kaplan calls for. And this project, like Kaplan’s, takes as its starting point the understanding that ideas and language circulate as powerfully as people and capital, structuring lived realities, constituting what seems possible, and thus having material consequences.

While the term “border” invokes images of demarcation, rules, and restrictions of movement, the term “bordering” fosters a sense of being nearby but not quite “there.” These “bordering” texts, while different in many ways, are always difficult to “pin down” and continually resist unilateral readings. These “bordering” texts produce spaces where discursive and lived worlds blend and cross. For example,
in the anthology *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writings by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*, very different stories are told about the same historical events and time periods. These discursive spaces tell both individual stories and group histories that are not recognizable or “hearable” in the dominant historical narrative of the Iranian Diaspora and U.S. history. Reading across spaces, places, and times, and framing the works in this way, sets up a textual space where new dialogues, new understandings of history, and new readings of power relations and identity formations become possible.

This project works to establish a powerful “collective.” It is a collective that defies the traditional definition of collectivity as that which necessitates rallying around a particular site, issue, cause, etc. to form a group. Rather, this is a collective that “inhabits” the borderland and all of those differences. I borrow Anzaldúa’s conception of “borderland” as both a metaphor and the literal (literary) space that situates this project: the “zone of transition and not belonging … where all the contradictions of living among and between worlds manifests itself” (Anzaldúa 95). Each author examined in this project is acutely aware of her history and her location, and/or subjugation, in that history. These authors write from a borderland, that “prohibited and forbidden space” (Anzaldúa 25) where their cultural texts simultaneously reveal and defy the “rules” and “regulations” of borders.

I argue that to read these particular cultural texts as what I am calling “bordering” texts is to understand them as a “collective” mode of writing that can move texts and bodies out of “borderland” and into new textual and material spaces.
And yet this movement is not one that is direct or has a singular destination or endpoint. Rather, these texts move in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways that are always in motion. Moreover, these textual movements are not only discursive (as if that were possible) but also historical and political. The textual actions these authors take are connected to historical events and the political implications of how histories are told. I thus refer to these works as "bordering" texts, not to coin a catchy phrase but rather to loosely define a trope that connects the authors' works in this study, all of which interrogate historiography as a mode of writing imbricated in relations of power. I use the term "loosely" here to draw attention to its strategic significance as a linkage within difference. These bordering texts that make up a "collective" mode of writing, as I am defining it, are a set of discursive interventions. They are interventions that form a trope which invites multiple readings and multiple interpretive strategies, and fundamentally disrupt traditional historical narratives (the paradigmatic official story), allowing for new possibilities, and common contexts/solidarities as Mohanty argues must be imagined in order to achieve "feminism without borders" (Mohanty 2). Experimental women's literature fundamentally challenges the relationship between form and content and indeed the possibility of objectively documenting "facts."

All of these bordering texts work, in different ways, to show material effects of literary and linguistic borders and the necessity to re-write histories. In his work on rewriting Chicano history, Ramón Saldivar argues that literary and historical discourses are not only integrally connected but mutually constitutive:
For Chicano narrative, history is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subtext of discourse. History cannot be conceived as mere "background" or "context" for this literature; rather, history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature. (Saldivar 55)

It is this understanding that history shapes the "form and content of the literature" that the bordering texts I examine, in their various experimental modes, work to expose and displace. As Saldivar argues, "history cannot be conceived as mere 'background' or 'context' for this literature" or, I would argue, any literature. This is because the very discourse available for "telling" one's story is already mediated through particular discursive systems that are continuously re-inscribed in existing historical (conventionally conceived) discourse. Hayden White calls this process "emplotment," in which narrativity and historiography are systematically connected. The "plot" of the story is always written through a set of discursive systems that locate historical subjects (those who can speak) within that system. And that system is precisely what I am arguing is the "dominant structure" that the aesthetic, the historical, and the political are all part of.

It is not enough to argue that history is incomplete, which many scholars in the fields of gender, Chicana/o, and American studies have done, nor is it enough to argue that experimental writing is political and cultural (this too has been done but to a lesser extent). This project works to show the linkages between discursive constructions, literary productions, politics of representations, and historiography in order to radically question and trouble literary conventions and knowledge(s) more broadly. While I could critically examine traditional historical narratives, I have chosen to read subjugated histories through a diverse selection of American
experimental women’s writing, all of which do history *through* their literary processes.

Challenging discursive conventions on the level of both form and content, these writers interrogate official stories both in how they write and what they write. This double trajectory (the how and the what) is a necessary strategy for re-reading official stories, given the hegemonic power and the discursive conventions on which they (the official stories) rely. Each writer chooses experimental writing as her mode of disruption and survival (from the implications of the official stories) on her own terms. Literary practice, particularly (women’s) experimental literature, is an important way to look at this disruptive work because it offers the kind of language-use/discourse that truly opens up the gaps through which we can both see the relations of history(ies) and also re-read American culture and its relation to transnational politics. I do not ever want to give the impression that in this project I am reading these literary texts as windows through which to see the “real” American culture. Rather, I read this literature as a necessary practice that changes what we are able to see. These authors write from subjugated locations within dominant literary discourse, where they are most able to challenge official stories and the historiography on which they depend.

Subjugated knowledge is engendered by dominant modes of producing history. This form of history production foregrounds some narratives and subjugates others. Michel Foucault argues that subjugated knowledge is “a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes
its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it” (Foucault 233). This formulation of subjugated knowledge is useful because it names the ways in which unsanctioned histories are layered under a terrain of official history and stories that erupt in the interstices of its own contradictions. However, I would argue that Foucault is mistaken in his notion that historical agency is defined through oppression or the “harshness with which it is opposed” because this view defines historical agents only in relation to their domination or victim status within dominant culture, flattening out complex historical processes and relationships through a colonizing and imperialistic gaze. Donna Haraway argues that historical subjects are subjugated because they do not show up as subjects within the dominant discursive system that produces the official story. It is precisely this invisibility that gives the subjugated subject a uniquely unsettling view into dominant structures of power on a systematic level. It is also from this place of invisibility that the subjugated authors turn their work into un-subjugated texts by using “unauthorized” history to write their stories.

These bordering texts use “history” to write “stories” and, in the process, expose the “fact” that history and historiography is a form of story and storytelling. They use “history” to tell “stories” and “story” to tell histories in ways that are so uncategorical that they constantly unsettle our ability to “document” the facts and also our ability to distrust the “stories” of fiction. Looking at how these “bordering texts” operate, as well as what they say, and understanding this relation of history to historiography and cultural narrative, we start to look at the “facts” and the very
process of documenting those facts with suspicion. We start to read those “facts” in relation to U.S. imperialism and histories of colonization and neocolonialism. And I argue it is the literary, especially the feminist experimental literary, that must be read as a necessary practice because it can change what we can see. This project interrogates the borders of knowledge(s) and the very process of categorizing Knowledge. Of course, the common response to disrupting categories of knowledge, history in particular, is to worry that we then have no way to speak about them (and so we often vehemently deny the instability of these categories). This project does not allow us to stay at the either/or level, as it looks at bordering texts that are always already in-between genres, histories, and cultures. These women’s bordering texts are plural in uncontainable ways that deeply trouble normative categories and reveal know-ing as an endless (even boundless) process. These writers will not meet our expectations. Their literary practices will not allow us to stay in our normative comfort zones, nor will we be totally lost in unknowable discourse. Rather, these bordering authors take us elsewhere, where boundaries are in perpetual motion, limiting nothing and including everything.

Each text does cultural work. They are texts that actively defy discursive and generic boundaries, exposing cultural norms and structures of difference that contribute to sustaining structures of dominance and power. Since these structures of difference and dominance are so deeply embedded in cultures and cultural practices, and because power is never static nor is it singular, each of these experimental writers makes necessary and different contributions to exposing structures of power in a
transnational framework (connecting America and its politics to the rest of the world). Each of these writers contributes her own voice and her own disruption that form this diverse and powerful collective. While I have chosen to “divide” the project into chapter-spaces, each chapter connects to the others and all stand in (some) relation to one another. By putting these texts side by side, and having them speak to and sometimes away from each other, they become a group of writers that form a unique (and truly diverse) collective, one that does not form a singular whole but that form its own collectivity.

In Chapter one, I begin with an examination of a selection of Gertrude Stein’s texts with an insistence on rereading Stein’s writing as process. I chose to put Stein first not because she wrote first in the temporal sense. Rather, it is because her work is so dynamic and radically uncategorical. I see her textual strategies as grounding the dissertation, not in terms of pinning it down but as an opening up of textual experimentation. Each of these writers uses different strategies but there is overlapping among them and all of their writings connect, in some way, to Stein’s texts. Stein’s use of language is so open that it allows us to read these other experimental women writers not only as disrupters of hegemonic language-use, but as themselves speaking on their own terms.

I found early in my work on Stein that writing about her texts is always problematic. I structured this chapter, in particular, as one that walks the reader through Stein’s words rather than one that tells the reader what Stein’s words mean. It is also a way of arguing that Stein’s work needs to be experienced and read as
experience. What might seem like redundancy is a result of my strategy for making my critical presence obvious. For Stein, language must be understood as something to break into. Her words constantly break conventional patterns and trump the reader’s expectations. And yet, the words she uses are of the most common variety. Her use of words gives the reader a radically new experience of them in the most familiar of contexts. Her use of language does something else, but she does not create a new language. She simply “uses everything” and leaves out nothing. She knows that things “must be simple through complication” (qtd. in Hass, A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein 34). The complications that she reveals open up new ways of hearing other experimental women writers’ ways of telling and knowing.

In Chapter two, I examine Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s text Dictee. For Cha, like Stein, writing must be unfixed by place, time or expected sequence. However, Cha is writing from the Korean diaspora. She is writing about and against specific histories of colonization and the master narratives that purport to tell her story. In Dictee, language and writing become a form of action and unmastering, drawing on a multitude of “archival” images, in which she refuses to name sources and proper referents. Cha, like Stein, breaks apart language but she uses many different languages in her disruption and writes into the “gaps of history.” Her telling is one that opens up, rather than sutures over the gaps that official narratives produce.

In Chapter three, I examine Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s experimental text Desert Blood, written as a fictional account of the contemporary history of the Juárez
femicides. Using her fictional text to draw attention to these murders, Gaspar de Alba works to expose the U.S. complicities, structures of dominance and power, and the traditional historiography that has kept these murders (mostly) hidden and quiet. Using Chicana feminist theory, I argue that Gaspar de Alba takes the “next step” by putting Chicana sexuality at the center of her narrative and developing a protagonist character that performs her sexuality in new ways. I also argue that Gaspar de Alba invokes key female mother figures in Mexican and Chicana traditions to tell her story through a cultural lens. This is a lens that will not allow contemporary history to be separated from U.S. imperialism and histories of colonization, neocolonialism, and globalization.

In Chapter four, I examine the first anthology of writing by women of the Iranian diaspora called *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*. I argue that this collection of writers opens up and pulls apart hegemonies of displacement, belonging, plurality and multiplicities of identity within American ideology and American cultural imperialism. Using a variety of different ways of writing, each of the authors in this collection challenges what it means to be an American and the very foundation of the “American Dream.” Gayatri Spivak argues that, “to create the new America out of the pipe dream of ‘We the People,’ or out of the bogus concept of the world policeman, or to give democratic ideals to a kind of moral luck is to forget the violence at the origin” (Spivak “Acting Bits/Identity Talk” in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992) 785). Each of the writers in this collected anthology, work to unravel and answer this very question: how do “pipe
dreams,” “bogus concepts of the world” and “moral luck” operate to create new American subjects and reiterate American hegemony? I work to show the accumulative effect that these collected voices from the Iranian diaspora reveal and the different ways that they challenge politics of identity and constructions of master narratives that seek to explain their diasporic histories.

This dissertation is positioned to do the work of creating a body of experimental writing. I pull these texts together and examine them as a collective, which contributes to the corrective critical move that I argue is necessary to be able to study experimental writing by women as a body of literature. Approaching these texts as a body of literature is imperative in order to give them a recognizable place within the canon as literature that can and must be read and taught in canonical ways. Breaking open the canon to include experimental writing by women will simultaneously help move us beyond restrictive literary traditions that rely on Western-masculine-centric signifying codes of meaning and radically challenge the canon itself. I argue that through these different voices and textualities, these writers, together, create interactive sites of diversity and a body of literature within difference that refuse singular defining of their/her selves.
My sentences do get under their skin, only they do not know that they do.

—Gertrude Stein

Can a question be clear. Can a pin be a shape. Can a length be different. Two, two are not more than one when there is a dress. This is no obstacle.

—Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein was a writer. She used language. Writing was her “intellectual recreation” or perhaps “re-creation.” However, perhaps because Stein was so open to playing with/in language such that her words do not look like most writers’ words (even though she used everyday common words), critics have had a tendency to qualify her words as something else. Critics consistently have approached Stein’s writing as if it were a puzzle in need of solving or code in need of breaking. As a result, Stein’s words are read in comparison to art forms such as painting (mostly cubist). She has been persistently identified as an inventor of a private language with her words taken to be nothing more than childlike utterances or unconscious gibberish. Just as often, critics have tended to read her words as evidence of mental instability and emotional fragility. It is not uncommon for critics to denounce Stein angrily as a hoaxter, one who foisted her nonsensical and grammatically lacking writing upon her readership (some go as far as claiming she wrote “automatically”).
and passed it off as intellectually innovative. In this chapter, I work to construct a process of walking with the reader through a small amount of Gertrude Stein’s writings as “bordering texts.” I argue that Stein’s texts interrogate boundaries and expose even more radically the master’s tools of language and literary conventions. Her writings need to be experienced and read as experience. I interject my readings and call attention to my own process at many points as a way of letting, literally, my process show through. As soon as one writes about, one presumes a kind of mastery of the author’s text. I realize that my conviction to write “nearby” Stein rather than about her is a difficult critical endeavor. Writing in first person is often viewed as subjective and not “scholarly.” And yet it is such views that limit how experimental writings can be read.

Stein invites her reader into her text as a collaborative partner who participates in its creation each time s/he reads Stein’s lines. Her texts are radically open, even “democratic,” offering readers the opportunity to make independent connections between her words and their imaginations. In her most experimental writing, all the words on the page have equal value, freeing them to relate to each other in almost unlimited ways. She produces in her work a vision of openness and plurality, providing critical as well as textual space for interrogation of seemingly fixed discursive boundaries on which official stories depend.

Gertrude Stein is a name that has come to embody both literary genius and, in critic Michael Gold’s words, a “literary idiot” (Gold 21). The question of how one to read Stein’s work has always been and continues to be complicated by her status as a
writer “more talked about by more people who have never read a line of hers than any other author” (Coats 69). There is a curious tension between Stein as a modernist literary hero and Stein as a secretive and coded (often considered crazy) figure, which is perhaps the reason why the critical response to Stein has been all over the map. Stein criticism arguably offers one of the most complicated and also fascinating moments in the history of American literature. Interestingly however, while critics have always had things to say about Stein’s work, it was not until the 1980s, nearly 40 years after Stein’s death, that her work was critically appreciated. Stein wrote at the same time as other expatriate modernists such as Ernest Hemingway (her student), T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Henry James and James Joyce. However, she did not receive nearly the same amount or same kind of critical attention that her colleagues did. Her position as a modernist author and her critical reception have been precarious in the sense that she was arguably the most precocious challenger of conventions, which modernists were valued for challenging, and the most prolific writer of them all, and yet she has received the least “competent criticism” (Reid 3). Even B.L. Reid, perhaps Stein’s most negative critic, has commented upon the insufficient critical literature on Stein:

The critics by and large, have fled from Gertrude Stein. I doubt that any other modern writer so widely considered important has received so little competent criticism, whether it is measured qualitatively or quantitatively. For example, she has not had one-tenth the volume of commentary that has been allotted to James Joyce. (Reid 3)

Reid, however, goes on to justify this lack of criticism by stating that, “Joyce is ten times the greater artist” and by arguing that Stein is not really an artist at all. The
function of Stein’s critical history has made a tremendous impact on how experimental writing can be read and has had important implications for her contemporaries. It has worked to keep experimental writing as instances of perplexity. Ours is the moment in history that has shifted to allow us to read Stein differently. I am not doing this reading of Stein because I think it is an interesting way to study Stein’s work. Rather, I am doing it because we must shift our critical lens in order to be able to read experimental writers, otherwise they will never become a body of literature.

A Critical History

In a 1929 review of Stein’s *Useful Knowledge*, Sylvia Norman writes, “If Miss Stein’s *Useful Knowledge* points out anything, it is that the loafing mind, equipped with language, can reach a triumph of chaotic imbecility” (in *Nation and Athenaeum* 52). In 1934, Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner wrote “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” an essay that claims Stein’s writing is really nothing more than automatic writing written by a “second personality successfully split off from Miss Stein’s conscious self” (in *Atlantic Monthly* 50). This second personality, Skinner argues, is “intellectually unopinionated” and “emotionally cold” (52). In other words, in Skinner’s argument, there is no possible way Stein could have written as an intellectual or had intellectually worthy things to say because she wrote “automatically” and because automatic writing is necessarily unintellectual. In 1936 Michael Gold wrote “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot,” in which he claims Stein’s
words “resemble the monotonous gibberings of paranoiacs in the private wards of asylums” (in Change the World! 24). This is another way of disregarding Stein’s words as simply being crazy babble.

Satiric imitation was another reactionary response to Stein’s work. It was not uncommon for critics to question the intent of her writing. Stein’s harsher critics often argued that she was fooling everyone and simply mocking the literary establishment as a kind of perverse joke. Critics such as Stuart Pratt Sherman spent their time attempting to prove Stein to be some kind of fraudulent figure by copying her writing style. In Sherman’s 1924 chapter entitled “A Note on Gertrude Stein,” he sets up an “experiment” meant to prove that Stein’s writing is a “method of madness” (in Points of View 267). He would write one hundred words on a sheet of paper, then cut the words out and sort them by parts of speech. He would then shuffle the words and put them together, joined with punctuation (again randomly selected). His experiment read thus: “Red stupidly; but go slowly. The hope slim. Drink yeah! Dream! Swiftly pretty people through daffodils slip lazily consumes old books. Up by a sedate sweet heart roar darkly loud orchards. Life, the purple flame, simply proclaims a poem” (Sherman 267). Sherman “proves” Stein’s writing to be “ludicrous” upon concluding that his experiment is equivalent to her work (Sherman 267). Such “experiments” are typical of the satirical pieces that have been written to demonstrate the “unworthiness” of Stein’s work and prove Stein’s writing as nothing more than “baby talk” or to categorize it as absurdly “Steinese.” Richard Burton’s characterization of Stein as a “self-advertiser of pseudo-intellectual antics” in his 1914 essay
appropriately entitled “Posing” precisely captures the sentiment of Stein’s more agitated critics (in *Minneapolis Bellman* 57).

In 1958 B.L. Reid wrote an entire book trying to prove Stein’s “worthlessness.” His book, *Art By Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*, is intended to write Stein out of literature, literally. Stein’s writing, Reid claims, has “sought obliteration of the narrative line [; it] is not strictly comparable to anything in the main stream of literature in our century” (Reid 70). Moreover, “Stein’s true position is anti-literary, anti-intellectual, often anti-human and anti-moral...her work possesses no beauty, no instruction, no passion...[but] her failure to communicate is the crime for which we will finally have to hang her” (91). In Reid’s view, Stein’s writing lacks most, if not all, of the qualities we demand from literature. It actively disrupts the reader’s ability to follow the story and participate in the plot in order to get to a conclusive endpoint that we have learned to desire. Stein’s stories, of course, do not allow for the conventional journey readers have learned to expect where he/she is confronted with something troubling (a mysterious event, character, etc.) and then navigates through the text, solving the mystery and eventually reaching (joyously) the conclusion (the resolution) thereby moving the reader from being confused or lacking evidence into the position of the knower, knowing the ending. Because Reid cannot make Stein’s texts function in this expected conventional manner, he argues that Stein simply cannot be taken seriously because she uses “private, abstract language” (180). His argument thus goes this way: he first claims an artist must communicate with his/her audience. He then claims that Stein is “talking
to herself.” Because Reid assumes that she is not talking to “us,” Reid concludes that Stein is “not an artist” (169). Another related argument Reid makes for why Stein is “not an artist” begins with the claim that Stein’s “art” is “one of subtraction” in which she “does not reflect” but “rules out the imagination” (72). Reid then concludes that Stein cannot really be doing art because “art by subtraction finally subtracts art itself” (72).

Reid also attempts to account for the difficulty critics have had in “understanding” Stein’s work. He argues that the “confusion” goes back to what he calls “the original mistake.” This “mistake,” Reid argues, happened “when she defined herself as an artist.” He thus claims, “most of the confusion about Gertrude Stein seems the result of trying to understand her in a mistaken context” (72). Reid’s text in particular is a good example of a Stein critic who just cannot leave her alone. One may wonder what is at stake for these angry critics. What is it about Stein’s work that infuriated so many of her critics? These are key questions that I will examine throughout this chapter.

In addition to Stein’s supporters and detractors, there have been critics who appreciate Stein’s work, but not for what it is as much as what it has the potential to be. In these readings, Stein is posited as an author’s author. That is, Stein’s work is inspirational and meaningful to other authors but has no value in its own right. Malcolm Cowley’s 1946 essay “Gertrude Stein, Writer or Word Scientist?” first published in The New York Weekly Herald Tribune Book Review epitomizes such a view of Stein’s work. He writes, “I think of her often not as a writer primarily but as a
scientist in his laboratory working at some problem that apparently has no connection with man or society... Her style is like a chemical useless in its pure state, powerful when added to other mixtures" (Cowley 165). Harvey Eagleston makes a similar argument in his 1936 essay “Gertrude Stein: Method in Madness,” calling Stein a “tool maker” (165). He does not define what “tools” she has made specifically but says she is not capable of using them herself: “Her writing as a whole is like a splendid workshop. The tools are all there, sharpened, polished and arranged in shining order, but that is all. The work of art they were to make is missing...” (166).

Based on this reading, Stein becomes the embodiment of lack. Cowley and Eagleston are two examples of this critical tendency to read Stein as being only potentially useful to other writers but presently lacking as a writer herself. Furthermore, such a reading regards Stein as a user of language but not an agent of it, a reading which works to further deny that Stein’s work does anything at all in its own right.

In 1965 Michael J. Hoffman wrote *The Development of Abstraction in the Writing of Gertrude Stein*, which was an attempt to read Stein (and legitimize her writing) in relation to the plastic arts (this is the earliest of multiple attempts to prove Stein’s worthiness by locating her writing in terms of the plastic arts, a critical method I will discuss at length later in the chapter). Hoffman clearly intends to validate Stein’s writing but this is not what he ends up doing. Rather, because he has already decided that language is necessarily communicative and that communication requires particular referentiality (words must refer to certain things for meaning to exist because “words are inherently associative”), Stein’s words turn out to be “an art
that created its own reality” (178). Hoffman argues that Stein uses words “as plastic elements in creations that have no iconic relationship to anything conceptually recognizable to the external world” (153). To reach this conclusion, he first defines Stein’s art as one of “abstraction.” He then defines abstraction as subtracting parts of elements in order to get to the essence of things. Hoffman’s argument ultimately leads to something similar to what Reid does, because when he talks about these “essences,” he says they are not readable inside of dominant discourse. He concludes that, “abstract art [his categorization of Stein’s art]... is an impossibility, especially in writing” (176). Thus both Hoffman and Reid end up saying that in Stein’s work there is nothing there to read.

In 1970, Richard Bridgman attempted to legitimize Stein’s work by “pulling it together.” In *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, Bridgman sets out to pull together Stein’s work in the order she wrote it and, by doing so, make the case that Stein’s work is worthy of the same critical attention that other modernist writers have received. He announces his project as “a preliminary inventory of Stein’s literary estate” (Bridgman xiii). Bridgman’s project is important in the sense that it did compile Stein’s work in such a way that it was apparent she had created a huge literary opus, an opus that deserved more serious attention than it had previously received. However, Bridgman’s assessments of Stein’s work leave much to be desired. He reads Stein’s texts as filled with “coded words” and then proceeds to go on a decoding mission translating words such as “cow” and “Caesar” into “parts of the body, physical acts, and character traits” which lead him to make observations about 26
Stein's work as self-referential and emotionally charged: "Even as she approached her fifties, Gertrude Stein's need to record her passions remained unquenchable" (148-9). It is perhaps his frustration with his decoding practices (Stein’s words resist singular interpretations which are a “problem” for official narratives and their cultural agendas) that led him to make the claim that Stein was “an improvisational writer” who wrote “thousands of pages of disconnected trivia” (150). While he states early on that he is writing a “description of her words” rather than a description of her life and reputation (as earlier critics had often done), and thus vows he is taking Stein seriously as a writer, he does not refrain from commenting on Stein’s “emotional life” (24). In fact, Stein ends up seeming dangerously close to an emotional mess, based on Bridgman’s account. Early on he claims that Stein “permitted her feelings to spill messily onto the pages of her college themes” (34). Similarly he argues that if The Making of Americans is “regarded as a novel rather than a psychological and stylistic day book it is [...] a disaster” (61). Bridgman reads The Making of Americans as “a psychologically liberating work for Gertrude Stein,” where she is “muttering reminders and encouragements to herself, imprecations, and cries of alarm” (61). For a self-acclaimed “dispassionate critic,” Bridgman spends a surprising amount of energy commenting on Stein’s emotional state and making claims about her psychological state. In his view, Stein’s writing is the result of Stein’s “purging her psyche of old ghosts” and recording it onto the page (79). In his critical assessment of Stein’s style, he declares that her “rambling compound sentences were means of pulling together the disarray of her consciousness” (73). Bridgman’s text is an
excellent example of criticism that seeks to appreciate Stein’s writing as such but fails to read her words without falling into a trap that filters her words through the constructed perceptions of her personality.

Beginning in the late 1970s and through the ’80s, Stein received a surge of critical attention as postmodernism hit the literary critical scene. If we look at Susan Sontag’s now seminal essay “Against Interpretation,” we can locate a moment where critical interpretative frameworks are called to task. Sontag argues that we have been reading literature in a way that neglects a whole aspect of it. Critical interpretations have neglected how literature works by only looking at the content (the what) of works. The focus of interpretation has been on discovering the hidden meaning of the art and in the process of searching for such meaning, according to Sontag; criticism has neglected the “artfulness” of art. She calls for a reconsideration of critical interpretation: “Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag 550). Sontag’s challenge is for criticism to look at how art is and not just what it is: “the function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (550). Sontag’s contribution, then, in this new strand of criticism loosely termed “postmodernism,” focuses on how the art works and not just what it says. She also focuses on “experiencing” art by using all of our senses, which is precisely what Stein’s work requires.

The process of reading Stein within a postmodern critical framework developed throughout the 1980s in the work of critics such as Marianne DeKoven (1983), Catharine Stimpson (1984), Ulla Dydo (1985), Shari Benstock (1986), Janice
L. Doane (1986), and Harriet Scott Chessman (1989). While I will challenge several of these critics’ readings of Stein later in the chapter, overall they applied a variety of critical tools and approaches to Stein’s texts that work to *open up a plurality* of ways to locate meaning in her work. Such critical approaches draw from a number of fields such as feminist, psychoanalytic, linguistic, deconstructive and lesbian theoretical protocols, all of which are broadly encompassed under the postmodern critical framework. Now that critics are looking for how meaning works in texts rather than simply what the text means there are all sorts of plural possibilities of what meaning can be. What emerges in Stein criticism at this contemporary historical moment then is not a consistent or definitive reading of Stein, but rather a range of critical analyses that move towards identifying and appreciating Stein’s textual practices as challenging dominant modes of locating meaning. It is in this sense that Shari Benstock, for example, asserts that Stein’s subversion of conventionality is “not merely resisting the grammatical law but writing itself in, around, against, and through that law” (30). It is precisely the emphasis on how Stein wrote that allows for these critics to read her writing as challenging the literary and cultural conventions (rules that equal constraints) that make speaking on one’s own terms as a woman difficult, if not impossible, in dominant discourse. It thus becomes important for these critics to question the ways Stein’s writing has been written about in terms of her writing as a woman, because she was an outlaw not only in that she wrote in the way she wrote but also because she did so as a woman. She disrupted dominant discourse
in two ways: she did not “communicate” but even if she had, she still would have been a lesser communicator because she was a woman.

Reading Stein with attention to her status as a woman writer is not new. In fact, questions about Stein’s person and more specifically her seeming deviance from feminine norms, have had much to do with reading Stein primarily as a personality, even an outlaw personality, rather than a writer. As Stein’s writing was written off as unsubstantial, her life was declared interesting. For example, in Axel’s Castle, Edmund Wilson conflates Stein’s status as a writer with her perceived personality announcing Stein as “a literary personality of unmistakable originality and distinction” (qtd in DeKoven 471), which works to ensure that she remained primarily a personality and not a writer. Stein speaks to this tendency in Everybody’s Autobiography: “it always did bother me that the American Public was more interested in me than in my work. And after all, there is no sense in it because if it were not for my work they would not be interested in me so why should they not be more interested in my work than in me” (50). Stein is recognizing that she has been simultaneously produced as an iconic figure and popularized for her perceived iconoclastic characteristics. The tendency to read Stein’s literary product as a narrative of her personal peculiarities, is a process that happens far too often in critical accounts of women’s writing, in particular, women’s “experimental” writing. The result is often that attention gets diverted from serious interaction with work that profoundly disrupts dominant conventions by retreating to safer, more familiar outlets: Stein as personality versus Stein as literary innovator. It is within this context
that I find Stein’s work to be of such importance to the conceptualization of writing that would do without ideological limitations and collusion with master narratives, needing instead to be taken on its own terms. Reading Stein’s words as she wrote them is to read Stein as offering us (all-of-us) access to language where nothing is denied and everything is included.

Stein did what she did and that has not changed. However, with new critical vocabularies emerging, we recognize Stein’s work as essential to understanding linguistic conventions and cultural contexts that structure what we think we can do and say and know in our time. As Mikhail Bahktin says: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—over populated with the intentions of others” (291). Gertrude Stein knew this. Stein profoundly interrupts cultural constructions of language and meaning. Her words, as often as critics have tried, resist translation or appropriation (though certainly not quotation). Instead, her words consistently offer possibilities of reading against the grain of rule-bound language that is generally taken for granted, and asking how notions of meaning are produced and maintained.

Catherine Belsey, in her 1980 work *Critical Practice*, interrogates the ways common sense works in relation to the idea of language as neutral: “it is argued that what seems obvious and natural is not necessarily so, but that on the contrary the ‘obvious’ and the ‘natural’ are not given but produced in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience” (Belsey 3). Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, Belsey understands ideology to refer not to
any particular doctrine of beliefs "deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals" but rather to "the very condition of our experience of the world, unconscious precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted" (Belsey, 5). Ideology is inscribed in language and, more specifically, in discourse ("a domain of language-use") which allows for "certain shared assumptions" not to signal particular patterns of ideas but to act as "a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing" (5). The work of ideology is thus to conceal and obscure the "production" of what we take to be reality, positing it instead as always already given and complete. Language is ideology's vehicle of escape, so to speak. As long as language is thought to be simply a "medium in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things," ideology masquerades as common sense, obvious, and natural (Bakhtin 291). As Belsey says, "the transparency of language," it turns out, "is an illusion" (4). Language never is and never can be neutral. To investigate language and the ways language is used in our culture then is to ask, how does language as a rule-bound orderly medium structure (and bind) what seems possible to say, think, and know?

On her 1934-35-lecture tour in America, Stein shared how she thinks about language:

Of course you might say why not invent new names, new languages but that cannot be done. It takes a tremendous amount of inner necessity to invent even one word, one can invent imitating movements and emotions in sounds, and in the poetical language of some languages you have that, the german language as a language suffers from this what the words mean sound too much like what they do, and children do these things by one sort or a other inventions, but this has really nothing to do with language. Language as a real thing is not imitation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to
go on being that as long as humanity is anything. So everyone must stay with
the language which has in it all the history that has come to be spoken and
written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation. (237-38
in Lectures In America)

Stein's understanding of language as "a real thing" is the problem for many of her
readers and critics alike. As I have already said, we learn language is a vehicle for
communication. It needs to be stable and orderly so that everyone can understand
what is being communicated. Yet if language is, as Stein insists, also "a real thing,"
then how can we be sure that it will behave in the orderly systematic ways that we
need it to for communication? Or, said differently, how can we be certain we know
what language means and how it means if it is also a "real thing"? For Stein,
language is what it is. As a writer she does what she does with her language, using
everything and leaving out nothing. According to Stein, a writer does not invent
language anew but rather writes in his or her language as it "has come to be spoken
and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation" (238). To
understand language as an intellectual recreation as Stein did, is to understand
language as both a real thing and not a real thing at the same. This is to recognize that
words written on the page are both materially there, we can see them and touch them,
and at the same time those same words are out of sight; we learn to read through them
in search of something else (meaning). To understand language as "a real thing" is to
simultaneously allow for its orderly process (communicative) and to interrupt this
function. While Stein used common words (even in her most experimental works she
used common words) her writing consistently invokes critical responses that are
committed to positing her use of language as a puzzle in need of solving. What she
did, she did with simple words.

**Breaking into Language**

I call Stein’s strategic and active defying of discursive and generic boundaries
breaking into language. Stein breaks into language exposing cultural norms and
structures of difference that contribute to sustaining structures of dominance and
power (including but not limited to master narratives). Breaking into language is not
just one thing that Stein does. It takes many examples from Stein’s work to
understand the complex ways in which she breaks into language. It is not simply her
breaking of grammatical rules, although this is perhaps the most obvious of her
interrogations. Our stories are limited. They are bounded by rules and regulation that
are so naturalized that we do not even know the bounds exist. And yet, as soon as a
writer defies the boundaries of these transparent but always-already-there rules, we
know it. We feel it. Challenging these conventions by way of questioning storytelling
and reading practices, is one way to investigate the relations between language,
thinking, knowing, and understanding our world and our ways of being in the world.

Writing that makes our assumptions about the world obvious as assumptions
and potentially problematic, violates the very rules and conditions by which we
structure our thoughts, our ways of speaking and our ways of telling our stories. In
“Ada,” (1910) Stein breaks into language and questions how we tell our stories. By
refusing to “tell” us a definitive story, she is asking what constitutes a “story” which

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has the effect of raising philosophical/existential questions of being, living, and existing.

The only thing constant in "Ada" is the emphasis on the action of telling and not on what is being told. After several pages of references to the telling of stories, "very pretty stories," "delightful stories," "charming stories," "very nice stories," Stein tells us Ada "came to be happier than anybody else who was living then. It is easy to believe this thing" (102). What thing? At this moment, we realize Stein is not "telling" us anything specific. But aren't stories supposed to be specific? Telling is supposed to be authoritative. The storyteller is imbued with the knowledge, the story; and we read to learn, to appreciate, and to know. Belsey describes the conventional expectations of storytelling to build up to the moment of closure: "[T]he story moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure... the moment of closure is the point at which the events of the story become fully intelligible to the reader" (70). Stein, however, refuses this role or, at least, complicates it. She messes with the process of telling and thereby interrupts the process of knowing. She cues an expectation for a form of discourse, the discourse of storytelling, and then does not pay off or, at least does not pay off in the way that we expect (a "solution" as closure to the story). What is important then is not only that she does not pay off but also what happens to us as we encounter the text and experience the text as art. We experience the process of our expectations being subverted. "Ada" ends with a universalizing claim that is peculiarly similar to the highly recognizable and cherished fairytale genre: "And certainly Ada all her living then was happier in living
than anyone else who ever could, who was, who is, who ever will be living” (103). Stein uses a phrase that is so reminiscent of the phrase “happily ever after” and yet denies any of the certainties or absolutes that the phrase is supposed to signal. It turns out it is not the stories Ada tells, or even her love of telling, that are at stake. Rather, what is important is the repetitive process of telling as a form of relating to another person. The telling becomes a relationship. When Ada finds someone who can respond to the act of telling by both listening and also telling, then she is "happy." Thus, we have a conclusion that refuses to conclude Ada’s story in any kind of recognizable way. Instead, storytelling becomes a way for characters to establish relationships with each other and, in the process, establish a relationship with the reader. What happened, in the singular sense, is not what is important. The critical point of “Ada” then is not what happened but that something is happen-ing. It is not really a story about Ada. Rather, Stein is using story as a process of relationships between people. Ada is an embodiment (metaphorically speaking) of the process of telling as relating. The emphasis has been placed on the telling rather than what is being told, prohibiting the consuming of knowledge. The story then is itself a function; it has an effect and it is this effect that we have to pay attention to in order to experience the story. We cannot know, definitely, a singular answer or conclusion to “Ada.” We are forced to stay in the more uncertain process of know/ing that disrupts our expectations, our assumptions and our beliefs about how and why stories are told. In other words, in Stein’s “Ada” we have to pay attention to how the telling works and not only what is being told.
Stein’s telling shows us that narrative and language are much more malleable than often seems possible. Paying attention to Stein’s telling, as “Ada” suggests, and not so much to what is being told, allows for an experiencing of telling and experiential reading of language rather than a consuming of story (reading to get to the answer/conclusion). It is not uncommon for Stein’s readers to cry “she cannot do that” or “she does not make any sense” or “what does this mean?” Paying attention to Stein’s process will help us question and understand from where these demands on texts to “mean” or to “make sense,” and the insistence to “follow the rules,” come. This means I will not be providing definitive readings of Stein’s texts. Such readings contribute to criticism that make her work into a puzzle in need of solving, as if the only reason to read Stein’s texts is to figure them out. Many Stein critics attempt to decode and classify her words into recognizable categories for safer and neater handling (precisely the mode of criticism that Sontag argues against). Yet reading Stein in this way, as mysterious and in need of “translation,” mystifies rather than clarifies her words. Stein’s writing is so uncategorical that after nearly a hundred years of criticism, critics are still uncertain what to do with her as her work continues to defy critical agreement. It is not simple, to be sure. With a consistent (and continuous) tendency to make Stein into an iconic figure whose words are eccentric and even crazy but fun and worth quoting nonetheless (or perhaps for that very reason) Stein remains different from other writers who provoke heated critical debate. With her words showing up on television shows (“Elimidate” used her “there is no there there” quote to describe one of the female contestant’s breast size on the
October 3, 2004 episode), greeting cards, and even coffee mugs (saying “a rose is a rose is rose and that is all there is to it”-- note the fourth rose is left out), Stein’s writing is always already complicated by her iconic representation and eccentric (even mythic) reputation. It is not that Stein wrote in mythic codes. She wrote in the modernist period; she was doing modernist things (defamiliarizing the familiar, questioning narrative forms and questioning linguistic conventions). Stein herself says in “What are Masterpieces” that “no one is ahead of his time” (32). And yet, Stein’s commitment to being in the moment, especially in her conception of “the continuous present,” seems to do something with language that did not quite fit (or at least not neatly) with what modernists were doing. Perhaps it is her commitment to making language democratic, as she pays attention and experiences the present, rather than possessing or mastering language that is precisely what makes her work so difficult for her critics to “master.”

As Stein knew, we need new ways of reading in order to understand that these old ways are, in fact, hegemonic and constitutive of our very ways of knowing each other, the world, and ourselves. There is a process of our knowing and our reading. Exposing these processes as unstable and un-natural matters. These processes have everything to do with how and what we think we know and can know. Postmodern deconstructive criticism offers theories of de-centering, de-authorizing, and de-categorizing in order to subvert dominant ways of using and thinking about language, reading, and knowing. By refusing to follow narrative conventions, which insist on linear (beginning, middle, end) narrative progression, Stein does not offer stories that
follow the old codes of meaning. As Harriet Scott Chessman explains in her 1989 book *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein*, Stein’s work “urg[es] towards an open-ended and speculative responsiveness to her writing, resisting traditional critical claims to objectivity and closure, and allowing ample room for subjectivity” (8). This urging and interrogation of reader’s expectations, moreover, also encourages an examination of cultural practices of colonization and mastery both within and outside texts. Stein’s work fundamentally resists the notion of mastery in her writing. She troubles her readers’ familiar ways of reading for mastery (conclusiveness), enacting feminist literary, social, and political practices as she displaces the hegemonic hierarchy of explanation, where teller/author is the expert and listener/reader is the trainee. Stein offers her readers opportunities to become co-creators of her text. She leaves her process for the reader on the page. By doing so, she offers a kind collaborative and democratic textual space where she and her readers come together to play, to interact, and to be both “patient” and “eager” in order to work through her writing together. For example, Stein speaks to this desire for her readers to go with her and to read “lovingly” in *The Making of Americans*:

Bear it in mind my reader [...] what I have said always before to you, that this that I write down a little each day here on my scraps of paper for you is not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversations to amuse you, but a record of a decent family progress respectively lived by s and our fathers and our mothers, and our grand-fathers, and grand-mothers, and this is by me carefully a little each day to be written down here; and so my reader arm yourself in every kind of way to be patient and to be eager [...] [a]nd so listen while I tell you all about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please this history of this decent family’s progress. (37)
This is Stein addressing her readers and asking them to go with her and follow her process. In doing so, she positions herself and her reader in a kind of intimate way as she requests that her reader "listen while I tell you about us" (37). She tells the reader that she writes down her stories on "scraps of paper" "a little each day" revealing that this is not "just an ordinary kind of novel." Rather this is a story that she writes in pieces, collaboratively with her reader as her co-creator and whom she asks to be "patient" and "eager."

In Stein’s work, then, textual space is both open for experience and becomes experience itself. Her words conjure up extra-textual experience but also open up possibilities for her reader to have an awareness of having the experience. This is what happens when one breaks language down. Conventional rules become transparent. Traditional reading practices no longer seem adequate. Common sense is thrown into question. One breaks into language. One begins to experience words as words. In Tender Buttons we see Stein exploring words on their own terms both within their given meanings in the sign-system and outside those meanings. She listens and encourages her reader to listen carefully to all the possibilities that words can have demonstrating uncategorizable use of them:

SUPPOSE AN EYES
Suppose it is within a gate which opens is open at the hour of closing summer that is to say it is so.

All the seats are needing blackening. A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.
Go red go red, laugh white.
Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.
Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton.

40
Little sales of leather and such beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

*(Tender Buttons in SW 475)*

As I look at this passage, I am struck first by its form. It looks like one of those thought experiments we all have seen in college. Suppose X. In its syllogistic form, the words all seem to line up in a “rational” sequence. But then as I read the words, it quickly becomes obvious they don’t mean in the way I expect them to mean. These words start off addressing me as if I am going to participate in their solution (conclusion). The word “suppose” makes me think, if I follow the passage logically, I should be able to solve the problem that the term “suppose” conjures up for me. It cues me to participate. I do participate. However, as I read the first few lines, I start to stumble. I have to begin again. I work to “make sense” out of how seats in need of blackening could possibly relate to “a white dress is in sign.” I want the white dress to be a sign but it does not say so. It says “in sign.” How is something in sign? The more I think about the lines and try to make them mean something familiar, the more unsure I become as a reader. The cues that have encouraged me to read this passage as a syllogism have misguided me. These cues don’t lead me to a recognizable next step. I read “Go red go red, laugh white” and smile. These words chant in my head. There is something so familiar about this line. In fact, it reminds me of my cheerleading days when I happily chanted similar lines: “Go red Go white Go Cougars.” This phrase was a cheer we used often. These words allow me to experience them as words. They feel personal and exciting. They do not tell me what they are supposed to mean by the words to which they stand in relation. By the time I
get to the word “laugh,” it has enacted itself and I am laughing. But why? What makes these words funny? They don’t seem funny and yet they are. What is the joke? Is it the buildup of words that don’t usually get placed next to one another (and the breaking of grammatical conventions)? That doesn’t seem funny. And yet it is. For me, it is the process my brain goes through to try to make the words make sense and tell a story I am familiar with that is funny. I am aware it does not work. These words do not represent in the ways we expect they will. They are placed on the page but they hardly stay still. They move about. As I read them they can relate or not relate, associate or not associate, with the words near them.

Each time I read these words, they can mean something different: “Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.” They move as I try to say what they mean. They are always literally there on the page, of course, but they don’t seem to say the same thing each time I read them. What happens in my struggle to define, to pin them down, is that these words enact an experience. What experience? The experience happens when I let myself imagine cheering or imagine how a collapse in rubbed purr would be. When I read this line, I imagine a cat rolling around purring. I don’t know why but I do right now. Later on, I may very well imagine something completely different. Imagination is as much a part of reading Stein as any novel but one imagines differently. This imagining is more reader-co-creating than visualizing what already defined characters and storylines might look like. Here, I can experience the text differently because there is no one interpretation that is better than any other. There is no sense that there is a preferred interpretation. I am not being asked to make
a choice between interpretations at all. All experiences of the passage involve its reader equally in the text. This line is thus open to infinite possible ways of reading and knowing it. I know this way at a particular moment. The fact I can know the line differently the next time I read it, helps me be aware that what is on Stein’s pages is a process and that I am also involved in this process. I become aware I am experiencing her words as both text and story. The text as words on a page is there, just sitting there, but the story is one in which I participate and create as I experience Stein’s words.

It is an opening up of language, or conversely breaking it down, in which Stein’s texts engage. Stein is breaking into language and I am participating. As I read her words I notice something different happening. I notice that all of the rules I have been taught about reading, how to read, what to look for, how words ought to behave, what is “correct” and what is “clear,” don’t seem to hold up in Stein’s texts. And yet, with all of this de-authorizing and unlawful acting, there is something left. I am still enjoying, laughing, and interested in Stein’s words. This is, indeed, surprising. Since Stein is such an “unruly” writer, breaking conventions with every utterance, shouldn’t everything break down? This is the argument her critics have grappled with many times over. The fear of losing all meaning and that everything will fall apart does not seem to materialize if we pay attention to the possibilities Stein’s writing can offer. What we have left, I find, is the possibility to understand that our stories and our ways of telling those stories are not sufficient. They do not tell the whole story. Yes, there are many stories and, as we “progress,” we continue to add more and more stories.
However, we keep reading these stories in similar ways. We continue to insist on hierarchized ways of knowing, reading, seeing, hearing, understanding, and making meaning. Our stories, as diverse and complex as they are, are fundamentally shaped and read in the same way. They follow the same rules.

Stein uses language to subvert or challenge dominant processes of producing meaning by disrupting the move from the lexical to the contextual. We are trained to expect words to mean very specific things and to appear in relation to other words in very particular ways. In other words, words will appear “random” or “out of order” if they are not written in particular relation to one another. This is where context becomes important. The very notion of being “out of order” implies that there is an expected order and signals that there is an impermissible violation. But where does this order come from? Who decides the order? Moreover, how do we know what this order “ought” to look like? These may seem to be ridiculous questions. Who cares as long as it makes sense? But how do we even come to know what making sense means? Stein interrupts grammatical conventions and expected word order. Readers of the following passage may be quick to claim that it does not make sense:

A PIECE OF COFFEE
More of double.

A place in no new table.

A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal than color than altogether. (Tender Buttons 463)
"A sign of more in not mention." What happens when Stein disrupts this process of moving from the lexical to the contextual? She messes with our very way of knowing. She messes with language and the production of meaning. She allows for her words to stand on their own.

When I read "Dirty is not yellow," I find myself nodding. That makes sense. But then when I get to "The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter," I am not so sure. In fact, if I try to "make sense" of the line with my analytical skills, I quickly grow frustrated. I think this is non-sense. It does not work. But isn't that the point? How do I know it does not work? I know because I have been trained to associate meaning and words in a very particular way. My training is not working on this passage. Isn't this interesting? What is happening to disrupt my ability to make sense out of these words? Stein uses common words. There are no tricks here. Stein knows how words are expected to mean and she plays with it, interrogating by way of interruption our cultural insistence on language as neutral and static. She both allows words to mean as they are expected to mean and also defies their assumed meaning.

By refusing to move from the lexical to the contextual in the conventional manner, she subverts the dominant process of reading and she breaks into language. Words, the meanings of which we believe we know exactly, do not have to hold onto these "meanings" in Stein's texts. They can, but they don't have to. In other words, we usually believe we know exactly what words mean; however, in Stein's texts not only do we not know exactly what they mean but it turns out they do not have to mean according to rules. What happens when a writer does not contextualize her
words in the conventional sense? She makes practices, which seem normative and neutral, obvious by making us aware we are involved in them. These reading practices do not seem so natural when reading Stein’s texts because they don’t work. What happens? They break down. Stein’s process of using and simultaneously rejecting the most basic grammatical conventions force her readers to attend to each word on the page and each word’s cultural hi/story that it brings along with it. This process of slowing down the reader and asking the reader to pay attention to what and how she writes and s/he reads allows the reader to, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, “reaffirm the narrative(s) the word is telling or … break into [the narrative] by distorting or deforming, opening the storied words” (DuPlessis 145). She breaks into language. She gets at the very foundation of our access to language and shakes it up.

In “Sentences,” Stein asks her readers to question why they have fixed expectations for writing:

Think of a sentence why should there be a noun. They think of sentences. Why should there be a noun. A noun is the naming of a thing a sentence is why they came. If they came they are here. Thank you. With them they think. (“Sentences” 148)

The noun, as Stein says, names a person place or thing. We generally trust these words to anchor meaning as they name, and value them as such. She questions this valuing of the noun and makes her readers think about “why should there be a noun,” after all, “a sentence is why they came.” There is a play on the word “them” going on in this passage. In the sentence “A noun is the naming of a thing a sentence is why they came,” Stein is using “they” to refer to nouns. Similarly, in “if they came they are here,” “they” seems to refer to the noun. Yet in the final sentence “with them
they think,” them/they seems to refer to something else. While there are many ways this sentence could be interpreted, the one that I want to suggest here is that the pronoun, “them,” refers to the sentences that Stein writes, the sentences that are not predicated on the assumption that a sentence must contain a noun. Likewise, the pronoun “they” refers to her readers who are given the opportunity to “think” about what and how they read when reading Stein’s sentences.

Late in her career, Stein reflected on her project in an interview with Robert Bartlett Haas: “I like things simple, but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme; otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity” (qtd. in A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein 34). As she says, she used everything, paying attention to the many possible ways that words can interact with one another. She writes knowing the complexities of language, the historicity of text, and the cultural politics/conventions of reading. As discussed earlier, Western systems of meaning are produced hierarchically through categories of difference (dichotomies). The need to simplify in order to clarify by exclusion and division (as opposed to inclusion) creates categories (albeit tidy ones), which as Stein knows, limit what seems possible. It may be precisely Stein’s willingness (insistence) to “use everything” that has been so difficult for her readers to grasp.

The following passage is taken from “Identity A Poem:”

I am I because my little dog knows me. The figure wanders on alone. The little dog does not appear because if it did then there would be nothing to fear. It is not known that anybody who is anybody is not alone and if alone then how can the dog be there and if the little dog is not there is it alone.
The little dog is not alone because no little dog could be alone. If it were alone it would not be there.
So then the play has to be like this.
The person and the dog are there and the dog is there and the person is there and where oh where is their identity, is the identity there anywhere.
I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog. (588-589 SR)

In this passage, Stein is literally working things out. As she “uses everything” she engages in a core epistemological question (identity) of Western philosophical tradition. Rene Descartes’ epistemic investigations, for example, specifically his work in Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), from where his famous Latin phrase, “cogito ergo sum” or “I think therefore I am,” comes, seems to be invoked in Stein’s claim, “I am because my little dog knows me.” Recall that Descartes’ text is made up of six meditations in which he attempts to doubt literally all beliefs that are not absolutely certain, and then he tries to establish what can be known for sure.

In the second meditation Descartes argues for the certainty of one’s own existence, even if all else is in doubt:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.
But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me ... the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. In other words, one’s consciousness implies one’s existence or, I am I because I know I am I. (41)

As I read Stein’s first three sentences, I am prompted to think about identity, a concept forever troubling in critical discourse. “I am I because my little dog knows me.” These words roll around in my head and I soon am thinking about the concept literally. I have a little dog. Do I identify in relation to her? No, I don’t think so.
Maybe I am already recognizable in the sense there is already something general established about me and this is what my little dog knows? Now I am imagining I am I because I am recognized as something that my little dog already knows. What might this mean? What is the difference between identity and identifying anyway? On the other hand, perhaps there is some innate beingness/essence that only a little dog might be able to know? I wonder if there is a difference between identity and being. Is there such a thing as “beingness?” I don’t know. Soon I start to question what counts as identity anyway. How do we know that we know anything? How do we know we are who we think we are? Aren’t these the same questions that Descartes’ Meditations has evoked from scholars since it was originally published in Latin in 1641?

Experiencing Stein’s words, I realize that she is helping me to acknowledge a kind of constructed reality here—Stein must “be” because her little dog recognizes her. Identity is predicated, it seems, not on an essential essence but on recognition between people (or person-dog in this case) in a kind of exchange. Identity is thus a kind of happening, in the recognition process as opposed to a discovery of some core essence. But even as I make this claim about Stein’s words, I am unsettled because I cannot be sure about it nor do I feel settled by it. So what does it mean if identity is a happening between participants at a particular moment? As I read on, I realize Stein’s prompting is not going to lead me towards any specific answer. In fact, she seems to be grappling with these questions herself. When I read, “The little dog is not alone because no little dog could be alone. If it were alone it would not be there,” it
feels to me that she is going through an analytical process. I imagine she and I are working this out together. This is an example of Stein leaving her process on the page. As I read, "The person and the dog are there and the dog is there and the person is there and where oh where is their identity, is the identity there anywhere," I realize she is wondering just as I am.

Her process is right here in front of me. However, when I look at this passage, I cannot help but think of its syllogistic form. Stein has written the text to cue me into it as such. She sets me up, as it were, and pushes me to approach the text in a familiar "logical" manner. This is not unlike Derrida’s argument in regards to metaphysics where he suggests that the process of deconstruction is vexed in the sense that we must always use the very thing that we wish to deconstruct. In “Structure Sign and Play and the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida calls attention to the fact that despite deconstructionists’ desire to “decenter the center” and rework our most basic notions of how meaning is made and what counts as knowledge, there can never be a total rejection of the what and how we know. We are always calling upon conventions and rules for explanation. We must then, as Derrida says, use what we know to do something else. Or, as Virginia Woolf says in “Modern Fiction,” we must use what we have and at the same time “put the emphasis elsewhere” (16). I read Stein’s cueing as enacting Derrida’s theory. This is Stein using language with all of its complicated histories deliberately, making her words do something else. Her disruption happens within the very conventions that she is challenging. I get to the line, “So then the play has to be like this,” and I am ready for “the answer.” However,
the answer, “I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog,” does not act like the answer my training has primed me to search for. In fact, I get to this point and I laugh. What does this mean? Just as with “Ada,” this is not the kind of conclusion that we expect. The words again roll around in my head as I read the line over and over. I imagine two dogs standing next to one another and then the dogs being pulled further apart until they are no longer in visible relation with one another. As I picture the dogs moving further and further apart, I enjoy myself. I am completely inside the text. I have broken into language. Language does not dictate how I imagine the dogs. Yes, I imagine small furry quadruped mammals, but there is no correct way to say definitively what “I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog” means in the totalizing way we are taught to read. I am enjoying imagining how these words might mean in relation to each other, at this very moment. I am part of the process. I create and re-create my experience with Stein’s words. I am aware that I am making meaning. There is no assuming going on here. Nothing must make sense in this enjoyable moment. It just does. As soon as I try to defend my “interpretation,” however, I stop my process of breaking into language with Stein and revert back to a conventional user of language, and her words no longer make sense to me in the same way.

It is only while I am willing to be flexible and play within my reading of the text that I am breaking into language, which is why it is useful to go through these kinds of readings that do not conclusively insist on what Stein is doing. I am going with Stein. I work to resist concluding what Stein does in a conclusive way. My readings work to emphasize how she does what she does. To emphasize the “what” of
Stein's work is to dissect it and to attempt to tell the "truth" about what is really happening in a text; it does not work with Stein. Rather than assuming she has a code to break and searching for the "real" meaning, I try to walk with her. As I do this, I find I become aware of language in a way I might not otherwise. I call this process of becoming aware of language and my expectations of how language ought to function and how words ought to behave to make meaning, breaking into language.

When Stein cues and then subverts the very cue she gives, she complicates our relation to language. Whether her reader responds with excitement or frustration, she disrupts the process of making meaning. That is, Stein's words make the reader realize that as they read there is a process of making meaning and that they are involved in that process. Reading Stein is an uneasy process and as you become aware of your uneasiness you begin to question your reading practices. It is thus in this process of experiencing tensions between your expectations of how language ought to behave and how Stein's words deviate from those expectations that pushes you to begin questioning where your uneasiness comes from. The moment you begin to question your expectations and become aware of your uneasiness with Stein's words, you have broken into language. The uneasiness of Stein's words is a happening, a process, rather than something that occurs only upon his/her reading; therefore, as one reads and experiences an awareness of the tensions between conventional understandings of language and Stein's use of language, one is breaking into language. At these moments Stein's writing renders the limits of conventions visible.
To destabilize language is to inquire into the ideological function of text and textuality and to explore the relationship between ways of knowing and how we know. Stein uses modes of telling through fragmentation, inclusion, repetition within difference, beginning again and again, and these modes must be read in tension with grand narrative (master narrative) structures of telling as complete systems of explanations. Grand narratives are stories that are always constructed by and for dominant culture and seem to be totalizing. Yet even as complete as they may seem, they are stories that are retold and have the potential to be told differently. What happens when conventions are broken down and language is broken into? When language is broken into, forms of speaking open up. Access is available in new ways for different kinds of subjects. Conversations of all sorts become possible. This has everything to do with who can be heard and how one is heard.

What do reading practices have to do with speaking and hearing? In her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argues that because subaltern women receive their discursive identities within always already historically determinate systems of representations, their speech acts can be heard only through those modes of speaking which operate in accordance with the rules of the dominant. “Subaltern women” is a term Spivak uses to signify a spectrum of disempowered women within particular political systems. The idea is that subaltern women can only be represented within and through the “eyes” of the political systems to which they belong. Subaltern is used to emphasize the systematic hierarchical processes to which voices are relegated and meaning is constructed. Thus, what disempowered subjects
say and what is heard of them are not equivalent. The point then is not that subalterns are physically unable to speak, but rather that they won’t be heard by the dominant ear. Stein’s words, read in a culture that is doggedly loyal to the belief that language functions statically, objectively, and representationally, are heard similarly to that of Spivak’s subaltern. This is not to say Stein is a subaltern or Stein’s speech is subaltern speech. Rather, like Spivak’s account of the subalterns, Stein’s words are often heard in terms of dominant reading practices (non-sense, etc.) rather than as disruptive, inspirational or enjoyable. It is not unusual for her readers to call her “crazy” or claim that her writing is “unconscious” which are, of course, ways of “othering” her (her “crazy” or “irrational” prose is chalked up to be the result of her being a woman). While Spivak is calling on identity categories (“subaltern women,” etc.) as a way of investigating how and why some people cannot be heard, as it were, I am saying that such silencing starts on the discursive level and then identities are constructed and called upon as ways of marking the silenced. Investigating how and why many hear Stein’s words as esoteric, annoying, and meaningless can help us question discourse and how discursive productions are fundamentally ideological and hierarchical. After all, Spivak is asking the question “Can the subaltern speak?” as one way of deconstructing cultural systems of meaning and unmasking the ideological functions of language that allow some speakers to be heard while rendering others silent against dominant discourse.

Stein says in Lectures in America, “You listen as you know” (169). I read this line as Stein commenting on how her words are heard/read/received in accordance
with conventional rules and regulations. Further commenting on the reception of her work, Stein has Alice say in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "she did not understand why since the writing was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work" (32-33). Stein knew that her words often could not be heard because of the ways we insist on reading them. Stein, often her own best critic, understands why her “complex simplicity” has been received as unlawful.

Much has been said about and done with Gertrude Stein’s work. However, rarely is Stein simply read in her own right. There has been a consistent critical drive to characterize Stein’s work as a giant jigsaw puzzle that critics must piece together. Her words are read as secretive and private. The challenge for the critic is imagined in terms of “breaking the code” and concluding with the answer. Of course, the answer is “proof” of what Stein’s words really mean or, just as often, what they don’t mean. Such critical accounts often seem to take very different approaches to Stein’s texts and yet end up doing similar work. Stein’s critics often look into some sort of psychological realm of human nature or look to other art forms to explain her work. These moves to make sense of her words outside of language, rather than reading what she wrote, inevitably end up creating a project for Stein in which they then concludes that Stein fails to perform this project adequately.

In her 1983 text, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*, Marianne DeKoven locates Stein’s language in the realm of the primordial and presymbolic. She then constructs an elaborate argument, which insists “the key” to understanding Stein’s writing is to “reveal” that it operates on the level of the
presymbolic, and is thus antipatriarchal. For DeKoven, experimental writing is, by its very structure, presymbolic. Following Lacan's use of the notion "The-Law-of-the-Father," DeKoven assumes that since the presymbolic is pre-patriarchal it is also necessarily anti-patriarchal (133). "Presymbolic" is a term DeKoven uses to build on Lacan's idea that we enter into culture through symbolic systems.

Lacan argues that symbolic systems are fundamentally partriarchical because this is the point where "The-Law-of-the-Father" becomes operational. When I use the term "The-Law-of-the-Father," I am specifically referring to the way Lacan names the rules of language ("The Mirror Stage" in Adams and Searle 106). What is important to understand is that this phrase, Law-of-the-Father, for Lacan, becomes a structuring principal of the symbolic order. Submission to the rules of language itself (The-Law-of-the-Father) is required in order to enter into the Symbolic order. Thus, in order to become a speaking subject, one must obey the laws and rules of language. DeKoven understands this to mean that anything happening before this moment (the entering into the Law-of-the-Father) in the presymbolic stage is necessarily prepatriarchal. It follows for DeKoven that if something is pre-patriarchal then "the underlying force behind her [Stein's] experimental writing throughout" is "the anti-patriarchal" (133). DeKoven concludes that experimental writing, with Stein's being an example, functions to transform patriarchy "at the most fundamental or radical level of the structures of language which enable meaning" because experimental writing does not follow the rules of the symbolic system (150). Thus DeKoven uses Lacanian theory to try to get "before" the conventions and the rules that structure narrative practices. She
argues that experimental writing can only happen outside of the patriarchal symbolic linguistic system. Going "pre" or "before" patriarchy via Lacanian theory is appealing for DeKoven because it seems to open up the possibility of using language without the hegemonic rules. It seems to be a way to make Stein’s words, as an experimental writer, mean outside the patriarchal linguistic systems. However, what happens when DeKoven does this is she accepts assumptions that undermine what she sets out to do.

The problem is that in DeKoven’s reading, nothing has been done to deconstruct the very categories that construct and maintain patriarchal ideology in the first place. In fact, in her efforts to make Stein’s words mean something specifically "antipatriarchal," DeKoven has recuperated and reinscribed the binaries upon which patriarchy depends: Man thinks and Woman feels. She has thus reconstructed the very binary that she set out to break down. In the process, she has read through Stein’s words. She relegates Stein’s words to the level of the unconscious, a fundamentally "female" space as opposed to conscious male space, a division in which DeKoven does not question. In DeKoven’s account, Stein’s words can only express in the reactionary sense. Her words then cannot mean anything in their own right. This reading of Stein has everything to do with characterizing her as a user (usually an incompetent one), not an agent, of language. The language DeKoven allows Stein is below consciousness. It can only be primordial. This recourse to the "unconscious" is one that moves Stein out of the active, logical, and rational agent of language.
DeKoven’s reading makes Stein’s words, as well as any experimental writer’s words, into something secretive and private and thus always already only her/their own.

In the critical mission to decode Stein’s words and to give a conclusive account of what they “mean,” critics have consistently attempted to locate Stein’s work in relation to the plastic arts. Take for example Wendy Steiner’s text 1978 Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein. Steiner works to show that Stein’s written portraits are the literary equivalents of painted portraits. Steiner performs a comparative analysis in which she tries to explain Stein’s “nonrepresentational” or “abstract” writing through cubist geometrical painting. She wants to say Stein’s words are nonrepresentational in the same way cubist painting is nonrepresentational (136). Stein referred to her writing in tactile terms. In an interview with Robert Bartlett Haas Stein connects her writing with plastic arts: “I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a relationship between the word and the thing seen (“A Transatlantic Interview” 25). It is not Steiner’s idea of connecting Stein’s writing to the plastic arts then that is problematic, but rather what she does with this idea. The problem Steiner runs into is that words, unlike other creative materials (paint, for example), always operate within a culturally inscribed system of meaning. In her 1984 essay “The Trojan Horse,” Monique Wittig says it like this: “No one expects color, sound, paint or clay to mean on their own where as words, even as ‘raw materials’ are expected to mean” (49).
Attempting to read Stein’s words as “raw material” in order to make them available as plastic substances such as paint or clay, one inevitably gets trapped into an attempt to force the separation of form and content. And as Wittig tells us, “in words, form and content cannot be disassociated, because they partake of the same form, the form of a word, a material form” (49). This is where Steiner gets into trouble. She attempts such a separation. Steiner cannot make the function of words and the function of paint logically equivalent. Words come “ready-made” with expectations, while paint (for example) comes neutrally and awaits the inscription of meaning. Stein works to free words from exactly this context. But Steiner is unable to consider the possibility of words as being anything other than associative and referential. For Steiner, words must always be signs. She writes, “For as we have seen, literary signs cannot be totally isolated and still refer to their subject” (159). She then defines Stein’s work in terms of lack: “Her écriture-objet gradually lost every link to its subject until it ceased to signify anything in the proper sense of the word” (159). This reading works to contain and restrain Stein. Isn’t it interesting that Steiner declares Stein’s work as nonsense because her words do not abide by the very rules that Stein is challenging? Steiner thus says, “the problem arose from her overextension of her medium,” and then declares Stein a failure who “insisted on trying the impossible” (160). Steiner continues: “Her intransigence, however, should not be too harshly criticized, for the attempted translation of pictorial norms into literary ones, like all her failed experiments, reveals a great deal” (160). It is revealing that Steiner refers to Stein’s projects as “failed experiments.” “Failed” as opposed to
success? What counts as an “experiment” in writing anyway? Evidently, even the experimental is expected to follow the rules.

This project seems to be driven by Steiner’s desire to “rescue” Stein’s work from the accusation of meaninglessness by translating it into something else. This reading assumes Stein’s words are meaningless in their own right. It also makes Stein out as doing something “impossible,” as Steiner concludes, and thus makes it seem that Stein is not really doing anything at all. Moreover, Steiner’s reading of Stein covers up the fact that “the attempted translation” is not Stein’s (160, my italics). Steiner is the one who is doing the translating. Since Steiner cannot make her project for Stein work, she has to denounce Stein as a “failure.”

Stein is not the failure in DeKoven’s and Steiner’s critical accounts. These critics’ desire to go outside of language for their critical conclusions reveals the hold language has on us. Both DeKoven and Steiner try to find meaning outside of language to explain what Stein’s words mean. The problem is that Stein does not try to do something outside of language. She does not invent language. She uses it with all of its complexities and its cultural history. She breaks into language using language and accounting for all of its cultural baggage. The critical drive to go outside of language to search for an explanation of what Stein “means,” does nothing to help us understand what Stein is doing with and in language. It does nothing to question from where our demands and expectations of how language ought to operate, and how meaning ought to be made, emanate.
Let's look at how Stein tells a story in a narrative structure we can more easily recognize. I am particularly interested in the way her story “Melanctha,” in *Three Lives*, works to disrupt narrative structure. *Three Lives* is generally thought to be one of Stein’s most “readable” texts. However, many readers of the text do not consider it an “easy read.” As we have seen before, Stein cues us to expect a particular kind of storytelling and then challenges this expectation. The title “Melanctha,” as does the title “Ada,” cues us to think this is a story about Melanctha. We are set up to expect to be told Melanctha’s story. And indeed the story begins in a fairly “traditional” way.

Early in the text, we learn all about Melanctha. Her story, as it were, is being told to us. Stein gives us a few pages of “telling” that fit with our expectations of storytelling. We learn about Melanctha and her friend Rose. We learn about where the two women met and the story seems to be unfolding in a fairly predictable manner: “Rose Johnson and Melanctha Herbert had first met one night at church. Rose Johnson did not care much for religion. She had not enough emotion to be really roused by a revival” (48). However, the majority of the text does not tell us the “rest” of this story. It does not follow a recognizable trajectory. Instead, Melanctha’s story is happening as we read. It is not being recalled but rather it is being created and re-created temporally, in the present, and is thus always in motion.

Melanctha Herbert is presented as an unreliable storyteller because she cannot tell a “whole” story:

Some man would learn a good deal about her in the talk, never altogether truly, for Melanctha all her life did not know how to tell a story wholly. She always, and yet not with intention, managed to leave out big pieces which make a story very different, for when it came to what happened and what she
had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha never could remember right. (100)

The emphasis is on what is happening to, with, and within Melanctha Herbert in the moment. Stein says in “Composition as Explanation” that this story disrupts the conventional sense of time in narrative: “I wrote a negro story called ‘Melanctha.’ In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future” (16). Stein is telling us that she intended to make “Melanctha” a disruptive story in terms of temporal structure and content, hence the constant recurring and beginning. The story begins and continues with a dialogue between Melencnta and her romantic interest, Jeff Campbell. The focus is on how Jeff “knows” Melanctha:

‘Melanctha Herbert,’ began Jeff Campbell, ‘I certainly feel this time I know you, I certainly do know little, real about you. You see, Melanctha, it’s like this way with me […] I feel so really near to you, and you certainly have got an awful wonderful, strong kind of sweetness. I certainly would like to know for sure Melanctha, whether I got anything to be afraid for. (80, 81)

Isn’t it interesting that the character that has trouble telling the “whole story” and does not claim to be a “thinker” is not the one who struggles with “knowing?” The “knower” and “rational thinker,” Jeff Campbell, is the one whose thinking ends up frustrating rather than providing him insight. Melanctha has trouble telling and Jeff has trouble “knowing” her because she does not tell her “whole” story as Jeff expects her to. The ongoing struggle between the two characters seems to be rooted in Jeff’s desire for Melanctha to tell him who she is really. Jeff’s expectation of telling is to achieve knowledge and his goal is to be “told,” while Melanctha’s telling, as is
Ada's, is one of relating. Melanctha's telling thus does not lend itself to telling a story that Jeff recognizes as such. Melanctha uses telling to relate whereas Jeff uses telling to know. He strives to *know* her, but she does not offer him the kind of story he is looking for. Remembering is the key to knowing. Jeff seems unable to remember Melanctha's telling in the context of this conversation. He claims many times to want to know her, but, at the same time, he seems to learn nothing from all of the dialogue that they share. Lots of telling takes place, but this telling does not satisfy Jeff.

Rather, much the way official stories or master narratives cue us to recognize according to pre-script, Jeff desires certitude where knowing becomes an endpoint:

I certainly did think once, Melanctha, I knew something about all kinds of women. I certainly know now really, how I don’t know anything sure at all about you, Melanctha, though I been with you so long, and so many times for whole hours with you, and I like so awful much to be with you, and I can always say anything I am thinking to you.’ (81)

The average Western reader's training is to rise above the words and to see them in terms of associating with one another in order to reveal that the extra-textual meaning may be the reason “Melanctha” often feels “annoying and “frustrating” according to Stein critics (Redman 32). The way we have learned to read through language, as in looking through and beyond, is constantly interrupted in this story. As soon as one attempts to pin down the word “know” and say how it is being used in this passage in any kind of singular or definitive way, the meaning changes. The word “knowing,” through Jeff’s ongoing struggle to know Melanctha, enacts itself. As I read this passage, I enjoy myself. It is fun to see and hear “knowledge” being tossed around, being unstable, being questioned. By the time I get to, “I certainly would like
to know for sure Melanctha,” the word “know” throws itself into question. The relation between language and thinking also gets called into question. Knowing, and by derivation, common sense and certainty become suspect. If something is known it is supposed to be certain (notice how often Jeff says the word “certainly”) and thus an endpoint. With Melanctha’s story “happening” as we read, knowing is itself a process. We know in an ongoing time-sense way rather than the conventional knowing that comes after reflection, after consideration, and after reasoning. As I continue on in my reading of this passage, pretty soon I am thinking about knowledge in the relational sense. I consider how these characters know themselves and each other. I begin to know, or at least I think that I know, that Jeff’s knowing is not as solid as he believes it to be. His knowing, as mine, is a process. In fact, it is a never-ending process. This is precisely the problem for Jeff. He refuses the verb and demands the noun, as it were. He strives for “progress” (Dr. Campbell the Scientist) but finds himself engaged in a process that does not progress in the linear way that he desires. Jeff Campbell presumably continues to struggle with his knowing since there is no “ending” for him in the text. He is not written out. We do not hear about what happens to him. Rather, Jeff never finishes.

The characters in Melanctha move in ways they are not supposed to move. Jeff Campbell does not move into a definitive conclusion: he is left but not finished. Rose is present at the beginning and again at the ending of the text. She reappears, however, as if she had never left. She is still “scolding” Melanctha as she was in the beginning of the story; “Melanctha, I certainly have got to tell you, you ain’t right to
act with that kind of feller” (123). Again we are told about Rose and her loss of her baby. The text begins “Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth. Melanctha Herbert who was Rose Johnson’s friend, did everything that any woman could” (47). Only three pages from the conclusion we are told, “Rose had a hard time bringing her baby to its birth and Melanctha did everything that any woman could” (134). Rose’s character has not developed. Her relationship with Melanctha has not matured or changed in the course of the text. This is because the story is Melanctha’s story but not Melanctha’s story as we expect. The focus is not on what happens to Jeff or to Rose. These characters are secondary to Melanctha. They matter only insofar as they are part of Melanctha’s on-going experience.

This main character is marked immediately by her name also being the title of the story, “Melanctha.” However, Melanctha’s story is not a telling of her but rather an experience-ing her. We experience her through her very process of being. In “Melanctha” as in “Ada,” the story moves through telling. These texts are both structured around the act of telling and not what is being told. It is not a telling that comes from an act of remembering. Remembering is not the kind of telling that Stein is doing. Stein says in Lectures in America, “[T]he making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or anything,” and “No matter how complicated anything is, if it is not mixed up in remembering there is no confusion” (175, 179 respectively). Let’s look at an example of the way both the concept and the word “remember” itself are played with in “Melanctha:”
‘You see Melanctha, it certainly is this way with you, it is, that you ain’t ever got any way to remember right, what you been doing, or any body else that has been feeling with you. You certainly Melanctha never can remember right, when it comes what you have done and what you think happens to you.’

‘It certainly is all easy for you Jeff Campbell to be talking. You remember right, because you don’t remember nothing till you get home with your thinking that everything is all over, but I certainly don’t think much ever of that kind of way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell. I certainly do call it remembering right Jeff Campbell, to remember right just when it happens to you, so you have a right kind of feeling not to act the way you always been doing, then you go home Jeff Campbell and you begin with your thinking, and then it certainly is very easy for you to be good and forgiving with it. No, that ain’t me, the way of remembering Jeff Campbell, not as I can see it not to make people always suffer, waiting for you certainly to get to do it. Seems to me like Jeff Campbell, I never could feel so like a man was low and to be scorning of him, like that day in the summer, when you threw me off just because you got one of those fits of your remembering. No, Jeff Campbell, its real feeling every moment when it is needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering.’ (107)

As I read this passage, what I remember is the complexity of the sentences and the raw emotions Melanctha and Jeff express. I have the sense that life is in motion as I read the words. I remember myself enjoying reading and being extremely attentive to the text, but I do not remember exactly what is said. If I go back and read the passage carefully, I can certainly remember some of the lines, but I begin to struggle with them. The text seems to be actively working against me when I try to remember it. Equally frustrating, the more I focus on figuring out what the words mean, the more I stumble over them. I find myself skipping over words and having to go back and begin again. The word “remembering” enacts itself. I try to remember. Remembering always requires stopping and that is exactly what I find myself doing. I am stopping as I try to remember what I have just read. This is always what happens when one remembers, but as I read this passage I become aware I am stopping and
that I am forced to start over again. If the text pushes me to begin again, then how will I ever make it to the end? This is a question many readers ask when they read Stein’s theories about beginning again and again. Perhaps we need in turn to question why is it so important for us to get to the end? From where does this expectation emanate? It has come to seem natural to go from start to finish. “Melanctha” interrogates this belief by its very construction.

When I look at the form of the passage above, the word “remember” is everywhere. And yet, when I try to say definitely how “remember” is acting, it is already elsewhere. My academic training encourages me to dissect the paragraph and pinpoint the ways “remember” is used. However, when I attempt such a move, my analytical tools fail me. As soon as I try to grab hold of the word and define it, it slips, as it were, through my fingers. Remembering moves around and, in fact, moves me through the passage. On the one hand, the word “remember” leads me through the complex dialogue. However, “remember” also circles around in such a way that it prohibits me from reading from start to finish. The word disrupts my reading. It makes me pay attention to its shifting, its turning, and its winding. Words are supposed to exist only in relation to each other. But remembering in this passage is doing more work than this. It doesn’t mean the same way or in relation to the same kinds of words in each of its instances in the passage. My attention shifts with its shifting. I watch how this utterance moves and I listen to how it sounds as it moves.

Stein makes words do things that fundamentally challenge our reading practices. Consequently, because she challenges our reading practices, she does not
use words in the ways that they are “supposed” to be used in conventional terms.

Stein’s words do not depend upon hegemonic binaries that allow words to mean only in oppositional relations. As we have seen in earlier readings, Stein’s words can mean in many ways. Her words can mean in relation to each other, but they do not have to do so. She challenges the rules, but she does not disregard them. She is not a language chemist, as it were, mixing and stirring words to create something altogether new.

However, this description is not an uncommon reading of her. In Cudworth F. Flint’s words, “One must regard Miss Stein as something of a sorceress...a person from whom one must escape“(64). Where does this comment come from? Why does Flint find Stein’s voice so profoundly dangerous?

In a culture structured by binary oppositions, where meaning or unity necessarily depends on essential difference, and where everything must mean in relation to normative rules and practices, it is not surprising Gertrude Stein’s work is received as threatening and coded. Critics who approach her words as coded and thus cryptic inevitably read Stein as not doing anything at all. Flint writes, “One wonders why Miss Stein has embarked on this unpromising endeavor” (66). What makes her endeavor seem “unpromising” to many is the belief that Stein is only a rule breaker. In this view, Stein becomes an embodiment of lack. It is easier, apparently, to say Stein does nothing of importance than to listen to her disruption. Her breaking down of language and the destabilization of the rules that follows from this breakdown are often seen as disruption for its own sake and therefore not of value.
What more can one do than to make visible the construction of this mandate of convention in terms of how meaning is made and to show how the mandate shapes what we think we know? I find it interesting how our culture values some modernists such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway who have called into question language and narrative structure and our relation to these structures in the ways that we think about ourselves and our world and our reality. Yet, Gertrude Stein’s disruption of these linguistic rules and regulations continues to be understood as only her own.

We have seen that in “Ada” there seems to be a crossing over between “portrait and story” and “Melanctha” does not quite fit the genre of narrative, but The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is an obvious assault on genre. Why does it matter that Stein disrupts genre? We have been examining how Stein moves away from stable binaries in her uses of words, but now we see her also moving away from a stable narrator. Why include genre in a discussion about how meaning and language work? Genre circumscribes language and meaning. Genre is perhaps the most overarching of rules that tell us how discourse, narratives, and meaning ought to function and thus is the essential backbone that structures our reading practices. Genre works against opening up possibilities of reading practices. It works against knowing and experiencing language outside of dominant conventions. Genre provides us assurance that even the most fragmented utterances can create recognizable patterns of meaning. In the end, the fragments can and must add up to truth. Stein’s interruption of genre disrupts such certainties. In The Autobiography,
she pushes her reader to yet another level of radical uncertainty. Not only are we uncertain about what is being told, as we are in “Ada” and “Melanctha,” but now we are also uncertain of who is doing the telling.

The last few lines of the text reveal it is Stein, not Alice, telling Alice’s story:

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (208)

Here Stein outs herself with the Robinson Crusoe reference. Robinson Crusoe, often considered to be the founding novel in English, is a fictional autobiography (written as Crusoe by author Daniel Defoe). The question that seems necessary to ask is, if we don’t know who tells the story, then how can we know if a story is “true”? The author is the source of meaning; at least, that is the conventional way of seeing it. After all, it is the Author’s story. The telling that happens in The Autobiography challenges authority on the authorial level. This is “Alice’s” story. Telling and remembering are enacted in a way with which we are familiar. After all, it is an autobiography. It turns out, however, what we are being told and what is being remembered is some uncertain combination of both and neither Toklas and Stein. We cannot adjudicate who is telling or if either of them is really “telling.” However, even though Stein outs herself or perhaps because she outs herself, Stein’s story works. People read it. People enjoy it. The final words quoted above act, in some sense, as a solution. We now know her “secret,” readers may momentarily believe. It does not take long, however, for this text’s telling to make its reader uncertain, even more uncertain than with “Ada” and “Melanctha.” We know that those are Stein’s (fictional) stories. But what
kind of story is The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas? We are right back to where we started. Ironically, this moment of “truth” makes us doubt not only whose memories are told but also if they are memories at all, thus subverting itself as a possible sense of “solution” in its very utterance.

Why do we value stories when we think that they are authentic autobiographies and accept them as true stories so easily? Alice’s story is only a lie when we find out that she isn’t doing the telling. Until Stein’s concluding confession, we do not question the story or at least no more than we would question any other autobiographical story (despite the fact that “Alice’s” story is mostly “about” Gertrude). We have been schooled to believe that the genre of autobiography is stable, truthful, and authentic. This genre acts as if it merely reports the reality of its teller’s experiences, but really it is always a kind of fiction. Even as post-structuralism continues to interrogate this idea that a whole story can be told factually unaltered, arguing that all stories narrate selectively, we still cherish our autobiographies as authentic spaces of true experience.

In Narration, Stein tells us that it is actually the fiction that we enjoy and desire:

Think of Defoe, he tried to write Robinson Crusoe as if it were exactly what did happen and yet after all he is Robinson Crusoe and Robinson Crusoe is Defoe and therefore after all it is not what is happening it is what is happening to Robinson Crusoe that makes what is exciting everyone. (45)

Robinson Crusoe is of course the fiction. Stein is saying that we want a story. We don’t want an autobiography or, at least, we want autobiographies and biographies in the form of stories. It is the fictional character to which we have listened that we have
engaged with all along. It is a fictional character whose telling we believed. In both cases, Defoe’s and Stein’s, we have given credence to the stories because they are set up as true stories. What does it mean if we think that we are excited by the true story, but really we are excited by the story itself? The fact that we think it is more exciting when it is true, Stein tells us, is really an illusion. It is the story that we tell ourselves to ensure we can differentiate between fact and fiction. How does this need to differentiate between fact and fiction play out in terms of how we think about meaning and how meaning gets made? If we consider the genre of fiction in light of what Stein tells us here, we can see an underlying contradiction that structures our reading practices. We demand fiction to tell us the truth, but it is supposed to tell the truth by lying. What many readers find frustrating with “Melanctha” is that, for all of the fictitious telling that goes on (lying), there does not seem to be any “truth” at the end. There is no recognizable solution or answer. There is no payoff, so to speak. We expect the story to have some underlying truth. We have learned that story is “a free narration, not necessarily factual but truthful in character … [It] gives us human nature in its boldest outlines; history, in its individual details” (Horne 23-24).

All stories are selections. We know this. Fiction is a time-honored venue for telling truth. Readers love literary symbolism and metaphor. The stories richest in such figurative language are considered the “best” by conventional standards and can be found in our much celebrated and cherished canons. What is loved about such figurative techniques is that we believe they lead us towards the transcendence, the transcendence of Truth/Answer/Ending. They are methods by which selections are
pieced together to make a whole or to give us the hidden message, the closure, the solution. Fiction in this sense leads to nonfiction, so it is thought. However, as many of Stein's critics and readers alike reveal in their frustration with her writing, there are very particular ways that fiction must be used. Authors must follow conventional standards in making their selections so that all of the parts come together to form the "right" kind of "whole." After all, if the right selections are not made we cannot get to the anticipated endpoint or answer. Our need to differentiate between fact and fiction then comes from the conventions of our reading practices. These practices are structured to have us believe that we can know the whole truth. We thus fool ourselves into thinking that we are getting a stable and true meaning by a stable and true story because we are already schooled, even at the lexical level, that meaning is transparent and stable and that it is whole and possible.

So what has happened in this "autobiography"? Stein appeals to us, knowing that we will find her telling more believable if we think that it is a "true" story. The fear that we may not be able to differentiate between fact and fiction is what Stein taps into. From the first moment that we doubt that this is Alice giving Alice's story, she problematizes the assumption that we know the difference between reality and fiction and thus knowledge itself. That is, if we don't know what is "real," then we do not have a way to know (or get to know) reality, which we are schooled to believe is possible. Knowledge, it is thought, can only be produced and re-produced if there is something stable, objective, real, and true to know. Knowing, it turns out, must follow traditional modes of telling. Thus, telling the truth of one's experience, as
Stein demonstrates in *The Autobiography*, may not be heard as true (or even real) if it does not follow conventional narrative structure.

“Common sense” is only common to those who have similar access and experience with/in language. Understanding, it turns out, means constructing, making common sense. That is, what we understand as making sense is always filtered through and bounded by cultural ideology. In other words, language is bounded by culture and the way cultures determine what counts as real and meaningful, subsequently presented as if neutral or natural. The “neutral” systems of making meaning must be exposed as culturally (and hegemonically) produced. What we think we know for certain are only selections of possible know-ing. This requires us, as feminist theorist Mary Daly says, to change “the nouns of knowledge into the verbs of knowing” (11). That is, if culture determines what counts as meaning, revealing that language is not neutral, as Stein’s process shows us, then we can begin to understand that what we think of as knowledge, a noun, is actually something that is continually in the process of being made, a verb. This is why Stein insists on the ability to “use everything” and limit nothing. What is at stake in “using everything” is to understand that making sense and making meaning are never neutral and that making knowledge is an ongoing process of constructing. There is nothing natural or innately fundamental about meaning, knowledge, or the systems of language which we use to create and understand our world. Rather, these are cultural processes that are structured by conventions and traditions, cultural rules which work to limit
possibilities. Stein “uses everything” in order to write parts of speech back into all of their possibilities.

What we get with Gertrude Stein’s texts is possibility. Possibility is, of course, all we ever really have. What is expressed as meaningful, truthful, and conclusive in dominant culture is possibility that has been produced as fact, by “I’s” who matter. Perhaps what we get from Gertrude Stein is the possibility of understanding that everything is merely a possibility and nothing, no matter how true or factual it feels to us, is ever really certain. Stein’s opening up of or breaking into language can be terrifying for readers because it opens something up without concluding it. The fact that Stein is a problem for critics (and many of her readers) tells us nothing about Stein and everything about ourselves. Critics have said that what Stein does is impossible, but how can it be impossible when there it is on the page? It is not what she wrote as much as the critical discourse we have available to talk about her that is problematic. Stein “simply” did what she did—she simply used her language paying attention to all of its complexities and possibilities:

We were right. We meant pale. We were wonderfully shattered. Why are we shattered. Only by an arrest of thought. I don’t make it out. Hope there. Hope not. I didn’t mean it. Please do be silly. I have forgotten the height of the table. That was a good answer.

—Gertrude Stein
CHAPTER II

"To name it now so as not to repeat history into oblivion": Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

—Audre Lorde

There really isn’t anything more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in the how.

—Toni Morrison

From another epic another history. From the missing narrative. From the multitude of narratives. Missing.

—Theresa Cha

In *Dictee*, Cha shows that history, as conventionally conceived, is always a master’s narrative. She troubles the reader’s desire to consume a totalizing story, outing the possessive in a master(‘s) narrative that we have come to expect. Instead, as the Morrison quote above insists, Cha exposes the *how* of how the master’s narrative or Master Narrative works. This is why the text is fragmented, often to the point that readers assume that Cha is not providing anything meaningful. However, similar to the subjugation at the sign level that Stein reveals, Cha reveals the “signs” of subjugation by exploring connections between experience, language, and history. Like Stein, Cha knows that the work of ideology conceals the very production of what we understand as natural and given. She does not explain to us the why, but rather shows us the “how” in action. What comes out of this fragmentation and focus on the how are that the gaps or the missing parts of stories (individual and communal)
that the master’s narrative leaves out. These gaps are given to us by Cha throughout
*Dictee*, but not in the way we expect to receive them. She does not give us
information in the conventional sense where those gaps would be filled in to create a
whole story. Rather she makes us aware that the only way to unpack the Master’s
Narrative is to split it up, fragment it and turn it into a multitude of narratives. This is
a text that both interrogates colonial and postcolonial practices and also requires the
reader to engage in its process of rewriting history as multiple narratives. Much like
Stein, she “uses everything” and limits nothing. Cha simultaneously performs theory
and action.

In this chapter, I will examine how Cha troubles the reader’s desire to
consume cultural differences in reading Korean-American narratives as a site of
cultural “evidence” about “the Korean-American experience” in American history. In
examining how Cha breaks the cycle of consuming culture, I focus on how she
disrupts the relationships between storytelling and history, history and memory,
memory and exile, language and nation, and dictation and translation in a
transnational context. I am particularly interested in how Cha troubles the historical
figurations of the Korean refugee in the American imagination. I use the term
“refugee” both in the historically specific sense, as Cha writes about her and her
mother’s experiences of exile, and also in the cultural terms in which refugee gets
refigured simultaneously as both an imaginable (potential) citizen and also as
inassimilable alien. The refugee figure is always imbricated in global processes and
connected to an imagined diasporic identity that is always refigured as homeless and
cultureless. The refugee as an analytic category then operates paradoxically and similarly to the category “Third World Women” in the U.S., full of history and imagined as free from specific histories and also as a general category of otherness. Cha’s use of fragmentation and disruption of the master narrative within a multitude of narratives of experiences of refugeeness (specifically Korean-American) reveals that modernist discourse of belonging, such as “native origin” and “nation,” always already depoliticized our understandings of the figure of the refugee. Modernist discourses of belonging also function as natural (normative) categories of identity in their own right. This matters because these categories work to make invisible dominant-subject formation and knowledge production, and specifically the production and maintenance of the master narrative.

The 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines the refugee as “any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country,” or is unable or unwilling to return (4). Most laws governing refugee asylums in European and North American countries, including the United States, follow from this definition, establishing refugee status as a condition radically external to the modern nation-state order. Nonetheless, the refugee is not an easily definable figure, as debates over changing and contingent legal criteria for refugee asylum keep the refugee from becoming an uncontested space. It is important to understand the ways in which the refugee, as a multivalent
category of difference, comes to accrue significant cultural and political value. Cha has to use multivalent processes of fragmentation in order to show that the refugee status as an imagined diasporic homelessness is not only part of the master's narrative but also necessary for keeping the master narrative intact.

I use the term Diaspora in several specific ways throughout this chapter. Cha's text itself, I argue, creates a diasporic text both in terms of its form and content. She scatters and gathers what she knows of her experience and what she has learned of her history. Diaspora is also a fraught and complex concept that has much to do with productions of knowledges and power relations. Writing about the Indian diaspora, Nalini Natajaran argues that, "in managing knowledge, as Foucault has shown us, one of the most effective way of holding together disparate images is that of nomenclature" (xiv). In this way, the concept of diaspora is an analytic category and a "social imaginary" to borrow a phrase from political philosopher Charles Taylor. It is understood as the transnational condition of a people, dispersed from a homeland throughout the world and linked through diverse locations. As such, diasporas are often understood in opposition to the nation-states in which they are located their transnational connections perplexing (and challenging) territorial bounds and nationalisms. Therefore, "traveling" the nation-state with multiple attachments, diasporas emerge as crucial albeit problematic sites of production and investment within transnational circuits of culture and capital. As Cha's text reveals, depending on the specific configuration of knowledges, histories, and state imperatives, the refugee and diasporic figure is not simply a target but also a vehicle of power, located
within a matrix of representations and geopolitical relations. Collected displacement then is threatening for American Master Narratives because those narratives depend upon the idea of state sovereignty, which give America supreme control of its national body.

Cha’s stories do not appear to be continuous, or even “stories” as conventionally conceived, because she troubles narrative structure in terms of both the stories she tells and the context/history that she provides. Unlike master narratives, which depend on linear form, Cha brings the reader into her fragmented narrative and forces the reader to engage with her wherever she is. This form of textuality itself is a kind of diaspora, but one that resists hegemonic rearticulation and the serving of old masters in new ways. This is not a text that merely embraces scattered utterances. Rather, it is a text that challenges what we think it means to be scattered and what it means to tell a totalizing story, versus an inclusive story. While *Dictee* is not literally in a fragmentary state, as it was completed and published by Cha, it is written as if it could have been pieced together. Cha offers bits of phrases and words with blank space scattered throughout the pages. At first, it may even appear to the reader familiar with the Western epic tradition as if the text is a collection of pieces of a larger incomplete piece of work. In fact, the first example of Cha’s reformation of the Western Classics is *Dictee*’s epigraph, a fragmented “quote” supposedly by Sappho, often considered the tenth muse, a mortal member of the group of nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Greek Goddess of memory):

May I write words more naked than flesh,
stronger than bone, more resilient than
An examination of the manuscript evidence of Sappho reveals that no such lines exist in the poet’s writing. Cha has made up these lines, simultaneously invoking Sappho’s authority as the archetypal woman poet and making the Muse unreliable at best. Unlike the traditional epic story in which the Muses are figured as telling stories that are always completed, Cha embraces incompleteness and writes in fragments, making a totalizing and teleological story impossible. And yet Cha writes *Dictee* into (or perhaps in spite of) the literary history of the West by a direct use and revision of Sappho, a key Western literary source. Cha structures her text in relation to the nine Muses, complete with a table of contents divided into nine sections, named after each Muse:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIO</th>
<th>HISTORY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CALLIOPE</td>
<td>EPIC POETRY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URANIA</td>
<td>ASTRONOMY</td>
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<tr>
<td>MELPOMENE</td>
<td>TRAGEDY</td>
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<td>ERATO</td>
<td>LOVE POETRY</td>
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<td>ELITERE</td>
<td>LYRIC POETRY</td>
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<td>THALIA</td>
<td>COMEDY</td>
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<td>TERPSICHORE</td>
<td>CHORAL DANCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>POLYMNIA</td>
<td>SACRED POETRY</td>
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However, even at this foundational point in the text where Cha anchors *Dictee* within the Greek muses, she plays with them, switching Euterpe, the Muse of the flute, with a fictitious name Elitere. She calls Elitere, a name that sounds as if it could be Greek,
the Muse of lyric poetry. Messing with figures of the origin of Western knowledge is radical territory. Cha clearly gets this Muse wrong with purpose.

Cha creates a space where the reader well versed in Greek mythology will recognize this error and will not be able to understand confidently why she structures the text through these Muses. The fact that she creates a Muse of poetry is particularly interesting, since literary language and poetry in particular have come to have a special status in Western culture. Certainly one is not expected to understand “great literature” that comes out of Greek mythology without some specific training. Poetry specifically is considered coded, using words that make sense only to those with specialized (read traditionally Western) training. Cha’s creation of a Muse of poetry then works to challenge the most basic form of Western literary practices. Moreover, it is particularly interesting how she plays with this muse’s name and role. It’s the Muse she names as presiding over lyric poetry. In Greek literature, lyric poetry has a different meaning from its modern one, which is linked to the Romantics such as John Keats in his famous “Ode to a Nightingale” and the attention that is paid to the status of the Self, the lyric “I.” The term lyric poetry then conjures up this idea of self with a capital “S,” giving the reader good reason to expect Dictee to be about Cha (or at least about a singular “I”). In Classical Greek, the word "lyric" comes from the word "lyre" which was the musical instrument that lyric poets originally used to accompany their words. These poems were written as performance pieces and were generally short in length, unlike their modern counterpart. However, Cha challenges this expectation quickly, even in the very changing of this Muse’s name.
Cha begins each section of *Dictee* with these Muses as headings that appear to give the text a recognizable structure grounded in classical “origin.” She uses these names of the muses as headings to signal authority of the ideas that they encompass and in addition, these headings cue us to think that the authority that they represent will be followed through in the materials of the chapter. The reader will quickly realize that this is only a formal move and that the content of the chapters does not match up with the headings. These headings become faux beginnings that do not work out the way we expect them to and do not enable the reader to assume that the text is supposed to be read linearly. Cha’s text operates similarly to the lines of the narrator asking the Muses to tell the story: “Tell me the story of all things. Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us” (11). Cha, like the narrator, starts “from wherever,” rather than at the beginning, and does not back up and explain anything to the reader. And in this sense, Cha seems to give us permission also to begin wherever we wish in her text. There is no payoff for starting at the beginning of *Dictee*, and in fact, our desire to start at the beginning is one reason *Dictee* seems so confusing.

Cha challenges her reader by telling stories that do not fit within the boundaries of the master’s narrative. She tells her history and Korean/American history on her own terms, writing into the gaps of history that the official narratives work hard to suture over. These gaps of history tend to exclude the refugee’s experience and the national trauma caused by colonization and war. When she opens up this historical record, the questions that are implicitly on the page, even though they are not asked in this form, are: What knowledge productions and disciplinary
formations constitute what we “know” about the refugee? And how might the refugee alternately figure as a threat to “national security” and, as an affirmation of what Liisa Malkki calls, “the national order of things?” The constructed “we” and its constructed knowledge, based upon a homeland nation-state and an external homeless refugee, situate the refugee as a figure that is both a threat and a reassurance of the national order of things. Cha shows that the constructions of “we-ness” and constructions of knowledge depend upon this paradoxical figuring of the refugee. She writes, “We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate” (80-81). Look at what Cha has done here. She says that the liberators have named the severance “Civil War,” then she inserts a period and follows that by “Cold War” and a period, and then follows that with “Stalemate.” What are we to make of these utterances side by side in close relation with periods between them? How are we supposed to parse these terms? How can we make these terms fit together? As common as these words may seem when looked at on their own, their effect as they are arranged on the page is anything but ordinary. We can offer interpretations as to what Cha is up to and why she has written these words as she has. We might think that there is a progression between the words and her claim that Civil War will always end in Stalemate or at an impasse. However, she does not give us any evidence to justify such an interpretation. We are left with our interpretations as our own. And yet that doesn’t mean we cannot say anything at all, nor does it mean she is not saying anything (which is a common reaction by Cha’s readers). What we are left
with is a collection of possibilities. It is in our best efforts to interpret what her words mean and our realization that she makes it difficult for us to decipher the text as we are used to doing (fact checking, narrative structure, grammatical conventions), that make us, as readers, “homeless” in her text. In this sense, her text performs a kind of diasporic embodiment. In our search to make her text mean what we expect it to mean, Cha shows us the relationship between homelessness and homeland that we are used to theorizing about, not experiencing.

Cha makes the reader accountable for understanding how this construction of the refugee as a diasporic homeless figure not only reassures that the refugee will function as a sign of security to us/the U.S., but also secures our position as the benevolent liberator. This position, in turn, reinforces the natural order of things and keeps the master narrative intact. It must therefore be challenged on a visceral level in order to challenge its stability of reliable boundaries (homeless/homeland, refugee/liberator), since no boundaries generic, cultural, or discursive remain stable in Cha’s text. In making the reader accountable for how s/he reads her text, she places the reader in the position of a refugee, forced to go through the experience of learning language, as one must do as a refugee, learning a foreign but now omnipresent tongue. The reader becomes deeply aware of how the text does and does not operate and the unsettling experience that being “in” this text creates. The reader “lives” the contradiction of having two voices present in oneself at the same time, but only being able to speak the voice that is not heard. As Western readers, when we are confronted with struggle, we are trained to think teleologically and that there must be an outcome
to that struggle. In *Dictee*, Cha forces the reader to inhabit struggle, and makes the reader’s process of struggling itself the place of meaning (rather than meaning being the outcome of the text as a tangible closure). As a refugee, the reader experiences this text as always in motion and as one that moves elsewhere when the reader tries to conclude its meaning in a totalizing way. The reader will try to settle the text by finding a home in it, a space that seems comfortable. However, Cha does not allow the reader to settle or become at home in her text, since becoming at home allows for ownership of the text. The reader as refugee may not own the text or ever feel completely safe, as this would allow the reader to consume and then close the text.

Cha’s text performs what Trinh Minh-ha calls a field of departure, rather than a point of departure:

> Inevitably, a work is always a form of tangible closure. But closures need not close off; they can be doors opening onto other closures and functioning as ongoing passages to an elsewhere. (Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red* 32)

With all of the traditional documents in place, including pictures, letters, stories, and even diary entries, *Dictee* seems to be constructed almost archivally to bear witness to the traumatic personal events of Cha’s mother specifically, and events of Korean-American history more broadly. Indeed, if one flips through the pages of *Dictee*, the text itself seems to be an archive of Korean-American history. I use the term “archive” following the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* definition: “a place in which public records or historical documents are preserved; also: the material preserved —often used in plural” or “a repository or collection especially of information” (65).
An archive is a collection of documents that produces meaning by the very fact that they are brought together. *Dictee* seems to give us a collection of documents of cultural evidence. At first glance, the text seems to have brought these documents together for us, to make it available to us and turn it into a master narrative that will narrate what we are supposed to learn from this evidence. And yet, what Cha does with this evidence, when we encounter it in the text, is to make it impossible for us to turn the evidence into a master narrative. Just as Cha is doing here, I am arguing that when we come to experimental writing and this text in particular by simply gathering them together, we have already produced a potential for a site that will, in turn, produce meaning. However, when we read these texts more closely, we realize that they can be collected together and that gives them some force and weight but not in the way that master narratives require to make meaning. This writing will have to be much more scattered, open, and porous. Just because it is a collective and a body of literature, this does not mean that it will deliver to us stable, reliable meaning.

Similarly, *Dictee* is hardly a “comprehensive” or “reliable” source of information. Providing citations without a specific referent and captionless photographs, Cha constantly offers her reader “evidence” without “proper documentation,” much like an un-catalogued archive. Refuges are often statistically unverifiable or marginal. They are often without documents or they must fabricate them in order to be “documentable.” Cha troubles the very process of documenting. Each time the reader tries to “make sense” out of the evidence, s/he will be deeply
frustrated and will be homeless in the text. There is nothing firm upon which to rest one’s readings of the text.

Take for example an unmarked, grainy black-and-white photograph of a mass protest in the ELITERE section of *Dictee*:
Figure 1. Image in *Ditecte*, 122.
The reader wants to know the referent for this picture. We can research and find that the photograph is an image of the 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration, where over two hundred students protesting for democracy were killed. We can research and find that the Korean government, which stated that the protest belonged to a communist uprising, silenced this pictured event. And yet while we have found the "context" and think we have discovered the real history behind this image, we are still left with the question of how—how to read this image as Cha has presented it. She writes:

The image. To appeal to the masses to conceal the information [. . .]. The response is pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (32-33)

Here, Cha challenges the very notion of objective knowledge and calls out the possessive in the Master(‘s) narrative. "To appeal to the masses to conceal" is precisely what the Master’s narrative performs. Archives are filled with images, information, and specifically photographs, which are used to "make sense" of traumatic histories. The meaning of an image, so often imagined by modernist discourses as authentic (True) value, is established through interpretive structures.

These structures exist outside the image at the convergence of social forces and specific historical imperatives. Cha calls out these processes, naming them "pre-coded to perform predictably," making it impossible for the photograph she provides to perform the role that her readers are looking for it to perform. Strategically, Cha refuses the possibility of a monolithic correspondence between the image and the "historical" referent to which it is supposedly attached. The photograph cannot
perform its role as evidence, “neutralized to achieve the no-response,” precisely because Cha refuses “to submit to the uni-directional correspondence” that her reader expects. That is, while photography maintains the illusion of neutrality, the medium, when consumed as “evidence,” necessarily obscures intentions of the photographer and renders invisible those interpretive conventions that produce and circumscribe the available meaning of the photographic image. This serves a particular ideological goal of limiting interpretations, performing what Laura Wexler calls “the innocent eye” in *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of US Imperialism*. In her study of photography, Wexler argues that photography was a necessary medium for successful American imperialism, which was integrally tied to domestic visual culture (images of American women and American families as natural and neutral). As Wexler shows in her study, domestic visual culture also produced everyday life perpetrators who are complicit in the social arrangements that domestic images enable in colonization processes.

Similar to Cha’s invocation of the “invisible enemy under the title of liberators” (81) who Cha says “have conveniently named the severance,” the “innocent eye” of the camera is anything but innocent or liberating (Cha 81). Photography as a materialist medium of documentation works to create a viewer who is invited to take a neutral or innocent stand to see the photograph as evidence on the conqueror’s terms. Cha’s insistence on questioning the historical and relational ground of meaning (and meaning-making) in the photograph (in this case, by leaving it captionless) forces the reader to become aware of her/his own reading of the photos.
in *Dictee*. Cha’s process then forces us to question the very idea of an “original” context and reveals that the “innocent eye” cannot exist.

Photography has never been an “innocent” or neutral medium. Susan Sontag argues that the camera is to be “aimed” and subjects are to be “shot.” The very term “snapshot” originated, literally, in reference to the hunter’s swift “snapshot” (Sontag, *On Photography* 31). Cha brings this history of the photograph into her text by picturing violence that is left unexplained or even actively erased, depending on the explanation of the context and by whom that explanation is given. Consider this photograph:
Figure 2: Image in *Dictee*, 39.
While we do not know the specific referent, it is clear that this image is a violent one within some history of imperialism. We can recognize the formation of the people figured in the image, an execution-style killing, where the perpetrator kills at close range conscious victims who are under the complete physical control of the assailant, as one that is associated with war. The reader struggles to figure out the specifics of this image and is met with frustration. This could be a “legitimate” execution in a revolutionary upheaval that would be sanctioned by most governments in times of declared war. At the same time, one could read this image perpetrating unsanctioned violence with it being set in the countryside and with the majority of the people standing around each other facing the victims (it seems), who are blindfolded and in a vulnerable stance. In either of these readings, one eventually realizes that while the image performs violence there are no pictured weapons. Why? The photograph is so intriguingly ambiguous that it both presents legitimate violence and illegitimate violence (government sanctioned and perpetrator/victim) at the same time. Cha shows us that searching for the “real” meaning of this photograph cannot account for the violence that it represents. Rather, it invokes the master narrative of war and at the same time it allows for enough ambiguity that we cannot be certain of our reading. And once we are aware that we cannot be sure of the meaning of the image, we are left with a collection of possibilities and Cha has achieved her purpose in troubling the readers’ processes of interpretation of the text.
We have learned to “fact check” constantly and expect that the author will provide the necessary documents and documentation as sign-posts along the way to get us to a satisfactory “conclusion:"

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To this enemy people. This meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. (32)

“[R]ests as record” is Cha’s reference to the belief that historical record is meant to explain one’s experience in colonized Korea, but the sign is Japanese. “Japan has become the sign,” which means it is the colonizer who is creating this historical record and if you are colonized within that record, you do not have a language to speak and to tell your story. And even if you did, you would not be heard within the colonizer’s record. Koreans as refugees under the sign of Japan were disenfranchised and are “people suddenly lost, without a tellable story” (Said, “Reflections on Exile” 166). Cha juxtaposes dominant language with memory and blood, showing that Japan as the sign appropriates the trauma of colonization and war and leaves trauma that cannot be explained. The historical record can never account for everything and we are complicit in the process of turning that partiality into an account that fits an agenda, namely the account that supports the master (or dominant) narrative. So how can the subjugated subject speak back? Cha uses the second person singular as she continues:

You live in a village where the other Koreans live. Same as you Refugees […] Still, you speak of the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak very
softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark in secret, Mother tongue is your refuge. (45)

The physicality that Cha evokes here reveals the trauma and resistance of both individual bodies and communities of silenced voices veiled within the official story. She begins by referring to Japanese as the sign of both literal and cultural occupation of Korea under Japanese imperialism. Japan as “the sign,” on the semiotic level, reveals the process of colonization where meaning making is seized and marked by the colonizer, taking an entire history, culture, language, and people and eliding them. Japanese “as the sign” means that Korean history, Korean memory, Korean culture, Korean tradition, and Korean voices cannot be heard. Cha makes the reader engage with these material effects and material items such as the photographs, as well as diagrams and charts, making the material world present, and thus making this colonizing history present (with all of its trauma intact). By invoking a level of physicality while speaking both directly to the reader (“you”) and to her mother (“you” who “speak [...] the mandatory language”), Cha works to connect the concepts of physicality and “human-made” with history (that history itself is a constructed story) and the literal human body with the national body politic. If the personal is political, to use a well-known phrase in feminist theory, then, in Cha’s text, invoking the physical, the most basic element of the personal, is a rather political move. She invokes physicality to give a material look at the world, since we are supposed to be able to “read” and know the material world, but it turns out that we have a difficult time understanding the most basic levels of physicality including the physicality of the human body. She makes her history present, but not seamlessly so.
She must make subjugated knowledge present in order to open up and write into “the gaps of history.”

Japan annexed Korea in 1910 and continued its occupation until its defeat in World War II in 1945. Japan’s annexation was facilitated by the United States when, after the Japanese defeated the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War, the U.S. agreed to allow Japan to occupy Korea under the condition that Japan would not interfere with the United States’ interest in the Philippines. During the period of Japanese colonial rule, Koreans were forbidden to speak their own language, study Korean history, celebrate Korean culture and traditions, or demonstrate any form of patriotism. Koreans were forced to take on Japanese names, learn to speak the Japanese language, and celebrate Japanese culture. As a result, many Koreans fled their home country seeking refuge in Manchuria, China, and the United States (Dudden 54). Cha’s claim that the colonizing language, in this case Japanese, “has become the sign” is then followed by showing that speaking against that sign is a necessary mode of resistance: “The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark in secret” (45). Here the “You” is Cha’s invocation of her literal mother. Her mother speaks her mother tongue secretly as her primary mode of resistance to colonization. Cha writes “Mother tongue is your refuge,” and the Mother tongue is necessary to tell one’s story and her (Cha’s mother’s as well as Cha’s) history. It is in this secretive reference to the mother tongue, along with Cha’s rejection of fluently and linearly repeating her Japanese and Chinese lessons, that Cha reveals the mother tongue as always at work
in the other tongue, and reveals nationality as highly invested in fantasies of sameness and difference (refugee/exile versus home).

Korea was "re-colonized" once again after World War II, by the communists and the "free world," which resulted in another war involving the U.S. and Japan, this time as assistants to the U.S. (supporters of the South), and the Russians and Chinese (supporters of the North): "there is no destination other than towards yet another refuge from yet another war" (80). Cha is revealing that the subject, once colonized, literally, is in a state of perpetual exile. Through predominant use of English, as well as her use of Chinese and Japanese characters and invocation of French, Cha reveals how the languages of these colonizing nations are used as a powerful (master's) tool to support and maintain imperial, national, and patriarchal projects. We can have the "facts" of history, but those facts always leave gaps and these are the gaps Cha is revealing and writing into. In order to write into the gaps of history, Cha has to look at the way language works and how historical facts are communicated and historical knowledge gets produced.

The very title of Cha's text, *Dictee*, is French for dictation, arguably the ultimate tool of the master. To dictate is an act of mastery, and therefore a term of the master. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines dictation as: "arbitrary command / the act or manner of uttering words to be transcribed/material that is dictated or transcribed" (347).

Indeed, dictation is a process deeply implicated in the core of Knowledge production that Cha is challenging. Depending on faithful translation and faithful uses
of signs and signifiers, Cha engages in almost a reverse form of psychology, beginning her text with a dictation lesson that is reminiscent of elementary "foreign" language classes. These lessons are hierarchical ones, as the student is taught to select the "correct" verb form, translating from one language to the other, setting up the primary/secondary order of languages. They also may evoke memories of anxious and disoriented feelings that one often experiences in the midst of learning a foreign language, especially in a classroom setting. As the reader might recall, there are consequences for failing to provide the correct response to the assignments, generally a low grade or in some instances, failure to move to the next class level. However, for the refugee or the diasporic subject, consequences can be much more grievous. As we have seen, when the sign is misinterpreted, the consequence may be imprisonment or worse, as it was for Koreans who refused to obey under the colonizer's rule.

Early in the text, we are given two paragraphs, the first in French and the second in English (1). The English paragraph is a faithful translation of the French one. She transcribes punctuation marks in words not just the marks. The translation is, in fact, so literal that the words, ironically, do not translate the meaning of the French paragraph. It turns out that a literal translation becomes a mode of resistance of the master language. Here is one instance of Cha's "translations":

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Aller à la ligne C'était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin point ce soir au diner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guillemets Ça c'est bien passé le premier jour point d'interrogation ferme les guillemets au moins virgule dire le moins possible virgule la réponse serait virgule ouvre les guillemets Il n'y a qu'une chose point ferme les guillemets ouvre les guillemets Il y a quelqu'une point loin point ferme les guillemets (1)
\end{align*}
\]
Open paragraph. It was the first day period. She had come from afar period tonight and dinner comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks at least to say the least of it possible comma the answer would be open quotation marks there is but one thing period There is someone period From a far period close quotation marks (1)

This is a seemingly “faithful” translation. Cha makes it clear that when language is taken word-by-word and, in this sense, only at its word, the meaning is distorted. Here, Cha demonstrates that the only thing faithful about this meticulous translation is that it produces an illusion of exactitude that cannot hold up. The intended meaning of these words does not (and cannot) translate seamlessly. For example, where the French “quelqu’une” is able to specify a female “someone,” the English “someone” offers only a gender-neutral instance of being. Similarly, where the French “loin” resonates, meaning both “far and “from afar,” the English translation specifies the meaning as only “from afar.” And while in French the term “point d’interrogation” is the standard term for the punctuation marker, Cha refuses its common English equivalent, the question mark, leaving the more ominous “interrogation mark” in the passage. This interrogation mark makes the families’ question about “the first day” something threatening, or at least seemingly up for interrogation. We pause to consider what extra meaning the question might entail. The word interrogation in English then does have a one to one correspondence with the French but “means” differently in English. Cha shows us here, similar to what Stein has shown us, that words always bring connotative baggage with them and that connotative baggage is culturally based. Connotation, no matter how faithful one is to literality, will always creep into translation. This is why, as Derrida has argued, literature is an important
place to look for ideologically-inflected discursive hegemonies and is a critical site for examining how to break them.

Let us look at another instance of Cha messing with grammatical rules in translation:

She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation, She would become, her self, demarcations, Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air, Give her, Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver. (4)

At first glance, the excessive use of periods jumps out at the reader. Cha’s use of almost constant pauses slows the reader down. One can certainly try to read the passage quickly, but will also quickly grow frustrated and need to slow down. Then one might notice the close relation between “Their” and “Punctuation.” Whose punctuation? She seems to be referring to speakers who have the power to choose or own punctuation as the colonizer did and master narratives continue to demand. The emphasis on punctuation as a mechanical element of speech, rather than using the “appropriate” signs is significant for how the reader is able (and unable) to navigate through the text. It is mechanical and thus there is nothing natural about it.

Forced to take one word at a time, each word seems both significant and also dependent on the word it follows. What relationship can we see between “Give her,” “Voice,” “Assign,” “Hand it,” and “Deliver it”? As I read the words, they begin to bounce around in my head similar to the ways I felt when reading Stein’s words. This line almost forms a jingle: “Give her,” “Voice,” “Assign,” “Hand it,” and “Deliver.” It sounds like a song. And yet, the more I read them, each of them and then all of them, the words look and sound different. I realize that I have selected some of her
words and attempted to make them into something else while reading over (perhaps in spite of) other words on the page. As I reread all the words, I notice Cha’s use of “take on,” in relation to the possessive “their punctuation,” has a double meaning. “Take on” could mean adopt or succumb to, but I would argue an exact opposite meaning. To “take on,” in this context, means to challenge, to fight, or, by “becom(ing) herself, demarcations,” she will separate herself from the Master narrative and discourse (language-use) that is attempting to translate her and appropriate her as its own.

Cha uses double meaning to disrupt the very purpose of dictation. Dictation purports to give us the exactitude that allows us to take possession of language, and yet what Cha shows through this double meaning is that all we ever (can) get is an approximation. She will not be colonized by the master narrative’s forms of telling. And the reader will not be allowed to recolonize her words and determine their meaning in any kind of conclusive way. The reader must take each word on its own terms, aware that whatever we decide to make the words mean, those decisions are made by us, not Cha.

In another language lesson several pages later, Cha draws attention to speaking and specifically the connection between speaking and writing as a way to unmaster language:

_How to_ Traduire en français [sic]:

1. I want you to speak.
2. I wanted him to speak.
3. I shall want you to speak.
4. Are you afraid he will speak?
5. Were you afraid they would speak?
6. It will be better for him to speak to us.
7. Was it necessary for you to write?
8. Wait till I write.
9. Why didn’t you wait so that I could write you? (8-9)

The repetition of the term “speaking” and the invocation of the term “write” both operate to alert and even warn the reader that language-use must be at the forefront of her/his thinking as s/he reads Dictee. The reader cannot be allowed to forget that this text is about breaking silences and opening voids those silences have produced in ways most of us have been previously unable to hear. If we do not pay attention to the way Cha uses language, we repeat the voids that she is trying to reveal and we are missing the how of what she is writing. She often speaks of “void[ing] the words” and “void[ing] the silence,” meaning that when we empty the words (and understand that words themselves are colonized) then silence will be broken. Words, like punctuation markers, are social constructs that carry very particular meaning decided upon by the dominant speakers. Cha knows, however, that writing is a powerful and necessary tool to account for the voids in history and works to fill those voids by outing the “dominance” that created them. If we look at the movement between the sentences above beginning with a desire to speak and moving to “Wait till I write,” a seemingly threatening statement, we see that there is a process of consciousness unfolding on the page. This final sentence is a warning that regardless of what the reader thinks she/he knows, Cha will expose the voids of history and the dominant structure in place that have allowed for these voids by unmastering language “when she writes.” And here in Dictee she writes. Similar to Stein’s breaking into language, I use the term
unmaster to show how Cha does not simply refuse the convention of language. To “un-master,” I would argue, is not to de-master, as in to take authority over language by inventing a new language or even remastering that language. Rather, she uses the languages she has available to her and does something else with them as she challenges the conventions that the master’s narrative depends upon.

One way Cha un-masters language is by inhabiting words to excess. Take, for example, the following lines:

I am only a child, powerless and weak, and yet it is my weakness that gives me the boldness of offering myself as VICTIM of your love, O Jesus! In times past, victims, pure and spotless, were the only ones accepted by the Strong and Powerful God.” (111)

[...]

“The smallest act of PURE LOVE is of more value to her than all the other workers together.” (115)

While these lines may sound familiar, the capitalization of “VICTIM” seems to show that she is playing with them as a way to inhabit the words excessively. These lines demonstrate the pressure to fit in, to call herself a child and to submit to the Christian doctrine. However, as we have seen throughout the text, Cha cannot be fitted into any box. She plays within the master’s narrative because in order to dismantle it, she has to reveal the process that produces collusion between history, language, and religion. She cannot avoid it; she has to inhabit it and inhabit it excessively.

As she inhabits these lines, she notices that the colonizer has constructed this story but that the colonizer also has to live in it and is confined by that story. Her use of the hegemonic language, in this case the hegemonic religious language, exposes its materiality.
Take for example, “PURE LOVE.” The capital lettering of these words draw the reader’s attention as it stands out from the rest of the words pure love. One has to look at these words, even if s/he is just glancing at the page. The words “pure” and “love” create an interesting and troubling construction. What does pure love mean? What is pure about love? The word, pure, is supposed to be self-evident. Pure, according to the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* means: “Free from anything of a different, inferior, or contaminating kind; free from extraneous matter” (1010). Pure establishes a line of questioning. What does it mean to be pure or “free from extraneous matter?” And love is a word we question all the time. Love is a term that embodies a concept that writers, artists, and scholars, academic and religious continue to grapple with. In the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* love is a: “Strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties, attraction based on sexual desire, affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests” (737). Doesn’t the colonizer claim to “save” those he colonizes out of “love?” Can anyone define what pure love is or what it should be? Cha uses these words to engage and challenge the reader and encourage interaction with the words on the page and to notice her/his reading behavior. The reader’s thought pattern has changed or at least been affected by these words. The words have had a material effect on the reader. It is ironic then, that after pages of showing that we do not understand that language physically affects the way we behave and how we think the world should operate, Cha then shows us diagrams, which are material representations that we initially think are going to offer clearer explanation. We are used to seeing diagrams
to explain complicated concepts in very clear and specific terms. Consider this
diagram:

Figure 3: Image in *Dictee*, 63.
Since the average American reader cannot understand the Chinese symbols that form these diagramed bodies, the bodies become configurations that we cannot easily consume because they are formed by "words" that many readers cannot understand (they are Chinese letters and are extremely small). We recognize, visually, that these are diagrams and the bodies and words are there, but we cannot "read" them and because of the words, and we know we should be able to do so. In this sense, these images become "material" bodies to which we seem to have no access. When we encounter these images, we cannot bracket off the visual aspect of the text because it is the only thing we have to rely upon. Cha has not provided any other writing that accompanies this image and we are forced back on a material reading of those bodies.

Charts of the human body demarcate special places of meaning—they map the interspaces of bodies and emphasize how they work. The physical apparatus of language (bodily) and the use of language, in particular, seem completely natural. However, Cha finds them deeply problematic. Take this diagram of the upper respiratory system:
FIG. 1 Side View of Air Passages and Lungs
FIG. 2 Position of the Larynx in the Neck
FIG. 3 Front View of the Larynx
FIG. 4 Superior View of Larynx and Vocal Folds

Figure 4: Image in Dictee, 74.
As the reader looks at this diagram filled only with labeled pictures, s/he stares at each body part that is supposed to make speech. Language is considered to be quintessentially human. The difference between humans and other species, supposedly, is that humans have the capacity to speak. This diagram works as the previous worded body did only here the words are labels that we think we recognize. However, in either case we are cued to know the meaning because of the presence of words to guide us, but Cha undermines that cue. Cha makes the reader look at the physical tongue and all of the physical parts that allow one to speak. She then follows the image with abstract imagery of the workings of the tongue:

One by one.
The sounds. The sounds that move at a time
Stops. Starts again. Exceptions
Stops and starts again
All but exceptions.
Stop, Start. Starts.
Contractions, Noise. Semblance of noise.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.
Cracked tongue, Broken tongue.
Pidgeon. Semblance of speech.
Swollows. Inhales, Stutter, Starts. Stops before starts. (74)

These words appear on the opposite page of the above diagram. Cha narrates the process of speaking that should follow if we know how to read this diagram. However, given the context of Japanese colonization, we are aware that the refugee’s voice is silenced and “voided,” leading to “broken speech,” “cracked tongue[s],” and “broken tongue[s].” The effect of these words and this chart, when taken together, reveals the link between culture and material reality. For Cha, there is nothing natural
about speaking because none of the tongues that she has available (French, Chinese, English, and Korean, her mother tongue) provide her with the ability to speak uninhibited. And so, the very body that should allow her to communicate and therefore have “a voice” or a place in the world has become a kind of war zone.
Figure 5: Image in *Dictee*, 78.
Cha's use of this DMZ (demilitarized zone) map invokes the militarized border that cuts the Korean Peninsula in half and represents the original border between the U.S. controlled (South) and Soviet controlled (North) areas of Korea at the end of WW II. This border remains one of the most heavily patrolled borders in the world. This map is a representation of physical space that is a visualized location of home. The represented space is far removed from actual home, in terms of not only Cha's personal history but of cultural history as well. Culture and history always impose lines of demarcation, and here Cha gives us a representation complete with a demilitarized zone (DMZ). When Cha looks a map of Korea and tries to "map" home, there is always a DMZ and she has to negotiate this imperialist history that continues to affect her and her family's sense of home.

Cha continues to draw connections between religion, language, documentation, and refugeeness as she moves from a discussion of her mother's experience in exile to her own experience as an immigrant returning to her native land.

Your father and your mother left as the others. You suffered the knowledge of having to leave. Of having left. But your MAH-UHM, spirit has not left. (45)

No more sentence to exile, Mother, no black crows to mourn you. Neither takes you neither will take you to Heaven no Hell they fall too near you let them fall to each other you come back you come back to your one mother to your one father. (53)

These two passages show Cha connecting religion and exile with reference to Heaven and Hell to her mother. In Korean, "MAH-UHM" means "spirit." This is a particularly rich word for Cha as "Mother" is echoed with MHA sounding like ma, or
short for Mother in English. Uhm sounding like “oma,” is Korean for mother (as well as German for grandmother). She says to her mother, “no more sentence to exile,” and then she shares her own experience of exile and conflict of “coming home.” The meanings of “foreign” and “home” are juxtaposed as Cha finds herself considered “foreign” in her “own” country. No matter what side she is on (or what country she is in), she is always homeless:

I have documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American passport. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their image.

[...] You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference....They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say... You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you. (56-58)

The first line, “I have documents,” represents what we think ought to be a shifting identity, from the homeless refugee who is “undocumentable,” to a documented (American) citizen. The official hands of customs officers, who “check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you,” reveal that she (or the speaker) exists neither in one place nor the other. Rather, the immigrant embodies dislocation in her motherland and the foreign land. Her identity is questioned wherever she is and her American identity, much like Cha’s early reference to “Japan as sign,” consumes her: “Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph,” much as the DMZ map has divided her home by marking it

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with “their signature their seals. Their own image” (56). Cha is referring to the naturalization ceremony, a ceremony that is imagined as the ultimate celebration for the immigrant in popular American discourse. However, Cha’s juxtaposition of herself “becoming American,” with her experience in customs trying to go “home” to Korea, reveals the profound alienation and disconnect between the two processes (becoming American and going “home”). It also reveals the totalizing structure that American discourse depends upon. She is expected not only to choose to become fully American, a choice that depends on giving up her Korean identity, she is also expected to embrace this process of American appropriation. Her description of this ceremony/appropriation does not seem radically different from her description of Japanese appropriation of Korea during Japan’s occupation, implicitly asking: What exactly is home in this globalized (and imperialized) world? What counts as home for a newly naturalized American citizen? Chandra Mohanty says it like this:

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are “my people”? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space? What interests me is the meaning of home for immigrants. I am convinced that this question—how one understands and defines home—is a profoundly political one. (126)

Cha demonstrates precisely Mohanty’s concerns. She reveals the hegemonic nature of American civic discourse by responding to naturalization in terms of estrangement rather than interpellation. In this sense, Cha “denaturalizes” discourses of American citizenship and America more broadly that require immigrants to “absorb, to submit to unidirectional correspondence” completely identifying with her new home nation and politicizing the very construction of “home.”
The documents that she holds onto as she goes through customs in order to prove her identity are the markers of assimilation that do not perform as she expects them to. Much as we saw with the previous photographs, these “documents, proof, evidence, photograph, and signature” (56) that Cha has to have in place, simultaneously highlight the mechanical aspects of naturalization and also the ways in which they are never enough to guarantee an identity that will not be questioned in customs. The ceremony that is supposed to make her an American that she pledges her allegiance to the United States of America, announcing that she is part of the one nation under God, ends up making her a foreigner yet again when she tries to go to her home of origin. She, like the map with DMZ territories, is marked up and recreated in refugee status.

In a letter to her mother later in the text, Cha articulates this clearly:

Dear Mother,

4. 19. Four Nineteen, April 19th, eighteen years later. Nothing has changed, we are at a standstill. I speak in another tongue now, a second tongue a foreign tongue. All this time we have been away. But nothing has changed. A stand still. (80)

Cha plays with the date she is writing, showing multiple ways of representing it (“4. 19. Four Nineteen, April 19th”), which draws attention to the fact that this date is eighteen years after she left her homeland. What happened to the promise of change for this once refugee, now an American citizen, who considers English not only her second tongue but also “a foreign tongue?” One would expect that things would have changed after eighteen years, several wars, and the interconnectedness that capitalism has supposedly forged between the two nations:
Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile. Here at my return in eighteen years, the war is not ended. We fight the same war. We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination. (81)

The destination that Cha is referring to here is of a Korean, and now Korean-American, identity. The perpetual exile and homelessness that Cha describes is not only the physical dwelling of her body or the physical landscape of Korea. Her use of the term “destination” in terms of struggle that is both in perpetual motion and always the same reminds me of Mitsuye Yamada’s essay “Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster” in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Describing her experiences as an Asian-American woman post Japanese internment camp and the struggle to be heard, Yamada writes:

[... P]eople are still looking right through and around us, assuming we are heard but not really listened to. Like Musak, they think we are piped into the airwaves by someone else. We must remember that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects, or let them speak freely and not listen to them with serious intent. (40)

Consider also Moraga and Anzaldúa’s explanation of what they call “theory in the flesh”:

Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from knowledge of ourselves. ‘My mother and I work to unravel the knot’ (Lavins Morales). (23)

In each of these passages, perpetual struggle with deep imperialist roots is articulated in ways that I think can help us understand the war that Cha is referring to. It is a war to be heard, to have her history heard, and to fight the tearing of identities by which American discourse of belonging is structured.
Returning to Cha’s experience in customs, just as the reader may think she/he knows what Cha means, the text switches back to an examination of seemingly unrelated material references:

To claim to reclaim, the space. Into the mouth the wound the entry is reverse and back each organ artery gland place element, implanted, housed skin upon skin, membrane, vessel, waters, dams, ducts, canals, bridges. (57)

And yet, if we take each line on its own terms, these lines perform the connectedness between the refugee, homelessness, and materiality of the body and bodies of water. Cha begins by articulating the refugee’s need “[t]o claim to reclaim, the space.” However, each time she tries to think about what that even means, or could mean, her focus goes “[i]nto the mouth.” She invokes various dental terms, “dams, ducts, canals, bridges” all of which could also refer to the movement, restraint, or crossing over water. These simple words have at least double meanings. When they are read as dental terms, of the mouth, they are stable. And yet, when these words are read as water, they are not simple nouns or sign but rather remind us of the how, or the function of bodies of water. The words, “dams,” “ducts,” “canals,” and “bridges” each invoke a materiality that is deconstructive as they perform motion, fluidity, permeability, and crossing of boundaries that reveal the how history operates. The historical record becomes not a record of what happened or a collection of archives, but a continuing process that is always creating what we are able to see. Cha reveals this continuing process as we have seen her expose the relationships between storytelling and history, history, memory, and colonization, language, dictation, and
resistance, language and nation, religion, immigration and exile and the production of
the “refugee” status in modernity and postmodernity.

Carved on one stone, the labor of figures. The labor of tongues. Inscribed to
stone. The labor of voices

— Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
CHAPTER III
“this thin edge of barbed wire”:
Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s Desert Blood

The US-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds.

— Gloria Anzaldúa

The desert is full of secrets, some of them buried in the sands.

— Lourdes Portillo

“Forgetting my Spanish”—meaning not just the language, but the accent as well—was the equivalent of losing my virginity.

— Alicia Gaspar de Alba

To do history through fiction may seem to be an impossible task. After all, official stories and the ideologies that sustain those stories are embedded in (Western) assumptions about how “reality” works. Feminist theorists have argued (for decades) that reality is an ideological construct, or at least that our perceptions of it are fundamentally structured by attempts to see reality as “objective.” Efforts to understand reality outside of our cultural stories by trying to contain them in fixed narratives are always illusory gestures. Fictional writing, particularly experimental fiction, is not a matter of distorting the “truth” of what really happened; on the contrary, it is about understanding the fiction of the “official stories” and claiming a space to imagine the layers of hegemonic discourses and its histories.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders offers a fictional account of the Juárez murders that implicitly poses the question: how does one speak about the unspeakable when there is no language to describe the material reality that
these (murdered) bodies reveal? Structuring her text to expose what she calls a “web of complicities” surrounding the history of the Juárez murders, Gaspar de Alba examines a history and uses fiction, working to show how these two things are (necessarily) intertwined and webbed together. She does not attempt to tell the “whole story” nor does she identify the “real” evidence on which the text is based. Rather, she works to connect the multiplicity of factors buried within the current history of these femicides, the web, and to make visible the intertwining function of that web. Just as Amy Kaplan insists on the necessity of “foregrounding culture” (15), and Ramón Saldivar argues that “history cannot be conceived as mere ‘background’ or ‘context’” (55), Desert Blood builds an ongoing web through fiction that cannot be stabilized by historiography.

Gaspar de Alba draws on four decades of Chicana feminist scholarship to write Desert Blood because of its deconstructive abilities, specifically related to ethnic and sexual identity categories and narrative forms that depend on intertwining fiction and history to tell (any) story. Chicana feminism has called Anglo-American feminists to task for using theoretical and literary practices that have, at times, been exclusionary from a Chicana feminist standpoint. Scholars such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa argue that Anglo-American feminist theory has not always considered the specific needs of Chicanas, based on the histories of conquest, imperialism, globalization and politics of transnational capital. Working from its inception to disrupt identity markers, politics, and (literal and figurative) buried bodies that have, historically, been used, forgotten, and ignored, this (Chicana)
feminist theoretical lens is specific to Mexican/American histories of exclusion. In *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, Anzaldúa speaks about what Chicana scholarship must do in order to work against Western (even feminist) marginalization:

In our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of the text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our *mestizaje* theories we created new categories for those of us left or pushed out by the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing aesthetics. [...] If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories. (xxvi)

As Anzaldúa implies, Chicana feminists have used their deconstructive tools to correct an Anglo feminist sensibility about gendered identity as monolithic. Anglo-American feminist practices have, historically, placed gender oppression as primary, and thus fail to account for the simultaneity of oppression[s] across gender, sexuality, race, and class. Chicana feminist theory must reposition Chicanas as subjects whose *lived experience* is placed at the center of analysis. This means that categories of race, sexuality, gender, and class all must be interrogated on equal terms and require new categories to do this work. It also means finding other ways of doing scholarship that do not accept Western aesthetic traditions as ways to find *Truth* and, as Anzaldúa says, “recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing aesthetics” as such (xxvi).

Chicana feminist scholars have had to do something else, disrupt identity categories and create new ones, and develop discursive (and aesthetic) practices because there has not been space for them to insert themselves within dominant
discourse and dominant canons. They have had to find ways to write about the very idea that such ideas could even exist in order to say what they know about their material experiences. Gaspar de Alba’s text participates in this tradition, as (re)writing history through story is not new in Chicana feminist scholarship. Fictional narratives have always been sites for doing Chicana historical work. Imagination has been at the forefront of Chicana feminist scholarship and understood as a necessary tool for constructing new ways of knowing. Emma Pérez’s *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, for example, challenges linear historical narratives of Chicana/o history arguing that it is crucial to move beyond traditional categories of historiography in order to decenter colonizing discourses that have shaped what we know (with a capital K) about this history:

The “tradition” and “discipline” of history is infused with morality, with how the documents “should” be interpreted and written, with ponderings over what is and what is not the definitive story. I have no intention of offering conclusive stories about Chicanas and our past, a past that crosses geographic terrains and political borders. I am more concerned with taking the “his” out of the “story,” the story that often becomes the universalist narrative in which women’s experience is negated. Women’s history began the project of refuting male experience as the norm. […] Voices of women from the past, voices of Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Indias, are utterances which are still minimized, spurned, even scorned. And time, in all its dialectical invention and promise, its so-called inherent progress, has not granted Chicanas, Mexicanas, Indias much of a voice at all. We are spoken about, spoken for, and ultimately encoded as whining, hysterical, irrational, or passive women who cannot know what is good for us, who cannot know how to express or authorize our own narratives. But we will. And we do. (xiv-xv)

Pérez argues that new ways of writing stories must be developed and those new ways of authoring narratives will allow new ways of understanding history as a “decolonial imaginary” where Chicana, Mexicana, and Indias’ experiences and stories are at the
center of historical narrative and lead to histories that construct new ways of knowing, speaking, listening, and hearing across difference.

Emma Pérez takes the next step in Chicana historiography, requiring scholars to reconsider the very process of writing history. Gaspar de Alba also takes the “next step” in Chicana studies by placing Ivon’s sexuality at the center of her narrative and developing a protagonist character that performs her sexuality in new ways. Borrowing a term from Homi Bhaba, I argue that Ivon occupies a “third space” between heteronormativity and oppositions to it, and in the process, shows us that neither “history” nor “fiction” narrative conventions can iterate that inbetween space. In this sense, Gaspar de Alba unburies heteronormative assumptions that continue to shape normative historical accounts and structure normative constructions of identity in narrative, along with the actual murdered bodies of Juárez.

Female sexuality is considered singular (at best) by Mexican and American patriarchal systems, as Cherrie Moraga describes: “To write as a Chicana feminist lesbian [is to be] afraid of being mistaken, of being made an outsider again” (Moraga 95). Struggling as a member of a culture that sees her sexuality as a marker of difference and understanding the tension between heteronormative gender and the complexities of identities outside the rules, Moraga boldly asserts that it is not a betrayal to critique this history. Moraga and Anzaldúa call for a version of feminism that will not stifle the complexities that those women who are Chicana, lesbian, and feminists face daily.
Chicana feminist writers and artists continue to create new metaphors, such as Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness, and new narrative spaces, such as Desert Blood, that confront us with new questions and hold us accountable to histories of oppressions and complicity. Gaspar de Alba connects Chicana feminist scholarship and the history of these murders by (re)invoking the tropes of Chicana gender and sexuality—a process first initiated in the 1970s by Chicana writers and artists and continuing into the twenty-first century.

Gaspar de Alba is able to write Desert Blood as she does only because she draws on this history of Chicana feminist scholarship. In particular, she reworks central archetypes of Chicana gender and sexuality as she draws on historical and popular figures such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona within the Chicana feminist tradition, as well as breaks new ground in feminist scholarship more broadly. Following this long tradition of re-figuring (female) symbols, Gaspar de Alba literally in-bodies this history within the contemporary history of the Juárez femicides. All three iconic figures are engulfed in the contradictions that follow from the process of re-signifying and re-presenting a figure that was, historically, a colonizing symbol. While these three figures are not the same, they all have a similar function in Chicana feminist theorizing. They are iconic female figures of creation that become empowering mediators of culture, patriarchy, and histories through a feminist lens.

As Chicana scholars and artists reimagined these gendered frameworks, Anzaldúa offered a methodology, a theoretical tool, with which to intellectualize such
reconfigurations. Assessing the state of Chicana identity, she wrote, “La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and La Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (Anzaldúa 52). Giving an organizational system to the three emblems, Anzaldúa anticipated the longevity of these figures as vehicles for contemplating, re-conceiving, and restating Chicana identity in the twenty-first century. Gaspar de Alba’s characters and characterizations move the tropes to the next step in our twenty-first century, reaching a Chicana consciousness that provides for hybridity—for multiple sites of identity—within the three mothers of Chicana people.

Extensive scholarship exists on the gendered frameworks that La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona provide Chicana artists and writers. For centuries, mytho-historical and religious figures such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona functioned as “controlling images” within Mexican cultures and subsequent Chicano cultures. By “controlling images,” I refer to Yen Le Espiritu’s interrogation of Asian-American stereotypes in U.S. popular culture, “generated by the dominant group to help justify the economic exploitation and social oppression of Asian American men and women over time” (Espiritu 128). Espiritu’s argument resonates for Chicana and Mexicana gendered frameworks because she connects literary, historical, and visual tropes to corresponding immigration policies and race-based legislations. Likewise, the figures of La Virgin de Guadalupe, La
Malinche, and La Llorona have, historically, contain(ed) Mexicana and, later, Chicana identity within sexist and disempowering cultural systems that resulted from historical and political changes.

During the early twentieth century, post-revolution Mexico reintroduced La Malinche as a nationalist concept for countrymen who “betrayed” Mexico by mixing their blood and culture with European or other outside influences. La Malinche was an indigenous woman to Mexico, who was given to Spanish conquerors in 1519 by her Tabascan captors. Fluent in several native dialects, she quickly became an interpreter for Hernando Cortés and, later gave birth to a son with him (Pratt 880). She is considered the founding figure that created the “Chicano” people. Of course, La Malinche’s story is much richer than this brief synopsis, but these events were typically used as the “proof” of her betrayal by twentieth century scholars such as Octavio Paz. Paz describes La Malinche’s ultimate treachery as the infamous mother of Mexico in his essay, “Hijos de la Malinche.” Comparing the pre-Colombian indigenous woman to La Virgen de Guadalupe, he argued that the two are simply different degrees of female “passivity / receptivity” (Paz 80). This comparison is especially important because it was a formal step in the construction of the virgin / whore binary in Mexican and Chicana/o consciousness. He also claimed that La Malinche acted on freewill when she “aided” the Spanish conquerors: “It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over” (Paz 85). This notion that La Malinche acted on freewill—that she voluntarily chose the conquering-colonial-European male over her indigenous
male counterpart—was naturalized by Paz as the “cruel incarnation of the female condition” (86). The assumption of La Malinche’s freewill (as an enslaved, indigenous woman) continues to persist and is particularly important for Chicana writers of the 1970s.

Following Paz, this narrow configuring of La Malinche “crossed the border” and provided the 1960s and ‘70s Chicano Movement with a way to further marginalize Mexican-American women who married interracially, pursued higher education, were lesbians, and/or wanted more public roles in the Movement, much like Gaspar de Alba’s protagonist character, Ivon. In her essay, “Yo Soy La Malinche: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism,” Mary Louise Pratt explored this transnational phenomenon, exploring the reconfigurative moment in the 1970s when Chicana writers challenged patriarchal standards. As Pratt argues, La Malinche “became an important site around which Chicana women negotiated their own struggles of identity to arrive at woman-gendered forms” (23). Employing the enslaved woman interpreter, Carmen Tafolla’s 1978 poem “Yo Soy La Malinche” challenged the androcentric voice of Corky Gonzales’ 1969 “Yo Soy Joaquin.” Tafolla provocatively declared (as La Malinche) that her efforts were in fact intentional, but not because of her preference for the European male, as Paz imagined. Rather, Tafolla (as Malinche), “saw our world / and your world / and another. / No one else could see!... I saw a dream / and I reached it!”(Tafolla 38)

Pratt reads Tafolla’s Malinche as the “central, world-changing protagonist of the conquest story” and the “dream” of “a genuine New World” outside “the patriarchal
and militaristic realities of both Aztec and Spanish societies” (178). Tafolla’s rethinking of *La Malinche*’s freewill disrupts Paz’s notion of her “passivity.” Although ethnically dangerous for the era, Tafolla’s poem interrupts all patriarchal renderings of the “female condition” because (as *Malinche*) her choices were exact and strategic—both in the sixteenth century conquest and twentieth century Chicano Movement (Pratt 179). In turn, Gaspar de Alba uses the notion of *La Malinche* as the “central world-changing protagonist” in her main character, Ivon. As Ivon negotiates her gender identity on both sides of the border, we can see that she is the next step in *La Malinche* consciousness.

Built on Chicana reimaginings of *La Malinche*, Ivon is a character who performs sexuality in a way that doesn’t fit into tidy categories as a Chicana, a lesbian, a scholar, and married to a white woman. Ivon embodies all contested identities within the patriarchal standards of Chicano consciousness. She embodies a “genuine New World”—Tafolla’s dream reached. Her multiple identities also resonate with Cherrie Moraga’s 1983 essay, “From a Long Line of Vendidas,” which considers *La Malinche*’s hybridity, or the multiple functions that the mytho-historical figure performs. In several readings of *La Malinche*, Moraga locates three “sides” to the woman: the betrayer / “sell out,” the mediator between cultures, and the spiritual instrument of prophecy (13). The third side of prophecy is the next step in Chicana consciousness and personhood. It predicts a space for multiple sites of meaning for Chicana identity, which Gaspar de Alba makes *real* with her “spiritual instrument,” Ivon.
Gaspar de Alba also uses the figure of *La Llorona* in *Desert Blood* to unpack the web of complicities that allow the femicides to continue. As the story goes, *La Llorona* was cheated on by her husband and in a fit of rage drowned her children in the Rio Grande. Her weeping cries and hollers for her children are said to haunt riverbanks and her story (similar to *Malinche*’s) participates in the construction of the good mother / bad mother binary in *Mexicana* and Chicana consciousness and in policing traditional gendered expectations. Gaspar de Alba uses images of water, river banks, and invokes song lyrics and various singing voices throughout that are all characterizations of *La Llorona*. Gaspar de Alba invokes these hugely important iconic figures in Chicana culture and weaves them together, employing the connections between *La Malinche* and *La Llorona*, so we cannot have a singular univocal story of this history of femicide but instead have to have a story of multiplicity that has no conclusion.

In conversation with multiple fields and discourses, Gaspar de Alba engages history, theory, and cultural icons in a fiction that relies on making visible the “web of complicities” within the context of the Juárez femicides. She uses narrative “story” to “un-story” an unspoken and unspeakable history and dig beneath the (narrative) surface to find out what the story cannot contain. As a critic, I also find myself needing to dig carefully in web-like bits to critically unbury what the story cannot contain. Similar to the dug up bodies that are full of clues but are not decisive evidence that will solve the crimes, the critical account of the narrative cannot and should not tell a whole story about that narrative. It should grapple with the tropes
that we have available to us and with the very process of knowing that the narrative engages.

To really grapple with the knowing is, and should be, painful. Anzaldúa says it like this: “Knowing is painful because after ’it’ happens, I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (25). I use the following experimental meditation section to perform this process of knowing and deauthorizing the text so that I keep the focus on the knowing rather than what we think we Know.

This is her home
this thin edge of
barbed wire
-Gloria Anzaldúa

how comfortable do
you feel meeting Anzaldúa
(and Gaspar de Alba)
on that “thin edge of
barbed wire?

Just across the U.S.-Mexico border, globalization effects Ciudad Juárez at “break neck speed”

Maquiladoras in El Paso’s twin city employ Mexican women in jobs whose conditions are alarmingly disturbing. These women come to Juárez specifically to enter into the formal economy
of the maquiladoras system. Referred to as las
muchachas del sur (women of the south), these
women face a lack of infrastructure to support the
rapid population growth in Juárez. Shanty towns (colonias)
have cropped up around Juárez that lack running water, electricity,
indoor plumbing, and a protective (read: non-corrupt) legal system.
Women travel daily from the outskirts of the city to their downtown job locations
at American companies such as Avery and Panasonic known as the

"Maquilas."

Within these borderlands, the number of rapes and murders in Juárez
since 1993 reflects the women’s economic and gendered vulnerability. The sexual
and physical violence against women in Juárez, Mexico, is an often neglected human
rights violation by both Mexico and the United States.

this is her home
it is quite easy to walk away from something that does not affect you directly or to not even know. Television and newspapers report (some) atrocities but does anyone feel what those words really mean?

Complicity.

How do you reach across and understand the pain of a family that just found out their daughter was naked, raped, mutilated, and dead in the desert. Desert as in deserted in spaces that are not attended to or taken responsibility for by the nation-states on either side of the this space. Desert Blood works to do this by placing personal responsibility on the reader to get and stay informed: “Knowing is painful because after ‘it’ happens, I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (Anzaldúa 25).

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, “defining women as archetypical victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves,’ men into ‘subjects-who-perpetuate-violence,’ and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people” (24). While the border is imaginary, this distancing “define[s] the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them” (Anzaldúa 3). Creating rationales at all costs. U.S. Corporations in Mexico need the cheapest labor they can find—young poor women. Judith Williamson proposes that, “economically, we need the Other, even as we politically seek to eliminate it” (314).
The ABCs of capitalism.

each person-reader stands alone as an (Individual), yet there must be a way to forge connections between people/readers. Somewhere along the line, you have to recognize that you have the power to act and not react (Anzaldúa) — so, you tell the story to anyone who will listen and try to effect change with the information that you have.

of barbed wire

Not just any information either, you have to say it in the right way (because Americans are so inundated with gory representations of violence and violation). It sounds wrong, but catchy/shocking.radical/emotional information that clutches the heart-strings of thousands is the best kind of packaging. everything, including information, is politics.

Women are silenced literally and figuratively in the maquiladora system. In Ciudad Juárez where thousands come to work in U.S. owned factories, death is silence, but not permanent. Women still speak through those that protest their deaths. Each death adds another group of voices to the struggle, but in the maquila, women have no voice, their opinions are not heard, and they have no right to organize.

“Silence is the language of the abyss: the cries for help we never heard/the screams of their voices” (Solis 47). Their silence reflects their unjust situation(s), as they are structurally and systematically unable to confront the oppressor. Regardless, silence is
not an invitation to generalize their struggle into one of the “typical” third world
women joined by race and gender, instead of a socio-historical and political history
(Mohanty 32).

Feminism without borders is not the same as “border-less” feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts differences, fear, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, disabilities, are real—and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division. I want to speak of feminisms without silence or exclusions… (Mohanty 2).
it’s not really about the Other, it is about us and the different ways that we define ourselves within the world (not the first or third). Gaspar de Alba is a storyteller, a disseminator of information, acting, possibly as a mirror for people/readers to see what they did not know. What does THIRD do? What does FIRST do? These labels reminds us, the greater Us, the western us, the non-western us (there we go again with more labels to separate) that there is somewhere that these two WORLDS meet—that place where the differences and similarities are simultaneously obvious. Of course there are similarities that we share, but there are so many differences from africa to latin america that to create ONE THIRD WORLD would be to silence the women that are struggling to create a voice that can be heard within both WORLDS discourses.

Circulating through the media and by word of mouth—as onlookers—try to determine if the murder victims were prostitutes, dutiful daughters, dedicated mothers, women leaders “double lives,” or responsible workers—is the question: “Was she a good girl?” ...is she really worth our concern? (Wright 4) “It looks like she is still screaming” (Gaspar de Alba 246).

this is her home

Hundreds of pink painted telephone poles with black painted crosses scattered throughout Ciudad Juárez. Each one standing in for a murdered or missing daughter, sister, mother, aunt, best friend, student, maquila worker. Painted by grieving families. 14 years of border femicides.

Not my family, not your family.

this edge

Women’s voices intend to construct feminist solidarities by crossing the geographical, racial, sexual, and class “borders.” Solidarity does not propose a
homogenous undifferentiated group of women because “sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis” (Mohanty 24).

Rosario Morales proposes

that the “basis of [feminist] unity is that in the most important way [they] are all in the same boat, all subjected to the violent pernicious ideas we have learned to hate that we must all struggle against them and exchange ways and means” (Moraga 93). In coming together, there is a space to create a “unified” voice in order to present an imagined community (Anderson 56) and, by derivation, an imagined history (Mohanty 62).

Abandoned by the US and Mexico, mutilated brown women’s bodies scattered in this third ambiguous space, figuratively and literally grate between WORLDS. To write about and organize around this space, is to do “borderwork.” Engaging in “borderwork” necessarily means complicities will be exposed and consciousness will be raised. Borders are crossed, opened, written through, and limitless possibilities open up in ways that are uncontrollable.

Enacting feminism which is aware of, and, simultaneously makes borders untenable, as Mohanty theorizes and Gaspar de Alba’s narrative performs, is not easy.

“we lose something in this mode of initiation, something taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways,
I will tell you something about stories…
they aren’t just for entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
---Leslie Marmon Silko

To do her experimental work, Gaspar de Alba writes a detective novel, one of the most formulaic genres of fiction. Just as desert sands have buried the bodies, and as politics and the police have buried knowledge about those murdered bodies, Gaspar de Alba selects a genre that would seem to suture over subtexts in favor of a clear narrative structure. This narrative structure sets up the clues and tells a story about how those clues lead to a resolved conclusion. And yet in using this formulaic genre Gaspar de Alba actually provides familiar ground that allows for fissures. And these fissures will inevitably rise to the surface.

Gaspar de Alba knows she has to do violence to the hegemonic discourse in order to tell a (full) story that accounts for the layers of history and historical complicities. Just as one breaks ground, creating new openings—fissures—from which something new can emerge, she uses the hegemonic discourse, breaks it up with invocations of Chicana feminist scholarship, and uses the discourse against
itself. She gives the reader a narrative that seems familiar, offering all the cues (and clues) that one expects in a detective novel and conscious all along of how easy it would be to read the book conventionally. And yet because “truth” and fiction are impossibly intertwined in the case of the ongoing femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Gaspar de Alba delivers an “anti-detective novel.” As Ivon realizes that “this wasn’t a case of ‘whodunit,’” readers become soberly aware that this narrative cannot end with the solution. Gaspar de Alba’s anti-detective novel does not reaffirm “a hidden order satisfying both the reason and the morality.” Rather, her work contributes to “a core of doubt,” revealing the web of complicities that continues to kill women at the border (Tani 45).

*Desert Blood* begins in ambiguity with a scene of a woman, presumably about to be murdered, that never gets resolved. As the narrative unfolds, clues are provided that lead the reader to think she knows whom this woman in the opening scene is; but other clues emerge that subvert the reader’s comfortable assumption. The epilogue works as the prologue’s mirror opposite, as it ties up loose ends and neatly resolves the story of Ivon’s sister, Irene. Yet the unsettled opening and case-closed ending is no narrative failure on Gaspar de Alba’s part. Both are done to trouble the accepted narrative structure and plot development, weaving together real world details and fantasy, ultimately frustrating the reader who is looking for answers as to what is real and what is imagined. Moreover, the formulaic ending makes the reader aware that the fictional narrative is just that, fiction. Irene, who has just been rescued from her kidnapping, jokes around with Ivon and Ximena as she opens “welcome home” gifts.
Ximena teases Irene, “it looks like you have enough stuff to open a thrift shop” (337). This concluding scene is strategically fashioned to be unsatisfactory as it mocks the normative detective story. It seems impossible that only a few days earlier she was fighting to survive her kidnapping.

Gaspar de Alba’s tidy conclusion to a truly messy history leaves readers to dwell on the cues throughout the book that invoke the “real” history that persists as the story ends. The ending “detects” the perpetrator but does not eradicate the underlying agendas that Ivon’s web of complicities reveals, such as patriarchal control of women’s bodies, white domination of race and class, heterosexism, and American consumption as the major benefactor of Maquiladora labor. The opening scene and the epilogue work as a narrative frame in tension with each other; instead of restoring order—beginning in ambiguity and ending in faux-resolution—they make that ambiguity all the more salient.

This narrative frame works to highlight the conclusion, which gives Gloria Anzaldúa the last word. As Ivon thinks about the murders and her sister still in the hospital she looks at “the horizon of sky and desert, river and mountains that spelled the ambivalence she called home … it was a spot where the open wound of the border was most visible. That place where, as Anzaldúa described it, ‘the Third World grates against the First and bleeds’” (333, 334). Just as Anzaldúa’s prolific text provided space for Chicana feminism to foster the next step in Chicana feminist consciousness, a step that insists on hybrid identities, Gaspar de Alba’s Ivon is the embodiment of such a step and she powerfully moves beyond it.
Building on the disruptive work of refiguring the iconic female figures of Chicana culture, Ivon re-visions her world as one that includes everything and is contained by nothing. And she does so in interesting and problematic ways because as she simultaneously occupies a hybrid identity—which refuses all binaries—she also tests the theory, the nature, and the authenticity of such hybridity. Ivon’s sense of herself as a hybrid subject never falters, and we see her "subjectivity" as fluid throughout her search for her sister Irene. Ivon understands the ways in which hegemonic silencing works. She is indefinable by geopolitical borders, just as identity categories cannot contain her. She is a character who lives in an ambiguous third space in order to survive, and yet her insistence on this third space reveals its troubling (even fleeting) status.

On one of her first border crossings to Juárez, we see evidence of Ivon’s third space identity in her forgetfulness about her appearance, manner, and behavior. How she walks and talks is consistent, regardless of her locale. Ivon behaves as if she is “at home” as herself, in a kind of “third space,” revealing her embodiment of the next step in Chicana consciousness. Only when the outside world intervenes on her space, does Ivon think about how she appears and is behaving. For example, after a local man stares her up and down and Ivon becomes furious, she pauses and considers her appearance:

Asshole macho piece of shit, she thought, don’t you fucking leer at me. She glanced down at her clothes and realized he was staring at the man’s shirt she was wearing, shirttails hanging low over her linen pants. No wonder he was looking at her like that. He probably thought she was una des las otras. Mexican men weren’t used to seeing women in men’s shirts not unless they were cholas or lesbians. (186)
Ivon recognizes that her particular performance of gender—her forgetfulness to dress differently in Juárez—leads to the man’s provocation to restore gender norms in a patriarchal system. With her intraethnic intimacy, Ivon acknowledges the status quo and accepts the man’s behavior as a “normal” response. But her forgetfulness in Juárez—a place that seems impossible for a lesbian Chicana to be unaware of her appearance—is how Gaspar de Alba conveys Ivon’s third space. Her forgetfulness is purposeful, if not intended. She is able to forget in Juárez because she operates in a space and from a place that does not subscribe to racism and heterosexism as routine and dangerous systems of power. Ivon recognizes the man’s reaction from a distance, from a third ambiguous space which is a safety zone outside the grasp of the patriarchal order for women.

Ivon’s forgetfulness in Juárez is also shown through comments made by characters that are not hostile. For example, when Ivon and her cousin William are in the Kentucky Club looking for Irene, the bartender mistakes Ivon as a tourist and advises Ivon and William not to go to the other bars they are asking directions to:

“Pues, miren, with all respect, it is not a good idea for you…tourists like you…to be going to those places on the map…just stay here, okay. Kentucky Club is safe for tourists, close to the bridge. You can go home easy, no problem, no problems with the police here” (189). This time, Ivon does not react as if she is offended. She needs the information from him so she demonstrates that she is not a tourist by speaking to him in Spanish. While this is a convincing move, he then worries for another reason:

“‘But now I worry more for you.’ He stared at her outfit, ‘Your clothes,’ he said”
Again we see Ivon in the midst of her third space and being interrupted from that space and confronted with borders of patriarchy and the heteronormative.

Ivon’s response is one of great surprise and a continued disbelief that her appearance is problematic in Juárez: “Ivon looked down at her khaki shorts, Sparks jersey, and running shoes, and realized she wasn’t dressed for walking the Mariscal” (189). Ivon’s surprise at the bartender’s words reveals that she does not “exist” within patriarchy. The fact that Ivon is not aware and only becomes aware when she is reminded, and reacted to in Juárez, shows that she is not afraid of the “dangers” that threaten the “conditioned” woman in heteronormative patriarchal worlds. She has a hard time wrapping her mind around the rules of the worlds from which she works hard to escape. “She wasn’t thinking. Just couldn’t concentrate on mundane things like clothes right now.” And yet, it is not that she does not understand the reality of those worlds. Ivon condemns herself for her forgetfulness, thinking “[r]eally stupid idea to wear shorts” (189).

Ivon’s gender performance moves Gaspar de Alba into new terrain of Chicana feminist studies. She embodies a twenty-first century Malinche that has been reinscribed with decades of Chicana frameworks: Ivon is a Chicana lesbian, a girl “our mothers warned us about” (to borrow a phrase from Carla Trujillo); she is a scholar, a feminist, is married to a white woman, and is in the midst of adopting a child. This is a character that takes the next step, radically challenging normative codes and revealing the web (of complicities and conventions) that work to entangle her, bury her, and make her sexual and gendered identity invisible. Ivon (and Gaspar
de Alba) is well aware of the historical struggle that Chicana lesbian feminists have endured and she is also informed by their discursive legacies, especially the identity work that Anzaldúa and Moraga, among others, provided in the This Bridge Called My Back era of the '70s, '80s and '90s. Specifically in the development of Ivon as a character in "another world" who merges her multiple identities and their meanings, Gaspar de Alba draws on Carmen Tafolla’s 1978 poem “Yo Soy Malinche:"

I saw our world, I saw my world, and I saw another!...And history
would call me chingada.

But Chingada I was not.
Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor.
For I was not a traitor to myself—I saw a dream and I reached it.
Another world. (15)

Ivon chooses another world. Yet at no point in Gaspar de Alba’s novel is Ivon’s world fixed and safe from the borders she traverses. She constantly negotiates and renegotiates cultures on both sides of the border that actively exclude or render her as sexually deviant. For example, when Ivon is in Juárez waiting for Raquel, her ex lover and the person she hopes will have information to help find her sister, Ivon
realizes that she is being watched by everyone around her. She thinks to herself that it is either her performance of her sexuality or her ethnic difference:

Either one [chola or lesbian] was bad news in Juárez. As far as Mexicans were concerned, they meant the same thing: traitors. As Americanized Mexicans spoiled by First World liberties and behaviors, Cholas betrayed their own culture, Lesbians, although every macho’s wet dream—to voyeurize or to conquer—of course, betrayed not just their culture, but their gender, their families, and their religion. (134)

Gaspar de Alba is speaking directly to the struggle that Anzaldúa and Moraga articulate regarding Chicana lesbians as outsiders within their own culture. And while Ivon clearly is aware of this history and these very real tensions, she does not want to be pulled back into a world that is still negotiating such tensions. So she renegotiates and also evades these struggles throughout the text, as she constantly works to remain in a third space that transcends such struggles. And if Ivon is a betrayer (or traitor), her betrayal is one of a different “nature.” It is not against la raza or any nation, but against heteronormative expectations of Chicana gender and sexuality.

Gaspar de Alba draws on Tafolla’s (re)vision of a New World reached as she develops Ivon’s negotiation of the worlds on both sides of the border and the world that she has carved out for herself. As the next step in La Malinche re-embodiment, Ivon makes strategic decisions on how to use / perform her sexuality in order to ensure her survival in critical moments throughout the narrative. Ivon must confront what it means to adopt a child across a border in the context of the Juárez murders. Ivon’s journey to discover the “truth” of the missing women, and then her own sister, is also a test of her world—that “third space” that transcends border politics. For instance, Ivon’s world is tested when Father Frank, the priest accompanying Ivon and
her cousin Ximena to visit the woman whose baby Ivon plans to adopt. Father Frank tells Ivon not to “say anything” to Cecilia:

> Whatever you do, do not tell them you’re a…you’re a…you’re not…”

‘Cat got your tongue, Frank? He means don’t go saying you’re a dyke, or they’ll never agree to let you adopt the baby, Ximena clarified ‘They’ll think you’re a pervert or something. (38)

In this moment, Ivon is yanked out of her third space and confronted with the reality of the worlds that she is trying to remain separated from. But she cannot. Ivon’s reaction to this testing reveals her third space: “They give a shit about that? They’re living in Hell’s Kitchen, here, and they give a shit what I do in my personal life?”

Ivon is genuinely shocked by the idea that these poor women could care about her sexuality. And Father Frank’s response confirms that Ivon lives in a non heterosexist world: “It’s not a matter of privacy…it’s a matter of religion. These people are very religious, very traditional. Poverty only strengthens family values, it doesn’t take them away” (36). Ivon wants the baby and is willing to accept Father Frank’s answer, but she has to work to do so: “Ivon bit her tongue and stared out the window” (36).

By testing Ivon, Gaspar de Alba gives the reader a tool kit to understand the larger social and political frameworks that produce and sustain the femicides. Even before her sister Irene is kidnapped, we see Ivon identifying herself as an academic as she “berates herself for thinking like a tourist.” For example, when she wants to take pictures of the black and pink painted telephone poles she sees all over Juárez marking bodies of each murdered woman, and she thinks to herself, “not a tourist […] said the ABD voice inside of her, it’s called research.” Despite the discomfort of her positionality, “she still wasn’t comfortable in the skin of an academic,” Ivon is
presented as a reliable character with the background to find out necessary information (35). When Irene disappears, Ivon wants and needs to understand how these worlds operate in order to save her sister. Gaspar de Alba tells us, “Ivon had to write down what she knew and research what she didn’t know. This would keep her focused, would keep her from wallowing in hindsight and guilt” (164). And we see Ivon conduct her research throughout the text. For instance Ivon researches Frontera NorteSur, a real news website that “provides on-line news coverage of the US-Mexico border” (FNS website), “digging through its archives section and catching up on the history of the maquiladora murders...[and searching for] anything that shed some light on why the murders were taking place at this particular moment in time” (118). Gaspar de Alba also gives the reader a sense of Ivon’s academic background which helps position her as a character who has the skills to expose what is “really going on” and do the work of material history in a fictional context.

Trained in cultural studies, Ivon always looked for the historical and cultural context of whatever she was researching. She got a nutshell history of the border in the process: the PAN sweep in the state of Chihuahua after decades of PRI monopoly all over Mexico, the dispute between the new PAN administration and the son of a maquiladora mogul over the expropriation of some prime property near the airport, the battles against nuclear dumping in Sierra Blanca, the new post-NAFTA senate bill to increase federal funding for Border Patrol for the implementation of Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper, the death of the top drug lord or Juárez cartel and the narco war it started at the changing of the cartel guard, protests on both sides of the Santa Fe Bridge sparked by the violent beating of undocumented immigrants in Riverside, California, the General Motors strike in Ohio that laid off thousands of maquiladora workers in Juárez, the hantavirus outbreak along the New Mexico border, the testing of new air defense missiles in White Sands, the unusually high incidences of domestic abuse against women in Juárez, and interspersed through all of it, story after story about yet another murdered, mutilated, raped muchacha del sur. That, apparently, was part of the profile of the victims; not only did they tend to be thin, dark-haired, dark-
skinned young women between the ages of 12 and 25, they were also all poor and many of them had migrated from the south to work at a maquiladora. (118-119)

Here we are given the historical context for the murders. This passage, and others similar, appear throughout the narrative and work in a somewhat contradictory way; they reveal the impossibility of telling a “true” or whole story about a reality that is so complicated. But for Gaspar de Alba, that is exactly the point. Indeed, Ivon’s research does make her a credible source for giving us “real” information about the context of the femicides. Through this passage, Gaspar de Alba offers the reader “real” information as well. However, Gaspar de Alba does this in such a way that the reader will have to do her own research to find out what the acronyms such as the Mexican political parties PAN (National Action Party/Partido Acción Nacional) and PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party/Partido Revolucionario Institucional) stand for, making Ivon’s information into a launching pad of sorts for the reader to educate her/himself. This makes Ivon both an informer and one who holds back on the reader, forcing the reader to question Ivon’s research, her reasoning, and the broader context of these murders. This simultaneous reassurance and questioning of Ivon, as the narrative’s protagonist, allows the reader to be an active consumer of information and provides the her/him with an opportunity to become an activist for the women of Juárez.

Ivon uses her research skills and the motivation to find her sister to confront worlds on both sides of the border as she works to maintain her third space for her own survival. And yet Ivon is not a completely innocent character. Ivon’s first
encounter with the “man from Dallas” on the plane exemplifies her understanding of her third space and also the complications that being a new Malinche and occupying such a space can entail. When he asks Ivon if she is from El Paso, her reply, “Not anymore,” suggests more than relocation. The idea that her response is loaded becomes more evident when he persists and asks if she is going home for a visit. Ivon “glared at him” and curtly replies, “I guess you could say that” (4). El Paso is no longer home for Ivon because she is no longer within “the patriarchal and militaristic realities of both Aztec and Spanish societies” (Pratt 145). But having transcended patriarchy on both sides of these “worlds” has led Ivon to another betrayal; one that she will need to make right as the narrative unfolds. It is not coincidental that it is this man who points out her negligence. As Ivon reads the magazine article on the murders of Mexicana maquila workers at the border, the man with the hat from the “Lone Star Hat Company” comments, “Sure is a damn shame they still haven’t caught the killers after all these years.” She does not respond to him this time, but loudly thinks to herself, “Yeah, and I’m ashamed I’m just now finding out about it, by reading this article, she wanted to say, but it would have been too embarrassing to admit that kind of ignorance to a complete stranger” (5). Having to admit she knew nothing about the murders prior to the article to a man who is already aware, suggests that Ivon has been complicit in the murders by not being conscious of these women and their plight in her world removed from patriarchy. It is Ivon’s desire to find her sister and she needs to learn about the femicides and the broader political and cultural context to do so.
Ivon's very insistence in and of "another world" requires continual negotiation and renegotiation of cultures that actively exclude her or render her as sexually deviant. Gaspar de Alba’s development of Ivon, as the new *La Maliniche*, puts Chicana sexuality at the center of negotiations around gender roles, expectations, and identity. Her negotiations of this third space manifest in Ivon’s behavior in a variety of ways: sometimes in her forgetfulness of how she dresses in one of the most dangerous places for Chicana lesbians in the world, contemporary Ciudad Juárez; sometimes in being surprised when confronted directly about her sexuality; and sometimes when she uses her sexuality strategically as a tool for uncovering the murders and finding her sister before she becomes a victim of the femicides.

When Ivon is outside the workplace of her ex-lover, Raquel, for example, she notices that a parking attendant and a taxi driver are laughing (presumably at her). As she is unable to get inside the building, she decides to "put on a show" for them, using her sexuality to get their attention.

[She] stood outside the truck with one leg up on the baseboard, smoking with one hand, holding a water bottle with another. The whole time she stared at the taxi. The heat bored like thorns through the flannel shirt. She could feel her arms and face, her scalp and toes roasting. She put the bottle to her lips and sucked at the water, then took a hit off her cigarette and let it flow out of her nostrils. It was making her dizzy, the cigarette and the heat, but she would not give up the pose. (134)

As a strategic tool (a weapon, even), Ivon’s performance of her sexuality serves a purpose unknown to the heteronormative gaze of these men. She knows Raquel has information about her sister and that Raquel is not going to open the door. When she realizes that the men could be interested in her, she performs her sexuality to get what
she needs. A few minutes later, the parking attendant tells her that Raquel is in fact inside, despite the vacant appearance of the building:

‘Alli llego alguien,’ he said, pointing towards the Instituto.
She threw down her cigarette and tossed the water bottle into the front seat of the truck, locked the door again, and hurried up the steps to the entrance. Nothing had changed, the cerrado sign was still on the door, but then she saw the lights turning on from the inside. (135)

In this exchange, Ivon shows active negotiation and renegotiation of her third space identity as she performs the readable mannerisms of her heterosexist audience. The move is bold and strategic as she uses the patriarchal order against itself. She knows how she is perceived by the men, but she also knows that these men may be able to help her get to Raquel.

In another critical moment, Ivon uses her sexuality and knowledge strategically to get what she needs when she and her cousin William are in the police car in Juárez. They have been picked up by the judiciales (Juárez police). After telling William “don’t say anything” and that she “know[s] what they want,” Ivon is prepared to do what she needs to do to get them out of the dangerous situation (212). As she realizes that they are heading towards the colonias, Ivon thinks, “Short of a blow job, she knew she was going to have to use her mouth to get her out of this one.” And then she begins to use her mouth:

‘My uncle and I made a report at PREVIAS yesterday. They have all the information, there. [...] The lawyer who took our statement, I think his name was Licenciado Marquez Ruiz. You probably know him, right? I can’t believe how many families were there to report a missing girl. What’s going on in Juárez, anyway? Why are so many young women disappearing and getting killed? Who is killing them, do you know?’
‘You need to shut your face,’ said the driver.
But she was on a roll now. 'We’ve been showing my sister’s pictures to everybody. We’ve left flyers up and down Juárez Avenue, in the plaza, in the church, and all over Mariscal. Everyone knows we’re looking for my sister.’ […] You know who she is, right? Rubi Reyna? She does that show on Channel 33, *Mujers sin Fronteras*. I don’t know if it interests you, but Rubi’s family and my family *se concen desde hace anos*, they go way back.’ (216-217)

In this performance, Ivon reveals herself as an informed insider *and* outsider, by verbally navigating through different systems of information; she cites the local places to which she and William have been; she drops names of local officials; and she describes her connection to the US media, detectives, and mentions the FBI. Ivon knows their world, and another. Her seemingly harmless questions, “What’s going on in Juárez, anyway? Why are so many young women disappearing and getting killed? Who is killing them, do you know?” directly confronts the *judiciales*’ complicity, if not responsibility, in the murders. Shifting into Spanish at the end of her negotiation for her and William’s freedom as she explains that she and the television journalist Rubi Reyna’s family have known each other for many years, Ivon powerfully uses her multiple sites of identity, her hybridity. Like *La Malinche*, a woman of multiple tongues, Ivon uses her bilingualism to successfully navigate this potentially grave situation that could have ended Ivon and William’s lives as well as Ivon’s quest to save Irene’s life.

Ivon has developed what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness.” With a complete refusal of binary gender categories and ideologies, Ivon “demands a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending
upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted" (Sandoval 14). As we see in this scene with the **judiciales** in Juárez, Ivon uses all of her information extracted from both sides of the border and strategizes her and William’s escape from the danger. Instead of being yanked out of her comfort zone or her third space, Ivon understands that she is in a situation where she can use her hybridity strategically. Ivon’s hybridity is a space that she cannot help but occupy, but also one that she has produced and can manipulate to get what she needs.

Gaspar de Alba also uses Ivon’s insistence on the next step in Chicana consciousness to reveal the problematic and historical division between the Mexican and the Chicana/o communities. As Ivon negotiates both sides of the border, we see a glimpse of the politics that keep these words separated, even divisive. Both communities share a history with the border that has become as much a figurative division as it is a physical boundary line. The border, as Anzaldúa says in Borderlands, “is set up to define safe from unsafe, to distinguish us from them…[it] is where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds…the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (25).

With different vantage points, Mexican and Chicana/o communities subscribe to the differences the border constructs. Gaspar de Alba illustrates how “constructions of difference,” to borrow Judith Williamson’s phrase, between *Mexicanas* and Chicanas recolonize as both identities are reified by and in-between these borders, with no consciousness of the hegemonic systems that produce their boundaries (Williamson 34). The material investment in such differences perpetuates the web of
complicities that Gaspar de Alba seeks to unveil throughout the narrative. We can see Gaspar de Alba exposing this system of reification through the character of Ivon’s sister. Irene also experiences these ethnic tensions but does not yet understand them as Ivon does. For example, while Irene is at the Juárez fair she recalls a saying her mother has used repeatedly:

People are completely different over there, even if it’s just across that dirty puddle of a river.” [Irene] felt like everyone was staring at her thinking she was a *vendida* or something because she was from the other side. She looked like them, same color of skin, same Mexican features, and, yet, she didn’t belong. She was an American. To a lot of people that meant sell-out. (104)

Irene doesn’t understand why she is considered a “sell-out.” She doesn’t understand how these differences can be so irrational and yet seem so natural. In *La Llorona on the Longfellow Bridge*, Gaspar de Alba names this confusion, “cultural schizophrenia” (40). She argues that Chicana’s heritage, literally, “straddles two cultures and tries to feed off two traditions” (41). The film *Selena* (1997) portrays this difficulty and material reality of “straddling” and provides a poignant illustration of “cultural schizophrenia.” For example, en route to Selena’s press interview in Mexico, Albert, Selena’s father says: “We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time! It's exhausting!” (Neves 1997). Selena has only recently learned Spanish to be able to sing her songs for a Spanish-speaking audience. Her father is well aware of the politics and history involved in Selena’s “crossing the border” as a performer, both the character in the film and Selena the musician. In fact, Selena’s inability to speak fluent Spanish was largely played out within popular culture as a Mexican audience
watched Selena interview on television shows such as The Johnny Canales Show and the Cristina Show, where her fluency in Spanish was "quite bad, and at best, some version of Tex-Mex Spanglish" (Vargas 318). As Selena's father's line reveals, language is an important marker that defines, divides, and works to create "cultural schizophrenia."

Gaspar de Alba shows this process that results in "cultural schizophrenia" as she weaves together histories of colonization with contemporary race and ethnic relations in the Chicana/o and Mexican/a communities. In particular, she works to show how language has been used as a colonizing tool that continues to recolonize even between Mexicanas and Chicana/os. As Anzaldúa puts it:

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other. (80)

When Irene meets up with Myrna, Raquel's niece, Myrna agrees to hang out with Irene at the fair but requires that Irene does not speak: "Just don't say anything. You sound like a pocha. I don't want anyone to think I am a pocha, too." But the girls at the fair are not the only ones who call Irene pocha. Irene's mother has called her this before.

Pocha. Irene hated that word. Even Ma called her that at times. Was it her fault she spoke Spanish with an accent? Could she help it if she was born in El Paso, if the nuns forced her to speak only English at school? Even the mexicanas at her school had to speak English. (Gaspar de Alba 103)

Gaspar de Alba is commenting here on several things. By having Irene's mother call her a pocha, Gaspar de Alba shows how this racial prejudice derives not only within
her own community but within her own family. This cultural difference and discrimination is not only projected on to Irene from the outside but is maintained by her mother. Irene attends an elite catholic school where the nuns police the student’s language. Gaspar de Alba is working to ground Irene’s experience specifically, and the novel more generally, in the history of US conquest and processes of assimilation. Her mention of Irene’s school invokes the history of the “Progressive Area” in the Southwest in which Americanization programs allowed only English to be spoken at schools (Ruiz 312). Irene’s experience, couched within this history, exemplifies what Anzaldúa calls “linguistic terrorism” (80). Anzaldúa helps contextualize Irene’s experience at the fair by recalling her own experiences as a schoolgirl in the Southwest:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess----that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for ‘talking back’ to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. ‘If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.’ (75)

While the story of Irene’s kidnapping and Ivon’s search for her could have been told without mention of these intraethnic struggles between communities, Gaspar de Alba chooses to reveal the way this “cultural straddling” functions in order to ground this history of colonization and cultural divisions in relation to the Juárez femicides. As a “bordering text,” we see Gaspar de Alba helping us to understand this relation of history to cultural narrative and cultural boundaries to U.S. imperialism and the histories of colonization and neocolonialism. Exploring how the politics of language and cultural differences (and overlaps) between *mexicanas* and *chicanas*
operate, reveals that the history of the femicides are layered in these cultural complexities and hegemonies. Also, if the presumed material differences between Mexican, Chicana/o, and Tejano/a identities can be maintained by the imagined and politically sanctioned “border” (of water and sand that shifts based on geopolitical changes), then the murders are no one’s (national) responsibility. Rather, the notion of blame—that it’s a US problem because of the consumptive power of the West; or that it’s a Mexican problem because of government negligence and antiquated gender orders—ultimately creates a binary that cancels out responsibility / culpability.

Gaspar de Alba works to show this having Rubi Reyna, the television journalist and host of “Mujers sin Frontieras” articulate the need to look at the “bigger picture” at critical junctures in the text. For example, on the rastro that Mireya’s body is found Rubi specifically confronts the official story’s projected cause of the murders:

‘The whole thing is about economics to me,’ said Rubi. ‘I don’t buy that FBI man’s theory about a serial killer crossing over from El Paso. Juárez has plenty of its own sexual predators and maniacs of its own, beginning with the police. We don’t need help from our good neighbors in the north. (254)

Here Gaspar de Alba is pointing to the multiple theories of conspiracy and commenting on there not being a singular answer. Even Rubi, the local media figure, won’t “buy” the simple answers and points to the web of complicities. Her response may seem simplistic, but actually she is making important connections between the victims, the locations of the murders, and the control of reproduction and production (specifically maquila workers productive abilities). While Ivon isn’t “ready” to give her theories, this statement offers the reader a hook to explore the evidence that
Ivon’s research yields, revealing the web of complicities with which Ivon concludes in her search for Irene.

As Ivon moves *La Malinche* to the next step in Chicana consciousness, Gaspar de Alba also reworks another mediating mother, *La Llorona*. In rethinking *La Llorona* as a way to represent the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Gaspar de Alba presents us with a characterization of the figure, not a character. In doing so, *La Llorona* is not one, but many, capable of multiple identities, and large enough to embody all the murdered women. For example, the unnamed woman about to be murdered with which the novel begins, remains all the more haunting to the readers at the novel’s neat conclusion because we never know who she is or who she was. But we do learn that water is going to be of significance despite the fact that the story takes place, mostly, in the dry Juárez desert lands. Despite its locale, water is everywhere in this story: “The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water” (1).

*La Llorona’s* traditional legend of infanticide and suicide by way of water is also particularly important to Gaspar de Alba’s reconfiguration of the legend. It is not a coincidence that Irene is a swimmer and that Gaspar de Alba draws attention to Irene’s sport early on. The first time we meet Irene, it is through Ivon’s comment, “[it] was her little sister, Irene, showing off her swimmer’s body in a midriff and cutoff shorts” (8). And the big news Irene has to tell Ivon is that she has “made captain of the swim team” (9). Gaspar de Alba reveals the multiple functions of *La Llorona’s* waters with Irene’s playful swim in the Rio Grande on the night of the fair and her kidnapping:
It occurred to Irene that she had never taken a swim in the Rio Grande before ... She yanked off her socks, stuffed them into the sneakers, and plunged into the brown water fully clothed. The men on the levee were laughing, calling her wetback and pocha and illegal. The water felt so cool seeping through the white denim of her jeans. Something slimy touched her toes, but she didn’t pay any attention to it. She breast-stoked and back-stroked back and forth across the river, daring the Border Patrol vans crossing the black bridge to take her in so she could laugh at them and tell them she was an American citizen. At one point she thought she saw Myrna, talking to a guy in a cowboy hat. (110-111)

It occurred to Irene that she had never swum in the Rio Grande, which since 1848 has been forbidden waters, emphasized by the names the men call her from the levee. “Wetback, pocha, and illegal” signify the borders of race, labor, and cultural identity and how they spatiotemporally intersect with geopolitics. By using all three of these terms together, Gaspar de Alba is calling attention to how language works and the history of these terms as part of the process of colonization and recolonization. Each of the derogatory labels reflects different times and legacies of labor relationships between the US and Mexico. “Wetback,” for example, is now commonly understood as a derogatory label for Mexicans who cross the Rio Grande illegally to find work; but the term also has a historical connection to the US’s 1954 “Operation Wetback” in which the US’s Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) aimed to remove over 1 million illegal aliens in the US Southwest. Gaspar de Alba has Irene’s mother uses the term “pocha” with intention. “Pocha/o” is a pejorative term first coined by the Mexican nationals to define second generation Mexicans whose parents had crossed the US-Mexico border following the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (Allatson 192). It refers to a Chicana/o who is “Americanized” and speaks Spanish with an American accent and is considered a cultural traitor, one
who speaks the colonizer’s language, and continues to be used widely in popular discourse.

As these illegal waters feel so “cool seeping through the white denim of her jeans,” Irene’s lackadaisical swim reveals her multiple sites of deviation from the status quo. Gaspar de Alba uses color symbolism to denote Irene’s lack of awareness of the imminent danger she is now faced with. The emphasis on the color of Irene’s jeans also invokes *La Llorona* as many variants of the popular legend describe the figure as a “beautiful woman in white.” Irene mistakenly believes her only threat is the border patrol, which she trusts her American nationality will protect her from; Irene was “daring the Border Patrol vans crossing the black bridge to take her in so she could laugh at them and tell them she was an American citizen” (111). She fails to realize that her gender transcends all borders and shatters all citizenships. As a young woman, she is not free on any side of patriarchy. At the moment of her kidnapping, Irene is only slightly conscious of this reality as “something slimy touched her toes” to which she pays no attention. Her deviation from patriarchy, her bending of the rules and carefree breaststroke in forbidden water, vanishes her from readers with the hint of her last memory: a man in a cowboy hat talking to Myrna, her *Mexicana* acquaintance who had accompanied her at the fair.

An exchange between Ivon and Raquel after Irene’s kidnapping reveals Irene’s transgression of multiple boundaries and the consequence of her main deviation from patriarchal norms. Ivon interrogates Raquel for more details about the whereabouts of Raquel’s niece, Myrna, when Irene was taken and Raquel responds,
"She was just standing around like everyone else, watching your sister play wetback. That’s how Myrna put it … she said \textit{la pochita} was playing wetback." When Ivon suggests that “maybe she got picked up by the Border Patrol,” Raquel snaps, “No \textit{mojado} would be swimming like that, back and forth, like it was a swimming pool. You think \textit{la migra} doesn’t know the difference?” (137). As an apparatus of the patriarchal, capitalist state, the Border Patrol (\textit{la migra}) knows the “difference” in terms of bodies of labor and bodies of leisure. However, Irene’s female body, it turns out, most powerfully commits an illegal act in the water. Once in captivity, beaten, sexually assaulted and drugged, Irene returns to the water in a dream that moves the reader back and forth in-between different types of water(s), conveying the hybridity that water represents. For example, chapter 28 begins with a dream sequence that does not (immediately) identify the dreamer but provides important historical references regarding ethnic and racial divisions in Chicana/o and Mexican culture:

When she sleeps, she dreams of water. Sometimes she is in the pool at school, alone, doing her workout, wondering where her teammates are … She is swimming diagonally in the pool and does not want to speed up. She loves the cool blue water, the slow even strokes of her arms, the firm kick of her legs, and the steady rhythm of her face coming out of the water every third stroke to suck on air.

Other times the water is black and slimy, and she knows she’s swimming in the river again. Only this time, there are hands down there growing up from the bottom, reaching for her, trying to pull her down. She is naked and the hands probe between her legs, pull her pubic hair, bruise her thighs. No matter how fast she swims, she cannot get away from those hands.

And then she is on dry land again, hunkering under the shadow of a black bridge. A train pumps across the trestles—she can see it clearly, the Southern Pacific, huffing and puffing and blowing its loud sad whistle. Then she hears something snapping … She sees the trestle breaking and she knows the train is going to crash down on top of her. Her only escape is the river, the
black water where the hands are waiting for her. She closes her eyes, her heart pumping like when she’s on the last leg of the 200 meters, and when she opens them again, she is back in the pool at school and the coach is blowing her whistle, telling her to stay in her lane and speed it up. (195)

These passages are presented in uninterrupted form. They work to flow, as the water Irene is dreaming about and do so as not to disrupt the effect. And yet these are the waters _La Llorna_ mediates, making specific historical references that ground this dream in material reality.

In the beginning, Irene is in _safe_ waters, but still bending the rules, diagonally swimming across the pool’s horizontally designated lanes. She is in love with her body, her autonomy. She feels her arms and legs moving at a steady pace and the even rhythm of her breathing. But the peaceful dream of “cool blue water” turns, and Irene is back in “the river again.” The slight “something slimy” that previously touched her has grown into hands that pull her down. No longer in white denim, or unaware of her gender(ed) deviation—her defiance of the patriarchal norms of both nation-states—she is naked and vulnerable to violations on the only part of her body that matters in these waters.

And then the dream-nightmare shifts again, and Irene is on land, beneath the black bridge, hearing the approach of the train. Since the late nineteenth century, the Southern Pacific Railroad has connected US and Mexican economies before there was a 1940s US Bracero Program, 1960s Programa Nacional Fronteriza (PRONAF) and better Border Industrialization Program (BIP), or 1990s North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The long history of migration and exploitation roars towards Irene, and Gaspar de Alba personifies the train as the “big bad wolf,”
“huffing and puffing and blowing” to articulate the carnivorous consumption of brown bodies—of human (reproductive) capital—in American industries. The wolf personification also keeps the train predatory, building to Irene’s impending doom as she anticipates that it will crash on top of her. The enormity of the metaphor implies that the entire US economy relies on her naked body that stands in for the countless bodies for which citizenship offers no protection against gendered inequalities and violence.

Ironically, and yet powerfully, Irene’s escape, her very survival, is to jump back into the forbidden water. As the hands that wait for Irene are actually the men who sexually assault her while she is in captivity, in the dream, they are more suggestive of the murdered and disappeared/ing women. Perhaps these are the hands of thousands of Lloronas drowned in the rivers of patriarchy and capital exploitation, now haunting us in the twenty-first century. The point of Irene’s return to the “black water,” however, is that it now means something else. It is not a trap or a threat to her, but a deviation that she can transcend. She shuts her eyes and she swims as if she were “back in the pool at school” with her coach “blowing her whistle, telling her to stay in her lane and speed it up” (195). No one rescues Irene in this nightmare; she reconfigures the waters that led her to captivity and finds her autonomy because of it. Through her kidnapping experience and struggle to survive, Irene now understands the world in which she finds herself and dreams, literally, of swimming out of it.

For Gaspar de Alba, the uncertain origin of La Llorona and her “borderless body” articulate the most frightening effect of the Juárez murders: the anonymity of
the victims in the international media (particularly the US) and the uncertainty of the perpetrators. As José E. Limón argues, the “Weeping Woman” is never treated as her own entity and many scholars prefer “to see her as still another version of Malinche, or in some cases, La Malinche combined with aspects of La Virgen de Guadalupe. La Llorona’s seeming blend of Guadalupe and Malinche sensibilities fits within heteronormative interpretations and the patriarchal virgin / whore binary because she is the “bad” mother who kills her children and then laments the act. Gaspar de Alba pushes Limón’s argument further by developing La Llorona as a blended (imaginary) figure that haunts the reality of the murders.

In the first moments of the text, as the reader witnesses the murder of an unnamed woman, we learn that she is drugged, making her “feel like she was under water,” with “blades slicing into her belly” (1). We do not know who the woman is and yet we are made to hear her thoughts, feel her sensations, and experience her memories before death. As this woman is stabbed again, she recalls a nurse from her factory who reduced her identity, her body, to “a bag of water and bones.” The sequence ends, chillingly, on a children’s nursery rhyme:

They were laughing, but she could hear someone singing, a woman’s voice singing, sana, sana, colita de rana, si no muerte hoy, que se muera mañana. Heal, little frog’s tail, heal; if you don’t die today, may you die tomorrow. It sounded like her own voice. (2)

Drawing on this popular Mexican nursery rhyme, Gaspar de Alba eerily invokes La Llorona in the scene, which is well known in Mexican and southwestern folksong traditions. Whether or not it is the unidentified woman’s voice that readers hear or that of another presence, who “sounded like her own voice,” the reader is troubled by
her (unresolved) murder throughout the novel. As we search for her identity and try to piece the clues Gaspar de Alba provides together, *La Llorona* haunts the reality of the murders. For example, she becomes Cecilia, the young pregnant *maquila* worker whose baby Ivon plans to adopt. When Ivon’s sister goes missing, the reader fears she will become the unnamed woman, particularly after the scene in which the song is sung again by Ariel, one of Irene’s female captors wearing, a “skeleton mask.” For instance, while Irene eats Ariel sings to her, “Sana, sana, colita de rana, si no muere hoy morirá mañana.” We quickly learn the significance of these lyrics as Gaspar de Alba narrates Irene’s thinking: “When [Irene] first realized the woman had changed the words to the song, she cried. Her mom used to sing her that lullaby when she got hurt as a kid: heal little frog tail, heal, if you’re not well today you’ll be well tomorrow. That’s how the song goes” (174).

Later, the nameless woman from the opening passages of the novel becomes Mireya Beltrán, whom readers first meet in a pause between Irene’s kidnapping and Ivon’s search. Mireya meets the man from Dallas at a nightclub. After getting into his car and being punched into submission, readers find her body on a *rastero* (body search) with the Contra el Silencio group. Rubi Reyna’s comment, “it looks like she is still screaming,” confirms the connection with *La Llorona*, the screaming woman that haunts the riverbanks (246). Gaspar de Alba uses *La Llorona* to characterize the murdered women of Juárez because of the very uncertainty of the identity of *La Llorona*. There are so many variants of her legend and identity in Mexican popular culture, cautionary childhood tales, and regional myths that she becomes a powerful
hybridity for Gasper de Alba. In rethinking *La Llorona* as a way to re-present the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, the figure is not one, but many, capable of multiple identities, and big enough to embody all the murdered women.

Returning to the epilogue, we can see yet another way in which Gaspar de Alba strategically uses iconic mother figures to mediate the text. She invokes *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, creating an ending in which Irene, as the survivor, becomes The Virgin. We see Irene joking around with Ivon and Xiemna, playing with her stuffed toys as she “hold[s] up her Curious George like a ventriloquist’s puppet” using a “screechy voice” and says “Don’t be mean to Irene” (336). Besides the fact that she has just “been released from the hospital yesterday,” this behavior seems to counter Irene’s claim early in the novel, “I’m not a kid anymore, Ivon, in case you haven’t noticed” (74). All seems to be resolved and happy in the Villa family home. Ivon’s dissertation chapter had “practically written itself,” Bridget, Ivon’s partner, and Ivon’s mom “bonded big time,” and little Jorgito, Ivon and Bridget’s newly adopted son, comes into Irene’s room yelling “Von” and embraces Ivon” (339). However, Gaspar de Alba writes this very unsatisfying happy ending to Irene and Ivon’s story strategically. In this ending sequence, Gaspar de Alba plays with the virgin/whore binary that binds women (in both) patriarchal worlds. She creates a *Virgen de Guadalupe* connotation in this ending scene around Irene, who at 17 years of age, lies in her bed that was “a zoo of stuffed animals” surrounded by unopened gifts as well as “balloons, jars of jellybeans, [and even] candles of the Virgin of Guadalupe” (336).
She seems to be the ultimate refigured virgin who, similar to *Virgen de Guadalupe* provides hope and assurance to the Villa family as well as the reader. Patricia Harrington argues that the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, historically, functioned as a healing figure: "The Aztecs had an elaborate, coherent symbolic system for making sense of their lives. When this was destroyed by the Spaniards, something new was needed to fill the void and make sense of New Spain [...] the image of Guadalupe served that purpose" (25). Throughout this final scene Irene sweetly plays with her toys, makes party plans, and does not speak of her assault. For instance, when Ivon is "brainstorming on a legal pad about how to integrate Anzaldúa’s theory on border identity with Caputi’s theory on femicide and the fetishization of serial killers in patriarchal culture," and begins to speak about JW, the villain also known as the “Lone Ranger,” Irene, “covering her ears with her hands,” demands in a child-like manner that she stop (337). She says, “Don’t talk about that, you guys,” (337). Gaspar de Alba makes readers uncomfortable, with the sharp swing of Irene back to the other pole—a virgencita. We know that Irene has learned about these two patriarchal worlds from her kidnapping experience. She sees the killers’ chart that shows the women’s exchange rate:

At the top of each column there’s a coin painted—a copper penny, white nickel, and a grey dime—big and exaggerated, the president on each coin smiling wickedly. Under coin there are lines; the penny category has the most lines, but she can’t focus to count them. (174)

Throughout her kidnapping experience Irene is referred to as a “lucky penny” and “worth a nickel,” and she “knows it’s kept her alive, kept them from hurting her
the way that they hurt the others. She hears their screams and knows they’re dying” (171). And yet, she is recuperated as the innocent virgin at the end of the narrative, as if she has learned nothing and has in no way been changed. She is restored and safe; however, given what Irene (and the women of Juárez, more generally) has gone through, this seemingly full recovery of innocence is confusing at best. Ironically, the story ends both with resolution and as if nothing has really happened.

What has really happened throughout Ivon’s search for Irene and Irene’s experience as a missing woman in Juárez is that Gaspar de Alba has woven an intricate web of components (structures of power, policies, and authority figures on both sides of the border) that enable the perpetrators and allow for the murders to continue. The invocation of the Virgin at the end of the novel works to highlight the importance of Ivon’s third space as Irene remains safely in the world that the reader is familiar with and the world in which the femicides continue. Ivon’s conscious negotiations of the different worlds in order to piece together clues to save her sister and Irene’s experiencing of these tensions but not (initially) understanding them, allows Gaspar de Alba the opportunity to reveal the web of complicities that normalize the killing of an “Other.”

One of Gaspar de Alba’s methods for breaking the silence surrounding these murders, is to draw on American symbols, especially symbols from American popular culture to implicate the American reader as to what is really happening in Juárez. She tells the reader up front that she has added “metaphorical dimensions” (v). For example, she uses American coins “to signify the value of the victims in the
corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies on the border economy” (v). The reader learns along with Ivon that some of the women’s bodies “had American pennies inside of them” (233). Even though the reader knows that these pennies are a fictional element of the narrative and the pennies aren’t killing the women but are making them “very sick,” each time the reader comes across pennies she/he makes a connection between American pennies and the women of Juárez. As one of the most tangible clues in the novel, Gaspar de Alba challenges her reader to grapple with the image of American money being integrally connected to the brutal crimes. She develops the expendable penny metaphor. Irene is labeled the “lucky penny,” one that is worth more due to her American features. The question, expendable to whom echoes through the novel as Ivon witnesses grieving mothers filling out missing person reports at local police stations. Connections between this notion of women’s bodies being as worthless as a penny also points to the uneven exchange rate between the peso and the dollar, the devaluing of the Peso with NAFTA in December of 1994 (Fregoso 143) and Ivon’s ongoing discussion of the labor politics in the Maquilas that are especially poignant on body searches such as the one where Mireya’s body is found: “The irony of an assembly worker disassembled in the desert” (255).

Gaspar de Alba also creates her antagonist, and mastermind of the serial kidnappings and rapes as a classic hero in American popular culture, The Lone Ranger. Using this quintessential American hero as the lead perpetrator in her story, Gaspar de Alba interrogates American readers’ complicity and the American popular
culture as a devastating force in a transnational context. The use of this character from an incredibly popular (and iconic) American television series to represent a main actor in the Juárez murders, symbolizes the role that U.S. imperialism had and continues to play in fostering an environment in which these murders can exist unnoticed and unpunished. As a frontier figure, the Lone Ranger is a character that Americans identify with as a “good guy” who works hard to keep people safe and right the wrongs in a world that was (supposedly) once much simpler. Fighting the villains achieving justice for (American) citizens, the Lone Ranger is an entrusted blue-eyed figure in American popular culture. When Mireya, his next victim early in the text asks, “Why do they call you the Lone Ranger?” he responds, “Para mi saber, senorita, para tu encontrar” (151). Mierya “frowns at his words. Sometimes it’s hard to understand his Spanish” (151). While he confuses Mireya by attempting to translate a colloquial American saying into Spanish, the reader knows why he is called the Lone Ranger. His character is symbolic of patriarchal capitalism—greed and exploitation. He leaves his empty “J&B” bottles in the wake of his crimes, his last remnant is, “a bottle of J&B inserted in her [Mireya’s] anus” (244). He is an individual that represents the multitude of American institutions. His role in the narrative implicates American readers, not only because they share a history of colonization but also because Americans continue to consume the popular culture that creates the Lone Ranger figure (among many others).

Gaspar de Alba works to show the material effects of our popular culture and cultural norms that circulate through this consumer culture. American
commercial products are everywhere in Juárez and within Desert Blood. From the, "kids with the greasy rags and bottles of fake Windex brazenly making a peso here and there by cleaning the windshields of the cars heading...toward the Promised Land" (185) to the little Chevron emblazoned car, and the Curious George Ivon gives to the child that she eventually adopts, Jorgito (341), we see Gaspar de Alba invoking American consumer culture. She bombards the reader with familiar brand names including “Nescafe” (141) “Coke” (142, 219), and the “Avon products, very popular with the El Paso girls” (152). And perhaps most eerie (even nostalgic) is her use of Disney products and discourse. Disney both reflects and fosters American consumer culture. The images of the “magical kingdom” circulate the text in consumer items. Ivon finds in Irene’s abandoned bag, “a khaki wallet with a Mickey Mouse face embroidered on it,” (143). William, Ivon’s Mormon cousin, has, “his gold Mickey Mouse watch” (187), and Rubi’s daughter Amber owns “18-karat Bambi earrings that her grandparents had given her as a going-away-on-your-first-independent-vacation present” (325). The reader may view these items at first as innocuous accessories; however, in a context of production, capitalist imperialism, and the Juárez murders and as the references accumulate, these items take on new meaning. One begins to realize the stark contrast between the Disney slogan, “the happiest place on earth,” and the material reality of where these Disney items are produced. Gaspar de Alba even has the “Lone Ranger” refer to Disney when he is angered by the beating of his female abductees: “They think this is Disneyland over here, they think they can do whatever they want with the merchandise, they hurt them bad” (197). Here we have
Disneyland used as a reference to the perpetrators for being able to do anything to the women that they want and the women being characterized as “merchandise.” The term “merchandise” draws the reader’s attention because Gaspar de Alba has presented many instances of Disney merchandise. When we see the women being characterized as merchandise within this context of “Disney,” it reveals a stark contrast to the “happiest place on earth” Disneyland and Disney images and consumer goods that America’s children grow up on and that seems so innocent. She implicates the American reader, who does not know (or consider) that Disney is not innocent and also has been unaware of border politics and the Juárez murders.

Gaspar de Alba makes sure that the reader notices how brand-name descriptions permeate the text. Before Irene disappears, she describes Rubi’s daughter, Amber, almost completely in terms of American brand-name commodities. Her “skin tight Tommy jeans,” and, “really expensive Dooney and Bourke little backpack” (107) contrast with Irene’s more casual apparel that includes “blue suede Sketchers” (100). Gaspar de Alba’s frequent references to brand name footwear throughout the text serves to illuminate the pervasiveness of American consumer culture at the border and transnationally. It also invites the reader to literally walk in the shoes of the different characters and notice the intersecting forces that affect each character’s experiences. Interestingly, even Ivon seems to be unaware or at least forgetful of her participation in American consumer culture and its connection with the Maquilas and the Juárez murders. For example, Ivon’s shoe collection includes “Doc Marten sandals” (30), and “cushioned...Nikes” (238). Ivon’s grocery list
includes more than just generic items. She requires brand name food and beer. She notes, when she first arrives in El Paso, that there is “nothing but yucky Folgers in the fridge, she was going to have to find a Starbucks somewhere” (26). This constant barrage of brand descriptors contrasts with the simplicity of Ivon’s mother’s home: a well-tended yard, warm smells in the kitchen, freshly prepared food and lemonade (61), and absolute cleanliness. The mother, who uses, “the same round pebbly pitcher… [she] had been using since Ivon was in grade school” (61), seems to be less significantly influenced by consumer culture.

Ivon’s mother, the only literal mother figure in the text functions as a foil that exposes Ivon’s complicity in pop and consumer culture and simultaneously is the character that is most threatened by Ivon’s lifestyle. She plays a complex role in the text, revealing the power that master narratives have on individuals. This is a character so entrenched within cultural and religious belief systems that the reader is able to witness the effects of those belief systems as we learn about her relationship with her daughters. The reader is very aware that Ivon’s mother disapproves of Ivon’s sexuality, and criticizes Ivon for living an “immoral lifestyle.” On multiple occasions she refers to Ivon’s lesbian lifestyle as “immoral” and “degenerate.” She disapproves of her daughter being a lesbian, and is even more upset by the idea of Ivon and Brigit (Ivon’s partner) adopting a child and starting a family so very different from what she would view as an acceptable, nuclear, heteronormative family unit. Ivon’s mother berates her daughter:
That’s all you do: embarrass me in front of the whole family...now you want to bring a child into that...that immoral lifestyle of yours? Es una verguenza. You should be ashamed of yourself.” (66).

Ivon’s mother perceives Americanized Mexican women and lesbians in the same patriarchal way as Mexican men:

“Cholas or lesbians. Either one was bad news....they meant the same thing: traitors...spoiled by First World liberties and behaviors, cholas betrayed their own culture. Lesbians... betrayed not just their culture, but their gender, their families, and their religion.” (134)

Ivon fits both of these categories, estranged from her heterosexual and Mexican heritage. Ivon is an educated Latina lesbian who has relocated far away from her community and has embraced popular, consumer, American culture. Ivon’s mother likens her daughter to a man, specifically her late husband (60), is critical of her Women’s Studies degree (66), and mentions repeatedly that Ivon is bringing misfortune unto the family, particularly in relation to the family’s Catholic values. The mother feels intense betrayal, and while she loves her daughter she feels abandoned and rejected by Ivon’s choices and path in life. The mother feels alienated and condescended to her well-educated daughter. At one point she tells Ivon to “stop using those big words like you don’t think I know what they mean” (66). She fears that Ivon will lead Irene away from home and community, “Take her away from me. Turn her into a Pancho just like you” (67). She inevitably blames Ivon for Irene’s disappearance.

Ivon’s mother has chosen her as a scapegoat for her family’s misfortune. She verbally blames Ivon for her father’s drinking and death. When Ivon’s uncle Joe defends his niece against the mother’s tirade, the mother interjects sarcastically,
“Poor Ivoncita, nothing’s ever her fault. She’s just living her life. As if what she chooses to do with her life doesn’t affect the rest of us. That lifestyle of hers killed her father” (130). As we have seen, Ivon lives in this third space and is constantly surprised when people confront her with it because she keeps trying to live it as if she doesn’t have to think about the consequences even though she is aware of them. Here we have an accusation of Ivon living in that third space and can see that the reason it is so upsetting for Ivon’s mother’s is that there is no way to code or contain it. The labels that Ivon’s mother has access to do not fit Ivon. None of the expectations that her mother has for the way Ivon ought to behave match up with how Ivon positions her identity and herself in the world. The mother even blames Ivon for Irene’s disappearance; “It’s your fault... You’ve always been a bad example for your sister... None of this would have happened if you hadn’t come to town... God is punishing us, don’t you see?” (163). None of the other family members blame Ivon in this way. Even Ivon’s grandmother encourages Ivon to speak up for herself against her mother’s bombardment of insults. And yet the reader is sympathetic with the mother character. One realizes that just as Ivon’s mother is frustrated at the positioning of herself among her heritage, her religion and her community, and the values of her Americanized daughters, Juárez is agitated by its positioning and the influx of American influence.

Throughout the text, Gaspar de Alba peels the layers that work to make the Juárez murders appear unsolvable.

Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policemen, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the
homeland – what did it matter who killed them? This wasn’t a case of “whodunit,” but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women? (333)

From the overpopulation due to the effects of NAFTA, the ease with which American sex offenders and narco-traffickers traverse the US/Mexico border, and the inundation of American pop culture images and consumer products that offer a glimmer of First World ‘dreams,’ all serve to create an atmosphere where mass exploitation and violence against women is possible and even fueled by American imperialism. Whose interests are being served? Who is allowing these crimes to happen? We learn along with Ivon that the “first” and “third” worlds are inseparable and not as far apart as language implies. And just as these “worlds” are not as far apart as they may seem, occupying the third space between them, literally as a Chicana and theoretically as Ivon’s character’s identity, “third space” cannot be contained or coded by either history of fiction. It is a dangerous space that both “bleeds” and escapes at the same time. Even as language and narrative form try to make all narrative space safe, this text reminds us that narrative space must remain necessarily dangerous; otherwise it becomes seamless. And in order to reveal hegemonies, literary and cultural, the seams must be shown. Gaspar de Alba has written a story that cannot end. It literally reveals the material effects of the US/Mexico border, “‘where the third world grates against the first and bleeds’” (335). Today, the Juárez murders are, perhaps, a “spot” in border history where “the open wound of the border [is] most visible” (335).
Were these crimes happening to men, were men being kidnapped, raped, mutilated, and dismembered, no matter what their class, we would already know the answers to the question of ‘Who is Killing the women of Juárez?’

—Gaspar de Alba
CHAPTER IV

“Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been”: Voices from the Iranian Diaspora

In creating our own centers and our own locals, we tend to forget that our centers displace others into the peripheries of our making.

—Elspeth Probyn

‘Th-th-th-t-t-tt. Bang bang, We’re gonna blow you up damn I-raynian.’ I hated when they pronounced the word Iran like they were from Texas. ‘I-ran so far away...I-raaaan, I-raaaan so far away.’ Then some wiseguy came up with a brilliant version of the Beach Boys song: “Bomb, bomb, bomb...bomb, bomb, Iran.”

—PAZ

Echoing forward from Gertrude Stein’s radical disruption of language and linear narrative form, Theresa Cha’s process of rewriting history, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s examination of cultural differences within Chicana feminism Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women from the Iranian Diaspora explores the complex process of identifying within a diasporic space, place, and history.

Because of the history and current relations between Iran and the United States, the Iranian diaspora is a particularly rich site for examining the material reality of “plurality” and multiplicity of identity in relation to American ideology. As I argued in the introduction, America supposedly offers its immigrants a plural space where diverse backgrounds are celebrated. In contrast, American cultural imperialism works to name, define, and control meanings of culture, cultural production, and discourses around the world as well as within its own borders. The women’s voices in this collective reveal the politics involved in traversing cultural “transitory crossroads,” as Shahrzad Zahedi describes them, which are always part of the diasporic identity.
While cultural identity is often talked about as something shared and specific, the authors contributing in this collective reveal that individual experiences of being an Iranian and an American and a woman differ greatly. It is important, then, to read these voices in relation to each other, as a collective that shows the nuances of individual experiences and the connections of those experiences.

Each of the authors in this collective describes, in different ways, experiences of being homeless, both spatially (where they reside in both physical and imagined "homes") and in terms of identity (how one is supposed to identify as either an American or Iranian woman but not both). When writing about these women's stories and experiences, it is tempting to invoke a standpoint epistemology and identity politics that argues that there is something identifiable as "personal experience" and that it constitutes an authentic form of political knowledge. And yet, whose experience and what experiences are complicated when identities are multiple and transnational? Euro-American feminist theory has had several ways of grappling with this question. In the 1970s, the phrases "sisterhood is powerful" and the "personal is political" were coined to emphasize the value of individual women's experiences and to forge connections among women. "Identity politics" is a politics that relies upon defining identity in terms of categories (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) and claiming those categories in order to fight various modes of oppression. However, these categories of identity are also the very ones that feminist identity politics oppose. The difference is in the "politics" part, redefining how and with what or with
whom one identifies to establish a greater “authenticity” (another problematic term for feminist theory) or recognizable grouping from which one “stands.”

The process of producing identity categories that one identifies with and fights from transitioned into what became known as standpoint theory in the 1980s. Standpoint theory, a term often credited to Nancy Hartsock, works to figure out where one stands in relation to the social categories which identity politics articulates. As Maggie Humm says: “Feminist stand-point theorist reject the notion that there are universal truths or universal answers to social questions by pointing out that gender, class, and race will always shape any individual’s understanding of the world” (Humm 276). Standpoint theory made it possible to put the theory “sisterhood is powerful” into practice by working to form a global feminism that assumes there is a common ground among all women and that all women share in the common struggle of gendered oppression. This idea of “common” struggle of oppression persisted even if women experience their gender differently and if women experience their oppressions differently. And yet, standpoint epistemology also recuperates and depends on the binary oppositions “us” and “them” through identity politics. For example, Nancy Hartsock asks the question, “Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of sisterhood becomes ‘problematic’?” (Hartsock 196). She argues that since the silenced objects of history (women) have not yet had their “modern subjecthood,” they are not ready for a postmodern deconstruction of it. Interpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue, however,
that in Hartsock’s effort to validate the subject positions of those previously silenced from or within history, she relies upon epistemological and ontological claims that both refuse multiple and shifting subject positions and also perpetuate Western Enlightenment ideas of subjectivity (Grewal and Kaplan 6). As such, claims of standpoint theory fit comfortably within multicultural conceptions of the US—enabling the articulation of multiple identities without challenging the idea of identity formation that, historically, privileges only certain subjects (white male Euro-American). This is the idea that “gender” might function as a location from which to speak and relies precisely on universality and perpetuates an abstract notion of gender outside of race, class, sexuality, and nationality, despite a claim for particularity. It also recaptures the binaries “us” and “them,” keeping intact dominant structures of power that rely on center/periphery division.

Questions such as “Whose standpoint matters?” and “From where does that standpoint emanate?” pushed feminists to complicate standpoint epistemology. Norma Alarcón argues that articulating multiplicity is not enough. She argues that when the point of view, or the standpoint, is inhabited by the category of “woman,” it does not necessarily change the structures of power or guarantee political possibility:

> To be oppressed means to be disenabled not only from grasping an ‘identity,’ but from reclaiming it. In this culture, to grasp or reclaim an identity means always already to have become a subject of consciousness. The theory of the subject of consciousness as a unitary and synthesizing agent of knowledge is already a posture of domination. (Alarcón 364)

Alarcón is pointing out that standpoint epistemology does nothing to challenge the very ways in which subject positions are created in the first place. As Alarcón
argues, subject formations proceed through identification into full consciousness. The right to a personal identity is considered from a Western point of view to be the key to subjectivity, citizenship (American and global), and political constituency. This process, historically reserved for white wealthy men, when left uncritiqued (as in standpoint epistemology), reclaims the “inherited view of consciousness that has not been questioned at all” (Alarcón 364).

So the question then becomes: How are we to read voices across difference and account for material differences without recuperating the framework that strives to create and maintain difference, which “Others” women from diverse parts of the world? How do we talk about the local and global without reinscribing the center/periphery paradigm that has historically operated in global feminisms? Elspeth Probyn argues for spatialized politics and positionalities that do not abandon the local but rather “work more deeply in and against it” in order to get away from the old notions of “similarities” and “differences” (Probyn 182). These are the very notions that keep feminist critical analysis from examining the linkages between, and the material effects of, the histories of colonialism, racism, and feminism.

While it may be tempting to read a collective of voices from the Iranian diaspora as performing identity politics, it is crucial to understand that identity politics privileges the productions of subjectivity organized around not singular but rather multiple intersecting axes of identification. This means that one aspect of identity (such as gender, race, or nation) must be emphasized over other aspects of identity. The structure of identity politics determines which parts of a person’s
experience can be rendered visible and for whom. Stuart Hall argues, the structure of identity should not preclude multiple or mixed experiences or identifications:

I use ‘identity’ to refer to a meeting point, the point of structure, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate,’ speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourse, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which constructs us as subjects which can be ‘spoken.’ Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject position, which discursive practices construct for us. (5-6)

Hall’s description of identities as being temporary attachments to the subject position within the discursive constructions is particularly important for listening to the voices of the collective that form this anthology. This collective allows us to look at Iranian women’s writings side by side, offering the opportunity to understand the connections (and even similarities) between these works as well as the differences that emerge from diasporic experiences. I use the term “similar” in order to purposely trouble it. These authors draw from similar, but not the same, contexts and experiences. There is a reason to read these women’s writings together as a collective, but in that collectivity there is a refusal to master the very discourse (the form of the anthology) that would either make these writings a representative selection or produce a singular “common” theme. There are similarities among the authors’ writings, but they are similarities that work like gender. All Women get constructed in terms of femininity and the category of gender (what it means to be a “Woman”), but their relations to those constructions and to one another vary greatly and are never identical.

Drawing on Edward Said’s 1999 essay entitled “Reflections of Exile,” I see the authors in this collective as engaging in “counterpunctual” speaking. Said writes:
Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that— to borrow a term from music—is counterpunctual. (14)

Said argues that “counterpunctual thinking” embodies the duality, ambivalence, and indeterminacy that shape exile consciousness in multiple and continually shifting ways. This is very similar to the temporary attachments that gender performances create. Judith Butler argues that gender is always performative: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 13). This means that gender is always a temporary attachment and gender performances can be multiple, shifting, and strategic, much like Said’s “counterpunctual thinking.”

Organized in six sections—“Home Stories,” “For Tradition,” “Women’s Duty,” “Axis of Evil,” “Beyond,” and “Stories Left Untold”—the entries in Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been perform this shifting and negotiate an array of genres that together produce what I call a “collected consciousness.” Genre creates discursive spaces of what is permissible to talk about, and just like identity, generic categories do not provide a tight fit for these authors. At first glance, the collective may appear to be simply a compilation of short stories and poetry, but one quickly realizes that even the entries that seem to fit into a particular genre, such as poetry, read differently from what one expects. The poems read like stories, while the stories often read like poems. Through these entries that do not act as we expect them to, and through the side-by-side voices, we are able to see how consciousness literally gets collected. This collected consciousness places the emphasis on the action of being next to one
without coalescing all the collected parts to make a singular voice or to find a particular position from where these voices speak.

This collective is full of stories that have been collected, not because the writers are well-known or do the same work, but because they come together to create a kind of temporary attachment that Hall writes about. These authors are situated in ways that the publishing world generally would not allow. Well-known writers of popular works such as Gelareh Asayesh (Saffron Sky), Firoozeh Dumas (Funny in Farsi) and Azadeh Moaveni (Lipstick Jihad) are placed near or next to writings from unknown authors, such as Azin Arefi’s short story “Blood” written in a college creative writing class, as well as poetry by Susan Atefat-Peckham published posthumously. The way that these writings are collected does not privilege one writer over another. They are all there, together and not together at the same time. This resistance to privilege breaks down notions of authority because it is impossible for the writings to be together if they are hierarchal. Hierarchy requires a top-down order. This very structure of collectivity refuses mastery, both among the writers and of the genres that they use. The temporary attachment that this collective creates does not and cannot “master” the genres in which these writers are working, nor does it allow the collected voices to speak for the Iranian diaspora.

I use the verb “collect” because of its ability to signal both a gathering and an accumulation and even a putting into motion. And yet I read the voices of this collection as contrary to the verb’s other definitions, “bringing together into one body or place” and to “infer from observed facts; to conclude from premises” (Merriam-
Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary 243). I read these voices as ones that allow me to follow the first definition of gathering and accumulation because it allows for constant questioning of my process. With this definition, I am able to emphasize the collectedness as gathering and accumulating, which allows me to read these voices in relation to one another and uncategorized, much like Gertrude Stein’s investigation of the-ing form as a “continuous present” in The Making of Americans. The ongoingness or continual movement is the kind of notion of gathering in which I see these writers participating. Michelle Koukhab’s poem “The Persian Baths” describes memories of the hammam, showing the “gaps [which] open sometimes/between the places we are born and the places that we live” (Karim 100). Her image of opening gaps is a metaphor for this continual and accumulating movement that I am interested in. Koukhab is pointing to the fact that the gaps do not only result from the movement to and from physical places and the stories about those movements. These stories also get played out and covered up in different accounts of histories and come together and do not come together in various ways.

These collected voices all write from gaps similar to the gaps Cha writes from and into in Dictee. Each writer, in her own way, uncovers gaps and shows us the limits of what we can see and hear and what spaces need to be opened up in order to hear fuller (hi)stories. And yet these spaces and places do not define the writers or their work. The work performs a collected consciousness that leaves open endless possibilities of understanding history, politics, and experiences across difference.
The writers of *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been*, speaking and writing from spaces that are supposed to be invisible, are always disrupting expectations by their very utterances. If we are taught to expect disaporic voices to scatter to the point that they are unreadable because we think of the diaspora as an imagined space, void of community, it would seem that collected voices and this collective are impossible possibilities. Diasporic scattering is a powerful master’s tool that works to reconfigure stories as explanations that make what actually happens invisible. Discursive identity is in tension with “actual experience” and when writers speak out of their “actual experience,” we cannot hear what they are really saying. We expect them to speak in certain ways and within the boundaries of those (discursive) expectations.

As these writers know, hegemonies are always everywhere and difficult to pin down. And the writers are insisting on the fact that these hegemonies already exist in scattered ways. Grewal and Kaplan coined the phrase “scattered hegemonies” to emphasize the fact the hegemonies are never static (Grewal and Kaplan 7). Hegemonies are also discursive. We know we have hegemony in discourse, but we have codified discursive hegemonies so that they exist in an ordered hierarchy. Scattered hegemonies help us think about how these hegemonies are always in motion. For example, the discourses that we have available for talking about the Self, home, and identity are produced in terms of hegemonic choices about what they are. These concepts are always hard to pin down, but are particularly difficult in the diasporic contexts, where the very term “diaspora” means to be dispersed from one’s
homeland. Diaspora is just a word attached to human movement in order to explain the power relationship that we want to be there, but actually it is always in motion and never “settle-able.” Part of the reason that these writings are unsettling is because as we read them, we have to look at the gaps of “diaspora,” which are created by cultural centrism that deter us from “actual experience” of the individual authors as well as the accumulated stories in this collected text. When we see these gaps it seems as if we are looking into an abyss of stories (and histories) that we have not heard or been able to hear before. These writers constantly examine and reexamine this process of digging through the scattered hegemonies as they invoke and question the meanings of constructs, such as home and not home, Iran and America, culture and experience, gender and identity.

Literary representations of home have often stood in opposition to movement, travel, im/emigration, and transnational migration of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and have created a world in which the idea of home has increasingly invoked ambiguity. Gendered literary representations of exile are particularly rich sites for examining master narratives because of the uneasy relationship between “Woman” and home. “Woman” signals a home place. She is expected to be it and to be silent about it. Home is “her” place but also not her place because she is it. The woman is always a marker of the home and dwells in it. The female self is configured as “home” or home space, and her body materializes that home, literally and figuratively. In this sense, she embodies “home” and does not speak, but rather, she is spoken as “Woman.” When “Woman” is placed in a transnational context and speaks,
we have what is supposed to be a non-speaking subject that not only speaks (material women do speak), but also speaks in so many voices (and usually at least two languages) that we have no way to grapple with what she actually says from a master narrative point of view. *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been* is a collected text and certainly not a master narrative, but more importantly, its writers are not positioned to “master” the tropes and narratives that their words inhabit. In this sense, home and text both become, and become together, an action of opening-up “site[s] of necessary trouble.” Judith Butler uses the phrases to discuss identity like this:

I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble. (Butler 14)

“Sites of necessary trouble” is a crucial concept for these writers because it calls attention to the ideas, concepts, and categories that are assumed to be natural and normal. Butler is talking specifically about identity categories here, but I argue that concepts such as “home,” gender, and genre are also sites of necessary trouble. They seem obvious and neutral. However, as these writers open up the boundaries and borders of text and home/not home/homelessness/diaspora, as well as identity categories such as Iranian/American/Woman, they reveal not only that they are binaries but also that they function to give always a partial understanding of possibility. These binaries seem to explain and naturally order or structure possibilities from which individuals are able to choose. The process of troubling these sites not only makes them visible as complex and problematic, but allows the writers to also reveal how these sites operate within the master’s narrative. These women also
become necessarily sites of trouble themselves as both “home” and speakers. Speakers are supposed to be masters. Woman is never figured as Master, but when women speak and refuse mastery, not only do they have a say, but they trouble the system in the process.

When I respond to these readings and then articulate that response, I am trapping the effect of the readings within those scattered hegemonies. Doing close readings of this work presents one with the same problem of analyzing experimental writing, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. The reason it is so important to be able to look at this writing is because it works against one’s inclination to rely on hegemonic impulses, which are the kinds of analyses that academic work requires. The work that is encouraged from readings of collected consciousness, such as *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been*, produces textualities that have to enact temporary attachment to meaning, rather than producing “authentic” accounts of what it really means to be Iranian or Iranian-American. These writings refuse mastery and refuse to allow singular definition of Iranian diasporic experience and what it means to be Iranian-American in contemporary America. The tension that the academic encounters, and the tension that my discussion engages, is one between (academic) authority and temporary attachment. Because conclusive readings close off the gaps that these writers open up, it is important to be careful how close readings are interpreted. Even though I will give readings that produce meaning and show connections within the collective, we should understand those readings as circulating among many possibilities. Meaning that is produced in my readings should be
understood as temporary attachments, rather than as the way to read this text. In other words, my goal is to look at the gaps that these writers point towards as revealing that the emphasis of their experiences is in a new place(s). And, as Virginia Woolf tells us, when the emphasis (of meaning) is in a new place (in the gaps), we might not understand it as an emphasis at all because we are used to fixing and suturing gaps in order to “make sense” of meaning.

In “Home Stories,” Zara Houshmand demonstrates the paradoxical relationship between home and master narratives of the belonging:

Home? What Home?
Hey, Great Satan, Sheitan-e-Bozorg,
Better the devil you know.
Better the stories we tell ourselves
Than the stories we've been sold. (6)

The first line of this passage opens up the question of home in an interesting way. Houshmand does not ask the expected question “where is home?” Rather, she asks “what home?” She then invokes Iranian revolutionary leader Rouhollah Khomeini, who had by 1980 named himself the Supreme Guide of the Muslim world (Ganji 111). Using Khomeini’s famous phrase Sheitan-e-Bozorg, “the Great Satan” (a reference to the United States), Houshmand invokes the history following the 1979 U.S. Embassy hostage-taking crisis, which has defined Iranians as Muslim terrorists around the world and silenced (and continues to silence) Iranians, Other phrases coined by Khomeini and circulated throughout Iran were “America can’t do a damn thing,” “Death to America,” and “Death to Israel,” which were chanted at all government-organized rallies as his regime simultaneously promoted burning the
American flag. Houshmand is talking back to her history and simultaneously writing herself into that history from the diaspora. Speaking back in this way is possible because she is in the diasporic position. She cannot challenge the power mongers directly if she is in Iran because to do so requires attacking the very utterances (Sheitan-e-Bozorg, etc.) that operate to hold power in place and maintain women’s positions in society. She cannot speak against these words as an American because this is the very history that Americans cite as evidence that Iranians are terrorists. In this case, the diasporic position becomes a kind of liminal space, an in-betweeness at once emptied of speech and simultaneously rich with forbidden speech.

As Houshmand negotiates an in-between space, she opens up a dialogue with and about Iran. And really, who better to open in-between spaces than women, who both live there (in Iran) or have lived there and “represent” the middle/mediator/mother space that is both and neither “home?” She addresses the Regime with the informal “hey” and concludes by invoking the term “stories”:

“Better the stories we tell ourselves than the stories we’ve been sold” (6). I read this line as a calling out of the official stories of what is “Iranian” and what is “American” that keeps the two nations seemingly worlds apart. Speaking as the very woman who is supposedly (in the American imagination at least) a silenced and homeless victim of the Middle East, Houshmand speaks out of tradition and against her positionality. She shows how the official story (the regime’s in this case) functions as a master narrative and is in the business of being “sold.” These stories to which she refers are also the stories Americans believe define Iran. Writing from in between two nations,
where home is neither Iran nor America, Houshmand resists the political, ideological, and cultural divide between the Middle East and the West. She is positioning herself as a critic and a member of both and, in the process, allows neither to remain separate. This positioning invokes a "collected" sense of place and identity that will not coalesce or settle into one place or self that we are schooled to expect (and need).

Gender and nation are always complicated, but Iranian diasporic women’s identity constantly plays out in the context of global conflict. Sitting around the dinner table talking politics, Farnoosh Seifoddini finds herself in conflict with her family:

I say we shouldn’t go to war
We are hated around the world.
My mother laughs:
Akh! Ah! Fekr milkoneh Amirka-ist!
(Oh! Oh! She thinks she’s American!). (8)

In this poem aptly entitled “Dokhtar-Amiria-I” (American Girl), Seifoddin uses a number of images to perform the multiplicity of her identities with which she experiences the world. The tensions play out around the dinner table and also when she meets a man at a local (American) bar. When asked where she is from, she answers “The Axis of Evil,” invoking George W. Bush’s 2002 speech that identified Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil.” Seifoddin allows these words to linger on the page, forcing her readers to sit with them and consider them, questioning what it might be like to live in a place where your homeland identified you, by default, as evil. Her next lines reveal the constant contradictions that “home” consists of:

In my dreams
Things aren’t punctuated properly

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I wear Amirika on my head
A turban of red, white and blue
Stars and stripes stream behind me
as I ride through the amber waves of grain
Glide over the fruited plains:
On my camel. (8)

As I read these lines, I cannot help but remember the flags flying outside homes and the “United We Stand” banners flying on many street corners, and the patriotic songs such as “America the Beautiful” by Katharine Lee Bates and “Proud to be an American” by Lee Greenwood playing endlessly on every radio station following the events of 9/11. Seifoddin exposes how these images operate as stereotypes, juxtaposing herself literally wearing America as a turban that resembles the American Flag (or perhaps this turban is the American Flag) and singing one of the most recognizable national pride songs as she rides a camel. This is particularly significant as the camel tours are the most notorious tourist attraction in Iran. These are images that blur the very boundaries that we expect to keep identities clearly defined. To cross boundaries, such as those that Seifoddin crosses, and write from this contradictory in-between place, is to work from “sites of difference.” Seifoddin cannot choose among her “selves” which are always already imbricated in contradiction. She has to work with them in order to speak as herself:

These contradictions are very much produced and maintained by American media. Sanaz Banu Nikaein remembers American children teasing her:

The girl screams across the playground
_i---ran in the gutter_
i---ran in the gutter
[...]
Yes I ran in the gutter
When I repeat myself until out of breath
That we don't ride camels back home
We drive cars
The entire fifth-grade class stares at me in disbelief
one yells:
\textit{she lies, cars get stuck in sand}
I give up. (214)

A few lines later, she concludes that these fifth-grade experiences are grounded in and sold by American media:

\begin{quote}
I see no more glamour as an Iranian
Iranian means terrorism on TV
Iranian means bombs in the media. (215)
\end{quote}

America's popular culture (specifically its news broadcasting) has much to do with the contradictory images that have continued to construct Iranians as an evil Other. Lives and homes seem (and are represented as) radically different from America. The fifth-graders' responses reflect the master's tools at work. As Audre Lorde argues, "[T]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 43). Lorde is talking about scattered hegemonies. She is talking about using tools that may seem neutral but are always shaped by hegemonic power and operate within dominant systems of power. In other words, it may seem as if the writers are simply talking about personal experience, but we need to always remember that discourses of personal experience only make sense to us if they fit into hegemonic discourses of what count as personal experience.

In this context, the master's tools operate to keep Westerners from understanding that Iran consumes Western goods, particularly technologies that are...
considered “modern.” We simultaneously buy into the portrayal of the Iranian terrorist with “weapons of mass destruction.” These representations work to make Iran seem other worldly, positioning the “East” and the “West” as different worlds. While these may seem to be personal experiences (since this is Nikaein’s fifth-grade class), the memories reflect a material gap in knowledge that is similar to Cha’s call to rewrite history. As I argued earlier, Cha troubles the reader’s desire to consume a totalizing story, outing the possessive of the Master’s Narrative. She rewrites history, as conventionally conceived, by exposing the ways that the how of the master’s narrative or Master Narrative works. She requires the reader to engage in the process of rewriting history as/in multiple narratives.

We can see these writers also exposing how the master’s tools work through experiences dealing with stereotypes that sustain the idea that the East and West, and Middle East in particular, are completely different worlds. And yet even when the context shifts and these stereotypes are considered exotic and even celebrity-like, the stereotypes are consistently of “primitive” camel-riding peoples. For example, the images that Firoozeh Dumas writes about in her short story, “With a Little Help From My Friends,” seem to have substantively shifted in recent history. Dumas describes her arrival to America several years before the Hostage Crisis as “one long running Oprah show, minus the free luxury accommodations, Chicago, and Oprah” (56). She describes herself as a kind of celebrity being constantly interviewed and followed by paparazzi. The kids she encounters want to know about camels and are shocked to learn that her family actually drove (not rode) in Iran. She goes on to discuss the
images of Iran that came from *Laurence of Arabia*, jokingly saying, “who ever Laurence was, we had never heard of him” (57). Persian anything, but particularly rugs and cats, have also become stereotypical markers of Iranians. Dumas recalls an older neighbor lady being shocked to find that her family does not have cats and considers them to be “dirty” (57). Clearly the woman thought that all cats in Iran were the stereotypical white fluffy Persian cats that are hot commodities in the American cat world. No wonder that the seemingly benign exoticized *Other* transitions so easily into the “Axis of Evil” that leads into the story of the opposition between the East and the West.

In each context, Dumas’ post-hostage exotic celebrity, Seifoddin’s family conflict, and Nikaein’s fifth-graders, the primitive stereotypes define each writer in her American audience’s eyes. No matter if the writer experiences a celebrity welcome or is treated as a potential “evil” terrorist, the master narrative overrides the material history. Echoing Houshmand’s statement, “better the stories we tell ourselves than the stories we’ve been sold,” the master narrative insists that Iranians are written into American history as “primitive” Middle Easterner peoples. These stereotypes operate to create and maintain a gap between the East and Western “worlds,” but that gap allows these hegemonic discourses to remain intact and be easily applied throughout historical eras. Hegemonic discourses rely on oppositions and these writers refuse that opposition.
In her poem "Home," Shadi Ziaei also writes against the imagined Eastern and Western worlds. Ziaei begins with an invocation of the *Wizard of Oz*, perhaps the most well-known American film about going home:

There's no place
Like Home she says
Clicking her heels three times. (38)

I read these lines and begin to remember the film fondly. Dorothy’s shiny ruby red shoes fascinated me as a seven-year-old kid. The idea that all it takes is three clicks to get home gave me a sense of security, and I spent hours practicing the click, as well as begging for shoes that looked like Dorothy’s. The movie’s premise, or at least its appeal, is that in the scary world in which we live (even in Kansas), there is always a place to call home. It might take a wild trip through fields of posies, forests and jungles, but if you try hard enough there is a way home. The story performs the American master narrative that “if there is a will, there is a way.”

Ziaei uses this reference to show the concept of home which America depends upon is deeply problematic.

In the dark
I click my heels
Rubber soul resists the hardwood
I lose my balance. (38)

Here Ziaei shows that when she tries to emulate the American idea, she loses her balance and realizes quickly that this concept of home does not apply to her. As she goes on, she unravels the quintessential American home that is such an impossible possibility:

Home is a four-letter word
This is a description of “home” that Americans understand as not only necessary but also as the only concept of home that circulates as normative. This is the “home” that everyone sees on television, and it is the home that everyone envies. Ziaei then troubles this normative sense of “home.”

Home is not what was said
Home remains, perseveres, stays
Home home home
Love is a four letter word
Home is a place where chair and tables
And words
Don’t stand in your way...
I can’t wait to go home. (39)

Invoking language, specifically referring to Home as “not what was said,” reveals that what the master narrative tells us is not what she experiences. As a diasporic subject, what she hears about home is supposed to be one that is stable, “remains, perseveres, stays” (39). Home and love may both be four letter words, but the concept of the loving-home in the diasporic context is not stable in this imagined (non-changing) way. If the “home” does not resemble the imagined quintessential American dwellings, such as the one that Dorothy is trying to return to, can it be “where the heart is?” Does that saying even apply to those who do not inhabit the kind of home that Americans are supposed to possess? “Home is where the heart is” invokes all kinds of reassuring tropes for us. Whether the saying conjures up images of physicals homes, emotional sense of homes, or psychological imaginings of home
place, it always means something that keeps one safe. And yet, the diaspora is thought of as transnational, even tragic “homeless” space. How can your heart be anywhere if your heart is scattered elsewhere?

The four-letter word expression is extremely culturally embedded. If you did not know that this figure of speech is in the American context, you would assume Ziaei is referring to a word that has four letters. However, Ziaei knows both meanings and also knows that, to a diasporic subject, home and love become epigraphs. These terms act as engraved inscriptions that recognize the ways in which language reifies the concepts, deeply troubling them. What is “Love?” What is “Home?” As a diasporic subject, the words cannot have the same meaning as they might (or are supposed to) in an Iranian or American context. Rather, home and love become forbidden in this context, much like a four-letter word as an American figure of speech and cultural embedding is “opened up” or “unembedded” in order to scatter. This process of opening up culturally embedded meaning exposes the very cultural codes that sustain them.

Each writer, in her own way, finds ways to break open cultural codes, Iranian and American, that counter hegemonic discourses, such as beauty standards and belonging within dominant culture. Most of these writers grew up in America (primarily) and are talking very knowingly about Iranian culture, while also being outside of it at the same time. The “situated knowledge,” to borrow a term from Donna Haraway, that these authors demonstrate can be particularly uncomfortable for the “typical” American reader, given the stereotypes I have already discussed. What
does it mean to “hear” stories from women of the Iranian diaspora that critique American culture, even those that grew up in America?

We have already seen the impact of American media within the Iranian diaspora in this collective. As Elaine Sciolino, author of *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* argues, Iranians have greater access to American images than Americans’ imagine. She writes:

Many Iranians, even those on very limited incomes, own illegal satellite dishes that give them instant access to American television. CDs, videos, and computer programs are pirated and sold on the streets for a fraction of their prices in the United States. Email is more widely available in Iran than in many other Middle-Eastern countries. (Sciolino 31)

I had the opportunity to discuss cultural codes, beauty standards, and American media that affect contemporary Iranian and Iranian-American women in an interview with Azin Arefi, a contributor in *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been*. When I asked Arefi why she thinks that the image of the blonde thin but curvy American woman had become so captivating in a transnational context more broadly, as well as an Iranian more specifically, she said: “it has everything to do with, ironically, male fascinations and infatuations with this particular image and the American Dream.”

For example, *Baywatch* has been the most viewed show among Iranians who had satellites. While this is an unofficial statistic, since satellites that pick up Western television programming in Iran are illegal, it is a well-known fact in Iran. Pamela Anderson continues to represent the blonde American woman, which is almost the complete opposite of Iranian women. Arefi explained that Iranian women go to great lengths, often including plastic surgeries and expensive beauty treatments with
“plenty of blonde dye and highlights,” in order to become “beautiful” and “attractive.”

Iranian males, on the other hand, want to participate in the American Dream whether they are in Iran, the Iranian diaspora, or the United States. Arefi talked about her father who watched Western television and was in awe of woman such as Marilyn Monroe and Farrah Fawcett as a young man in Tehran. After moving to the States in 1987, when Arefi was entering the sixth grade, she recalls her father discussing beauty tips with her. He suggested (and she complied) that she color her hair blonde and “go on a diet.” Her father taught her that in order to find a Persian husband, especially in America, that, ironically, she needed to look as American (read: blonde, thin, white) as possible (Arefi 2008).

Leyla Momeny writes about her complicated experience with American beauty standards. In her story “If You Change Your Nose,” Momeny equates changing one’s nose with changing one’s destiny. The nose is a particularly rich site for examining cultural codes and beauty standards because it is the feature that often defines beauty and is a foundational racial marker in the American imagination. A literal marker of race, ethnicity, and place, Momeny discusses nose jobs as markers that move her between worlds:

I am trying to be supportive
I am trying not to judge
[...] but I prefer the beauty of Ugliness,
and in between the post-surgery, and celebration,
I rush back and forth from these two, three, or four worlds. (162)
Momeny describes her uneasy relationship with supporting her mother’s two nose jobs and her sister’s plastic surgery procedure. She struggles to not judge their choices, knowing that these choices are grounded in dominant American culture. The only word in the poem that is capitalized (besides “I”) is “Ugliness”: “but I prefer the beauty of Ugliness.” This preference or perspective keeps her “rushing” between worlds: “I rush back and forth from these two, three, or four worlds” (162). I read this line as her finding herself both in multiple worlds and being otherworldly. She seems to be “out of this world” because she is in so many worlds, which constantly produce conflicting messages. Beauty is perhaps the most identifiable cultural construction because it is literally visible. Momeny recalls learning from her mother’s actions that white beauty standards were the right standards:

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the machete hanging on the kitchen wall
displays my mother’s initials
and a recipe for miss clairol’s
summer of ’56
solarium blond. (162)
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The invocation of the machete placed on a kitchen wall is a particularly interesting image in this context. After all, a machete is a knife, a knife is a kitchen tool, the Clairol’s formula is a recipe, and a recipe is something one finds in a kitchen. However, Momeny uses the word machete, rather than the word knife, and so we need to consider its various meanings. She tells us that the machete hanging on the kitchen wall displays both her mother’s initials and a recipe for a blonde hair dye concoction. It is not a knife that is being used to prepare food or to display a culinary recipe that one would expect to find in a home kitchen. The machete can be a useful
tool and a tool to destroy and therefore, her use of the word machete is purposeful. It has a double meaning, or at least is an object with multiple uses in various cultures. In tropical countries, the machete is often used to chop through thick rainforest undergrowth in order to clear space for agriculture. In this sense, the machete is a tool necessary for people to be able to use the natural land. The other use of a machete is also as a weapon. Historically, machetes were the most visible weapon used in battles. For example, the machete was both the weapon primarily used in the Rwanda Genocide. It is also the image that circulates, transnationally, to signal the barbaric killings done en masse without the technology Westerners assume is needed for “civilized” bloodshed to take place. Momeny seems to be equating, or at least leaves open for interpretation, the violent and barbaric image with perhaps the most recognizable Western tool to achieve “beautiful” whiteness, peroxide filled blonde hair formula. And she does not just use any hair formula. She specifically invokes Miss Clairol, the hair product that changed American women’s beauty regimens forever with its one-step formula that “lightened, tinted, conditioned and shampooed in only 20 minutes!” as the transcript claimed in the original release of Miss Clairol ads of the 1950s. In this poem, the hair dye is something to both make life better (at least her mother believes so) and also something that is capable of doing great harm to one’s identity.

Sanz Banu Nikaien also describes feeling as if she is an outsider and in another world in her poem aptly called “Bad.” Nikaein repeats over and over the word “bad” to describe herself and her behavior:
I am bad:
to decorate my face with piercings
dye my hair blue
to match my nail polish
pose nude for art students
bad
[...]
I am bad:
to disobey my husband
have a career instead of being his cook
control birth without his permission
refuse to wear turtlenecks in Spring
bad. (196)

Nikaein strategically uses “bad” against itself. The traditions she lists and then resists, body piercings and bright dyed hair to match her nail polish, showing her naked body, having a career outside the home, challenging the clothing norms, and disobeying her husband, are all things that Westerners believe that Middle Eastern women should have the freedom to do. Mockingly, she discusses these issues but not in the way we might expect. She works through these traditions showing her critical outsider/insider position as a member of the Iranian community. She says, “Tradition disowns me as a member,” but she “disown[s] the culture as a follower.” She does not say that she rejects or disowns the culture, as Western readers might expect. After all, why would Nikaein want to be part of a culture that restricts her in these ways? She says she is “bad” for disobeying these traditions. But she also says:

No regrets
No shame
Bad
Proud. (196)

She seems to call for reform on her own terms. She is proud with no regrets and feels no shame for being “bad.” And yet she considers herself part of the community that
she challenges. She writes, “Still the eyes of my community watch my every move” (196). Nikaein uses the possessive here—this is her community. As an insider and outsider of that community, she is aware that she is being watched and seems to embrace it. She is watched because she is not a follower; however, she is also not a stranger. She is working at the edges of both Iranian and American culture, literally embodying this in-between space of cultural diaspora, accepting and rejecting neither.

Living within and in-between worlds of America and Iran shows differences Westerners might not expect to learn about. In “Arrivals and Departures,” Sharon Parker reveals subtle but revealing contradictions in American culture. Recalling her experience moving from America to Iran in the 1950s, Parker uses Iran as a foil for unraveling those contradictions. She describes her family’s move to Iran when she was a teenager and the cultural and physical shock she experiences, including developing “Tehran Tummy” as she acclimated to the new cuisine:

During my first few weeks in Tehran I was mortified when asked about my ‘tummy’ by well-meaning people. Since I did not yet speak Farsi, and some of the people asking did not speak English, much of their questioning consisted of tiny patting and other gestures, along with various facial expressions. (80)

It is interesting that Parker finds discomfort in the questions about her health as what she recalls being her major concern resulting from the language barrier. While teens are often shy about discussing bodily functions, Parker describes the ways in which her American sensibilities do not match up with the American ideology of openness that Iranian culture is thought to severely lack in the Western imagination:

Unlike late 1950s America, where the body could not be mentioned (but could be revealed in clothing specifically designed to titillate), in Iran the body, which had to be discreetly covered but not necessarily veiled in the case of
women, could be discussed at great length. I quickly learned that couching things in the terms of the body was normal, particularly in interactions with friends and family members; that love could be expressed through the liver, a curse could be placed on a head, and that if someone sneezed when preparing to leave the house, it was necessary for everyone to sit down and wait for some time before leaving. (80)

I am struck by the difference between how the body operates in each cultural context, respectively. I was familiar with the contradiction within the 1950s American culture (still apparent today) that makes the body seem like a secretive "private" space, but is acceptable as something to be exposed in order to sell specific images and consumer products. We think that Iranian women are extraordinarily oppressed and "second class citizens" because they are expected to be covered and sometimes even "veiled."

And yet, Americans are invested in focusing on body image and selling that image (and real bodies by extension) transnationally. However, Parker is showing that while Iranian women may be covered, dialogue about their bodies was a way to express love and concern. So while the outer body may be covered, the inner body is openly discussed and cared for communally:

Asking about someone’s health was serious business requiring close listening, careful consideration of the descriptions of symptoms, and an offering up of possible remedies. In time, the discussion of the body, as both an abstract and a concrete entity, became so much a part of what I was accustomed to that I no longer remembered that although many Americans felt compelled to ask, ‘How are you?’ they really did not want to know the answer. This was brought home to me most clearly when, having moved to Tucson, to enter a graduate program at the university, a faculty member asked how I was doing. Her eyes glazed over as I proceeded to tell her, and she walked away before I had finished speaking. (80)

Parker’s experience with her professor demonstrates how superficial American culture can be. "How are you?" as a figure of speech is rarely intended to be a
genuine question about a person’s health or emotional state of being. We expect to
hear “Fine, how are you?” and we get either uncomfortable or bored very quickly if
we receive a substantive response. Similarly, Parker notices that the “veiled” Iranian
women enact the values that America claims to own—honesty, community, equality,
integrity, and freedom to speak openly—but generally fail to uphold in a material
sense.

In “Tales Left Untold,” Aphrodite Desiree Navab also deals with in-betweens
in a literal way as she describes her experience in the Iranian-American diaspora. She
demonstrates that no hegemonic discourse is going to suffice with stories that
necessarily fracture, as diasporic experiences and identities do. Dividing her poem
into seven “tales,” complete with a prologue and epilogue, Navab writes a poem that
follows the traditional narrative structure that we expect with a beginning and an end,
making it obvious that she is messing with genre on both structural and content
levels. Beginning with the prologue, Navab calls into question the very process of
storytelling and what stories can be heard:

To tell a tale is all that’s left
To those forbidden passage home
It’s in the telling
Not the tale
That the untold pieces get re-sewn
To pick them up
One
By
One
And then throw them in the air
Is this storyteller’s mad hope
That one piece will make it there. (281)
Navab makes it clear that for diasporic voices, "those forbidden passage home," the emphasis must be on the telling of one’s stories. The telling not the tale is what establishes our inner relationships and our understanding, just as Stein did with "Ada." It is also much like Toni Morrison’s insistence that the emphasis must be placed on the how and not the why, Navab focuses on how stories are told. She knows that master narratives, which always rely on normative structures of telling, make it so that her stories (the untold tales) cannot be heard. She must blow wide-open the process of storytelling and show that the untold tales reveal the gaps (that untold stories produce) where voices can speak in and against the master narratives of the diaspora and American identity. Like Cha, Navab understands that the untold stories and the gaps that those untold stories create are spaces of limitless possibilities that break open the layers that keep the gaps hidden. She therefore gathers her stories “one by one,” and then must “throw them in the air” to allow the stories to scatter.

The image of throwing stories up in the air exposes the discourse that demands that stories are told as complete and unchanging. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the story of the diaspora itself is a tragic space of moving people, homeless, and in need of authenticating an identity (as if immigrants arrive in America as always and already in identity crisis). Navab hopes “that one piece will make it there” in order to continue the process of telling.

Each piece of her story grapples with the complexities of speaking from multiplicity and what this means on a material level:

These are the bags I bring with me
Suitcases burdened with memory

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I'll put them down and open them
To let them breathe before they speak
To tell a tale that needs to be. (281)

Invoking the image of bags filled with memories, literally and metaphorically, Navab gives life to her memories, challenging the normative idea that memories are untouchable and unchanging. Instead, Navab opens up her memories, and gives them time to breathe and even reflect “before they speak.” The memories will tell the tale that “needs to be,” depending on the context. This is a radically different concept of memory than that which operates within the genre of autobiography. For example, in autobiography memories are expected to tell the tale of what was in an unchanging way. They are expected to tell the “truth.” However, as Navab will show, the “truth” can only be told when the emphasis remains on the telling as a process of experience, rather than as evidence of experience. Her words then work to “map” who she is within the complexities of her multiplicities as an “Iranian, Greek, American” and “not just one but all of them” (282). She writes about the difficulty of “messy” ambiguity trying for “consistency” “to be one of them:

Complete
Just one of them
Please
Just to make things neat
How I’ve tried all my life to be
No messy ambiguity
No ambivalent loyalty
To be
One
Whole
One
Identity. (282)
While Navab says that she has tried to claim and be "one whole identity," her process reveals that this is literally impossible on a material level. Her history cannot allow her to give up any piece of herself, no matter how hard she may have tried. She finds herself unable to choose a piece of her heritage to identify with in total because each part fights the other, historically, making no part of her seem most primary:

The flag of each nation  
In me, stirs little sensation  
No nationalism shouts loud in me  
Even after living in all three  
To see one flag burned  
In the other country  
There’s no going back for me  
My people held my other people hostage  
The weight of this I carry in my luggage  
A criminal in reverse. (282)

The idea of a person writing about oneself as “a criminal in reverse” is powerful and disturbing. Her criminality is not from committing a crime. Her crime is being several nationalities and not “being” one or the other. She is part of many nations and not "identifiable" which, according to American pluralism is not a crime but rather something to celebrate. As Navab shows, instead of feeling allegiance to all three of her identities, she feels disconnected from each. Her crime also stems from oppositional cultural locations that situate her as “the enemy” wherever she is. When she writes, “My people held my other people hostage. The weight of this I carry in my luggage,” what she is saying is here she is, this person, but if she stands in America she is the enemy because of her Iranian heritage and if she is in Iran, she is American. And so, because of the history of those cultures and the relation between them, she is the enemy no matter where she stands. In addition to not being
“identifiable” because she is from multiple places, she is, paradoxically, identifiable as the enemy because she is always on the “wrong side.” Her identity becomes a kind of catch twenty-two trap from which she cannot escape. And it is even more salient for the American “side” because it is American discourse that pretends to celebrate pluralism while Iran does not have a discourse in tension with singular identity.

How did you become American?
The interrogation begins
The airport official’s eyes
Questioning me up and down
In my passport
In black ink
Disclosing where it is I’m from
Born in Esfahan, Iran

Passport, all-American
But a potential terrorist

Don’t stop me
Search me
Steal me
Why do the others all prance through?
When my passport is just as blue?
Official eagle, stamped and sealed
So much prejudice revealed

My mother is American
My father, sister, brothers, me
We were all born in Iran, see
That is it
That is why
Right, he said
Not at all
You’ve got it wrong
Try again. (283-284)

“American by your own birth” as “the only correct answer” breaks open the myth of American plurality at its core. Not unlike Cha’s experience crossing national
boundaries, Navab is always a “potential terrorist,” and thus permitted by American
law to be interrogated, harassed, and put on a “show” in the middle of the airport each
time she tries to arrive on or depart from American soil. She cannot win. It does not
matter that her “passport is just as blue,” complete with the “official eagle, stamped
and sealed” (284). However, according to the discourse of American plurality, she
should be able to become American in a variety of ways.

As we have seen through readings of other stories in this collective,
stereotypes of Iranian culture function to keep America and Iran separate, as if they
are two different worlds. Navab shows how she experiences these stereotypes and
must actively do work to not let them “make her”:

    I am not a Persian Carpet
    You may not do your prayers on me
    You may not
    Trade me
    Wheel me
    Deal me
    No embargoes can be placed on me
    No children weave eyes blind for me
    My value does not increase with age
    No pattern can contain this rage
    Rubbing your greedy hands
    Imagining how to fill your land
    Measuring with an abacus in hand. (289)

Speaking to her American audience, Navab shows how these deeply embedded
discursive and cultural hegemonies operate. Persian rugs and the “Orient” are the first
things many Americans think of regarding Iranian culture. Stating that she is outraged
by these stereotypes—“No pattern can contain this rage”—Navab shows the reader that
such images trap her in a historical vacuum. The abacus is an arithmetic tool invented
in early Persia and now imported in the West as a child’s counting tool that one often finds with bright colored beads in elementary school classrooms. She uses the stereotype of “greedy” money-hungry Middle Easterner against itself: “Rubbing your greedy hands/Imagining how to fill your land/Measuring with an abacus in hand” (289). It is America’s concern that Iranians supposedly come to the U.S. and “abuse” the system, make money, take professional jobs away from “deserving” American people, and reap the benefits that America has to offer by taking advantage of “the system” that creates this stereotype of the Iranian as greedy. It is also Americans who understand Iranian culture to be archaic, primitive, and, as other authors in the collective have shown, lacking technology. Here, Navab is playing with the figure of the abacus as if Iranians are still using basic counting tools. And yet, she addresses the reader in these lines as “you.” So while the lines read as if these are descriptions of how Americans imagine Iranians, they also implicate Americans and American culture. America fills its land with immigrants who have the American dream ideology that cannot materialize for them, precisely because of this structure of thinking and speaking that produce and maintain oppositional binaries such as, Us-civilized/ Them-primitive.

The images that she invokes are not only hurtful and limiting to the diasporic subjects coping with life in America; they also operate to contain the ways in which we understand the diasporic process. They work to limit the voices from the diaspora. Navab’s account of her father’s experience in exile reveals the material reality of the diaspora but with an interesting twist:
Baba, I will mourn for you
Because you chose life for us
Baba, I choose this too for you
Because your exile has been death
Baba, I will travel there for you

His silent suffering
Not shown
Not shared
He stood there
Staring out the window
At an Iran that was not there
[…]
An ululation
A lamentation
A scream released from its frustration
To do the things denied to you
Baba, this space, here
Is all I can do. (293-294)

Her father’s exile has been his death. He ends up dying (culturally) working towards giving his family a better life. Her use of the word “choose” is interesting here. She is mourning her father’s losses and also embracing his choice; “Because you chose life for us Baba/ I choose this too for you.” Emphasizing “choice” opens up fissures in this familiar master-narrative American immigrant story not unlike that duality within the category Woman. Women can be either a madonna or a whore, a victim or a power (masculine) monger, but the actual experiences of real women cannot be accounted for within the category, Woman. Here too, the “actual experiences” of immigrants with all its cultural complexities included may be silenced, but in the process a kind of duality is produced. One can succeed in the promised land, but only with great sacrifice so that his/her children and their children will be the recipients of
all of that promise. One can choose this but their choice conceals the actual experiences that result from this choice.

Navab understands that this man, her father (among others), gets sacrificed “in silence” within the diasporic process. We cannot hear his story. His story is “not shown” and “not shared.” Lamenting one’s parents’ sacrifice is a kind of traditional narrative story as long as it produces the next generation’s success. But Navab has already revealed that her struggle to belong in America and inhabit “one whole identity” has not been successful. She describes herself as a “criminal in reverse.” She finds herself stopped, searched, and interrogated when she tries to go through customs, despite her American passport.

Her scream “from frustration” is from witnessing her father’s cultural mourning that she cannot prevent and feeling her own sense of splintering that her multiple identities create within American framework. She promises to “do things denied” to her father, recognizing the difficult and continual process of “getting lost and then found” (291). Her father felt lost and in a sense, got lost, in his new “home.”

Navab, however reveals the tales that get left untold, by mapping who she is (“I am Iranian Greek American not just one but all of them”). Ironically, it turns out that to embrace the ambiguity that her multiple identities produce in contemporary America, the supposed land of plurality, is a radical counter-hegemonic mode of survival.

There is a cumulative effect of the tales Navab tells. Each tale reveals different pieces of the complexity and politics of identity. Each shows struggle and reflection of the struggle, but taken together, we see there is not a tragic response to
the ambiguity that her multiplicity produces. Rather, the epilogue returns to the
prologue insistence that the emphasis must be on the telling, not simply what is told:

To tell a tale
When there’s nothing more
Is when meaning itself
Has shut its door
It is then
The uninvited guest
Comes in
Breathing life into the rest
It is then
That the untold tales
Begin
Resurrecting that old quest. (294)

Writers and speakers throughout this text are “telling” what the master
narrative has disguised as nothing to hear, unless it can be made to fit the storyline
somehow and not “scatter” or make “temporary attachments.” And when we make
tales fit the storyline so that “there is nothing more,” that is when “meaning itself has
shut its door” (294). Navab and the other contributors in this text do not depend upon
the Law of Narrative to make meaning, but on experience, their experience, and
experience enacted through words that tell stories that will not conform to the master
narrative. When we are reading a collective of writers we are reading experientially
based work that gives us something thematic in a diverse way. What this means is
that this anthology collects diverse experiences, and yes it groups them around
general themes, but because the experiences come from so many different kinds of
backgrounds and perspectives we see that those thematic structures are not singular. It
gives us a much richer context for understanding diaspora. This is not unlike Spivak’s
claim regarding the importance of the postmodern condition as a deconstructive movement:

I think of it myself as a radical acceptance of vulnerability. The grands récits are great narratives and the narrative has an end in view. It is a programme which tells how social justice is to be achieved. And I think the post-structuralists, if I understand them right, imagine again and again that when a narrative is constructed, something is left out. When an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are. So I think what they are about is asking over and over again. What is it that is left out? Can we know what is left out? We must know the limits of the narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future [...]. (Spivak 19)

Spivak understands the necessity of our reading practices including (and being foremost) “a radical acceptance of vulnerability” where “one might not know what those ends [of stories] are.” It makes us vulnerable in a sense to read a collective as having thematic similarities that do not coalesce. This is how untold tales get told in ways that do not simply “resurrect that old quest” of the gestures that we already know how to read. We must accept what order cannot tidy up.

An example of the radical ambiguity of in-betweness, where “we must know the limits of narratives rather than establish the narratives as solutions” in order to understand its complexities comes, ironically, from authors of the Iranian Diaspora who were born in America. It is ironic because we might assume that those born as American citizens are not part of the Iranian diaspora. This brings us to the title poem of the anthology, “Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been,” by editor Persis Karim, which explores this in-betweness. Her narrative is necessarily messy. Karim is not an Iranian immigrant. Her father is Iranian and her mother is French. She was born and raised in Northern California and currently lives in Berkeley, California. In a way, her
story of in-betweenness is most informing of how displacement in the Iranian diaspora operates. Her story is most informing because, ironically enough, her being born in this country produces in her a longing for the other identity that she can only visit. The particular memories of what has happened to her, in the typical biographic sense of autobiography, are not the same kind of recollections that we expect because her memories do not go back to her childhood in Iran. She is not able, like the writers born in Iran, to think back to early childhood experiences of being born elsewhere even though that part of her identity is very important; consequently, her memories are always “storied” memories shaped by imagined longings. Her example is most informing then because here is someone who seems to be positioned to have a more cohesive identity (born and raised in America as an American citizen) but what it produces is an even more fragmented identity that causes her to have to long across imagined distances.

She describes her passport as “etched softly into the curve of [her] spine.” She has a passport that gives no doubt about where she is from, but she is not official in the sense that she cannot be (ideologically and emotionally) of two cultures. The map of her life is “invisible” and charts the imagined spaces and places, “[she] want[s] to say [she has] been” (336). She feels a strong connection to her Iranian heritage and carries it with her.

Karim wants so badly to be more connected to her heritage and embrace the temporary attachments to meaning and culture that she has: “Some women go deaf with the sound of children crying and weep at the thought of more togetherness. And
I keep looking for ways to belong” (335). She wants to be part of Iranian culture and she has roots but she was not born there. Her in-betweenness is always temporary—it is imagined or constructed through memories of visits, discussions, and correspondences. Her story is one of scattered experiences, memories, significations, and radical ambiguity. She does not try to tell a “full” story in the conventional sense that concludes with resolution of her identity.

Karim’s longing for Iranian identity, her Iranian “passport,” if you will, is her box of memories. The box holds memories from her trips to Iran or perhaps souvenirs given to her by family and friends that have come to visit from Iran or gone to visit. This is not even the nicest box. Its “lid that fits too tightly” and it was “purchased at a crowded bazaar” (336). The box is filled with temporary attachments. It holds mementos and memories that may or may not be literally re-membered. Her identity is in that box, full of “places with worn roads and blue-domed mosques: Tehran, Shiraz, Esfahan—places I want to say I’ve been” (336). She carries it with her, “like a passport not from this place where I was born but from the other I think I have been” (336). Unlike Navab and other contributors, Karim does not have to deal with the immigration process. And yet, she lives in the Iranian Diaspora. This in-betweeness of cultures and places is still a part of her that she wants to tell.
All of the *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been* contributors’ works I have discussed in this chapter have placed their emphasis on the telling of their stories. I have argued throughout this chapter as well as the other chapters that we must read these writers without tidying up their stories. These collected voices (in the anthology and through the dissertation) both reveal and unravel what we can know about narrative hegemonies and their influence on what we count as true and possible. Each writer messes with narrative hegemonies in her own way.

This brings us back to Stein and Stein’s critics who largely misunderstood her agendas and work as a whole. If we pay attention to how Stein breaks conventions with every utterance we begin to see that the fear of losing all meaning if we are without conventions, the fear that in consequence everything will fall apart, does not seem to materialize if we consider to the possibilities that this “unlawful” writing can offer. Similarly, we see Cha writing into the gaps of history, exploding the ways in which “documents” and “archives” piece together stories, official and not. She shows us pieces that do not seem to form a whole (at least not in the wholeness of story that we expect). Gaspar de Alba’s (faux) attempt to conclude her narrative strategically puts the emphasis on the unknown. There is no conclusion of the Juárez murders (to date). Her ending will not allow the reader to rest comfortably. To be comfortable is never an agenda for the experimental writer. What we have left is the possibility to understand that our stories and our ways of telling those stories are not sufficient to do the work of the kind of complexities that we need to refute the master narratives on a structural level. Paying attention to how “the how” of language and narrative...
function and emphasizing how stories are told and not simply what is told is
immeasurably important because it reminds us that there is no such thing as a
sufficient story.

In a transnational context it becomes even more important to understand how
our stories and storytelling operate. The evidence is so weighty for us after reading
these pieces by the women of the Iranian Diaspora, for instance, that we have no
choice now but to understand that when we subscribe to master narratives as the way
to fix identity and history in place we do great disservice to ourselves and others
because we limit our ability to speak and tell our stories on our own terms. We must
pay attention to the divergences and similarities alike in order to be able listen and
speak across difference in ways that do not force one to choose among (her) selves.

I have positioned this dissertation to do the work of creating a body of
experimental writing by women and argued throughout that approaching these texts
as a body of literature is imperative in order to give them a recognizable place within
the canon as literature rather than singular instances of radically disruptive writing. It
is radically disruptive writing, of course, but these writers must be seen as writing in
conversation with each other and as participating in a body of literature in order to
challenge what we expect literature to do and how we expect it to mean. All of these
writers together challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction and create non-
conventional spaces for the telling of as well as listening to experience that
conventional narrative order would deem impossible. What we find in this body of

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literature are unlimited possibilities in the words of women writers who limit nothing and include everything.

I like a thing simple, but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme; otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity.

—Gertrude Stein
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VITA

Hilary Jennifer Marcus

Although born in New York City, Hilary Marcus spent most of her childhood in California. As a student at the University of California, Berkeley, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in Philosophy and with a minor in Women’s Studies. She earned a Masters of Arts in American Studies from the College of William and Mary.