

# THE DUALITY OF ETHNIC AND FEMALE IDENTITIES IN U.S. MINORITY LITERATURE

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## INTRODUCTION

The recurrence of the double marginalization of ethnic and female identities in U.S. minority literature is indicative of the differences felt and perceived in the face of an Anglo American majority whose historical, economic and numerical dominance subordinates cultural relations with the ethnic groups which retain differentiating characteristics, such as U.S. Latinos (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and others), African Americans, Native Americans or Asian Americans. In addition, ethnic women in such a context confront the preconceived notions of a monocultural and monolingual society, and while as Clayton observes, «the nation has little common experience» (9), the perceived norm that has taken hold of the United States is that of an English-speaking, white community which Audre Lorde calls the «mythical norm» and which Davies defines as «white male, monied, propertied, middle or upper class, thin, young, blonde, Christian, heterosexual» (30), a standard which privileges

the non-ethnic over the ethnic and the male over the female. While multiculturalism has been one of the key words of the nineties, ethnic dichotomies (We-They) are still synonymous with struggles of identity, given that the perception and underlying notions of otherness continue to be deterrents to integration with a white Anglo America which expects acculturation or assimilation.

Whereas ethnicity signifies the cultural aspect of the ethnic and female identity, its duality is complemented only through a female recognition of self. While some metaphorical accounts of this self are explored by U.S. Latino, Asian, African and Native American women through the madwoman, exile, and discourses dealing specifically with issues such as displacement or disempowerment, further gendered expressions of this cultural otherness are articulated through the reinterpretation of myths that women grow up with or through revisionist models of the standards in place in America.

## MADNESS

If as Gilbert and Gubar argue, the madwoman has been a popular figure in literature in this century, emblematic of women's discovery of female identity and their realization of their imprisonment in men's texts, the fact that statistically there are more mad women than mad men has lent authority to the theory of female madness stemming from male dominance, family and societal impositions. While Ghymn (109) points out how Asian American women in the U.S. are doubly imprisoned by language and a strange land, there is no doubt that the mere presence of factors of this nature undermine an internal psychological balance to such an extent that they can lead to madness.<sup>1</sup> In some narratives by ethnic women the madwomen are alter-egos or doubles of their writers, while in others they are metaphorical representations of women unable to cope.

One of the most extraordinarily sad cases is Mrs. Oka in Wakako Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance*, a Japanese American play which

exposes the consequences of being deprived of one's culture if there is nothing to substitute for it. Mrs. Oka's end begins when she is sent from Japan to California to marry her dead sister's husband, and is destined to a loveless life, for besides her being forced to leave a love back in Japan, her husband will mistreat and beat her. Without her sophisticated culture of kimonos, tea ceremonies and song and dance, her life is barren -metaphorically represented here by the Californian desert she lives in. If the female conditions for madness are already in place, it will be the ethnic ones which will draw her even further away from reality. Mrs. Oka longs for her culture which the few Japanese members in her community cannot reproduce as they have all in varying degrees accepted their fate in the U.S., while she has not. This is a woman desperate to return home to Japan, but ironically the only trip she will be allowed to make is to another farm, when her husband discovers the money she has secretly saved for her boat ride home and decides to use it instead for his daughter's «Americanization» perm included, so that she will look «like a regular American girl» (170). Events mirror real-life situations in so far as the destiny of the young immigrant is one of assimilation, while Mrs. Oka, already set in her ways and with a formed culture, is fated to an alien feeling in a United States that can offer her nothing.

Mrs. Oka, whose crying, smoking, drinking and separateness are in sharp contrast to the rest of the characters-' more 'correct' behaviour, develops into a pathetic figure as she «She breaks into a dance, laughs mysteriously, turns round and round, acting out a fantasy» (173) in the middle of the desert. Her loveless marriage destroys her female side but it is her ethnicity which will bring about her final downfall. The acknowledgement of the non-viability of a return home to end her emotional exile becomes an act of madness and escape as Mrs. Oka wanders into a dreamworld accessible only through Japanese music, for only there can her soul dance.

Due to the great number of cultures that come together on the Hawaiian islands, it is not surprising that these outcomes of cultural and sexual differences should be reflected in its literature as well. In the recent *Shark Dialogues* by Kiana Davenport, it is the dark-skinned Emma who

will embody many of the characteristics of the madwoman after marrying «Vernon, pale and blond» (294), an event which in the early 1950s ostracized both: «They never went south again, never returned to Hawai'i, both banished from their tribes» (218).

Paralleling certain instances of Mrs. Oka's life, Emma yearns for a return home that is denied to her too and, again like her Japanese counterpart, she will encounter her destiny in the sands of a foreign land. When Jess, Emma's daughter, travels to the Algerian Sahara to recover her mother's ashes, her mother's lover tries to explain her death: «Her death was not intentional. Nor was it accidental. She walked too far into the dunes without water. Fasting had become a habit. Or a test. That is all, my child» (294).

The turn of events that lead to Emma's death are hinted at in her daughter's reminiscences of their life together, when the ethnic and female identities of her mother had already come together symbolically in the daughter whom the outcasts produce and for whose light skin Emma is grateful, for at least 'Tife will not test her every day» (295). Without a doubt, the ethnic otherness she is so frequently confronted with generates the feelings of instability and placelessness about which her daughter painfully observes:

Remembering her raw moods, tearing off jewelry and clothes, yelling at my father, how they were placeless, without family or blood, how they lived like Gypsies, and how would their child be normal? My fear that she would stop tearing things, that she would begin tearing at her skin... Then, her gentle, dreamy moods bringing me relief, hoping the good moods would outlast the bad and she wouldn't go insane... (294)

The clearest case of a madwoman is Moon Orchid, another Asian woman who goes mad when a foreign ethnic standard, which foregrounds her differentness, cheats her of her culture and subsequently strips her of her dignity. Moon Orchid is the aunt of the alter-ego of Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*, one of the most representative examples of what it means to be Chinese in the U.S., and a narrative which brings together the extremely different Chinese and American cul-

tures in a juxtaposition realized through Kingston's American reality contrasted with the traditional Chinese stories her mother tells her. As in *And the Soul Shall Dance*, the first immigrant generations remain essentially tied to their native cultures, adapting only with difficulty to the new one, a condition which further aggravates cultural differences. In *The Woman Warrior*, the point of view is mainly that of the second generation who, having arrived at a young age or having been born in the U.S., share in the historical dilemma of most minorities as they struggle to contend with their parents' traditional native culture within the context of the mainstream cultural reality.<sup>3</sup> It is in this light that Kingston explores the clash of cultures.

Moon Orchid comes to reflect this clash of cultures and, like Mrs. Oka, reveals how the double ethnic and female marginalization, or «skillful orchestration of a compound double-voiced discourse,» as Cheung (77) astutely observes, can lead to madness. Moon Orchid is a woman who has remained in China many years, waiting for the return of her husband who has emigrated to California like the rest of her family. While in China, she had retained the socially superior position of first wife, but as soon as Moon Orchid arrives in California and meets her husband, who after so many years has remarried a much younger woman and become largely assimilated, he spews out: «It's a mistake for you to be here. You can't belong» (152-3). This rejection symbolizes the traditional East clashing with the more modern West and demonstrates the impossibility of cultural transference in so far as Moon Orchid's loss of status brings about her mental disintegration.

This impossibility of cultural transference refers to the fundamental principle that the more divergent the traditions and behaviors, the less the chance of their functioning in a like manner in another culture. In China, Moon Orchid's culture and accepted norms gave her an identity, but as soon as she travels east to the United States and her husband ceases to play by the same cultural rules, she is deprived of both her ethnic and female identities. Moon Orchid becomes a victim of a reality which she cannot change and she will eventually end her voyage from China in a mental asy-

lum, a typical scene in many contemporary feminine Gothic novels, according to Moers (133).

Brave Orchid visited her sister twice. Moon Orchid was thinner each time, shrunken to bone. But, surprisingly, she was happy and had made up a new story. She pranced like a child. «Oh, Sister, I am so happy here. No one ever leaves. Isn't that wonderful? We are all women here.» (160)

Another woman who cannot cope with her cultural otherness is the Mexican wife of a migrant worker in the United States, doña María in «La noche buena,» one of the short stories in *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* by the Chicano writer Tomás Rivera, and the only text written by a male 'to be include in this review. Here again is the impossibility of cultural transference, albeit of another type. Doña Marías children want toys for Christmas but due to her fear of venturing out into Anglo America and coming face to face with another reality, another language and other rules, she shields herself behind the existence of a different cultural calendar: «She would tell them to wait until the sixth of January, the day of the Reyes Majos. By the time the day arrived the children had completely forgotten about toys» (85)<sup>4</sup>.

Overcome tip to now as she has been by her inability to attempt an approach towards this other reality, this Christmas doña María makes a serious effort to get the toys for which she takes courage and decides to cross the train tracks into an unknown world in which «She didn't recognize anyone on the sidewalk» (91). Further indications of pending schizophrenia are hinted at when the overpowering noise and crowds of people in the department store doña María finally walks into hypnotize her into putting the articles she has chosen directly into her bag without paying for them. She is of course caught and her worst fears come true. However, instead of blaming her immigrant status which precludes her incorporation into Anglo American society, rules, language and familiarity with her environment, or instead of blaming the false security created by her dependency on her husband («Also, her husband brought everything to her,» 89), she blames herself: «I think I'm insane, viejo» (93). Madness, or the verge of it, again due to ethnicity and womanhood.

## NORMATIVE STANDARDS

Doña María at least has the support of her family and the community but Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has no one at all. The problematic existence of minority women is exposed in this African American narrative which touches upon relationships between blacks and whites, the dysfunctionality of men, and the misleading standards of beauty, all in contrast to the mythical norm of the ideal American family regardless of color or ethnicity:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. (1)

This ideal, which introduces the novel, is imitative of primers and a symbolic construct which will be retold from another point of view. First, the author deconstructs this standard externally by presenting it as «normal» text, secondly as a text with no punctuation or capital letters, and thirdly as a run-on text.<sup>5</sup> Upon the establishment of monocultural paradigms, Morrison proceeds to deconstruct the standard internally by juxtaposing this happy family with Pecola's not-so-happy family, a strategy which exposes the extended feelings of African American inferiority that originate in assumptions of non-ethnic beauty standards. Morrison herself explains in the afterword:

I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female. (168)

Young Pecola is another symbol of lost or misguided ethnic and female identities who will also go mad, and not unsurprisingly: she believes she is ugly, she is poor and has the support of no one, not even her mother who seems to prefer the children of the white family she works for. The final and fatal step towards her insanity will be the rape by her own father. Besides being at the mercy of men, Pecola suffers the indignity of the impossible beauty standard portrayed in movies, candy wrappers, chil-

drens books and toys. Claudia, one of the narrators and who herself receives one of these dolls for Christmas, is lucidly astounded that: « ... all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured» (140).

Blacks do not usually have blond hair and blue eyes, but Pecola, the child, who is not brought up to believe in the beauty of Blacks, wishes for blue eyes on the assumption that if she possessed them she would finally be loved. After she is raped, Mr. Soaphead, a quack minister, (and an obvious figure for the condemnation of both men and the church) allows her to believe she has the blue eyes she so vehemently longed for. Pecola's reaction then to being barred from her own identities, racial and female can only be madness. The following schizophrenic dialogue Pecola has with her divided self once she has gone mad points to the manner in which this madness and psychological affliction is a consequence of the ruthless subversion of social beliefs capable of leading to social paradigms of exclusion.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

*Blue enough for what?*

Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you! *I'm not going to play with yott anymore.*

Oh. Don't leave me.

*Yes, I'am.*

Why? Are you mad at me?

*Yes.*

Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes? (161)

## EXILE

The contingency of women depicted in U.S. minority literature is in itself not lacking in stronger representations, although in its earlier historical development a great number of female protagonists have been the less



favoured type -stereotypes and all- a fact which has created a framework in which self-understanding and a projection of the self have, in a documentary fashion, made ethnic women better understood to themselves and others. For example, She/Ella 6 in *Coser y cantar*, a play by the Cuban American writer Dolores Prida, upon confronting a recently acquired biculturalism, seems not to be able to deal with cultural dichotomies except by dangerously approaching a schizophrenic behavior.

SHE: I think I'm going crazy. Talking to myself all day.

ELLA: It must be. It's too soon for menopause. (57)

Ella is Cuban, listens to Latin music, believes in Santería and eats fried plantain. She, on the other hand, is American, reads the magazine *Psychology Today*, goes jogging and likes Barbra Streisand. They, She/Ella, are two sides of the same Cuban exile living in a New York apartment where She and Ella must each come to terms with who She/Ella is.

She/Ella is lost in her biculturalism and is attempting to negotiate her cultural self and bridge her native Cubanness with her acquired Americanness.

ELLA: Tú no eres tan importante. Ni tan fuerte. Unos meses, tal vez unos años, bajo el sol, y ¡presto!... desaparecerías. No quedaría ni rastro de ti. Yo soy la que existo. Yo soy la que soy. Tú no sé lo que eres.

SHE: But, if it weren't for me you would not be the one you are now. No serías la que eres. I gave yourself back to you. If I had not opened some doors and some windows for you, you would still be sitting in the dark, with your recuerdos... (66)<sup>7</sup>

The implications of linguistic exclusivities are rendered more dramatic by She/Ella's code-switching throughout the entirety of the play, for the use of two languages by the same speaker is one of the most common manifestations of bilingualism; besides being one of its most obvious external exponents, code-switching is an integral part of the signifying system of biculturalism-a fact which is foregrounded by the stage directions which specify the absolute necessity of performing the play in the bilingual format it was written in.<sup>8</sup> As can be seen in She/Ella's semi-schizophrenic dialogue, not only is there a need to come to terms with the

ethnic self as an ethnic question *per se*, but there is also a need to comprehend the impact of different cultures on women. This is a similar case to Moon Orchid's who, however, never has a chance to understand what her imposed imbalance stems from. For example, in *Coser y cantar* (which was what her mother told her life was like until She/Ella discovers it is more like *coser y cagar*),<sup>9</sup> She/Ella react each one differently to her boyfriend when he calls their relationship off. She talks to him quite calmly but Ella berates and shouts at him. How then is this woman to act and be true to herself? In the attempts of this Cuban American to create a symbiosis of crosscultural identity, it is womanhood and ethnicity which are guilty of a brush with instability as long as bicultural women can only behave according to inherited stereotypes and parallel culture-specific perceived norms.

Mrs. Oka speaks of exile to express the emotional distance she feels from her home, and although hers is not imposed by politics, She/Ella's in *Coser y cantar* is, as is that of other Cuban American writers, such as the poet Lourdes Casal.<sup>10</sup> If as Kavolis EMF says "There is a current tendency in literary circles ... to erase what exile has historically meant by extending the term to all conceivable forms of alienation" (43), what we have then are two types of exile: the actual political or economic exile and the metaphorical one. Whereas Mrs. Oka or Moon Orchid are not able to cope with their alienation, Lourdes Casal seems to have come to terms with the reality of her exile in the poem "Tara Ana Veldford," which reminds us and reiterates how once someone has been ethnically transposed, there is an otherness that will not disappear.

Permanezco tan extranjera detrás del cristal protector  
 como en aquel invierno  
 -fin de semana inesperado-  
 cuando enfrenté por primera vez la nieve de Vermont  
 y sin embargo, Nueva York es micasa.  
 Soy ferozmente leal a esta adquirida patria chica  
 Por Nueva York soy extranjera ya en cualquier otra parte<sup>11</sup>.

The Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer, author of *Silent Dancing*, who grew up as a «cultural schizophrenic» as she herself says, travelling back and forth between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, observed a self-imposed alienation in her mother. This narrative, which includes the author's own poems the short stories are based on, reproduces instances of her mother's feelings of loss and loneliness as an ethnic woman distanced from her cultural milieu. Heartwrenching is the notion of this exile being equated with a prison sentence, a sentiment which eerily resembles Mrs. Oka's:

My mother carried the island of Puerto Rico over her head like the mantilla she wore to church on Sunday. She was «doing time» in the U.S. She did not know how long her sentence would last, or why she was being punished with exile, but she was only doing it for her children. (127)

#### DISPLACEMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

Ethnic and female identities are continuously jeopardized in minority literature and this is reflected in disempowerment and displacement. If children are the attributable source of the feelings of alienation that Cofer's mother experiences, in Native American literature, they hold an even stronger position, being as they are pawns in power struggles between Native Americans and the United States government. In the short story «Lullaby,» Leslie Marmon Silko subtly exposes the usurpation of Native American land, language, traditions and people through Ayah, a woman who has her children taken away from her because she has signed a paper she cannot read and which no one explains to her. It is clear that the hidden agenda is one of undermining the Native American, first by un-Indianizing them and then by Americanizing them; the excuse of the American government, however, is that her children have tuberculosis and would be better off in more sanitary conditions.

Ayah is a Navajo whose culture is so distant from the white Anglo American culture that for merely this otherness she will suffer unbearable pain. Despite colonization, Native Americans have maintained a cultural

distinctiveness which while a major source of their strength also highlights their differences even more strongly. Like Morrison with Pecola, Silko achieves a more than plausible rendition of the overpowering consequences of this divide through the most vulnerable members of the group: children. After one of the rare visits from her two small children the fact that «she [Ayah] knew they were already being weaned from these lava hills and from this sky» explains her understanding of the subordinating elements in place and the cultural distance between the childrens maternal culture and their acquired one.

Apart from the fundamental political and cultural considerations, Native American women have had to contend with gender realities. The literary critic and writer Allen explains: «... if in the public and private mind of America Indians as a group are invisible in America, then Indian women are non-existent» (9). As Ayah symbolizes all the misfortunes that befall Native American women, besides those which are a consequence of her ethnicity, she will witness the disintegration of her husband Chato, whom she blames for teaching her how to sign using the white man's language (i.e. literacy) and which her ancestors had warned her against. Ayah will be the only one left, using Allen's term, to remember (an act -which takes place by remembering her life and telling her story) and remain strong during her husband's disintegration, which begins with the humiliation of being fired after «years of loyalty and work,» and ends with his following the same path of alcoholism of so many other Native American men. In spite of being beaten by her ethnicity and her female condition, this Navajo woman will find the strength to sing a lullaby chant, charged with the symbolism of a cultural tradition almost lost and which might not have been her last act of remembering had she remembered to sing it to her children instead of now having to sing it to usher in her husband's and her death, albeit it with Native American dignity.

Cultural differences produce Ayahs disempowerment; likewise, cultural differences produce feelings of displacement which drive some younger secondgeneration immigrants on an inward search for their roots

in an attempt to understand themselves, a process which undergoes at least two clear stages: (1) the supposed need to explore and perhaps reinvent an identity, and (2) the acceptance of a bicultural identity. Some writers physically return to the land their parents left: Helie Lee will in fact return to Korea and Amy Tan's Jing-Mei to China. Other writers make it a metaphorical trip, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, who returns to the China her family moved away from by exploring the traditions and stories transmitted orally from her mother.

In all of these cases and more, some minority women undergo moments of quite evident cultural clash inside a basic frame of embarrassment which is frequently sparked by everyday events such as clothes or accents -external and identifiable signs of otherness. For example, Cofer writing again about her mother in *Silent Dancing* phrases it in the following manner:

I would walk home every day from school. I had fifteen minutes to get home before my mother panicked and came after me. I did not want that to happen. She was so different from my classmates' mothers that I was embarrassed to be seen with her. (126)

The Korean American Helie Lee, who does not appreciate her grandmother's Korean behavior in America, likewise expresses the impossibility of cultural transference and feelings of displacement by favoring a non-ethnic behaviour:

«You sick? Stick out tongue.» Grandmother sticks out hers to demonstrate. «Grandmother, not here,» I whine, embarrassed. «Grandmother right. You not eat enough,» Mother remarks as she brushes the bangs out of my face, ruining a perfectly styled hairdo. «It's too late,» I protest. «I am who I am. I am not like you.» «What! You think you better than your mother? You shame because we Korean?» (12)

In *The Woman Warrior*, after a mix up with a druggist, Brave Orchid wants her daughter to undo a curse by going to the drugstore and bringing back some free candy, the 'sweet' way to erase a curse in China, an action which in monocultural U.S. could only emphasize ethnic differences:

I felt sick already. She'd make me swing stinky censers around the counter, at the druggist, at the customers. Throw dog blood on the druggist. I couldn't stand her plans. (170)

The displacement and distance between cultural norms is too wide to bridge, and the daughter's embarrassment expresses «the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist» (171).

The historical tension accrued by some minority women in the U.S. accounts for a significant displacement and otherness which in many cases evidences itself through an explicit realization and occasional unacceptance of the insurmountable differences that a contrast of their native culture with American culture produces; on the other hand, other minority women empower themselves and come to terms with their ethnicity and minority status through a negotiated acceptance of their bicultural reality. Such is the case of the Puerto Rican writer Aurora Levins whose ethnic displacement is transcended once she has created a space where her biculturalness is allowed to find its own expression.

Since she could not . . . bring herself to trade in one-half of her heart for the other, exchange this loneliness for another perhaps harsher one, she would live as a Puerto Rican lives en la isla, right here in north Oakland. (13)

## REINTERPRETATION OF MYTHS

The discourse of displacement proves to be due at times to an imposition of myths and the corresponding contradictions inherent to differentiated ethnic and gender identities. The basis to the articulation of historical alienation is twofold; on the one hand, traditionally revered icons differ from one ethnic group to another, while, on the other, a great number of myths become sexually gender-incompatible with reality. Sandra Cisneros, who writes of how Chicanas grow up with the contradictory images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche and La Llorona as female models, copes with these positive and negative images by reinterpreting them and assigning them new signifiers. For

example, in her rewriting of La Llorona in the short story «Woman Hollering Creek,» her biculturalism takes on the Mexican myth and like the author, makes La Llorona partake of a new reality, the United States; they (myth and woman) transcend their native culture and offer ethnic women new possibilities.

1 As legend has it, La Llorona<sup>12</sup> roams rivers and creeks looking for the children she drowned; in this short story, Cleófilas, a young Mexican woman and a true believer in the modern myths of the *telenovelas* (soap operas), marries a Mexican man living in the United States. Shortly after her marriage and her trip to the the U.S. she discovers that her brutal husband «doesn't look like the men on the *telenovelas*.” (49) for he beats her and cheats on her. Like Mrs. Oka she feels trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage far from home.

Cleófilas, symbolically the mother of one child and pregnant with another, will reverse the myth of La Llorona and do something to save her children and herself by returning home to her family in Mexico, a feat she is able to carry out with the help of two Chicana women. One of these is Felise who signifies the independent woman capable of her own volition as she drives Cleófilas and her child in her own pick-up truck («The pick-up was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it,» 55) across the creek called Woman Hollering, hollering like Tarzan («Woman Hollering. *Pues*, 1 holler,» 55). The reversal of the Mexican myth is implemented with mented with the help of America and thus gives way to the birth of a new ethnicity (Mexican American) and a new female condítion (Chicana) supported by the role model of the strong Felice who «was like no woman she'd ever met» (56) and who is able to actually present new modes of action.

As certain Anglo American myths perpetuate female ethnic identities, the rewriting of them is not only important but essential to provide contrasts and so lay the groundwork for new identities. Marjorie Agosín, a Chilean American writer who publishes poetry in a bilingual format, takes

more universal myths such as Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood and addresses male and female beliefs by offering a satirical reinterpretation which confronts myth with reality as for example, in «Fairy Tales and Something More.»

La Caperucita Roja	Little Red Riding Hood
tuvo que dormir con un lobo	had to sleep with a wolf
pero todas nosotras	but all of us women
hemos dormido con lobos que roncan	have slept with wolves that snore
y nos amenazan con el cielo y la tierra	and promise us heaven and earth
con días felices recogiendo	happy days gathering up
cabellos del lavabo	hair from the washbasin
trayendo café y periódico	fetching coffee and the newspaper
como amaestradas amas de amos.	as tamed mistresses of masters
Y los cuentos de hadas	and the Fairy Tales
colorín colorado	rose-colored off-colored
hasta ahora nunca se han acabado.	have never had any ever after.

Also tongue-in-cheek is LeAnne Howe's reinterpretation of Native American and American historical relationships, starting with the sale of New York: «No wonder we sold the whole place for twenty-six bucks and some beads. I wouldn't give you twenty-six cents for the entire island right now» (247). In the short story «An American in New York,» the narrator who is already an urban Native American is thus able to gloss over the issue of Indian female identities and concentrate mainly on ethnic issues to attempt to comprehend the complexity of her biculturalism, for she feels that «Half-breeds live on the edge of both races. You feel like yo're split down the middle» (254). She plunges into this dilemma attacking it head on without making any concessions, which she is able to do by ironically playing with her role as a Native American woman. Nowhere in the short story is this better exemplified than at the beginning when she is planning her business trip to New York.

I saw this assignment as a kind of reversal of historic roles... And I thought it a perfect opportunity to trot out my Tonto-with-tits garb. I'd learned a long



time ago that even in Texas people don't recognize you as an Indian unless you're wearing a costume. (246)

## CONCLUSION

By extending the metaphor of the costume from Mrs. Oka's kimonos to this Indian costume, the coherence of ethnic female identities operating on the realization of a palpable recognition of an ethnic otherness lies not on a void of culturelessness but on a shared literary and cultural space which also reflects diacronic changes in ethnic and female identities. The consequence is the impossibility of transferring cultural behavioral patterns and applying them in other cultures, without creating new ones or without some varying degree of integration with the heterogeneous fabric of present-day United States. In an approach similar to the intertextuality of women exploring the limits of their ethnic and female identities, Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist and writer, addresses the difficulty of identifying exclusively with one's cultures, and although she writes particularly of Mexican Americans, she seems to voice the concerns of the contemporary hicultural woman:

We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.* [Sometimes I am not anything or any one. But even when I'm not, I am.] (63)

The identity of ethnic women is not a hesitant force unwilling to pursue social, historical, cultural and linguistic tensions; on the contrary, even if minorities have always been portrayed in U.S. literature, today writers are rewriting history and telling it in their own way, and in the process they are transforming the American literary canon to include the dual reality of the ethnic and female voices of U.S. minorities.

## NOTES

- 1 Ghymn's *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers* is an extremely useful and thorough guide which covers a vast number of Asian American works. In her chapter on Asian American madwomen she focuses on Mrs. Oka and Moon Orchid, in addition to Miss Sasagawara («The Legend of Miss Sasagawara» by Hisaye Yamamoto) which I will not be dealing with here.
- 2 In spite of the documentary nature of ethnic literature, there is generally little direct social commentary in Asian American literature. However, Yamauchi accentuates the plight of the immigrant by writing into the play the existence of the American laws of the 1930s which stipulated that Asians were not allowed to reside in the same place for more than three years nor own land.
- 3 See Cheung, Ghymn or Wong for accounts of cultural differences such as Asian subservience to men and the perception of silence, which are quite distinct values in the United States and Asia and which appear with regularity in Asian American literature.
- 4 In Mexico, as in most other Spanish-speaking countries, children traditionally receive Christmas presents on January 6th, the festivity which celebrates the visit of the Three Kings to the newborn Jesus.
- 5 The ideal of the American family and the impact of its deconstruction is strengthened visually by having the three texts on the same page, a stylistic device which provides an immediate iconic representation.
 

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy.

Here isthehouseitisgreennandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymother fatherdickandjaneliveinthegreennandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy
- 6 The lone protagonist in this play remains nameless throughout the play and is only referred to as She and Ella, which is 'She' in Spanish.
- 7 ELLA: You aren't that important. Nor that strong. A few months, perhaps a few years, in the sun, and presto! ... you'd disappear. There'd be no trace of you left. I'm the one who exists. I'm the one who is. You. ... I don't know what you are.
 

SHE: ... You wouldn't be who you are... with your memories.
- 8 Although the bibliography on the uses, implications and significance of code-switching is extensive, two useful references for the strategies of code-switching and the switch between English and Spanish among the Puerto Ricans in New York are respectively Milroy and Muysken's *One Speaker, Two Languages*, and Zentella's «Language and female identity in the Puerto Rican community.»
- 9 'Coser y cantar' which means to sew and sing is an expression which could best be translated as 'leasy as pie.' 'Cagar' on the other hand can mean 'to crap' or 'to wreck.'
- 10 In her poem «Definición,» Lourdes Casal describes the emptiness of exile: «Exilio/es vivir donde no existe casa alguna/en la que hayamos sido niños.» [*Exile / is living where there is no house / in which we have been children.*]

- 11 I remain as foreign behind the protective glass/ as in that winter/-unexpected weekend-/when I faced for the first time the snow in Vermont/and, yet, New York is my home./I am ferociously loyal to this adopted homeland./Because of New York I am a foreigner in any other place.
- 12 The legend of La Llorona, which literally means 'The Hollerer or Críer,' can be interpreted as a metaphor of the many children Mexico has lost to the Spanish first and then to the Americans.

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