Autobiography and poststructuralism - redefining the relationship: Maxine Hong Kingston, Jeanette Winterson and Audre Lorde

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Additional Information:

- A Doctoral Thesis. Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University.

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/8691](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/8691)

Publisher: © Louise Aikman

Please cite the published version.
This item is held in Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) and was harvested from the British Library’s EThOS service (http://www.ethos.bl.uk/). It is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM – REDEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, JEANETTE WINTERS ON AND AUDRE LORDE

by

Louise Aikman, BA, MA.

Doctoral Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of

Degree of Philosophy at Loughborough University
May 2001

© by Louise Aikman, May 2001
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the immense amount of support and encouragement I received from friends, family and colleagues. Professor Linden Peach provided an invaluable supervisory role with his patient, understanding and persistent encouragement. My family have supported my academic goals throughout my life and their belief in my abilities has certainly kept me going in moments of doubt. The role of my friends has also been fundamental in the achievement of this thesis. Cally for being a loyal and supportive best friend. Matt for providing such inspiration and being an excellent role model. Peter, Katherine, Dom and Andrea for much needed intellectual stimuli and also relaxing holidays. Iain, Anita, Anna, Cathy, Liz, Paula, Sharon, Neil, Maya, Dave, Clive, Kevin, Tobes and many more for their belief in me.
Contents

Abstract iv

Chapter One
Restructuring Autobiography, Re-reading Deconstructionist Poetics 1

Chapter Two
Black Autobiography and Deconstruction: Reviewing the Relationship 55

Chapter Three
Maxine Hong Kingston: Historicism, Communication and Identity 93

Lesbian Autobiography: An Introduction 164

Chapter Four
Jeanette Winterson: Oranges, Sexuality and Theory 178

Chapter Five
Audre Lorde’s Zami and the Restructuring of Difference 260

Afterword 324

Bibliography 334
Abstract

In a comparative analysis of three texts in which the narrators question and revise the dominant cultural discourses of the countries in which they are born, this thesis investigates contemporary women’s autobiographical negotiations with ‘history’ (a Foucauldian sense) and sexual, racial and national identities. Concentrating on the works of Maxine Hong Kingston, Jeanette Winterson and Audre Lorde, this dissertation is concerned with the difficulty of theorising women’s autobiography as a radical imaginative space. Utilising the term the ‘autobiographical novel’, this work traces how the authors’ deployment of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical, destabilise conventional notions of the self and hegemonic historical narratives. As such, this thesis develops a new paradigm within which to explore autobiography. It utilises poststructuralist theory, whilst confronting the paradox of how one argues for the validity of identity within this framework.

Rethinking the relationship between autobiography and the ‘indifferent’ subject position associated with poststructuralism, this thesis argues that the relationship between black women critics and deconstructionism offers a path in which to subvert dominant paradigms of subjectivity, identity and expression. By challenging the conventional distinctions between the terms ‘writer’, ‘critic’ and ‘theorist’, black writers create an autobiographical space which challenges categories of the ‘writing I’. Experience and theory can, therefore, become conflated as the generic constraints of writing associated with the autobiographical self are subverted. Kingston, Winterson and Lorde, it is argued, problematise cultural and representational hegemonies through their postmodern narratives. They reconfigure the autobiographical genre too through their
resistance to, and rejection of the conventional versions of femininity. Thus, a focus of this discussion is the way language, geography and history provide discourses in which the entanglement of the mother/culture/race complex can be discussed.

The third chapter focuses upon Maxine Hong Kingston. The questioning of whiteness as a synonym for America, provides a catalyst in which to explore her subjectivity in both The Woman Warrior and China Men. This is grounded in an examination of the mother tongue/fatherland dichotomy, and the problems of how to embrace the cultural abyss in-between. Historicising and mythologising her Chinese American history, allows Kingston to tread the fluctuating and ambiguous place, between recognising differences, yet not adhering to a universal group identity. She counters any traditional essentialist categories of ‘woman’ or ‘Chinese’ by placing herself and her ancestors in both real and imagined fields. Thus, Kingston traverses any fixities of identity by locating the dialogical relationship between “future memories” (Anderson), fictional self-representations, and the self.

The element of fantasy as undermining and problematising a ‘constructed’ self, is pursued within the fourth chapter which focuses upon Jeanette Winterson. Discussing her novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, I examine how Winterson’s use of fantasy foregrounds the discursive construction of the ‘real’; consequently, creating a dialogic relationship between history and fiction, and, therefore, the self. Winterson specifically problematises the historiography of the Bible, and uses a reinterpretation of this ‘story’ to begin to create her own identity as ‘difference’. Written on the Body develops the deconstruction of identity categories by creating a narrator who cannot be identified within any
recognised realm. Specifically, gender, sexuality and desire are, therefore, placed on a trajectory which flouts conventional discourses. This approach allows a reading of desire which, I argue, develops a poststructuralist reading of identity. As an element that is elusive and inexpressible, desire destabilises traditional notions of the self. It resists cultural norms and boundaries and, therefore, represents a subversive state which blurs the distinction between reality and imagination, nature and culture.

The final chapter, concentrating upon Audre Lorde, reflects this concern of revaluing the space for female desire through her reading of ‘the erotic’. Lorde’s assertion of the erotic as both a sexual and creative energy allows her to challenge binary oppositions such as passive/active or seductive/seducer and thus challenge conventional notions surrounding women’s relationship to power and sexuality. She reaffirms her identity as consisting of multiple ‘differences’, within her ‘biomythography’, Zami. Developing the problems of coming to terms with a lesbian identity, as outlined in Oranges, this chapter is interested in Lorde’s much more public negotiation of her position as a black, poor, lesbian in America in the 1950s. The chapter also pursues the problematic relationships all three authors’ experience with their mothers. Although Lorde attempts to interrogate this relationship through fantasy and myth, as do Kingston and Winterson, I argue that Lorde does not adequately question the traditional category of the strong black matriarch as she is unable to demythologise her heritage.
Chapter One

Restructuring Autobiography, Re-reading Deconstructionist Poetics

Traditionally autobiography has been a difficult subject to classify and, therefore, formulate a critical stance upon. Situated between fiction and non-fiction, history and subjectivity, the writing of the self involves a changing and complex perception of the relationship between the individual and culture. The fluctuating genre of autobiography is outlined by James Olney in one of the first books\(^1\) on the subject, which traces why there was an explosion of interest in autobiography in the 1950s through an understanding of how attitudes towards the self have changed with historical patterns of identity. Olney acknowledges that the elusive quality of autobiography makes it hard to state when the first autobiography was written and, as this is a traditional method of constituting a literary genre, this means it is both difficult and exciting to gain a perspective on the history of autobiography.

I will be historicising autobiography in order to define how the changing perceptions of the 'self' influence different forms of writing, and I argue that, as we begin the twenty-first century, the various distinctions surrounding autobiography are no longer necessary as autobiography bridges a number of different genres and modes of writing. This doesn't leave autobiography in an obtuse and obscure position, but rather posits it as heralding a dialectic between different areas of literature and, therefore, allows me as a critic to utilise the emergent 'autobiographical novel' as a

---

means to discuss the twentieth century authors Maxine Hong Kingston, Jeanette Winterson and Audre Lorde.

I use the term ‘autobiographical novel’ to describe work in which there is an important relationship between the various levels of the writing ‘I’ which certainly includes a fictional ‘I’. I argue that this kind of part-fiction is a more productive medium for exploring women’s multiple selves than traditional autobiography, and that contemporary cultural pluralism highlights the necessity of acknowledging fantasy and myth as part of identity. My exploration of identity, therefore, focuses on Kingston’s, Winterson’s and Lorde’s deployment of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical in order to destabilise conventional notions of the self and hegemonic historical narratives. As such, this perspective differs greatly from that by critics who focus on traditionalist autobiography such as Olney.

To locate the emergence of what he considers an autobiographical genre, Olney refers to particular critical texts such as Osborn’s The Beginning of Autobiography in England, and Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth Century England by Patricia Meyer Spacks. He proposes that these critics are interested in attempting to define “the moment when a modern autobiographical consciousness and self-consciousness began to insinuate itself into culture”, mainly identified as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these centuries, Olney argues,

---

2 This concept is defined in greater detail on p. 11
3 For a comprehensive list of other texts which trace this rise of individual consciousness see Olney, p. 12
4 Ibid, p. 12
autobiography as a literary mode ... [emerged] out of autobiography as a confessional act.\(^5\)

The dichotomy that Olney posits between the previous non-fictional, 'spiritual' act of autobiography and its emergence as an art form, which necessitates its move into the fictional arena, is contentious. Dramatically simplifying the genre of autobiography, Olney ultimately argues that the movement away from any traditional sense of what constitutes autobiography (that is questioning the relationship between self and history) has resulted in the late twentieth century focus upon the multiple 'I', which has caused the end of autobiography. He proposes that the deconstructionist focus upon the fictionalisation of autobiography and, therefore, the self, has willed the subject out of existence.\(^5\) However, the relationship between history, subjectivity and identity is much more complex than Olney suggests, and this is a point I pursue through developing an autobiographical model which recognises the significance of the relationship between fiction and non-fiction within the autobiographical novel. In fact, I argue that the part-fiction aspect of Kingston's, Lorde's and Winterson's texts is a better medium for the exploration of women's multiple selves than traditional autobiography.

Interestingly, though, Olney includes in his edited work the famous essay by Georges Gusdorf.\(^7\) This offers a more complex understanding of the self within history - from the middle ages to the mid twentieth-century - than Olney proffers, and I want to discuss this essay whilst outlining my own autobiographical model. Gusdorf places the self within the

\(^{5}\) Olney, p.13
\(^{6}\) Ibid, p.22
\(^{7}\) Gusdorf, Georges. 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' in Olney pp 28-48. See also Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Misch's works for background to Gusdorf's historiography
framework of a western history of autobiography, suggesting that "the concern, which seems natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it is not at all universal". This is a point, which I develop through this discussion, which moves the debates surrounding autobiography into the twenty-first century. In a changing global world where more people, and sometimes significant populations, are experiencing voluntary or enforced migration and in which tourism is increasingly more accessible, the writing and expressing of the self needs to include a transitory and multi-cultural level of identity. Moreover, it is important to recognise that not all individuals have the same relation to the dominant cultural discourses of the countries in which they are born.

Kingston and Lorde are included in this thesis as authors who have to grapple with the contradictions between non-western and western concepts of the self. Indeed, exploring the historical tensions between the non-western focus on mythology as part of identity and the western tradition of a more linear sense of self becomes paramount to their negotiation of the 'I'. Winterson is also included as an author who has found herself marginalised in the dominant white, western culture to which she belongs in terms of race on account of her gender and sexual orientation. As an orphan, a lesbian and someone who has experienced an alienating fantastical religious world cut off from conventional society, her sense of identity, like that of Kingston and Lorde, is ostensibly based on difference. My argument is that cross-fertilisation has changed the writing of the self, and that Winterson's, Kingston's and Lorde's works illustrate the way autobiography has to be reconfigured in order to acknowledge this. But

---

8Gusdorf p. 29
9Western critics such as the French Feminists have utilised mythology in their critique of the self. However, I am referring to the historical difference between the western and non-western tradition of writing the self.
their wider conceptual significance is in their deployment of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical, destabilising conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives. The notion of the self that emerges from their work, and on which my thesis is based, is “at once antifoundationalist and politically engaged, while promoting a field of multiple historiographies that is both contextualized and provisionally totalizing”.10

Although I want to posit identity as incorporating complex historical dimensions, Gusdorf’s historicising of the rise of western individual consciousness is a key place to begin discussing autobiography. Gusdorf identifies the Middle Ages as the period in which the individual became a focus for concern as distinct from mass consciousness. This resulted from circumstances such as the invention of the mirror and the connotations surrounding the reflection of the self,11 but most significantly the rise of self-examination is specifically related to Christian asceticism.12 Christianity created a divide between the previous “disciplinary notion of an individual being” without regarding any notion of an ‘interior’ life, and the emergence of a Christian destiny which involves “a dialogue of the soul with God”.13 Thus, although individual consciousness began to be developed and encouraged through this discourse with Christian transcendence, as Gusdorf points out, the destiny of the individual is explicitly connected with a communication between God and the soul. Therefore, aspects of ‘truth’ are inextricably bound with humility and forgiveness from a divine source. The ‘freedom’ of the individual’s

12Gusdorf, p. 33
13ibid
narrative and thoughts are consequently questionable. As Gusdorf argues, "confession, an attempt at remembering, is at the same time searching for a hidden treasure, for a last delivering word, redeeming in the final appeal a destiny that doubted its own value". 14

Gusdorf seeks to compare Christian-inspired concepts of the self with the later historical movement, which revolutionised the confessional narratives of writers like Augustine. Authors such as Goethe and Mill demonstrate within their works an awareness of the non-linear spaces between memory, experience and consciousness. These writers herald a different understanding of the relationship between truth, fiction, history and autobiography, which has provided the focus for serious debate in the twentieth century. Hence, Gusdorf seeks to define autobiography as ultimately both "a document about a life" and also a "work of art". 15 In other words, he recognises that this genre cannot be classified as either fictional or non-fictional. His essay, therefore, offers a useful point to begin discussing autobiography within a twenty-first century consciousness, which recognises the conflicting aspects of this genre. However, my concern with Gusdorf's essay is with his premise that autobiography is a 'work of art'. It is this focus on the artistic value of autobiography which late twentieth century critics have questioned, particularly the way he creates a hierarchy between written and spoken narratives. From a twentieth century perspective this now appears to be an unnecessary division, and this is a point which black women writers/critics, arguing for the cultural significance of the 'oral', in particular have addressed. Asserting oral heritage as an important part of cultural history involves a reconsideration of what constitutes the

14 Gusdorf, p. 39
15 Ibid, p. 43
autobiographical voice, and this is a subject I pursue in the following chapter.

Identity and Difference

Feminist critics reworking traditional concepts of autobiography to include women writers have argued for the acknowledgement of different and disparate subjectivities through various means, such as deconstructing the category ‘woman’ and interrogating traditional essentialist conceptions of race, class and sexuality. However, in the course of this thesis I argue that a number of these approaches now need to be fundamentally reinterpreted, as within the contemporary framework of a women’s poetics of autobiography, they remain static and represent non-confrontational, ‘accepted’ ground. Rather, the emphasis needs to be placed upon the recognition of merging identities both outside and within the text. This involves renegotiating ‘experience’ within different spheres, and other radical interrogations of subjectivity. It also means transcending categories such as fantasy, myth, desire and ideologies surrounding the self in which conventional discussions of the self are normally anchored. I am proposing that, within our postmodern, deconstructionist culture and literary aesthetics, autobiography gives *poststructuralism* a text and a discourse through which to consider human subjectivity, identity and agency.

However, I don’t want to create a set of false antitheses such as identity versus difference or deconstruction versus reconstruction.¹⁶ Gayatri Spivak has demonstrated that ‘strategic essentialism’ allows us to embrace a coherent, shared identity with others as given, while not denying the

---

¹⁶Benhabib, Butler, Cornell and Fraser, p. 71
importance of difference to us as individuals.\textsuperscript{17} The self is \textit{both} a textual construction (poststructuralism) and a tangible being that is formed outside a community (humanism). Kingston, Winterson and Lorde all create political identities, which "struggle to reconcile context-specific difference or situatedness with universal political aims".\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the view of identity as difference should not negate the shared themes of fantasy, myth and desire, which I trace in their work as building a new understanding of what constitutes identity. I argue they are building an innovative political position which is ascertained through moving both within and against political ideologies which take the subject to have a single, primary identity.\textsuperscript{19} I want to develop a view of identities as "at once discursively constructed \textit{and} complex, enabling of collective action \textit{and} amenable to mystification, in need of deconstruction \textit{and} reconstruction".\textsuperscript{20} Thus, the autobiographical model I'm proposing situates the individual amongst cultural pluralism whilst acknowledging the resulting contradictions and paradoxes.

Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior} and \textit{China Men} focus on the paradoxical situation in which many marginalised people find themselves: on the one hand responding to a need to conceive an assertive, coherent identity, yet inhabiting a sociocultural space in which numerous voices jostle for authority. These voices include not simply relatives (both real and imaginary) but also the hegemonic white male voice of history. Lorde's \textit{Zami} negotiates the political necessity of pushing through barriers constructed around her 'inferior' position as a black lesbian, by the

\textsuperscript{17} see Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' in Gates, H (ed). \textit{Race, Writing and Difference}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1986

\textsuperscript{18} Waugh, Patricia. \textit{Practising Postmodernism: Reading Modernism} p 126

\textsuperscript{19} Gilmore, p. 32

\textsuperscript{20} Butler, p 71
mythical elements of her past and around the voice of her mother who, as with Kingston's, seems to occupy a completely different space in her past and present lives. Although not marginalised in terms of race, Winterson occupies a comparable paradoxical position in terms of her sexual orientation and the way her mother is configured as a real and imaginative presence in her consciousness. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*\(^\text{21}\) considers the problem of finding and expressing an identity against the backdrop of *The Old Testament*, a principal text in her childhood environment, and the portrayal of lesbian desire in a predominantly heterosexual culture.

Winterson's *Written on the Body*,\(^\text{22}\) however, is a more radical inclusion in my critique of the autobiographical novel than *Oranges*. As a text with a genderless, raceless and ageless narrator, the appropriateness of the label 'autobiography' is surely questionable. Winterson undermines the very notion of autonomy with a narrator who totters on the edge of a poststructuralist anonymous abyss. However, it is the *writing* of the self which is paramount in this text. Erasing the signature exposes the many false constructions and ideologies surrounding the self and draws attention to the relationship between the writing 'I', the authorial 'I' and the fictive 'I' on which my model of autobiography is based. A shift is made from focusing on re-telling a life to the self who can tell it.\(^\text{23}\) And this is also the case, albeit less radically, in the other texts I am discussing. Re-naming or deleting the authorial signature challenges conventional representations of the self and offers a site of resistance.

---


\(^{22}\) Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. Kent: QPD, 1992

\(^{23}\) Gilmore, p. 27
This is also evident in Winterson's earlier, less innovative novel Oranges in which the issue of naming is considered in relation to the Old Testament where it is power bestowed upon God and the patriarchs. Creating a fantastical world to counter religious extremes, the narrator shifts between the 'I'/Jess/Winnett to reconstruct an identity as independent as possible of the patriarchal hegemony. In her novels, Kingston also re-names herself throughout the text, reconstructing not only various aspects of her own identity, but also those of her relatives who are torn between Chinese and American representations of the self. Lorde's Zami, too, emphasises the importance of renaming. Described as a 'biomythography', Lorde replaces the 'auto' with 'bio' and 'myth' in order to draw attention to the way she has incorporated identity within mythological histories and those of other people.

All three are antidevelopmental and in the context of traditional autobiography, antiontological. This means that instead of focusing on discovering the origin of the self, they are interested in renaming the autobiographical self. Hence, rather than finding identity through reciprocity, they also incorporate the challenge of including the non-identical in their works. The narrator in Written on the Body illustrates this very ground between reciprocity and difference, as she/he cannot be classified in any conventional sense.

Through the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Jeanette Winterson and Audre Lorde, I am principally concerned to reconfigure contemporary feminist/women's poetics of autobiography in order to accommodate contemporary notions of a multiple and contradictory 'I'. My thesis

24Gilmore, p 28
necessarily involves re-reading Foucault on the discourses surrounding the production and containment of subjectivity and sexuality, which in turn requires revisioning the new historicist determinist argument that there can be no "subject-position" outside of the currently existing field of discursive representations." The three diverse authors on which my arguments are based are all located at a number of intersections, where boundaries of sexuality, race, culture and language are crossed in significant ways. Focusing as they do on the way fantasy, myth and desire can be used to destabilise traditional notions of the self inevitably involves them in establishing a new understanding of what constitutes identity in theory as well as practice. They, therefore, offer texts in which a poststructuralist analysis of the poetics of autobiography can be realised.

Initially, this chapter will consider how women writers/theorists have reconstituted the label 'autobiography'. I want to discuss them in order to illustrate the framework for my own autobiographical model, to create a platform from which my innovative position can be explored. This deconstructionist interest provides the focus for my discussion of current theoretical debates surrounding autobiography, whilst also highlighting the significant relationship between feminism and deconstruction.

Deconstruction, deriving from Derrida, locates 'logocentrism' ("Western philosophy's fusing of meaning with words"), 'phallocentrism' ("the belief in unitary male values"), and 'dualism' ("belief in binary oppositions") as totalitarian issues which signify a false unity between text and author. Women writers in particular have utilised this deconstruction of a formal

system of meaning in relation to *autobiography*. Thus, just as Derrida
problematises the hierarchy of nature/culture and speech/writing in
Rosseau’s *Confessions*,28 so feminist critics of autobiography have
challenged Rosseau’s depiction of autobiography as a linear trajectory of
identity and self-awareness.29

The Autobiographical Novel
As I have suggested, feminist writers have been concerned with
reimagining the label of autobiography, in order to emphasise the
relationship between not only the ‘writing’ of the self through
fantasy/myth/memories but also the various complex and conflicting
interpretations by readers/theorists/critics. Hence, words such as,
and ‘autograph’ illustrate a list of phrases which clearly subvert the
associations and connotations attached to this genre, problematising the
relationship between ‘auto’ and ‘biography’ from a feminist perspective.
As a poststructuralist critic, I am clearly interested in the deconstruction of
words, and the possibility of new meanings ascribed outside of their
conservative associations. However, I want to propose that it is important
not merely to rethink the parameters in *contrast* to traditionalist male
autobiographical narratives, but to *reclaim* the word ‘autobiography’ in
relation to the novel. The term ‘autobiographical novel’, I would argue,
does not simply imply that autobiography has developed to include fiction
but highlights the contemporary cultural pluralism on which it is based. In
the twenty-first century the autobiographical novel, as a development of
the kind of work written by Kingston, Lorde and Winterson in the previous

28Humm, p 109
29As identified in Marcus, Laura *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism and
Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, p 175
century, promises to provide a vehicle for the contemporary diverse sense of self. Women’s autobiographical writing, I argue, has pioneered the development of the ‘autobiographical novel’.

In our postmodern culture and society, the traditionalist autobiographical narratives of writers such as Augustine and Rosseau are no longer the principal models for autobiographical writing. Indeed, to resort always to this orthodox definition of autobiography is a redundant and defunct position for theorists of autobiography. It is now accepted that autobiography involves aspects of fiction/fantasy, a cyclical or disrupted narrative, different uses of language, history, chronology, and, therefore, identities. As Liz Stanley argues, autobiography can “deal with both process and product, fiction and fact, selves and others, ideological representation and its deconstruction”. The myriad of contemporary autobiographical novels written by both women and men reflects this interpretation, problematising any notion of a traditionalist unitary and linear progression of identity and therefore questioning the boundaries of autobiography itself.

My position regarding autobiographical theory develops the many texts written concerning women’s autobiography. It is one that acknowledges the diverse voices of women and the vibrant cultural possibilities within women’s writing. Significantly, therefore, the poststructuralist perspective on autobiography is one to which I argue black women’s autobiography and theory have made an important contribution. This provides an original

31 The Booker Prize winners are an obvious example of books celebrated by our culture which certainly disrupt the traditional autobiographical genre - for example: *Roy, Arundhati. The God of Small Things*. London: Flamingo, 1998 (winner in 1997)
platform for my framework and is the focus for the second chapter, which highlights how black women writers have eschewed the distinction between ‘writer’ and ‘theorist’ and brought the distinction between fiction and reality once more into debate. This section also explores the relationship between black women writers and theory, and how the development of a black feminist discourse, occurring at the same time as the rise of deconstructionist theory, created an uneasy relationship between the two, which was subsequently addressed by critics such as Deborah McDowell, and bell hooks.

**Women’s Autobiographical Criticism 1980-2000**

However, this chapter’s concern is the proliferation of critical texts regarding women’s autobiography, which have evolved from the first major theoretical consideration of women’s autobiographies, Estelle Jelinek’s *Women’s Autobiography. Essays in Criticism*. Jelinek’s text provides a significant point of reference as it traces the historical contribution women have made to autobiographical theory and their place within this multifaceted genre. Nevertheless, this text simply replicates the traditional divisions between private and public spheres by placing women’s separate autobiographical tradition within the private realm. Post-Jelinek interpretations of women’s autobiographical genre are more pertinent to my interests, as the conventional binarisms of public/private have been complicated by the deconstructionist interest in the non-referential possibility of a text creating a dichotomy with ‘personal’ writing. Deconstructionists argue that a historical self, a fictive self and the writing self all dissolve under the signature of autobiography. They

---

33 As observed by Stanley, p.91
34 Gilmore, p.35
are more interested in "the name as a potential site of experimentation rather than contractual sign of identity". 35 This is evident in critical texts such as Domna Stanton's The Female Autograph36 and Peggy Kamuf's 'Replacing Feminist Criticism'37 which argue for the exclusion of referentiality in autobiography, thus taking poststructuralist criticism to its logical, yet extreme conclusion. In contrast, texts such as Nancy Miller's Getting Personal. Feminist Criticism and Other Autobiographical Acts wish to reclaim the personal writing within theory,38 thus seeking to problematise, not erase, the signature.

The 'experience' and 'non-referential' camps delineated within the major texts, Shari Benstock's The Private Self and Bella Brodski and Celeste Schnek's Life/Lines,39 illustrate the need to question further the authorial concern within autobiography, depicting the debate surrounding autobiography as not really progressing but moving in contumacious circles. In order to place autobiography firmly within the deconstructionist arena, it is necessary to subvert this contention surrounding the recognition of biography. The uncertainty surrounding the role of the author and her/his relation to the text highlights the danger many critics (or editors) of critical autobiographical theory face when classifying autobiographical writing. Critics tend to focus either over-enthusiastically upon the author's biography (for example Jeanette

35Gilmore, p. 42
Winterson’s work is nearly always reflected upon from a lesbian perspective) or upon the absence of the authorial presence, which creates a focus upon the autobiographical text. Both these approaches essentialise the author’s presence/non-presence. Clearly, focusing upon an author’s sexuality creates a limited interpretation of the varied and conflicting identities that constitute the authorial and textual ‘I’. Moreover, to write the author from the text places the onus of interpretation within an essentialist negation of difference, which, as feminists have been quick to point out, eschews gender, race and class issues, as the authorial identity is placed firmly within the universal subject arena. This is a point I specifically address through a reading of Winterson’s ‘unidentified’ narrator in Written on the Body.

The authorial relation of text to subjectivity, therefore, often occupies extreme locations, which are problematical, and can be reconstituted in reference to the authors within this thesis. Kingston, Winterson and Lorde are situated on the threshold of a number of different positions. They destabilise conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives of identity through recognising that autonomy does not necessarily mean asserting self by annihilating other. A coherent, politicised self is not set in contrast to the disruptions and contradictions of the writing self, but rather they both inform each other. Using a Foucauldian parameter, I suggest that all three authors posit the authorial perspective as offering one interpretation within their texts. However, the fictional/mythical characters such as Lorde’s and Kingston’s ancestors, or Winterson’s fantastical/literary alter egos in Oranges, offer an equally significant part of their subjectivities. Thus, by creating a dialogical

---

relationship between fictional and ‘real’ aspects of the self, all three authors embrace a fluctuating identity. This is an identity which allows the authors to be present within a number of guises, which in turn allows for a ‘strategic essentialist’ concept of the self.

The complex position of these three authors both reflects and interrogates current work on women’s autobiography. The seminal aspects of Shirley Neuman’s criticism provide a useful framework to focus my reading of these authors. Within her introduction to Autobiography and Questions of Gender Neuman outlines possible future directions in autobiographical criticism, drawing attention in particular to the absence of gender theory within deconstructionist autobiographical discourse. I propose that a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography answers, or at least provides possible alternatives for, the ellipsis she outlines. Neuman argues that “the self-representation of the autobiographical subject at the intersection of discourses of race and class, as well as of gender, has received comparatively little attention”. She thus draws attention to the artificial divisions I have described above within women’s autobiographies, which concentrate on separate discourses, rather than acknowledging a number of simultaneous positions for the subject. Consequently, Neuman places her observations regarding gender on a trajectory, which allows a dialogic relation with other elements of subjectivity, creating this as an integral part of her discussion upon the discourse of gender within autobiographical writing.

42Neuman. Autobiography and Questions of Gender. p. 5
Neuman is specifically concerned that the spaces in autobiography regarding the representation of gender are often invisible and create an "indifferent" subject position for the individual.\footnote{Neuman, Autobiography and Questions of Gender, p.5} In other words, she focuses upon the dangers of creating an apolitical identity. Thus Neuman draws attention to the difficulty of negotiating subjectivity for women within a deconstructionist framework without annihilating different and diverse histories. She argues that a Foucauldian analysis ignores the different construction of gender and sexuality and, therefore, doesn’t adequately question this fundamental difference between the differing attitudes society places upon men’s and women’s bodies. In order to subvert this apparent impasse, Neuman proposes that many critics of autobiography are now concerned with negotiating a space between ontological and poststructuralist positions, by “acknowledging the specific ‘epistemologies’ behind the speaking/writing ‘I’“.\footnote{ibid, p 4} She, therefore, offers this as a possible consensus for the diverse interpretations of autobiography represented by the essays in her edited collection.

However, while this provides a starting point from which to begin rethinking autobiography, a much more complex model of analysis is necessary. Given contemporary critical concerns, we need to develop a model that is not only concerned with the different projections of the ‘I’, and thus the symbiosis of fact and fantasy, but accommodates new historicist perspectives on the subject. Such a model would involve rethinking some key new historicist viewpoints. These include recognising the agency of the individual. Positing the struggle between the concept of the ‘autonomous self’ and the ‘individual as a product of society’ challenges the limitations of a new historicist discursive
position’. This position also entails the renegotiation of Foucault’s ‘politics of difference’ from a specifically feminist perspective. To approach difference as a resource, therefore, develops “Foucault’s ethics of the self [which] prioritises difference as an antidote to those dogmatic and totalising discourses which attempt to silence differences”.

Thus, Neuman’s concerns regarding the expressing/writing of the self can be addressed by acknowledging difference as a means to challenge any fixed notion of sexual identity. Neuman’s concern with acknowledging and challenging gender constraints is a point which I want to pursue through discussing the delineation of the mother within cultural discourses. At the time Neuman was writing, there was a limited focus on the maternal in women’s autobiographies, and this is a point which she records. However, while there is now an abundance of analysis regarding the mother-daughter relationship, we have reached the stage whereby it is possible not only to critique the maternal presence but to actually respond with anger, accusations, and even antipathy towards this ‘sacred’ bond. The focus on the maternal is a major part of my autobiographical model; it illustrates for Kingston, Winterson and Lorde an unhappy, strained and in many ways an irreconcilable relationship between mothers and daughters. These authors, therefore, deliberately deconstruct the mother-daughter loss at the heart of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. They deauthorise the psychoanalytic models, which

---


emphasise the symbiotic relationship between mother and child disseminated through this well-known myth,\textsuperscript{48} whilst simultaneously challenging the eurocentric focus of the myth and ideologies surrounding this sacrosanct relationship. The problem of the mother controlling and invading the subjectivity of the individual, manipulating her child's autobiographical space/voice, provides a significant subject with which to begin discussing a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography.

Neuman develops her ideas surrounding an autobiographical 'poetics of difference' within Essays on Life Writing. From Genre to Critical Practice,\textsuperscript{49} which explores further the complexity surrounding autobiography and identity. Providing a counter argument to her previous concern over the elimination of identity through the apolitical universal stance of deconstructionism, she balances this observation by now warning of the dangers of focusing on 'difference'. In her opinion such an emphasis could propose an equally restrictive parameter and lose any political significance if it simply becomes part of mainstream rhetoric. As she points out, “to mark one's difference in some circumstances may be simply to reinscribe one's oppression in a more self-satisfied manner”. Elaborating upon this, she argues that this “seems particularly imperative in a theory of autobiography where different poetics founded on racial, gender and sexual identities are being proposed as a corrective to earlier theorists' efforts”.\textsuperscript{50} She illustrates this point by arguing that autobiographical theory is in danger of blurring differences by demanding 'authenticity' for 'group identities', which she clarifies in reference to people of ethnic minorities. In other words, she draws attention to the


\textsuperscript{49}edited by Marlene Kadar, as cited previously

\textsuperscript{50}Neuman, 'Autobiography From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference'. p.220
ahistorical, essentialist approach to grouping autobiographies of ethnic minorities together as ‘aboriginal autobiography’.

Discussing this point in reference to women’s autobiographies, Neuman proposes that it is important to historicise these personal narratives in order to counteract essentialist assumptions surrounding their ‘group’ identity. She argues that to recognise diverse and earlier forms of expression is an important move forward for women’s autobiographical theory. But she also suggests that it is necessary to recognise the existence of autobiographical writing before the political rhetoric of the 1960s feminist movement. Otherwise, to simply focus upon feminist writing post 1960 creates a distinction and hierarchy between different expressions of the self ‘before theory’ (naive and personal) and the idea of asserting one’s subjectivity against hegemonic identity\(^{51}\) (political and vociferous).

However, whilst not disregarding Neuman’s points regarding the privileging of theory, I am interested in creating a poetics of autobiography which recognises and emphasises the importance of the rise of deconstructionist theory in the 1970s. I identify this poetics not in contrast to writing prior to the 1970s, but rather suggesting that it is this poststructuralist poetics of autobiography which can augment expression and subjectivity for the female voice through fantasy, myth and desire which questions dominant historical narratives. The merging of fact and fiction, myth and history through autobiography creates this freedom of expression for women writers. Therefore, Neuman’s identification of the manipulable yet hazardous ground between focusing upon difference and the erasure of difference can be interrogated within a different light.

---

\(^{51}\) Neuman, ‘Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference’, p. 221
Rather than concentrating upon possible interpretations of women’s writing throughout different historical periods, new historicism might provide the means for a more radical approach to autobiography. A new historicist focus need not replace one canon with another ‘feminist canon’; rather, it can be utilised to question conventional concepts of the self.

Neuman, however, within her chapter, does contemplate the anti-essentialist position towards confronting the dilemma of the agency of the subject within the poststructuralist concept of a subject being discursively produced. This is an approach which recognises the complexity of identity I pursue through the following chapters. Neuman conceives of a ‘poetics of difference’, which embraces agency, individuality, and the manifold components of subjectivity. As she argues

such a simultaneous and dialectic recognition, by critics and theorists of autobiography, of the subject as socially constructed and constructing might enable a poetics of difference that would allow for the particularities of discourse and experience producing and changing any given subject in autobiography.52

This emphasis upon occupying multiple and conflicting differences is clearly necessary to a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography. However, although I agree with Neuman that moving away from determinism within poststructuralism should be a significant part of autobiographical theory, this approach is something more profitably explored through a reinterpretation of Foucault’s work upon a politics of difference to which I referred above.

**Foucault and Subjectivity**

Foucault proposes “the base for a theory of resistance based upon a politics of difference”, in which differences are “seen as a resource ... [which] multiplies the points of resistance to the myriad of relations of

52Neuman, ‘Autobiography From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences’, p.223
inequality and domination that constitute the social field". However, his placing of the self within these ‘differences’ raises questions and, as Lois McNay points out “for many critics, particularly those on the left, what is unacceptable about Foucault’s one-dimensional account of the subject as a ‘docile’ body, is the denial of the individual’s capacity for rational and autonomous thought”. Nevertheless, by historicising Foucault’s writing upon the agency of the subject, it is possible to reinterpret his poststructuralist extremes which threaten the possibility of individual expression.

The Archaeology of Knowledge\textsuperscript{55} introduced Foucault’s concept of the subject as “just an effect of language, a figment of the short-lived-humanist imaginary, one whose claims to truth and self-knowledge will soon show up as the merest of transcendental illusions”.\textsuperscript{56} This decentring of the subject is clearly questionable within the autobiographical genre. However, Foucault’s later works reopened “the questions of truth, knowledge, and ethical agency”,\textsuperscript{57} which began to recognise the self-creation of the subject. Thus, the ‘dividing practices’, in which societal ‘norms’ and ‘deviants’ are created, informs his earlier works, but takes on a new direction when he looks at “those processes of self-formation in which the person is active”\textsuperscript{58}(discussed within The History of Sexuality volumes).

\textsuperscript{53}McNay, p. 110
\textsuperscript{54}ibid, p. 83
\textsuperscript{56}Norris, Christopher. Truth and the Ethics of Criticism. Manchester, Manchester University Press. 1994, p. 41
\textsuperscript{57}ibid
Importantly, McNay identifies Foucault’s last work within these volumes as specifically revising his notion of the self. She argues that Foucault provides a different perspective to other poststructuralist critics, as he is “unwilling to reject completely certain concepts derived from Enlightenment thought, such as autonomy, domination and self-determination, in the name of an undifferentiated celebration of plurality.” Thus, McNay highlights the fundamental problem surrounding the poststructuralist dissolution of the subject. However, she notes that “there is an unresolved tension” between Foucault’s commitment to emancipatory social change and his refusal to outline normative assumptions upon which such a change should be based. Therefore, his insistence upon viewing individuality within the discourses of history can only go so far. This illustrates that although Foucault is concerned with fighting the objectification of the subject, proposing that “we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries”, he doesn’t offer any possibility for this in his definition of the subject, either within his earlier or later works. By revising new historicism to include a ‘future memory’ mode of existence (discussed in further detail at the end of this chapter), and questioning traditional notions of the self, I offer a way forward through the conundrum Foucault creates.

Neuman also challenges aspects of the static subject, as she posits the changing, in process, poetics of differences, which is necessary for a

---

60McNay, p. 117
61within The Use of Pleasure
62McNay, p. 8
poststructuralist reading of autobiography. Her understanding of the redefinition of autobiography, which involves both challenging and appropriating humanist and poststructuralist theories of autobiography, places her in a fluctuating position. She specifically embraces the "intersubjectivity that occurs as the autobiographical 'I' is 'called momentarily' into this or that discourse, this or that subject-position". However, it does lead her to contemplate the difficulties of describing a poetics of difference within autobiographical theory without "falling back into the problems of categorisation". She concludes that a poetics of difference is "unwriteable" which, paradoxically, is precisely how it can exist; it is *uncontained* and allows for the self to move into different "systems".

Her poetics of difference, which remains indefinable, raises queries, however, as in its vagueness it could lend itself to misunderstandings. Neuman's perspective also stands in stark contrast with other autobiographical critics' attempts to outline an overt agenda with which to recognise and critique autobiography. I propose that a more productive approach to the defining of a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography is to negotiate a position between these two extremes. I suggest that humanist *and* poststructuralist ideologies inform concepts of identity. Within my framework, a genealogical approach towards identity categories is combined with reproducing some identity politics while resisting others. In other words, a coherent, political identity can exist

---

64 Neuman, "Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences", p.217
65 ibid, p.226
66 ibid, p.225
67 "A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view. Rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating an *origin* and *cause* of those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin". Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, p.xxix.
alongside "resistance, contradiction and interruption". For example, a feminist framework can be identified within all three authors' works, yet this isn't a totalizing narrative, and it informs, not dictates the position of the writing self.

To develop this position, I want to discuss Sidonie Smith's politicised notion of an 'Autobiographical Manifesto', and her precise definition of this genre as containing texts "which participate in self-consciously political autobiographical acts". This description quickly emphasises the problem of such an explicit agenda of representation. Her overt challenge to the problem of the poststructuralist decentring of the subject creates essentialist problems of its own, as she proposes that this depoliticization of subjectivity can only really be subverted and questioned through an "expressly political collocation of a new I". Whilst recognising the complex relationship between autobiography and subjectivity, in which a number of conflicting discourses "can lay out an agenda for a changed relationship to identity", Smith nevertheless adopts an unnecessarily divisive approach to revolutionising the autobiographical 'I'. As she asks "what kinds of autobiographical strategies lead to what kind of empowering?" Smith places the 'autobiographical manifesto' in contrast to 'mimesis/mimicry', the 'politics of fragmentation', and 'experiential' politics. I would argue that these latter categories are also part of a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography and, therefore, need integrating with her definition of an 'autobiographical manifesto'.

---

68 Gilmore, p.105
69 Smith, Sidonie. 'The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities. Politics' in Autobiography and Questions of Gender, edited by Shirley Neuman
70 ibid, p.189
71 ibid
72 ibid, p.186
73 ibid, pp187-188
Significantly, this is a point which Smith seems to acknowledge in her subsequent revision of her ‘Autobiographical Manifestos’, where her inclusion of Jo Spence provides a coalition of ‘fragmentation’, ‘experiential’ and ‘political’.

The dialogic relation between the different ‘categories’ of experiential and political writing is, however, not pursued within either of Smith’s articles. I would, therefore, suggest that Kingston’s, Winterson’s and Lorde’s works illustrate that Smith’s autobiographical manifesto can include a less rigid interpretation and paradigm of the ‘revolutionary subjectivities’ she outlines. Focusing upon Cixous and Andzaldua, Smith defines the ‘autobiographical manifesto’ in relation to their revolutionising of language and in the suggestion of a new subject position. Thus, she describes this ‘manifesto’ as contesting the sovereignty of the white male ‘I’, questioning the binary between the public and the private, voicing multiple oppressions, resisting a universalising position, and “to speak for the future”. Although I understand that any definition of an ‘autobiographical manifesto’ must be controversial, operating simultaneously within points of exclusion and inclusion, Smith’s list is compromised by her reference to a self-conscious objective within autobiographical practice. By placing her autobiographical manifestos within an overt political arena, Smith inadvertently creates a hierarchy between ‘real’ autobiographies and those which consciously question

---

75 Smith defines Spence as “incorporating bare chronological data with exhibition catalogues, interviews, articles, and photographs in a textual montage of self-portraiture and its politics”, ibid, p.154
76 Smith specifically refers to Cixous, Hélène ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ and Anzaldúa, Gloria. Borderlands/La Frontera
77 Smith, ‘The Autobiographical Manifesto’, p 194
identity. Thus, the ‘private’ sphere (represented by diaries and journals) is not addressed in this manifesto, but rather repressed to an insignificant level of identity. Smith’s position is further compounded in her text *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* which, although written prior to the above ‘Autobiographical Manifesto’, still resolutely categorises between different types of autobiographies. In *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* Smith distinguishes between diaries, journals and oral histories, and ‘formal’ autobiography, which are written to be published,\(^{78}\) as she proposes that different sets of critical tools are needed to approach these various forms of writing.

The authors with which this thesis is concerned do not fit into the municipal realm outlined by Smith, but occupy a much more complex position. I argue that they rethink Smith’s fuller exposition of theory on a number of levels. Significantly, they develop the relationship between the ‘revolutionary subject’ and the interlocking elements of fantasy and mythology not addressed by Smith. Kingston’s subjectivities remain on the threshold of not only the reimagining of her female ancestors, but also within the Chinese mythology of the belief in ghosts and their relationship to life and death. Lorde also places herself within a Caribbean mythologised past which creates an integral link to her present identity. Similarly, Winterson’s merging of fantasy and different portrayals of her younger self is reflected within a reworking of the most famous ‘myth’ of all - the Bible. The problematic distinction between written and oral histories, which Smith implies within her introduction,\(^{79}\) is also disrupted through Kingston’s, Winterson’s and Lorde’s texts. Most notably within


\(^{79}\)although it must be noted that Smith appears to contradict this position within her discussion of Kingston’s ‘talk stories’ within *The Woman Warrior*
The Woman Warrior and China Men, Kingston illustrates that speech and writing are not easily separated; rather, they inform each other and, therefore, become an integral component of Kingston’s identity. Her life story is reasserted in relation to the passing of history through whispers, guess work and the imagined futures and destinies of her ancestors. A new historicist approach to autobiography thus allows the dissolving of the distinction between the ‘personal’ form of diary writing, and the more ‘formal’ style alluded to by Smith.

Finally, the authors address Smith’s identification of women’s autobiographical writing as “fragmentary and discontinuous”, which again is placed in opposition to ‘the autobiographical genre’. Rather, by questioning conventional notions of the self, I argue, the three authors challenge this traditionalist interpretation of “the empowering figure of male selfhood”. Specifically, Kingston’s rewriting of history from a female Chinese American perspective, and her focus of an entire text on Chinese men’s experience, challenge the ideal of a unitary ‘male selfhood’. By placing her writing within a racial context, Kingston explicitly undermines the traditional historical linearity of the autobiographical genre, highlighting instead the ‘discontinuity’ of history exemplified by the experiences of her female and male ancestors.

A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography does, however, offer a framework in which to discuss Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, as Smith concentrates upon fluid, multiple subjectivities and the renegotiation of cultural restraints arising from the position of being between two cultures. Smith herself, therefore, offers an excellent interpretation of Kingston’s

---

80Smith. A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p 17
81ibid
conflicting identities. Crucially, within this earlier text, Smith also identifies desire as disrupting the traditionalist category ‘autobiography’. Hence, she places desire as a revisionist element in women’s expression of the self. Although I would argue that Smith does not adequately address the unnecessary formal/private dichotomy within autobiography as outlined above, the recognition of the need for expressing female desire provides the impetus for her to begin outlining an alternative interpretation of women’s autobiographies. As she states “woman remains ‘unrepresentable’ because autobiography as a formal, public contract requires her unrepresentability, because it makes no space for female desire and ‘self’-hood”. I develop this point further, and posit desire as part of the poststructuralist poetics of autobiography I am outlining. (This is a point I pursue in detail with reference to Catherine Belsey’s deconstruction of desire in my introduction to lesbian autobiography and in the discussion of Lorde’s and Winterson’s texts.) Desire represents an elusive factor of identity and, therefore, the possibility of destabilising notions of the self in conventional autobiographical writing in ways which critics have not previously recognised.

The poststructuralist autobiographical poetics I am developing thus displace a number of binarisms: divisions which present themselves through various critics’ interpretations of autobiography. Hence, despite texts such as Liz Stanley’s The auto/biographical which offers an alternative to Smith’s hierarchising of autobiographies (as Stanley argues the case for the inclusion of ‘real’ autobiographies within any context of autobiographical theory), Stanley’s critical stance also provides problems

---

82 Smith, p 56
83 Stanley Liz The auto/biographical I. The theory and practice of feminist auto/biography Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992
of its own. My poststructuralist position, therefore, draws on elements of both Smith’s and Stanley’s work. Stanley’s text The autobiographical I illustrates an entirely different perspective from Smith’s later explicit autobiographical manifesto, as Stanley approaches the concept of autobiographical writing from a sociological perspective. The inclusion of Stanley’s text within this consideration of autobiographical criticism thus reflects the poststructuralist disruption of disciplinary boundaries. The new historicist deconstruction of writing genres and practices specifically encourages this redefinition of the self within a number of different spheres.

Stanley clearly occupies the autobiographical ‘referential’ ground, critiquing the poststructuralist ‘death of the author’ as a process of exclusion. She argues against those autobiographical critics who deny the relationship between autobiography and “the materiality of social life”. In particular, she refers to Domna Stanton’s The Female Autograph, which proposes that ‘graphing the auto’ as an act of rebellion and self-assertion should be set outside the referentiality of the subject. The differing perspectives of Stanley and Stanton provide an interesting focus. As an ‘absolute’ deconstructionist Stanton’s views of the implications of women writing with the phallic pen, and the removal of the ‘bio’ (the subject’s life from writing), allow for a re-reading of the genre of autobiography and the position of the female author. Once again I would suggest, perhaps contentiously, that although the position of the female writer is complex with regard to the history of the white male literary canon, within autobiographical theory there is a recognition of the artificiality of the

---

84Leitch, Vincent B. Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism. New York: Colombia University Press, 1992, p xiii
85Stanley, p 93
writing/speaking I, which is not implicitly connected to gender. Poststructuralist autobiographical theory accepts the deconstruction of dominant historical narratives, and consequently questions and undermines any sense of a linear literary canon. Thus, to focus on the 'phallic pen' is a less useful point of feminist autobiographical concern, as it draws attention away from the idea of a fluctuating identity, and instead posits female identity in direct opposition to the historical preference of the male 'I'.

The danger of this perspective is the possibility that the realities of gender difference are eschewed. This is an issue with which Stanley is very much concerned. She outlines the possibility that postmodern critics deny classifying women differently because this implies an essentialist category of 'woman'. As a materialist poststructuralist, I would propose that gender is at the intersection of many interconnecting identities, and this is evident in the work of all three authors discussed within this thesis. Lorde, in particular, illustrates the interdependent, fluctuating positions of her conflicting identities as a lesbian, black, poor, 'communist', 'ugly' and fat woman. Hence, Lorde reasserts Neuman's critical concern at the beginning of this chapter, in which gender is understood as a difference amongst many other differences, thus countering any suggestion of a predominantly essentialist female identity. Again, I would argue that a Foucauldian interpretation of ethics surrounding the self encourages this focus upon an identity politics, which recognises gender ontologies, but does not offer this as an exclusionary category. This is a point which a poetics of women's autobiography needs to make explicit, as the danger of a genderless position is that it is evidently apolitical.

---

86 McNay, p 113
The implications of these multiple identities, such as gender, race and class, described above, is something that concerns Stanley who, as a sociologist, is clearly interested in the material reality of identity. She argues that it is through a feminist interest in auto/biography that a path between the apparent mutual exclusiveness of postmodernism and the material realities of gender difference can be constructed.\textsuperscript{87} She develops this to illustrate that:

a concern with the details of particular lives ... show[s] the importance of time, place, gender, community, education, religious and political conviction, sexual preference, race and ethnicity, class and of the indomitable uniqueness of people who share social structural similarities.\textsuperscript{88}

This is then balanced with the recognition of the textual complexities of writing the ‘I’, the selective nature of memory, the fictive elements of the self, and the boundaries of narrative form. All of these elements emphasise the complex relationship between material realities and the autobiographical text,\textsuperscript{89} but crucially illustrate that the apparent polarities between fiction and fact, ideological representation and its deconstruction,\textsuperscript{90} can be approached through this ‘genre’.

Stanley thus challenges theorists who do not recognise this symbiotic relationship. Moving on from Stanton’s restricted non-referential view, Stanley considers Benstock’s \textit{The Private Self}, illustrating that although this text considers the deferred meeting between the referential I and the textual I, Benstock’s poetics seem to imply that one should always read autobiographies in terms of ‘gaps’. Stanley concludes that this emphasis ignores the very different ways in which autobiographies are written, and once again sets up a hierarchy, which suggests ‘good’ autobiographies are

\textsuperscript{87}Stanley, p.242
\textsuperscript{88}ibid
\textsuperscript{89}ibid, p.243
\textsuperscript{90}ibid, p.244
those which self-consciously include a hidden text.\textsuperscript{91} Stanley thus takes issue with Benstock’s “reading against the grain to discern problematics regarding the self and its constitution”,\textsuperscript{92} as this excludes different writing conventions and different reader interpretations. Thus, we reach similar ground to Sidonie Smith’s politicised arena of the ‘autobiographical manifesto’ in which a dichotomy between ‘good’ (read political) and not such significant autobiographies (diaries or journals) is upheld.

Stanley’s solution to the deconstruction of this ‘theoretical arena’ is to focus on the role of the reader, the life of the author, and the accessibility of autobiographies. She suggests that individual interpretations of texts are varied and valid and thus emphasise the complex relationship between the self and the graphing of the text. As she states “autobiographical textuality is neither deterministic of a life nor (usually) a complete invention: in autobiography graph is predicted upon bio, writing upon life, and not the other way round”.\textsuperscript{93} Hence, she centres her argument away from theorists’ analysing of the self, which imply that the author is unaware of the fragmented self displayed in ‘real’ autobiographies such as diaries and journals. Rather, Stanley argues for a need to rescue and recognise the author’s and readers’ roles within the autobiographical genre, ensuring that autobiographical texts should not be dismissed due to “their lack of sophistication in theorising the ‘self’”.\textsuperscript{94}

Whilst I agree that a hierarchy based on this dichotomy is surely replicating the very canon feminists are seeking to subvert, Stanley allows readers a deconstructionist role which she denies theorists. She argues

\textsuperscript{91}Stanley, p 95
\textsuperscript{92}ibid
\textsuperscript{93}ibid, p. 110
\textsuperscript{94}ibid, p. 119
that autobiographical theorists do not accept the "bio, in auto/biography, the narration of a life, seriously at a theoretical and analytical level", thus ignoring the "material events of everyday life". However, this implies boundaries that are not necessary within a poststructuralist deconstruction of the role of writer/theorist. Therefore, I wish to suggest that a more dialogic relationship between authors, theorists and readers will disrupt the opposition between referentiality and exclusion of the signature, allowing a poststructuralist reading of the autobiographical self. Winterson, Lorde and Kingston are included in this dissertation as theorists as well as authors, as their works demonstrate the unnecessary division between the labels of theory and practice.

Nancy K Miller's *Getting Personal* engages further with this problem of referentiality. However, she is concerned with explicitly reclaiming personal writing within theory, thus "turning theory back on itself". Miller, therefore, has a more comparative approach to my model, manipulating existing theoretical paradigms in order to imagine a deconstructionist autobiographical poetics. Miller relates the idea of referentiality or non-referentiality to a speech she performs in which she "suspended the autobiographical referent". In other words, she allowed her text to be ambiguous by "relinquishing the authority of the critical 'I' that would guide and control ... [her] reading". However, she found this...

---

95Stanley, p.244
96ibid, p.246
99ibid, p.5
100ibid, p.93
101ibid, p.94
caused difficulties as the audience made various assumptions concerning her sexual, racial and class identities, which were inaccurate but which she could not refute, as she had deliberately excluded personal material from her speech. In an interesting experiment, she revised the speech for another occasion, in which she wrote herself back into the subject matter, and proclaimed her identity politics as a ‘Jew’. In other words, she located her position as speaking from a number of sites of oppression and difference, and not simply from what ostensibly appeared to be a middle class white feminist. However, this adaptation brought problems too, as she discovered that she did not want to speak as a ‘representative’ and allow this Jewish identity to supersede her recognition of her other identities. 102 Miller’s solution to this paradox was the inclusion of the word ‘performance’ within her critical position. This word deconstructs the politics of representativity as it implies the taking up of a position ‘as if’, as opposed to ‘as an’, thereby deliberately exposing the ‘critic as figure’ within the text. 103

Highlighting the problems of representativity for women and the discourses surrounding gender, Miller asks

can we imagine a self-representational practice for feminism - that is not recontained by the pre-constituted tropes of representativity? How do the cultural and political restraints that provide the context for our discussions police and short circuit their effects? 104

These are questions I hope to answer by reinterpreting deconstructionist practices within autobiography. By re-reading Foucault to include the possibility of agency beyond these ‘cultural and political restraints’, I propose that the displacement of the present through new historicism

102 Miller, p. 95
104 Miller, p. 98
offers a new poetics, which disrupts the past, whilst simultaneously offering a further direction for the recognition of multiple identities.

Miller, like Stanley, is concerned with the conflating of ‘reality’ and ‘theory’ in autobiography. She states that autobiography is “a social and institutional activity [which is] distinct from merely reading autobiography or theorising it”, thereby questioning any notion of a theoretical elite. Miller argues that “autobiography in its performance as text complicates the meaning and reading of social identity, and hence of the writing subject”. Whilst I recognise that I am proposing a new theoretical model with which to critique autobiography, and that this is a complex and multifaceted approach to this genre, I also accept that my interpretation involves a number of contradictory concepts. My poststructuralist poetics, therefore, breaks down preconceived notions of the autobiographical form, thus complicating the idea of the writing subject. The emphasis on a poststructuralist interpretation of autobiography “collapses the traditional theory/practice distinction, framing “theory” as one mode of practice, neither transcendental or privileged”. I develop this point further with regard to black autobiographical writing and theory in the next chapter.

Given the poststructuralist emphasis upon the disintegration of definitions and ideologies surrounding the autobiographical ‘genre’, it is surprising to discover that contemporary critics often restate association of autobiography with ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’. This is very much evident even in Leigh Gilmore’s Autobiographies, in which she proposes that it is

105Miller, p.135
106ibid
107Leitch, p.xiii
crucial for autobiographical theory "to examine first the discursive legacy of ‘truth’ and ‘lying’ in the ongoing project of self-representation".109 She thus places her discussion "within two histories: (one) the history of self-representation constructed by autobiography studies and (two) the contemporary discursive histories of specific autobiographical texts".110 Although Gilmore recognises that in poststructuralist practices the binarism of ‘truth’ and ‘lying’ represents redundant modes of thinking, she nevertheless specifically utilises these terms within the poststructuralist interest of who controls these discourses, and thus their relationship to power and authority.

Yet, despite Gilmore’s deconstruction of these terms, I would question the relevance of them in the first place. In placing the production of ‘truth’ in relation to autobiography, Gilmore ignores a number of fundamental issues, such as the manifold relationship between autobiography and fiction, fantasy, myths and dreams. Why does self-representation need to be discussed "in relation to dominant forms of truth telling?"111 Although her basic premise appears to be that the subject within autobiography is no "experientially truer than other representations of the self, or to offer an identity any less constructed than that produced by other forms of representation",112 the discussion of autobiography within its connection to ‘reality’ denies the complexity surrounding this genre. Gilmore reaches a conclusion, which simply reasserts formalist arguments about the relationship between autobiography and fiction. Fantasy is now recognised as an important feature of the autobiographical genre, and my definition of the autobiographical novel emphasises this. Therefore, her premise that

109Gilmore, p.in
110ibid, p.xiii
111ibid, p.19
112ibid, p.25
there is a division in autobiographical criticism "between those who fake autobiography as a factual document and those who view it as much more closely ...aligned with fiction"\textsuperscript{113} is a redundant argument.

Gilmore does, however, draw attention to the destructive possibilities of a poststructuralist approach to autobiography. She asks how "the claim that women autobiographers construct a space from which they can speak differs from Foucault's sense that all writers inevitably construct a space into which they disappear"\textsuperscript{114} Gilmore's reading of Foucault reflects his earlier works regarding the decentring of the subject. However, as I have outlined with reference to McNay, Neuman and Stanley, it is the dialogic relationship between the self, the reader/critic and the subject which questions this deconstructionist 'extreme'. Gilmore proposes a different approach to understanding this perspective. Her description of 'autobiographics' posits the speaking subject as 'gendered', and the implications of this position are imagined through rethinking language and the 'fictions of identity'. Thus, Gilmore's perspective reflects Neuman's discussion of the complex relationship between 'gender' and 'difference'. Gilmore's description of language and fictional aspects of identity also provides a less rigid interpretation of her reading of poststructuralism, and I develop this aspect of her discussion in my chapters concerning Winterson and Lorde. As identified by Smith, revolutionising language is an important element within a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography.

\textsuperscript{113}Gilmore, p.25

\textsuperscript{114}ibid, p.90
implications of voice and communication become inextricably bound with the understanding of metalevels of identity.

Within this introduction, however, it is Gilmore's description of 'fictions of identity' which is of interest. This is an element which she doesn't pursue, to make the explicit point that fiction should be recognised as part of identity, not simply through recognising the spaces between the 'I' writing, the memory, and the 'I' of the narrative, but to move beyond this to analyse the dialogic relation between fiction and representation of reality at all these levels. This is a point which needs to be addressed as one of the ellipses in many critical theories of autobiography, and is also evident in 'Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject', in which Betty Bergland fails to question a linear perception of time and space. A focus on the elements of fiction and fantasy, as illustrated particularly by Winterson's and Kingston's texts, offers alternatives to this traditional trajectory of time and history.

Bergland's article approaches the symbiosis of time and space within the Bakhtin definition of 'chronotype', which places the human temporally and spatially within the universe. By discussing this within autobiography, Bergland suggests that "the 'I' who speaks in discourse determines the spatial and temporal 'here' and 'now', 'there' and 'then'," which are the boundaries of identity. Bergland develops her reading of the relationship between time and space to describe a chronotopic approach to autobiography. In other words, it allows her to

---

117Bergland, p. 136
read works written by women differently by “examining the subject’s temporal and spatial placement in the world”.\textsuperscript{118} But she simply seems to subscribe to the poststructuralist emphasis upon the relationship between the control of knowledge and power. Without reinterpreting the deterministic elements of the subject within discourses, Bergland does not offer us any new ground with which to perceive autobiography. Her approach is also based once again on the revaluing of past autobiographies and the acceptance of more traditional assumptions about history and autobiography, as do so many of the critics I have discussed. It, therefore, eschews a new historicist interpretation, which questions dominant historical narratives, creating a new space in which autobiographical practice and criticism can be developed.

As I have suggested, a more relevant discussion of Bakhtin’s perspective in relation to autobiographical theory would focus on his understanding of the dialogism of language. This would allow for a renegotiation of the poststructuralist interest in language, as Bakhtin places language within a different sphere of agency, which connects thought, speech and writing. He suggests, as Cheryl Wall points out, that “speech/writing [can] become at once a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche”,\textsuperscript{119} and this is a point I develop in chapter two. Language thus operates on a number of simultaneous and conflicting levels. Moreover, Bakhtin’s view of the cultural signs and socially constituted aspects of language are not left within the endlessly reinterpreted arena of ‘signifying’, which, taken to its deconstructionist extreme, would imply

\textsuperscript{118}Bergland, p. 156
that language is essentially meaningless, but placed with ‘utterance’ within a “delimited field of answerability”.120

In this framework, Caryl Emerson in Bakhtin in Contexts identifies Bakhtin as an excellent mediator between old and new methodologies, as he wants to make structures and genres more free but “not entirely, and not indefinitely”.121 Thus, he considers deconstructionist ideas with regard to language and meaning, but does not develop them through to their expected conclusions, as he rejects the open-endedness of this theoretical perspective and positions himself with the “antitheoretical mode of thought”.122 Although I am renegotiating, as opposed to eliminating, theory I recognise Bakhtin’s concern regarding the dangers of poststructuralism, and acknowledge a reworking of language as part of my theoretical model.

Thus far, the discussion of a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography has been developed by challenging and appropriating elements from critical texts concerned with women’s position within this paradigm. Laura Marcus’ book Auto/biographical Discourses123 represents the only critical text I am including which does not concentrate specifically on women’s autobiography. However, the inclusion of this text emphasises the fact that many critics of autobiography still publish works in which women are consigned to one chapter. With this consideration in mind, I want to focus only upon a specific part of Marcus’ work. She discusses the historical

122ibid
practices of autobiography, focusing on the rise of deconstructionism and the revolutionising of the genre regarding life-writing, autobiography and biography and, therefore, the specific move away from viewing autobiography as history writing. Marcus’ linear historicising of autobiography reflects, as I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, a traditionalist approach to this genre which I want to radically revise. However, Marcus does identify women writers within the context of a future poetics of autobiography, and deconstructionist practices. Moreover, Marcus confronts the dilemmas of the autobiographical space and the relationship between referentiality, experience and the place of the subject, through a reading of Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, in which there is a tension between an autobiographical voice and a sociological perspective.

I refer to Steedman’s text, as it represents a focus for many critics interested in the dialogical relationship between different genres of autobiography. Steedman produces an autobiographical account of the self, within the framework of a biography of her mother, and simultaneously deconstructs other representations of autobiography, which have excluded class consciousness, and thus are irrelevant to her working-class childhood. As a scholar who has written working-class history in other forms, she “challenges the sufficiency of two identity-authorising discourses, psychoanalysis and Marxist class critique, to describe women’s lives, here, hers and her mother’s”. The deconstruction of autobiography as ideologically a realist genre, analysing the clear fictive

---

125 Marcus, p.278
126 as observed by Gilmore, p.36
notions of the self,\textsuperscript{127} places interesting connotations within this ‘historical framework’ supposedly grounded in realism. Thus, the merging of history and autobiography within this text has important implications for the poststructuralist critic, as it traces the impossibility of a linear trajectory of identity. Moreover, Steedman’s problematic relationship with her mother also illustrates an integral part of my autobiographical poetics discussed previously. Both Kingston, Lorde and Winterson experience difficulties with the maternal figure and this is similar to Steedman’s mother who leaves her a contradictory legacy “of being both desired and a burden”.\textsuperscript{128} Steedman, therefore, specifically deliberates the absence of a feminist discourse in which antipathy towards the mother can be expressed.

Steedman “refuses to be read and to read her family’s life in the master narratives of class critique or psychoanalysis”,\textsuperscript{129} illustrating that it is the intermeshing of stories, the imagination and material reality, which create different interpretations of identity. As such, Steedman creates a tension with regard to her being labelled a sociologist. She historicises the documenting of the written self, whilst simultaneously recognising the problem of speaking for or representing others, a universalism which is dangerous and reductive. Her position thus complements and develops Stanley’s discussion of ‘real’ autobiographies within a poetics of autobiography, and places the deconstruction of the ‘sociological self’ as part of a new poetics of autobiography.

Marcus’ interpretation also places Steedman’s “redefinition [of] historical consciousness”\textsuperscript{130} within a new historicist perspective, a place to begin

\textsuperscript{127}Stanley, p 62
\textsuperscript{128}Steedman, p 16
\textsuperscript{129}Steedman, p 16
\textsuperscript{130}Gilmore, p 38
\textsuperscript{130}Marcus, p 279
deconstructing historical and present-day notions of the ‘self’. Hence, Marcus’ discussion recognises the multiple elements now present in autobiographical theory through her interpretation of Steedman. Steedman’s text, therefore, does allow Marcus to mention (although only in passing) the intermingling of fact, fiction and myth, and the individual/collective experience within autobiography which problematises any notion of an authentic identity. However, as I have argued, by placing most of her argument upon a re-reading of Gusdorf as reasserting a mythical framework, Marcus fails to give precedence to the real revolution within her description of autobiography, which is women writing autobiographies and women critiquing autobiographies. Marcus ends her book with a reference to the postmodern feminists’ emphasis on selves in the future, but fails to give any idea of how this future will be shaped.

**Future Meanings**

A possible way beyond some of the problems identified in the work of the above critics is provided by Linda Anderson’s *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*, which addresses this issue of the *future* possibilities for a poststructuralist interpretation of women’s autobiographies. Although Anderson introduces her text by focusing on the problems of a deconstructionist approach to the autobiographical genre, and the quandary of objectifying or erasing women within this theoretical stance, she does offer a possible way beyond this position, which the other critics fail to do. Her title ‘Remembered Futures’ reflects her revolutionary reading of women’s

---

131 Marcus, p. 280
autobiography. She suggests that memory offers a space in which feminist autobiography can question and consider the interconnection of past and present, and thus a different notion of subjectivity. As she states “a feminist reading of autobiography could ‘include’ memory, or create a space like memory, where past and future meet”.133 Anderson places her thoughts specifically within Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s different approaches to the relation between the symbolic and the semiotic, and the difficulties for female expression within the symbolic realm (this includes women’s relation to theory, language, the maternal and many more categories of identity).134 However, Anderson interestingly suggests that memory could offer the possibility for women discovering a “space within the symbolic for their subjectivity”135 (my emphasis), thus implying that memory works on a number of different levels, allowing a connection between different levels of existence (such as the semiotic and the symbolic).

Anderson develops this point by placing Irigaray’s interpretation of “imaginative fluidity” within a reading of Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. This text problematises psychoanalytic discourses and interpretations, by offering memory in which the “imaginings of a different time”136 can be practised. Irigaray’s use of memory, in which to “suspend the power of interpretation”, is developed by Anderson to propose that “memory could also provide a space in which the subject can create herself, or that it contains a future we have yet to gain access to [which] could also change the knowledge we already have”.137 She specifically posits the revision of

133 Anderson, p 8
135 Anderson, p 10
136 Ibid, p 11
137 Ibid, p 12
language within autobiography as creating this new space: "the words that begin to exist between women - and to which autobiography has contributed in abundant and intricate ways - create a space, which if not yet, will have been".138 'Future meanings', therefore, designates an emancipatory sphere of identity, where a new historicist interpretation of the past can be reconfigured, to include a possibility for the recognition of a 'future' 'her-story' within a poetics of subjectivity.139

However, although memory provides a significant space for the expression of female subjectivity within autobiography, working on a number of important simultaneous and disparate levels, it is most profitably discussed within a poststructuralist poetics which challenges the French feminist focus upon the transhistorical relationship between language and the semiotic. Anderson recognises the different approaches critics such as Kristeva and Irigaray have towards understanding female subjectivity, through their deconstruction of theory and 'master narratives'. They are both nevertheless posited in a renegotiation of language and the maternal. Thus, although they provide a useful point of reference within my discussion, I feel that in many ways a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography moves away from and beyond the French Feminists' specific recognition of the symbolic/semiotic divide, questioning this limited perspective.

Their perspective is, therefore, challenged in a number of ways within this thesis. The following chapter refers to their focus on language and the

---

138Anderson, p 143
139 The complex interconnection between the autobiographical genre, intersubjectivity and memory is pursued within Cosselett, Tess, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds) Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories and Methods. London and New York, Routledge, 2000, which I refer to in later chapters.
body, which does not adequately address an essentialist notion of biology and gender. This is then developed with reference to Kingston, in which the eurocentric bias to the French Feminists’ theoretical stance is revealed. Also, in reference to Lorde, I suggest that the semiotic space should be renegotiated to include ‘dangerous’ or controversial elements, such as incestuous relations between mother and daughter.

The French Feminists’ approaches to historiography offers a point at which to begin theorising this deconstructionist process in relation to autobiography. Their interpretation develops their conjectures surrounding the sphere of ‘otherness’. As Hamilton’s reading of Cixous expounds

The ‘other’ co-opted by history cannot be theorised, but it can be written in a style discomfiting to history’s purpose, exceeding its economy and elaborating its expository figures and metaphors beyond their stated uses.¹⁴⁰

The ‘other’, as ‘outside’ history, represents a significant position for subjectivity. As such, although I recognise the restricted relationship between ‘otherness’ and identity, this position nevertheless undermines and revises “history’s process” through the deconstruction of the process of history. Kristeva approaches this concept through a discussion of linguistic meanings and appropriations via the contemplation of the semiotic sphere. She “thinks her ‘semiotic’ alternatives to standard historical interpretation carve out a reading position neither masculine or feminine”.¹⁴¹ Thereby, Kristeva places the emphasis on the role of the reader as an emancipatory sphere of difference, as opposed to rescribing a canonical review of women’s works. This certainly creates a dialogic relationship between readers/writers/theorists which is of interest to a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography. Irigaray’s text Speculum of the

¹⁴¹I certainly problematise this assertion. Her focus on the maternal belies this premise.
Other Woman also contributes to the feminist historicisation of major discourses. As Hamilton poses

She not only posits a new object of knowledge for the reader, historical versions of men’s desire for a maternal function; she also embarrasses this scientific quest with its own history - one of disqualifying female experience from serious consideration.  

Hence, she fulfils the new historicist aim of challenging traditional concepts of history, whilst simultaneously creating different discourses of communication and interpretation.

These observations do, however, illustrate the French Feminists’ onus upon the realms of language and the maternal as specific historical discourses which need deconstructing. I propose rereading new historicism on a number of other levels. In order to develop this point, it is necessary to discuss in more detail the parameter of new historicism and its place within poststructuralism. As I have argued, I wish to modify both in order to counter the determinist premise of the decentred subject.

New Historicism and Identity

New historicism suggests that “historical agency” is already “inscribed in some pre-given system of differential power relations”. This offers a reading of history which clearly restrains the subject within the given discourses within society, and thus indicates the problems regarding the recording and writing of history - who ‘owns’ the narrative. Although this is clearly relevant to my theoretical model, it is important not to fall into the trap of deconstructing history to the point that it becomes depoliticised. By rethinking the discourses of knowledge and power, despite the New Historicists’ aim to question the objectification of history, I would suggest that there is a deterministic problem regarding the autonomy of the

142 Hamilton, p. 199
141 Norris, p. 70-71
individual in relation to the theories of power. I propose through my discussion of Kingston, Winterson and Lorde, that the subject is more complex and multifaceted than is perhaps suggested within the New Historicists’ focus on power relations, and that the subject occupies a number of conflicting positions. These include the recognition that an individual can be both autonomous and an ideological product of society. This, therefore, recognises the possibility of the subject to move beyond and through their ‘discursive position’, and this specifically renounces the underlying (hotly denied) determinism within new historicist practices.

Autobiography, therefore, illustrates a genre in which a dialogical relationship between agency and new historicism can be imagined. I feel that this paradigm offers a possibility of answering the concerns of critics of poststructuralist elements, such as Kristeva’s warning within Strangers to Ourselves and Nations Without Nationalism. She states “that we must find ways of interpreting ‘otherness’ which avoid the twin dangers of rhetorical vacuity and paranoid reactive definition.” By creating or acknowledging that the subject is not simply controlled by discursive forces, the dichotomy is questioned in poststructuralist thinking between “on one hand the subject ... conceived in ideal illusory abstraction from the physical or bodily domain, and on the other a realm of implacably determinist forces and drives which renders such illusions untenable”.

---

146Norris, p. 81
147Ibid, p. 42
I feel I am able to offer a path between these two extremes of an abstract or determinist understanding of subjectivity, by concentrating on the trope of ‘future memories’, the spaces which “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”. As Homi Bhabha argues

'Beyond’ signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future but ... the very act of going beyond - ... [is] unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the ‘present’ which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced.

It is this displacement of the present through the concept of future memories which develops Anderson’s concept of memory’s location as a space in which “past, present and future can meet”. The New Historicists’ discontinuity of history is, therefore, modified to include the possibility of future memories as part of historical discourse. Thus, a space is created which is not part of the past and present continuum, but, rather, offers a re-reading and revaluing of identity, through the constant displacement of the present. Consequently, historical constraints upon the individual can be challenged.

Frank Lentricchia addresses this contradictory element within new historicism by suggesting that this theoretical position “reject[s] the metaphysics of determinism while cunningly retaining (not without discomfort) a complicated commitment to the principle of causality”. He cites this as a paradoxical position for new historicism, which is unable to address the dividing forces between the ideal belief in individual agency and the reality of cultural dictations. However, the interesting aspect of

149ibid, p 4
150Anderson, p 11
151ibid, p 7
152Lentricchia, p 231
Lentricchia's observations was his deliberating as to where the possibility for this human agency could be fulfilled within historicism. He suggests that there is a crucial emphasis within new historicism upon the central belief in the self as a "product of forces over which we exercise no control". Yet, he also cites the possible unacknowledged desire within historicism, which is "to avoid the consequences of that central commitment, to find a space of freedom, and so free us from a world in which we are forced to become what we do not wish to become".\textsuperscript{153} In other words, he rightly pinpoints the self-subversive element of new historicism, which Foucault's polemics unwittingly illustrate. Lentricchia identifies the level of historicist discourse which undermines the objective rationality of discursive theory, that is the humanist impulse and desire for freedom and agency, as he concludes hating a world we never made, wanting to transform it, we settle for a holiday from reality, a safely sealed space reserved for the expression of aesthetic anarchy, a long weekend that defuses the radical implications of our unhappiness.\textsuperscript{154} Hence, we sustain the belief of our free selfhood within the parameters of our imagination (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{155}

This observation interestingly develops a poststructuralist critique of autobiography, as I have illustrated that the imagination does offer one possible path of agency and change for the individual. Imaginative concepts create a space away from the cultural (mis)placement of the individual authors regarding their race, gender and sexuality. However, crucially, the recognition of a poststructuralist subject, "which is precarious, contradictory and in process",\textsuperscript{156} posits imagination as an

\textsuperscript{153}Lentricchia, p.241
\textsuperscript{154}ibid
\textsuperscript{155}ibid, p.242
element present amongst many other avenues of identity within autobiography. As I have outlined, my autobiographical poetics offers an alternative reading of identity which revolutionises Lentricchia’s observations, as a number of theoretical bases accept the possibility of disparate identities and, therefore, destabilise conventions of the self through an understanding of the autobiographical novel as a place in which fantasy, myth and desire can reconfigure hegemonic historical narratives.

Therefore, although I acknowledge a debt to the New Historicists, I agree with Christopher Norris that their bleakness of historical and political vision ... derives from the conviction that subjects are always and everywhere caught up in a network of discourses.... beyond their capacity to comprehend or to change through any kind of knowing and willed intervention.

I am illustrating through Kingston, Winterson and Lorde, the possibility of intervention, of re-reading history and cultural discourses in ways that reconfigure the conventional boundaries of identity. In the autobiographical novel self-representation and self-invention are negotiated through language, imagination, fantasy and myth without denying the importance of real historical contexts.

By deliberately choosing three authors who have very different historical and cultural backgrounds, I demonstrate how the autobiographical novel can provide a different perspective on dominant historical narratives. I am suggesting that the self-in-process needs to reflect cultural pluralism and the contradictions which that entails. By looking at three authors across cultures and generations who refuse the fixities of history represented by their parents, without denying the importance of inescapable historical

---

158 Norris, p. 69

53
realities, my argument offers an innovative perspective on autobiography. I suggest that these three authors challenge traditional ideologies of identity, power and history which have been related to the autobiographical genre, with their self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation which destabilise conventional configurations of the ‘I’. By referring to fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical, the difficulty of self-representation is not answered, but rather possible ways to address this becomes the foci of their works. I am, therefore, suggesting that writers such as Winterson, Kingston and Lorde offer a future direction for autobiography. They are not on the margins of autobiography, not outside the genre, but rather, redefining it.

159 Gilmore, p. 105
Chapter Two

Black Autobiography and Deconstruction: Reviewing the Relationship

Black autobiographical writing and criticism has made a distinctive contribution to a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography. This is due to a number of critical factors, but mainly because black feminist criticism coincided with the rise of deconstructionist theory. In many ways these separate discourses created an unwanted binarism between the traditional divisions of theory and practice, as black women were ‘relegated’ to practice, whilst theorists were acknowledged within an ‘intellectual’ sphere. Nevertheless, this confusion and competition between the black and white theoretical worlds created an explosion of discussions and discourses, which I will be outlining in this chapter, allowing critics such as Deborah McDowell to begin to recognise the complicated moments of contact between these critical modes. In fact, McDowell addresses the issue of the relationship between theory and experience as the focus for her seminal text The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory, which provides a parameter for my discussion of black autobiography. Focusing upon texts by writers such as bell hooks, Mae Henderson and Amina Mama, which concentrate upon black subjectivity and black feminism, I want to offer a different critical approach to these books than in the previous chapter. Rather than tracing their contribution in a linear fashion, I will be discussing the texts in a more intertextual way, reflecting the polyvocality of black women's positions, and their focus upon the negotiation of theory and experience. I also want to develop the history surrounding the relationship of black

---

feminists to 'theory', to place this in dialogue with the black male critic's position, and to suggest that a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography offers an important political position to question assumptions surrounding the dichotomy of practice and theory.

McDowell argues that the negotiation of 'theoretical' elements such as poststructuralism was not identified when black feminist criticism began to make a mark of its own. She outlines the issues which suggested polarity between the two positions. These included: experience as opposed to questioning the authority of experience, historical context rather than denying the authority of experience and the significance of the author, and the canon for black writers which contrasted with the poststructuralist questioning of the role of the author and the very idea of canons and traditions. Thus, writers such as Joyce Ann Joyce and Barbara Christian proposed that these white critical theories which appear to eschew the significance of race, class and gender with the dissolution of the subject were inappropriate for analysing black literature. These apparent contradictions created a divide which black feminists are still trying to interrogate and although, as McDowell points out, this has consequently created a legacy of undervalued 'humanism' in relation to black writers'/theorists' positions, it has also meant that this is an issue which black feminists had to confront at an early stage.

McDowell places herself as being involved in academia during the literary 'change' in the late 1970s and early 1980s from practice to theory, or

\[2\] McDowell, p.168
rather the increasing onus upon the recognition of the importance of theory and the subsequent ‘race’ debate which suggested a gender divide between utilising theory (black male) and resistance to theory (black female). She identifies the important political implications for black women at this time when everyone was “engaged with the shifting aesthetic, critical, cultural conventions and values that influence, and at times determine, writing by and about black women”.

McDowell locates herself as sympathetic with various theoretical frameworks and, therefore, not following the nihilistic path of rejecting theory simply because it derives from white male western traditions. However, she also acknowledges the importance of caution and debate surrounding the context of theories and this category of assumed intelligence. McDowell, therefore, advocates the move through this conundrum by inventing new forms of analysis whilst appropriating those critical tools which are suitable. This is a point I pursue through critics such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins during the course of this chapter.

This renegotiation of theory marks an important direction for black feminists. Liz Stanley in The auto/biographical I, a text discussed in chapter one, refers to the significance of the recognition of ‘differences’ within feminism. She emphasises the necessity of embracing identities and the formation of disparate subjectivities, as opposed to a monolithic conception of identity. Stanley identifies this position as deriving “from the increasingly influential voices of black feminists speaking to the white centrism and chauvinism of supposedly ‘universal’ feminist theorising”.

---

2. McDowell, p.xii
Although this is now a recognised supposition for feminists, it is important that this conjecture is acknowledged as deriving from the deconstructionist practices of black women. This perspective immediately posits black feminists in a different position from the white feminists who are still grappling with the self/bio aspect of autobiographical theory. Black women, in contrast, have considered a more complex position through this ambiguity. This involves not only rethinking the importance of theories, and the deliberate exclusion of the majority from this specific language and intellectual site, but also the recognition of theoretical perspectives in black women’s positions before, during, and after the ‘deconstructionist movement’. In other words, questioning the assumption of the either/or status of a theorist or a writer, and replacing this with both/and, thereby reflects the poststructuralist interrogation of these labels. As Hortense Spillers suggests, we need to dissolve “those pernicious distinctions ... [between] the ‘academy’ and the ‘vernacular’; the ‘scholar’ and the ‘folk’; the ‘ivory tower’ and the ‘real world’”. However, I argue that this new critical position need not involve revaluing black women’s literature from different eras, or tracing ‘black theoretical concepts’ and other tropes such as ‘the journey’ within black literature, (which many theorists concentrate upon). Rather, developing my point in the previous chapter, I find this position redundant in terms of beginning to imagine a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography which incorporates antagonistic and conflicting identities. This approach doesn’t deny the existence of a coherent identity, but suggests that women’s multiple selves can be expressed through my definition of the autobiographical novel.

This chapter is, therefore, concerned with discussing black autobiographical theory and its contribution to the poetics I am developing, and how black women’s redefinition of subjectivity, history, matrilineal diaspora, language and theory poses a complex position which complements, but also develops, the conclusions of chapter one. Carole Boyce Davies’ concept of the various and changing meanings of subjectivity provides an understanding of this position, as she states the need to “pursue the understanding of the resisting subject and apply it in different ways to the diasporic elsewheres of a radical black diasporic subjectivity”.

This suggestion of a resisting subject focuses this discussion of black women writers as it reflects their position as agents of change, process, progress and flux, countering any traditional essentialist concepts of black identity. Hence, their fluctuating position allows them to confront the difficult position between the need to move away from representativeness, yet simultaneously recognising the problems surrounding the political connotations of the denial, or repression, of black identity.

A changing and dynamic position deliberately questions the position of black male theorists such as Henry Gates Louis Jr who within Black Literature and Literary Theory illustrates a clear division between theoretical and practical criticism. By dividing his text into ‘Part I Theory: On Structuralism and Post-Structuralism’ and ‘Part II Practice’, Gates creates a divide which needs questioning. Moreover, all the contributors to the former category are male, thus relegating a few women writers such as Barbara Johnson, Toni Morrison and Gwendolyn Brooks to the

---

‘practice’ arena. Gates views the black critical tradition as non-theoretical and creates a hierarchy between theory and practice, locating the bifurcation of the contemporary black critic as occupying a position contending with both the Western tradition and the black tradition. Gates’ text, therefore, provides a useful place to begin to rethink the concept of theory and interpretation being gender divided (albeit unwittingly), and also the separation of contemporary theory and the “nature and function of black writing”.

I want to offer a different approach to the relationship between gender and theory, and black criticism and theory, through a reading of the triptych of essays published by Barbara Christian, Michael Awkward and Deborah McDowell, in which the relationship between essentialist identities and the location of theory is further expounded. Within these essays, Awkward critiques both McDowell and Christian for their relationship to theory, Christian for her naive eschewing of theory and McDowell for her embracing of poststructuralism to the extent that identity is erased.

Awkward’s comments regarding Christian’s controversial discussion within ‘The Race For Theory’ criticise her suggestion that deconstructionist theory (read white, male western) tends towards a monolithic approach to interpretation, and therefore creates an unwanted set of elitist presumptions and expectations prior to reading/critiquing a text. He argues that theoretical concepts are employed within black

---

10 Gates, p.24
women's writing, and uses the example of Barbara Smith's foregrounding essay 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' to illustrate this. He describes this piece of writing as "a theoretical - if not poststructuralist - discussion of critical practice and textual production",\textsuperscript{12} as it is concerned with celebrating and encouraging a critical practice that refuses linearity. Hence, Awkward proposes that it is unproductive for black female critics to ignore the implications of the theoretical practices which they use. Rather, he argues, black women writers need to acknowledge that their literature benefits from some contemporary literary theories, in particular text specific theories such as poststructuralism. Awkward considers Henry Louis Gates' suggestion that perhaps renaming these Euro-centric theories creates a recognition of the productiveness of this approach, whilst simultaneously moving beyond the narrow definitions of what constitutes 'theory'.\textsuperscript{13} However, Awkward does not develop this point, but rather emphasises the dichotomy between theory and practice, and concludes by stating that in order for black women's literature to gain the respect it deserves "it will require that its critics continue to move beyond description and master the discourse of contemporary literary theory".\textsuperscript{14}

The problem arises within these comments by a black male critic of not acknowledging the importance of the critical basis already established by black women writers, and the possibility that theory and experience can develop a different and more diverse reading of theory. Rather, he eschews any suggestion of the recognition of theory outside the 'acceptable' models of academia, thereby unwittingly denying the poststructuralist deconstruction of knowledge and power. I am arguing

\textsuperscript{12}Awkward, 'Appropriate Gestures', p.240
\textsuperscript{14}Awkward 'Appropriate Gestures', p.243
that black feminist critics have, in fact, located a much more complex position from which to question theory. This is through the deconstruction of autobiography - an arena which questions the boundaries of fiction and identity. As I have argued in chapter one, cross fertilisation has changed the writing of the self, and black feminist critics have pioneered the questioning of traditional boundaries surrounding autobiography. Thus, although I disagree with Christian's definition that 'people of colour' theorise differently from western abstract logic (a point which I develop later in reference to bell hooks), I do feel that Christian begins to develop the need to interrogate theories. This is a position which Awkward side-steps by re-naming, rather than disputing, the foundations of theory. Christian utilises the example of the French feminists to focus her discussion of the problems of deconstruction theory. She argues that their emphasis upon the female body as a means to creating a 'new' female language and communication offers a restrictive paradigm of interpretation. Christian proposes that this paradigm ignores the presence of languages which are not developed around the concept of woman as 'other' (she gives examples of certain native American languages to illustrate this point). Moreover, Christian argues that by concentrating specifically on the body as a means of re-representation, the French feminists return to the myth of biology and determinism, ignoring the crucial social construction of gender which is of particular concern to black women writers.15 Christian, therefore, identifies the eurocentric focus of the French feminists, which is a point referred to in chapter one and developed through the authors within the following chapters.

15 Christian Barbara. 'The Race for Theory' in Gender and Theory, p 233
McDowell's text *The Changing Same*, I feel, develops the critical space between Awkward and Christian. McDowell recognises the fact that early desires to categorise black feminist criticism and theory meant creating an alliance which was often illusory and utopian. Nevertheless, this movement formed an important means to begin articulating an alternative discourse.16 However, McDowell also acknowledges the need for a black feminist criticism to create a dialogue with western theories whilst simultaneously reinterpreting them on various levels. Thus, rather than reflecting Awkward and Gates' call for the re-labelling of western theories, McDowell's position emphasises a focus upon removing the dichotomy which privileges theory, allowing the revision of criticism from multiple perspectives. With reference to autobiography, therefore, McDowell's reading develops the dialogical relation between identity, reader, critic and the 'self' as outlined in chapter one.

McDowell’s deconstructionist stance was, however, also attacked by Awkward, who, as I have indicated, proposed that her poststructuralist framework suggested the erasure of race and, therefore, identity. Awkward argues that 'Boundary Crossing' (the title of McDowell’s article) simply creates a barren space of unproductiveness and assumed identity (which is white and male). He therefore places his argument within the possibility of a 'true identity', which is belied by McDowell’s poststructuralist position. Clearly, this implicates problems of its own, and within *The Changing Same* McDowell argues her position in response to Awkward's comments. She asks why we need to use “a theory drawn from the text’s own cultural or intellectual inheritance?”17 Can we reduce the modern writer to this one interpretation, without recognising the

---

16McDowell, p. 19
17ibid, p. 116
influence of western culture and traditions on African-American, or
African-British discourse? A strategic essentialist approach answers this
question, allowing for a political identity whilst simultaneously
acknowledging other cultural and geographical areas of influence.

It is this recognition of the construction of history which provides the
crucial direction for a poststructuralist black feminist criticism, and
develops the premise of chapter one. The deconstruction of dominant
historical narratives is a point which critics such as Awkward do not
explicate, thus appearing to create essentialist identity politics, rather than
McDowell's more complex understanding of the actual formation of
history/knowledge and the construction of subjectivities which destabilise
conventional notions of the self. It is for this reason that I would cite
McDowell as employing a Foucauldian framework with reference to her
deconstructionist and new historicist stance. However, she does not
explicitly acknowledge this, and I found this a problematic connection
with the other black feminists' works which I discuss. Although these
writers work within, around, between and through various theoretical
positions, they appear reluctant to acknowledge the renegotiation of
explicit deconstructionist theories such as poststructuralism and new
historicism. These still appear to be 'dirty words' as far as black critics
are concerned, and this is something I want to question by illustrating a
Foucauldian frame of reference with regard to black feminist criticism and
autobiographical theory.

Reflecting the concerns of chapter one, Foucault's new historicist
deconstruction of the past is significant, as,
at the same time he writes a history of the present by getting us to recognise that he is
writing outside the familiar and traditional frameworks of historical explanation, about
former intensities of power identifiable now in different places and disciplines.18

Thereby, he deliberately disrupts any sense of continuum between the past
and the present. This provides a number of complex positions for the
black female critic. In particular, the implication for a ‘freer future’,19 is
significant, in the sense that this ‘future’ is discontinuous from the present,
thus creating a space with increased possibilities, away from hermeneutic
traditions and the repetition of power through various discourses. Black
women have needed to find ways to think differently within the discursive
restraints that Foucault originally thought inescapable. Hence, through the
manipulation of language, desire and fantasy - specifically the merging of
dream, reality and myth - they have created a focus outside this sense of a
pre-determined identity and future. Certainly, this is reflected through
Kingston’s location, which, as I have argued in chapter one, historicises
the Chinese American experience within the metalevels of myth, dream
and superstition.

Chapter one thus outlines a poetics of autobiography which identifies the
rewriting of history from multiple and disparate perspectives as a
significant part of a poststructuralist approach to autobiography. As
Kingston and Lorde’s texts indicate, black women’s relationship to history
is complex and, therefore, needs to be considered within a number of
different trajectories. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that, confronting the
“paradoxes of historical exploration”, recognising that “the legacy of
empowerment cannot be severed from the legacy of victimisation and
enjoyed as the whole truth”,20 creates a position of conflict for the black

19 ibid
20 Kubitschek, Missy Dehn: Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists
critic. Questioning “how [history] was constructed, by whom, and with what consequences” traces the knowledge that Western concepts of history have shaped both the past and the present; thus, to deconstruct this history poses difficulties. In other words, black writers face the problem of how to voice alternative identities outside of prescribed discourses.

One way of approaching the rewriting of history from a black perspective is through celebrating ancestral figures and spirits as the “sense of [history as a] continuous process” is envisioned, which is paramount to black culture. Certainly, this perspective challenges traditional history, and the importance here is to celebrate both stories of ancestors and tales of spirits, thereby not creating a dichotomy between the de-mythologising and mythologising of black history, both of which can create traditional essentialised black identities.

Subverting conventional mythologies represents a significant position for black writers regraphing history. Jacqueline De Weever pursues this relationship between black subjectivity and the appropriation of myths with western ideology and history. Within her text she deconstructs Greek mythology, emphasising and questioning the privileged voice of these so-called intellectuals, positing their race and culture as inappropriate historical lineage to all myths. De Weever traces the pervasiveness of Greek and Roman myths within language and psychology (for example the ‘everyday’ use of references to the Oedipus complex) and, therefore, argues for the necessity of deconstructing these.

---

21Rosaldo, Rosaldo 'Others of Invention: Ethnicity and its Discontents' in Voice Literary Supplement, Feb 1990, p.27
22Kubitschek, p.4
23De Weever, Jacqueline Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992
western myths, and reinstating other mythologies which have been repressed through the course of history. Relating her points specifically to the sphere of fiction, De Weever points out that folklore, folk tales and mythologies with African origin become an integral part of black women’s writing.24

De-mythologising history from a number of perspectives is a point which I develop in both my readings of Kingston and Lorde and therefore, identify this as an important element for the autobiographical theorist. Kingston deliberately reinterprets and rewrites Chinese myths, whilst simultaneously deconstructing ‘white’ myths. Lorde also utilises African mythology throughout Zami to begin reconstructing a different notion of beauty and history from white ideals and paradigms. However, Lorde’s reading of her ancestral homeland also illustrates a non-strategic essentialist notion of a mythologised past, as I argue that she creates a problematic utopian vision and space in which to discuss her strong, independent female ancestors. Nevertheless, this is a point which needs to be considered in the context of Lorde’s relationship with her mother. As referred to in chapter one, I argue that Lorde’s extremely volatile relationship with her mother occupies a difficult location of expression. In fact, in a similar conclusion to Oranges, I suggest that Lorde rejects her mother from a woman-oriented diaspora. Hence, Lorde radically re-writes the mother-daughter relationship as she is only able to bond with her mother through imagining her within a lesbian continuum (a location her mother would utterly oppose).

24However, Weever’s book only offers a limited perspective on motifs, for example, the journey (p. 9) and she does not address the reality that folk tales and African mythologies can be equally essentialist within Black fiction. This is a point addressed through Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby, for example.
As I have posited previously, rethinking the mother-daughter relationship is an important paradigm for a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography, and this is developed from a black woman’s perspective by Lorde, who has to battle with the pervasive image of the strong black matriarch. Thus, Lorde creates conflicting discourses between the traditional essentialist qualities of her powerful female ‘mythical’ ancestors, and the exclusionary, didactic and antagonistic characteristics of her mother. This tension focuses my discussion in chapter five.

Within this parameter, bell hooks warns of the need to negate “superheroic models of black subjectivity”. Developing Shirley Neuman’s recognition of the ahistorical approach of grouping ethnic autobiographies together, hooks also warns of representing differences as ‘exotic’. She thus discusses the dangers of any notion of a monolithic black identity, and this compares with McDowell’s stance regarding language and identity. Both advocate the postmodern critique of identity as a way of challenging an outmoded notion of ‘blackness’. Certainly within the twenty-first century and a rapidly changing global culture, an understanding of the dynamic nature of identity is important in critiquing and writing autobiographical writing. Rather than viewing this as an apolitical stance, hooks views postmodern culture and poststructuralism as a way for “new and varied forms of bonding”, and places the ‘authority of experience’ as part of this move towards understanding differing subjectivities.

27 hooks, Yeal1ling, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. Boston: South End Press, 1990, p.28
28 ibid, p.31
De Weever's discussion of myths also reflects this point. Referring to the writer Paule Marshall, De Weever argues that Marshall “refers sparingly to both Western European myth and popular myth but creates myths of the people”. This represents a crucial point, and one which can be developed to define a point of connection between the three authors which are focused upon within this thesis. All three writers are concerned with identifying a mythical concept of the self with history and the deconstruction of western myths. Their use of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically original destabilise conventional notions of the self and hegemonic historical narratives. In *Oranges*, Winterson deconstructs the Bible through a mythical reinterpretation of various aspects of Jeanette's identity, thus creating several conflicting voices which undermine the distinction between myth, reality and history. Lorde is interested in placing aspects of herself and her friends within a continuum of African mythological and ‘real’ ancestors. For example she “claims the West African thunder god Shango as her brother”. Similarly, Kingston articulates new modes of language for not only the ‘private’ myths surrounding her family, but she also places her different identity within the significance of mythology for the Chinese race as a whole.

De Weever's observations concerning the problematic nature of Jungian myths develops this deconstruction and is a point I pursue within my reading of Kingston. The 'collective unconscious' clearly needs to be deconstructed and problematised further, drawing attention to the origin of this opinion, and the cultural differentiations which are necessarily ignored through the pursuit of this consensus. As De Weever points out through the commentary of Frantz Fanon, "the unconscious is culturally

---

30 De Weever, p. 10
31 Ibid, p 12
constructed through education, acquired not inherited".  

She further observes that while the authors she discusses “respect the gods of the triple culture of the Americas, their female voices invert and deconstruct the myths associated with them”. This complex position of the black woman deconstructing myths on a number of levels is developed by Kingston and Lorde who posit the autobiographical voice(s) as a point of communication between conflicting identities. Their deployment of fantasy, myth and desire questions traditions surrounding the writing and thinking of the self and how this has been expressed in historical narratives.

Therefore, I propose that black women’s writing concerning subjectivity and identity develops the concerns of the critics in chapter one, as black women battle with the dichotomy between black and white history and the annihilation of the self through these different productions of history. Reclaiming the relationship between language, speech and writing allows black women writers to emphasise the arbitrariness of history’s narrative, and thus to rework white male elitist representations. Thinking back or ‘talking back’ through a number of different means, questions the European preference for “intellectual discourse as the measure of a peoples’ history.. asking why it is considered superior to those traditions that value creativity, expression, paradox in the constructing of their historical process”. This perspective draws attention to the structure of history, which has created a hierarchical distinction between oral and written communication, a position which black women writers are anxious

32De Weever, p 11
33Ibid, p 16
to subvert. As I have argued in chapter one, this observation has had a major impact upon black women’s literature and has been developed in a number of ways, but most specifically through the advocating of a language that is both visual, oral and written.

Language and dominant historical narratives
Carole Boyce Davies cites language, talking and communication as important elements in a black female poetics, and these are points I want to relate to the poststructuralist reading of autobiography which I am developing. Davies argues that it is this tension between articulation and aphasia, between the limitations of spoken language and the possibility of expression, between space for certain forms of talk, and lack of space for black women’s speech, the location between the public and the private, that some black writers address.36

As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, speech, story-telling and silence become significant elements in both Kingston’s and Lorde’s texts.

In her text Talking Back. Thinking Feminist - Thinking Black, hooks develops this description of the black female voice(s). Lorde, hooks and Kingston all advocate the importance of talk from its emergence within childhood and the constant asking of questions, to the formulation of one’s own voice and identity. As hooks states, “to make my voice, I had to speak, to hear myself talk - and talk I did - darting in and out of grown folks’ conversations and dialogues, answering questions that were not directed at me, endlessly asking questions”.37 Unlike Kingston, hooks proposes the importance of not “hiding speech”, but rather publicising one’s emotions, and she specifically equates this with learning to voice an opinion at a young age. hooks, however, does create a divide between her

36Davies, p.153
37hooks, Talking Back, pp5-6
‘adult’ and ‘child’ voice. She discusses the complexity of writing her autobiography which was initially an attempt to kill her younger self, the one who was constantly being told off and threatened with mental institutions due to her overactive ‘voice’. Consequently, hooks identifies the relationship between the past, the present, the writing ‘I’, and also the silencing of her voice. She thus posits the re-working of language and communication as creating a radical understanding of identity and subjectivities by black women.

Moreover, by drawing attention to the necessity of voicing one’s experience, hooks emphasises the symbiotic relationship between the written and spoken word. Although it is easy for us to suggest now, in a postmodern western world that orality is an important means of communication, it is necessary to acknowledge and deconstruct the power of the written word which has gained precedence in the West. The historical hierarchical relationship between the spoken and written word is significant, as the “essential connection with orality” present in all literature has been displaced and repressed in the world of academic literature. Thus, historicising this movement has obvious connections with the rediscovering and celebrating of orality in Afro-American literature.

Gayl Jones in Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature perceptively traces the difference between European literary models and language, and the American relationship between literature and language. She argues that the differences in these models parallel the tensions between “African American and European American

38hooks, Talking Back, p. 155
literatures". Jones discusses his use of American colloquial language in his early works. Significantly, he eventually abandoned this use of language as it was considered crude by writers of "Eastern establishment devoted to a genteel and imitative tradition". Yet her fundamental argument, which places "African American writers into the context and contours of American language", is illuminating as it suggests that American literature only became distinctive when it "consciously recognised, employed and explored the techniques of American orality and landscape as distinct from European models".

Jones, therefore, identifies an important space in which orality became symbolic as offering a viable contribution or alternative to dominant ideologies and histories of written literatures. Hence, I feel it is important to be aware of how oral traditions modified both American and European literature, as to separate them from this history creates a false dichotomy. The move from considering folklore and oral tradition as "quaint and restrictive", to celebrating it as "the ore for complex literary influence", has been a significant movement for black writers, and represents a re-reading of theoretical concepts surrounding identity.

Bakhtin’s recognition of ‘inner speech’ develops this point. His interpretation of language/speech/thought provided a significant aspect of autobiographical theory in chapter one, and this is an aspect which is also addressed by black critics. Mae Henderson discusses Bakhtin in relation

---

40 Jones, p.16  
41 ibid, p.10  
42 ibid, p.8  
43 ibid, p.9  
to black women writers’ position. She suggests that the relationship between consciousness and inner speech is significant because the ‘outer word’, the spoken word, “links the psyche, language and social interaction”. She identifies this in terms of different voices speaking to the ‘other(s)’ both within and without, creating a dialogue between different social dialects and varying social identities. Henderson posits black women’s writing as the culmination of this dialogic position, as she suggests that the privileging of ‘otherness’ is a distinguishing factor of black women’s writing. However, I want to place Bakhtin’s observations within a different parameter, suggesting that his recognition of inner dialogue allows inner thoughts and feelings to become part of language, creating a pathway between reality and myths/dreams. This location subverts the binarisms of ‘otherness’ to create a much more fluid position of expression.

Reinterpreting language, therefore, deconstructs the dichotomy between oral and written; and the privileging of the visual within western history develops these points of exclusion. In terms of expressions such as ‘enlightenment’ or ‘revelation’, a distinction is set up and expressed through language which suggests the ‘proper’ spheres of communication. However, as Barbara Johnson argues, the black writer may not fit into “spatial or visual space, and occupies a different dimension”. This offers a significant means to begin to reassess western privileging of specific modes of communications within history.

---


46 Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. ‘Canon-formation and the Afro-American Tradition’, response Barbara E. Johnson, in Afro-American Lit studies in the 1990s, p. 43
Baker develops this further with regard to black women writers' redefining the concept of 'place'. He argues that they offer an alternative Afro-American epistemology by subverting traditional linear notions of 'time' and 'space'. Defining the definition of 'place' within European consciousness, which is equated with the historical use of slaves as commodities, Baker suggests "relationships of property, and not free, human, personal relations, marked the spaces between Europeans and Africans". He thus proposes that black women writers deconstruct traditional definitions of 'place' by creating a fluid understanding of imagination/space/time and history. I develop this point in more detail with reference to Lorde and hooks and the redefinition of 'home' (in chapter five).

However, within The Workings of the Spirit, Baker's argument is compromised by his use of the phrase "imagistic fields" to describe a poetics of black women's writing, which, as Henderson points out, "connotes women as spectacles, objectified and inscribed by the male activity of scopophilia". Although this is a phrase I would argue that he uses unwittingly, Henderson's argument illustrates the sensitive issue surrounding black women writers and the use of theory. She states that Baker creates a division between "theoretical activity [which] connotes discursive engagement, performance and praxis", and 'imagistic fields'. Once again, black women's relationship to theory is diminished within a problematic paradigm. Hence, I propose that Baker's argument needs

---

49 This description is generated by Walker's metaphor of creativity from her mother's garden, Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s, p.157
50 Henderson, p.160
51 Ibid
developing to illustrate that the controlled, assigned spaces which represent locations black women writers are recreating, are fundamentally linked to the deconstruction of language, identity and its *dialogic* relation to theory.

**Historicising Black Autobiography**

Having begun to redefine the relationship between black women writers and deconstruction, I feel it is important to relate this to the historical model of the black autobiography. Critics such as James Olney and Stephen Butterfield outline a specific black autobiographical model which simply reflects the binarisms between private/public, male/female, theory/practice as outlined above. Olney in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* recognises black autobiography as a changing genre, but suggests there are two constants in black autobiography,

the expressed desire to live as one would choose, as far as possible, and the tacit or explicit criticism of external national conditions that, as far as possible, work to ensure that one’s freedom of choice is delimited or non-existent.52

I would suggest, however, that this description is implicitly referring to the black male ‘political’ autobiographical model (as described by Butterfield53) with its suggestion of the criticism of “*national conditions*” by black writers; a point which black women’s autobiographies have traditionally not vocalised. The distinctions between the more ‘personal’ autobiographies by black women, and the ‘political’ concerns of black men are developed by Olney in reference to the different use of journeying within the texts. He thus creates an unwanted dichotomy which mimics Euro-American privileging of certain discourses, and consequently does not question the *categorisation* of experience, as black women do.

---

Moreover, I want to propose that in a similar reworking to that of the previous chapter which deconstructed the traditional concept of the linear autobiography, black autobiography also needs to interrogate and move beyond the slave narrative tradition. Although I am not questioning the place of slave narratives within literary history and culture (and certainly their transcending of the divisions between oral and written language), I feel a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography needs to deconstruct this tradition which suggests a representative status for historicising black autobiographical texts. Therefore, I would like to refer briefly to the essay written by William Andrews entitled ‘Toward a poetics of Afro-American Autobiography’,\textsuperscript{54} which highlights the need to question the documentation of black autobiography. Andrews argues that much criticism of black autobiography is too specific as it pays too little attention to the social, historical or ideological significance of the forms of black narrating that have evolved since the mid eighteenth century. To put it simply, we have read too many black autobiographies as works, not texts.\textsuperscript{55} Andrews develops this point through suggesting that we need a revised conception of the history of the slave narrative genre, which has been distorted through the advocating of specific models of selfhood by black autobiographers of the 1960s and early 1970s. For example, as I have already outlined, Butterfield’s text “highlights writers whose lives seem and style seem to echo [Frederick] Douglass” “famous narrative of injustice”\textsuperscript{56}. Andrews argues against this representative status of texts such as Douglass’. He illustrates that our perception of slave narratives is misconstrued, as postbellum slave narratives, written between 1865-1920, have not been adequately explored and, therefore, the important paradigm shifts within this field have remained elusive. He proposes that the

\textsuperscript{54}Andrews, William L. ‘Toward a Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography’ in Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s.
\textsuperscript{55}Andrews, p.80
\textsuperscript{56}ibid, p 82
evolution of the slave narratives and the "revisions of the image of slavery and the idea of heroic selfhood" are extremely important with regard to recognising an historical process which did not neatly fit into the category suggested by Olney. This new historicist deconstruction of slave narratives and expectations creates a crucial reworking of the genre of autobiography and identity. Once again, this focuses my interpretation of the autobiographic genre from a contemporary perspective: deconstructing historical definitions of autobiography and presenting a poststructuralist model of autobiography, including elements of fantasy and myth which revolutionise traditional representations of the self and dominant historical narratives.

It becomes clear that black women writers contest and interrogate the positions of both black and white critics' embrace of the label 'theory'. Whilst recognising the poststructuralist elements evident in many black writers' works, these need to be simultaneously equated with the rejection of the "Eurocentric, masculinist belief that probing into an individual personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion". Moreover, whilst acknowledging the limitations of implying African-American discourse as separate from 'theory', which "can be achieved only via assumptions of a traditional humanism and methods of standard disciplines such as social history, philosophy and group psychology", it is also necessary to recognise the problem of a definition which excludes the above.

57 Andrews, p. 85
59 Baker. Workings of the Spirit. p. 42
It is the ability to move between theories that I suggest is the way forward for black feminist criticism. By recognising the polyvocality of black women's writing we can relate those aspects of poststructuralism, materialism and experience which reflect black women's position, as McDowell states:

A dialogic method of reading would benefit Afro-American feminists, as it reminds us that the diversity of critical and theoretical voices is not an issue to be settled or a problem to be resolved but... a conversation to be constructed and entered.60

In this context the essentialist rhetoric of looking for 'wholeness' in a racially divisive past,61 which Awkward argues is important for black writers, is reconsidered. I would agree with Boyce Davies that "the recognition of as many identities as exist (or the inherently plural character of identity) ensures that one is not placing oneself in the oppressive position",62 is a much more rewarding step forward for the black female critic/writer to take. Certainly this approach develops the position of the critics in the previous chapter. As Butler points out:

In some contexts, it may be appropriate to shape our behaviour according to universal emancipatory or epistemological ideals, in other contexts, to recognise the lurking cultural imperialism always potential in such practices and thus to draw on the postmodern as a strategy of disruption.63

As I have suggested, McDowell's text The Changing Same is placed within a number of these deconstructionist aims which create a direction for the future of black feminist criticism. She challenges the apparent essentialising of a 'language of blackness'; subverting any notion of there being a monolithic black language, thus developing the deconstruction of language/thought/orality as described previously. McDowell is careful not to create an unwanted binarism between black and white language, but

60 McDowell, D. 'Boundaries or Distant Relations and Close Kin' in Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s, p 70
61 Awkward in above, p 75
62 Davies, p 30
63 Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble. p 164
rather creates an alternative discourse which works within a new historicist understanding of language. McDowell also argues that “black feminist critics should not become obsessed with searching for common themes and images in black women’s works”. This is a controversial stance, but one which is productive for a poststructuralist analysis; the connections within or between black women’s writing cannot be identified on such a primary level, as this ignores other interdependent factors such as class or religion. McDowell treads the delicate path between the problem of a traditional essentialist reading of black women’s writing/identity, and the apolitical deconstruction of the subject, through fusing the categories of theory and experience.

Significantly, Patricia Hill Collins identifies this as an important direction for black feminist critics, stating that “contemporary Black women intellectuals continue to draw on this tradition of using everyday actions and experiences in our theoretical work”. Although I would suggest the ‘intellectual stance’ needs to be deconstructed, nevertheless this observation emphasises the crucial displacement and questioning of poststructuralist theory by black feminists. Autobiography becomes a sphere in which the binarism between theory and experience can be transcended. As Collins further elaborates, we need to develop a definition of Black feminist thought that relies exclusively neither on a materialist analysis - one whereby all African American women by virtue of their biology become automatically registered as authentic black feminists - nor on an idealist analysis whereby the background, worldview, and interests of the thinker are deemed irrelevant in assessing his or her ideas.

64 Collins, p. 29
65 As outlined in chapter one, Liz Stanley subverts the division between ‘intellectual’ theorists who are able to read the subversive elements of autobiography, and the actual authors of autobiography who are apparently unaware of these elements.
66 Collins, p. 33
Reflecting this perspective, McDowell poses a number of questions throughout her text. These are questions which I feel can now be provided with possible answers, as a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography can begin to be imagined.

It is necessary at this stage to point out that McDowell doesn’t refer specifically to autobiography within her poststructuralist critique of literature. However, I am utilising her position to create a focus for this discussion of deconstructionist autobiographical discourse. What is interesting is that she specifically reclaims the ‘label’ black feminist criticism, which clearly refutes the postmodern emphasis on the removal of this specific location. However, this position clearly corresponds with my reconsideration of the term ‘autobiography’ and the need to recognise its changing and fluid genre. Similarly, black feminist criticism does not imply a monolithic critical perspective but allows a number of simultaneous, and in many ways conflicting, feelings and ideas to be expressed.

It is significant that although, as I have outlined, there is a seminal body of work by black women writers/theorists regarding identity, there is actually no corresponding emphasis on the term autobiography and its tradition within these texts. The negotiation of theorising black women’s autobiography is discussed and interpreted through black critics that closes the gap between writer and theorists. Thus, in a sense, this position negates the necessity of books entitled “black women’s autobiography”, as the exploration of different identities, subjectivities and lives are presented through authors such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks and Audre Lorde. These, and other writers, recognise the unnecessary division between writing theory and writing literature, thus utilising and building upon the
poststructuralist emphasis on the dissolving of this division. As Collins argues, we need to move away from the false dichotomy between thinking and doing so that "both/and, scholar/activist" can be realised.\textsuperscript{67}

This emphasis, I suggest, complements the critical texts concerning autobiography written by white women, and together these different avenues of exploration develop a new autobiographical voice; one which recognises that cross-fertilisation has changed the writing of the self and that Kingston's, Winterson's and Lorde's works are part of a new generation of autobiographical novelists. This new theoretical position envisages a future without any presuppositions, and allows theoreticians to contribute a discourse to this literature: a voice as opposed to a definite path of agreement and indoctrination. I, therefore, want to situate other texts which have attempted to consider deconstructionist theory in relation to black women's literature and lives, making comparisons with the critical stance of the writers in the previous chapter.

Amina Mama's \textit{Race, Gender and Subjectivity} discusses the construction of race through a materialist analysis of researching individual black people's position in the workplace in Britain. Through the imposition of psychology, she discusses how race is constructed and considered, from slavery to the present day. Mama's research is significant as she chooses a research group of women from working-class backgrounds to give a different and much needed onus upon these silenced voices. This is a deliberate move, as she observes that much previous research has focused on the black man, and, therefore, denied black women's voices. This book, therefore, complements both Stanley's and Steedman's focus upon

\textsuperscript{67}Collins, p. 16
correcting the exclusion of working-class narratives. However, what is notable in comparison to these texts, is that Mama does not include any reference to literature. Her discussion remains exclusively within the sociological field, and, therefore, does not address the complex relationship between autobiography, the self, writing and identity which the above-mentioned books attempt to explore (Liz Stanley in particular argues for the inclusion of ‘real’ autobiographies within a feminist autobiographical theory).

Identifying herself as being sympathetic to poststructuralist theory, Mama specifically uses the word ‘subjectivity’ to indicate multiple and dynamic identities within this parameter. However, she immediately undermines this premise by stating that in order to posit herself and the participants of her research within an identified minority, she “decided early on in the research to theorise subjectivity through the trope of race instead of gender”. This appears to be a somewhat questionable statement, considering that Mama acknowledges the complexity and conflicting identities of individuals. Mama fails to acknowledge the crucial point that it is reductionist to focus upon one trope, rather than embracing interdependent parts of subjectivity. Creating a political identity eschews other levels and a strategic essentialist approach would counter exclusivity. Thus, with this statement she belies her poststructuralist leanings.

Despite this confusing stance, Mama locates herself as understanding and interpreting theory through her research progress, rather than having a

---

68 Mama, Amina. Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 70
69 ibid, p. 129
particular theoretical agenda to fulfil. Hence, she deliberately equates ‘theory’ with ‘experience’, thus reflecting McDowell’s deconstruction of these two practices. Mama also acknowledges that her focus on the interconnection of discourses and their construction of knowledge and power is a Foucauldian analysis, but suggests that she (Mama) uses the relationship between various discourses to analyse the construction of subjectivities, as opposed to knowledge and its relationship to social institutions. However, as I have proposed in my previous chapter, I feel that Foucault is also concerned with rescuing ‘subjects’ from the conception of a predetermined destiny and identity, and, therefore, he does acknowledge and ponder the complexity of the individual. Consequently, Mama misreads Foucault, as her description of subjectivity as “a process of movement through various discursive positions, as something which is constantly being produced out of social and historical knowledge and experience”, is certainly a Foucauldian analysis of the influences of the discourses within society. This is a point which I pursue through Kingston, Lorde and Winterson, arguing that the autobiographical novel offers a genre which reconfigures traditional historical narratives. These authors incorporate a sense of history which incorporates a radical understanding of the relationship between language, fantasy, myth, desire and expressions of the self. This allows for a fluctuating sense of subjectivity.

What is interesting is that Mama interprets Foucault (despite her misreading of him) through a black perspective. She rewrites historical material surrounding black people through the oral histories of the women she interviews. Mama recognises the problem of interviewing and interpretation within this context. In other words, the hierarchical position

---

70 Mama, p. 99
of the interviewer needs to be subverted to empower the participants, reversing any preconceived ideas of who is more 'knowledgeable’. Mama, therefore, specifically describes her ‘interview’ sessions as “open-ended exploratory discussions in which participants compared and contrasted experiences that they felt to have had some bearing on their identity and on their awareness of themselves”. Thus, her representation of individual histories creates a dialogic relationship with historical events and sociological explanations. Developing this perspective, Mama employs language in a very specific way. I found her sociological explanations of words she used such as ‘discourse’, had a number of effects. Initially, this self-conscious analysis of theoretical words emphasised this text as ‘scientific’. Nevertheless, this ‘objective’ stance, merged with the very individual and personal stories, created a significant path of fluctuating representations. Hence, Mama creates a fluid relationship between the experiential and the non-referential aspects of the self which reflects Steedman’s stance in chapter one.

However, Mama’s personal yet objective stance, unlike Steedman’s, eschews the complex issues surrounding her writing of the ‘bio’. Although she includes her multiple identities as part of the female group she is interviewing, nevertheless it is her graphing of the ‘bio’ which the consumer reads, and considering the nature of her text, I was surprised that her position as the writing ‘I’ did not seem to concern Mama. Although Mama is explicitly concerned with the construction of the self, she negates any mention of the writing of the self. Thus, one of the vital expressions of identity - the writing of autobiography - represents a significant ellipsis within her work. The complexity of autobiography, and how this can be a

71 Mama, p.73
place to experiment with the self, to construct alternative identities and to subvert distinctions between the oral and written word, leaves a large hole of unanswered questions in her research. There are clear parallels between her research subjects and autobiographical texts written by black British writers which she does not address. By not including any mention of the great significance of black women’s literature as a form of expression, Mama unconsciously creates a hierarchy away from this, implying that ‘real’ autobiographies have substance and relevance which cannot be found within published literature. Despite understanding her call for the use of theory within this different context and outside academia, I think the further demarcation of the line between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is unnecessary and limited and my recognition of the autobiographical novel confronts this division surrounding the writing of the self.

Instead, Mama concentrates upon psychoanalytic theory in relation to her research subjects. Thus, I do not feel that her ‘new approach’ to subjectivity is in any way groundbreaking. By placing her observations within an identified ‘real’ subjectivity, the new language of deconstructionism, which she suggests can answer the complexities of subjectivity, becomes relegated to one level of interpretations, and is not identified on a number of metalevels. By reinforcing the binarisms of sociology, psychology and literature, Mama places identity within a trajectory subverted by Kingston, Winterson and Lorde. These authors place autobiography outside these recognised spheres, accepting facets such as fantasy and myth, which are conventionally associated with fiction, as part of identity.

---

72 see for example, *Stories of Exile and Belonging*, edited by Joan Riley and Briar Wood. London: Virago, 1996
bell hooks develops this understanding of identity, as she recognises the complex relationships between memory, life, and the writing 'I'. The secrecy and silence of her past clearly affect her memories which she describes as appearing in “surreal, dreamlike style which made me cease to think of them as strictly autobiographical because it seemed that myth, dream and reality had merged”. Although hooks does not acknowledge this as a specific theoretical position with regard to autobiography, this does, however, highlight her broader sense of what constitutes theory and her call for the removal of the divide between experience and theory. She proposes that experience on a number of levels can be theoretised, “used constructively, confession and memory are tools that heighten self-awareness; they need not make us solely inward-looking”. She, therefore, places the autobiographical voice on a number of different and simultaneous levels, relating identity “to culture, history, politics, whatever and to challenge the notion of identity as static and unchanging”. Her autobiographical text and her other critical texts regarding race, gender and other multiple issues affecting black women’s identities, consequently have this myriad grounding (not just of the individual, the theorist, but also the collective experience), and, therefore, form part of a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography.

Significantly, although hooks develops her understanding of theory from a variety of angles and situations, both outside and within academia, she still situates theory as ‘abstract’, which she does not see as a problematic term. Her deconstruction of ‘abstract’ is, therefore, crucial to her rethinking of theory, as “even that which emerges from the most concrete of everyday

---

73 hooks, *Talking Back*, p. 157
74 ibid, p. 38
75 ibid, p. 39
76 ibid, p. 110
experiences”, she deliberately defines as abstract. This is an important observation, as the demystification of the notion of ‘abstractness’ questions and highlights the elitism surrounding this idea of an enigma which can only be understood in certain echelons of society. hooks emphasises that much of our everyday language is abstract, and also undermines any idea of this obscure logic being exclusive to western thought and tradition. She states that “different groups of African people like the Dogon ... [have] very abstract logical schemas to support rituals that focus on creating gendered subjects”. By redefining academic language and the connotations surrounding it, hooks argues that her aim is to make theory more accessible, “not less complex or rigorous - but simply more accessible”.

She develops this point within her text Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics in which she berates the closed access to postmodern theory. Recognising the benefits of a stance which allows the decentring of a subject and the negotiation of ‘otherness’, she argues that this theory “still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialised audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge”. Rethinking poststructuralism outside academia and in relation to autobiographical voices, allows the recognition of individual identities within a radical renegotiation of life and art.

Carole Boyce Davies develops this questioning of theoretical elitism. Within Black Women Writing and Identity. Migrations of the Subject she acknowledges the inappropriateness of affirming the writer/theorist split

---

77 hooks, Talking Back, p.39
78 hooks, bell. Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, p.25

88
so favoured in European thought.\textsuperscript{79} Significantly, Davies cites Lorde as a writer who obliterates any divide between writer/theorist, theory/practice and who, therefore, exists on the border of a number of different theoretical positions.\textsuperscript{80} Davies develops this location, arguing that the title of her text ‘Migrations of the Subjects’ “suggests that Black women/’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of a specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of discussion”.\textsuperscript{81} This position also implies a reinterpretation of poststructuralism as ‘death of the author’ becomes meaningless if the role of the writer is not explicitly connected to specific genres of writing. As with hooks and McDowell, I feel Davies engages with theory on a more fundamental level than many of the writers in the previous chapter. She discusses the need to examine critically the origin of theories, but also the need to determine their intent and possibilities,\textsuperscript{82} to recognise “that one is always acting out of some theoretical position/s whether these are named or not”.\textsuperscript{83} To implement this approach allows us to recognise that black women’s theorising of discourses such as race and gender has had a seminal impact “on recent theorising of postmodernism and of feminism without being identified”.\textsuperscript{84} Hence, Davies seeks to subvert the exclusion of theory within academia. She describes theory as “discursive ways of making sense of structures of values and beliefs which circulate in any given culture, and not as a reified discourse for the privileged few”.\textsuperscript{85}
In a similar attempt to merge theory with 'experience' that Mama takes, Davies develops the issue of identity and subjectivity, but takes this to a much more complex level, and does, therefore, acknowledge the dialogical relationship between theory and experience, as opposed to the hierarchizing of the two, implied by Mama. Davies approaches this conjecture through adopting an "anti-definitional stance" towards black feminism which challenges any monolithic understanding of identity (black feminism can include specifics such as a latina lesbian feminist or a more general discussion of women of colour). This asserts "critical relationality" in which theoretical positions such as race, gender and class can become related to both a text in its own context (i.e. exploring individual identities) and with other dimensions of thoughts and ideas on a transnational level. 'Critical relationality', therefore, challenges the binarisms and hierarchical structure present within many theoretical positions, and, instead, disrupts borders surrounding identity and expression. Thereby, Davies posits black feminist criticism as a "praxis where the theoretical positions and the criticism interact with the lived experience".

Davies pursues a poststructuralist reading, allowing her "to go in search of the ideas of a variety of subversive theoretical formulations and work toward the redefining of ownership of knowledge in a variety of areas". She therefore situates herself as occupying the space between 'high theories' and the rejection of all theoretical concepts. This is a direction I have already identified through hooks and McDowell, and, therefore,

---

86 Davies, p.56
87 ibid
88 Davies lists a range of texts which address this issue of identity and writing. (p.57) see Gayatri Spivak or Gloria Anzaldua's works for example.
89 Davies, p.55
90 Davies, p.43
clearly one which defines the rethinking of theoretical constructs by black feminists. As Davies argues, it is not simply a case of negotiating these ‘new’ theories, but also accepting “the need to read ways in which these disruptions already exist in non-western/woman/centred cultures”. As emphasised by McDowell, black women writers’ contribution to deconstructionist theory needs to be addressed.

Thus, the future poetics of autobiography as outlined in chapter one with reference to Anderson, is developed by black female critics who deconstruct not simply the acquisition of language, but also the problematic distinction between the written, the oral and the expression of the self. Moreover, the deconstruction of the Western appropriation of myth not only problematises language associations, but also undermines historical representations of the self. However, although black women have contributed a significant body of work which provides a poststructuralist reading of autobiography, working on various levels, it is clear this has not been done within an identified arena, but rather by utilising deconstructionist elements from different observations of black women’s fiction and non-fiction. Writers such as Jacqueline De Weever and Patricia Hill Collins have certainly contributed substantially to the merging of these two genres. However, it is only really through hooks, Boyce Davies and McDowell’s seminal texts that autobiographical theory really begins to take a new direction, as I have illustrated through this chapter. Whilst I understand that deconstructing elements of poststructuralism necessarily involves different paths of interpretation, I feel it was a necessary and productive task to bring a cohesive text together which outlines the possible direction for a deconstructionist

---

91 Davies, p. 54
poetics of autobiography, and which recognises black women’s unique contribution to this literature.
Chapter Three

Maxine Hong Kingston: Historicism, Communication and Identity

Kingston situates her novel The Woman Warrior within poststructuralist parameters, displacing the author, deconstructing hegemonic historical narratives, and implying a number of different interpretations which undercut notions of fact and fantasy. Yet this book has also been described as an autobiographical work, and the search for an identity, or at least recognition of multiple identities, is the prevailing impetus within the text. The “dialogical relationship between autobiography and identity” is expressed within a deconstructionist narrative, which affirms Shirley Neuman’s premise that “the theorist and reader of autobiography enact a series of simultaneous and multiple gestures”. Thus, the subject is identified on a number of levels “conceived of as the matrix of differences within and from itself as well as differences from others”.

Hence, although the book has been described as an autobiography by many critics, it immediately refutes being categorised within this genre as it specifically embodies more interpretation, myth and fantasy than actual ‘facts’, deliberately blurring the lines between fiction and history, surface and sub-text. The difficulty of confronting an abstract notion of identity

---

4Ibid, p.225
within this setting is acknowledged by Kingston, whose immediate dilemma is “to negotiate between the pull of essentialism” that is to represent specifically your community as an ethnic member, and/or the “attempt to erase the marks of difference and hold all works of literature up to a ‘higher’ standard of ‘objective artistic truth’”6 - in other words to make herself essentially indistinguishable. Kingston confronts this problematic divide by deliberately fusing fictional self-representation with ‘autobiography’. She therefore emphasises the “elusiveness of self-representation”,7 while specifically challenging our concept of self and what it signifies. She changes her voice, position and perspective to suggest that everything is open to different interpretations. Certainly with regard to history, her texts argue that the concept of ‘historical truth’ needs to be questioned from a non-hegemonic position. As a Chinese American Kingston is aware that identity can be constructed within different and conflicting historical narratives. I argue she uses a Foucauldian view of the relation between the past and present. As Claire Colebroke explains:

whereas conventional history would show all events leading naturally and logically to the present, the genealogist shows the chance, the heterogeneity and the forces of power … which have produced the present in its own heterogeneity.8

Kingston thus creates an ambiguous presentation of the self, but by constructing a space in which “ambiguity becomes a revolutionary instrument”,9 she creates a powerful position within her narratives which allows her to embrace, encounter and contemplate a complex locality.

---

6Furth, Isabella. ‘Bee-e-een! Nation, Transformation and the Hyphen of Ethnicity in Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey’, in Modern Fiction Studies, 40:1, Spring 1994, p.35
7Smith, Sidonie. A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.171
Kingston's narrative becomes a means of deconstructing conventions surrounding identity, recognising the closures of both universal subjectivity and an ethnic identity. She therefore addresses Neuman's identification of both these elements as described in chapter one. Recognising 'differences', yet not creating the ahistorical group identity which Neuman warns against, Kingston counters traditional essentialist categories of 'woman' or 'Chinese' by placing her ancestors in both real and imagined spheres. Their relationship to her is ambiguous, representing conflict as much as contact.

Developing and reappropriating the French feminists' interest in the relationship between language, memory and articulation, Kingston writes in the gap between her actual memories, suggesting what is not yet part of her history and thus allowing the interesting concept identified by Anderson, that "her memories [could] contain knowledge that she has not yet gained access to". By fusing the imagination, memories and mythology, Kingston's text illustrates Liz Stanley's recognition of the symbiotic relationship between fiction and memory, slipping between different illusions of reality. As Stanley further expounds: "we share ... [Kingston's] problems in discerning what is real, often rejecting reality as implausible, preferring the truths of myths and legends".

Thus, Kingston negotiates her subjectivity within a revised historicist setting, acknowledging that poststructuralism does not have to involve a

---


12As outlined in chapter one

“liquidation of history”\textsuperscript{14} but rather a reworking of it. Her historical consciousness involves new historicist ideas: an understanding of “a developing and continuous history”\textsuperscript{15} so both the self and the world are in process.\textsuperscript{16} Yet Kingston sees this as a manifold movement, not simply a sequential progress. And one of the key elements in revising this historical ‘eye’/’I’ is building upon the feminist focus on gender, which necessarily questions dominant historical narratives as “any historical enquiry that takes gender as its analytic co-ordinate will be diachronic... [as it uses] an analytic frame which breaks up the seeming unity of time into its multiple sediments and infinite relays”.\textsuperscript{17} Kingston utilises this “principle of unevenness” to allow her to “conceptualise history ... as a field of endless mutations”.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the different voicing of history through her mother, her relatives, her father and her own interpretations all suggest the subjective and fluctuating site of history. Moreover, by creating an interdependent relationship between talk stories and historical narratives, Kingston’s autobiographical novel questions the compartmentalising of history and fiction as this allows her conflicting cultural identities to fluctuate between fantasy and reality.

This fluctuating historical place Kingston steps within gives her agency as she has redefined historical and geographical consciousness to allow a subjectivity not displaced or repressed, but enriched by these fields. By learning to recognise and celebrate “herself, her mother [and other relatives] in a historical context, as having been shaped not only by

\textsuperscript{11}Terry Eagleton: \textit{The Function of Criticism from The Spectator to Poststructuralism}. London: Verso, 1984, p 96
\textsuperscript{15}Marcus, p 222
\textsuperscript{16}ibid, p 167
\textsuperscript{17}Dimock, Wai-Chee. ‘Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader’, in \textit{American Literature} 63:4, 1991, p 622
\textsuperscript{18}ibid
personal choices but by differing historical forces and perspectives”,19 Kingston reconfigures the traditional view of history. She employs the Foucauldian logic of questioning the concept of ‘history’ as rational, but still insists that the past represents a component of her subjectivity. This a precarious, intellectual balancing act but for her it is a viable position because the past, in her view, is outside hegemonic ‘historical knowledge’. She thus develops a space which acknowledges the necessity of historicising herself and her ancestors within their ‘real’ pasts (a deconstruction of American history), yet simultaneously embraces the postmodernist call for finding alternative expressions of how to “‘think differently’ from both their past and their present”.20 The employment of myth, fantasy and imaginary elements of her past/future creates a place in which Kingston can approach this dilemma. This is illustrated within Kingston’s portrayal of China. Despite her mother’s clear ‘grasp’ of her Chinese past, Kingston herself has never been there, and therefore draws attention to her fictitious past, “I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there”.21 This is comparable to Lorde’s imagining of her mother’s ancestral home of Carricou, which can only exist in a sphere imbued with her mother’s subjectivity and memory.

Kingston’s reinterpretation of autobiography is relevant to my argument that autobiographical writing can be poststructuralist because it is based on a dialogic relationship between fiction, fantasy and history. By creating a fluctuating, both singular and plural identity, she refuses to acknowledge the politics of centrism (imagining a centre without margins (my

emphasis)), thereby crossing the boundaries between autobiographic and poststructuralist concepts of the ‘I’. Displacing pre-determined fields of expression Kingston etches out an alternative space in which her experience as a Chinese American can breathe through disparate re-memberings.

Embracing this complex position as a Chinese American, Kingston’s sequel to The Woman Warrior entitled China Men, also embodies different and diverse interpretations of her identity. Significantly, Kingston chose to separate these two books “for fear that the men’s stories would undercut the feminist viewpoint in The Woman Warrior”. This provides an explicit political agenda and tension within the two books in relation to Kingston’s struggle with gender, racism and identity. As the title China Men implies, this book concentrates exclusively on the perspective of Chinese men and their immigrant experience in America. Kingston asserts through this premise the untold tales of the initial Chinese sojourners who form the material basis to the existence and identity of Chinese American people. However, despite this historicist conjecture, these tales are superseded by the women’s experience in The Woman Warrior. It becomes evident that Kingston needs to imagine herself within a specific feminine construct and environment before she can include the men’s stories. Significantly, this deliberately revokes the more ‘traditional’ secondary position of women within texts, in which feminists are concerned with writing women back into the texts they have been excluded from. Thus, Kingston asserts an important position with regard to sexual politics and the rethinking of gender specifics.

22 taken from title of Stephen Sumida’s article: ‘Centres Without Margins: Responses to Centrism in African American Literature’ in American Literature, 66:4, December 1994
23 Wogowitz, p.5
Respecting this position, this thesis will initially concentrate on The Woman Warrior. It will discuss how Kingston carves an empowering relationship between autobiography, identity and fantasy, and relate this to how she creates her subjectivity within a poststructuralist historicist and postmodern geographical space. Reflecting Smith’s observation that the ‘I’ “must be crossed, perhaps double-crossed, before it can signal the trace of female subjectivity in an autobiographical text”, Kingston creates a number of tensions surrounding the position of the autobiographical ‘I’ and her fictional self-representations. She questions this position to focus on her disrupted and dichotomised position as a first-generation Chinese American woman haunted by a Chinese history and mythologised past which is deciphered and ‘voiced’ by her mother, and an American present in which Kingston’s voice as an ‘immigrant’ is silenced.

Rethinking the Parameters of Language

To illustrate this strain of two opposing histories and cultures, Kingston employs the example of the physical presence of the written word ‘I’ in English, discussing this in comparison with the Chinese equivalent of a more complex written symbol. She indicates that the Chinese version of the female ‘I’ (which can also be translated as ‘slave’25) appears in complete contradiction with the assertive bold mark of the English letter ‘I’. As she states, “How could the American ‘I’, assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?” Kingston also points out that the Chinese had “to write her own name small and crooked”26, clearly symbolising the suppression of women.

26Ibid, p. 150
within this culture. Language and the written word immediately become points of conflict for Kingston, indicating the hazardous ground inbetween these apparent two extremes. For whilst the American ‘I’ appears assertive and bold, this generic term implicitly undermines women’s voices by negating their very existence, thereby offering no escape from the more explicit Chinese version of female subjugation within language.

bell hooks also challenges this capitalisation of the written, visual ‘I’, as she deliberately writes her name in lower case to re-write and reconfigure emphasis within writing and speech. Thus, her desire to “shift attention away from personal identity, speaker, back to the words themselves and the meaning they evoked”, deconstructs language and the relationship between writer/theorist and text (as discussed in chapter two). Similarly, Kingston’s reference to the written ‘I’, emphasises the limited space for women’s expression. She specifically establishes her identity away from the space occupied by the autobiographical ‘I’, a tool which “serves metaphorically as a site of the universal subject and its normative masculinity”. Moreover, her reference to this writing of the self begins to outline Kingston’s radical interpretation of the fictional, mythological and disparate points of her identity, the many ‘I’s’ reflected in the female ancestors and fictional figures she refers to throughout The Woman Warrior.

Kingston’s ‘stories’ challenge the western binary opposition between speech and writing; thereby undermining the prescribed spaces of the

---

27Wogowitz, p.21
29Smith, Subjectivity, Identity and the Body. p.2
written ‘I’. The symbolic law regarding the privileging of writing\textsuperscript{30} is explicitly questioned, as it is the ability to learn and recreate her mother’s ‘talk stories’ which allows Kingston to explore other fields. Language, however, represents “both the possibility and the difficulty of identity”\textsuperscript{31}, posing an ambiguous source of power with regard to Kingston’s fluctuating cultural location. Donald Goellnicht\textsuperscript{32} draws attention to this predicament, arguing that Lacanian psychoanalysis and the French Feminists’ interest in revising Lacan is extremely Eurocentric and doesn’t acknowledge the difficulty that women from non-European cultures might have in embracing this focus upon language. Focusing upon the symbiotic relationship between the mother and daughter is problematised from an ethnic perspective in which the mother is not simply representing a parent but symbolic of a whole country and culture. Developing the work of black female critics\textsuperscript{33}, Goellnicht proposes that the French Feminists’ emphasis on the preverbal, the semiotic moment, creates a danger of a “transhistorical” form of interpretation. This location does not digest or consider the difficulty of Kingston’s movement (or resistance) from the semiotic to the symbolic as “an attempt at balance between the old mother tongue/culture and the new fatherland”.\textsuperscript{34}

The choice between the apparent simple resistance by manipulating language becomes manifold with regard to Kingston’s position as a first


\textsuperscript{31} Marcus, p.291


\textsuperscript{34} Goellnicht. p.122
generation Chinese American. She clearly occupies a difficult place, with a number of options which threaten her agency and subjectivity to a far higher degree than recognised in, for example, some of Kristeva’s works.\textsuperscript{35} Does the daughter ‘regress’ to the literal pre-oedipal language she communicated with her mother - thus effectively silencing her as she refuses to move into the symbolic - or does she “adopt the oral tradition of the ‘mother culture’ which is the domain of women and which challenges some Western feminists’ stress on writing/ecriture”?\textsuperscript{36} Or does she choose to embrace her new culture, thus forfeiting the mother tongue in preference for the fatherland?

Michael Fischer\textsuperscript{37} further explicates these complexities of language, specifically in relation to ethnic identity and the reinvention of mixed race subjectivity within new generations. He proposes that adapting to the strain of different voices and languages can be achieved by “inner listening” to different components of the self. This clearly corresponds with my discussion of Bakhtin in chapter one and his suggestion of an “inner dialogue” which operates within a form of communication which connects thought/speech/writing. Fischer introduces “dream translation” to this dialogic relationship between identity, language and communication, which he relates specifically to Kingston’s talk-stories. As he suggests: “her talk stories are fragments of stories, customs and events”.\textsuperscript{38} Although Fischer develops his premise to a myopic conclusion,


\textsuperscript{36}Goellnicht, p. 124

\textsuperscript{37}Fischer, Michael. 'Autobiographical Voices (1,2,3) and Mosaic Memory: Experimental Sondages in the (Post)modern World', in Autobiography and Postmodernism, edited by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore & Gerald Peters. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994, pp79-130

\textsuperscript{38}Fischer, p. 84
which I strongly oppose (suggesting that “these fragmentary images must be turned into a coherent narrative” (my emphasis)), Nonetheless, he identifies the different levels and meanings within Kingston’s talk stories which operate within varying modes of communication and language, to which ‘dreams’ provide a recognition of the significant space between reality and fiction. Dreams, therefore, create another form of discourse which develop Kingston’s fragmentary identity and stories.

Dreams, imagination and fantasy create a connection between and through the different histories I have illustrated. However, this space is not easily negotiated by Kingston. From a child’s perspective, Kingston’s mother’s inability to distinguish between real and imaginary concepts creates a disturbing legacy for Kingston. As she describes: “I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began”. The graphically violent events such as the “stories of war, violence, bombing raids, shrinking babies, insane women stoned to death”, create fearful apparitions for Kingston, and produce an ambiguous point of contact in which the power of ‘talk stories’ is overwhelmed by the terror of the subject. Until Kingston can incorporate these violent stories, myths and dreams within her identity, her mother continues to threaten her identity. Language thus signifies the difficult relationship between Kingston and her mother which echoes Winterson’s and Lorde’s experiences. The need to violently disentangle the mother’s voice and presence within their narratives is an impetus which is developed through all three authors. As far as Kingston is concerned, her mother’s ambiguous voice and position provide a focus for

---

39 Fischer, p. 85
40 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 25
41 Goellnicht, p. 126
the text in which she paradoxically writes her mother out of the text, whilst simultaneously basing the narrative around her mother’s identity.

The maternal language, rather than being illustrated as a powerful medium of possibilities, is in Kingston’s childhood a language which in many ways represses her and remains an obstacle. It places Kingston as a girl in association with a slave’s position, as she states, “we failed if we grew up to be but wives and slaves”. It is a language which she comes to recognise as simultaneously questioning and “enshrining” patriarchal culture. She negotiates this difficult space initially by rebelling against her mother and the derogatory language she experiences as a female child. Kingston “rejects the traditional occupations of femininity, refusing to cook [and] breaking dishes”. Her attempts to play with ‘boyish’ cultural signifiers do not impress her mother or the community, thus undermining her potential identity of the “phallic woman”. Yet it is important that she works through this possible identity as her subjectivity is continually threatened by her mother and there is a need for her to reinscribe her own identity within this book, which both questions and celebrates her ambiguous female heritage.

Thus, the discourse Kingston utilises operates on a different level from the ahistorical position many feminists take with regard to the deconstruction of language. Rather than simply asserting the semiotic space, Kingston recognises the ambiguities which prevail with the acquisition of language. Historicising and racialising her position, Goellnicht cites Kingston as illustrating that the “mother and the mother tongue emerge as both

---

42 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 25
43 Goellnicht, p. 126
44 Smith, A Poetics of Women Autobiographies, p. 160
45 ibid
desirable and terrifying, empowering and debilitating; silence is at once escape and doom". Kingston adopts a strategic essentialist approach, as referred to in chapter one, as for her identity can be both coherent and contradictory. Significantly, with respect to Kingston’s political stance, for every possible interpretation of an overt political agenda there remains a different possibility, and within both her books, but particularly The Woman Warrior, I think it is important that these contradictions remain in place and are not resolved.

These inconsistencies are exemplified through the relationship between silence and language. The cessation of her self-inflicted silence as a child implicates the beginning of her position to begin to define her identity as an autonomous individual, away from her mother and also the other Chinese American girls she encounters. The medium of ‘talk stories’ enables her to create her own interpretations to others lives, to talk her own way back into her history and possible futures. Yet the reverse is true in a perverse way in the story of Kingston’s ‘No Name Woman’ aunt, the ‘anti-heroine’ who through her silence, her refusal to speak of her illegitimate baby’s father, places herself in defiance of patriarchal lineage and tradition. Despite the suicide of this aunt, her silence allows her an agency and a subjectivity in the “boundless infinite beyond the identity constructed” by the dominant culture. It allows Kingston to adopt a powerful interpretation of her aunt’s life story, representing her as a rebellious individual rather than as a victim of patriarchal conservatism. As Kingston describes her, the aunt “crossed boundaries not delineated in space”. In comparison to this, Kingston herself recognises the “powerful

46 Goellnicht, p.127
47 Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.154
48 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.15
presence"\(^{49}\) of silence as a space in which she doesn’t have to contend with her position as a Chinese American woman. Consequently it is a place to which she returns a number of times during the narrative through other avenues of her identity, and this is a point I develop with reference to Fa Mu Lan and also Kingston’s renegotiation of madness at the end of this chapter. Once again, Bakhtin’s ‘inner dialogue’ provides a framework for discussing Kingston’s premise here. She implies that silences, what is unsaid, occupies an equally significant sphere to that of language, and within her text deliberately mixes the two so that the distinction between language and internal dialogue is another unnecessary opposition which needs to be questioned.

This heterogeneous communication is reflected in Kingston’s non-linear text and the knowledge that the narrator is unable or unwilling to distinguish between myth and reality, ‘talk’ and thought. Hence, there is no resolution to this text, no specific ‘ending’. Rather, the last story within The Woman Warrior represents a lens through which the rest of stories can be viewed. Kingston deliberately inverts a conventional coherent assimilation of identity by reinscribing her struggle with subjectivity and language within this final vignette. The opening of the story ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ illustrates the continual contradiction between silence and language as powerful places, culminating with her attack on a fellow Chinese girl at her school. This is a significant incident in the book because it is the only blatant attack on herself and her ethnic position within the text (as opposed to within mythic/fictional projections of her disparate subjectivities) which expresses her anger at American society and her voiceless status within

\(^{49}\text{Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.155}\)
this land of 'opportunities'. At this point Kingston's narrative engages with similar ideas to Winterson and Lorde's. All three authors illustrate the necessity of destabilising a self-constructed image in order to come to terms with, and recognise, different identities within themselves. Both Winterson and Lorde express their lesbian sexuality as part of a liberating force through the heteroglossia of prescribed discourses.

It is thus important that Kingston deals with her encounter with the silent Chinese girl not within a mythical setting, but within the recognisable reality of an underground toilet, as this basement location could signify a psychoanalytic search within herself. Certainly, within the text, the environment reflects Kingston's own fears of the unknown. For example, she describes the effect her scream has: "my voice hit the tile and rang it as if I had thrown a rock at it. The stalls opened wider and the toilets wider and darker. Shadows leaned at angles I had not seen before".50 Her frustration at the speechless Chinese girl echoes her own feelings of disempowerment developed within this enclosed and sterile environment. Employing Jungian psychology, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos suggests that some of the characters in The Woman Warrior illustrate that "archetypes operate in polarities ... [thus] when one extreme is constellated ... the opposite is automatically invoked and struggles to emerge, to give a completion, a wholeness".51 She thus posits the silent Chinese girl as the 'other', the alter-ego, of Kingston. However, although Demetrakopoulos considers the implications of this theory with regard to the different roles women have to play, I feel that she fails to recognise the

50 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 161

107
cultural complications of this dichotomised approach to the self. Kingston at this moment desperately wants to confront her archetypical opposite, yet this involves a number of contradictions. Destroying this image also represents the negation of part of her own history and culture. The silent girl represents the silent Kingston, the other side to her self which she wants to repress, “reflecting her own fears of insubstantiality and dumbness”.52 But, most importantly, the subservient girl represents a concept which in many ways she believes her mother wants her to be, in order to become acceptable and pliable within both cultures. Thus, Kingston’s attack on this child clearly symbolises self-hatred and frustration at her own voicelessness,53 as someone who is inscribed by both Chinese and American histories.

The threat to her identity due to this cultural abyss between China and America is exemplified by the physical utterings of Kingston’s own voice which produces a whisper in school and still fails to be understood as an adult. Thus, when she voices her disgust over racist language to her boss in her later employment, her voice is muted, ‘‘I refuse to type these invitations,’ I whispered, voice unreliable”.54 Within the ‘American realm’, her voice evidently falters. This self-consciousness feeling surrounding her voice is further compounded by the actual sound of the Chinese language which Kingston suggests is a “guttural peasant noise” to American ears, “it isn’t just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian”.55 Cultural judgements and misunderstandings are further complicated by the fact that

52Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.169
53ibid
54Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.50
55ibid, p.154
“the Chinese can’t hear Americans at all; the language is too soft and western music unhearable”.

To illustrate this point Kingston describes a Chinese audience talking throughout a piano recital as they presume the musician cannot hear them. She follows this description with the remark, “normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy”.

Kingston thus recognises that she cannot “entrust [her] voice to the Chinese either, [as] they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them”. The whisper she is left with in order “to make .. [herself] American-feminine” is a significant space between silence and the spoken word, and is in many ways a satisfactory escapist position - one that cannot be easily classified. The whispers symbolise a different form of communication/language which exists ‘underneath’ words, creating a position of disruption and chaos and, as I argue later, offering a point of communication between Kingston and her father. However, this ‘whispery’ state is also emblematic of the childhood game ‘Chinese Whispers’ in which words, voices and language become distorted and reinterpreted through the relaying of simple phrases. Thus, the whisper also connotes an arena of misunderstandings and a reconfirmation of racist stereotypes of an enclosed Chinese community steeped in secrecy and superstitions.

Kingston interrogates these contradictions surrounding silence and speech by confronting her ‘doppelganger’, the silent Chinese girl whom she associates with complicity and obscurity. The girl’s “whisper was as soft
as if she had no muscles".\textsuperscript{60} It becomes a debilitating force in this context, one which Kingston feels can only be broken by the sound of the girl's voice. The girl does not speak throughout the entire ordeal. However, what is interesting is that her 'quiet' state does \textit{not} make her vulnerable. Kingston later reports that the girl was "protected by her family," looked after by a sister who never marries.\textsuperscript{61} Consequently, the girl avoids the journey, the transition, between childhood and adulthood, remaining in that in between state, representing an alternative 'fate' (or life) for Kingston. The girl thus simultaneously represents the agency of silence as it exists outside of patriarchal discourses and foundations. Her unmarried position is an important recognition of silence as a powerful possibility, as it places her within a similar location to the 'No Name Woman' aunt. Both refute conventions associated with the public and private domains of gender roles/behaviour. The domestic/sexual space associated with women is questioned through Kingston's revision of spoken language, and this is a point developed throughout this chapter.

It is equally significant that this confrontational incident with the silent girl is followed by an illness of eighteen months for Kingston, placing her in a powerless, debilitating situation symptomatic of her victim's state. This suggests that confronting stereotypes, and reimagining the space for language is a difficult and exhausting area to create. Paradoxically, Kingston describes this period as "the best year and a half of my life".\textsuperscript{62} It represents a retreat to a safe environment where confrontational issues could be avoided. Kingston treasures this long period of illness in which she does not have to attend school. The situation of having to attend both

\textsuperscript{60}Kingston, \textit{The Woman Warrior}, p.156
\textsuperscript{61}ibid, p.164
\textsuperscript{62}ibid, p.163
an American school, immediately followed by a Chinese school, is clearly traumatic for the young Kingston. It highlights the difference between the white 'ghosts' (the Chinese description of the white American race) and the Chinese, whose cultural traditions are surrounded in secrecy and simply expected to be accepted by children such as Kingston.63

This dichotomy only confirms her suspicion that these two cultures can never be united. Secrecy and silence are developed as ambiguous positions. They represent insular spheres connoting empowerment and powerlessness. hooks also identifies these elements as signifying the parameters of her childhood, providing a bond defining the domestic space of family life, yet also creating an arena of exclusion. “Secrecy about family, about what went on in the domestic household was a bond between us ... yet I could not grow inside the atmosphere of secrecy that had pervaded our lives”.64 She thus describes the difficulty of ‘leaving a trace’ of her life, whilst trying to write her autobiography many years later. The sense of betrayal she feels in discussing her family within a ‘public’ arena is something that hooks comes to terms with through a recognition of the fictional aspects of memory. She refers to Lorde’s Zami to pursue this point, “encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material we use to invent the self, Lorde invited us to challenge notions of absolute truth”.65

The renegotiation of memory as part of a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography creates a point of contact between secrecy, silence and the space for creativity. Recognising the fluid relationship between these

63Wogowitsch, pp.18-19
64hooks, Talking Back, p.156
elements allows the authors to confront the contradictory space of silence, which is both an exclusionary zone, and a place which offers insular protection from the outside world. Within Zami, Lorde describes how her parents weave a web of secrecy around their personal worries and concerns. They create a clear divide between public/private and adulthood/childhood, placing Audre permanently within the latter binaries. However, this is a sphere which she reconfigures, pushing her identity through the dichotomous understanding of private/public, and instead allowing the two to inform each other. Hence, throughout Zami she describes how political changes in America become enmeshed with aspects of her own personal growth. Nevertheless, this is a complex position to imagine, and certainly illustrates the difficulties Lorde, Kingston and hooks have to contend with. They face conflicting histories, part of which is inscribed by their parents and grounded within a different country’s history, and part of which reflects their current status and the need to fight the repression of minority voices in their ‘home’ country. Thus, although both authors recognise the fear of racism that surrounded the secrecy in their childhoods, and despite their perspective from a 1950s/1960s generation which ‘talks back’ into the void of silence, they register the extreme difficulties within this position of ‘double-consciousness’.

In Kingston’s case, it is only when she has to fight through her self-inflicted ‘safe’ silence, only when she realises that silence is not culturally recognised as an acceptable position to occupy, that the problems begin: “It was when I found out I had (my emphasis) to talk that school became a misery”.66 Margot Wogowitsch describes how Kingston tries to mask

---

66Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p150
herself from the need to adjust to this new situation. She covers her school paintings with black paint and writes on the blackboard with a thick layer of chalk: “I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top”. The abundance of black and white seems to connote a number of meanings. On a most visible level, these colours symbolise a clash of cultures, in which skin colour signifies non-status within a ‘host’ country. However, considering these drawings on a more metaphorical level, it is notable that black signifies mourning in the west whereas white is the colour associated with mourning in China. Death represents the possible loss of identity for Kingston caught between two polarised cultures; it is a location difficult to maintain, and could symbolise self-annihilation. It is notable that both Winterson and Lorde have to confront images of death within Oranges and Zami. Although these deaths are evident on a more literal level (both suffer the loss of close female friends), this loss symbolises the problems of redefining identity outside of conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives.

Deconstructing multiple discourses such as historical narratives, individual stories and the writing, sound and thought connected with language is an extremely difficult position to ascertain. Developing a voice becomes complicated, as the vocalising of stories and imagined spaces, which redefine Kingston’s position and identity, also allow for another more sinister possibility: that “ultimately the full, the “real” story of women may lead to madness and self-destruction rather than to legitimate self-representation”. Death and madness are explicitly identified as alternative outcomes for Kingston, Winterson and Lorde in the

---

67 Kingston, p. 140
68 Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p. 157
deconstruction of self identity, and this is a point detailed at the close of this chapter.

Thus, in respect of Kingston, both cultures threaten her subjectivity. Talking, writing and thinking (which includes silence) become crucial possible means of breaking free from this “culture that would make nothing of her by colonising her, and in so doing, steal her authority and her autobiography from her as her mother’s legend would do”.69 This point is developed by Thomas Causer who suggests that

instead of carving her identity and her story in terms of conventions of the dominant culture, Kingston appropriates and revoices the tales and texts of her girlhood in a way that challenges or deauthorises the discourse of the cultures - Caucasian, Chinese and patriarchal - that threatened to condemn her to silence or marginality.70

However, it becomes evident that the formation of part of her identity outside the realm of reality places Kingston in a paradoxical situation, for whilst it allows her to explore multiple identities, it also means that “her empowerment does not threaten to disrupt the representations of the patriarchal circle”.71 Thus, Kingston’s search beneath hierarchies and cultural binary oppositions regarding concepts of race and gender72 needs to redefine history, to provoke a new understanding of the dialogic relationship between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’.

History, Mythology and Identity

As I have outlined, Kingston employs this different construction of history within a parameter which deconstructs the distinction between myth and history, and this is a point reiterated throughout both narratives. Despite

69Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p. 160
71Smith: Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p. 158
72Humm, p. 112
historical 'signifiers', she creates a postmodern dialogic relationship between history and myth, each informing the other and both becoming synonymous with the representation of her identity. This is a position which she illustrates within her narrative which, although certainly is never 'complete', aims to etch out a space in which different historical, geographical and linguistic identities are acceptable to her.

This innovative historical approach offers an interesting comparison with China Men which seems to employ a different concept of history, initially perceived by the reader to trace a more conventional approach to historical narratives. Within China Men there is clearly more defined 'historical data': events set within specific dates and against the backdrop of immigration policies and the disfranchisement of Chinese men within America from the late 1800s onwards. It becomes evident that the stories of the sojourners to the gold mountain are based in a far more recognisable reality than the characters within The Woman Warrior. Kingston concentrates upon the everyman figure of the Chinese man. Thus she allows her father, grandfather and other male relatives to become emblematic of 'china men' in general, rather than reasserting and reimagining specific incidents and specific personalities, as in The Woman Warrior (and this is clearly reflected in the titles of the two texts).

History is, therefore, employed for a different purpose in China Men, as Kingston is advocating the need "to recover history from deceit and lies by telling it from a Chinese American point of view".73 What is paramount, however, is that this different use of history is built upon The Woman Warrior's new historicist, non-sequential illustration of events and myths.

---

73Wogowitzsch, p.45
Although Kingston appears to be replicating the binary oppositions between public and private with regard to her portrayal of men and women, I propose that she undermines the more public arena for men with the myths still very much present within China Men. This is echoed by the structure of the text itself, which differs notably from The Woman Warrior. In China Men, the tales of relatives are followed by short 'myths'. This structure has a manifold effect on the relationship between 'truth', reality and mythology but, perhaps most significantly, it deliberately “disturbs the very shape of historical time, challenging not only normative temporality but also its spatial disposition of margins and limits”.74 Hence, the surface text is undermined by these myths which deconstruct hegemonic, American 'white' history.

Kingston employs a reading of myths which recognises its position as promising “another mode of existence entirely, to be realised just beyond the present time and place”.75 Consequently, myth provides a means of creating a path between historical narratives and fiction. As I have suggested in chapter two, both Kingston and Lorde problematise the reading of myths from a Jungian or Freudian perspective, as both these psychologists are concerned with reading the significance of the 'ego' and the 'psyche' for identity. These terms derive from Greek words, and, therefore, immediately place the interpretation of myths within this cultural heritage.76 Kingston and Lorde are concerned with replacing these Western mythical narratives with Chinese and African mythologies which defamiliarise conventional interpretations. Hence, instead of “eternal

---

74 Dimock, p. 621
76 For example, the word psyche derives from a Greek word meaning ‘breath’ or ‘life’, and by extension ‘soul’. See Coupe, Myth, p. 125
patterns of understanding”, and “universal motifs” providing a paradigm for deciphering mythology, Kingston creates a dialogic relationship between myth, history and identity which subverts the possibility of one interpretation. Myths, therefore, do not help to define aspects of identity, but rather become part of identity.

Reconstructing myths allows Kingston to place her father within the Chinese context which he denies and refutes. By placing him within the history and mythology of his forefathers she specifically attaches him to a cultural heritage which he dismisses. Linking him to his background is important for Kingston, as many of the sojourner Chinese men were cut off from their heritage because of their exploitative position within America. However, it is interesting that in China Men the original source of the stories/myths are not mentioned. Unlike in The Woman Warrior where they are spoken by the mother, Kingston has to look for inspiration elsewhere in this text, outside of the family arena. She creates for her father a space in which to explore his identity. It is not so much a problem of disentangling herself from a wealth of ‘talk’, but of finding any connection at all with her father who remains a distant figure. This is demonstrated within one of the first short stories in China Men, in which Kingston and her siblings mistake another man for their father because they see him so infrequently. She describes the man exclaiming “‘But I’m not your father.’ Looking closely, we saw that he probably was not ... this man continued his walk down our street, from the back certainly looking like our father, one hand in his pocket”.

77Coupe, p.139
78Wogowitzsch, p.36
79ibid
80Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.11
What becomes clear is that her father seems to need a specific historical context as a means to begin thinking about his life, as the only access Kingston has to his life is through a public arena. His private life is kept hidden which is symbolised by the private spaces he creates in each house they live in. Kingston, therefore, has to start from scratch as she has no details of his background, which is a completely different experience from that with her mother who deliberately and resolutely connects herself to the past. Within *China Men* Kingston acknowledges that her father is constrained by history. In as much as her mother looks at future meanings in her history, her father is only able to be in the present, within a fixed time. Chronicling historical dates to rewrite American hegemonic history is a way to understand her father’s and forefathers’ generations and their difficulties in association with the American immigration policies. So, rather than dominant historical narratives being a problematic force as it is in relation to women in *The Woman Warrior* - it is a linear history denying the subjectivity of women - in *China Men* Kingston questions history within a different paradigm. She utilises ‘facts’ as a way to begin understanding the psyche of her father. Yet, just as within *The Woman Warrior* it was important for Kingston to engender history, so in *China Men* in order to disrupt hegemonic history, she ‘racialises’ it. The racism Chinese men experience forms a link between them which undermines linear history.

Dominant historical narratives are thus questioned in both texts. The clearer distinction between fictionalised history and factual history, which Kingston seems to be asserting in *China Men*, is undermined by the mythical figures connecting with the ‘real’ figures of her relatives, and in this sense they are interchangeable. This resembles more closely *The
Woman Warrior and the rethinking of hegemonic history and historical context. Kingston intermingles the past and the present, allowing them to be entangled, not separated as her father would wish. This position addresses the debate between Shirley Neuman and Sidonie Smith as outlined in chapter one.\(^8\) Kingston carves a space between the overt 'Autobiographical Manifesto', as outlined by Smith, and the 'unwriteable' poetics of difference as defined by Neuman. As detailed previously, Neuman's critical stance creates the possibility of an uncontained self. By creating a fluctuating subject position she identifies the agency of the self which is both socially constructed and constructing. This is certainly reflected in Kingston’s narratives which combine historical narratives with individual fantasies, mythologies and stories, all of which identify a subject in process. Moreover, by rethinking American history from a first generation Chinese American perspective, Kingston politicises her voice. This reflects my development of Smith’s ‘revolutionary subject’, in which fantasy, fact and myth inform the ‘political collocation of a new I’.

The connection (and/or disconnection) between fantasy, fiction, myths and history is an integral part of China Men, and Kingston concentrates on fables as a means of connecting images of the East and West. Thus by inference, she tries to relate to her father’s position. This is exemplified through her re-writing of the Robinson Crusoe story with her vignette concerning Lo Bun Sun, a character whom Wogowitsch describes as “the fictional link between the West and Chinese diaspora”.\(^8\) In this story within a story, because it is a child’s book, the concept of time must pass quickly – for example twenty five years on the island is mentioned in just a few sentences. This concept of time is linked with the disparate notion

\(^{8}\)see page 25  
\(^{82}\)Wogowitsch, p.47
of history which Kingston reiterates in both texts: the idea that time moves differently in different places. This develops Kingston’s mother’s mythical concept of China in The Woman Warrior: “One year lasted as long as my total time here [in America]... I would still be young if we lived in China”.

Time becomes a construct which is, therefore, irrational and cannot be equated with conventional concepts of linearity. This highlights Kingston’s interest in reconfiguring western constructs of history and chronology which create a static, conformist and exclusionary culture.

The island of Lo Bun Sun represents the place in between China and America in many ways: an independent place, a ‘free’ zone where every action Lo Bun Sun takes only has implications upon himself and not others. It also, however, suggests that it is only in fiction, a place outside of history, that there is a point of contact between two cultures, and, significantly, it is through the imagination that this communication arises.

The tale of Lo Bun Sun progresses through the interaction between himself and his ‘Man Friday’ equivalent - Sing Kay Ng. It is noticeable that the master/servant relationship is maintained, even after their rescue from the island, and finally it is through following an order from his ‘master’ that Sing Kay Ng dies. This hierarchical association is explicitly emphasised within racial terms; the black cannibal savage and the civilised, adroit Chinese man represent a reflection, not a re-discussion, of Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday’s colonial relationship. By placing a Chinese man in a direct replication of a white man’s identity, Kingston confronts her father’s assimilation of an American identity. She thus questions this racialised space from a post-colonial perspective, in which the master/slave, black/white dichotomy focuses on the problems surrounding

83 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 98
the late twentieth century ‘American’ identity. Hence, the reconsideration of her father’s politicised space is as problematical as the ‘silences’ surrounding the talk stories in *The Woman Warrior*. Recognising her father as someone who has internalised ‘Americanism’, Kingston has to conclude that although her relationship to her father *appears* easier for her to negotiate, it is as difficult to understand and interpret as her feelings towards her mother. It is apparent that historical narratives in many ways *fail* to offer an avenue through which Kingston can understand or interpret her father. This conclusion deliberately undermines the linear history of white America.

Joseph Fichtelberg, discussing the dangers in challenging the discourses of history and language, argues that “the constant ruptures of continuity, the shifting perspectives in storytelling, expose all language to its own deconstruction.” In undermining patriarchal discourse, Kingston, according to Fichtelberg, may “undermine her own text”.84 This observation develops the problems surrounding the extreme of the “discursively produced and dispersed subject of poststructuralist theory”,85 as identified by Neuman et al in chapter one: how “to create an independent stance in discourse without abandoning it - a task, as Foucault notes ... that is, at best, treacherous”.86 Kingston’s stance at the intersection of multiple identities, both fusing her own life and the lives of others with individual interpretations, places Kingston in a powerful yet dangerous position. Displacing the ‘I’, Kingston must be careful not to

---

84Fichtelberg, Joseph. ‘Poet and Patriarch in Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men’. in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, edited by Shirley Neuman, p 175
85Neuman, ‘Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference’, p 225
become anonymous, but she treads this terrain carefully, refuting any categorisation in her crossing of the I.\textsuperscript{87}

I propose that although Kingston allows deconstructionism to threaten her text on a myriad of levels (she considers the very dissolution of identity as warned by Stanley, Neuman and Miller), it is this very tension that provides a basis on which a future discourse of subjectivity can be imagined. Valuing the Foucauldian logic of “depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analysing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse”,\textsuperscript{88} Kingston re-thinks her role as an author. It is through her ambiguous portrayal of history as a more genuine recovery of the past, yet infused with mythology and fantasy, and it is through her reinterpretation of language as both empowering and disabling, that Kingston provides an alternative discourse within autobiography. This allows her to contemplate the “simultaneous and sequential subject-positions”,\textsuperscript{89} as identified by Neuman.

However, Kingston confronts her subjectivity within a different parameter in \textit{The Woman Warrior}, as in comparison to the problems of finding a connection between herself and her male ancestors, Kingston has a clear bond between herself and her female relatives in this text. In order to reconstruct notions of identity, it is significant that Kingston creates an autobiographical novel which does not simply involve elements of her own life but incorporates her interpretations of her mother’s biography and other female ancestors and mythical figures. \textit{The Woman Warrior} thus fuses her own history and past in direct relation to that of her mothers and

\textsuperscript{87}Smith: \textit{Subjectivity, Identity and the Body}, p.2
\textsuperscript{89}Neuman, ‘Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference’, p.226
relatives, and is perhaps more comparable to Audre Lorde’s definition of a biomythography.¹⁰ Kingston’s relationship with her mother, in a similar predicament to Lorde’s, reflects the ambiguity and tension surrounding the deconstruction of the patriarchal discourse in China Men. For, within The Woman Warrior, Kingston approaches the problem of deconstructing the maternal language and the mother-daughter relationship.

**Mothering and Ambiguity.**

As I have argued, Kingston rewriting the maternal space on a number of levels. This reflects Carolyn Steedman’s position as discussed in chapter one. Steedman is concerned with the difficulty of finding a discourse in which ambiguous feelings towards her mother can be expressed; the prescribed ‘landscape for a good woman’ needs to be deconstructed. Similarly, Kingston subverts and questions her mother’s ‘landscape’ as Kingston discovers that “controlling her feminine space is difficult with the legacy of her mother’s words and images of female victimisation”⁹¹ to contend with.

Smith makes the point that many times in the narrative Kingston’s mother cuts off other women’s “autobiographical possibilities”.⁹² This includes not only Kingston’s own narrative but her mother’s sister, Moon Orchid’s, story. Yet even more symbolic is the female slave which Brave Orchid buys to help her with her doctoring duties whilst in China. In this incident Brave Orchid inspects the slaves like animals, checking their teeth, eyes and heart. Although Kingston hints of a little compassion within her mother by the fact that she does not buy a slave “from parents, crying and

---


¹¹Smith, A. *Poetics of Women’s Autobiographies*. p 170

¹²ibid, p 167
clutching”\textsuperscript{93} this is undermined by the knowledge that it would suit her mother better to find an independent girl with no family attachments. Significantly, the ‘girl’ she chooses is given no name within the text and, despite being valued for her servitude, Kingston’s mother marries off her servant before her trip to America, and never refers to her again. Thus, the slaves’ ‘life’ is set within an inferior space within the narrative and reflected in her lack of ‘autobiographical possibilities’, manipulated and inscribed by Kingston’s mother.

Moreover, Causer identifies The Woman Warrior as “ghostwritten”\textsuperscript{94} in the sense that Kingston’s mother provides much of the material of the book. Given the presence of ghosts interspersed within the text, such as the ‘sitting ghost’ which Kingston’s mother confronts in her days of training as a doctor (and the actual title of the book), it is surprising that Causer does not adequately question this phrase. I have argued that the presence of Kingston’s mother represents a severe threat to Kingston’s individuality and own ‘stories’. Hence, the concept of the mother ‘ghostwriting’ her daughter’s story could be compared to ‘The Ghostmate’ fable (this vignette is detailed later in this chapter), in which the body of the traveller is surreptitiously ‘bled dry’ by a ghostly/imagined woman. This comparison clearly symbolises the possibility that Kingston’s mother not only represents a difficult presence within Kingston’s narrative, but also a dangerous one.

It is the ability to let her mother’s word “stand without resisting it”\textsuperscript{95} which is the point where Kingston’s own subjectivity can be considered as

\textsuperscript{93}Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.76
\textsuperscript{94}Causer, p.243
\textsuperscript{95}Wogowitz, p.29
both autonomous and interrelated to that of her mothers and other relatives, thus breaking through cultural and historical barriers. The final story within a story (the last few pages of The Woman Warrior) exemplifies Kingston’s renegotiation of her subjectivity linked to her problematic relationship with her mother. This vignette focuses upon Ts’ai Yen, a poetess born in AD 175, captured by barbarians and thus isolated within a tribe which does not speak Chinese. Significantly the children she bears by the chieftain do not recognise Chinese as a language either but simply “imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed”.96 This clearly reflects Kingston’s own mother’s position and her daughter’s need to break free from the Chinese language - one based upon female powerlessness. However, in the story a point of communication arises between the poetess and the barbarians in the form of music, a sound “which disturbed Ts’ai Yen; its sharpness and its cold made her ache. It disturbed her so that she could not concentrate on her own thoughts”.97 Ts’ai Yen eventually accompanies the music with sorrowful singing, yearning for her own culture and language, which the barbarians nevertheless understand, thinking they can hear pieces of their own language in the songs. Ts’ai Yen not only discovers that the crude barbarians can produce beautiful sounds, and, therefore, are not one-dimensional, but also when she sings her children sing with her, which represents an important new understanding between them.

Significantly, this story also suggests that the deconstruction of female sexuality becomes part of a more positive female legacy for Kingston. Underlying the narrative of Ts’ai Yen is Kingston’s criticism of this woman’s (and she becomes emblematic of women throughout the ages)

96Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.185
97ibid, p.186
fate as her sexuality is inscribed by male power and abuse. As such, the language with which Ts'ai Yen eventually communicates with the Barbarians is particularly significant, as it is one that is free of sexual connotations. As someone who has probably produced children as the result of rape, Ts'ai Yen finds an outlet of expression which is not bound by her sexuality: an outlet which she finds through her singing. Although at the end of the tale Ts'ai Yen's fate is still inscribed by men, as she is married off to Tung Ssu “so that her father would have Han descendants”, it is paramount that her songs remain in Chinese culture, leaving her a space in which to move away from a sexuality prescribed by patriarchy, and rather begin to imagine her own discourse.

These songs that Ts'ai Yen composes represent a form of communication which reconfigures conventional language, as it is the sound rather than the meaning of the words which is significant, and thereby the story of Ts'ai Yen signifies a new space of communication which Kingston has created with her mother. This is a point of contact which is not bound by conventional interpretations of female space/sexuality or cultural signifiers. It is a powerful medium, both individual and collective, which reasserts Kingston within a matrilineal heritage, connected to her mother and other female ancestors, but also acknowledging the story of her grandmother (as told by her mother) who despite having bound feet is a strong and resourceful character. As Wogowitsch suggests, Kingston “tells herself back into the family circle”; thereby reasserting the fluidity of boundaries between them, and establishing the different pattern of history I have described. She celebrates a redefined ‘matriarchal’ communication which transcends our traditional concept of historical

---

98 Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, p. 186
99 Wogowitsch, p. 29
time: listening and communicating between present, past and future: learning as much from imagined futures as from the past. As Kingston describes on the final page of *The Woman Warrior*, the story of Ts’ai Yen is one that “translated well”¹⁰⁰ between cultures, and I would propose that the significance of the word “translate” is used to indicate a space of understanding, of communication, which differ from the written or spoken word. The mirroring of the importance of breaking down the distinction between oral and written mediums is again suggestive of language as a different tool from the one we perhaps recognise.

**Approaches to a Dichotomised Identity**

The telling, the verbalising, of the story is a means of letting go, of moving through a painful history. Kingston uses ‘talk stories’ to revise her subjectivity, to move through the bound conventions of what constitutes ‘Chinese’ and ‘American’, constructing images which are neither. This position of questioning different cultural associations is one that Kingston as a first generation Chinese American needs to contemplate: “those of us in the first American generations had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fit in solid America”.¹⁰¹ And, although she considers this in her first book, the entire text of *China Men* centres around the immigrant position. Kingston is deliberately creating an alternative history for her ancestors, away from the “concept of the dual personality”.¹⁰² Wogowitsch suggests that this is a stereotype evolving from the fictional character Charlie Chan in the mid 1920s which suggested that Chinese Americans had “an American half and a Chinese half, and the ability to respond to situations with the appropriate mode”.¹⁰³

---

¹⁰⁰Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* p.186  
¹⁰¹ibid, p.5  
¹⁰²Wogowitsch, pp.3-4  
¹⁰³ibid
Kingston historicises and deconstructs this binary position. Problematising this from a post-colonial perspective, as I have argued, Kingston deconstructs any division between myth/mystic (East) and rationality/order (West). She locates her identity as disrupting any notion of an ‘all-American’ identity by historicising the Chinese immigrant experience.

Kingston’s concern with re-reporting the immigrant experience and acknowledging that she is a mixture of cultures is in opposition to how her mother and father confront the possibility of a ‘schizophrenic’ identity. They deal with this dilemma by focusing in totally polarised directions. As is evident in The Woman Warrior, Kingston’s mother is fixed within a Chinese heritage, culture and ideological perspective. China represents a focus and a context of her life: a concept whether real or imaginary which represents home, a place of belonging. In this way, she always feels and acts as a ‘foreigner’ in America, symbolised by her refusal to change her name when entering America. This perspective contrasts with ‘the father’ who changes his name twice. Initially, aged 14, he changes his name from Bibi (meaning shy and cute) to BaBa, thus clearly asserting his independence and ‘manhood’. The second time ‘the father’ re-names himself is in America, where he adopts the name ‘Ed’, clearly symbolising his embracement of a new identity and existence in America. He resolutely connects himself to an American present, disassociating himself from Chinese history through his new identity.

Name changing represents the polarity of identity between husband and wife, and contrasts with the redefining of names by women writers/theorists, who rename themselves not simply to connect (or
disconnect) with a new colonised identity, but, rather, to embrace a number of fluctuating not static spaces within autobiography. Both Lorde and hooks illustrate this point. hooks changes her name to begin to remember her past self through a different avenue away from the repression of her childhood. As she argues,

How could Gloria [her real name] find her voice, speak firmly and directly when I was so accustomed to finding veiled ways of expression, abstract, unclear ways? For me, the pseudonym had a very therapeutic function. Through the use of the name bell hooks I was able to claim an identity that affirmed for me my right to speech.104

Similarly, Lorde embraces the name 'Zami' to identify her position within a different realm from her experiences as a child, where expression and innovation were stifled to an extreme. The name of her autobiography situates Lorde amongst the mythological and 'women-loving' ancestors who form an integral component of her identity. These writers thus suggest an alternative position to Kingston’s mother’s and father’s location within Chinese/American cultures.

The fundamental difference between Kingston and her parents is that she has the ability, or perhaps ‘luxury’, of contemplating the fluid place, the boundary-less space between nations and national identities. She can discover empowerment and contradictions within this space because she is not in the same situation as her ‘immigrant’ parents - both economically and politically. “The fact of being at once Chinese and not-Chinese is the centre around which all other issues of identity cluster”,105 and provides a starting point for Kingston to explore her subjectivity. However, the immigrant position in the early 1900s is completely different from Kingston’s own experience of being born in America (despite racism), and Kingston acknowledges that her parents’ concerns were economically

---

104hooks, *Talking Back*, p.162
105Jelinek, p.233
focused. This is reflected in *China Men* in which 'the father’s’ relative 'success’ is set against the backdrop of many *failures* by relatives and contemporaries who travelled to America and were not able to make a living. (For example the story of Ch’u Yuan represents the Chinese who travelled to America and could not cope with homesickness or adapt to the new lifestyle.)

Kingston’s parents’ concerns in America were not about displacement, but about adapting and earning a living in a capitalist country. The political relationship between China and America only affected them in terms of their status in America; thus their position was not something they had to *contemplate*, but something they had to *live* and *work* through. Kingston’s position of intellectualising the Chinese American position is specific to her generation growing up in America in the 1950s and, as such, is as alien to ‘the father’ and ‘the mother’ as their relationship to history and the past is puzzling to her. Thus, just as ‘the brother’ (who represents Kingston’s generation), when leaving to fight in the Vietnam war, tries to instil into his pupils a sense of the atrocities and horror of war, but reports defeatedly how the pupils blindly and ignorantly accepted capitalism and its aims, the generation of Kingston’s parents did not politicise their position in America, simply exploiting (or in reality being exploited by) the country for economic gain.

This generational ‘conflict’ is further compounded in Lorde’s *Zami*, in which her mother and father accept the inevitability of racist comments and behaviour in America in the 1940s, whereas Lorde as an adult in the late 1950s and 60s becomes part of a political climate which fights

---

106 Wogowitsch, p.44
through derogatory stereotypes. Kingston’s and Lorde’s parents’ experiences (despite the differing time scale between their emigrations to America) illustrate the rising hysteria against ‘undesirable’ immigrants, reflected in major laws introduced in the 1920s which restricted prospective immigrants’ possibility of acceptance. These strictures are detailed in Kingston’s father’s experience, who sets out for America with “two sets of papers: bought ones and his own ... He would carry his diplomas, and if they did not work, he would produce the false papers”.107 Moreover, his journey to America is either through being smuggled in on a boat, or being detained “for an indefinite time at the Immigration Station on Angel Island”,108 depending upon different version of his histories.

Either way, his entry into America is based as much upon deceit and luck as it is upon his abilities. Furthermore, Kingston’s father’s position of working in a laundry, despite his qualifications as a teacher and scholar, illustrates the blatant racism of this period, which attempted to keep immigrant workers within the bottom echelons of society by prohibiting them from practising specific vocations such as law and medicine. Esther Ngan-ling describes the effect of this political degradation on Chinese men and women to prevent Asian Americans from forming a strong coalition and political force, US immigration policies emphasised the importance of cheap labour and discouraged the formation of family units by setting up restrictive quotas for women and children of Asian labourers.109

As I have suggested, Kingston’s and Lorde’s experience of American racism differs from their parents’ experience. Although the “hegemony of a Eurocentric culture”110 is a fact they must face, their understanding of

107Kingston, China Men, p.48
108ibid, p.55
110Schlesinger, Arthur. ‘The Return to the Melting Pot’ in above, p.298
America is influenced by a political climate of unrest and rebellion. Both build their identities alongside the recognition of a growing political consciousness of the past and present repression of different identities. And both, therefore, deconstruct American linear ‘white’ history with their stories, mythologies and multiple narratives, which voice the contradictory and complex perspective of first-generation Americans. The changing concept of the ‘American identity’ is paramount to both Kingston’s and Lorde’s texts, as embracing, or at least recognising one’s different and diverse cultural roots becomes a possibility in late twentieth century America.

This changing approach is emphasised by Kingston’s interpretation of her father’s life and journeys, which are centred specifically in America, so even the story entitled ‘The Father from China’ describes his journey (significantly described in five different versions) and first experiences in America. This then links with the portrayal of ‘The American Father’, which is the father she herself remembers. Kingston does not seem able to unite these two images of her father within the text; they remain two different and distinct identities. Thus, in the beginning of ‘The American Father’, although rationally there can be no possibility of her father being born in America, Kingston examines the possibilities simply because she cannot imagine her father outside of an American context. “He appears as a committed American who merely happens to have Chinese ancestors”.111 So she imagines the possible fantastical explanations:

In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco, where my grandmother had come disguised as a man. Or, Chinese women once magical, she gave birth at a distance, she in China, my grandfather and father in San Francisco. She was good at sending. Or the men of those days had the power to have babies.112

111Wogowitz, p.43
112Kingston, China Men p 231
But although Kingston employs mythical concepts and superstitions elsewhere in China Men and The Woman Warrior, she undermines these explanations here with the previous interpretation of her father’s history and his journey from China to the ‘gold mountain’. The language she employs here exposes the ‘fact’ behind this fictional account, thereby exposing the father behind his American facade.

The Feminisation of America

Confronting these binary conventions of ‘Chinese’ and ‘American’ concepts is a position crucial to Kingston, marking a path away from her parents. By indicating and outlining the feminisation of America as a ‘tempting’ gold mountain for immigrants, Kingston discusses the parasitic and fraudulent relationship between ‘the father’ (Chinese men) and America (the promised land). This is emphasised in the tale of ‘The Ghostmate’ which follows the story of ‘The Father from China’. ‘The Ghostmate’ is a vignette involving a travelling man who finds a seemingly perfect woman who encourages the traveller in whatever he does “as if she expected just him and no other, his hostess brings him the very fruits, the very poem, the very game he likes best”.113 Importantly, the traveller is an everyman figure symbolising that this relationship has universal implications, and thus Kingston makes references to his possible trade within the story; he could be a potter, a student, a cobbler, or a farmer.

Wogowitsch argues “that the Ghostmate is a personification of America”, proposing that the bottomless bowls of food, the unconditional welcome, and the harmonic environment are tempting concepts for the traveller, and by indication the father, as “they both find an object they cherish and

---

113 Kingston, China Men, p.79
idealise”. Both temporarily forget their families and responsibilities and discover a new and exciting lifestyle; crucially both, therefore, are fixed in the present moment. Of course the ‘myth’ of the Ghostmate is told in such a manner that the reader is aware that the situation can only be temporary as it is ‘too good to be true’. However, interestingly, its parallel, the country of America and the Chinese men anxious to obtain part of the American dream, is not so quickly spotted as a facade, a shambles of deception and exploitation, and in fact her father never seems to acknowledge his immigrant status within America.

The twist to both stories is the result of disillusionment. The traveller leaves the beautiful woman and her home, only to be greeted with shock and horror by fellow villagers at the sight of his emaciated sickly body. He was unaware that he had been working himself close to death, and upon his return home to his village, discovers a grave upon the sight of his imagined utopia. The similarity to the working conditions of ‘Ed’ (‘the father’s’ American name) and his laundry partners becomes clear when Kingston exposes the reality behind the songs and extravagant ideas they fabricate, to reveal the extremely long hours and the loneliness they experience, “They worked very late at night, and after a while did not sing or talk ... Ed’s legs ached ... No, they were not going to be welcomed home by wives; they would stay here working for ever”.

The ability to focus on days off spurs the young men on and belies their working conditions. However, upon the arrival of his wife, ‘the father’ Ed cannot live in his imaginary bachelor world any longer and must begin “to see America more realistically”. The crisis point of accepting America as a

114 Wogowitsch, p.40
115 ibid, p.39
116 Kingston, China Men, p.64
117 Wogowitsch, p.41
host country and rejecting one’s own culture is rewritten within ‘The Ghostmate’ as the traveller returns to his home and family. Thus, Kingston imagines an alternative to her own father’s position who, in contrast, never registers a crisis point, becoming ‘All American’ at the expense of his cultural roots.

It becomes clear that Kingston occupies a complex position which thrusts between and through the polarities of the mother tongue and the fatherland. Goellnicht cites this position as a positive one: a shifting identity which can “critique the law of patriarchy and the totalizing voice of dominant history”.

As I have argued, it is through the reconsideration of ‘female space’ that Kingston negotiates this ground between her mother and father, exploring the possibility of new identities. ‘The Ghostmate’ tale focuses and develops this ‘new’ space, as the feminisation of New York in the early 1900s, a country which ‘promises’ immigrants the prospect of making a fortune, is questioned. The Ghostmate becomes the product of this ‘relationship’: a mirage of enticement which belies the reality of exploitation. The personification of countries as women is fundamentally linked to Kingston’s deconstruction of language, space and geography from her hybrid position. This is explicated through Sue Best who describes, “the contours of countries and districts [as] frequently drawn by using the concepts of motherland or mother tongue, and cities, and even whole countries, are frequently personified as women”.

However, significantly, New York also represents a contradictory sphere: an important space in which ambiguities can exist. For, whilst it promises

---

118 Goellnicht, p. 128
the containment of an environment of opportunities, it also represents the unknown. Best develops this conjecture by suggesting that

feminising space seems to suggest, on the one hand, the production of a safe, familiar, clearly defined entity, which, because it is female, should be appropriately docile or able to be dominated. But on the other hand, this very same production also underscores anxiety about their ‘entity’ and the precariousness of its boundedness. 120

Thus, Best identifies the contradictory nature of the relationship between women and space, in which the issue of containment and the ‘active ingredient’ of women’s body-matter in the production of space complicate both terms. 121 What I found significant, however, in relation to Kingston’s text, is that she problematises this domesticating and containment of space specifically in relation to New York’s position as a white feminised space. This, therefore, places Chinese Men’s relationship with this space within a different light. By racialising the space of New York, I would suggest that Kingston deconstructs symbolic associations with the masculine and feminine. Hence, she begins to imagine a new medium and place of communication which fluctuates between the domestic space of privacy and secrets, as outlined in the beginning of this chapter, and the equally ambiguous public white feminine space of New York.

Again, this perspective reflects Neuman’s description of a poetics of difference which is ‘uncontainable’. 122 Kingston utilises her autobiography of differences (such as race, gender and class) to create a tension which problematises gender opposition within the production of space, thus indicating an ‘uncontainable’ entity. However, this space/place is not acknowledged by the immigrants entering America, and this includes her father. The Statue of Liberty is immediately mistaken by her father for a goddess when he enters New York. Kingston describes her

---

120 Best, p.183
121 Best uses Irigaray’s re-reading of metaphor to reach this conclusion
122 as referred to in chapter one

136
father as “glad to hear that the Americans saw the idea of Liberty so real that they made a statue of it”. Yet this “grey and green giantess”\textsuperscript{123} represents paradoxes and exclusions, which she needs her father to comprehend; it is a misnomer, belying the reality of the immigrants’ experience. Kingston, therefore, rewrites him into the ‘uncontainable space’ he refutes.

As I have suggested, this space also involves a reinterpretation of the mother/daughter relationship. The displacement Kingston feels, which her father never acknowledges in \textit{China Men}, is echoed within \textit{The Woman Warrior}, in which her mother’s contradictory voice and position question female sexuality/language/identity on a number of levels. Pushing through masculine and feminine constructs, Kingston attempts to etch a path through the essentialist/constructionist debate within feminism.\textsuperscript{124} Using a strategic essentialist approach, she maintains her own identity whilst reinscribing any traditional essentialist qualities her parents feel she has as a woman, through mythological and fantastical representations of her self. This position reflects her historicist conjecture which I have outlined, as this employs mythology to allow Kingston to embrace her identity as both historically and ahistorically constituted.

\textbf{Gender Terrorism}

Kingston thus entertains a space in which women and men are not judged by their sex, a position in which cultural signifiers are confronted and reimagined. The story of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior who enters the ‘heroic’ world of adventure and violence in a realm where “male and

\textsuperscript{123}Kingston, \textit{China Men}, p. 54
\textsuperscript{124}as identified by Fuss, Diana. \textit{Essentially Speaking, Feminism, Nature and Difference}. New York: Routledge. 1989, p.3
female difference remains undelineated”,125 implies a possibility of ‘genderlessness’. Within this sphere Fa Mu Lan’s sexuality, her menstruation and her ability to procreate are treated as natural body functions without any overt signifiers; she is treated no differently from a man despite her different biology. However, within this emancipatory sphere, it is significant that rather than remain essentially genderless, as is her position when being trained by the old couple (who are themselves hermaphrodites and, therefore, not bound by sexual relations), she has to masquerade as a man to revenge the wrongs done to her village. Ultimately, as this tale progresses, Kingston undermines the possibility of a genderless position within this heroic role, as Fa Mu Lan’s sexuality and body remain hidden126 as opposed to remaining meaningless. The functions she has as a woman prevail as essentially inferior rather than equal and, fundamentally, childbirth and the possible discovery of her femininity, represent vulnerability. Thus, the woman warrior’s ability to reproduce a son simply reasserts the patriarchal lineage and her body remains an implement for her father to write upon. It becomes an implement of power, but one that is inscribed specifically from a male perspective.

Fa Mu Lan avenges the wrongs of her family. However, her narrative ends with her kneeling before her parents-in-law announcing she will now serve them as a wife and slave “now my public duties are finished ... I will stay with you, doing farm work and housework, and giving you more sons”,127 simply negating her assertive position before, and reaffirming gender stereotypes with her momentary, not permanent, transformation. Thus,

125Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.157
126ibid, p.158
127Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.47
Sidonie Smith summarises that it is precisely because Fa Mu Lan’s sexuality remains hidden and unspoken that her subjectivity is inscribed “in the law of the same representation [which] legitimises the very structures man creates to define himself, including those structures that silence women”.  

This muted subjectivity is, however, undermined by a different conclusion, again rejecting the closure of a single meaning. Smith identifies the important layer to this story which is the portrayal of the “witch amazons”, the band of swordswomen who killed men and boys, thus specifically “slaying the source of the phallic order itself”, and undermining the surface text of this vignette. These women represent an important subversive element to the story, and although Fa Mu Lan does not ride or directly associate with these women, it is important that it is she who frees these foot-bound women: they “blinking weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat. The servants who walked the ladies had abandoned them, and they could not escape on their little bound feet”. From this passive description of the women, Kingston builds the violent band of swordswomen, rewriting the reason for the degrading tradition of foot binding, imagining that “perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had (my italics) to have their feet bound”. The women represent the part of Kingston’s subjectivity which wants to question the dominant order in a radical and extreme way. Through them Kingston criticises “the ontological bases on which ... love, 

---

128Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, p. 158-159
129Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, p.53
130Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, p.159
131Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, p.46
132ibid, p.25
power and compliance with perfect filality rest”. In many ways this echoes her attack on the silent Chinese school girl. It is a violent assertion of her identity in protest against the traditional, submissive female realm inscribed by patriarchal traditions.

In this context it is vital that Fa Mu Lan states that she “learned to make ... [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes”. Kingston intrinsically locates this woman warrior as part of the fabric of her own identity, along with the other ancestors and mythological figures she mentions, but draws attention to the ambiguous position of the woman warrior. She is powerful, yet powerless, in her muted female position. This, again, reflects the ‘silent Chinese girl’s’ position; she is a girl/woman who also contests female domestic space and language, yet within the tenuous sphere of silence and secrecy. Moreover, the band of swordswomen in the Fa Mu Lan vignette embrace this ambiguity from an opposing perspective. Representing an extreme alternative route to ‘gender terrorism’, these swordswomen invoke violence, destruction and revenge: clearly not representing a preferable path to female identity. Thus, Kingston draws attention to the difficulties of reimagining spaces associated with femininity. It is a realm that needs to deconstruct traditional spheres of identity, recognising the ambiguity and “conflict between the desire for individual identity and the realities of a historically imposed group identity”.

---

133Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.157
134Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.28
Within this text, as I have indicated, Kingston needs to learn to accept herself as multifaceted, acknowledging the anger and resentment at her background, her (his)story which is steeped in insecurities and ambiguities. Kingston, therefore, does not want to resolve the many contradictions within her texts. As Wogowitsch points out, they are “necessary to keep [her] in suspension, because it is exactly in this ‘between-world’ condition that [Kingston] continues to exist”.  

However, as I have argued, it is also the concept of ‘future meanings’ and her deployment of fantasy and mythology in ways that are politically radical which allow her to question conventional ideas surrounding the expressing and writing of the self.

This space for female identity/sexuality/gender being muted by a patriarchal discourse and culture is also explored within *China Men*. Kingston has to acknowledge and find an alternative to the language Chinese men use, which denies women autonomy, as it is a language based on the defilement of women’s sexuality. It is a discourse policed by men. As hooks describes of her own experience

Perhaps it was the memory of her father saying the word slut - slurring it just so - that made it sound disgusting and evil at the same time. It was the word he used when talking about the way they dressed. He didn’t want any daughter of his going out into the world looking like a slut. Sluts were worse than whores - a slut was somebody who had a choice, somebody who could have kept herself from falling but who wanted to fall. Sluts made choices. They were not victims.  

hooks’ experience of her father’s hatred of untamed, dangerous sexuality in women is also echoed in Lorde’s *Zami*. Lorde’s parents seem to almost blame Gennie’s sexual abuse by her father upon her own lack of sexual morality. A specific sphere of acceptable female sexuality is, therefore.

---

136 Wogowitsch, p.156  
137 hooks, bell, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, p.62
prescribed through patriarchal discourse and the violent language and stigma associated with female desire.

Consequently, although Kingston has negotiated a unique subjectivity for herself in *The Woman Warrior*, she has to confront the negation of it in *China Men*. As a woman, she is deemed inferior by the language her father uses, which is far more aggressive than her mother’s words. Kingston has to carve out a realm in which these generalised comments are not connected with actual women but are relegated to abstract notions of language which bear no relation to the physicality of women. Specifically she tries to find a space in which these insults bear no relation to her.138 It is the bitter abusive language her father uses such as “smelly cunt”139 which is extremely problematic for Kingston to come to terms with, and provides the impetus for her to imagine her father’s story, to reinterpret the silence and the insults in a different context. In comparison to *The Woman Warrior*, silence is *not* an acceptable position for her father to contemplate, as it may be built upon the subjugation of women. As Kingston states “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m not mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong”.140

This makes it necessary for Kingston to imagine the possibility of a different language for her father within the text. During his journey to America, Kingston explicitly links him to the feminine semiotic space of language: “he heard a new language... the water’s many tongues speaking and speaking. Though he could not make out the words, the whispers

---

138 Wogowitsch, p. 34
139 Kingston, *China Men*, p. 12
140 ibid, p. 15
sounded personal, intimate, taking him over”.\(^{141}\) This point is also discussed by Fichtelberg in which he argues that “whereas the language he [the father] inherited from China was hierarchical, a network of correspondences, the language he uses in America is often chaotic, improvised”\(^{142}\). Kingston tries to connect with her father through his relationship to this new language, symbolised by chaos, temporality and misunderstandings. This, therefore, offers a point of contact with the chora, the maternal\(^{143}\) and disruption of meanings. Developing the poststructuralist recognition of subjectivity constructed through language “and is, therefore, an open-ended, contradictory and culturally specific amalgam of different subject positions”,\(^{144}\) Kingston attempts to reimagine her father’s position (both historically and linguistically). Fichtelberg develops this premise by suggesting that ‘the father’s’ association with the chora is also symbolised by the well in his cellar in America. This well with its “black sparkling eye of the planet”,\(^{145}\) “so resonant with maternal imagery, redeems the other well, poisoned in The Woman Warrior by the narrator’s nameless aunt”.\(^{146}\) Her father’s connection with the well offers a possible dialogue between Kingston, her father, and the silenced voices of their female ancestors, and Kingston imagines the possibility of communicating with her father within this female space.

However, significantly, another alternative to this space of contact with her father is Kingston’s ‘gender terrorism’. Within China Men, Kingston’s

\(^{141}\)Kingston, China Men, p. 52-53
\(^{142}\)Fichtelberg, p. 180
\(^{143}\)I use this term within the renegotiated realm I have developed throughout this chapter, which certainly problematises the French feminist’s essentialist conception of feminine/maternal.
\(^{145}\)Kingston, China Men, p 239
\(^{146}\)Fichtelberg, pp 180-181
inversion of gender stereotypes forces pain and humiliation upon her father who vitiates female sexuality and roles. Clearly, the oppression of women, which is obviously the problematic force in *The Woman Warrior*, also underlies the text within *China Men*. Here Kingston creates two moments where men are forced to become either physically, or in their imagination, women in order to emphasise the immense difficulties and complexities surrounding any communication with her father who replicates gender divisions. This is within the first fable concentrating on Tang Ao and also the story of Tu Tzu-chun. Developing the brutal disruption of gender roles illustrated within *The Woman Warrior*, in which the ‘masculine’ qualities of violence and destruction are manifested through Fa Mu Lan and the band of swordswomen, Kingston now pushes men into the feminised space.

Tu Tzu-Chan’s story illustrates this perspective. Within this tale he takes three pills from a Taoist monk in order to experience what happens in hell, although he must not talk during the ordeal. Tu is subjected to horrific illusions, his wife being tortured, his own body being abused and then killed, but finally within his illusionary state he is reborn a woman. Significantly, he is reborn a deaf-mute female, the parents of whom marry her off to a husband who states: “Why does she need to talk ... to be a good wife? Let her set an example for women”. But her husband tires of her inability to speak, as this is something he cannot control. To force his wife to speak he threatens to dash their child’s head against a rock. Naturally the mother cannot utter a word, and so the child is brutally killed. It is at this moment that Tu shouts out and thus breaks his illusory

---

147 Kingston, *China Men*, p. 121
state. Importantly, it is in his role as a woman that he experiences the most pain, and is not able to endure it.

This crude feminisation of men is further developed within Tang Ao’s story. This fable seems to begin as a fairy tale with the familiar opening lines “Once upon a time”,148 and this is a considered play on these traditional images by Kingston. She undermines the sexual stereotypes we associate with the fairy-tale world by objectifying the traveller Tang Ao in a deliberate fashion. In a similar objective, Winterson subverts the recognised realm of fairytales within her texts. By creating intelligent ‘heroines’ she deliberately deflates the passive romantic feminine roles created within this magical world. Within China Men, Tang Ao reflects this stereotype of women’s roles, as he is initially pleased to be captured by women in his travels, assuming they want and need him for sexual or romantic pleasure. However, the opposite is true: he is forced to undergo the painful and humiliating process of ‘feminisation’ so that he can become an object of pleasure. Firstly, Tang Ao’s ears are pierced with a needle and the brutal language Kingston uses underlines the reality of the pain of this ‘beauty’ treatment taken for granted within many cultures: “they worked the needle through - a last jerk for the needle’s wide eye (‘needle’s nose’ in Chinese). They strung his raw flesh with silk threads; he could feel the fibres”.149 The emphasis upon the violation of the body through ‘piercing holes’, clearly analogises the sexual appropriation of women for male pleasure, as the phallic instruments scar the feminised body.150

---

148 Kingston, China Men, p 9
149 ibid
150 Fichtelberg, p 169
The women in this vignette then proceed to break the bones in Tang Ao’s feet in order to bind them. “They gathered his toes, toes over and under one another like a knot of ginger root. Tang Ao wept with pain”. He is forced to unbind his feet each night so that he can wash his bandages which smell rotten and foul. “He felt embarrassed; the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his”. The implications surrounding female sexuality are developed, and the real consequences of the male fetishisation of feet are blatantly expressed by Kingston. Tang Ao is also fed special foods which encourage him to have women’s biological functions. Then when he has become fully feminised, the women take him to wait on the queen and her fellow diners. The queen passes comment on the dainty feet and the ‘prettiness’ of this new servant “she’s pretty, don’t you agree?”. Tang Ao serves his/her purpose as an aesthetic object of beauty - exposed to be so ridiculous now the roles have been reversed.

Reflecting the stories in *The Woman Warrior*, this fable works on a number of simultaneous interpretations which further develop Kingston’s exposing of gender ideologies. By specifying that this ‘Land of the Women’ was in North America, this story comments on the fact “that Chinese men are forced into female subject positions in the new land”. In other words, Kingston links her father’s abusive language with his own situation as little more than a domestic servant in America. Although this does not excuse his language or behaviour, it provides a means for Kingston to begin to understand her father’s hidden frustration, and to form her subjectivity away from that doctrine. Goellnicht develops this

---

151 Kingston, *China Men* p.10
152 ibid
153 Goellnicht, p.123

146
discussion of the feminisation of Chinese men through their employment in America. He argues that “American society perpetuated the myth of the effeminate or androgynous ‘chinaman’, while erasing the figure of the ‘masculine’ plantation worker or railroad construction worker”.\textsuperscript{154} He identifies Kingston’s narrative as redressing this stereotyping and “historical erasure”, not by a simple reversal of masculine and feminine roles, but by disrupting “this gendered binary opposition”.\textsuperscript{155} Hence, through the story of ‘The Ghostmate’, the feminisation of New York, and the subversion of gender roles in both \textit{China Men} and \textit{The Woman Warrior}, I have illustrated how Kingston questions the boundaries between male/female, space/place and offers the disruption of language, history, myth, geography, race and gender to address this issue.

Blurring distinctions, creating a dialogic relationship between the above categories, allows Kingston to deconstruct the cultural signifiers of China and America, embellishing both with fantasy and a different historicism. Throughout \textit{The Woman Warrior} the geography of China and America become intertwined, and this provides a point of communication between the polarities of her mother’s and her father’s identities, whilst reinscribing an alternative subjectivity for Kingston. Significantly, Kingston’s mother becomes part of the route to intertwining these two different countries, as she is the embodiment of someone who exists in entirely different social worlds in China and America, but it is not clear whether these worlds are real or imaginary. By restructuring the


\textsuperscript{155}ibid, p.157
autobiographical space, to include both these possibilities, Kingston can begin to embrace the contradictory aspects of her identity.

The story ‘Shaman’ within The Woman Warrior focuses exclusively upon her mother’s story; she embellishes a realm which Kingston needs to deconstruct. This story establishes her mother’s different relationship to memory, as her mother complains that “her American children had no feelings and no memory”.\(^{156}\) However, what is significant in this vignette, is that the relationship between memory and ‘home’ is problematised. Kingston’s mother’s fierce attachment to China clearly causes tension within the American home environment, which represses Kingston. As she explains: “When I’m away from here ... I don’t get sick ... I can breathe. I don’t have to take medicines or go to doctors. Elsewhere I don’t have to lock my doors and keep checking the locks”.\(^{157}\) Within the text she comes to understand ‘home’ in a more enlightening way, existing not so much as a physical space but as a concept not defined by a geographical location. Consequently, this develops Anderson’s premise of future meanings within autobiography, as she expounds: home is “something yet to be constructed, and not as an origin [which] we can only ever desire in retrospect”.\(^{158}\) In this re-imagined space cultural signifiers such as linear time and hegemonic history are disintegrated, and ‘otherness’ is dissolved

What becomes clear to Kingston throughout this narrative, and indeed the entire book, is that she cannot be sure of her mother’s history, in the same way that her father’s history remains elusive and ambiguous. Her mother

---

\(^{156}\) Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 107
\(^{157}\) ibid, p. 100
\(^{158}\) Anderson, p. 10
appears in control of one environment, the landscape of China, but not the other, America. The two extremes that her mother presents to her, the thin authoritative, autonomous doctor in China and the fat woman working in a launderette in America, are hard to synthesise in her imagination. Despite the knowledge of racial inequalities against Chinese immigrants in America, Kingston is also aware of the pull towards China in her mother's memories which negate the possibility of recognising any objective truth. Once again, Kingston has to reconfigure a space for her mother within Kingston's own interpretation and 'talk story', coming to terms with her mother's subjectivity which is based upon denying other women's theirs. The fact that her mother's power is based on the powerlessness of others is something that Kingston has to work through. And she deliberately invokes an alternative vision of Brave Orchid at the end of this story as an old, frail and dependent woman, in order for her as a daughter to begin to understand aspects of her mother's journey and history in a more 'ordinary' context.

'Shaman' begins with a detailed description of her mother's medical certificates, which certainly make them seem based in a reality we know and can decipher. Kingston seems to want to believe this aspect of her mother's history, and thus allows us to temporarily become immersed in historical dates and stamps, which situate the metal tube containing her mother's certificate within a specific time. Yet within a few pages, the Foucauldian questioning of linear history is employed again through the use of 'future memories', thus deconstructing chronological history. Kingston describes the metal tube with her mother's certificates as having "a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain". This is a

159Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.57
memory inscribed by her mother and Kingston’s own imagination, it, therefore, develops the notion of a part of ‘history’ outside of conventional historical knowledge which I have focused upon throughout this chapter.

The inclusion of a description of a photograph of Kingston’s mother further complicates this point. Photographs provide an ambiguous perspective which develops Kingston’s embracing of paradoxes. As Stanley suggests “it is a truism that the camera does not lie; it does not readily tell the truth either”.\(^{160}\) It represents an artifice which demands different interpretations and, as Stanley argues, photographs do not speak for themselves and are either literally surrounded by text, or are interpreted from the reader’s own subjective knowledge.\(^{161}\) Stanley develops this premise to deconstruct the visual representations of the self. As she proposes “for those of us who are or who have been sighted, the autobiographical I is a seeing I, a seeing eye”.\(^{162}\) Thus, she is concerned with the “speaking aspect of photographs”, for the “voice that speaks through representation in photographs is gendered as well as raced, classed; and ‘seers’ of these representations are also gendered, raced and classed beings”.\(^{163}\) Her concern with the relationship between the subject of the photograph and the production of the ‘text’ surrounding it, is elaborated upon by Paul Jay who poses the question of whether it is possible to divorce oneself from the cultural and stereotypical expectations captured within a photograph.\(^{164}\) Focusing upon Roland Barthes and Cindy Sherman, he compares their commentary on the cultural production

\(^{160}\)Stanley, p 22
\(^{161}\)ibid, p 25
\(^{162}\)ibid, p.21
\(^{163}\)ibid, p.20
of identity, concluding that "while Barthes' desire is to defend his essential self from this conditioning, Sherman dramatises its inevitability". These critics provide a useful point of contact with Kingston's position in autobiography, reconfiguring the poststructuralist determinist view of the human agency within discourses (thus suggesting the subject is culturally produced), and/or the recognition of future memories as employed by Anderson - proposing an agency outside of the picture. The silence surrounding the photograph provides an ambiguous position for the subject, both captured, yet autonomous, of the photographer's/audience's gaze, and this reflects Kingston's fluctuating subjectivity which is inscribed by both 'real' and mythological histories.

Incorporating visual images thus allows Kingston to embrace different aspects of her and her mother's subjectivities. For example, in one photograph Kingston describes her mother as looking past her present: "she stares straight ahead as if she could see me and past me to her grandchildren and grandchildren's grandchildren". Kingston's mother's refuting of being deciphered at a moment in time thus neatly captures the theorists'/writers' of autobiography concept of rethinking conventional history to allow the idea of a place where "past and future meet".

One of the photos identifies further this ambiguous location. It has been tampered with after it has been developed; someone has smudged ink on the photo to give the impression that her mother had a fringe, but we do not know when or by whom this act was performed. Its significance lies in that it appears to echo the desire of Kingston and her mother's story.

---

165 Jay, p. 199
166 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 58
167 Anderson, p. 8
rewrite, to reinscribe history from a different point of view. Nevertheless, this changing of the photograph after its development also has a less positive interpretation, and perhaps provides a distinction between Kingston and her mother. The latter is only able to imagine a history in which her different conflicting identities are acceptable (signified by the changing of an image, to conform) whereas Kingston is able to experiment with changing identities within an environment not dictated to purely by economic survival.

Kingston’s position between the two histories of China and America revolves around this different recognition of history. Incorporating visual, future and present memories, Kingston confronts the varying manifestations of recording the eye/1. Within China Men, reflecting this premise, Kingston places ‘Asian eyesight’ within a specific parameter. With reference to her brother and his travels between America and Taiwan, Kingston describes his meeting with an ophthalmology student who proposes that visual letterings are culturally specific and, therefore, exclusionary. This student argues that “clarity was a matter of preference and culture”, suggesting that Americans make billboards for Caucasian eyes. This point is further developed with reference to newspaper type, and height of traffic lights, which are aimed towards particular visual expectations. Importantly, he concludes that “the eyes of ethnic Asians have a naturally faraway focus”. Thus if they lived in Asia “where everything is arranged according to our eyesight, we wouldn’t need glasses”. Kingston cleverly plays on the mythical component of her and her ancestors’ identity. The ‘faraway focus’ suggests not simply the concept that Asians could be long-sighted, but more significantly that this

---

168 Kingston, China Men, p. 287
‘focus’ includes the understanding of seeing an alternative history in the past, present and future. In other words, a mythological and fantastical interpretation of history is reflected in this more abstract concept of seeing: ‘faraway’ includes the possibility of a remote, dreamy and preoccupied state. This reference to eyesight, therefore, underlies the premise of a different way of looking at things, a different form of communication which she develops through both her texts. Thus, her reference to her mother’s ‘look’ within her photograph is significant: “perhaps ... [she] couldn’t shorten that far gaze that lasts only a few years after a Chinese emigrates”.

The reconstructing of the self through other cultures threatens to annihilate previous memories, and Kingston has to find a path which doesn’t “sacrifice her subjectivity or suppress her distinctively accented voice”.

However, this is not an easy position to ascertain and I want to end this discussion by reaffirming the problems surrounding deconstructionist narratives, and the reconfiguring of female subjectivity, as Kingston deliberately allows madness to threaten the narrative in the same way that deconstructing discourses threatens her very subjectivity.

Madness and Discourse

The annihilation of the self is illustrated and threatened through the story of Moon Orchid, Kingston’s aunt, suggesting that the association of women with madness is the alternative to their achievement of self identity. And this is a position Kingston needs to question. Moon Orchid builds her subjectivity around others, notably her husband and also the

169 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 59
170 Causer, p. 239
171 Fichtelberg, p. 178
servitude of female servants, eventually only finding subjectivity in
madness.\textsuperscript{172} Her inability to cope in the real world emphasises her
position as a decorative ornament now discarded by her Americanised
husband. As Smith proposes: “she is a flower of the moon, a decorative
satellite that revolves around and takes its definition from another body,
the absent husband”.\textsuperscript{173} Moon Orchid’s final ‘home’ is an all-female
mental asylum: a place in which she finds happiness: “we understand one
another here, we speak the same language the very same. They understand
me, and I understand them”.\textsuperscript{174} Once again language emphasises the split
between this private emancipatory all-female sphere, where feelings of
cultural dislocation do not have to be confronted, and the ‘public’ arena of
recognised ‘talk’. Kingston suggests that “I thought talking and not
talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people
were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves”.\textsuperscript{175} Madness,
consequently, illustrates the very conundrum in which Kingston finds
herself, attempting to explore and explain her identity, whilst
simultaneously questioning the very history and language upon which it is
based. Madness compounds this crucial position of ambiguity; it is one
associated with unpredictability and uncontrolled behaviour and
consequently a celebration of the irrational. It represents a chaotic threat
which links with the renegotiation of the relationship between female and
space. However, madness also represents a place of exclusion and
punishment; talking too much can lead to an isolated point of non-
communication.

\textsuperscript{172}Smith, \textit{A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography}, p 167
\textsuperscript{173}ibid, p 164
\textsuperscript{174}Kingston, \textit{The Woman Warrior}, p 144
\textsuperscript{175}ibid, p 166
hooks develops this connection between ‘talking’ and ‘madness’ as she describes her family’s disapproval of too much dialogue, “madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if you were female”.

hooks’ punishment is specifically connected to ‘talking back’ - a sense of not knowing when to stop talking is associated with unfeminine, uncontrollable behaviour. As she further suggests, I “was the girl who was to end up in a mental institution because she could not be anything but crazy”. Kingston describes many incidents of ‘mad’ women throughout The Woman Warrior whose fate echoes this threat: to be locked in an institution (such as Moon Orchid or Pee-A-Nah the local ‘witch-woman’), or much worse to be stoned to death, which is the villagers’ barbaric means of dealing with a ‘mad’ woman whom they cannot understand or control. Moreover, Kingston also recognises the elements of madness she sees within herself as a child “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be it at our house? Probably me”. Kingston identifies herself as different from the rest of her family as “there were adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked”. And she also recognises that she is perceived as being strange due to her messy appearance and her refusal to be assimilated into a Chinese culture which subjugates the female voice. This is exemplified when her mother begins to bring prospective men to the house in order to begin considering an arranged marriage for Kingston. Kingston deliberately makes herself undesirable with her clumsy, rude and lazy behaviour. Although she faces the wrath of her mother when the men leave, tellingly, Kingston describes how she cannot stop this behaviour now/"But I couldn’t stop at will any more, and

\[176\] hooks, Talking Back, p. 7
\[177\] ibid, p. 155
\[178\] Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p. 170
\[179\] ibid
a crease developed across the bridge". She, therefore, marks herself as
different and difficult, 'the crease across the bridge' illustrating her
refusal to accept the conventions of either Chinese or American cultures.

The story of Moon Orchid emphasises an alternative fate for Kingston's
position. As Causer explains "Moon Orchid is a kind of self-surrogate,
suffering the fate Kingston sometimes feared - of being destroyed by Brave
Orchid's unrealistic and wilful demands, of being domineered into
madness". He elaborates this point by discussing the significance of the
third person narrator stance Kingston adopts within this vignette. This is
"a novelistic technique that simultaneously permits the penetration of
other characters' consciousness and the disengagement of the self from the
story". This then focuses the ambiguous position Kingston takes with
regard to sanity and madness, and this is something she pursues within her
own experiences in *The Woman Warrior*, deconstructing the binarisms of
silence/talk, madness/sanity.

This is most effectively exemplified with the incident of the 'retard' who
attends the Chinese school and "followed [Kingston] around, probably
believing that we were two of a kind". The references to his movements
"like Frankenstein's monster" evidently hint of this child as emblematic
of Kingston's 'ugly' and uncontrollable traits. He seems to reflect the
element of Kingston that her parents and relatives *exclusively* see, ignoring
her intelligence to focus on her appearance and inappropriate female
behaviour. At first his presence seems to provoke a moment of
'confession' between Kingston and her mother, a possible moment of

---

180 Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, p. 174
181 Causer, p. 237
182 ibid, p. 238
contact: “I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat”.184 But Kingston can only whisper the words to her mother one night late at the launderette and her mother dismisses her daughter’s mutterings as “craziness”.185

Yet the ‘retard’s’ continuous following of Kingston and sitting outside the launderette eventually causes Kingston’s throat to “burst open. I stood up talking and burbling”.186 Kingston’s outburst is extremely important as, although it is a coherent monologue asserting her intelligence and individuality, it is also comparable to speaking in tongues - a necessary and cathartic moment of self expression. Just as writing Frankenstein allowed Mary Shelley to express the ‘darker’ aspects of her personality, so Kingston’s monologue allows her to accept the conflicting components of her subjectivity; she does not try to fight her differences anymore. Significantly “the very next day after I talked out, the retarded man, the huncher, he disappeared”.187 And this represents the difference between Kingston and the many incidents of madness within the text. She allows and encourages her subjectivity to have an agency which crosses the spaces of both ‘madness’ (the inner voice) and sanity, acknowledging and not repressing those aspects of her mind which are uncontrollable. Thereby she distinguishes herself from her Inother who cannot “make a space in her story for female subjectivity in unfamiliar landscapes”.188

184 Kingston, The Woman Warrior, p.176
185 ibid, p.177
186 ibid
187 ibid, p.183
188 Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.167
Kingston develops the notion of madness due to cultural dislocation within China Men. Although, fundamentally, women’s madness is also linked with the repression of sexuality within The Woman Warrior, it is clear that Kingston utilises the difficulty of cultural adaptation as a point of communication between both female and male Chinese immigrants. The story of ‘The wild man of the green swamp’ is an example of someone who is unable to cope with the failed prosperity of his trip to America; he doesn’t want to return to his wife and would rather remain living in the desolate swamp conditions of his place of hiding. His situation parallels that of the grandfather Ah Goong who keeps returning to the ‘gold mountain’, believing in the promise of economic success in America, however, he eventually has to be brought home by his family’s money as the reality is that he is homeless and destitute on the streets of New York.

The women “without autobiographical possibilities”\textsuperscript{189} are, therefore, echoed in the stories in China Men. ‘The wild man of the green swamp’ is significantly given no name; within this landscape and culture which is unfamiliar, the man’s subjectivity is erased. He becomes objectified from the perspective of the white Americans who report him in newspapers as the ‘wild man’, sensationalising his position which is actually extremely tragic. Reflecting Moon Orchid’s transient and subservient role in American society, so too ‘the wild man’ has to survive in extreme conditions of hardship because of his position of not belonging to either culture. The ‘wild man’s’ journey to America, his interpretations of events, differs significantly from the account of the officers on the ship he boarded. It thus appears to be a simple case of miscommunication and misunderstanding, belied by the propaganda of an uncivilised Chinese

\textsuperscript{189}Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, p.164

158
exile. The man is disorientated and seems to want to return to his family, yet he also harbours feelings of guilt as he has seven children to support, and thus is frightened of returning penniless and unsuccessful to China. He, therefore, represents the ‘no-man’s land’ between China and America, doesn’t belong in either and, in a sense, the uninhabitable swamp in which he lives is the consequence of this dislocation.

These feelings and places of dislocation are further compounded from a different perspective in China Men. The story of an Americanised ‘successful’ Chinese man who is unable to disassociate himself from his Chinese past in the way that Kingston’s father does so resolutely, exemplifies the problematic pull of two different cultures. The story of ‘Mad Sao’, and the haunting by his mother’s ghost, emphasises the difficult position of someone who has settled in America and embraced a different set of cultural beliefs, yet to his mother and relatives left in China he still needs to fulfil his role as provider. His mother, a powerful and persistent woman, plagues him constantly asking for food and money in the time of Communist China and the Great Leap Forward. The son cannot placate his mother unless he returns to China, his rightful home. She berates him for wasting food on his daughters when she is starving “why are you building a new house in America? You have a house here. Sell everything. Sell the girls, and mail the profits to Mother”.\textsuperscript{190} The mother as a continuous and unwanted presence links to Kingston’s own mother, but also illustrates the inappropriateness of her cultural beliefs within American society. Fichtelberg argues that when Mad Sao’s mother eventually dies, “deprived of letters he is thrust into a presymbolic madness dominated by the mother”.\textsuperscript{191} As Kingston describes, “he could

\textsuperscript{190}Kingston, China Men. p. 169
\textsuperscript{191}Fichtelberg. p. 176
not sleep because she kept talking to him. She did not fade with the dawn and the rooster’s crowing. She kept a watch on him. She followed him to work. She kept repeating herself”.192 This relationship between Mad Sao and his mother’s ghost emphasises the association between the ‘female sphere’ and madness, and this is why it is important that Kingston illustrates the ‘madness’ of both sexes within her texts; she continually and resolutely reconfigures gender divisions and spaces.

‘Mad Sao’ eventually returns to China with his mother’s ‘ghost’ to bestow upon her the traditional Chinese burial she desired. He can then return to America with his conscience intact, and resume his American lifestyle. The price of ‘normality’ seems to be in many respects the position of disassociating one’s cultural roots. This is certainly the case with ‘Mad Sao’ who, once all his connections with China have gone, is much happier. Kingston’s father also reflects this perspective, deliberately repressing his Chinese heritage. The space between two cultures and ideologies, therefore, seems to involve denying the complexities of this position. As Causer argues, this conundrum “confirms Kingston’s avoidance of two complementary dangers: on the one hand, the monologism of complete assimilation - exemplified by Moon Orchid’s husband ... - and on the other hand the monologism and silence of total alienation - exemplified by Moon Orchid”.193

Kingston, however, refutes this closure of identity both within China Men and more explicitly in The Woman Warrior. With this text she embraces the identity of her No Name Aunt who is denied words and, therefore, “a

192 Kingston, China Men, p.174
193 Causer, p.239
linguistically constructed identity”\textsuperscript{194} and she embraces the madness of her other aunt Moon Orchid, who also revalues language within a different realm. Simultaneously, Kingston acknowledges the “power of speech [as] reconnecting with the land/words”\textsuperscript{195} and talking also becomes a possible means of exploring aspects of her identity. Thus, it becomes evident that different and opposing forms of communication are negotiated within \textit{The Woman Warrior} and this concept is further developed within \textit{China Men}. The men sing, write or talk as a means of survival, especially in severe circumstances, such as Bak Goong’s experience of working in a sugar cane plantation. Significantly, it is this \textit{different} mode of communication, as identified in \textit{The Woman Warrior}, which offers a most subversive point of contact. In Bak Goong’s case, forbidden to talk within a life of forced labour, he uses his cough as an important point of communication “his cough did come in handy. When the demons howled to work faster, faster, he coughed in reply. The deep, long, loud coughs, barking and wheezing, were almost as satisfying as shouting”.\textsuperscript{196} This improvised sphere of language is reflected through Kingston’s brother’s experience. He fights in the Vietnam war, and resists the violence and destruction within his dreams through constant muttering\textsuperscript{197} “his bunk neighbours told the brother he talked in Chinese and yelled in his sleep ... he found some shipmates who listened, though he would have otherwise muttered to himself”.\textsuperscript{198} Hence, as Fichtelberg argues, it appears that “to oppose an oppressive discourse, one must create a language of one’s own”.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{194}Goellnicht, p. 126  
\textsuperscript{195}Wogowitsch, p. 105  
\textsuperscript{196}Kingston, \textit{China Men}, p. 105  
\textsuperscript{197}Fichtelberg, p. 182  
\textsuperscript{198}Kingston, \textit{China Men}, p. 285  
\textsuperscript{199}Fichtelberg, p. 182
As I have argued, expression is, therefore, a necessary and cathartic process, but one which is double edged: too much talking is equated with madness, whereas silence can be disempowering. This is reflected through Kingston's parents. Kingston wishes her father would talk himself back into an attachment to her, whereas her mother's dialogue is too repressive and needs to be silenced in many ways to allow Kingston's own narrative voice.

Kingston's brother identifies this position within a political context. Moving on from his parents' position, Fichtelberg argues that her brother "survives by perceiving, without succumbing to contradiction". Thus, in his position as a pacifist within the navy, balancing these two extremes, he manages not to kill anyone, or get killed himself. "Neither master nor slave, he had at least endured". However, I would suggest that Kingston actually pushes beyond these binary positions located by her brother, to begin to embrace contradictions and ambiguities.

The multilayered texts of The Woman Warrior and China Men permit Kingston to keep crossing and recrossing the I. Her use of language to traverse rather than reverse cultural meanings symbolises a renegotiation of hegemonic history and traditional concepts of identity. This allows Kingston to employ a discontinuity which evidently is far removed from the universal subject, but essentially is also removed from an abstract identity. Her work employs autographical, biographical, geographical and new historicist elements with the recognition of interdependency to create a new understanding of subjectivity: a platform upon which her own identity can possibly be built.

200Fichtelberg, p.183
201ibid
The following chapter outlines another approach to defining subjectivity outside of prescribed cultural realms, through a discussion of Lorde’s and Winterson’s questioning of a traditional essentialised lesbian identity. By displacing definitions of desire and the erotic from their expected and conventional discourses of love and voyeurism, both authors radicalise the space to consider sexuality. Hence, the next chapter illustrates the diverse space for lesbian expression in the late twentieth century and develops the two authors’ contrasting understanding of ‘difference’ to pursue this point.
Lesbian Autobiography

An Introduction

This introduction is concerned with placing lesbian autobiography within the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s which influenced both Lorde and Winterson, the coming out stories of the later 1970s that revolutionised lesbian autobiography, and the more recent deconstructionist arena. I want to trace the problem of a traditional, essentialised lesbian identity, and suggest that Winterson and Lorde question this through their readings of desire (Winterson) and the erotic (Lorde), in doing so radicalising lesbian identities. I also want to propose that their re-reading of the relationship with the mother revolutionises the lesbian literature of the 1980s which thinks back through the mother. ¹

Diane Fuss discusses the problem of a lesbian ‘essence’. She identifies the familiar tension ... between a view of identity as that which is always there (but has been buried under layers of cultural repression), and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be formed, created or achieved) ... This tension between the notion of ‘developing’ an identity and ‘finding’ an identity points to a more general confusion over the very definition of ‘identity’ and over the precise signification of ‘lesbian’. ²

Once again, Foucault’s new historicist approach focuses this discussion, as the History of Sexuality provides a parameter for the confusion surrounding acceptable sexual discourses. Foucault’s work regarding the historical construction of sexuality in the West has allowed lesbian theorists to begin to reinterpret and deconstruct the repressions and categorisations of sexual terminology. However, Foucault has been

criticised by many lesbian critics for focusing exclusively upon homosexual men within his interrogation of sexual discourses. Hence, he does not include lesbian sexuality as part of the necessary disruption of history and historical constructs, but rather buries lesbianism within the generic term homosexuality. Thus, although his work provides the tools of deconstruction, lesbian critics have needed to develop and modify his approach.

Therefore, although Foucault’s revision of power relations - his redefining the scope for the political - creates a path for deconstructing traditional essentialist categories of identity, lesbian critics still face the problem of how to define lesbian identity in the twentieth century. Identity politics surrounding lesbianism has caused dilemmas for critics disputing how inclusive or exclusive this category should be. The Radicalesbians of the early 1970s proposed that ‘Lesbian’ offered a different model of female identity which was not simply a choice of sexual activity, whereas later theorists writing in the late 1970s and 1980s, such as Irigaray and Wittig, have focused on locating lesbianism as an alternative sexual discourse which challenges the very structure upon which heterosexuality is based. This revolutionising of the term ‘identity politics’ illustrates the major shift in lesbian literature in recent years, and is certainly related to the rise of deconstructionist theory within autobiography. Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope identify

---

3 Wolfe and Penelope, p. 11
the simultaneous emergence of lesbian and other minority identities and cultures on the one hand, and of the poststructuralist deconstruction of the ideas of self, author, text and identity on the other.6

However, they view these emerging discourses as conflicting and, therefore, suggest that their synchronicity was unfortunate.7 Nevertheless, I would argue, in a similar reading of black women's fundamental contribution to a poststructuralist poetics of autobiography, that lesbian literature should not be seen in opposition to deconstruction, but rather points of contact can be explored between them. In comparison to black women's assertion of the relationship between theory and experience, within a deconstructionist climate, lesbian writers/theorists such as Winterson and Lorde complicate the relationship between the different levels of the 'I' in order to reconfigure traditional categories of lesbianism. Lorde and Winterson, therefore, provide a possible solution to this apparent division within the asexual8/sexual theory/practice identity of lesbians through their autobiographical novels which deny the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political, thus "subverting the entire debate about whether 'real' lesbianism consists of genital activities or acts of attention or political acts".9

Thus, I want to discuss how Winterson's and Lorde's use of difference within their works confronts the division between material and theoretical autobiographical constructs. The coming out stories of the 1970s, as Biddy Martin suggests, represent the genre upon which contemporary lesbian writers are explicitly and implicitly rethinking and reworking.

---

6Wolfe and Penelope, p. 5
7ibid
8Rich was accused of devaluing lesbian sexuality with her definition of a 'lesbian continuum' which could include woman-identified experience which was not sexual. See Rich, Adrienne. 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' Signs, 5:4, pp 631-660
These stories marked an important movement which celebrated a woman-identified-woman rhetoric and, therefore, vocalised an alternative to mainstream literature and heterosexual discourses. However, these stories invariably involved a bildungsroman linear plot which was rather limited in its scope. Moreover, Martin also argues that these stories “are addressed to a reading community assumed to be (or to have the potential to be) lesbian”\textsuperscript{10} and, therefore, they operate within a specific political solidarity arena. Martin critiques these ‘coming out’ novels for their traditional, representative, and homogeneous, not diverse, relationship to the past. She also problematises the “presumption of referentiality between life and writing, which is seen as the organising principle of such collections”.\textsuperscript{11} Although this reflects the concerns of the critics in chapters one and two, as I have argued, the positing of fantasy and myth as an integral part of the autobiographical novel revises this perspective, and this is certainly an approach which both Lorde and Winterson take.

Moreover, Liz Stanley argues that the importance of ‘coming out’ novels was their “everyday language in which to understand lesbian women’s feelings and desire”.\textsuperscript{12} Developing her concern in chapter one, Stanley places the onus upon the reader who can interpret different elements into these stories, certainly beyond the probable happy ending. This is a point which both Winterson and Lorde develop with their revolutionising of lesbian autobiography; they rewrite recognisable discourses and allow multiple and diverse interpretations. Both writers/critics deploy fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical in order to reconfigure

\textsuperscript{11}Stanley, Liz: \textit{The Auto/biographical I}. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1992, p.115
\textsuperscript{12}ibid. p.116
traditional concepts of the self and dominant historical narratives. Lorde and Winterson focus on a strategic essentialist approach to identity which allows them to embrace a coherent, shared identity with others as given, while not denying the importance of difference to them as individuals.

Lorde and Winterson have transformed any conventional notion of a lesbian identity through their appropriation and also subversion of certain movements within lesbian literature. Their re-evaluation of identity works not in opposition to heterosexual identity, but rather offers spaces in which disparate parts of their subjectivities can be expressed. Linnea Stenson in 'From Isolation to Diversity in Lesbian Novels' suggests that in America the political climate of the 1960s caused lesbian literature after this decade to form a much clearer concept of a lesbian community. She discusses the growth of lesbian bars in the 1950s, the publication of the Kinsey report which identified the frequency of homosexual activity, and the publication of Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America* (1951) which, therefore, suggested an increased awareness of the reality of homosexuals as a persecuted minority. However, she locates an absence of community within the lesbian novels written in this period, as the single 'deviants' disrupt family life and thus must remain on the outside.

I found this an interesting observation in relation to Lorde's and Winterson's illustration of the community and their undermining of the family unit which becomes a key component of their autobiographical novels. Within *Zami* Lorde certainly illustrates the beginnings of a lesbian community, but frankly acknowledges that race and class cut through this possibility as they are ignored within the bid for a homogeneous lesbian

---

1. In Wolfe and Penelope *Sexual Practice and Textual Theory*, pp. 208-225
existence. In Oranges Winterson hints of the possibility of many hidden lesbian lives under the fabrication of 'acceptable' positions for women. In both these novels, therefore, female friendships undercut any notion of the traditional family, and thus develop not an idealised notion of a community, but the beginnings of a space in which other than preconceived identities can also be expressed. These autobiographies refute the division between community and outsider as expressed by Stenson above and begin to define their identities within fantastical, mythical and political realms. Importantly, therefore, the restructuring of the family does not mean a position of outsider, but rather undermines the whole ideology surrounding the nuclear family. This becomes a significant political comment upon the history of the conformist 1950s in both Britain and America, in which traditional notions of the family and family life pervaded. Interestingly, within Zami Lorde equates the persecution of the Rosenbergs with her feelings of isolation. The Rosenbergs become scapegoats not exclusively due to their political ideals, but also due to their inversion of familial stereotypes. As Elizabeth Wilson explains

the Rosenbergs were represented as a family in which the natural sexual hierarchy was disturbed, since Ethel Rosenberg was popularly portrayed as the more dominant and fanatical partner, and in which 'unnatural' parents indoctrinated their children into the Communist creed.

This inversion of the mother figure threatens stereotyped ideologies, and this is a fundamental point, as both Lorde and Winterson deliberately interrogate the mother figure within their work. They offer the

---

14 It must be noted, however, that 1950s America was ostensibly perceived to be a much 'freer' society as technological and productive developments, facilitated by continued economic growth following the second world war, led to an extension of the consumer culture. As such, America - via both advertising and the media - promoted a culture of individuality which contrasted with Britain's more traditional family-based ideologies.

restructuring of the mother-daughter relationship as an integral part of re-
thinking the family and the structuring of woman-identified-woman
relationships. As I will argue, Lorde presents her mother as a violent
woman who in many ways distances herself from her daughter through her
silences, self-denials and strict insular family regime. Similarly, within
*Oranges* Winterson portrays her mother as a ‘mad’ religious fanatic who is
not ‘motherly’ at all and really only obtains Jeanette in order to teach her a
vocation she wanted to achieve. This focus upon the mother figure
connects with Kingston and the poststructuralist model of autobiography
which I develop, in which the restructuring of the mother-daughter bond is
a necessary move to begin to assert an autonomous identity. However, as I
will argue in the next two chapters, Lorde and Winterson write their
mothers *from* a woman-oriented diaspora, specifically outlining the
destructive force of the mother, and thus redefining a matrilineal heritage
to focus upon female relationships which exclude the mother. I also argue
that Lorde writes her mother from any present or future connections by
placing her mother within a historical mythologised lesbian continuum.
Although I suggest that this creates the problem of a traditional
essentialised past, nevertheless, it is significant that Lorde eroticises her
relationship with her mother, proposing that the only way she can find any
point of connection with her mother is through the lesbian heritage of her
island home.

Desire thus becomes a way in which to question conventional connections
between relations, and I want to look at how it is placed as a subversive
element in lesbian literature. Within *Zami* Lorde places her lesbianism
within a number of conflicting possibilities and situations. Martin makes
an observation regarding Pratt’s essay ‘Identity: Skin Blood Heart’\textsuperscript{16} which I would suggest is comparable with Lorde’s autobiographical situation

lesbianism figures ... as a basis for her political vision ... lesbianism then figures as desire, pleasure, and possibility, as a desire that transgresses conventional boundaries, not only the boundaries between self and others but the boundaries around ‘identity’ itself.\textsuperscript{17}

Desire is placed as an important element which counteracts any notion of a traditional concept of the self, and this is a point which both Lorde and Winterson pursue. Their sexuality becomes part of the many identities which form their ‘make-up’. I would, therefore, suggest that in both \textit{Zami} and \textit{Oranges} the recognition of multiple identities infused with fantasy, myth and desire question dominant ways of thinking about the self and history. Hence, although lesbianism “remains a position from which to speak, to organise, to act politically ... it ceases to be the exclusive continuous ground of identity or politics”.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the changes and direction of ‘lesbian autobiography’ can be seen as part of my autobiographical model, illustrating a complex notion of subjectivity which certainly allows us to begin to imagine authors as different as Lorde and Winterson as not sharing a ground of exclusionary politics, but rather contributing to the complex notion of what constitutes a poetics of women’s autobiography.

This also allows me to focus upon my poststructuralist reading of desire, which I want to identify as part of the autobiographical novel. In this context I am using Catherine Belsey’s text \textit{Desire, Love Stories in Western Culture} which she bases on a deconstructionist reading of desire, placing it

\textsuperscript{16}Martin, p.99. I am aware that this quote is regarding Pratt a white, middle-class Southerner, who thus is placed in the antithesis of Lorde’s position; however I am deliberately using this quote to illustrate that desire remains an element which can be traced through a number of lesbian autobiographies, and to place this within the deconstruction of any notion of a traditional essentialised identity.

\textsuperscript{17}Martin, p.99

\textsuperscript{18}ibid, p 103
as a subversive element blurring the distinction between reality and imagination, nature and culture. Desire thus becomes a tool which links my themes of imagination, memory, fact/fiction, and the merging of genres. It is an element which connects the three authors together, all of which I interpret as locating desire as a multifaceted position, occupying my renegotiation of a poststructuralist space of expression. However, I am particularly interested in Belsey’s reading of desire as she suggests it becomes a place in which the distinction between the body and mind becomes displaced. This is a point I pursue with reference to Winterson’s Written on the Body which eschews recognised categories of identity. A genderless narrator represents an important move away from the focus on the female body as a source of oppression and re-thinking, which in some ways replicates the idea that it is the body which incorporates sexuality, as opposed to the mind. Certainly, within my contemporary perspective, I feel that creating a dialogic situation between body and mind, avoids any suggestion of a metonymic approach to women’s sexuality. It also recognises that pleasure and desire are entities that are undefinable, individual and, therefore, emancipating. Consequently, Belsey’s position is, I would suggest, different from other critics, as she explicitly makes a distinction between desire and sexuality19, which I suggest revolutionises our concept of identity. Therefore, I am re-interpreting some of her ideas specifically within the discourse of autobiography.

Importantly Belsey suggests that this disruption of the division of body and mind through the recognition of desire counters Western tradition.20 It, therefore, offers a path for the negotiation of a different poetics outside of

20Ibid, p.3
Western concepts, which is certainly appropriate for the authors I have chosen, as they occupy positions *between* cultures, or in Winterson’s case, outside of conventional society. And this is a point which Lorde pursues with her redefining of the erotic outside of conventional voyeuristic images. As I argue, through the figure of Afrakete, Lorde incorporates the erotic into her work as a means of interrogating ‘absolute difference’. Her assertion of the erotic as both a sexual and creative energy allows her to challenge binary oppositions such as “emotion and thought, poetry and action, love and power”.\(^{21}\) Lorde, therefore, approaches the erotic from a similar perspective to Belsey. Both focus on the erotic/desire as an energy which can destabilise traditional notions of the self. Moreover, as I argue, Lorde also defines the erotic within African mythology specifically from the female perspective. By creating an erotic female figure (in *Zami* this is Afrakete), Lorde “challenges a key word in the symbolic code of the West”,\(^{22}\) as she creates a woman whose power is *active* not simply seductive. Thus, Lorde reconfigures conventional notions of power and stereotypes of women. Specifically, her revaluing of repressed myths fuses together past, present, future or mythological selves. Desire, therefore, resists cultural norms and traditions, and consequently provides a different history “it transcend[s] cultural boundaries and historical difference, to be shared across time and space”.\(^{23}\) This concept of a space that challenges hegemonic history is clearly one that interests me, as it underpins my reinterpretation of the new historicist position.

---


\(^{22}\)Lauter, p. 406

\(^{23}\)Belsey, p. 7
Belsey also situates desire outside of any kind of scientific knowledge, as it has tried to be appropriated by analysts such as Freud. Belsey suggests that in the “process of scientific analysis something slipped away. What is arbitrary, paradoxical and elusive, subjected to explanation and measurement, becomes drab and clinical”.24 Significantly, Belsey cites fiction as the only medium in which desire was allowed to remain a ‘mystery’ at the beginning of this century. I take this further and argue that ‘mystery’, this elusive element, is a significant aspect of a poetics of women’s autobiography. It not only subverts the canon, as Belsey identifies, but undermines any sense of an unambiguous relationship between fact, fiction and fantasy. My thesis here is that desire is elusive not because it is a longing for wholeness, a seeking of an ‘other’, as Belsey suggests, but because it forces us to acknowledge the roles of fantasy, mythology and fiction within the construction of identity.

This is evident within Zami as Lorde creates and re-mythologises stories in order to create a dialogue between not only different aspects of her own identity, but also to suggest that there is a “mythic figure underlying women’s creativity”. And, as Estella Lauter points out, tapping into this alternative ‘positive’ energy, may turn out to be more workable than other feminist theories that identify specific psychological motivations for creativity (for example, anger or substitution for procreation) or which focus on traits of the ‘creative personality’ (androgyny).25

Lorde, therefore, redefines the erotic within creative energy and mythology, which allows for alternative expressions of female identity.

I want to end this brief introduction by referring to Naomi Wolf’s Promiscuities, as she bases her book on the changing nature of the female

24Belsey, p.11
25ibid. p.414
space in relation to desire and this develops the parameter identified by Lorde and Winterson. Wolf concentrates her research on the role of her own and other females' experience of childhood and adolescence in relation to the absence of expressed desire. In this aspect her thoughts create an interesting arena from which to discuss Lorde and Winterson, especially with regard to how they approach this area of childhood sexuality. Perceptively, Wolf describes the changing nature of desire with regard to the changing body of the female 'child'

Analogous process takes place in relation to girls' experience of their own desire. The culture that surrounds girls signals to them that they must sexually forget themselves. They must become passive in relation to the energy of desire, or detached from owning it, even in the face of its increasingly active pressure. Wolf identifies that the girls’ lust for physical freedom and their own space/place comes just at the point when this freedom is restricted with the onslaught of sexuality and a developing body; consequently “we had to learn that this sense of physical freedom would retreat into the space we must now reserve for fantasy”. In relation to my autobiographical theory, the altering of this space with the recognition of autonomy within the fantastical sphere creates a moment of conflict but also of potential power.

By recognising fantasy and fiction as part of the autobiographical voice, I am renegotiating Wolf’s recognition of the role of fantasy, and certainly both Winterson and Lorde illustrate that the fantastical/magical sphere operates as a significant part of their identities. Thus, Wolf’s description of placing teenage sexuality within an analogy of the fairytale world has a number of further implications which I am concerned with. Wolf states that

27Ibid, p.43
Being a teenage girl negotiating the world sexually can feel as if one is standing before three magical doors, behind one of which lies a moment's ecstasy; behind the second, the love of one's life, and behind the third, a monster. Once you open the door it is too late to alter your fate.28

This certainly appears to be the case as far as fairytales and society works to place identity within one particular identifiable realm. But within my autobiographical model, I am suggesting that the authors with which I am concerned allow these disparate parts of their selves to co-exist, recognising the importance of fantasy and reality to identity.

Finally, Wolf also acknowledges the subversive qualities of female desire by describing the "altered state of consciousness"29 which she suggests threatens men because it is a place which they cannot understand or follow. She relates this to religious indoctrination of female sexuality explicitly within procreation. This is a point which I develop with regard to Winterson's Oranges. However, what is interesting is that Wolf hints at the same conclusion as Belsey: that the distinction between body and mind is threatened within the discourse of desire.

Thus, I hope my introduction has exemplified the number of elements I will be discussing which co-exist within a much freer notion of what constitutes lesbian autobiographical writing, and moreover lead to an understanding of the future direction of autobiographical writing in which a number of different discourses can co-exist. Neuman's recognition in chapter one of the autobiographical self as "a complex, multiple, layered subject with agency in the discourses and the worlds that constitute the referential space of his or her autobiography, a self not only constructed by

28Wolf, p. 46
29Ibid, p. 90
differences but capable of choosing, inscribing and making a difference\textsuperscript{30}
is further complicated with Lorde’s and Winterson’s appropriation of
desire and the erotic as elements which reconfigure traditional categories
of lesbian identity.

Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Written on the Body*, like Kingston, also reclaims the autobiographical genre as a mode of writing in which to reconfigure conventional ideologies surrounding the self. Developing the position I've outlined with reference to Kingston, Winterson's text illustrates that the self can be both a textual construction (poststructuralism) and a tangible being that is formed outside a community (humanism). Hence she proposes that 'difference' and the possibility of a shared political identity can co-exist.

Focusing upon autobiography as a site for these different and often antagonistic authorial/theorist/speaking positions, Winterson specifically describes *Oranges* as being both an autobiographical novel and not, as she asks, "Is *Oranges* an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course".¹ She, therefore, emphasises the dialogic relation between the self, the writing 'I' and fiction. The autobiographical novel, as I have outlined in chapter one, includes fictional aspects as I argue that this is a more appropriate medium for exploring women's multiple selves than traditional autobiography. Winterson concurs with this position by drawing attention to the artificiality of generic boundaries. By creating a postmodern concept of her self/selves, Winterson's text can be seen as engaging with autobiographical theorists such as Shirley Neuman who identifies "the autobiographical 'I' [being] called into this or that subject

---

position". Thus, Winterson creates a fluctuating and fluid ‘I’ which questions any traditional notion of identity and (dis)locates a number of conflicting discourses such as dominant historical narratives. Her autobiographical text focuses on the character Jeanette who symbolises both a persona of her younger self and a fictional character. But she also creates a parallel reality to her everyday world which uses myths, fairy/fantasy tales and biblical references in order to emphasise, as Paulina Palmer observes, that Jeanette has “a series of shifting, fluid selves [which she acknowledges] ... by means of the acts of story telling and fabulation in which she engages”.

An understanding of the malleable relation between the self, the writing ‘I’ and expectations surrounding classifications and fragmentations of identity also informs Winterson’s work Written on the Body. This is a text which again posits an ‘unreliable’ narrator. In Oranges, as I have suggested, Jeanette/the narrator shift between different versions of reality. In Written on the Body, the narrator is someone who is not only unidentifiable in the usual ways (that is through gender, class, race classifications), but one who flits between the subject position of two people, further complicating the divisions between ‘I’ and ‘you’ as these merge within this text. The narrator pushes through the boundaries which categorise the lover as separate from him/her. Illness, adultery and, more importantly, absence do not prevent a discourse between the narrator and the lover, Louise. A dialogue thus exists which defies conventional aspects of communication,

---


one in which body and mind, lover and beloved become fluid and interchangeable concepts.

Winterson, therefore, creates two texts that embrace and confront differences in order for her to create a space to radicalise conventional notions of identity. As someone who is marginalised within the white, western culture to which she belongs due to her gender and sexual orientation, Winterson is able to revise hegemonic historical narratives. Her sense of identity, like that of Kingston and Lorde is ostensibly based on difference. As Dianne Fuss describes “deconstruction dislocates the understanding of identity as self-presence and offers, instead, a view of identity as difference”.4 This is a position developed within all of Winterson’s fiction which infuse fantasy and gender blurring as integral points surrounding the fluidity and malleability of identity. Her heroines do not belong to the dominant class, race or culture but rather exist on the fringe of a number of positions.5 Thus, dominant historical narratives are questioned through destabilising conventions surrounding expressing the self. This allows categories of ‘otherness’ which are often illustrated within gender and sexual stereotypes to be refuted and rewritten. For example, as Lyn Pykett suggests, Dog Woman in Sexing the Cherry illustrates a “grotesque female body that incorporates all sorts of myths of femaleness and femininity at the same time as defying all conventional definitions of the essential feminine”.6


180
However, within this chapter I am concentrating on Oranges, as this creates a unique sphere because it locates these differences within an autobiographical novel, hence creating tensions around the writing of the self, and Written on the Body, as this text is also concerned with renaming the autobiographical self through the deployment of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical. The fact that both these works are read as being autobiographical is a point which Winterson deliberately parodies. As I have suggested, the narrator in Oranges is both an aspect of Winterson’s younger self but also a fictive character. In comparison, by creating a genderless narrator in Written on the Body, Winterson revolutionises any sense of a predetermined ‘I’. The multiple narrators within Oranges and the reciprocity between the narrator’s and Louise’s bodies and thoughts in Written on the Body further complicates Winterson’s reading of subjectivity, and this chapter focuses upon Winterson’s use of fantasy, myth and desire in order to destabilise conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives.

As I argued in the first two chapters, and illustrated with reference to Kingston’s narratives, the reimagining of hegemonic history is an integral part of the poetics of autobiography for which I am making a case. Within Oranges Winterson rewrites The Old Testament through juxtaposing this book with her postmodern reading of elements such as fantasy and mythology. She subverts the mother figure and also deconstructs sexual and gender boundaries to create a focus for her radical historicist reading of identity. History also provides the fulcrum around which Winterson questions the conventions surrounding identity in Written on the Body. The historical constraints surrounding language and hierarchical systems of knowledge (for example medicine) exclude individual expression, and
Winterson is concerned with voicing alternatives through creating new realms for identity. A genderless, classless, ageless and raceless narrator allows Winterson to focus exclusively on language without preconceived connotations, and this provides the framework for the discussion of this chapter.

Winterson uses the Old Testament as a paradigm for Oranges. Utilising the first eight books of the Bible to name her corresponding chapters in Oranges, Winterson traces the Bible’s relationship to history, illustrating how this heterogeneous text represents a myriad of interpretations - an approach that allows Winterson to interrogate a number of possibilities. By locating the Bible as an arbitrary framework for history, Winterson sees the Old Testament as deconstructing a linear understanding of history, as the stories of the Old Testament have been re-written and re-recorded many times, thus suggesting the pliable and subjective nature of history through both speech and writing. Winterson is specifically concerned with re-writing the Old Testament from a perspective which questions conventions surrounding female identity and female sexuality, and this chapter focuses particularly on the books Genesis, Exodus and Ruth,\(^7\) in order to illustrate this point.

Beginning with the first book of Moses, Genesis, and comparing this with Jeanette’s relationships within ‘Numbers’, I argue through the course of this chapter that Winterson reconfigures issues of morality and sexuality surrounding Eve’s and Adam’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Eve’s transgressive sexuality, which is explicitly linked to her desire for knowledge outside of God’s omnipotent control, is rethought through

\(^7\)In order to avoid any confusion I will refer to the books of the Old Testament in italics, and the corresponding chapters in Oranges in standard typeface
Winterson's poststructuralist reading of desire. Utilising Catherine Belsey, I suggest that desire allows Winterson to contemplate a space in which the discourse of love, and specifically heterosexual love, is deconstructed. This is also a point I develop in reference to Written on the Body, in which Winterson argues that language is an inadequate form of communication as it consists of constructions which actually belie meaning. For example, the linguistic tools available to express desire are exposed as conventions and clichés. The words 'I love you' reflect this conjecture, as despite their appeal to individuals' desire to be wanted, this expression is so commonplace that it becomes, ultimately, void of emotion. Moreover, in both novels, Winterson illustrates that desires and needs become dictated elements which conflate heterosexuality within the acceptable spheres of love and marriage. By removing desire from its conventional associations Winterson questions the indoctrination of female sexuality within the specific realm of procreation referred to within Genesis, and in Written on the Body, female sexuality is deliberately evoked as disrupting conventional concepts of perfection and objectification of the female body. The narrator desires both the diseased and dissected body of the lover; in fact she/he celebrates the imperfections of the lover's body, as these suggest a different history from the more superficial reading of what constitutes beauty. Clearly this interest reflects Winterson's concern with disrupting conventional patterns of identity.

Winterson problematises identity built upon preconceived gender categorisations within Oranges, not only through Jeanette's lesbian relationships which explicitly celebrate sexuality outside of the procreative realm, but also through the other female characters throughout Oranges. None of these characters are mothers and therefore represent an alternative
network of female friendships, relationships and identities. Moreover, the premise of this chapter’s discussion of Oranges focuses upon the fact that Winterson writes her mother out of this network of female friends, who, as in Lorde’s Zami, represent an alternative matrilineal bond which excludes the mother. Using the story of Ruth, I argue that Winterson rewrites the traditional mother-daughter bond as this biblical story reclaims the possibility of female relationships away from this conventional tie. Winterson, like Kingston and Lorde, thus creates the mother figure as a fulcrum around which issues of Jeanette’s identity need to be confronted. In connection with the other authors, her mother illustrates a contradictory source of power and repression for her daughter. Throughout Oranges, Jeanette’s mother becomes equated with the patriarchal figure of God, not only because she ‘begets’ her own child (Jeanette is adopted), but also because she reinforces the repression of female sexuality through her choice for her daughter’s vocation as a missionary. However, ironically, her mother’s usurpation of power also represents another possibility, as she offers an eccentric revision of theology combining dreams and stories which could suggest a potential point of communication between mother and daughter. As Jeanette states: “my mother is very like William Blake; she has visions and dreams and she cannot always distinguish a flea’s head from a king”.

Her mother could thus offer her daughter the legacy of revision which Jeanette utilises to radically rewrite the stories of the Old Testament with her own voice.

Nevertheless, the difficult and oppressive relationship between mother and daughter needs to be reimagined. For Jeanette, asserting her own space means divorcing herself from her mother’s attempt to inscribe her

---

8 Winterson, Oranges, p 9
daughter’s autobiography. And Winterson utilises *Exodus*, which is the story of the exile of the chosen people from Egypt, to illustrate her isolated position, not only from her mother who represses Jeanette’s sexual feelings, but also from the rest of society which cannot accept Jeanette’s eccentric upbringing and religious beliefs. By narrating her isolated position with references to the displacement and journeying of the people of Israel, I argue that Winterson begins to redefine concepts of family and the home. Much like Lorde’s reimagination of the term ‘sojourn’ as a fluid constant position rather than simply a temporary space, so too Winterson reimagines the state of exile, through the incomplete journeys depicted within Ruth and Exodus, as a fluctuating space of possibilities where her sexual identity is not repressed. Moreover, reimagining a place in which different aspects of her subjectivity can be expressed undermines the morality of the Old Testament which is based on the premise that perfection can be attained. The impossibility of this stricture is denoted throughout *Oranges* as Jeanette begins to recognise the repressive nature of this doctrine which denies differences.

**Fantasy, Fiction and Perfection**

The fantastical identities with which Jeanette experiments throughout *Oranges* further develops her deconstruction of the Old Testament stories to create a radical space for her sexuality. Jeanette’s rewriting of fairytales reinforces her questioning of the dichotomy between good and evil, and specifically the ‘goodness’ associated with female sexual purity. Furthermore, Winterson’s allusions to fairytales develop her use of the Old Testament to disrupt any sense of traditional linear history. In her work fantasy opens up the possibilities of alternative versions of identity which question dominant historical narratives. This reflects the important
fluidity between 'reality' and fantasy, which allows the various narrators to become integrated within Jeanette’s identities. The actual meaning of the word fantasy originates from the Latin ‘phantasticus’ “which means visible, visionary and unreal”,9 and this illustrates Winterson’s multidisciplinary approach to identity. Just as Kingston deconstructs the opposition (among others) between visual representations and written ones, Winterson creates a dialogic relationship between fantastical illusions and the autobiographical eye/’I’. Her imagination, therefore, allows a number of connections which at times can be more significant than her actual material existence. Linda Williams describes this possibility

in fantasy the subject may not even be present, fantasy can render the subject invisible, can un-write the process of subjectivity, situating the fantasist before, or outside of, his or her identity, and the gender alignments which subjectivity implies.10

This reflects Winterson’s concern within Oranges. However, what is interesting is that the above quote can be related to an autobiographical novel. “Render[ing] the subject invisible” would surely seem to contrast with the autobiographical ‘I’. Yet, what is paramount to my interpretation of Oranges is that fantasy creates a dialogue between different versions of subjectivity as, ultimately, the writing ‘I’, the authorial ‘I’ and the many other identities pursued within Winterson’s narratives become interpretations of existence. Fantasy, therefore, cannot be seen in contrast to the ‘autobiographical self’ but rather is inextricably linked to identity. Surely, this is most clearly identified within Written on the Body, in which the ‘subject’ sways between an unidentified narrator and Louise who is mainly absent from the text. Winterson mixes fantasy and a ‘realistic’ narrative, thereby challenging binary oppositions between fantasy and

10Ibid, p.104
reality, or the imaginary and the real.\textsuperscript{11} She draws attention to the unreliability of the narrator at the beginning of the text “Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology?... I don’t know. I’m in another rented room now trying to find the place to go back to where things went wrong”\textsuperscript{12} This develops ‘the fictions of identity’, as described by Leigh Gilmore, and which I have identified as a significant part of a poststructuralist poetics of identity. As such, Winterson develops an approach to her novels which recognises “the possibility that subjective identity is constructed not in the real world of empirically realised ‘fact’ but through fantasies of the self”.\textsuperscript{13}

 Fantasy and fiction, therefore, offer an alternative reading of history and identity, and \textit{Oranges} and \textit{Written on the Body} become texts in which fact and fiction become indistinguishable. Winterson uses this approach to undercut the fixities of reality, as Christy Burns argues: “to open up a space for alternative life styles” (such as alternatives to the family, heterosexuality and society).\textsuperscript{14} This can be illustrated through the reoccurrence of the brown pebble in \textit{Oranges}. The pebble has an allegorical significance connecting the fantastical world of Winnet with the decisions Jeanette faces. Within the fairytale world the pebble is given to her by a raven who announces it is his heart which has grown “thick with sorrow and finally set”. Chained metaphorically and literally to the manipulative sorcerer, the raven is “struck dumb”\textsuperscript{15} by the magician and,

\textsuperscript{11} Burns, Christy L. ‘Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson’s Recovery of the Postmodern World’, in \textit{Contemporary Literature} 37, 1996, p.288
\textsuperscript{12} Winterson, Jeanette. \textit{Written on the Body}, p.17
\textsuperscript{13} Williams, p.90 (she uses this quote in reference to Angela Carter) Although other critics have compared Winterson and Carter, it must be noted here that Winterson herself refutes this comparison and resolutely reaﬃrms herself within a Modernist genealogy with writers such as Virginia Woolf and T. S Eliot.
\textsuperscript{14} Burns, p.304
\textsuperscript{15} Winterson, \textit{Oranges}, p.144
consequently, silenced within the narrative. However, the pebble occurs again in the text when Jeanette breaks free from her mother and the church. She is given a brown stone by the orange demon she encounters, which immediately pre-empts her decision to leave the church and the end of her relationship with Katy. As Jeanette writes “I didn’t know what to expect, but I knew I wouldn’t live through any of that again. Hands in my pocket, I played with a rough brown pebble.” Both these incidents are then juxtaposed with Winterson’s biblical reference to “who will cast the first stone?” Notions of sin, manipulation and power are, therefore, explored within a fantastical reality, one in which biblical reference, individual choices and fairytales become merged. Rather than suggesting that the pebble provides a link with the ‘real’ world, while Jeanette is fantasising, Winterson suggests that the pebble has equal status or significance regardless of conventional notions of reality. This object provides a dialogue between different projections of the self, and deliberately confuses any idea of traditional ideologies surrounding absolutist truth. Her use of fantasy, myth and desire destabilises hegemonic history and the literary conventions normally utilised when writing about the self. Jeanette must learn to break down the polarisation of things in order for her to form an acceptable self-identification, and fantasy becomes a means for her to mediate between the extremes of good and evil offered to her through her mother and church society.

Similarly, within Written on the Body, the narrator deconstructs signifiers of reality. Firstly, by creating a scenario in which her/his gender identity is hidden, then through highlighting the inadequacy of a scientific language which attempts to classify and contain Louise’s condition within a specific

16Winterson, Oranges, p 128
17Ibid, p.110
diagnosis, not allowing for individuality. The narrator creates an alternative reality/fantasy by dissecting this language of objectivity and reclaiming the diseased body. Winterson describes the desire to literally enter the lover’s body and confront the onslaught of her illness, but also to embalm Louise’s body through the narrator’s own embracement of decay “let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body”.18 Winterson is concerned with questioning ideals of perfection which surround the female body, creating false ideals and hindering the expression of different identities. This is a point she elaborates through celebrating the scars on Louise’s body which tell a story of their own; it is the imperfections of the body which are interesting “the glossy smoothness of the inside of your upper lip is interrupted by a rough swirl where you were hurt once. There’s a story trapped inside your mouth”.19 Scars on the body, another form of writing on the body, allow an alternative narrative, particularly due to the fact that these are hidden scars, which challenge superficial constructions of identity.

The Leviticus chapter in Oranges reflects Winterson’s concern with questioning ideals surrounding perfection, and especially female perfection. Leviticus is a chapter which offers an alternative to the space Jeanette negotiates to express aspects of herself, as within this chapter Winterson imagines a fantastical extreme of the pursuit of perfection. This vignette becomes a means for Winterson to critique the fundamental basis of the Old Testament which would wish to consume her individuality and differences. Hence, Winterson devotes this chapter to parodying the

---

18 Winterson, Written on the Body. p. 119
19 ibid. p. 117
series of laws designed to make the Hebrew people perfect in the eyes of God. The Biblical source demands animal sacrifices for those who do not attain perfection. Winterson parodies this doctrine by illustrating a fairy-tale of a perfect prince who desires perfection. He too has to make sacrifices “but only to silence those who suggest that he has gotten the definition wrong, that perfection is not flawlessness but symmetry”. Fairytales provide the counter to religious extremes. Operating in a different world, fairytales can reimagine the polarities of moral oppositions.

This tale of the “pretty” prince searching for a perfect wife within *Oranges* certainly reflects this concern. The prince roams his castle wishing for a wife. He specifies “I want a woman, without blemish inside or out, flawless in every respect. I want a woman who is perfect”. During a sermon vociferating the aspiration of mankind for perfection (since the fall of man), Jeanette imagines the fairytale outcome of this impossible and unnatural wish. The prince becomes consumed with this pursuit of perfection, with the conviction that what he desires is obtainable. Interestingly, during the increasing number of years with no success, the prince begins to write a book to outline the intensification of his views. His opinions are becoming more extreme and by attempting to justify them on paper he significantly makes them concrete rather than an abstract philosophy. His ideals begin to resemble a fascist desire for a race of perfect people (clearly commenting on God’s search for perfection within the ‘chosen’ people), consequently convincing himself that to live with anything other than perfection is impossible. Eventually, the prince finds

---

21 *ibid*, p.366
22 Winterson, *Oranges*, p.59
a seemingly ‘perfect’ woman and upon seeing her he “fell on his knees and begged her to marry him”. Exploding the expected fairytale ending, Winterson’s independent and intelligent heroine refuses in a very matter-of-fact fashion, as marriage does not appeal to her. The woman proceeds to try and explain to the prince that perfection is really the search for harmony within oneself, that is the projection of one’s own inadequacies onto others.

Although the ‘perfect’ woman’s voice becomes silenced within the narrative, as the prince cannot be seen to have made a mistake, it is significant that this projection of perfection symbolises not only the attitude towards Jeanette by her mother, who uses her daughter as a vehicle of righteousness, but also this vision deconstructs the borders between ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ which reflects a Foucauldian interest in these discourses. Winterson’s parody of perfection emphasises the arbitrary values of what is considered acceptable, and highlights the Foucauldian concern with discourses which are repressed in order that certain forms of knowledge are considered ‘true’. Thus, Winterson inverts a number of expected binarisms within this tale (specifically the idea of perfection without flaws), allowing a much more complex reading which locates identity as needing to transcend this dichotomised way of thinking both within and outside the fairytale world. The story of the prince ends with his journey back to his palace after killing the ‘perfect’ woman. He kills the voice of reason as he is determined to pursue his illusion, if necessary outside of the fairytale world. This represents the other outcome to the omnipotent figure of God who plays with human destinies. The book the prince purchases from an orange-seller to read on

---

23Winterson, Oranges, p.62
his homeward journey explicitly develops this point, as it is the novel *Frankenstein*.  

Winterson thereby deliberately revokes the binary oppositions of good and evil as dictated by Christian doctrine. The extreme result of the pursuit of perfection becomes personified in Frankenstein’s monster, the ultimate consequence of playing the role of God the creator. Marina Warner suggests that Frankenstein rewrites the book of *Genesis* and the creation myth. This represents an important point as, not only does the monster symbolise Jeanette’s own creation, as she is also formed, manipulated and controlled by someone that has created her outside of the womb (her mother), but also the monster’s unhappiness and acts of destruction symbolise aspects of Jeanette’s identity. Good and evil are, therefore, closely linked and the monster represents a disturbing vision and replication of the fall of mankind, whilst simultaneously reminding us that perfection can never be obtained - a paradox which Winterson recognises and questions.

Winterson, therefore, utilises the first eight books of the Old Testament in order to reconfigure the structure of these texts, which are based around obeying the patriarchal figurehead of God whose tests of perfection and loyalty undermine the notion of autonomy and individuality. To further emphasise this point Winterson places her reimagining of the Old Testament within references to William Blake. Blake, as Laurence Coupe argues, was interested in radically “revitalising the Christian myth”; and Winterson illustrates Blake’s concern that “we have constructed a false

---

ideal, [as we] ... have come to believe in a tyrannous perfection: One King, One God, One Law".\textsuperscript{28} Winterson thus develops Blake’s ideas which reveal God to be a human projection, not a divine presence. She also undermines the role of God and instead asserts the value of the imagination. Blake is, therefore, alluded to as he is both a revisionary mythmaker whilst also embracing contraries.\textsuperscript{29}

Blake’s interest in revising myths links him specifically to Winterson’s concern in re-evaluating well-known myths whilst developing her own stories. Winterson recognises that as long as Jeanette “remains within the mythic structure of the Judaeo-Christian Bible” she cannot tap into a different “source of creative energy”.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, by creating her own and adapting other myths, such as the quest for the Holy Grail, Winterson uses mythology as a means of re-viewing the world - and thus a source of empowerment.\textsuperscript{31} Significantly, myths involve “a continuing dialectic of same and other, of memory and desire, of ideology and utopia, or hierarchy and horizon, and of sacred and profane” and thus these tales are emancipatory in their possibility to “constantly imply, but always to resist completion”.\textsuperscript{32} This is a device used by Kingston, as I have illustrated, and within Oranges this space allows a medium between the doctrines of the church (symbolised by her mother’s attitude towards sex) and Jeanette’s own sexuality. Myth, in a similar perspective to fantasy, is something that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29}Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. \textit{Feminist Revision and the Bible}. Cambridge, Mass, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993, p.1
  \item \textsuperscript{31}ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{32}Coupe, p.197
\end{itemize}
is "set outside historical time" and it signifies a sphere in which to rethink hegemonic historical narratives and conventions surrounding the self. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, like many myth critics, views myths as "the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are stored." The rewriting of myths, therefore, becomes a means to imagining identity outside of expected discourses, not only rewriting the "oppressor’s language, which denies [women] ... access to authoritative expression", but also to enmesh ‘reality’, fantasy and history.

Dismantling hegemonic history from the constraints of knowledge and conventions reflects Winterson’s recognition of the multitudinous and diverse circumstances surrounding identity and subjectivity as they are (re)constructed constantly within her text. The concept of histories, her rewriting of the possibility of a single historical narrative through the fluid relationship between the Old Testament, fairytales, mythology and fiction, allows her to contemplate a position in which a number of different historical strands conflict and are intermingled. Winterson thus emphasises a strategic essentialist approach in which a coherent, shared identity co-exists with recognising differences as individuals and the importance of questioning hegemonic history and finding different representations of the self.

Therefore, illustrating a similar paradigm to Kingston’s and Lorde’s texts, Winterson’s books can also be read through a Foucauldian frame of reference as the relationship between history, discourse and identity is questioned. In particular Foucault’s interest in the construction of

---

33Coupe, p. 5
34Ostriker, p. 4
35ibid
knowledge, power and ‘truth’ relates to Winterson’s position of questioning why some discourses are privileged over others, and the essential arbitrariness of the circulation of knowledge. 36 Foucault’s work creates a radical historical framework, which he refers to as genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects etc, without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. 37

As I have argued within the first two chapters of this thesis, Foucault’s desire to dislocate the subject creates a significant tension when utilising his ideas to discuss autobiography. I would suggest that Winterson’s poststructuralist outlook modifies Foucault, as she is concerned with the “subject in process” 38 within a radical concept of history (thus reflecting Lois McNay’s re-reading of the problem of determinism within Foucault’s works). Winterson’s view of history, therefore, develops Foucault’s “deconstructive mode of historical enquiry ... disrupting [conventional ideologies surrounding] “reality”, “identity” and “truth”“. 39 She states clearly throughout her text, her possible historical (dis)location: “very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognise its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should”. 40

38 Mills, p.34
40 Winterson, Oranges. p 92
The impact of history and its relationship to conventions of truth is an aspect Winterson focuses upon specifically within her chapter Deuteronomy, the last book of the law. This chapter is significantly only a few pages long, and represents a clear ‘break’ within the text as it involves specific observations by the narrator and departs from the main thread of the narrative. Rather like the vignettes in Kingston’s China Men, which are employed as commentaries before the stories of her ancestors, Winterson also allows this short section to operate as a commentary upon her philosophy within Oranges. In fact, Winterson herself has remarked on the significance of this chapter, as she outlines in her introduction to the script of the film version of Oranges:

One of my favourite passages in the novel, a short essay on the difference between history and storytelling, entitled ‘Deuteronomy’, had to be left out. And yet it is central to the book and no accident that it falls precisely in the middle of the seven chapters. Her comments on the arbitrary nature of history, depending upon who is telling the story, become the fulcrum for Oranges. History is described as a “string full of knots. It’s all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end”. Different people’s interpretations of what constitutes history create a false construct of history, and historical process. As Lyn Pykett argues, “history falsifies through its commitment to explanatory causality”. Hence, Winterson advocates stories “as a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it’s a way of keeping it alive, not boxing it into time”. Winterson argues that fact and fiction are necessarily intertwined; it is impossible to separate them, and the drive to do so within Western culture results in conventions surrounding absolute ‘truth’ rather than interpretations of events. This is a

---

41 Winterson, Jeanette. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit: The Script, p.viii
42 Winterson, Oranges, p.92
43 Pykett, p.55
44 Winterson, Oranges, p.92
tradition which Winterson refutes throughout *Oranges* and which is outlined in this chapter. The past as something that can be manipulated according to the present interpretation is a fact she illustrates through an ironic discussion of the role of curios. Collecting the ‘past’ means exerting control over dead objects. With a play on words, she compares this to being ‘curious’, which results in jeopardising the individual “it’s much safer to be a collector of curios, because if you are curious, you have to sit and sit and see what happens ... the curious are always in some danger”.45

Moreover, being curious, for example, an explorer, must result in something concrete being brought back to people. Visions are useless without evidence and Winterson critiques this form of history which, as Cath Stowers argues, illustrates a “masculine paradigm of representation and travel” as history and progress are heralded in images of fixing, mapping and colonising.46 People, therefore, regulate history to fit into acceptable versions of reality. As Winterson states, “people like to separate storytelling, which is not fact, from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious”.47 It is this artificial convention of reality which Winterson clearly deconstructs. Outlining the deliberate destruction of the past by leaders such as Pol Pot, she compares this to the everyday occurrence of “people ... never having a problem dispensing with the past when it gets too difficult”.48 In order to fit history into our sense of what constitutes rationality, a great deal is deliberately excluded. This conjecture is

45Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 92
47Winterson, *Oranges*, p 91
48Ibid, p 92
comparable with Kingston's writing of the past, and in particular the way in which her mother manipulates her own past so that Kingston is unable to distinguish between various different accounts of her life story. What becomes evident in both The Woman Warrior and Oranges is that varying and antithetical accounts of the same event create a dialogue between past, present and future which encourages diversity and individual expression. As Winterson concludes,

when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own. 49

It is significant that Winterson makes these comments within the chapter Deuteronomy, the equivalent book in the Bible in which God's voice and Moses's voice become indistinguishable in many ways. The multi-voiced narrative of Deuteronomy is important as a complex chorus of viewpoints are heard, and the relationship between God, the Deuteronomist and Moses creates a paradoxical situation for Moses, both creating a unique space for his voice, and also in many ways silencing his narrative. As Robert Alter and Frank Kermode argue, “the Deuteronomist gradually blur[s] or soft[ens] the unique status of Moses at the very same time that most of the retrospective elements in the book explicitly enhance it”. 50 The frame breaks in the book thus serve to create a dialogue between the narrated past and the narrated present 51 and between the narrator, Moses and God.

As such, the relationship between God's and Moses' speech begins to be less defined. In the first address “Moses is depicted as reporting God's

---

49Winterson, Oranges, p.93
51ibid
word”, whereas by the second address, which outlines the law code, the main core of the book,

it is much more difficult to determine within the code which utterances are meant to represent the very words of God, which the commenting and responding reactions of Moses, and which a combination of both. 52

Significantly, this chapter is placed immediately before Jeanette’s retribution by her mother. Clearly her mother’s voice, like Moses’ voice, becomes both part of and an interpretation of God’s will and thus her mother becomes symbolic of the rigid code of law within the Old Testament. As Ostriker argues,

we can observe within biblical narratives the actual process of patriarchy constructing itself. We watch the Law of the father gathering its material and building itself up, bit by bit, layer upon layer. 53

Certainly, this is evident within Deuteronomy which is filled with the necessity of obedience to God. As Alter and Kermode point out, God’s role is one of justice and not mercy. “In Deuteronomy the telling of God’s mercy is almost always neutralised by an immediately preceding or subsequent telling of his terrible vengeance or of the need for obedience”. 54 And Jeanette’s complex relationship with her mother is a point I pursue with reference to ‘Ruth’ later in this chapter.

Importantly, Deuteronomy gives a “panoramic preview of the subsequent history” 55 of the Old Testament, and this again links with Winterson’s grounding of her text within a new historicist understanding of history and its relationship to fiction, myths and interpretation. Jeanette escapes the fixities of hegemonic history by creating fluid and fluctuating selves. In the same way that Kingston employs a number of different narratives and

52 Alter and Kermode, p. 95
53 Ostriker, p. 121
54 Alter and Kermode, p. 100
55 ibid, p. 96
narrative voices to create a multitudinous position for her protagonist through the reinterpretation of myths/narratives, Winterson intertextualises the Bible and other texts (such as Malory’s *The Holy Grail* and Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*), in order to create diverse and conflicting spheres of identity for Jeanette. Just as the stories in *The Woman Warrior* create an important space between the real and fictionalised history of her ancestors, within Oranges story-telling and mythology allow a dialogic relation between the fairytale world, fiction and the Old Testament - the most famous story of all. As Laura Bollinger proposes, “the bible is a good example of a text between history and storytelling, or, at least, fluctuating between the two, depending on the point of view of the observer”.56 And it is precisely this fluid nature of stories which, like Kingston utilises, offer Winterson a path to begin imagining histories.

Stories create a medium which is not bound by these strictures, as Pykett suggests

Stories are less a way of trying to explain or understand the universe than of (re)experiencing it, or alternatively, of shoring oneself against its confusions and complexities; less a way of understanding material history or the ‘historical process’ than of transcending it or escaping from its confines.57

Both Oranges and *Written on the Body* “repeatedly foreground the subjectivity and cultural relativism of space and time”58 and, therefore, begin to offer different alternatives to conventional structures of history, knowledge and communication. This is made clear within the first few pages of *Written on the Body*, when Winterson questions the relevance of learning capital cities

---

56Bollinger, p.365
57Pykett, p.56
58ibid, p.54
What is the capital of Canada? ... you wait in the silence, absolutely the victim, your own mind doubts itself. What is the capital of Canada? Why Ottawa and not Montreal? Montreal is much nicer, they do a better expresso. 

Who decides how and why a particular city should have capital status is an arbitrary matter and Winterson deliberately questions this prominence of knowledge. Why is this aspect of history important? Hence, Winterson is interested in a new historicist approach to history, rejecting the ‘master’ narratives of history and replacing these with individual narratives and stories. As Susana Onega points out “the striving for self-identity against the background of history is still the general aim behind the writing of historiographic metafiction”. Within Written on the Body Winterson addresses this through reasserting different identities away from historically imposed categories surrounding male and female behaviour. The female body in particular is focused upon. Imagined through the narrator, her/his lover Louise is rescued from any position of ‘otherness’, powerless or passivity which categorises female sexuality.

The ‘Sick’ Identity

Focusing upon Louise’s illness allows Winterson to explore issues surrounding the construction of identity within our culture. Initially the narrator agrees to leave Louise so that conventional treatment (in the form of her doctor husband) can cure her leukaemia. S/he thus complies with conventional understandings of a metonymic approach to the body and mind. The body is sick and consequently Louise’s identity is consumed within medical diagnosis. Her own wishes are ignored within the genuflecting towards medicine’s knowledge and ultimate power. It is assumed that Louise cannot be in control of her own body and, therefore, the diagnosis, and in fact her voice is silenced despite the evidence that

---

59 Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 12
60 Onega, p. 17
she is clearly knowledgeable about her disease and in control of the situation. As the narrator acknowledges, “she knew a great deal about the disease and I would learn: we would face it together”. 61

However, the narrator’s lover’s illness means that her body becomes subsumed and written upon by medical institutions. Her sanitised, robotic husband represents the bleak reality of medical diagnoses and the treatment for leukaemia, which involves a great deal of pain and discomfort, which Louise does not want to confront while she is asymptomatic. Cleverly, by creating Elgin as a doctor, Winterson illustrates the possessive and dictatorial nature of institutions within our society which claim to have knowledge and power over individuals’ needs. This is echoed within *Art and Lies* in which Handel muses that when you tell people what’s good for them particularly if you are a doctor, they will believe you. Having no beliefs of their own they believe. It’s a truism that as faith in God has declined, belief in science, especially medical science, has increased. 62

This is evident in *Written on the Body*, in which Elgin wants to reclaim his wife’s body from her lover, not only for his own personal satisfaction, but also within his role as a doctor to write his subscription on her body. It becomes a means for Elgin to ‘own’ his wife’s body, which he is not able to do within more conventional realms. (For example, Elgin’s and Louise’s intimate relationship is described very crudely as ‘an arrangement’: “Elgin and Louise no longer made love. She took the spunk out of him now and again but she refused to have him inside her”. 63) The title of this text clearly relates to the authorship of body and self within patriarchy and heterosexuality. This is a point which is reflected in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. The warrior Fa Mu Lan goes into battle

---

61 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p. 104
63 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p 68
to defend and seek revenge for her family and village with words literally inscribed upon the skin of her back by her father. She becomes an implement for his authorship of her body, and this clearly illustrates Kingston's concern with women's individual histories, stories and myths being silenced sexually and textually by discourses which control the female body.64

Within Written on the Body, the narrator writes Louise's body back into substance, life, love and desire, as the narrator describes written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights ... in places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille ... I didn't know Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into a book.65

As Louise inscribes herself on her lover the narrator thus translates her body away from the authorship of medicine which paradoxically denies the life of the individual. As Burns argues, "the narrator ... battles with the language of science in an attempt to reclaim the body, and language, for romance and memory".66 Medical discourses Winterson recognises as attempts by male discourse to "represent, colonise, otherise".67 The emotions and desires of the person do not correspond with medical terminology.

Therefore, the last sections of Written on the Body outlines various medical descriptions for tissues, skin and the senses, and rewrites these with her/his own experience of how Louise relates to this. So, in reference

64This point is also echoed through Toni Morrison's book Beloved in which Sethe becomes an implement to be written upon by the teacher. This is a means of inscribing her as both racially and sexually inferior. See Goldman, Anne E. 'I made the ink: (Literary) Production and Reproduction in Dessa Rose and Beloved' in Feminist Studies 16, no. 2. Summer 1990
65Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 89
66Burns, p.296
67Stowers, Cath. 'The Erupting Lesbian Body: Reading Written on the Body as a Lesbian Text' in I'm Telling You Stories, (cited previously) p.92
to the skin, the narrator imagines Louise’s skin within sexual connotations. The smell, and feel of it offer a form of communication between them, “your smell soothes me to sleep. I can bury myself in the warm goose down of your body ... there is nothing distasteful about you to me; not sweat nor grime, not disease and its dull markings”. The fantasy replaces the clinical description. Objective descriptions of cells such as “the multiplication of cells by mitosis occurs throughout the life of the individual” are replaced with the erotic and intimate description of Louise’s mouth “the lining of your mouth I know through tongue and spit. Its ridges, valleys, the corrugated roof, the fortress of teeth”. Significantly, desire replaces the distaste surrounding disease, as Burns points out “Louise is now the body to be invaded not with disease but with desire”. Masculine discourses are themselves dissected to see what they exclude. The meaningless words used within scientific language hide the reality of the emotion, lust, pain, destruction of the body. Thus, the body becomes only real through the imagination.

Moreover, the sick female body is something not conventionally desirable and, therefore, must be healed, yet the narrator seeks to reclaim this for her/himself as something more than just an objective framework of skin and bones. Heather Nunn develops the issues surrounding the silencing of the female body.

---

68 Winterson, Written on the Body, pp 123-124
69 Burns, p 296
70 Winterson, Written on the Body, p 115
71 Ibid, p 117
72 Burns, p 296
73 This recalls Monique Wittig’s text The Lesbian Body which illustrates a split subject between I and you which become indistinguishable from one another and in which no part of the body is taboo.
the psychic processes of love, betrayal, melancholy and the intertwining of attraction and repulsion are explored through the body and the social categories that attempt to map its boundaries and police its irregularities.74

This is a significant point as, historically, the female body, especially the female Biblical body, is something that should be clean both sexually and literally. Julia Kristeva refers to this in *Powers of Horror* which proposes that the ‘clean and proper body’ is outlined within religion by defining the abject and thus creating boundaries of the body.75 Kristeva makes the interesting point that a decaying body threatens those very boundaries as it confronts the abject and thus blurs “between the inanimate and the inorganic, [representing] a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is indistinguishable from the symbolic”.76 She refers to examples of leprosy in Biblical narratives to develop this point, as this is a disease which represents pollution from the outside and, therefore, transgresses the ‘pure’ body. Certainly, this raises a significant issue with reference to *Written on the Body*, in which Winterson deliberately refutes these boundaried conventions as she “appropriates Biblical imagery to redefine the impure as the desired self”77

If I’m not careful you’ll cut me. If I slip my hand too casually down the sharp side of your scapula I will lift away a bleeding palm. I know the stigmata of presumption. The wound that will not heal if I take you for granted. Nail me to you.78

As Nunn points out, “the dismemberment of the body underscores the traditional fragmentation of the woman’s body”.79 Yet, by referring to wound, stigmata and the diseased body within the context of desire, I

---

75 Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p.17 I must add here that Kristeva’s work on love, melancholy and abjection in the 1980s reflected heterosexual assumptions (that is creating the lesbian as a ‘bad object’) and clearly this is a point I challenge. For further debate on the problem of Kristeva’s heterosexual assumptions see E. Grosz. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989
76 Kristeva, p.109
77 Nunn, p.25
78 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p.131
79 Nunn, p.25
argue that Winterson reinscribes the female body in contrast to images of perfection. By obsessing and desiring the secretions from the lover's body, which are Biblically impure and represent defilement, Winterson revises Biblical scriptures. The dichotomy between body and soul is refuted, as the dying body is something the narrator wants to enter and possess, the frame and organs of the body manifest Louise's identity and there is no possibility that body and mind can be separated. Disease does not represent a boundary but instead offers a means of communication with the narrator's lover.

Consequently, images of perfection are consistently questioned through this narrative. Winterson illustrates that perfection hides individual narratives, and this is reflected within Foucault's *The Order of Things*, in which he argues that knowledge is preoccupied in "generating the most perfect representation possible". This results in classifying systems of knowledge which create exclusionary boundaries and, as Stowers points out, "following this line, it could be argued that Winterson is also interrogating the relationship between anatomical discourse and representation using tropes of bodily exploration to reconceptualise both sexuality and textuality along lines of reciprocity." In other words, the narrator writes and maps her own body, as well as trying to understand what is happening to Louise's body. The subjectivity of the narrator and Louise become intermingled, unable to be separated. Louise has left "hand prints all over my body" and the narrator has to work through the

---

80 Kristeva, p. 102
82 ibid, p. 95
83 ibid
84 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p. 106
pain of separation through marking the body with Louise's. Penetration and inscription of/on the body are exchangeable and "are applied to both speaker and the remembered lover invoking reciprocity rather than mastery of the marked female body".85 Winterson reiterates that the body needs to be redefined away from traditional essentialised properties and expectations. Written on the Body describes a 'real' body with blood and sweat

within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise ... I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid.86

Language and History

Language and history as restraining forces are explored in both Oranges and Written on the Body. I want to develop this point further with reference to Written on the Body and then discuss how language and creation create a problematic space for female expression in the Genesis chapter of Oranges. Winterson is clearly concerned with the constraining forces of language, the inability to express emotions and feelings outside of the constructs of our linguistic tools specified by history and society. She needs to rethink the position of 'I', given these constraints. As Nunn points out, the "successful 'I' of the symbolic is always already rooted in a fixed and gendered and heterosexual identification".87 By creating a fluid subject within Written on the Body, Winterson allows her narrator to fluctuate between masculine and feminine positions and thus refute normative assumptions associated with gendered stereotypes. The speaking position of the 'I' thus creates a complex dialogue between various conflicting subjectivities.

85Nunn, p.23
86Winterson, Written on the Body, p.111
87Nunn, p.207
The reader’s desire to identify the speaker through identity categories based around gender and sexuality is deliberately frustrated. However, I want to include another aspect of the narrator’s identity which has not been addressed by critics of Winterson. Although critics have argued for reading the narrator as female, there is no contention surrounding the race of him/her, rather, interestingly, the narrator is always perceived to be white. Although it is evident that critics might make white assumptions due, for example, to the exclusively white literary references the narrator refers to (e.g. Shakespeare), surely this is illustrating the exact circumstances of stereotyping which Winterson wishes to deconstruct. Consequently, it is necessary to question this rather superficial way of reading identity. It is actually highly significant that the narrator’s skin colour is not mentioned at all. The only references to her/his skin colour within the text are descriptions of her/his “blackened skull” and “my skin was grey”, both of which certainly allow for an ambiguity surrounding racial identity. It becomes evident, therefore, that reading Written on the Body as an autobiography has led critics to make assumptions which I would contend with. Reading the narrator as he/she is actually presented creates a much more radical paradigm for the text and, moreover, reflects Kingston’s, Lorde’s and Winterson’s understanding of identity based on difference. Surely, the absence of references to skin colour must be a deliberate exclusion from the text, especially when compared to the myriad of descriptions concerning Louise’s hair and skin colour. I would argue that Winterson is suggesting that deconstructing identity also

88 For example, Kauer, Ute. ‘Narration and Gender: The Role of the First-person Narrator in Jeanette Winterson’s Written on the Body’ in ‘I’m Telling You Stories’: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading (cited previously)
90 Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 138 and p. 109

208
involves questioning concepts and constructs of racial identity within the
discourse of love/desire.

This conjecture offers a crucial interpretation, as creating a genderless and
raceless narrator excludes the possibility of the intertwining of racial and
sexual stereotypes. This is a point which black feminists are concerned
with. For example Audre Lorde refers to the ‘exotic’ element of being a
black lesbian in New York in the 1950s. Being treated as somehow more
exciting and desirable due to the difference of her skin colour reflects the
exclusionary strictures surrounding identity ‘norms’ which Lorde re­
evaluates. Similarly, novelists such as Toni Morrison are interested in
exploring clichés surrounding black male sexuality, which is often
perceived as both virile and threatening due to stereotypes emanating from
the slavery eras.91 The narrator in Written on the Body defies
categorisation in this way. Blurring the boundaries between you/I also
destroysthe possibility of gender and race becoming identity labels.

Winterson, therefore, carves an alternative between the vociferous actions
of bell hooks and Audre Lorde who describe the interrelationship between
race, class and gender, and Kingston’s complex understanding of ‘talking’
which includes silence and whispers. Winterson’s absence of overt
reference to sex and race creates a dialogue between these different
authors. She creates a narrator who cannot be identified using
conventional constructs and thereby deconstructs the traditional
assimilation of identity within a radical extreme. Nevertheless, by not
explicitly commenting upon race, Winterson creates a silence which is
both problematical and emancipatory. Assumptions surrounding the

example
probable whiteness of the narrator replicate racial hierarchies which exclude minority voices. However, simultaneously, the absence of the narrator's race allows for the understanding that racial identity is irrelevant within this discourse of desire/loss and fantasy. Rather, rethinking conventions and traditions surrounding language and history offers a more productive and less restrictive way of understanding identity and subjectivity.

Winterson, thus, addresses identity politics from a different perspective to Lorde. Rather than overtly celebrating differences which Lorde advocates, Winterson undermines the binarisms between difference and similarities. Written on the Body draws attention to the possibility of sameness and the threat of actually losing one's identity within another. In her desire, love and obsession for Louise the narrator refers to mirror images such as "your face under the moon, silvered with cool reflection, your face in its mystery, revealing me".\(^92\) And other reflections of her/himself "myself in your skin .. That is how I know you. You are what I know".\(^93\) This reflects the possibility that she/he is losing any sense of self in her longing for another, and also that he/she is becoming part of that person. Yet, Winterson creates an interesting paradox here as while these references to sameness could suggest racial and sexual parallels between the narrator and Louise, ultimately, the whole structure of the book denies this possibility of identification. The reader does not know if the narrator and the lover share any similar bodily makeup, and so Winterson undercuts the fixities of identity construction by concentrating on possible connections between the lovers which defy conventional categorisations.

\(^92\)Winterson, Written on the Body, p.132
\(^93\)ibid, p.120
Thus, Winterson emphasises the possibility of destroying clichés and myths surrounding identity. This is also a point she develops through the role of language which categorises and stereotypes. The narrator battles with expressing her/his feelings outside of these constraints. Language contains our ability to express ourselves. As Samuel Beckett concluded “there is nothing to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express”. This paradox surrounding creating or expressing meaning outside of ‘normal’ discourse is something that Winterson confronts through revitalising language: specifically through the body. Love and passion are elements specifically uncontrollable and, therefore, remain subversive. This is an issue I pursue later in this chapter with reference to Belsey’s deconstruction of love.

The rhythm of the language Winterson uses in Written on the Body draws attention to the sound and tonal effects of language. In order to surpass the limits of language, Winterson acknowledges that “words call up visions distinctly different from those they actually present, letter-by-letter, on the page. From the ways in which words can be sensuous and metaphors pungent, eroticism develops”. It is the imagination which allows different feelings and meanings to exist. In comparison to Kingston’s dialogic concept of the connection between speech and thinking, Winterson, too, can be critiqued using Bakhtin, for it is the ‘inner dialogue’ which she attempts to break into. The different language used in various parts of the book reflects Winterson’s desire to create new meanings.

95Burns, p. 280
96ibid, p. 297
Thus, the section on the body (see above) "transports the reader into unknown territory". The language used to describe the evocation of colour in reference to Louise’s hair is very sensuous and rather disturbing: “I am living in a red bubble made up of Louise’s hair ... it’s the colour I crave, floodings of you running down the edges of the sky on to the brown earth on the grey stone. On to me”. And this contrasts with the factual information which gives us some background on Elgin’s parents, for example, or the humorous incidents in the text, such as the narrator’s relationship with Inge and the bombing of male urinals. Then again, this language is then juxtaposed with the gritty language of love, obsession and passion “who taught you to write in blood on my back. Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons?” Reclaiming the body allows Winterson to create different patterns of language. The lack of irony in the sections describing the body and emotions “separates this part clearly from the rest of the book; here the impulse to create a new language ‘written on the body’ outweighs the destructive impulse to destroy old clichés”.

Winterson’s concern with rethinking language is also something she writes about in her other texts. Within Art and Lies Winterson draws the reader’s attention to the flattened state of language Delicate words exhausted through over-use. Bawdy words made temperate by repetition. Enchanting and enchanted words wand broken. Words of the spirit forced into the flesh. Words of the flesh unlovely in a white gown. Slang in a sling shot hurled and hurled and hurled.

---

97 Burns, p.279  
98 Winterson, Written on the Body, p.138  
99 ibid, p.89  
100 Kauer, p.45  
101 Burns, p.281  
102 Winterson, Jeanette Art and Lies. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994, p.65

212
She argues that the extremes of postmodernity have caused an alienated society with passionless and empty vocabulary. Winterson focuses on the dulling of emotions within a society that is based on the compartmentalisation of feelings. In *Art and Lies* Handel discusses the binarism of newspaper reportage upon love/romance, comedy/sitcom compared with the real suffering and depression within the world at large reportage is violence. Violence to the spirit. Violence to the emotional sympathy that should quicken in you and me when face to face we meet with pain. How many defeated among our own do we step over and push aside on our way home to watch the evening news?103

As Burns suggests, “Handel’s contemporaries are caught between maudlin reaction and emotional withdrawal”.104 Winterson proposes that emotions have simply become mandatory, automatic reactions rather than real feelings. This is a point I pursue later in this chapter when discussing desire, as both *Written on the Body* and *Oranges* displace conventions surrounding desire in order to offer a discourse which cuts through the conventions surrounding languages and history.

Within this recognition of the heterogeneous and varied forms of history Winterson begins to reimagine her identity and sexuality. Therefore, I want to begin discussing Winterson’s revising of gender roles through her rewriting of *Genesis*. In comparison to Kingston’s identification of the sexist appropriation of language to debase women’s sexuality, Winterson emphasises the relationship between the acquisition of language and the restricted sphere of female sexuality within the Old Testament. Within *Genesis*, language is explicitly connected to creation. As Gilmore explains, “the Genesis account of creation (‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’) is a narrative about the creation of language as

---

103 Winterson, *Art and Lies*, p. 14
104 Burns, p. 282
a precondition of identity, and about the gendering of the world".\textsuperscript{105} However, it is God's speech which "designates language as the prior system through which matter is enfleshed"\textsuperscript{106} and this concept of language controlling identity is clearly problematised by the fact that speech and communication outside of God's omnipotent control is explicitly associated with the sexual transgression and silencing of women (in the form of Eve).

Sexuality and language consequently become paramount to Winterson's text. The reclamation of the significance of speech and orality becomes an important means of reimagining the Old Testament, of questioning "the master text of Western civilisation"\textsuperscript{107} thereby disrupting the association of sin with speaking. Winterson is concerned with rewriting this traditional interpretation of \textit{Genesis} as a judgement upon Eve who tempted Adam to eat with words. Marina Warner develops this idea in \textit{From the Beast to the Blond}, a text which offers a feminist and new historicist reading of mythologies and fairy tales. As she explains, "the seduction of women's talk reflected the seduction of their bodies; it was considered as dangerous to Christian men, and condemned as improper per se"\textsuperscript{108} This resulted in the silencing of women's voices within the Old Testament and, unlike Kingston, Winterson does not view silence ambiguously; rather, she is concerned with reinscribing these repressive texts in order to re-negotiate and reclaim female identity(ies).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{106}ibid, p.163
  \item \textsuperscript{107}Palmer, p.103
  \item \textsuperscript{108}Warner, Marina. \textit{From the Beast to the Blond: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers}. London: Vintage, 1995, p.31
\end{itemize}
Winterson, therefore, employs a disrupted narrative to illustrate and emphasise the distortions and arbitrariness of narrativity and story telling, as this has important signification in relation to the origination of the beliefs of the Old Testament. Shelley Phillips points out (in her book which complements Warner’s with her feminist focus on reimagining mythologies) that “in earlier creation myths Adam and Eve were described as being created simultaneously and Eve was Adam’s instructor, rather than merely his helper”. The later concept of Eve being created from Adam’s rib evidently has different connotations. It suggests that “because of the textual uncreation of the female body, female speech concomitantly lags behind male experiments with language”. Moreover, this version also represents the severing of female procreativity from female sexuality, and thus the dissolution of female power. As I have suggested, this is something which Winterson is fundamentally concerned with rethinking in Oranges. She questions the stereotypes of women through their status within the Old Testament which, as Ostriker argues, “usually locates a female’s value in her sexuality and procreativity”. Winterson is interested in creating, exploring and acknowledging different roles for women outside of this restricted sphere. Women’s Biblical reproductive role is clearly undermined in Oranges, with the focus upon Jeanette’s religious upbringing within a self-enclosed female environment in which the women she encounters and befriends are “disruptive presences” as they are either past the ability to procreate, or choose not to. These women, therefore, offer an alternative to the numerous examples of women in the Bible who are barren and made to suffer for their inability to reproduce.

---

110 Gilmore, p. 167
111 Ostriker, p. 125. Ostriker does point out that there are a few exceptions to this, for example, Deborah in the Book of Judges.
112 Warner, p. 44
Thus, the chapter Genesis parodies the first book of the Bible and its theme of procreativity. The Literary Guide to The Bible succinctly suggests that the Book of Genesis is concerned primarily with “life-survival-offspring-fertility-continuity”. However, the equivalent chapter within Oranges represents an entirely different landscape, as these issues become modernised and meaningless as they are placed within a completely different context. Importantly, Jeanette’s position as an adopted child undermines the reproductive role ascribed to women within the Bible. Her mother’s easy acquisition of a child (the actual process of adoption is deliberately absent in the text) explodes the understanding of God the creator, as essentially Jeanette’s mother creates her own child. This is explicitly alluded to as the child cried out for seven days and seven nights - a clear reference to the seven days of creation. Jeanette’s mother consequently adopts a different interpretation of motherhood and creation. Furthermore, she chooses a girl, which stands in opposition to the setting up of the patriarchs within Genesis in which the “lives of the protagonists, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph [are established] within the framework of the begettings of their fathers”. Instead, Jeanette’s mother has an extremely unusual disposition towards procreation she had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting of children; it wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, more that she didn’t want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. Jeanette’s adoption appears to be a bizarre modern interpretation of the immaculate conception, and again this is specifically alluded to by the fact that her mother follows a star to the place where she ‘finds’ Jeanette. However, this ‘conception’ is significantly instrumented by her mother,

113 Alter and Kermode, p. 41
114 Winterson, Oranges, p. 10
115 Alter and Kermode, p. 41
116 Winterson, Oranges, p. 3
thereby undermining the role of God. Within *Genesis* God blesses the barren women with sons so their offspring can begin to build permanent homes in Canaan. It is *He* that can enable and guarantee continuity. Jeanette’s mother side-steps this issue, creating her own destiny and role, paradoxically allowing an alternative to the position of the Biblical women and also defying patriarchal lineage.

Nevertheless, her mother is a product of the Old Testament law and this is evident through her mother’s attitude towards sex. Sexuality and fertility are aspects Jeanette’s mother associates with ‘fornication’, a disgusting act. Her dogmatic view of sexuality develops the Book of *Genesis*’ concern with “precarious aspects of sexuality ... in which characters and reader are forced or invited to decide what is or is not sexually permissible under special circumstances”.\(^{117}\) Issues such as incest and immoral liaisons are, therefore, expounded within the context of worthy and corrupt human beings. For example:

Tamar, who tricks her father-in-law into lying with her, is dramatically vindicated at the end of chapter 38, [however] it is by no means certain that the narrator condemns the curious case of incest ... where Lot’s daughters ply their father with drink and become pregnant by him.\(^{118}\)

These judgements concerning what is morally acceptable are reflected within *Oranges*, in which we experience Jeanette’s mother’s judgement upon what is sexually allowed. In Genesis Jeanette builds a friendship with the two middle aged women who own her local sweet shop. However, when they invite her to the seaside she is banned from purchasing sweets at their shop again, and hears her mother announcing they dealt in “unnatural passions”.\(^{119}\) Her mother thus judges the women as sexual deviants. It must be noted at this point that although the Bible

---

\(^{117}\)Alter and Kermode, p.42  
^{118}ibid  
^{119}Winterson, *Oranges*, p.7
appears able to consider various ‘sins’ such as adultery and incest within certain contexts (i.e. procreation), homosexuality is never condoned within the Old Testament, and thus Winterson draws attention again to the danger and exploitative notion of fixing sexuality within reproduction. What becomes evident is the **controlling** of the discourse of sexuality within the Bible and through Jeanette’s mother. But what this point also develops is the **extreme** repression of this discourse; for example, her mother suggests she shouldn’t even worship the Saints as they were wicked in their desires “she told me all about the lives of the saints, how they were really wicked and given to nameless desires. Not fit for worship; this was yet another heresy of the Catholic church”. 120

Winterson offers a solution to this repression of sexuality by imagining a possible **genderless** identity through one of her narrators within a fairytale element of Oranges. Once again, her text reflects the concerns of Written on the Body and also Kingston’s ‘gender terrorism’. Kingston interrogates the stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity within both her texts and, similarly, Winterson is also interested in the possibility of removing identity from gender constraints. This is developed throughout Oranges, but can be illustrated in a more extreme form with Winterson’s portrayal of a goose within one particular story. 121 This talking animal clearly alludes to the mother goose character, the immemorial storyteller who takes many guises. 122 I feel she is particularly significant with regard to Winterson’s concept of identity, as “Mother Goose conceals many ancestors beneath her skirts - Kings .. poets - but her voice remains proudly that of the contemporary writer masking and unmasking

---

120 Winterson, Oranges, p. 15
121 The tale concerns the prince in search of perfection which I have referred to at the beginning of this chapter.
122 Warner, p. 57

218
herself". Hence, her figure becomes a reference to the fluid and fluctuating subjectivity Winterson creates for Jeanette. Furthermore, this character is often played by a man within the realm of pantomimes, so the sexual identity of this character is deliberately confused and in many ways is immaterial. The suggestion of a genderless position is thus played out within this fairy tale: an aspect of Jeanette’s identity which has important connotations as it offers an alternative possibility to the draconian sexual categorisation she experiences within her church.

However, a ‘gender-free’ identity has problematical connotations which are reflected in Written on the Body. The unidentified narrator creates a predicament for the critic as to how to describe this person. As evidenced in this chapter so far, I have been forced to refer to the narrator as he/she. Christy Stevens argues, however, that this is an inadequate form of expression as it draws attention to the binary understanding of gender. Stevens develops this argument to propose that “the narrator is not part ‘she’, part ‘he’, but rather is something other, which perhaps could be described as the slash between ‘she’ and ‘he’ rather than as the words on either side”. This clearly reflects my observations of a genderless identity. However, I argue that this is also a possibility considered within the Old Testament as the serpent in the Garden of Eden represents exactly that phenomenon. As a being who is not sexually fixed, this creature could reflect Winterson’s concern with deregulating gender categories. David Rutledge describes the serpent as “sexual[ly] otherwise, embodying the movement of a restless dynamic of both sexes”. He develops this point by suggesting that

123ibid, p. 176
124Stevens, Christy R. “Imagining Deregulated Desire: Written on the Body’s Revolutionary Reconstruction of Gender and Sexuality”. San Diego University (www.ags.uci.edu/~clcwegsa/revolutions/Stevens.htm), p. 1
this kind of understanding of gender is a radical one: difficult perhaps to think through because it involves a diffuse concept of biological sex which confounds the idea of a ‘natural’ (i.e. binary) sexual economy that has prevailed for centuries in philosophical, religious, medical and scientific discourses.125

As I argue later in this chapter, with reference to Oranges, Winterson considers the possibility of the Garden of Eden as a place which offers the potential of a different understanding of sexuality (that is prelapsarian). Nevertheless, in Oranges, this is a position Jeanette reworks through her relationship with Melanie, whereas Written on the Body deliberately leaves the possibility of a genderless identity open and ambiguous.

Thus Winterson, as does Kingston, considers the very annihilation of difference which Stanley and Neuman warn against, fluctuating between the restrictive politics of representativity acknowledged by Miller (Winterson as a lesbian, Kingston as a Chinese American), and the other extreme of an unfathomable genderless perspective. Clearly, this latter position has a number of different connotations for Winterson as a lesbian. As I have indicated in the Lesbian Autobiography chapter, the lesbian ‘coming out’ novel and lesbian autobiography in the late twentieth century challenge the very idea of the annihilation of difference as this constitutes an apolitical arena. Within Written on the Body, Winterson must be careful to tread between the two extremities of creating a genderless narrator which, therefore, excludes overt lesbian issues126, or creating a traditional essentialised lesbian space in which lesbianism is addressed as a ‘third’ term.127 Winterson negotiates this by negating the possibility of a traditional essentialist lesbian position as she reconstructs the narrator as a

---

126 Critics such as Dunker, Patricia. ‘Jeanette Winterson and the Lesbian Body’ in I’m Telling You Stories, p.84 have been disappointed with Written on the Body not being a recognisable ‘out’ text
127 Nunn, p.26, refers to the lesbian body as a ‘third term’ in a literary construction. I refute the essentialised connotations surrounding this
subject position\textsuperscript{128} and, moreover, a \textit{fluid} subject position which escapes gender oppositions. As Stowers argues, “the narrator travels to a lesbian narrative space which is a disruptive space of sameness instead of that difference which has structured traditional (heterosexist) narratives”.\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Written on the Body} is thus an ‘experimental’ text infused with a dislike of categorisation of any kind, and this allows Winterson to question the fixities which dictate identity, such as gender and sexuality. She adopts a genealogical approach to identity in which there is no genuine or authentic sexual identity but an identity which is an effect of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origins.\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{Oranges} also complicates any recognised arena of lesbian writing, but in a different fashion. This text both disrupts and appropriates aspects of the genre of the ‘coming out’ novel. As already identified, the ‘coming-out’ novel is set within a specific parameter (involving a Bilundsroman narrative from innocence to experience) of coming to terms with lesbian feelings within a hostile environment. Winterson’s novel clearly has connections with this model; however, she is anxious to move away from the overt political agenda and ‘closure’ associated with this genre. Therefore, although many of the issues deriving from the ‘coming out’ story - significantly the rejection from society and the issue of betrayal - are identified within \textit{Oranges}, Winterson reshapes this rhetoric with her use of anti-realism and humour. \textit{Oranges} therefore, like \textit{Written on the Body}, creates a significant space which compares with Lorde’s, as she contemplates the position between the political agenda of ‘lesbian autobiography’ and the ambiguous space of a gender-free perspective.

\textsuperscript{128} Stowers, ‘The Erupting Lesbian Body,’ p. 91
\textsuperscript{129} ibid, p. 95
\textsuperscript{130} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, p. xxix
Desire

Winterson’s use of desire offers an avenue between these two extremes and this is a point I want to pursue in detail, as the restructuring of conventions surrounding desire is a salient issue in both the Winterson texts I am discussing. Desire is deployed in a politically radical way to destabilise traditional ideas surrounding the self and dominant historical narratives. As I have suggested, Winterson problematises the representation of female sexuality in *Oranges* through her re-writing of the Old Testament, and desire offers a space in which the conflicting discourses of religion and sexuality can be addressed. In *Written on the Body*, issues surrounding the silencing of desire structure the entire text. As Stowers argues, the text “remaps that old mythic, heterosexual structure of desire where Woman as sexual Other is the goal of the quest, and which traces instead radical relationships of reciprocity.”131 This focus on desire develops and complicates a poststructuralist reading of identity. Desire is surrounded by elements of the unknown and is unable to name itself. However, simultaneously, desire is also set within the specific discourse of heterosexual love and unity.132 This paradoxical situation reflects the tension between an individual’s agency and the discourses of society, as outlined in my introduction. Belsey develops this point by suggesting that desire’s object is completeness, which can never be fulfilled, because it is an unknown, always just beyond reach. This definition of desire creates a fundamental point of contact with the sphere of identity as something which also is never complete, something in process, and something diverse.

---

131 Stowers, ‘The Erupting Lesbian Body’, p.93
As Burns argues through Baudrilliardian and Lacanian theories, metonymy provides a link between “two arbitrary juxtaposed objects thereby allowing desire to shift laterally from one object to its associative kin in order to find an attainable focus and achieve at least temporary satiation”. In other words, false associations are created between desire and needs, but what is significant is that desire represents a gap, something to be filled. Consequently, I would propose that desire undermines conventional images of the self whilst simultaneously subverting the placing of desire within procreativity as outlined in *Genesis*, or within the confines of heterosexual discourses, as identified in both *Oranges* and *Written on the Body*. The ambiguous, conflicting, fluctuating and struggling nature of desire, therefore, provides an important place for Winterson to begin destabilising traditional notions of the self.

In *Written on the Body* Winterson begins her text with a discussion of the paradox surrounding the words “I love you”. “Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear?” The inadequacy of expressing feelings of love is a point she is concerned with. Our language simply resonates with clichés associated with love: “Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love”, which actually deny the intensity of emotion involved. Opening her text on this note highlights Winterson’s interest in developing a different language within this text, one that involves writing on the body as I have discussed, but also one that acknowledges desire without confinements. Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva critique the

133Burns, p.283  
134Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p.9  
135ibid, p.10  
manipulation of the language of love. Both argue that there is no longer any socially authentic lover’s discourse, unless it is the language of “extreme solitude”.¹³⁷ Within a capitalist society in which ‘false’ needs are created, the amatory experience remains one that is obsolete, clichéd or just plain ‘naff’. This is echoed by Handel in Art and Lies Romance, Love’s counterfeit free of charge to all... this is the favourite antidote to the cold robot life of faraway perils and nearby apathy... the things I value are not the fake attentions and easy affections of a world unmoored from its proper harbour. I too long to feel, but feeling genuine and deep.¹³⁸

This concept of ‘acting’ the romantic role is exemplified within Written on the Body, as the narrator adopts a Don Juan stereotype, a point specifically referred to as the narrator acknowledges the act of “playing the Lothario.”¹³⁹ He/she follows the game of seduction in a meaningless and clichéd fashion. The affair with Bathsheba becomes one of many with married women and, as Nunn argues, seduction gets reduced to signifiers, linguistic referents without emotions.¹⁴⁰ “You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women’s lumber-rooms. I have a head for heights it’s true, but no stomach for the depths. Strange to have plumbed so many”.¹⁴¹ Racing through life trying to find the ultimate sexual experience becomes an aspect which rules the narrator’s life. Finding lovers who are unobtainable manifests a power struggle between two individuals wanting commitment and possession, overshadowed by the realisation that this will never happen. Winterson carefully describes the Don Juan characteristics to illustrate that these exist outside of marital conventions. The marital institution is ridiculed by Winterson who

¹³⁸Winterson, Art and Lies. pp14-15
¹³⁹Winterson, Written on the Body. p 20
¹⁴⁰Nunn, p 21
¹⁴¹Winterson, Written on the Body. p 17
illustrates the hypocritical nature of this institution, which seems only to thrive with the presence of a third party (i.e. lovers). Her derogatory comments throughout the text emphasise this: “I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick. The self-exhibition, the self-satisfaction, smarminess, tightness, tight-arsedness.”

What becomes clear is that the roles of the lover and beloved need to become blurred and interchangeable; this suggests the absence of power, and rather mutual understandings. Because Winterson deliberately displaces gender differences, and also her use of language in which the definitions between self and other are eradicated, she begins to offer a language of love and desire which questions traditional notions of the self and hegemonic history.

I would suggest that Winterson locates desire both within and outside of its conventional discourse, placing her feelings and experiences within the recognisable realm of love, yet simultaneously transcending and exploding conventional expectations, not simply because she is writing about homosexual or heterosexual desire but because she recognises the difficulties and complexities of this discourse. This becomes clear in Written on the Body. His/her relationship with Louise belies clichés as the body and mind become indistinguishable and, therefore, negates any voyeurism of the female body. Moreover, creating a dialogue between thoughts, speech and the bodies and minds of two people allows Winterson to offer a new discourse which redresses the use of the erotic. Just as Lorde redefines the erotic in Zami to focus upon woman-oriented relationships, so Winterson creates an understanding of eroticism which deconstructs conventions. For example, the narrator discusses the

142Winterson, Written on the Body, p 13
143Stowers, 'The Erupting Lesbian Body', p. 93
relationship between food and sex but focuses her attention away from the crude symbolic level of “bananas and leeks and courgettes ... [and] outsize pepperpots”, and replaces this with her experience with Louise. The narrator wants to taste Louise through the food she has made; it becomes a means to be part of Louise’s self: “the potatoes, the celery, the tomatoes, all had been under her hands. When I ate my own soup I strained to taste her own skin”.144 The eroticism works through a longing for Louise in which the taste and smell of food offer a means of expressing an obsession, but one that includes a desire for ‘other’ bodily parts such as Louise’s teeth and spit. Dismantling the conventional contexts of what is considered ‘sexy’ allows the narrator to express her desire outside expected patterns: “I didn’t only want Louise’s flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together. I would have held her through time and stripped away the tones and textures of her skin”.145 The description of their first sexual experience again shatters conventions. Rather than describing the actual sexual act, the narrator describes the room they were in with sensuous language: “the walls, bumpy and distempered, were breathing. I could feel them moving under my touch. They were damp, slightly ... we were magnified in this high wild room”.146 Eroticism is expressed through a different medium, one in which the body, the room and subjectivities become intermingled: “I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me”.147

Winterson also explodes myths surrounding desire in Oranges. This is exemplified through Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie and is then illustrated within Winterson’s analogy of the Garden of Eden. The chapter

144 Winterson, Written on the Body, pp36-37
145 ibid, p.51
146 ibid
147 ibid, p.52

226
‘Numbers’ begins with Jeanette’s disturbing dream of marriage. Rather like the narrator’s vision in Written on the Body, Jeanette’s narrative begins with the traditional trappings of a white wedding and this dream develops into a nightmare vision of marriage and what this long term commitment actually means for women. Her image of men as beasts is a result of a literal reading of Beauty and the Beast, and her own experience of the men she meets who are physically grotesque, and consequently resemble the beast within the tale, as opposed to his later metamorphosis as a handsome prince. Jeanette imagines the women being cheated as their husbands are unable to transform from beasts. As she states “There was a woman in our street who told us all she had married a pig. I asked her why she did it, and she said ‘You never know until it’s too late’”. Winterson creates an amusing parody of the fairy tale romance Beauty and the Beast, in which love conquers physical appearances. In the reality of this small northern town in the 1960s, marriage is a function which is separate from the allusions of romance, and Winterson makes this clear by juxtaposing the fairytale world with the real experience of ‘love’.

‘Numbers’ develops with Winterson’s further exploration of the abyss between the ideals and the reality of what constitutes desire in order to reconfigure conventions surrounding the self. Jeanette eavesdrops upon a conversation between two married women who complain about a husband’s possible extra-marital affair and the general dissatisfaction with their relationships. Clearly Winterson further undermines the discourse of love with this image, as the reality of marriage also undermines the convention of faithfulness and commitment. Paradoxically, marriage actually destroys desire as it removes the thrill of the ‘forbidden’. Once

148Winterson, Oranges, p.69
again the separation of female sexuality and procreation is underlined. It is hinted that the men seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere, as their wives have fulfilled their role as mothers. Although this questioning of conventional heterosexual relationships is grounded within Jeanette’s upbringing in a household where traditional gender roles are inverted, it is significant that this child’s vision deconstructs romantic love, not by reversing gender stereotypes but by questioning the whole discourse of love. Once again, Winterson’s novel can be compared with Kingston’s, in which gender categories become problematised from the rigid and ridiculous associations attached to feminine and masculine behaviour and the author’s concern to reconfigure identity away from this. Winterson’s mother’s description of losing her virginity further exaggerates this position. The tale of her experience in France with Pierre becomes an amusing parody of a mother’s warning to her daughter about the dangers of male sexuality. Her mother sleeps with Pierre and agrees to marry him due to a ‘fizzy’ sensation she experiences which she believes to be ‘love’. In this description, Winterson again cleverly parodies the conventions of romantic love when Jeanette’s mother discovers that the feeling was in fact due to a stomach ulcer. This results in her warning to Jeanette “So just you take care, what you think is the heart might well be another organ”.  

Jeanette’s mother’s fear of sex and sexuality, I would suggest, results in the Foucauldian paradox. His work on sexuality argues that the concern regarding sex, which has been prominent since the eighteenth century, has resulted in a multiplication of discourses on this subject. (For example, the increasing vigilance of childhood masturbation during the Victorian

---

149 Winterson, Oranges: p 85
150 Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction.
period meant “an increasing sexualisation of childhood” during this time). Similarly, we see Jeanette growing up within a seemingly asexual environment, with specific conditions dictated by her mother, which she directs Jeanette to continue with her proposed celibate life as a missionary. Yet Jeanette’s identity is determined by an evangelical religion which is specifically based upon sexual repression, as evil and damnation are equated with the act of fornication. Thus, as Foucault’s theory suggests, ironically it is precisely this eccentric, enclosed upbringing which becomes the means for her to justify her own sexuality outside of this extreme. She cannot equate her sexual and emotional feelings with the sinful, evil rhetoric of the church, and hence does not view her relationship in these terms; it remains beyond the rhetoric of religion.

However, there is not simply one interpretation of Jeanette’s sexual relationships. Although she appears to convince herself that her feelings are disassociated from the evils of fornication, the idea of undermining sexual purity is played out with other characters within Oranges. Many times within the narrative we learn that the Morecambe guest house had to be closed because of gambling, or sexual liaisons between members of this church. What becomes evident is Foucault’s suggestion that repression serves only “to produce a particular type of pleasurable sexual practice within the confines of secrecy and guilt”.

Within this framework Jeanette introduces her own experience of love. But, what is significant is that her relationship with Melanie is not simply

---

152 ibid, p.38
set in opposition to the conventions of desire, it is not merely offered as an alternative to the unsatisfactory results of many heterosexual relationships, rather, as I have mentioned, it operates on a number of opposing levels. Their sexual relationship is essentially described in terms of a progression of their friendship and, as there are very few ‘conventional’ heterosexual relationships in the book, Jeanette’s experience cannot be categorised as ‘different’.153 Thus the notion of ‘otherness’ and the association of lesbianism specifically with sexual gratification is undermined by the context of this sexuality. This is a point which Lorde also concentrates upon in Zami, as she illustrates woman-oriented friendships and communities which both exclude and include sexual relationships.

However, conflicts and anxieties still remain around the notion of desire, as described by Jeanette: “I was frightened but couldn’t stop. There was something crawling in my belly. I had an octopus inside me”.154 This image works within the concept of the unpredictability and urgency of sexual desire, yet simultaneously deconstructs it, placing the image of the octopus in place of traditional aquatic images or explosions, metaphors related to the moment of female orgasm. Moreover, the metaphor of the octopus also explicitly illustrates the repellent nature of sexual desire which, when considered in the context of the lecherous men referred to above, and Jeanette’s own experience, illustrates the destructive consequence of sexual desire. Unlike Lorde, who does not experience any misgivings regarding her sexual feelings, Jeanette feels ‘frightened’ by her actions and feelings. Thus, I feel it is significant that her next sexual relationship, with Katy, is preceded by an analogy of the Garden of Eden,

153 For example, her mother’s and father’s relationship is far from conventional as they rarely spend any time together and sleep at different times. And, as I have argued already, the rest of the characters consist mainly of single women.
154 Winterson, Oranges, p. 86
as this allows Winterson to confront the ambiguous relationship between desire, the forbidden and the religious rhetoric of *Genesis*.

Re-writing Eve’s expulsion from Eden represents an important perspective for Winterson, as she specifically deconstructs this heterosexual construction of desire. God’s punishment for Eve’s transgression from the Edenic paradise of his control is to place her desire within a narrow specified confinement. She will desire her husband; however, the consequence of this will be painful childbirth. Desire is thus set within a specific sphere of *punishment*. As Gilmore argues, this illustrates the place of ‘woman’ within this Biblical narrative: “her desire is for another; that is, she can neither possess nor redirect desire; it is neither owned nor for her own”. Gilmore elaborates this point: “the woman pays for her transgression through the loss of naming her desire”; hence female desire is consequently established as “a primal loss; it is that which is one’s own, though forever out of reach, its absence mourned, its presence a punishment”. 155

However, I would argue that this placing of the woman within heterosexual desire is rewritten within *Oranges*. Belsey reads desire as something which “transcends cultural boundaries and historical difference, to be shared across time and space”. 156 This Foucauldian perspective places an important emphasis on reconfiguring the conventions of love and desire, as it suggests a non-chronological, discontinuous history of desire. Desire can, therefore, be read as a politically radical element, as it defies categorisation when removed from the discourse of love and heterosexuality. Moreover, the fathomless quality of desire actually

155Gilmore, p.171
156Belsey, p.7
revises the subjugation of woman. Belsey situates desire as “what is not said, what cannot be said”.\(^{157}\) It is, therefore, a discourse of pluralities; there is not “one female desire”.\(^{158}\) This interpretation allows Winterson to question the conventions of the *forbidden* associated with female sexuality, knowledge and autonomy which is indoctrinated through Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit within the garden of Eden. In fact, I would suggest that Winterson’s metaphor of oranges throughout her text continually emphasises the relationship between the questioning of religious conventions and the reimagining of a different location for her desire and sexuality, as the orange *replaces* the traditional forbidden apple.\(^{159}\) It represents a new interpretation of traditional symbols and, therefore, conventional concepts of sexuality and identity. Hence, I argue that Winterson, in a similar perspective to her deconstruction of ‘desire’, attempts to remove the idea of the ‘forbidden’ from its conventional discourse and surroundings. She is interested in renegotiating the borders around a subjectivity dictated to by Christian ideologies and an identity (re)constructed in an arena essentially formed by, yet resisting, this doctrine.

As I have suggested, this is illustrated through her representation of the garden of Eden which becomes a paradoxical place for her sexuality; it is both an emancipatory sphere, and a walled garden with an entrance that’s guarded.\(^{160}\) In the heart of this place is an orange tree, but what is significant is that it is surrounded by plants “that grow circular-wise like a

---

\(^{157}\) Belsey, p. 76
\(^{158}\) *ibid*, p. 6
\(^{159}\) *My reading of the significance of oranges within Winterson’s text differs from other critics who, I would argue, have misread Winterson’s references to oranges as a metaphor for Jeanette’s hidden sexuality (that is the soft flesh hidden inside a hard exterior). See Doan, Laura. ‘Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern’ in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, edited by Laura Doan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994

\(^{160}\) Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 120
Jeanette clearly becomes a target for transgressing sexual boundaries, as she states “it all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of people. Right sort of people in every respect except this one; romantic love for another woman was a sin”.161 This description of an Edenic-like garden, therefore, precipitates Jeanette’s leaving the church due to her sexual preferences but, significantly, her departure is self-propelled, rather than by expulsion “At that time I could not imagine what would become of me, and I didn’t care. It was not judgement day, but another morning”.162 Jeanette thus attempts to replace the ‘forbidden’ through considering her identity within an Edenic parallel. Interrogating the Edenic naivete involves rethinking “the place you love”.163 Hence a number of paradoxes are set up. The retreat to Eden is a retreat to an essentially powerless place; Edenic paradise highlights the mythical aspect of the Bible, as this is something beyond our imagination, a prelapsarian abstract utopia, according to Christian beliefs. Yet this is also a space that exists before ‘knowledge’. It is a place, a concept, in which the Foucauldian recognition of the privileging of certain discourses about knowledge over others could not exist. Negating this conventional, well-worn path of the construction of hegemonic history is certainly a significant space to contemplate.

However, as Rutledge argues, the Garden of Eden is fundamentally not a blank slate of ‘pre-history’ “where knowledge, meaning and intention are ‘pure’ and devoid of any covert social or political interest”. Rather, the Garden of Eden is a site of struggle “where language equals interpretation, and meaning requires the exercise of coercive power for its stability”.164

161 Winterson, Oranges, p.125
162 ibid, p.134
163 ibid, p.120
164 Rutledge. p.202
The garden is a space controlled by an omnipotent God and based around traditional concepts of sexuality, desire and procreation. Therefore, in many ways Eden represents an extreme example of control and repression. This echoes the paradoxical nature of Kingston’s childhood retreat into silence and a debilitating illness, representing a safe haven, but also a possible powerless one. Winterson also recognises the conflicting aspects of this escapism back to Eden which offers both repressive and emancipatory qualities for her sexual identity. As she states, “to eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings”.  

However, by deliberately placing this analogy of the garden of Eden before her love affair with Katy, Winterson’s objective is not to attempt to solve this paradox. Rather, it is to specifically place her lesbian feelings and relationship within this traditional essentialised notion of humankind and procreation and hence reconfigure it. Desire thus defers and rejects issues of morality and consequently exists outside of any moral dimension. As suggested within the Lesbian Autobiography chapter, this location of desire actually deconstructs the opposition between body and mind, as there is a “difficulty of fixing, delimiting, delineating a state of mind which is also a state of body”. This is an important point as, once again, Winterson questions traditional binarisms with her use of desire(s). By problematising the relationship between the female body and desire/sexuality, Winterson’s text offers a number of “resistances to the norms, proprieties and taxonomies of the cultural order”.  

165 Winterson, Oranges, p. 120  
166 as also identified by Sidonie Smith referred to in my Kingston chapter.  
167 Belsey, p. 3  
168 ibid, p. 6
Rethinking cultural ‘norms’ is paramount to Written on the Body, in which stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity are ridiculed. Winterson re-writes the language of love and desire to move away from identity configured around ownership and exploitative relationships as these replicate static roles with the lover and beloved. Thus, stereotypical masculinity is mocked in the narrator’s memory of the letter box trap awaiting the postman, “poking out of the letter-box just at crotch level was the head of a yellow and green serpent ... I hesitated ... hesitated because to reach the bell meant pushing my private parts right into the head of the snake”.169 The phallus is illustrated as an obvious target symbolising aggressive male sexuality. However, this is dealt with in a humorous fashion which ridicules the whole situation, and this is very effective because, as Ostriker points out, “the moment of laughter ruptures the principles of authority”.170 The threat of castration is placed alongside the use of this device by the girlfriend to chop a leek in half. Similarly, Winterson pokes fun at the idea that destroying phallic symbols will lead to equality. The narrator describes an affair she/he has with Inge who was “a committed romantic and an anarcha-feminist”. This causes a conflict of interests as she is not able to destroy beautiful buildings

She knew the Eiffel Tower was a hideous symbol of phallic oppression but when ordered by her commander to detonate the lift so that no-one should unthinkingly scale an erection, her mind filled with young romantics gazing over Paris.171

Winterson’s concern to rethink stereotypes is also illustrated through her description of married ladies which the narrator views in terms of ownership:172 “the women wore their jewellery like medals. A husband here, a divorce there, they were a palimpsest of love-affairs”.173 The

169 Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 41
170 Ostriker, p. 125
171 Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 21
172 Nunn, p. 22
173 Winterson, Written on the Body, p. 31
women become merely "sites of patriarchal exchange" and consequently remain not only anonymous but also symbolise the repressive nature of sexual discourses which employ ownership and power between the sexes.

As in Oranges, Winterson is interested in exploring desire in a space which questions conventional discourses. Again, it is a space which is not easily negotiated. The narrator her/himself, as I’ve outlined, is described as a Don Juan at the beginning of the novel and proceeds to illustrate her/his transitory relationship to desire which is simply demonstrated through sexual encounters. Reflecting Jeanette’s observations in Oranges, the narrator in Written on the Body suggests that desire can only be found within urgency, passion and the forbidden. Thus, her/his 'normal' relationship with Jacqueline is something she/he tries to embrace as conventional, but their relationship forms patterns which destroys desire: "what we have is simple and ordinary. That’s why I like it. It’s worth lies in its neatness. No more sprawling life for me. This is container gardening". Nevertheless, familiarity breeds contempt in this situation. Yet, interestingly, within the narrator’s relationship with Louise, this doctrine is overturned as the narrator wants to familiarise her/himself with every single aspect of Louise’s body and mind. Desire thus becomes a means for Winterson to reclaim the body from convention:

the lover literally rips and tears her lover apart, challenging the fetishization of the female body by worshipping all of its elements: the tissues, the scar, the anus, the filthy bloodstream, the womb, the gut, the brain, the skin cells, the skeletal bones...  

The female body becomes erotic, wanted and beautiful, not in terms of ownership or conventions surrounding appearances, but simply through

\[174\] Nunn, p.22  
\[175\] Winterson, Written on the Body, p.27  
\[176\] Nunn, p.25
the presence of Louise. The narrator imbues her/his life into Louise’s through imagining she/he is part of that very body.

*Oranges* develops this rewriting of female desire specifically through her sexual relationships with girls/women which transpose the rhetoric of the Old Testament. This is reflected through her relationship with Melanie and her refusal to ‘confess’, to register their relationship as essentially evil. Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie is addressed publicly in church when they are both bullied into considering their love for each other as sinful. Although Melanie complies, Jeanette refuses to consider their relationship in these terms and is, therefore, punished with imprisonment “my mother locked me in ... she took away the light bulb. Over the next thirty-six hours that followed, I thought about the demon and some other things beside”.177 Battling with delirium and sickness, Jeanette is eventually forced to confess as it is the only means to escape from locked confinement in her room. Yet she undermines this action, as it simply becomes an *act* of compliance: “I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible; besides, I hadn’t eaten for two days”.178 The notion of ‘confessing’ is specifically deconstructed by Winterson. Her attitude reflects Foucault’s interest in the confessional. As he states:

The Christian West has invented this astonishing constraint, which it imposed on everyone, to say everything in order to efface everything, to formulate even the least faults in an uninterrupted desperate, exhaustive murmuring, from which nothing must escape.179

Confession is thus paradoxically a complying action, despite its appearance of free speech. It simply reinforces the Christian discourse of the binarism between good and evil, as confessing one’s sins immediately absolves one of them.

177Winterson, *Oranges*, p.105
178ibid, p.107
This act of confessing by Jeanette appears to represent a contrast with Kingston’s cathartic outburst in *The Woman Warrior*, in which her monologue allows her to assert her individuality and intelligence and, more importantly, accept her alter-ego represented by the ‘retard’.

Winterson’s confession within the rhetoric of the church, in comparison, simply reinforces the pretence and hypocrisy surrounding the notion of individuality and acceptance within this institution. However, Jeanette’s imagined talk with a ‘demon’ she has when locked in her room provides an important point of contact with Kingston’s acceptance of the uglier, uncontrollable aspects of her subjectivity. In Jeanette’s case the demon represents not the Heathen but a source of comfort as a companion and advisor. As the demon proposes: “I want to help you decide what you want .. everyone has a demon ... but not everyone knows this, and not everyone knows how to make use of it”.

Moreover, the demon represents Jeanette’s alter-ego and, in direct comparison to Kingston, the demon personifies the repressed, unacceptable aspects of Jeanette’s identity. This interpretation is developed by Cosselett who argues that Jeanette’s ‘demon’ could signify aspects of her sexuality which are labelled as demonic within *Oranges*. Jeanette asks “Demons are evil, aren’t they?”, to which the creature replies “not quite, they’re just different, and difficult”. Once again, Winterson juxtaposes religion with the re-reading of sexuality. The demon is registered as a creature rather than an unidentifiable source of evil. This instigates an important point as, by accepting her ‘demon’, Jeanette not only interrogates the attitudes to lesbianism within *Oranges*, but also

---

180 Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 106
181 Cosselett, Tess. ‘Intertextuality in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit: The Bible, Malory and Jane Eyre’ in *I'm Telling You Stories*, p. 25
182 Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 106
specifically links this to the necessity of confronting and accepting aspects of ‘madness’ within herself. The association of madness with repressed sexuality is also explored within Kingston’s texts, in which she allows madness not only to threaten her narrative, but also to represent elements of her identity which she embraces - epitomised within the cathartic ‘speaking in tongues’ moment I have referred to above. Similarly, by using the metaphor of the demon, Jeanette is able to imagine and express the disparate elements of her sexuality within madness, irrationality and delirious moments.

Cosselett develops this relationship between female sexuality and madness within her reading of Jane Eyre. This text is referred to a number of times within Oranges and, as Cosselett argues, provides a framework in which Jeanette can both echo and disrupt aspects of Jane’s journey. Within Jane Eyre, it has been widely agreed by critics that Bertha represents the alter ego of Jane Eyre, and that consequently Brontë proposes that this figure must die before Jane can embrace ‘wholeness’. Locked in a room, Jeanette plays with the same madness as Bertha - both punished ostensibly for their sexuality.

Yet, by illustrating different manifestations of madness throughout Oranges (for example the religious fervour of her mother, or the mumbling man she meets on a train journey home), Winterson deliberately deconstructs its association with sexual ‘deviance’. As Jeanette states: “it is not the one thing nor the other that leads to madness, but the space in

---

183 see for example Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1979
184 see Rhys, Jean. Wide Sargasso Sea. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968 for a re-writing of the figure of Bertha and her cultural and sexual dislocation which is equated with madness
between them".185 'Madness', therefore, becomes an arbitrary definition of a number of uncontrollable feelings or behaviour, and Winterson illustrates 'mad' elements as part of all her narrators', and characters' identities. It becomes a link between the 'real' world, the mythical world and the fairy tale world, all of which define 'madness' in different ways, negating any possible single meaning of this word and, therefore, its negative categorisation.

Significantly, it is Jeanette's mother's changing of the ending of Jane Eyre which negates this dialogic reading of identity and sexuality by Winterson/Jeanette. By replacing the 'romantic' ending with the more acceptable position of Jane marrying purely for religious conviction, Jeanette's mother reinforces the place of sexuality within the confinements of religion. "I found out that dreadful day in a back corner of the library, that Jane doesn't marry St John at all, that she goes back to Mr Rochester. It was like the day I discovered my adoption papers".186 Her mother's changing of the story is of paramount significance for, as this quote illustrates, it reflects her control over Jeanette's own autobiography and life. In Oranges Jeanette's mother becomes an extreme example of control, for she has specifically mapped out Jeanette's life and identity as a missionary. In a very similar predicament to Kingston and Lorde, Winterson has to free her own voice from her mother's, to write her own ending or at least progression of her story. Thus, I want to look at the final chapter of Oranges, to illustrate how Winterson (in a reflection of The Woman Warrior) uses this chapter as a focal point through which the other chapters can be read. This chapter not only embodies the necessity of writing her mother from the text, but also illustrates her rejection of the

185Winterson, Oranges. p 158
186ibid, p.73
closure and destination surrounding identity; Winterson’s subjectivity is both coherent and fragmentary, as opposed to the traditional linear progression which her mother reinforces.

Mother and Daughter Paradigms

As I have argued, in a similar fashion to Kingston’s and Lorde’s mothers, Jeanette’s mother delineates a point of conflict and contradictions; she is a bizarre mixture of conventional religious doctrine, but yet a strong, resourceful and independent woman. As Palmer suggests, she “is portrayed in a particularly ambiguous light. Her character displays a contradictory though convincing amalgam of courage and bigotry, imagination and callousness”.187 Like Kingston and Lorde, Jeanette has to learn to come to terms with these opposing aspects of her mother, who both represses Jeanette’s autonomy and simultaneously encourages her vivid imagination: “I learnt that it rains when clouds collide with a high building, like a steeple, or a cathedral; the impact punctures them, and everybody underneath gets wet”.188 However, although Jeanette attempts to amalgamate her fantastical imagination with Biblical allusions, just as her mother approaches the Bible in a highly eccentric and unusual way, Jeanette learns the limitations and restrictions surrounding her mother’s reinterpretation of the Old Testament.

This is evident in her mother’s teaching of religion and history to her daughter. The parts of the Bible she doesn’t agree with, she simply either rewrites or dismisses completely. As Jeanette describes: “we had no wise men because she didn’t believe there were any wise men”.189 The

---

187Palmer, p. 103
188Winterson, Oranges, p. 15
189ibid, p. 4
alternative readings her mother imagines could suggest a possible source of power between mother and daughter, and in fact Jeanette’s revisions of the Bible, The Holy Grail, and other fairytales symbolise her wish to rewrite stories. As Cosselet further explicates: “there is a sense of similarity of these two strong women, both powerful storytellers and revisionists”. I would suggest that Winterson is parodying the semiotic space, the communication between mother and daughter preceding her entry into the Symbolic. Jeanette is taught by her mother an alternative language, a different view and understanding of the world. In this sense she teaches her daughter an alternative discourse, one which allows Jeanette a certain amount of power and autonomy within the church community. As Jeanette observes: “our branch of the church had never thought about it, we’d always had strong women, and the women organised everything”. However, this connection between mother and daughter, which seems to defy monolithic categorisation, is undermined by the discourse of a religion which is bound by patriarchal conventions. In fact, although her mother’s bizarre teachings are dealt with in a humorous fashion, it is interesting to note that her mother’s selective references to the Bible actually reflect the church’s own teachings, which exclude chapters of the Old Testament which highlight a more ambiguous approach to morality (for example Lot’s daughters and the topic of incest). Hence, it is not surprising that when Jeanette attempts to shape her identity outside the conventions of the church, any connection between mother and daughter is shattered. Jeanette has to acknowledge and come to terms with the fact that religion is not an emancipatory sphere for her identity to grow within, as her evangelical community represents the paradox of “a

190 Cosselet, p. 24
191 Winterson, Oranges, p. 131
female world of power where men are treated as awkward conveniences [yet this is set firmly within]... a rigid patriarchal framework”. 192

Thus, this novel is also not about mothers and daughters, and Winterson emphasises this by the fact that Jeanette is adopted and her adoptive mother is not ‘maternal’ at all, as she feels her role is as an instructor rather than a nurturer. Winterson parallels Jeanette’s mother’s position with the fairy tale of a fragile princess “so sensitive that the death of a moth could distress her for weeks on end”. 193 By illustrating that this character needs responsibility (to be in charge of educating and advising a small village) to rescue her from the ‘passive princess’ position, Winterson exposes Jeanette’s mother’s need for a role and responsibility. In this way, Winterson again undermines the biological role of women as procreators and naturally ‘maternal’. Her mother is in fact ineffectual in her role, and her selfish reasons for ‘obtaining’ Jeanette are reflected in her unemotional attitude towards her daughter - not seeing or understanding her in any other relationship other than in the context of the church: “‘we are called to be apart,’ she said. My mother didn’t have many friends either. People didn’t understand the way she thought; neither did I”. 194

Jeanette’s immediate circle of women ‘church’ friends emphasises this rethinking of women’s roles. The women never mention motherhood or marriage and really are seen solely in relationship to their religious convictions. Their position, however, represents an interesting paradox. Whilst they exist outside of patriarchal expectations (and essentially outside of capitalism as they do not appear to perform any paid work),

192 Klein, p. 333
193 Winterson, Oranges, p. 9
194 ibid, p. 42
they seem to be filling this ‘gap’ with a fierce and over empowering belief in their religion. In other words, viewed in a less emancipatory vision, they could simply be substituting one set of patriarchal beliefs with another equally repressive doctrine. However, what is interesting within this set of women is that friendships appear to be based on shared interests rather than similar age groups. Thus, older women represent a supportive network but one which, I will argue, subverts the surrogate mother/daughter roles.

The final chapter in Oranges, entitled ‘Ruth’, develops this argument. This chapter refers to the book of Ruth which is an important Biblical story of female bonding. Significantly, this story has caused controversy and multi-interpretations, as it is the only Biblical book which focuses almost exclusively upon female friendships and relationships. In this chapter Winterson also introduces a character Winnet, who is part of a mythical magical world which represents part of her own possible identity (hence the similarity to Winterson’s name), and simultaneously part of the subjectivity of the character Jeanette. Winnet’s story also becomes a means for Winterson to offer alternative endings to the Ruth story and, by implication, her own story. Importantly, therefore, a number of narrators become interrelated at this point, reflecting the multi-dimensional aspect of this narrative, which employs a number of different threads, but

---

crucially there is no culmination to these multiple discourses; the notion of identity/identities remains contradictory.

I thus want to incorporate the stories of ‘Ruth’/Ruth and Winnet through a reading of Jeanette’s relationship with her mother. In order to do this, I think it would be helpful to give a synopsis of the story of Ruth. Briefly, the Book involves punishment for a Judean family who have abandoned God and his land to live in Moab. The inevitable calamities befall them - the husband dies and the two sons are married to Moabites. Naomi, the mother, is the only survivor of this disastrous turn of events, and she resolves to journey back to Bethlehem to seek God’s forgiveness. Importantly, for an old woman this is a long and dangerous journey to undertake alone. However, her daughter-in-law Ruth insists on travelling with her, despite the knowledge that upon reaching Bethlehem she will be treated as an outsider and ‘foreign woman’. The outcome of the story is that Ruth provides the support that Naomi needs and, upon their arrival in Bethlehem, it is as a direct result of Ruth’s actions that Naomi is able to reclaim her land.

Shelley Phillips describes this book as “in the midst of such ambivalence [regarding the Bible’s interpretation of mother/daughter relationships] .. as a charming oasis and a straightforward description of mother-daughter love”. However, I would argue that it is precisely the fact that this isn’t a mother-daughter relationship which makes it significant for Winterson to allude to. The issue of a female friend is of more importance. Oranges (echoing Kingston) is specifically concerned with the dangers of the relationship and emotional baggage involved in mother-daughter relations.

---

196 Phillips, p.249
as Jeanette’s ‘difference’ is actually punished through her mother’s betrayal of her. Consequently, the story of Ruth who “chose to leave her own people and country because of her love for .. Naomi”, instead of anticipating a possible reunion or form of contact between Jeanette and her mother, I would argue, in fact, celebrates the possibilities and potentialities of woman-centred love and loyalty outside of that traditional sphere.

This reading is further compounded through the story of Winnet. As Palmer proposes, this “idiosyncratic version of the tale of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice relives and re-evaluates [Winterson’s] stormy relationship with her mother”. Utilising the metaphor of magic, Winterson represents the unequal and manipulative relationship between the sorcerer and the apprentice, and this becomes an important means for Winterson to explore the mother-daughter relationship. It is significant that her mother is represented by a male wizard, as this inversion of genders reflects the concern of the whole text which, as I have argued, reconfigures conventional gender/sexual roles. This perspective also “universalises the theme of power relations between parent and child and illustrates Winterson’s refusal to be tied to biologistic assumptions”. Imagining her relationship with her mother within the realm of fantasy, fairytale and myths allows Winterson to maintain a degree of detachment from this difficult relationship, and to describe the “shifting identities” she experiences.

---

197Phillips, p. 249
198Palmer, p. 102
199ibid
As I have argued in my introduction, fantasy is an arena which allows Jeanette to gain autonomy in this way. The story of Winnet is a story controlled by herself, and is the first step upon several paths Jeanette asserts away from the destiny that her mother has mapped out for her. Winterson, therefore, reflects the postmodern shift “towards fantasy as a mode of understanding, as an [essential] ingredient in survival, as a lever against the worst aspects of the status quo and the direction it is taking”. Fantasy is thus deliberately employed throughout this last chapter, as it represents a point beyond the extremes of her mother’s fanatical doctrine. Her mother sees things in stark moral oppositions, and fantasy allows Winterson to break through this dogma just as myths, fantasy and the re-evaluation of language allow Kingston to interrogate the polarities of her mother and father’s attitude towards life. Fantasy is, however, often identified as a problematic form of escapism, and Burns identifies current critical work on fantasy as “split between those favouring its subjective use and those wary of its more dangerously seductive effects”. However, as Burns argues, Winterson’s use of fantasy is not so easily fixed as escapism. She deliberately does not use a utopian vision of the imaginary, but rather “active fantasies of resistance against social normalisation”. Thus, the significance of fantasy employs an important commentary and undermining of the mother/maternal role.

200 Warner, p. 415
201 Burns, p. 284
202 Burns, identifies that Hassan “has argued that the use of the imagination allows us to form ourselves through the teleological effects of fantasy” see: Hassan, Ihab. Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975, p. 52. Whereas Peter Burger “criticises the use of fantasy as a social ameliorative, since that form of art, when it approaches autonomy, siphons off the need to take action” see: Burger, Peter. Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 50. Both cited in Burns, p. 287
203 Burns, p. 287
It is, therefore, important that Winterson rewrites the story of ‘Ruth’ through her fantastical stories, as this indicates her disruption of this story itself. Winterson reads *Ruth*, I would suggest, as a radical re-evaluating of the relationship between women. By refusing to go back to her mother’s house, to seek a husband in her own country, Ruth “violates the basis of her culture”\textsuperscript{204} which is based upon women’s relationships to men. Bollinger identifies the ambiguous nature of Winterson’s sexual ‘conquests’ within the ambivalent nature of sexuality portrayed in the story of *Ruth*. Bollinger argues that Jeanette’s relationships with Melanie and Katy are due to Jeanette’s evangelising skills. Thus, at one level the “sexual is safely concealed within the spiritual”, and this parallels *Ruth’s* story whose inversion of sexual alliances can be read conventionally as Ruth spreading Christianity amongst the gentiles. However, importantly, Bollinger also suggests that Winterson simultaneously “reads loyalty between women on a sexual level”.\textsuperscript{205} This is an important point, and one which Bollinger later belies by suggesting that the loyalty and love felt between Ruth and Naomi cannot be found by Jeanette within her experience of romantic love, and so she returns to her mother to seek this close bond at the end of the novel. Bollinger thus undermines the possibility of female sexual relationships within Ruth, as she reads the Naomi and Ruth relationship in terms of the loyalty of mother/daughter love specifically set within a non-sexual sphere.\textsuperscript{206} By reflecting Phillips’ (mis)reading of *Ruth*, as representing the maternal figure and surrogate daughter relationship, Bollinger’s stance again emphasises Steedman’s recognition of the limited space for expressing antipathy towards the mother.

\textsuperscript{204}Bollinger, p.369
\textsuperscript{205}ibid
\textsuperscript{206}This reading of the asexual nature of mother/daughter relationships is problematised by Lorde, and is something I concentrate on within the following chapter.
The very fact that Winterson deliberately excludes the most prominent conventional events in this story (such as the marriage between Boaz and Ruth)\textsuperscript{207} surely undermines any conventional reading of the mother/daughter relationship. Just as heterosexual relations are excluded from this story, the basis of mother-daughter relationships is also parodied. Therefore, although the story of \textit{Ruth} is formed upon a patriarchal structure - their ultimate happiness is built upon Ruth’s production of a son, which she presents to Naomi, as this male child will then be able to redeem Naomi’s land when he reaches maturity - this event is actually \textit{eschewed} from Winterson’s reinterpretation of \textit{Ruth}. Rather, Winterson chooses to focus upon the subversive elements within \textit{Ruth} such as the issue of naming. Within \textit{Ruth} it is important that the “female neighbours - and not the parents - invent a name for Obedi [the son]”.\textsuperscript{208} The power is temporarily reinscribed to the women. This is the point of the story which connects to Winterson’s narrative, as it represents an important moment of contact between women who appear to be building relationships which revise the expected roles of wife and mother, and, equally significantly, undermine patriarchal authority.

This reading is reflected in Winnet’s story. Employing the feisty heroine, Winnet, as an alternative aspect of Jeanette/Ruth’s identity, Winterson alludes to the issue of naming within the Bible. In her ‘adventure’ Winnet is approached by the sorcerer who declares “I \textit{don’t} know your name”,\textsuperscript{209} (my emphasis) and this remark has significance in relation to the themes of female autonomy and identity within \textit{Genesis}. Phillips develops the implication of naming within the Bible, as she argues that the life-giving

\textsuperscript{207}Cosselett, p. 17
\textsuperscript{208}Alter and Kermode, p. 327
\textsuperscript{209}Winterson, \textit{Oranges}, p. 139
role was taken away from women by the specific interference of God who gave the naming power to Adam. As she elaborates “Naming in Genesis is not only a symbolic act of creativity, but defines women as part of man’s flesh, in an inversion of the relationship of mother to child.” The ambiguous figure of the sorcerer, who both represents Jeanette’s manipulative mother and a fantastical figure, cannot name Winnet and, therefore, cannot assert power over her at that moment. This interaction deliberately places the power of naming outside of the recognised structures of the Bible. Moreover, the fact that Winnet clearly exists within a fantastical and magical sphere undermines the whole basis of names which are associated with creativity, genealogy and patriarchy. As I have suggested, Winnet’s name actually consists of part of Jeanette’s name and, therefore, emphasises the fact that Jeanette has many different identities which destabilise conventional notions of the self because they cannot be grounded within one name.

This removal of naming from patriarchal conventions is also reflected within the story of Ruth, as it is the female neighbours who name the child. I would argue that again this illustrates Winterson’s revision of the bond between mother and child. She is not reclaiming the act of naming for the mother, but rather locating this specific act of influence, power and responsibility within the arena of the female community. Thereby, Winterson consistently undermines the patriarchal structure of the Bible by her revolutionising of Ruth’s narrative. It provides a space in which to critique not only her own relationship with her mother but to suggest that alternatives to the mother/daughter relationship represent a significant source of power for women.

210 Phillips, p 247
Ruth also provides a basis on which to critique the temptation to be conformist, and thus to deny aspects of one’s identity. Ruth becomes a “foreign woman” who is accepted in her new community “through her acts of love and loyalty”. In stark contrast Jeanette, who is now in a position of being alienated not only from the larger community but also from the insular female community in which she was brought up, is rejected because she is a ‘foreigner’ and refuses to conform. She, therefore, remains a threat to a society built upon overt heterosexual values. Her altercation with the Pastor emphasises this aspect. He renounces her as immoral because of her sexual ‘betrayal’ to the church. Jeanette considers

There are different kinds of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. No, he wouldn’t kill me, soft-voiced men do not kill, they are clever. Their kind of violence leaves no visible mark. Interestingly, the concept of betrayal is reversed, as Jeanette considers that it is the church that has misled and deceived her trust and belief, and not the other way round; and the image of violence within this quote emphasises the degree of emotional betrayal she experiences. In this context Jeanette’s predicament seems to represent a modern interpretation/re-write of Ruth’s story where, because the bond between women takes on an explicit sexual nature, she is punished and cannot be admitted into the community. Jeanette inverts the heterosexual discourses of marriage, love and desire, in an overt fashion which radically reinterprets the story of Ruth. However, Jeanette’s punishment is ostracism and confinement, which certainly exemplifies the extremity of the threat of a different ‘uncontrollable’ sexual discourse within the Church.

This interpretation within Oranges employs an important difference to Ruth’s story, as Jeanette ultimately refuses to fit into a community built

---

211 Phillips, p. 14
212 Winterson, Oranges, p. 147.
upon these fundamental beliefs. She eventually leaves the community, and it is significant that she must free herself from a religious discourse which will not recognise her sexuality. Similarly, Winnet’s journey becomes equated with Jeanette’s position as outsider. In Winnet’s escape from the sorcerer’s castle, she settles in a village where she is received hospitably. However, during her stay she cannot grasp fully the different language they speak, which is very primitive and doesn’t address the philosophical and complex questions Winnet is interested in. Significantly she “learned the words but not the language”. Whenever she makes a linguistic error, they are reminded that she is “foreign” - a direct reference to Ruth’s position in Bethlehem. Ruth becomes consumed, and in many ways sacrificed to the culture she enters. The role of the narrator (presumably male) in this Biblical narrative constantly draws attention to Ruth’s depraved origins (Lot’s daughters and the Moabites) which suggest sexual degradation and thus submissiveness to Israelite culture. It is thus highly significant that Winterson, Jeanette and Winnet narrate a different story, voicing an alternative to the outcome of Ruth’s story. Jeanette and Winnet spurn acceptance; Winnet leaves the village in search of the beautiful city she dreams of, and Jeanette in particular must go through the painful process of realising that she needs to remain different.

Consequently, the journeys made within this chapter illustrate a number of important motifs in Oranges. Multiple journeys clearly develop the concept of different identities, with conflicting yet simultaneous paths to follow. The journey Ruth and Naomi make to Bethlehem, and the structure of forgiveness and belonging, contrasts with the difficult journey Jeanette makes back to her mother for Christmas, which is again reflected

\[213\text{Winterson, Oranges, p. 148}\]
\[214\text{Rutledge, p. 26}\]
in Winnet’s perpetual journey - both to the sorcerer’s castle, the village she stays in and then her eventual journey to the “beautiful city”\textsuperscript{215} (representing a utopia she may never reach). This is also paralleled with references to the journey of Sir Perceval and his doomed quest for the holy grail. The loneliness of Perceval and Winnet clearly undermine the story of female companionship in Ruth\textsuperscript{216}, implying a less satisfactory conclusion, and thus rewriting the ending of *Ruth* which celebrates female bonding within the continuation of the male blood line and ownership of land. Moreover, the fact that none of the journeys are complete in *Oranges* radically undermines the morality of the story of *Ruth*, in which the journey from Moab to Bethlehem is *rewarded* by Ruth’s marriage, her producing a son, and thus heritage, land and recognition for both herself and Naomi.

The metaphor of incomplete journeys clearly symbolises the rejection of closure surrounding Winterson/ Jeanette’s identities. Therefore, to end this chapter I want to look more closely at Winterson’s location of this state of exile and displacement and the paradoxical space/place this offers in relation to her relationship with her mother and Jeanette’s lesbian sexuality.

This feeling of exile provides a direct parallel with the people of Israel in *Exodus*, and once again Winterson’s revision of the Old Testament creates a radical space for her identity. Significantly, *Exodus* reaffirms the paradoxical element of the state of exile. The Old Testament is grounded within the progress of the chosen people to a land which they can call their own, and in which they won’t be persecuted. *Genesis* outlines the promise

\textsuperscript{215}Winterson, *Oranges*, p.149

\textsuperscript{216}Cosselett, p.17
to the patriarchs through God that they will have the land of Canaan as a permanent home. *Exodus* continues this theme, as the 'chosen people' escape Egypt on their quest for this 'home'. However, what is interesting is that the next Book *Leviticus* "expresses a desire for something closer than possession, a fellowship of exile, shared among the people". The text makes a "direct connection between holiness and exile". In other words, the moment of exile is an important spiritual process for the people of Israel, as the stark landscape, the 'wilderness', seemingly offering no hope, is a "necessary lacuna, between cultures and between past and future history, in which the people can receive the redemptive symbolic order of the Law". This space 'between' develops my description of Winterson's possible place(s) of identity. What is significant, however, is that the space within this religious narrative is only *temporary*, and it becomes a particular space of unity in which the people of Israel can discover a new closeness and are tested in their faith in God. This situation thus works within the discourse of progress and development of the 'chosen people's' identities and future. In contrast, Jeanette's various journeys through the text reflect Lorde's redefinition of sojourn as somewhere not transitional, but rather a powerful space in which to accept and celebrate differences. However, embracing this location is both difficult and isolatory. Lorde's sexual journey is extremely isolated as she cuts herself off from her mother who wants to inscribe the parameters of her daughter's life. Winterson illustrates that by rejecting the doctrine of her mother, Jeanette is not only spurned by the church, who refuse to accept her 'deviant' sexuality, but she also faces rejection from the rest of society due to her eccentric and fanatical religious upbringing. She is thus alienated from any sense of community or belonging, and I would propose.

---

217 Alter and Kermode, p. 74
218 ibid, p. 76
that this allows her to begin to imagine a politically radical definition of
the self.

As I have suggested, this is emphasised through the Exodus chapter in
which Jeanette compares her difficult journeys with the people of Israel’s
flight from Egypt. Significantly, Winterson equates this journey, and the
process of disjunction, with Jeanette’s entry into school at the late age of
about eight. This is the point when her two worlds - the everyday one, and
the in many ways ‘fantastical’ world of her mother’s making - begin to
clash, which results in an irrecoverable split. This illustrates Jeanette’s
initial realisation that she does not belong, she is different not only from
the rest of the children, but is also isolated from the teachers who
disapprove of the unusual Biblical education she has received from her
mother. However, although Jeanette is comforted by the fact that her
church group offers an alternative institution which accepts and
encourages her religious fervour, her entry into school marks an important
discovery of the limits of the insular religious community she grows up in.
As she states:

what constitutes a problem is not the thing, or the environment where we find the thing,
but the conjunction of the two: something unexpected in a usual place... or something
usual in an unexpected place.\textsuperscript{219}

This statement consequently suggests an interesting revision of \textit{Exodus}, as
Jeanette equates her situation of being discriminated against due to her
unusual upbringing, and later her sexual ‘deviation’, with the people of
Israel who are driven out of Egypt due to discrimination against their race.
Reconceptualising ‘normal’ and conventional contexts, however, allows
Winterson to begin to assert her identity away from structures of

\textsuperscript{219}Winterson, \textit{Oranges}, p. 44
patriarchal authority. Her identity is, therefore, deliberately connected and contrasted with the 'chosen people', who are a race led by God, yet permanently in a state of exile. Jeanette in fact makes a direct comparison between herself and the children of Israel - being safely directed on their journey by cloud and fire - in order to emphasise this point. She acknowledges that her journey and destination contrast with the destiny of these Biblical children who are specifically guided and safeguarded by the figure of God. Within Jeanette's world “The pillar of cloud was a fog, perplexing and impossible. I didn’t understand the ground rules. The daily world was a world of Strange Notions, without form, and, therefore, void”. The clash of these two worlds becomes problematic for Jeanette. It is not simply a set of practices she can rebel against, it is much more complex than this, as she is both part of and yet different from ‘society’. This position reflects Kingston’s experience of being in between the two worlds of China and America, and the difficulty of embracing this position. The ‘Exodus’ chapter, therefore, underlines Jeanette’s muddled and confused journeys and identities, which stand in contrast to the important and significant journey the Israelites take guided by Moses away from Egypt. Jeanette’s position is unfocused and more importantly isolated. Her identity is played within the extremes of a journey guided by her mother (echoing the people of Israel’s journey), and a non-existent path in which to express and consider other aspects of her identity, such as her sexuality.

The difficulty in embracing differences is further illustrated through Jeanette’s period of deafness at the beginning of this chapter. Despite the humour surrounding this incident, as her mother assumed Jeanette was in a

\[220Winterson, Oranges, p.47\]
state of rapture, the significance in its juxtaposition with the entering of school and the beginning of her sexual journey cannot be missed. The simple choice in the moral Biblical tale - the ‘evil’ Pharaoh ordering male babies to be killed contrasting with the ‘good’ Israel people - cannot be equated with Jeanette’s position. Both worlds offer sacrifices to her integrity and individualism, which become further complicated as she later recognises the hypocrisies surrounding religious acceptance. Becoming deaf is a way to stay temporarily between these two worlds: a safe space which is a means of not confronting the issue. This ‘retreat’ is comparable with Maxine’s illness in The Woman Warrior, an illness which confines her to her bed for over a year, yet is also described as one of the best years of her life. Winterson develops this idea of transcending or escaping the difficulties of being between two cultures, or two different worlds, by re-evaluating the state of exile - this is not a temporary place where one is banished, but rather a space in which different aspects of identity can be imagined. This stance effectively questions the strictures of calendar time which entered the lives of the people during Exodus. David Grossman asks “did this strengthen their sense of the circular, the cyclical, the monotonous? Or did time suddenly seem to be just another dimension of the desert in which they were trapped?”221 Either way the cycle of the week invented by God appears in negative terms as a way of organising and also repressing these people. Winterson’s rewriting of time outside of the Biblical narrative allows mythology and fantasy to rescue Jeanette from the same fate as these ‘waiting’ people.

Most significantly, this becomes a space in which gender and sexual constraints can be critiqued. As I have argued, this is emphasised through

---

221 The Book of Exodus introduced by David Grossman

257
Winterson’s reimagining of the garden of Eden, in which desire represents a politically radical element which undermines the conventions surrounding heterosexual relationships. This is further compounded through the story of Ruth in which the mother-daughter relationship is rewritten and female friendships and relationships are celebrated outside of this arena. And finally, within Exodus, as I have suggested, Jeanette equates her growing feelings of isolation from not only her school, but later her own community, with an acceptance of her difference.

By confronting differences on complex and opposing levels Winterson frees identity from categories of ‘otherness’. In Oranges, deconstructing images of perfection becomes a means to achieve this. Ideals surrounding attaining perfection are undermined, as we have seen in fairytales, within mythology - specifically deflating the heroic journeys of the quest for the Holy Grail, within the narrators, and people Jeanette meets, especially within her mother who exhibits an extremely un-Christian attitude towards their ‘lower class’ neighbours. This is then reflected in Winterson’s deconstruction of the Bible and mankind’s quest for perfection. This continuous and never-ending pursuit reflects the framework in which I have discussed Jeanette’s disparate identities. She, however, deploys the alternative, conflicting discourses of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that are politically radical to destabilise conventions of the self and dominant historical narratives.

Written on the Body also revises traditional narratives of the self by blurring the boundaries between ‘you’ and ‘I’ through the relationship between the narrator and Louise. However, this is pursued to such an extreme that Winterson considers the very annihilation of identity within
another. At first this pursuit of sameness or oneness would appear to counteract Fuss’s advocation of identity as difference referred to at the beginning of this chapter. However, by creating a narrator who cannot be classified in any conventional strictures, Winterson diffuses our understanding of the very constructs of differences. As Judith Roof points out:

Allowing the play of differences, allowing flux, dismantles categories and analogies and enables us to see instead the potentially increased understanding that exists in those places ‘between the lines’, which might ultimately erase the rigid categories represented by those lines.\(^{222}\)

This autobiographical novel explores and exposes the relation between self and fiction in order to revise traditional notions of the self. *Oranges* and *Written on the Body*, therefore, approach identity in novel ways. Within *Oranges*, Jeanette begins to understand the importance of accepting her differences, whether religious or sexual, which cause her to be ostracised. In *Written on the Body* this understanding is developed to illustrate that deconstructing the binarism between different/same offers a unique, if dangerous, point of contact between individuals. Reciprocity involves a dialect between same and other which counters conventional gender and sexual alignments.

There is, however, an alternative approach to considering the relationship between identity and difference, which is developed through Lorde and which I illustrate in the following chapter. Lorde is interested in *celebrating* differences, and her position at the intersection of a number of minority positions with regard to race, gender, class and physical appearance allows her to confront negative stereotypes in a more overtly politicised arena.

Chapter Five

Audre Lorde's *Zami* and the Restructuring of 'Difference'

Audre Lorde offers a complex interpretation of identity(ies) within *Zami* which creates significant points of contrast and potential connections with Kingston’s and Winterson’s texts. As a black lesbian, Lorde is a possible bridge between these two authors. She challenges the boundary positions she is placed within from a number of perspectives including those of race and sexuality.

In chapter one, I suggested that the autobiographical novel is a definition which draws attention to the significance of the fictional ‘I’ and that this approach is a more productive medium for exploring women’s multiple selves than traditional autobiography. I also argued that cultural pluralism emphasises the necessity of acknowledging fantasy and myth as part of identity. Lorde labels *Zami* a ‘biomythography’ and in doing so highlights the inter-relatedness of not only autography and biography but myth and its relation to hegemonic history, language and the matrilineal diaspora. As Katie King points out “layers of meanings, layers of histories, layers of readings through webs of power-charged codes mark [this] biomythography”.¹ This chapter argues that Lorde’s deconstruction of the term ‘autobiography’ offers an important revisioning of the autobiographical novel. It is thus concerned with identifying those aspects of Lorde’s ‘biomythography’ that emphasise the dialogic relation between

---


260
also confronts the reductionist qualities of identity politics as outlined in chapter four, which Erin Carlson further develops:

Lorde's positionalism allows for a view of identity as the product of both social inter-(re)action and self-(re)creation, reconciling the apparent contradiction between identity politics (implying essentialism) on the one hand, and personal and social change through coalition(s) on the other.  

Lorde's politics of location, therefore, develops Carol Boyce Davies' premise that "one's location may ... be a site of creativity and rememory; exploration, challenge, instability. Or it may be a site of further repression. But positionality assumes not necessarily fixity, but movement (my emphasis)". 

Lorde provides us with an autobiographical novel in which conventional notions of the self are radically revised, thereby, from the same poststructuralist perspective as the other authors, questioning and subverting the whole artifice surrounding the traditional autobiographical genre. *Zami* emphasises and echoes the framework, which both Kingston and Winterson develop, that "deconstructing identity is not necessarily a disavowal of identity, it is simply a means of interrogating/questioning identity". As Carlson points out

by maintaining a tension between the roles of the author, the narrator, and the text, and pointedly calling the work a *biomythography*, Lorde emphasises that life is a *story* produced as a dialogue between a subject and society, and most importantly, open to rewriting.

Clearly, this perspective is comparable to Kingston's talk stories. Explicitly relating her ancestral talk stories to her present and future histories, Kingston creates a dialogic relationship between different

---

6Carlson, p. 132  
9Carlson, p. 229
representations of the self. Similarly, Lorde creates a biomythography in order to destabilise traditional concepts of the self.

The prologue, pre-prologue and epilogue in Zami define this reimagining of the subject. In the prologue, Lorde explicitly refers to the fluid ‘I’ which questions the traditional concept of a linear progression of identity and, moreover, rewrites conventional patriarchal familial relationships:

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed.10

This rethinking of family connections not only appears to write the father from the text (which is a point I develop later) but also, as Zami progresses, revolutionises the traditional matriarchal bond and form of communication referred to here. In fact, in a similar position to Winterson, Lorde writes her mother out of this maternal heritage. Developing Kingston’s and Winterson’s perspective, it is Lorde’s problematic relationship with her mother which resonates within the text. Thus, once again, I read Zami in a contentious light, as other critics have mistakenly suggested that Zami represents a reconciliation between mother and daughter.11

The prologue also emphasises Lorde’s reinterpretation of hegemonic history and conventional notions of the self, as the ‘I’ is as much connected to her ancestral past as it is to her future and present identities.

As I will argue in the course of this chapter, Lorde approaches this complex position from various perspectives. Firstly, in a similar

---

perspective to Kingston, Lorde mythologises her history whilst simultaneously placing her female identity within the political climate of the 1950s. As Lorde grows up, the changing political landscape becomes intertwined with aspects of her personal growth. Modification of race laws (such as equality in public places) Lorde relates to her own feelings of discrimination and anger/disbelief at the outside world. This perspective culminates in the period of the Cold War, a climate which created and exaggerated boundaries between people and what was considered ‘acceptable’ identities and behaviour. As a poor, black, lesbian, female, politicised poet, Lorde clearly transgresses white norms. As she acknowledges in one of her essays “to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson - that we were never meant to survive”.  

Zami, therefore, traces an American potted history through a black minority perspective. Lorde rewrites the linear American history of the 1950s whilst simultaneously offering an alternative historical narrative through the interpretation of myths as outlined by Jacqueline De Weever in chapter two. By comparing Lorde’s and her friend Gennie’s experimentation with different identities with Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, I emphasise the restrictions surrounding the expression of female sexuality and identity in the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Moreover, Lorde’s relationship with Gennie displaces Lorde’s primary attachment to her mother, and this friendship gives Lorde the opportunity to begin to define herself within a sphere which rejects her immediate family and home life.

Lorde’s redefinition of the ‘home’ develops this intertwining of ‘real’ and imagined histories, and I identify this as an aspect of her

---

‘biomythography’. In the epilogue (which like the prologue does not serve as an introduction or conclusion, but rather offers a framework in which to contemplate Lorde’s identities), Lorde states that “Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carricou was no longer my home”. Lorde needs to remove herself from the magical sphere of her mother’s ancestral home of Carricou and provide her own space in which to remember her past. As I argue in the course of this chapter, Lorde does not interrogate the traditional essentialism of her black mythologised past as successfully as other aspects of her identity. However, her redefining of the home represents an important location as it reflects Kingston’s feelings of sickness and suffocation in her mother’s American home. Significantly, therefore, the home environment represents a sphere of attachment to the mother which needs to be questioned by both these authors. This is specifically connected to the fact that these authors’ identities as an African American and a Chinese American exist in a cultural ‘in between’ space in which the concept of home is difficult to embrace. By reinscribing and refiguring the place of home within a metaphysical realm, both Lorde and Kingston develop a space in which to begin to rewrite the displaced location of the first generation American citizen.

Secondly, my interpretation of Lorde’s biomythography is fundamentally grounded in her revolutionising of lesbian identity. As I have indicated above, Lorde subverts the notion of identity politics by creating a politics of location. However, Lorde’s lesbian sexuality is also radically rethought through her explicit sexualising of her relationship with her mother. It appears that it is only through imagining her mother as part of a lesbian

---

13 Lorde, Zami, pp223-224
continuum that Lorde can find any productive contact with her.

Nevertheless, as I have argued in the Lesbian Autobiography chapter, Lorde’s mother would emphatically refute this position, so Lorde’s relationship with her mother is reconfigured within a destabilised lesbian continuum. Part of Lorde’s identity, thereby, involves creating a fictionalised space to imagine her sexuality, a point which is further compounded by Lorde’s reference to being “both man and woman” in her prologue. Echoing Winterson’s desire for a genderless, or at least gender-free position for her identity, Lorde posits the remapping of the body and sexuality as an integral part of her ‘politics of location’.

I have always wanted ... to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me - to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks. I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered - to leave and to be left - to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving.14

Leigh Gilmore develops this description of sexuality to argue that Lorde “abandons the prescribed development of sex, gender and desire as [she] denaturalises gender through an analogical slide to nature”.15 Thus, “the effect of gender can be accounted for, even argued against, rather than simply represented as the experience that follows naturally from a bodily condition”.16 Lorde refers to her body representing “the mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth”17 which deliberately revises the dichotomy between the conventional masculine (‘hard’ images such as stones and mountains) and feminine (trees, water, flowers - ‘softer’ metaphors of nature). Revising traditional associations of gender identity allows Lorde to question both homosexual and heterosexual discourses and, in a similar position to

14Lorde, Zami, p.xvi
16ibid, p.32
17Lorde, Zami, p.xvi

266
Winterson's Foucauldian analysis of sexuality, confront the artificiality of sexual stereotypes.

Lorde re-evaluates the term ‘erotic’ in order to develop this deconstruction of sexual categorisation. She defines the erotic not simply in terms of bodily desire but also creativity. Just as Winterson removes the discourse of desire from the discourse of love (specifically heterosexual love), Lorde removes the erotic from the voyeuristic field of male pleasure. Her restructuring of the erotic is a point I develop throughout this chapter, and is reiterated throughout her other texts, as she outlines in *Sister Outsider*

When we release [the erotic] from the patriarchal prison of genital (hetero)sexuality where it has been an instrument of women's subjugation for centuries, it operates in all of our activities: not only in our lovemaking but in our artmaking, in our work as well as in our play.\(^{19}\)

Hence, Lorde's restructuring of differences within this prologue emphasises the rethinking of lesbian sexuality, and the cultural politics of eroticism allows her the mobility of different subject positions.\(^{20}\)

Finally, this chapter is also concerned with Lorde's interest in language. By subtitling her text 'A New Spelling of My Name', Lorde “explores the power words give to women to redefine themselves and their world”.\(^{21}\)

The new spelling of her name becomes incorporated through the multiple voices, perspectives and different kinds of language she employs.

---

\(^{18}\)as outlined in her essay ‘Uses of the Erotic, the Erotic as Power’ (1978) in *Sister Outsider*


\(^{20}\)Gilmore, p.30


267
throughout *Zami*. Lorde illustrates varying forms of language and words through her use of italics which emphasise intricate connections between written and spoken words. Once again, Bakhtin’s ‘inner dialogue’ provides a useful perspective on this presentation of multiple voices which deconstruct the barrier between thought, speech and writing.\(^{22}\) However, specifically Lorde also posits *poetry* as a form in which different voices, perspectives and thoughts can be written as it offers a medium of communication which, whether written or spoken, is based around the *sound* of language. The arbitrary relationship between language and meaning is emphasised through poetry which illustrates multiple and fluctuating interpretations of words. Within *Zami*, this interest in poetry creates a fundamental basis for her renegotiation of language. She incorporates poetry, poetic expression, various voices from the past and present, and evocative language in order to emphasise the necessity of utilising different forms of language to question conventional notions of the self.

Linda Anderson develops this point in arguing that Lorde utilises poetry as a form of communication because she is distrustful of “how language codifies and reifies knowledge”. The poetic form is “a way of mediating this other knowledge, a mysterious process which flouts the rules of grammar and syntax”.\(^ {23}\) Lorde deliberately questions the relationship between language and representations of knowledge. By creating a much more fluid relationship between different forms of communication, through the voices of mythical ancestors and her own voice, Lorde utilises


Foucault’s redefinition of truth and subjectivity. Just as Winterson and Kingston develop Foucault’s recognition of the discursive systems surrounding the autonomy of the individual within their autobiographical texts, Lorde adopts “critical historicism”\textsuperscript{24} in order to identify the prevailing relationship between language, knowledge and power. In doing so, she offers alternative modes of expression with which to assert the self.

Moreover, Lorde attempts to offer an alternative to the hierarchical language structures inherent in western culture, through her discovery of a ‘maternal language’ which can express feminine desire.\textsuperscript{25} This again represents a contradictory location, for in a direct parallel with Kingston’s relationship with her mother, Lorde’s mother encourages her daughter to express language differently (through her poetic and imaginative linguistic dialect) but also instigates the negation of Lorde’s voice. In Lorde’s case, by silencing and ignoring the effects of racism, her mother eschews a position which Lorde wants to address, fight and change. Thus, like \textit{The Woman Warrior}, Lorde and her mother represent the polarities of generational politics in facing the realities of dual cultural identities.

Memory and Identity
In the light of the above, \textit{Zami} is initially most profitably approached through the subject of memory and its relationship to history. Both Kingston’s and Lorde’s mothers use memory as a form of escapism from reality. Memory creates moments of nostalgia which offer respite from their immigrant status within a ‘host’ country. As I have argued in chapters one and two, Lorde, Kingston and Winterson all develop my

\textsuperscript{24}Radinow, Paul (ed) \textit{The Foucault Reader, An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought}. London: Penguin, 1991, p 27

\textsuperscript{25}Anderson, p 142
poststructuralist model of autobiography which includes a more complex understanding of memory. One of Lorde’s poems emphasises the possible destructive relationship between history and memory “History is not kind to us/we restitch it with living/past memory forward/into desire/into the panic of articulation/of want without having/or even the promise of getting”. This is further compounded with hooks’ advocation of the “politicisation of memory” which “distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, as a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present”. Moreover, Anderson elaborates this perspective to argue for the incorporation of ‘future memories’ - a form of communication which suggests access to memories that haven’t been experienced yet. Thus hooks and Anderson reflect the complex and changing relationship between history and memory upon which all three authors focus. In discussing this aspect of Zami, Chinosole identifies different levels of consciousness within the text, primarily “collective memory rendered through myth and legend that recaptures the past, the memory of personal experience that records the personal narrative, and a mythical fantasy dream state that projects into the future through desire”.

Lorde’s rethinking of autobiography and identity is developed through these different interpretations of memory and history. As the cyclical movement of the text belies the seemingly structured accounts of childhood, adolescence and maturity, Lorde questions traditional notions

---

27 hooks, bell. ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’ in Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. Boston: South End Press, 1990, p 147
of the self. By embracing her identity on the multiple levels identified by Chinosole, Lorde creates a dialogic relationship between the erotic, language and sexuality: connecting politically with women, recognising her heritage which is not associated with them, and sexually reprinting a black history which is not acknowledged not only by the outside world but also within the insular gay community of the 1950s.

As I have argued, Lorde’s restructuring of her lesbian identity connects these different levels, giving an overt political dimension to her writing. Simultaneously, her historicising of lesbianism within a continuum of both real and imaginary ancestors challenges any notion of a traditional, essentialised lesbian identity. As Gilmore suggests, “between the hunger for language and the desire for home, Lorde builds a mythic image of herself in relation to mythic, historical, and potential lesbians”.29 I want to propose that the figure of Afrakete embodies this interpretation. As someone who frames the text by being specifically referred to in both the prologue and the epilogue, Afrakete symbolises Lorde’s rethinking of lesbianism. As such Afrakete destabilises dominant historical narratives and, like the previous works I have discussed, the final pages of Zami offer a parameter with which to interpret the entire text.

Afrakete, Mythology and the Erotic

Afrakete symbolises a personal myth (as discussed in chapter two), a mythical figure, a collective mystical goddess, a twentieth century politicised figure and part of Lorde’s own identity. Afrakete becomes an integral aspect of the “power from particular sources of my living [which] flow back and forth freely through my different selves”30 which Lorde

29Gilmore, p. 28
30Lorde, Sister Outsider, p. 121
refers to within *Sister Outsider*. Afrakete’s multiple location and identity allows Lorde to illustrate her definition of ‘Zami’ - “women who work together as friends and lovers”\(^{31}\) - as she becomes a symbol of all the women who have empowered her to express the various parts of herself and who offer an alternative history of female identity and sexuality. I want to discuss the figure of Afrakete with particular reference to Lorde’s revision of the term erotic and its relationship to Western mythology, as both these concepts become divorced from their white patriarchal historical connotations through the relationship between Audre and Afrakete.

Afrakete’s name posits her within African mythology, as it refers to the goddess Afrakete, and Lorde specifically refers to this mythical and powerful aspect of Afrakete, as she describes how “the goddess” speaks through Gennie’s stepmother Ella’s songs, and offers an alternative to the destruction of women such as Ella through her husband’s physical and verbal abuse.\(^{32}\) Ella’s position is a point I refer to later in connection with Lorde’s restructuring of the family. However, in this example it is significant that Afrakete’s presence represents a means for Lorde to advocate the *voicing* of oppression in order to create autonomy for women. Afrakete thus offers a symbol of independence and a recognition of the importance of woman-oriented relationships and networks of knowledge. This is further compounded by the fact that Lorde’s reference to the goddess Afrakete specifically celebrates a prepatriarchal African goddess, as in the later representations of Afrakete she has been transformed into the male trickster god Eshu/Elegba,\(^{33}\) thereby clearly

---

\(^{31}\)Lorde, *Zami*, p. 223  
\(^{32}\)ibid, p. 220  
\(^{33}\)Keating, p. 26
excluding the female voice. By emphasising the earlier version Lorde not only “denies traditional representations of the divine as exclusively male”\textsuperscript{34} but celebrates “woman-identified source[s] of knowledge”.\textsuperscript{35} This provides a clear parallel with Winterson’s subversion of patriarchal religious doctrine in \textit{Oranges} through her radicalising of female sexuality and desire in order to offer alternative networks of women-oriented friendships. Within \textit{The Woman Warrior}, Kingston also celebrates the voices of her female ancestors’ stories outside of the patriarchal sphere of silence they are placed within.

Moreover, as in the work of both Kingston and Winterson, within \textit{Zami} the “mythic narrative establishes lines to a world that it is not only beyond the real world but that, at the same time, transforms it”.\textsuperscript{36} As I have argued in my introductory chapters, myth disrupts history and becomes the “fictional construct that frames past, present and future selves in \textit{Zami}”.\textsuperscript{37} Re-thinking Western discourse from a black perspective allows Lorde to question conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives. Specifically, Lorde is interested in interrogating sexuality through this onus upon mythology. She, therefore, revises both the western and African mythological onus upon the male deity and re-writes black female sexuality within both recent and past histories through the intimate and joyful arena occupied by Afrakete and Audre.

Lorde’s focus upon the revision of myths is also comparable to Kingston’s, as Lorde is concerned with subverting western mythologies which centre

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item[34] Keating, p.27
\item[35]ibid, p.30
\item[37]ibid, p.384
\end{thebibliography}

273
upon Greek myths. She addresses this through her revision of the erotic within the relationship between Audre and Afrakete. The word ‘erotic’ derives from the Greek word ‘eros’. Yet, Lorde is interested in “revis[ing] well-known Greek myths that represent the erotic either in terms of the male god Eros, whose passions are sexual, or of Aphrodite whose activities are seductive” as she describes a lesbian relationship based upon a passion which deconstructs these stereotyped discourses which equate passivity with femininity and sexuality with masculinity. Moreover, since the affinity between Afrakete/Kitty and Lorde is sexual and explicitly erotic, it counteracts any suggestion of the ‘proper’ location of desire within heterosexual discourses. In a similar perspective to Oranges, I would suggest that Catherine Belsey’s poststructuralist reading of desire provides a useful interpretation of the emancipatory qualities of desire as something which transcends the “norms, proprieties and taxonomies” of Western culture. Lorde locates desire specifically within eroticism, and illustrates this as a primary connection between herself and her lovers. However, she removes the erotic from any preconceived connotations by illustrating this need as a form of expression of other needs and desires. As Ruth Ginzberg also argues: “for her it is a source of power and information that encourages resistance to atomism and unchecked individualism, opening up an entire realm of human understanding otherwise unavailable”. Therefore, rather than sexual practices being defined as ‘transgressive’ or the norm which dictates what is morally acceptable within various cultures, Lorde infuses sexual feelings as an integral part of her everyday life. The erotic becomes a

38Lauter, p.398
41as discussed within Foucault, Michel. History of Sexuality Vol 1

274
"metaphysical yearning to integrate or connect that which subjectively seems separate". Hence, the representation of the erotic as something hidden, secretive and hence ‘the forbidden’ is reconfigured through this premise.

Consequently, in a similar objective to the way Winterson locates desire as rejecting issues of morality, Lorde utilises the erotic as a creative and powerful connection between women which specifically questions the compartmentalisation of sexuality by Western culture. She specifies that the erotic works on a number of simultaneous levels connecting sexuality with creative energy, power, politics, and desire. It is a resource “that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling”. I would suggest that Afrakete offers an example of how this connection between the spiritual and the erotic enters Lorde’s writing. As I have described, Afrakete becomes part of Lorde’s identity and thus reflects aspects of Lorde’s growing acceptance of her individuality and differences. Afrakete’s confidence surrounding her body: “there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women” allows Lorde to embrace her own sexuality: “dancing with her this time, I felt who I was and where my body was going, and that feeling was more important to me than any lead or follow”. Untangling herself from the roles and structures of the gay scene, Lorde taps into a specific energy which unites her with Afrakete not just sexually but also within an understanding of shared power, shared experiences and, therefore, mutual admiration. As Lorde describes

---

42Ginzberg, p. 74
43Lorde, Audre. ‘The Use of the Erotic…’ in Sister Outsider, p. 53
44Lorde, Zami, p. 213
45ibid, p. 214
we had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange.\textsuperscript{46}

Consequently, their relationship differs dramatically from the narrator's experience in \textit{Written on the Body}. Although Louise and her lover unite on a physical and spiritual level, Winterson emphasises the possibility of losing oneself within another. Obsession can lead to the possibility of annulling one's own subjectivity. In contrast, Lorde describes her relationship with Afrakete as "exchanging energy" (see above quote). Rather than the possibility of subsuming each other, Afrakete's presence symbolises a transition in Lorde's life. In this way, Afrakete is both a real person and also reflects Lorde's changed attitude to relationships. In contrast to the destructive claustrophobic relationship she shared with Muriel, Lorde re-evaluates love, desire and communication within a less possessive, restrictive and monogamous doctrine.

Her relationship with Afrakete also illustrates Lorde's separation of "eroticism from abuse of sexuality, [which] frees herself and those who would write after her from the idea that black women's sexuality is to be whispered about and to be ashamed of".\textsuperscript{47} As I have argued, Lorde's relationship with Afrakete revolves around not only their sexual attraction but their political convictions and a shared feeling of power and strength between them.

we talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies' strongholds, too much and too often, and how our psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46}Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p. 222
\textsuperscript{47}Alexander, Elizabeth. 'Coming Out Blackened and Whole: Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's Zami and The Cancer Journals' in \textit{American Literary History} 1994 Winter, 6:4, p. 701
\textsuperscript{48}Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p. 219
As Lorde argues in *Sister Outsider*, the erotic forms a bridge between the spiritual and the political⁴⁹ and, through her relationship with Afrakete, Lorde celebrates this possibility.

Dreams, reality and myth become enmeshed through the figure of Afrakete, and Lorde connects the women of Carricou with the Afrakete/Kitty of the Caribbean and New York by placing her dreams of the mythic figure of Afrakete alongside her experiences with Kitty. Thus, Lorde

*remember[s] Afrakete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the underedge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava.*⁵⁰

Lorde explicitly equates this image with the fruit that Kitty buys from the market. Importantly, food represents an integral description of Afrakete’s and Lorde’s relationship. It becomes sexualised in an overt celebration of female sexuality, genitalia and orgasmic moments. Lorde emphasises the significance of food and clothing throughout *Zami* as offering a different recording of history and memory. Within *Zami*, the description of food and the clothes the women in the gay scene wear symbolise an alternative culture and develop a sensuality which celebrates a language of expression defying conformity. Hence, Lorde’s description of the clothes the women wear at Kitty’s party is elaborate, detailed and evocative

There were garrison belts galore, broad black leather belts with shiny thin buckles that originated in army-navy surplus stores, and oxford-styled shirts of the new, iron-free dacron, with its stiff, see-through crispness.⁵¹

Clothes allow Lorde to express her sexuality within a culture which denies its very existence. This is emphasised in Lorde’s comment that “clothes were often the most important way of broadcasting one’s chosen sexual

---

⁴⁹Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 56

⁵⁰Lorde, *Zami*, p. 218

⁵¹Ibid, p. 211
role". Her reference to the significance of dressing for work, and dressing for her 'real' life, illustrates the transgressing of norms within American culture: "I had my straight clothes for working at the library ... I had very few clothes for my real life, but with the addition of Muriel's quixotic wardrobe, we developed quite a tidy store of what the young gay-girl could be seen in".

Lorde develops this acknowledgement of different identities through the description of the food at the party which reflects the celebration of women-oriented sexuality and eroticism. Lorde describes the "rare meat [which] had been lovingly laid out and individually folded into a vulval pattern, with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex". This sexualisation of food is also used to develop the connection between Lorde's present and past identities. As Lorde grows up, she imagines Carriacou as "my truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums". The sensual nature of the island food is elaborated through Lorde's description of the fruit that she shares with Afrakete, and thus becomes symbolic of an alternative history of a lesbian continuum. Moreover, Lorde's description of the apples and "red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower" is more explicit than Winterson's metaphor of oranges within her text. As I have outlined in chapter four, Winterson's displacement of the forbidden fruit in Oranges undermines religious discourse, reconfiguring the notion of desire as a

---

52 Lorde, Zami, pp.211-212
53 ibid, p.181
54 ibid, p.212
55 ibid, p.6
56 ibid, p.218
heterosexual longing. In *Zami*, Lorde’s metaphor of fruit for female genitalia (as quoted above) develops this liberating of female sexuality from the restrictive constraints of patriarchal doctrine. By placing food, and specifically, fruit within female *pleasure*, not shame or punishment, I would argue that Lorde celebrates a female sexuality which questions traditional roles for women, specifically, like Winterson, undermining the procreative ‘function’ of women. What she does is to utilise female sexuality to rethink structures of family and the home outside of conventional spheres. Afrakete, therefore, embodies an integral link between the rewriting of female sexuality in myth, ancestral heritage, and present and future avenues for female identity.

Kitty/Afrakete becomes symbolic of the contact between disparate entities, and the two cultures which Lorde finds herself in: the racist reality of 1950s America, and the mythologised Caribbean past of her ancestors. As Katie King suggests, “Kitty ... [becomes] simultaneously mundanely particularised and mythologically elaborated”.\(^5\) The fluid movement, yet division, between these two cultures is embraced as a position of powerful possibilities, and Lorde’s self-definition becomes intertwined with hers, creating a fusion of histories. However, I would suggest that this fusion also illustrates a fundamental problem with Lorde’s deconstruction of hegemonic history, which is that she does not problematise the cultural boundary crossing symbolised by Afrakete. Within *Zami*, there appears to be no struggle between her dual existence in America and her ancestral connection with Carricou. As Carol Boyce Davies points out, another definition of ‘sister outsider’ is the Caribbean term for “those who occupy the immigrant slot”,\(^6\) yet Lorde does not address her position of

---

\(^5\)King, p.60

\(^6\)Davies, p.54
‘immigrant’ status in both American and Carricou. The mythologised strong female figures of her African past become too easily interpreted within her contemporary identities, leaving no room for the recognition of the possibility of traditional essentialism. Where are the black female figures of her past who are not imbued with strength and beauty?\textsuperscript{59}

I recognise that this is a difficult and complex position for Lorde to imagine. Nevertheless, I would suggest that in her desire to rewrite and reimagine the colonial history of the islands of Grenada and Carricou, Lorde hypothesises the lives of her female forebears to the extent that they become mythologised figures with a strained connection to reality. She creates a dichotomy between the motherland (Carricou) and the fatherland (America) which I pursue in more detail with reference to Lorde’s redefinition of home later in this chapter. Lorde describes the women from her motherland as having “root truths” taught to them by their mothers, and imagines their lives specifically in terms of strengths

[they] tended the goats and groundnuts, planted grain and poured rum upon the earth to strengthen the corn’s growing, built their women’s houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together.\textsuperscript{60}

Writing the autonomous space for women, Lorde’s gendered view of history becomes myopic, taking the essence of her poem “we seek beyond history for a new and more positive meaning”\textsuperscript{61} to an unnecessary extreme. Paradoxically, by placing these women on a continuum with her as fundamentally and primarily sources of strength, I would suggest she actually negates their personal histories.

\textsuperscript{59} as referred to in \textit{Zami}, p.5
\textsuperscript{60} Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p.5
\textsuperscript{61} last two lines from “Outsider”, unpublished poem in \textit{Sister Outsider}, p 123
This perspective contrasts with Kingston’s text which specifically confronts her contradictory female ancestors and their relationship to hegemonic history. Kingston has to confront an image of silenced and subdued Chinese women whose sexuality and position rests explicitly within patriarchal control. She attempts to deconstruct this image by recognising and creating moments of strength between her female ancestors and figures of mythology, but also by embracing the contradictions of silence as an empowering tool. Lorde, in contrast, feels strengthened by an African heritage built upon explicitly strong women, forming communities and relationships with each other alongside and connected with the more conventional heterosexual relationships expected of them. Even this subversive possibility of lesbian relationships is a situation that is “easily” imagined. As Lorde describes: “women.... survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily (my emphasis), because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning”.  

The need to configure a radical historical and mythological space for Lorde’s lesbian identity, combined with her problematic relationship with her mother, is responsible for this inability to confront negative aspects of her ancestral history. Ultimately, her link to the motherland not only replaces her link to her mother, but also allows her fulfilment of a lesbian identity in a realm away from the expectations of heterosexual society. I want to pursue these two points by comparing Zami with Kingston and Winterson with regard to their relationships with their mothers and interpretations of sexuality.

---

62Lorde, Zami, p.5
Sexuality and Mothering

Lorde’s reinterpretation of the ‘powerful’ women of Carricou in the context of a more open sexual identity that involves both heterosexual relationships, but more fundamentally special relationships with women, is clearly an interesting interpretation of the term ‘lesbian’, and the connotations surrounding this label of identity. By linking her feelings to a continuum of women-oriented relationships both real and imagined, sexual and platonic, Lorde rethinks and rewrites her ‘lesbian history’ within a different context; as Lorde proposes “every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me - so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognise her”.63 She deliberately deconstructs the notion of ‘coming out’ as sexuality becomes something integrated within her own lifestyle and history and, therefore, does not create a barrier between her past and present. Anna Wilson suggests that “the term ‘coming out’ describes a movement away from the culture of one’s birth and towards a re-cognition of one’s identity within a different, non-generationally structured group.” Therefore, “a lesbian history is ... always self-consciously a fiction, an imagined heritage”.64 Lorde clearly rethinks these definitions, as she specifically places her lesbian identity within her female cultural heritage which is both a ‘real’ and imagined past. Lorde thus expresses her sexuality within a political conjecture. She endeavours to rewrite the silences of black lesbian writers/poets to “free the idea of lesbianism from the closet of white decadence”,65 and also embraces her sexuality within the subjectivity of her foremothers.

63Lorde, Zami, p.223
65Chinosole, p.386
Lorde's sexuality, like Winterson's, therefore, revolutionises traditional lesbian 'coming out' stories in which there are "strong ahistorical and utopian elements in lesbian self-fashioning". Instead of concentrating upon the idea of a 'new' identity, or a utopian future, Lorde celebrates the cultural, mythical and historical representations of female friendships. Deconstructing the focus upon a utopian 'future' identity allows Lorde to fuse past, future and present identities for the black lesbian. Echoing Winterson's premise, Lorde "lays claims not to the natural or [traditional] essential but to the revision of the terms [black lesbian] to provide a constructed, and, therefore, at once endangered and negotiable ground for being".

Nevertheless, as I have argued, this celebrated connection with her woman-oriented past also suggests an inability to dismantle or question this heritage in realms other than her sexual identity. I would suggest that this could be due to Lorde's difficult and complex relationship with her mother. Failure to communicate with her mother results in avoidance of any interrogation of her family roots, as this is in fact the only way she can connect with her mother. Consequently, Lorde attempts to locate this possibility of their ancestral 'sexualised' past within a sacred realm - a space in which the painful conflict between mother and daughter dissipates and becomes meaningless. It is only through the radical reimagining of "the idea that lesbian relationships could replicate mother-daughter bonds, suggest[ing] another kind of consciousness" which allows Lorde to form some sort of understanding and connection with her mother. As Lorde explains: "that is why to this day I believe that there

66 Wilson, p. 80
67 ibid, p. 90
have always been Black dykes around - in the sense of powerful and woman-oriented women - who would rather have died than use that name for themselves”. It is, however, paramount that Lorde notes that this point of contact would be vehemently denied and refuted by her mother, so even this sphere remains a space created by Lorde, but not inhabited by her mother - again, perhaps serving to highlight the wide gulf between them.

Thus, I want to discuss Lorde’s difficult relationship with her mother in more detail, relating Lorde’s redefining of identity firstly through discussing her restructuring of matrilineal diaspora and secondly by illustrating her contradictory attitude towards the space of home and the motherland. Significantly, Lorde’s biomythography is haunted by the absence of her mother from the moment Lorde leaves her parents’ house at the age of seventeen. It, therefore, serves as a marked difference from Kingston’s and Winterson’s texts, both of whom at the end of their novels confront the differences and hostilities they experience with their mothers. Kingston attempts to understand the paradoxical nature of her mother, and manages to distinguish herself as an individual without negating a bond between mother and daughter. Winterson’s seemingly irreconcilable split with her mother is reverted at the end of Oranges, as Jeanette is able to visit her mother at Christmas time; the differences between them remain absolute, but a tacit understanding between them still forms a bare connection. In contrast, Lorde cannot even contemplate visiting her mother’s house for Christmas, and the family Christmases to which Lorde briefly refers are held in the neutral territory of her sister’s house.

69 Lorde, Zami, p. 6

70 again this appears to be a point which critics such as Barbara Christian eschew when they suggest a reconciliatory relationship between Audre and her mother.
It is, however, necessary to point out that Lorde’s relationship with her mother is under more cultural restraints from outside prejudices than the other two authors, due to Lorde’s position as a black lesbian. In comparison, it is significant that Winterson ends Oranges before Jeanette has reached the position of forming any adult and long lasting relationships with women. Her relationship with her mother can remain in that ‘in between’ sphere between recognised adulthood and the innocence of childhood. Her mother can, therefore, place Jeanette’s lesbianism within the temporary arena of a ‘phase’ she will ‘grow out of’. Similarly, although Kingston has to contend with the racism and sexism of her mother who in many ways wants her to become the subdued, silent Chinese girl, within the sexual sphere she can still maintain her mother’s wishes (whether intentionally or not) and continue the line of descendants. Lorde remains much more of a threat to society and, consequently, a more obvious victim of society’s prejudices, a fact which no doubt her mother recognises, and which manifests itself through her brutality, instigated as a misguided notion of protection.

Her mother’s anxiety to protect Audre from the racist reality of everyday life results in continual violence towards her daughter. Rather than encouraging Audre’s ambitions and individuality, her mother views them as a mark of difference and, therefore, danger. Invisibility is a safer place to contemplate. This doctrine is emphasised when Audre decides to run for presidency in her school. As this honour is bestowed upon the brightest pupil of the class, Audre feels that considering her top school marks, she should be able to win. The election results, however, award the most popular girl in the class and Audre is left to consider the unjustness of the situation: “I was the smartest girl in the class. I had not been elected vice-president. It was as simple as that. But something was escaping me.
Something was terribly wrong. It wasn’t fair”.71 Expecting sympathy at home for this cruel rejection, Audre faces a barrage of abuse from her mother who had warned her not to run for the school presidency “through my tears, I saw my mother’s face stiffen with rage. Her eyebrows drew together as her hand came up, still holding her handbag”.72 As her mother is powerless to change the situation, fear for, and a desire to protect, her daughter manifest themselves in violence. Rather than using her anger constructively to teach her daughter about the consequences of living in a racist society, the mother inadvertently replicates the violence and indifference Audre faces in the outside world. As Lorde contemplates “as usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored”.73 In a later essay, however, Lorde considers the possibility of tapping into anger as a source of empowerment. As a feeling which can be “loaded with information and energy,”74 Lorde rescues this emotion from the destructive, negative qualities illustrated within her mother.

In this context, it is not really surprising that Lorde writes her mother out of the pre-prologue, instead reflecting the significance of other women’s friendships, or even just fleeting moments of contact, as the necessary skeleton forming the disparate parts of her identity. I would suggest that the pre-prologue actually outlines Lorde’s radical reinterpretation of matrilineal diaspora to include not only the connection with her lesbian identity, but a move away from the literal meaning of descending through the mother, to use a broader definition of matrilineal to include other women who have nurtured or affected her in her many journeys. The pre-prologue describes the women who have layered their outline upon her

71Lorde, Zami, pp.49-50
72ibid, p.51
73ibid, p.54
74Lorde, Audre ‘Uses of Anger … ‘ in Sister Outsider, p.127
life, in ways seemingly unimportant at the time. Yet these portrayals represent significant attitudes of women both black and white who symbolise oppression or/and rejection of dominant values and, therefore, infuse different parts of Lorde’s identities. For example, “DeLois lived up the block on 142nd street and never had her hair done, and all the neighbourhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by”.75 DeLois embraces her individuality and demonstrates the woman-centred sphere of difference, and Lorde’s belief that “the idea of differing, being different, and changing is validated as part of Black women’s identity”.76

Matrilineal diaspora which is a recognisable tool in much African American literature is, therefore, reconfigured within Zami and, again, this appears to be a point which many critics don’t address. Before I pursue this point, the terms ‘matrilineal’ and ‘diaspora’ need to be defined.

Diaspora refers to the forced displacement of Africans that was initiated by the European slave trade, perpetuated through colonial governments, and continued through global economic and military control by the United States and other Western powers.77 However, diaspora suggests a dialogue, culture and contact between African descendants which exists in spite of forced separation and exploitation. Hence, for example, images of home and journeying reoccur in much black literature which addresses issues of displacement.78 Matrilineal clearly refers to the maternal lineage/power which is certainly celebrated in Zami. Nevertheless, although critics like Chinosole acknowledge that Lorde revolutionises the term matrilineal diaspora as she includes lesbian feelings within that description, Chinosole fails to address

75Lorde, Zami, p.xiii
76Chinosole, p.392
77ibid, p.380
78see works by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, as referred to in Chinosole, p.381
the possibility that Lorde actually excludes her mother (or at least her 'American' mother) from any idea of matrilineal power and legacy.

In a similar perspective to my interpretation of Winterson’s reading of *Ruth*, Lorde offers female friendships, relationships, differences and even vulnerability as part of a connection which *excludes* the mother. Thus, although I problematise Lorde’s traditional essentialising of her female ancestors, I would suggest that her revising of matrilineal diaspora offers a significant reworking of many black female autobiographies which celebrate their mothers unconditionally. As Wilson points out, the acknowledgement of the violent and difficult relationship between Lorde and her mother certainly “suggests something more difficult, something both more challenging for the Black community and more suggestive for African-American literature than reconciliation”. Lorde’s mother represents an unwanted presence, a threat to Audre’s individuality, and one which Audre must disentangle herself from. In this way, her position is certainly comparable to Kingston’s and Winterson’s, both of whom fight the possibility of their mothers’ inscribing their lives through control and manipulation. The violence of indoctrination is certainly vociferated through these texts. However, within *Zami* it is the actual *physical* violence which remains her mother’s chosen mode of influence.

Given this context, it is poignant that Lorde reflects upon the idea of self-mothering in her essay ‘Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger’.

Offering another alternative to the mother-daughter bond which she finds

---

79 For example Maya Angelou’s first book in her series of autobiographical texts, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, easily forgives her mother for essentially abandoning Maya and her brother. Rather than focusing on the devastating effect this had upon her, Angelou concentrates on the later bond between herself and her mother.

80 Wilson, p.79

81 In *Sister Outsider*, pp145-176
painful, difficult and inadequate on many levels, Lorde introduces the concept of mothering ourselves. Her description of this type of mothering involves specific power over individual destinies and choices. As she argues,

It means we must establish authority over our own definition ... It means that I can affirm my own worth by committing myself to my own survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women.  

This suggests acknowledging responsibility for one's own actions and not relying on the possibility of someone else to be there to cushion your fall, or to celebrate your success. This is exactly what has failed in Lorde's own relationship with her mother, who has projected manifestations of love into threats, violence, bullying and silence. Lorde's self-mothering conjecture also provides a dialogue with other Black women based on acceptance instead of anger, confusion and competition. As Lorde argues, "we are Black women, defined as never-good-enough. I must overcome that by becoming better than you".  

Significantly, Lorde cites her mother as contributing to these feelings of self-worthlessness "my mother taught me to survive at the same time as she taught me to fear my own Blackness".

As Patricia Hill Collins argues, it appears that her mother has ensured Lorde's survival through physical control and ignoring racism and negative situations which she can't control, but this is at the high cost of the emotional destruction of Audre. Paradoxically by specifically locating herself as a figure of power and strength, Lorde's mother only succeeds in distancing herself from her child - by denying her own humanity and

---

82 'Eye to Eye', in *Sister Outsider*, p.173
83 ibid, p.170
84 'Eye to Eye' in *Sister Outsider*, p.165
vulnerability. This "other than woman", a source of both pride and resentment to Audre, thus creates a mask of strength which Audre is only able to recognise later in life as actually hiding a vulnerable, scared woman. Her mother’s self-imposed strength differs from Kingston’s and Winterson’s experience. Kingston has first hand evidence of her mother’s inferior position in America, a situation which her mother does not try to deny, yet she answers with the stories of her influential doctoral role in China, allowing Kingston to situate her mother somewhere in between these two extremes. Winterson, also, does not simply see her mother in roles of strength as she gradually learns that her mother gladly relinquishes any power under the roof of the patriarchal church.

Lorde’s mother, however, remains an unfathomable enigma, and Audre leaves home before she can begin to understand any other possibilities beneath her mother’s exterior. As Audre grows up her mother takes great pains to disguise from her daughter the many instances of powerlessness she faces as a black woman in America. As Audre remembers as a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat... my mother... fussied about low-class people who had no better sense or manners than to spit into the wind... impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random. Her mother’s strategy for survival is to ignore racism, to pretend it doesn’t exist. As she states, “if you can’t change reality, change your perceptions of it”. However, by eschewing the realities of racism her mother actually causes Lorde’s exposure to racist remarks to be more acute. As Lorde describes “the Sisters of Charity were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared

86Lorde, Zami, p 7  
87ibid, p.9  
88ibid
for it. I got no help at home". Consequently, ‘changing your perceptions of reality’ is a doctrine that Lorde rejects later in life, recognising that it may be a strategy for survival but this clearly denies an essential part of yourself to accept this tenet. Embracing differences, rather than denying them, remains an important division between mother and daughter. As Lorde argues “I had grown up in such an isolated world that it was hard for me to recognise difference as anything other than a threat”.90

Nevertheless, in a similar understanding to Kingston’s different position from her mother, I would also place Lorde’s mother’s situation and attitude within a historical context. Her desire to be invisible within a ‘strange country’ is due to her need to survive against blatant prejudices in the 1920s, and the reality that economic survival means extremely hard work and no prospect of returning to her home country. As Lorde comments “Black people in this country have always had to attend closely to the hard and continuous work of survival in the most material and immediate planes”.91 Although Lorde, too, faces poverty and the struggle to survive economically, she is part of a generation that can contemplate their position, moving from acceptance towards fighting against racism. Just as in Kingston’s case, as a first-generation American, born of parents migrated to America, Lorde faces a different position to that of her parents, making her path more politicised, yet difficult to carve, as she has no-one to follow.

Lorde’s writing her mother from the text forms, I think, part of her radical rethinking of ideologies surrounding the self and, although as I will

---

89Lorde, Zami, p.46
90ibid, p.66
91Lorde, Audre. ‘Eye to Eye’, p.171
suggest parts of her mother live on through the narrative, I feel the legacy of violence and negation of racism has a profound effect on Lorde. The underlying narrative, on a significant level, levies the anger and frustration at her mother, who uses her ‘power’ in ways which unintentionally exclude Lorde. The crux of this problem is her mother’s connection to her homeland and her feeling of being trapped in America. Lorde’s complex attitude concerning the relationship between her mother, the motherland and Lorde’s home in America provides a further interpretation of Lorde’s difficulty in finding a space in which her identity can be expressed.

Within *Zami* Lorde refers to America as “this place of my mother’s exile”,92 and develops this further to suggest: “there was so little that she really knew about the stranger’s country”.93 This transient feeling never seems to leave her mother and creates an exclusivity which Audre can never penetrate. Rather, her mother’s connection to her home country creates a dichotomy between her past and present selves. Lorde refers to her mother as a “very powerful woman”, yet this was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the white american common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black.94

Hence, Lorde creates a blatant distinction between her mother’s ancestral home which encourages and celebrates women’s strength and powerfulness, and the American climate which specifically represses these aspects.

Lorde’s premise appears to be to write her mother from her American present and connect with her specifically through the motherland. The island of Carriacou is defined as a space at the beginning of *Zami* which is

---

92Lorde, *Zami*, p.86
93ibid, p.2
94ibid, p.6
principally connected with her mother. The young Audre associates her mother’s utopian vision within a magical sphere of a far-away country which heralds such delights as unusual sweets and a different way of living. As Audre describes

Once home was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth.... This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention.95

However, this places Audre in a complex position, for whilst the prospect of another country where dreams can be fulfilled is naturally tempting, it also means that she is left with a constant feeling of occupying the temporary space of America. The American home which Lorde inhabits is a hostile temporary space, transmitted through her mother who seems extremely alienated in a country which she will never call her home. In direct comparison to Kingston, Lorde needs to redefine the concept of home not so much as a place but as a fluid and fluctuating space for her identities to be expressed, thus attempting to challenge the disjunction between America and the motherland. However, like Kingston this is a difficult path to tread as Lorde’s parents’ attitudes towards their ancestral home reinforces the dichotomy between the past and the present. Lorde’s mother dreams of her homeland, whereas her father “did not like to talk about home because it made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom for himself in this new world”.96 In a very similar position to Kingston’s father, Lorde’s father’s situation is focused upon economic prosperity, as to return home signifies failure to survive in a land of perceived opportunities.

95Lorde, Zami, pp. 4-5
96ibid, p.4
Yet, unlike Kingston’s endeavours to rewrite her father’s connection to, or at least acknowledgement of, his Chinese history, Lorde adopts a very different stance. She associates her father exclusively within the American sphere (his background and family are completely excluded from *Zami*); consequently, Lorde specifically *reinforces* the divide between her parents. In fact, she only seems able to inscribe her identity *through* this disconnection between the past and present, as her mother’s and father’s American identities represent constraint, repression and physical abuse for Lorde, whereas, as I have argued, her mother’s past identity offers an avenue of connection with her daughter. Lorde describes her parents throughout her childhood as speaking with an “unfragmentable and unappealable voice”97 which represents an important sphere of *exclusion* for Lorde. Significantly, this contrasts with both Kingston’s and Winterson’s perspectives towards their mother’s and fathers’ relationships. Kingston deliberately separates the voices of her parents by dividing their stories into different texts. She tries to locate her father within her different form of language and communication, and cites this as an important part of confronting different aspects of her identities. Winterson refutes this position as she paints a picture of her father in *Oranges* as an apathetic individual *silenced* by her mother’s voice. Nevertheless, although Winterson does not offer him a story of his own, it is significant that Jeanette *equates* her position with her father as they are both controlled and manipulated by the dominant mother figure. However, Lorde’s description of her parents’ voices and decisions speaking *together* only serves to further revoke the possibility of any unity between mother and daughter, or father and daughter.

---

97Lorde, *Zami*, p. 7
Lorde’s relationship with her father remains in the same unsatisfactory sphere as Lorde’s connection with her mother. In a similar veneer of respectability and show of absolute power, her father creates a dichotomy between reality and perceptions of reality - in other words, creating an extreme example of control within his home and work environment as this deflects from his essential powerlessness in the outside world. Hence, Audre perceives her father as a distant figure and only has fleeting glimpses of any sense of his personality and individuality underneath his mask of respectability. One of these moments is when Audre enters her father’s room when he is asleep and she is “shaken by this so-human image of him, and the idea that I could spy upon him and he not be aware of it, even in his sleep”. His vulnerability is an aspect of his character that Lorde cannot equate with his normal persona, and thus she avoids this situation which depicts her father as ‘human’. Interestingly, Lorde repeats this word in relation to her father’s business stature. When she visits her father’s office she is not allowed to go upstairs to see him as this is his private space in which his “ordinary humanity” can be expressed (it is used for sleeping or other moments of rest). Her father is clearly fastidious about his appearance and this relates even to meal times. Although naturally Audre experiences her father eating, no-one else in his workplace does; as Lorde comments “for my father, eating was too human a pastime to allow just anyone to see him at it (my emphasis)”.

Lorde’s parents, therefore, both create a severe facade within their work and home environment which teaches their children respect and discipline, but ironically prevents them from offering much needed emotional support.

98 Lorde, Zami, p.48
99 ibid, p.53
Lorde’s reaction to this strict doctrine is to reject her American past, disconnecting herself from her home and her family and concentrating on redefining herself outside of these conventions. Her description of “the women in my family, my closest friends,”100 within her Burst of Light essays specifically refers to a different meaning of ‘family’, as the women-oriented friendships she describes are not her relatives. It is highly significant that Lorde also writes her sisters from Zami. Although mentioned in her childhood, their similar ages create an exclusionary zone which Lorde cannot penetrate. Once more, this situation serves to highlight the extreme isolation she experiences within a family in which she feels she never really belongs.

Abstract Visions of Home

By redefining the concept of ‘home’ throughout Zami Lorde attempts to reinscribe her identity through a renegotiated past which exists outside of the hostile environment of her American home. This is a fundamental move in beginning to define her own identity, as the antagonistic relations between Audre and her mother are so extreme that Lorde develops physical manifestations of the psychological abuse: “frequently I woke to find my pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds during the night, or damp and saturated with the acrid smell of tears and the sweat of terror”. Lorde describes their relationship as an “emotional war”, and records the smells and stains on her pillow as “evidence of something living ... [as] I so often felt that I had died and wakened up in a hell called home”.101 These images of home are experienced not just within her

101 Lorde, Zami, p. 68
childhood, but later in the form of nightmares, which graphically emphasise this fear of alienation within her parents home

And then suddenly I realise that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me. The doors refuse to open. The glass cracks when I touch it... This is no longer my home; it is only of a past time.\(^\text{102}\)

Lorde, therefore, needs to disconnect herself from these images of home - both the dreamlike qualities of Carricou “a magic name like cinnamon”\(^\text{103}\) - and the hostile American home, both of which are controlled and inscribed by her mother. Consequently, she begins to locate “home as an image [which] means primarily the place of her most private self, but it [also] alludes to the sacred place of worship of the orishas (spirits) when she speaks of the house of self”.\(^\text{104}\) This places ‘home’ within African mythology, her cultural roots, whilst simultaneously connecting it with her own private space, creating an important fusion of past and present. Home as a site of multiple, changing locations develops her reconfiguration of conventional notions of identity. bell hooks discusses this meaning of ‘home’ in relation to her position as a first-generation African American having to confront the abyss between the dichotomous concepts of ‘home’ she is offered: her cultural, historical homeland and her American home.

She suggests that

at times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers, difference.\(^\text{105}\)

hooks and Lorde, therefore, rethink history in terms of a much more postmodern sense of home, developing Baker’s recognition of the need to define ‘place’ away from the idea of owning property (as referred to in

\(^{102}\) Lorde, Zami, p. 173
\(^{103}\) ibid, p. 5
\(^{104}\) Chinosole, p. 387
chapter two) and rather to create a more fluid interpretation of home. This is also comparable to Kingston’s narratives and the realisation that home is not so much a place, but a space or concept which redefines that definition.

Home becomes both metaphysical and geographical and Wilson suggests that Lorde embraces this position with her phrase “this country of our sojourn”. Wilson cites this as an important description as “sojourn is neither home or exile; lexically it is located, perhaps on the hyphen between ‘African’ and ‘American’”. I would develop this point to argue that Lorde redefines ‘sojourn’ not as a temporary space (as this echoes her mother’s transient location), but as a fluid space of possibilities. This interpretation offers an alternative to the polarising of the magicalness of Carricou with the ‘real’ world of New York which, as I have suggested, Lorde has difficulty in overcoming. Wilson suggests that Lorde’s utopic vision of Carricou is solved by Audre eventually finding the island on a map. This causes it to become a mapped space, not an idealised dream, which “reinforces the need for Lorde to re[in]scribe it, to give it a voice and significance that is not the strangled one of a former colony”. However, I would suggest that Lorde on many levels is unable to rescue Carricou from the magical sphere her mother placed it within when Lorde was a small child. She doesn’t seem to come to terms with the fact that her mother’s voice has been colonised as, once again, to deconstruct this image would be to jeopardise any connection she has with her mother.

106 Lorde, Zami, p 104
107 Wilson, p 83
108 ibid
Consequently, Lorde develops an ambiguous and contradictory revision of 'home' and what it constitutes. She is able to restructure her subjectivity in a realm where shifting identities are acceptable, and which places her in a different sphere from her mother's feeling of "self-imposed economic exile from their Caribbean homeland". However, her connection with the motherland represents an image of home which she is not able to interrogate. Her mother's history represents a point of strength which Lorde specifically addresses in the opening page of *Zami* which involves a description of her visit to Grenada:

> when I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did.

Immediately, therefore, we learn of the necessity for Lorde to visit her mother's 'home' in order to associate herself with this image. This places Lorde in a contrasting position to Kingston who specifically does not want to visit her mother's home in China. For Kingston China represents multiple complex paradoxes, and she needs to negotiate her identity and subjectivity outside of that realm. Lorde, however, explicitly connects her mother with the strength and power of the Grenadian women, as this offers an alternative to the abusive and violent relationship she has with her 'American' mother.

Lorde's initial description of her mother's journey to America emphasises this separation of her mother's identities. Lorde uses her mother's first name to describe her experiences: "Linda missed the bashing of the waves..."

---


110It must be noted that Lorde's essay 'Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report' in *Sister Outsider* illustrates her ability to understand the island of Grenada within a less subjective realm. This essay politicises her relationship to a place which heralded a people's republic but has also been the victim of American invasion threatened by a "Black nation's aspirations" and "Black Progress" (p. 184). Lorde, thus, describes a resilient country which has survived invasion and colonisations and she is proud to be identified with this historical spirit.

111Lorde, *Zami*, p. 1
against the sea-wall at the foot of Noel’s hill, the humped and mysterious slope of Marquis Island rising up from the water”. It appears that Lorde is able at this point to disassociate her mother from her maternal role, not only because she is a young, childless woman but because she is still living within the memories of Carricou and has not yet adopted her harsh ‘American’ exterior. The double image and voice of her American/Caribbean mother reflect Kingston’s experience of attempting to separate the dichotomous voices of her mother who not only records different experiences of her life in China to those which Kingston is aware of, but also her mother’s description of her physical appearance in China differs drastically from her American exterior.

Lorde, however, is unable to unite the two opposing images of her mother. The only other time that Audre is able to contemplate her mother within a different sphere is after her father’s death. As Audre describes, “for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her”. Again, this represents a point when her mother is vulnerable and, therefore, exposes an aspect of herself that Lorde rarely sees. However, this incident occurs after the communication between mother and daughter has been irreconcilably broken. The dichotomy between her mother’s past and present selves is thus a point which Lorde has difficulty in coming to terms with, and these two incidents above represent the only times Lorde can imagine her mother as an autonomous individual.

Once again this contrasts with Kingston’s text which allows her mother’s ‘autography’ to monopolise one chapter of The Woman Warrior, sanctioning her mother to have an identity away from her daughter, thus

---

112 Lorde, Zami, p.2-3
113 ibid, p.122
freeing, if only temporarily, Kingston from the suffocating bonds of her mother. By placing this chapter within the middle of The Woman Warrior, Kingston allows her mother’s identity to be individualised outside of the maternal sphere. In comparison, Lorde only allows her mother’s own narrative to briefly occupy a few pages at the beginning of her text, and then her identity other than the problematic mother figure is effectively written out of the equation. By placing her mother within a collective reinscribed woman-oriented past, Lorde attempts to connect with her mother outside of the American sphere. However, the female friendships, which Lorde devotes the last section of her book to, offer a much more comfortable and productive way forward than her strained relationship with her mother, which can only exist within a mythologised past.

Redefining Language

Nevertheless, Lorde’s re-naming of herself through Zami and the celebration of woman-oriented relationships proves contradictory, for whilst she wants to assert her identity, her image of home, and her matrilineal diaspora away from her mother, paradoxically, her mother still offers pathways to a different source of communication. Language becomes a tool which Audre inherits and celebrates as part of her mother’s identity; it represents something which Lorde can have access to, a form of imagining that her mother cannot destroy or repress. However, language also embodies her mother’s problematic position as a mixed-race child, and delineates a location of warring principles. Lorde describes her mother’s words ... [which taught] me all manner of wily and diversionary defences learned from the white man’s tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had had to use these defences, and had survived by them, and also died by them a little, at the same time.114

114Lorde, Zami, p.45
As Carol Boyce Davies argues: her mother “then stands as the figure of dispossession in patriarchal culture, but also the figure of language and articulation”. Her mother’s language consequently provides an initial plateau for Lorde to begin to think about language, meaning, and the politics of location, but also a place to begin reimagining her identity away from her mother, as Lorde explains:

when the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother’s mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words.

This is most evident with Lorde’s recognition and adaptation of the sensual language she inherits from her mother. Although words for sexual organs are described codedly as “the lower region”, Lorde reinterprets her mother’s descriptive language such as “raising your zandelee” to be evocative and erotic words. Nevertheless, she rewrites her mother’s language to involve frank discussions of the remapping of the body, not simply in terms of the pleasures of the female body but also the violent intrusions of her body. Thus, Lorde’s abortion scene focuses on the graphic reality of the blood and pain she experiences, a situation which her mother would want to veil in secrecy. Lorde describes how she

watched one greyish mucous shape disappear in the bowl, wondering if that was the embryo. By dawn, when I went to take some more aspirin, the catheter had worked its way out of my body. I was bleeding heavily, very heavily.

This recording of physical hurt, scars and ordeals associated with female sexuality reflects Winterson’s concern in Written on the Body. In this text, as I have suggested, it is the mutilated body which the narrator wants to possess. Images of perfection create boundaries disguising the reality of

115Davies, p. 163
116Lorde, Zami, p. 21
117ibid
118ibid, p. 22
119ibid, p. 94
the body and bodily functions. Lorde also records aspects of her life through the reality of the body; it becomes a means to connect reality (denied by her mother and father), her sexuality and her growing acceptance of differences. From the emotional scars she experiences in her youth, through this abortion scene, and to the point where Lorde scars her own body (which I discuss at the end of this chapter), I would argue that she comes to terms with these violent intrusions of her body as a means to re-map her own body, and, therefore, appreciate others. Hence, Lorde’s lover Eudora’s scar due to a mastectomy is a means of intimate contact between Eudora and Audre “I pass my hands over her body, along the now-familiar place below her left shoulder, down along her ribs. A part of her. The mark of the Amazon”. The scar becomes symbolic of the strength and uniqueness of Eudora’s body and mind. Rather like Winterson’s conjecture in Written in the Body of the impossibility of separating body and mind, Lorde describes Eudora’s scar as part of her personality. This represents an important point as Lorde can rewrite violations or illnesses of the body within a sensual context which questions ideologies surrounding female body images.

However, Lorde’s rewriting of the body as part of language and sexuality also involves the recognition of “non-verbal communication beneath language” which Lorde cites as emanating from her mother. This becomes clear in scenes within Zami, such as when Audre sits between her

---

120 Lorde, Zami, p. 146
mother's legs as she combs her hair. Lorde describes the specific
woman's smell emanating from her mother

I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our
physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering
of mace.\footnote{Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p.22}

This, therefore, offers a moment of contact which overrides the fear Audre
feels towards her mother; the sexualised intimacy counteracts her feelings
of pain and anxiety. As I have argued, Lorde imagines the maternal as an
integral part of 'the erotic' and which, therefore, offers this possibility of a
different communication between Lorde and her mother. Hence, in a
similar position to Kingston's narratives, the maternal language could
offer a subversive moment of understanding underneath language which
connects mother and daughter. Gloria Hull develops Lorde's use of
language with Kristeva's own descriptions "about language and
subjectivity - her locating of the meaning in the unconscious, chaotic,
preverbal, infant chora, in the rhythmic pulsing of semiotic sound, the
drives and tides of a maternal body".\footnote{Hull has taken the ideas from Kristeva 'Revolution in Poetic Language' in Toril Moi (ed) \textit{The Kristeva Reader}. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986} However, what becomes
fundamental to Lorde's identity is that this semiotic language is also built
upon the possibility of an incestuous and erotic connection with her
mother. She places her relationship with her mother within an explicit
sexual realm; as she describes "I would have a fantasy of my mother ...
looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly,
our touching and caressing each other's most secret places".\footnote{Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p.63} Lorde,
therefore, I would argue, \textit{rewrites} the semiotic sphere alluded to by the
French Feminists to include a more radical interpretation of the mother

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p.22}
\footnote{Hull has taken the ideas from Kristeva 'Revolution in Poetic Language' in Toril Moi (ed) \textit{The Kristeva Reader}. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986}
\footnote{Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p.63}
\end{footnotes}
daughter relationship. As she reiterates: “it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood”.\textsuperscript{126}

The mixture of languages with which Audre grows up allows for this multiple interpretation of a language which celebrates the remapping of the body and also the power and possibilities of non-verbal communication. Eva Birch discusses these various linguistical options open to Lorde: “there was the Grenadian poly-language of her parents, who secretly discussed matters in their patois; the idioms of her mother tongue ... and the language she learned at school”.\textsuperscript{127} Yet, these different linguistical avenues also create a paradoxical situation for Audre, for whilst the language of her parents feeds her imagination, and mode of thought, it also means that she is isolated from her mother’s tongue. The language of her parents, her ‘homeland’, is always spoken in secret. It remains a language that represents their own sphere of communication, one which Lorde is not invited to enter and has to guess the meaning of “my mother said something in patois and my father answered. Watching their eyes I could tell they were talking about the office and money”.\textsuperscript{128}

Once again the barrier formed around this ‘special’ language which Lorde is denied access to is never contested due to Lorde’s sudden and permanent break from her family. Although it is evident that this ‘secretive’ language was hidden from Audre for her own protection, it remains as a space of resented separation for Lorde.

This special language spoken in hushed tones becomes one of the reasons Lorde advocates the \textit{spoken} arena as part of her politics of location(s). It

\textsuperscript{126}Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p. 224
\textsuperscript{127}Birch, p. 120
\textsuperscript{128}Lorde, \textit{Zami}, pp40-41
is necessary for her to assert a means of communication which is not controlled by her mother’s compartmentalisation of language into what is acceptable within private and public spheres. Her mother’s domination over Audre’s access to language is further symbolised by the cutting of her membrane as a child, to stop her from being tongue tied. This offers a critical connection with The Woman Warrior as Kingston’s fraenum is also cut by her mother. Both these incidents clearly symbolise the control of language and speech by their mother, as although cutting the fraenum is a medical practice, this act also symbolises a dominant mother figure’s expectations surrounding speech and language.

Therefore, Lorde is concerned to place language within the political arena of “talking back”\textsuperscript{129}. This involves ‘talking back’ to the mother whose silence surrounding racism marks Lorde’s childhood with “isolation, fury, mistrust, self rejection and sadness”.\textsuperscript{130} ‘Talking back’ names the many oppressors of Lorde’s identity which include her own mother. As hooks argues

moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of ‘talking back’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject - the liberated voice.\textsuperscript{131}

This places Lorde in contrast to Kingston who considers the liberating qualities of silence - the space and place where cultural implications are negated and one is ‘free’. Lorde overtly advocates the need for self-expression, which she acknowledges involves a painful exposure of the inner self but nevertheless argues that this offers the only way to combat

\textsuperscript{129}title of bell hooks’ book

\textsuperscript{130}Lorde, Audre. ‘Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger’ in Sister Outsider, p.149

the fear of difference. Silence represents a destructive force for Lorde, as she states “it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence”. Louise Keating develops this point “Zami can be read as Lorde’s transformation of silence into language and action; by acknowledging the differences between herself and her mother, she begins to acquire her own voice”. Kingston, in contrast, is connected to a history and heritage which specifically silenced women, and the image of the silent, subdued ‘perfect’ Chinese girl, her possible “doppelganger”, is a damaging stereotype which Kingston must interrogate by acknowledging the space of silence in a different way. However, it could also be suggested that Kingston is able to consider the possible political implications of the sphere of silence, as she has access to both her mother tongue and also that of the ‘fatherland’. Conversely, because Lorde is denied the language of the ‘motherland’, the patois language used by her mother and father, she is unable to contemplate any consideration of silence as it represents a point of alienation she wants to voice.

Lorde’s position of not understanding her parents’ language does encourage her to listen to the sounds of words and deconstruct the meaning of language from the actual words themselves. This becomes a political tool which Lorde utilises within many of her works. For example, throughout Zami and Cancer Journals, she spells america with a small ‘a’ which immediately subverts and questions the power of this nation. This assertion clearly echoes bell hooks’ spelling of her name in the lower case.

133 Lorde, ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action’ in Sister Outsider, p.44
134 Keating, p.23
(as outlined in chapter two) which allows a more symbiotic relationship between author, reader and text as the authorial presence is deconstructed.

Rethinking language in this way involves new points of connection, and also the ability to recognise when this possibility becomes obsolete, as is so poignant in the breakdown of Lorde’s relationship with Muriel “what was lying between us had moved beyond our old speech, and we were both too lost and too frightened to attempt a new language”. The familiar language signifying a special connection is broken by distrust.

Nevertheless, this language offers an important parallel with Lorde’s childhood experience. Muriel’s letters offered her a new perspective on things “I came to marvel and delight in the new view she afforded me of simple and unexpected things.... endless and wonderful re-discoveries of the ordinary”. Lorde as a child similarly disconnects words from their meanings in order to view the world differently. As she describes in an interview, “she charmed away nightmares by choosing words which most terrified her and then stripped them of anything but the sound - and put myself to sleep with the rhythms of them”. Lorde’s ability to do this appears to stem from her extremely poor eyesight which she has to cope with from a very young age. In the summer, unable to wear her glasses as the medical centre are examining the progress of her eyes, Audre sees everything as “dazzled by light” and is only able to distinguish objects by touch and smell. As she describes, “the crabshells in the sand were distinguished from the clamshells not by shape, but by the different feel of them beneath my brown toes”. Audre, therefore, sees a world through colour and touch, which encourages an intuitive approach to life rather

---

135 Lorde, Zami, p.204
136 Ibid, p.164
137 Hull, p170
138 Lorde, Zami, p.32
than a structured one, and this develops her desire to rethink ‘norms’ surrounding the connection between language and the world and consequently conventions surrounding identity. Rather like Jeanette in Oranges who understands that it is not her aptitude at school which is the problem, it is the expectation of the teachers which cause her to be considered strange, Lorde begins to realise that her observations of the relationship between language, perception and reality are different from those of others.

This also reflects Lorde’s rejection of religion; she only mentions her mother praying at the beginning of Zami and then does not refer to religion again. Her mother resorts to religious words in moments of crisis and Audre remembers them as mysterious and “beautiful words”.139 However, fundamentally these words become simply that, just words, and once again represent a boundary between Audre and her mother which is never crossed. Religion remains an accepted presence within their household, but one that is never discussed. Lorde, however, clearly disassociates the words she hears from any religious meaning and instead, in Zami, asserts her own language which endeavours to connect real emotions such as rejection, pain and betrayal with her spiritual celebration of women’s sexuality, creativity and friendships. This use of language offers a realism which conventional religious words cannot fulfil. Hence, Lorde presents an understanding of spirituality which celebrates diverse women rather than a male god. As she states, “this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. Zami”.140 Thus, just as Jeanette

139 Lorde, Zami, p. 2
140 Ibid, p. 223
in *Oranges* rewrites the stories of The Old Testament in unconventional ways, Lorde constructs an individual ‘womanist’ understanding of what constitutes spirituality.

**Poetic Expression**

Clearly this ability to deconstruct the meaning of words, and to form a different language (through both a new spelling and rhythm of their own) develops Lorde’s use of poetry throughout *Zami* and her other works. Her poetic identity is of profound importance to Lorde as she writes the majority of *Zami* under the heading ‘How I Became a Poet’, acknowledging the number of influences which encouraged this form of expression. Poetry becomes a location where a number of disparate identities and violent feelings and emotions, as well as happier feelings can be expressed. Lorde equates the writing of poetry with a vital means of expression within a difficult environment, so the poems she memorises as a child become a means of talking later in life. “They were my way of talking. To express a feeling I would recite a poem”. hooks echoes these feelings as she argues that “growing up, poetry had been the sanctuary, that space in words where longing could be spoken ... poems came in another language”. This ‘other’ language creates an important outlet for Lorde as an adult. Within her insular relationship with Muriel, poems allow a means of expression when she is otherwise mute “I seldom spoke. I wrote and dreamed, but almost never talked”. The connection between Lorde and Muriel, which as I have suggested fails through the distrust and breakdown of their special communication, leaves Audre

---

141 this word was invented by Alice Walker to offer a celebration of women’s culture, emotional flexibility and strength. For a full definition see Walker, Alice *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: The Woman’s Press, 1984, p xi


143 Lorde, *Zami*, p 187
devastated. Her poetry allows her an emotional outlet and helps her cope with her lonely circumstances. It provides her with a voice which expresses in other ways, and this is also illustrated in the poem Audre writes immediately after the death of Gennie (detailed in the next section).

Lorde identifies poetry as an important medium for black women. Within *Sister Outsider* and *A Burst of Light*, she argues that this is an accessible contemporary medium of communication between black women. This is due to economic reasons - it can be written on scraps of paper (like the poems Lorde sends to Muriel) and can be written quickly in between other necessities such as work and childcare. Lorde adapts poetic expression to the reality of black women’s economic and political situations. She, therefore, identifies poetry as an important sphere of communication between repressed minorities: a means of ‘talking back’ available to everyone.

This is a particular concern for Lorde due to the political climate of the 1950s in which she grew up. Poetry represents a subversive form of language in the context of the McCarthy era of persecution. In an environment of blame and suspicion of anyone with leftwing political leanings, poetry and poetry readings provide contact between people with similar convictions and feelings, creating an explicit bridge between the personal and the political. As Lorde describes, “writing was the only thing that made me feel like I was alive”, and sharing raw emotions with others offers the possibility of an alternative contact with people. I would like to discuss Lorde’s friendship with Gennie, and the number of

---

144 Lorde makes many references to poetry meetings she attends, for example the Harlem Writers’ Quarterly meetings (*Zami*, p.99), which creates a space for many oppressed voices to speak.

145 Lorde, *Zami*, p.99
identities they play with, in this context. Locating the 1950s feelings of repression and hostility with Lorde's advocation of difference, I argue that her identity as a lesbian, and her move towards understanding a woman-oriented concept of friendships radically develops her revision of the family.

Gennie, The Bell Jar, and Rethinking the Family

Lorde's first real friendship with Gennie, at the age of approximately sixteen, marks an important initiation for Lorde into a life outside of her insular strict family, but more significantly, away from her mother. Their friendship develops a number of important points regarding the boundaries of identity and explicitly traces Lorde's growing consciousness of the political events which were to shape and influence her life on a personal level. For example, when she meets Gennie, Lorde focuses upon the date of 1948 and the fact that the State of Israel was founded "the summer of 1948 was a time of powerful change all over the world. Gennie and I felt ourselves a part of it".146 By connecting their friendship with political changes, Lorde illustrates the different manifestations of her identity, which is not simply an insular experience but one that works within a number of different levels which again connects the personal and the political. In fact she specifically equates her 'wakening' with political progress. For example, in Mexico when she learns of the desegregation of Southern schools she comments

it was not that I expected it to alter radically the nature of my living, but rather that it put me actively into a context that felt like progress, and seemed part and parcel of the wakening that I called Mexico.147

The notion of explicitly experimenting with identities is clearly crucial in Audre's later recognition of differing identities. However, this also marks

146Lorde, Zami, p.71
147ibid, p.149
the boundaries between the safe space of adolescent experimentation and
the hostility of the ‘real’ world, in which, as I have argued, Lorde has to
fight for her different identities to be recognised. Nevertheless, a
significant part of Audre and Gennie’s friendship is their enjoyment of
dressing-up in a variety of clothes and enacting the varying identities and
cultural origins associated with these specific roles,

Bandits, Gypsies, Foreigners of all degree, Witches, Whores, and even Mexican Princesses
- there were appropriate costumes for every role, and appropriate places in the city to go
to play them all out. There were always things to do to match whomever we decided to
be. 148

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, I would identify a clear
parallel here with Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar in which her protagonist
Esther experiments with different identities, until she is defined as ‘mad’
and locked within an institution. Her transgressive subjectivity,
fluctuating between various different identities, is perceived as something
that should be ‘cured’. The premise of the book is based on the fact that
Esther is required to identify a cohesive and coherent single identity, as
she (or more specifically society) is unable to cope with rejection of
conventions surrounding the self.

Both Lorde and Plath situate their ‘fictional’/younger selves’ within the
specific political climate of America in the 1950s and early 1960s, the
post-war climate in which a return to conservatism and family values
dramatically affected women’s identities and freedom. As Flora Davis
points out, in the early 1960s “the average woman became a wife at the
age twenty, younger than any other generation since the turn of the
century”. 149 Lorde and Plath are concerned with disrupting and negating
this association of women with marriage, identifying this as a repressive

\[148\] Lorde, Zami, p. 72
\[149\] Davis, Flora Moving the Mountain. The Women’s Movement in America Since 1960.

313
image, and one which in many ways creates a crisis of identity. Plath expresses this through Esther’s experience of the cultural signifiers surrounding femininity. As Anderson points out, Esther encounters violent intrusions of her gendered body. Through rape, electric shock treatment and loss of virginity which leaves Esther nearly haemorrhaging to death, she attempts to construct an identity outside of this prescribed feminine exploitative realm. Creating the pseudonym Elly Higginbottom, Esther endeavours to create a barrier between her own experiences and those she would like to experiment with. Nevertheless, as Anderson argues “however hard she may try to imagine otherwise, Esther repeatedly discovers that her gendered body is already commodified, violently appropriated, beyond her control”.  

This notion of controlling a different space to that prescribed by society is a point which Lorde attempts to deconstruct through her relationship with Gennie. By imagining different outcomes to their lives, Audre and Gennie, like Esther, create alternative existences. However, their fictional and ‘real’ world do not become as enmeshed as Esther Greenwood’s; their experimentation does not replace their own identities but merely allows room for fantasy to play a role. What becomes evident is that Lorde develops this questioning of strictures surrounding acceptable identities in her later life. “Women’s exclusive identification with marriage and motherhood” thus becomes reconfigured within her development of ‘difference’ as a positive force; “somehow I knew difference would be a weapon in my arsenal when the ‘time’ came”. Within the context of the

---

150 Anderson, p. 121
151 ibid
153 Lorde, Zami, p. 178
1950s Lorde, therefore, identifies the notion of the suburban housewife as a white middle class minority by representing the reality of poor, disparate but autonomous black and white women she meets - in other words, rewriting the myth of the pervading image of 1950s nostalgia. Winterson also undermines the domestic mother figure as her mother’s fanatical religious convictions essentially usurp her maternal role. Lorde, Plath and Winterson are all concerned with challenging conventions surrounding gender roles. All three define their identities in opposition to conventional concepts of family relations.

Lorde and Plath both explicitly criticise the McCarthy Era. As Lorde suggests

rather than the idyllic picture created by false nostalgia, the fifties were really straight white america’s cooling-off period of ‘let’s pretend we’re happy and that this is the best of all possible worlds and we’ll blow those nasty commies to hell if they dare to say otherwise.’

And the opening lines to The Bell Jar reflect this repressive environment: “it was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York”. Both authors affiliate their inability to express their feelings with the persecution and execution of the Rosenbergs, and both feel the need to escape the repressive climate of suspicion within New York in order to assert their identities elsewhere. As argued in the Lesbian Autobiography chapter, the Rosenbergs become scapegoats not simply due to the fear of Communism, but also because they threatened the image of the idyllic family with the strong figure of Ethel Rosenberg. Moreover, as Jacqueline Rose points out, the execution of the Rosenbergs illustrates “the Cold War’s self-defeating logic and rhetoric of violence”. In other words,

154 Lorde, Zami, p 192
155 Plath, Sylvia. The Bell Jar. London: Faber, 1990, p 1
this illustrates the hypocrisy of the era which is prepared to kill ‘spies’ in order to keep the secret of the atomic bomb which in itself threatens the human race. Democracy, therefore, becomes a loaded term within a climate of expulsion and mistrust. In Lorde’s case the persecution of the Rosenbergs becomes affiliated with the suppression of autonomy, and particularly her position as a black lesbian: “the Rosenbergs struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings”. Racism pervades her attempts to get a job, and also to fit into a white lesbian scene. Although Lorde affiliates herself with the Left in order to fight this doctrine, she criticises its homophobic repressive attitude: “for them, being gay was ‘bourgeois and reactionary’, a reason for suspicion and shunning”.¹⁵⁷

Of course, this illustrates that Lorde’s position as a black lesbian places her in a different position from the white heterosexual Esther, but it is the political climate that I feel creates a point of contact for these two authors, as both Plath and Lorde remain isolated due to their recognition of the various conflicting identity positions they occupy. Both authors illustrate the violence of the era invading their consciousness on a fundamental level. As Anderson argues, this reflects a significant crisis of the 1950s which was how to identify the possible threat of individuals if the boundaries between outward behaviour and inward feelings could not be regulated

indeed the question of where to attribute the threat - is it inside or outside - could be seen as the key question of Plath’s era and culture, producing the need for ever more stringent policing of the boundary.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷Lorde, Zami, p.127
¹⁵⁸Anderson, p 105
The ‘enemy within’ remains a threatening potential, and it is precisely this need to police people’s consciousness which both Lorde and Plath begin to rewrite.

In this context, it is significant that Plath’s own works are invariably read autobiographically, as this allows readers and critics to castigate Plath’s uncomfortable questioning of various boundaries into the purely personal realm. This is a point pursued by Anderson who argues that Plath interrogates boundaries such as the “sexual, psychic, cultural - which then must be all the more forcefully redrawn by the expulsion of Plath’s text to a place beyond, by the denial of the readers’ own implication in them”:159 hence, “disregarding what is most unsettling about her writing”.160 Plath’s refusal of a fixed identity, therefore, creates problems within a society and culture which cannot, or refuses to, understand her contradictory and complex persona, and this is reflected in both Esther’s and Audre’s predicament.

Experimenting with different identities and personalities remains the only route open to Esther, Audre and Gennie. Plath finishes The Bell Jar before we know whether Esther is allowed to re-enter ‘normal’ life, whether she is able to redefine ‘schizophrenia’ within an acceptable arena (by denying its very existence). In direct comparison to this we are also deprived of seeing Gennie in adulthood. As Lorde’s poem written after Gennie’s death implies

We did not weep for the thing - weep for the thing-
we did not weep for the thing that was
once a child.161

---

159 Anderson, p. 102 (this is Anderson’s reading of Jacqueline Rose’s book detailed on the previous page)
160 ibid
161 Lorde, Zami, p 80
The significance of the lines “once a child” and “thing” reflects the problematic sphere between childhood and adulthood for girls, with the realisation that a sexualised identity restricts freedom of expression. This is a point I refer to in the Lesbian Autobiography chapter with reference to Naomi Wolf. She argues that as girls develop sexually “they must become passive in relation to the energy of desire, or detached from owning it”.¹⁶² This results in a paradoxical situation for whilst bodily development results in being sexually attractive, the passivity surrounding girls ‘owning’ their own sexuality and desire essentially denies their sexual identity. Within this repressed and confusing discourse, the difficulty of forming and expressing an individual voice is highlighted. The important initiation from late adolescence to the responsibilities of adulthood is thus only recorded through Audre’s eyes, and she can only contemplate this position by living between and on the boundaries of identity.

Audre’s friendship with Gennie offers a point of interruption to the tight family circle of Audre’s existence. However, Gennie’s presence also represents the possible tragic alternative outcome to Audre’s life. Just as in The Woman Warrior, the silent girl represents the frustrated part of Kingston, Gennie’s short life embodies part of Lorde’s identity. Gennie becomes the victim of physical and probable sexual abuse at the hands of her estranged father. After 10 months at his apartment, too proud to return to her snubbed mother, Gennie commits suicide. Gennie’s fate seems to echo the difficulties of Esther within The Bell Jar, as both are effectively silenced by society’s non-acceptance of their respective positions. The destinies of Gennie and Esther, therefore, symbolise the alternative possibilities of death and madness (which are also reflected through

female friends and relatives in *Oranges* and *The Woman Warrior*) and which are specifically related to the repression of female sexuality and autonomy within the conservatism of the 1950s. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath specifically deflates the romanticism of Esther’s first kiss which is described in a humorous, detached way by Esther, whose ‘crisis of identity’ is explicitly connected with her desire to remain outside of a restrictive feminine sexualised arena. Within *Zami*, Gennie’s probable sexual abuse represents an extreme form of exploitation forced upon a young vulnerable girl, and certainly causes her already fragile identity to shatter. Both Gennie’s and Esther’s positions illustrate their inability to express vulnerability, and challenge gender roles, and thus reconfigure prescribed sexualised arenas of identity.

Moreover, Gennie’s position as a voiceless victim echoes her stepmother’s position. As I argued within the introduction to this chapter, Ella is a downtrodden, in many ways insignificant, woman yet one who sings them warnings (through the voice of Afrakete) of what their lives might entail as black women.¹⁶³

Ella was too beaten down and anaesthetised by Phillip’s brutality for her to believe in her own mouth, and we, Gennie and I, were too arrogant and childish ... to see that our survival might very well lie in listening to the sweeping woman’s tuneless song.¹⁶⁴

The violence surrounding Ella’s and Gennie’s situations echoes the violence within Lorde’s own life from her own mother. Her mother’s constant hitting and pinching, certainly touch on the possibility of an abusive relationship, and emphasise the necessity for Lorde to escape her mother’s physical presence in order to assert an autonomous identity. Her mother’s control is at the expense of any show of love for her daughter. In this context, Lorde’s powerlessness and possible fate becomes comparable

¹⁶³ Wilson, p 85
¹⁶⁴ Lorde, *Zami*, p 220
to Gennie’s and Esther’s. The destructive relationship Lorde experiences with her mother offers a reflection of the dysfunctional relationships present within a society which encourages individuals to accept discrimination such as racism and sexism rather than confront these issues.

As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, defying this conjecture, Lorde endeavours to restructure the family, matrilineal diaspora, language and her lesbianism outside of conventional realms. However, the fates of Ella and Gennie also emphasise that this is both dangerous and difficult ground to tread. And I want to end this discussion by focusing on the problematic position of addressing conflicting identities manifested through Gennie and also through Lorde’s later lovers and friends. Lorde describes how she

lost my sister, Gennie, to my silence and pain and despair, to both our angers and to a world’s cruelty that destroys its own young in passing ... out of not noticing or caring about that destruction. I have never been able to blind myself to that cruelty, which according to one popular definition of mental health, makes me mentally unhealthy.\footnote{Lorde, \textit{Zami}, p. 221}

This quote clearly emphasises the vulnerability of Lorde’s position and her own difficult relationship to a society which silences individual voices who are perceived as transgressing the norm. This vulnerability is reflected throughout \textit{Zami} and the women she meets; for example, Eudora is an alcoholic and Muriel has mental problems which eventually cause her to be admitted to an institution, suffering from schizophrenia. Lorde too exhibits self-destruction and self-hate at many times in \textit{Zami}, but perhaps most significantly when she deliberately severely burns her hand after Muriel has betrayed her, illustrating that she is not always able to find words to express her feelings. As Lorde states, “many of us wound up
dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon". 166

Significantly, Lorde's embracement of difference is also repressed within the 1950s gay scene itself, as lesbianism becomes a unified identity which consumes other differences. Lorde records the suspicions which subsume the meetings and furtive glances between the black lesbians she encounters, which emphasise the gulf between the acceptance of one's sexual preference, and the racist overtones of a white movement. Difference becomes something to frantically avoid in the desire to form alliances with other lesbians. And although Lorde recognises the progressives of the lesbian culture, in which woman-oriented friendships and political opinions could be expressed in an otherwise difficult era for women's rights, this is certainly problematised by the racist overtones of the lesbian bar scene.

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armour, mantle and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me. 167

Lorde recognises the problem of pretending differences didn't exist within the lesbian scene in a naive attempt at solidarity "we were not of that other world and we wanted to believe that, by definition, we were, therefore, free of that other world's problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism etc". 168

As suggested in the introduction, Lorde certainly considers the possibility of escaping the difficulty of occupying multiple locations completely by addressing the desire of a genderless position. In her Prologue, Lorde

166 Lorde, Zami, p.196
167 ibid, p.156
168 ibid, p 178
states that she wants to be both woman and man, as she wishes “to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.” This point is pursued in reference to her mother whom Lorde describes as possibly occupying a “third designation”. In other words, Lorde entertains the possibility of a ‘third sex’ in which traditional essentialised ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ qualities are negated. This certainly draws parallels with Kingston’s and Winterson’s perspectives. Within *Oranges* Winterson contemplates the possibility of escapism to an Eden-like paradise, where gender identity would clearly become meaningless, and in *Written on the Body* she imagines the possibility of annihilating gender identity completely. Kingston experiments with this possibility differently, by acting ‘like a boy’, in order to gain recognition in a household in which girls are relegated to a submissive sphere. All three authors question conventional notions of the self, thereby deconstructing gender restrictive roles and expectations.

All three, however, acknowledge the powerlessness of this ‘utopic vision’, and Lorde does this in a unique way, as she effectively exposes this desire as impossible by writing men from the text. After the departure from her home, and her experimentation with a heterosexual relationship, there is a complete absence of men from *Zami*. Even the people she works for in her various jobs are mostly women. Naturally, there would have been some contact with men both in and outside of the workplace, but these are effectively written out of Lorde’s text, as she specifically creates her history based on the lives and influences of women. Her deconstruction of traditional history is placed in a different context to Winterson’s and Kingston’s, both of whom experience an overt patriarchal sphere (that is.

169 Lorde, *Zami*, p. 7
170 *ibid*, p. 6
the church in respect of Winterson’s, and Kingston’s family represents an extreme form of control) from which they find extremely difficult to detach themselves.

Lorde’s biomythography creates a paradoxical position, for she imagines the possibility of an alternative woman-oriented existence which differs from Kingston’s voicing of her father’s narrative, or Winterson’s conclusion of Oranges before the maturation of Jeanette’s sexual identity and sexual relationships. Nevertheless, Lorde is only able to create this through an uneasy relationship to history. Ultimately, her description of her mythologised past creates a dichotomy between this utopian location of power and strength, which differs dramatically from the difficulties and strains of the 1950s present. The figure of Afrakete as someone who disappears at the end of the novel perhaps only serves to emphasise that Lorde’s woman-oriented experiences offer a perspective on the past rather than her future selves. Ironically, therefore, negating her premise that “we don’t have to romanticise our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present”.171

171Lorde, ‘Learning from the 60s’ in Sister Outsider, p.139
The criticism of women’s autobiography has been transformed by the poststructuralist decentring of the subject and the interrogation of established disciplinary, generic and theoretical boundaries. However, as I have argued during the course of this thesis, a poststructuralist reading of the autobiographical novel enables us to recognise the nuances of identity. Within a more complex postmodern culture in which the fragmentation of identity has increased, particularly blurring the boundaries between cultural, race and class categories, the concept of identity as at once coherent and shared and ostensibly based on difference needs to be acknowledged. In a world of demographic pluralism, which includes global tourism and mass migration, culture and identity are often based within a temporal and contradictory dimension. As Homi K Bhabha argues, postmodern culture suggests

A deconstructionist approach to autobiography allows a writer to express multiple, conflicting and disparate identities in works which embrace elements of fantasy, myth and desire in ways that revolutionise conventional notions of the self and dominant historical narratives. Hence, this thesis re-evaluates the term ‘autobiography’ to acknowledge that

the female subject requires ... a new conjunction of space and movement: a notion of boundaries which are not fixed, which do not prevent one side being thought about as being permeated by, absorbing or moving towards the other.  

1Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London; New York: Routledge, 1994, p.140
In pursuing my interest in autobiography, this dissolution of the subject can appear contradictory, and certainly critics such as James Olney have failed to address this impasse. I have, therefore, taken issue with Olney who argues that the deconstructionist focus on the fictionalisation of the self essentially negates the subject. I illustrate this as a myopic position as Olney does not consider the symbiotic relationship between fact and fiction and the writing 'I'. In order to redress this my own argument draws on Gusdorf’s more complex understanding of the relationship between fact, fiction and discourses of truth. He acknowledges that throughout history confessional narratives are inextricably bound to seeking forgiveness and, therefore, question the whole doctrine surrounding 'truth'. Olney and Gusdorf illustrate the problem of the divide between the subjective/objective and the experience and the non-referential possibilities within a text. Both these perspectives create strictures around the autobiographical voice. This thesis interrogates this position by focusing on the difficulties of negotiating aspects of the self within a deconstructionist arena without creating an indifferent subject position for the individual. 3

Shirley Neuman highlights this dualism surrounding referential and non-referential positions within a text. She discusses the problem of creating either an apolitical identity, in which the different construction of gender and sexuality are not taken into account (she criticises Foucault for eschewing this point within his work), or focusing on difference as a means of clarifying group identity which is an equally traditional essentialist concept. However, through merging fact and fiction and re-reading Foucault's understanding of differences which allows for the

---

autonomy of the individual within discursive structures, I offer a channel through which this dilemma can be reconsidered. This reading is developed with the help of Lois McNay’s work which argues that Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Volume 3* illustrates his desire to de-objectify the subject. In respect of autobiography, therefore, I argue that plurality does not deny autonomy. In fact, it is possible for these two elements to co-exist. The way Winterson eschews difference in *Written on the Body*, as I discuss, is a case in point. By employing a narrator who cannot be identified using the usual tools of gender, class or race, Winterson emphasises the artificial construction of identity categories and, therefore, creates a position for her narrator which transcends the barriers and boundaries erected around conventional notions of the self. As a narrator without a determining subjectivity or a fixed historical definition I posit this anomaly as reflecting my own formulation of autobiographical criticism in which plural and fictional identities operate as a necessary aspect of the writing ‘I’.

Moreover, tracing Winterson’s reconfiguration of the language of love and my theory that she places desire within a discourse that cannot be associated with conventional heterosexuality, I argue that Winterson creates alternative spaces for sexualities to be expressed. Just as Lorde divorces eroticism from any voyeuristic tendencies and associates the erotic with everyday actions, feelings and creativity, Winterson critically exposes the tools of the language of love as contrived and questions the artificiality of discursive structures within received English conventions.

Contesting identity categories and exposing the complex layerings of the writing ‘I’/‘eye’ also involves confronting the difficulties of conflating
reality' with 'theory' and this has been a primary focus of my study. This involves examining not only the distinction between 'good' autobiographies (that is those with a political conjecture - whether overt or covert) and autobiographies such as diaries or journals which are not perceived as so significant, but also the problem of the perceived dichotomy of the role of author or critic. By reconfiguring the perspectives of Smith, Stanley and Miller, I renegotiate the problems of representativity. I conclude that Miller's stance of taking a position 'as if' rather than 'as an' deliberately draws attention to the role of the critic within the text, and that this conjecture bridges the gap between author and critic. This reflects a fundamental praxis of this thesis which is that the autobiographical 'I' cannot be separated from more public spheres of identity. By creating an integral dialogue between authorial and critical roles, I revise hierarchical identity structures which limit an understanding of the manifold perspectives possible within autobiography.

Black female critics have an important place in my thesis because I argue they adopt a distinctive reading of the relationship between poststructuralism and autobiography. Tracing the simultaneous beginnings of the deconstructionist movement and the black feminist movement through McDowell, I suggest that this creates complicated moments of contact between these critical modes, rather than divisions. Disrupting the either/or status of theorist or writer and thus the theory/practice divide, black feminist critics can embrace both these terms. Hence, questioning hierarchical dichotomies allows the problems of representativity to be reconfigured. Utilising texts such as Awkward's, which suggests that black critics need to master contemporary literary theory in order to be taken seriously in the literary arena, I argue the need
to understand the possibility that theory and experience can co-exist within a text and neither should take precedence over the other. This is certainly reflected in Kingston’s, Winterson’s and Lorde’s works. Thus, autobiography creates a platform for multiple voices and perspectives.

One of the ways I conceive of this fluidity surrounding autobiography is by deconstructing history as a linear process. Through creating a new historicist framework, which includes points such as rewriting mythology from a Western perspective, it is possible to develop Foucault’s conjecture of disrupting any continuum between the past and the present. Black women’s complex relationship to this fluctuating model of history is a fundamental component of my understanding of the autobiographical novel. Both Lorde and Kingston place their ancestors within real and mythological spheres. For Kingston, rethinking the myths surrounding both her Chinese and American experiences and heritages becomes a means of breaking free from the strictures of both cultures, especially aspects of them that threaten her sexuality. In this respect, Lorde provides an illuminating contrast to Kingston. Her understanding of a mythologised past is more problematic as her ancestral heritage and culture is the only link that she has with her mother. Nevertheless, through the figure of Afrakete she offers a celebration of myths which question not only Western prevalence but also the onus upon African male gods.

An understanding of how identity can transcend hegemonic historical constraints is fundamental to this thesis. Kingston’s, Winterson’s and Lorde’s works develop their writing as a political, material and fictional autobiographical space. In other words, the ability to fluctuate between different identities in their autobiographical novels allows for the
possibility of not negating any. As Anderson points out, “movement [is] ... a necessary part of defining where one is”.4 As I have outlined, one of the fundamental ways this is confronted is through rewriting dominant historical narratives and the authors I have chosen reflect the necessity of this from their ‘competing’ cultural, racial and sexual identities. Kingston and Lorde situate their autobiographies within the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s and both equate their difficulty in expressing their identities with the persecution of their individuality within a segregated American society. However, this historical perspective is simultaneously informed by the magical, mystical and mythological elements of their ancestors and past history. Therefore, history provides a double narrative which reflects their positions as first generation American citizens.

Winterson’s radical restructuring of the parameters of history in Oranges is also crucial to my understanding of the changing dynamic of what constitutes ‘autobiography’. Utilising the first eight books of the Old Testament, Winterson emphasises the relationship between history and storytelling. The biblical narratives become means to explore her own sexuality and to comment upon repressions surrounding female sexuality within mythological, fantasy and biblical tales. Interrogating this from a lesbian perspective, Winterson seeks to question gender stereotypes through stressing the fantastical aspects of her own identity. In a similar reading to Kingston, she utilises the paradox in order to undermine conventional notions of the self, focusing on the paradoxical nature of the human pursuit of perfection through her own and other characters’ journeys within her novel. As such she suggests that the constant search

4Anderson, p.135
for something that can never be obtained becomes a metaphor for the difficulties in expressing different and disparate aspects of the self.

In order to address the notion of conflicting identities within autobiographical voice(s), I argue that fantasy needs to be included in any discussion of autobiography. This is a point I pursue through Bakhtin's recognition of the different 'space' and 'time' through which the writing 'I' speaks, a perspective which allows fact and fantasy to become merged through different fictions of the 'I'. The three authors in this thesis illustrate that fantasy must be included in discussions of the self. Fantasy informs their identities on a number of levels, specifically undermining identity constructs. The demon Jeanette encounters in Oranges, the world of Fa Mu Lan and the Afrekete goddess Lorde meets, all symbolise aspects of their own selves; not repressed aspects of their personalities, but rather fantastical elements of their present, past and future identities.

Recognising fantasy and fiction as an integral aspect of exploring the various subjectivities Winterson's, Lorde's and Kingston's works confront, develops Anderson's observation of the possibility of future memories. I suggest that this polemic offers a fusion of past, future and present selves and, therefore, resists the problems surrounding agency within a New Historicist reading of the subject. However, I also utilise this changing concatenation between history, fiction and memory within expressions of identity to argue for a reconsideration of the French Feminists' focus on language and the maternal. I demonstrate that these offer a less productive means of deconstructing identity. Through Kingston I illustrate that language is not transhistorical. Kingston's ambiguous approach towards silence encompasses the overall conjecture of both The Woman Warrior
and *China Men*, which is to create an unstable identity as this transcends the fixities of cultural identity, whilst simultaneously acknowledging points of connection with her ancestors. The mother tongue, mother country and fatherland become complex subjects in Kingston’s search for identity. Concentrating on elements such as the Bakhtinian recognition of the interconnection between language, speech and thought, which revises the division between oral and written communication, I argue that Kingston’s texts acknowledge varying and conflicting means of communication. Language which includes silence and whispers offers a marginalised yet powerful perspective and my reading of Kingston’s texts illustrates that ambiguity is a tool which can diversify conventional aspects of the self.

The French Feminists’ focus on the maternal develops this issue around the acquisition of language and is a point I reconfigure through delineating Kingston’s and Lorde’s experience of a ‘mother tongue’ which in many ways excludes them. Certainly, as far as Lorde is concerned she does not understand the patois language of her mother and this remains a point of distrust and miscommunication between them. Rather than concentrating on a semiotic/symbolic divide and the Lacanian understanding of the relationship between mothers and children, a fundamental aspect of a poststructuralist reading of autobiography needs to consider the difficulties of varying ‘tongues’ of language a child experiences and how this can seriously jeopardise a connection between mother and daughter. Both Lorde and Kingston confront the problem of the mother figure invading their autobiographical space to such an extent that she threatens their voices within both the real and mythical world.
The difficulties inherent in re-evaluating the mother-daughter relationship are particularly evident with regard to Lorde. As someone at the intersection of such ‘minority’ identities as black, poor and a lesbian, I argue that Lorde has the most difficulty in contemplating a space for her identity. Focusing upon her complex relationship with her mother, Lorde attempts to balance her mythical ancestors from which her (past) mother derived with the harsh exterior of the (present) ‘American’ mother, but seems only able to approach this dilemma through essentialising her ancestral heritage. Unlike Kingston and Winterson who utilise fantasy and mythology to carve a space for their identity, and thus create a dialogic relationship between different historical narratives, Lorde seems to create a dichotomy between a utopian past and a problematic present and future. Ultimately, therefore, I suggest that Winterson and Kingston are able to imagine a space for their identities which incorporates my polemic of experiences which radicalise conventions of the self through a revision of dominant historical narratives. However, Lorde’s text fails to fully confront this possibility as she still creates a traditional essentialised mythologised past.

My thesis, therefore, outlines a poststructuralist approach to autobiography which challenges the conventional categorisations of identity through creating a dialogical concept of autonomous and plural subjectivity(ies). I would encourage future work on the poetics of autobiography to acknowledge that part-fiction is a more appropriate medium for exploring women’s multiple selves than traditional autobiography. Political and fictional identities can co-exist and allow for a more enlightened understanding of the self. Moreover, the connection between past, present
and future identities creates a shifting, multiple reality. This is echoed in Winterson’s latest work

What is it that I have to tell myself again and again? That there is always a new beginning, a different end. I can change the story. I am the story.5

In relation to autobiography, writing, thinking and ‘talking’ a life involves understanding these myriad levels of the ‘I’ which cannot be separated. I have sought to document an approach to autobiography that acknowledges these varying levels and have argued that through poststructuralism autobiography is given a new lease of life.

---
Bibliography

Major Books

Maxine Hong Kingston


Jeanette Winterson

____. Boating For Beginners. London: Minerva, 1990
____. Written on the Body. London: Jonathan Cape, 1992
____. Great Moments in Aviation, and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit: Two Filmscripts. London: Vintage, 1994
Audre Lorde


__. From a Land Where Other People Live. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973


__. Between Our Selves. San Francisco: Eidolon Editions, 1976


__. Chosen Poems: Old and New. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982


__. Undersong. Virago, 1993


__. Zami. A New Spelling of my Name. Pandora, London 1996


335
Secondary Texts

Autobiography, Poststructuralist and New Historicist Criticism

Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997


336


Debord, Guy. ‘Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography’ in *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, C.A: The Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995


Mason, M & Greed, C (eds). Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women, 1979


_____ ‘The Text’s Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions’ in Diacritics 12, Summer 1982


**Black Women’s Writing and ‘Ethnic’ Identity**

Alexander, Elizabeth. ‘Coming Out Blackened and Whole: Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s Zami and Cancer Journals’ in American Literary History, 1994


Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London; New York: Routledge, 1994


Byerman, Keith. ‘Remembering History in Contemporary Black Literature and Criticism’ in American Literary History, Winter 1991


Goldman, Anne E. “‘I made the Ink”: Literary Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*’ in *Feminist Studies* 16 Number 2, Summer 1990

Holloway, Karla. *Moorings and Metaphor. Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature,* 1992


_____ *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.* Boston: South End Press, 1990

_____ ‘Essentialism and Experience’ in *American Literary History.* Oxford University Press, Spring 1991
Hull, Gloria T, Patricia Bell-Scott and Smith, Barbara (eds). All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave. Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1982


Perez-Torres. ‘Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread - Beloved as Postmodern Novel’ in Modern Fiction Studies. Vol 39, Numbers 3 & 4, 1993

Rabine, Leslie. 'No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston', Signs, 12:3, 1987


Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. 'Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's Beloved in American Literature Vol 64 Number 3, Sept 1992

Sledge, Linda Ching. 'Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men: The Family Historian as Epic Poet', MELUS 7.4, 1980


Zinn, Maxine Baca and Bonnie Thornton Dill. ‘Theorising Difference from Multiracial Feminism’ in *Feminist Studies 22*, no.2 summer 1996

**Feminist Criticism**


Benhabib, Seyla, Butler, Judith, Cornell, Drucilla, Fraser, Nancy. **Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange.** New York; London: Routledge, 1995


Bollinger, Laura. ‘The Biblical Ruth in Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit’ in **Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature,** Fall 1994

Burns, Christy L. ‘Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson’s Recovery of the Postmodern World’ in **Contemporary Literature** 37, 1996

Butler, Judith: **Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.** London; New York: Routledge, 1999


Davidson, C.N & Broner E.M. **The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature.** New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980


Donaldson, Laura E. **Decolonising Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire-Building.** London: Routledge, 1992


Heilbrun, Carolyn. *Writing a Woman’s Life*. The Woman’s Press, 1988


Stevens, Christy R. ‘Imagining Deregulated Desire: Written on the Body’s Revolutionary Reconstruction of Gender and Sexuality’ San Diego University (www.ags.uci.edu/~clcwgsa/revolutions/Stevens.htm)


_____ From the Beast to the Blond. On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers. London: Vintage, 1995


**Lesbian Criticism**

Engelbrecht, Penelope J. ""Lifting Belly is a Language": The Postmodern Lesbian Subject' in Feminist Studies, Vol 16 No.1, Spring 1990
Maynard, Mary and June Purvis (eds). (Hetero)Sexual Politics. London; Bristol, P.A: Taylor and Francis Ltd, 1995