An Ethics of Reading

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Interpretative Strategies for Contemporary Multicultural American Literature

By

Sandra Cox

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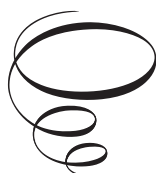

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for Susan,
who always knew

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CHAPTER ONE

ETHICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC SCHOLARSHIP

> The old way of dealing with the problem of many cultures was to make us *e pluribus unum*. Out of many cultures, to mold one. Anyone who appreciates [. . .] the splendid variety of American literatures [. . .] is likely to balk at such a project. And anyone who has looked at our history and seen how often the one into which we were to be made was white and Anglo-Saxon and Protestant will be skeptical that the one into which we are to be made could be anything other than the cover for the domination of one of our sectional cultures. These are, in my view, legitimate skepticisms. And the only alternative, so far as I can see, that doesn't threaten perpetual schism, is the hard work of a multiculturalism that accepts America's diversity while teaching each of us the ways and the worth of others.
> —K. Anthony Appiah ("Race, Pluralism and Afrocentricity" 118)

The "hard work of a multiculturalism" that accepts and celebrates diversity has been a central focus for American literary studies for some time. Appiah's is one of several perspectives in an ongoing conversation about the function of cultural difference in the study of the humanities in the United States. These critical conversations have been called "identity politics." Under the umbrella of that (occasionally derisive) moniker, scholarly inquiries about the relationship of culture to identity pervade most of the criticism of American literature since the so-called "culture wars" gained primacy in the late 1980s. This project undertakes an approach to contemporary American fiction and aims to contribute to those debates and assist with that "hard work," by focusing upon fictional texts by writers who are not "white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant" and whose fiction seeks to represent the collective identities of others of similar cultural backgrounds as a response to the historiography of cultural trauma. The novels by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherman Alexie, Craig Womack, Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz analyzed in this study present readers with a testimonial account of the traumatic events shared by categorical groups.

As I examine African American novels that treat slavery, Native American novels that dramatize land and child theft and Dominican and Haitian American accounts of U.S. backed hegemony in the Caribbean diaspora, I hope to demonstrate how some works of contemporary American fiction function as literatures of witness. In analyzing the testimonial functions of each novel I hope to provide a model for “reading across” ethnic literature under an ethical framework, which establishes coalitions across difference without colonization. Each author crafts his or her text autoethnographically and generates a mechanism for encouraging ideological transformation in readers, specifically insider-readers, who share the author’s subject position and have a personal stake in the testimony about cultural trauma. The strategies each group uses will often be based upon building group solidarity around historical perspectives at odds with dominant historical construction in mainstream American culture. These strategies are hard to track, and engagement on an ethical level is difficult for critics who are not also insiders. However, even as these texts speak within group identities the novels communicate across those group identities. In the fictive strategies that the authors employ to deliver their testimony to outsider-readers, I hope to find an implicit mechanism for building coalitions for social justice around literature.

One might reasonably inquire as to whether or not investigating fiction is the best vehicle for this kind of coalition building, since by its very nature fiction lacks the apparent veracity of historical or scientific texts. William Harmon's *Handbook to Literature* defines fiction as "narrative writing drawn from the imagination of the author rather than from history or fact" (202). This seems to set up a reasonable barrier between autobiography or historiography and fiction, but the extent to which an author's imaginative intervention must differ from history and fact is difficult to delineate.[1] Maxine Hong Kingston's short story collection *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and Tim O'Brien's collection *The Things They Carried* (1986) are both heavily influenced by historical situations and factual experiences in the lives of the authors, but both works are often categorized as fiction.

Since the distinction between fact and fiction is difficult to adjudicate, some critics have relied upon formal distinctions. Wayne Booth argues that fiction stylistically avoids both the versification and abstruse linguistic construction intrinsic to poetry and the reliance upon spoken dialogue inherent in drama (ii). However, Booth also notes that such distinctions are not always concrete, as in the case of prose poems or experimental novels.[2] Mark Spilka proposes a caveat to Holman and Harmon's simpler definition, noting that "*fiction* is now often used to describe any literary

construction or making—any of the ways in which writing seeks to impose order on the flux of thought or experience" (xi). The order that testimonial fiction imposes on the experiences of its characters is often at odds with what is perceived as ‘factual’ in dominant histories of instances of historical trauma. For instance, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Farming of Bones* both Diaz and Danticat attempt to either raise awareness or correct inaccurate perceptions of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Haitian and Dominican Americans, especially those born on Hispaniola before 1961, are likely aware of the horrors of the Trujillato. But the effects of the dictator’s reign will be filtered through systemic removal and the ideological construction of U.S. nationalism for American readers without Dominican or Haitian familial histories. Because insider-readers may already be painfully aware of the traumatic history these novels narrate, the locus of the order the novels impose is a revision to the histories (or the gaps in histories) that exist outside the novel from outsider-perspectives. In order to maintain a concern with attending to the novels’ testimony about colonization, outsider readers must be especially careful to avoid overwriting the literary witnessing in the texts with their own meanings drawn from a historical narrative that ignores the perspective revealed in the fiction. Such overwriting compromises the ethos of engaging with autoethnographic texts. Ethical engagement with this kind of literature requires careful analysis for the explication of testimonial properties.

An ethical literary analysis exposes the ways in which American national identity is reliant upon the assumption of ethnic difference. Toni Morrison has described this reliance in terms of an American Africanism, and Craig Womack has protested that Native identity is usually figured as a foil for American immigrant narratives. The novels destabilize national identity by writing correctives to U.S. historiography. These fictional texts reveal the human costs of cultural trauma—the context of which the insider reader is aware—to the outsider reader who may be unaware or misinformed. The progressive development of American identity is both shaped by and reflected within American literary production. An understanding of this shaping and reflecting might be best facilitated by an additional definitional imperative; what does the phrase "American literary production" constitute? Because the first modifier in the phrase identifies a national origin, such a definition must answer some key questions: What does the category "American" mean in reference to literary studies? How does the reification (or revision) of a nationally defined canon become central (or even relevant) to construction of cultural identity? A theoretical interrogation of identity, as an issue of nation as well as race, is a critical

issue in the study of American literature and may even be necessary to generate that acceptance of diversity that Appiah stresses.[3]

Since much of what follows this introduction will be an examination of some explanations about how identity is created, constructed, reified or illusorily perceived (and because the wide-ranging conceptions of ethnic identity may present a conceptual difficulty to the project) a clear articulation of how the term is used herein may be an appropriate starting point. By "identity" I mean to invoke what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "personal or individual existence" and to make reference to the psychoanalytical process of identification, whereby one forms an awareness of this individual existence. Such a "consciousness of one's perceived states" is "subjectivity," according to the *OED*.

In addition to collapsing such hotly contested terms as "identity" and "subjectivity" into a single category for analysis, this definition is also complicated by the central assumption upon which the thesis of this manuscript is based—identity is shaped (but *not* wholly determined) by ethnicity. Further separating ethnicity from race could be important here. As Appiah has rather famously and compellingly argued, race is not a particularly useful category of identity.[4] Unlike race, which seems to be ascribed from outside the subject based upon the perception of his or her phenotypical traits, identity is a socially and psychologically constructed through collective identification that may split or bridge racial categories. For instance, calling both Craig Womack and Sherman Alexie "Indians" makes a racial assumption that there is a collective identity for indigenous North Americans, but referring to Womack's Muskogee and Alexie's Interior Salish tribal affiliations marks them as part of an ethnic group. Rather than assuming an illusory connection based on variables, like the color of one's skin and hair, as racial categorization does, the ethnic category focuses upon shared culture, like the language one speaks or the food one eats or the place one calls home. Ethnicity, too, can easily become a category that essentializes individual difference away, but because it is a socio-psychic paradigm rather than a biologically determinist one, the ways that ethnicity may shape collective identity in the U.S. are certainly relevant to explorations of the American literary imagination.

In socio-psychic constructivist paradigm like ethnicity "identities create forms of solidarity [. . . .] with those who share [one's] identity" which then creates "a universal value of solidarity" (*Ethics of Identity* 24). One comes to understand one's identity through the interactions with others, who are either like or unlike oneself. Because Womack's sense of his own development may be informed by the role models and familial

relationships in his Creek community, the sharing of Creek identity becomes an important category of self-definition for him as an author and critic. This self-definition by group affiliation also means that communicating with others who share one's ethnic identity does not require any explanation of cultural antecedents. According to Appiah, as identity is continually negotiated in every social situation it is likely that one remains most comfortable with those one is like, since they do not require one to define, defend or explain one's identity. The distinction between this universal value and some others (like the WASPish tendency critiqued in the epigraph to this introduction) is that even in its universalizing impetus, the value refutes any position that might remake difference into sameness, because its universality is founded in its commitment to difference.

Ethnicity, then, is a cultural product that "works out in different ways for different people because different people have different identities." Despite these differences "many values are internal to an identity: they are among the values someone who has that identity must take into account, but are not values for people who do not have that identity" (*Ethics of Identity* 26). Since values may be determined by identity, an ethics of evaluation would seem central to the prospect of a functional multiculturalism. According to J. L. Mackie "[e]valuations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards," and Appiah has pointed out that cultural solidarity may function as the mechanism for agreeing and assuming those kinds of ethical standards. Mackie notes that "[s]o far as ethics is concerned, [. . .] there are no objective values [. . . for such values] would be action-directing absolutely, not contingently upon the agent's desires and inclinations" (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* 24-27). If Appiah's assertions about ethnic solidarity's effect upon inclinations holds true, then there may be good reasons to consider how testimonial texts situate readers as either insiders or outsiders when making determinations about what is ethical.

If situations arise when the values of the collective group for whom the author delivers his or her testimony are at odds with the values of the outsider reader, determining a clear ethos for engagement may prove difficult. Womack's *Drowning in Fire* dramatizes the ways that different cultural backgrounds produce different judgments about history in Oklahoma. When his Creek characters consider the history of allotment, they find the actions of the Oklahoma legislature that signed the Dawes Act to be unethical, and find that maintaining their land claim is essential to the preservation of their cultural identity. For instance, the Henneha family, who are the subject of much of the narrative, is one of few families

who still live on their allotment in the mostly Creek town of Eufaula. Josh Henneha, the grandson of the couple living on their allotment, works in the Oklahoma City office of the Department of Agriculture with some white men who express a totally different perspective. Those men analyze projected crop yield and note that much of the arable land around Eufaula is left fallow, which they see as a missed financial opportunity for Oklahoma's agrarian markets. The different cultural histories of the Hennehas and the white men at the state office determine their evaluation of the ethical use of that land. The Hennehas remember that governmentally forced relocation and land-theft by allotment have produced to an increasingly diasporic Creek nation that is scattered throughout the U.S., sometimes resulting in the loss of cultural continuity between generations. This memory of cultural trauma makes holding on to their land—even when farming on it becomes less than feasible—an ethical imperative; Josh Henneha looks back on the struggle to resist allotment and draws this lesson from that history: "Hold on and salvage whatever was left. Don't give up anything else. Sell no more land. Uphold the Treaty of 1832, its promise of unbroken land tenure and Creek national government in Indian Territory into perpetuity" (224). The white men at the DOA remain either ignorant or unmoved by that history. Instead of beginning with this history of land-theft and its human consequences in the present day, the agricultural adjusters see only that the fallow fields do harm to the state economy, and they consider the transfer of the land to corporate farmers as an ethical imperative. Ethnic solidarity may require a particular set of culturally influenced values, so sometimes insider readers and outsider readers cannot share a singular ethos. As he considers his job, Josh notes that because of his sense of ethnic solidarity, "I shared none of my male colleagues' interest in the agency's philosophy" (169-70). The ways ethnic identities may incur specific ethical values has a great deal to do with the processes of acculturation, transculturation and identity-based solidarity. Fiction, as a product of the author's ethos, allows those processes to be made more apparent to readers outside the cultural boundaries created by solidarity. Womack's fiction is more than just a memorial to those who have been traumatized by the wrongs visited upon the Creek nation; the novel can also function as a way to explain to non-Creek readers the ethos that emerges from ethnic solidarity organized around cultural trauma. Sharing the context in which such a set of historical values may emerge from history is a first step in an ethical cross-cultural paradigm.

Culture and a sense of shared ethnic history shape a textually revealed ethos in the novels I'll examine, and culture also contextualizes the ethical

framework in which readers interpret those texts. I wish to stress that my use of the word “culture” is not an abstraction of personal identity. Raymond Williams has argued that culture is the sum of the “processes of human societies and human minds” and that “[c]ulture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind” (16). The ordinariness intrinsic to Williams’s famous definition highlights the universality of cultural influence which results in the relativist ethics this project proposes for cross-ethnic coalitions. Every subject, whether originating linguistically or socially, undergoes a process of acculturation. The construction of any dominant value (whether it should be an epistemological norm or a system of mores and beliefs) would be culturally determined to some extent. Williams goes on to posit five important observations about culture; first, culture is learned. Second, culture is socially mediated. Third, culture emerges out of language. Fourth, culture works to organize hierarchies, and fifth, culture is material. Literature, as both an individual and a cultural product, may be one of the best examples of the applicability of Williams’s observations. The ethnic hierarchies produced by culture are evident in almost all written works. Language, with which all literary works are built, is both learned and socially mediated. Because Morrison, Walker, Womack, Alexie, Danticat and Diaz each explore how their characters’ ethnic identities are shaped by solidarity and complicated by transcultural contact, each novel provides fertile ground for the analytical seeds of inter-ethnic encounters as illuminated by an ethos produced by particular histories of cultural trauma. The linguistic and symbolic maneuvers that each novelist employs in allowing readers to infer that ethos of encounter is revealed by the use of language to construct culture.

An overwhelming number of 20th and 21st-Century literary theorists seem to agree that language is among the most important of all external pressures on burgeoning subjects, but approaches to the analysis of linguistic acquisition and socialization are quite divergent. It seems natural, then that the ways the novelists employ language to shape fictionalized historiography are also divergent. In any case, the category of identity—gendered, sexed, racial or ethnic—emerges at the point of its naming and the ethos of each ethnic identity may be manifest in the symbols chosen for that naming. When Morrison and Walker choose to employ particular dialects when framing ethnic differences between their characters to indicate their link to European, African and Caribbean cultural perspectives, the connotations of the diction and tone they choose communicate as much as the denotative meaning of the words they write. When Womack mixes Creek words and rural Oklahoman dialect into the English syntax of his novel, he helps readers understand how the level of

the text and the language of the characters are imbued with culturally specific meanings. This is also apparent when Diaz mixes Spanish words and Washington Heights-slang into his English-language novel.

Each fictive act of signification necessarily draws a boundary around identity to facilitate the solidarity of which Appiah writes. The ways characters share language, and the ways they are separated by it, indicate how collective identity and difference are culturally and linguistically produced. But this use of language to emphasize sameness and difference needs not be reductively produced as evidence for any essentialist claim about the fixed nature of ethnic identity. Culture is, as Williams suggests, material, and as material conditions shift, so do cultural meanings. There is no static African American, Creek or Dominican American essence that can emerge from Morrison, Walker, Womack or Diaz's works. The difference between Morrison's 17th Century characters and Walker's 21st Century characters is not that the instance of cultural trauma—the slave trade—is a permutable event but that the material conditions for African American women who are still enslaved are radically different from those who are not, even when they share a culturally transferred sense of identity built around the specter of slavery. This does not mean that the solidarity between Walker's narrator, Kate Talkingtree, and her enslaved ancestors is illusory. The need to generate solidarity while maintaining individuality troubles post-structural approaches to identity politics in literary criticism as well as in novels. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir argues in the introduction to *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (4). She makes an anti-essentialist claim; however, she does not imply that the act of "becoming," as she explains it in the text, is an exertion of total agency. One does not usually choose a gender, but rather is assigned one after a cursory examination of corporeal traits (much like racial identification from the outside owing to phenotypical features). Beauvoir articulates that external hierarchies influence the meaning and evaluation of gender identity to such an extent that the polar opposition of "man" with "woman" will constrain the options and identities of any subject on the basis of sex. Any extension of this claim necessarily complicates the construction of identity for any subject defining him or herself (or any author writing his or her character). Kate does not choose an ethnic solidarity, but is assigned one as she enters into culture. The categorical construction of Kate as an African American woman is a conduit that connects the cultural trauma of slavery with her sense of community and solidarity with others. Since that solidarity is based as much upon exclusion as inclusion, it also sets up a boundary around Kate's identity that is meaningful as it reveals difference. Difference

mitigates the possibility of identity outside an *a priori* symbolic order. Language (and thus fiction) and identity (and thus difference) are flowers with twin roots.[5]

All meaning is shared between subjects through opposition; language itself (as a font of culture) sets up these oppositional binaries. As pairs of identifying traits are socially negotiated through these oppositions, people are able to communicate, and through communication, create solidarity and name categories of identity. For instance, the word "man" is defined by its negative relationship to the word "woman," in Beauvoir's analysis. Because there are categorical definitions for sexed traits, the ways in which individuals who possess those traits are perceived is determined by cultural context rather than personal choices. What is right and proper for "man" will be conversely wrong and inappropriate for "woman" according to their oppositional relationship. Merleau-Ponty, who approached subjectivity from a phenomenological position, sees spoken language as the initial manifestation of consciousness, but Jacques Lacan, whose perspective is heavily influenced by Freudian structuralism, understands language as a preexisting order into which the subject falls. Because the issue of methodology and critical priorities is not often a source of productive engagement with theoretical or literary texts, arguments about the primacy of a self over of language (and thus of identity over solidarity) appear irresolvable. The nature of the perspective on these arguments seems to have a determinist effect on which solution is favored. This persuades me that all critical perspectives have a position that, in some way, colors the analytical processes and outcomes that are revealed by criticism. Just as culture shapes authorial ethos, so too does it shape critical ethos. Even when critics attempt to construct a position clear of bias, the risk of critics presenting an interventionist interpretation that violates the ethos of the text is inherent in the practice of reading literature. The identity of the analyst shapes the content of every analysis, just as the identity of the author shapes the content of every narrative.

Even within a determinist paradigm of analysis, one cannot rely fully on ethnic solidarity to account for all differences in a text or the analysis. Just as Morrison and Walker, both African American women who write fiction, come to different conclusions about the potential of inter-ethnic solidarity in their novels, so too might readers who approach those texts, regardless of the similarities those readers may have in terms of identity. Feminist literary critics, for example, take radically different methodological approaches to literary analysis, but are likely to see the same masculinist bias in linguistic construction. Julia Kristeva, like Beauvoir, considers how gender and familial roles might function as a

frame for subjectivity, but because Kristeva is more closely allied to a Lacanian methodology than Beauvoir, who applies an existential approach to the hermeneutics of sexism, the conclusions they come to have nuanced differences. Beauvoir is interested in disproving biologically and psychologically determined explanations for the devaluation of femininity in opposition to masculinity. Kristeva remains concerned about gender disparity, but suggests that numerous mechanisms exist that may recuperate psychologically determinist models for feminist uses. Kristeva builds upon Freud and Lacan to produce a revised model of identification that sets mothers up as spaces of unified identity, and as original others against which selves are articulated. Both Kristeva and Beauvoir find that because categorical oppositions are created and maintained through the social circulation of meaning, both hierarchies and subjectivity arise out of those categories. However, if language is an incipient point of culture, and culture is an incipient point of hierarchy and identity, that does not necessarily make the subject using language a deterministically constructed entity.[6] Situating subjects within a social hierarchy mandates a conception of consciousness that can only be expressed through language; ergo, every subject must access a symbolic order that both restrains and sustains him/her.

Identity, then, is performed by a subject through the use—both intentional and incidental—of language.[7] This idea is perhaps most often attributed to Judith Butler, who forwarded an argument about the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble* (1991), but the extrapolation of performativity to other categories of identity—like race and class—are also prevalent in poststructural thinking. The opposition between "man" and "woman" is a good example, but other oppositional constructions are more complex than the "natural" binary biological sex presents.[8] Cornel West writes that "[w]ithout the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be 'white'—they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity" (xi). West notes that the designation of difference also permits the possibility of collective identification through shared negation; European-Americans become "white" because they share the collective identity of "non-black." The opposition of "black" to "white," as categories of identity, masks the differences in ethnic background of both categories through the constructed relationship between them, and also works to deny the existence of other categories that are neither "white" nor "black." Because the notion of oppositionally defined categories relies upon the social negotiation of meaning, it might be argued that all identity is socially constructed and that this construction

is founded upon the hierarchical evaluation of difference. Debates that concern these issues are often derisively called "identity politics."

What exactly is meant by the phrase "identity politics" might be the subject of as much critical discourse as the definitions of subjectivity and culture. I use the term here to encompass a number of cultural considerations that exert some influence on identity. Because my focus is largely one concerned with ethnicity, I must make clear here that it is but one consideration. A nexus of socially constructed identifiers have interstices of interaction. For example, solidarity and difference are produced by Walker and Morrison's ethnic backgrounds *and* their genders. Womack and Alexie may share a pan-ethnic identity in that they are both Native American, but they also have significant differences in identity that are produced by their different tribal affiliations and sexual orientations. Danticat and Diaz, in a U.S. context, may be collectivized as Caribbean-American, but on Hispaniola the differences between their Haitian and Dominican national origins would be considered a point that prohibits full solidarity.

Identity is created not by one consideration independently, but by the interstitial matrix of often conflicting points of solidarity and difference. This matrix, like the individual identities produced within it, is created by processes of subjugation and acculturation. Hence, a theoretically ethical politics of identity would need to theorize of socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, regionality, sex, gender, sexuality, kinship and a host of other categories around which solidarity between people is built. To extricate just one of these concerns from the others is difficult and perhaps even counterproductive, but to treat all of them in simultaneity is impossible. For example, Hortense Spillers' foundational article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" demonstrates the extent to which African-American identity is inflected by not just the racial and ethnic constructions of the dominant episteme, but also by permutations in gender, kinship and class that constitute perceptual norms for that identity structure. Other critics—Morrison, Appiah, Allen and Anzaldúa, just to list a few—make similar assertions about the performed or constructed nature of identity. Toni Morrison's notion of the spectral "American Africanism" that generates an absent or silenced other in all American literary endeavors works to reveal the constructed nature of ethnic collectivity in much the same way that West's point does. Appiah's work to reject the biologically reductive explanations for racial difference undertakes the same project of revealing the culturally derived mechanisms for socially mediated understandings of difference. Paula Gunn Allen considers how categorical identities intersect, and she argues

that a close examination of different cultural perspectives proves that evaluations of difference (like the hierarchies that result from them) are never universal. Gloria Anzaldúa forwards some claims about the productive and radical potential of spaces between polar opposites—hybrid identities that fit neatly into no singular cultural construction. The particulars of these approaches may be radically different; each approach finds that critical interventions in literature written from marginal [read: non-white / female / non-heterocentric / non-elite] subject positions with sensitivity and modesty must not seek to apply standards garnered from Eurocentric critical models exclusively. Because identity is transcultural and built upon interactions between and within collectively identified groups, the critical methods for explicating it should be informed by the diverse origins and ethical concerns framed within the textual narrative. Often, a Euro-American critical methodology cannot account for the varied influences of interstitial cultural subject positions to texts by socially marginalized authors, and the singular application of such a method to such a text would mitigate the opportunities for using the textual ethos as a means of producing viable coalitions across identity categories. If literature is to be used as a tool for social justice, then readers and critics must seek to make the most of those opportunities.

Because testimonial fiction can provide such opportunities, it is important to look carefully at the way those opportunities have been missed within the texts to determine how they might be explored outside them. Because I propose a critical model for finding coalition through the ethical interpretation of testimonial literature, I begin with an examination of how some interpretive models fail in that endeavor. I argue that the chief reason for these failures is the conflict that emerges between the contextual value system of writers and readers. In my analysis I privilege texts that present a legible ethos, and undertake to illuminate the ethics implicit in the text. I understand the subtextual representation of each novel's ethical stance as an exertion of authorial intention, which outsider readers must respect. This means that the conflicts between the values of the reader and the writer are only soluble if the reader is willing and able to be receptive to the testimonial functions of the text. The reader, either insider or outsider, should look carefully at the ways the testifying author constructs a narrative that gives a complete history. That reader must consider how the author uses narrative to compel the reader to make value judgments about different perspectives on the history of cultural trauma, and the reader must be willing to enter into a deliberation about how the author uses the text to call for action that serves to secure social justice. This model for considering these functions in the texts produces an ethical

paradigm for interpretation in many cases. However, the ethical values derived from acculturation and solidarity go beyond the material functions of language and culture; Appiah notes that

> [w]e pass on our language to the next generation because we care to communicate with them; we pass on religion because we care for its vision and endorse its values; we pass on our folkways because we value people with those folkways. Even when these values are not explicitly articulated, they lie at the heart of our self-conceptions and our conceptions of community. Culture in this sense is the home of what we care about most. If other people organize their solidarity around cultures different from ours, this makes them, to that extent, different from us in ways that matter to us. The result, of course, is not just that we have difficulty understanding across cultures; this is an inevitable result of cultural difference, for much of culture consists of language and other shared modes of understanding, but that we end up preferring our own kind. ("Reconstructing Racial Identities" 71)

Accordingly, the identities of the author crafting representations, of the characters he or she represents, and of the readers and critics interpreting those representations all work together to produce a troubled maze of identification and differentiation. To navigate this maze, readers from different languages, religions and folkways must suspend an initial judgment based upon their own cultural norms if they are to hear the authorial testimony.

An important result of 20th and 21st-Century literary theories may be that the examination of first-person accounts of difference and identity has become a common approach to theoretical engagement with texts outside the core of the traditional canon. Examples of this sort of critical work come from a number of disciplines. For example, Mary Louise Pratt examines autoethnographic functions in non-fictional narratives; her work seeks to construct a paradigm that privileges the voices, perspectives and experiences of those marginalized communities, allowing their autoethnographic texts to define and describe their collective identities rather than imposing a Eurocentric ethnographic description upon those identities.

Pratt achieves this privileging first by beginning with the text, and asking what rhetorical clues might be provided that suggests a manner of reading. This manner of reading is just as productive for testimonial novels as for life narratives, because fictionalized testimony serves the same autoethnographic functions that Pratt examines in autobiography. For instance, Morrison's polyphonic and non-linear narrative in *A Mercy* (2009) employs a complex structure that is challenging for the reader. In

considering what Morrison may suggest about the content of her autoethnographic narrative a reader needs to attend to her form. The use of different narrative voices, each from a different 'home culture,' allows Morrison to dramatize an inter-ethnic exchange between her characters; in looking at how those different cultural values shape those characters' relationships to one another, Morrison makes an implicit point about the dangers of misunderstanding cultural referents. The form of the novel presses readers to linger over the text, to re-read and reconstruct narratives that are difficult to understand, to think about the different narrative perspectives as part of a continuous whole that is fragmented by identity politics.

Secondly, Pratt emphasizes the need for context, and reiterates that the burden of finding reliable contextual materials is not to be placed on "Native informants" but to be assumed by the ethnographic critic, who must be modest and attempt to suspend value judgments until after a great deal of context has been gathered. In her speech, Pratt notes that to read the letter of Guaman Poma, a Mayan bureaucrat, to King Philip of Spain it is not sufficient to look at histories of American conquest authored by European historians. Pratt draws important context from reading texts written by other Mayans, both in Poma's time and in the contemporary period that look back on colonization. In determining what kinds of context are sufficient, Pratt looks to contextual and critical texts that are also autoethnographic in order to illuminate the original autoethnography.

During the 'culture wars,' African American literary studies were the subject of a debate about the primacy of African American critical voices. White scholars of African American literature were challenged. Joel Chandler Harris' ethnographies of Southern African American literature seem as fitting example, especially since both Morrison and Walker have offered comment upon them. Literary critic H. L. Mencken relates a truncated version of the controversy about Harris' work: "Once upon a time a Georgian printed a couple of books that [were] little more than an amanuensis for the local blacks—his works were really the products, not of white Georgia, but of black Georgia. Writing afterward as a white man, he swiftly subsided into the fifth rank" (65). In Walker's estimation, Harris' work was successful only in "stealing a good part of my heritage" ("Uncle Remus[. . .] 29), and although Harris famously recorded a folktale about a 'tar baby' and a trickster rabbit, Morrison, when questioned about her novel *Tar Baby*, claimed no firsthand knowledge of Harris and stated that the story had been part of her family's oral heritage (Ruas 99). During the culture wars, critical voices like Walker's and Morrison's were privileged above those ethnographic sources like Harris' books because of

the ethical concerns about intellectual property and the authority to speak for and about an ethnically identified group. In fact, many of the most authoritative and respected voices in the critical discourse about blackness in American culture in the late 20th- and early 21st-Centuries are those of African Americans. This change is reliant upon an increasing number of autoethnographic scholars, and has been longer coming in Caribbean studies, and is still the subject of contentious debate in Native American studies.

What these debates in these three fields suggest is that ethnographic criticism is an issue that requires ethical examination because it may take up space rightly afforded to insider-speech, and, even if not, it may be so vexed by the competition between cultural referents that it is difficult for ethnography to be reliable. I would not contend that a scholar cannot ever ethically enter into conversation with testimonial texts by authors from other cultural backgrounds, but I would contend that scholars who do enter these conversations must do so with care and respect. Pratt employs a specific set of terms to discuss the distinctions between representations crafted by outsiders—like Harris—and insiders—like Morrison and Walker: "[E]thnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others. [. . . .] Authoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan representations" (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 35). Autoethnographic literature foregrounds the author’s culture in his or her literary representations. To foreground cultural solidarity in a narrative requires a particular kind of authorial subjectivity, one imbued with the agency to control the intentionality of the text. Raising this issue of authorial agency in interpretive praxis, as Pratt does, brings ethical considerations into an examination of critical practices in the study of narrative. If outsider critics are to interpret and analyze insider texts, then those critics should consider how the testimonial project of ‘writing back’ can be aided by allies outside the groups on behalf of whom the autoethnographer testifies. These critics need mechanisms for allegiance without oppression, for cross-ethnic communities without colonization.

There are many critics who have contributed opinions about how to build these allegiances and communities, proving that Pratt is not alone in her concern for the ethics of representing difference. The question of how to theorize difference (and consequently, to interpret textual representations of difference) is central to the study of the language arts, which are, at their semiotic foundations, rendered in terms of negation and identification. To refer to any subject position, in any way, already demands a consideration of difference; what subjects in that position *are* is

determined, in whole or in part, by a contrast with what they *are not*. In an essay responding to some of Pratt's work after that influential speech, Harold Fromm noted that "to refer, it seems, is to colonize, to take things over for one's brutal use, to turn everything else into a mere Other" (396). Fromm draws from Pratt the implication that critics can only operate ethically as insiders, that reading and analyzing across identities is always an oppressive action. Pratt's rejoinder to Fromm points out that academic scholarship *can* be distorted by personal or cultural agendas and value systems in ways that result in colonization. However, Pratt also notes that criticism, as a professional practice, can and should avoid distortions whenever (and perhaps even however) possible; she writes, "[T]he criticism industry is a reality not to be overlooked. Academics have a responsibility to stay self-aware and self-critical about their own and their profession's interests. [. . . .] The image of academic colonization suggests that one has stepped beyond some legitimate borders and laid claim to territory rightfully inhabited by others" (400). The issue of "rightful" ownership of rhetorical territory brings ethical considerations into the crucial conversation about referring to difference in the disciplines of the humanities. Fromm's argument that any reference to difference is likely to construct a power differential is similar to the one Pratt sites in defining her terminology, but Fromm's argument is framed as "simply reductive" in Pratt's retort (401). Within this dialogue *ad hominem*, Fromm and Pratt engage in a debate about the ethics of representation and identity. What the published disagreement indicates is that such a debate raises important, if complex and difficult, problems about whether (and how) ethnography can be recuperated from its colonialist incipience. Such a recuperation may require a critical intervention that carries a risk of turning the autoethnographic text into "a mere Other." Pratt admits that her on-going investigation of cultural difference is exactly that sort of "interventionist project" (401). Fromm worries that the paradigm for understanding autoethnographies as authorial texts leaves ethnographic critics with "the impossible choice of keeping permanently quiet or perpetuating ruthless violence" (396). These two oppositional perspectives may function as a microcosmic example of an important debate about ethical ethnography, but other examples from the same period abound.[9]

I believe that Pratt's paradigm is a good foundation for an interventionist project in ethnographic criticism. However, for this paradigm to fully assuage Fromm's concerns, it is necessary to illustrate that the methodology for ethical engagement with autoethnographic texts can function in practice in ways that neither blindly affirm autoethnographers' claims nor contribute to the silencing of outsider

perspectives. Any project contributing to the building of the kind of multiculturalism for which Appiah calls (and I believe Pratt's work seeks to make such a contribution) must begin by rejecting the equally problematic and diametrically polarized options Fromm identifies in favor of "something completely different" (Pratt 401). An ethical critical intervention in interpretive responses to autoethnographic American literature does not simply retreat into arguments about the inevitability of recolonization. Ethical ethnographic criticism may need to reconsider not just critical roles and responsibilities, as Pratt suggests, but also interpretive practices at the methodological level. The “criticism industry” is in need of strategies for preemptively avoiding unethical engagement (or "perpetuating ruthless violence") and ethical disengagement (or "keeping permanently quiet") with autoethnographic texts. Many critics and theorists have been hard at work developing, applying and analyzing exactly those kinds of strategies. Some of those strategies include: starting with the text as a recursive historiography and looking for intratextual clues that guide reading; relying on criticism written from a subject position that has commonalities with that of the author; reasserting the need for critical attention to authorial intentionality; expanding critical endeavors to include less-frequently taught, anthologized and researched texts and authors; conducting contextual research to appropriately historicize instances of cultural trauma; and providing deliberative analysis that draws out the implicit calls to action in the texts for readers outside the ethnic group depicted by the authors.

In the final three chapters of this work, I will explore how each of those strategies works in praxis. My analyses will always begin with what the author says about her or his text, and will then consider how critics who claim solidarity with authorial subject positions might respond. This does not mean, however, that I will refrain from using any Euro-American criticism or theory. Just as I believe that it is important to privilege insider perspectives, I am also convinced that outsider perspectives can contribute to building cross-ethnic coalitions, because without both halves of the dialogue autoethnographic texts cannot achieve the potential inherent to their dual audiences. As testimonial literature speaks to insiders, it memorializes those who have suffered most from cultural traumas and it provides a venue for correcting historical oversights in ethnography. As testimonial literature speaks to outsiders, it raises awareness about these legacies of cultural trauma—which surely can contribute to preventing their recurrence—and presents demands for introspection upon the role that difference and identity formation through group solidarity play in

perpetuating ethnically-motivated acts of violence, aggression or imperialism.

Because I remain firm in my conviction that a tokenized representation of each ethnically identified group is never enough to encompass all the interstitial perspectives that will occur within identity categories, I have endeavored to complete a set of three two-text dialogues about instances of cultural trauma. I do this for four reasons. First, I wish to demonstrate how authors in similar subject positions may come to different conclusions about historical events and cross-ethnic coalitions. This demonstration allows me to stage my own attempts to produce an ethos of engagement that coheres in some way, even when the values communicated by one autoethnographer are undermined by the values espoused by another. Second, I wish to make an argument for a wider canon of American literature. Evaluations of the literary merit that separate "Great Books" from popular fiction are insufficient for critical practices. Some of the novels I have chosen are not highly regarded as "literary" and some are. I would maintain that an ethical reader who attends to the testimonial function of autoethnographic texts can learn as much from a 'bad' book as a 'good' one. Additionally, because value judgments are subjective and often informed by the cultural background of the evaluator, those judgments don't seem to contribute much to the impetus for ideological transformation through reading that is the starting point for this book. Third, by reading across autoethnographic fiction I hope to illustrate how intra-ethnic dialogues face similar ethical concerns that inter-ethnic ones face. Because ethnic categories are, as discussed above, socially constructed, the ways in which solidarity is undermined are as relevant to this debate about the ethics of ethnography as the ways in which solidarity may be bolstered. Finally, I hope to provide some of the necessary context and attend to the deliberative calls I find in the six novels I have chosen. If this enterprise can be sufficiently produced under the paradigm of a book, then that alone seems to illustrate that it is possible for critics in the academy at large.

The next few chapters represent my own ideas about how an appropriately ethical intervention might be presented. As Pratt and Fromm's dialogue demonstrates, ideas about the most appropriate way to approach autoethnographic texts are frequently discussed and hotly debated. Those debates are far from sufficiently resolved in the first decade of the 21st Century, and the methodological strategies emerging out of those debates have inaugurated a new set of concerns into the discourse of literary theory. In the disciplines of the language arts post-modern representational maneuvers and post-structural theoretical approaches have

become dominant, and claims to the kind of authorial agency Pratt suggests are often highly suspect.[10] Critics who are not in the same cultural subject position as the autoethnographers about whose works they write can (and probably should) ethically engage with autoethnographic texts by relinquishing some amount of control of the texts to the author and the group with which the autoethnography professes solidarity. I hope that beginning with the fiction-as-exposition, and then proceeding to the authors' claims about that text and the ethnographic criticism will provide mechanisms for relinquishing that control as this methodology cedes primary interpretive authority to members of the group that is represented in the autoethnography. In what follows, I will theoretically outline appropriate strategies for such a relinquishment, and rhetorically situate those strategies in an on-going critical conversation about the role of culture in a progressive tradition of literary scholarship and pedagogy in the American academy of letters.

In examining the role of the ethnographic criticism of autoethnographic American fiction, this work attempts to posit and provide evidence for some claims about the relationship between literature and American identity, as shaped by ethnicity. Chief among these claims is my belief that the diasporic qualities of American culture prove to be central to both national identity (as a paradoxical site of solidarity and differentiation) and literary production (as a material and personal artifact espousing a particular identity). Movement from place to place, from nation to nation and region to region is a central commonality in the works of most writers in the U.S. canon, even those who write from a dominant subject position. Even relatively static writers who may be regionally defined often reflect the hidden diversity within seemingly homogenous cultural groups. For instance, within Flannery O'Connor's work—all of which, it may be argued, is illustrative of the oeuvre of U.S. Southern literature—the distinctions between white Protestant Southerners and white Catholic Southerners, or rich urbanite whites and poor rural whites are explored with an attention to differentiation.

Writers in the United States live in a national community expanding out of numerous ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and to divorce their works from the context of diasporic identity would suppress some of the most important content from American literature. In spite of this diasporic root, there is no core American diaspora, but instead each diasporic experience is heterologous and denies any monolithic conception of national culture. Each instance of transculturation in the U.S. creates its own contextual instance of diasporically determined identity, and many of

these instances are artfully represented, in their specific contexts, by writers of autoethnographic fiction.

The multicultural and immigrant traditions within American literature have important relevance to the ways in which I consider strategies for ethical engagement. The strategies with which this project is primarily concerned might work to generate a theoretical synthesis of divergent methods produced in area-specific literary studies. In the United States oppressive institutions create the necessary conditions for cultural trauma in the service of a nationalist concern with constructing a consolidated, white supremacist American identity—either by defining it against an African-descended other that is to be subordinated, positioning it as an achievement of 'manifest destiny' to repopulate space left vacant by a 'vanishing' indigenous population, or by constructing it as a resilient stronghold that denies entry to 'third-world boat people.' I hope that by looking at some autoethnographic fiction and literary criticism in African American literature, Native American literature and Caribbean American literature together, I may be able to learn what mechanisms for ethical engagement those autoethnographers recommend. In intervening in those recommendations, my object is to generate a paradigm for coalition building outside the pan-ethnic categories to which the criticism in each of those literary areas speaks. Because of its orientation on synthesis and recontextualization, what follows this introduction may make a contribution to these existing critical discourses by way of positing an emphatic shift in critical practices. In spite (or perhaps because) of this syncretic orientation (which proposes to find some commonalities between autoethnographic literature and critics written by three very different marginalized American populations), I am willing to risk proscription in my exploration of the role of the ethnographic critic, which, admittedly, is a risky theoretical endeavor that may have as many ethical problems as it attempts to resolve or mitigate.

Speaking for or about autoethnographic literature risks a number of potentially hegemonic rhetorical actions against (or even insulting assumptions about) the subject position of the autoethnographer. At best, that critical intervention can start a process by which "the ways and worth of others" may more fully be understood. At worst, critical intervention in autoethnographic writing can have the result of silencing or distorting the voices of the autoethnographers. This argument has often galvanized calls by scholars in marginal positions for metropolitan critics to "move over" (Maracle 10) so as to create a space for autoethnographic voices to take precedence over ethnographic ones. This "moving over" is distinct from Fromm's suggestion that ethnographers should keep "permanently quiet"

because it doesn't elide any notion of describing or discussing difference as a mechanism for colonizing autoethnographic texts. Rather, the call to "move over" suggests that ethnographic criticism is only one part of a larger project to discover how identity-based hierarchies might be challenged through narrative. Calls to "move over" simply argue that prioritizing autoethnographic critical voices within scholarly conversations may be requisite for the success of that project.

"Moving over" may not necessarily assume that the ethnographic critic can have no productive response to autoethnography. For example, one effective strategy for “moving over” might be to go beyond a tokenized treatment of a few autoethnographic texts, which only makes superficial gestures toward inclusivity. Ethnographic critics may need to read, teach and write about less-frequently treated authors and texts. It also could be ethically appropriate for ethnographic critics to remain current in terms of autoethnographic critical production. While the literature of the culture wars is still quite relevant after the turn of the 21st-Century, limiting ethnographic responses to texts that have an established and secure place in the accepted canon of multicultural (or “ethnic”) literature that has been included in anthologies of American literature also limits the number of autoethnographic voices that are being considered in critical and pedagogical conversations. This is occasionally a perilous concern to bring into one’s pedagogy. For example, if my own experiences in the last few years are representative, that academy, even at the turn of the 21st century, remains a hostile environment for the teaching of Native literature. Some of my students object to the "accusatory" and "intolerant" tone of Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island" when I introduce the poem in a unit on autobiography in my composition courses. One student evaluation of an introduction to fiction course I taught complained that the class required the reading of "too much Indian stuff," when only a single novel and two short stories by Native authors appeared on the course syllabus. In a special topics course for undergraduate English majors, a student who considers herself especially tolerant and receptive recently declared that “Indians are just wiser than other people. They understand how the land and stuff is all connected.”

Each of these varied and subtly racist responses is unsurprising given the marginal presence of Native voices on many university campuses, including my alma mater—the University of Kansas. The notable exceptions to this generalization, of course, are those BIA-funded institutions that serve an exclusively Native student body—like Haskell Indian Nations University, which is located, like KU, in Lawrence, Kansas. In spite of this proximity, which one might expect to highlight

Native Identities in the context of institutional politics, the University of Kansas recently pulled funding for a number of graduate students in their Indigenous Nations Studies program. There may be several reasons that these sorts of discursive and policy-oriented manifestations of hostility go largely unchecked. But I suspect one contributing factor is that a large percentage of post-secondary administrators and the American academy's professoriate (even that which specializes in the study of Indigenous cultures) is non-Native. Additionally, the fact that Native students often have a marginal presence within higher education serves to exacerbate the inclusion of Native voices and perspectives in the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. In spite of the "multicultural" initiatives in many collegiate classrooms, the current university system maintains the marginal status of Native identity in many cases. Unfortunately, pedagogical and critical activism is not likely to change the facts emerging from demographic data (although the loss of funding for programs that might train Native American students to become Native American professors certainly further complicates the issue). Scholars and teachers can begin by approaching the task of speaking to a body of largely non-Native students carefully, by finding an ethical rhetorical space from which to speak to each other and to students about explicitly indigenous concerns by using literature as a vehicle for social justice.

In addition to working toward the further inclusion of autoethnographic texts, ethnographic critics could consider situating autoethnographies in appropriate intertextual relationships to one another. This doesn't mean that comparative projects that treat ethnographic texts alongside autoethnographic ones are useless or inherently unethical, but such projects are not without their own set of risks. For example, Toni Morrison argues in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" that critical investigations of the intertextual relationships between "whitemale authors" and writers of color must navigate some insidious and harmful assumptions; she notes that some critics assume that African-American literature in particular "is imitative, excessive, sensational, mimetic (merely) and unintellectual, though very often 'moving,' 'passionate,' 'naturalistic,' 'realistic' or sociologically 'revealing'" (9). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa echoes this sentiment, noting that she addresses Anglo readers only incidentally in her autoethnography, because she believes that these readers are likely to be unprepared to accept the radical potential of her ideas. Certainly ethnographic criticism can avoid fulfilling these pessimistic expectations forwarded by autoethnographers by carefully negotiating the intertextual relationship between ethnographic and autoethnographic texts. Anzaldúa herself notes