# BREAKING THE SILENCE:
# MANIFESTATIONS OF THE ORAL TRADITION IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE

by

CHRISTINE TIMM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Professor Steven Kruger

_____ _____

Chair of Examining Committee

Professor Steven Kruger

_____ _____

Executive Officer

Professor Steven Kruger

Professor Poundie Burstein

Professor George Otte

Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Christine Timm

Adviser: Professor Steven Kruger

By the twentieth century, most writers participating in the western print text market had significantly distanced themselves from traditions of oral storytelling. However, the twentieth century saw a reemergence of the oral narrative tradition within mainstream culture.

In one context, we find post-colonial writers who are coming out of a strong native oral tradition but still wanting to participate in the print-text market exploring ways to infuse properties of the oral tradition into their print text novels. African writers, for example, have struggled with artistic and national identities that must negotiate an indigenous cultural heritage with the realities of political and cultural colonization. As a result, African writers began merging oral and print traditions by integrating oral narrative elements, like proverbs, antiphony, and most interestingly, music into the print text. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, *Matigari*, represents his innovations well as it reflects the formal structure and musical dynamics of the oral narrative.

Some first and second generation American writers composing on the borderlands of an ancestral and adopted culture have also had to grapple with various print and oral conventions in an effort to represent both ends of the cultures they have inherited. Maxine Hong Kingston's first three novels, *China Men*, *The Woman Warrior*, and

*Tripmaster Monkey*, all reflect a symbiotic relationship between music, talk-story, and print text. Kingston plays with myth and music in novel ways to compose a text that reflects a narrative on the borderlands of culture as well as oral and print communication.

A third context for the reemergence of the oral tradition is found in the poetry and prose of the Beat Generation of American writers. Specifically, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac's work can be considered as representative of the creative blending of oral performance compositional forms and procedures with print text formats and conventions. One way Kerouac achieves this is through the jazz-poetry jam forums, where narratives were often improvised and collaboratively composed. Ginsberg's collaborations with musicians like Bob Dylan and Joe Strummer have inspired novel poetry-music forms that show the influence of musical compositions in style and structure.

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**Introduction**

> For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.
>
> - Jacques Attali
> *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

By the twentieth century, readers of English literature had become accustomed to the conventions of a silent print text medium. These conventions presupposed a visual text image with an aphonic underpinning. Unlike some modern cultures that have a print text mechanism but still retain the oral narrative traditions, most western English language communities manifest few vestiges of an oral narrative tradition. Some literary theorists claim that the introduction of English Romantic literature marked the effective obliteration of oral literary trends while others posit an earlier date for the demise of the oral tradition in English. Walter J. Ong suggests: "Oral habits of thought and expression, including massive use of formulaic elements, sustained in use largely by the teaching of the old classical rhetoric, still marked prose style of almost every sort in Tudor England some two thousand years after Plato's campaign against oral poetry (Ong 23-47). They were effectively obliterated in English, for the most part, only with the Romantic Movement two centuries later" (Ong 26). While there is no consensus as to the precise moment print text authors, for the most part, abandoned features of orality, it is clear that at the turn of the twentieth century print text English literature was a medium meant to be seen and not heard.

The twentieth century ultimately saw a resurgence of interest in orality evidenced

by a number of trailblazing anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological studies on societies with a still vibrant oral tradition (for example, Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* and Peter Seitel's *The Powers of Genre*). Concurrent with these scientific surveys, we find a number of innovative authors integrating features of the oral tradition into their print text compositions. Some Anglophone authors, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, were motivated to give voice to their literature for political reasons while other writers, like Jack Kerouac, focused more on the aesthetics of the oral tradition, and still others, like Maxine Hong Kingston, located the space between oral and print traditions as viable ground for experimental cross-cultural forms. However inspired, they have produced a body of literature that fascinates readers and listeners for the curiously novel integration of oral narrative dynamics into a silent print text framework. These efforts to integrate oral narrative and print text traditions have resulted in stylistically adventurous texts with intriguing textural designs. At the same time, as with any innovative move away from tradition, these inventive works have arrived with much controversy, and so writers have struggled against a critical and political backlash. In considering these texts then, one cannot overlook the theoretical, aesthetic, and political implications of the resurgence of the oral tradition in print text Anglophone literature.

Along with these new literary forms comes a struggle for power, not just power over textual invention and production, but the kind of power that comes with the ability to give voice to one's thoughts. And with sound comes power since sound is dynamically produced. Walter J. Ong points out, "Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out"

(Ong 32). Because oral production is dynamic in this way, the oral tradition offers immediate access to the power of literary/narrative production. Unlike print text forms, oral performance is not encumbered by tools of composition or delayed by complications of publication. Because oral production is active, it may obviate other structures of power. Consequently, oral performance often surfaces unfiltered by a governing politicized machine. Oral display can surface unapproved and unedited and thus untouched by those governing bodies that control textual production. Often, in obviating material contingencies and elite access to publishing institutions, the oral tradition can promise vocal equity.

The conditions of oral production further empower composers of an oral work with the ability to appeal to the listener not just intellectually but physically. The body is clearly involved not only in the production but the performance of any oral narrative. Walter Ong indicates that the oral word does not exist in an exclusively verbal context, the way that the written word exists primarily in a visual context. The orally produced narrative must be vocalized and engaged while the written word need not be vocalized or even heard. Ong says, "Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable" (Ong 67 – 68). The production of the oral word is an act invested in the body and likewise the reception of the orally produced word necessarily implies a physical connection with the body of the audience/listener. In discussing the relationship of sound to the visceral image, film theorists have indicated that speech and environmental sounds actually enter the viewer/listener's body to a direct physical extent. In his text, *Knowing*

*the Score*, Erwin Bazelon points to the ability of music to engender a corporeal, emotional effect on the body of the listener. He writes:

> If the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, the fastest emotional path to the heart is through the ear. . . Music has strong physiological impact. Perhaps this is so because sound waves entering the ear hit the nervous system, ricochet, and echo through the body.
>
> (Bazelon 126)

Music therefore engenders a real physiological reaction as it penetrates the body of the listener. To this end, sonic vibrations enter the body and penetrate the nerve center so that environmental rhythms can influence, and even alter, the listener's inherent internal corporeal tempo. The science of sonic impact on the body carries huge and interesting import when one considers the power of the orally produced word to effect a real physical reaction in the listener/audience.

Given the ability of sound to influence the listening body intellectually and corporeally, we can imagine the effect of oral compositions on a community of listeners. In part because the listener's body cannot avoid physical interaction with the text, oral performance conventions include features that encourage audience participation. For example, Ruth Finnegan reports that oral works often pose questions that require an immediate verbal response (Finnegan 104). Musicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia explains that the oral composition in many African communities often contains antiphonal (call and response) sections and further that the audience members often have the power to alter the expected response and temporarily derail the text or even lead the narrative in a new direction (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 140-46).

These and other vocally derived mechanisms create a narrative that is referentially dynamic and therefore difficult to pin down as one might pin down a written text in terms of a salient author and edition. The reiteration of an oral sequence of words necessarily calls on the orator at hand to collaborate with other authors embedded in the sequence. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the somewhat complex concept of authorship within oral production:

> Another's discourse, when introduced into a speech context, enters the speech that frames it not in a mechanical bond but in a chemical union (on the semantic and emotionally expressive level); the degree of dialogized influence, one on the other, can be enormous. For this reason we cannot, when studying the various forms for transmitting another's speech, treat any of these forms in isolation from the means for its contextualized (dialogizing) framing - the one is indissolubly linked with the other. The formulation of another's speech as well as its framing (and the context can begin preparing for the introduction of another's speech far back in the text) both express the unitary act of dialogic interaction with that speech, a relation determining the entire nature of its transmission and all the changes in meaning and accent that take place in it during transmission.
>
> (Bakhtin 340)

Within the oral performance, narrative production simultaneously recalls previous authors and typically invites those present to participate in the composition, by way of antiphonal response or dialogic refrain for example. In Bakhtin's sense, the production of a narrative demands an acknowledgement of a community, a community of listeners as well as a community of authors. Simply put, the orally produced word is one that defies

authoritarian claims of authorship and/or production as it is essentially a collaboratively produced narrative.

The oral word suits well Bakhtin's notion of an "internally persuasive" discourse in that the oral narrative, as an internally persuasive discourse, is open ended and in its open-endedness invites intersection, interjection, and adaptation. This Bakhtin sets beside the impervious "authoritative discourse," which is fundamentally intractable as it prescribes dictatorially and resists interrogation. More so than an orally produced narrative, the printed text tends to align itself with the authoritative discourse in its resistance to free adaptation and collaboration. Indeed, the print text locates a credible author or set of authors and presents a copywritten text that, under penalty of law, may not be modified. Thus, while the authoritative discourse claims a verifiable authorship and an immutable text, the internally persuasive discourse, is one that is "half-ours and half-someone else's" (Bakhtin 345).

Ong points out that although "words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever" (Ong 12). In part, it is this tyranny of the written word that allows it to be employed to impose and maintain a prescribed ideology. Because the internally persuasive oral composition allows for some autonomy for the listener, in form and structure it can resist making as well as accepting authoritarian ideological claims. The English print text convention, on the other hand, has served as an essential tool driving western imperialism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ong claims that print text communication lends itself to colonial purposes. Ong says that writing "is a particularly preemptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself even without the aid of etymologies" (Ong 12).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o compellingly points to the imposition of an imperial language and literature as a means of colonizing the minds of indigenous peoples. Regarding the British colonial occupation of his native Kenya, Ngugi has said, "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 9). According to many post-colonial authors, a major challenge has been to effectively negotiate elements of an indigenous oral tradition with the formal conventions of the western print text tradition.

When we consider audibility as a sign of power, within this discussion we should also address the potential of music as an organized, composed noise. In his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali repositions music within an "ideologically Interpretive" forum (Jameson in Attali xi).

> Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding. Today no theorizing accomplished through language or mathematics can suffice any longer; it is incapable of accounting for what is essential in time - the qualitative and the fluid, threats and violence.
>
> (Attali 4)

Attali's claims pose the possibilities of music as a functional "tool of understanding" within a coherent hermeneutics for literature. .

The oral narrative traditions of most cultures indicate music as a significant feature of the narrative performance. The African storytellers, called griottes/griots or jails, are skilled musicians as well as orators. African griotte/griot scholar Thomas A. Hale has written, "It is difficult to separate the musical art of griots and griottes from their vocal art. The two forms work together in a synergistic fashion that produces a

powerful effect on audiences and often surprises those who seek to learn about one or the other in isolation" (Hale 146). In his celebrated *Griot and Griottes* text, Hale tells us of American linguist Charles Bird's 1966 experience involving a field study of Bamana syntax where he was advised by his Malian colleagues to consult a griot on novel syntactic variants. According to Hale, the griot came to Bird's office with a four stringed lute called an ngoni. Bird found the griot's integration of music distracting. He relates, "I wanted to analyze language syntactically. The music was interfering a lot. . . I asked him to come back without the instrument. This time he drummed on the table. He needed something to drive his language. That struck me - there was an organizing force in the language" (Bird and Kendall, 1988 as quoted in Hale 146). Bird's anecdote points to music as an essential "driving force" for spoken word performance. Here music does not simply enhance emotional dynamics or provide adjunct accompaniment. It is part and parcel of the oral narrative in that it contributes structurally to the narrative design.

Oral forms cross-culturally have relied on the functional components of music and speech to frame a structure that is both intelligible and aesthetically appealing. Vietnamese literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha figures structural features of music significantly in the performance conventions of oral narratives: "To produce their full effect, words must, indeed, be chanted rhythmically in cadences, off cadences" (Minh-ha 122). The cadential properties of music do not bear a merely metaphoric relationship to phrasing but instead Trinh seems to infer a real relationship between a musical cadence and rhythmically chanted words that lead to a moment of closure.

At one time readers and speakers of English were skilled readers/listeners and writers/performers of oral narratives. Historically music and literature composed in

English speaking communities have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship where music and text are often entwined in mutually supportive and denotative ways. This historic symbiosis reveals a literary framework that implicates music significantly in compositional procedure, interpretation, and analysis. However, the histories of production and reception of music and language diverge strikingly subsequent to the initiation of a print literary tradition. As a result, the interrelationship has for the most part been veiled by a concept of music and language as signifying on mutually exclusive planes. With the exception of the most obvious combinations of pitch, rhythm, and speech, such as opera, song, some drama and lyric poetry, print literature has been received and produced as a medium with minimal reliance on music for transmitting meaning, and even though the aforementioned examples do suggest a relationship to both music and text, they (except perhaps lyric poetry) are not primarily received in print form.

Further reinforcing this concept of the autonomy of text and music is a Western perception of music as transcending denotative meaning. While language can dispatch messages explicitly, music is thought somehow to exist independently of any kind of distinct process of communication so that music ostensibly transcends all meaning and instead performs on a purely aesthetic and subjective plane. In Allan Bloom's "Music" chapter of his *The Closing of the American Mind*, he argues for a purely emotive function of music: "Music is the medium of the human soul in its most ecstatic condition of wonder and terror.... Music is the soul's primitive and primary speech and its alogon, without articulate speech or reason. It is not only not reasonable, it is hostile to reason" (Bloom 71). Bloom's reading of music is fairly typical of current humanist approaches

as it points to the musical text as appealing to the primary emotions of the listener. Not only does music transcend meaning, it violently resists rational thought. Bloom claims, "Even when articulate speech is added, it is utterly subordinate to and determined by the music and the passion it expresses" (Bloom 71). While denying music a linguistic or signifying function, he endows it with a mysterious command of human passion. Indeed, this notion that music is a tool that essentially provokes emotions reflects a general disposition of Western culture towards music.

This premise derives from a complex history of ideological discourse around music theory and methodology. In his *Kritik der Urteilschaft*, Immanuel Kant infers a discrete transcendent property of music that communicates emotionally yet somehow avoids any explicit signification.

> Although [music] indeed speaks by means of pure sensations without concepts, and so does not, like poetry, leave something over for reflection, yet it moves the mind more variously and, though fleetingly, with more fervor; but it is certainly more enjoyment than culture (the neighboring thought play excited by its means is merely the effect of a sort of mechanical association).
>
> (Kant 339)

In acknowledging the occidental notion of music as a transcendent signifier, Kant is able to delineate the art as aloof and somewhat austere, quite divorced from the locutionary, denotative act of poetics that Charles Bird noted in Bamanan oral production. By distinguishing music's signifying capacity from that of language, Kant demonstrates how the idea of musical transcendency segregates music and literature. While locution in

literature communicates lucidly and directly, music utters "pure sensations without concepts."

Earlier similar ontologies of music are fairly represented by Pythagoras, who professed grounding the formative features of music in mathematics and the natural physical ordering of the universe. In his *History of Western Music*, Donald Grout points out that to Pythagoras and his followers "music and arithmetic were not separate as the understanding of numbers was thought to be the key to the understanding of the whole spiritual and physical universe, so the system of musical sounds and rhythms, being ordered by numbers, was conceived as exemplifying the harmony of the cosmos and corresponding to it" (Grout 7). Subsequent ideology surrounding the notion of the triad as a paragon of tonal symmetry emanated from early claims to a musical structure mathematically based on a series of overtones determined by an occidental science of acoustics.

This tendency to ascribe music's methodology and structure to timeless, immutable sources like the "natural" or "logical" sciences rested ultimately on a concept of divine origin. Grout notes that "Greek mythology ascribed to music a divine origin and named as its inventors and earliest practitioners gods and demigods, such as Apollo, Amphion, and Orpheus" (Grout 4). Thus, early ontological theories sought to situate musical behavior outside of the parameters of mortal control. In this way, as a natural or even supernatural phenomenon, popular theories constructed a methodology that "transcends" human intervention in ineffable and thus inscrutable ways. Thus, the clear historical trend has been to attribute musical function and power to suprahuman phenomena like "natural" science or immortal deities.

From early on, then, humanist thought has constructed music as an enigmatic art which obscures and, as a result, "transcends" human ingenuity and design. These early foundational philosophies exacted the fundamental and historically rigid permanence of musical transcendence. Jean Philippe Rameau's 1722 landmark text, *Treatise on Harmony*, reflects this influence of musical transcendence. In his treatise, Rameau provides a scientific rationale for his theoretical claims so that the triad is posited as emanating from a "naturally" occurring overtone series. With this scientific defense of the triad as a sonority that transcends human intervention/invention, Rameau was able to derive an entire discourse to legitimate Western diatonic harmony and theory over other culture musical theories and practices. It should be recognized that *Treatise on Harmony* does not invent this concept of an organically determined methodology, but rather in its systemization of musical practice represents the culmination of humanist notions of scientifically based structures. In many academic and performance forums, Rameau's text is still regarded and respected as a salient for music theory.

Current waves in music theory interrogate this still often honored tradition of a "natural" methodology in an attempt to expose the human intent lurking behind theories of musical transcendence. In order to reveal and define a mortal impetus for transcendence, some contemporary scholars have ascribed the origin of this tradition to a number of socially and politically driven motivations. Feminist musicologist Susan McClary maintains that theoretical moves to mystify music emanate in part from a lack of experience.

> Because non-professional listeners usually do not know how to account intellectually for how music does what it does, they respond either by mystifying

> it (ascribing its power to extrahuman sources, natural or implicitly supernatural) or by domesticating it (trivializing or marginalizing it, asserting that it does not really bear meaning).
>
> (McClary 17)

For McClary, the failure to acknowledge music's capacity to signify is a corollary of a desire to name the unknown or to invent that which is "unlearned." In addition to providing one rationale for historic transcendence, McClary also critiques it, suggesting that in order to be a responsible reader of texts one would need to recognize the power of music not just to convey passion but also to communicate explicitly.

Recognition of the semiologic and symbolic/representational properties of music, of the variety Charles Bird realized in certain African oral narratives, contextualizes the political and social conditions of production and reception and marks the musical text as a signifying mechanism. John Shepherd in his article, "Music and Male Hegemony," considers the ability of "classical" music to reproduce the "finite and infinitely repeatable nature of capitalist social relations" (Shepherd 160). In doing so, Shepherd outlines the participation of music theory in social stratification:

> in the same way that personal initiative in the social realm must be constrained through imperatives of social acceptability and demonstrated loyalty to bureaucratic ideals, so individual musical initiative as expressed in performances through deviation from notational norms of pitch and rhythm must be constrained through relatively tight adherence to those norms.
>
> (Shepherd 161)

Thus, music implicates itself politically by the way it behaves as a socializing vehicle (who gets to compose; who gets published; who performs, who gets paid) as well as a vehicle of dominant ideology.

Current theoretical and sociological revelations which assign political and social significance to music require a reconsideration of the hermeneutic value of music. This text will participate in the reassessment of the theoretical relationship of music and literature by looking closely at the work of four different authors in three distinct literary contexts. As a novelist and political and literary theorist, Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o has taken head-on issues of western interference with literary production within a colonial context. African authors, like Ngugi, have faced the challenge of creating native community flavored narratives that reflect the dynamic characteristics of the indigenous oral traditions but still communicate well within a print text tradition. The political implications of such a move are clear. Creative attempts to play with the print text models inherited from a literary tradition bent on colonization undermine the prescribed literary forms and challenge the authority behind these forms. At the same time, these print text innovations reinforce the literary value and vibrancy of an oral narrative tradition under attack. In Ngugi's novel, *Matigari*, the main character employs oral narrative and its correlative music to mobilize his culturally, economically, and spiritually colonized community.

Maxine Hong Kingston explores the interwoven qualities of music and storytelling in her first three texts, *China Men, Woman Warrior*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*. While her characters grapple with the often complex and confusing communicative properties of the homespun brand of storytelling called talk-story, Kingston herself forges

innovative literary forms born out of her own efforts to make sense of the oral storytelling traditions of her parents' native China. Kingston's experimentation with styles and forms leads her inevitably to a curious dialogue between talkstory and music. Like Ngugi, she is not without her critics who, unlike Kingston, do not see an easy transition from the oral narrative of talk story to the printed page.

Beat authors Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac hit the literary scene with their own special blend of words and music. By the twentieth century, the oral tradition of storytelling had been generally eclipsed by an academically honored print text convention. Though there were communities where oral narrative survived, in Native American culture for example, for the most part western society in general and Americans in particular were quite divorced from any sort of oral narrative tradition. In 1982, Ong said of the compositional process, "an early poet would write down a poem by imagining himself declaiming it to an audience. Few if any novelists today write a novel by imagining themselves declaiming it aloud, though they might be exquisitely aware of the sound effects of the words" (Ong 95). Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote novels and poems to be read aloud. Both authors focused on the natural breath of the human body and sought to break open traditional literary forms by creating longer prose lines that followed more closely the natural breath of an individual. Kerouac in particular made a point of ignoring conventional punctuation codes in an effort to create prose that characterized as genuinely as possible the spoken word.

In his collected dialogues, *Composed on the Tongue*, Ginsberg speaks to Kerouac's innovative word/music compositions that melded music and language, rather than employing music as mere accompaniment. Within these compositions, Kerouac

effectively interwove the two texts. Ginsberg refers to a poetry/jazz recording made by Kerouac and jazz musicians Zoot Sims and Al Cohn:

> That was the only recording of jazz and poetry that was original and recorded in the studio spontaneously. See, all the rest was sort of like background music, or prepared music or music that really had nothing to do really with the poetry. Kerouac would pronounce a little haiku like "The bottom of my shoes are wet, from walking in the rain" and Al Cohn or Zoot Sims would take the rhythmic thing [sings] tab ba da ba ta ta, ta ta, ta da da ta ta ta," a little haiku of music, then Kerouac would go, "In my medicine cabinet the winter fly has died of old age," then Al Cohn would go "Ta Ra . . ." So they would make rhythmic structures mirroring each other.
>
> (Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue* 66 – 67)

In his own work, Ginsberg likewise consciously seeks to reflect musical properties of sound and language. In some cases, Ginsberg derives inspiration from musical structures for the format and design of his poems. His epic *Kaddish*, for example, while a musical poem overall, has one section that is explicitly imitative of a Baroque fugue format.

Jaques Attali posits music as an essential component of any responsible investigation of social(izing) texts. Attali writes:

> All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form.

(Attali 6)

Since sonorous text is linked to political, social, as well as cultural power and since music is part and parcel of the production and performance of oral narratives, this text sets out to begin an inquiry into the reemergence of the oral tradition in twentieth century Anglophone literature and at the same time to look closely at how composers' language and narrative structures jibe with the musical dimensions of the tradition. Beyond the innovative literary forms that emerge from the creative manipulation of features of oral tradition within a print text format, this text will also approach the political and critical dynamics that underpin and encircle the creative process. In this manner, perhaps this text may contribute to the noise.

## Chapter I

### Do You Hear What I See? – Negotiating Oral and Print Traditions

> Literature as a creative process and also as an end is conditioned by historical forces and pressures: it cannot elect to stand above or to transcend economics, politics, class, race . . . because of its social involvement, because of its thoroughly social character, literature is partisan: literature takes sides.
>
> - Ngugi wa Thiong'o
> *Writers in Politics*

Perhaps nowhere else in 20th century literature does the aesthetic meet the political quite so significantly and creatively as it does within the context of 20th century African narratives. Indeed, in order to enjoy a full and informed appreciation of many of the African texts of the last century, one would need to recognize the longstanding and pervasive impact of western imperialism on the African continent. Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has stressed that as pernicious as the physical occupation of African territory and the dismantling of national regions has been, the concomitant annihilation of African culture and the colonization of African minds has proven to be the more destructive byproduct of western imperialism.[1] Part and parcel of the colonization process in Africa has been a move by the imperialist forces to destroy local and national culture and replace the traditions and practices with western models. With the intensification of the physical colonization of the African continent in the second half of the nineteenth century, native Africans simultaneously witnessed a more subtle but

[1] Ngugi has written and spoken extensively on the colonization of African culture and thought, most persuasively in Decolonising the Mind, Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms, and Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya.

nonetheless equally destructive assault on regional cultures. Western cultural practices and their products sought to supplant native cultural phenomena and in the process devalue the native African culture. Essential to this imposition of a western culture was the installation of the language and literature of the colonizer.

As Edward Said points out in his *Culture and Imperialism*, while Europeans gazed on the African continent as a "blank place" and "assumed its supinely yielding availability," in the interest of cultural survival, decolonizing Africans have found it necessary to "reimagine Africa stripped of its imperial past" (Said 210). But how realistic is the notion of a return to a state void of western influence? Can one ignore a history of imperial cultural, economic, and political impositions? Or must one recognize Homi Bhabha's notion of the hybridity of a post-colonial nation-state and with it the hybrid influence on cultural production? And how does this concept of hybridity jibe with the realities of an imperialistically driven definition of cultural production and the hegemonic ordering of cultural performance?

Certainly, as custodians of local African traditions and culture, the composers of narratives, both written and oral, assume central roles in decolonizing revolutions. In an effort to maintain the integrity of their regional literary heritage, many African authors have had to meet the challenge of reconciling imposed western literary forms and literary conventions, learned within an imperialist context, with local, native narrative traditions. In particular, the function of orality within narratives has been one such grappling point for authors looking to preserve local traditions. Because many African cultures incorporate a dynamic and time-honored oral tradition, post-colonial authors have recognized that one way to maintain local culture in the face of western colonial and

post-colonial moves to undermine and destroy native traditions is through the continued honoring of the oral narrative – even in print. Some African authors have taken on the challenge of maintaining an oral tradition notwithstanding an aggressive and calculated move to undermine the value of national African narratives. For this reason, for many African authors, perhaps more than any other 20th century writers, the oral narrative has been imbued with political as well as aesthetic significance. Indeed, the oral tradition, along with its distinctive components, has taken on political significance as a sign of native creativity and national culture in spite of imperialistically imposed western cultural icons and practices.

With this in mind, authors invested in the maintenance of respective local and shared African cultures have made a personal commitment to preserving the oral heritage. In some cases, this commitment has had interesting social and political consequences and has inspired innovative approaches to print text narrative forms. This chapter will discuss how western imperialism has challenged the continued relevance of the oral narrative in some African cultures. The chapter discussion will then focus specifically on how one Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has participated in the revolution to marginalize colonizing culture by mediating western print models with his national Gikuyu oral tradition.

**Charting the Land**

Certainly, the physical reordering of the African continent by imperialist Europe anticipated attacks on African culture. Prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century, Portugal was the only European nation to actively occupy coastal tracts of African land.

Portuguese mercantile interest in the continent began in earnest in the mid-fifteenth century. The occupied areas were mainly toeholds that supported the ships involved in the export of goods from Africa and east of Africa. Some of the more strategic Portuguese colonies were along the west coast at Ceuta, in the Zambezi River Valley, and the port at Sofala. The seventeenth century saw other European nations entering into the fray for acquisition of African land and resources. Significantly, the expanding European colonial plantation economy in the Americas drove Europeans to Africa to shore up labor supply. Studies of the effects of the slave trade on Africa have estimated that between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries approximately 10 million native Africans were enslaved and forcibly exported out of Africa (Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. 265 – 269 as quoted in Brooks op cit 111). According to Howard University Professor Michael Blakey, "From 1492 to 1776, about 6 million people came from the old world to the Americas, according to some accounts of history. Only 1 million of those people were European. The rest were mainly African. By about 1660, it is estimated that the population of New York (then called New Amsterdam, as settled by Dutch immigrants) was 40 percent African" (Garnett). It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that slave-trading began to subside in Africa, most significantly after 1808 when both the United States and British government outlawed slavery within their national boundaries (Brooks 117).

The imperialist pursuit of Africa reached an apex in the 1880s at which time western Europe began to formally carve up the continent through a series of intra-European treaties and legislation. In 1881, France invaded Tunisia, and Britain moved into Egypt and the Sudan. In 1883, France occupied Madagascar. From 1884 to 1885,

Germany colonized tracts of South West Africa, the Cameroons, Togoloand, and an area of East Africa and then annexed territory in Tanganyika (Holborn 245). Perhaps most significantly, from November of 1884 through February of 1885 the major European players in the quest for dominion over the African continent met for a series of discussions that collectively formed the Berlin Conference. Fourteen western countries were represented at the Conference: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. The stated aim of the Conference was to ensure that the participating western nations would maintain liberal access to the Congo and Niger Rivers as trade routes. At the same time, however, as a direct result of Conference agreements, the coast of Africa, which had been largely colonized already, along with interior Africa, which had been generally uncharted by the European nations, was divided up among Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Portugal, with Britain and France seizing the lion's share of African terrain.

Thus, early on in the twentieth century, through a series of European allied agreements, the major western European nations acknowledged, at least amongst themselves, the boundaries demarcating an occupied Africa, the result of the imperialist conquests of the 19$^{th}$ century. In the process, native national African communities were divided and conflated by an imposed European design of physical national boundaries. The physical demarcations that reordered the land most often did not acknowledge previously existing national boundaries. The division of native communities and indeed nations effectively isolated groups and undermined culturally engaged communal bonds.

The influx of western colonists contributed further to the alienation and indeed

annihilation of preexisting communities. To further maintain control and a western presence, native Europeans were encouraged to "settle" the colonized territories so that, for example, by 1930 more than half of Kenya's cultivated land was occupied by 2,000 white settler farms. This presence of a significant community of colonizers further obfuscated the sense of an indigenous national culture. As well, with significant tracts of farmland in the hands of a minority colonial population, the native community was forced to look to other recourses to sustain themselves, their families, and the community.

Through a convoluted series of local economic maneuvers, colonizing nations created an environment where in some cases native Africans were forced to labor under foreign-own businesses or the colonial government in order to survive. Under Portuguese Premier Antonio Oliveira Salazar, native Africans were legislated indirectly to work for Portuguese-owned businesses. The Code of Indigenous Work (1928), the Colonial Act (1930), and the Organic Charter of the Colonial Empire (1933) all contributed to the systemized economic enslavement of the colonized community. Under this series of legislation, each native African dwelling was taxed (hut tax). Since the tax had to be paid in Portuguese coin, at least one member of each household needed to somehow earn Portuguese money (Monteiro). French colonial officer Gallieni's strategy of employing the native population in the colonial military in order to securely occupy the colony is implicit in his following statement. Here he encapsulates his strategy for defending French occupied Upper Tonkin from "foreign" (Chinese) invaders:

> To occupy the country firmly, to win over the natives and to make them participate in the effort we are undertaking, such were essentially the principles to

> be applied in order to save the Upper Tonkin from the anarchy from which it suffered.
>
> (Collins 157 - 158)

Both of these conditions provide examples of the colonizing governments' intent to economically enslave the native community. In both cases, the colonized are forced to participate in the colonial economy, but must do so as a subordinate laborers. Here we also see evidence of fiscally inspired "team-building" efforts. By participating in the economic culture of the imperial power, the colonized inadvertently joins a community of individuals who, by choice, force, or circumstance, are unified in the production of labor towards a common goal – the success of the economic or political institution.

Inequities in appropriation of land and other national wealth as well as the pervasive racial and ethnic social bias born and bred by the system of colonization created an environment that was overwhelmingly oppressive and stifling for the native Africans. Civil unrest and renegade freedom movements ensued and gradually brought about some element of political liberation. These movements first took root and achieved success in northern Africa. Egypt led the way by gaining independence from British rule in 1936. Italy divested its power over Libya in 1951. Morocco and Tunisia both achieved independence from France in 1956. In Kenya, the Mau Mau freedom movement of the 1950s adapted guerilla warfare tactics during what is known as the Mau Mau rebellion (1952 – 1959). The rebellion as well as other civil disobedience strategies brought about an end to British occupation of the colony with political independence declared in December of 1963. Other African nations followed this trend toward

independence from European colonial governments so that by the end of the 20th century African countries had achieved political liberation, at least in theory.

**Charting the Mind**

In addition to the physical, political, and social presence of the colonizer, a complete and thorough colonization of the continent could not be achieved without attention to the imposition of an imperial cultural presence as well. In his article "Literature – Nationalism's other? The case for revision, "Simon During maintains that "the notions 'culture' and 'nation' align" so that for 19th century Europe the exportation of a national culture led to global influence and power. During writes, "Imperialist thought possesses itself of culturalism" because "cultures are even more worth fighting for than nations; hierarchies of cultures seeming to fix identities, whereas hierarchies of nations merely belong to history and politics. Under this dispensation, an imperialist nation, competing with others, must regard itself as having a world-historical culture" (During 139). The coherence of the newly formed nations depended then not only on internationally recognized territorial boundaries but at least as significantly on the institution of a shared national culture. Homi Bhabha speaks of the process of a "nation's coming into being" as being dependent on "a system of cultural signification as a representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social *polity*" (Bhabha 2). In a similar manner, Ngugi was Thiong'o has pointed to the "colonization of the mind" as the most pernicious and enduring imperialist maneuver. For Ngugi, the reordering of culture takes on the features of military aggression. He speaks of the "cultural bomb" as "the

biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 3). Ngugi posits serious consequences to this kind of assault: "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 3). In order to be truly effective then, colonialism must occupy not only land and economic resources but also the ideological and material culture of the community.

Under cultural occupation, a hegemonic ordering of the various cultural components places the imperialist cultural production at the apex while depreciating the native culture. The culture of the colonizer is associated with desirable byproducts, such as success, sophistication, and style. The aim then of cultural colonization is not only to impose a foreign culture but also to impose an elevated authoritative culture. This process simultaneously devaluates the preexisting native culture. The debasement of culture coordinates strategically then with imperialist efforts to nationalize a community. Frantz Fanon suggests that convincing the native resident of the inferiority of the native culture by association effectively dismantles the concept of a viable nation that is dependent on that culture for its national identity. Because, according to colonial rhetoric, the native culture cannot stand up, the nation must fall to a "stronger" and therefore more viable imperialist national construct. Fanon writes, "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior to recognize the unreality of his 'nation.'" (Fanon 236). This cultural debasement leads to the annihilation of communal

bonding mechanisms and thus alienates the colonized individual not only from the culture but from the native community as well.

Such a devaluation of one's native culture has an impact on the construction of the native African's self-image. The general sense of the inferiority of the collective group extends necessarily to the construction of the native figure as a stand-alone inferior being. Fanon continues to delineate his thoughts on the effects of imperial cultural debasement by relating that "in the last extreme" the insistence of the inferiority of the native culture leads the colonized person to a perverse conceptual image of "the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure" (Fanon 236). The corruption of the native figure's self-image necessarily has an impact on the global representation of the native image.

In his *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi writes, "Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 16). The projection of the perverse inferior self-image outside of the community collapses back on the collective group as well as the individual as a ratification of the colonial construction of an inferior native population.

In order to repair the devalued self-image, the colonized is encouraged to adopt the culture of the colonizer. Taking on the culture of the colonizer implicitly aligns the

colonized subject with the colonizer. But though the colonized can aspire to the desired byproducts of western cultural production, they cannot approach the pinnacle of cultural performance primarily because of their national birth and their social position as a member of the community of the colonized. For example, a colonial subject retains the accent and other elements of native style that establish his/her place in the hegemonic order as statically subservient to that of the colonizer. This position where the colonized can never surpass or match the colonizer's performance of culture along with the devaluation of the native culture secures the imperialist social paradigm where the colonized is essentially and irrevocably subservient to the colonizer.

In addition, because the colonizer sets himself up as the master producer of culture, in a synecdochic manner, the minority population of colonizers misleadingly represents the culture of the masses. Homi Bhabha indicates that "Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative ... ) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity. The 'part' (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the 'whole' (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its radical difference" (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 111). The imperialist discourse must acknowledge cultural difference in order to establish an authoritative cultural superiority over a so-named inferior discourse at the same time that it dismisses the inferior discourse in order to foreground the imperialist discourse as the only representative discourse. For Bhabha this type of "doublethink" is made possible through a "disavowal" of the native culture.

> Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the reference of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination

> between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different - a mutation, a hybrid. It is such a partial and double force that is more than the mimetic but less than the symbolic, that disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic. To be authoritative, its rules of recognition must reflect consensual knowledge or opinion; to be powerful, these rules of recognition must be reached in order to represent the exorbitant objects of discrimination that are beyond its purview.
>
> (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 111)

While the "hybridization" of the native culture is the logical result of imperial impositions, the notion of a bifurcate cultural discourse goes against the grain of colonial claims to representation of a monolithic national culture.

To the point of national identity, Roberto Retamar speaks of a colonization of a culture where even the very existence of a community is called into question. In the face of a forcibly altered frame of cultural reference, the colonized meets the query, "Do you exist?" According to Retamar, the colonial environment causes native culture to become virtually extinct. Thus, in the post-colonial setting, the culture is archived as a point of reference but does not function in any vital or immediate sense within the post-colonial community. Retamar expounds, "to question our culture is to question our very existence, our human reality itself, and thus to be willing to take a stand in favor of our irremediable colonial condition, since it suggest [sic] that we would be but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere" (3). The demise of a culture marks the demise of the culture's agency in forming and influencing identity. The absence of native cultural

influence necessarily then effects an identity that takes on more of the qualities of the colonizer and less of the mindset and cultural distinctions of the ancestral heritage. Considering this evolution of the post-colonial identity, can we then question the continued vitality of a native identity? Or are we now speaking of a communal identity that has been calibrated to the cultural mores of an imperialist society?

Homi Bhabha locates cultural salvation of the colonized at those liminal points where the colonizing discourse intervenes on the native culture. The hybridity of the colonized culture reflects difference and diversity in a way that undermines imperial attempts to establish a pure authoritative cultural discourse. Bhabha contends:

> Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory –
>
> (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 112)

The distillation of the various components of the colonizing culture creates gaps in cultural articulation, which in turn provides opportunities for the creation of cultural constructs that invalidate colonial claims to an authoritative cultural discourse.

**Charting Discourse**

This notion of a hybridization of cultural discourse is especially apparent in the consideration of the impact of colonization on language. Language as a carrier of culture and national identity plays a critical role in the colonization process. The notion of aligning the colonized with the colonizer is in part achieved through the successful imposition of a colonial language. In this sense, more than the reordering of territory and the planting of flags, language contributes significantly, though certainly not exclusively, to the transformation of a national self-image. Ngugi has emphasized the impact of an imperialist enforcing of the English language by British colonial powers on native-Gikuyu speakers in Kenya. Indeed, he cites language as a salient force superceding that of military power: "language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 9).

In his *Decolonisinq the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o addresses the struggle of Africans in maintaining their cultural identity specifically in the face of native language vilification. According to Ngugi, the institution of European languages as the legitimate locution of education, literature, and finance has effectively robbed native speakers not only of their economic power but also of their agency in self-definition. Ngugi speaks of language as an "image-forming agent" (15) that becomes active as young children begin

to learn to articulate what they see and feel. This objectification of the environment is acted out through a received lexicon that guides the fledgling speaker not only in describing what s/he sees and feels but also in internalizing and understanding these stimuli. In this way, language guides perception as much as it articulates an understanding of one's self and one's environment. When perceiving and articulating the world through the imposed language of the colonizer, the colonized view becomes underpinned by imperialist images that support the colonial order. Ngugi relates this condition to early language acquisition and the experience of the child in a colonized African community: "Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see the world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 17).

In Ngugi's terms, language contributes not only to the formation of one's self-image but also to the reception of that image both locally and globally: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (*Decolonising the Mind* 4). In its global projection, language is often looked to as a defining feature of a cultural identity. Cultural lineages and connections between various communities are often traced along the lines of a common or related language. Indeed, political and social relationships are implied through the perceived bond of a common language.

Beyond the individual then, language galvanizes communities and helps define ethnic groups and national boundaries. Specifically, this is accomplished in a number of ways. For one, language articulates a community's general moral disposition and values both in content and format. The selection of terms and even their arrangement into a meaningful syntax are just two features of language that can simultaneously reflect and inform the values of a people. Pan-African scholar and poet David Dabydeen offers an example as he explains why he has chosen to write and perform in his native Caribbean Creole, a cultural hybrid that signifies the colonial process, rather than British English: "It's hard to put two words together in Creole without swearing. Words are spat from the mouth like live squibs, not pronounced with elocution. English diction is cut up, and this adds to the abruptness of the language: *what* for instance becomes *wha* (as in *whack*), the splintering making the language more barbaric. Soft vowel sounds are habitually converted: the English tend to be polite in *war*, whereas the Creole *warre* produces an appropriate snarling sound" (Dabydeen 3). Here Dabydeen reads an ethical distinction between the British English and the Creole hybrid. In Dabydeen's terms the Queen's English reflects a sometimes disingenuous politeness that he associates with this community of speakers. At the same time, he points to an inherent sonorous quality that he associates with the diction of Creole as reflecting the candid expression of a contrasting community of speakers. Regardless of whether of not Dabydeen's theories of locution are viable, we can recognize his interpretation of the various performative features of these languages as emblematic of one way that language signs culture in the form of an ethical perspective to a broader, more global community.

Language also defines and classifies groups as it carries and conveys the shared heritage of a people. Ngugi writes: "Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 15). The history of a people necessarily conveys details of economic production, domestic behavior, genealogy, and all the other features of culture that characterize, unify, and catalog discrete groups. An interpretive history is communicated vis a vis language, but in addition, the lexicon as well as the organizing syntactic foundation bears signs of the proceedings of history. In this sense, language provides a schema of events, transformations, and watershed moments in the evolution of culture over time. One can look to the English language's substantial French word stock as well as innovations in Middle English spelling as a concrete reminder of the Norman Conquest (Pyles and Algeo 138 – 139).

The correlation of a community to a shared language is significant as this relationship informs the classification of a people by speakers of the language as well as those located outside the boundaries of the community. Shared language has been considered a significant, though not a solely determinative, bonding mechanism in the process of nation-building. Linguist Sidney Greenbaum points to post-colonial America as an example of the creation of a national language as precursor to the construction of a discrete, and liberated, national identity. In his essay, "Whose English?" Greenbaum relates the contributions of notable American lexicographer Noah Webster to the formation of an American identity distinct from the British. In a book published twelve years after the Declaration of Independence is drafted, Webster writes: "As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as

well as government" (Greenbaum 17). Webster was not alone in his desire to redefine the nation's language as being distinct from British English. "Indeed, a law enacted in 1923 in the state of Illinois proclaimed that the official language of the state should be known from then on as the American language and not the English language," so Greenbaum relates (Greenbaum 17).

In Africa, it was not enough to redefine national geographic boundaries according to imperialist conquests. In order to translate these artificially carved regions into real national entities, the colonizer needed to create some sort of cultural cohesion amongst the native people. Prescribing a colonial language as the national mode of discourse was one way to provide necessary cohesion to an otherwise diverse group. In addition, the imperialist imposition of a colonial language was part and parcel of an effort to maintain a continued, authoritative presence in the region. In *The Theory of African Literature*, Chidi Amuta writes: "Owing to the ethnic heterogeneity of all African nation-states, European languages – as official languages – have been instrumental in the realization of national cohesion among members of erstwhile disparate nationalities. It is crucial to acknowledge here that the instruments that created African countries in the heyday of colonialism were fashioned in European languages" (Amuta 112 – 113).

In the colonial and post-colonial context, with the imposition of an imperialist language, the colonized takes on cultural codes that drive thought and behavior. Ostensibly aligned by a shared language with the colonizer, the colonized is presumed to embody a shared code of ethics, a shared history, as well as shared style and format of music, art, and other dynamics of culture. In *Africa's International Relations*, Ali Mazrui describes the impact of a prescribed imperialist language on a community's approach to

defining itself: “European languages became so important to the Africans that they defined their own identities partly by reference to those languages. Africans began to describe each other in terms of either Francophone or English-speaking Africans” (Mazrui 92). Because language is so culturally encoded, the global community began to classify the African population through the respective colonizing language. Ngugi describes how the languages of colonized African nations take on global dimensions, “African countries, as colonies and even today as neo-colonies, came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe: English-speaking, French-speaking, or Portuguese-speaking African countries” (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 5). Not only the personal but the communal and global identity of a people is transformed then with the imposition of a colonial language. In this sense, language as a carrier of culture imposes identifying cultural features from without as well as from within. Thus, in recognizing language as a national bond, the global community inadvertently participates in, and even reinforces, the revision of the identity of the colonized.

It is not enough though that the colonized acquire and be privately and publicly associated with the colonizing language. The general colonizing trend towards cultural debasement requires a concurrent disrepute of the native language. By comparison, the imperialist language must be seen as carrying more value and more validity. This language must also be viewed as the avenue to both economic and social success. In order to promote the language of the colonizer, the native language must be discredited. Henry Louis Gates relates the disposition of Alexander Crummell, a Liberian minister and statesman, to the English colonial language. According to Gates, “Crummell never stopped believing that mastering the master’s tongue was the sole path to civilization,

economic freedom, and social equality for the black person" (Gates 43). In his 1860 speech, "The English Language in Liberia," Crummell expounds on the assets attached to British English: "In the English language are embodied the 'noblest theories of liberty' and 'the grandest ideas of humanity.' " By contrast, according to Crummell the African vernacular languages "have definite marks of inferiority connected with them all, which place them at the widest distances from civilized languages" (Gates 44). The colonized community is thus encouraged to believe that all good things, spiritual, educational, social, and economic elevation, come with the successful mastery of the language of the colonizer.

The forced acquisition of the language of the colonizer situates the colonial subject under not only the governance of the colonizer but also within the cultural mindset of the colonizer. The colonized participates and contributes to the cultural life of the conquering nation, yet this dynamic is enacted within a hegemonic order that ensures the subservience and oppression of the native colonized people. Regarding language, through an imperialist system of schooling, the colonial subject is forced to acquire and perform the colonial language. However, the colonized cannot presume to master the language. Mastery is reserved for the colonizer, who has been born into the culture and who possesses a longstanding connection to the heritage. This dynamic ensures the hegemonic order that places the colonizer at the apex. George Lamming uses Shakespeare's *Tempest* to develop a theory that elucidates this paradigm: "Prospero lives in the absolute certainty that Language which is his gift to Caliban is the very prison in which Caliban's achievements will be realised and restricted. Caliban can never reach perfection, not even the perfection implicit in Miranda's privileged ignorance" (Lamming

110). The colonized thus finds him/herself in the oppressive situation of not being able to utilize the native language to the point of success and not being able to truly master the colonial language. Because of language's connection to identity and culture, in taking on the prescriptive colonial language the colonized cannot master the language, nor his/her identity, nor the material byproducts of the native culture.

Language presents just one dynamic of cultural production that complicates and de-romanticizes notions of hybridity as a "third space" of equitable bifurcate cultural productivity. The hegemonic ordering of the performance of culture is a necessary byproduct of cultural imperialism and hybridity loses its innocence in the process. Post colonial or neo-colonial languages are signs of hybridity that also acknowledge fatalistic notions of cultural mimicry as a trajectory towards an autonomous and equitable national identity. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam detail the dangers of "celebrating" hybrid cultural productions:

> A celebration of syncreticism and hybridity per se, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the fait accompli of colonial violence. For oppressed people, even artistic syncreticism is not a game but a sublimated form of historical pain, which is why Jimi Hendrix played the "Star Spangled Banner" in a dissonant mode, and why even a politically conservative performer like Ray Charles renders "America the Beautiful" as a moan and a cry. As a descriptive catch-all term, "hybridity" fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political co-option, cultural mimicry and so forth.
>
> (Shohat and Stam 42 – 43)

Without the necessary theoretical underpinning of imperial hegemonic ordering of culture, we are left with notions of hybridity promoted as a space where culture is equitably produced. Thus, hybridity is a useful concept but one that must be employed self-consciously alongside discussions of imperial domination of native culture.

**The Language of Literature**

The imposed hegemonic ordering of hybrid and colonizing languages permeates the colonial environment so that the impact is recognized in the day to day existence of the colonized as well as in the cultural production of the community. In response to queries about his choice to write in French, Ethiopian author L?opold S?dar Senghor wrote in his introduction to his poetry volume, "Ethiopiques, le 24 September 1954," "In our languages [African languages] the halo that surrounds the words is by nature merely that of sap and blood; French words send out thousands of rays like diamonds." Indeed, under imperialism, language complicates the position of the African author. Some, like Senghor, have chosen to write in the colonial language. Chinua Achebe, possibly the most renowned and internationally recognized African author, insists that writing in the language of the colonizer does not need to be a move that implies acquiescence or a shift in African identity. Achebe posits an insurgent adaptation of the imperialist langue, "Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them, that destiny does not include a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship. And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it" (Achebe 74). Achebe's position on the language issue is that ideological focus should not be placed on

the instrument of communication but on the effect. In this sense, if the language of the colonizer can communicate the author's intention, insurgent or otherwise, explicitly and effectively, then these imperialist modes can and should be seized by the colonized to do the business of the native author. Moreover, due to widespread colonization, European languages are intelligible to a broad, international audience. It has been argued, therefore, that implementation of European discourse by the African author can result in a broader audience. African scholar Chidi Amuta insists that for the African author the national lingual affiliations are subservient to international disseminations (in the African as well as the global sense):

> Language qua language is (therefore) not the issue in African literature. The problem of communication in our literature is directly related to the forces that prevent human communication at the economic and social levels. As part of the struggle to correct this anomaly, all the avenues of cultural communication should be explored to get the benefit of progressive, revolutionary literature across to the greatest possible majority of our peoples. In this respect, European languages, African languages, oral performance, written expression, radio broadcasts, etc. are implicated.
>
> (Amuta 113 – 114)

Indeed, it appears that Amuta views colonial languages not just as options but as necessary components of any national effort to mobilize the masses. To this point, both Achebe and Amuta take the position that the colonial language can not only aesthetically efficacious, as Senghor implies, but also politically viable. For the colonial/post-colonial/neo-colonial African author, language is necessarily politicized so that the opting

for either colonial or native langue is not a decision that is driven by aesthetic considerations alone. And, as Amuta suggests, for decolonizing authors language selection is something other than an either/or choice. Rather, African authors must determine the language of literature self-consciously with attention to all the political and social dimensions of such a resolution.

After writing his first few novels in English, the colonial language of his native Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o elected to write his novel, *Caitaani Mutharabaini* (*Devil on the Cross*), in his mother-tongue, Gikuyu. Ngugi reacted strongly to those who critiqued his choice to write in his native language: "It is almost as if, in choosing to write in Gikuyu, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikuyu is my mother tongue! The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 28 – 29). In fact, it does seem that colonialism has been so efficient so as to prompt the questioning of the implementation of native discourse outside of the domestic arena. The somewhat mechanical global acceptance of colonial, occidental languages as *the* utilitarian modes of communication is part of a mindset that is so pervasive that the colonial native must defend the choice to write in the mother-tongue. While translation has always been a viable option for these western discourses, it appears that in the African (and perhaps any colonial) context the process of translation is unnecessary and even hostile. The expectation is that the colonized writer will employ the dialect that has been prescribed by the literary conventions of the colonizing culture. The colonized writer is expected to

perform in that dialect to the best of his or her ability in the sense that s/he must aspire to the colonial model. The decision to write in native languages is seen as a direct rejection of the colonizing culture and a refusal to assume the role of the colonial subject who aspires to the mastery of imperial western culture. Since opting for the language of the colonizer seems to have been the "friendlier" choice in terms of political, social, and even economic (as related to publication and marketing) dynamics, the decision to write in the native langue can be interpreted as politically contentious.

In part, the contentiousness of writing in native languages is tied to access and audience. The argument that imperialist discourses communicate to a broader global audience overlooks the fact that the language of the colonizer simultaneously alienates likewise broad sectors of the native population that are not literate in the colonial languages. The choice to implement occidental tongues assumes then that the text is created for a western and/or western-educated audience. While this choice may be economically effectual, to a great extent it can disregard readership on the colonial writer's home territory. Subsequently, any instinct to use narrative to mobilize or to diffuse imperialist mechanisms is squelched and the writer's attention and efforts are distracted to the point of producing texts that encourage broad access to an international market. As a writer, Ngugi sees his texts as effective revolutionary tools that can contribute to a move to dispossess imperialist powers of African resources and put political and economic power back in the hands of native Africans. In this case, the choice of language is critical to the creation of the text since the masses illiterate in the language of the colonizer, the peasantry and working class, often form the foundation of a cogent revolution. Ngugi writes:

> It is precisely when writers open out languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their biggest challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, their real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class. A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence . . .
>
> (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 30)

In order to deconstruct imperialist scaffolding, both concrete and ideological, some African authors, like Ngugi, would argue then that only through the native African languages can a writer repossess the native African of the ability to reconstruct a wholly native self-image and to mirror that image globally. In this way, the native author participates in the restoration of cultural and material damages incurred by western imperialism. To this point of reinstating native authority and of employing language as a tool of revolt: Audre Lorde has written that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 99).

**Creating New Forms**

The successful colonization of a culture along with the institution of a colonizing language allows the influence of the imperialist nation to live on long after the achievement of political independence and the departure of a physical, military presence.

Thus, a discrete and imposing western influence has continued in post-colonial Africa with regards to culture and society. What is the role of those who have taken on the charge of producing cultural artifacts in the post-colonial environment? In order to truly represent the evolution of a national culture, one would need to acknowledge the influence and impact of the colonizing culture while evoking the pre-colonial native heritage of the community. For some artists, the reality of a cultural hybridity that takes into account the history of colonization calls for hybrid aesthetic forms.

In the process of creating a national body of literature that speaks to the African native in important (and even revolutionary) ways, some African authors made the move to situate the home-language alongside the colonizing language within the context of the hegemony of a neo/post colonial environment. Because many of the native narrative forms exist within an oral tradition, there is a need for African writers to translate oral forms into a print-text genre. Equally desirable to maintaining the utilitarian value of the native languages is preserving the heritage of the oral narrative tradition. Indeed, for many African writers inspiration for written texts seems to emanate from early exposure to a rich oral tradition. Ngugi relates his first introduction to narrative forms as a child listening to stories told in his native Gikuyu: "I can vividly recall those evenings of storytelling around the fireside. It was mostly grownups telling the children but everyone was interested and involved. We children would retell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking the pyrethrum flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 10). Here Ngugi describes a scene where the community actively participates in the creation and proliferation of the narrative. Ngugi relates further that ultimately the narratives

typically stressed communal cooperation and participation so that this objective seems to be met not only in the content but also in the formal construction and dissemination of the oral narratives. To this point, the characters were local and thus recognizable to those in the community, and at the same time, the character development and plot action reinforced the values and culture of this local community. Achebe also stresses the significance of his early exposure to the narrative through a vibrant local oral tradition. In his chapter, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe recalls the stories told by his mother and elder sister as reflecting "the immemorial quality of the sky and the forest and the rivers" (Achebe 38). Achebe also relates the valorization of western print texts in relation to these folk narratives. Indeed, by and large, the native African is not present in these texts, and when s/he is, it is typically in a pejorative context filtered through the lens of an imperialist ideology. Concomitant with the alienation of the African character in the western print texts is the imperialist devaluation of the African oral productions. Achebe points to the received notion that by comparison to the western texts promoted in the colonial schools and in the market, the African oral productions were perceived as "primitive and heathenish" (Achebe 38).

Prompted by introduction and institution of the western novel as a superior literary form, many African authors have, thus, for both political and aesthetic reasons found the need to rescue the oral tradition from threatened obscurity. Not satisfied with a conciliatory concession of literary "authority" to a faction of Western educated Africans (mostly men), it appears that it has been the aspiration of writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o to inscribe themselves into a cultural canon as legitimate creators of African

narratives in the traditional style. To this end they eschew prescribed conventions and build the African print format using the tools of the culture, language and music inclusive. Indeed Ngugi seems to view this literary revolution as a starting point for the divesting of foreign oppression vented through neocolonial avenues. Ngugi proposes:

> most national liberation movements start by rejecting the culture of the colonizer, by repudiating religion of the oppressing nation and class and the entire education system of the colonizer. People create their own songs, poems, dances, literature, which embody a structure of values dialectically opposed to those of the ruling class of the oppressing race and nation.
>
> (Killam 39)

Part and parcel of this project to create a native African literary form that derives from a vibrant oral tradition and reflects the culture of the African communities is to develop print-text formats that somehow reflect features of the oral performance. One of the challenges of creating an African literary text that supported African cultures and motives was the revision of the western novel. Edward Said contends in his *Culture and Imperialism* that the essence of the European novel as a literary form depends on the cultural and political domination of a native subclass. Said writes, "The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power" (Said 71). Said further connects British global military might and imperialist presence with a simultaneous production of a British "novelistic institution" that both dominates the market and is held up as an iconic literary form. In addition, the novel's claim to reflect

reality places western contrived reality, specifically British, at the forefront of leaders' consciousness. In this way, the novel effectively coordinated with British imperialism by continually reinforcing the primary features of English culture and sensibility. Said posits: "The *continuity* of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century--in fact a narrative--is actively accompanied by this novelistic process, whose main purpose is not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place" (Said 74).

It has become clear then, in creating a literary form that would support African, and not imperialist western, sensibilities, African writers would need to develop a narrative framework that was distinctly African in form and structure. Certainly this literary form would need to derive from the oral tradition in salient ways. In some sense, this development is congruous with the western evolution of the novel since this occidental form has its roots ultimately in an Anglo-Saxon oral tradition, represented by narratives like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as the classic epic oral narratives, with representative narratives that would include Homer's *Iliad*. In the African literary traditions there was no form analogous to the western novel prior to the 20th century (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 64-65). However, the oral tradition has included a narrative form that bears resemblance to the western epic in form and structure. John William Johnson in his introduction to *The Epic of Son-Jara* addresses a common concern with the adaptation of the western "epic" as a relative form when discussing African narratives. Johnson prefers to view these African narratives as culturally distinct "ethno-aesthetic constructs," which can only be truly defined by the local audience (Hale 132). All things considered, Johnson does ultimately relay on the

term “epic” to describe these extended African narrative forms due to his determination that “the similarities of the various examples of this genre are so striking” (Hale 132).

So what features of the African “epic” are relevant to the construction of the African novel? In *Griots and Griottes*, Thomas Hale provides a list of components that are typically associated with the epic: “Praises, genealogies, tales, and songs, as well as shorter rhetorical devices such as proverbs, sayings, metaphors, and comparisons” (Hale 131). Indeed, many of these features of the oral performance of the African narrative (including the “epic”) are embedded in the daily lifestyle of the community. Proverbs, for example, are commonly used verbal forms that, according to Hale, reflect “a full grasp of the cultural values of a people” and at the same time fluent implementation of the proverbs reveals a preparedness to enter into adulthood (Hale 130). The proverb has often been pointed to as one of the distinctively African elements in Achebe’s novels. In their critique of Ngugi’s first Gikuyu novel, *Devil on the Cross*, David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe indicate the novel’s use of proverbs to construct sound rhetoric. Specifically, according to Cook and Okenimpke, proverbs are organized into clusters to construct and strengthen an argument and are employed by the characters within the arena of discussion and debate. By way of example, they direct our attention to one character’s assertion of sexual power and prowess with three women regardless of his obesity: “As the dancer prepares himself for the arena, it’s he who knows how he is going to dance. The elephant is able to carry his tusks, however huge. And again, whoever is able to resist money today is beyond human help” (Cook and Okenimkpe 129). The lyrical proverb is thus woven into the narrative in a manner that is not only non-obtrusive but makes the proverb essential to the construction of the rhetoric, which is in turn key to the dialogue and plot.

Another feature of the oral tradition that reflects the lifestyle and values of a community is the notion of collaboration and communal ownership. The performance format of the oral narrative lends itself to a collaborative construction of the text. Chidi Amuta relates the source of interactivity to the geographic configuration of the oral performance, "Oral literature in a village setting presupposes a spontaneous, live audience in which there is physical proximity between the artist and his audience. He creates and modulates his art in response to the determinate needs of his audience" (Amuta 109). The venue's face to face geography supports and encourages interactivity between storyteller and audience. In the context of the oral performance, the listener may be called upon or may even spontaneously, without encouragement from the cantor, contribute to the performance by, for example, introducing a new plot dimension, or critiquing a character's actions or questioning the narrator/cantor's credibility. This collaboration between storyteller and listener undermines any system of textual ownership. The cantor's version of the text is not seen as the authoritative rendition since listeners are free to intervene and modify the presented version.

Achebe speaks to this divesting of textual ownership in the context of artistic production. Achebe points specifically to the Igbo tradition of mbari art. As Achebe describes it, mbari art is a work that is commissioned by one or another of the community's deities (typically the Earth Goddess). Select members of the community represent the broader group by performing as ndimgbe in creating a series of works, sculptures and paintings depicting images of the deity. In the creation of these artworks, the ndimgbe are, in the community's terms, reenacting the divine act of creation. After the series of works are completed, the ndimgbe disclaim any credit for producing the art

by "putting as much distance as possible between themselves and their recently constructed works of art" (Achebe 48). Herbert Cole relates in his *Mbari: Art and Life Among the Owerri Igbo* that claiming authorship of a work of art could destroy the artist. Cole clarifies the artist's instinct to distance him/herself from the creative product by pointing to the artist's trepidation that s/he "might slip up and say, 'Look, I did this figure.' If he [says] that, he has killed himself. The god that owns that work will kill him" (Achebe 49). For Achebe, the ideology that underpins this attitude towards a communal appropriation and even collaboration of art stands in stark contrast to western notions of individualism. The "primacy of the individual" incites an ego-centric disposition that, in the case of the artist, takes precedence over the communal participation as well as the communal sharing of the rights to control and disseminate a text.

Perhaps we can refer, as above, to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses to illuminate this notion of collaborative authorship. In *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin outlines two major modes of discourse: authoritative and internally persuasive. Authoritative discourse draws its ideology on previously established and accepted texts so that "its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past." In this sense it is a "*prior* discourse." In part because authoritative discourse emanates from a cogent, ideologically bound body of accepted (and revered) texts, as Bakhtin indicates, "it demands our unconditional allegiance." The authoritative discourse is not open then to intersection or collaboration. In this way, it is static "for it is fully complete" and "has but a single meaning." Internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, is a malleable text that provides opportunities for intersection and collaboration.

Bakhtin clarifies: "The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite,* it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new *ways to mean"* (Bakhtin 345).

Bakhtin's internally persuasive model closely resembles the ideological foundation of the collaborative oral performance. Because it is a malleable text, with each retelling, and indeed within the same performance, the oral narrative continually generates multiple interpretations. This ideological approach to textual construction acknowledges the voice of the audience and gives credence to the needs, desires, and motivations of the masses. Achebe marks the African print-text compositions as a digression from this sensibility of collaborative production in the oral tradition. Achebe writes: "One of the most critical consequences of the transition from oral traditions to written forms of literature is the emergence of individual authorship. The story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendent, the writer in his study, 'belongs' to its composer" (Achebe 47). In the composition of his first novel in Gikuyu, *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi envisioned a revolutionary approach to the novel, one that would somehow be open to intervention by an audience/reader in the manner of an internally persuasive discourse that would perhaps exemplify Bakhtin's sense of dialogic print narrative. In *Decolonising the Mind,* Ngugi discusses the reception of the novel, especially by the provincial villagers of Kenya. Ngugi tells of how the novel was read in families where one member of the family who was literate in Gikuyu would read to the others. In the same manner, the novel was read among the workers in factories, in business offices, and on farms. An especially interesting response was the development of "professional

readers" who would read aloud to other patrons in local pubs for the price of a continually replenished glass of beer. Ngugi refers to this reception as "the appropriation of the novel into the oral tradition. *Caitaani Mutharabaini* (*Devil on the Cross*) was received into the age old tradition of storytelling around the fireside; and the tradition of group reception of art than [sic] enhances the aesthetic pleasure and provokes interpretation, comments, and discussions" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 83).

Additionally, we would want to give attention to music as another intrinsic component of the oral narrative. Cultures that possess a still vibrant oral tradition enjoy a literary form where music animates the text in emotional and structural ways. The symbiotic relationship of tune and text is a recognized function of shared signifying properties. The production of the oral text requires symmetrically apportioned devotion to pitch, rhythm, and lyric. The coordination of the components of music and language animates the resulting text so that the communicative features of these two elements coalesce in mutually supportive ways. Ethnomusicologist Irene Jackson's discourse on the panegyric oral tradition of the Bahia nation provides one example of the interdependence of speech and music toward a common goal in the oral narrative:

> There is no dichotomization in Nago ritual; the religious community is one of synthesis, whose dialects are functional and dynamic . . . Interrelated elements complement each other in complex patterns, as the rite is a symbol where nothing is gratuitous; music/cum/text are not perceived as separate entities, but as a vital part of the gestalt of the rite.
>
> (Jackson 151)

Thus, in Bahia ritual the ideological message is released in the combined effects of language and music. Indeed, Jackson indicates that this process produces not just an interdependence of narrative and music but an elemental integration.

In cultures with a vibrant oral tradition, music is typically embedded in day to day life and that critical dimension of music is played out in oral narrative performances. The close interplay of music and text enjoys a daily presence most clearly because of the intimate relationship of music to the many of the African languages. This total integration of music with lifestyle is perhaps due to the inherent musical qualities of the language in terms of rhythm, pitch, and phrasing. Ghanan ethnomusicologist J.H. Kwabene Nketia has remarked on the musical properties of language:

> African languages are tone languages, languages in which tone is phonemic or serves to distinguish words in much the same way as do vowels and consonants.
>
> (Nketia 184)

Negation, declarative, and interrogative determiners, syntax, and indications of parts of speech are all communicated through set pitches. Semantic tones are used to distinguish words of the same morphemal composition. In the Twi language, for example, the words for *hunter* and *messenger* are articulated with the same utterance but are distinguished from one another by pitch inflection. Similarly, in Twi a statement and a question would be composed of the same string of utterances with the declarative or interrogative property communicated through differences in pitch. Syntactical relationships may also be indicated by pitch. A noun can be made genitive by raising the tone located towards the end of the word. The noun-adjective relationship is indicated by a lower intoning of

the last syllable of the noun approaching the adjective (Nketia, *Music of Africa* 185). This reliance on intonation for linguistic communication provides a dual purpose of affording music a communicative property outside of the purely aesthetic while transforming the language into an art form.

It is perhaps the interdependence of music and language that gives melody and rhythm a privileged position in an African oral literary tradition. Oral storytelling has conventionally been the avenue for transmission of history, mythology, poems, and folk tales. Nketia relates that "the absence of an indigenous tradition of writing in the past made the song an invaluable medium for recording traditions and for creating social commentary and criticism." He goes on to say that storytelling is a combination of music, dance, and drama in which the song plays a crucial role (Nketia, *Ghana: Music, Dance, and Drama* 10). Within the oral tradition then, music has a practical as well as aesthetic value since it maintains considerable influence on the political, historical, and cultural identity of the people.

Additionally, music is a valuable component of oral narrative as it encourages the emotional involvement of the listeners and invites participation through the various formal structures of the songs. In all cultures, one can note the spiritual effect of melody and rhythm and the ability of music to elicit an emotional response. Regarding this function of music as it relates to African narratives, Nketia relates: “while the song texts provide the significant changes in thought, mood, or feeling, it may be the music that defines or expresses the general character of the occasion or the spirit of the performance” (Nketia, *Music of Africa* 178). Thus, in the oral narrative, music is a functional tool used to draw listeners into the literature emotionally. The structure of the

song-text as it is inscribed in the narrative also supports and encourages community involvement. Although the oral rendition is commonly led by a delegated cantor, the antiphonal structure of songs encourages active verbal participation on the part of the audience. In addition, spontaneous melodic verbal comments by individual listeners are also encouraged and often expanded on by the orator or cantor.

One sociopolitical advantage of this collaborative approach to oral narrative and song is that the audience experiences solidarity in identity and agency. The structural emphasis of the validity of group participation gives voice to the congregation and designates power to the masses to control their history and cultural delineation. The group is able to recognize the value and power of the culture and may view culture as a force contributing to self-definition as opposed to an anthropologically derived function defined by a voyeuristic congregation. This privileging of the listener(s) in the manipulation of the discourse and formal structure of the text is an empowerment foreign to traditional Western literary conventions. Indeed in its reified form, the print-text novel precludes "audience" interaction as well as the malleability of the text. Just as Bakhtin's models of authoritative an internally persuasive discourse reflect narrative malleability and the agency of the author/cantor, these modes of discourse illuminate the interactive dynamic of the oral tradition. To this point, an occidental approach to the print-text narrative tends towards Bakhtin's notion of *authoritative discourse*:

> It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously

> creative stylizing variants on it.... It is indissolubly fused with its authority -- with political power, an institution, a person.
>
> (Bakhtin 345)

It is perhaps this occidental devotion to the printed literary word that sets up the author as an uncontested authority. Approaching literature via the authoritative discourse runs counter to an African concept of equitable distribution of textual power. Closer to the African oral tradition would be a dialogic concept that would permit the reader/listener to inscribe her/himself into the text. Bakhtin refers to this doublevoicedness as a *heteroglossia*,[2] which spontaneously evolves from his notion of an internally persuasive discourse:

> . . . the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us [as readers] as it is further, that is, freely, developed applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts.
>
> (Bakhtin 345 – 346)

In this sense, internally persuasive discourse naturally occurs within the oral presentation. Nketia indicates the symbiotic relationship between several participants within an oral performance: "A good dancer follows the master drummer, but where there is good will, a master drummer would change the style of the drumming if a dancer

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[2] David Richter defines heteroglossia as "the notion that the meaning of language is socially determined, that utterances reflect social values and depend for their meaning on their relation to other utterances," (Richter 725).

changed his movements ahead of the music" (Nketia 229). Similarly, the narrative writer/orator does not establish him/herself as a textual authority but rather the invites the audience to lend voice to the creation of the text. In this way, the narrative is the product of a cooperative effort with the cantor acting as the guiding force.

**The Properties of Noise**

One of the challenges then in translating the oral narrative into a print-text format is to construct a work that involves the emotional and creative networking of the community by encouraging equitable participation. This challenge can include the creative adaptation of oral tradition conventions, like music, song, and other narrative devices that invite participation. It becomes clear then that one of the major challenges experienced by African creators of print literature is in reflecting these properties of oral narrative in print. In order to better locate and recognize the features of the oral tradition within a print-text form and to better understand the authors' creative negotiation of these features, we would do well to consider a number of these components in some detail. We might first address the intrinsic relationship of melody to many of the African languages. In *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms,* John Miller Chernoff informs us that

> African languages are what are called "tonal" languages. In tonal languages, the pitch of a spoken word is important in determining its meaning, and the "same" sound pronounced at different pitches can mean entirely different things.
>
> (Chernoff 74)

Evidence of this relationship can be found in the ordering of elements of pitch to create a melodic phrase. According to Nketia, most African melodic foundations do not rely on an ordered set of pitches from which a tonal sequence is drawn as is the custom in Western music. Even in cultures where a scale or mode system is employed, the exact frequency of the pitch and indeed, often the ordering itself, are not stringent. When scales are formed they are usually pentatonic, hexatonic, or heptatonic and arranged in equidistant patterns. Most often, however, melodies are based on intervalic patterns. Sequences of linear and interlocking intervals are aligned to form a cohesive whole (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 116-124). The intervals typically reflect the natural melodic inflections of the language. In this sense, the melodic structure of oral narratives is influenced by linguistic models. To this point, Nketia relates that instrumental music is often imitative of "melodic intervals, contours and phrases characteristic of the particular vocal tradition" (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 119). Regarding most African languages, this relationship of melody and speech is particularly apparent. Indeed, in Gikuyu a melody might be suggested by the mere utterance of a phrase. In this way melodic composition is strongly guided by the tonal quality of the African languages. Occasionally, the pitches of the spoken phrase conflict with the predetermined melodic sequence. In this case the spoken tone is altered to suit the melody and the word is understood through rhythm and context. One can observe then that there is no distinct hegemony in the relationship of melody and text and that they are, in fact, functionally interdependent. In this way, the lexicon and syntax of the narrative text influences both the melody and structure of song (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 177).

Because African languages, like Gikuyu, are typically "tonal languages" (a language in which tone is phonemic) a melody might be suggested by the mere utterance of a phrase. Melodic composition is, thus, strongly guided by the tonal qualities of African languages, and African speech likewise recommends certain melodic sequences. In this way, oral texts, by virtue of the correlation of speech to pitch, often become song texts. Clearly then, the interdependence of words and music is made obvious in an oral performance. Musicologist Ruth Finnegan suggests that oral narratives may be more analogous to music than to printed literature because of this correlation between melody and language: without its oral realization and direct rendition by singer or speaker an unwritten

> literary piece cannot easily be said to have any continued existence at all. In this respect the parallel is less to written literature than to music and dance; for these are two art forms, which in the last analysis are actualized in and through their performance.
>
> (Finnegan 2)

In addition to considerations of the pitch and lyricism of language, African authors would also need to address the communicative rhythmic properties of native speech. Nketia points out that rhythm is an important vehicle of communication. Like pitch and tone, the rhythm of a musical composition or song is often derived from a spoken phrase. Because rhythms often depend on language, African rhythms are much more developed and complex. In order to better mirror the unordered and often spontaneous rhythm of language, the African rhythms must allow for significant diversity in meter and phrasing. Whereas traditional Western-classical music has relied on triple

and duple meter, the African pieces are characteristically composed in odd times (5/4 and 9/8 for example). A multitextural rhythmic configuration is formed by the synthesis of what Western music theorists would call odd-time rhythms into a single piece. The various lines begin at the same point and repeat independently converging only after a time determined by the greatest common denominator. This "counterpoint" of rhythm is especially effective when executed by varying timbres. Syncopation, hemiola, and off-beat techniques also contribute to the rhythmic interest. It is the use of hemiola in conjunction with additive alterations of the basic rhythmic unit that form the foundation of the intricate structure. These modifications allow the composer/performer greater freedom for improvisation because the techniques transcend strict meter and phrasing formulas. Hemiolas, for example, might allow for a triple feel within a duple framework. An additive technique, which strings smaller units of rhythm to create a longer line, would further compound possibilities by throwing the beats off meter.

Simultaneous execution of these alternate rhythms is a distinguishing feature of African music. These complex rhythmic stratifications are ultimately derived from the rhythm of the language. Indeed, in many African communities young children are educated in and able to perform these odd-time beats that many Julliard percussion students struggle with. The teaching method relies completely on imitation and repetition of oral phrases. Once the oral phrase is internalized rhythmically, it becomes second nature (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 168-174). The ultimate merging of percussion and speech can be heard in the African drum language. The drum language is executed in several ways. Perhaps the most easily conceivable for foreigners is the use of a code to represent words and phrases. This functions as Morse code does in the communication of

basic intentions. Much more elaborate and interesting, however, is the use of percussion in actual imitation and representation of language.

The drum language has had many practical applications in many African societies. It has been used to effect mass communication and in this way it can relate emergency information, make announcements, or give valuable information such as weather forecasts. It has been used in the religious ceremonies and other ritual activities. Regarding oral narrative, pitched drum language can be employed to communicate proverbs, history, or myths. Poetry is most often performed on the drums in addition to being recited, for instance. The Yorubas play and sing their oriki praise poems alternately. The close relationship of rhythm to language is made apparent by the ability of those in the community to communicate percussively. Ruth Finnegan observes: "... drums actually speak words, that form the point of view both of the analyst and of the people involved, the basis is a directly linguistic one" (Finnegan 245). It seems that the use of percussion to communicate becomes more efficient with the concurrent application of a distinct melody. While it is true that the drums are able to approximate pitch and thereby relate tonal speech quality, a more precise execution of pitch is naturally afforded by the use of the human voice or even the various African aerophones.

**African Song Structures**

Rhythm and pitch probably most succinctly cohere within the African song format. Since music is an integral part of African societies, the functional use of song both individually and within the community is common. In the personal spectrum, the lullaby is typically sung by the mother in a rhythmic almost chant-like manner. The tone

of the song is meditative and the melody simple and lilting. Children's songs are often educational. Nursery songs are used to teach pronunciation and vocabulary. Some songs are accompanied by actions or hand movements that simulate various work tasks; these kinds of songs would prepare children for future adult responsibilities. These action songs often evolve into games with the children arranged in a circle around a central figure or object. The Shona children play a game of this type in which they imitate an eagle catching chickens (Finnegan 312). Once a child grows to young adulthood, music is used in courtship. A Kassena Nankari adolescent of northern Ghana would enlist the help of an age-mate in courting a young woman. The interested gentleman sings the stanzas of the courtship song and the comrade repeats the verse antiphonally either vocally or on the flute (Finnegan 261). Music has also been used to keep the heritage of African nations alive. History is communicated to the youngsters through the "song of the elders." Here song provides a dual purpose of reminding the people of their roots and reinforcing respect for ancient traditions and attitudes. Naturally, the song is built on and modified by subsequent generations. In this way African communities become knowledgeable about their historical background. As well, honor and respect is enhanced through the solemnity of melody and tone. The motivating power of the song has been used by the workers in the fields in order to maintain a steady tempo for exertion of work. Here the work tune forms a communal bond between the farmers in addition to its functional capacity. The various communities or workers (farmers, craftsmen, women cooking, etc.) often have their own repertoire of music that can be used not only in the work setting but also in times of relaxation.

In the religious ceremonies, the gods commonly have their own songs which are performed at various festivals or within the praise ritual. The gods are praised through chanted diction and music. Here, again, we see the interdependence of speech and music towards a common goal. This function of song is present in Chinua Achebe's novel, *Arrow of God* where the narrative describes the various songs and instruments at the ritual mask initiation ceremony (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 197-201). In addition to the emotional effect produced, these religious songs also contribute to a feeling of community and group cooperation toward a common goal similar in nature to the work songs (Finnegan 272).

Likewise, political songs have provided the same function for many African communities. The Chopi society has a tradition of using "critical songs" to protest against the unfavorable actions of a chief or group leader. Because the dissatisfaction is expressed in a musical form the effect is not harsh. The acceptance of song as an aesthetic and functional medium affords the community a vocal outlet for their complaints (Finnegan 272). This tradition of political song has been especially applicable in the colonial arena. The freedom songs of South Africa have been famous internationally and have served not only as a critical medium for black South Africans but also as a vehicle for promotion of the cause. Because of the characteristic mutual integration of music and language, music has been able to be a covert tool in the cause of African civil rights. In the early 1900's in West Africa, the Ashanti conventionally played a traditional drum poem to mark the arrival of British dignitaries. The drum piece seemed to be executed ceremoniously and in honor but was in fact an old war song which repeatedly intoned "slowly but surely we shall kill Adinkra." Though not evident to the

colonizers, "Adinkra" denoted the British (Finnegan 285). There has also been overt politically motivated use of song within many African communities. In a manner similar to the indigenous South Africans' use of freedom songs, the people of North Rhodesia used tunes to put pressure on the Europeans to provide more access to civil rights. The texts of various songs divulged important facts on election procedures and state policy to the uninformed community (Finnegan 288).

Political songs proved to be an essential tool of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya in the early 1950's. The Mau Maus advertised their cause and elicited support through the spread of these subversive songs. The leaders of the movement capitalized on the Gikuyu love of hymn singing by setting seditious lyrics to familiar tunes. The Kenyans would easily memorize the songs and the message spread with the melody. There were many additional advantages to using songs to promote the cause. These hymns were expediently circulated throughout even the rural illiterate communities thereby having a more far-reaching effect than the government print propaganda. Since it was not the custom for most Europeans to familiarize themselves with the regional languages of the African communities in which they were living, they would have little opportunity to decipher or understand the Gikuyu political song. Moreover the ruling bodies were not likely to be threatened by songs and music because of the conventionality of the medium. The songs were therefore not suspect and were allowed to flourish and spread freely. These tunes also generated the same emotional effect among the citizens that were associated with the religious ceremonies and rituals. The songs, therefore, promoted solidarity and patriotism through the emotional bond of the people. These songs were habitually sung at KAU (Kenya African University) meetings and at independent schools

and churches. Indeed, the government was covertly attacked through its own political song by the Mau Maus as the leaders of the revolutionary group set new words to the British national anthem that in essence asked the gods for a blessing on Jomo Kenyatta and the ambitious revolutionaries (Finnegan 17).

In this way, songs have become a standard tool for most African political movements. Songs and music were favored for their intelligibility by the masses, expediency of communication, emotional patriotic effect, and efficacy for real political change. This use of song to mobilize can be seen in much of the literature. For example, the women in Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* use the power of song to sustain their strength and motivation on their political march. Many of Achebe's novels figure characters engaging song for political ends. English Zimbabwe Scholar, Emmanuel Ngara, supports the legitimacy of Achebe's use of song to the point of mobilization as he comments on the use of song to promote Marxist ideals: "Zimbabweans, young and old, wrote and composed revolutionary and Marxist inspired poems and songs. An important feature of *The Voice of Zimbabwe* radio program in Maputo was the singing and teaching of revolutionary songs and significantly enough, each broadcast concluded with the singing of the song 'Kune Ngira dze Masoja,' the soldiers code of behavior which is a Shona rendering of Mao Tse-Tung's eight guiding points for guerilla fighters" (Ngara 27).

Often the formal structure of a song is determined by its function. For example, the aforementioned "work songs" promote pride and solidarity among the individual guilds and work groups. In this format the call-response structures between soloist-chorus lend themselves particularly well with the senior member of the group controlling the

action and tempo of the community as cantor (Merriam 58). The antiphonal structure is also used in congregational religious and ritual ceremonies. In initiation rituals the central initiated figure or group sings an emotional melody celebrating their transition to adulthood. The initiate might also be called upon to perform a solo song, which may be personal and improvised. In this way, the initiate creates an oral text that reflects and communicates a self-constructed identity. The audience recognizes the initiate's construction by replying within the antiphonal format of the narrative. The Ila and Tanga peoples of Zambia retain this personal composition and ownership of a song as part of their identity. The individual may be called upon on both formal and informal occasions to perform the personalized tune (Finnegan 269).

Repetition is another device that often lends structure to a song/narrative. Indeed repetition is a hallmark of the African oral tradition. Within the narrative a word, phrase, or stanza can be repeated as part of an antiphonal framework. A common method uses the call-response structure where a cantor sings a phrase that is then repeated antiphonally by the chorus. It is the cantor's prerogative to alter the text, melody, or rhythm of the phrase, the chorus must follow his lead. Another procedure is for the leader to begin a phrase and for the chorus to help finish. In a third form, the leader sings a phrase and then joins in with the chorus on the repetition; in this way, the cantor is continuously active. An additional structure is created by the singing of a melodic narrative phrase by the cantor with the chorus interjecting a repetitive stanza. In each case, the cantor is guiding the song by controlling the text and the structure formed by repetitions. Although this leader-chorus antiphonal format is the most common type of African song organization, there are alternate forms. For example, the antiphonal procedures may be executed by two

soloists, without chorus. Occasionally in this form the chorus supplies a repetitive ostinato underpinning over which the soloists sing in imitative polyphony. Another contrapuntal structure is formed when a group of soloists sing their phrases first individually and then simultaneously or in alternate groupings. This arrangement allows for individual expression within the communal unit (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 140-147).

The performance of an oral narrative represents then the synthesis of music and language. Due in part to the tonal quality of speech, the mere narration would in itself suggest melody and rhythm. For this reason, the conveying of oral narrative can sound very much like song. The structure of the oral literature performance calls for a narrator who is most often surrounded by the "audience." This is an audience within the African oral tradition where the audience is less a silent spectator than a motivated and essential participant in the construction of the text. Although the narrator is the central figure in the execution of the oral performance, s/he requires collaboration with the audience. The narrator alternates from speech to song structure depending on the tone and action of the story. The singing of a phrase is often a signal to the audience to respond antiphonally by either intoning the phrase in imitation or providing an answer (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 178). The leader controls the formal organization and content of the performance in a manner similar to a cantor's in the sense that the cantor often likewise invites communal participation by the audience. It is clear, then, that music and song contribute not only to the telling of the tale but to the formal structure of the narrative and so are indispensable facets of African oral narratives.

**Grappling with the Text: Ngugi's Struggle**

African authors have attempted to integrate the formal and performative features of an oral tradition into the print text genre since western print-literature has not typically communicated the features of an oral performance, such as pitch and rhythm. The manifestation of music and song in African oral literature clearly presents a problem for many print-text African authors. In attempting to reconcile themselves with the literary style and language of the colonizing government they have often had to forsake essential qualities of their linguistic culture. A few writers have attempted to simplify the problem of capturing these qualities in print by opting to compose in their vernacular language. Naturally, for many authors this choice is not only a linguistic one but a political one. Ngugi recognized the dual purpose of such a move in his *Decolonising the Mind*:

"I would like to see Kenya peoples' mother tongues (our national languages!) carry a literature reflecting not only the rhythms of a child's spoken expression but also his struggle with nature and his social nature" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 28). We can see the close relationship between the motivations of the African vernacular novelist and those of the composers of political songs. Emmanuel Ngara draws this parallel between the subversive song and patriotically or politically motivated literature: "In times of social upheaval literature, like revolutionary music, can become a powerful weapon in the hands of those fighting for justice and human rights" (Ngara 24). For many contemporary African novelists, the creation of vernacular literature simultaneously sets out to mediate western and indigenous literary forms and mobilize for political and social change.

Ngugi had already established himself firmly in the ranks of the highly respected and successful African print authors who wrote in English with novels like *A Grain of Wheat* when, in 1980, he made the decision to write his first Gikuyu novel, *Caitaani Mutharabaini* (*Devil on the Cross*). Importantly, this work communicated a well-resolved decision to abandon colonial forms in favor of the indigenous variants. Ngugi's resolve to preserve the culture of native Africa had been well established. In his essay, "Literature and Society" Ngugi pointed to western corruption of indigenous African culture as a subversive colonization: "Cultural imperialism was then part and parcel of the thorough system of economic and political oppression of the colonized peoples and literature was an integral part of that system of oppression and genocide" (Killam 28). The writing of *Caitaani Mutharabaini* was a self-consciously subversive act, meant to reinstate African culture, literature and languages in particular, in the various communities and to globally announce African literature as being culturally valuable and relevant.

Although one cannot ignore the political ramifications of writing in the vernacular, part of the decision to compose a Gikuyu work must certainly have rested within the scope of aesthetics and communication. Ngugi acknowledged the problems of capturing African linguistic tone and rhythm in translation in a 1971 interview.

> In Chinua Achebe's or Leonard Kibera's writing there is a kind of tension in their work which arises out of the fact that they're using the English language created by one cultural environment to capture a rhythm and life, a rhythm of speech created by a totally different cultural environment.
>
> (Killam 48)

Ngugi recognized that in order to reclaim African literary culture, one of the issues authors must struggle with is the inscription of the lyric qualities of indigenous speech as they participate in the oral tradition. In part, the difficulty in translating the lyrical language into a print format was grounded in the inadequate Gikuyu orthography, which had largely been developed by non-native speakers, like the European missionaries. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi refers specifically to his efforts to codify vowel sounds and the length of these sounds. Attention to these details was required since accurate articulation of these sounds in print was essential to coherent communication. Ngugi recalls the process:

> I tried to solve the problem by using double vowels where I wanted to indicate the long vowel. But it took several pages before I could get used to it. And even then it was never finally satisfactory for what it called for was a new letter or a new marker for the long vowel. Gikuyu is also a tonal language but the prevailing orthography did not indicate tonal variations.
>
> (Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind* 74)

One concern then was the successful expression of the lyrical qualities of native languages in print. Ngugi's experience clearly reflects narrative lyricism as having aesthetic, political, and even pragmatic significance, since the language's tonal properties are central to a responsible interpretation of the text.

*Caitaani Mutharabaini* enjoyed instant popularity in Kenya. The initial five thousand copies were sold within a month, contrary to the expectations of the publisher who had predicted one to five years. Five thousand more copies were printed one month after publication and another five thousand by the end of the year. By 1990, the

publishers reported annual sales of one thousand, which is competitive with any English language novel marketed in Africa (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 84). Ngugi attributed his success to the mass accessibility of the novel, even to the suburban illiterate. According to Ngugi, the print-text novel was incorporated into the oral tradition in interesting ways. The novel was read within families as well as outside of the domestic arena. An interesting by-product was the development of "professional readers" in local pubs. For the compensation of a constantly full beer mug, the reader would read the novel aloud to the gathered customers. Ngugi himself distinguishes this practice as an "appropriation of the novel into oral literature" (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 26). The success of Ngugi's novel as an oral narrative is no coincidence. According to the author, it was created with the rhythm and pitch of the language in mind: "I also borrowed heavily from forms of oral narrative, particularly the conventional poem, the fable, proverbs, songs ..." (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 77). Through these attempts to capture the musical spirit of oral narrative in print, Ngugi was able to create a work that transcended the print and was successful in both forms -- the oral and the written.

**Orality as a Tool of Resistance in *Matigari***

Like *Caitaani Mutharabaini*, Ngugi's second Gikuyu novel, *Matigari*, is also extraordinary for its total immersion in the oral tradition. In addition to serving as a content motif, the oral narrative provides the foundation of a formal structure, serves as a plot device, and politically mobilizes. It is evident that, in *Matigari*, Ngugi was trying to produce the same oral style in his narrative that made *Caitaani Mutharabaini* so appealing. Indeed, in *Matigari*, we witness a complete infusion of oral narrative

performance features in content and form. The tone of the oral tradition is established up front, before the narrative even begins, with the author's preliminary address to the reader/listener:

> This story is imaginary.
>
> The actions are imaginary.
>
> The characters are imaginary.
>
> The country is imaginary -- it has no name even.
>
> Reader/listener: may the story take place in the country of your choice!
>
> The story has no fixed time.
>
> Yesterday, the day before yesterday, last week...
>
> Last year Or ten years ago?
>
> Reader/listener: may the action take place in the
>
> time of your choice!
>
> And it has no fixed space.
>
> Here or there ...
>
> This or than village ...
>
> This or that region.
>
> Reader/listener: may you place the action in the space of your choice!
>
> And again, it does not demarcate time in terms of seconds
>
> Or minutes or hours Or days.
>
> Reader/listener: may you allocate the duration of any of the actions according to your choice!
>
> So say yes, and I'll tell you a story!

Once upon a time, in a country with no name …

(4)

The explicit address to a "reader/ listener" is significant in the sense that the author presents the novel as not just a work to be read silently, as one might typically approach a western novel, but a work to be read aloud, indeed, to be performed. Thus, we find that, in the manner of the oral narrative, Ngugi invites the reader/audience to participate in the composition of the novel by choosing the country, the time reference, the "space," and the duration of action.

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi relates the strong impression that the oral performance experience made on him in terms of communal participation: “I can vividly recall those evenings of storytelling around the fireside. It was mostly grown-ups telling the children but everyone was interested and involved” (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 10). Similarly, in this preface to *Matigari*, Ngugi is inviting the community to participate in his story just as the oral narrator enlists the help of the gathered group and signals the community to join in. This introduction, therefore, sets up the narrator as the storyteller, in the tradition of oral performance. This narrator functions as an orator or cantor might with the reader/listener as active participants in the creation and performance of the work.

In addition to this feature of communal participation, the prologue resembles song by virtue of its structure. The address is in strophic form with a modified repetitive thought sounding off each stanza. There are four stanzas of five lines each forming a symmetrical whole that adapts easily to choral repetition. The punctuation might be read as an indication of dynamics. The last line of each stanza and the first line of the final

quasi-couplet all end with exclamation points signifying a change in dynamic level. These moments of rising dynamics propel the lines into the subsequent stanzas.

The lyrical structure of the prologue sets the tone for the ensuing novel. In fact, the narrative form throughout is imitative of African oral narrative in style and formal organization so that Ngugi's attempt to capture the style and format of the oral tradition is evident throughout the piece. In Chapter Seven, for example, the dialogue is fairly repetitive, with the speakers often reiterating words and phrases that had just been introduced into the conversation:

> 'Muriuki. My name is Muriuki.'
>
> 'Yes, that's right a place a where Muriuki and I can find something to eat ...'
>
> 'Do you live in a children's village?' Ngauro asked.
>
> 'Yes, that's where I live,' the boy replied.
>
> (19)

In many cases the substance of the question is included in the response:

> 'And who are you my son?' he asked the man.
>
> `Who, me?' the worker said. 'My name is Ngauro wa Kiriro.'
>
> 'Ngaruro? Of the Kiriro clan?'
>
> (19)

Presented in this manner, the repetition imitates well oral narrative performance practice whereby the listeners/audience echo significant words, phrases, and statements. This device engages the community and at the same time functions as a mnemonic strategy for keeping track of key points in the text.

Another variety of the imitative lyrical format is seen/heard at the beginning of

the tale in Chapter Two. In this passage, Ngugi begins each line similarly with either the pronoun “His” or “He.” In the text’s language of origin, Gikuyu, the masculine personal pronoun and possessive pronoun would be rhythmically the same, as they are in English. Likewise, in Gikuyu these pronouns would begin with the same initial sound, as they do in English. Thus, repetition here emphasizes the alliteration of the initial consonants. This narrative technique is also reminiscent of the African oral narrative procedure where each line is begun in the same fashion but completed in an improvisatory manner.

> His feet felt heavy. He decided to rest for a while. He laid his coat on the ground and sat on it in the shade leaning back against the tree. He removed his hat, placed it on his left knee and wiped his brow with his right hand. His hair was a mixture of black and grey. His brow had creased with fatigue. He yawned drowsily. How could it be so oppressively hot so early in the morning?
>
> (5)

Beyond the aesthetic value of repetition, the reiteration of specific words and phrases serves other very practical purposes. In *Griots and Griottes*, Thomas Hale relates that in the oral narrative, repetition is commonly used to stress a point, thus calling attention to significant moments and articulations in the text. Additionally, repetition can be employed to “indicate the passage of time or movement” (Hale 138). The repeated intonation of the agent, “He,” in this section of *Matigari* effects a virtual rubato in the tempo of the text, thus underscoring Matigari’s fatigue in the midst of an agitated stream of activity. In this way the sound of the repeated prose supports the content.

In Chapter Thirteen we can locate the integration of an additional component of oral narrative. This scene takes place in the prison cell where each prisoner consecutively sings/says a line in turn.

'First he retches! Then he pisses!'

'Now all that's left for him to do is shit on us!' 'Pinch him!'

'Punch him!'

'Wake up, weave punda milia!'

(52)

The lines are marked by exclamation points indicating excitement, a higher dynamic level, and perhaps a rapid-fire execution. This procedure is analogous to the oral narrative convention where each soloist sings a line individually and sequentially. The similarity between this section of the novel and the oral tradition convention is accentuated by Ngugi's choice of words further on in the passage:

> 'So our vomit was some kind of sacrifice to God,' one of them said again sarcastically. 'And your fast was no doubt the sound of thunder,' echoed another. 'Rain, rain, come today, so I may slaughter a calf for you. And another with a hump!' somebody else sang.

(53)

The carefully chosen terms, "echoed" and "sang," emphasize repetition and musical interplay, thus indicating both an imitative and tonal quality for these lines.

Chapter Thirteen proceeds with each prisoner executing a short narrative in an attempt to identify himself or 'tell his tale.' This is the analogous to the procedure that anthropologist Ruth Finnegan describes where a community member who is coming of

age introduces him or herself to the community by way of a personal narrative or song. Within this format, after the individual lines are sung, they are expanded on by each soloist (Finnegan 269).

Oral narratives typically rely on the motivic use of words and phrases to engage the community and to provide formal structure. In *Matigari,* Ngugi makes great use of motifs and thematic phrases. As in the oral tradition, these themes and motifs contribute to the lyrical flow of the piece and also contribute to the establishing the structural framework of the novel. Specifically, phrases are repeated motivically in the novel to unify and organize the entire narrative. We can consider the "belt of peace" theme as one phrase that behaves like a lyrical motif within the text. Ngugi refers to "the belt of peace" throughout the narrative in relation to Matigari. In this sense, it becomes a prop that is explicitly associated with this character. In European classical music, we can point to a similar, analogous device called the leitmotif. Typically employed in large narrative works, like operas, the leitmotif is associated with one character or idea. The "appearance" of the leitmotif signals an explicit reference to the coordinating character or idea. In his operas (*The Ring Cycle*, for example), Wagner employed leitmotifs that both collaborate in the production of a tonal narrative and structurally organize the works. In a similar manner, the "belt of peace" theme referentially signals the needs, concerns, and desires of Matigari. Because "the belt of peace" motif is associated with Matigari, it necessarily appears in all three broad sections of the novel. The motif is introduced in the beginning of the text where we see Matigari fastening it as a sign of a revised approach to revolution and the reinstatement of the African native. The "belt of peace" is explicitly referenced again at the end of the text where we see Matigari removing it in order to

accommodate the artillery he deems necessary for armed struggle. Thus, the "belt of peace" motif provides a thematic unifying thread by adeptly connecting all three sections of the work.

Another motif appears in the story in the form of a question. "Who was (is) Matigari ma Njiruungi?" The interrogative form of the motif is interesting because it invites a response. Even more intriguing is the fact that the question is never really answered. The open-ended quality of the query provides further agency for the reader/listener in contributing to the construction of meaning in the text. Like "the belt of peace," we find this motif interposed throughout the text and functioning as a lyrical phrase in a musical piece would in terms of creating unification and contributing to the overall formal structuring. The query first appears as the last line in Chapter Nine of the first section. It is also the concluding phrase of the entire first section. The motif is thereafter employed with increasing frequency. It is then used as the final line in both the second section and the penultimate chapter of the complete novel. Thus, the question provides a motif-like link between the three sections of the book and also contributes to the shaping of the entire work by serving as the concluding thought for each section.

While the community repeatedly intones "Who was (is) Matigari ma Njiruungi?" Matigari articulates his own interrogative motif, "Where can one find truth and justice?" This heartfelt question is also never answered though Matigari poses it to most every character in the novel. Interestingly, these motifs function in a parallel manner. Matigari does not provide a desirable response for the community nor does the community for him. This reciprocal lack of cooperation or communication is a dissonance in the novel. In this case, the two units are not functioning harmoniously and seem to be on diverging

paths. It is a polyphonic stratification but one that is never blended or reconciled. This dissonant clashing of motifs contributes to Matigari's difficulty in making himself completely intelligible to society.

Throughout the narrative, Matigari attempts to use lyric to engage the community, but no one cooperates. Not only do we find prevalent conventions of the African oral tradition embedded in the narrative structure of *Matigari*, but we also see/hear discrete references to oral performance in the form of song units, like Matigari's lyrics, that are interspersed throughout the work. The aesthetic appeal of the song fragments is clear. Most African reader/listeners would recognize the interjection of song as reminiscent of the oral narrative heritage. Indeed, Matigari endeavors to use song throughout the story in order to elicit a response and promote communal involvement. It is Matigari's strategy to set himself up as cantor or narrator so that he may lead the community. Prior to his arrival in the city and his first interaction with the other central characters, he rehearses two traditional songs that he remembers from his days in his hometown.

If only it were dawn,

If only it were dawn,

So that I can share the cold waters with

the early bird.

(4)

Great love I saw there,

Among the women and the children.

We shared even the single bean

That fell upon the ground.

(6)

The integration of songs like these into the novel is imitative of oral narrative performance where brief traditional songs are interjected at various moments throughout the text. Hale refers to the utilization of song within oral tradition practices of the Mandes: “there are several poetic modes, which can be likened to meters, with different functions for each: the narrative mode recounts the story, while the song mode highlights events in the story” (Hale 134). Strategically placed then, songs can signal critical junctures in the narrative. In Ngugi’s novel, we find the central character, Matigari, employing traditional tunes in order to recall the heritage of the native African culture. The nostalgic recollection of these tunes prepares Matigari for his future undertaking of the cantor/storyteller role. He attempts to engage the community by hopefully introducing songs that he believes will still be relevant to his people. Unfortunately, Matigari finds that the community has forgotten many of the old traditions, including oral performance practice and the native songs. When he meets the children for the first time he asks, “What was the song we used to sing?” but they don't seem to know the correct response. Again, in the prison, he calls to his cell-mates, “What did we use to sing?” When he once again finds an unreceptive audience, Matigari provides his own response with the “bean song.” The prisoners listen but have forgotten how to respond. They clearly cannot recall the old songs and traditions.

> Something in Matigari’s voice made them listen to him attentively. There was a sad note about it but it also carried hope and courage. The others now fell silent. His words seemed to remind them of things long forgotten, carrying them back to

dreams they had had long before.

(56)

Matigari repeatedly attempts to initiate the characters he encounters into the oral tradition. One motivation is to revive the native cultural traditions. This cultural revival would naturally lead to a sense of native national pride, which would then incite an awareness of the colonial mechanisms paralyzing the community. In this way, and perhaps most significantly, these songs are meant to recruit the native population for the revolution. This seems to be his tactic from the outset as is evident in Chapter Seven when Matigari meets Ngaruro wa Kiriro for the first time. At the initial introduction, Matigari strives to engage Ngaruro in the oral tradition by attempting to establish a relationship of narrator/audience or guide/recruit. The dialogue is marked by short repetitive phrases.

'What is you name?' Ngaruro Kiriro asked him.

'Matigari ma Njiruungi.'

'Matigari ma Njiruungi?'

'Yes, that is my name.'

(20)

As the young working class radical, Ngaruro is more receptive than others to Matigari's drive to decolonize. This receptiveness is reflected in Ngaruro's fluent articulating of the repetitive lines. Indeed, Ngaruro seems at ease with the antiphonal structuring of Matigari's discourse.

Immediately following this interchange Matigari lapses into the "Settler Williams narrative." There is a clear parallel between the narrative format established by Matigari

and that of oral narrative. In *Griots and Griottes*, Thomas Hale points to the tendency of the oral "epic" tradition to embed "legends within legends, each of which may contain praise names, folk etymologies, proverbs, incantations, curses, and oaths" (Hale 136). Alternating imitative lines followed by solo narrative is a structural pattern in oral narrative. As well, the narrator comments on the tonal as well as the traditional qualities of Matigari's narrative.

> His melodious voice and his story had been so captivating that Muriuki and Ngaruro wa Kiriro did not realize that they had searched the restaurant. His story had transported them to other times long ago when the clashing of the warriors bows and spears shook trees and mountains to their roots.
>
> (22)

Through his "performance" Matigari is attempting to provide what he considers to be essential and relevant historical information. He assumes that by using the traditional oral narrative form, his listeners will be not only attentive but moved to participate in the radical coup that he's plotting.

Matigari repeats this tactic of using the "Settler Williams" story in Chapter Ten where he meets Guthera and again when he encounters the prisoners in Chapter Thirteen. In both cases, the motivation is the same; he is recruiting followers for his revolution. In each case, it appears that Matigari achieves initial success in using traditional methods to capture the attention of his listeners and to encourage participation. There are those, however, who have forgotten or who have chosen to forsake their cultural heritage. A classic example of the effectively colonized native who has abandoned the indigenous culture appears in the character of John Boy, the son of Settler Williams' native lackey.

In Chapter Ten, Matigari employs his song strategy with John Boy but with disappointing results. Seemingly, his plan is to educate John Boy as to his historical past through oral narrative, but after several lines he is interrupted in mid-sentence by John Boy who complains, “Look, I don't want history lessons; I only asked you about the house” (45). It is clear that John Boy does not wish to participate in the oral performance. He has been thoroughly colonized by way of his overseas, occidental education. He has adopted the language, clothes, and philosophy of the imperial government and has relinquished his heritage. The motivations of both characters become clearer as the scene progresses. After this initial failure, Matigari makes a further attempt to involve John Boy in the oral narrative by singing a politically motivated song, perhaps designed to touch his emotions and spark his patriotism.

‘You foreign oppressor.

Pack your bags and leave!

For the owner of this house is on his way!’

(46)

Matigari’s methods prove to be ineffective, however, and the song is not adapted and repeated by the listener. In fact, at one point, when John Boy hears his father’s name used disrespectfully, his response comes in the form of a crack of his whip. Matigari persists, however, in his struggle to win over John Boy by reminding him of the significance of native community resources, to John Boy’s western education, the foundation of his current neo-colonial position. Matigari articulates these resources as material monetary backing as well as emotional support grounded in collaborative song.

> Are you the boy we sent abroad? The boy the cost of whose education we all contributed to, singing with pride: Here is one on our own and not a foreigner's child over whom I was once insulted? The boy for whom we sang: he shall come back and clear up our cities, our country, and deliver us from slavery?
>
> (48)

Matigari tries to shame John Boy into assuming responsibility for retaking the territory and reinstating his native culture by reminding him that he was once the community's hope for the future as well as the subject of native community songs. In this way, Matigari attempts to alert John Boy as to his obligations to his community through political action and reverence of tradition. The words are lost on John Boy, however, and he responds to Matigari's invitation to participate by speaking of the "freedom of the individual." His rejection of communal interaction is further evidence of his complete integration into the European way of life.

It becomes increasingly evident as the story progresses that John Boy is not the only member of the indigenous community who has forgotten or forsaken the traditional practices. This cultural amnesia can be seen in the reluctance of citizens and certainly the government officials to respond to Matigari's lyric. In performing the traditional narratives and songs, Matigari is the one who is perceived to be out of sync with contemporary neocolonial culture since he is the one who sings the wrong song and is not familiar with the newer, more progressive songs and practices. The incongruity of Matigari's traditional narrative is made especially apparent in the second section, where Matigari employs the "truth and justice motif." The first time he sings this query is at a

shopping center. Here the store owner and customers are busy singing the praises of the man who had become a legend, Matigari. Ironically, when Matigari himself appears and invites them to respond, they reject his attempt to engage them in his oral narrative and, in fact, because of the colonial displacement of the tradition, probably don't know how to reply.

> 'Kindly tell me this, my friends. Where can one find truth and justice in this society?' They fell silent and just stared at the stranger as if he had struck the wrong chord or a popular melody. Then they started talking to one another complaining about the man who spoilt their song.
>
> (73)

It appears that although the people are fascinated by the image of the man, they are deaf to his message in song. In fact, the citizens of Trampville compose their on song to honor the legend of Matigari. The lyrics reflect their captivation by way of the tales and miracles surrounding Matigari as hero but the lyrics don't mention the political message of his tune.

> Show me the way to a man
> Whose name is Matigari ma Njiruungi,
> Who stamps his feet to the rhythm of bells.
> And the bullets jingle.
> And the bullets jingle.

He is seemingly revered as their savior and through the legend of his deeds, but the people are slow to digest his message. This attitude is clearly presented in the scene in which Matigari encounters women at a crossroad who are exchanging fabulous versions

of tales involving Matigari. Here, one of the women expresses the desire to meet the legend and to sing him the "Matigari ma Njiruungi" theme personally. At this point, Matigari himself greets them and intones, "Our people, where can one find truth and justice in this country" (77)? But once again, Matigari finds himself in the position of the singer of the wrong song. His lyrical invitation to respond is answered by, "What? What is he asking now? Let me be off." The women do not understand his song and so it is left incomplete and, in effect, unsung.

It is the teacher who finally clarifies Matigari's problem of being out of tune with society. He gives an anguished reply to the "truth and justice" motif and reminds Matigari in the process that the social climate has changed.

'Ssssshhhhh. Stop talking so loudly,' the teacher cautioned him.

'Yesterday is gone and forgotten. Today is a new day.'

(92)

He proceeds to counsel Matigari on the benefits of singing the "approved tune," sanctioned by the laws now governing the community.

' ..there are those who reap benefits from singing the approved tune,

those who dance in step with the approved dance.'

(92)

The teacher clearly views Matigari's songs as being politically radical and subversive. Surely Matigari is aware of the revolutionary tone of his songs. Indeed, the integration of political song into the antiphonal oral narrative structure is part of his recruitment strategy. To his mind, he is attempting to reach a logical goal vis a vis a traditional method with which he is comfortable and one that represents the heritage he is trying to

preserve. The teacher seeks to dissuade Matigari from his goal by schooling him in the new colonial cultural and narrative practices. Matigari is not convinced, however, and he retorts: "... far better are those who are going to gaol singing songs of courage rooted in their commitment to truth and justice ..." (92).

It is in Matigari's "song of resistance" that he defines his role as seeker of truth and justice. The song of resistance or the "he-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed" (97-98) motif exemplifies Matigari's argument with capitalist society. The song is initially directed toward the priest who, naturally, as a product of colonialism, does not value the message or play the game. He quickly tires of Matigari's "foolish questions" and "political fables" and endeavors to get rid of him as expediently as possible. The narrative clearly indicates that the priest is only receptive to the "approved tunes" of colonization.

What are the tunes sanctioned by the government? This becomes clear in the courtroom scene in Section Two. It seems that the government has compiled an approved repertoire of hymns that had been composed to replace the traditional African songs. This collection had been printed in a volume entitled, *Songs of a Parrot*. Clearly, the songs are based on western conventions, as the narrative reveals. These songs are anthologized in the hymn book "which had been composed by a group of specialists in the voices of parrots" (101). The printed anthology of tunes removes any possibility for improvisation or communal intersection with the text. Indeed, the followers of parrotology don't seem to be able to sing without the hymn book as reference: "They sang three stanzas from *Songs of a Parrot* and then sat down, clinging to the hymn book as though their lives depended on it" (104). Ngugi derived this reference to parroting from a 1984 speech made by

President Moi of Kenya upon his return from Addis Ababa on September 13th in 1984. His speech in part is as follows:

> ... I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots ... you ought to sing, the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should also put a full stop. This is how this country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it ...
>
> (Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* 86)

President Moi advocates a narrative style that has the reader/listener mindlessly parroting the texts he presents. Ngugi's reference points to Moi's obvious intention to set himself up as cantor or narrator for the country – but within the mode of an inflexible authoritative discourse, not an internally persuasive collaborative discourse in the traditional style of the oral narrative. In the novel, this reference also coordinates with his Excellency Ole Excellence's move to seize the role of leader of oral performance and song by advocating Parrotology. Apparently the government also recognizes the oral tradition, with narrative and song, as an effective tool of mobilization. Thus, any attempt to completely colonize the African society must include abolition of the oral tradition and an instatement of new western lyric conventions.

Since the *Songs of the Parrot* hymn book is presented as an authoritative discourse, in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the term, its power and influence must eventually break down. And indeed, the reader soon discovers that the *Songs of the Parrot* are not the only pieces performed in the courtroom; in fact this scene becomes a virtual cacophony of conflicting tunes and styles. It is Matigari who begins the agitation

with his juxtaposition of the "resistance song" ending with the motif, "Where are truth and justice on this earth?" The Minister for Truth and Justice does not recognize, or chooses not to recognize Matigari's performance mode, which is in the style of oral narrative, nor does the Minister acknowledge Matigari's texts since they are not in the *Songs of the Parrot* hymn book. The narrative has the Minister responding to Matigari's attempt to engage him by attacking Matigari's mode of discourse: "Stop speaking in parables. If you want to ask a question then do so in plain language" (113). Matigari's discourse, with traditional narrative and song at its base, presents a culturally and politically dissonant clash with the approved parrot songs.

Some of the citizens in the courtroom sing the song composed spontaneously by the people of Trampville. The minister immediately informs them that he has "banned that song." Clearly, songs other than the prescribed tunes are perceived as weapons by the government. They are texts that need to be rigorously controlled and banned. They represent a subversive threat to the stability of the ruling class. The priest contributes to the raucous scene with his narrative of the twelve commandments, which represent a colonial version of truth and justice. The student also takes part in the dissonance with his seditious composition: "Even if you detain us, Victory belongs to the people. Victory belongs to the people" (121)! The teacher responds to the student with support and cooperation, "I shall never sing like a parrot, never; I shall sing the same song of courage and hope that was sung by the brave and courageous students" (172). However, the teacher is forcibly hindered from singing the student's stanza. In order to retain the song and, in the process, maintain the conventions of the oral performance, the community of civilians sings the student's song and, in this way, provides the antiphonal response. This

communal antiphonal response acknowledges the legitimacy of the student's song for the people and so the tune becomes part of the community's tradition by being assimilated into the political song literature.

The courtroom provides a forum for the juxtaposition of the three sources of political song represented in the novel: the government's *Songs of the Parrot*, Matigari's songs, and the songs of the people. Although the ruling body attempts to eradicate all subversive (and traditional) texts by banning and substituting its own texts and narrative modes, the revolutionary oral texts prevail. In fact, by authoritatively privileging texts like *Songs of the Parrot*, the government and ruling culture dooms these texts. For one, setting the "approved" texts up as the authority calls attention to the existence of competing, insurgent texts. Homi Bhabha relates the problematic position of an authoritative ideological discourse:

> . . . it is rendered vulnerable by its attempt to make visible the place from which the social relation would be conceivable (both thinkable and creatable) by its inability to define this place without letting its contingency appear without condemning itself to slide from one position to another, without hereby making apparent the instability of an order that it is intended to raise to the status of essence.
>
> (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 298)

Through the act of energetically imposing the *Songs of the Parrot*, the ruling party recognizes the existence and proliferation of maverick texts. This recognition inadvertently gives the insurgent texts access to the very power structure that the authoritative texts seek to secure.

The scene ends with the people reiterating the Trampville song of Matigari ma Njiruungi, despite the insistence of the minister that “all subversive songs and dreams are banned” (125)! It is apparent that even though the people have not fully digested and assimilated Matigari’s motifs, texts and songs, they have been inspired to create their own in working toward a common goal. Indeed, the text tells us that the radical songs of the people “spread like wildfire in a dry season” and that ""he people sang them day and night.” In this way, the oral texts bring the message of revolution to all citizens, even the illiterate masses.

The polyphony of song in the courtroom is an effective prelude to the climax in Section Three. This climax occurs at the burning of John Boy's house and the Mercedes-Benz. The citizens form a circle around the pyre of these symbols of colonization and sing various improvisatory versions of the burn song. Here, we can note the community’s utilization of many of the traditional oral narrative structures. The burn song includes repetition of key ideas and phrases:

> Everything that belongs to these slaves must burn!
>
> Everything that belongs to these slaves must burn!
>
> Their coffee must burn!
>
> (167)

The narrative makes explicit the community’s employment of antiphony by indicating a repetitive, and presumably communal, response following the dashes in the print text:

> Yes, their coffee must burn!
>
> Burn detention without trial -- burn!
>
> Burn detention without trial -- burn!

Burn exiling of patriots -- burn!

Burn exiling of patriots -- burn!

Also the oral narrative form of a static beginning with varied ending is used:

They burned down the houses.

They burned down the tea-bushes

They burned down the coffee trees ...

(168)

These burn songs bring the people together in a communal setting and create the emotion and excitement necessary to inspire the masses. The citizens form a circle around the burning sacrifices as they would in a children's game or a religious ritual. Once again, we see a politically motivated contemporary adaptation of traditional oral narrative procedures. The novel ends with Muriuki's vision of all the nationalities of Africa singing "Victory shall be ours" in harmony.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the oral tradition is a major plot device in Ngugi's text. The authoritative mode of discourse, in the form of the imperially influenced *Songs of the Parrot*, is used by the government to convert and undermine indigenous cultural heritage. The oral tradition, as well as the texts and songs that are part and parcel of the tradition, is used by the people to force the government into action and to promote their cause. The oral tradition is used by Matigari to engage and reeducate his compatriots.

Initially, Matigari returns to recoup property. When he first arrives on the scene, he clearly indicates that the reoccupation and settling of the land is an essential sign of

the end of the colonial state. It seems somehow natural that the narrative should rely on this familiar trope as the emblem of national articulation. Homi Bhabha points to the "recurrent metaphor of the landscape" as "the inscape of national identity" that "emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 297). However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that the revitalization of culture through a collective recollection of pre-colonial traditions is as critical to the reinstatement of the pre-colonial community as the recovery of land. Indeed, Matigari invests much effort in reacquainting the folk with features of a forgotten heritage. In the end, the house is burnt to the ground, and Matigari has not realized his initial aim to recoup the landscape itself. He has, however, reawakened nostalgia for native traditions and culture. This nostalgia displaces the authority of the cultural and political criteria outlined in the *Volumes of Parratology* and elsewhere. This displacement upsets the hegemonic order, which values the imposed culture and, at the same time, does not efface those cultural precepts in place. In fact, Matigari generates a conflict of cultures and leaves the scene in chaos.

The land as a symbol of nationhood and national stability is relinquished for the representation of the community in flux as a vehicle for the reinstatement of the nation. Ultimately, it is the task of the community to identify and catalog the discrete units of Matigari's message and then to reconcile this information with the tenets of the authoritative culture. Neither Matigari nor the promoters of Parratology can claim to exclusively define a national identity. The struggle between the two discourses brings the

community to crisis. Homi Bhabha has discussed the consequences of this kind of crisis in the course of development of a national identity:

> … the claim to be representative provokes within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjest' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or imaginary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process.
>
> (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 297)

Since in Bhabha's terms neither Matigari nor the proliferators of Parrotology can solely represent a discrete and unified national identity, the community must sift through the competing ideologies in order to create a novel foundation for the developing nation.

In the end then, we do not find the various strands of the narrative tied neatly together, nor do the characters achieve any of the pre-established goals. Instead, the narrative leads the reader, rather atypically for conventional western novels, to a chaotic moment. However, it is within this chaos that we can catch a glimpse of the realization of Matigari's vision. Frantz Fanon indicates chaos as a necessary precursor to liberation, "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder" (Fanon 36). Implicit in this chaos is an aggressive, even militant urgency to cultivate an order that represents the native community. Indeed, in re-

girding himself with the belt of peace, Matigari demonstrates that he too has realized that being "armed with armed words" is insufficient. Fanon writes, "Non-violence is an attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table, before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made, before any blood has been shed. But if the masses, without waiting for the chairs to be arranged around the baize table, listen to their own voice and begin committing outrages and setting fire to buildings, the elite and the nationalist bourgeois parties will be seen rushing to the colonists to exclaim, 'This is very serious! We do not know how it will end; we must find a solution-some sort of compromise' " (Fanon 62). For Matigari and ultimately for the community as well, discourse and texts alone are insufficient tools for liberation. There must be a visceral, physical component to galvanize these efforts. Just as the Gikuyu oral tradition, which relies on physical gesture, dance, and song in its performance, cannot rely on text alone to reach its goal of effective communication, Matigari, in the end, concedes that an effective liberation movement cannot float on historic narratives and words alone. Decisive action must coordinate with these texts.

"To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves," said Sekou Toure.[3] In addition to allowing for a physical component to his narrative of liberation, Matigari ultimately recognizes that the traditional songs, like the bean song, must work in conjunction with more modern narratives that have emerged from the community, like the closing Burn song. In the traditional sense of the oral narrative, power to create the

[3] "The political leader as the representative of a culture," address to the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Rome, 1959. as quoted in Fanon op cit, 206.

narrative of rebellion must be disseminated among the various players in the revolution – leaders and followers alike. As a consequence, the narrative must accommodate contemporary productions as well as the traditional songs. While the native songs embody a pre-colonial ideal, the contemporary innovations significantly reflect the influence of the process of colonization. In this sense, Matigari found that a return to a pre-colonial cultural as well as physical state could not be realized. If the master singer were to include the voices of the people, he would need to deal with the problematic hybrid nature of the post-colonial voice.

Just as Matigari's approach to mobilization reflects an evolution of thought on effective implementation of native traditions, especially traditional songs and stories, Ngugi's approach to the novel reflects a struggle with an evolving native narration that acknowledges western colonialism while remaining close to the storytelling tradition. It is at this juncture where, for some African authors like Ngugi, the aesthetic becomes political. With *Matigari*, Ngugi addresses a need to reconfigure the oral narrative tradition in order to produce a narrative that rebels against cultural imperialism at the same time it recognizes the colonization of the cultural traditions as a fact of national history. Somewhat ironically, the move here is to break with tradition in order to salvage tradition. Fanon writes, "The desire to attach oneself to tradition or to bring abandoned tradition to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people. When a people undertakes an armed struggle against a relentless colonialism, the significance of tradition changes" (Fanon 224).

For Ngugi, entering into the print market while honoring the narrative traditions meant participating in and contributing to Bhabha's notion of hybrid post-colonial

culture. Ngugi's choice to *write* a novel in Gikuyu that incorporates features of the native oral tradition is a visceral sign of a hybrid colonial byproduct that reflects the problematic nature of the hybrid model within post-colonial discourse. In local as well as international forums, the real success of *Matigari* is that it represents a break-away form that defies categorization within a western print as well as an oral narrative paradigm. As an innovation then, *Matigari*, must be met on its own terms.

## Chapter II

### Walking the Walk: Searching for Truth through Talk-story and Music

> When I write most deeply, fly the highest, reach the furthest, I write like a diarist -- that is, my audience is myself. I dare to write anything because I can burn my papers at any moment. I do not begin with the thought of an audience peering over my shoulder, nor do I find my being understood a common occurrence anyway ---a miracle when it happens. My fantasy is that this self-indulgence will be good enough for the great American novel.
>
> - Maxine Hong Kingston
> "Cultural Mis-readings"

More than a narrative form, for Maxine Hong Kingston, talk-story or oral storytelling has been a way of life. In interviews and in her own implicit and explicit textual references, Kingston refers to stories told to her by relatives (mostly the women). During childhood and adolescence, these prevalent tales were important image forming agents. The stories communicated and embodied family, ethnic, and national history. The stories communicated ideas and values. The stories outlined behavior and social mores. In her own writing, Kingston has made clear her intent to infuse her print texts with a sense of the talk-story oral narrative heritage – not just in content but in form and style as well. Oral narrative influence derives from the Asian tradition to be sure, but also, in keeping with the bifurcate character of her Asian American texts, Kingston herself has positioned her work within the American tradition of the oral narrative.

Kingston has said, "I am in the tradition of American writers who consciously set out to create the literature of a new culture, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, the Beats all developed ears for dialect, street language, and experimented with how to make written language sound like spoken language" (Huntley 37).

**History of Chinese Immigration to the United States**

The Asian American literary tradition is a relatively new phenomenon. Although the United States manifests a centuries long flow of immigrants from the East, social and political policies have colluded in their attempt to thwart and even prevent the literary efforts of the diaspora. Recorded history of Chinese immigration to the Americas dates back to the 17th century when free trade between Europe and Asia provided the option for some Chinese traders to join the crews of European ships bound for American locales, like Mexico and Acapulco. The first *recorded* Chinese immigrant to the U.S., a cook whose name has been documented as Ah Nam, arrived in Monterey, California, in 1815 (Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 1980, p. 218 as cited by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). Through the first half of the nineteenth century, the numbers of Chinese immigrants increased as poverty, particularly in the Canton province, became more acute.

With the California Gold Rush of 1848, emigrants arrived from China to the U.S. in burgeoning numbers. The United States Citizen and Immigration Service reports that in "1852, at the height of the Gold Rush, 67,000 people came to California, of which 20,000 reportedly were from China." The vast majority of these immigrants from China

were men since it was the custom for men to immigrate alone with the idea that they would return with wealth cultivated at the "Golden Mountain." These men would support their families from a distance while the women managed the homesteads in China. In 1852, there were only seven Chinese women recorded in California, and most of these were reported to be prostitutes (Hirata 226 – 228 as quoted in Ling "Chinese American Women Writers" 219).

Subsequent to the Gold Rush, continued emigration to the U.S. was encouraged by considerable employment opportunities presented by U.S. industry and territorial expansion. In particular, Chinese labor contributed significantly to the construction of the west coast railroads. On June 18, 1868, the Burlingame-Seward Treaty was signed by China and the United States. Article V of the Treaty articulates an agreement on the free emigration of Chinese to the U.S.: "The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from the one country to the other, for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). By 1850, Chinese Americans numbered approximately 4,000 out of a total U.S. population of 23.2 million ("Becoming American: The Chinese Experience").

The early Chinese immigrants had always been targets for racially-driven ridicule in the U.S. An economic depression in the latter half of the nineteenth century only exacerbated racial tension for Asian Americans. This social tension and discrimination was underpinned by formal government legislation. In 1882, the U.S. government passed the first of four discriminatory immigration acts, designed to curtail and control Chinese

migration to the U.S. These laws represented the first U.S. legislation designed to target a particular national community. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers to the U.S. for ten years and refused citizenship eligibility to non-resident Chinese immigrants already residing within the States:

> Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or, having so come after the expiration of said ninety days, to remain within the United States (Section I).

The Act was aimed directly at laborers and their families emigrating from China since groups of elite Chinese immigrants, such as diplomats, students, educators, and the merchant class, were exempt (provided in Sections 3 and 13). The restrictions outlined in the Chinese Exclusion Act were extended an additional ten years by way of the Geary Act, passed in1892 and upheld by the Supreme Court in a 1893 court case. The Immigration Act of 1904 permanently closed U.S. borders for Chinese laborers. The fourth act in this series, the Immigration Act of 1917, indicated all Asian countries as "barred zones" as it excluded Chinese laborers emigrating from most all-Asian countries in addition to China (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). Those already residing in the U.S. and those of the exempt class were required by law to carry official identification papers on their person at all times. Never before and not since has such harsh and restrictive immigration legislation been leveled at any one national group.

China's ally status during World War II prompted many in the U.S. to rethink the appropriateness of the Chinese Exclusion Acts. In a speech delivered at the Hollywood Bowl in 1943, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek called on the U.S. to repeal the discriminatory acts. On December 17, 1943 the Chinese Exclusion Acts, already having been in effect for just over 60 years, were repealed. After the repeal, Chinese immigration continued to be regulated by general federal immigration policies that controlled and delimited immigration for other national communities. Subsequently, for the following two decades, the Chinese immigration quota was set at 105 immigrants per year (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). Thus, Chinese immigration to the U.S. continued to be severely curtailed despite the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

In addition to being inherently racist, these restrictive immigration policies were decidedly gendered. The immigration laws called for women to assume the status of their husbands. Consequently, wives of laborers were immediately barred by way of the Exclusion Act of 1882, and only the wives of registered merchants were eligible immigrants. Still, in the 19th century, passage to the Americas was costly and few families could afford to immigrate en masse so that, in part, the disproportionate emigration of men to women was the result of pragmatic family economics. However, despite economic hardships, over the course of the ensuing years, a small number of Chinese wives began to join their merchant husbands. As well, brides were sent for by unmarried Chinese men wishing to remain in the U.S. By the 1880s, the ratio of women to men had increased to one woman for every 20 men (Chang 173). The establishment of even the few Chinese American families in the U.S. increased the number of females at

the same time that male immigrants were dying off or returning to the homeland so that by 1920 the ratio was one female to seven males (Chang 173).

Subsequent to the wave of Chinese Gold Rush immigrants, national immigration policy targeted Chinese in general but Chinese women in particular. The National Origins Act of 1924 legislated a total immigration quota of approximately 150,000 per year. This quota set severe immigration limits that applied to all nationalities; however, the most stringent restrictions were reserved for non-European national communities. The 1924 Immigration Act prevented Chinese women from emigrating to the United States at all. This restriction applied even to wives of naturalized Chinese Americans citizens as well as to the wives of American-born Chinese. Ultimately, Chinese women's lack of representation in the United States was a legislated condition. Indeed, largely because of not only ethnic but gender-biased immigration policy, only 150 Chinese women legally entered the U.S. between 1906 and 1924. From the ratification of the Immigration Act of 1924 to its revision in 1930, not one Chinese woman entered the U.S. (Chang 174).

The 1930 review of the Immigration Act resulted in slightly more liberal immigration policies for Chinese women, and for the ensuing ten years women emigrated to the U.S. from China at an average rate of approximately 60 women a year (Ling 219). After over 60 years as public policy, the Chinese Exclusion Act was rescinded in 1943. Even though the repeal of the Exclusion Act provided more opportunities for women to emigrate from China, not until 1954 did the ratio of Chinese women to men begin to equalize in the United States (Ling 219). The *Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments (Immigration Reform Acts) of 1965* discontinued all quotas, and as a

consequence, Chinese immigration increased dramatically. Statistics show that of those Chinese emigrating in the early 1960's, only 7.8% were destined for the United States. By the early 1990's, 38% of all persons emigrating from China were seeking U.S residency (Skeldon). 1990 Census statistics reveal that at 1.645 million or 0.7%, U.S. citizens of Chinese ancestry make up the largest Asian American group (*U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*). Year 2000 Census statistics show that Chinese Americans number 2,879,636 out of a total U.S. population of 281,421,904 ("Becoming American: The Chinese Experience").

Since the relaxation of immigration laws in 1965, many ethnic Chinese immigrants have come to the U.S. by way of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and other countries. In his "Migration from China," article, Ronald Skeldon reports that "many of those who left China in the late 1940s for Taiwan and Hong Kong were among the first to move to North America and Australasia once immigration restrictions were removed" (Skeldon). Up until 1992 most of the recent immigrants had been granted legal residency status in the United States through the sponsorships of family members who were already citizens or legal residents. However, in 1993 and 1994, the United States government granted legal residency to 37,131 and 31,913 ethnic Chinese immigrants respectively. The greater part of this number consists of students who had been living and studying in the U.S. at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre (Skeldon).

These statistics do not reflect a significant number of Chinese immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally. Some government sources have indicated that an estimated 100,000 people a year have entered the United States illegally from China during the 1990's (Skeldon). Vestiges of the credit-ticket system can be seen today within the

syndicate-operated illegal immigrant ship runs between China and the United States. Chinese immigrants pay smugglers between $30,000 and $50,000 to insure safe transport to the United States. Those who avail themselves of this method typically do not have the cash on hand, and so the syndicate purportedly will accept a 10% down-payment on the cost of the journey. Upon arrival, the sojourners are indentured to the smugglers for the balance. As a result, most end up in the slave labor market of urban areas, like New York and San Francisco (Skeldon).

**Chinese American Writing**

The relative dearth of particularly Chinese Asian American publications in English in the United States compared to the quantity other multicultural literature can be traced to the racist Chinese Exclusion Acts. Elaine Kim compares the climate for Japanese American literature with the scant opportunities for Chinese American literature by way of the differing U.S. policies toward these two groups of Asian immigrants.

> Unlike Filipinos and Chinese, most of whom were prevented by exclusion and antimiscegenation laws from establishing families in the United States, Japanese immigrant men were enabled by the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907 to bring picture brides to America until 1924, when further Japanese immigration was prohibited. Louis Chu, who came to America at the age of nine, was one of the relatively few bilingual young Chinese living in America even in the 1950s. In contrast, there was a sizable second generation of American-born Japanese in the United States by 1930, and the presence of native-born, American-educated,

> English-speaking nisei resulted in more Japanese American literature in English. (Kim 39)

With the Exclusion Acts, the U.S. government had effectively curtailed the grounding of Chinese American families, and this, in turn, impeded the development of an American-born second generation of Chinese citizenry who would have access to an American education. The U.S.-educated children of Japanese immigrants, on the other hand, provided a class of Japanese Americans who would be prepared to write from the Japanese American perspective. To be sure, Japanese Americans endured social as well as U.S.-legislated racism. However, in this case, many of these experiences have been recorded - as can be seen in the literature of those Japanese American authors, like Toshio Mori, who was raised in a U.S. government internment camp. At the same time, Chinese American literature was restricted not only by the absence of an educated immigrant class but also by the legislated lack of a U.S. born and educated generation of Chinese Americans. While there was a dearth of Chinese American citizenry in general who were prepared to create and promote a literary tradition, this deficiency was even more acute among Chinese American women. Since restrictive U.S. immigration policies often targeted Chinese women in particular, there were few women in a position to foreground an essentially female Chinese American literary tradition. In her article, "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston," Amy Ling points out that rather than considering the dearth of Chinese American women's writing prior to the second half of the 20th century, we should note with surprise how many Chinese American women did manage to write.

The earliest Chinese immigrants did not enjoy a lifestyle that was conducive to creative writing. Chinese immigrants arriving in the 19th and early 20th century financed their journeys in a number of ways. A minority funded their own passage. Some were subsidized as indentured or contract laborers by the U.S. government or independent companies while others turned to the "credit-ticket," which called for immigrants to repay the cost of the journey once reaching the destination (Skeldon). Most of these immigrants were indentured servants, who had to labor for decades in order to earn their freedom. These immigrants endured hard labor in the coal mines and in the laying of the railroads. Some were forced into situations where they were little more than slaves. Ultimately, these laborers could allocate neither time nor energy to literary pursuits.

The vast majority of these Asian immigrants to the United States were rural and provincial peasants from southern China (Skeldon). The immigrating Asian peasants and working class came to the U.S. as manual laborers. As part of the Chinese working class, these immigrant laborers had little or no formal education in their home country. The motivation to immigrate grew out of financial need and not a desire to transcend social or economic class through education or formal career training. These laborers arrived in the U.S. because of perceived opportunities for manual labor employment in particular. Once reaching the U.S., all physical and intellectual energy was invested in earning enough to survive and, ultimately, to send back home. Clearly, these laborers did not have the luxury of time to devote to education, even if it had been made available to them. Thus, these early immigrants were not of the class of scholars or literati who would have been predisposed to recording Asian American experience or writing the Asian experience from this new geographical perspective. A mindful awareness of class

politics and their position as manual laborers within broader Chinese American society certainly must have also discouraged these early immigrants from writing.

Given the lifestyle of the early Chinese immigrants, it is not surprising then that one of the first Asian American texts is not a literary narrative or volume of poetry but a pragmatic guide for dealing with Caucasians. The *English-Chinese Phrasebook* was written in 1875 and published under the name of Wong Sam. The first and second editions were published by Wells Fargo and distributed from its 130 offices throughout western United States. The concise volume offers a strategy for dealing with white businessmen and the American court and legal system through the employment of a series of memorizable phrases (Chan 93). Phrases like, "I will come to deal with you always if you give me the best kinds" and "please give me now that portion of my wages which you have withheld from me," provide a handy script that assuages not only the lingual confusion but also the cultural confusion of dealing with non-Asian Americans.

The earliest vestiges of a Chinese American literature is captured in an anthology titled *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island: 1910-1940.* This anthology catalogues poetry carved by Chinese American inmates on the walls of the Angel Island Detention Center barracks. The editor of this volume writes that these poems represent a "vivid fragment of Chinese American history and a mirror capturing the image of the past" (28). As this compilation indicates, the laborers immigrating from China in the early 20$^{th}$ century were certainly not illiterate. However, their standard of life in the U.S. as manual laborers did not provide them with the wherewithal to engage in such leisure activities as the writing of literature or poetry.

Though many of the early Chinese Americans were literate in their native - language, as working class peasants, they would have been more comfortable and conversant with oral narratives than written texts. While access to print texts may have been restricted by class, these laborers would have had free access to the performances of storytellers, dramatic dancers, and singers (Kim). The earliest Asian American oral narrative creations would have relied on traditional stories, myths, and songs. Poetry and classical essays were the realm of educated scholars and literati so that these forms would not have been available to oral performers. In her article, "Asian American Literature and the Importance of Social Context," Elaine Kim tells us that among the Asian readership fiction was considered "frivolous," and likewise, autobiography was not a popular form as it was considered a Western genre. Kim writes, "Peasants performed as storytellers, dramatic dancers, and singers, but they rarely expressed themselves through the written word, and certainly they did not write autobiographies" (Kim). Since memoir was not a popular form and indeed may not have even been familiar to the immigrating laborers, oral storytellers would not have instinctively integrated the Asian American experience into their narratives. This is not to say that they did not do so, but that any move towards memoir would have been influenced by the fact of immigration - the physical transcendence of border and with this the concomitant cultural transcendence. Asian American autobiography is then truly a literary representation of the cultural nexus of Asian and Western forms.

Indeed, Frank Chin posits Chinese American autobiography as a product of cultural, particularly religious and theological, colonization. Chin confirms that "autobiography is not a Chinese literary form" but beyond that he maintains further that

"the only autobiographies written by Chinese have been written by Christians" (Chin, "The Chinese Fight City Hall"). Chin points to the pervasive influence of Christianity on the Chinese American community ("Forty three Christian churches and church institutions in [San Francisco] Chinatown's nine blocks") and makes connections between Christian missionaries' zeal in converting the Chinese immigrant community and the Chinese American production of literature. Significantly, the rules and tenets of Christianity proselytized through the literature of the Bible have eclipsed Chinese philosophy, myths, and legends in the minds of Chinese Americans. As Chin puts it, missionaries have replaced the Han dynasty warrior subsequently named god of literature and war, Kwan Kung (featured in the Chinese children's epic, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), with Jesus Christ. As a mark of cultural, and a particularly Christian driven, colonization, memoir and autobiography present a very specific Asian American experience and perspective (Ling 171). Chin writes that most Westerners and Christianized Asian Americans

> have never read the autobiography of Confucius, or Kwan Kung, or Mao Tse Tung, or even Chiang Kai Shek. Chiang was a Christian, but he was Chinese. Chinese don't write autobiography. The first, the very first autobiography by a Chinese, was written by a mission school boy, Yung Wing, who was the first Chinese to graduate from Yale. *My Life in China and America* was published in 1909 as a Christian, not Chinese, accomplishment.
>
> (Chin, "The Chinese Fight City Hall")

In fact, Chin contends that the only Chinese authored autobiographies have been written by Chinese Christians. While there is no comprehensive study that assesses and tabulates religious affiliations of Chinese autobiographers, Chin's claims do underscore the fact that Chinese American autobiography is a form that manifests a cross cultural perspective that may have, by force of colonization, skewed or even forgotten many of the traditional values and literary styles.

Early Asian American writers may have been drawn as well to the autobiographical format because it presented more possibilities for publication and broad readership. Chin indicates that American publishers favored Asian American memoir over other forms: "Christian autobiographers were the only Chinese Americans published by the big commercial houses." Amy Ling also points to the Chinese Exclusion Acts as creating an essentially Christian colonized class of Chinese American writers. Since the Acts "prohibited immigration of by all Chinese except a small number of diplomats, businessmen, professors, and students, the earliest books, of course, were written by these people and their children, or, in other words, by Christianized upper-class Chinese" (Ling). One of these privileged Christian authors, Yung Wing, was the first Chinese American to graduate from a U.S. university (Yale, class of 1854). His Western education and Christian training reflect an experience that is not representative of the majority of those emigrating from China. Certainly, his autobiography presents a perspective not shared by the bulk of Chinese American immigrant laborers. As with many of the early Chinese American U.S. publications, with Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America*, Western readers could be assured of a thoroughly colonized perspective, one informed by a Christian-oriented mindset. This common ground of a

shared theological framework created a comfort zone that made the Asian texts accessible to a demanding Western readership.

At the same time, preconceived racist notions of the Chinese Other drove the expectations of a largely Caucasian American readership. In the 19th century, the P.T. Barnum Circus traveled all over the United States bringing its special brand of entertainment to the masses. The Circus was famous for its display of curiosities and what came to be known as "freak" shows. Featured were anomalous figures like the bearded lady or the head - to - toe tattooed man. In 1850, the Circus showcased "Barnum's Chinese Museum," which, for the entertainment pleasure of the American audiences, displayed a "genuine" Chinese family. Advertisements and newspaper reviews highlighted stereotyped features of the family members, such as the small, bound feet of the women (Yung 16 - 17). In her article "Spectacle ethnography and immigrant resistance: Sui Sin Far and Anzia Yezierska," Lori Jirousek reflects on the fact that ethnographic representations, like those found in Barnum's Chinese Museum, reinforced narrow, stereotyped characterizations of Chinese Americans "by presenting the Chinese as primitive, exotic, peculiar Others, whose natures fitted them for display but not participation in Western society" (Jirousek). It seems that if Westerners were going to cast their gaze in the direction of the Chinese American community, in order for a representation to be considered legitimate, or indeed to be considered at all, it ought to reinforce the exotic fantasms already in place in popular mainstream discourses on what it means to be Chinese.

Chinese American authors needed to walk a finely defined tightrope between the exotic and the inscrutable in creating characters that mirrored images which had been

both familiarized through popular entertainment like Barnum and colonized to demonstrate Western domination and influence. Regarding Chinese American literature, then, it was important that the expectations of the "exotic" were fulfilled in a manner that authenticated American readers' racist models of the Chinese figure in America but, at the same time, did not alienate the Western reader. The popularity of the Asian American autobiography for non-Asian American readers seems to support Chin's notion that these Christian-influenced Chinese American texts "fulfilled white fantasy in form and content" (Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers" 49). In not stepping outside the Western mindset that prescribed a certain image for Asian Americans and that demanded that certain values be reflected in the literature, this particular brand of Asian American writers sustained Western preconceived notions of Asia and its people. In some way, playing into Western fantasmatic constructions supported imperialist notions of Western authority while reinforcing a Western-prescribed identity for the Asian American.

Two of the earliest Chinese American women writers, Edith (1865 – 1914) and Winnifred (1875 – 1954) Eaton, were daughters of a British-born merchant and painter and a Chinese woman. Edith Eaton identified with her mother's Chinese ethnicity and adopted the pen-name Sui Sin Far while Winnifred aligned herself more broadly with Asian culture and took advantage of the fact that Japanese Americans were held in higher esteem by assuming the Japanese name, Onoto Watanna. In her articles and short stories, Edith Eaton championed the rights of Chinese American laborers. Winnifred, on the other hand, gave the American readership what they expected from an Asian woman writer by composing novels set in romantic locations and featuring submissive Asian

women and debonair American heroes. Amy Ling describes Winnifred Eaton's output thus,

> Winnifred Eaton's women are nearly always in an inferior, powerless position: social outcasts (*A Japanese Nightingale*, *The Wooing of Wisteria*), orphans (*Sunny-San* and *The Heart of Hyacinth* ), and unwanted step-daughter (*Love of Azalea*), a blind, homeless wood sprite (*Tama*), a geisha in bondage (*The Honorable Miss Moonlight*). Her men, in clear contrast, are invariably in positions of power and influence: princes, ministers, architects, and professors.
>
> (Ling 223)

Ling goes on to point out that the somewhat formulaic plot recapitulated in book after book predictably has the "childlike" but charming Japanese woman dependent upon the superior physical, social, and intellectual facilities of the Caucasian male. In this way, Winnifred Eaton's texts fulfill a western readership's expectations of an "exotic" and accessible female Asian. Winnifred Eaton's work predictably exceeded Edith's in popularity; *A Japanese Nightingale* (1903) was produced for Broadway and Tama (1910) was a best-seller. She ultimately went on to write for various Hollywood producers and collaborated on screenplays for films like Showboat and Shaghai Lady. Clearly, the figure of the helpless, subservient Asian juxtaposed with the commanding American or European was a marketable brand of Asian American characterization.

Early Asian American publications often translated Asian culture for a western readership. Chinese born Lin Yutang (1895–1976) emigrated to the U.S. and received his Ph.D. from Harvard. Many of his publications were marketed to Americans as a Chinese

perspective on American culture and politics. His 1935 nonfiction text written in English, *My Country and My People*, was one of the first texts to provide Western readers with an ostensible "insider's" view on the politics and social climate of China. American readers looked to Lin's text for an authentically Chinese perspective that decoded the dynamics of Chinese culture and philosophy, often deemed as Delphic or mystifying. *My Country and My People* quickly became a best seller. Chinese critical reception did not support the notion of Lin's text as a reliable Chinese perception, and indicated that Lin's western education had distanced him from a truly Chinese point of view. As an autobiography, and a decidedly Christian autobiography, as Chin would strongly indicate, the form and genre of the text alone points to the fact that the purity of this "Chinese" perspective has been diluted by Western imperialist notions. Indeed, critic Wing-Tsit Chan relates, "many Chinese called his book 'My Country and My Class' or, resorting to a pun…, 'Mai Country and Mai People,' mai being the Chinese word for selling and betraying" (Wing-Tsit Chan as quoted in Kim).

With the onset of World War II, China gained favor with the U.S. public as a major Eastern ally. Thus, interest in Chinese culture and literature was stimulated. Asian American author Jade Snow Wong (b. 1922) was recognized as a lynchpin of Chinese culture. The U.S. federal government negotiated publication rights for multiple Asian language translations of Wong's best seller, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950). In 1952, the U.S. State Department subsidized a tour of forty-five Asian cities, during which Wong was to present the virtues of democracy, ostensibly from the Chinese American perspective (Kim). Wong's work sits firmly in the corpus of "ethnic" American fiction: a documentary film of her life was produced in 1976, and in the academy Wong can be

considered one of the canonical multicultural authors. Kingston cites Jade Snow Wong and her novels as having a seminal influence on Kingston's own work and even credits Wong with her decision to write at all. Jade Snow Wong has also earned recognition for her pottery and ceramic-ware, and her work is among the holdings of institutions like the Chicago Art Institute and Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art. For the "Jade Snow Wong: A Retrospective" pottery exhibition catalogue published by the Chinese Historical Society, Kingston provided personal commentary in which she addresses Snow and tells her of her attachment to *Fifth Chinese Daughter*:

> just in the nick of time, you gave me a story about a girl like me. We spoke one language at home and another in the wider world. And Fifth Daughter, Jade Snow, became a writer. It was possible: I could become a writer too, and write about this peculiar life we have. People like us are worthy of art. We have stories. We can write them, and we can be in them … you taught me to think out my values and be true to myself.
>
> (Kingston, "Jade Snow Wong: A Retrospective")

While Jade Snow Wong certainly blazed trails for later Asian American women writers, like Kingston, some scholars have been critical of her unprogressive characterization of the Chinese American woman. Amy Ling points to the popularity of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as resting, in part, on the novel's propensity for reproducing those expected exotic stereotyped characters to which an American readership had become accustomed. Ling reflects:

> . . . Wong's success may be attributed in large part to the same characteristics that made Winnifred Eaton's romances so popular: she caters to the stereotypes and myths of the majority about itself. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is an ethnic Horatio Alger story bearing witness to the achievement of the American dream, in which even the poorest and most unlikely (that is, nonwhite) Cinderella may find her way to the palace of the prince - in this case, gain recognition from the mainstream world by setting up a pottery business in Chinatown in San Francisco.
>
> (Ling 228)

It seems that, in order to successfully participate in the print market successfully, Chinese American authors needed to play into racially typecast notions of an Asian American figure dependent on the superiority of a Caucasian hero. For Asian women, this meant passive obedience to men in general and to western men in particular. This characterization served to underscore white patriarchal authority. At the same time, the presence of the white male undermines the authority and influence of Asian men within the American context. Indeed, Amy Ling asserts that for Chinese American writers publication depended not so much on the literary merit of a particular work but on its ability to support racist and patriarchal stereotypes. She writes: "Autobiographical works of this period that did not cater to stereotypes were neglected, despite the fact that some were livelier and better written" (Ling 229). The plot of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* also sustained the idealized myth of the United States as the land of "golden opportunity" where residents had equal access to success regardless of race or ethnicity. In her lectures abroad, Snow promoted this ideal by claiming that race was not a barrier to

personal achievement in the U.S. (Ling 229). Even in her personal deportment, Jade Snow Wong needed to substantiate the characterizations inherent in her narratives and memoir by embodying white America's bias-tinged notions of a Chinese American woman.

Unusual for the day were the publications of Helena Kuo, a working journalist with feminist ideals. Kuo was a product of the 1911 Chinese Revolution, which resulted in an end to oppressive cultural practices, like foot-binding, and gave women the vote and equal access to education. In her first novel, *Peach Path*, Kuo introduces readers outside of the Chinese tradition to empowered female characters, including Fa Mu Lan. It is important to bear in mind though that since the U.S. Immigration Act limited entrance to the U.S. to very few eligible Chinese diplomats, businessmen, professors, and students, Chinese American literature of this time was produced by immigrants of this status and/or their children, namely the Christianized upper-class, and Helena Kuo was representative of this class (Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers" 142). Thus, even though Kuo presents Western readers with an alternative literary- perspective on Chinese American women, her view is, nonetheless, underscored by her relatively privileged position.

One of the tacit charges of Chinese American authors was to decode the exotic underpinnings of the Asian experience for Western readers. While readers wanted and anticipated the unfamiliar, there was an expectation of a western orientation for the exotic elements of the text. Hence, some writers took on the role of "explainer," as Amy Ling has termed this phenomenon (Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers" 150). In this

sense, part and parcel of the author's project was to interpret Chinese politics and culture for the Western reader. This was a tricky business in that the decoding process needed to lend a coherent text but at the same time not dismantle completely the exotic elements that a Western readership had come to expect. For the Western readership, perhaps the best known and most prolific "explainer" was Han Suyin, whose most popular memoir-based novel, *A Many-Splendored Thing*, provided the storyline for the 1955 Academy Award-winning film, *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*. Amy Ling points to Suyin's four-volume autobiography, *The Crippled Tree* (1965), as Suyin's most outstanding literary achievement. Here Suyin conflates a variety of literary genres, national history, family history, and personal memoir, and unifies these within the construct of a novel in a manner similar to that which Kingston adopts for her *The Woman Warrior* (Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers" 142).

This mixed-genre text reflects the complex position of the Asian American writer in the United States. The content, including plot and characterizations, was adjusted to support popular exotic images as well as genuine experience. For example, one way the bifurcation of Chinese American experience is reflected in the text is by way of the love relationships that are often forged in these narratives, where many of the couples are inter-racial and/or inter-ethnic (as can be seen in the work of many 20$^{th}$ Century Chinese American women writers: Diana Change, Han Suyin, Chuang Hua, Amy Tan, and of course Maxine Hong Kingston). These complex social junctures within the narrative plot are supported by the coordinating formal structure of the literature, which often reflects a composite melding of literary formats from various ethnic traditions. Consequently,

within the mixed-genre text, customary western autobiography can sit comfortably next to Chinese myth and oral family tales.

Because literary challenges and harsh public policy curtailed the production and publication of Chinese American writing, the articulation of an archived Chinese American body of work did not appear until the second half of the 20th Century. The first collection of Chinese American work is the 1972 184-page anthology, *Asian American Authors*, edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas. On the heels of this first Asian American anthology, in 1974, Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Chin L. Inada, and Shawn Wong edited *Aiiieeeee![4] An Anthology of Asian American Writers,* which includes excerpts from Diana Chang's novel, *The Frontiers of Love*, Louis Chu's award-winning novel, *Eat a Bowl of Tea,* and Act I of Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. This was followed in 1991 with *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, which includes three short stories by Sui Sin Far, *An English Chinese Phrasebook*, and excerpts from the work of Louis Chu and Frank Chin. The anthology opens with Chin's essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake," in which he offers a scathing commentary on the work of, among others, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Chin accuses Kingston, in particular, of creating characters that play into western stereotyped notions and disparage Chinese American culture. Specifically, Chin claims that in *China Women* Kingston rewrites "the heroine, Fa Mulan, to the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped by a Chinese civilization" (Chin, *The Big Aiieeeee* 3).

[4] "Aiiieeeee" represents the sound, and often the only articulation, that had been typically associated with Asians in American popular entertainment (television, film, and radio).

While *The Big Aiiieeeee!* presents one perspective on Asian American literature, other anthologies, like Jessica Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (1993) - as well as the sequel collection *Charlie Chan Is Dead II: At Home in the World: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (2004) – mediate against caricatured representations simply by presenting a broad range of Asian American literary images. Hagedorn's collection includes already well-known and well-anthologized writers like Tan and Kingston as well as previously unpublished authors. Fifteen years after the publication of the first Asian American Anthology, we see the publication of several anthologies of specifically women's writing: *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women* (1989), edited by Diane Yen-Mei Wong and Emilya Cachapero, and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989). As Asian American literature gained more recognition and enjoyed an increasingly broader readership, there was a parallel recognition in the academy. The last two decades of the 20th century produced a series of critical collections, such as Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1984), Amy Ling's *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990), Shirely Lim's *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (1992), and the Chelsea House Publishers' Modern Critical Views series volume, *Asian American Women Writers*, edited and with introductory chapter by Harold Bloom.

Evidence of the burgeoning market for Chinese American texts is evident not only in the popularization of the genre by mainstream authors, like Kingston, Gus Lee, and Amy Tan, but also with the initiation of interest and support groups, like the Asian

American Writers Workshop (AAWW). In addition to their series of writing workshops, the New York City based AAWW publishes Asian American works, focusing foremost on the publication of "underrepresented" Asian American experience. In addition, the AAWW also sponsors *The Asian Pacific American Journal* and The Asian American Literary Awards. While organizations like AAWW are surfacing, these groups are nonetheless in their infancy, and as a result, their existence is very fragile. For example, because of lack of financial support, AAWW came close to shutting down in January of 2004. Founded in 1991, it had been running since then without any endowments but rather subsisting on government and foundation grants, which had subsequently been slashed drastically. Community and popular support of the Asian American genre, however, continues to sustain the existence of this kind of organization.

**Kingston Employs the Oral Narrative: Retelling and Revisions of Traditional Tales**

Just after the Chinese American anthology *Aiiieeeee!* publication in 1974, Maxine Hong Kingston's first novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) was released with her *China Men* appearing the following year. Although Kingston had sold *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to Random House as fiction, both texts were catalogued and marketed as autobiography. In 1981, Kingston won the National Book Award for *China Men* and was the first Asian American to win the National Book Critics Circle Award (1997) for nonfiction with *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston followed the memoirs with her novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. With the popular reception of *Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Kingston is the first

Asian American celebrity author and paved the way for Amy Tan, who was able to sell paperback rights of her *New York Times* best-seller, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) for $1.23 million and sell film rights, which resulted in the popular Wayne Wang film *The Joy Luck Club* (1993).

Just as Kingston herself sets the trend for the new Asian American writer, her work foregrounds a stylistically innovative format that uniquely reflects, not only in content but in texture, the composite Chinese American experience. Essential to her form is the integration of traditional Chinese narrative. In *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men,* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston does not simply integrate, but adapts and modifies Chinese literature, myth and legend in particular, often to the consternation of fellow Asian writers. Frank Chin has been arguably the most outspoken of Kingston with his many publications and lectures critiquing her adaptation of Chinese myth. Chin has claimed that by definition myths can and should not be altered, "Myths don't change. That's why they're myths" (Chin, "The Chinese Fight City Hall"). For Chin, the perceived willingness of some Chinese Americans to revise traditional ethnic literature is a measure of the extent that cultural colonization has annihilated specifically Chinese thought and literature.

> The Christians who crossed the ocean to America didn't change their myths. They kept the old, and created new myths to reflect new experience in a new geography. The Greeks didn't change Homer and Hercules. They might have changed personal citizenship, but they didn't change the nationality or the character of their myths. Kingston's Mulan seems to be only one that changed

> circumstance, changed character, and changed meaning to "become American," or more accurately "politically correct."
>
> (Chin, "The Chinese Fight City Hall")

Chin seems to argue that in order to construct an accurate representation of the Asian American experience, one needs to preserve traditional Asian texts by integrating them into the new literatures untailored. This kind of rhetoric breaks down when one considers the context of an oral tradition where there typically are in circulation a number of versions of any one narrative. Indeed Mikhail Bakhtin proposes, "The following must be kept in mind: that the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is-no matter how accurately transmitted-always subject to certain semantic changes" (Bakhtin 340). Moreover, by definition, an oral text is interpreted and indeed altered by the performing orator so that the narrative is freely revised. In this sense, Chin is ironically asking Chinese American authors to break with tradition and view the oral narratives as immutable authoritative discourses.

Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kingston has stated explicitly that her compositional process has been influenced by the content and style of oral narrative, especially the tradition of revision. In an interview Kingston has stated, "I feel very happy when I hear people tell me that they've read my books aloud to one another, because they are written aloud, you know. There is no page that I haven't both written and read aloud to myself, especially the dialogue. Sometimes the dialogue is spoken before it's written, especially when there's translation. I'll type in English and speak in Chinese so I can do the rhythms so I feel it was composed both orally and written" (Meachen and Williams). Her concept

of the modern text derived from oral narrative reveals an intentional merging of the two forms, oral and print. Like 20th century African authors who sought to maintain an oral storytelling heritage within the print text format, Kingston has faced the challenge of creating a calcified text that still invites readers' intervention. (Although one can only wonder about possible narrative devices Kingston might employ within a hypertext environment where words can actually change on the page with each reading.) As Kingston indicates, part of that challenge involves the creation of a print text that honors the flexibility of the oral narrative. If the print model cannot evolve with each subsequent reading, in imitation of the traditional oral form, then at least it needs to reflect a sense of malleability, in the tradition of the oral tale.

Conversely, Chin's mindset posits myth (and fable) as an immutable text, what Mikhail Bakhtin would term an authoritative discourse, where there is one reliable version that must be transmitted intact. In this case, it is the responsibility of the storyteller to be true to the traditional version of the text. There is no creative latitude as this would result in a corruption of the text as well as the tradition it represents. It seems that then, as Chin and others of his mind would have it, in communicating myth and fable, the role of the storyteller is that of transmitter rather than translator. This notion coordinates with Bakhtin's thoughts on authoritative discourse: "Authoritative discourse can not be represented -- it is only transmitted" (Bakhtin 344).

Some literary critics argue though that Kingston does not set out in these novels to faithfully represent a purely Chinese experience. The novels do present Chinese perspectives on text and music but through the filter of American experience. Once these

myths and stories cross a geographical border, they necessarily must undergo the expected transformations that come with the crossing of cultural borders. The text cannot transcend geographic and culture boundaries intact, nor should it. Kingston has confirmed that the legend related in the "The White Tigers" section of *Woman Warrior* does not represent a purely Chinese myth but rather presents a myth "transformed by America" (Kingston, "Mis-readings"). The end result is a novel permutation of Chinese myth and talk-story. The bifurcate experience produces a talk-story narrative that is as much American as it is Asian. In this sense, Kingston is interested in faithful representations; however, it is neither a purely Chinese experience nor an American experience that she seeks to characterize but a wholly personal hyphenated position that blends the two cultures. Kingston has written, "I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. *The Woman Warrior* is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness" (Kingston, "Mis-readings").

For Kingston, the bifurcate nature of the Chinese American status calls for a revision of inherited texts that reflect the conflation of Chinese heritage and American experience. Literary critic Debra Shostak has written, "Were Kingston not to reinvent her source materials, her narratives would be marred by an either/or fallacy-- each textualized remainder would be either Chinese (in translation), or American (in English), but not convincingly integrated so as to provide historical identity to Chinese American experience" (Scandera-Trombley 54). For Shostak then, Kingston's move to retell Chinese myth by way of an American consciousness is a logical strategy. Kingston has indicated that imported ethnic myth will, by necessity, take on the tone and color of the

new landscape and culture and has related that those readers who do not recognize her texts as mixed-culture products have not recognized the salient dynamic of the narratives. Like Chin, one sinologist in a review of *China Men* was disturbed by the text's deviant versions of Chinese myths. Kingston comments:

> He said I got my mythology all wrong, without any realization that I was writing American mythology. He said I was trying to elevate my family to the status of high culture by bringing in all these high-culture Chinese myths. He had no understanding that I was saying that the Chinese-American peasant embodied these myths. They are part of a lower culture. And when I say "peasant," I mean "American peasant." He didn't understand this.
>
> (Loke 28)

Kingston clearly takes issue with readers like the quoted Sinologist, who, much like the patrons of Barnum's Chinese circus, impose on Chinese American writing their notions of the genuine Asian. Rather than expecting a faithful Chinese text, the reader does better to look for a bifurcate narrative that represents with validity the Chinese American experience.

With regards to creating valid representations of experience in general and the Chinese American experience in particular, Kingston points to the somewhat oxymoronic implications of the term "oral history." To the general reading/listening public, "history" implies a "chronological record of events," where "record" indicates an "enduring" preservation of "facts and events" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan relates that by definition the oral narrative is a free-floating text that is

likely to evolve according to the diction and sensibilities of the times **(Finnegan ).** Certainly, the various representations of oral stories will be influenced by the particular experience as well as the colloquial disposition of both the narrator and the audience. In some way, it is the challenge of the orator to maintain the integrity of the oral narrative while interpreting a version that will be coherent to a contemporary audience or the audience at hand. Kingston, indeed, wishes to avoid construing oral narratives as infallible documents of record. Rather, she views the orally communicated stories as providing inspiration for the retelling. Kingston writes: "Somehow I think there's something wrong with oral histories. People are treating them like *sacred* material when what they are is *raw* material" (Thompson 6). Mythology, oral history, and other orally received narratives, in Kingston's terms, provide a foundation on which derivative compositions are forged.

This vision of the mutable oral text that by necessity calibrates with the sensibilities of a contemporary storyteller and audience insures the continued relevance of a narrative. Like Bakhtin's notion of an internally persuasive discourse that is "half-ours and half someone else's," (345) the inherited oral narrative will take on the life experiences and sensibilities of the storyteller and, indeed, of the era. In this way, as an internally persuasive discourse, the oral narrative not only can change but must change in order to retain the attention of its listeners. The oral narrative enjoys continued relevance by assimilating itself into subsequent societies - this in contrast to the fate of the authoritative discourse, which is, according to Bakhtin, that it "always remains, in the novel, a dead quotation, something that falls out of the artistic contex" (Bakhtin 344). Conversely, the authoritative discourse is, ideologically speaking, the definitive word of

the forebears and, as such, cannot be represented by contemporary writers or orators but only transmitted (Bakhtin 344) verbatim. Indeed, as Bakhtin relates, "it is a *prior* discourse" because "its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past" (Bakhtin 342; stress Bakhtin's). Thus, while authoritative discourse remains locked in the past, internally persuasive oral narratives are continually rejuvenated by ensuing generations of storytellers.

The underlying rhetoric of Frank Chin's argument against Kingston's so-called corruption and consequent annihilation of inherited narratives seems to rely on the assumption that these stories are conceived as immutable authoritative texts. In response to this position, one might make the argument that, by resisting the authoritative objectification of Chinese myth, Kingston poses the oral myth as an inherently mutable narrative form, which further enables the claim that not only is she not dismantling these texts, but she is ensuring the continued vitality of such stories by modifying them in the manner of an internally persuasive discourse. This compositional process, which sanctions textual modification of the oral narratives, allows her to represent with more validity contemporary Chinese experience in an American context. While the authoritative discourse may become irrelevant with each new geographical and generational context, the modified discourse retains its vitality by adjusting to the sensibilities of the writer and her audience.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the internally persuasive character of the narrative allows Kingston to retell the No Name Woman's tale with a contemporary Chinese American sensibility. In retelling her aunt's tale, she considers possibilities that lay outside the

boundaries of her mother's narrative. Within the narration, Kingston speculates that her unmarried and pregnant aunt may have gone to the pigsty not out of shame but "as a last act of responsibility: she would protect the child as she had protected its father" (15). In his Kingston biography, E. D. Huntley describes this manner of revision of family tales in Kingston's writing as an "ancient right," an inherited right passed on through the generations:

> Kingston's technique derives from the ancient right of storytellers to change a story with each retelling to fit the circumstances of that telling and the audience that is listening. Her mother and her mother's friends told and retold their several versions of how they came to America, each time revising the stories to fit the occasion, the listeners, the context of the telling. As she listened, young Maxine was profoundly impressed not only with the effectiveness and malleability of the stories, but also with the capacity for a single story to become relevant to a variety of contexts and audiences.
>
> (Huntley 34 – 35)

Having modeled textual revision throughout Kingston's life, the mother must have passed on stories like that of the No Name Woman fully aware that her daughter would also inherit the right to rework the text to suit her needs and the needs of her audience. It seems that what must be preserved is the underlying intention of the narrative. In this case, the didactic underpinning of the tale transcends the details of plot and characterization. In the "No Name Woman" chapter, the narrator's mother tells the unfortunate tale of the sister-in-law in order to communicate to Maxine the value of

adhering to the sexual mores of the community as well as the consequences that personal deviances may have for family. In this sense, the mother's tale is instructive. Clearly though, the didactic tone of the mother's talk-story does not preclude the narrative's malleable predisposition.

Frank Chin takes particular umbrage with Kingston's bending of the Fa Mu Lan tale, and systematically points out the various deviations, like the appropriation of the tattooing of the legendary Chinese war hero, Yue Fei, for Mulan. Chin infers that Kingston's departures from the "original" text result in a hyperbolic rendering of the female warrior and posits Mulan as a victim of oppressive male managed society (Chin, "The Chinese Fight City Hall"). In fact, these embellishments of female empowerment may be needed at least to balance out and at best efface misogynist attitudes underlying traditional precepts. Certainly, not only Kingston but contemporary audiences as well would deem some of the tenets relayed in the original tale invalid and, therefore, in need of revision. In *The Woman Warrior,* the notion that "there's no profit in raising girls" seems to be conventional wisdom passed on to children as a point of fact. The revision of the Fa Mulan tale in the "White Tigers" chapter is the narrator's ideological counter to the "better to raise geese than girls" mindset. In *The Woman Warrior,* her retelling of the Fa Mulan tale mirrors the narrator's strength and resilience in her struggle with gendered social and family conflicts.

Interestingly, these revisions and retellings of oral tales have an impact on the structural framework of Kingston's texts. One distinction that Kingston makes between oral and written forms rests on the ability of the oral narrative to emerge in multiple

versions, with each version carrying equal validity and legitimacy. Kingston links the oral text's ability to proliferate to its liberation from the reified state of the written word. Kingston insists that "there will be many versions of one story" in part because "the oral tradition is freer than the written tradition" ("California Book Awards"). This vision of the oral narrative emancipates the author and/or orator from the text in the sense that there is no dedication to a particular version or any need to be faithful to a particular reified "authoritative" text. The author and/or orator is, thus, emancipated from the content and structure of the narrative and at liberty to creatively manipulate the narrative's various components. Thus, in her texts, Kingston does not only acknowledge the malleability of the oral narrative in theory but also takes advantage of the libertarian value of the adaptability of the oral narrative by developing innovative compositional structures that accommodate the retelling of Chinese national and family oral stories. The weaving of the oral narratives into her texts is neither gratuitous nor incongruous. In *China Men*, Kingston retells the four versions of her father's immigration story that she remembers from her family's oral history. Kingston outlines: "One of them is that he stowed away illegally on a ship from Cuba. Another one is that he came legally through Angel Island. Another is that he was born here because Chinese women have magic powers and my grandmother made him appear in America. Another is a story that he had a birth certificate but it was burned in the hall of records during the San Francisco earthquake" ("California Book Awards"). These multiple versions disrupt any tendency towards a linear narrative structure. Instead, we get a polyphonic structure that considers every voice with equanimity. For the text, the result is a postmodern structure that entertains a number of possible narrative strains.

Kingston has also made the point that it is within this multiplicity of narrative content, character, and plot that one can find some semblance of truth. Kingston elaborates: "I think that in this way of telling many stories about what happened that we get to an authentic truth of history. I just don't find it very satisfying to tell one story. You have to tell it in all its different ways, and there are many causes for a story to appear" ("California Book Awards"). The multiple tellings of the father's immigration in *China Men* is, then, not only an aesthetic decision but the result of a determination to represent some semblance of veracity. We cannot relay on one story to credibly represent the father's immigration experience. In order to satisfy a reader's (and author's) desire for authenticity, we need to hear the various versions. No single version is more accurate than another. Each is equally dependent on the other for its value, its veracity. In this sense, truth is a collaboration of equally empowered voices.

With talk-story, the author herself is not certain of the veracity of the events and details. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator exclaims in exasperation to the mother, "You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you made up" (202). But here Maxine the narrator has missed the point. It is the listener's responsibility to determine the truth for him or herself based on the various narratives and versions. The listener may then add her own voice to the multitextual/polyvocal texture with her own rendition of reality. In the end, the narrator does "get it" and the proof is in Kingston's own mix of indisputable truths and imaginative creations. Kingston has drawn a connection between imagined texts and truth. She states: "To have a right imagination is very powerful because it's a bridge

between reality. . . The power of imagination leads us to what's real" (Feng). Thus, in some ways, whether labeled as fact or fiction, the multiple talk-stories becomes a bridge to reality because they entertain the various possibilities instead of denying alternative modes and experiences in favor of one authoritative text.

This multi-textual/polyvocal model contrasts significantly with what Kingston views as a calcified written text that is impervious to the intersection of other voices Kingston relates, "when literature is written down, it hardens into official form" ("California Book Awards"). In order to retain its integrity, the authoritative text resists alteration by alternate voices. To Kingston's point, one way Bakhtin's theory distinguishes authoritative from internally persuasive discourse is in the authority's fundamental resistance to self-modification and collaboration with other discourses: "Authoritative discourse may organize around itself great masses of other types of discourses (which interpret it, praise it, apply it in various ways), but the authoritative discourse itself does not merge with these (by means of, say, gradual transitions); it remains sharply demarcated, compact and inert: it demands, so to speak, not only quotation marks but a demarcation even more magisterial, a special script, for instance" (Bakhtin 343). In this sharply demarcated, quoted context, the authoritative text is, thus, "hardened" into a state of inertia. As Kingston explains, unlike the spoken word, the written word serves as a pervasive point of reference, an "official" version of a story or narrative.

Beyond the opportunities multiplicity offers for plot construction, character development, and other features of content, Kingston has made the point that multiplicity

influences the formal structure of the narrative. In describing the process that leads the oral narrative from its performance venue to the printing press, Kingston relates that the oral tale "takes such a journey, the way it makes itself into our present-day culture, that somebody has to go out and find it, and somebody has to let it out. So by the time it comes to us in the modern literary tradition, the story has taken various forms through the eyes of an anthropologist, through the eyes of a translator and so on" ("California Book Awards"). Here Kingston implies not just a history of multiple textual transformations but also formal manipulations of the narrative as well. Significantly, the narrative may undergo a formal transformation in a translator's attempt to make a narrative accessible to a reader/listenership outside of the community of origin. Coming from outside the community, the anthropologist may overlook or disregard inherent, culturally encoded formal elements.

Linda Sledge has indicated that the distinctive formal structuring of some Asian American texts is one reason why these texts have often been difficult to classify within a western literary taxonomy. Specifically, Sledge indicates crossover and fused forms that have defied clean classification. She relates that many Asian American texts, "inhabit that nebulous region between social history and belles lettres; or they daringly mix diverse kinds of fictions, as in David Henry Hwang's amalgamation of ancient myth with real-life love story in *FOB* ; or they take 'hybrid' generic forms such as oral family narrative" (Sledge, "Teaching Asian American Literature"). This borrowing of ancient oral myth involves more than a textual manipulation of content or even a lingual and cultural translation of characters and events. Beyond that, the translation of oral narratives, like myths, legends, and community stories, into a print text version requires a

structural transformation of both the oral narrative form and the narrative structures dictated by print conventions. In some way, this manipulation of the narrative form suits well the practices of the oral tradition, since manipulation and variation is part and parcel of the compositional process. Indeed, multiplicity and multifarity is expected in the oral narrative. At the same time, print text readership holds certain expectations for formal structures so that a deviation from expected textual constructs may be confusing and even alienating.

Specifically, Sledge points to the "collective, ethnocentric notion of selfhood" as an important factor in determining the narrative framework of Asia-influenced literature. Sledge writes, "In short stories, for example, characters are generally passive; plots seem static because of apparent lack of conflict; endings often lack clear resolution. The reader of Asian American short stories must look for a subtler kind of conflict or characterization than that which lies in external action or the clash of individual wills" (Sledge, "Teaching Asian American Literature"). An individualized personal voice does not drive the text. Nor does the plot seem to depend on the welfare of a single, iconoclastic voice. Rather the narrative design must leave space for possibilities that address collective interests. The recognition of a collective voice with pooled interests results in a textual design that allows for multiple possibilities. At the same time, the text may promote no one possibility. Significantly, these narrative gaps leave room for the insertion of the reader's voice. Just as an oral story teller might invite the listener(s) to participate in the telling of a story, the print-text reader may personalize the text with the contribution of personal details to fill in the gaps. In this way, the literary text approaches the collaborative construct of the orally disseminated tale.

In addition, Sledge points to the multiple retellings of autobiographical material, such as Maxine's mother's retelling of family events, as having formal influence on a narrative. According to Sledge, while a credible text emerges from the multiple retellings, these multiple versions create an "encyclopedic" structure where each retelling has a life of its own. Sledge adopts historian James Clifford's term, "ethnobiography," to refer to the formal organization of a mélange of disparate texts as well as the collected version and indicates that this is an autobiographical form foreign to Western literature. Sledge proposes:

> "ethnobiography" is a term coined by the historian James Clifford for those communal, open-ended forms of life writing prevalent among non-Western cultures. That is, they are encyclopedic works rehearsing an ordinary and typical life history for the edification of the group. The ethnobiographical self is so densely interwoven with its specific social and cultural milieu that the self is often not clearly distinguished from its context; the characteristic events of the community's history are seen to be central to the individual's life.
>
> (Sledge, "Teaching Asian American Literature")

Thus, in borrowing from not just the content but the formal structure of Asian and family oral narratives, Kingston introduced to a broad readership not just the visual props of her family and ethnic cultures but the formal narrative structures of an Asian talk-story tradition.

**Orality and Access**

Kingston's assertions that oral narratives can and do vary between orators and performances and that each version of a narrative performance may be equally valid in their heteroglossic representation provide common ground between her definition of an oral tradition and the way oral traditions are delineated in other communities. Like much of African oral narrative, talk-story narratives recognize a collective voice that represents generations of storytellers as well as multiple versions, styles and narrative formats. Like Kingston, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his written texts borrowed from the oral tradition of his Gikuyu community. In describing the writing process for his first Gikuyu language text, *Caitaani Mutharabaini* (*Devil on the Cross*), Ngugi confirms that he drew from Gikuyu "oral narrative, particularly the conversational tone, the fable, proverbs, songs and the whole tradition of poetic self-praise or praise of others" (Ngugi 77 – 78). In addition, the characters and plot of Ngugi's *Matigari* are inspired in part by a local Gikuyu folktale. Thus, this freedom to freely adapt narratives to serve one's own creative purpose is a fundamental liberty of narrative production that can transcend national and ethnic boundaries. Common ground, like the equitable valuation of multiple versions, provides both composers and the reader/listeners across communities with some shared conventions and expectations for production and reception.

In her article, "Cultural Mis-readings," Kingston relates her dismay over the lack of understanding critics showed for *The Woman Warrior*. According to Kingston, rather than reading the work as an essentially American text, many critics chose to invoke stereotypes of the Asian female by characterizing the text as inscrutable or exotic. Kingston quotes critic Margaret Manning writing for the *Boston Globe*: "Mythic forces flood the book. Echoes of the Old Testament, fairy tales, the Golden Bough are here, but

they have their own strange and brooding atmosphere inscrutably foreign, oriental" (Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings"). The implication here is that the Asia-influenced text must always be essentially enigmatic. As well, labels like "exotic" and "inscrutable" isolate the text by distancing it from mainstream literary productions. In her survey of critical responses, Kingston discovers a general critical disposition towards Asian American texts that alienates texts by Asian American authors by honing in on what is perceived as the exotic and unfathomable. In its extreme, such classifications deny these texts human qualities so that the "inscrutable" subjects lose their sense of humanity. In this case, critical reception places the characters so far out of the mainstream that they seem to exist outside of human classification. Kingston writes, "By giving the 'oriental' (always Eastern, never here) inhuman, unexplainable qualities, the racist abrogates human qualities" (Kingston. "Mis-readings"). Thus, as Kingston asserts, this kind of mis-reading supports bias in a general social context as well as a literary one.

In constructing an alien identity for narrator and characters, such critical assessments clearly question a text's ability to coherently communicate to the American masses. Some critics flag Asian cultural references as marking junctures of mystification in *The Woman Warrior*. In the *Peninsula Herald*, Barbara Burdick, clarifies her sense of the "mysterious" nature of the oriental by way of cultural props, "Even the word China brings to mind ancient rituals, exotic teas, superstitions, silks and fire-breathing dragons" (Kingston, "Mis-readings"). Here cultural icons form an impervious barrier for anyone unfamiliar with their significance. In order to understand the text then, these critics would argue that one would need to not only experience but also be able to decode the Delphic "exotic" referential images in the text.

There are some critics, however, who argue that beyond these indices of culture is an underlying human experience that is common to all readers. Linda Sledge looks to a reader-response based theory as a viable tool for assessing the readability of a text. In particular, she suggests "transactional interpretation" as a useful trajectory towards developing an understanding of Asian American texts. In his "Unity Identity Text Self," Norman Holland locates an "identity theme" that is specific to each individual. This identity theme guides literary interpretation and determines the reader's understanding of the text. Holland clarifies: "any individual shapes the materials the literary work offers him … to give him what he characteristically both wishes and fears, and … he also constructs his characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears" (Richter 1165). Holland also argues for several textual dynamics - a text's manifest content (the overt elements of the text – the plot, the characters, and the language) and latent content, which is veiled by the symbolic workings of the text (Richter 1165). "Meaning" is derived from a reader's engagement with these two textual dynamics. How a reader engages these dynamics is influenced by his or her experiences and personal characteristics. In this sense, according to Holland, through the act of reading, each reader personalizes the text and constructs an intrinsically personal and inherently individual meaning. David Richter discusses how a reader's relationship with the manifest and latent content figures into the process of transactional interpretation: "In the reading transaction, the audience, in absorbing consciously the manifest content, would also be stimulated, under the table as it were, by the latent content, and the reader's own orality or anality would be gratified by the experience. In effect, the

reader's experience would mirror the text's central fantasy and modes of defense" (Richter 1165).

If one is willing to accept a common experience and consciousness that is fundamental to all human beings, then there is some room for discussion in determining common ground interpretations of literature. Sledge looks to common features of oral traditions as providing possible shared points of reference. Sledge posits: "Maxine Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and *China Men* offer tangible evidence of the persistence of unchangeable forms common to all oral cultures" (Sledge, "Teaching Asian American Literature"). For Sledge then the oral undercurrent of Anglophone texts in general, and Asia-influenced texts in particular, provides perhaps the best access for uninitiated readers.

**Conclusion**

Kingston does not hide the fact that her tales are revisions of traditional and family narratives. She wants the reader to know that the talk-story framework allows for many versions of one story, like *China Men* with its multiple versions from of the father's immigration tale from varying perspectives. A number of critics, both male and female, have posed various points of defense for Kingston's decision to freely adapt oral Chinese tales. Amy Ling states quite simply that these revisions are Kingston's right as an author by way of poetic license: "Perhaps the author has objected to a cultural practice close to the heart of the reader, but such an objection is an author's right" (Ling 150). Beyond poetic license, Kingston's adaptation of oral narratives is essentially at the heart of her texts in that these revisions contribute to the representation of the bifurcate Chinese

American experience in content, form, and structure. In order to retain authenticity, the plot and characterizations must necessarily reflect the experience of the author. As well, coherent transmission of the tales depends on the author's ability to transpose the tales to for a contemporary the audience. It is not just the story that is being refigured in the text but the actual process of re-vision, a tradition that has been modeled by her elders and passed on to her as a composer of tales. In the closing story of the grandmother and Ts'ai Yen in *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator tells us quite explicitly and somewhat proudly that the beginning of the story is her mother's, "the ending, mine" (206). She is assuming her position by birthright as not just the transmitter but the composer of tales.

**Telling the Tales: Kingston Talking Story in China Men, The Woman Warrior, and Tripmaster Monkey**

The careful reader does not have to search for evidence of oral performance influence in the work of Maxine Hong Kingston. While Kingston is not the first Chinese American author to incorporate features of oral performance and the oral tales themselves into her work[5], her texts are singular in their reference to the style and mode of oral performance. Linda Sledge has commented that Kingston's unique "ability to invest idiomatic English with the allusive texture and oral-aural qualities of Chinese" distinguishes her work from others in the genre (Sledge, "Oral Tradition" 145). The liberal infusion of folk and family tales, the innovative and often unlinear narrative design, as well as the inclusion of multiple voices are a few of the features that define Kingston's texts as orally inspired work. In addition to these, we may consider the presence of music, in content and form, as another manifestation of oral performance.

[5] See Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Helena Kuo's *Peach Path*, for example.

Sledge claims that for Kingston "writer" is synonymous with "singer" or "performer" in the ancient sense of the privileged keeper, transmitter, and creator of stories now lost or left behind with the successive publication of 'definitive' texts" (Sledge "Oral Tradition" 147). This conflation of singer and writer coordinates well with the many textual and even structural references to music in Kingston's texts. In the first three novels, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey: his fake book*, the musical dynamic of oral composition surfaces as both a politicized and socializing force. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, the main character utilizes the music of the oral tradition to undermine oppressive conventions. Alternatively, in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* the main narrator initially finds the gendered dynamics of music, as they relate to "talk-story" and other musical conventions of her cultural heritage, repressive in their masculine design.

**Song, Talk-Story, and Truth in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior***

In both *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*, music and talk-story have clearly delineated functions. In *China Men*, from the narrator's perspective, music appears to be the conduit of truth while in *The Woman Warrior* talk-story, at least initially, holds a more dubious veracity. While the talk-story genre does occasionally include music, the effect of music involved in this form of oral performance seems to be shaped by the identity, and often the gender, of the performer. The music of knowledge and erudition that the males employ in *China Men* is distinct from the female-aligned talk-story text (along with any of its musical components) in *The Woman Warrior*. In *China Men*, the father's music adheres to conventions of verifiable knowledge while the mother's freely-

composed talk-story in *The Woman Warrior* is suspect. The father is aligned with music and veracity while the mother is associated with the questionable validity of the talk-story.

In *China Men*, the narrator relates that song and chant are used by the male scholars as pedagogical tools for the memorization of facts concerning math, poetry, history, and other areas of knowledge. The songs are learned by rote and then passed on as immutable texts that contain unchallengeable knowledge. Baba, the father, must memorize points of information in preparation for the teacher's exam. As a memorization strategy, these points of knowledge are set to a melodic lyric. Upon his arrival at the examination cell for the last Imperial Examination, Baba is divested of his garments, bedroll, and all other possessions, and the official scans Baba's skin for any evidence of cheat notes. Subsequently, as Baba sits in his examination cell waiting for the commencement of the critical qualifying test, he reviews his knowledge. The narrator tells us that the father "sang his memorizations . . . Muttering the texts, he gave voice and breath to word after word" (26). For the father and his scholar colleagues, music structures the scholarly tomes, and in this way, functions as a pneumonic device. The absence of print reference texts in the examination cell does not prevent the father's review of material since the songs of knowledge are easily retrieved. Music, thus, explicitly enables the memorization and rehearsal of knowledge. In this way, in "The Father from China" chapter, the narrator foregrounds the intrinsic connection between music and fact.

Later on, as an instructor, the father uses chant and song in the classroom with his own pupils. The narrator relates that "he called his role in a name chant" (33). We are

also told of the children "chiming" the lines to various lessons. The father/teacher instructs the boys, "Repeat after me." Here he employs antiphony to help the younger boys internalize the lessons. The narrator tells us that he reads "Lesson One to them many times, the children chorusing line by line" (33). Clearly, this approach that aligns music with knowledge is not just the province of scholars. In this way, the strategy of setting factual information to pitch transcends the teachers' school and seems to be a cultural configuration of the larger (male) society rather than the isolated practice of any single learning community.

Indeed, in *China Men*, the mnemonic strategy of linking knowledge or fact to song is not even restricted to academic or school-centered productions. The narrator tells us about China men who took on the identities of "paper sons." These were fictional sons that other older men who had become American citizens had invented for each year they visited China. According to the narrator, another way immigrating China men could gain entrance to the United States was by taking on the identity of a previous traveler to the United States after one had retired or died. To prepare for the inevitable questioning required for entry to the United States, these China men who are assuming false identities would need to commit to memory the many details relating to the assumed persona. The narrator relates: "The men preparing to go wandered in the fields and among the mud huts and great houses of the village, chanting these facts to a beat, rhymed them, quizzed one another" (46). Here we can see that, just like the scholars, the common Chinese villagers are also familiar with the customary connection of music to knowledge. However, in this case, unlike the scholarly use of music, which situates song and lyric as a conduit of facts, music is used by the village men to memorize fictions that will later be

presented as facts. In this sense, the men use music to transpose points of fiction into points of truth. Assuming the identity of the "paper sons" or of another Sojourner involves a series of lies, but the process of both setting the information to music and performing the songs accurately seems to effectively, and even mystically, convert the lies to credible truths. It appears then that China men sing the truth, even when the "truth" is based on inaccuracies or lies.

Ultimately, the father is not successful as a teacher of lyric or a conductor of song. Dissatisfied with the teaching experience, he soon finds that the students have "ruined his eating; they ruined his sleep", and perhaps more importantly, they have "spoiled the song of birds" (39). It seems he fared much better as a solo performer or a communal participant in the chorused verses of erudition. The narrator relates that the father became increasingly uninterested in the songs of knowledge and instead "became susceptible to the stories men told, which were not fabulations like the fairy tales and ghost stories told by women" (41). It is important for the narrator (as well as the father) to make the distinction between the veracious stories told by the men and the incredible female tales. It is easy then for Baba to allow himself to be seduced by the stories of the Gold Mountain Sojourners. And he consequently makes the trek to the United States.

The power of music is played out in *China Men* by great-grandfather Bak Goong. The great-grandfather is lured to Hawaii by the promise of wealth and security. Once in Hawaii, Bak Goong finds himself laboring on a sugar plantation. Here the China men and boys suffer under the oppressive command of the western "demons". The effects of the long hours and grueling labor are amplified by the tyrannical regulations imposed on the plantation workers. One particularly onerous rule forbids speaking. Men guilty of

violation are whipped on the spot and monetarily fined. After having suffered the inhumanity of these penalties, Bak Goong devises a way to obviate the authoritative regulations through song.

> One day - he could not help it - he sang about the black mountains reddening and how mighty was the sun that shone on him in this enchanted forest and on his family in China . . . The demons paid his singing no mind. They must have thought he was singing a traditional song when he was really commenting and planning. "I've solved the talking," he sang to his fellow workers. "If that demon whips me, I'll catch the whip and yank him off his horse, crack his head like a coconut."
>
> (*China Men* 100-101)

One could say that the western authorities are, in this case, a victim of their own cultural misrepresentation of music. Historically, music in the West has been thought to transcend denotative meaning. The accepted precept has held that while language communicates explicitly, music ostensibly performs on a purely aesthetic and subjective plane and so cannot signify concretely. In his "Music" chapter in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom promotes the popular misconception that music is purely emotive. "Music is the medium of the human soul in its most ecstatic condition of wonder and terror . . . Music is the soul's primitive and primary speech and its alogon, without articulate speech or reason. It is not only not reasonable, it is hostile to reason" (Bloom 68). Bloom's ideas are fairly representative of Western thought on the signifying property (or lack thereof) of music. Music appeals to the emotions of the listener and does not complicate this process with the trappings of rational thought or logical

denotative communications. Through this imaging, music has been erroneously presented as an obscure art-form that does not explicitly communicate and, thus, has no concrete influence over the thought and behavior of the listener. Because the Western oppressors are listening to Bak Goong's song by way of the cultural codes of Western musicology, they are somewhat oblivious to the singer's ability to communicate to and ultimately influence his listeners. However, Bak Goong knows the power of song to communicate, and he employs the song for subversive purposes. In this case, traditional song provides both a connection to the homeland and a tool for rebellion.

As a transplanted Chinese American living with his family in California in *The Woman Warrior*, according to the narrator, the father is somewhat uncommunicative. Indeed, the daughter/narrator feels the lack of dialogue and yearns for verbal communication from the father. The father-daughter conversation that she yearns for is never realized. The father does not impart intimate recollections or family history. Interestingly, for the narrator, he is remembered for vocalized music rather than articulated words. The daughter recalls, "a humming came from him continually" (34). The cultural codes aligning factual knowledge with music are transported to the foreign setting, but they do not seem to survive. The knowledge cannot be articulated, but the music is sustainable. In California, the father does not recognize any pedagogical value for the code and so the facts remain unsung. After all, he is no longer a teacher, and in this new setting, pupils and other listeners are unfamiliar with the oral conventions.

The hummed lyric does, however, provide a viable tie to the homeland. The humming recalls the father's respected position as scholar and teacher in China. It recalls his mastery of facts and knowledge. Despite his altered social position in the United

States, the musical production reinforces his elevated position within the family and within the Chinese American community. At the same time, the humming is uncomplicated by language. In this sense, the veracity of the communication is unchallengeable because there are no words or issues with which to grapple. The father thus maintains authority over the production of this form of communication. It is an authoritative production in that it does not invite inquiry or interaction. It cannot be permeated or altered. It is meant to be heard, not to be engaged. Thus, the daughter and mother are left out of the performance, and the father maintains mastery over this type of oral production.

Ultimately, for the father, music, as it is associated with facts and knowledge, is much more than a mnemonic device. Here music sustains the social and cultural codes of the home community. When the father hums, he is eliciting the performance of a scholar and teacher. As well, the lyric cannot be understood by the uninitiated. The pitches function as trade terminology, theoretical language, or technical codes that are coherent only for those inaugurated into the proper communities, those who have fulfilled the eligibility requirements. Thus, the humming, importantly, maintains the father's knowledge, his position as scholar and teacher, his membership in a privileged community of scholars, and even his masculinity. As long as the father can recall the tunes, he will not lose his identity or his self-respect – even in the foreign setting.

Because the father's humming is remembered as his salient form of oral communication and because the father's lyrical production is associated with factual knowledge, the father is aligned with music and veracity. On the other hand, the narrator associates the mother with the questionable veracity of the talk-story texts. In a climactic

confrontation with her mother in *The Woman Warrior*, the daughter confesses: "I don't want to listen to anymore of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you made up" (202). When we juxtapose this with the daughter's reminiscence of her father's communication of history through lyric in *China Men*, the contrasts of song and talk-story become clear. The narrator/daughter relates: "He sang 'The Song of the Man of the Green Hill' … This was a song by Kao Chi, who had been executed for his politics" (255). The narrator/daughter accepts the pitched language of the father as factual documentation of history while the mother's talk-story is challenged. At this juncture, the daughter/narrator has not thought through the relationship of polyvocal texts with multiple versions and perceptions of truth.

Thus, in Kingston's first two books, music, as it relates to the production and communication of texts, seems initially to tip the balance of power in favor of the male performers. This gendered appropriation of music to the point of power is neither novel nor unparalleled. In "Music and Male Hegemony," music theorist John Shepherd explores the various motives of and methods for a masculinist supervision of music production and reception. He begins by pointing to a both occidental and patriarchal inclination to codify and delimit musical and female behavior. In order to harness and circumscribe the power of music, the masculinist trend has been to create paradigms and impose dictums that attempt to construct music as a rational and, therefore, non-threatening discourse. Because music is rational, its production is driven by complex codes and theories, which can be mastered only through a process of formal, supervised

education. In the west, historically, access to these codes of production had been limited to male scholars and musicians. According to Shepherd:

> The male fear of women is mirrored in the threat posed by uncontrollable musical experience to the "moral fiber" of the rationalistic scribal state. But since music cannot ultimately be denied any more than social relatedness, the answer to music's "threat" for post-Renaissance men has been to isolate those components, pitch and rhythm, which can be objectified and frozen through a fully analytic notation.
>
> (Shepherd 158)

There are many motives for seeking and maintaining control over the production of texts. The reification of music in print form demystifies its source of power and allows for critical analysis. Thus, those who can decode the script have access to the inner workings and deep meanings of the musical texts. Shepherd also writes, "It is no accident that the vast majority of noetic and scribal elites have been male," and indeed, history offers compelling evidence of a propensity for male control through codification and claims of theoretical mastery. In this way, men have held dominion over "serious" music while women have been limited to more domestic and, in that sense, more restricted participation in music.

Shepherd's claims illuminate readings of *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* in that as the narrator's father inherits the patriarchal role of scholar and scribe, he also becomes master of the songs of truth and erudition. The father's music is most often "scored" since the tunes derive from scholarly texts or even print school texts, like the class roster. Conversely, the mother's talk-story oral narrative is domesticated and

trivialized as idle fabrication. The decontextualized diaspora setting complicates the paradigms of male music veracity and female fallacious talk-story. The daughter/narrator, listening to the texts on the borderlands of Chinese tradition and western convention, is frustrated by the gendered nature of the various discourses and resents the unreliability of the mother's oral texts. When we juxtapose the daughter's long-standing but long-untold complaint to her mother in *The Woman Warrior,* "You lie with your stories," with the daughter's reminiscence of her father relating history through lyric, the contrast of credible male-driven song and unreliable female talk-story becomes clear. The dubious veracity of talk-story effects a breach of communication between the daughter and mother. Since the mother's discourse is not credible, the daughter finds it difficult to maintain an honest association with this parent. As a result, the mother-daughter relationship is mired in evasion, suppression, and insincerity.

At a pivotal moment in *The Woman Warrior*, after a lifelong silence on the subject, the daughter purges herself of emotional baggage by eliciting a confession where she delineates the problems complicating the mother-daughter relationship. At this moment of catharsis, the daughter recites a long list, what she calls a "telling list," of grievances for her mother. The list provides an itemized history of conflict. The daughter/narrator recalls: "When I said them out loud I saw that some of the items were ten years old already, and I had outgrown them. But they kept pouring out anyway . . ." Significantly, the daughter reveals her true feelings with what she describes as a "voice like Chinese opera." The narrator elaborates: "I could hear the drum and cymbals and the gongs and the brass horns" (203). The detailed "telling list" provides insight into the true status of the relationship and, at the same time, represents years of untold,

unrevealed issues. Since music has been aligned with veracity, the magnitude and importance of these truthful revelations is accompanied by the appropriate fanfare of elaborate musical accompaniment. Here Maxine sets foot on the musical territory of her father and the gradual unraveling of her gendered notions of oral production is made explicit with her adaptation of the father's truth music.

**Monkey in the Middle**

In Kingston's third novel, *Tripmaster Monkey, his fake book*, music establishes conventions, which the narrative hero, Wittman Ah Sing, must relentlessly seek to overturn. To this point, we find Wittman subverting the ritualizing intent of traditional music in order to establish his own, liberatory forms. Indeed the title of the book insinuates mutation of form through improvisation. The subtitle, *his fake book*, refers to the underground jazz and pop fake books. These books have been popularly used by working musicians because they provide the basic structure or plan of a standard, jazz or pop tune. The general idea of a fake book is that any of these tunes can be revised through improvisation. The chord progressions, as they are outlined in the fake book, provide the formal structure. However, riffs, or improvisatory melodic passages, may be inserted and certain tonal areas may be extended through harmonic play. Also, dynamic markings, like *pianissimo* or *forte*, which would indicate loud or soft intonations, are offered as suggestions but ultimately the performers orchestrate the piece and make it their own. Thus, in a sense the fake book provides a blueprint on which players can build their own interpretation of a musical piece. Interestingly, these fake books have been historically illegal because of the many violations of federal copyright laws. The fake

books are massive and typically include hundreds of tunes. Some of the tunes are fairly contemporary and many are legally protected by copyright restrictions that prohibit the for-profit circulation of this type of sheet music. Because of the illegal nature of the fake books, they are typically not sold in retail stores where most folks buy sheet music. Instead, fake book sellers and buyers must deal underground. It's not surprising then that in *Tripmaster*, like those who deal in fake books, Wittman must ultimately travel society's underground in order to coopt musical forms and turn them to his own purpose. In this sense, he appropriates the standard, "fake book" forms of music and uses these forms as a foundation for his own configurations. This results in forms that are true to his unique perspective.

The fake book format also resembles the hua-pen reference books, which are often used to prompt Chinese storytellers, especially in the performance of longer epic-form narratives. Debra Shostak relates, "Hua-pen would typically include the major episodes of a traditional story, but storytellers were known for adding new episodes." In this way, the performers would "edit, elaborate, and add to the major episodes" (Scandera-Trombley 57). Here we see Kingston's notion of the oral narrative as a mutable text at play. Texts are presented as internally persuasive discourses that can be altered and adapted to the purposes of contemporary storytellers and their audiences.

The implicit tie of truth to music that we saw in *China Men* is recapitulated in *Tripmaster Monkey*. In Chapter 2, "Linguists and Contenders," during an adventure that emanates from his writing, Wittman follows a "music boat" on courses of waterways. Aboard *The Song Boat*, in the bay between Macao and Hong Kong, Wittman finds himself at the center of a maritime marketplace. Surrounded by boats offering lush

displays of freshly cooked seafood as well as the wine of the poets, "the plum rose that inspired Tu Fu and Li Po," Wittman marvels at the shimmering lights of the surrounding hillside villages as they bounce off the water's surface.

> "What do you want to hear?" Our singer, Joang Fu, calls for requests and dedications. (His name, Joang Fu, pronounced like Joan of Arc, like a bell of Time, means Inner Truth, which was also Wittman's byname, it so happened. Named by his father at the throw of the Ching.) "Our band has traveled more than five thousand days, and found no gold, and found no eagle-feather shield, but we bring back music to our tribe." Balancing, he hands a menu of songs over to the lovers."
>
> (*Tripmaster Monkey* 37 – 38)

Here the singer, Joang Fu, clearly holds an explicit tie to truth through his name. He possesses his "menu of songs" or his own fake book of standards. We can assume since he is the bearer of truth, his songs must reflect an intention to bring truth to the masses. He also indicates that he has assumed responsibility for performing the music and passing this music on to others. Indeed, to his listeners, he infers that the music carries value, perhaps more so than gold or an "eagle-feather shield."

In *Tripmaster*, the music-truth continuum resurfaces at the play rehearsal, where we are told that the "Those who weren't such talkers riffed the jungs, banjos, erhus, fiddles. Drummers were hitting the wooden whales knock-knocking, that is, dock-docking truths out of their wide mouths" (276). In the *The Song Boat* passage not only is truth aligned with music, as in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*, but the function of music as a conduit of truth is also ascribed to a male singer, thus continuing the gendered

construct established in *China Men* that associates music and truth with male orality (and talk-story and fiction with female orality). In the play rehearsal scene, however, the performance role of music/truth is broadened in the sense that the performance of music and song as trajectories of truth is not the privilege of men alone. Wittman's play-plan includes all and liberates the participants from social behavioral prescriptions and limitations. Women as well as men can enjoy the truth-telling properties of music and song as all engage in the lively production.

**Music, Control, and Subversion**

If music is so tightly aligned with a listener's (and a player/singer's) perception of truth, then whoever controls the production of music controls mass perceptions of truth. While music seems to correlate with truth in the Kingston texts, there does seem to be an awareness or a wariness of subversive uses of music. For one, music can be used to persuade. In *China Men*, the narrator relates, "Even today the family trusts any insurance, encyclopedia or gadget salesman who talks like us, our language a music that charms away common sense" (91). Thus, the music of the language eclipses the content and effectively converts and convinces the listeners. Because music is perceived as having truth-bearing properties, if the communication is sung, it must be true. At the same time, music signifies community where only those in the know can perform the lyric. The musical properties of the language signal membership in the community and, thus, instill trust in the listener who is in the know.

Song may also be presented as an immutable, authoritative discourse. Listeners may easily be recruited by way of the rote-learned lyric. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, at the

toy convention, the audience is reported as "having a good old time, singing along, shrugging shoulders to the beat" (61). The text conjures the scene of a community sing-a-long.

> Three chicks and three men with straw hats, red-and-white blazers, and candy-canes, men in blue pants, girls in nets, hoofed out. They led a cheer, "YOU CAN TELL - IT"S MATTEL - IT"S SWELL." "All together boys and girls," they said. "Hit it." Taped music started up. They banged tambourines and shook sleighbells. They sang that Christmas song that rhymes "boy and" with "toyland."
>
> (*Tripmaster Monkey* 61)

Music is clearly used here as a vehicle for community-building by melding the disparate voices into one monophonic cheer for the corporation. The redundant, chant-like performance and the thematic nature of the lyric are also reminiscent of the pedagogical function of rote-learned lyric in the China classroom in *China Men*. But rather than internalizing the principles of math and science or significant points of history and literature, at the toy convention, the community is led to accept the "swell"-ness of the corporate product as a matter of fact.

Although Wittman resists the collective acceptance of song in the Mattel scene, he does acknowledge being vulnerable to the recruitment power of music. On some evenings, he and his date, Tana, often track the melodious chanting of the Monks to the monastery. "Knowing some Latin from school, Wittman felt on the verge of understanding the songs. 'Compline,' said Tana, 'the last prayer at night.' The compline had been so wonderful, Wittman admitted that he'd wanted to join up but for his vow

against missionary religion" (150). Wittman has the ability to resist; nonetheless, the potential of music to convert is acknowledged.

His realization of the dangers of this potential to recruit is made clear in the party scene. Here the diverse gathered personalities are united by music. The strobe-enhanced, bass-driven dance music has the various members of the crowd moving in sync with one another. Like the others, Wittman is strongly and internally affected by the musical call:

> He went monkeying around the room, fancy feet making intricate moves, multiplexed by the light … We are as face cards being shuffled, and my fanning arms are merging into the images of the fanning arms of others. And the world is in sync. In sync at last. God Almighty, in sync at last. Feet go with the drums. Heart booms to bass. My pulse, its pulse. Ears, eyes, feet, heart, myself, and all these people, my partners all. In sync. All synchronized.
>
> (*Tripmaster Monkey* 110)

We see music functioning as a unification device, setting standards and dictating conventions of movement. Music sets a beat and prescribes a pace. This tempo guides the very movements of the listeners.

Film theorist, William Johnson, indicates the ability of music to disturb "the natural tempi of the body," thus effecting an influence which is difficult to circumvent (Johnson 3). Clearly an individual possesses a distinct internal rhythm, determined in part by heartbeat, breathing tempo, blood flow, etc. Johnson's theory points to the ability of suprarhythmic influences to provoke disruptions in the natural, internal tempi of the individual. Erwin Bazelon in his text, *Knowing the Score*, supports this claim for music's real, corporeal impact on the body and grounds his claim in physical science:

> If the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, the fastest emotional path to the heart is through the ear. While music is the most abstract of the arts, its rhythmic, harmonic and structural designs are readily expressible in mathematical terms . . . music has strong physiological impact. Perhaps this is so because sound waves enter the ear, hit the nervous system, ricochet, and echo through the body.
>
> (Bazelon 126)

Visual images are easily effaced by closing one's eyes; however, aural stimuli are not so easily obliterated. Even if one were to effectively seal out the higher pitched notes of a musical production, the lower notes would continue to have an impact on the listener's body due to the production of bass vibrations. These vibrations can permeate the nerve center of the listening individual and can alter the body's natural, biological rhythm. This seems to be precisely what Wittman and his fellow partiers experience. The music, in effect, takes over their bodies and influences not only external movement but internal dynamics as well. Because of its power to dictate external and internal movement, music can establish a common, fundamental framework within which all action is manipulated.

In addition to the pulsing instrumental rhythm and bass, in the Kingston books lyric evinces an effective influence as well. The *China Men* narrator relates the Communists' use of song to convert: "Grandmother and the aunts wrote letters on the death of every last uncle. If the uncles could have figured out what the communists wanted of them, they would have complied, but the Communists made no sense. It was something to do with the new songs, new dances, and the breaking of the families . . . The Communists were not simply after property; they wanted the people to say certain

things. They had to sing ugly communist songs . . . they memorized fast and sang loud" (275). In this way, a political enculturation is accomplished in part through the imposition of melody and lyric. In order to govern the masses, the production of history, literature, and other forms of knowledge that are cultural indicators must fall under the control of the ruling class so that culture and knowledge support the governing ideology. If communism is to be the true ideology, then this ideology must drive the composition of music and song. Alternative productions are, therefore, heretical and unacceptable and must ultimately be annihilated. In *China Men*, the implication is that if the uncles had had access to the new songs, they could have saved their own lives.

In *Tripmaster*, music as a trajectory towards this kind of power to control and recruit is clearly acknowledged by Wittman. He points out at the campsite, "whoever controls music has the world spinning in the palm of his hand" (198). Indeed, Wittman does not oppose the use of music to accrue power. The beginning of *Tripmaster* exhorts, "Let the musicians rule. Play-a-what kind of music? - how does it go" (35)? In this sense, the power of music is not reserved for the authorities alone. At the play rehearsal, we see Wittman pounding on the drum to control the players and restore order to the scene. Thus, music as a mechanism of control seems to hold potential for all those who choose to seize the power.

**Music, Resistance, and Insurgency**

Since the employment of music for didactic purposes is not a privilege extended to a delimited class, music can also be wielded by the masses as a tool of resistance and insurrection. If musical texts credibly communicate truths, then perceptions of truth can

be manipulated to suit the agenda of the composer or performer of the text. The social status of the producer does not seem to undermine the ability to successfully communicate veracity. Like Great Grandfather Bak Goong in *China Men*, Wittman is aware of the insurgent capacity of music. He seeks to overturn racial inequities and misconceptions through song and drama. Wittman rebels against ethnic typecasting that has been constructed through a prescribed musical identity. He relates that Chinese lyrical form has been falsely adapted by the predominant culture and used to fabricate a fantasmatic musical identity that has little relation to a real Asian imaging in song. There is a tonal sequence commonly associated with Asian characters and culture that has been popularized by Hollywood. This musical sequence has functioned as a leitmotif for all things Asian and has thus entered into popular culture as the musical icon of Asia. Interestingly, the sequence is not drawn from any native Asian composition or folk lyric and, in fact, bears little resemblance in tonal structure to traditional Asian composition. Though illegitimate, the leitmotif does impose an identity on the Asian subject, and the pervasive use of the leitmotif by those in control of the production of popular culture has created a misrepresentation of Asian identity and Asian culture.

Wittman points to the illegitimacy of the prescriptive musical definitions as he proclaims, "We got rhythm" (15), thus denying the illusion that Chinese don't play pop culture. Wittman ponders:

> I want so bad to be the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America. Of all the music on the airwaves, there's one syllable that sounds like ours. It's that song by the Coasters. "It'll take an ocean of calamine lotion. Poison ivee-eeee-ee." No, not the ivy part. It's where they sing, "Aro-ou-ound-aaaa-ah." Right there, that's

> a Chinese opera run. A Coaster must have been among those Black guys you see at the Chinese movies and at dojos seeking kung fu power.
>
> (*Tripmaster Monkey* 27)

Wittman argues that not only do the Chinese have rhythm but that the ethnic tunes have been freely appropriated in pop tunes. "Back at the jazz station Wittman heard Louis B. Armstrong and John Cage credit Chinese opera for inspiring their rhythms. Yes? Yes? Was Wittman's yearning giving him an hallucination of the ear? A piece he could not identify bingbanged forth and jangled in his ear" (41). Wittman rejoices in the affirmation of his suspicions that his ethnic tunes do speak to contemporary popular culture.

In line with this desire to liberate prescribed ethnic images from the bonds of authoritative production, in his drama, Wittman attempts to use music to create a defiant image of his ethnic culture, one that resists prescriptive definitions already firmly posited by the authoritative culture. "No ching chong music," he vows (309). Here Wittman banishes Hollywood's musical typecasting in favor of a music that conjures positive and truthful images.

**Liberating Talk-Story: Creating New Forms**

The fundamental value of music for traditional Chinese drama is underscored in *The Woman Warrior*. At the end of *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator tells the reader how her grandmother insisted on attending the theater accompanied by the entire family. The narrator also tells us that the grandmother would bring a chaise lounge so that she could sleep while remaining at the site for many days. "Our family was immune to harm

as long as they went to plays . . . I like to think at some of the performances they heard the songs of Ts'ai Yen, a poetess born in ad 175." *Tripmaster Monkey* concludes with Wittman orchestrating a drama that appears to be a hybrid of song and talk-story. The equitable melding of lyric and spoken word seems to draw influence from traditional sources.

Though he draws ideas from the Chinese dramatic productions of his ancestors, in Wittman's theatrical production, he significantly integrates song and dialogue to create a dramatic form that does not fit easily into preformed structures. Within this new form, Wittman recognizes the interpretive quality of music that can be seized by the performer: "The same story can be comedy or tragedy, depending on the music" (93).

At the same time, he adapts the improvisational qualities of the talk-story. *The Woman Warrior* relates the mutability of talk-story even when retold by the same performer to the point where the mother, Brave Orchid, concludes that her sister is mad, based on the sister's inability to vary her stories: "'The difference between mad people and sane people,' Brave Orchid explained, to the children, 'is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over'" (159). Thus, deviation seems to be indigenous to the genre. In Wittman's drama, variation in talk-story is politically significant as it provides the performers with voice and agency and usurps control from both the playwright and the director. Wittman's open format is reflected in his text. Wittman distributes to the assembled performers "Xeroxes of the script that had lots of holes for ad lib and actor's gifts" (277).

Despite the liberating format, Wittman is up-front about the didactic intent of the drama, which he calls a "lecture-revue" (289). Clearly Wittman wants to maintain

artistic control over the project. He pounds the drum; he sets the rhythm; he wants order. However, within that order, within that structure, he encourages variation through improvisation. In this manner, he creates his own fake book text. He provides the groundwork in the form of a basic formal organization but he leaves room for aesthetic freedom and the integration of performer/reader/listener's personal musical and dramatic style.

Indeed, Wittman seems to argue for a fake book society with free appropriation of formal structures. This position speaks to a question posed earlier in the text at the party: "How do you reconcile unity with identity" (105)? Wittman's answer is perhaps to resist singing the prescribed tunes. Rather, choose from the fake book repertoire and then play the melodic line, modify the harmonies, choose a dynamic, and create an original song.

**Conclusion**

Wittman's fake book approach to text construction reflects Kingston's own attitude toward free adaptation of traditional talk-stories already in circulation. In this way, *Tripmaster Monkey* responds to critics like Frank Chin who wonder about the appropriateness of playing with the characterizations and story lines of traditional Chinese texts. Likeminded critics would like to impose the same hands off standards on oral narratives that are imposed on copyrighted print-text publications. However, it has generally been part of the convention of oral narratives that they be freely appropriated by the storyteller. Can one impose the legal and even philosophical restrictions of a print-text medium on the oral narrative tradition? The centuries long history of oral narrative conventions sanctions variety in the dissemination of oral tales. Should the new

legal order of print text publication apply to oral tradition practices as well? Certainly, this would be difficult to enforce as discrete communities would have already received narratives with slight variations. For any single narrative, there would need to be some agreement as to a standard version without bias for or rejection of any one community's version. Or should we only consider the integrity of the oral narrative once that tale crosses over into the print format? And here lies the core of the problem for critics like Chin. It seems to be the case that Kingston's infraction involves not just altering a traditional Chinese narrative but setting this modification in print and disseminating it cross-culturally. These critical claims bring to mind a number of questions.

First, should we demand that oral narratives put in print appear in an accepted, unalterable standard form? Especially between cultures, the dissemination of any narrative has been most effectively done in print. Even with the popularity of digital recording, the print-text medium is still the most popular mode for carrying oral narratives across national and ethnic borders. A demand that any oral narrative appear in an approved standardized version would complicate production and hinder dissemination. Predictably, there would be a constant debate over the stylistic fine points and content details of any single narrative. Such commitment to standardization would be nearly impossible to maintain. In this way, the imposition of the same uniformity of narrative that is generally found in print text publications, even among the various editions of a text in print, would undermine the right for communities to have their own version of any one oral narrative.

Secondly, would the institution of a single, "correct" version of any oral narrative undercut the underlying truth of the tale. In *The Woman Warrior*, we find the mother

telling and retelling a variety of stories and altering the narrative with each retelling. The mother even goes as far as to claim that continual retelling of the same narrative without alteration is a sign of insanity. Although her sister, Moon Orchid manifests many of the tell-tale signs of paranoia and schizophrenia, it is only when her sister begins to habitually tell the same story over and over without modification that the mother, Brave Orchid, is willing to concede that her sister is mentally ill and must be institutionalized. Thus, performance of talk-story with a modification of text is a sign of mental alacrity. For the narrator's mother, the master talk-story communicator, if one loses the ability to improvise on a tale, one has lost an ability to think and communicate rationally. One needs to entertain all possibilities before one can logically consider the general sense of a narrative.

Another question addresses the responsibility of the reader/listener in receiving the oral narrative. Frank Chin railed against Kingston's retelling of the Fa Mulan tale for a general cross-cultural readership. To Chin's point, in general, a western readership, for example, would not be familiar with the Fa Mulan tale, at least not enough to recognize any significant deviations from a traditional version. A Chinese audience, on the other hand, would be prepared to distinguish most of Kingston's fabulations from the legend. Chin has argued that in misappropriating the legend of Fa Mulan, she has mislead a western readership into accepting a corrupt version of the tale. Thus, a broad western readership believes that Kingston's version of Fa Mulan is the one authentic version of the tale. One may wonder then what is the responsibility of the reader in authenticating oral traditional narratives in print? Should the reader be responsible for familiarizing him or her self with the various versions of any one tale? Or should the writer identify

deviations from the received narrative? Kingston has discussed her reluctance to provide her readers with background information. She says of her writing process, "I do not slow down to give boring exposition, which is information that is available in encyclopedias, history books, sociology, anthropology, mythology." And she calls on the reader to assume some responsibility for research, "I rarely repeat anything that can be found in other books. Some readers will just have to do some background reading. Maybe my writing can provide work for English majors. The reader ought not to expect reading always to be as effortless as watching television" (Kingston, "Mis-readings"). Also, if we are going to worry about faithfulness to some notion of an accurate version of an oral narrative, then should we likewise concern ourselves with Disney's rather corrupt version of MuLan or for that matter Disney's retelling of western tales, like Snow White and Cinderella, that diverge considerably from the versions collected by the Grimm Brothers?

One might also question the importance of maintaining the integrity of an oral narrative performance tradition. While Chin views transpositions as corruptions, Kingston sees these newly created texts as the aesthetic byproducts of a liberated environment that inspires creativity through laissez-faire inter-textual conversations. Supporters of textual improvisation claim that the freedom to adapt and modify encourages the construction of fresh narratives and innovative forms. The composition of any single oral narrative is not typically attributed to any particular author or group of authors. Oral narrative is therefore not the possession of any individual or indeed any community. As a result, any author may freely appropriate the oral narrative and bend it towards a context and precept that may vary with each narrator. This kind of environment that allows for freely derived compositions and inter-textual borrowings

encourages creativity and textual innovation. Donald Barthelme's idiosyncratic *Snow White*, for example, could only have been possible in an environment that tolerated free adaptation of this kind of oral tale.

Finally, the evolving character of the oral narrative has perhaps been the central reason why these traditional narratives continue to be disseminated and enjoyed over the course of centuries. Wittman recognizes that in order to make the traditional tales relevant and entertaining for his audience, he must alter the narratives to reflect the needs and experiences of the community. Likewise, Kingston retells Fa MuLan for a contemporary audience with an evolving set of needs and desires. In doing so, she creates a Chinese female warrior that possesses many of the qualities for survival necessary for women in general and Asian women in particular. This kind of alteration of a traditional narrative ensures the relevance of the tale for a contemporary audience. As Bakhtin has stressed, an immutable, authoritative text will soon become irrelevant and be discarded. However, a text that can be tailored to meet the needs of a variety of audiences will continue to be significant.

In *The Woman Warrior*, it is the mother who demonstrates the art of the talk-story for Maxine the narrator. Initially, the narrator finds this practice confusing and misleading. However, she ultimately comes to understand that it is only with the multiple versions of a single narrative that one can arrive at the truth. Kingston's narrator in *China Men* adopts the same approach to narrative veracity with the multiple versions of the father's immigration story. Thus, for Kingston, the value of Chinese oral narrative is in its adaptability to any context and for any creative form. Kingston derives inspiration from the oral narratives and innovates a textual framework that reveals qualities of the

oral tale and performance practice. The musical references and language as well as the multiple perspectives are just several signs or oral narrative influence. Kingston empowers the reader to arrive at the truth through thorough consideration of a variety of versions. And by modeling re-vision of a text, the structure of the narrative itself provides opportunities for the reader to engage in personalized retellings of the presented text. This collaborative approach to the composition of a print text publication derives from oral narrative tradition and works, as oral narrative does, toward an inclusive readership. What Kinston says of her *The Woman Warrior* can be applied to her *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey* as well: "I want my audience to include everyone. I had planned that if I could not find an American publisher, I would send the manuscript to Britain, Hong Kong, Canada, Taiwan -- anywhere -- and if it did not then find a publisher, I would keep it safe for posthumous publication, so I do believe in the timelessness and universality of individual vision. It would not just be a family book or an American book or a woman's book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book" (Kingston, "Mis-Readings").

# Chapter III

## Beyond the Beats

> I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America
> Introduced to Gyalwa Karmapa heir of the Whispered Transmission Crazy Wisdom Practice Lineage
> As the secret young wise man who visited him and winked anonymously decade ago in Gangtok
> Prepared the way for Dharma in America without mentioning Dharma-scribbled laughter
> Who saw Blake and abandoned God
> To whom Messianic Fink sent messages darkest hour sleeping on steel sheets "somewhere in the Federal Prison system" Weathermen got no Moscow Gold
> Who went backstage to Cecil Taylor serious chat chord structure & Time in a nightclub
>
> - Allen Ginsberg
> *Ego Confession*

John Lennon put the A in Beatles as a tribute to Beat Generation poets who he declared inspired the group musically, lyrically, and stylistically (Alfsono 254; Gilmore 237). An initial version of the cover photograph for Bob Dylan's 1966 recording *Blonde on Blonde* features Dylan flanked by Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure (Gilmore 237). Dylan has cited Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* as having a seminal influence on his own work and has said of the Beat poems, "It was the first poetry that spoke to me in my language and I could understand it, and it also made rhythmic sense to me, an American language" (Kubernik, "10/96 interview"). And Grateful Dead front man Jerry Garcia stressed, "I owe a lot of who I am and what I've been and what I've done to the beatniks from the Fifties" (Puterbaugh 361).

In general, western popular music of the 1950s and 1960s both reflected and inspired social movements and radical counter-culture practices. These cultural and social contexts shared by both the Beat writers and the musicians provided fertile

common ground for artistic activity. While literature often reflects the culture of the times, Beat poetry and prose seems to have entrenched itself as a genre that participates in a very particular symbiotic relationship with cultural artists - most notably musicians. It's clear, for example, that Ginsberg's "America" (1956), a gutsy diatribe against United States politics ("America when will we end the human war? Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb"), helped foster the anti-Vietnam War protest music that followed. Not just musical trends but also related social behavior has emanated out of Beat thought and literature. Counter-cultural practices like so-called "New Age" bohemian travel, for example, as perhaps best exemplified by the Deadhead tour travelers who trailed the rock band, The Grateful Dead, were inspired by Beat travel literature, like Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound."

Subsequent generations have continued to foster this symbiosis by fanning the flames of the Beat spirit. Hip hop DJ "The Subliminal Kid" took this alias from a character that appears in two novels by Beat author William Burroughs - *The Ticket that Exploded* and *Nova Express* - and both rappers Ice-T and Ice-Cube have said that their aliases reveal the influence of Beat writer Iceberg Slim (*Pimp – The Story of My Life*) (Kemp 417-418). Punk band Sonic Youth's 2000 cd release, *NYC Ghosts and Flowers* features cover art by William Burroughs, and Ginsberg recorded with the band's drummer, lyricist, and professed Beat enthusiast, Lee Renaldo. On their song, "I Should Be Allowed to Think," contemporary New York based rock group They Might Be Giants quotes the opening lines of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl for Carl Solomon" as they sing: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical. I should be allowed to glue my poster. I should be allowed to think" (as quoted in Norbury 191).

Indeed, in an Allen Ginsberg memorial collection of memories and tributes published in *Rolling Stone*, Lou Reed said that without the poetry of Allen Ginsberg "modern lyrics would be inconceivable" ("Memories" 278). Clearly, the radical ideology of the Beats resonates in contemporary western music as well as in social movements, print-text, and other literary forums, thus influencing ensuing counterculture trends.

But aside from explicit evidence of the influence of the Beats on modern popular music, arguably just as significant to contemporary culture was a synthesis of music and literature, not just in content and attitude but also in process and form, that manifested itself foremost and most prominently in Beat literature. Thus, we find that less than two decades after the initial coming together of the seminal members of Beat Generation poets and writers, prominent musicians coming of age in the 1960s, like Dylan and Lennon, were already reflecting in their work the underlying musicality of Beat poetry. In a 1975 letter to his father, Allen Ginsberg places Bob Dylan within the tradition of western poetry by assigning him a significant position in the linear evolution of lyrical forms. In this letter, Ginsberg tells his father, poet Louis Ginsberg, that Dylan epitomized "all the American poetics from Poe thru Vachel Lindsay thru the poetry-jazz experimenters of a decade ago - He's able to stand up & chant/recite/sing intricately regularly rhymed irregular-lined narrative poems to continuous downbeat & instrumental background, making a combination of music & poetry, with emphasis on the words, that maybe hasn't been performed as *theater* since the Greeks" (Schumacher 381). In this way, Ginsberg tracks the progression of music-based poetic lyric from the Greeks to American poets, like Poe and Lindsay, to the Beat jazz poets, like Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman, to Dylan. In doing so, he points to the work of the Beat writers and

collaborating musicians as being representative of a significant movement in the history of western literature, a movement where poetry and literature unite in form and structure with contemporary music. At the same time, Ginsberg indicates a lapse in collaborative poetry/music performance, extending from the ancient Greek dramas that fused poetry and music. Since Ginsberg was very much aware of the European minstrel tradition, we can assume that what he's indicating here is a formal structure where poetry and music collaborate in such a way that one element does not supercede the other and where the work takes on life within the live performance. Significantly, what he is pointing to is a novel, contemporary framework for collaborative performance of music and poetry that exists outside of familiar music/literature forms, like opera and the modern musicale.

Contemporary popular musicians acknowledge and support Ginsberg's claim for Beat influence of innovative forms. For example, R.E.M. lead vocalist, composer, and lyricist Michael Stipe has claimed that his approach to music composition has been significantly influenced by Beat novelist William Burroughs's cut-up compositional technique, which calls for the writer to literally cut-up the linear text, disassemble and then randomly rearrange the discrete, disembodied parts (Appleford 422). Importantly, though, these derivative artists, like Stipes, reveal influences that are born out of the formal musical structures and aural connotations of the poetry and prose, not merely the radical content of Beat literature.

Because Beat writers, like Allen Ginsberg, recognized the common aesthetic ground shared by poets and musicians, they identified their musical counterparts as poets in their own right, producing lyrics that survive very well on their own in their ability to be spoken and read as well as sung in order to touch the soul of the reader/listener. These

musicians/composers are portrayed as a type of lyric poet who creates text that does not merely accompany a catchy melodic phrase or support a densely harmonic structure but is, at the same time, intrinsically musical itself. On first hearing Dylan's "I'll know my song well before I start singing," Allen Ginsberg relates that he wept in reaction to the "heroic," sentient lyrics, which Ginsberg compared to the best of Shelley and Rimbaud. As well, Ginsberg has called the Beatles "pure poets" and in particular set John Lennon's "A Day in the Life" favorably beside the best work of Apollinaire (Alfonso 255). This mutual admiration of musician and poet reflects an enhanced understanding of the compositional procedures that drive both poetry and music. Thus, rather than categorizing lyric and music production as discrete processes, we see an evolution of artists whose works reveal a synthesis of forms where the music is reflected in the text and the text in the music.

**Bebop Crop: Kerouac et al. Catch the Wave**

When the Beats were students at Columbia University, the jazz music flowing out of the clubs into the streets of the Harlem community where the nascent generation of Beat poets resided provided the back beat that set the lyric tongues in motion. Bebop in particular was favored by the group. Fore-grounded by pioneering musicians Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and picked up by masters like Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus in the 40s and 50s, the jazz form played in the margins of society. The mostly African American musicians who laid the foundation for the form drew on African rhythms and harmonies as well as black American street culture and dialect. The fluid nature of the musical form called for sections where the

musicians departed from conventional western harmonic progression and improvised on a musical motif or rhythmic riff. The integration of improvisation triggered three important and somewhat radical musical departures: First, with the improvised passages, the musician was no longer tied to a score. Second, through improvisation, the performed piece became a collaboratively composed product, a merging of the creative impulses of both the original composer who set the musical architecture and the performer who freely altered it. Third, this maverick new form set notions of western tonality on its head by ignoring some of the tonal protocols of compositional procedure already in place and incorporating unsettling atonal features, like "unresolved" chords and unconventional harmonic progressions.

Certainly, the nonconformity of bebop dovetailed with the social behavior and activity associated with the milieu. Drugs, promiscuity, and other socially rebellious forms of behavior were typically linked with the bebop scene. In many ways, the Beat poets saw themselves as allies of this unconventional group. They too felt that they were at least ideologically if not socially at odds with mainstream convention. In a 1953 letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac claimed that most of the jazz masters had done jail time and that the truly revolutionary poets would also need to follow this route (Tytell 23). Lucien Carr was the first in the Beat circle to do time for a serious crime when he killed Columbia student colleague David Kammarer for allegedly making sexual advances toward Carr. Although Allen Ginsberg never seemed to set out to get himself in trouble with the law, his association with criminals, like Carr, and street thugs, like drug hustler Herbert Huncke, led him also to the penitentiary during his college years (Miles 107). Ginsberg and Kerouac were both introduced to marijuana while at Columbia. Ginsberg

eventually moved on to occasional illegal intravenous drug use as well as hallucinogenic use while, at the same time, contending that drug experimentation was a trajectory to getting in touch with the subconscious poetic impulses. Kerouac's abused substance of choice, on the other hand, was alcohol, an addiction that ultimately killed him. Other Beat poets, like Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, and Peter Orlovsky, also openly engaged in unlawful drug use. Ginsberg and other Beats actively and openly lobbied for decriminalization of marijuana and other "soft" drugs. The Beats were likewise quite open about their liberated sexual conduct and fluid sexuality. Their liberal attitudes toward sex anticipated the "free love" attitudes of the 60's and paved the way for more open discussions of homosexuality and multiple sexual identities. These radical positions on drug use and sexual conduct are reflected in the literature, evincing a bold move to align publicly with other counter-culture movements, like jazz.

But the Beat and bebop artists were not just united in their rejection of the social status quo; fundamentally, they were interested in experimentation with new artistic forms. Certainly, creative deviations reflected the rebellious social attitudes that placed the artists in the margins of society. At the same time, artistic experimentation was a result of integrating counter-cultural social influences with artistic forms that were not at the forefront of popular imagination. Perhaps most famously, Burroughs's alternative organization of narrative material places him at the forefront as the writer who scholars, like John Tytell, have named as most experimental of the Beats. Burroughs' cut-up technique calls for the cutting up of a narrative into discrete pieces and then the reassembling of the narrative by the placement of these pieces into a random sequence. This dismantling of the expected linearity of the narrative results in a text that does not

communicate details chronologically or even thematically; rather the narrative functions as a complex monolith with the reader at the center of a whirlwind of details that are understood in sum rather than units. Tytell describes the process as a "technique that juxtaposes fragments collected from random reading, snatches of conversation, newspaper items, quotations from writers, like Rimbaud and T.S.Eliot, recurring motifs from Burroughs' own work, all rearranged into a mosaic with no overtly centralizing idea" (Tytell 115). In conjunction with the cut-up procedure, Burroughs' developed what he called "fold-in," a process where he would take two distinct pages of text, fold both down the middle, and then juxtapose them on the page in a manner that he believed mimicked a filmic flashback (Tytell 116).

In his prose, Kerouac often references jazz performances in great detail and these passages function as an underlying soundtrack for the narrative. *Pic*, Kerouac's 1971 novella, features a character who is tied to music more than by trade. The character's manner of discourse reflects the bebop strains that he blows through his horn. The descriptive musical passages create a tone for the setting and develop further the reader's understanding of the character.

> He was holdin, and pushin that horn in front of him like it was his *life* he was rasslin with, and jess as solemn about it, and unhappy. And ever' now and then he made it laugh too, and ever'body laughed along with it. Oh, he talked and talked with that thing and told his story over again, to me, to Sheila, to ever'body. He jess had it in his heart what ever'body wanted in *their* hearts and they listened to him for some of it. That crowd rocked under him, it was like the waves and he looked like a man makin a storm in that ocean with his horn.

(200)

Here we can see that the prose itself takes on the character of the man and the music as the improvisational quality of jazz is echoed in the colloquial, ambling dialect of the narrator.

Beyond the infusion of jazz through the narrative content, the base musical properties of jazz can be perceived in the narrative design. In an early review of *The Decca Chicago Style Album*, Kerouac described "real jazz," exemplified in particular by tenor sax man Lester Young, as "Music which has not been pre-arranged – free-for-all ad lib. It is the outburst of passionate musicians, who pour all their energy into their instruments in the quest for soulful expression and super-improvisation" (Swenson 29). Likewise, in his "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose Writing," Kerouac urges poets and novelists to approach the writing process by "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better." As critic John Swenson points out, Kerouac's take on jazz "reads like an auto-analysis" of the freely-written extended lines that would come to characterize Kerouac's own innovative prose style (Swenson 29).

Kerouac's development of a jazz inspired prose emerges from direct involvement with the musical form. Like his Beat colleagues, Kerouac was not satisfied with relegating his bebop relationship to that of passive listener. Kerouac wanted to participate in the process, even on the most basic levels. In a 1955 letter to fellow writer John Clellon Holmes, Kerouac captures a day in June on the streets of Manhattan. As Kerouac relates in this letter, he begins his day by getting drunk with Gregory Corso and others at the home of a friend. They then proceed to Washington Square Park where they sing bebop tunes. At sunrise, the poets find themselves at Morton Street Pier, where they

are joined by three bebop musicians, two on tenor sax and one on trumpet. Thus, while Kerouac was not per se a musician, he felt the music and could participate in bebop composition with the various jazz musicians he randomly encountered.

Sometime during 1956 Jack teamed up with New York City jazz horn player David Amram and informally put together what they termed "music/poetry - poetry/music" performances in artists' lofts around town. According to Amram, the precursor to these events was a type of melding of poetry and jazz performance similar to that executed by Langston Hughes and local jazz musicians in Harlem in the 1930's and 40's. Though Hughes and musicians never went public with these collaborations, the creative impulse for the merging of poetry and jazz was already in the air. Together with Beat poets Howard Hart and Philip Lamantia, Kerouac and Amram organized and performed at the very first public New York City jazz-poetry reading on November of 1957 at the Brata Art Gallery (Amram, "This Song's for You, Jack" 126). This transposition of the jazz-poetry jam sessions from a private to public forum marked a significant juncture in the development of the jazz/poetry form and also provided important opportunities for both musicians and writers. In these new forums, the artists could exchange ideas on style, structure, and performance and could freely experiment with the new structures and styles. It certainly didn't hurt that the late night audience was typically "zonked out," as Amram describes the scene, so that the appreciative audience proffered a generally positive environment, a creative comfort zone that fostered the artistic experimentation.

This comfort zone was in part contingent on a social undercurrent of mutual respect between the musician-poet and the audience as well as a sense of welcome and

encouragement that grew out of this respect among and between all types of artists and their audiences. Within these open forums, all involved seemed engaged, interested, supportive, and supported. Amram illustrates a typical music/poetry - poetry/music session:

> We never once rehearsed. We did listen intently to one another. Jazz is all about listening and sharing. I never drowned out one word of whatever Jack was reading or making up on the spot. When I did my spontaneous scatting (today called freestyling) he would play piano or bongos and he never drowned out or stepped on a word or interrupted a thought that I or anyone else had when they joined us in these late night-early morning get-togethers. We had mutual respect for one another, and anyone who joined us received the same respect.
>
> (Amram, "Poetry and All that Jazz")

Here Amram describes a collaborative relationship between artists, particularly between poet and musician, where center stage is a free-floating position which no one voice dominates. Interestingly, even the subject position of poet and musician is fluid so that the musician feels free to scat or free-style and the poet can create percussive sound with a sense of legitimacy and without fear of critical scrutiny. Thus, the collaborative dynamics of this forum are so genuine that artistic role and function seem ultimately transposable. As well, Amram describes here a version of the oral narrative performance format where the on-stage performers welcome audience participation. Each voice is afforded equal "respect" within the composition. We can assume that in responding to the invitation to participate in the performance, each voice, while retaining its individual tone color and style, assumes the posture of the collective and consents to the equal

distribution of creative agency among the group. Within this forum, the integrity of the individual is not sacrificed but liberated and the individual voice experiences an enhanced power to explore and innovate.

Within the compositional process in these forums, the tacitly agreed exchange of phrases effects a collaborative creative process where one voice does not supersede another. The lyric does not dictate the musical line nor does the music eclipse the spoken narrative. In this way, the voice becomes an instrument with a tonal color that is shaped by the language, and likewise, the instrumental passages "speak" to the poetry by reflecting not just the content and mood but also the musicality of the language. Key to this process, as Amram points out, is the artists' willingness to "listen" to each other. As if in counterpoint to one another, each line plays off of the other. None autonomously meanders on but rather each voice picks up on a riff or a rhythm articulated by another and spins it out or improvises on it or reinterprets it. In this sense, the lines are not dictatorial or prescriptive but rather inclusive and, by necessity, spontaneous.

The type of extemporized, inspired compositional jazz procedure that Amram describes in these jazz/poetry performative forums ultimately found its way into Kerouac's prose writing process. In his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac describes a writing process that he terms "sketching," where the mind identifies a topic or motif but then releases the theme to the subconscious and permits the theme to traffic freely between the writer's conscious, semi-conscious and subconscious states. What emerges is a quite individual and unmediated "sketch" of the original motif. Kerouac compares this process to jazz improvisation as he writes that sketching language is the "undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz

musician) on subject of image" (Kerouac, "Essentials"). Sketching liberates the writer from traditional forms and expected and predictable frameworks for organization of expository prose. In this manner, it mimics the spontaneity of performed bebop. Interestingly, Kerouac and many of his Beat peers would eventually embrace Buddhism, which supports the notion that tapping into the subconscious through meditation brings one closer to truth and that knowledge is a product of the spontaneous mind.

Sketching by necessity employs a methodology that disregards any mechanics of written language that might interfere with the spontaneous flow of thought and words. Kerouac wrote, "No periods separating sentence - structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas - but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)" (Kerouac, "Essentials"). Punctuation organizes the breath and dictates phrasing and even the logical interpretation of a written thought. Rather than organizing the breath according to prescribed standards for punctuation, Kerouac suggests that writers replicate in writing the natural breathing and phrasing of the spoken word. In this way, written prose inscribes the body since the phrases are formed by the natural flow of the individual writer's oral performance. The length of prose and poetry lines is not determined by punctuation protocols. Instead, each line rounds off when the writer's breath has expired. In a *Paris Review* interview, Kerouac compares his long prose lines to the drawn out phrases of jazz performers, whose phrasings are generally led by the natural flow of the individual breath and not a time signature or tempo indication. Here he talks about "breath as measure" or, by extension, breath as prose line and clarifies his theory by evoking the image of a tenor sax player "drawing a breath and blowing a

phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made." "That's how I therefore separate my sentences," explains Kerouac, "as breath separations of the mind" (quoted in Tytell, *Naked Angels* 199). Thus, the rhythm of the lines is not constrained by the strictures of punctuation that dictate rhythmic boundaries and set parameters for units of breath. Rather, the obviation of conventional punctuation allows the writer to produce a text that simulates more closely the intrinsic phrasing and rhythm of both the language and the individual body. The produced discourse is ostensibly a language that's closer to the body in its move to evoke the natural flow of the writer's breath and, at the same time, closer to the colloquial tongue of the writer's community in its capacity for reproducing localized spoken word.

Concomitant with the rejection of punctuation protocols that prescribe phrasing is the dismissal of other dynamics of script that would impede free movement and evolution of thought. Thus, Kerouac advocates a flow away from traditionally structured sentences formed by the accepted tenets of grammar, syntax, and structure. This notion finds its musical parallel in the rather undiatonic improvisations of the jazz instrumentalists. Within these improvisatory passages, jazz players are free to eschew western tonal dictates for harmonic progressions and cadential formulas. Just as the jazz performer's lyrical line deviates from strict diatonic tonal structure and expected harmonic progressions, the writer should liberate language from any sentence structure conventions that hamper the free flow of ideas or that seek to structure expressions of subconscious thought. Here the written word mimics the spoken word by communicating ideas without the complications of sentence structure regulations for the written word. Allen Ginsberg's father, the poet, Louis Ginsberg, had questioned the literary value of

Kerouac's novel, *The Subterraneans*, in part because of Kerouac's bold rejection of formal English structures. In a letter to his father, Allen Ginsberg points out that Kerouac is "trying (as Proust and Celine [had]) to include all the little private thoughts you normally wouldn't mention - so he arrives at a complicated sentence structure. It's not trying to be English sentence structure. It's trying to be American speech - and thought - reproduction" (Schumacher 106). Thus, by releasing the hold of sentence structure guidelines on language, the writer can produce a text that is more candid and spontaneous. As well, rhythms are structured neither by punctuation nor by a closely regulated arrangement of carefully structured clauses and phrases but are once again guided by the natural breath of the human body. According to Kerouac, writing should be

> following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash) - Blow as deep as you want - write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning - excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.
>
> (Kerouac, "Essentials")

With this approach to writing, the consistent motive is to achieve an uninhibited liberated flow of language. Kerouac addresses though the concerns of those who may wonder about the ability of such writing to communicate coherently by concluding that

communication relies to some extent on a primal common ground of the human subconscious. In addition, realizing one's subconscious emotional network in a way that allows the emotions to surface leads to an explicit and honest articulation of thought that is motivated by deep and cogent emotion. Written into the language, palpable emotion connects with the reader/listener's subconscious in a tangible and even empathetic manner. The soulful strains of a bebop tune draw on the deepest emotions of the player and connect with the primal passions as well as the realized emotions of the listener. Likewise, for the Beats, the best writing emerges from a candid and deeply felt relationship with the topic at hand. Kerouac tells us that "the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow! - now! - your way is your only way – 'good' - or 'bad' - always honest ('ludi-crous'), spontaneous, 'confessionals' interesting, because not 'crafted.' Craft is craft" (Kerouac, "Essentials").

Unity and clarity are also achieved through the use of "landmarks" which surface throughout the text (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 199). In jazz, lyrical motifs are recapitulated and treated in variation to create a sense of continuity in the musical text. Movements to and away from a motif can mimic travel through various tonal areas with a final return to an initial tonic home key. Returns to the motif in key can create a sense of cadential closure. In a similar manner, Kerouac integrated textual motifs into his narratives. The restated images function as a unification device by providing common ground between and among the various sections. These repeated motifs or "landmarks" also plot the rhythm of a piece. With poetry, the repetition of a word, image, or idea can mark the natural rhythm of the breath, creating a measured sense of meter. We see this technique

at work in Ginsberg's "Howl for Carl Solomon," where the initial repeated whos signpost the beginning of each breath and contribute to the formation of a rhythmic pulse.

> who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and
> saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tene-
> ment roofs illuminated,
> who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes
> hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy
> among the scholars of war,
> who were expelled from the academies for crazy &
> publishing obscene odes on the windows of the
> skull,
> who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burn-
> ing their money in wastebaskets and listening
> to the Terror through the wall,
> who got busted in their pubic beards returning through
> Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York,

The long lines are not measurable by traditional metric means but instead follow the natural breath of the speaker. Kerouac's initial *On the Road* manuscript that was submitted for publication to Viking appeared to the editor, Keith Jennison, in the form of a 250-foot roll of paper. There were no margins to speak of and the prose was single spaced with no paragraph divides. The punctuation seemed random. According to Allen Ginsberg, the format revealed Kerouac's attempt to "discover the rhythm of the mind at work at high speed in prose" (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 158). Ginsberg had lamented the subsequent sweeping editorial contusions of the text that called for the dissection of Kerouac's rolling narrative to form chapters and paragraphs as well as the further obliteration of the natural rhythmic flow through the structuring of sentences by way of conventional punctuation. Ginsberg wrote: "The sadness [is] that this was not published in its most exciting form – its original discovery – but hacked and punctuated and broken – the rhythms and swing of it broken - by presumptuous literary critics in publishing houses [sic]" (Wolf and Fancher).

Critical to this approach to the writing process, where the prose rhythm flows unimpeded from the body of the writer, is the equally unrestrained flow of ideas. For Kerouac, first thoughts are the thoughts that are closest to the subconscious and therefore closest to the truth. Any attempt at revision leaves the door open for disingenuous recastings of original thought. Unmediated thought put directly into writing, almost subconsciously, is closer to the primeval emotions of the author and thus more candid and closer to the spirit of the individual. In his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac directs writers to "write 'without consciousness' in semi-trance (as Yeats' 'trance writing') allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so 'modern' language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps" (Kerouac, "Essentials"). According to Kerouac then, spontaneous writing allows the natural, colloquial dialect of the individual to emerge so that the resulting prose reflects an honest representation of the language of a community as well as an honest rendering of the author's thoughts in writing. Any attempt to alter the indigenous language would result in the corruption of the original thought and the distillation of an authentic dialect. This composition process parallels the jazz musician's articulation of improvised passages. With jazz, the spontaneous play of rhythm and lyric motifs emerges from an unrestrained flow of ideas and internal impulses. During these interludes the jazz musician is not seeking to replicate what has been already heard or to reproduce lines from a printed score but is looking to compose spontaneously something that is entirely fresh and inspired. There is no opportunity to revise as the improvised lines exist for the moment. These passages can be captured on a recording, but the reification of melody on tape serves to archive the sound and not to promote scrutiny and

revision. Likewise, putting pen to paper is for the benefit of recording the spontaneous thoughts of the writer. For the Beat artists in general, the act of writing is its own end and does not serve as an occasion for the writer or another (editor or reviewer) to revise or otherwise alter the inspired lines.

**The Blues-Rock Connection: Ginsberg Beats Time**

Kerouac blazed the trail for a radical approach to the writing process and was the first Beat writer to draw connections between literary and musical, particularly bebop, composition. Like Kerouac, Ginsberg hung out and exchanged ideas on aesthetics and politics with prominent jazz musicians, like Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie (Kubernik, "10/96 interview"). However, Ginsberg was not drawn to the performantive poetry – jazz model as Kerouac and other Beat writers, like Kenneth Rexroth, were. While Ginsberg certainly appreciated the form, in the 1950's the poetry-jazz format appealed to him mostly as a spectator and casual participant. Even though Ginsberg did not perform in the poetry-jazz arenas, he was captivated by Kerouac's notion of an innovative bebop influenced literary form.

Allen Ginsberg appreciated and respected the same talented jazz artists that Kerouac turned to as musical representatives of his new prose style, but at the same time, Ginsberg's musical interests included a broad range of genres and styles. Growing up in Paterson, New Jersey, he mainly listened to blues artists like Ma Rainey and Leadbelly (Alfonso 254). In addition, although Ginsberg was not raised in a religious household, he did have access to Hebrew chant, and he drew connections between Hebrew incantation and the blues.

In fact, Ginsberg's early poetry does not explicitly manifest the influence of any particular musical genres, like jazz and the blues. Rather, this early work shows the clear influence of more traditional prosaic forms that tend to approach musicality by way of a standard metric organization and poetic features like repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. By comparison to Ginsberg's later and better known works, these early poems are more physically formal, with their largely symmetrical framework, the symmetry achieved by the organization of lines into proportioned stanzas. There is generally an evenness of tempo that is generated by short, well-punctuated lines, and these lines are often rounded off by rhyme or near-rhyme intonations. Ginsberg's 1948 poem, "On Reading Blake's 'Sick Rose,'" is representative of his early work in its manifestation of some of the expected conventional properties of western poetry and perhaps specifically the conventions of Romantic Blakean poetry:

> Rose of spirit, rose of light,
> Flower whereof all will tell,
> Is this black vision of my sight
> The fashion of a prideful spell,
> Mystic charm or magic bright,
> O judgment of fire and of fright?
>
> What everlasting force confounded
> In its being, like some human
> Spirit shrunken in a bounded
> Immortality, what Blossom
> Gathers us inward, astounded?
> Is this the sickness that is Doom?

The tendency of the early poems, like "On Reading Blake's 'Sick Rose,'" to reveal all of the likely hallmarks of traditional poetry can be traced in part to the influence of Ginsberg's father, Louis Ginsberg, who was a high school English teacher and a poet. Louis Ginsberg's interest in writing poetry was sparked by one of his high school English

teachers, Margaret Coult, who had asked the class to write a poem in imitation of John Milton's "L'Allegro." Coult's enthusiasm for the young Louis's efforts in this regard spurred an interest and energy for writing poetry that would lead him to publication of his work and to his teaching career (Schumacher xxii). Louis was a member of the Poetry Society of America and had a few volumes of poetry published.

Louis Ginsberg favored traditional forms and encouraged his son in the direction of western canonical literature and the poetic forms represented therein. Louis's own poetry reveals the influence of Renaissance lyric (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 82). For example, his "Waterfalls of Stone," is organized into two quatrains with the rhymes falling expectedly at the end of the second and fourth lines, as with the standard ballad stanza. The content is organized into an iambic tetrameter rhythmic scheme, the meter used in much traditional poetry. The imagery is lively and effectively animates the stone structures.

> Buildings are waterfalls of stone
> That, spurting up with marble crest,
> Are frozen and enchained in air,
> Poised in perpetual rest.
>
> But water seeks its level out.
> So, when these fountains are unbound,
> The cataracts of melting stone
> Will sink into the ground.

Louis's influence over Allen's early work is evident in comments gleaned from correspondence exchanged during Allen's tenure at Columbia University. In a letter dated July 23, 1948, Louis provides Allen with quite decisive feedback on an unnamed poem Allen had written: "Received your letter and mulled over your poem. It's got some

weighty thought, closely packed, but I can't say that I am sure of what you mean. Your piece seems knotty, slightly crotchety, and blurred in places" (Schumacher 20). Louis's remarks divulge a clear preference for coherent, explicit verse, where the imagery serves a main idea or central point of communication.

In 1949, Allen Ginsberg met William Carlos Williams, a poet from Ginsberg's own Paterson, New Jersey, neighborhood. Williams encouraged Ginsberg to avoid the stilted, stylized language that characterized his notion of traditional western poetry and inspired instead the implementation of language that was closer to a writer's own speech. Williams read Ginsberg's poetry and was critical of Allen's overly literary, somewhat predictable language (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 97). Williams's comments represented a counterbalance to Louis's assessments. Allen was ecstatic about his interview with Williams and wrote to Louis about their encounter and the literary insights that sprung from that meeting:

> I suddenly realized that his poetry was absolutely identical with speech, the highest speech, but absolutely identical, rhythmically and syntactically. And then I suddenly realized that if you began right where you are, with your own speech, then obviously you would have to create a whole new world of speech, that had never been written down before, which is what he was doing and what anybody could do. But it also meant that you had to listen, as he advised, very carefully to your own sound, and to other people's talk-sound and talk-rhythms -
>
> (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 97)

Wiliams encouraged Ginsberg to work out his own relationship with poetic language. Allen was obviously enchanted by Williams's devotion to the natural language of the street. He admired Williams's ability not just to evoke genuine images in an authentic tongue but to recreate in poetry the intrinsic rhythm of the spoken word. Interestingly, as Allen hones his ability to adapt the language of the street, Williams urges him to "listen" carefully to the nuances of his own and others' "talk-sound" in a manner similar to the careful listening involved in the poetry-jazz forums, as described by David Amram. Much of Ginsberg's subsequent poetry shows the influence of his interview with Williams. Allen's 1949 poem, "Paterson" exhibits long lines, liberated from any responsibility to conventional poetic structures or a forced sense of symmetry. The punctuation is not regular nor does it seem to adhere to writing conventions.

> What do I want in these rooms papered with visions of money?
> How much can I make by cutting my hair? If I put new heels on my shoes,
> bathe my body reeking of masturbation and sweat, layer upon layer of excrement
> dried in employment bureaus, magazine hallways, statistical cubicles, factory stairways,
> cloakrooms of the smiling gods of psychiatry

This excerpt reveals the genesis of Ginsberg's separation from his father's brand of poetry and from traditional literary formulas in general. In a letter dated June 26, 1957, that he sends to Louis from Venice, Allen defends Williams's free flowing, unstructured poetic rhythms and his use of less formal spoken dialects and street language: "It's undeniable that every so often the rhythms of poetry are refreshed by exposure to everyday speech, words, & rhythms – as with Wordsworth & Eliot & Williams & Whitman. Normal speech has great rhythms – it's not a question of abandoning rhythm

at all, it's a question of being conscious, as in WCW, of the beauty of the rhythms of regular talk" (Schumacher 63).

Simultaneous then with Kerouac's move to create rhythmic bebop derived prose, Ginsberg forges a poetic style that reflects the long lines of colloquial speech. Kerouac embeds the body in his prose by inferring a jazz wind player's practice of blowing a line as long as the breath and body permits, a line that is not guided as much by formal English language convention as by the physical dynamics of the/a human body. Within his writing process, Ginsberg searches also for a more meaningful connection of words and format to the body and everyday speech. In this manner, Ginsberg makes a move early on to foreground oral properties of language in poetry, but it is a brand of orality that does not take for granted the musicality of speech. As well, supporting the lyrical bent of the spoken word is a responsiveness to a variety of instrumental and vocal forms, bebop as well as blues, classical, punk, and, in his last poems, even rap. John Tytell provides important commentary on the significant musical properties of Ginsberg's work:

> The poems exist not only as a formidably substantial body of work, but as a demonstration that poetry need not be disembodied, removed from a natural base in chant and song. Rhythm, Ginsberg has shown his own generation, is less a matter of seeing the poem on the page than hearing it sounded. As with Indian mantras or traditional religious meditation, the effect is to slow the conscious flow, to change ordinary conditioning so that new perceptions can occur. The words repeated aloud assume a new transporting destiny, become a magical incantory vehicle for body and nonconceptual sensation as well as mind. The

> poems are made to be sung; the singer uses them to see what is there and what possibilities lie beyond.
>
> (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 256 – 257)

For Ginsberg the influence of music on literature in content, style and form necessarily went beyond the bebop-poetry nexus. In his Introduction to a volume of his father's poems, *Morning in Spring*, Ginsberg hails a new generation of "minstrel poets", including Bob Dylan, who "sang their poems aloud in contemplative rooms black alleyways or bardic halls thru microphones and a new consciousness that had broken thru the crust of old lyric forms like my father's evolved back to the same forms refreshed with new emotions and new subtleties of accent and vowel articulation" (Ginsberg 5).

In 1963, after spending some time on the west coast, Ginsberg and his longtime partner, Peter Orlovsky, returned to New York and initially stayed at the home of publisher Ted Wilentz. Well connected to the urban arts and culture scene, Wilentz often entertained guests of note. One of the first visitors to Wilentz's home after Allen and Peter's arrival was journalist Al Aronowitz with Bob Dylan in tow (Miles 333). Dylan was familiar with Ginsberg's work and in fact was a fan of the Beats. Surprisingly, Dylan was in possession of an unpublished collection of Ginsberg's poems dating from 1948 to 1952. Years earlier, the manuscript had been given by Ginsberg to a woman who was traveling to London with the hope that she might find a publisher for the work. After the package had changed hands a number of times, it was passed on to Dylan as a gift, an acknowledgment of his ardent interest in Ginsberg's poetry (Miles 334). Because of Ginsberg's mutual respect for Dylan's musical works and bardic artistry, the two became

quick friends and got together often alone and in broader social circles to hang out and to discuss literature, music, culture, and the events of the day.

Since neither artist strictly divided poet and musician/singer, they both recognized rich opportunities for artistic collaboration. Most significantly, in 1975, Dylan had the idea to form a troupe of roving musicians, called the Rolling Thunder Review, which would perform in the "minstrel tradition" by rambling around the country playing unannounced concerts. Dylan invited Ginsberg to join the group and told him the tour would be filmed and that the footage would be used to produce a documentary of the tour. Allen was eager to join the minstrels, though at the outset the status of his participation was not set. Before embarking, he wrote his father that if requested, he was prepared to "wander around stage in Merlin costume or velvet Uncle Sam hat or sit on side on meditation cushion" (Schumacher 378). In fact, Ginsberg participated mostly as supporting musician/singer for other performance pieces, playing finger cymbals with Rick Danko and joining in on the vocals for *This Land is Your Land.* While Allen had few opportunities to bring his own work to the stage, he did perform his poetry with the group for the documentary. His involvement in the tour was interrupted when Allen received word that his father had been diagnosed with pancreatic and lung cancer and was dying.

The Rolling Thunder tour nurtured a creative atmosphere that proved inspirational for Ginsberg. Continual access to talented word artists/musicians/poets, like Dylan, Joan Baez, Sam Shepard, and Jack Elliot fed Ginsberg's aesthetic instincts and encouraged innovative expression. During the tour, Ginsberg composed a body of work that manifests the clear influence of the musical forms predominating in these Rolling

Thunder shows. A collection of the poems produced during this period are published in Ginsberg's 1972-1977 volume, *Mind Breaths.* Many of the poems assume the form and character of gospel, standard American blues, or Dylan-style ballads. Some are set to music and appear with the musical notation. Ginsberg describes the assortment as "Aboriginal rhetoric, mouth-page free verse-forms, Whitmanic-miltonic periods, Chinese-american imagery, scholarly politics apostrophe, dirty blues & racy ballads rocknroll & airy numbers musicked with lead –sheets, 3 line sparks, objective tombstones, & in narrative high style Oratory a Blakean Punk Epic with nirvanic Rune music the *Contest of Bards*" (Ginsberg, *Mind Breaths*, back cover).

Ginsberg's gospel influenced "Lay Down Yr Mountain" appears as section I of his poem, "Rolling Thunder Stones." In an interview, Ginsberg described the poem as "a gospel style song for blues chord changes" (Chowka), and indeed, many of the stylistic and formal elements of the poem fall within the basic parameters of a straightforward gospel tune. Ginsberg would have enjoyed continual exposure to this song form through his Rolling Thunder cohorts. Gospel was central to Joan Baez's repertoire, "Gospel Ship" and "Just Closer Walk with Thee" being just two of the many gospel tunes she covered and recorded during this period. Dylan also not only covered but composed original gospel that meshed with his own signature style. Dylan's "Gotta Serve Somebody" and "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking" are two of his more popular gospel works. In fact, Ginsberg dedicated his "Lay Down Yr Mountain" to Bob Dylan, to whom he refers within the lines. Like Dylan, Ginsberg adopts the gospel form as the inspirational seed for this work but liberally plays with the structure. Thus, he creates a text that indeed has gospel undertones but that is nonetheless true to his Beat instincts. In

order to better recognize any concrete connections between the musical form and Ginsberg's piece and to better understand how the poem may, at the same time, deviate from the formal structure, we may consider some of the historical conditions and structural elements of gospel.

The gospel form surfaces in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, when we find the first documentation of such a musical structure. However, musicologists debate the precise roots of gospel. Musicologist Eileen Southern cites African American spirituals and folk tunes as contributing significantly to the genesis of gospel (Southern 444 – 447) while jazz bassist and Yale Professor Willie Ruff maintains that although the gospel form develops within the black Baptist congregations, the inspiration for the form derives from Scottish-Presbyterian psalm singing (McConville). In addition, the repetitive refrains that are part and parcel of the gospel form may be traced to African antiphonal oral performance where a cantor intones a phrase and the audience imitates.

In his *The Music of Africa,* J.H. Kwabena Nketia points to the inherent formal element of "call and response," or antiphony, within many African oral performance structures. Indeed, Nketia indicates that any type of group or choral performance would involve call and response. One form of antiphony has the cantor intoning a line and a second singer or group of singers repeating verbatim. Another type had the cantor performing a line with the respondents repeating the line with slight variation. Each scenario may include a "closing refrain" rounding off the lines (Nketia 140). African drumming scholar John Miller Chernoff describes a modified form of call and response where the leader begins with a long and perhaps ambling phrase while the group responds

with a more concise and rhythmic response (Chernoff 123). This response serves the dual purpose of commenting on the lead performer's text and establishing a rhythmic pulse. In western music, the downbeat or strong, pulse-setting beat is normally expected on the first beat of a measure. In the context that Chernoff describes, the strong beat that sets the pace and rhythmically structures the work is felt at the end of the line, at which point the group intones in unison.

In Ginsberg's poem, every line in every section begins identically with the command to "lay down" while each line continues with a different answer for the command.

> Lay down Lay down yr mountain Lay down God
> Lay down Lay down your music Love lay down
>
> Lay down Lay down yr hatred Lay yrself down
> Lay down Lay down your nation Lay your foot on the rock
>
> Lay down yr whole creation Lay yr mind down
> Lay down Lay down yr empire Lay your whole world down
>
> Lay down your soul forever Lay your visio n down
> Lay down yr bright body Down your golden heavy crown
>
> Lay down Lay down yr magic hey! Alchemist lay it down clear
> Lay down your practice precisely Lay down yr wisdom dear
>
> Lay down yr skillful camera Lay down yr image right
> Lay down your brilliant image Lay down light
>
> Lay down your ignorance Roll yr wheel once more
> Lay down yr empty suffering Lay down yr Lion's Roar
>
> (October 31, 1975)

We might relate this pattern to one of the indigenous African styles of vocal antiphony, as described by Nketia, where the leader intones and the community responds in unison. In

addition, many of the lines in Ginsberg's piece are rounded off with a similar closing refrain, a variation of "lay down." The last phrase of the two lines of the first and sixth section and the second lines of the fifth and seventh sections explicitly contain "lay down." The end phrases of other lines also include the "lay down" command but with additional material intervening between the verb "lay" and "down," the preposition of the idiom. These closing "lay downs" may be identified as distinct African oral performance-style closing refrains. We can also connect these concluding "lay down" reiterations to Chernoff's account of long lines that end with cogent, punctuated repetition. The lines are unified not only by the initial command to lay down but also by the ending echoes, which also provide rhythmic interest.

An argument for Scots Hebrides influence on gospel also locates antiphony as an intrinsic musical/textual application that is significant to Scots psalmody. Because of high illiteracy rates and the prohibitive expense of printing multiple hymnals for those in a congregation who may have been literate, the practice of "precenting the line" or what ethnomusicologists call "lining out" became popular in European Protestant churches beginning in the 16th and continuing through to the 19th century. The practice was exported to the United States by way of the European colonists, mostly Baptists and Puritans, but it did not survive among most religious communities. According to , Professor Willie Ruff, it was mainly the Scottish Highlanders who maintained the tradition of "lining out" in the American colonies. In his research Ruff discovered 18th and 19th century African slave communities in the deep South that spoke fluent Scots Gaelic. To the point of gospel hymnody, he unearthed evidence of southern African-American congregations worshipping in Gaelic as late as 1919 (McConville). Ruff has

compared the church music tradition of the Scottish Highlander slave owners with that of their African-American slaves and has been able to draw parallels between the Presbyterian psalm and the gospel forms. Just one common ground practice is the practice of lining out, which the African slaves adapted from their Scottish slave masters. This is also a musical practice to which the African slave community would have been receptive due to its resemblance to an African brand of antiphony. Musicologist Ben Bailey describes the lining out process as a staggered repetition where a phrase is stated and reiterated in a number of voices:

> After chanting his line the leader may begin singing before the congregation staggers in after a beat or more. Individual singers drop out in the middle of a phrase, only to surge back in before the phrase is ended. A few singers might prolong the final tones of a phrase after the majority have finished it. In some instances, such a prolongation may last well into the leader's next chanted line.
>
> (Southern 447)

Looking closely at Ginsberg's "Lay Down Yr Mountain," we can observe the lining out process at play. The poem is organized into seven two line sections, each beginning "Lay down." Each line follows the typical gospel rhythmic pattern guided by the repetitions. The repeated phrases can be said to imitate the gospel textual tradition of lining-out as outlined by Bailey. The initial "lay downs" of each line establish the content parameters for each line, replicating a lead cantor's intonation of the initial key content phrase of any psalm line. Many of the initial "Lay downs" are followed immediately by a reiterative "lay down," mimicking the congregation's repetition of the

cantor's lead phrase. Some of the lines even prolong the command in a manner where a singer might extend the initial phrase even after the antiphonal response is sung. In some sections, we hear the "lay down" phrase surfacing three times within one line. This can be heard perhaps most clearly in the first two lines of the poem.

If we look at the musical score that accompanies Ginsberg's published text, we can note that the harmonic progression outlined in the musical notation manifests the standard simplicity of gospel harmonies in moving simply from an A chord to an E chord. Ginsberg sets the piece in the key of A so that A is the central or tonic chord. The E chord, as the fifth above the tonic, would be the dominant pitch and thus provide the key pitch for the dominant chord in the key of A. Hence, the harmonic progression moves from tonic to dominant, in other words, from base or home chord in the key to the dominant or second most significant harmony within the key. The simple alternation between tonic and dominant continues throughout without any intermediary flights into other tonal areas or even any introduction of other tritone harmonies.

In considering the content, we can note that traditional gospel spirituality and reverence for a higher being resonate. However, the call to "lay down" often falls outside of what one might expect in a church rendered gospel tune. Indeed, the poem asks listeners to lay down "your nation," "yr empire," "your ignorance," "yr Lion's Roar" so that the gospel poem takes on the character of a war protest lyric. As well, in section IV the poem makes an explicit reference to a Zen food thanksgiving prayer; "We give thanks for this food, deer meat & indian-corn soup." In quoting eastern theology, Ginsberg thwarts the expectations of an essentially Christian text. The message is for the masses -

followers of all faiths and even those who resist organized religion. The text also implies that divinity is not necessarily relegated to a single spiritually superior being. Dylan appears in the fifth section as the Alchemist, possessing magical powers and noteworthy wisdom. The ability to work magic through miracles and to employ this skill with wisdom does not rest entirely in the hands of a laudable god as this facility is attributed to a mortal being as well. Section six refers to the filming of the Rolling Thunder tour, and here the lyrics acknowledge the filmmakers' ability to generate and manipulate images as well as to create and orchestrate light. Once again we see that sole authority over the creation of images as well as the command over shadow and light is not the singular function of one divine being. By attributing to mortals the general characteristics that a gospel tune would typically associate with a single Christian god, Ginsberg's poetry recognizes the godlike qualities of humankind. The thrust of the praise is directed towards fellow humans rather than a salient god. In presenting this content, Ginsberg also continues with his practice of unconventional abbreviating and free-style punctuation and sentence structure. Thus, while Ginsberg turns to the canonic gospel texts in the literature as inspiring models, at the same time, as is his custom, he challenges predetermined prescriptions by creating an innovative text that undermines expectations.

**Rebel Yell: Where Beat and Punk Collide**

When the Dolls of New York, later and better known as New York Dolls, hit the streets of NYC in 1972 with their new, anarchic sound with attitude, even New York urbanites, who thought they had seen and heard everything, had to take notice. Visually, the Dolls effectively put together a package designed to startle. In their highly stacked

heels and fishnet stockings, they fired up the transsexual British glam rock look, made popular notably by David Bowie with spandex and eye makeup, to a more intense level. Not content with a bit of lipstick and eyeliner, the Dolls appeared in a mask of thickly applied mascara and pancake makeup, an intentionally garish exaggeration of their forerunners. The Dolls included former Brooklyn gang members Johnny Thunder and Rick Rivets (replaced only a year later by Syl Sylvain) on guitar, Billy Murcia on drums, Arthur Kane on bass, and David Johansen (who would later embark on a solo career in the form of his alter-ego, Buster Poindexter) on vocals. The band's name came from The New York Doll Hospital on Lexington Avenue. Although all of the Dolls had played previously in New York garage bands, none of them were really musicians of any caliber -- but that didn't matter. Their brand of music called only for a hard core pulsating back beat, very basic but brutally belted harmonies, and razor-screeched vocals, all bolstered by a sound system set permanently on super-loud. With all the amplified feedback and conflicting blasts of sound, audiences wouldn't recognize a random misplaced chord or slightly-under-pitch vocal anyway.

The Dolls backed up their visceral shock appeal with on and off stage personas designed to awe and even repulse. In performance, lead guitarist Johnny Thunder would spit and even vomit on the young audience members crowding around the stage. The Dolls were all heavy substance abusers and brought this habit to their act by shooting up on stage or staggering off stage in a dazed stupor. During the band's 1972-73 European tour, drummer Murcia drowned in a tub after what turned out to be a deadly heroin/alcohol mix (he was replaced by Brooklyn session drummer Jerry Nolan). Band members also overtly proclaimed their bisexuality through their appearance, behavior,

and lyrics at a time when gay-lesbian-bi-transgender politics had not made enough headway for bisexuality to go mainstream. Underscoring the aggressive music and scandalous exterior was a hard-hitting, belligerent attitude that their fans found appealing.

It was this mix of counter culture extremes and confrontational tough-minded attitude that excited and inspired the punk movement. While street-wise punkers and artsy-hip college students appreciated the ear-splitting expletives and transvestite glitz, the record industry was slow to warm to this particular brand of what amounted to at the time as urban cult music. The raw and ambiguous sexuality as well as the vulgar language were considered too risky by most record label executives. However, in 1972 the band did land a recording contract with Mercury Records and put out their first album titled simply, *New York Dolls*. The Dolls released a second follow-up album two years later, *Too Much Too Soon*. Neither album sold very well, and Mercury dropped the band after the release of the second album.

In 1974, the Dolls took on a new manager, Malcolm McLaren, who had been fascinated with the band's rebellious image and aggressive musical style. McLaren had been a student at London's St. Martin's School of Art and, through his studies, had become drawn to the "International Situationists," a Europen art movement which Berlin contemporary music scholar Peter Wicke describes as "an (anti-)art concept" that was related to Parisian Dadaism and was initiated in France in the fifties. By 1960, this anti-art concept had made its way from the mainland to Britain and had become a point of interest in British art schools (Wicke 136). McLaren saw the Dolls as an opportunity to forge an avant-garde anti-art experiment. However, within a short time, McLaren and the Dolls had a falling out, and he left New York for England.

Significantly, McLaren chose to resuscitate his experiment in London in the form of another newly formed street band that he named The Sex Pistols. As McLaren later said, "I was trying to do with the Sex Pistols what I had failed with the New York Dolls" (McNeil and McCain 247). The Sex Pistols played their first gig on November 6, 1975, at McLaren's alma mater, St. Martin's School of Art. At this initial performance, The Sex Pistols assumed the spirit of the Dolls' hostile on-stage image by vulgarly insulting and spitting at the audience. As well, the band offered a similar brand of angry and deafening three-chord tirades. After only five songs spanning a total of ten minutes onstage, college administrators turned off the band's sound system and the concert was over. The band's debut resonates in contemporary music history as being emblematic of the counter-culture, socially rebellious punk trend that was to follow. The following September, fans would see the first British Punk Rock Festival staged at London's prestigious 100 Club. In addition to the Sex Pistols, the festival included other bands that would soon become successful: The Clash, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and The Damned (Wicke 136).

By 1974, McLaren's anti-art experiment had taken on a life of its own and was quickly embraced by an appreciative group of young disenchanted and disenfranchised devotees. The economic recession of the early 1970s in both United States and Britain produced high rates of unemployment, with the rate climbing to 8.5% in the U.S. and hovering consistently around 10% in England (Higgs 625). In Britain, unemployment among employable teenagers, kids who had either left school or received a certificate, reached a stunning all time high of 29% (Wicke 140). At the same time, unemployment among black immigrant teenagers reached more than 80%. Concurrent with high

unemployment was a decrease in tax revenue that resulted in less financial support for social and municipal programs (Wicke 141). Poor economic conditions on both sides of the Atlantic caused youngsters to feel as though they were living in the economic margins of their society. At the same time, these youngsters associated older rockers with the elite. The enormous success of bands ranging from the Rolling Stones to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young to Led Zepellin had enabled rock musicians to transcend class lines and assume a high-end living standard. Disaffected teenagers saw no common ground, economic or otherwise, with the aging rock artists of the 60s. On the other hand, these youngsters readily identified with the similarly rancorous punk rockers. The punkers' aggressive posturing and anarchic attitude empowered teenagers in the sense that if they could not gain economic power, at least they could intimidate those who held this power – the presumed root of their disenfranchisement.

Fashion trends supported punk notions of hostile intimidation and anti-social proclivity with rag tag outfits unearthed from second hand stores. Found and discarded objects, like chains and safety pins, turned up as accessories. The tattered look underscored the need for economically feasible fashion. This was a look that could be maintained on a very modest budget. In addition, the oversized safety pin piercings and drapes of hefty metal chains contributed to the culture of intimidation. Dog collars became popular, but more preferable were the collars with spikes and studs, normally associated with violent attack dogs. Spiked collars underscored a sense of untamed aggression, hostile energy that requires harnessing. Spike imagery could also be found in the hair styles. The popular Mohawk hair design had women and men shaving the sides of their heads and leaving a narrow strip of hair extending from the center of the forehead

over the top of the head to the neck. The remaining hair was set to stand on end in spikey fashion with thick styling gel. The spiked look was also popular with short hair. The desired result replicated an image of barbed wire, thorns, or the dangerously piercing spikes found on weapons. In addition, edgy sexually referenced attire, like fishnet stockings (preferably ripped), long fingerless gloves, garters, and leather bodices were incorporated into the punk fashion vocabulary. The bondage imagery conjured by these fashion items coordinated well with the forceful overtones of the punk movement. While the overall appearance was certainly designed to shock and disturb, the outlandish visual cues also distinguished the punkers as a community clearly disassociated from mainstream society.

Likewise, the music forged by the punks departed in a clear and calculated manner from that of rock predecessors. The rock industry had become inhabited in large part by an elite group of musicians whose virtuoso style implied an educated and studied caliber of musician. Hard rocking bands, like Led Zeppelin and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, featured guitarists, like Jimmy Page, who were honored for their technical expertise. The music showcased the rock musician's virtuosity with rapid-fire scales and running complex guitar riffs. Other popular bands on the model of Yes, Gentle Giant, and Pink Floyd similarly composed tunes that included long rambling virtuoso passages that showed off the expertise of the musicians. Adoring music students practiced long and hard in order to produce signature scale improvisations and key licks from these soon-to-be classic rock tunes. The lyrics as well strove for a sense of high minded literacy and so included complex imagery and symbolism that typically sent fans to the

liner notes. Listeners spent much time studying, decoding, and deliberating the meaning of the often obtuse lyrical poetry.

This type of musical elitism was eschewed by punk rockers, who dispensed with technical prodigy and musical complexity. Instead, punkers produced tunes based on simple harmonies, typically with a minimum of chord changes – there is even a repertoire of one chord songs, like LCD Soundsystem's "Losing My Edge." The simple chords executed with sledge-hammer imprecision produced exactly the rough and tumble, frayed-edge sound that would represent and drive the gestalt of punk. The dumbing-down of the music made it accessible to fans not only as listeners but also as participants in the production of punk music culture. Any street kid who could get hold of a guitar would be able to knock out a few basic punk tunes – without expensive lessons or hours of leisure time devoted to practicing. Since punk vocalists often screamed their lyrics, crisp vocal tone quality and an ear for accurate intonation were not essential qualities. Anyone with a voice could belt out a tune. This immediate accessibility to music production and composition fed the creative spirit of the punk movement and resulted in the formation of a variety of experimental garage bands.

Putting the music in the hands of the masses extended also to the performance venues. Successful rock bands had started playing prodigious venues like Madison Square Garden and Albert Hall and were setting prohibitive rates for tickets to these concerts. As a result, attending rock concerts had become a leisure activity enjoyed by the gainfully employed. Punk rockers played more modest venues, like CBGBs, thus making concerts affordable and so making it possible for more fans to participate. Thus,

the punk revolution promised music for the masses, mostly the underprivileged and disenfranchised – or at least those who identified themselves as being so.

Interestingly, the revolutionary dynamic of the punk movement initially stopped short of being a mechanism for broad-based political mobilization. The punk rockers aggressively attacked the status quo in their lyrics but, unlike the young radicals of the sixties, they presented no notion of an imagined utopia. Sixties youth culture located specific political and social problems and, through organized protests and acts of civil-disobedience, sought to bring about change. The punk perspective tended to be blatantly hostile and ultimately negative without making any specific demands for social change or offering any solutions. In part, this political ambivalence was a reaction against the previous generation's idealist pitches for love and peace. The youngsters of the sixties represented their generation with long hair, flowers, and love beads in bright colors. The punkers strove to distance themselves from the now-aging hippies with their short cropped, entirely shaved or partially shaved (as with the Mohawk) hair, and black became the color of choice. Instead of proselytizing for love and peace, punk lyrics celebrated anarchy and dwelled on the macabre features of life. The Sex Pistols' popular single "Anarchy in the U.K." shouts out an aggressive but typical disdain for mainstream existence and attitudes without offering any suggestions for a more harmonious existence. The stress is on rage and destruction.

> I am an anti-christ I am an anarchist,
> Don't know what I want
> But I know how to get it.
> I wanna destroy the passer by
> 'cos I wanna be anarchy,
> Ho dogs body

Anarchy for the uk
It's coming sometime and maybe
I give a wrong time stop a traffic line.
Your future dream is a shopping scheme
Cause I wanna be anarchy,
It's in the city

How many ways to get what you want
I use the best I use the rest
I use the enemy.
I use anarchy
'cause I wanna be anarchy,

It's the only way to be

Is this the mpla
Or is this the uda
Or is this the ira
I thought it was the uk
Or just another country
Another council tenancy.

I wanna be an anarchist
(oh what a name)
And l wanna be an anarchist
(I get pissed destroy)

("Anarchy in the U.K," 1976)

Indeed, through their image, behavior, and lyrics, the Sex Pistols promoted anarchy, but not a politically minded anarchy or an anarchy with an objective. Rather, the Pistols preached anarchy as a disruption of mainstream society's manicured state. Lead Singer Johnny Lydon (a.k.a. Johnny Rotten) explained, "We mean musical anarchy . . .Politics is simply too stupid. All liars up there. Musical anarchy means chucking away all the boring, bourgeois, organized stuff" (Wicke 142).

So while there is a move to destroy, there is no real desire to rebuild or restructure – at least in the sense of political or social upheaval and reconstruction. This attitude is

represented quite explicitly in what is perhaps the Pistols' most notorious cut, "God Save the Queen." The tune, first released in 1977, takes its title from the British national anthem and is a scathing reaction to the 1977 Silver Jubilee celebration of Queen Elizabeth's 25 year reign. A minor recording chart scandal transpired the week of the Jubilee festivities. The official charts showed Rod Stewart's single, "The First Cut is the Deepest," a cover of a Cat Stevens tune, at number one. It was widely believed that the Sex Pistol's "God Save the Queen" really sold more copies but that, through British government conspiratorial intervention, the single was remanded to the number two position. The BBC and other British radio stations banned the song but even without airplay, the single sold extraordinarily well, and the song became punk rock's unofficial anti-anthem.

God save the queen her fascist regime
It made you a moron a potential h bomb!

God save the queen she ain't no human being
There is no future in england's dreaming

Don't be told what you want don't be told what you need
There's no future no future no future for you

God save the queen we mean it man (God save window leen)
We love our queen God saves (God save... human beings)

God save the queen cos tourists are money
And our figurehead is not what she seems
Oh God save history God save your mad parade
Oh lord God have mercy all crimes are paid

When there's no future how can there be sin
We're the flowers in the dustbin
We're the poison in your human machine
We're the future your future

God save the queen we mean it man

There is no future in england's dreaming

No future for you no future for me
No future no future for you

("God Save the Queen," 1977)

"God Save the Queen" contained all of the salient punk culture themes – destruction, ambivalence, despondency, disdain, alienation, irreverence, impertinence, arrogance. The prominent theme, "no future for you - no future for me," hammers through the core of the tune, encapsulating the fundamental punk philosophy.

Thematically and in tone and tenor, punk songs tended to be fairly consistent, even when stepping outside of musicians' skewed version of the political-social commentary tune. A majority of top 50 songs focus on romantic love, but punk tunes did not address this topic very often. In his scholarly text on punk rock, *One Chord Wonders: power and meaning in punk rock*, D. Laing publishes the results of his 1985 content analysis study, which shows that whereas 60% of top 50 tunes tend to deal with romantic love, only 21% of punk tunes essentially address that same topic. Interestingly, the study showed furthermore that while 15% of punk tunes explored sexuality, less than one percent of pop tunes ventured in that direction (Longhurst 168 – 169). Even when punk lyrics did address romance, the character of the text departed from what listeners had come to expect from the romantic genre. Rejecting the 60s songwriters' notions of "a groovy kind of love" and with it idealistic and simplistic pop song perspectives on love and relationships, the punkers chose to address love on their own terms and from a perspective that acknowledged the internal qualities of aggression, despondency, alienation and so on that were emblematic of the punk mindset. As well, musicians

adapted a different language for discussing love relationships, a locution that departed significantly from the tender if not naive standard that could be found in the lyrics of the predecessors, like that of the Beatles' "I Will": "Who knows how long I've loved you. You know I love you still. Will I wait a lonely lifetime? If you want me to, I will" (*White Album*, 1968). By contrast, we may consider Morrissey's punk love tune "There Is a Light that Never Goes Out." Morrissey broke out as lead singer and front man for the enormously popular British punk band, The Smiths (*Meat is Murder*, *The Queen Is Dead*, *Louder than Bombs*). Interestingly, Morrissey was also president of the British faction of the New York Dolls' fan club. In 1988, he launched his solo career with his cd, *Viva Hate*. Morrissey drew devotees with his signature whine/moan approach to vocalization, and he became notorious for his downcast on-stage presence, characterized by his continuous writhing while lying prone on the stage. "There Is a Light" appears on his *Redondo Beach* cd. The song begins with the narrator's plaintive plea to the listener to "take me out tonight" for a long drive in a car. The speaker expresses a sense of urgency to go, "where there's music and there's people and they're young and alive." At the outset, there is nothing spectacularly odd about the narrator's request to spend the night close to the listener in the seclusion of the car. However, the text takes a macabre turn when the narrator utters a hidden gruesome desire:

> And if a double-decker bus
> Crashes into us
> To die by your side
> Is such a heavenly way to die
> And if a ten-ton truck
> Kills the both of us
> To die by your side
> Well, the pleasure - the privilege is mine

The speaker goes on to imagine a moment when this hidden desire might be realized. "There Is a Light" upsets the love song genre with its unconventional perspective on romance. Certainly, in previous love tunes, the list of romantic activities played out within a car did not include head-on collisions with over-sized vehicles. However, the punkers were quite willing and able to accept this alternative view of romance as legitimate and realistic as the song echoes already embedded punk notions that there is "no future for me no future for you."

In 1976, The Clash crashed the punk scene as a punk band with a difference by departing from some of the philosophical tenets laid down by its predecessors. Inspired by the Sex Pistols, the group of five young Brits banged together a few tunes and made their public debut opening for the Sex Pistols in London at a small 300 seat theater called The Screen on the Green. The band's lineup included Joe Strummer and Mick Jones on guitar and vocals, Terry Chimes on drums, Paul Simonon on bass, and a fifth musician who left after the first gig. The Clash and Pistols musicians jibed musically and personally, and so The Clash joined the Sex Pistols for their 1977 tour as the opening warm-up act. As well, their manager, Bernie Rhodes, was a close friend of McClaren and the two held a shared vision for the conditions and future of punk rock. Under these influences, the band developed a hard-nosed, tough street-wise presence, with music that cranked energy and dynamic power. The band quickly culled a substantial and devoted following that led them to punk rock celebrity. Indeed, *Rolling Stone Magazine*'s list of *500 Greatest Albums of All Time* ranked Clash's *London Calling* as number 8. In 2003, The Clash was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, just one year after Talking Heads and The Ramones. These three bands are the only punk rock inductees into the

Hall of Fame since the organization began in 1986 (Rock and Roll Hall of Fame), and The Clash is the only British punk band to be given this distinction.

The band aligned themselves with the general punk philosophy through their hard-driving, really loud music, and menacing appearance. Early in their careers, the band members did their best to promote the image of street thugs. In the late 1970s, Strummer and Jones were arrested multiple times for a variety of minor crimes, "ranging from vandalism to stealing a pillowcase," and Simonon and Headon briefy did time for shooting racing pigeons with an air gun (Wikipedia) (BBC News Monday, 23 December, 2002, 10:59 GMT "Strummer's lasting culture Clash").

However, unlike, their punk rock colleagues, The Clash were a band with a social conscience. The popular British rock magazine NME proclaimed the band "the thinking man's yobs." They participated in awareness raising concerts, like Rock Against Racism. The band was an overt supporter of some of the revolutionary Latin American Marxists, like the Sadinistas, as their 1981 album, *Sadinista!,* attests. Joe Strummer was one of the founders of Future Forests, an organization that works towards planting trees around the world in order to combat global warming (Wikipedia). The text of the Clash's hit single "This Is Radio Clash" demonstrates the band's turn towards a more socially and politically concerned brand of punk rock:

> Interrupting all programmes
>
> This is radio clash from pirate satellite
>
> Orbiting your living room,
> Cashing in the bill of rights
> Cuban army surplus or refusing all third lights
> This is radio clash on pirate satellite
>
> This sound does not subscribe

To the international plan
In the psycho shadow of the white right hand
Then that see ghettology as an urban viet nam
Giving deadly exhibitions of murder by napalm

This is radio clash tearing up the seven veils
This is radio clash please save us, not the whales
This is radio clash underneath a mushroom cloud
This is radio clash
You don't need that funeral shroud

Forces have been looting
My humanity
Curfews have been curbing
The end of liberty

Hands of law have sorted through
My identity
But now this sound is brave
And wants to be free - anyway to be free

This is radio clash on pirate satellite
This is not free europe
Noh an armed force network
This is radio clash using audio ammunition
This is radio clash can we get that world to listen?
This is radio clash using aural ammunition
This is radio clash can we get that world to listen?
This is radio clash on pirate satellite
Orbiting your living room,
Cashing in the bill of rights
This is radio clash on pirate satellite
This is radio clash everybody hold on tight

A-riggy diggy dig dang dang
Go back to urban 'nam

The song clearly sidesteps the concrete ambivalence of the band's punk colleagues. And, at the same time, hostile physical aggression is rejected in favor of "aural ammunition," in the form of a lyric that aspires to non-violently affect public opinion for the better.

The band seemed to be more worldy than other punk bands regarding the music as well as the politics. The Clash experimented with a variety of musical forms and genres,

from reggae (“The Harder They Come," "A Message to You, Rudie") to ska (“Hateful,” “Rudy Can’t Fail”) to funk and even jazz (“Jimmy Jazz”). Their voyage into cross-over forms enlivened punk and created various hybrids, like punk/ska. These hybrids were picked up and developed by subsequent bands. Rancid, for example, gained its following with Clash-inspired punk/ska classics like “Ruby Soho” and Time-Bomb.”

The Clash met up with Allen Ginsberg at Bonds, a New York City club that featured cutting edge punk bands, like The Talking Heads, the Patti Smith Group, and The Ramones. The Clash had a seventeen night gig at the club. One evening in June of 1981, Ginsberg wandered in to check out the band. He was friendly with the club’s sound engineer and so asked the engineer to bring him backstage to meet the band. Lead guitarist and lyrisict, Joe Strummer, was familiar with Ginsberg’s poetry and so recognized Ginsberg immediately and welcomed the poet by asking when he was going to run for President. Strummer told Ginsberg that the band had brought in someone to address the audience on Latin American policy and to explain the situation of the Sandinistas. The audience had not been receptive, but instead verbally abused and threw food and objects at the speaker. Strummer asked Ginsberg if he would go out on stage and speak to the young crowd. Ginsberg declined to speak but offered to perform a punk-style poem with music that he had written a year earlier, “Capitol Air.” The band quickly went through Ginsberg’s piece and then took it to the stage. As Allen relates, the sound engineer mixed the vocals hyper-loud so that Ginsberg’s words were eminently audible. According to Ginsberg, the audience reacted well to the poem because of the “common sense” of the lyric (Kubernik 263).

Living on the east end of downtown Manhattan had placed Ginsberg in the center of burgeoning punk activity. Surrounded by the punk clubs and street culture, Ginsberg found himself immersed in this emerging musical and social revolution. Initially drawn to the youth culture through the music and poetry of Patti Smith, whom he admired and befriended, Ginsberg soon became familiar with many of the up and coming punk bands. Certainly, the dissatisfaction and alienation communicated by the punk youth culture resonated familiarly with Ginsberg. As well, many of the relevant themes of punk culture recapitulated those that had been important to the Beats thirty years earlier. Ginsberg felt in a big way that the seeds of the anti-establishment, anti-elitist, anti-mainstream attitudes of the punks had been sown by the Beats in the fifties.

During a tour of Eastern Europe in 1980, Ginsberg was struck by how similarly the police bureaucracies of the countries of Eastern Europe and the United States operated. For Ginberg, though operating within two relatively distinct political envirnonments, the evident oppression of both systems mirrored each other and presented a depressing state of affairs for residents in all regions. Ginsberg describes his "Capitol Air" as a "Clash-like good anthem" in its efforts to aggressively counter-attack political and social tyranny, and indeed, the poem locates a broad range of oppressive sources. Ginsberg's "Clash-like" description is well placed as rather than ranting for rant's sake in the style of the Sex Pistols and other wrath and fury punk bands, the lyrics reflect politically astute Clash-consciousness rage.

Capitol Air

I don't like the government where I live
I don't like dictatorship of the Rich
I don't like bureaucrats telling me what to eat
I don't like Police dogs sniffing around my feet

I don't like Communist Censorship of my books
I don't like Marxists complaining about my books
I don't like Castro insulting members of my sex
Leftists insisting we got the mystic Fix

I don't like Capitalists selling me gasoline Coke
Multinationals burning Amazon trees to smoke
Big Corporation takeover media mind
I don't like the Top-bananas that're robbing Guatemala banks blind

I don't like the K.B.G. Gulag concentration camps
I don't like the Maoists' Cambodian Death Dance
15 Million were killed by Stalin Secretary of Terror
He has killed our old Red Revolution for ever

I don't like Anarchists screaming Love is Free
I don't like the C.I.A. they killed John Kennedy
Paranoiac tanks sit in Prague and Hungary
But I don't like counterrevolution paid for by the C.I.A.

Tyranny in Turkey or Korea Nineteen Eighty
I don't like Right Wing Death Squad Democracy
Police State Iran Nicaragua yesterday
Laissez-faire please Government keep your secret police offa me

I don't like Nationalist Supremacy White or Black
I don't like Narcs & Mafia marketing Smack
The General bullying Congress in his tweed vest
The President building his Armies in the East & West

I don't like Argentine police Jail torture Truths
Government Terrorist takeover Salvador news
I don't like Zionists acting Nazi Storm Troop
Palestine Liberation cooking Israel into Moslem soup

I don't like the crown's Official Secrets Act
You can get away with murder in the Government that's a fact
Security cops teargassing radical kids
In Switzerland or Czechoslovakia God Forbids

In America it’s Attica in Russia it's Lubianka Wall
In China if you disappear you wouldn't know yourself at all
Arise Arise you citizens of the world use your lungs
Talk back to the Tyrants all they're afraid of is your tongues

Two hundred Billion dollars inflates World War
In United States every year They're asking for more
Russia got as much in tanks and laser planes
Give or take Fifty Billion we can blow out everybody's brains

School's broke down 'cause History changes every night
Half the free World nations are Dictatorships of the Right
The only place socialism worked was in Gdansk, Bud
The Communist world's stuck together with prisoners' blood

The Generals say they know something worth fighting for
They never say what till thay start an unjust war
Iranian hostage Media Hysteria sucked
The Shah ran away with 9 Billion Iranian bucks

Kermit Roosevelt and his U.S. dollars overthrew Mossadegh
They wanted his oil then they got Ayatollah's dreck
They put in the Shah and they trained his police the Savak
All Iran was our hostage quarter-century That's right Jack

Bishop Romero wrote President Carter to stop
Sending guns to El Salvado's Junta so he got shot
Ambassador White blew the whistle on the White House lies
Reagan called him home cause he looked in the dead nun's eyes

Half the voters didn't vote they knew it was too late
Newspaper headlines called it a big Mandate
Some people voted for Reagan eyes open wide
3 out of 4 didn't vote for him That's a Landslide

Truth may be hard to find but Falsehood's easy
Read between the lines our Imperialism is sleazy
But if you think the People's State is your Heart's Desire
Jump right back in the frying pan from the fire

The System the System in Russia & China the same
Criticize the System in Budapest lose your name
Coca Cola Pepsi Cola in Russia & China come true
Khrushchev yelled in Hollywood "We will bury You"

America and Russia want to bomb themselves Okay
Everybody dead on both sides Everybody pray
All except the Generals in caves where they can hide
And fuck each other in the ass waiting for the next free ride

No hope Communism no hope Capitalism Yeah
Everybody's lying on both sides Nyeah nyeah nyeah
The bloody iron curtain of America Military Power
Is a mirror image of Russia's red Babel-Tower

Jesus Christ was spotless but Crucified by the Mob
Law & Order Herod's hired soldiers did the job
Flowerpower's fine but innocence has got no Protection
The man who shot John Lennon had a Hero-worshipper's connection

The moral of this song is that the world is in a horrible place
Scientific Industry devours the human race
Police in every country armed with Tear Gas & TV
Secret Masters everywhere bureaucratize for you & me

Terrorists and police together build a lowerclass Rage
Propaganda murder manipulate the upperclass Stage
Can't tell the difference 'tween a turkey & a provocateur
If you're feeling confused the Government's in there for sure

Aware Aware wherever you are No Fear
Trust your heart Don't ride your Paranoia dear
Breathe together with an ordinary mind
Armed with Humor Feed & Help Enlighten Woe Mankind

(Frankfurt-New York, December 15, 1980)

The poem is organized into organized into twenty-four stanzas of rhymed quatrains. Each quatrain follows the same aabb pattern with some paired endings linked by assonance rather than proper rhyme. Assonance provides effective coordination between lines nonetheless and so the aabb pattern is preserved throughout. Each line receives a consistent four rhythmic beats, and thus the poem falls in line rhythmically with the vast majority of punk tunes (indeed most popular tunes) with its four quarter time signature. Rarely does one hear a rock or punk tune in anything but four quarter time. This pulsing four beat organization was made explicit by The Ramones with their 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 signature shout that began many of their more energetic tunes. As in the Ramones' repertoire, this beat furiously drove the dynamic content of punk rock songs.

Here in "Capitol Air" the function is similar as the downbeat of the four stroke pulse is accented in the first two stanzas with the intial "I don't like"s. These reiterations replicate a hammered guitar chord signaling the beginning of each measure, each line, each new thought. The aggressive rhythm of the poem is thus established in the first two stanzas. The pulsing rhythm is supported in the ensuing stanzas with reiterations of the "I don't like" cry falling on the first beat of the first line of most stanzas. This constant reverberation of the rhythm over the course of the first nine stanzas clearly establishes the four beat pound and this sense is sustained throughout the remaining stanzas.

The initial recapitulations of "I don't like" howls out the theme of the piece as well as the rhythm. The fact of not liking is not the stressed motivation, however. Rather the poet cites a broad range of legitimate sources of dissatisfaction. Essentially though, the poem bemoans the bureaucratization of society. The first stanza begins with a general sense of political and class domination but the diatribe becomes quickly and emphatically more personal in the second stanza with very specific complaints about the poet's personal experience with bureaucratic intimidation. The poet is decidedly non-partisan in locating tyrannical elements of society and politics as his grievances point to a range of both left and right aligned offenses. Ginsberg points to the despotism of the Communists as well as the Capitalists and the Zionists as well as the Palestine Liberation groups. Even anarchists fall under the poem's astute sledgehammer as the fifth stanza shouts, "I don't like Anarchists screaming Love Is Free."

Significantly, the poem moves beyond locating sources of dissatisfaction, and in the tenth stanza we find the poet calling the listener to action. The lyrics, thus offer more than merely a catalogue of oppressive entities. With this call to revolution, the poem

offers a solution and provides energy for addressing the oppression in a positive and effective manner: "Arise Arise you citizens of the world use your lungs Talk back to the Tyrants all they're afraid of is your tongues." Here the poet tells us to use words, oral narrative, as ammunition. This rebel yell also echoes Beat notions of radical political and social revolt. The poem continues to gain energy for fighting back and concludes with a call to listeners to be mindful of tyrannical entities worldwide and to be politically aware. The very last stanza chants "Aware Aware whereever you are" and encourages political enlightenment. These overtones are simultaneously Clash-like and Ginsberg-minded in their move to educate and encourage listeners to mobilize for change. While the third to last stanza states that "the moral of this song is that the world is in a horrible place," the poem in fact moves far beyond merely establishing the dismal state of world affairs by pushing listeners to act and be aware.

The accompanying musical score indicates a key of A major and a three chord progression that moves simply I (A chord) – IV (D chord) – I – IV – V (E chord) – I. The movement from tonic (I) to subdominant (IV) back to tonic and then to the very typical cadential formula, subdominant – dominant – tonic is a predictable and very basic harmonic progression. This simple three chord progression reflects the punk rock drive for simplicity in harmonic movement. This three chord arrangement also suited Ginsberg since he didn't know how to employ more than three chords. Initially introduced to harmonics through fooling around with Peter Orlovsky's harmonium, Ginsberg's early music-poetry pieces were one chord works. Eventually, he found the need for musical movement to another harmonic area and asked someone to show him how to move to another chord. It was Bob Dylan who taught Ginsberg a three chord sequence (Kubernik

254). While Ginsberg did not understand the music theory behind harmonic progressions, he could manipulate three chords and reproduce a three chord song formula, such as he employed in "Capitol Air." The melody of the song moves with a narrow range from A (the tonic pitch) to D (a fourth above A). The narrow four-pitch range made for a very basic melody that could be singable by almost anyone. In this way, the musical organization of Ginsberg's work replicated the spirit of punk rock in its attempt to create a song that could be easily played and sung by anyone who knew even a few chords. The simplicity of the music allowed the content to be clearly heard. The music supported and enhanced the lyrics, but did not overshadow them.

Much of the electric charge of "Capitol Air" rides on a punk brand of heated dissatisfaction and a sense of anarchic seslf-righteousness. With its prevailing discontent with mainstream politics and social mores, the poem resonates with both punk and Beat sensibilities. Beyond the surface discontent of the poet, the poem speaks to specific points of contention for like-minded groups. This kind of specificity contributes to a cogent rhetoric that may at once be compelling and edifying. Initially attracted by overt anger as recognized common ground, the listener/reader may transcend the emotion of the piece and engage with the text on an intellectual plane. As Ginsberg related, "The real challenge is to be so clear and definite and so courageous and so authoritative as to lay down a story in front of three thousand screaming new-wave heads that they actually listen to it because it makes sense" (Miles 492). The compositional strategies of punk poet Strummer and Beat lyricist Ginsberg seem to overlap on this point of effective edification and mobilization of a broad-based audience. Earlier Ginsberg poems like "America" and "War Profit Litany" certainly resonate well with Clash-style politically

hip punk rock. "Capitol Air" is simultaneously an extension of Beat infuriation as well as an expression of aggressive punk tyranny. The Bonds crowd reacted positively to Ginsberg's performance in part because his attitude and delivery were familiar to them. Ginsberg was able to spin his brand of political conscious lyricism into a punk-styled text both because of the common ground between Beat and punk sensibilities and because of Ginsberg's ability and his willingness to experiement with new aesthetic formats.

**Naomi Tunes in on Mandolin: Ginsberg's Tribute to Mother's Music**

"Death is a letter that was never sent."
- Allen Ginsberg
"Ignu"

"The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window-I have the key-get married Allen don't take drugs. The key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window. Love, your mother." These concluding lines of the first section of Ginsberg's epic *Kaddish* are drawn from a letter Naomi Ginsberg wrote to her son a week before she died of a stroke. It's one of the few places in the poem where Ginsberg's mother speaks for herself. It's also the moment where the listener gets a clear sense of the significance of Naomi's influence on her son. Indeed, the coordinating images of key and sunlight appealed to Ginsberg especially as they effectively and beautifully reference an ironic sense of enlightenment and insight that influenced the author's life work.

Naomi Ginsberg, a paranoid schizophrenic, did not have the wherewithal to be a responsible or nurturing parent to Allen and his older brother, Eugene. Indeed, even as a very young boy, Allen was often put in charge of monitoring his mother's anomalous and even dangerous behavior. She experienced her first nervous breakdown before Allen was

born, and during Allen's lifetime she was constantly in and out of sanitariums. During the brief spells when she did return to the Ginsberg household, her behavior continued to be driven by the pathological dynamics of the schizophrenia that could not be cured or treated. Naomi's condition caused her to be argumentative and unreasonable, which caused disharmony in the marriage. When Allen left home for Columbia University, Naomi left Louis, her husband and Allen's father, and moved in with her sister, who was living in the Bronx. After physically attacking her sister, Naomi was sent to live with her cousins, Max and Edie Frohman. Naomi continued her abusive behavior in their household. One evening Naomi flew into a rage and Edie called Allen to remove his mother from the apartment. When Allen arrived, he found his mother in an enraged and irrational state. Allen called the police, who took Naomi to Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island. In 1947, when Allen was 20 years old, he received a letter from the Hospital indicating that Naomi's condition had worsened and that she would benefit from a prefrontal lobotomy. Because Louis had already divorced Naomi, the responsibility for signing the consent papers for the rather drastic procedure fell to Allen. For the rest of his life, Allen was haunted by a profound sense of guilt for permitting what he later considered an extreme and ineffectual procedure (Gilmore 236). Naomi struggled with her mental illness till the end of her life. She died nine years after the lobotomy in June of 1956 when Allen had barely reached his thirtieth year.

Allen's father, Louis, has been popularly recognized as the salient parental influence on Allen's poetry. After all, Louis was not only an English literature professor but a poet himself. And indeed Louis did model for Allen compositional process and the assiduous work habits of a professional poet. One of Allen's fondest and most vibrant

childhood memories was of his father sitting evenings at his rolltop desk in the corner of the living room working out the lines of some new verse. Upon Allen's request, when Louis died, Edith, Louis's second wife, gave the rolltop to Ginsberg. Allen installed the piece in his kitchen at the 11th Street apartment where he lived most of his adult life. Ginsberg often derived inspiration from Louis's workstation, and many of Ginsberg's own lyrics were composed at the desk.

In some ways, the desk symbolized Louis's devotion to the written word and his reverence for literary formal structures that could be worked out with pen and paper. Most often in his critical commentary on Allen's poetry, Louis stressed content, imagery, and formal properties over oral dynamics. In a 1956 letter to Allen, Louis reflects on "Siesta in Xbalba and Return to the States," a mammoth poem Allen had mimeographed and published privately. The poem's opening lines manifest the rhythmic vitality of the entire work and at the same time the piece's lack of reverence for the kind of formal stability that Louis honored:

> I
>
> Late sun opening the book,
> blank page like light,
> invisible words unscrawled,
> impossible syntax
> of apocalypse-
> Uxmal: Noble Ruins
> No construction-
>
> let the mind fall down.
>
> - *Guanajuato-Los Angeles 1954*

In his letter, Louis focuses on the visual imagery and meaning and makes connections between symbolic references and what he sees as a central unifying theme. Louis writes,

"There is entangled in your lines a nostalgia for the past and ruins that make a pulpit for mortality" (Schumacher 55). The operative and perhaps carefully and quite consciously chosen verbal adjective, "entangled," calls attention to the poem's rejection of any predictable or familiar formal structure. Still, Louis searches for sense in the poem by seeking a common theme among the many seemingly disparate references to history and environment in the text. In addition, what Louis finds "interesting" is what he calls the "cinematic flashbacks of scenes and people" (Schumacher 55). Here we see a quite explicit referencing of the visual. Within his son's poetry, Louis struggles to find something he can hang his hat on, an image or line that will communicate unambiguously and perhaps familiarly. The visual illustrations provide one such clue. In this case, the nonlinear text can be deciphered in terms of visual cinematic flashbacks.

Several years after "Siesta in Xbalba" and after many such letters of commentary from Louis on Allen's poems, Allen writes "To My Father in Poetry," a poem that reflects on the disparity between Louis's literary vision and Allen's rebellious lyricism. The poem's final two stanzas speak most specifically to these disparities and Allen's aesthetic and emotional reaction to them:

> For all my hatred of the forms you used
> knowing full well the bags of intestines & eyes
> the lungs and sputum classrooms of the grave
> all the experience that brought you to your sighs.
>
> Father, I read you in an ancient book
> And as you prophesied I know you best
> And love you most when the last page is turned
> And hear the echo of your soul in my own breast
> And night is quiet, and I have forgot the rest.

Here Ginsberg speaks quite emphatically and directly of his disdain for prescriptive literary forms. As well, he seems to figure the formal structuring of poetry as

institutionally derived and dictated by an elitist status quo of scholars. Clearly, he aligns his father, as high school and college English teacher, with the literary arm of the academic institution that sets parameters around creative products by imposing standards that involve imposed critical criteria. For Allen, this imposition of poetic standards and formal procedure has a deadly effect on the creative process, as we can see not just from his references in this particular poem but in his lifelong creative pursuit of innovative and individually inspired aesthetic products.

The poem does not essentially or irrevocably disdain the poetry of the father, however. The last stanza reveals that the father's work is best loved after the last page of text is turned and the echo or oral reverberation remains. For Allen, the formal prescriptions of the literary institutions harness not just the creative process but the soul as well. The "ancient book" refers to a text of early Jewish poetry that Ginsberg had been reading at the time. The rhythmic layout of the poem calls up the chant of Hebrew prayer and thus echoes the oral properties of a genre that would have been familiar to both father and son. Significantly, the truest spiritual connection for the son to the father's poetry is in the hearing of the echo. Allen sent the work in progress to his father and remarked that he thought the poem would "please" Louis even though the older poet would probably find many of the lines "awkward and obscure." In his response, however, Louis took exception especially to the poem's reference to a "hatred" of poetic formal structures. Louis retorted, "Poetry is where poetry is. To exclude regular forms which the bulk of the best poets of times present and past have used only mutilates the fundamentals of poetry" (Schumacher 125). Here Louis clearly positions himself within a literary tradition that honors the pre-established prescribed forms.

The divergent approaches to composition of father and son were not missed by the literary milieu and, in fact, promoters latched on to these familial contentions of the creative spirit by sponsoring a series of "Battle of the Bard" readings, a joint reading where the divergent poetic styles were highlighted. Both Ginsbergs scoffed at the insinuation that they were engaged in a poetic battle. Even though they did privately squabble over literary points, they preferred to present themselves in these public forums as representing dissimilar yet equally legitimate dynamics in poetry. In a 1969 article, titled "My Son the Poet," published in the *Book World* section of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Louis describes a typical Battle of the Bards event:

> I usually come on first, neatly-dressed, the "Square" poet, and I intersperse my poems with puns and witticisms. Allen is picturesque and charismatic. He has a kindly owl-like face with long hair and ringlets and a wide beard which is his trade-mark. His orange shirt with beads and amulets disdain his shabby, creaseless trousers. He comes on with small, tinkling cymbals and chanting mantras and *Hare Krishnas.*
>
> (Schumacher 287)

In this passage, Louis focuses on not only the divergent visual facades of the poets but also the aural properties which distinguish one from the other. Allen is clearly aligned with music and song while Louis's charisma emanates out of a cerebral connection of poetic text by way of puns and witticisms.

Written communication between father and son underscores the fact that they did not always agree on matters of poetic style and structure. However, they both were united in their mutual respect for each others' poetic endeavors. As parent, teacher, and

elder poet, Louis was typically the one to offer critical commentary on particular poems of the younger Ginsberg, while Allen's rhetoric played mostly on a broader platform of compositional approach. Even though Louis felt free to critique Allen's work, at the same time, he was careful to recognize that his son's poetry was being popularly acknowledged - and so regarded Allen's poetry with respect. In this way, his comments revealed a somewhat resigned nod to the fact that his critiques were personal reflections and criticisms and possibly not representative of popular opinion. Mixed feelings of parental pride in the popular appeal and disapproval of the renegade obfuscation of traditional forms played out in Louis's engagement with much of his son's work. "Kaddish" was one of the poems that Louis struggled with not only aesthetically but personally.

In 1956, Allen was living in Berkeley and working as a yeoman-storekeeper on a United States Navel Service ship. In June of that year, he received a telegram from his brother, Eugene, informing him that his mother had died somewhat suddenly of a stroke. Although Naomi's mental state had deteriorated in recent months, physically there had been no indication that she was close to death. Ginsberg did not make the journey to New York for his mother's funeral. Because of Naomi's institutionalization for the last several decades of her life, the funeral would be predictably small with only a few family members in attendance. In a letter to Allen reporting on the details of the funeral, Eugene informs him that there were seven mourners in attendance (Schumacher 51). The functionary recited some Hebrew prayers at the service and then again at the cemetery but because the requisite quorum of ten men (a minyan) was not on hand, the Hebrew prayer for the dead, the *Kaddish*, could not be said (Miles 205 – 206) (Schumacher 51).

Although Ginsberg had not been raised in a religious household, had not been taught by his parents how to pray, had not been bar mitzvahed, and did not know Hebrew or Yiddish, he was nonetheless disturbed by the fact that the *Kaddish* had not been said for Naomi (Tobias 175). Ginsberg attempted to have *Kaddish* said in Berkeley and to that purpose brought Jack Kerouac and Allen's partner, Peter Orlovsky, to a synagogue in the Jewish section of town. However, the rabbis informed Ginsberg that because they were not Jewish, Orlovsky and Kerouac would not be eligible to participate. In the end, a quorum of ten Jewish men could not be found and the *Kaddish* remained unsaid. Ginsberg resolved to compose his own *Kaddish* and wrote Louis asking for a full text version of the prayer (Miles 207).

In November of the following year, Ginsberg wrote his father from Paris indicating that he was composing a "requiem" or "elegy" for Naomi. Ginsberg had researched and studied the Hebrew text and was now ready to begin his own more personal version. Ginsberg had been reading the epic works of authors like Shakespeare, Crane, Artaud, and Keats, and he wanted to create a prodigious poem of similar proportions for his mother. And indeed the poem represents one of the longer, epic works in Ginsberg's oeuvre. The final version of the poem has five sections, the first long section comprising 80% of the piece, the second "Hymn" section and following three sections being that much shorter in length, while proportionately similar to one another. The bulk of the poem was written during a two day marathon writing session after Ginsberg had been listening to Ray Charles and chanting the original Hebrew *Kaddish* at a friend's apartment. He then injected morphine and methamphetamine before writing. Ginsberg believed the drugs would provide enhanced access to the subconscious. In

addition, the amphetamine drugs in his system allowed him to work from 6 A.M. Saturday until 10 P.M. Sunday without interruption of sleep. By the end of the session, he had written fifty-eight pages, which eventually represented the first long section and the second Hymn section. The three other sections, including the fifth fugal segment were written later in both New York and Paris (Miles 256 - 257). After an arduous editing process, Ginsberg sent the final version to his father in the summer of 1960. In October of the same year, he sent the publishable version to City Lights editor, Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

In his poem, "Ignu," Ginsberg affirms, "DEATH IS A LETTER THAT WAS NEVER SENT." For Ginsberg, Naomi's spiritual death was threatened by a Kaddish that was never said. Significantly, the Kaddish prayer serves four main functions within the Jewish community. First, it recognizes the grief of God, the creator of men and women, brought on by the mortal loss of one of his creations. Second, it assuages the grief of the mourners by healing emotional and psychological wounds. Thirdly, it educates the mourners as to the spiritual dynamics of life and death (Lamm 153). Fourthly, and importantly, the recitation provides a public demonstration of the productivity for good of the life of the deceased in that the Kaddish is initiated and performed by a group of reverent relatives and/or friends who concern themselves with their own spiritual lives as well as the continued spiritual existence of the departed subject (Lamm 161). In this manner, the recitation of the Kaddish provides confirmation of a life well lived and a life that promoted the common good of the world community. For a parent especially, the performance of the Kaddish by male offspring validates the parent's lifelong propagation of good. This acknowledgement is essential for the spiritual vitality of the parent. Rabbi

Simeonbar Yohai has said, "so long as his children live, so long does the parent live. They who leave worthy children, do not die in spirit. Their mortal remains are interred in the earth, but their teachings remain strong among men" (Lamm 159).

Although Ginsberg had not been raised in a religious household (in fact Naomi was a secular communist), Ginsberg was interested in the realm of the spiritual. By the time of Naomi's death, he had been introduced to Buddhism, most influentially by Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, and had in fact asked Kerouac to instruct him in the practices and philosophy (Miles 174 – 175). Almost ten years earlier, Ginsberg had a divine vision of Blake that he recalled as a transcendent religious experience, "The peculiar quality of the voice was something unforgettable because it was like God had a human voice, with all the indefinite tenderness and moral gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son" (Douglas 8; Miles 99). Because of Ginsberg's evident interest in a transcendent spiritual life, we can surmise that he would have been concerned with the spiritual well-being of his mother. As well, Ginsberg suffered unremitting guilt over signing the permission documents for his mother's disastrous frontal lobotomy. The recitation of the Kaddish would have been one way to at least salvage Naomi's spirit and make her spiritually, if not mentally and emotionally, viable.

The cathartic value of the compositional process for Ginsberg's Kaddish is clearly shown within the lines of the poem as when the narrator recalls calling the police at a moment when Naomi's emotional and physical fury could not be controlled.

> Your last night in the darkness of the Bronx - I phonecalled - thru hospital to secret police
> that came, when you and I were alone, shrieking at Elanor in my ear -who breathed hard in her own bed, got thin-
> Nor will forget, the doorknock, at your fright of spies, -Law advance-ing, on my honor-Eternity entering the room-you running to the bath-

> room undressed, hiding in protest from the last heroic fate-
> staring at my eyes betrayed-the final cops of madness rescuing me-
> from your foot against the broken heart of Elanor,

Louis recognized Allen's emotional need to create the elegy and even empathized with his son's desire for a public show of compassion, confession, and grief:

> Allen's writing of "Kaddish" gave him a vent for his grief, a safety-value for his pent-up anguish so that the poem was a purgative and an exorcism of his grief-raged heart. . . . [it] helped him, as lines in "Macbeth" assert, to "cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart."
>
> (Schumacher 284)

Thus, Ginsberg sought to compose a piece that would not only fulfill a son's religious obligation and redeem his mother's spirit in the eyes of the Lord but also function as a cathartic vehicle through which he could work through his complex and often suppressed feelings about his mother.

Ginsberg felt the singular weight of responsibility for creating a poem that would serve the dual purpose of mimicking the Hebrew Kaddish and providing a permanent, repeatable vehicle of catharsis. His poem would take on some of the features of the Hebrew prayer, yet he knew that his Kaddish must diverge from the original in some significant ways. Ginsberg knew that he wanted to create a prodigious work of impressive proportion and even to innovate a new literary form to suit his purposes – a multi-section piece with long lines in the style of "Howl." He would not rely on any of the classic poetic structures to organize the content. Rather the structure of the poem would emanate from the emotional profundity of the content. In a *Paris Review* interview, Ginsberg spoke about the process of locating a structure for the piece:

> I was working with my own neural impulses and writing impulses. See, the difference is between someone sitting down to write a poem *in* a definite preconceived metrical pattern and filling in that pattern, and someone working with his physiological movements and *arriving* at a pattern, and perhaps even arriving at a pattern which might even have a name, or might even have a classical usage, but arriving at it organically rather than synthetically. Nobody's got any objection to even iambic pentameter if it comes from a source deeper than the mind - that is to say, if it comes from the breathing and the belly and the lungs.
>
> (Clark 3)

Because he was going to be reaching into the depths of his conscious and hopefully subconscious memory in the writing process, Ginsberg knew that the dredged up ideas and emotions would surface in unpredictable and even chaotic ways. As per Kerouac's writing from the top of the mind - first spontaneous thoughts - no editing approach, Ginsberg wanted to allow himself the liberty of expressing spontaneous sensation. The drugs, he thought, would assist in accessing the subconscious, but the writing process must cooperate by providing an opportunity for laissez-faire expression.

In addition, Ginsberg wanted to create a powerful prayer poem that would affirm Naomi's life. He had spoken to rabbis about the Hebrew Kaddish and had done research and so was familiar with the chanted lines and the lyrical style of the prayer. Jewish prayer chant had been an influence on the long lyrical lines that comprise his "Howl for Carl Solomon." Clearly here with his Kaddish he was looking for the same long breath lines and the same uninterrupted flow, a style which is very similar to that which drives

Hebrew chant in general and the Kaddish in particular. The musical component of the chanted Hebrew Kaddish is essential for the overall effect. In his text, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm describes the Kaddish, in part, as follows, "It is an ancient Aramaic prose-poem, a litany whose word-music, strong rhythms, stirring sounds, and alternating responses of leader and congregation, cast sheer hypnotic power over the listeners" (Lamm 150). The rhythmic, lyrical lines where the body is inferred by way of deep, long breaths necessary for the execution of the drawn out lines contribute to the spiritual dynamics of the prayer and bring participants to a transcendent state that implies the spiritual.

Ginsberg was aware of the powerful effect of music and discussed this in terms of hypnotic rhythms that once introduced to the nervous system by way of performance stimulated an "electrochemical" reaction on the body that could "catalyze specific states of consciousness." His perception derives from personal experience with poetry, like Vachel Lindsay's "Congo," Poe's "Bells," and much of Artaud. Ginsberg related, "There's a statement by Artaud . . . (on that subject), that certain music when introduced into the nervous system changes the molecular composition of the nerve cells or something like that, it permanently alters the being that has the experience of this" (Clark 297). Ginsberg's belief that music had the power to alter – even permanently – the psychic and physical state of the individual suggests that he saw music as a dominant and perhaps essential component for poetry meant to affect the listener in dramatic ways. He knew that his spiritual poetic guide, Blake, had recognized the value of prose-music combinations as well. He knew that in salons of friends Blake had sung his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* accompanied by period instruments. According to Ginsberg,

scholars of the day were so tied to the literature and the written format that they had noted the text but not the melodies, the musical component (Alfonso 253).

In an effort to create a piece of substance that would simultaneously affirm Naomi's life and reflect Ginsberg's complex emotions, music, then, was destined to be an essential component of the poet's Kaddish. And indeed we perceive at the very beginning of the poem, in content as well as form, that music is a prevailing and powerful presence.

> Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on
> the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
> downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking,
> talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues
> shout blind on the phonograph
> the rhythm the rhythm--and your memory in my head three years after--
> And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud--wept, realizing
> how we suffer--
> And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remember,
> prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of An-
> swers--and my own imagination of a withered leaf--at dawn—

Ginsberg opens his piece by evoking the musical strains of a diverse group: Hebrew Kaddish chant, Ray Charles blues, Hebrew song, and Buddhist chant. The multi-voiced text collaborates in song to sing the history of Naomi and to sing for the redemption of Naomi. But this Kaddish spans a variety of spiritual persuasions and includes the voices of an ethnically, racially, and even theologically diverse community. Though each voice is stylistically distinct, they are united in their purpose. Ginsberg invites these voices to assemble a broad based and diverse quorum. Thus, the quorum assembled within the text reflects diverse representation of voices, simultaneously legitimizing the spiritual efficacy of the text and positioning Naomi as part of a broad and varied world community.

It is “the rhythm the rhythm” that has unearthed the substance of the poem’s content locked inside the poet’s head, and as the poem unravels the various details of Naomi’s life, it is the rhythm, pulsing but unfettered, that will set the pace by providing a fundamental underpinning and will intensify the emotional content by engaging the body and mind of the performer/listener. In this way, Ginsberg seeks to reproduce the rhythm in his head for his listeners and reader/performers alike. The long lines necessitate the deep breathing and long drawn out drone of Buddhist chant. The rhythmic intensity of the long lines reflects the Hebrew chant style, as heard in “Howl.” This rhythmic approach suits the narrative as it permits the poet to adopt a prose-like style in presenting the story of Naomi’s life. This rhythmic approach drives the first three and fifth sections of the entire piece.

The narrator begins by addressing Naomi directly and provides a location for his current state, a point from which he will now invoke her spirit through recalled memories and emotions. And of course, because it is a prayer, there is the “worshipping the God included in it all.” After this 24 line introduction establishing the purpose and tone of the piece, the narrator proceeds to tell Naomi’s history, beginning with her birth and emigration from Russia to the United States and immediate installment in the Lower East side of Manhattan fifty years ago. The poem quickly concludes that because of Naomi’s internal struggles and turmoil, Death, a salient theme in the poem, is “good”:

> Ai! ai! we do worse! We are in a fix! And you're out, Death let you out,
> Death had the Mercy, you're done with your century, done with
> God, done with the path thru it--Done with yourself at last--Pure
> --Back to the Babe dark before your Father, before us all--before the
> world--
> There, rest. No more suffering for you. I know where you've gone, it's good.

In Part I, the themes "Death" and "Strange" that open the poem continue to be significant as this section relates the experiences of Naomi, including behavior clearly driven by her madness.

Part II sustains the tension caused by Naomi's madness, tension between Naomi and the narrator, Naomi and others, and Naomi and herself. Indeed, at times it is the internal conflicts that are most poignant. This section continues the first person address to Naomi laid out in Part I but in line 37 Naomi's own voice is heard in dialogue with the narrator.

> 'Allen, you don't understand-it's-ever since those 3 big sticks up my back-they did something to me in Hospital, they poisoned me , they want to see me dead- 3 big sticks, 3 big sticks-

Here Naomi may speak for herself. In this case, however, while vocal agency may be empowering, it is damning as well since the listener hears from the source the madness embedded in Naomi's utterances. At this juncture right after Naomi's speeches, the narration moves to third person with reference to Naomi as "she" rather than "you." The third person narration continues to the end of Part II.

As the narrator reflects on the various events that comprise Naomi's life, we hear a range of experience – from mundane to madness. Ginsberg takes us back to Naomi's schoolgirl days in Newark's "Normal School" and leads us to her schizophrenic rages. In mapping out her life, the narrator often pauses for personal reflection on these moments. The personal reflection at times works through Ginsberg's personal conflicts as when he recalls Naomi not recognizing him during a visit to the institution.

> 'Are you a spy?' I sat at the sour table, eyes filling with tears -"Who are you? Did Louis send you?

Still, as the opening of Part II suggests "over and over" the refrain of the Hospitals hasn't written Naomi's history in a satisfactory manner. At one juncture the litany of madness is interrupted by a passage that recalls a young Allen's anticipation of his mother's release from the Lakewood institution:

> So that a few years later she came home again - we'd much advanced and planned - I waited for that day - my mother again to cook & - play the piano - sing at mandolin –

The narrator looks forward to the return of Naomi as mother and nurturer. Nurturing behavior is associated with cooking, playing, and, importantly, with making music, in this case on piano, and mandolin, and through song. The narrator later implies that Naomi as the sole purveyor of music in the household: "we still had the piano-and the book of Poe -and the Mandolin, tho needed some string, dusty." Clearly, the mandolin had not been used in her absence and only comes to life in her hands. In this passage, the M tone that initiates mandolin competes with the M of Metrazol for alliterative alignment with Mother. In the end, the Metrazol wins out as we discover, "Her mandolin gone, all strings broken in her head, she tried." Thus, the mandolin and music seems to be tied not only to the nurturing behavior of a mother but also to logic and coherency. The loss of the mandolin anticipates the loss of her mind. Later, in a passage that recalls Naomi's extreme paranoia, we hear her defending herself against perceived attacks from relatives: "I cooked for my two children - I played the mandolin." Through Naomi's voice, Allen has the mother herself acknowledge the significance of her music as she recognizes the rhetorical value of claiming to bring music into the household for her children. Indeed, music is valued, as it is mentioned in the same breath as feeding her children.

This symbolic alignment of Naomi with music is supported by the overt aural dynamics of the text. While the rhythmic qualities of the poem are significant in that they recall various musical forms like Hebrew and Buddhist chant, the tonal character of the poem supports the underlying rhythm in its aspirations to create a musical text. The initial word of the poem, "Strange," serves the dual purpose of providing an aurally explosive launch and a thematically valuable point of reference for the listener/performer. The S sound that begins the text continues to be a pervasive presence, recalled in key words like "suffer" and "singer," in alliterative clips, like "sighing, screaming," and in consonance, like "lays down on the sidewalk-in a single vast beam." After the initial S, the D tone is quickly introduced and proves to be a significant sound as it begins the thematically significant, "Death." The D and S tones continue to be prominent through the first part of the first section and to play against each other as in

> Cut *down* by an i*d*iot *S*nowman's i*c*y--even in the *Spring*--*strange* gho*s*t thought *s*ome--*Death*--Sharp i*c*icle in his han*d*--crowne*d* with ol*d* ro*ses*--a *d*og for his eye*s*--cock of a *s*weatshop--heart of electric irons.
>
> (italics mine)

The D and S also trade off the position of predominant tonal center as in

> You once kicked Elanor in the leg, she died of heart failure later. You of stroke. Asleep? within a year, the two of you, *sisters in death*. Is Elanor happy?

This first section of Part I ends with a coda which departs from the recollection of Naomi's history and moves to prayer of mourning. This turn of content is underscored by a quick, dramatic, and explicit move to a tonal area that favors M:

> Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind, mar - ried dreamed, mortal changed—Ass and face done with murder.
> In the world, given, flower maddened, made no Utopia, shut under pine, almed in Earth, blamed in Lone, Jehovah, accept.

The predominance of M leads to a cadence that recapitulates and reaffirms the salient D, introduced at the beginning of the piece:

> This is the end, the redemption from Wilderness, way for the Wonderer, House sought for All, black handkerchief washed clean by weeping -- page beyond Psalm—Last change of mine and Naomi—to God's perfect Darkness—Death, stay thy phantoms!

We may want to pay attention to the quality of the stressed consonants. Linguists typically use three criteria to classify consonant sounds. The first of these is based on the place of sound articulation - from the lips, behind the teeth, etc. The second considers the manner of articulation, which would take into account the movement of the tongue, if any. The third addresses the degree to which the vocal chords must vibrate to produce the sound. For example, articulating V causes the vocal chords to vibrate, so V would be categorized as a voiced consonant while F would not be voiced because vibration of vocal chords does not occur. Using these criteria, linguists would classify the S sound that we hear in words like "strange" and "sister" as voiceless because articulation does not cause the vocal chords to vibrate. This S would also be considered an alveolar consonant because the tongue must be positioned against the gums and behind the teeth at the alveolar ridge. For S, the manner of articulation calls for a narrow opening to be formed in the mouth so that air can rub its way through. Consonants that are articulated in this manner are called fricatives from the Latin verb, fricare, which means to rub. Thus, S would be classified as an unvoiced alveolar fricative. D is voiced and articulated at the alveolar ridge, but D is considered a stop because in its articulation a stoppage is made in the mouth. We can classify D then as an voiced alveolar stop. Consonants that are voiced "by obstructing the oral passage and letting the breath and voice flow through

the nose" (Pyles and Algeo 30) are classified as nasals. M would thus be considered a voiced, bilabial nasal (some information in this paragraph taken from Pyles and Algeo 27 – 30).

If we analyze the stressed tonal areas in Ginsberg's "Kaddish," we can see that the piece begins with an unvoiced alveolar fricative. The sense of the suspension of the fricative is maintained by the prevalence of s in words like corsets, eyes, blues, etc. Just before the introduction of the D as a second important tonal area, the listener is reminded of the predominance of S:

*And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud--wept, realizing how we suffer--*

Significantly, we get the initial S in "suffer" immediately before the introduction of the thematic "Death" at the beginning of the line that follows. In this manner, the fricative S is sustained and leads the listener/performer to the voiced stop D. The stop on "Death" aurally underscores the significance of Death as a theme in the work. It also works metaphorically as sound stops on Death. The vitality and sustainability of S is immediately reasserted significantly with terms that reference music:

*And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remember*

Moving to the close of section I, we hear the salient M of the cadential prayer as a sustained tone because it is a nasal capable of being prolonged and because of the preponderance of M in this cadence. Again, the sustained M leads the listener/performer to a stopped D, in the final line. The D is emphasized by way of alliteration in "Darkness" and "Death." Thus, the theme of Death and D as aural tone are both recapitulated as the final cadential line sounds.

Part II begins with an emphasis on the alveolar liquid R and continues with anaphora featuring another voiced stop, B. These two tones interact in much the same way as S and D had with the sustainability of the liquid R moving it effectively to the stopped B. A tonal play between vowel and consonants continues throughout Part II with various tonal areas being favored and emphasized before a movement to another tonal area. The movement from one tonal area to another aurally drives the piece and strategically leads the ear to thematically significant moments. Importantly, Part II concludes with a recapitulation of the thematically significant "Strange" and with it the S tone that opened the piece:

> Strange Prophesies anew! She wrote - "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window - I have the key - Get married Allen don't take drugs -the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window.

However, here the S in Strange does not lead to Death but to Key, Sunlight, and Window, references to enlightenment, joy, and escape.

Ginsberg has called the final Part V of Kaddish a fugue. Throughout the almost two years over which the Kaddish evolved, Ginsberg had been in the habit of sending his father finished fragments. In May of 1959, he sent his father the final section with the following accompanying comments:

> The Caw Caw Caw section is like a fugue with two parts that meet & harmonize in the last line – which is a very weird line. Built on the structure of a fugue, like Bach. The "With your eyes" section is an extension of the stanza shape-form of "Howl [Part] III," used sort of as a stanza, it builds up 3 times & the third it diminishes back down.
>
> (Schumacher 118)

Ginsberg was familiar with other poems that looked to classical musical structures for influence and inspiration. He held in great esteem the work of Ezra Pound, whom he had met several times, most significantly in the fall of 1967 in Venice where Ginsberg expressed his admiration for the work of the elder poet as well as his gratitude for the artist's influence on Ginsberg's own work (Tytell, *Ezra Pound The Solitary Volcano* 336 – 337). Ginsberg had read Pound's 160 section epic *Cantos* and had spent some time discussing the piece with William Carlos Williams (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 98). As he embarked on the project of composing the *Cantos*, Pound wrote in a letter to W. B. Yeats that his intention was to "write one hundred cantos modeled on a Bach fugue: 'There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse, but two themes, the Descent into Hades from Homer, a Metamorphosis from Ovid, and mixed with these, medieval or modern historical characters'" (Erkkila). Thus, Pound had in mind a literary model where content themes behaved as fugal themes would in a musical passage.

The fugal form is characterized by the introduction of a melodic phrase or subject in one voice and a continued exposition section where additional countersubjects or subthemes are introduced in other voices in counterpoint to the original subject. After the exposition of themes, the piece proceeds in imitative counterpoint with fantasia sections that explore other tonal areas and where the subject appears in different keys and combines with the various countersubjects and scale passages. There are sections called episodes where the main subject does not appear. The counterpoint builds to a climax that is diffused in a stretto section where all themes reenter in quick tandem counterpoint with one another. Music theorists do not typically refer to a fugue in terms of a formal

movement but as a compositional procedure so that we might refer to fugal passages within a larger piece.

Part V of Ginsberg's fugal Kaddish section begins by introducing the first Caw Caw theme, which we may consider the subject of the fugue:

Caw caw caw crows shriek in the white sun over grave stones in Long Island

An additional, subsidiary motif or countersubject is introduced immediately in the next line:

Lord Lord Lord Naomi underneath this grass my halflife and my own as hers

Thematically we see a contrast of imagery where the primary subject introduces skybound subjects, the black crows and the white sun, subjects that can said to be close to the heavens, while the countersubject presents Naomi underneath the earth. Within the contrapuntal variation of a subject, a composer may invert the melody. For example, if the melody begins with a leap up a fifth, the inversion begins with a leap down a fourth and proceeds in that manner, with each linear step or leap moving in the opposite direction counter to the linear design of the subject. In a similar manner, we can say that the second theme is a thematic inversion of the caw caw subject.

After the introduction of the subject and countersubject, the piece proceeds in a fugal manner as these themes appear in alternating repetition with the themes playing off one another. The thematic repetitions include some imitation as in the second and third

lines where the subject reintroduces the eye motif from the previous movement and the countersubject imitates. We also find the caw caw theme repeating ground-centered burial material and the Lord Lord countersubject taking on the above ground imagery of the subject with references to "black cloud" (with perhaps the black crow embedded within) and "echo in the sky."

> Caw caw caw crows shriek in the white sun over grave stones in Long Island
> Lord Lord Lord Naomi underneath this grass my halflife and my own as hers
> caw caw my eye be buried in the same Ground where I stand in Angel
> Lord Lord great Eye that stares on All and moves in black cloud
> caw caw strange cry of Beings flung up into sky over the waving trees
> Lord Lord O Grinder of giant Beyonds my voice is a boundless field in Sheol
> Caw caw the call of Time rent out of foot and wing an instant in the universe
> Lord Lord an echo in the sky the wind through ragged leaves the roar of memory
> caw caw all years my birth a dream caw caw New York the bus the broken shoe the vast highschool caw caw all Visions of the Lord
> Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord

As the two motifs continue a rapid alternating imitation, motifs from earlier movements surface – the bus that Ginsberg and Naomi road to the Institution, the broken shoe that she waved at Louis during a psychotic rage in the pharmacy, Naomi's high school. The recapitulation of former themes heightens the intensity of the movement and pushes the lines toward the stretto in the final line where both subject and counter subject appear in quick alternating juxtaposition. Interestingly the final tone of the piece is the voiced stop D which was a central tone in Part I, most significantly appearing in the motif Death. Indeed, the character of the tonal D is transformed from despondency and helplessness inferred in Death to the promise of the divine in Lord.

Ginsberg's father valued the poem for its affirmation of Naomi's life and its promise for divine salvation of Naomi's spirit. However, he had concerns about some of

the poem's raw, personal content as well as its musical formulations. In fact, in a letter to his son, Louis listed a number of editing suggestions, foremost asking Allen to omit intimate references that Louis found disconcerting. These included mentions of Louis's courtship of his second wife, Edith. Louis instructed Allen to "Remove 'Louis found himself a girl' too embarrassing for me" and to take out all "troubling" references to his "affair" (Schumacher 140). Louis also maintained that the poem's image of "long black beard around vagina" was too "obscene" and suggested this be deleted. In addition, Louis suggested omitting all references to Allen's homosexuality, "why give power to calumniators" (Schumacher 140)? As well, Louis expressed reservations about the caw caw section. In response to his father's list of revisions, Ginsberg wrote NO in large caps in the margins of the letter after each item on the list. The personal nature of the poem called for the honesty of expression that underscored the blatant imagery and personal references to sexuality. Ginsberg also retained the fugal caw caw section as an essential musical structural component of the piece.

Indeed, the honesty of the content and the musicality of the formal structure reflect the influence of Naomi on her son's personal and artistic life. Naomi's lifelong struggle to be true to her own convictions regardless of the potential for social or even political alienation had an impact on Allen's attitude towards truth and social and political positioning. In a 1962 letter to his son, Louis criticizes Allen's political positions, "I charge you with being a brain-washed Commie – brainwashed by a rationalization of childhood memories and attachment to Naomi's family or by your inbuilt, blind rebelliousness" (Schumacher 196). According to Louis, Ginsberg's rebellious spirit is hard-wired by way of his maternal genetic material. Louis often

disapproved of Allen's radical political platform as well as his energetic acting out of these positions in the form of organized protest demonstrations. Naomi, on the other hand, fearlessly participated in communist organizations, and her young sons would often accompany her to party meetings. Indeed, some of the first tunes that Allen learned were "The Red Flag" and the union song "On the Line" (Miles 19). As an adult, though not a communist himself, Allen was clearly inspired by his mother's commitment to a politically radical platform. Naomi's radical leanings gave Ginsberg permission to act on his own political convictions.

Naomi's disregard of social imperatives that suggested prescriptive images and behavior fostered a climate that encouraged Allen's own tendency to play in the margins of society. This attitude extends beyond politics and social construction to Ginsberg's relationship to art and literature. Through her singing accompanied by mandolin, Naomi was the primary musical influence on her son as well as the most musically passionate parental influence. It is Naomi's rebellious instinct and political revolutionary attitude that enables Ginsberg to rebel against classic poetic structures and to innovate new forms that infuse music in distinct ways. Thus, Ginsberg's rejection of traditional poetic forms can be linked to this inherited sense of rebellion and fearless drive for behavioral and cerebral autonomy despite social expectations. Because, the significant dynamics that have made Ginsberg an eminently important 20th century American poet – his social and literary radicalism and his drive to explicitly infiltrate the spoken and written word with music – derive from Naomi, she cannot by overlooked as a critical influence. Nowhere in the literature is that tie to music and radical instincts more apparent than in Ginsberg's devotional poem, *Kaddish*.

## Conclusion

Through their intense relationship with music, the Beats in general, and Kerouac and Ginsberg in particular, forged innovative forms and styles that drove the current of their success as contemporary writers. True innovation arises from the fact that music does not enter the work in an ancillary manner but rather the word-music components merge and blend in an effort to blur any lines of distinction between both artistic forms and the production of these forms.

This blurring of creative expression coordinates well with the intrinsic Beat philosophy of creating a prose voice that is closer to the body. The Beat notion that the written/spoken narrative should emanate spontaneously without mediation or revision brings the produced text closer to the primeval, subconscious, and therefore genuine and natural thoughts that drive the body, soul, and mind. The unmediated production of text must by necessity eschew prescribed literary formats and fabricated formal organization of words into structured units (mandated by academic notions of sentence structure and paragraphing and encoded by punctuation prescriptions). The obviation of compositional imperatives allows for the long lines of text that may flow directly from the subconscious to the page or stage. These longer lines are manifestations of the body's unmitigated mind-thoughts and also, importantly, the body's breath cycle. The creative instinct then is to produce a text that reflects the natural rhythms of the body. These rhythms may resemble artistically contrived forms, like iambic pentameter, or they may not. The critical distinction is that the rhythms must surface as a byproduct of the body's own natural predisposition within the context of the content at hand.

The insinuation of the body in the compositional process locates the body proper as a musical/lyrical tool or instrument. The spoken word is akin to song in its reliance on the body's capacity for producing certain specified sounds and prolonged phrases. The compositional process that Ginsberg and Kerouac had in mind takes into account the body's natural facility for the production of spoken/sung text. Because the compositional process accounts for at once the limitations and the rich capacity of the body, in performance these compositions draw on the body's natural ability to produce comprehensible sound. Indeed, the poet writes for the body in much the same way a composer of music would write for a particular instrument. A composer must take into account an instrument's distinctive characteristics, like range, tone color, and temperament. For example, a composer in general would avoid writing a melodic run to high C for a bass clarinet because these high pitches would be well outside of the range of a low pitched instrument. In this manner, Ginsberg creates long lines with the particular characteristics (such as natural human breath-flow) of the human body as instrument in mind. This compositional process, thus, effectively blurs the lines distinguishing musical composer and poet as well as musician and spoken word artist. And we see this intentional blurring within the compositional process played out in performance so that the poet often functions as musician and/or the musician as poet as in the Kerouac, Amram, et al. jazz-poetry sessions.

In fact, in Kerouac's prose, novels, and short stories, we often perceive an easy vacillation between descriptive prose or even dialogue and word-music, where the words are chosen for their aural capacity to create a specific musical sound, not necessarily for any ability to communicate something sensible. The aurally derived utterances often

reflect the content without speaking to it or contributing to it in any obvious way. This intermingling of words and phrases for content and words for aural pleasure can be seen clearly in a collaborative poem composed by Kerouac and Ginsberg in the 1950s, “Pull My Daisy.”

**Pull My Daisy**

Pull my daisy
tip my cup
all my doors are open
Cut my thoughts
for coconuts
all my eggs are broken
Jack my Arden
gate my shades
woe my road is spoken
Silk my garden
rose my days
now my prayers awaken

Bone my shadow
dove my dream
start my halo bleeding
Milk my mind &
make me cream
drink me when you're ready
Hop my heart on
harp my height
seraphs hold me steady
Hip my angel
hype my light
lay it on the needy

Heal the raindrop
sow the eye
bust my dust again
Woe the worm
work the wise
dig my spade the same
Stop the hoax
what’s the hex
where's the wake

how's the hicks
take my golden beam

Rob my locker
lick my rocks
leap my cock in school
Rack my lacks
lark my looks
jump right up my hole
Whore my door
beat my door
eat my snake of fool
Craze my hair
bare my poor
asshole shorn of wool

say my oops
ope my shell

Bite my naked nut
Roll my bones
ring my bell
call my worm to sup
Pope my parts
pop my pot
raise my daisy up
Poke my pap
pit my plum
let my gap be shut

Here we see the hazy distinction of words employed for auditory effect and words that promote a content narrative – an additional blurring of music and speech.

Allen Ginsberg continuously maintained that good poetry was meant to be spoken or performed. But beyond valuing the oral dimensions of the word, Ginsberg made a move to create poetry that was overtly musical or tied to music even by way of pitched scoring. In his anthologies, some of Ginsberg's poems/lyrics are accompanied by scores detailing musical passages that coordinate with the written text. However, for the most part, Ginsberg does not distinguish between his poems that are composed to be sung and

those that are composed to be read whether silently or aloud. For Ginsberg, the poetry was in the music and the music was in the poetry and the two could not be easily divided.

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