The Re-\textit{Bildung} of American Fictions of Female Development

Styliani Bolaki

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

2007
Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Styliani Bolaki
Contents

Acknowledgements v
Abstract vii

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 17
Female Travelling in the West/Indies: Trauma and Bound Motion in Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River and Lucy*

Chapter 2 77
"The Mestiza Way": A Bildung of the Borderlands in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

Chapter 3 127
"It translated almost well but not quite": The Promise and the Perils of Translation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

Chapter 4 181
"In the name of grand asymmetries": Body Bildung in Audre Lorde's Work

Coda 233

Bibliography 235
Acknowledgements

This thesis is not only about the journeys of the characters in my novels but also about my apprenticeship to the world of research. My journey is not solitary as many people have helped along the way and I am happy to have an opportunity to acknowledge their contribution and support.

This PhD became possible thanks to an award by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and a studentship by the College of Literatures, Languages and Cultures of Edinburgh University. I wish to express my warmest thanks to my supervisor, Andy Taylor, for helping me give shape to this work, for his invaluable guidance, incisive reading and continuing interest in my project. I am also indebted to my second supervisor, Sarah Dunnigan for going through the dissertation with patience and care, and for her constant encouragement. Liana Sakellion from the University of Athens has also been an important source of inspiration and support since my time as a student there.

Sections of the second chapter, though with different points of focus, have appeared in *E-Sharp* 5 (Summer 2005) and in *The Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 23 (Spring 2006): 65-74, and I am grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their feedback and generous comments. Many thanks, too, to the Edinburgh Development Trust for a Small Project Grant that funded participation in conferences and other intellectually stimulating events. Without the National Library of Scotland and the interlibrary loan system of the Main Library, I would not have collected all the material and information needed for this study. My colleagues, while working at the Main Library, have been helpful, and I would like in particular to thank Kate Macgregor and Scott Summers for either giving me all these extra hours of work I needed or for justifying my absence from work whenever I had to use that time to study.

My students in the English Literature Department have helped “distract” me from my research in lots of pleasurable as well as challenging ways and I owe them a great deal for that. I also want to thank the students and staff of Craighroyston Community High School in Edinburgh where I had a short AHRC-funded placement as a Researcher in Residence, in particular Eric Freund who agreed to be my hosting teacher. The time I spent with them gave me the chance to approach my research in ways that I would not have imagined. The experience of presenting my work to students aged ten
to sixteen counterbalanced nicely the high theory and academic language that I had to master all these years.

My thanks are boundless to my friends and colleagues in Scotland and Greece who have been close to me in the course of the four years I have been in Edinburgh. My flatmates, who also happen to be my best friends, have helped me immensely and I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to them. To Georgia: for encouraging me when I was blue, for sacrificing time and energy to read parts of the thesis, for her humour and unique approach to life, and for keeping the conversation going, however late. To Angeliki: for being a patient listener, computer whiz, and an unusually sensitive person. Many thanks for never stopping to be persistent and optimistic. It is contagious! Kostas and Ioanna have given me solace and a share of their magic, and although I do not see Maria, Irini and George so often, I constantly think of them. Last but not least, many thanks to Stefanos for reminding me with his example in life and art what it is like to be on the border of languages and cultures, Toni for his thought-provoking film screenings and discussion, and Vangelis for all the incredible dinners and long coffee (and cigarette)-sessions. My sweetest thanks to Antonis for his patience, tolerance and love, and for all our harmonious and discordant moments.

The commitment and love of my parents and brother means more than I can put in words. Though my family complain that I have been away for a long time now, they never stopped to encourage and support my endeavours. They will know when I explain to them the concept of “bound motion” and they will understand my being away in these terms.

Finally, I am indebted to a wealth of texts, speakers, events and activities for kindling the spark of my passion for the topic of this dissertation and for helping me sharpen my insights and research questions. I could not forget the ghosts of the past and present, which this study has stirred, and all those people I have unconsciously omitted. Σας ευχαριστώ διόλου.
Abstract

This thesis explores how Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* (1978) and *Lucy* (1990), Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and Audre Lorde’s *Zami* (1982) and *The Cancer Journals* (1980) stretch the generic category of the Bildungsroman. These texts reframe and multiply the sites of tension between individual desire and the demands of socialisation, which is what the novel of development negotiates. Tracing the kind of ideological functions both the traditional and contemporary versions of the genre are expected to fulfil, I draw attention to all those resisting elements in my texts, both thematic and formal, which trouble the trajectory and closure of the Bildungsroman, highlighting the unassimilable conflicts and particularities that cannot be represented by such forms. All the texts considered challenge from various, but related, perspectives the developmental narrative of American assimilation, which disciplines memory, affiliation, language, and the body, and criticise the pressure of “normality”, which implies blindness to other experiences and histories.

The four chapters examine authors from diverse backgrounds, and this comparative framework is intended to help identify similarities and differences when it comes to the use of the Bildungsroman in new contexts of American literature. Kincaid, Cisneros, Kingston and Lorde problematise what it means to be or to become “American” by interrogating discourses such as ‘mobility’, ‘individualism’, ‘transcendence’ and ‘happiness’ underlying both the conventional novel of development and conceptions of American identity. Their texts re-inscribe “Americanness” by documenting processes, both playful and painful, of fusion and syncretism that transcend fixed boundaries and result in the emergence of hybrid spaces and transcultural identities. Such processes construct an “alternative art of living” in the Bildungsroman informed by the four authors’ “consciousness of borderlands”.

The study opens more space for debate around the Bildungsroman by examining its intersection with stories of trauma, disability and death as well as of marginality, enforced silence and hampered movement. It also enhances the contact zones between genres like trauma narrative, mother-daughter plot, biomythography, thanatographical text, and lesbian novel, in order “to pour new wine” into the Bildungsroman. Much of the pressure exercised upon “the old bottle” of the genre comes from the consideration of
female novels of development, what this study exclusively focuses on. The *Bildungsroman* as a genre has been conceived as a Eurocentric and patriarchal category, and the texts considered here dramatise a compound or multiple form of oppression for women as members of both local patriarchal communities and of “mainstream” America. In order to show the variety of critical responses that the *Bildungsroman* elicits, my detailed readings of the texts draw on the insights of theories such as poststructuralism, postcolonial studies and feminism. Moreover, I situate the texts within discussions of concepts that have gained theoretical currency in the last few years such as trauma, hybridity, translation and disability. The structure of the chapters reflects the dialogic (both nurturing and antagonistic) relation between text and theory. The larger goal of this study is to move towards a firmer understanding of the *Bildungsroman* as more than a narrative of private formation but as “the story of a cultural moment, its uncertainties and desires” (Fraiman 144) and, thus, as an apt vehicle for social and political comment.
“Whose house is this? ... This house is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?”

Toni Morrison, *Honey and Rue*
Introduction

This study starts from the premise that the Bildungsroman is not an outdated and exhausted form but one that can be detached from its initial context and used productively across different historical periods and cultures. The genre may invoke concepts like coherent identity, organic development, linear movement and closure, which have been theoretically discredited, but exploring it in new settings and through new perspectives reveals its usefulness for the representation of postcolonial and ethnic American subjectivities.

Contemporary understandings of genre are articulated within a generally anti-essentialist context. Genre criticism, if we see it as synonymous with setting fixed boundaries and rigid classifications, is inadequate given that these constraints cannot hold protean and elusive forms, which more and more expand their field of play. The "law of genre", to cite Jacques Derrida's famous 1980 essay, has been challenged not only in theory, by poststructuralism for instance, but also in practice, by literary practitioners like the authors from diverse backgrounds examined in this study: Jamaica Kincaid, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde. This does not, however, imply the death of genre criticism. We are still interested in the reasons why texts are grouped together on the basis of a set of characteristics, why they are taught and marketed as belonging to a certain category and on what premises such categorisations operate. Similarly, it is important to raise the question why particular authors or groups of writers opt for certain forms rather than others and what is the ideological work that these are expected to fulfil. I espouse, of course, a practice of genre criticism which approaches genres as constructions whose functions change depending on who defines them and when.

Literary critics who have turned for one reason or another to the notoriously slippery category of the Bildungsroman often start by summarising the debates around the difficulty of defining it. They call it "a phantom genre" (Sammons 239), comment on the difficulty of translating it into English (Buckley viii), volunteer their own terms of definition such as "novel of formation" (Hirsch 1979) or "African American narratives of Bildung" (Kester 8), ask whether there is such a thing "as a separate female Bildungsroman" (Lazaro-Weis 34), and wonder whether, by looking at revisions of the genre in a non-Western context, they might "run the risk of inflicting yet another
Eurocentric body of thought” onto texts which have a life and history of their own (Stein 23). Although I do not underestimate the importance of such attempts at delimiting the genre, which also make possible the continuation of its study as a category, and although I share some of these anxieties, I do not see the Bildungsroman’s “semantic hypertrophy”, to use Franco Moretti’s phrase (15), as something that merely attests to the urge to retain a genre without content or proper members, as Jeffrey L. Sammons, for instance, contends (232). Even this urge, however, says something about “the investments and insecurities that generic issues can evoke” (Redfield 18). In the case of the Bildungsroman, one of its most influential theorists, Moretti, writes about “the magnetism that hovers around the category”:

Even these novels that clearly are not Bildungsroman or novels of formation are perceived by us against this conceptual horizon; so we speak of a failed initiation or of a problematic formation, expressions of dubious usefulness as are all negative definitions; nonetheless they bear witness to the hold of this image on our models of analysis. (15)

If the Bildungsroman is not a meaningful generic term, why is it so compelling? Despite the postmodern challenge to the coherent and autonomous self, which is central to the genre’s definition, the Bildungsroman has an enduring power. In the twentieth century there has been a resurgence of interest in the form, especially by marginalised subjects, which can be explained in part by alluding to phenomena such as the women’s and civil rights movement, multiculturalism, decolonisation, and various experiences and histories of diaspora. The frequency with which we hear about the Caribbean Bildungsroman, the Asian American Bildungsroman, the Chicano and the African American novel of development, the number of courses taught at various levels, as well as the proliferating criticism on these variants, suggests the vitality and ongoing relevance of a genre whose social function is not obsolete.

How “secure” are designations like the Asian American or the Chicano Bildungsroman? One of the questions addressed in the subsequent chapters is how the novels I explore fit the generic box which has been known as the Bildungsroman, and what happens when these texts are read in that context. The law of genre creates “outlaws” according to Caren Kaplan (128), and this is central to the ways in which I approach the relation of my texts to the Bildungsroman. It is of little importance whether the four authors examined in this study consciously set out to revise the problematic
genre in question; most of them have been educated in the West, and, as they have recognised, they are more than familiar with texts that fit the genre. Whether the Bildungsroman is “chosen” to claim America for immigrants and ethnic groups, to expose the traumas of a colonial education by decolonising the self, or as an appropriate means to demonstrate the process of coming to voice for marginalised individuals and larger groups, in the house of the genre we can hear “the deep stirring of the unhomely” (Bhabha, “The World and the Home” 445). This is not to say that the novel of development is discarded altogether as a form. As I will argue, the hybrid space of the Bildungsroman offers an appropriate site for the negotiation of a number of tensions which relate to the fundamental conflict that this genre, as “the prototypical genre of individual development in society” (Felksi, Beyond Feminist 135), dramatises. The texts considered in this study, At the Bottom of the River (1978), Lucy (1990), The House on Mango Street (1984), The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976), Zami: A New Spelling of my Name (1982) and The Cancer Journals (1980), reframe and multiply the sites of tension between individual desire and the demands of socialisation, engaging at the same time with ideas of female education and inventing formal means to convey the process of growing up. However, what I consider to be more significant are the ways in which the texts collide with normative conventions of the genre, grating against its naturalised assumptions, bending and stretching the form so that it reveals the multiple patterns and figures hidden under the generic “carpet” that has served to define a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form.

The Bildungsroman has a certain baggage attached to it. In its schematic representation, its primary function is to make integration into the existing social order legitimate by channeling individual energy to socially useful purposes. Most critics have exposed the reactionary closure of the genre. Hegel writes that “the conclusion of [a sensitive hero’s] apprenticeship usually amounts to the hero getting the corners knocked off him ... in the last analysis he usually gets his girl and some kind of job, marries and becomes a philistine just like the others” (qtd. in Swales 50). Moretti, pointing to the ways in which the genre resolves conflicts (of class in particular) through plots like marriage, writes that the category narrates conflicts (of class in particular) through plots like marriage, writes that the category narrates how the French Revolution could have been avoided (73). And Lisa Lowe, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s insights, sees the Bildungsroman as “a privileged site” for the individual’s “identification with an idealised ‘national’ form of subjectivity”, an “official” narrative of integration” that mutes other histories and
experiences (99). The conservative bent of the genre, and the economy of exchange in which it seems to operate, are recycled in the ways contemporary narratives by women of colour are marketed and received by Western audiences. The genre’s movement from the uncertainty of youth to the power of maturity is often used to buttress Western ideas of progress, and more complex conflicts become assimilated to the familiar plot of generational conflict that the genre tries to resolve. Turning to the ways in which my texts respond to the genre, I want to challenge the idea that reading ethnic American and postcolonial texts in the context of the Bildungsroman inevitably mutes their social and historical specificities in order to integrate them into a universalising narrative. It may be that the form implies such a structure, but it does not necessarily follow that the texts are univocal or that they cannot resist gestures that attempt to either deny or fetishise their cultural difference. As Susan Fraiman writes, “There are always voices disputing the dominant view, if only we would hear them” (xiv). In the texts that I have chosen, I pay attention to all these elements that “make waves” to trouble the closure and reconciliation of the Bildungsroman. The texts challenge from various but related perspectives the developmental narrative of assimilation, the different manifestations of “normality”, and the genre’s blindness to difference, shedding light on the violence hidden under what Moretti calls “the comfort of civilization” (15).

One of the aims of this study is to open more space for debate around the Bildungsroman by examining its intersection with other forms and narratives; stories which seem unable to coexist harmoniously with it. Those of trauma, disability and death are the most obvious, but I also discuss various instances of marginality, enforced silence and hampered movement. Yet, the texts I read are not to be seen as failed or counter-Bildungsromane. The fact that they challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of the genre does not mean that they do not gesture towards their own “art of living” or that they do not tell their own stories of development. Thus, their subversive potential—and this is a clarification that I wish to make from the outset—should not be seen merely in relation to the deviations from the genre’s patterns.

In the chapters that follow I investigate the interaction of the Bildungsroman with trauma narratives, mother-daughter plot, immigrant story, biomythography, memoir, diary, thanatographical text, and lesbian novel, a range which reflects an awareness of how rigid genre classifications cannot capture the mixed genre approaches my authors use. By reading my texts in the context of the Bildungsroman, I am not saying that they
should from now on be read as novels of development. Even the classification “novel” might be problematic for some of them as they blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, short story and novel, and in the case of Cisneros and Lorde, even poetry and prose. By examining short story collections and poetic forms, such as the vignette, within the context of the genre, I push beyond the formal boundaries of the classical Bildungsroman, freeing the genre from such constraints. The fragmentary sense that is conveyed through some of these hybrid forms is not of course accidental, and in most cases ties well with the themes that the texts tackle.

By enhancing the contact zones between genres, “new wine” is poured into the Bildungsroman making “old bottles explode”, to borrow Angela Carter's metaphor (“Notes from the Front Line” 69). Through such a process of mixture and transfiguration, we can arrive at new meanings which the Bildungsroman could not have arrived at on its own. Thus, the genre acquires an extended flexibility and capacity for signification. Of course one could argue that in this equation I take the Bildungsroman as a more or less stable vessel or container where all the other forms are being poured, creating a certain power relationship. The Bildungsroman is a kind of “host” and the other forms “parasites” that invade its space, to use J. Hillis Miller's pair in “The Critic as Host”. However, in accordance with Miller's paradigm, my texts emphasise the interpenetration and intertwining between forms which results in the deconstruction of boundaries and in the reversal of such roles. Ultimately, and this is an idea indebted to Fraiman although she uses it in a different context to mine, the con-fusion of genres I talk about allows us to see the dialogue between them “not as the space between genres but as the space within a genre for critique, contradiction, mediation and productive tension regarding issues of development” (141).

Much of the pressure exercised upon the old bottle of the Bildungsroman comes from gender, and this is one of the reasons why I have chosen to examine female novels of development only. The interaction of gender with genre has always been central to feminist literary criticism. In the case of the Bildungsroman, critics like Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, the editors of The Voyage In, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Fraiman and Rita Felski have traced the ideological configurations of the genre which have made it largely a masculine form, excluding female fictions of development from the canon. The growing gains of feminism are reflected in later female Bildungsromane which “write beyond the ending” of their predecessors, to use DuPlessis' controlling motif in her study,
articulating distinctive paradigms of female development. Besides my personal interest in feminist theory and literature by women, the orientation of this study towards the female *Bildungsroman* comes from a realisation similar to Fraiman’s in her study *Unbecoming Women*, namely that women’s fictions of development dramatise “the endless negotiation of a crossroads” (x), thus challenging linear patterns, which is how the genre has been schematised by critics like Jerome Buckley and Susanne Howe on the basis of a number of selected male texts. I do not wish to essentialise this dialogic perspective as being more applicable to texts by women, and neither does Fraiman, but in the case of my texts the notion of individual development as conflicted and plural is even more prominent, given that gender interacts with race, ethnicity and sexuality. The specific texts I have chosen allow me in particular to examine the place of feminist discourses within the conflict between assimilation and cultural nationalism, and how they query this binary when it comes to their stories of development. As I argue, the texts confront false dilemmas and divided loyalties, such as those between gender and ethnicity, by attempting, with different degrees of success, to construct hybrid spaces and borderland subjectivities.

In all the texts the authors represent a compound or multiple form of oppression for their protagonists as women and as members of an ethnic minority or other group. The texts position themselves against both patriarchal and racist traditions but also challenge assumptions of a homogenising idea of sisterhood. Similarly, their revisions of tropes and themes like mobility, exile, the body and the mother-daughter relationship are informed by their status as women of colour both within their local communities and in larger America. Kincaid writes against a neo/colonial paradigm that brings together the Caribbean with England and America, Cisneros and Kingston against the patriarchal characteristics of their communities and the racism of the mainstream society, and Lorde against racism and homophobia in America but also against the racism of lesbian and other progressive circles. Despite their shared oppression on the basis of their status as women of colour, each of them also articulates perspectives that reveal a distinctive brand of feminism that draws attention to specific tropes, themes, histories and myths in the literatures in question.

The selection of texts was made to cover contemporary writing from different ethnic traditions in America such as Chicano, Asian (in particular Chinese) American and African American, with a text from the Anglophone Caribbean also included. Some of
the texts can be read within a diversity of literary traditions. An example is Lorde, whose work has a place within black women’s writing, African American, Afro-Caribbean and lesbian literature. By reading together texts from the Caribbean, Asian American, Chicana and African-American traditions, the study aims to arrive at certain trans-minority commonalities in the literature of the Americas when it comes to narratives of development. Through this dialogue, parallels can be drawn which were not there in the first place or which alert us to things that we would not have access to were we to read them alongside other texts of the same ethnic/cultural tradition irrespective of genre. There have been studies of course which focus on the Chicano or on the Asian American *Bildungsroman* for instance, but there is a tendency more and more for comparative approaches to multiculturalism in America, and to this genre in particular, not to mention approaches which place multiethnic American literature within post-colonial, transnational and global contexts.¹ The “choice” of the novel of development and other equivalents by a variety of authors from different national, regional and ethnic traditions invites such approaches whose goal is to trace similarities and differences in the thematic, formal and ideological characteristics of the use of this genre in new contexts. For some critics, in particular those working within ethnic studies, there is still, however, tentativeness when it comes to applying paradigms and theories devised for certain ethnic traditions to new contexts. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, for instance, in an article on American immigrant autobiography, cautions against “premature adoption of a transethnic approach” to texts of divergent backgrounds since it risks glossing over the historical particularities of ethnic groups (“Immigrant Autobiography” 161). To this argument, she also adds a “political objection” according to which “reading by ethnicity is a necessary act of tradition—and identity—building for those whose literatures have been rendered invisible by subsumption” (“Immigrant Autobiography” 161).

In the individual chapters, I have tried to use perspectives, theories and tropes which respect the specificities of the cultures and contexts in question, but in some cases I have transgressed methodological boundaries to highlight similarities. For instance, my chapter on Cisneros uses the trope of the border, which is central to Chicano studies, and in the case of Kingston, I use translation, which is another motif in Asian American

literature because of the extreme dichotomy between the linguistic systems of English and Chinese. I also address the relation of this literature to “the missing plot” of marriage (Chu, *Assimilating* 18), which is directly related to American policies of exclusion against Asian immigrants. However, in my chapter on Cisneros I apply an Asian American paradigm to a Chicana text. I do that via the *Bildungsroman* and its trajectory, thus revealing what I see as similar interventions into Western discourses of the private and the public in literary criticism of ethnic American texts by women. Similarly, the function of the mother-daughter bond in Kingston, Kincaid and Lorde presents interesting similarities. Recent pleas by Americanists to move away from “an inward orientation”, interpreted as a focus on “intra-American cultural pluralism”, in order to begin to address America in a transnational and global context (Messmer 50-51) does not render the examination of ethnic American writing redundant. American canons are still largely Anglo-influenced and male-dominated despite the continuous development of ethnic studies as a discipline. Even in the case when one would argue that the narrative of American *Bildung* as assimilation has been displaced and that we are now enjoying a happy state of hybridity in which new migrant and borderland subjectivities emerge, there is still the need to remember, understand and appreciate the numerous and different ways in which writers of colour publishing in America have contributed to this through their unique responses to the marginalisation and exclusion that are among the themes that emerge from their work.

The authors I have chosen for this study write from different histories and experiences but all of them problematise what it means to be or to become “American” by engaging with a well-known rhetoric whose cluster of terms and vocabulary is crucial both to the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and to American cultural narratives. Among these terms we find words such as ‘exceptionalism’, ‘individualism’, ‘mobility’, ‘freedom’, ‘transcendence’, ‘American dream’, ‘materialism’, ‘heroism’, to mention but a few. The texts examined in the chapters, when approached in the context of the *Bildungsroman* in particular, tell us about “how Americanness is achieved ... how it is established again and again as newcomers and outsiders are socialised into the culture”, to cite Werner Sollors (7). They re-inscribe “Americanness”, giving literary representation to some of the first attempts to go beyond fixed boundaries and to deconstruct oppositions, whose goal is to close down heterogeneity and difference. These texts then document processes of fusion and syncretism, which result in the emergence of borderland and
transcultural identities. Kincaid writes about the state of moving away while retaining the past at a point of transition for the British colonies in the West Indies (during their independence) and about the ironies of escaping into a neo-colonial centre. Cisneros negotiates a delicate position both inside and outside her local community, being one of the first Chicana writers who see the need to articulate gender perspectives within a literature that until then largely concentrated on the cultural erasure of Chicanos by Anglo ideologies and practices. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, one of the most or even the best-known Asian American texts in print, attempts to escape "a neither/nor" paradigm in order to claim *both* a Chinese *and* American identity through her project to translate the immigrants' culture into a new, hybrid language. These efforts take place at a time when the need to "claim America", by recovering the lost histories of the immigrant ghosts, confronts also the need to integrate critiques of diasporic Chinese American communities' patriarchal practices. Finally, Lorde, writing from different histories of vulnerability and empowerment, such as slavery, racism but also the civil rights movement, sculpts out of these conflicting discourses an exceptional body to counter normalcy in both mainstream American society and progressive (lesbian, left) circles. The borderland experiences narrated by these texts have of course many more trajectories than the ones addressed here, but I have picked those with more relevance to the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*.

The texts were not chosen to constitute a canon, a multiethnic canon of the *Bildungsroman*, or even of the female *Bildungsroman*. Given the limited amount of material, the temporal frame of the novels, the fact that only female novels of development are represented, as well as my knowledge, competence and interests, the study has a more modest goal. A project like the above would most certainly require a collective effort and scholars specialising in different traditions and periods. With this study I do not make claims about the Asian American or the Chicano *Bildungsroman* as a category. I do not see these texts as necessarily representative of any Chicano or African American *Bildungsroman* for example, even less in the case of Kincaid of the Caribbean, which is such an extended entity, though of course further study might reveal the emergence of certain patterns that are crucial to the kind of functions the genre performs when placed in new contexts. These authors, as I approach their work, combine the various traditions they are familiar with and their "individual talent" to construct sophisticated and complex responses to the genre. It should perhaps also be mentioned at this stage
that the authors I have chosen are some of the best-known female writers in the literary scene of ethnic American and Anglophone Caribbean writing. In this sense, they may be differentiated from other authors publishing in America who are not yet as well known. Their texts have been reprinted by mainstream presses, as in the case of Cisneros, or have won numerous awards and have become bestsellers, as in the case of Kingston. They feature in reading lists and are also widely taught. Lorde, though she is no longer alive, has become iconic, more a symbol of resistance than a real person. Their popularity has at times caused debate. Cisneros admits that she is “more privileged that those who ‘cannot out’”, the women of the barrio to whom she dedicates The House on Mango Street. Although she sometimes feels guilt, she does not see herself “as rich or reclusive” as a result of her success, which is how others have seen her (Interview with Oliver-Rotger 2000). Kingston claims that she is an “American” writer despite the accusation of selling-out that she has received by the cultural nationalists. Kincaid “apologises” for her comfort, writing that she has “joined the conquering class”, but adds that her feet are “in two worlds” (My Garden 85). This is a comment that could be made for all my authors given the complex and contradictory positions they hold vis-à-vis America. These positions point to attractions, resistances and conflicting feelings.

Rather than revising the canon of the Bildungsroman to include further members, I see this study more as providing exemplary readings of texts and of the genre informed by theories and concepts that have gained currency in the last few years, thus showing the variety of critical responses that the category elicits. This is important given that the Bildungsroman tends to be seen as “the last vestige of an outmoded humanist method of criticism” (Lazarro-Weis 19). Among the themes and tropes I investigate are trauma, translation, border and hybridity, play, and disability. What we gain by examining such concepts within the contours of this genre is one of the questions that can be raised. Interweaving theory with literary example is always useful for both theorists and literary critics in order to see how one shapes the other. New theories and concepts which reflect the trajectory of criticism in recent years, when used in relation to the genre, help us see how there is “a new version” of the Bildungsroman that “does not reintroduce the same legacy of originary coherence or idealised integration” (Barney 372). Theories inspired by deconstruction, and concepts and tropes like trauma, hybridity, borderlands and others challenge the genre’s will to closure, which in the context of the texts in question is represented by the master narrative of US assimilation. The relationship
between text and theory is not of course unidirectional. The texts reveal to us the need to query our current understandings of concepts like play, privacy, trauma or labels like 'postmodern', 'postcolonial', 'essentialist'. Thus, among the points made in the chapters that follow is that trauma in Kincaid's work is not linear or merely personal, that the trope of the house in Cisneros's text does not serve as the emblem of privacy and materialism, and that Lorde's disabled body is not another discourse of the grotesque.

To illustrate the un/comfortable connection between text and theory I have structured the individual chapters accordingly. Each chapter starts with one or several sections that introduce the primary theoretical and historical contexts for the detailed discussion of the texts that follows. The sections blend theoretical perspectives on the Bildungsroman with critical understandings of concepts such as trauma, translation, privacy, the body and others. The remaining part of the chapters turns to the texts, focusing on the ways in which the novels ally with or interrogate this theoretical body of work. Given the various critical approaches which notions as the above have attracted, and considering the heavy baggage of the Bildungsroman, the division of labour in the chapters allows us to situate the texts within a wider frame of contested theories and perspectives while at the same time capturing the mutual and complex links between literature and theory.

In the introduction to a recent special issue of the journal Genre on the Bildungsroman we read that the genre "has been compelling for its promise to embody the process of human development and equally problematic in its apparent inability to give that representation conclusive form" (Barney 359). The Bildungsroman lends itself well to approaches that draw on deconstruction, since although we have come to conceptualise forms of narrating the development of the individual subject in linear and coherent terms, there is room to dismantle their aesthetic architecture, that is to say, room for alternative formulations of development. However, when considered in relation to the texts in question, this characteristic of indeterminacy and irresolution is not to be assimilated to poststructuralist notions of all literary texts as potentially subject to deconstruction. Although I draw on the insights of poststructuralism in my readings, the effects of dissonance and fragmentation in the texts invite further questioning: why is it not possible for the authors to give the representation of development a conclusive form, and what would be the cost of such a conclusion? Through what plots or narrative strategies and formal means do they dramatise the tension between openness
and closure in their texts, and how are these relevant to the cultures and histories from which they write? Thus, coming back to abstract concepts like hybridity which are criticised for having nothing to do with everyday lived experience or for being too imbued in Western paradigms to be able to respond to anything foreign, when used in the ethnic American or postcolonial *Bildungsroman* they undergo challenging transformations. To give an example, most of the chapters introduce an element that frustrates closure in the *Bildungsroman*. This appears under different names, such as ‘specter’ and ‘remainder’. Addressing these concepts in the context of a genre that is crucial for the theorising of agency and for self-definition allows them to be unanchored from their elitist foundations to point to silenced histories, unclaimed experiences and traumas, novel forms of belonging, and new forms of resistance. Translation and hybridity become tools of growing up for the protagonists of the novels, building blocks for the learning of “the art of living”. Such a double take on the *Bildungsroman* has many advantages. The complexity of the texts in question, the fact that they are aesthetic artefacts rather than merely ethnographic documents, opens them to highly sophisticated practices of literary criticism, but this is not done at the expense of their politics or relation to everyday life. The genre then becomes a site where debates between humanistic literary approaches and more theoretically inclined paradigms can be blended, and where aesthetics and politics can work together.

Finally, although I could have used another term such as autobiographical novel of development or coming of age narrative that would not have been burdened with the cultural baggage of the *Bildungsroman*, I have decided to retain it for a number of reasons. As a word, *Bildung* means both product and process. Critics like Joseph Slaughter have noted the simultaneous meanings captured in the term: “image and image making, culture and cultivation, form and formation, product and process”. Because most of my chapters trace the tension between fragmentation and unity in the texts by drawing the reader’s attention to the double movement that drives them, the term *Bildung* seems appropriate for that reason. At the same time I retain it for the echoes it has with “building” for those non-German speakers for whom the word is mystifying, and which I think is significant for my texts that use tropes such as houses, communities and languages, or highlight activities such as putting together and reassembling. As already mentioned, some of the texts are composed of building blocks: *vignettes*, stories, diary entries, memories, body parts. Moreover, *Bildung* has been used to refer to “God’s
creation of human beings in His image (Bild)” (Cocalis 400), and outside of a German context of mysticism or of religion I find such an idea relevant to the attempts of some of the protagonists (and by extension of the authors) to fashion a separate identity on the basis of building upon, revising or translating, previous material, though it is in relation to the powerful figure of the mother rather than the father/Father that this refashioning takes place. Finally, I have kept this familiar but mystifying term, hoping that by reaching my conclusion it would continue to be problematic, but for different reasons. I wish the readings to defamiliarise the category, pushing towards new directions and more importantly towards raising new questions.

Turning to the four chapters, the first one examines the textual itinerary of trauma in two texts by Kincaid, a collection of short stories entitled At the Bottom of the River and a subsequent novel Lucy, approaching them as a continuing Bildungsroman of both the main character and the author. I argue that trauma frustrates the Bildungsroman’s drive to closure through its recurrence in Kincaid’s work but does not foreclose “mobility” for the protagonist, who manages in the space between the two texts to acquire a strong voice, however melancholic. In a similar way, the repetition with difference allows Kincaid to experiment with various modes of representing trauma in an intertextual project that remains open. The chapter traces examples of “a melancholic agency” located in the protagonist’s passionate but traumatic relationship with her mother, a topos in the female Bildungsroman, which in Caribbean literature also serves to encode the ambivalent relationship of the West Indies with Britain and, in the case of Lucy, with neocolonial America. The term “bound motion” used in the readings signals the complex ways in which trauma, which has been seen as the death penalty of the genre in a European context, intertwines with postcolonial and female mobility. Revisiting concepts like mourning and melancholia as well as conventional understandings of mobility in the Bildungsroman, the chapter differentiates histories of trauma and movement from Western ones in an effort to re-contextualise the genre.

Building on the first chapter’s critique of closure in the Bildungsroman, the second and third chapters, which can be approached as a pair, interrogate the assumption that the necessary closure of the genre is either dictated by cultural nationalism or assimilation. Despite being challenged from numerous theoretical perspectives, binaries still exercise power and in the case of the Bildungsroman often suggest how the genre and its ethnic revisions should be read. Thus, we almost take it for granted that an individualist
category like the Bildungsroman will be communalised by ethnic authors to buttress ideals of communal solidarity and unity. When the genre is not revised accordingly, its ethnic practitioners, in particular women, are often considered to be surrendering to a destructive individualism. Though Cisneros and Kingston use different styles, which have without doubt affected the reception of their texts, the reductive patterns that have been applied to their work, whether positive or negative, do not do justice to the complex and hybrid spaces they construct in their novels of development. As I argue, Cisneros maintains a healthy distance from both a ruthless individualism and the practices of a repressive community by “building” a hybrid space, the house on Mango Street and The House on Mango Street. Using border theory and examining the significance of the basic structural aspect of the text, the vignette, which forces the narrative to adopt a double movement, I suggest that Cisneros resolves false dilemmas between privacy and affiliation, anticipating novel forms of ethnic solidarity, which are in accordance with the post-Aztlan generation she is part of and with her feminist commitment. As in the first chapter, I adapt a series of syncretic terms like “interested disinterestedness” and “the politics of private enjoyment” to show how the teleology of the genre from “Extravagance” to “Necessity”, “individuality” to “normality”, and pleasure to purpose is problematised through a form of “play” which is both “recreational” and “re-creational”.

The “consciousness of the borderlands”, which is how the art of living or of Bildung is envisaged in the second chapter, gives its place to the art of “a resisting translation” in the third, which turns to Kingston’s The Woman Warrior. I suggest that Kingston’s distinctive practice of cultural translation, exemplified in her effort to update and relocate her mother’s Chinese talk-stories into an American context, challenges the trajectory and the destination of the Bildungsroman, gesturing towards a more dynamic model of affiliations and belonging to America than one predicated on exchange and absorption. The conflict between nationalism and assimilationism, which is what Kingston has been criticised for, is explored in the context of the tension between nationalist and feminist concerns in Asian American discourse through the question of translation. Central to Kingston’s work, despite the dismissal of her translation project as a form of betrayal by the cultural nationalists, is the goal of claiming America and grounding her story in specific ethnic histories. This brings her before both the promise and the scandals of translation. Translation as an alternative trope of bound motion in
this chapter allows us to conceptualise Asian American Bildung not as a simplistic story of movement from the mother’s Asian culture to the daughter’s American one but as an apprenticeship to a cross-cultural and hybrid idiom.

The subversive potential of the body is central to the last chapter which examines Lorde’s Zami and The Cancer Journals. Corporeality and embodied experience turn Lorde’s continuing Bildungsroman into a story of “body Bildung”. Lorde writes from the perspective of a black, lesbian and disabled woman, which multiplies the axes of difference in this text compared to the previous ones. As I suggest, her body, which is “the house of difference”, challenges the socially integrative purpose of the Bildungsroman from numerous perspectives. Despite relying on the stock of images and characters drawn from the lesbian Bildungsroman and coming-out story, Lorde deconstructs some of its static formulas and assumptions in Zami, criticising the idea of “a Lesbian Nation” by showing how an idealised lesbian bonding becomes nuanced through discourses of race. Like Cisneros’s text, which deploys a similar double movement, Zami moves within both a real and a mythical world, and, like Kingston’s, mediates between different cultures and allegiances by portraying its protagonist engaging in an effort to blend her Caribbean heritage with her lesbianism. Turning to The Cancer Journals, I draw upon a disability studies perspective to show how Lorde’s asymmetrical and “extraordinary” body mounts a strong critique of assimilation and normalcy in the Bildungsroman. As in Zami, Lorde tries both to incorporate pain, voicing collective histories of trauma, and to move beyond it. The result is a form of agency which is fluid, collective and erotic, and a responsible and political “art of living” which draws on both vulnerability and the struggle to survive. When seen in the context of the Bildungsroman, this reformulated type of Bildung goes against the myths of individualism, heroic mastery and disembodied transcendence and, more particularly, against the idealisation of perfection, health and happiness in American culture and literature.

In the late thirties Bakhtin’s assessment of the Bildungsroman was that it portrayed a hero “emerging along with the world … He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs at the transition point from one to the other … He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being” (23). More than seventy years later conferences like the fifth MESEA (The Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas), which took place in Pamplona, foreground the idea of “writing selves” as being conjoined with that of “writing histories”. I find this more than
evocative when it comes to considering the *Bildungsroman* as a genre (as with other genres of life writing). Along with the story of individual development that my texts narrate, we also get a larger view of the concerns and preoccupations of the communities about which the authors write, as well as a sense of the trends and shifts in various modes of ethnic and postcolonial writing. The genre is then, as Fraiman is right to observe, more than a story of private formation. It is “the story of a cultural moment, its uncertainties and desires” (Fraiman 144) and, thus, an apt vehicle for social and political comment.
Chapter 1

Female Travelling in the West/Indies\(^1\): Trauma and Bound Motion in Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* and *Lucy*

Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, which has been read as a coming-of-age narrative, bridges the author’s first work, a collection of short stories entitled *At the Bottom of the River*, and her later novel *Lucy*.\(^2\) All three texts exhibit a common preoccupation with the process of a daughter’s frustrated individuation from her mother, and construct around this thematic axis what seems to be an enigmatic trauma. The “narrative overspill”, which is exemplified in the reenactment of similar scenes and the repetition of motifs across Kincaid’s work, creates a sharp sense of *déjà vu*, “the uncanny sense that we have been ‘here’ before” (Gilmore 116).\(^3\) Indeed, Leigh Gilmore has approached the above texts as a “serial autobiography”, in which Kincaid “add[s] volumes” (Gilmore 100) and creates “an intertextual system of meanings” (Gilmore 98). Kincaid’s protagonist, a single character who appears under different names in book after book, “mourns”, as we read in *Lucy*, “the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know” (132).\(^4\)

The dynamics of the protagonist’s journey towards the construction of a separate identity, what can be called her *Bildungs* process, and the trauma(s) interwoven with it, as I will show, vary from book to book.

This first chapter will explore the recurrence of trauma and melancholic memory in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Lucy*. In relation to trauma and identity formation, which are closely linked in Kincaid’s work in what seems to be an infinitely extendable process of representation, the two texts I will examine invite a comparison between different manifestations of trauma. More specifically, *At the Bottom of the River* locates trauma primarily

---

1. The title is a borrowing from Antonia MacDonald-Smythe’s *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Construction of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid*.
2. For a reading of *Annie John* as a female *Bildungsroman*, see MacDonald-Smythe, Caton and Karafilis.
3. All quotations from Gilmore in this chapter are from *The Limits of Autobiography*.
4. This also applies to Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1997) where we encounter a similar meditation on the past, mother-daughter relationships, history, and the body.
within a psychic landscape and charts an interior journey of identity formation. Contrary to “the cryptic, dreamlike quality” of the collection of stories (Paravisini-Gebert 49), Lucy articulates trauma in more concrete terms by intertwining it with the predicament of a female subject who leaves behind a colonised territory only to move into a neo-colonial centre. In both texts it is the necessity to achieve individuation and gain mastery over the presence of trauma that prompts the narrators, collapsed into a single person, towards gestures of defiance, which are conjured by different forms of mobility and agency. In At the Bottom of the River this mobility is in great part metaphorical, in the sense that it allows the daughter to construct identity as a speaking subject and, thus, to escape the constraints of her mother’s authoritarian voice. In Lucy, on the other hand, the protagonist is portrayed claiming a sexual mobility, which, along with her angry voice, enables her to “talk back” to her mother’s immobilising sexual scripts and to redress patriarchal and colonial discourses of movement.

The distinction between the two texts can be also seen as a distinction between a “psychic” and a “social text” of female development (Gilmore 111). Psychoanalytic and more political readings are not mutually exclusive of course and this is why I draw on theories of trauma, in particular of mourning and melancholia, in my close readings of both texts. Kincaid’s drama pitting daughter against mother, which is a topos in the female Bildungsroman and one that is usually interpreted as a personal or psychoanalytic conflict, cannot be detached from the history of British colonialism in the Caribbean and the powers of neoconialism in America when it comes to her work. Although her project to voice this tension between powerful and powerless is initiated in At the Bottom of the River, it is Annie John which helps decode this text, and even more Lucy, which takes the heroine away from home to the American shores to explore the themes of identification with, and separation from, the maternal figure through different angles.

In tracing the transmission of trauma from text to text, I suggest that Kincaid’s work is better understood if one considers what comes before or after each text. The return to foundational moments, in this case the mother-daughter trauma, does not only construct evolving heroines but also offers Kincaid the opportunity to experiment with different representational models and aesthetics. Maria Helena Lima calls Kincaid’s work “a
continuing *Bildungsroman* ("Imaginary Homelands" 858) which dramatises "the Bildung of the writer", that is Kincaid's *Bildung* (857). In this chapter, drawing on Kincaid’s own assessment of her written style in *At the Bottom of the River* in the light of her later work, and on critical appreciations which have placed it within ‘postmodern’ and ‘postcolonial’ discourses, I add to the discussion by focusing on the ways in which the choices she has made as a writer impinge on her representation of trauma.5 My argument is that the repetitive force of trauma is not pathological and counter-productive but rather the source of “a melancholic agency”, in Judith Butler’s words ("After Loss" 467-8), which resists dominant ideologies of American *Bildung*. More specifically, as I will suggest, the persistent reenactments of trauma in Kincaid’s continuing *Bildungsroman* “command” us to “listen beyond the pathology of individual suffering”, to evoke Cathy Caruth (*Trauma* 156), in the same way that the texts’ stubborn investment in the mother-daughter relationship asks us to read beyond the familiar narrative of adolescent ambivalence. Trauma cannot be integrated into a completed story of the past, which also presents *Bildung* as incomplete. Repetition is important in Kincaid’s work; trauma returns to haunt its survivor as a form of protection against forgetting (which could be seen as one version of *Bildung* driven by futurity and *telos*). However, this recurrence does not signify immobility. It is a way in which what has not been fully experienced can become slightly more accessible to consciousness. Thus, repetition can potentially generate new forms of knowledge which illuminate aspects of past, present, and future. This is important in both *At the Bottom of the River* and in *Lucy*.

**Trauma and the Bildungsroman**

The focus of this chapter upon the impact of trauma on the *Bildungsroman*, one of the two thematic centres of this exploration, is particularly offered in response to Moretti’s discussion of the crisis of the European *Bildungsroman* in his influential study *The Way of the World*. In “A Useless Longing for Myself”, the appendix of his study, Moretti delineates the ways in which trauma challenges the basic premises of the genre, leading to its collapse and

---

5 In relation to Kincaid’s evolution of written style, Lima notes that the Antiguan Creole is used more in Kincaid’s *My Brother* ("Imaginary Homelands" 858). For the question of reclaiming orality (and its potential advantages/disadvantages) in Kincaid’s work, see MacDonald-Smythe and Hoving.
paving the way for modernist experiments. Trauma, according to Moretti, is immobilising; it reverses the directionality of the genre’s movement turning it into a “regression from youth to adolescence and childhood” (232). This shift is also inward directed as the pervasive presence of a nostalgic memory further suggests. The Bildungsheld or protagonist of the classical novel of formation turns into a rootless hero growing up in an industrialised world dominated by impersonal institutions, which, in Moretti’s words, provide “a merely functional socialization” that meets no inner need (231), and thus cannot be made “symbolically legitimate” (16).

In terms of the novelistic episode, the greatest structural achievement of the genre, in the late Bildungsroman as Moretti calls the period leading to the genre’s demise, kernels (a narratological term which points to the most important events in a novel, actions which are usually initiated by the hero) no longer offer opportunities for growth. Instead, they are transformed into accidents that underline the futile effort to find meaning in an increasingly meaningless world (Moretti 233). Finally, in terms of style and language, trauma undermines the “calm passion” that Moretti associates with the realistic category of the Bildungsroman (vi), by “generating centrifugal tendencies toward the short story and the lyric” (244), thus creating a hybrid construct, the “lyric novel” (236). This is characterised by a trauma-induced poetry and cryptic epiphanies, which do not correspond to meaningful revelations, and in this way attest to the inability of language to signify in the aftermath of trauma (Moretti 238). The difficulty of representing trauma witnessed in the breakdown of language, postpones or renders impossible its articulation, and consequently deters the implementation of a possible healing process. Trauma’s resistance to articulation is deemed to disrupt the traditional movement of the Bildungsroman towards delivering a meaningful narrative. From then the options are to write either a “counter-Bildungsroman” (Moretti 232) in order to mourn the loss of the grand narrative of individual development or a parodied version in order to mock it (Miles 990).

In declaring the demise of the Bildungsroman, Moretti allies himself with other critics, like David H. Miles and Sammons, who impose a death sentence upon the genre unaware of writers who are still practitioners of it. Moretti’s acknowledgement in this last chapter of his study that “problems change and old solutions stop working” (230) is pertinent to the fact
that, as he claims elsewhere, “a phase of Western socialization had come to an end, a phase the European Bildungsroman had both represented and contributed to” (244). Such a claim, however, if generalised to make speculations on the future, or rather lack of future, of the Bildungsroman, seems not to take into consideration the exportation of the genre into different cultures and its relocation into new discursive domains. This phenomenon, according to Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, has led to the “resuscitation” of the genre especially by marginalised people, in particular ethnic and postcolonial writers, who embrace it as an appropriate medium in order to articulate their concerns about questions of subjectivity and identity (75).

The fact that the genre flourishes in a period where “mourning remains”, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s phrase (1), as a brief list of the losses of the twentieth century would demonstrate, raises the important question of whether Moretti’s account of the experience of trauma aptly describes the state of modern subjects in general. Even Moretti himself considers, however in passing, this question. While in the appendix of his study he discusses aspects of a general, abstract and even metaphysical trauma (an anguish stemming from epistemological uncertainty), in his preface (written in retrospect) he hints at a different kind when he notes that a more profound reason, other than the specific historical scope (from 1898 to 1914) of his study, which explains the omission of gender and race from his account, is that the fundamental elements of the Bildungsroman were at the time only available to the West European middle-class man. Among these elements, Moretti lists “wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom” (ix); in his words, people deprived of the above were “without the right to dream” and thus not eligible to participate in a narrative of self-growth and development (Moretti x).

Comparing the two types of trauma described above, at first glance they seem to have similar repercussions when it comes to the Bildungs process. In both cases, Bildung is undermined by trauma: in the case of the trauma brought by the War and the “discontents” of modernity, a certain familiar kind of Western “education” formerly available to middle-classes is seriously challenged; in the case of social outsiders, however, given their exclusion from the privileges of the white, male, and middle class groups, even the possibility of embarking upon the path towards maturity is a priori foreclosed. Could we not, however,
place next to “Goethe’s ‘aspirations’, Stendhal’s ‘ambitions’, Balzac’s ‘illusions’, Dickens’s ‘expectations’”, to mention some of the most representative practitioners of the classical Bildungsroman (Moretti x), the memories, past and present (traumatic but also joyful) of a character like Kincaid’s Lucy without positing them, as Moretti does, “as the stark double negative of the ‘modern vice of unrest’” (x)? Postcolonial stories of mobility, trauma and exile, as I wish to argue, expand the genre’s topography by generating alternative stories of growing up; stories in which trauma is confronted and loss mobilised for productive ends.

Rethinking the nature of trauma offers a way to move beyond understandings of loss which situate it in a narrowly psychoanalytic frame and which cast melancholia as inherently pathological and counter-productive. In an anthology of essays entitled Loss: The Politics of Mourning, it is argued that losses such as genocide, war, slavery, colonisation and exile “need to be engaged from the perspective of what remains” (2, my emphasis). Shifting our attention from what is lost to the ways in which traces of loss persist through melancholic attachments can paradoxically illuminate the creative potential of trauma. The notion of “the politics of mourning” in the title of the anthology suggests that a reconceptualisation of loss in this light, as Eng and Kazanjian put it, can allow us to see the present epoch, an epoch where mourning remains, as “full of volatile potentiality and future militancies rather than pathologically bereft and politically reactive” (5).

Returning to the more specific preoccupations of the Bildungsroman, Braendlin suggests that the genre, as it is currently practiced, “evinces a revaluation, a transvaluation of traditional Bildung by new standards and perspectives” (75). Among other things, this means that the underlying assumptions of the Bildungsroman are being scrutinised and revised in accordance with different values and a different social reality. In the case of the postcolonial Bildungsroman, Lima argues that it is a form that “paradoxically attempts both to represent the movement from fragmentation and loss to(ward) wholeness and homeland and to deny the possibility of such recovery” (“Decolonising Genre” 442). The suggestion is then that trauma has a place in the postcolonial Bildungsroman. This trauma has its own historical referents and place in fictions of development, which a story like Moretti’s, cannot do justice to.
How can loss be registered within the contours of the *Bildungsroman* in ways that point to different histories of trauma and that at the same time underline its creative potential? Unlike Moretti's conviction that trauma is anti-productive, for Butler, who added an afterword to the anthology of essays on loss already mentioned, loss has a "strange fecundity" (469). What is crucial to investigate is "what is produced from the condition of loss"; whatever is generated from loss "will bear the trace of loss, but how will it bear it? In what form?", Butler asks (468-9, my emphasis). In her words, "full 'recovery' from trauma is impossible" but the "irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency", what she calls "a melancholic (or spectral) agency" (Butler 467-8).

In accordance with the call to rethink loss from the perspective of what remains, the recurrence of trauma in Kincaid's work can be approached in relation to the patterns of mobility/mobilisation that it animates. Kincaid gestures, as I will suggest here, towards a form of melancholic agency that can be captured with the term "bound motion" (Hoving 15). Her texts construct images of fusion with the mother and more fluid trajectories away from and towards the mother, which draw attention to the pre-oedipal bond as well as to the role of memory and to the power of the past to shape the present. Such an alternative concept of mobility, when placed in the context of the *Bildungsroman*, both its Western and postcolonial version, revises dominant tropes of unbounded movement and unconstrained freedom in accounts of the genre by male writers, thus rewriting the act of growing up as "a process of exchange" and "a social relationship" (Fraiman 139). Shedding light on the state of mobility in the paradox of memory, the continuing presence of the past for postcolonial subjects who leave home, and the ways in which different spaces and fluid allegiances shape them while in exile, it posits *Bildung* as mediated by social and historical context.

The hybrid term "bound motion" captures the complex ways in which trauma intertwines with mobility in that it brings two parts together while sustaining a tension between them; the adjective "bound" qualifies mobility by infusing it with a melancholic quality, but does not obliterate it. The pattern of relationship can be also described as a blurring between the states of mourning and melancholia. In "Mourning and Melancholia",

---

6 I borrow the term from Isabel Hoving. Though I share her desire to "criticize those masculinist ideologies of free mobility" (15) through alternative concepts of movement, a critique which I localise within the *Bildungsroman*, in my analysis I particularly focus on how this concept can be used in relation to trauma.
Freud contrasts melancholia to what he calls the “normal” work of mourning (243). While mourning enables the mourner to gradually leave the lost object behind (whether this refers to a loved person or to an abstraction) and invest in new ones, melancholia denotes an unresolved grief (a mourning without end) with extremely damaging consequences for the melancholic person.

However, the distinction between these two conditions is not as fixed as it appears. Eng and Kazanjian draw attention to Freud’s own recognition that “it is really only because we know so well how to explain [mourning] that this attitude does not seem to us pathological” (3). They approach Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, initially drawn in “Mourning and Melancholia” and revised later in The Ego and the Id to recognize the special status of melancholia in the formation of the ego, through Walter Benjamin’s “historical materialism”. In their words:

Unlike mourning, in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present ... melancholia might be said to constitute, as Benjamin would describe it, an ongoing and open relationship with the past. (Eng and Kazanjian 3-4)

It is precisely melancholia’s “confrontation with loss through the adamant refusal of closure” (Eng and Kazanjian 3) that, which for the editors and contributors of the anthology on loss mentioned, turns melancholia from a pathological state into one that can help illuminate the past and offer new insights for the present and future.

Kincaid’s sustained forms of mourning in her work gesture towards a condition of melancholia, but this does not suggest stasis. If mourning has been traditionally understood as a way of “working through” trauma, in other words as a way of “moving forward”, melancholic agency captures a sense of movement, which is, however, always to be interrupted by melancholic moments, “behaving like an open wound” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 253). As Butler writes in the afterword, “[Trauma’s] mark ... is irrecoverable. It becomes the condition ... by which the questions of whether one can move ... and in what way are framed and incited by the irreversibility of loss itself” (“After

---

7 Freud describes the gradual process of detaching libido in order to sever attachment to the lost object as “alike to mourning and melancholia” but notes that while “nothing hinders” the mourner “from preceding the normal path”, which will finally free him or her, “this path is blocked for the work of melancholia” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 257).
Loss” 472). However, this movement, as she clarifies, “has its own dynamism, if not its own dance” (“After Loss” 469). A similar principle operates in Lorde’s work, as we will see, where there is a need to both acknowledge pain and move beyond it, but also in the other chapters, which engage, from different perspectives, in such a double or simultaneous movement.

**Mobilities in the Traditional Bildungsroman**

The reason I turn to the concept of mobility, the second thematic axis of this chapter, bears upon its significance for the Bildungsroman. Before I explore its distinct formulations in Kincaid’s work, I offer a more extensive overview of this trope in the traditional novel of development, thus prefacing the other chapters, which although they are framed by their own theory, all concern movement in its various manifestations. The section is also complemented with a discussion of postcolonial mobility and its traumas, which are the more specific foci of this chapter.

Moretti singles mobility out as the most important attribute of modern youth, and traces its growing importance in the European novel of development of the nineteenth century back to the “destabilizing forces of capitalism” (4). Mobility may have of course different manifestations, but one of the most obvious is travel. The journey from the province to the big city, which in Season of Youth Buckley includes in the principal elements of a Bildungsroman’s archetypal plot (18), marks the separation of the hero from familial and familiar surroundings and, thus, initiates the process of Bildung. This urban journey is expected to respond to the hero’s “inner restlessness”, another characteristic which Moretti traces back to modernity by associating it with its material sign, that is youth; both modernity and youth “give rise to unexpected hopes”, restlessness, or “interiority” (Moretti 4-5). The Bildungsroman, for Moretti, is the symbolic concentrate of all the above attributes.

The journey away from home, besides responding to a yearning for an encounter with the unknown, becomes on many occasions a journey up the social hierarchy. Fraiman in her study of the British novel of development compares male and female ideals of “education” during the nineteenth century, and specifically alludes to “the mythology of bourgeois opportunity” (5). As she argues, this myth not only characterises the British male
Bildungsroman, but also continues to hold an appeal for many American authors and critics (Fraiman 5). Such an emphasis on upward socio-economic mobility, buttressed by critical studies on the nineteenth-century male Bildungsroman such as Howe’s Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen, is meant to assert the autonomy and sovereignty of the individual, in particular of the bourgeois male subject, by fixing free choice and mastery as the universal characteristics of every Bildungsroman.

The inner restlessness mentioned above does not necessarily have to find an outlet in physical travel. Movement may also involve a kind of mental/spiritual travelling or a quest for an artistic constitution. In the latter case the category of the Bildungsroman slides into that of the Künstlerroman, which charts the process of an artist’s development. Despite the distinct forms that mobility can take, it is important to stress that the Bildungsroman’s premises make it a prerequisite for self-growth that, as Fraiman puts it, the “Bildungsheld has room to maneuver and somewhere to go” (126).

The above necessary condition for the possibility of development naturally invites a comparison with a number of static female figures who make their appearance in the traditional Bildungsroman, both the male and its female counterpart. I will explore the place of mobility in the postcolonial Bildungsroman in a subsequent section. For the moment, looking at the female Bildungsroman, especially in its nineteenth-century characteristics, it can be better described as a domestic novel rather than one of development and mobility. The female journey, both in life and literature, seems predetermined and with a fixed destination. As DuPlessis puts it, “Freudian theory, postulating the telos of ‘normal femininity’ ... bears an uncanny resemblance to the nineteenth-century endings of narrative, in which the female here becomes a heroine and in which the conclusion of a valid love plot is the loss of any momentum of quest” (Writing 35).

In a similar frame of mind, Karen R. Lawrence before proceeding to raise the question of “what happens when Penelope voyages” (x), which structures her critical study on women and travel in British literature, alludes to a familiar “Western cultural truism” according to which Penelope waits at home while Ulysses roams the oceans (ix). The figure of Penelope, her hands at the loom, weaving the tale of her journeying husband, points to a whole tradition of women frozen in time and space who function as mere props in the male
plot of adventure. Fraiman has a similar point when she notes that the female figures a man encounters during his travels represent the difficulties he has to overcome in order to attain a proper Bildung (7). Working from a narratological perspective, Teresa de Lauretis calls woman a “personified obstacle” that stands for the “primordial obstacle” civilised man has to master, namely nature (133). Such use of female characters as milestones or vehicles for measuring the progress of a male’s journey illustrates the traditional association of woman with space, immobility and passivity.

In her article “Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm”, which is included in a collection of essays on the female novel of development entitled The Voyage In, Marianne Hirsch discusses, as her title suggests, another form of movement in order to test its applicability to women. Among other texts she explores Goethe’s “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul”, an intrapolated story placed within what is considered to be the male prototype of the Bildungsroman, Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship. This story represents a model of female Bildung characteristic for its one-dimensionality, since it embraces “the purely subjective, psychological, emotional, spiritual”, which diverges from Goethe’s conception of ideal Bildung that praises a harmonious development of all aspects of the self (Hirsch 29). The only kind of movement available to women, which Hirsch uncovers through her reading of four novels, including George Elliot’s The Mill on the Floss and Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, is a spiritual quest that usually takes place in nature, is characterised by a circular pattern and ends in death with or without spiritual/religious redemption. Although such a type of spiritual Bildung “writes beyond the ending” of marriage typical of nineteenth-century female novels of development, it has its own limitations. Hirsch sees the idea of withdrawing from society, which is a pattern of the spiritual quest, in somewhat romantic terms as an “active rebellion” although she is aware of the price to be paid for this choice, notably death (32). Still, for her, such a closure is a cry for action in that it exposes the violence of patriarchal structures.

What I find useful in Hirsch’s discussion above is that building on her readings, one can recognise the ways in which mobility becomes ideologically gendered. Fraiman, who also considers Goethe’s novel, is more explicit about this point. For her, the Beautiful Soul’s inner journey represents a specifically female pattern of “travelling”, which Wilhelm must
renounce in order to assert a “masculine” Bildung that privileges action rather than a purely “contemplative” or “ghostly”, in Fraiman’s description, female alternative (7). As soon as this female figure, who seems to exist merely as part of “a providential décor” (Swales 52), has fulfilled her task, she is banished from the text. What Fraiman exposes, along with providing an example of the narrative function of female characters in plots of male quest, is a division of active and passive roles distributed to the male and female respectively.

In the same article, Hirsch adds that even though spiritual quests also feature in the male Bildungsroman, they usually have an optimistic closure since they trace the hero’s path towards art, which provides compensation for his dissatisfaction with society (46). Buckley also reads a number of nineteenth and twentieth-century male novels of development, such as Joyce’s A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, subsuming them under the category of the Künstlerroman. Through his readings he uncovers romantic motifs which point to the figure of “the genius”, an exceptionally gifted minority, and demonstrate what Fraiman calls the “mania of narrating one’s own origins” through the vehicle of art, a prevalent pattern in male novels of development (8). Unlike the male Bildungsroman, nineteenth century and early twentieth-century female novels of development are unable to redeem their heroines through art and, as a result, the spiritual journey portrayed usually ends in death (Hirsch 47). Access to artistic development and, thus, to a new locus of agency is reclaimed by twentieth-century women writers who, according to DuPlessis, depict their heroines becoming artists in order “to extend, reveal and elaborate [their] mother[s’] often thwarted talents” (Writing 93). This is a pattern that we encounter in the work of Kincaid, Kingston and Lorde, but one, which, as I will show, is fraught with ambivalence.

Along with the above revision in the outcome of the female spiritual quest, contemporary women writers have also appropriated a more specific form of male travelling, the conventional “on the road saga” and the “lighting-out motif”. Such tropes of mobility are particularly associated with the archetypal American hero, who as R. W. B. Lewis puts it, is a “hero in space” (91). Space, in the sense of “spaciousness”, suggests an extremely open realm of possibility (Lewis 91). In popular mythology, figures such as the

---

8 For more examples of this pattern, see Fraiman (149 n.10), Annis Pratt (“Women and Nature” 482-3), and Goodman.
frontiersman and the lone ranger attest to the hold of images of unbounded mobility in the American imagination. Dana A. Heller describes contemporary American women writers’ revisions of such mobility myths with the term the “feminization of quest romance” in a study thus entitled, which looks at the fiction of Mary McCarthy, Anne Moody, and Mona Simpson among others. More specifically, she draws attention to the ways in which female authors of quest romances, a proxy for the Bildungsroman, have revised mainstream discourses of mobility so as to combine the importance of both autonomy and “intersubjectivity” (32). With this, they seek to recognise what accounts of rugged individualism dismiss or disguise, in other words the need for emotional connection and affiliation.

By illuminating, in particular, the ways in which the separation from the mother can be traumatic in female novels of development, contemporary women writers seem also to acknowledge recent psychoanalytic theories that stress women's relational identity. Among the most well known are Nancy Chodorow's studies on the pre-oedipal mother-daughter bond and Carol Gilligan's theories of object relations. Such a reconceptualisation of mobility, which I will explore in Kincaid’s work in more detail, and will connect with translation in Kingston’s, anticipates the notion of bound motion that is mobilised in order to confront another instance of trauma. Strangely enough, this kind of trauma does not result from immobility but from the untenable ideal of unbounded mobility, the traumatising effects of which the female novel of development does not hesitate to disclose. As I will argue, women writers, including Kincaid (to the extent that she also revises male patterns of movement and exile), are more sensitive to the ways in which movement is framed by the material and discursive spaces that individuals inhabit and to the numerous ways in which they are the effects of their anchoring within particular places, people and social relations. This holds true even when the mother (both the physical mother and the adopted one in America), as in Kincaid’s work, functions as a (neo)colonial agent.

Although Heller expresses optimism in the light of the emergence of new “feminized” forms of travelling by women writers, one cannot avoid pointing to the difficulties which

---

continue to obstruct women’s freedom in movement. For instance, while mobility in men takes sexuality as given since the latter is considered integral to the formation of the evolving hero, its female counterpart becomes associated with promiscuity. This link is made explicit when considering Eve’s transgression, which is described as stemming from “Eve’s wandering” in Paradise Lost, as Lawrence is right to note (15). Janet Wolff points to the way male travelling is connected to sexuality by referring to the “spermatic journey”, a journey offered to the male so that he can sow his wild oats while the female has to stay at home to fulfil her reproductive function, which imposes stability and controlled movement (230). George Eliot has condensed what a patriarchal society expects of women in her well known “the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history” (335). Women with history, in other words wandering females, have been identified with the figure of the prostitute, a figure who has always stood for a fallen female sexuality, thus serving to pathologise female mobility. This is a stereotype that accounts such as Kincaid’s and Lorde’s challenge through perspectives that talk back to assumptions about exotic subjects and to the system of compulsory heterosexuality.

Given such attitudes towards female wandering, the plot of the male traveller rebelling against his community only to return and be proclaimed a hero who paradoxically deserves a place within society hardly seems viable when it comes to female travelling subjects. Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, the American prototype of the Bildungsroman, is such a story of male rebellion that ends with integration into society. Yet, Wolff is right in asserting that women have travelled and continue to do so (234). At this stage, it seems important to note that this chapter is not geared to an examination of the patterns of travelling which are applicable to different categories of women. As mentioned, I use the concept of travel in an expansive sense, and this obviously means that a range of experiences cannot be covered. Hence, the feminist reworkings of the male journey and quest mentioned above may not be equally available to all women. Carole Boyce Davies, who focuses on the ways Black women writers have reconceived tropes of movement, is, for example, sceptical as to the validity of the emotional/mental journey to Black women at large (134). As Davies maintains in Black Women, Writing and Identity, “We need to read escape/flight critically against a series of modalities—time, age, space, education, language, ability, family, location
and so on” (135). Without wanting to gloss over any differences among women in relation to travel, the concept of bound motion seems to be equally emphasised by both Western and non-Western women writers in their renditions of female characters as travelling subjects.

**Locating the Postcolonial Travelling Subject**

In a similar way that images of travel and mobility have been reappropriated by female subjects and reworked in female novels of development, the trope of the journey has acquired a new importance in discussions of postcolonial variants of the *Bildungsroman*, which focus on the insights and knowledge gained by a specific form of travelling from the periphery to the centre. It goes without saying that through colonialism a massive number of European populations left the big centres to settle in various colonised territories. The colonial “voyage out”, as it is usually called, has met its counterpart in the “voyage in”, the latter involving a reverse movement from the colonies to the great colonial centres. This voyage has been in great part a journey imposed by necessity, rather than a self-chosen one, directly related to the history of slavery (The Middle Passage) and later, after decolonisation, to economic migration.

Such a consideration makes travelling an over-determined concept for postcolonial subjects. The journey to the centre seems to be ambivalent as a gesture, a curse and a blessing at the same time. To understand how enticing the appropriation of movement can be for formerly colonised subjects, all we have to consider is how mobility has always served as a metaphor for freedom and self-possession. Its importance is asserted in the male slave narrative where, as Davies explains, the journey in the form of physical flight and escape features as a liberating movement from slavery to freedom, which also opens the path towards manhood (130). Thus, on the one hand, the postcolonial journey represents an entry into history, which enables formerly colonised subjects to shed their colonial past and embark on a project to forge an autonomous and strong identity. On the other, however, this journey, which becomes invested with the significance of a veritable rite of passage, is not easy. To the universal formula of the Western *Bildungsroman*, which “posits a single, well-marked, ‘right’ path and a protagonist who, finding this path, climbs predictably
from stage to higher stage” (Fraiman 5), one can juxtapose numerous descriptions of mobility in postcolonial and ethnic narratives as “strenuous, chronic, directionless, dependent on external factors ... over which the individual has little control” (Wong, From Necessity to Extravagance 131).\[10\] Rather than a form of unconstrained mobility as in American accounts of the wilderness, the postcolonial journey points to a traumatic departure resulting in a permanent split and displacement, which creates reasons to mourn the loss of home. At the same time, the difficulty of reconciling the demands of both the host and original cultures turns mobility into a process of mediating and balancing conflicting demands and allegiances.

If we turn to the relationship between the West Indies and America, there has been a significant migration movement between the two over the centuries. Both Annie John and Lucy refer to the transitional period from the colonial to that of independence, and portray their heroines moving away from the Caribbean: Annie to England; Lucy to America. Critics have pointed out the irony of escaping a colonial site only to enter a new one, a point to which I will return in my close reading of Lucy. In an article which explores recent novels by women of colour in the United States (including Lucy) that weave “the coming-to-America narrative” into the more familiar coming-of-age plot, Rosemary Marangoly George argues that such novels often “partake of and propagate a developmental narrative” in which Americanisation is the final and logical conclusion to one’s Bildung (140). It seems according to this account that the closure of the coming-of-age/to America narrative is as conservative as that of marriage in the traditional Bildungsroman in that both cast Bildung as a form of internalising social norms, in other words as a form of assimilation.

If submitting to a new form of imperialism is not the necessary closure of the postcolonial Bildungsroman, and if Caribbean women writers are less reluctant than their male counterparts, as I will show, to use the genre in order to promote nationalism, what are the options, and thus possible trajectories of the genre? Antonia Mac-Donald Smythe writes that the concluding images of the West Indian Bildungsroman are often those of exile that collide with the optimistic resolution of the traditional Bildungsroman in which conflict is

---

\[10\] One has to be careful when comparing mobility in postcolonial and ethnic texts, but nonetheless commonalities exist when it comes to memories of the past and experiences of cultural dislocation, which the chapters will illustrate.
harmoniously resolved and the individual finds a productive place in society (36). Theorists of exile such as Edward Said have alluded to the figure of the exilic intellectual who is able to challenge the system of imperialism through his/her position on the interstices of two or more cultures. In “Reflections on Exile” Said notes the advantages of such an in-between-ness which allows exiles to fashion a “scrupulous subjectivity” that can maintain distance from, and thus interrogate, totalising narratives of ethnicity and identity (184). The Barbadian writer George Lamming in his 1960 work The Pleasures of Exile finds a similar affirmative power in exile: “The pleasure and paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am” (50). Giles argues that such ways of understanding exile “belong to a modernist conception [of it] as a privileged state of consciousness” (“American Literature” 31), and adds Julia Kristeva and Homi K. Bhabha to those who embrace this view. Even more radically, recent postmodern conceptualisations of travel such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of “detrimentalization” and “nomadism” dismiss any sense of pure origins in positing “becoming” in the place of “being” and celebrate a new poetics of fluidity in movement, as well as a form of constructive homelessness by substituting “routes” for “roots”, in Paul Gilroy’s formulation (“Roots and Routes” 15). Leela Gandhi summarises what is part and parcel of our plural, metropolitan world by registering the recent appeal of “the postnational promise of a genuine cosmopolitanism” (136).

Given the hold of trauma over the loss of home in many postcolonial literary texts as well as over the continuing unavailability of freedom and individualism to formerly dispossessed people, it would be fruitful to investigate the ways in which postcolonial variants of the Bildungsroman, which engage discourses of mobility, situate themselves with reference to such theories of travel, frequently reproached for their ethnocentrism. Are postcolonial subjects willing to give up notions of a stable identity, especially when they have been deprived of it for so long, and embrace hybridity, which Bhabha calls “the art of the present”? (Location 1) If the answer to the above question is yes, how are we to account for counter nationalist discourses and the backlash of fundamentalist movements, which we are currently witnessing, and which, according to Said, initially grow from a sense of displacement (176)? The question, then, which I would like to raise here, is whether
postcolonial mobility is a form of empowerment, a traumatic experience or both at the same time. If the latter is the case, can this combination be productive?

To return to the scope of this chapter and to the two texts whose analysis will follow, given the history of colonialism in the Caribbean and the focus of this chapter on a Caribbean female writer’s work, the emphasis is going to be on the intersection of gender with postcolonialism. Such a link inserts the discussion of the concept of mobility within a more specific context and invites a theorisation of a postcolonial and female form of movement. This more contextualised thematisation of mobility departs in important ways from its representation in both Western male and female novels of development as well as in non-Western male variants of the Bildungsroman. Postcolonial women writers who appropriate the motif of the journey in their texts, as I will argue, are forced to interrogate not only the limits to female mobility imposed by patriarchy and in particular by the patriarchal structures of their specific societies (in ways which are both similar and dissimilar to Western women), but also to review its associations with the colonial enterprise and, thus, with Western imperialism. Moreover, since, as I will explain, in Caribbean literature the mother figure is tied to the land (both the native land and the colonial mother country), the concept of bound motion, introduced earlier in the context of object-relations theories by feminist psychoanalytic critics, acquires additional meanings when appropriated by postcolonial women writers.

MacDonald Smythe observes that unlike their male counterparts who use images of travel in order to rewrite narratives of a whole nation, Caribbean women writers are primarily interested in constructing “personal iterations rather than national testimonies” (105). The interaction of the Bildungsroman with nationalism will be addressed in more detail within the context of ethnic versions of the genre in subsequent chapters. For the moment it suffices to note that unlike Cisneros, Kingston and Lorde whose stories of Bildung write self into community, Kincaid’s work, in particular Lucy, seems indifferent to this task. However, just as communal solidarity is mediated in the ethnic writers whose work will be treated in the following chapters, the notion of individualism that is being

---

11 See Fredric Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” for a discussion of third-world texts and forms, including the Bildungsroman, as national allegories.
asserted in Caribbean women's texts is not unmitigated. In the case of Kincaid's work, as I will show, the memory of the past mediates her mobility in the present gesturing towards images of bound motion. MacDonald-Smythe in a brief survey of the history of the Caribbean Bildungsroman explains that male West Indian writers (such as George Lamming and Edward Brathwaite), especially in the 1950s, appropriated an individualistic genre to represent the experience of an entire community (30). If the Bildungsroman is reclaimed for such a purpose and "creolised" by Caribbean writers who seek to construct narratives of the self/nation to assert decolonisation, female writers "contribute to the further creolisation of the Bildungsroman", to cite MacDonald-Smythe (32), in that they add to it gendered perspectives of experiences such as mobility and trauma.

Coming back to an earlier point, that is the association of travel with colonialism, Mary Louise Pratt has revealed in her influential study Imperial Eyes the ways through which the rhetoric of imperialism, with its discursive emphasis on travel and exploration, casts "undiscovered" lands in sexual terms and describes them as dark continents to be invaded and possessed by male explorers. Given the "feminisation" of colonised territories and the fetishisation of Black sexuality, this chapter will also investigate alternative patterns of mobility by postcolonial women writers in which female sexuality is used as a vehicle of empowerment rather than objectification. This is something to which I will return in the last chapter where I look at Audre's Lorde's representations of the body.

Bringing together the two thematic centres which will organise the subsequent textual analysis, that is trauma and mobility, the purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the ways in which trauma, depending on its distinct articulations, animates discourses of mobility, which gesture towards responding to its hold in various ways. These discourses engage in a dialogue with old and new tropes of mobility and shape narratives of formation in specific ways, ways that ultimately determine whether Bildung is possible in the aftermath of trauma and, if this is the case, the forms that it can take. Since, as it will become clear, trauma always leaves a realm of remains susceptible to continuous signification, I will trace its textual itinerary and recurrence from At the Bottom of the River to Lucy, comparing at the same time the patterns of mobility and forms of knowledge that it generates in the two texts. The analysis of Kincaid's work will proceed with the above aims in mind.
Merging with and Separating from the Mother: Bound Motion in *At the Bottom of the River*

In *At the Bottom of the River*, the unnamed narrator’s *Bildung* is encoded as a journey from speechlessness to voice. The mother-daughter bond provides the thematic and emotional centre of the collection of stories, and, given that it is so predominant, it transcends the pressures of the courtship and marriage plot. The “mother-daughter romance”, although it “writes beyond the ending” of the traditional female *Bildungsroman*, presents its own dangers, however. As Moira Ferguson contends, motherhood has a “double articulation” in Caribbean fiction (*Where the Land 1*). In a fiction where colonial power manifests itself through domestic institutions, motherhood is both biological and colonial. In Caribbean literature the mother figure is conflated with the land, and becomes symbolic not only of the native land (the Caribbean), but also of the colonial mother country (England) (Nasta xxv). Thus, just as in Kingston’s work, as we will see, the relationship to the mother tongue is problematic, in Kincaid’s the ambiguity of the maternal voice is a recurring anxiety, which both authors attempt to resolve through the practice of a bound motion. This double or simultaneous movement registers both attraction and resistance to the mother/land and her tongue.

The daughter’s movement towards a position of speech separate from the mother can be charted by comparing the narrative space given to the mother’s and daughter’s voices respectively in the various stories, by deciding the extent to which they are distinct or become blurred, and finally by locating instances of silence or of dialogue in their conversational encounters. In the first story, “Girl”, a one-sentence, three-page paragraph, which is an incantation of instructions on how to become a proper lady, the mother’s voice appears to possess a mesmerising power. We can glimpse here the duality of the mother which makes her a conservative-progressive hybrid, a carrier of colonial ideas and at the same time a vehicle of potentially transgressive baggage:

> Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday ... don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; ... when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum on it, ... on Sundays try
to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; (3–4, emphasis in the original)\(^\text{12}\)

The mother instils patriarchal and colonial values in her daughter, thus identifying with the colonisers (“try to walk like a lady”), but also shows her ways of performing transgressions (“this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it”), at times siding with the native culture (“this is how to make good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child”, where good medicine refers to native practices, as it becomes clear in *Annie John*). The daughter’s voice, which interrupts the litany of the mother’s exhortations only twice, is marked by italics in the text and, given that her mother only acknowledges one of her intrusions, represents a feeble gesture of defiance.

It seems, then, that the daughter’s journey towards finding her own voice is still situated at an initial stage. In the first part (“The House”) of the third story of the collection entitled “At Last”, however, mother and daughter appear to engage in a dialogue:

Why were all the doors closed so tight shut?
But they weren’t closed.
I saw them closed.
What passes between us then? (14)

The fact that the two voices are given equal space and that there is a two-way communication suggests that the earlier stage of the daughter’s voicelessness in “Girl” has been overcome. Nevertheless, it is still hard to distinguish which voice belongs to the mother and which to the daughter. As the conflation of the two voices implies, then, the daughter has not yet found a distinct voice.

The above fusion of mother and daughter, enacted stylistically in the text through the blurring of their speech, also acquires a more “physical” manifestation in some stories of the collection, which further emphasise how traumatic and, thus, immobilising the

\(^{12}\) When citing from the primary texts, I provide page numbers without including the name of the author or text in the brackets unless the context makes this hard to follow. Quotations of any secondary material are marked normally with all the information within brackets or within the sentence. I will apply this principle throughout the chapters.
separation from the mother can be. The story “My Mother”, for instance, depicts the narrator boarding the boat that will take her away from her island and her mother. It seems, however, as if this departure had to be enacted so as to make the return an even more joyful moment. The scene of separation, the exemplary scene of trauma par excellence in Kincaid’s work, “like a film being rewound” (Paravisini-Gebert 77) or a fort-da game turns out to be a scene of reunion in which the daughter totally merges with the mother’s body: “I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began” (60). The longing to return to the womb, which conveys a strong reluctance to grow, is what, according to Moretti, underpins the Bildungsroman in the aftermath of the trauma of the Great War: Childhood becomes the “Lost Kingdom” (231); or as he puts it elsewhere, “under artillery fire, the favourite position of World War I infantrymen was the fetal one” (Moretti 234). Kincaid’s images of intercorporeality seem to point to another sort of traumatic experience well documented by psychoanalysis, which revises the Bildungsroman’s autonomous notion of self by revealing the power of the pre-oedipal connection to the mother: “I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother’s arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach” (“My Mother” 60). As I will show in more detail below, the trauma of separation, acknowledged as more painful for women, is in some stories of the collection paralleled to a prelapsarian bliss, thus recycling Moretti’s trope of the dissolving paradise mentioned above. However, this trauma becomes specifically situated within the context of the experience of colonialism.13

“What I Have Been Doing Lately” is another section that captures the contradictory movement traced in “My Mother”. To the linear, progressive movement of the male Bildungsroman that gives the illusion of total self-determination, Kincaid juxtaposes an alternative geometry characterised by confusion and ambivalence. As in the previous story of the collection, it is the motif of the literal journey that is being used here. Nevertheless, it is subjected to a number of modifications. Its circularity suggests a particular form of quest, what Hirsch has described as a spiritual journey, but it also points to a technique that Kincaid takes from Antiguan oral narratives. According to Annis Pratt’s analysis of the

13 The identification of childhood with a lost Arcadia, a Romantic motif which underlines the spontaneity and imagination of the child, is also enacted stylistically in the collection through certain parts which appear to be written according “to a child’s mode of perception and language” (see Ismond 75).
correlation of women with nature in modern fiction and in particular in the female Bildungsroman, the female journey often takes place in a natural setting, which here appears as a world filled with contradictions. Things appear and disappear out of nowhere. Nature, an extension of the female principle, according to Pratt ("Women and Nature" 477), is not presented in this story as a refuge. On the contrary it hides dangers that threaten to engulf the heroine. At the same time, the “naturistic epiphanies" (Pratt 481) that it inspires appear to be indecipherable. It is not a coincidence that the protagonist is in a “deep hole” when she sees things written “in a foreign language" in this story (42). The meditation on changeability and unreality, which the cryptic poetry illustrates in At the Bottom of the River, has been associated “with an African-Caribbean understanding of life, obeah" (Hoving 205), a native practice of magic and witchcraft that stresses ideas of transformation.

The circularity which characterises “What I Have Been Doing Lately" is not only thematic but also formal. Such circularity emerges through instances of repetition, which are typical of Kincaid’s style. The narrative of the daughter’s journey “gestates” anew in a second version which picks up the details of the first in order to rework them. Starting with the phrase “What I have been doing lately", the story narrates the protagonist’s adventure: “I was lying in bed and the doorbell rang. I ran downstairs. Quick. I opened the door. There was no one there. I stepped outside" (40). The story begins one more time when the narrator is asked the question “And just what have you been doing lately?" by a woman she meets on the road. Her response is the following: “What I have been doing lately: I was lying in bed on my back, my hands drawn up, my fingers interlaced lightly at the nape of my neck. Someone rang the doorbell …” (43). The whole story resembles a child’s game. The “looping of the narrative”(Paravisini-Gebert 70), which makes the text self-reflexive, also recalls postmodern experiments which undermine any sense of teleology and closure, both significant elements of the conventional Bildungsroman. However, as already mentioned, this is also a characteristic of oral narratives on which Kincaid partly draws. As we will see, this distinction applies as well to Kingston’s self-reflexive moments that have been uncritically attributed to postmodern experimentation rather than to the nature of “talk-stories", which her translations revise. Moreover, unlike the circularity which Hirsch uncovers in the plot of the spiritual quest (one that involves inward growth, return to society and finally death), as
MacDonald-Smythe has noted, the second version of the journey in this story replaces the passivity of the first one with activity (133). Indeed, the disorientation experienced by the narrator in the first version is not felt in the second. The protagonist is determined to keep walking rather than waiting for things miraculously to happen. At the same time, there is a scene in which the protagonist throws a stone at the monkey she sees, which never takes place in the first version. Such shifts create a space of agency, which, unlike the fusion observed in “My mother”, allows for some mobility, no matter how tempered it appears to be.

In the light of the protagonist’s ambivalent movement, the trope of bound mobility might be better suited to describe her journey of development. Such qualified movement is directly related to the maternal figure as well as to the Caribbean home in that they both seem to circumscribe the daughter’s motion. In “What I Have Been Doing Lately” both versions of the journey presented, despite their slight differences, emphasise the narrator’s nostalgia for her mother and her wish to return back home. The image of travelling together with the mother becomes literal in “My Mother”. Many of its sections translate the daughter’s process of maturation in physical terms and, thus, depart from earlier depictions in which the narrator strives to find a voice of her own. Once again, development presupposes a free space where the daughter can breathe and grow unimpeded. This space, though, opens a gap between mother and daughter, which the daughter interprets as a betrayal.

Kincaid invents tropes to convey the daughter’s developing bitterness and rage, which border on a matricidal desire. According to Thomas L. Jeffers, patricide and matricide in many Bildungsromane “seem figuratively a kind of test of [wo]manhood” (17) for the Bildungsheld, but in this case the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter is a product of the former’s ambivalent status as both supporter of the native culture and colonial agent. Trauma, which exceeds traditional forms of representation, is once more captured in symbolic ways. The tears the protagonist sheds over the separation from the mother become “thick and black and poisonous water” (54), she hopes to see her mother “permanently cemented to seabed” (56), and she builds a beautiful house for her mother which conceals a hole. Despite these attempts to overcome her trauma through hatred, the
daughter is defeated by her feelings of remorse and by her fear of the mother’s hyperbolised size: “My mother has grown to an enormous height. I have grown to an enormous height also, but my mother’s height is three times mine” (58).

Biblical imagery is used in “My Mother” to suggest that the maternal figure is a kind of God and that the pre-oedipal bonding a kind of lost paradise. The trope of the Edenic Garden features frequently and so does the symbol of the snake. Similarly, the story “The Letter from Home” resonates with religious references with its meditation on Heaven, Hell, the Lamb and the Lion. In an earlier scene in “Wingless” the mother is portrayed walking “on a carpet of pond lilies” (25), echoing a familiar biblical scene from Christ’s life. The unnamed protagonist, on the other hand, is identified with Lucifer, an association hinted at in Annie John and made more explicit in Lucy. The mother is depicted controlling not only water but also light and, given these powers, the daughter can only recognise herself as a mere reflection. In one scene of “My Mother” the mother blows out the candles and the daughter’s shadow, which “cannot stir without the (m)other’s”, to use Irigaray’s phrase, vanishes. The fact that the daughter cannot define herself outside her mother carries echoes of the etymology of Bildung, which, according to Wilhelm Dilthey, “is the process by which a human being becomes a replica of his mentor” (qtd in Feng 3). This issue will be further explored in the third chapter, which addresses questions of imitation or fidelity to the original through an investigation of processes of translation.

A further example of the dependency of the daughter upon the mother for her maturation, which gestures towards tropes of bound mobility, can be found in a scene of the same story where the mother transforms herself into a reptile. The daughter’s metamorphosis is not described in as much detail as the mother’s, but is presented as “a secondary, imitative gesture” (Paravisini-Gebert 75). According to Moretti, such a supernatural metamorphosis is a pattern of non-European narratives which “lie at the meeting point between rites of passage, mythic narratives and the Bildungsroman” (246). Moretti considers this to be typical of a specifically female Bildungsroman. In Kincaid’s

---

14 Jeffers reads a number of Anglo-American Bildungsromane focusing on the trope of paradise, which he casts in terms of “unity with a maternal matrix” (121). In Kincaid’s case, it also emerges from her engagement with Milton. See Simmons’s “Kincaid and the Canon: In Dialogue with Paradise Lost and Jane Eyre”, pp. 57-72, in Jamaica Kincaid.
collection, such instances of metamorphosis, which engage the fantastic, allude, as already mentioned, to Antigua’s folk tradition and in particular to obeah, as well as to the figure of the jablesse, usually a powerful female who can assume different forms. Although the daughter is portrayed growing “a special lens” to allow her to see in the dark and “a special coat” to keep her warm, a development which suggests that she is becoming more autonomous, she is soon tired of living alone and returns to her mother’s side (57). The two, who were formerly depicted travelling together in the form of reptiles leaving in their trail “small colonies of worms” (56), are portrayed again as a pair of travelling companions, in a revision of an earlier scene. The motif of the mother-daughter dyad in flight is used in many contemporary women writers’ feminised versions of the quest romance. Such an emphasis on connection and affiliation revises the image of the solitary male journey so prized by American cultural mythology.

In “My Mother” the idea of bound motion is reinforced through the repetition of the pronouns “we” and “our” which suggest a joint effort: “Our white muslin skirts billow up around our ankles, our hair hangs straight down our backs as our arms hang straight at our sides … we eat from the same bowl, drink from the same cup; when we sleep, our heads rest on the same pillow” (60, my emphasis). The section closes with mother and daughter walking, this time in a domestic space, “merging and separating” (60) in the by now familiar simultaneous movement enacted in almost every story of the collection. The daughter’s expectation that “soon we shall enter the final stage of our evolution” (60) stresses that development is a shared process between mother and daughter. However, the question which needs to be addressed is to what extent this bound mobility traced so far is truly empowering for the narrator and, most importantly, to what kind of Bildung it leads.

The Politics of a Silent Voice

“Blackness” is one of the most lyrical stories of the collection and as a result probably the hardest to decipher. The section revolves around two equally enigmatic concepts, “blackness” and “the silent voice”. The motifs of light and darkness also feature in the story as throughout the collection at large. In most stories, light is presented as a symbol of self-knowledge and self-awareness, as for instance in “Wingless” where the heroine is portrayed
swimming “in a shaft of light” (22). However, given the ambivalent movement that we have traced, the narrator is often depicted as having “one foot in the dark, the other in the light” (51). In “Blackness” it is the silent voice which seems to rescue the daughter from the blackness: “I shrug off my mantle of hatred. In love I move toward the silent voice” (52). Light becomes significant as a symbol of a renewed self in the last story of the collection where the narrator becomes transformed into a prism refracting and reflecting light. What is challenging, however, is to attempt to define the form of self-knowledge opened to the protagonist both by the silent voice and the light in these final two stories.

In an insightful analysis of “Blackness” in a chapter devoted to Kincaid’s writing, Hoving matches blackness to race and, by extension, to “postcolonial, and/or black cultural practices” (185). She then contrasts this “black postcolonial” voice to a silent postmodern one which seems to lure the narrator towards a particular direction. Hoving justifies the connection she makes between the silent voice and postmodern poetics by alluding to the way silence has been used in postmodern literary texts, in terms of pauses and gaps within discourse, in order to challenge unitary systems (185). A similar appropriation of a silent voice has also been associated with practices of écriture féminine in the sense that silence pierces a phallogocentric discourse. In an article on the novel of self-discovery, Felski also alludes to the use of silence but localises it within the female novel of awakening in which silence is used as a tool that paradoxically serves to articulate those female desires that cannot be spoken using a male discourse (“The Novel of Self-Discovery” 143). In considering the possibility of such a distinction between the postmodern and the postcolonial, Hoving engages with familiar understandings of the former as less “situated”, in her term, than the latter (187). Citing Linda Hutcheon among other critics, Hoving explains that postmodern texts usually have an “aesthetic and negative character” in contrast to “the positive character” of postcolonial texts (188). This seems to suggest that postmodernism is unable to theorise agency and is thus reduced to a merely aesthetic practice of the West without political repercussions, a point which has been both defended and contested. Hoving herself finds the distinction problematic and proceeds to show how Kincaid complicates it in the rest of her chapter.
Because of the formal experimentation and emphasis on ambivalence and fragmentation in *At the Bottom of the River*, many critics who conceptualise postmodernism in terms of its poetics rather than its politics have rushed to proclaim Kincaid a postmodern author. According to Hoving, such an attempt ignores Kincaid's engagement with various traditions (including Caribbean modernism) that make any project of domestication under any label suspect (203). Giovanna Covi's textual analysis in “Jamaica Kincaid and the Resistance to Canons”, for instance, with its focus on the formal characteristics of the text, risks overemphasising the ways the collection challenges Western metaphysics at the expense of adequately situating it in a non-Western tradition. Still, Hoving's interrogation into whether the developmental narrative of the collection culminates in a “girl's surrender to the silence of a postmodern discourse that does not speak her reality” (185) seems to be legitimate given Kincaid's own comment in an interview that *At the Bottom of the River* was “a very unangry, decent, civilized book” and that it represented “a successful attempt by English people to make their version of a human being ...” (Perry 499).

Kincaid's remark raises the possibility that the protagonist's *Bildung* in the collection concludes with her conformity to “English” or colonial education, an outcome buttressed by the protagonist's attachment to her mother and her inability to see her complicity with colonial practices of education. Perhaps this blindness also speaks of the ways in which the collection tends to be received by Western audiences. Without readings which bring to the surface the colonial echoes of the text, such as Ferguson's “Mystical Decoding” in *Where the Land Meets the Body*, MacDonald-Smythe's investigation of Kincaid's reclaiming of Caribbean oral narratives, or Hoving's uncovering of the use of irony in her work, it seems difficult to situate Kincaid's first work, with its Standard English, abstract beauty and silent voice, within a different tradition, especially if the collection is not read in juxtaposition with the author's later work. However, Kincaid's comment in the interview can be also seen, as Hoving is right to point out, as an attempt to contextualise the alleged postmodern sensibility of the collection by exposing its association with English colonialism and, thus,
proceed to reclaim the text as postcolonial. In other words, Kincaid's comment could be read as a cautionary remark against an ahistorical or monolithic understanding of her work.

Debates like the above, which pertain to practices of labeling, are open to multiple interpretations. However, what is important here is to assess the unnamed protagonist's Bildung in *At the Bottom of the River*, comparing it with Lucy's. The association I make between the *postmodern* and *At the Bottom of the River* on the one hand, and the *postcolonial* and *Lucy* on the other, in terms of less “situated” and more “situated”, is not intended to reproduce a superficial dichotomy. The choice of these labels does not suggest that the two texts should be fully domesticated under these categories. It would be difficult, for instance, not to agree with Hoving's well-documented conclusion that Kincaid's "writing does not inhabit a binary scheme—but [should be situated] in a zone where modernisms, postmodernisms, postcolonialisms, and feminisms collide and overlap, and it picks its own itinerary through all of these" (224). Having said this, the postmodern/postcolonial debate Hoving engages with in her chapter, is useful for me here in that it provides a terminology, however problematic, to convey a possible way in which the distinction between a more abstract trauma on the one hand and a more concrete and contextualised one on the other can be translated in formal terms. To put it in a way that echoes descriptions of patterns of Bildung, if the *Bildungsroman* traditionally documents one's development from innocence and ignorance to maturity and knowledge, the trajectory in Kincaid's *Bildung* as a writer (from *At the Bottom of the River* to *Lucy* at least) involves, among other things, a difficult negotiation between the *postmodern* and the *postcolonial*. Although there is no clear-cut directional axis, through *Lucy*, as I hope to show, Kincaid localises *At the Bottom of the River* by re-entering what superficially appears to be the same trauma, thus extricating her former text from a

---

15 Although Kincaid has not used the distinction postmodern/postcolonial in her public repudiation of the style in which *At the Bottom of the River* is written, she seems to be aware of the ways in which her work has been approached. Hoving makes this explicit when she describes the author's passage from one form of expression to another in the following way: "After having been praised for the *postmodern* charm of her earlier work ... she declared in a 1990 interview 'I'm not interested in that form of expression anymore. Now, for instance, I've become very interested in writing about sex, or smells. I'm interested in being not a decent person" (qtd. in Hoving 227-8, my emphasis). Hoving suggests that this shift not only challenges the *postmodern* theorising of the body in terms of textuality, which underpins colonial stereotypes, but also "narrow postcolonial discourses that [Kincaid] loathes" (228). Clearly, then, Kincaid's work cannot be fully domesticated under such categories, but it invokes them.
necessarily Western tradition. Such a contextualisation redeems readings that have downplayed the collection’s political use value while at the same time resisting closure.

Returning to “Blackness”, I want to show how the cryptic language and abstract setting of this story glosses over the specificity of trauma which Lucy makes more explicit. This story seems to establish a parallel between the narrator’s trauma and a more universal predicament that assumes existentialist dimensions. The daughter embarks on a meditation on death which will culminate in the last story of the collection; phrases such as “banishing randomness from my existence” (47), “fleeting existence, ... subject to the violence of chance” (51), or questions such as “What is my nature, then” (48) point to the narrator’s effort to define her place amidst the infinity of the cosmos. Her bodily fragmentation, which makes her unable to recognise herself, is a direct result of her separation from the mother who stands for a not-yet-divided Mother Nature. On the contrary, after the “Fall” which fractures the symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter, the latter has to negotiate her position within a hostile “reasonable” world.

To cope with the pain her enigmatic trauma brings, unlike Lucy who claims an angry voice, the narrator of “Blackness” opts for the silent voice which “does not oppose the blackness, for conflict is not a part of its nature” (52). This kind of compromised solution resonates with the closure of the traditional Bildungsroman, which, for Moretti, makes it a “weak form” (12), a suggestion that I will clarify and complicate in subsequent chapters. The silent voice acquired by the narrator at the end of her development is similarly weak. Although it helps the daughter to “shrug off [her] mantle of despair” and hatred (52) and thus reconcile herself with the inevitability of loss (whether this refers to death or to her separation from the mother), it does not allow her to gain an insight into the ways colonialism is implicated in her trauma. As a result, the narrator is unable to confront the blackness that marks her difference: “The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased” (52). Through the association with a more abstract and even metaphysical trauma, the specificity of her predicament is, in other words, dissolved, hidden beneath “a fiction of universal and presumably equal suffering” (Lanser 93). Lucy

---

16 Having said that, I am, however, aware of critiques made against the postcolonial by critics, like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik, who, in the words of the third, see postcolonialism as “a child of postmodernism” (330).
on the other hand, as I will suggest, refuses to sacrifice her difference, paying, of course, a price of her own.

The silent voice, then, points to another facet of bound mobility, which, while it gives some kind of agency, sacrifices another: “Living in the silent voice, I am at last at peace. Living in the silent voice, I am at last erased” (52). The silent voice simultaneously expresses and refrains from expressing the narrator’s trauma. As Hoving suggests, the weak voice is a stepping stone for the development of a more politicised one (213). Gilmore refers to Kincaid’s politics as a politics “of rage” (111) and, like Hoving, suggests that it is Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, a text which precedes *Lucy*, which “clarifies [this] politics … and differentiates its intensity from its imbrications in the mother-daughter relationship” (111). My intention, in the following part of this chapter is to show the ways in which Kincaid returns to an angry, though more subtle discourse with *Lucy*. This turn allows her to articulate trauma in more political terms without abandoning the mother-daughter matrix and the melancholia associated with it, both being so central to her work.

Before moving to *Lucy*, however, it remains to clarify why the silent voice that the narrator acquires at the end of her journey is feeble. One suggestion would be that it points to an ahistorical or even escapist solution which cannot offer any proper resistance especially when one’s life is burdened with colonial relations. The last story of the collection returns to some of the familiar tropes of the mystical quest, such as the natural or symbolic setting of the spiritual journey, and ends by bringing the protagonist to art. This story can be seen as reinforcing what Hoving calls “a schizophrenic sense of time”, whose politics are regressive (212). Hoving, who investigates this as an Antiguan discourse, traces its presence in *A Small Place* and connects its weakness to a collective immobility and a total submission to neocolonialism.

Another connection can be made on the basis of some of the formal and thematic attributes of this story. According to Felski, the escape from history, encoded in the understanding of time as circular, is a recurrent motif in the novel of awakening (“The Novel of Self-Discovery” 142). Since this variant of the *Bildungsroman* has been approached as underpinning a distinctively female paradigm, a notion of time as cyclical or monumental becomes, in Kristeva’s term, “women’s time”. The last story of *At the Bottom of the River*
seems, indeed, to share many of the concerns of the novel of awakening, especially in its emphasis on the search for an authentic self which appears to have been alienated by patriarchy (a quest which, it can be argued, occludes the protagonist's predicament as a colonised subject). The search for a world of "unquestionable truth and purpose and beauty" (78) points to a futile effort to recapture the sense of time before the Fall, a primary unity, that can only take place through a nostalgic memory or through artistic transcendence. In accordance with the novel of awakening, the story that closes the volume seems to underline the difference between the female and male principle. The narrator undergoes a bathing ritual and emerges "solid and complete" (82). Such an experience of unity, which the text intensifies in portraying the female protagonist claiming each part of her body anew, is clearly differentiated from the masculine element that "cannot conceive of the union of opposites" (63).

From another perspective closer to Hoving's account, it could be argued that the narrator's yearning for a world "not yet divided, not yet examined, not yet numbered, and not yet dead" (78) points to a "precolonial harmony" in Africa as Ferguson interprets it (Where the Land 24), rather than to a female "wild zone" uncontaminated by patriarchy. Even in this case, however, the search for an original purity in a precolonial Paradise risks being seen as essentialist in that it elides the differences among Black people for the sake of establishing a common connection to Africa. Given the overall abstraction of the collection such an interpretation could be viable, although Kincaid herself in an interview dissociates herself with "any sort of back-to-Africa philosophy" (Simmons, "Coming-of-Age" 118). Whatever the scenario, ideas of unity and fixity are finally undermined since in this last story of At the Bottom of the River conflicting identities are replaced with multiple ones, as the text clearly suggests: "I did not exist in pain or pleasure, east or west or north or south, or up or down, or past or present or future ... I were a prism, many sided or transparent, ..." (80).

However, such a "victory", in the sense that it destabilises any notion of a unified or fixed self so crucial to the conventional Bildungsroman, needs to be evaluated by considering the price that the narrator has to pay for such an experience. The last story of the collection opens with the description of a large stream of water, which has "only a deep ambition to see itself mighty and powerful" (62). In ways which connect the water's fluidity with tropes

48
of a particularly female travelling, the protagonist becomes identified with this body of water which “collects itself in a pool” (63). According to Hoving, water which becomes associated with the fluids of the female body and, thus, with a form of female sensuality and sexuality, points to a form of bound motion, a movement “rooted in the body” (62). Nevertheless, the sensual knowledge that the body opens is soon substituted with another, which points the protagonist’s Bildung to a more inward direction.

To summarise the final steps taken by the narrator in this last story, she first recognises the transience of the objects around her and, as a result, acknowledges her own fragility. In order to defend herself against the unspeakable trauma of loss and death, she activates a number of memories which take her back to flashes of everyday joy. The path towards Art, which promises to compensate for the loss that she sees everywhere, appears to be open. The narrator sees a house at the bottom of the river with only one room, a room “with an A-shaped roof” (75). The protagonist strips herself of her former body, a process of “shedding” which is common in the novel of awakening, but retains her will over which she has “complete dominion” (79). As soon as she embraces this new self, she experiences an epiphany which gives the world back its undivided totality and her fragmented body its lost integrity. The protagonist’s empowered position, further emphasised by her transformation into a prism refracting and reflecting light, is clearly a temporary solution, which she can, though, attempt to “fix” through writing. The process of writing out traumatic experience is often considered therapeutic in the sense that it can help one move beyond trauma through a process of mourning. In her study on trauma and testimony in women’s life writing, Suzette Henke calls this process of writing “scriptotherapy” (xii). Writing as a form of therapy seems to revise the traditional Künstlerroman’s obsession with the exceptional artist or genius in that it uncovers another impetus behind writing. This is also crucial to Lorde’s work, as I will show in the last chapter.

Having surpassed fear after the above moments of revelation, the protagonist of *At the Bottom of the River* emerges from her “pit” which, as she confesses, she has “sealed up securely” having put all the ancestral ghosts to rest (81). She then steps into a room where she sees a pen. The collection closes at this moment, leaving the narrator to embark upon her writing. It seems, though, that we have already read what the narrator is prepared to
write. In privileging the silent voice both as a narrative technique of the collection and a philosophy of life, the narrator has found her style; she has managed to construct a position of speech and to articulate part of her plight. She has, however, sealed the place which keeps another more concrete predicament, not yet audible despite its echoes, locked and repressed, thus depriving herself of a different kind of knowledge. It is Lucy who will reopen that pit in yet another revision of the process of identity formation in the midst of trauma.

Declarations of (in) (ter) Dependence in Lucy

Unlike the interiorised plot of At the Bottom of the River, Lucy opens with the depiction of its eponymous narrator reaching the United States. From the beginning of the novel, we get the impression that a more mature narrator relates the protagonist’s journey of identity formation. The narrator begins her story, for instance, saying that she arrived on a cold night “as expected in the middle of January, though I didn’t know that at the time” (3, my emphasis). The “distance between the perspective of the narrator and that of the protagonist” is listed as one of the essential traits of the narrative model of the Bildungsroman devised by Hirsch (“The Novel of Formation” 293). From the beginning, Lucy’s partial consciousness is juxtaposed with the narrator’s retrospective awareness of things. The protagonist escapes the “small place” of Antigua to move to America, which before arriving she sees as “a lifeboat” for her “small drowning soul” (3). Lucy here, as Kristen Mahlis notes, “expresses the feelings of many Caribbean authors, who speak of escaping the parochial atmosphere of their small countries” (166). It also recalls George’s pattern in several novels of female development by women of colour according to which coming to America is envisaged as an important stage in the fashioning of a modernised identity. However, Lucy’s escape does not provide the freedom she seeks. Expressing her disappointment over the gap between the idea and its reality when she compares the way she had imagined the places she passes on her way to the airport in daydreams, places which turned out as “ordinary, dirty, worn down … in real life”, the narrator notes, “It was not my first bout with the disappointment of reality and it would not be my last” (4, my emphasis).
Lucy's acknowledgement in this first chapter, entitled “Poor Visitor”, that appearances are not to be trusted suggests that her quest to forge a new identity will be shaped by a constant revision and reevaluation of goals and expectations. The closure of the previous text which portrays the protagonist shedding her former self at the bottom of the river is problematised by Lucy's opening comment after she arrives to America: “Oh, I had imagined that with my one swift act—leaving home and coming to this new place—I could leave behind me, as if it were an old garment never to be worn again, my sad thoughts, my sad feelings” (7). The first chapter is already imbued with a feeling of nostalgia for the Caribbean home and an accompanying insecurity over the future which is represented as “a gray blank” (6).

Throughout Lucy the narrative of the protagonist's Bildung consists of two distinct temporalities: on the one hand, there is a forward movement which registers the appeal of the ideals of individualism and mobility for the protagonist; on the other hand, fertile moments in the narrative present open doors to the past, which surfaces in the form of dreams, snapshots and flashbacks. These vignettes of the past, coupled with the text's preoccupation with the mother-daughter relationship, derail the progressive train of events that take place in the narrative present. The co-presence of “here” and “there” grants Lucy's mobility a peculiar quality of “dwelling-in travel”, borrowing Clifford's phrase (26). The text alludes to a “specific diaspora temporality and historicity” (Gilroy, Black Atlantic 266), which complicates the linear and teleological character of the traditional Bildungsroman. At times the form of fluid temporality that we encounter is aided by the memories of the body and bodily sensations which initiate spatio-temporal transitions, as when Lucy feeds her employer's child and remembers the taste of a boy's tongue when she was younger and still in Antigua or when she recalls the taste of her mother's food. On other occasions Lucy explicitly reflects on time. For instance, at one moment she visualises time as “a flow of water” which has created “two banks”, corresponding to the past and the present (5). Several dispersed comments elsewhere further illuminate her perception of time: “everything remains the same and yet nothing is the same” (78); “my sense of time had changed, and I did not know if the day went by too quickly or too slowly” (154). What seems to be the strongest barrier to her reinvention of self is the image of the present
“taking on the shape of the past”, which Lucy clarifies with the phrase “My past was my mother” (90).

The duality exemplified above can be approached as an instance of what I have called bound mobility. In this sense, the melancholic memory of the past in the novel, in particular of the mother, can be seen as a postcolonial version of what Fraiman calls “the logic of impediment” (36), which serves as a critique of the forward movement that drives the other half of the novel. Unlike George, who maintains that “the novel’s parallel preoccupation with this teenager’s ongoing power struggle with her mother dims the potential of the less familial resistance proffered by the text” (139), in what follows, I will suggest that it paradoxically fuels it. In other words, Lucy’s sad realisation that “My past was my mother”, which seemingly condemns her project of rebirth in the present, or which displaces attention from the critique of America by reducing Lucy’s traumas to “a ‘vinegary’ bitterness” towards her mother (George 139), in reality makes the narrator more alert to the various forces that shape her in the present.

George suggests that because coming-of-age plots are conventional and representative, they can easily be read in ways that gloss over cultural differences (139). Along this line, Lucy’s rage toward her mother risks being dismissed as a natural adolescent stage of frustration; one, however, which, if we were to accept this scenario, would eventually be overcome. At the Bottom of the River seems more susceptible to the risks George warns us about on account of its abstraction, and so does Annie John, which The New York Times Book Review has described as a text “so touching and familiar … it could be happening to any of us, anywhere, any time, any place”. Although for George Lucy’s participation in the coming of age genre condemns the protagonist’s resistance to something that is interpreted “as no more than a display of adolescent angst” (140), its collision with trauma, and the persistence of this trauma across Kincaid’s work, instead of eliminating history, allows it to “arise there where immediate understanding may not” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 11). The diffuse history the mother stands for in Kincaid’s work not only becomes “re-situated in our understanding” as something which is not necessarily straightforward” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 11), but also within a genre that is supposed to be hostile to anything other than private, that is limited and familial, history. The fact that trauma can be perceived only in
unassimilable forms here also defamiliarises a genre like the Bildungsroman, which tries, in vain, to contain a narrative that cannot be integrated within a completed story.

History arises in Lucy through the interwoven dreams which contain symbols echoing the traumatic legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean. This past re-emerges at uncanny moments in the present which restage the narrator’s trauma within a new setting. In terms that echo Benjamin, “the past is brought through memory to bear witness to the present as a flash of emergence, an instant of emergency and a moment of production”; the lost past “step[s] into the light of a present moment of danger” (Eng and Kazanjian 6-7). This time Lucy has to confront her American employers who function as neo-colonial agents seeking to fix her into a set of static roles. In particular, the third dream, which closes the first chapter, is indicative of the ways in which an old painful trauma can reopen in a new setting. In Lucy’s dream, Lewis, the father of the family where the protagonist works as an au-pair, chases her as she runs naked while Mariah, his wife, urges him to catch her. Both Lewis and Mariah interpret this dream in the context of the Western idea of repressed sexual desires, according to Freudian psychoanalysis (an interpretation supported by the appearance in the dream of phallic symbols such as the snakes). However, the dream also seems to contain colonial symbolism to which Lewis and Mariah are oblivious “in their determination to consolidate [Lucy’s] proper role in at least one … narrative” (O’Brien 73). They even pay no attention to Lucy’s interpretation, which ignores both Freud and the colonial symbolism of the dream: for Lucy the dream is proof that these people, Lewis and Mariah, are starting to be important for her. Her American employers choose nevertheless to cling to their interpretative framework, which they take to be the norm. Lewis further asserts his power of representing “the other”, by naming Lucy “the Visitor” (13), a nickname which captures her lack of belonging and exclusion from her new surroundings. In naming her thus, however, they give her a “spectral” agency, since Lucy, as I will show, will use her distance from things to expose hidden truths. Lucy’s name, “the visitor”, is appropriate, then, because, to appropriate William Spanos’s description, she becomes “the ‘revenant’—the interred ‘specter’ who returns to ‘visit’” (196).

In her effort to resist the ways in which the neocolonial centre tries to mould her, Lucy maintains critical distance from both past and present. Just as Lucy’s prequel, Annie John, is
about rebellion against colonial institutions such as motherhood and formal education, Lucy’s Bildung tells a similar story of resistance which interrogates the closure of the Bildungsroman, that is to say the idea of a final accommodation to society. Lucy cannot idealise her past and use it as a vehicle of compensation for her present plight because it is the locus of an enigmatic trauma. This trauma, which grows out of the daughter’s intense bond with the mother, as illustrated in At the Bottom of the River, is further contextualised in Lucy, in particular in the chapter “Cold Heart”. Although Kincaid never refers explicitly to a single originary event of the protagonist’s trauma, Lucy explains to Mariah that her mother favoured her brothers and prevented her from pursuing an education as a doctor. Such a betrayal draws attention to the mother’s inability to transgress the confinements of colonial and patriarchal orthodoxies, and articulates Lucy’s traumatic upbringing in her native Caribbean island. For Lucy, both Antigua and the United States, despite their differences, have limited life scripts to offer her. As she confesses, “In this great big world, why should my life be reduced to these two possibilities?” (21). Lucy does not seem to treat her border subjectivity as an exciting site of opportunity.

Similarly, she is unable to embrace a poetics of travel, in accordance with the Deleuzian notion of nomadism, which Caren Kaplan ironically describes as a form of travel that apparently allows everyone to “meet … en train” (“Deterritorialization” 191). In Lucy, in a scene which literally takes place in the train, the narrator exposes the ways in which such universalising and abstracting notions of travel hide the existence of asymmetrical power relations. In this scene, though both Lucy and Mariah travel in the same train, as Lucy observes, “The people sitting down to eat dinner all looked like Mariah’s relatives; the people waiting on them all looked like mine” (32). Lucy cannot construct a hyphenated or a nomadic identity; she fantasises an absolute freedom in a world of her own which transcends the need to belong through a determination to remain “free even to the definition of freedom”, as Diane Simmons writes (133). But, how and why does Lucy opt for such a radical solution? Most importantly, is such an idea of unbounded mobility a viable possibility for a postcolonial female subject, or even a possibility at all?

The narrative of Lucy’s coming of age in the United States registers the lure of the ideology of individualism, but this discourse is gradually shown to acquire an ironic
poignancy. Lucy seems to appropriate the rhetoric of movement, self-invention and freedom. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that it advances an indirect critique of the fissures of such myths, clothed in familiar discourses of liberalism and individual Bildung. The novel, in other words, proceeds from within to deconstruct such ideals, just as Lucy attempts to claim a position within discourses of mobility so as to invent a new self, but ends up repudiating them for what they serve to disguise. As Cyrus R. K. Patell puts it, “[F]or the victims of sexism, racism, and other forms of group-oriented discrimination, the promises of individualism are simultaneously the source and the frustration of hope” (22). This ambivalence is at the heart of the novel, and as already mentioned is voiced from the very beginning when Lucy arrives to America. The very choice of America (understood in the novel as the neocolonial power of late capitalism) as the site of Lucy’s escape from the colonial mother “measures the complex attractions and resistances that surpass any neat postcolonial binary”, as Ian Smith suggests (805). In what follows, I will trace these attractions and resistances by looking more closely at the double movement or bound mobility deployed by the text.

Throughout the novel, Lucy stresses the fact that she is “inventing” herself: “It was January again … I was making a new beginning again” (133); “The New Year came, and I was going somewhere new again” (143). Such a migratory pattern of identity, suggested through references to the passing of time such as the alternation of the seasons, is also reflected in Lucy’s project of “working through personae toward personhood” in Crucilla Cornell’s term (qtd. in Gilmore 103). In the first place, Lucy claims a past of her own. Having passed a winter in America and looking back at it, she exclaims, “It was my past, so to speak, my first real past—a past that was my own and over which I had the final word” (23). She also asserts her self-possession and agency in what seems to be the utmost act of individualism, namely changing one’s name, and identifies with Lucifer on account of his rebellion against power. Although she acknowledges that she has neither position nor money, she embraces her “intuition” and “invents” herself in the way an artist would do (134). In a scene of the chapter “Cold Heart” she identifies with such a figure, a painter (probably Gauguin) who left his family to travel around the world: “[I]Immediately I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an
unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven” (95). However, despite this initial act of identification spurred by the fact that she yearns to be “with the people who stand apart” (98), Lucy soon grows aware of the internal contradictions of such patterns of mobility and individualism: “I had heard of people in this position [that of an artist] ... I noticed that mostly they were men. It seemed to be a position that allowed for irresponsibility, so perhaps it was much better suited to men ...” (98). More importantly, as she concludes, although the painter rebelled “against an established order he had found corrupt”, and “died an early death”, he “had the perfume of the hero about him” (95). Lucy realises that her life, unlike this man’s, will never be found in the pages of a book: being “a young woman from the fringes of the world” who has left home “wrapping around her shoulders the mantle of a servant” (95), such a heroic narrative is by definition foreclosed to her.

But even if Lucy’s exclusion from such images of mobility as the above, which is at the heart of liberal humanism, lies in the ideological gendering of travel, Lucy is similarly marginalised by its feminist counterpart, namely liberal feminism, which is blind to racial and cultural markers of difference among women. Mariah seems in a way to correspond to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “female individualist” who constructs herself at the expense of other, less privileged, women (“Three Women’s Texts” 897). Mariah’s sentimental fiction is that of an equal sisterhood of women. She tries to persuade Lucy to overcome her bitterness over her mother and start anew. Nevertheless, whenever Mariah treats Lucy’s predicament as something common to all women as a result of the existence of patriarchal structures, Lucy’s more specific history is erased: “I felt [annoyance] at [Mariah] for once again telling me about everybody when I told her something about myself (139, my emphasis). Lucy dismisses Mariah’s feminist books, offered to her as guides to the mysteries of femininity, as attempts to reduce female identity to such simple formulas as “a womb, an ovary” (132). As Lucy points out, “Mariah had completely misinterpreted my situation. My life could not really be explained by this thick book that made my hands hurt as I tried to keep it open” (132). To further stress their similarity, in one scene Mariah goes as far as telling Lucy that she has “Indian blood” (40). This she announces to Lucy as if it were a “trophy” she possessed (40). Kaplan’s intervention into Deleuze and Guattari’s conception
of “becoming minor” could be used here to unravel this scene. Against what Kaplan cautions, Mariah “appropriates the minor through romanticization, envy, or guilt” (“Deterritorialization” 364). As Lucy confronts her, “How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (41).

Through the depiction of Lucy’s strong but ambivalent attachment to Mariah, Kincaid not only interrogates the possibility of a narrow sense of sisterly solidarity. Mariah is also granted the familiar duality that characterises Lucy’s mother, as illustrated in At the Bottom of the River. On the one hand she is attentive to Lucy’s needs, in ways which even surpass Lucy’s mother. On the other, she functions as a neo-colonial agent, a characteristic which, given the conflation of both maternal figures to Lucy’s mind, gives sharper relief to the ways the mother has been implicated in colonial discourses of education in At the Bottom of the River. As we have seen, in the collection of stories motherhood has a double articulation, which relates to issues of gender and race/colonialism; in Lucy, through Mariah who functions as a maternal substitute, such issues become “triangulated”, in Giles’s words, “through a series of points involving Britain, the United States, and the West Indies” (“American Literature” 35). While in Kincaid’s earlier text the mother/daughter bond is used as a metaphor for the unequal relations between the Caribbean and England, in Lucy, through the protagonist’s relationship to Mariah, one can explore the equally unequal power relations between the Caribbean and its new “mother country”, the United States. According to Gilmore, the utterance that organises Kincaid’s work, raising “the specter of endless autobiography”, is the following: “There will always be a mother” (97). The “spatial fluidity” invoked by Giles (“American Literature” 35) suggests that “this mother”, just like imperialism, has many faces.

Although Mariah is described in a more sympathetic light when compared to other female characters in the novel, Lucy is aware of how her employer blends with her surroundings in that she leads a superficial, empty life, typical of people who live comfortably and can appreciate beauty precisely because they have “an excess of beauty to begin with” (22). Lucy describes Mariah as a person for whom “things must have always gone her way” and thus as an unblemished female with a “pleasant” smell (27). Despite this seemingly envious note, the protagonist’s perception of her employer suddenly changes:
"And I thought, but that's the trouble with Mariah—she smells pleasant" (27). As in the scene with the painter already described, Lucy proceeds to define herself against Mariah: "By then I already knew that I wanted to have a powerful odor and would not care if it gave offense" (27). In claiming an offensive odor, she also asserts the subversive potential of such a distinction between the two women.

Emblematic of Mariah's neocolonial gaze and her determination to make others "see things the way she did" (36) is a scene in which she blindfolds Lucy and takes her to a field full of daffodils. Lucy, who has explained to Mariah in an earlier scene of the novel the ways in which these flowers are symbols of oppression to her, cannot share Mariah's enthusiasm. Although Lucy has never seen what daffodils look like, an old wound is reopened. The memory of Lucy having to recite a poem at school, probably Wordsworth's, an experience that led to nightmares of engulfment until now repressed, surfaces in front of the uncanny appearance of the flowers. Lucy underlines the difference in which the two women look at things. To Mariah's universalising vision, according to which daffodils are beautiful flowers for all, she juxtaposes her local gaze which can only contemplate "sorrow and bitterness" (30). Placed in Lucy's world, the daffodils carry a different string of echoes and inscriptions.

Edyta Oczkowicz argues that Lucy assumes the role of the "translator" in the novel in that she engages in both a creative and destructive process (118): she must invent a new identity, but to do that she must first shed her old self by decolonising the mind. This is after all what education (from the Latin educere) literally means, in other words to move out of something. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman in which heroes learn lessons and where formal education and reading plays an important role to their formation, the postcolonial Bildungsroman often thematises the process of "unlearning" by showing the constraints and traumatic repercussions of a colonial education.17

Throughout the novel Lucy exposes Mariah's restricted vision, which either obliterates or romanticises her history. Unlike her former self in *At the Bottom of the River* who is tempted to reduce things to their essence, so that the sun can become "The Sun" (77)—an

---

17 See Lima's "Imaginary Homelands" and "Decolonising Genre" for this aspect. See also a recent study entitled *Representations of Education in Literature*, in particular Eva Haxton's essay on education and the Caribbean Bildungsroman.
act, which Moretti associates with a “veritable semiotic anxiety” (240), typical of modernity—Lucy is caught in a reverse process. Instead of “de-semiotizing” things in order to cope with the sensory overload of indecipherable signs, to evoke Moretti’s vocabulary in a different context (240), Lucy is determined to invest signifiers with more local meanings so as to redress such totalising acts as Mariah’s, which ignore the specific conditions in which Lucy’s predicament is embedded. Lucy describes the daffodils in the following way: “They looked beautiful; they looked simple, as if to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea” (29). As Ian Smith interprets this description, “The history of disempowerment, conquest and slavery is this ‘complicated and unnecessary idea’ that is the obverse narrative of colonialism’s public face—lyric nature poetry” (817). Against this effort at cultural amnesia and depoliticisation, Lucy re-politicises the setting by translating the word daffodils in her native language, casting Mariah’s beloved flowers “in a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes” (30).

The need to forge an identity in opposition to other people, illustrated in the scenes with the painter and Mariah already discussed, foregrounds Lucy’s refusal to become “an echo” of another human being (36). This pattern represents the narrator’s Bildung in negative terms, that is as a freedom from restraint, and agrees with Lucy’s desire for unconstrained freedom. This form of negative freedom, as Patell explains, stresses the desire for “individuality, self-expression, and self-fulfillment” outside authority and social constraints (23). On the contrary, a positive conception of freedom is translated as a freedom to achieve the above but usually through active participation in political life. For Patell, despite the differences between the two, the official narrative of the United States argues for the complementary nature of both freedoms: negative freedom is the point of departure and positive freedom the happy conclusion. Patell cites Franklin’s Autobiography as a model of the typical immigrant experience in the United States according to which the immigrant starts as a servant but finally becomes a master and a respectable citizen (15). In other words, negative freedom changes into positive freedom as soon as the individual realises that it is only within society that self-expression can be fulfilled.

Such a possibility of synthesis is precisely what is being tested at the end of a novel of development. In his study of the European Bildungsroman, Moretti wonders how it is
“possible to convince the modern—‘free’—individual to willingly limit his freedom” (22), to put an end to his journey. This is an important task of the Bildungsroman since, according to Moretti, it aspires to offer a harmonious solution “to the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and ... the demands of socialization” (15). Moretti suggests that for such a renunciation of freedom to be reliable, “the individual must grow weary of his individuality” (59, emphasis in the original). These words recycle the pattern described above, namely the transformation of negative into positive freedom. When the individual realises that his individuality is better served in society, “then socialization is no longer felt as a mere necessity, but as a value choice” (Moretti, emphasis in the original 67). Such an end brings the formal and semantic satisfaction that the Bildungsroman is supposed to provide as a genre.

In Kincaid’s account, sexism, relations of domination and neocolonial patterns underline the shortcomings of the above official narrative. As part of her Bildung in America Lucy learns the crucial lesson that “on their way to freedom, some people find riches, some people death”. She makes this comment observing the animals “that had been trying to get from one side of the road to the other when fast-moving cars put a stop to them”, while she is taking a ride in Paul’s (her boyfriend’s) car (129). Paul’s story of the search for freedom, which he considers to be “part of the whole human situation” (129), is phrased in the discourse of romantic individualism reminiscent of Emersonian self-reliance. Unlike Paul, who “spoke of the great explorers who had crossed the great seas, not only to find riches, he said, but to feel free” (129), Lucy cannot celebrate freedom as “a hobby” (129), which is open to all. The cautionary story of the animals highlights the dangers endemic to this hobby. Rather, then, than interpreting Lucy’s “melancholic” interventions into narratives of individualism as “pathetic”, I see them as “a realistic response” (Luciano 149) to the conditions she encounters in America, “a kind of postoptimism”, in Appiah’s words, “to balance the earlier enthusiasm” (155) surrounding the yet-to-be realised American narrative of individual freedom and betterment.18

18 The coined term “postoptimism”, beyond its specific use by Appiah, seems to me consistent with the basic concepts of this chapter, namely those of melancholic agency and bound motion, in that it, too, consists of two parts which are in tension. I read post not merely as meaning after and thus serving to “challenge earlier legitimating narratives” (Appiah 155), but also as suggesting a bound optimism as opposed to pessimism.
Up to this point I have explored how the novel deploys a bound or melancholic mobility and exposes the gaps in the myth of individualism by showing how this narrative of ostensibly universal Bildung is foreclosed to people like Lucy. This narrative of freedom and autonomy, which has acquired its most extreme form in American literature and popular culture, is also interrogated from another perspective, through the novel’s “stubbornly relational mode”, in Fraiman’s term (140). I see this mode as another manifestation of bound mobility, in that it tempers the individualistic narrative traced so far without subsuming it. I want now to further clarify the function of this relational mode in Lucy and explain why it becomes important for the Bildungsroman in general.

As in many novels by women writers, in Lucy absolute individuality and self-sovereignty are presented as invalidating fictions through the text’s subtextual insistence on the constitution of identity by manifold social relationships. As Gilmore argues, “[Lucy] can remove herself physically from her mother, but she cannot leave behind the matrix of identification and intercorporeality in which her efforts to become a person have been shaped …” (114). Lucy may feel strongly that “family [are] the people who become the milestone around your life’s neck” but wonders “if ever in my whole life a day would go by when these people I had left behind, … would not appear before me in one way or another” (8). In subsequent chapters I will use the axes of the “horizontal” and the “vertical” in order to capture the tension between the wish for freedom and transcendence and the need of attachment, which frustrates flight, a tension that the Bildungsroman often dramatises. Lucy’s refusal to be defined by anything underwrites an illusory faith in absolute mastery, which proves futile. Her self-imposed outsider status, though it helps her resist externally imposed constructions by people in the United States, brings with it a strong feeling of loneliness and a deep emotional void. As Lucy states in an ambivalent declaration of independence, “I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for” (161). After all, Lucifer, with whom she identifies, though cast in a sympathetic light as the embodiment of individualism and freedom, is also doomed to eternal loneliness in Paradise Lost.

From a more explicitly psychoanalytic discourse, it is “the lost other” that forms the ego, the ego which the Bildungsroman strives to build. In The Psychic Life of Power, Butler, drawing
on Freud, further develops his insight that the ego is instituted through melancholia. The ego comes into being the moment it recognises the other, a lost other, which is preserved through traces that become installed into it, thus creating what Butler calls the ego’s numerous “splits and parts” (179). Along these lines, any claim to coherence and autonomy should be abandoned “as a fiction”, in the words of Sara Salih (134). The haunting presence of the mother in the form of the letters she sends to her daughter, despite Lucy’s refusal to open them, demonstrates that growing up involves a persistent relatedness to other people. Lucy’s concluding statement in the novel “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it” (163), which refers to her mother, however embarrassing for Lucy, can be seen as a challenge to the autonomous ego. Melancholia, as Eng and Han explain, overthrows the ego from the position of power it occupies “in the Freudian oeuvre”: “In this present formulation ... we have the loved object, not the ego, holding sway ... the loved object is so overwhelmingly important to and beloved by the ego that the ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost of its own self” (Eng and Han 364).

The idea of relatedness is also captured by means of Lucy’s relationship with Mariah, which, as Gilmore notes, is a “diluted and manageable version of her relationship with her mother” (115). Lucy rehearses a familiar technique in the way she relates to Mariah, which she had used with her mother, namely repetition. The compulsion to repeat traumatising moments, often in dreams, had perplexed Freud, as witnessed by the opening of Beyond the Pleasure Principle. This is where for the first time Freud admits an exception to his suggestion that dreams are fulfilments of wishes (32). In a lecture on fixations to traumas, Freud explains that although traumas are being replayed in the guise of flashbacks, dreams and other symptoms, patients are not aware of their repetition complex; the challenge for them is to see through this “obsessional action” for which there is apparently no motive because the whole process of repetition is unconscious (“Fixations to Traumas” 277). Lucy seems to be moving towards that direction. In her case, repetition seems to be geared towards recognition, in that it offers the protagonist a way of confronting the past in more active and conscious ways. Lucy seems at least to be aware of her repetition complex, if not yet of a way to put an end to it. She admits that she likes Mariah because she reminds her of her mother and then adds that this is precisely why she also dislikes her (58).
More importantly, Mariah, besides being a surrogate mother for Lucy, functions as an interlocutor, the person to whom Lucy relates her dreams, past memories and indigenous stories. Finding the proper words to articulate the traumatic deprivation of her mother in front of Mariah is a vital step for Lucy in that it facilitates the productive and recuperative work of mourning. The self-absorbed mood of melancholic people, according to Butler, which tempts one to dismiss melancholia as merely pathological, should be seen more clearly in terms of what it hides. Butler asks whether “the psychic violence of conscience [is] not a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable” (Psychic Life 185). Although Butler, following Freud, alludes here to the “misdirected ‘plaints’” of melancholic people (who, instead of directing them to the lost object, resort to self-accusations), in Lucy’s case, these complaints, no matter how they are encoded, are not misdirected. Rather, it is Mariah’s misinterpretations which render Lucy’s losses “ungrievable”, even “unthinkable”, to use another term Butler uses in an interview (Bell 170). Lucy’s losses are unrepresentable within the kind of discourses and narratives that her employers and people around her use in order to place and categorise her. We have seen for instance how Lewis and Mariah are unable to interpret Lucy’s dream in the first chapter of the book outside their familiar (Freudian) narrative of sexual repression. Thus, once more Lucy’s melancholia appears to be “a realistic” response to the conditions that perpetuate trauma by foreclosing mourning.

**Locomotive Tongues: Voice and Body in Lucy**

In Kincaid’s collection of stories trauma is coded in strings of lyrical and poetic images, which encircle it in a true labyrinth of indecipherable tropes. In *Lucy*, the enigmatic trauma is given more context in that it becomes associated with (neo)colonial power relations. As mentioned earlier, Lucy tries to articulate her trauma in front of Mariah. Mariah often appears to be granted the role of the analyst and Lucy that of the analysand; it is through the familiar practice of the ‘talking cure’ that Lucy tries to give some coherence to her fragmented memories and perceptions. Having an addressee to reenact one’s trauma, following the rule of transference that applies during therapy, certainly gives Lucy an advantage that the protagonist in *At the Bottom of the River* lacks. I have identified instances
of dialogue between mother and daughter in the collection. However, what makes a difference in Lucy is that the narrator restages her trauma with a third party whom Lucy can confront, at least in their conversational encounters, in more or less equal terms. Such repetition and exchange is one reason why trauma is communicated with relatively more clarity in Lucy.

Having said that, it is important to note that trauma in Lucy never becomes completely integrated or fixed into a precise narrative. Caruth writes that refusing to fully understand or to represent trauma by reintegrating it into our customary discourses is an ethical attitude, for it allows the experience of trauma to retain the “shock”, “force” and “incomprehensibility” which are endemic to its nature (Trauma 153-154). Although communication of trauma is vital for the sake of cure, “the possibility of integration into memory and the consciousness of history” raises for Caruth the question whether, in the words of van der Kolk and van der Hart, “it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past” (Trauma 154). My third chapter, which turns to Kingston’s work, poses a similar question in relation to translation.

Although Kincaid provides in Lucy more context to the mother-daughter trauma articulated in At the Bottom of the River; this does not dissolve the enigmatic quality of her work. Lucy leaves some gaps, in the form of innuendos, whenever, during her encounters with Mariah, she points to the scars left by the phantasms of the past upon the present. As Butler explains, unlike the process of mourning where loss is declared and the lost object is safely set aside, the melancholic is “communicative”, but his or her speech is “neither verdictive nor declarative (assertonic) but inevitably indirect and circuitous” (Psychic Life 186). An example is to be found in a scene where Mariah, in a chapter thus entitled, asks Lucy to admire the freshly ploughed fields through which their train is travelling. As in the scene of the daffodils, Mariah asks Lucy to admire a de-contextualised nature. Lucy, for whom the fields are symbols of forced labour and territorial dispossession, replies with cruelty “thank God, I didn’t have to do that”, and adds, “I don’t know if she understood what I meant, for in that one statement I meant many different things” (33). Such an instance, which reinforces the perceptual gap between Lucy and Mariah, also attests to the difficulty of finding adequate words to represent the reality of trauma.
Viewed from another perspective relevant to the performance of melancholia in public, such ellipses as the above, which beg to be filled by another person—be it Mariah or the reader—reveal the ways in which representing trauma posits the person who listens as "response-able", "as one who can, will, and should respond to us", as Kelly Oliver suggests in Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (qtd. in Price-Herndl, "Our Breasts" 225). In the last chapter, as we will see, Lorde shares her personal history of trauma to invite other women to do the same with their own fears and experiences, thus using, in Diane Price-Herndl's words, "the relation of self and body as a model for a relation between self and other" ("Our Breasts" 225).

The lyric and obscure quality of the late Bildungsroman, which points to the ineffability of trauma, undermines the genre's effort to deliver a meaningful narrative. In the case of At the Bottom of the River a similar difficulty is created by the style of the text. In his appendix Moretti refers to the ways in which practitioners of the late Bildungsroman like Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad manage to deal with the toll placed by trauma upon language and representation through efforts to "stylize" and contain it within conscious memory (237). In particular, he alludes to the way irony's prosaic characteristics are used to counterbalance the poetry instigated by trauma and loss (238). For Mann irony is a perfect tool to keep crises at bay in that it is the style of decorum and good manners. Rather than promoting conflict and shedding light on traumatic encounters, irony, in Moretti's words, meets people's needs for "naturalized spaces" like dinners, which demand specific table manners (239). Given the Bildungsroman's emphasis on balance and synthesis, irony turns out to be the only way the genre can survive in the presence of trauma.

Moretti seems to suggest here that irony is a form of repression. Such an understanding is conveyed by the attention he pays to its mediating function: the ways it can help control, in his words, "one's animal drives" (239, my emphasis). In highlighting irony's antiradicalism, which ties well with his conceptualisation of the Bildungsroman as a weak form, Moretti downplays its transgressive potential. Lucy, who resorts to irony, is indifferent to etiquette; she deliberately wants to dismantle naturalised spaces and turn them into battlefields. Unlike the narrator in At the Bottom of the River who opts for a silent voice that opposes conflict, Lucy claims an angry voice and asserts her agency as a speaking subject. Anger and
irony are intermingled in Lucy's reactions. In her study *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, which, among other things, explores the myriad forms that irony can take, Hutcheon explains that “in terms of emotional involvement irony can range from cool detachment to engaged hostility” (40). Lucy's elliptic remarks, which are in keeping with the indirect patterns of melancholic speech, create the expectation of ironic meaning and intention. One of the most characteristic aspects of Kincaid's style, as Simmons has observed, is her rhythmic repetition which “hulls the reader disguising what is actually happening” (*Jamaica Kincaid* 47). I see irony “happening”, in Hutcheon's term, within the spaces of those repetitions, through “the interaction of the 'said' and the 'unsaid'” (89). The repetition of the question “How does a person get to be that way” in “Mariah”, for instance, functions as a refrain throughout the chapter which bears witness to the above interaction. Unlike the incantatory tone which might be interpreted as “the shameless voicing of self-beratement” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 181) in *At the Bottom of the River*, the above refrain in *Lucy* is a form of mockery directed to Mariah and used to demystify myths and false narratives. It is, thus, both melancholic and militant. According to Hutcheon, irony is unstable precisely because it works through indirectness (13). Irony and melancholic speech share an important element: they do not declare what they seek to communicate. As a result, their interpretation depends upon the verdict of the audience. Irony's nature is “transideological” (Hutcheon 29), and this makes it a flexible tool to be used either for conservative or oppositional ends.

Even though Lucy's bursts undermine the “calm passion” of the *Bildungsroman*, they point to a situated anger activated by the particularity of the protagonist's predicament as a postcolonial female subject. As she tells Mariah, who notes that Lucy is an angry person, “Of course I am. What do you expect?” (96). Lucy's sustained anger brings triumphs which are at times “hollow” (41), but it still opens a form of agency that she claims at all costs. As the narrator recognises in a statement that echoes Stephen's words in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the tools she has at her disposal in order to disrupt order are her "memory", her "anger", and her "despair" (134). These become the resource for the future. Lucy's melancholic memory that fuels her anger means that, unlike Mariah, she cannot "take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face” (31). However, this constant stumbling on the past, which is
irreconcilable with the teleological movement of the Bildungsroman, instead of pointing to a pathological situation, can be seen as an example of trauma's generative force because it helps the narrator unmask a series of truths. As Butler writes, “Melancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crashed. Yet it is not a static affair. It continues as a kind of ‘work’…” (Psychic Life 190).

Lucy situates herself in a discursive territory previously occupied by others whose power of representation she now contests in using her insights and voice to expose lies and redress injustice. Appropriating a strong voice makes her a sort of “cultural demystifier”, in Ferguson’s phrase (“A Small Place” 138). In an interview Kincaid mentions one occasion in which she was asked by a museum in Boston to pick one painting and talk about it. She picked a painting of a duchess of Spain which depicted the duchess and her possession, a black girl. For Kincaid, the invitation by the museum to talk about something like the painting is embraced as an opportunity “to tell the people who used to own me a few things about themselves” (Birbalsingh 150). In the same interview she adds that the people to whom she used to belong, meaning the British, “invented a life for [her]” whereas she can only “tell them the truth about themselves” because she knows the danger of invention (150). Lucy seems to participate in a similar task. Throughout the novel, with the aid of her critical gaze and angry voice, she breaks open Mariah’s “decent speech” and deconstructs the “fairy tale” the people in the United States tell about themselves (Simmons, Jamaica Kincaid 68). She perceives the upper-middle classes as posturing people who could easily feature in advertisement catalogues; they possess names that “made the world spin” (64). Despite appearances, Lucy sizes them up and brings to the surface what they refuse to see or try to hide. In the case of Mariah and Lewis’s marriage, for example, Lucy breaks the veneer of family harmony by foreseeing the ways in which their relationship is crumbling. Similarly, she exposes Mariah’s myopic sight, notably her inability to make a connection between her comforts and the destruction of the environment (in one scene in the section “Mariah”) for which people like her are also accountable. As Lucy puts it, “I could have told them a thing or two about it. I could have told them how nice it was to see them getting a small sip of their own bad medicine” (72).
Lucy’s anger is also voiced through her body, which provides another locus of agency. The silent voice claimed by the unnamed narrator at the end of *At the Bottom of the River* seems inadequate when it comes to Lucy’s new condition in America. Lucy chooses the disturbing materiality of the body over the tranquility of transcendence by claiming a form of sexual mobility. Unlike its former self in the collection who undertakes a spiritual journey, Lucy’s quest involves in great part a sexual maturation. The emphasis on the body, which points to a sexual concept of bound motion, rewrites the *Bildungsroman*’s emphasis on romantic inwardness and on pure autonomous essence untainted by materiality. The body, rather than being sacrificed for the development of a strong voice or mind, according to the familiar mind/body duality, figures prominently in the novel. Like anger, it disturbs order and decorum, and introduces an element that cannot be easily repressed or controlled. In the context of Caribbean fiction, more importantly, it represents a subversive discourse that challenges the body’s erasure by colonialism.

The emphasis on the sensuality of the body in *Lucy* can be seen, however, as a way in which the “postmodern” aestheticism of *At the Bottom of the River*, which Kincaid repudiates, returns through the back door. Patricia Waugh argues that postmodernism has not entirely abandoned “the metaphysical ground of Romanticism”, and warns that the body runs the risk of becoming a fetish (193). In *Lucy*, although the body is highlighted, it is not reduced to mere textuality. Despite its tactility and disturbing quality, it does not invoke the trope of the ‘hysterical body’ either. The body introduces a non-rationalisable element in the novel, but the anger and provocation that it conveys do not border on the schizophrenic. Even though, in other words, Kincaid does not deny aestheticism, which becomes a tool of extravagance that enables her to avoid realism, she does not merely indulge in a negative version of it.19 In the same way that Lucy’s anger does not point to a pathological situation but functions as a counter-discourse of resistance, Kincaid utilises the body’s promiscuity in order to redress patriarchal and colonial discourses of mobility.

Lucy seems at first glance to propagate familiar stereotypes which equate woman with space and describe it as a topos to be invaded by men. However, Kincaid revises such a form

---

19 Hoving suggests that Kincaid’s distrust of realism is “connected to her critique of nationalism” as “the realist novel [can be seen] as part of the tactic of nationalist legitimation” (223).
of passivity using “the master’s tools”. The author juxtaposes another trajectory to the path carved for women according to Hélène Cixous in “Castration or Decapitation”, which involves the passage from one bed to another (43). Cixous describes woman’s place using the myth of the Sleeping Beauty who is “lifted from her bed by a man … who will lay her in her next bed”, and stresses that for a woman to walk even such short distance, a man has to intervene (43). In contrast to such patterns of circulation which reduce women to objects, Lucy claims a sexual mobility of her own and, thus, secures her position as a subject of desire. In a scene where she is portrayed getting into a taxi after a sexual encounter with a stranger in order to reach unsuspecting Paul, she is presented as a commuter travelling between sexual encounters.

In her predilection for such a form of “travel”, Lucy steps into a dangerous terrain. As already mentioned, the link between female ‘wandering’ and promiscuity has always been strong. Lucy, however, instead of having the label of the slut (a twentieth-century equivalent for what in the nineteenth century would be prostitute) externally imposed upon her, consciously chooses such a role in asserting that “life as a slut was quite enjoyable” (128). In her book Promiscuities, which concerns the culture of the sixties and is told through a series of confessions, Naomi Wolf exposes the ways in which female desire becomes tainted through such epithets which condemn any woman who has a sexual past. As she eloquently puts it, “Our sexual histories are often tapestries stitched around great areas of silence”. This is because, even today, a record of promiscuity can be used to devalue and even ruin a woman (Wolf 4-5). Lucy, like Wolf’s pseudonymous protagonists in her book, resists misreadings of her promiscuity as something negative or worthy of guilt. In claiming a sexual past, she smashes the taboo around it and, in giving her own account of events, challenges the pejorative connotations of the term slut which stem from the fact that it is a male construct. As Wolf notes in her chapter “Sluts”, while sexually active girls were “heroes” to girls, to boys they were “just sluts” (80).

Lucy calls sex an “adventure” (113), and to this we could add that it is one in a libidinal rather than a heroic sense, which disentangles the idea of adventure from its traditional masculine associations and rewrites its plot au féminin. Lucy’s sexual mobility does not lead to the commodification of her body: she does not use it as a tool of upward mobility in
order to “whiten” herself, which, according to Frantz Fanon, constitutes the secret wish of “all these frantic women of color in quest of white men” (49). Nor does she plan to sell her body in order to secure a successful marriage, which would close her Bildungsroman with a harmonious assimilation within American society. As Mahlis is right to note, “This exchange—a woman’s body for a man’s social capital—is precisely what Lucy rejects. She chooses, instead, to remove any hint of exchange or barter from her sexual encounters, entering these sexual relationships according to the dictates of her body as a locus of sensory pleasure” (176).

Through her body Lucy also deconstructs colonial discourses of mobility. In her descriptions of her sexual encounters and fantasies to Mariah she appears as a female version of the “Perverse Traveler”, which in Haunted Journeys Dennis Porter associates with Flaubert in Salammbô (165). Lucy seems to claim a place in Flaubert’s perverse journey, given their mutual disposition to forms of sexual deviance including voyeurism. There is a particular scene in the chapter “Cold Heart” where Lucy describes her fascination with an incident that happened to a friend of hers in Antigua and which she wishes she had experienced instead. The episode concerns the sexual abuse of a little girl by an older man in exchange for money. As Lucy confesses, if this had happened to her instead, it “would have become the experience of my life” (105). Voyeurism and fetishism are suggested in the scenes which describe Lucy and her friend Peggy picking out the men they would like to sleep with in the park. The ritual of selection involves paying attention to individual parts of the male body, especially the hands; to Peggy, “if a man had small hands, it meant he had a small penis to match” (89). Finally, in a scene of the chapter “Cold Heart” Lucy confesses to being thrilled by the violence of sex (113).

Like Flaubert, Lucy celebrates travel as a form of transgression in that her sexual adventure represents a flight from and a reaction to her mother’s repressive upbringing, “devoted to preventing [her] from becoming a slut” (127). To Mahlis’s point that Kincaid carves out “the space of the female exile” (165), “a space that is shaped by the complex

---

20 With the comparison of Lucy to Flaubert I want to emphasise that Lucy claims a position as a female traveller, a position that, among other things, allows her to subvert colonial stereotypes. As noted, Lucy mis/identifies with a Western painter/traveller in the text (whom critics have identified as Gauguin).
interaction between the female body and masculinist cultural imperatives” (165), I would add that this space is also that of a *postcolonial* female exile. Unlike Flaubert, who is undertaking an Oriental journey, Lucy moves to a neocolonial centre. Porter argues that the submission of the self to a force greater than itself, such as sexuality, a familiar romantic *topos*, exercised great fascination over Western travellers like Flaubert (181). However, although such a force can annihilate the ego and the Western traveller chooses precisely that, submission does not change the fact that travellers like Flaubert, for instance, use their sexual curiosity to satisfy a narcissistic need for possession. This point demystifies any attempt to romanticise travel and imbricates it with issues of power and knowledge. Although Lucy expresses enthusiasm over her great discovery of sexuality, unlike Flaubert, her former position as a colonised subject does not allow her to sacrifice her integrity once again. Lucy does not idealise her sexual encounters with men and does not confuse sex with love. On meeting Paul for the first time she notes after describing his beautiful eyes, “This is usually the moment when people say they fall in love, but I did not fall in love.... what I wanted was to be alone in a room with him and naked” (100). The moment, however, she feels that Paul tries to “possess her in a certain way” she grows tired of him (155).

Lucy’s reclamation of mobility in the form of sexual travel suggests, then, a reversal in that it allows her to revise the erotics of discovery in male travel narratives and subvert previous hierarchies of activity and passivity, not only between male and female but also between coloniser and colonised. The image she has of female desire never culminates in possession of other people. As in the case of her angry voice, through which she talks back to the people who tried to invent a life for her, her empowering sexuality serves to unmask different sorts of truths. In fact, both voice and body convey similar messages, a cooperation suggested by the motif of the tongue in a chapter thus entitled, which portrays Lucy putting her tongue in other people’s mouths; an image that suggests “the locomotive faculty of body [and] mind”, to borrow a phrase from Mary Wollstonecraft (141). The various “metonymic functions of the body”, in the case of the above example of the tongue, as transmitter of words and as a source of sensual pleasure, “are suggestive of the

---

According to Peter Brooks, Flaubert was “a precursor” of Gauguin’s search of an exciting other of European civilisation (164).
multiple ways in which the body can be figured”, according to Susan Spearey (177). These metonyms, which, as Spearey adds, do not limit the body “to the strictly corporeal or physical” (177), are also crucial to Kingston’s and Lorde’s work, which I explore in subsequent chapters.

Lucy’s dependency on her body needs also to be seen in contrast to the disembodiment observed in *At the Bottom of the River*, which results from the protagonist’s option for transcendence rather than corporeality. At the same time, the cultural specificity of this emphasis on the body should be established. In “Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid”, Helen Tiffin suggests that Caribbean women writers retrieve the body “from and within discursive erasure” (141). Hoving connects such a form of erasure to “the privileging of writing over speech in postmodernism ... ” (220). Once more, the postcolonial converges with feminist practices. Kincaid effectuates her critique of colonialism through the means of the angry voice already mentioned. At the same time, the body equally crosses boundaries and disturbs a given order: in *Lucy*, as illustrated, it appears as an unruly, circulating body that refuses to be fixed by written discourse. Hoving explains that there is a tendency in postmodernism to reduce the body to the textual, and mentions the association of tears, mother’s milk and sperm with ink (227), an association made in *At the Bottom of the River* through the concluding scene of writing (and echoed in *Lucy* through the description of the blank pages of Lucy’s notebook “as white and smooth as milk” (162)). Kincaid, in her later work in particular, expresses interest in bodily senses such as smell and taste, which “do not easily translate into terms of textuality” (Hoving 227) and can thus retain their subversive potential as part of “a Caribbean rhetoric of provocation” (237). In *Lucy*, the body looms large, and the reference, in particular, to the powerful and offensive odor as opposed to Mariah’s pleasant perfume (27) claimed by the protagonist, suggests its transgressive potential.

In the essay mentioned above, Tiffin considers examples of discursive erasure of the body, among which can be found “formal literary recitation”, which also features in *Lucy* (142). Both *Annie John* and *Lucy* describe instances of cultural colonialism which, in distorting the Caribbean past and native history, aim at producing obedient subjects who
have internalised master narratives. Recitation in particular, according to Tiffin, is directly related to the body’s obliteration since it disciplines movement and most importantly splits the speaker into two elements: on the one hand, the black colonised body, and on the other, the “English voice”. The latter creates the impression that the speaker is English, thus depriving him or her of his/her racial marker of difference (Tiffin 147). Such fragmentation is enacted in Lucy when the narrator describes her experience of recitation at Queen Victoria Girls’ School in Antigua, but this is given a subversive quality in accordance with Bhabha’s conception of mimicry. Bhabha defines mimicry as “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline … and also the sign of the inappropriate (Location 86). For Bhabha, there is an inherent threatening element in such a strategy caused precisely by its ambivalence or duality, which can disrupt colonial authority. The reproduction of the colonial subject as almost the same but not quite/white suggests that the identity of the colonised remains slippery, defined by both “resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 86). As Lucy puts it, while reciting the poem about the daffodils, “I was at the height of my two-facedness: outside false [almost English/white], inside true [black and resistant to the social imperative to assimilate]” (18). A subsequent dream which depicts Lucy buried underneath a pile of daffodils returns to the traumatic nature of mimicry and telescopes the violence inflicted upon the body by colonialist interpellation.

Besides revising patriarchal and colonial clichés, the emphasis on the body effectuates an important revision of dominant patterns of male Bildung in Lucy. In offering sensuality and sexuality as alternative routes to identity and knowledge, the novel deconstructs the belief in identity as pure autonomous essence and seems to promote a more “democratic” notion of Bildung, open to more women. Waugh finds interesting the fact that many of the male heroes of Modernist literature—and I would add of novels of development too, in particular of Künstlerromane—achieve an illusory “self-determination in aesthetic terms through a refusal of social relationship” (200). Such a Romantic topos, though it challenges the idealisation of pure Reason as the locus of subjectivity, can become equally totalising. Given the novels of female development by both male and female writers which deny artistic redemption to female characters, such as those that Hirsch discusses in “Spiritual Bildung” already mentioned, it seems that the path towards individuation through art is not
open to all. *At the Bottom of the River* redresses such an injustice in claiming some form of a Romantic aesthetics of transcendence. However, such a resolution has its own limitations in that, as argued, smoothing out contradictions and offering merely an aesthetic ideal of autonomy deprives the narrator of a more situated knowledge of her predicament. Unlike the narrator in the collection of stories, Lucy cannot get any compensation through art. She passes time experimenting with photography but she finds her effort to make reality better through her prints futile.

The same happens when Lucy tries out writing. The final scene of the novel, as in the case of both *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, is carefully prepared by Kincaid “as autobiographical” (Gilmore 115). As Gilmore puts it, “Both Annie and Lucy reach toward textual images and toward the task of summing up at the text’s close” (115, my emphasis). Such a closure is however deferred. In *Lucy*, the narrator, who has now moved into a house of her own, sees her fountain pen and the notebook that Mariah has given to her. At the sight of her name, which strangely appears as Lucy Josephine Potter rather than Lucifer, she writes the sentence already cited: “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it”, obviously referring to her mother (163). The very end of the novel in which Lucy’s tears make these words become “one great big blur” has been read as an example of a subversive body “eras[ing] a final act of scriptorial obedience” that would have congealed her agency (Tiffin 156). Through this melancholic deferral of closure and the image of fluidity, Kincaid revises the former text’s closure. I will return to the spectral agency of the body and its power to resist the assimilative force of translation in the third chapter which looks at Kingston’s work. There, the tension between written word and body is recast as a dilemma pertaining to translating “the sense” rather than “the letter”.

The closure of *At the Bottom of the River* is, thus, unmade with *Lucy*, which re-enters what superficially is the same trauma in order to re-member the fragments of memory and traumatic remains of the previous text in a different way. As Gilmore phrases it, Kincaid “returns to the scene because she has left a body there which requires further attention” (97). This body, which Kincaid pulls “from the bottom of the river”, could be either the body of the heroine sacrificed for the sake of a “prismatic” transcendence or Kincaid’s “unangry, decent, civilized” style that she later repudiates. The note of unhappiness at the
end of Lucy, which means that although the narrator has progressed in her journey she is not completely “cured”, seems to offer the novel a more realistic and sincere closure when compared to the narrative outcome of At the Bottom of the River, where a miraculous transformation takes place. Trauma is irrecoverable in that it always leaves traces. However, Kincaid’s return to it suggests that it has an “extended flexibility”, an “expanded capacity of representation” (Eng and Kazanjian 4). With each book Kincaid throws light on what Kristeva calls “the black sun of melancholia” by bringing to the surface, as far as possible, those elements which cannot be contained within our customary discourses of representation.

Trauma lingers in Kincaid’s work but instead of resulting in immobility it creates “a realm of remains”. Unlike the residues of the European Bildungsroman, which Moretti calls “the debris” of the genre (242), this remainder mobilises a melancholic agency and activates forms of bound movement. Rather than breaking down the Bildungsroman, the presence of this contextualised type of trauma, as opposed to a general and abstract kind, becomes, in Butler’s phrase, an “enabling disruption” (Bodies 23) of normative Bildung and the occasion for a rewriting of its history. Kincaid tells a different story about the postcolonial female Bildungsroman. Starting from a familial drama that pits daughter against mother, her texts trace a complex interaction between mobility and melancholic memory across spatio-temporal dimensions. In mediating the journey toward individuality through a relational mode of development, which articulates a new “narrative of maternal responsibility in the coming-of-age process” (MacDonald-Smythe 66), and in adapting the Bildungsroman’s emphasis on mobility as a catalyst of individual development to the needs of people whose history of growing up carries the legacy of trauma, At the Bottom of the River and Lucy reformulate development as a matter of social context and conflict. Kincaid’s continuing narratives of development dramatise the disputes and intimacies with both past and present and carve out an open and ambivalent space of postcolonial and female mobility. The sites of identity formation proliferate and so do the functions of trauma as we move progressively from text to text in an intertextual system that refuses to close down.
Chapter 2

"The Mestiza Way": A Bildung of the Borderlands in Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street

In the previous chapter, I was concerned to explore whether postcolonial mobility is a form of empowerment, a traumatic experience or both at the same time. The use of the term “bound motion”, a difficult encounter of heterogeneous elements in a meaningful ensemble which sustains tension, served to provide a tentative answer to the above question. This chapter will turn to the productive potential of another contradiction, one that involves a similar pair of opposites, notably individuality and community, or privacy and affiliation. If in the mobility/trauma polarity of the first chapter, mobility stands for individualism, and trauma, in at least some of its forms, lingers to suggest the contingency of mobility, I will argue that a similar dialectic applies with concepts such as privacy and affiliation in Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street. Moreover, just as the first chapter argues for a rethinking of the notion of trauma as a space of melancholic agency, here I seek to reestablish the relation of individualism and privacy to social life, to a defence, among other things, of their political potential.

Before turning to the dynamics of individualism and community in ethnic American texts by women writers, in particular in Chicana novels of development, I would like to make a brief comment about the above conflicts with regards to the Anglo-American Bildungsroman. For Moretti, the Bildungsroman has functioned as “a cultural mechanism” that tests the coexistence of conflicting principles such as “individuality” and “normality” (16). What explains the continuing appeal of the genre, in his view, is the fact that it has succeeded, at least in its original eighteenth-century form, in representing the fusion of such opposites as autonomy and social integration “with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equalled again” (Moretti 16). The genre’s “synthetic vocation”, understood as an attempt to fuse opposites “into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter” (Moretti 16-7), could work, as Moretti explains, when ideals such as “absolute cohesion and totalizing harmony” were viable (72). When the subject can no longer realise himself/herself in society, when Moretti’s “comfort of civilization” (15) starts becoming uncomfortable,
the area of synthesis that he describes becomes less secure. Still, the conflict between the two principles remains, and requires some ground, if not to be resolved once and for all, then at least to be played out. As I will argue, the hybrid space of the Bildungsroman becomes the ideal site in which to explore these conflicts.

The tension between self and society is particularly acute in ethnic American texts by women, which often become battlefields of competing forces. The central dilemma of the Bildungsroman becomes further qualified with the consideration of additional factors, such as ethnicity, gender and class. The question is how individuality and freedom from constraint can coexist not only with the larger world of “Necessity” (Moretti 17) but also with the more intimate, though not empty of symbolic obligations, sphere of community. While the traditional Bildungsroman traces a young hero’s development by portraying his journey out into the world, many ethnic texts such as Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, and Kingston’s The Woman Warrior examine their protagonists’ complicated attachments to the spaces and communities in which they already live. Individualisation in such texts takes place within an ethnic framework, and instead of idealising movement they often explore more nuanced forms of mobility mediating the appeal of individualism. What this chapter explores, then, is the boundaries between self and local community in the ethnic Bildungsroman.

A series of questions can be raised starting from the above departure point: do ethnic writers revise the individualist Bildungsroman educating their protagonists to the “communitarian ideal”, in Iris Marion Young’s phrase (308)? Do they renounce patterns of a Western individualism or do they turn to this genre precisely because they can make use of its individualistic focus, however differently? A more specific question is how ethnic women writers in particular negotiate demands such as ethnicity and gender or individualism and community, and how this negotiation becomes refracted through their narratives of growing up ethnic and female in America. One of the goals of the chapter is to interrogate the idea that the only logical conclusion of the ethnic Bildungsroman is the union of the protagonist with ethnic community, just as one of the goals of the following one is to investigate the opposite, that is, whether assimilation or Americanisation, is its necessary closure. In other words, if the answer to the first question is no, we tend falsely to believe that the answer to the second is yes, because ethnic nationalism and assimilation are part of a binary that still exercises power in our imagination. I would like, however, to problematise reductive patterns of reading the
ethnic Bildungsroman by showing how both closures, that is, either cultural nationalism or assimilation, fail to respond to the more complex spaces that my texts gesture towards.

**Individualism or Communitarianism?**

At this point what is required is a more detailed, but brief, discussion of the place of cultural nationalism and assimilation in the ethnic Bildungsroman. According to Martin Japtok, who investigates the intersection of nationalism with the Bildungsroman, ethnic cultural nationalism emerged in part as a response by minority groups to their exclusion from the mainstream version of American nationalism, which is what the traditional Bildungsroman secures by offering its protagonist a place within “the imagined community” of the nation.¹ (As the next chapter will show, Asian American writers use the Bildungsroman to claim America). On the other hand, ethnic nationalism emerges as an attempt to preserve cultural identity under pressure of assimilation (Japtok 137). Once more, this is relevant to the Bildungsroman since “coming to America” narratives, especially those written by women, as I will suggest in the next chapter, are often criticised for extolling the advantages of assimilation for ethnic immigrants. It is not only the ideological function of the immigrants’ coming to America narratives which is dangerous but also “the coming of America” to them, which is how Chicanos interpret their transformation into racial others within America after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which gave one million square miles of Mexican land to the United States. In the light of this, cultural nationalism emerges more specifically as a defence strategy against the materialism and ruthless individualism of American culture. Japtok in his analysis of African and Jewish-American novels of development sees cultural nationalism as rejecting “mainstream materialism” and embracing some sort of “ethnic idealism” (11). The implication is that the second is a higher or more moral way of life.² Although this comment is made in relation to the ethnic traditions he discusses, as I will show, it bears some relevance to Cisneros’s text, which portrays its heroine

---

¹ See Benedict Anderson, and Lisa Lowe (pp. 98-100). Lowe explores the internal contradictions of American democratic systems of inclusion in the light of legislative acts directed against Asian immigrants by the United States. For Mexican Americans, see John-Michael Rivera on the ambivalent position of Mexican Americans within national discourses of American citizenship.

² See Sollors’s distinction between the “practical” and the “visionary” man, which is relevant to my discussion of “Necessity” and “Extravagance” in this chapter (pp. 168-173). Sollors identifies the need to fuse the realm of descent with that of consent through “aesthetic creation” (172). In his account the practical (Necessity) becomes associated with America whereas the visionary (Extravagance) with ethnicity in what seems the reverse of Wong’s paradigm.
harboring a wish for a dream house of her own that will have nothing to do with the barrio in which she lives.

Ethnic American texts are often split by diverse developmental narratives that attest to the appeal of both ideologies of individualism and community. Japtok asks in relation to the appropriation of a genre like the Bildungsroman by ethnic minorities “Why would a form with a largely individualistic focus be attractive to authors who experience discrimination based on group affiliation” only to answer that “an assertion of individuality makes sense in the face of a denial of individuality” (24). The fact that individualism represents a major pole of attraction is understandable given that ethnic minorities, on account of their ambivalent place within the American nation and its democratic patterns of inclusion, are also the recipients of the ostensibly universal story that has become the paradigm of progress in America. It is the story of Emersonian individualism and of the American dream, whose liberating potential remains yet to be realised for ethnic minorities. It is also Franklin’s story of the rise from rags to riches, which suggests a teleological movement from servant or journeyman to master and citizen that resembles the stages of the Bildungsroman outlined by Howe and Buckley. Both critics have tried to make the migration of the genre from a German into a British context smoother. In Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen, Howe, indebted to Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, the acknowledged model of the genre, proposes three stages for the young Bildungsheld: “apprentice”, “journeyman” and finally “master” (25). In Season of Youth, Buckley provides a more extensive list, which presupposes that a number of social options must be open so that a protagonist can pass successfully through all the stages that are part of his checklist. Whatever the formulation, the ethnic Bildungsheld remains on the threshold of such stories of development, which is perhaps why an ethnic version of nationalism has emerged to counter the mainstream one.

Stories that exalt the ideals of mobility and individualism, however problematic for ethnic minorities, characterise genres from autobiography to the Bildungsroman and the more representative of the American tradition (quest) romance. The Anglophone male Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding (Buckley’s area of focus in the study already mentioned) has been schematised by critics in such a way so as to emphasise mobility, autonomy and self-mastery. Fraiman wonders why in Buckley’s study, Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, or any other novel by a woman writer (other than George Eliot), “fails to register as a novel of development within the schema crystallized by Season of Youth”
She interprets such selectiveness as an attempt to elide different developmental plots which present Bildung as "a process of exchange" and "a social relationship" (139), a point that I have also addressed in the previous chapter. Fraiman reads a series of canonical nineteenth-century novels by women writers in an attempt to challenge what sociologists call "the unencumbered self" (Patell 67), and to argue for development and identity as constituted by manifold social relationships and communal bonds.

Similarly, the category of the romance, which can be seen as a proxy for the Bildungsroman, buttresses ideas of alienation and separateness from social constraint. Richard Chase cites Henry James's remarks in the first four prefaces he wrote for the New York edition of his works in order to further explore the question of defining romance in his study The American Novel and Its Tradition. In one of these remarks, James describes experience in the romance as "liberated, disengaged, disencumbered ... operating ... in a medium which relieves it ... of the inconvenience of a related, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities" (qtd. in Chase 26). The vision of fictional heroes operating in a vacuum, growing up "not in, but in spite of their social contexts, not shaped by cultural pressures so much as bravely withstanding and transcending them", to which Fraiman alludes in a much more recent study (137), is also embodied by such popular culture American icons as the frontiersman and the cowboy. These, according to Patell, are "exaggerated" versions of the desire for individualism (71). Still, they continue to have a hold in America where they are transformed into stories of noble achievement. However, these ideas are fictions, which merely give the illusion of a total self-determination. In reality, the price for striving to achieve absolute autonomy, as shown in the previous chapter, entails a sacrifice of affective ties, emotional bonds and communal attachments, in other words, it brings a perennial loneliness. The "stubbornly relational mode" in Lucy, which points to half of the story, a half that parasitically feeds on its other half, the individualistic narrative (blurring the distinction between "host" and "parasite" in ways similar to Miller's argument), offers

3 Although Miller applies his distinction to literary criticism (exploring the relationship between univocal and poststructuralist methods of reading), the question he raises in "The Critic as Host", namely whether "host and parasite [can] live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food" (217), is relevant to a point I make later on a series of syncretic terms such as "bound motion" and on the symbiotic relationship between the parts that compose them (I use the organic metaphor on purpose to highlight the connection I draw). Miller's argument is that there is "an ambiguous transition between one and the other" (219), a "perpetual reversion of parasite and host" (225).
its own alternative, among other things, to the fiction of unconstrained freedom without erasing the desire for mobility.

Just as Gilligan and Chodorow have argued that women have more permeable self-boundaries, ethnic American communities have been conceptualized in similar terms. Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker's suggest that "the indigenous psychology of self is more fluid, more inclusive, and recognizes that the self exists as part of various social networks, rather than an independent entity somehow apart" (qtd. in Patell 152). Similarly, Felski describes feminist writing in ways that correspond to how ethnic American literature has been perceived by both its practitioners and ethnic as well as Anglo-American critics:

Even the most subjective feminist writing ... appeals to a notion of communal identity which differs significantly from the literature of bourgeois individualism, combining an examination of individual experience with a dimension of solidarity through an acknowledgement of a shared experience of subordination. *(Beyond Feminist Aesthetics 78)*

This statement can be indeed corroborated by many other critics who have explored the ways in which minorities revise Western fictions of individual development such as the *Bildungsroman* or autobiography in order to convey a sense of how inextricable a story of one's selfhood is from that of the larger community to which they belong. Japtok reiterates the idea that "ethnic forms communalise individualist forms and are answering to different, more communalist demands" (149). The pattern of what he calls "the ethnic *Bildungsroman*" in particular is to "propose a more communalist-oriented model of development" (Japtok 73). Felski's reference to the "shared experience of subordination" in the above quotation is important in that it contextualizes and historicises what is often described in essentialist terms as a more fluid female or, in our case, ethnic self. Fraiman's emphasis on relational female *Bildung*, to which I have briefly referred, is meant to claim attachment and bonding as not merely a negative "counternarrative" that fails the normative story of individualism and thus constructs a "truncated *Bildungsroman*" or a story of "deformation" (xi), but also one that criticises dominant ideas of *Bildung*. Moreover, unlike the editors of *The Voyage In*, Fraiman does

---

1 Bernice Johnson Reagon has argued that black autobiography is to be apprehended as "cultural autobiography" in that it roots the story of an individual within a sense of community (81). Sandra Zagarell has identified a new genre, the narrative of community to which most contributors have been women writers. See also TuSmith's *All My Relatives*. 

---
not valorise relationality merely in a psychological sense (169, n.20). Like Felski, she seems to suggest that an appeal to communal identity is not the result of some kind of “biological pull” but a survival tactic that offers a safety net for minorities who suffer discrimination by the mainstream culture, thus becoming not only an alternative to narratives of rugged individualism but also an inevitable conclusion.

However, just as this alternative is explored in ethnic American literary texts as a strategy of resistance, many writers, among which are a substantial number of women, reveal the lurking oppressive nature of intimate spaces like local communities, which promise to deliver what a more abstract idea of community embodied in the official US story of individualism is unable to, notably comfort, empowerment and a sense of belonging. Such less alienating spaces, usually “invested with a redemptive significance” (Patell 141), are not, nevertheless, devoid of obligations and responsibilities. To recall the pattern of movement according to which the traditional Bildungsroman operates, the individual willingly limits his freedom in order to enter society. As mentioned in the first chapter, Patell reads this movement in terms of the transformation of negative into positive freedom, which is the official story of individualism that America wants to tell itself. Both Moretti and Patell speak of a self-chosen sacrifice of freedom, which the latter calls “the alpha of U.S. culture” (19), for “the happy belonging to a harmonious totality” (Moretti 65). This Patell calls the “omega, [the narrative’s] conclusion and happy ending” (19); “forced to be free”, in Rousseau’s words in The Social Contract, “forced to be happy”, in Moretti’s (21), for, as the latter explains, what indicates the end of one’s Bildung is when “as ‘a free individual’, not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as one’s own” (16, my emphasis). The contradictory phrase “forced to be happy” reveals what is often the price of maturity: the necessary, and at times violent, sacrifice of individuality. Given that a relationship can be established between mainstream American nationalism and an ethnic version, does the ethnic Bildungsroman operate within a similar economy? In other words, one could argue that communal solidarity is made a “legitimate” choice for the ethnic Bildungsheld when the latter becomes convinced that only this can offer protection from mainstream oppression. However, communal solidarity can easily be marred by communitarianism and nationalism and show a blatant disregard for any kind of difference that risks threatening coherence and unity.
Although “ethnic nationalism and ethnic Bildungsroman make a happy marriage” (Japtok 135), in the case of ethnic versions by women, especially those belonging to Cisneros’s generation in Chicana literature in particular, there are also more antagonistic patterns. It is not only the dominant culture that puts a barrier to individual agency but also family and community. Security and freedom do not fit together. In many ethnic communities, which are structured through patriarchal traditions, independent and stronger women, that is, women who pursue self-fulfilment, become outcasts. If ethnic literature often conveys a sense of how inextricable a story of one’s selfhood is from that of the larger community, doesn’t “this language of overcoming distance ... sound dangerously like the language of oppression” (Williams, Alchemy 148) to someone who wishes for a sense of privacy? Similarly, wouldn’t we agree with Stephen Holmes that “society is a dangerous place in which to grow up” (179) when, for instance, in The Woman Warrior—the focus of the following chapter—we read that the protagonist’s unnamed aunt is punished by the villagers with brutal violence “for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (19)?

A community often extorts women’s consent to its oppressive practices by threatening to inflict the charge of betrayal to those women who depart from its precepts. As Bonnie TuSmith phrases it, soliciting women’s complicity under these circumstances becomes synonymous with asking them not to “rock the boat” (All My Relatives 165). In this way, a community’s traditional practices, however outgrown, oppressive or deadening, remain unchallenged. Individualism, however, is not necessarily detrimental to the community and can even revitalise communal values. A community, as Morrison explains in an interview, contains “pariahs” within it that are “very useful for the conscience of that community” (Tate 129). One, for instance, recalls how in Sula, the community’s narrow vision makes it impossible for them to see the protagonist’s defiance as a potential source of renewal and agency for the whole community. In The House on Mango Street, although Esperanza is not as rebellious as Sula and never becomes a threat to her community’s practices, she maintains, as I will show, a space of privacy and relative distance, which can rejuvenate her barrio, in particular by giving agency to its entrapped women.

Finding alternative models of social organisation that do not sacrifice individuality has, of course, been the object of theoretical study. Emmanuel Levinas’s whole theory of relating to the other, to which I will return, aims at sustaining unity without
subsuming difference. In “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference”, Iris Marion Young, drawing on poststructuralist philosophy, exposes the suppression of difference which the idea of a unified community inevitably brings about and proposes as an alternative to homogeneity “a politics of difference”, which she also calls “a politics beyond community” (301). Exploring the rigid opposition between individualism and community, the product of an obsessively dualistic system of Western reasoning, she clarifies notions of what has been already described as “an unencumbered self” as well as its opposite, namely the idea of “a radically situated self” (Patell 37), using terms such as difference and heterogeneity on the one hand, and unity and totality on the other. The unencumbered self is, in her words, “a self-sufficient unity”, which denies difference by denying the other, whereas the situated self renounces difference, but does so via another route, that is through absolute “fusion” with the other (Young 307). The unnatural boundary imposed upon the two models also creates a false either/or choice. As Young observes with amazement, “The possibility that there could be other conceptions of social organisation does not appear because all possibilities have been reduced to the mutually exclusive opposition between individualism and community” (307). There are, however, as I would argue, other intermediate positions that could perhaps be seen as residing in what Bhabha calls “the realm of the beyond” (Location 1): empowering positions beyond individualism and at the same time socially transformative ones beyond communitarianism. As I will argue, Cisneros’s Bildungsroman charts a trajectory towards such spaces.

Mastering “the Art of the Present”: Unnatural Boundaries and Borderlands

Before moving to actual textual analysis of The House on Mango Street, I would like to complement my discussion of ethnic narratives as split by what we normally consider to be contradictory developmental narratives, notably individualism and community, drawing on the insights of border theory. My intention here is to show that ethnic versions of the Bildungsroman dramatise their protagonists’ constant “border” crossings and negotiation of belonging in distinct territories, while blurring or transcending

---

5 The social theories of Jürgen Habermas, Alain Touraine and Zygmunt Bauman also offer critiques of community.
unnatural boundaries which present the above narratives as mutually exclusive. Such gestures are productive and ultimately political in that, in Bhabha’s words, they can “initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation...” (Location 1-2). In alternative terms, if in the traditional Bildungsroman the protagonist grows up expecting to learn “the art of living” (Moretti 32), in the ethnic American variant the protagonist becomes apprenticed to “the art of the present” (Bhabha, Location 1), and develops “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 99). While the first phrase above suggests an organic unfolding and a harmonious integration of all aspects of the self, the other two, when used in the context of the genre, redefine traditional notions of eighteenth-century Bildung by turning attention away from organic integration in order to express the acute conflicts and complexity that characterise life “on the border”.

Notions of borders and borderlands are very useful for my approach of the ethnic American Bildungsroman. Other than the appropriateness of such terminology for discussions of the Chicano/a novel of development, which is here my specific focus, the idea of the border is flexible in that it does not merely point to geopolitical boundaries, such as in our case the one that has divided Mexico from the United States since 1848. As most border theorists agree, the idea of the border becomes even more fertile when we “liberate it from the notion of space [or from a specific locale] to encompass [among others] notions of sex, class, gender, ethnicity, identity and community” (Benito & Manzanas 3). To actual physical borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa adds “[t]he psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands”, which, as she explains in the preface to the first edition of Borderlands/La Frontera, “are not particular to the Southwest” (19). Anzaldúa’s account of Chicanas’ divided loyalties and multiple allegiances, what she calls “Una lucha de fronteras/A Struggle of Borders” (99), is useful in another way as well in that it allows us to link her idea of “The Crossroads/La encrucijada” (102) with a similar geometry that Fraiman proposes for the female Bildungsroman in particular. Fraiman’s vision of the female process of growing up “not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of a crossroads” (x) resonates with Anzaldúa’s own, notably what she describes as “El camino de la mestiza/The Mestiza Way” (104). Though ethnic narratives by male writers also exhibit a

---

6 For the ways in which the Bildungsroman reflects Enlightenment ideals of a harmonious form of cultivation aimed at developing the whole person, see Martini, pp. 1-25.
similar negotiation of crossroads (which does not seem to inform Western male novels of development judging from the ways they have been read by critics), it would be hard not to agree that in ethnic American novels of female development such a struggle is characterised by more intense contradictions.

These contradictions are often negotiated at the time of writing. Like the protagonists in their novels, straddling between ideologies and cultures, ethnic American writers position themselves within the multiplicity of discourses of the time they are writing, responding to their demands in their own way. While Fraiman investigates the collision of narratives of gender and class in the nineteenth-century British texts she examines, ethnic American novels by women writers usually explore the tension between gender and ethnicity. In Chicana fiction in particular, a first wave of female writers in the 1970s started to pay attention to female issues, but, as Francisco A. Lomeli explains, this group of writers remained “influenced by the nationalist vogue” of the period, and as a result more specifically gendered needs were sacrificed to the larger Chicano cause agitating against the racial and material conditions of oppression (75). A second wave of Chicana writers in the 1980s, which includes Cisneros, soon turned to oppression from the inside as opposed to merely from the outside, seeking thus to problematise the idea of a unified community and to articulate more gender-identified perspectives. However, those writers who seemed more concerned with such issues were “considered traitors, non supportive of La raza—Malimchistas” (Rebolledo 71), after the mythical figure of La Malinche, who betrayed her people by helping Cortés’s conquest of the Aztec Empire. The Bildungsroman is relevant since the above shifts were largely effected through this genre. As Candida Hepworth notes, “Early and successful publications like Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra (1971) and Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972) adopted the format of the Bildungsroman and echoed, in that search for self-realisation, one of the focal concerns of El Movimiento [the national cause]” (“Chicano/a Fiction” 202). The House on Mango Street, in particular, has been

---

*7 The Chicano social movement of the 1960s and 1970s, known as the Chicano Renaissance, aimed at asserting Chicano identity by associating it with a certain cultural heritage stemming from a mythic past. Like the familiar Négritude, which has been mainly influential in Africa and the Caribbean in the late fifties and sixties, and which celebrated “blackness” and a common African past, the Chicano movement utilises the myth of the legendary Aztlán, the ancient homeland of the Aztecs, which is today known as the American Southwest, after it was annexed by the United States in 1848. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez calls the period that goes “beyond the nationalist drive” of the 1960s and 1970s transatlantic and notes that its representatives try to “explore borderland identities and experiences” (796).*
approached as a response to Rivera’s “representations of gendered relations” (Grobman 119).

Given the above response by Chicana writers to the discourse of nationalism, a pattern which has similarities to responses by other ethnic women such as African American, the opposition between individualism and community is coterminous with and often implies another border struggle for women writers, namely between gender and ethnicity. As already mentioned, while Chicano communities try to promote absolute unity, Chicana “individualists” reveal the asymmetries in such totalising patterns, thus showing how problematic “the communitarian ideal” can be. The tension between gender and ethnicity, what in the next chapter will be also cast as a tension between feminism and cultural nationalism, puts considerable burden on ethnic American women writers, since their texts are usually judged by their local communities on the basis of and according to the degree in which they fulfil their responsibilities toward them. As Wong succinctly summarises their predicament, “[V]ictimised by sexism [women] must be ready to suppress potentially damaging (to the men, that is) material; to do less is to jeopardise the united front and to prostitute one’s integrity for the sake of white approval” (“Autobiography” 259).

This is the kind of criticism that has been directed at Kingston, among others, to whom the next chapter is devoted. In “Keeping Her Distance: Cisneros, Dickinson, and the Politics of Private Enjoyment”, Geoffrey Sanborn, on whose insights I draw here, wonders why Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street “has remained almost entirely exempt from such censure” (1335). While I also find that the text, as Alvina Quintana puts it, challenges “patriarchal institutions and cultures gently, from an apparently middle-class, mainstream perspective” (73-4), which could explain its reception by critics, it still participates, as I will show, in the tension between gender and ethnicity mentioned above. However, what I consider to be of more interest in Sanborn’s article is the reason why such a gentle text, which a host of critics have celebrated as a unified portrait of self within the larger frame of the community, might have become the target of a similar criticism of betrayal. Sanborn introduces another element, what I will treat as a certain manifestation or designation of individualism and negative freedom, namely privacy or what he calls “private enjoyment”. The crucial question that opens his article is the following: “What happens to the political dimension of a work of art when the artist shows signs of becoming lost, or of being lost, in the pleasures of creation?”
What he proceeds to investigate is whether “traces of private enjoyment indicate the abandonment of communities and causes” (Sanborn 1334). The main question then boils down to whether private enjoyment and politics are mutually exclusive. Is there, after all, such a thing as “a politics of private enjoyment”?

It is important to note at this stage that with my investigation of the notion of privacy I do not intend to contribute towards a rewriting of the term’s history. Without doubt, there is much debate as to what can be included under its rubric, as well as concerning its content, function and overall value in law, politics, and philosophy. The articulation of a clearer account of privacy, which drives Julie Innés’s study for example, is beyond the scope of this chapter. I am aware, in other words, of the limits stemming from a choice to treat privacy in an expansive sense as a certain type of individualism (as I also did with mobility in the first chapter). Despite its complex, contested and multivalent nature, one of the more traditional tropes of privacy I address here is “domestic privacy” (Renza 88). I also use the adjective ‘private’ with the noun ‘enjoyment’, after Sanborn, in order to associate it in particular with enjoyment in writing and other seemingly gratuitous acts, which fall under what Louis A. Renza calls the “more subjective private affairs, such as thinking or feeling” (88).

Like Sanborn, I hope to show that the boundaries between privacy and affiliation or between personal pleasure and social responsibility are more porous in Cisneros’s text, but I intend to investigate this pair in the context of the Bildungsroman and complement his analysis by considering not only the activity of writing in the novel but also that of playing. In order, moreover, to encourage cross-ethnic comparison, I blend Sanborn’s conceptual framework with Wong’s similar intervention into Western discourses of the private and the public in Asian American fiction. Wong, not unlike Sanborn, is interested in questions of political engagement and private pleasure in a larger study that explores a series of motifs in Asian American fiction. These motifs are woven together under two terms, Necessity and Extravagance, which lend her study part of its title. Wong

---

8 For a broader account of the distinction between private and public, see Weintraub and Kuman. The essays in the anthology investigate “a complex family of oppositions”, thus demonstrating that “the public/private distinction is not unitary, but protean” (xii).

9 All quotations from Wong in this chapter are from Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance unless otherwise indicated.

10 Like Sanborn who records Cisneros’s intervention into discourses of privacy through her revision of Dickinson, Wong explores alimentary images, the motif of “the double”, patterns of mobility and images of art and artists, revealing the distinctive characteristics that these seemingly universal motifs acquire when situated in an Asian American context.
takes these two terms from the first chapter of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (13), which is the focus of the next chapter. In her words, Necessity usually “appears with words like force, demand or constraint whereas Extravagance with words like urge, impulse, or desire” (Wong 13); Extravagance denotes “excess” whereas Necessity is characterised by a sense of “containment” (Wong 13) similar to what Sanborn associates with the mode of social organisation structured by “the communitarian ideal”.

Without neglecting the fact that Wong’s paradigm is devised to capture the historical and contextual specificities of Asian American fiction, given that the terms Necessity and Extravagance are characterised by a certain level of abstraction, as Wong herself admits (14), it is relatively safe to transplant them from their “original” context. As she explains, the two concepts “function mainly rhetorically to tie together related tendencies contingent upon concrete social circumstances” (Wong 13). On several occasions throughout her study, Wong suggests potential comparisons with other minority literatures. Her chapter on patterns of mobility, for instance, establishes parallels with African American and Chicano novels. A more “playful” justification for bringing an Asian American paradigm together with a Chicano text is the sentence that appears in the vignette “My Name” from *The House on Mango Street*. There, Esperanza states that “the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (10). Moreover, Cisneros has said in an interview that *The Woman Warrior* gave her “permission” to write *The House on Mango Street* (“Search for Identity”). Finally, Sanborn notes that “a similar argument [to his own] could be made with respect to the work of ... Kingston” (1346, n.1), and chooses as one of the epigraphs of his article a sentence from the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*.

Both Sanborn and Wong explore writing and its place in the respective dichotomies of privacy and affiliation and of Necessity and Extravagance. Sanborn sees writing as “a technology of privacy”, which, like self-talk, fantasy and hallucination, flirts dangerously with “mental masturbation”, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, because it is not productive in the strict sense (1338). Wong makes a similar point: she maps her distinction between Necessity and Extravagance on the larger dichotomy of “work” and “play” (171), and explains that in an Asian American context transcendence through art is suspect since it appears to be in the service of personal pleasure, and thus is not socially useful. Unlike the aesthetic ideal of autonomy nurtured by artistic Extravagance, work contributes to common welfare.
In addition to deconstructing the work/play dichotomy, Wong reveals how the binary Extravagance/Necessity is gender-biased. Extravagance, which often manifests itself through sexual desire and artistic creativity, is dismissed as an irrational female principle (172-3) just like female mobility, which is similarly tainted as shown in Lucy. Lauren Berlant cites D.A. Miller's argument that women have become “the deserving recipients of those mortifying charges (sentimentality, self-indulgence, narcissism) which our culture is prepared to bring against anyone who dwells in subjectivity longer or more intensely than is necessary to his proper functioning as the agent of socially useful work ...” (271, my emphasis). In that sense, the narrator in At the Bottom of the River with her child-like voice must be found guilty for she “refused to enter the adult [and male] symbolic order and went on indulging in strings of associative images”, as Hoving puts it (210). What the above account suggests about the Bildungsroman in general is that the right path to maturity has to involve a repudiation of Extravagance and a repression of indulgence for the sake of a higher purpose. Franklin's Autobiography is perhaps a classic example of this trajectory, at least in an American context. Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, the archetype of the genre, has obviously set the example since Wilhelm Meister outgrows his love for the theatre and turns to the society of the Tower in the end. Although this is presented as a voluntary choice he would have made anyway, such a turn transforms the former individuality (interpreted as “abnormality”) into a form of “normality” that, to evoke Wong, “functions as work” while it promises to “feel like play” (189). To summarise then, the teleological movement of both the traditional and the ethnic Bildungsroman can be seen in terms of a passage from Extravagance to Necessity, from negative to positive freedom, and from individuality to normality. In the Western female Bildungsroman in particular, it is the heterosexual narrative pressure and the marriage plot that undermine individuality for the sake of normality, cast in domestic and sentimental terms. In the case of the ethnic Bildungsroman, as already suggested, the pressure for communal solidarity and unity may have a similar effect.

Both Wong and Sanborn interrogate the tendency to see art (and in particular writing) as “irresponsible” and “dissipative” (Wong 171), and undertake to recuperate the good that such a subversive space safeguards in non-atomistic and non-patriarchal

11 Wilhelm Meister’s words to his mother evoke this discourse of Extravagance that has to be superseded by Necessity. At the beginning of the novel, his mother warns him that his father is not pleased with his love for the theatre, to which Wilhelm responds: “Is everything useless which does not immediately put
terms. Like Sanborn, who examines the socially transformative potential of private enjoyment, Wong argues for an “understanding of play as an activity embedded in material processes”, in other words as situated and potentially useful (185). With this argument Wong challenges an argument, which I have explored in the previous chapter, notably that absolute self-determination assumes its most radical expression in literary texts when seen in tandem with art.

What would be the price for ethnic American writers who might be interested in experimenting with such technologies of privacy? Wong wonders, for instance, whether images that draw attention to the more playful aspects of art in ethnic American literary texts should be subsumed “under the modern bourgeois concept of the alienated artist” (166). Wouldn’t such an aspiration toward transcendence through art be characterised as an “illicit operation”, in Fredric Jameson’s words (“Import-Substitution” 181)? Jameson uses this term to suggest various artistic techniques that are used in Western autobiography and its novelistic equivalents (including the Bildungsroman) to “construct the personal subject and the illusion of a personal, a subjective, a private identity” (181, my emphasis). Using the term “import-substitution” in the title of his article, Jameson registers the dilemma of the Third World writer who hesitates between adopting an “openly Westernizing” strategy and providing an alternative (“Import-Substitution” 184). As he, however, explains, unlike Western autobiographical texts that are “machines designed to construct centered subjects” (182), “the Third World text cannot but specify the restricted social status of the ego or personality or centered subject who comes into being in these works” (183). Thus, even if the ethnic writer attempts to locate herself in narratives of privacy and individualism, inevitably she locates herself differently. Though the concept of play is invoked to challenge stereotypes such as “the model minority” in Asian American literature, even in cases when such a need to eschew stereotypes is at its most crucial, play is never reduced to something purely “disinterested” (Wong 185), which would be the equivalent of a Western “art for art’s sake” philosophy of play. As Wong stresses, “[Ethnic American artists] can hardly abandon questions on the moral and political propriety of play” (185). Using the terms

money in our pockets and which does not procure us possessions near at hand?” In the theatre, as he asserts, he is seeking “things which will entertain, enlighten and elevate us” (qtd. in Kester 55).  

12 In the chapter entitled “The Asian American Homo Ludens: Work, Play, and Art” of her study, Wong alludes to the Western literature on play, explaining that Asian American ludic discourse shares many features with Western accounts but also diverges when it comes to others (see pp. 166-211).

92
she coins, ethnic American texts display “a conscientious aestheticism” (191) or “an interested disinterestedness” (13).

The suggestion that I want to advance here is that the borderline that divides dichotomies such as Necessity and Extravagance, individualism and community, privacy and affiliation, or work and play, safeguarding them against trespassers, imposes a boundary, which is “unnatural” when it comes to the experience of ethnic Americans which, being dictated by life on the border, involves a constant process of mediation and negotiation. Ethnic American women writers in particular seem to be constantly responding to the above pseudo-dilemmas (for example to the question “Individualism or Community?”) with the joke with which Slavoj Žižek opens (and entitles) one of his essays, that is, with the answer “Yes, please!” (90): a refusal of choice, which is accompanied by a very serious effort to transcend unnatural boundaries and articulate a synthesis of the competing values. For Anzaldúa, this synthesis can take place in an ideal space, namely “the borderlands”. As she explains, a borderland is “created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25, my emphasis). From what she describes as “the edging of cultures”, which resonates with Mary Louise Pratt’s description of “contact zones” as “spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (4), emerges “a third element ... greater than the sum of its severed parts” (Anzaldúa 101-2). For Bhabha, such “a third space”, though it bears the traces of the positions that inform it, is a syncretic construct which can give rise to “a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (“The Third Space” 211). For Anzaldúa, it is the ground where “a new mestiza consciousness” can flourish (99).

The Bildungsroman is an appropriate site for the construction of third spaces like the ones suggested by the term of the borderlands. The category’s “contradictory, hybrid and compromising nature” (12), which for Moretti makes the genre inherently conservative, is reclaimed by the ethnic American texts I read as a condition that allows them to carve a space where several of the above conflicts can be played out. This meeting ground, rather than closing the tension between “dueling” narratives through the reconciliation of oppositions, remains, in Anzaldúa’s phrase, “in a constant state of transition” (25). The dialogue opened should not be approached as a kind of postmodern exercise in ambiguity and indeterminacy. As Fraiman notes, “The appeal of ideological disarray is the room it leaves for oppositional impulses” (xiv). As with the
creative use of melancholia in the previous chapter, anything that cannot be easily accommodated can potentially become a source of resistance.

The blurring of boundaries in the borderlands, in which not only *The House on Mango Street* but also subsequent texts that I read engage, is also captured by a series of syncretic concepts, which are constantly coined and used in critical discourse, revealing the increasing interest in and various applications of in-between and third spaces. Terms like “interested disinterestedness” and “the politics of private enjoyment” provide a serious response, analogous to Žižek’s teasing “Yes please!”, which unsettles oppositions and deconstructs customary boundaries. I find these terms useful in that they allow unity, or “an osmotic mixing”, to borrow Miller’s phrase (221), while sustaining tension. Though they can be seen as third spaces, which are more than the sum of their parts and thus have an integrity of their own, the traces of the positions that inform them are visible. This seems more faithful to the kind of precarious unities construed by ethnic American versions of the *Bildungsroman*. Such unities are permeable or more porous and as a result can easily fragment back to their initial constituents. Lukács would call them “*attempt[s] at synthesis or problematic compromise[s]*” (qtd in Moretti 69, emphasis in the original). I would argue, however, that this inherent vulnerability is not a deficiency but rather something that demonstrates that there can be no “unity without remainder” (Young 304). The concepts above suggest a symbiotic relationship, both in a nurturing and antagonistic sense, which is similar to a host/parasite relationship (see n.3). As with the term “bound motion”, which I used in the first chapter, no constituent superimposes itself on another. Here, Levinas’s ethics of alterity founded on the Other is more than relevant. His philosophy of relating to otherness without subsuming difference takes place when the terms that constitute a plurality “limit” each other. Because of the double function of the limit as both border and bridge, elements can be brought together while at the same time maintaining their identity (Levinas 222). This form of unity is a “foundation of pluralism” (Levinas 220) that eschews the either/or choice in that it allows fragmentation and unity at the same time. As Levinas puts it, the terms of a whole are “partially independent and partially in relation” (223), and this arrangement “leaves them in commerce or war” (220). In the context of the novel of development, such an uneasy bonding, maintained until the very end, is an important difference from the classical *Bildungsroman*’s problematic closure of absolute unity.
Weaving and Unweaving through the Vignette

Having suggested that ethnic versions of the Bildungsroman are defined by a constant struggle of borders as well as by an attempt to articulate a consciousness of the borderlands, I will now turn to The House on Mango Street in order to investigate this possibility. Although Cisneros is not a conscious practitioner of the Bildungsroman, The House on Mango Street has been perceived against this conceptual horizon. Annie Eysturoy organises her study, which looks at the emergence of the “new figure of the Chicana Bildungsheld” (137) in novels by Isabella Ríos, Cisneros, Estella Portillo Trambley and Denise Chávez, on the basis of two interpretations of Bildung: “entrapment” and “subversive act” (27). The shift she documents parallels the relation of Western women writers to the genre, as this has been explored by critics like Labovitz, Felski, DuPlessis and the editors of The Voyage In. In their account, the female Bildungsroman gradually manages to “write beyond the ending”, a change which reflects women’s increasing social and political power over the years. In tracing this shift, Eysturoy sees the genre as “an interesting medium for understanding the development in Chicana feminist consciousness” (27). Needless to mention, The House on Mango Street is cited as one of the novels where Bildung becomes subversive act.

Maria Karafilis suggests that Cisneros’s emphasis on space, rather than on linear development, “marks her most radical revision” of the genre (71). With space she does not refer merely to physical space, in other words the urban barrio where the novel is set, but also to a cross-cultural space in the imagination which allows the protagonist Esperanza to grow up integrating opposing elements (71). Unlike other Mexican American fiction of development, which uses the physical border as the backdrop of their protagonists’ hybrid “education”, or recreates border encounters between Mexico and the United States through code-switching and linguistic hybridity, The House on Mango Street dramatises the idea of border struggle in a more subtle way through its basic structural principle, that is, the vignette.

Tomás Rivera’s 1971 coming-of-age novel ... y no se lo tragó la tierra/... and the earth did not part has been compared to Cisneros’s first novel on the basis of their structural
similarity, among other things. As Rivera explains, "I finally decided to structure a work (novel) from which any element (chapter or short story) could be extracted and stand, out of context, on its own, with its own kernel of sensibility and meaning, albeit [with] its ambiguity" (qtd. in Olivares, Teaching 210). Cisneros makes a similar point about *The House on Mango Street* which adds a fresh alternative to the well-worn image of texts as quilts pieced together by assembled patches: "I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn't have to know anything before or after and you would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 305). The question that we might raise is whether Cisneros's choice to structure the text in this way is capricious and devoid of purpose: if from one perspective the book is a novel and from another a short story sequence (or cycle), what do these two alternatives have to offer? More importantly, what do they do to the *Bildungsroman*?

The imagistic or episodic *vignette*, which has become the hallmark of Cisneros's fiction since her first work, may seem a simple technique but its alleged lack of complexity is deceptive. A reviewer for *Booklist* has described it as "convincingly represent[ing] the reflections of a young girl", and has suggested that *The House on Mango Street* is written in a "deliberately simple style, halfway between a prose poem and the awkwardness of semiliteracy", adding that "[o]ccasionally the method annoys by its cuteness" (qtd. in Ganz 29, my emphasis). However, in addition to aiding the process of imitating the voice of a child, as I will show, such a technique also helps conceptualise the text as a matrix of constant crossings.

A series of definitions of the term *vignette* exemplify an extraordinary consistency in their predilection for specific vocabulary. Starting with the two entries found in the *OED* I also list several definitions from various online dictionaries: "illustration, especially on the title-page of a book, but not in a definite border"; "photograph or drawing, especially of a person's head and shoulders, with the background gradually shaded off"; "an illustration that has soft edges"; "an illustration unenclosed by a formal border"; "an image that does not have a definite border around it. This term also applies to a small image that is part of a larger print"; "an image in which the colours or tones gradually bleed out into the background". Other than the association they all draw to photography, the item that recurs in these definitions of *vignette* is that of the border; a

---

13 See Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo's "Growing up Chicano".
border, which, rather than appearing as a rigid line, merges with what has been referred as the borderland.

Rocio Davis argues that the short story cycle as a genre offers "formal possibilities that allow its practitioners the freedom to challenge the totalising impression of the traditional novel of social and psychological realism" (6). Davis cites Gerald Lynch's idea that this genre allows "for a kind of unity in disunity and a more accurate representation of modern sensibility" (6). Although Davis's study is on Asian American and Asian Canadian short-story cycles, she makes a few general points about the advantages of this form that can be also applied to other ethnic texts which dramatise "experiences and perceptions of the transcultural position—the establishment of borders, indeterminacy, fragmentation and process of memory, the question of assimilation" (Davis 215). The idea of "unity in disunity" can describe both the short story sequence as a genre and the predicament of women situated on the border of cultures. Just as in short story sequences a story can stand on its own and be part of a larger unit, Chicanas should not have to choose among their multiple loyalties and allegiances, such as gender and ethnicity or privacy and affiliation.

Chicana texts, according to Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, which turn to "minor" genres and forms such as the short story and the vignette, "depict radical experimentation yet no ahistorical play of signifier" (Mermann-Jozwiak 113). Her argument that ethnic short fiction exemplifies "a multicultural, political version of postmodernism" (113) is useful to mention here in that it ties well with my former discussion of play and politics. The "intersection between postmodernism and multiculturalism" (101) that Mermann-Jozwiak traces unsettles the rigid opposition between aesthetics and politics and has affinities with Wong's idea of the "interested disinterestedness" in an Asian American context. Like Wong, she suggests that the radical experimentation of Chicano texts departs from "elitist 'art pour art'" projects (101). Moreover, like Davis, she echoes the idea that such experimental and hybrid forms as the vignette serve to articulate borderlands in that they voice the tensions between the numerous cultures and traditions that Chicanas claim. Though, as Mermann-Jozwiak explains, in speaking from both sides of the border these texts seem to agree with the postmodern challenge to unitary systems, their formal experimentation is contextualised within greater historical and political realities. Cisneros is conscious of this difference. As she explains in an interview, "I ... take my responsibility seriously of being a woman who lives on the
border of cultures, a translator for a time when all these communities are shifting and colliding in history” (Kevane and Heredia 53).

Due to the interplay between parts and whole, *The House on Mango Street* can be either read “in a series to tell one big story” (Cisneros, “Do You Know Me?” 78), which is what one conventionally expects from a *Bildungsroman*, or as a spatial configuration. A call to pay attention to the spatial dimension of the text does not mean that one should deny its temporal dimension. The idea is rather to try to extricate our reading habits from a tendency to privilege linearity and teleology at any cost. In the spatial whole of the text, the chapters can be seen as interchangeable and as carrying equal weight. No story contains the absolute message since each one of them is meaningful. The spatial dimension I am proposing supports Fraiman’s re-reading of the female *Bildungsroman* in that the compressed stories, “lazy poems” (Cisneros, “Do You Know Me?” 79), and vivid sketches of *The House on Mango Street*, each with its own title, disperse the protagonist’s narrative of development across several trajectories. At the same time, they represent the narrator’s process of growing up as a movement in contradictory directions by inscribing competing narratives of development. In *The House on Mango Street*, these rival stories can be uncovered through a close juxtaposition of different *vignettes*, a task rendered easier thanks to the compression of the *vignette* as a form. The reader’s role in reconfiguring the text is very important here. While the “narrative overspill” in the *vignettes* and the recurrent imagery, in particular the tropes of the house and the *barrio*, unify the stories, the readers can rethink the relationship between part and whole and broaden their understanding of the text.

Several of the *vignettes* in *The House on Mango Street* underwrite the narrator’s wish to escape from the confining patriarchal scripts of her community into a space of “private enjoyment” (Sanborn 1334): into a real house and into “the house of fiction”. This is how Esperanza gives flesh and blood to her dream in a section entitled “A House of My Own”:


---

14 Elisabeth Bronfen, drawing on Gérard Genette and Joseph Frank, discusses a similar “spatial” mode of reading that underscores a text’s “simultaneity” and “reversibility” (197), although her focus is not on the short story sequence.
books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

This vignette comes before the last story of the text, and it has made a few critics, like Juan Rodriguez, suggest that Esperanza seeks “to become more ‘Anglicized’” (qtd. in de Valdés 289) or that her development culminates in “her deterritorialization from kinship, friendship, group, community, and history” (Morales 231). This is the price ethnic American women presumably pay in the pursuit of C.P. MacPherson’s “possessive individualism”, or in the pursuit of Woolf’s feminist dream of “a room of one’s own”.15

Other vignettes such as “My Name” and “Beautiful and Cruel” are similarly underwritten by an individualistic spirit. In the first, Esperanza, like Lucy, seeks to “baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like [her]” (11). Like the unnamed narrator of The Woman Warrior, which I discuss in the following chapter, Esperanza wishes to locate herself in a maternal descent line, but she is afraid that she will inherit her great-grandmother’s fate. Her great-grandmother was a wild woman but was forced to marry: “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (11). In “Beautiful and Cruel” Esperanza renounces marriage, which she sees as a form of slavery, and declares that she will not “grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (88). However, these vignettes in which Esperanza wishes to refashion herself, acquiring a new name and house, and adopting a more masculine attitude, have their communal counterparts, which convey a sense of closeness to the members of her community without annulling the more individualistic or feminist counternarratives. This is why I would argue that criticisms as the ones advanced by Morales, to which I will return below, though not necessarily directed at Cisneros, fail to do justice to the text by treating it as univocal. As I have suggested, the text is split between competing narratives and as a result has to be grasped in its multiplicity and simultaneity.

The vignette I quoted in its entirety above can be juxtaposed with another entitled “Bums in the Attic” in which Esperanza offers to open that very same house to “bums”

15 For Cisneros’s revision of Woolf, see Doyle.
since, as the narrator confesses, she knows “how it is to be without a house” (87). This particular vignette makes room for both the narratives of privacy and affiliation, thus reproducing the simultaneity of the text on a smaller scale. Esperanza admits that she dreams a house on a hill because she is tired to look at “what we can’t have” (86). In an essay entitled “Ghosts and Voices” Cisneros describes one of the most important books in her childhood, namely Virginia Lee Burton’s *The Little House*, a picture book that tells the story of a house on a country hill “witnessing the changes of seasons and generations, although curious about the distant lights of the big city”:

Finally the city that has been growing ever larger, catches up with the little house, until, she finds she is no longer in the country but eventually surrounded by tall buildings and noisy traffic. The inhabitants move away, and the little house, no longer able to see the stars at night, grows sad. (70)

The house is finally rescued by the granddaughter in the story: traffic is halted to wheel the house away to the country where it settles “on a hill just like the one it originally sat on, happy and once again loved” (70).

How can we read this story? Does it evoke nostalgia for an older time? In Burton’s story the house that tries to survive by staying as far as possible from the traffic of the city becomes a symbol of a type of life that was less fragmented, rationalised and individualistic. In “Bums in the Attic”, however, Cisneros rewrites this story. She makes the following comment: “People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth …They have nothing to do with last week’s garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind” (86-7). The juxtaposition between hill and earth evokes a “vertical” and a “horizontal narrative”, (to use Wong’s terms), to which I will return. With the revision to the story of the little house in *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros does not erase Esperanza’s wish. As she explains, the appeal of Burton’s story for her was the dream of “a house where one family lived and grew old and didn’t move away …One house, one spot.” (“Ghosts and Voices” 71); a wish which is legitimate given the fact that her family, like other Mexican-American immigrants, had to constantly move in order to find work. The opening vignette of *The House on Mango Street* alludes to this constant movement: “We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keller it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot” (3).
The House on Mango Street operates on the basis of a double movement according to which one narrative, either individualism or community, interrupts or qualifies the other revealing its contingency. Robert M. Luscher uses Hortense Calisher's image in her preface to Collected Stories of narratives “bumping” (148) in an essay that attempts to add to the definition of the short story sequence as a genre. This bumping takes place within vignettes and across vignettes in Cisneros’s text, and from this collision new hybrid spaces emerge. In “Bums in the Attic”, for instance, Esperanza’s dream of a house on a hill is mediated by a realisation that there are people who are not that privileged and whom she should remember. This does not evacuate her desire but simply makes it more responsible: “One day I’ll own my house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (86-7). Cisneros’s text stretches the definition of individualism and community by showing how individualised expression can be compatible with collective participation and how one can be both divided and united; as Esperanza is told in “The Three Sisters”: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? ...You will always be Mango Street” (105). Interpreting the phrase “remember to come back” as “remember in order to come back”, Sanborn argues that “the sister restores contingency to privacy without denying the validity of the pursuit of privacy” (1344). As in my reading of “Bums in the Attic”, where Esperanza promises to remember where she comes from but does not renounce her dream of owning a house of her own, Sanborn reads the sister’s message as saying to Esperanza “When you leave you must always remember to come back’, “not ‘Don’t leave”’ (1344). Thus, in “Bums in the Attic” Esperanza’s embarrassed wish for a house on a hill exposes her to criticism but clearly this is half of the story. The other half of the vignette, borrowing Sanborn’s phrase, “asks us [as it also asks Esperanza] to remain open to the contingency of experiences and lives” (1334).

The House on Mango Street as a whole compels us to remain open to this possibility since it is interspersed with the stories of a whole cast of characters. A substantial number of the vignettes focus on the women of the barrio and are characterised by significant parallels that create a kind of symmetry. When the tableau hangs complete, we stand in front of a tapestry of static women confined in houses, “sitting their sadness on

16 I focus on the vignettes that describe the women but the text goes beyond an exclusive portrayal of the oppression of Chicanas to name and give voice to other outsiders in the community. Vignettes which can serve as examples of this point are: “Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin”, “Gil’s Furniture Bought &
an elbow” (11), looking out the window all their lives. Spatial confinement implies discursive confinement at the same time. The different developmental narratives represented by the women of the barrio point to the discursive possibilities of becoming a woman in Esperanza’s community. The prospects are not very bright. In these stories, which echo well-known fairy tales such as “Cinderella” and “Little Red Riding Hood”, single women dream of a prince and try to escape their father’s house through marriage only to end up inaugurating another cycle of oppression and entrapment. Married women are either abandoned, abused by their husbands, or like the narrator’s mother, “a smart cookie” who “could’ve been somebody”, sacrifice their dreams (90). There is also the model of the excessively spiritual woman, Esperanza’s aunt Lupe, who is sick and helpless (“Born Bad”), or of the old, unassimilated immigrant who is nostalgic of her home, another liability (“No Speak English”). Few women try to make a difference in their lives by writing beyond such patterns of socialisation, for their practices or voices are muted like Minerva who writes poems “on little pieces of paper” when the kids are asleep (84). Other more rebellious counternarratives entail many sacrifices. Most women, such as Alicia who studies all night and “sees the mice” (32), have to balance any choices that make their lives less alienating with the roles of wife, mother and daughter traditionally ascribed to women. Finally, for the women, like Sally, who choose promiscuity as a form of self-expression, they are punished for the pursuit of such private enjoyment with public shunning in La Malinche fashion: “Until one day Sally’s father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn’t come to school … he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You’re not my daughter, you’re not my daughter” (93).

How does Esperanza situate herself amidst these options? Esperanza’s dilemma is how to free herself from Mango and “yet belong” to it (de Valdés 293). Her Bildung follows a simultaneous movement toward two directions, what Sanborn, drawing on Bhabha, also captures through the division of “One” with a capital O and “one” with a small o that informs the opposition of “diachrony and synchrony” (1342-3). A general comment about this simultaneous movement is that Esperanza yearns for unity and

Said”, “The Earl of Tennessee”, and especially “Geraldo No Last Name” where Esperanza speaks for an immigrant who dies in an accident surrounded by other people’s indifference.

17 This textual reference to creating from discrete elements could be seen as a metafictional comment that signals a consciousness of the strategy of making a whole out of parts, which is how the entire collection is built. Kingstons’s The Woman Warrior in the third chapter has its own self-reflective moments, and in the last chapter Lorde also evokes the technique of collage.
transcendence, the timeless ideal that the capital O promises. But this ideal is shown to be contingent, a contingency most obvious when “One in privacy persistently remembers the one and one and one and one she has been” (Sanborn 1345, my emphasis). In short, the movement of the protagonist towards transcendence is mediated by another movement that brings Esperanza back to the ordinary space of the barrio. Before providing more examples, it is important to note that such a pattern challenges ideas of Bildung as a straightforward movement with clear boundaries between stages and with a fixed closure. Just as growing up is not a simple story of escaping from a repressive home to the land of the free in Lucy, or a shedding of past affiliations for the sake of Americanisation, as I will argue in the following chapter, in The House on Mango Street growing up entails finding a balance between self and the other. This turns Bildung into a state of constant transition and mediation that frustrates its will to closure.

Sanborn captures the pole of the first in his One/one distinction by documenting Esperanza’s desire to “stop time in a moment of uncomplicated bliss”, as this is registered by a series of lyrical and repetitive vignettes (1343). These vignettes, which are infused with what seems similar to the incantatory tone of At the Bottom of the River, challenge the preoccupation of the Bildungsroman with progress and temporal movement. Vignettes such as “Hairs”, “Gil’s Furniture Bought and Sold” and “Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark” articulate a wish to stop time, to halt the transition from childhood to adulthood. The first communicates an experience of pre-oedipal bondedness and recalls the scenes of mother/daughter intercorporeality in Kincaid’s collection of stories. Esperanza describes her family’s hair and expresses a longing to be lost in “Mama’s hair that smells like bread” (7) giving her a sense of safety and of being at home. In “Gil’s Furniture Bought and Sold”, a music box creates a similar feeling of warmth and belonging. Finally in “Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark” Esperanza rehearses the scene of family bonding described in “Hairs”, this time with her father: “I hold my Papa in my arms. I hold and hold and hold him” (57).

The desire for “atemporality” is also associated with a yearning to escape the constraints of the body. As Sanborn explains, this wish is often “short-circuited” by the fact that even “atemporal fantasies” are overwritten by a male language and thus allow limited room for agency (1343). To cite an example, Esperanza says in a poem of her own that she recites to her aunt Guadalupe in “Born Bad” that “one day I’ll jump out of my skin” (60). However, when the chance is given to several girls to walk their
neighborhood in high heels, what starts as a game of private enjoyment ends on a different note. In “The Family of Little Feet” a woman gives Esperanza’s company several pairs of shoes. Trying them on, the girls see themselves as “Cinderella” figures, but also express their uneasiness with the “long long leg[s]” that they suddenly inherit: “But the truth is it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg” (40). Walking around the barrio wearing the magic high heels, the girls meet men who look at them as if they were ladies. The corner grocer threatens to call the “cops” and a “bum man” offers to give Rachel a dollar for a kiss. In the end the girls, “tired of being beautiful” (42), escape by returning to their ordinary shoes. The scene exposes the commodification of women in the barrio and undermines the girls’ pedestrian act.

The division between One and one becomes perhaps more apparent in the juxtaposition of the struggle for survival in nature and in human beings. As Sanborn observes, the “easily idealized survival strategies of natural objects” are placed side by side with “the compromised struggles of human beings” (1344), and this becomes a condition for remembering and for affiliation. To substantiate this reading, Sanborn turns to the specific position that certain vignettes occupy in the text. As he explains, Cisneros wishes to draw an analogy between the trees “who grew despite concrete” (75) and the women of the barrio. This is why the four snapshots “No Speak English”, “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays”, “Sally” and “Minerva Writes Poems” come right after the vignette entitled “Four Skinny Trees” (1344).

To Sanborn’s account of natural images of transcendence which contrast with the truncated attempts of human beings, I would like to add the distinction between images of flight on the one hand and images of fall on the other. In her discussion of patterns of mobility in a chapter of her study on Necessity and Extravagance, Wong argues that “the motif of ascent” registers “the impulse toward Extravagance” (154). In contrast to the vertical movement of elevation that represents Extravagance, Necessity becomes encoded through a horizontal movement that conveys “linearity, direction, purposefulness, containment, control” (Wong 154). In the texts which Wong explores, a vertical axis of potential often becomes frustrated through an element that brings down to earth. Episodes which describe truncated human efforts in Esperanza’s community mirror the inferior place of Chicanos within mainstream America but they are also the result of repressive patterns of socialisation in the barrio, especially for women. In the
There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do”, for instance, the boy who learns to fly ultimately drops from the sky “like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and explod[es] down to earth without even an ‘Oh’”(30). Unlike a bird, which can fly without difficulty, the boy’s attempt to imitate it, like Icarus, is necessarily truncated. In “vertical” scenes of fall like this, the barrio is presented as an environment that puts obstacles to dreams and aspirations, in other words as a circle which suffocates.

Juxtapositions of vertical and horizontal movement are not, however, necessarily weighted against the former polarity. As Wong explains, “The horizontal plane is not only the locus of coercion and stagnation, needfulness and arrested development. It is also the locus of human habitation, attachment, reciprocity; ‘Gravity’ may impede, but it also sustains” (158). The same could be argued about the hold of the past, and its “logic of impediment” in Lucy, as shown in the previous chapter. This relational mode is what tempers Lucy’s movement, turning it into a bound or controlled motion just as in “Bums in the Attic”, as we have seen, it mediates a renewed connection to the community. In another vignette, “Boys & Girls”, Esperanza wishes to fly like a balloon, but “is tied to an anchor”, meaning her sister and the responsibility she has towards her (9). Similarly, the image of the sky in the vignette “Darius & the Clouds”, which “can keep you safe when you are sad” (33), merges with that of God: “You see that cloud, that fat one there? Darius said, ... See that. That’s God” (34). This image becomes, in the following vignette entitled “And Some More”, an image of a sky populated with clouds.18 While in the first vignette a boy spots that fat cloud which is God, the second is filled with descriptions of various clouds interspersed with a multiplicity of names of people, probably people of the barrio: “Joey, Marco, Nereida and Sue. [...] Phyllis, Ted, Alfredo and Julie ... Reynaldo, Angelo, Albert, Armando, Mario ...” (36). Once again, a desire for transcendence and singularity (“the one house, one spot” that Cisneros describes in “Ghosts and Voices”) appears next “to the one and one and one” (Sanborn 1342), which here correspond to the various names listed in the vignette (encoding the horizontal that brings back to earth and becomes a basis for connection with the community). The relationship to the “celestial” (whatever this stands for) is not refused but becomes amplified as new, non-vertical dimensions open up.

18 In “Eleven” from Women Hollering Creek Esperanza imagines that she is a balloon flying and she describes that as a tiny o (9). This resonates with Sanborn’s distinction between the One and the one.
Private Open Spaces: Rebuilding the Private and the Public

The distinction between the One with a capital O and the one with a small o is one that Sanborn initially draws in relation to the trope of the house, which is the controlling motif of the narrative, and which also provides it with its title. In contrast to the “successive” houses Esperanza has had in the past, the one on Loomis, the one on Keeler, the one on Paulina, and the one now on Mango, as she lists them in the first vignette of the text, she dreams of a house that will be hers for ever. It is precisely this domestic fantasy of absolute seclusion which provoked the criticism of the text’s apparent deterritorialisation and refusal of social ties. This, however, raises the important question of whether the house Esperanza imagines, which Sanborn describes as “a space that is intimate, private and under her control”, and one that is to be distinguished from the houses of the barrio and the street on which they stand (1335), refuses any possibility of affinity or relation to the world outside. Is there such a space in reality, “a privileged space that knows no interruption”, in Peggy Kamuf’s phrase? (157)

In an article entitled “The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis as Gloss in Chicana Literary Study”, Cordelia Chávez Candelaria revises the well-known Ardener schema of intersecting circles, which distinguishes between dominant and muted cultures, to describe Chicano/a experience.¹⁹ Chicanas are determined by a number of factors unique to their case: they are members of a patriarchal ethnic group (which is, of course, marginalised in the Anglo world), but at the same time are partakers of their own “wild” culture. Applying this to The House on Mango Street, Esperanza’s desire for privacy and transcendence, which can take place in a “heretical space” such as the wild zone, is mediated, though not contained entirely, by her partial location in the space of her community which compels her to remain open to other experiences and lives. While the need to belong to such an idealised space (which is imagined as being exterior to time and close to nature) is legitimate, for Candelaria, isolation in the wild zone, no matter how vital the existence of such a space is for the maintenance of a less alienating reality, is not a solution for marginalised people like women who “must for survival know and practice the dominant patriarchal discourse and conventions” (250).

¹⁹ For ‘the wild zone thesis’, see Showalter and Shands.
Can the trope of the house be envisaged as a solitary space outside history? Is a woman able to claim such an idealised space, untouched by patriarchy, in order to attain absolute singularity and wholeness, as narratives of female quest in nature and novels of awakening seem to suggest? Losing oneself “in the wild zone” can be too dangerous, too disorienting for women. While the wilderness, as Showalter explains, is part of the circle that denotes male experience, the equivalent female crescent in the Ardener schema cannot be realised in the language of the dominant culture; the “wild” is thus “always imaginary” (Showalter 200). It seems that only men can emerge empowered through a private pursuit of individual fulfilment in their own wild zone, and return intact.

Other than the wilderness, which, in American at least accounts, we tend to associate with lonely heroic figures like the frontiersman, the domestic realm becomes another emblem of privacy or individual success, and surprisingly not only for women. In “Penelope at Work: Interruption in A Room Of one’s Own”, Kamuf alludes to the “Room of One’s Own”, whose capital letters suggest the room of the Cartesian subject, “the original room” where the male subject retreats to become “one, both singular and whole” (158). Drawing on Foucault who describes it in such terms, Kamuf argues that the subject of Reason maintains his unified shape by erecting a rigid border between the inside and the outside, eliminating interruption and thus otherness. Ramon Saldivar adds to Kamuf’s visualisation of the house as the domain of the autonomous male subject another layer. As he argues, the “house as the preeminent symbol of the privatized, sovereign and individual self” is not a universal motif in that it “is plotted and fixed topographically onto a terrain of white male values” (183).

Though Sanborn has applied the distinction One/one to The House on Mango Street and has registered Esperanza’s desire for a similar type of transcendence (suggested by her search for the ‘One’), an argument I have supported by providing further examples from the text, I would like at this point to problematise the association of such a form of desire with what Jameson calls a “virtually metaphysical preoccupation” (“Import-Substitution” 187). Sanborn, starting from the fact that critics have neglected in their reading of The House on Mango Street Esperanza’s, and by extension Cisneros’s, desire for

---

20 Kamuf discusses an extract from Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own where an intrusion into this room is imagined by the narrator; it is an intimate scene, however, “that has no place in the history and the biographies of great men which one may consult” (159).
privacy, brings it to the surface through the parallels he draws between Emily Dickinson and Cisneros. Although I do not want to deny the affinities between the two authors, which Sanborn persuasively documents, the extent to which this commonality is read as a metaphysical preoccupation seems slightly exaggerated. This is not to say that Esperanza’s desire for privacy is not significant. Neither, however, do I embrace Jameson’s nostalgia which leads him to the idealisation of minority writing for its lack of implication within the “alienated psychologism and placeless individualism” of Western literature (Shih 21). Rather, as with the previous chapter, in which I made a distinction between a more rooted trauma as opposed to a general, abstract and metaphysical kind, I would like to stress that Esperanza’s desire for privacy is likewise more specifically situated.

Jameson suggests that First World autobiographical texts are characterised by “a whole rhetoric of desire”, based on what seems to be a misreading of Freud (“Import-Substitutions” 186). To the “glamorous and metaphysical notion of desire … that speaks the language of the sublime and of the great elite and aristocratic forms”, Jameson juxtaposes “the more prosaic everyday business of wishes and wants”, which is more typical of Third World narratives such as the testimonio, one of Jameson’s topics in this article (187). Although, as noted, I do not share his tendency to romanticise the alternative he proposes, his argument is important when turning to Esperanza’s description of the ideal place she imagines. Thus, placing next to Esperanza’s wish Foucault’s description of the Room with a capital R as “a peaceful retreat to which Descartes’ philosopher retires to transcribe the exercise of radical doubt” (qtd. in Kamuf 158), or where Dickinson dreams that she can be “Exterior—to Time—” (Sanborn 1342), one cannot help but see the difference that Jameson cautions us about. Esperanza wishes for: “a house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after” (108).

At this point, one might argue that the seemingly innocent and legitimate wish for a house in the above description risks becoming synonymous with the idea of possessive individualism, which takes us back to the domestic realm not so much as a trope of  

21 Shu-mei Shih explains that when Jameson praises Third-world literature for its emphasis on communal rather than individual values, what emerges is not so much a critique of the First World and of its idealisation of Freud but rather a form of nostalgia which denies Third-world literature other spaces of existence and interpretation outside the stereotype of the national allegory (21-2).
privacy and transcendence but rather as a “bastion of bourgeois privilege” (Renza 105). Marilyn R. Chandler has documented “the centrality of the house in American cultural life and imagination” (1), which paradoxically coexists with narratives that celebrate an unbounded mobility. Home ownership becomes a critical objective for immigrants and marginalised people, in that it is seen as almost a rite of passage into claiming a rightful place as equal to others. Esperanza’s picture of her dream house develops, to a certain extent, from an American mythology of progress and from images promoted by the media. Cisneros writes about “the houses on T.V.”, “the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket” and “the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed” (4). However, she criticises ideologies and economic systems that perpetuate the myth of opportunity while denying it. As McCracken notes, “It is precisely the lack of housing stability that motivates the image’s centrality in works by writers like Cisneros and Rivera” (“Sandra Cisneros’s The House” 64). Although a desire for a house could be interpreted as proof of the minority’s assimilation into the dominant economic structure, for those who have been deprived of a place to live “because of the inequities of income distribution in US society, [such a desire] is not a sign of individualistic acquisitiveness but rather represents the satisfaction of a basic human need” (McCracken, “Sandra Cisneros’s The House” 64).

On several occasions in the text, Esperanza envisions a house she can “point to” (5), thus reinforcing the association of home ownership with a sense of dignified self. Her present house on Mango Street with its swollen door is, in TuSmith’s words, “an ethnic sign that can easily close off the future for Esperanza” (All My Relatives 161), and consequently undercut the process of self-making. Two vignettes, namely “The House on Mango Street” and “A Rice Sandwich”, refer to an identical incident. In the first one, a nun asks Esperanza to show her where she lives. Esperanza points up to the third floor and the nun replies, “You live there?” As Esperanza explains, “The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there” (5, emphasis in the original). Likewise, in “A Rice Sandwich” another nun, this time while Esperanza lives in Mango, “made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? She said pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into” (45). In both cases, the house is turned into an extension of identity.

The space of the house is often conceptualised, then, as either the interiorised or the suburban home, both being the reserve of privileged subjects. Paraphrasing Leslie S.
Gutiérrez-Jones, can Esperanza “inherit [such a] ready-made structure” (297)? Though Cisneros makes room for the expression of a similar need for privacy and comfort using the trope of the house, she also interrogates it. As already argued, women who exist in the borderlands, in particular women whose social status is a problem, can only aspire to a different, less idealised and more “prosaic”, form of privacy. Dickinson, though a woman, is still in a relatively privileged position to inhabit ideal and transcendent spaces in a way that her Irish housekeeper, with whom Cisneros seems to empathise, is not. As Cisneros herself explains in “Notes to a Young(er) Writer”, though she was inspired by her “favorite American poet, Emily Dickinson” (74), it took her some time to realise that Dickinson occupied a privileged position:

She even had a maid, an Irish housekeeper, who did, I suspect, most of the household chores ... I wonder if Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper..... Maybe Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper had to sacrifice her life so that Emily could live hers locked upstairs in the corner bedroom writing her 1,775 poems. That’s what I’m thinking. (75)

While claiming a place in Dickinson’s text, Cisneros also introduces a “resisting” idiom which interrupts the movement of “translation” towards the aspiring but unattainable ideal of her predecessor. The example of the vignette with the trees, in which the compromised struggles of human beings becomes a condition of remembering that mediates Esperanza’s dreams of flight, is indicative of this kind of “foreignising translation” (what has been captured, so far, in terms of a double movement). A woman is, in Monique Bosco’s terms, “not only the poet’s servant but the poet’s translator as well” (Derrida, Ear of the Other 151). Cisneros, then, who identifies with Dickinson’s servant, also becomes Dickinson’s translator.

Just as Cisneros engages with Dickinson’s notion of privacy, she also deconstructs the idea of a house as “felicitous space” (Bachelard xxxv). Her revision of Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space (1969), which inspired the subject matter of The House on Mango Street, has been extensively treated by critics, so I will not dwell on this here.23

22 Bosco’s comment brings to mind the idea that women have been constantly told in the past that they cannot create but can merely imitate a man.
23 For Cisneros’s revision of Bachelard, see in particular Olivares’s “Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, and the Poetics of Space”. Moreover, in “Ghosts and Voices” Cisneros gives an account of her experience at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop during a seminar discussing Bachelard’s Poetics of Space (72-3).
With the *vignette* cycle of the women of the *barrio* in particular, Cisneros reveals how even the more prosaic wish for a house, not invested with Jameson’s metaphysical dimension, ends with a sense of “domestic confinement and drudgery” (Olivares, “Poetics of Space” 165). It is what J.F. Kanthak suggests when he says that “the force of patriarchy can be felt within any wild zone” (154), in this case even the long-desired house, which is far from being an earthly paradise of freedom, peace and security. Most women who get it end up imprisoned in it: Rafaela who is “locked indoors because her husband is afraid [she] will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” asks from the kids to send up to her coconut and papaya juice (79-80); Sally sits at home and “looks at all the things [she] own[s]: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake” (102). The domestic space is thus redrawn as the space where women embrace normality through techniques of power that police movement and curtail freedom.

In the same way that Cisneros questions white and male ideas of privacy and individualism through the trope of the house, she also challenges communitarian modes of organisation through the social trope of the *barrio*. In other words, the text not only explores a conflict between the narratives of individualism and community, but also proceeds to problematise each of these narratives from within, thus challenging narrow understandings of concepts such as privacy and affiliation. Just as the narrator yearns for a private space but weaves her tale of growing up with snapshots of women entrapped in houses so as to explore the indeterminate area between privacy and confinement, her attitude towards the *barrio* is likewise ambivalent. Empathy is complemented with critical analysis, and Esperanza both identifies with and maintains distance from her community. She has a “feeling heart” and a “seeing eye”, in Sandra Zagarell’s words (517). To illustrate this attitude through a pair of dialogic passages, in “Those Who Don’t” the protagonist conveys a sense of what holds the community together as a safety net, in which everyone knows each other and is not afraid: “We aren’t afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby’s brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that’s Rosa’s Eddie V. and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he’s Fat Boy ...” (28). In this *vignette*, Esperanza uses the pronoun “we” to refer to a common ethnic identity, and depicts her community as an enclave that protects her from hostile spaces outside: “All brown all around, we are
safe” (28). Even in this vignette, however, one gets a sense of what the side effects of closed communities are. Esperanza explains that though she feels safe within her barrio, on entering another neighborhood “of another color ... our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight” (28). The barrio, long associated with “stigma” in mainstream US language, remains a danger zone. In the above description, the symbolic demarcation of a community’s boundaries, which is a necessary condition for its existence, is sustained through the differentiation of the community from other groups. Thus, even though, as Young explains, the ideal of community is not itself racist, “it can validate the impulses that reproduce racist and ethnically chauvinistic identification” (312). In this vignette Esperanza seems to agree that this is a pattern: “Yeah. That is how it goes and goes.” (28).

In subsequent vignettes the narrator turns to the exclusion of groups from within the community, in particular to the oppression of women. The vignette in which the girls walk around their neighborhood wearing high heels, to which I have already referred, interrogates the possibility of considering the barrio as “a primary territory”, in Carmen Flys-Junquera’s term (99). The barrio is not an extended home as it is presented in “Louie” (where Esperanza describes an episode which turns into an opportunity of fun for all, Louie’s appearance in the neighborhood with an expensive, but stolen, car) or in “Those Who Don’t”. On the contrary, it appears more as a public space that regulates traffic patterns. Bhabha’s argument in “The World and the Home” that the “homely” world of Nadine Gordimer’s fiction where “the banalities are enacted” hides violence could be made as well in relation to Cisneros’s depiction of the barrio. In both cases, violence “falls most enduringly on the details of life: where you can sit, or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love or not” (Bhabha 452).

Many ethnic texts which support individualist aspirations “recognize that the course of individualism needs justification” (Japtok 132), which means that certain features of their ethnic communities have to appear as oppressive so that individualism appears in turn to be legitimate, rather than a form of betrayal. Cisneros at points portrays her protagonist as sharing this awareness. For instance, in the vignette entitled “The Three

24 Flys-Junquera uses the term “tertiary territory” to designate the barrio from “a legal and jurisdictional point of view” (99). Although the barrio is at times represented as a primary or a secondary territory, this vignette (as well as the end of “Louie”) draws attention to the barrio as a ghetto, which the dominant authority (and its various disciplinary instruments like the police) can easily access.
Sisters”, when the three sisters guess Esperanza’s wish for a house of her own, Esperanza confesses, “I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish” (105). Similarly, the three sisters’ comment that “You must remember to come back” confirms Japtok’s point that there is a need to present life in the ethnic community as a higher or moral choice for the protagonist (133). However, the way the above plea is articulated by the three sisters does not preclude Esperanza’s escape from her community. Likewise, when it comes to the notion that ethnic individualism “requires constant justification” (133), Cisneros is equally determined to demystify romanticised notions of ethnic ghettos through “writing about [them] in the most real sense I knew, as a person walking those neighborhoods with a vagina …” (“On the Solitary Fate” 69). This clearly emerges from several scenes, such as the incident in which the girls walk around their barrio in high heels, already described.

The tropes of the house and the barrio, which, according to Rivera, are constant elements in the lives of Chicanos and their literatures (“Chicano Literature” 441), upset, then, commonly sustained distinctions between the private and the public through the ambivalent and complex ways in which they are used in the text. Moreover, since confinement and disempowerment operate in both the domestic and public territories, the terms of belonging to either sphere remain under constant negotiation for the women. Both houses and local communities are arbitrary. Like borders, they enclose people within the safety of familiar or intimate territories, but can, at the same time, become prisons. They foster “wild zones”, subversive spaces which allow for freedom and empowerment, but at the same time risk becoming bad copies of the dominant culture through the perpetuation of exclusion and oppression.

Esperanza construes a third space by selectively integrating her diverse territories, both the house and the barrio, in order to find her own hybrid space. This solution does not necessarily have to be envisaged in terms of a neither/nor state.25 The narrator also moves “toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101). Anzaldúa, who wishes to cast such a border position as nurturing and empowering, starting from her own experience, describes it in the following way: “I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light

---

25Being in an in-between state of “neither/nor” is anthropologist Victor Turner’s idea. Anzaldúa also uses the phrase “half and half, mita ’y mita’, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling …” (41).
and dark and gives them new meanings” (103). Just like Anzaldúa who imagines creating a *mestiza* consciousness “with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (44), Cisneros uses the trope of the house to suggest, as Kanthak puts it, that “characters build the wild zone around them ...” (162, my emphasis). Building is, after all, a process implicit in *Bildung*. Anzaldúa seems optimistic, but Cisneros, implies that this construction might entail hard work.

To summarise the narrator’s strategy of claiming a space of her own, the house that she imagines is a combination of what could be captured for the sake of consistency as House/house: the first, a wild zone space, private and eternal; the second, a place rooted in a community, material and contingent. Borrowing Sanborn’s interpretation of the slash (in his case a slash between Cisneros and Dickinson) as both “a slash” and “a suture” (1345), I also envisage the slash or the borderline between these two spaces as a kind of suture or, in alternative terms, a borderland. The suture of the narratives of privacy and affiliation (or of transcendence and materiality) is permeable. Extending the surgical metaphor, the joining of these two narrative tissues through the writer’s stitch does not close the wound firmly. The text in its double movement remains, in Anzaldúa’s term, “una herida abierta” where each of the discourses in question “grates against the [other] and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 25). However, this does not prevent their encounter in the space of the borderlands. Thus, in “Bums in the Attic”, the “other” intrudes into the privacy of the house but does not threaten private enjoyment. Esperanza still demarcates her space (after all the bums are in the attic), keeping the necessary distance while housing this otherness.

Similarly, just as the house as a physical space is shown to be porous in “Bums in the Attic”, an interior space that is experienced as open, the fictional “house”, in the sense of the textual container of the *vignettes*, also reproduces the above encounter in the borderlands. As I have suggested, *The House on Mango Street* is a spatial whole that weaves the developmental narratives of individualism and community simultaneously in its fabric. Through such a close juxtaposition, these discourses become conflated, and out

26 In *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse*, Kirstin W. Shands argues that twentieth-century white feminists employ hypertransgressive spatial imagery which privileges constant movement and fluidity, associating *place* with images of rest and nostalgia that have to be resisted at all costs. As an alternative to such incessant mobility, Shands proposes a series of what she calls “embracing” or “parabolic spaces”. These spaces are both open and protective and can be visualised as receptacles that open outward (The cave and Kristeva’s “chora” are examples of such spaces). Other than the affinities they have with borderlands, the idea of embracing/parabolic spaces can be seen as a mirror image of the concept of “bound motion” used in the first chapter.
of this textual collision new subject positions emerge. As Anzaldúa puts it, the Chicana refuses the choice of either of the two “opposite bank[s]” and learns to be “on both shores [of the border] at once” (100). In more technical terms, there is no such thing as an “uncontaminated” dividing line: borders inevitably generate borderlands that blur boundaries by creating opportunities for cultural exchange, dialogue and hybridisation. In our case, from the coming together of privacy and affiliation emerges what Sanborn calls “a socially progressive politics of private enjoyment”, or what McCracken, in her reading of The House on Mango Street, has called “community-oriented introspection” (“Sandra Cisneros’s The House” 62).

How exactly does Esperanza construct this more encompassing space that fuses oppositions into a new synthesis so that she can both escape Mango and belong to it? Anzaldúa suggests that the Chicana “can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event … The work takes place underground-subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs” (101). For Esperanza, as for Cisneros, it is also work that the pen performs. In “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”, the final vignette of the text, both escape from, and relocation into, the space of the community become simultaneously possible for the narrator through the means of writing: “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much” (110). Like Anzaldúa, Esperanza expresses the pain, conflict and contingency that accompanies any effort at synthesis and integration. The narrator’s suggestion is that her attempt to escape through writing is not always successful: “I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes” (110, my emphasis). In this same vignette, Esperanza reiterates her desire to escape only to return “[f]or the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). What does this promise mean? Other than perhaps revealing that Esperanza distinguishes between different subsets of the community, the question that arises is also whether Esperanza will actually leave as well as actually return. It seems that for the moment she can only leave through writing. The promise of return is also fulfilled through the same vehicle, since in this last vignette Esperanza circles back to the first words of the book to “what I remember most … Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (110).

Esperanza’s symbolic return through writing seems to be triggered by a desire to do something for a part of her community. Yet, as the narrator admits without remorse at the opening of this concluding vignette, she also “returns” because she likes to tell stories,
a “return” that she realises through taking herself and us back to the beginning of The House on Mango Street. Sanborn suggests that "nowhere does Esperanza renounce her private enjoyment; nowhere does Cisneros suggest that she should" (1335); not even in this concluding vignette, which might set things right by putting an end to Esperanza’s play so as to finalise her Bildung. In the concluding part of this chapter, I will argue that the persistence of play, whether this refers to a literal playing or to a form of playful writing, corresponds to a counternarrative that ensures that distance is kept from narratives of entrapment either in marriage or within community, in the traditional and ethnic novel of development. This persistence defers the Bildungsroman’s familiar closures while constructing new spaces of ethnic solidarity and communal belonging that make room for individual freedom, imaginative play, and contingent unities.

More Room to Play: Deterritorialisation and Reterritorialisation

Part of the title of Sanborn’s article is “keeping her distance”. Although Sanborn does not discuss The House on Mango Street in relation to the Bildungsroman, the moments of “keeping distance” which he traces are relevant to my discussion. The “distance” here is from maturation narratives, which, as I see it, threaten Esperanza’s Bildung with spatial and discursive confinement in houses and old plots. In Sanborn’s account, the protagonist’s means of keeping her distance from such developmental scripts, while not extricating herself entirely from her community, are self-talk and writing (1341). As I want to suggest, Esperanza negotiates a similar balance between the demands of her community and her need for a space of creativity and pleasure through playing as well. Like writing, playing is “stubborn”, to evoke Sanborn’s term (1340), not merely because the text is interspersed with games, but also because games continue for Esperanza longer than is necessary.

The notion of play that I advance here is situated between the literal, in other words the actual games of Esperanza and her friends, and the metaphorical, that is the ways in which play is understood as an artistic practice. I linger more on the literal sense of play because it seems a fair thing to do in a text that recuperates the simplicity of children’s speech. Just as a host of critics have argued that Cisneros revises the motif of the house as a private abstract space, a more “quotidian” sense of play can be retained which does not dissolve into poststructuralist theorisations of “the free play of the signifier”. At the same time, it is necessary to defend minority writers, in particular women, who
appropriate notions of playful writing from the charges made against it by those who see it as a politically insignificant or even dangerous practice.27

The link between the child and the artist has been established in literary history through such movements as Romanticism and Surrealism. In many ways, an artist shares “the child’s instinct for fantasy; the free play between its imaginings and the world of fact; its spontaneous connection between widely different spheres and categories” (Ismond 75). Whether it becomes associated with children or with artists, however, play is often seen in opposition to reality or to serious work. Children are not expected to contribute to society. As Borges observes about childhood, “Todo es juego para los niños” (“Playing is everything for children”; qtd. in Mackintosh 98, my translation). Despite the nostalgia with which adults view childhood, there is, nevertheless, the expectation that children will grow up and take a socially responsible position in the adults’ world. The Bildungsroman, as argued, dramatises precisely this shift into an adult mature personality. To pursue the parallel between the child and the artist, which inevitably connects Esperanza with Cisneros, an artist’s only possible work is art, but when reduced to free play and formal experimentation it risks being dismissed for promoting an aestheticism that has no practical value.

In his discussion of The House on Mango Street Sanborn suggests that the mantra “wait, wait, wait” and “keep, keep, keep”, which is what Esperanza hears coming from the four skinny trees that first appear in an eponymous vignette, becomes realised through “the stubborn materiality of writing” (1340). Because the idea of “keeping” is evoked once more in the vignette “Sire” that describes Esperanza’s “auto-erotic reverie”, Sanborn aligns it with the private pleasure of masturbation, but the imperative to keep writing is also part of Aunt Lupe’s advice to Esperanza in “Born Bad”: “You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (61). As Sanborn concludes, after having established a connection of “keeping” with either masturbation or writing, it is the tenacity of this alternative that allows Esperanza to escape the other women’s “fantasy scenarios” (1341), which through enforcement of marriage and of domestic confinement serve a patriarchal Necessity.28

27 For the ways in which Cisneros revises the motif of the house, see McCracken’s “Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street” and Doyle. For the charges against women in relation to play, see Sanborn p. 1334.

28 The theme of a subversive sexuality is also central to Cisneros’s poems in My Wicked, Wicked Ways. See Madsen’s Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature, pp.105-134.
Another example of “keeping” that I would add to Sanborn’s account is the fact that in the snapshots of the women of the barrio Esperanza is both empathetic towards them and critical of their passivity. Her position is that of “a participant/observer” (Zagarell 503) who takes part in and maintains distance from her community’s practices. In “Sally” Esperanza tries to gain access to Sally’s mind and invents a series of little plots, recreating an imaginary conversation with her friend:

Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home? ... And you could laugh, Sally.... you wouldn’t have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you’re strange because you like to dream and dream. (82-3)

This vignette stages the dialogue between the narratives of privacy and affiliation. It is indicative of what Christopher Nealon calls the “double life”: “the group life”, which forces Sally to behave in a specific way inhibiting her passion, and “underneath, another—secret and passionate and intense [life]” (8), to which Esperanza here gives voice. Even though Esperanza admires Sally for her self-expression and identifies with her in this vignette, she indict her in “Red Clowns” for her complicity in a conspiracy of lies about sex that have kept women in the dark: “Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, ...” (99). In “The Monkey Garden” Esperanza literally maintains distance from Sally, who “stay[s] by the curb” talking to the boys while Esperanza plays with the kids. Esperanza rebels, “Who was it that said I was getting too old to play the games?” (96).

In an eponymous vignette Marin stays in the doorway and puts herself on display so that the boys can see her. Esperanza’s response is: “I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27, my emphasis). Esperanza seems both to identify with Marin’s dream of flight (since she herself aspires to a similar thing) and to be ironic of it. The phrase “I know” in Esperanza’s response signals both attitudes. Marin’s desire, like Esperanza’s, is inextricably connected with the inadequacies of the ethnic and social space in which she grows up. And because the latter does not have a concept of female independence or positive agency, the only way out of economic oppression which most of its female inhabitants can envisage, not unlike their Victorian female counterparts, is by meeting someone “who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (26). “Minerva”, which similarly tells a story of female violence,
expresses both Esperanza’s empathy and her critique of the ways in which women contribute to their oppression. Closing with Minerva’s decision to accept her husband despite being abused by him on several occasions, Esperanza notes, “There is nothing I can do” (85, emphasis in the original).

Games in *The House on Mango Street* also open a potentially “heretical” space of enjoyment, which allows one to maintain distance from the properly social. As Hugh Matthews, Melanie Limb and Mark Taylor put it, spaces where young people gather “are places ‘won out’ from the fabric of adult society although they are always in constant threat of being reclaimed” (64). In “The Monkey Garden” Esperanza describes a space of freedom and autonomy, which is “a private open space” (Cliff 367), just like the house she dreams of. As she explains, the children “took over the garden” when the monkey that used to live there moved, and from then on used to go to the garden because it was “far away from where our mothers could find us” (94-5). The garden presents an alternative to some of the stifling domestic settings in *The House on Mango Street*. With its “dizzy bees”, “the sleepy smell of rotting wood”, “weeds like so many squinty-eyed stars”, and with “flowers that stopped obeying the little bricks that kept them from growing beyond their paths” (94-5), it is presented as a locus of enjoyment, and, to recall Wong’s concept, as a site in which Extravagance resides. Esperanza likes this place because “[t]hings had a way of disappearing in the garden, as if the garden itself ate them”. On one occasion a child fell asleep under a tree while playing a game and disappeared “until somebody remembered he was in the game and went back to look for him” (95). As Esperanza notes, “This is where I wanted to die” (96).

Does this precocious fascination with death demonstrate a stubborn determination not to grow up, a fantasy of never leaving childhood? The garden, after all, with its “big green apples” and which gives the impression that it has “been there before anything” (95-96), gathers echoes of the Garden of Eden and brings to mind the myth of Childhood as Paradise Lost, a myth which is central to Kincaid’s work, as I have shown in the previous chapter. At first glance, Esperanza seems to want to prolong this dimension of her life, to retain the child in her; she prefers to continue playing with the kids rather than participating in Sally’s game. “Sally had her own game”, Esperanza explains, and adds, “One of the boys invented the rules. One of Tito’s friends said you can’t get the keys back unless you kiss us and Sally pretended to be mad at first but she said yes. It was that simple” (96, my emphasis). As with writing, which can be divided
into “procreative” and “recreational/re-creational”, to evoke Sanborn’s terms, there are different kinds of games.29 Sally’s game, however innocent, fulfils a necessity in that it is almost an initiation ritual into proper womanhood. Contrary to this conditioning game, Esperanza’s games fail to become indexes to her internalisation of male definitions of female sexuality. In an earlier vignette Esperanza expresses her desire to baptise herself under a different name so as to escape domestic confinement which is the destiny of most of the women in the barrio. Sally’s game provides training for domestic “labours of love” and thus cannot help her escape that closure, as the subsequent vignette entitled “Linoleum Roses” starkly reveals. On the contrary, Esperanza’s games open different paths and thus allow her to maintain distance from limiting scripts of femininity. This is not to say, however, that Esperanza does not try out more traditionally “feminine” games. As Sanborn is right to point out, the imperative to wait or to keep, which the young protagonist realises through writing, is an advice to keep some distance as opposed to completely separate herself from the fairy-tale fantasies of the other women (1341). Indeed, we have encountered instances in which Esperanza is drawn to such fantasies, as in “The Family of Little Feet” where she puts on high heels and imagines that she is Cinderella.

Many vignettes align the children’s games with linguistic games. Games provide for Esperanza a kind of laboratory to conduct her experiments with language, a space which complements the private space of creativity that she longs for, that is the house. The House on Mango Street can and has been read as a Künstlerroman in that it traces among other things Esperanza’s artistic development. This is mainly conveyed through the form and structure of the individual stories. In the vignettes situated at the beginning, Esperanza’s observations are simple and take the form of snapshots of her family, house and barrio. However, as the narrative unfolds, her thoughts and reflections, which are initially close to a child’s perception of the world in terms of black and white oppositions, become more complex and sophisticated, providing as well a glimpse of her growing artistic sensibility. Another thing that anticipates Esperanza’s formation as a writer is the nature of the games she takes part in as a child. In a few of these games an immediate connection between play and language is established.

29 Sanborn distinguishes between “the imperative to reproduce”, which Spivak calls “uterine social organization”, and pleasure which is not only valued for its outcomes but on its own terms. As Sanborn explains, such a pleasure is productive in a different way, a difference that becomes captured through the term recreational as both recreational and re-creational (1337, my emphasis).
To illustrate the association of games with creativity, in a vignette entitled “Hips”, drawing on their thoughts about a physical change in their bodies, Esperanza and her friends contribute to a creative exercise. While they dance or jump the rope, each one improvises a little poem about the meaning of hips:

Some are skinny like chicken lips.
Some are baggy like soggy band-aids
After you get out of the bathtub.
I don’t care what kind I get.

Just as long as I get hips. (51, emphasis in the original)

The scene could be dismissed as trivial or as an example of the reason why female culture, a culture of “children-women”, is susceptible to charges of worthlessness. To use a passage by Fanny Fern that Lauren Berlant cites, “For women are consumed by their ‘Mutual Admiration Society; emptying their budget of love affairs; comparing bait to trap victims; sighing over the same rose leaf; sonnetizing the same moonbeam; patronizing the same milliner; and exchanging female kisses’” (273, emphasis in the original). As I would like to suggest, however, the pleasure derived from the game is not a pure waste of energy. The game depends on the input of each player and promotes collaboration. The outcome of the song the girls create is unlike the same song that Marin sings in order to attract the boys (24), a private pleasure absorbed by patriarchy. Its product is of a different kind: work and play seem to coexist in this game, which, to recall Sanborn’s phrase, can be seen as “recreational, in the strong re-creational sense of the word” (1337, my emphasis). The distinction between this type of creative Work and “real” work becomes evident through the sharp contrast between this vignette and the one that directly follows, entitled “The First Job”. This vignette starts with a sense of guilt on the part of Esperanza—“It wasn’t as if I didn’t want to work” (53)—and ends with an account of sexual abuse in the workplace. Unlike the game described in the previous vignette, work in “The First Job” takes the form of a series of uncreative and repetitious duties, which allow no room for personal feeling.

The game in “Hips” is not, nevertheless, totally free in the sense of undisciplined; it has its own rules, but these are voluntarily adopted. Only Nenny, Esperanza’s younger sister, cannot follow them. She does not seem to be able to move away from the kids’ usual rhymes while, as Esperanza explains, the purpose of the game is to invent something new:
Not that old song, I say. You gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know? But she doesn’t get it or won’t… Nenny, I say, but she doesn’t hear me. She is too many light years away. She is in a world we don’t belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going. (52)

Julían Olivares explains that through this scene “the awareness of time passing and of growing up is given a spatial dimension” ("Poetics of Space" 165-6). Just as Esperanza in “The Monkey Garden” scene is inside the garden looking at Sally who is outside, in this scene Esperanza is on the outside “looking at Nenny inside the arc of the swinging rope that now separates Nenny’s childhood dimension from her present awareness of just having left behind that very same childhood” (Olivares, “Poetics of Space” 166). Through the differentiation between various kinds of games and through the use of spatial indexes, the text shows how Esperanza maintains her distance from both Nenny and Sally. It is not that she resists the inevitable process of growing up, but she resists those developmental patterns that provide models for “growing down”, in Pratt’s phrase (Archetypal Patterns 168). Esperanza inhabits a threshold zone: she is neither a child who cannot yet grasp her responsibility towards her community nor a woman who sacrifices her creativity to the imperative of Necessity enforced by patriarchy. Although “The Monkey Garden” ends with Esperanza realising that “the garden that had been such a good place to play didn’t seem mine” (98), which resonates with the ending of “Hips”, this closure does not imply a definitive removal from the children’s world. Esperanza is still tied to this dimension of pleasure, and it is precisely this anchor that enables her to keep a necessary distance from patriarchal narratives of maturation. As Olivares puts it, “Although we perceive a change in voice at the end of ["Hips"], Esperanza is still swinging the rope” (“Poetics of Space” 166).

The image of the swinging rope is invoked, however subtly, in the concluding vignette of the text entitled “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”. There, as already mentioned, Esperanza fulfils the message of the three sisters, which tells her to remember that she will “always be Mango Street … A circle, understand?” (105), in a playful way, that is by literally circling back to the opening of The House on Mango Street. Esperanza has not entirely abandoned games, but she now finds an outlet for her playful energy through the act of writing. The circle is no longer literal, as in the case of the children’s games, but it still designates a space of creativity and bonding, which also allows room for difference and distance. In this last vignette, Esperanza’s words that she makes “a story
for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes” (109) recall the girls’ creative game in “Hips”, in which a poem is made for each jump of the rope.

Esperanza’s repetition of the first words of the narrative in this concluding vignette leaves herself open to the accusation of self-indulgence, frivolity and “masturbation”. Sanborn, however, explains that through this self-reflexivity the narrator identifies the book “retroactively as an overheard monologue, a story that has been told by and to Esperanza” and that it is “on those terms that the book is dedicated “[a] las Mujeres”, that is to the women of the barrio “who cannot out” (1335). In other words, Esperanza makes public what, paraphrasing Renza, seems to be the private code that has generated the entire narrative (104). It is this peculiar “form of publicity” (Sanborn 1344), which can empower the other women by creating the possibility of what Berlant calls “punctuated identification” (278). As I understand Berlant’s clarification of this mode of identification, Esperanza’s return, which she anticipates in the last vignette, is a kind of gift offered to the women, a gift that “for the women who experience no legitimacy in public”, offers “[a] periodic point of identification” (Berlant 278), a possibility of affinity that maintains distance and respects difference. It is this empowering position that Cisneros wants to communicate to the women through her personal and private testimony.

Another thing to note in this last vignette, with reference to Esperanza’s playful trick of return through writing, is the way the narrator introduces this return “to the sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (110). As Karafilis notes, “Cisneros’s novel ends virtually (but significantly not quite) where it began” (68). Her repetition of the opening vignette with a difference anticipates that she will return more powerful in order to help her community. This is also reflected in the choice of the words in the last vignette. Referring to herself in the third person, Esperanza says, “And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked” (109, my emphasis). The verb ‘trudge’, though pointing to a slow, heavy and difficult movement, complements the “intransitive existence of the trees” (Sanborn 1340) “whose only reason is to be and to be” (75), a state of waiting and “keeping” that we have identified as rebellious, and which Sanborn has associated with “the stubborn materiality of writing” (1340). Here, the force of writing, and its regenerative power in

---

30 In an interview, Cisneros, talking about the Mexican way of storytelling suggests that her telling of stories is also her way of giving a “gift, a flower of a story” (Kevane and Heredia 55).
the future is further stressed since it is through this medium that the return to the community becomes performed (the use of ‘trudge’ stresses this performative function of language).

Esperanza’s return through writing, a return that allows her to keep some distance and to seek her private enjoyment without forgetting where she comes from, can be also approached in light of what Wong writes about play. For Wong, Extravagance and play “may be in the service of some Higher Necessity”, which would “relocate and re-distribute [play’s] value” (186). Play may feel like play in the short term but can bear fruit in the future. Wong blends Necessity and Extravagance, creating “the third space” of “a Higher Necessity” where both pleasure and responsibility coexist. This coexistence is also expressed through the “interested disinterestedness” and the “purposelessness with a purpose” that Wong coins (186). It is also in keeping with Sanborn’s idea of a “socially progressive politics of private enjoyment”. The kind of memory that Cisneros invokes (“but what I remember most is …”), what becomes the basis for affinity in that it constantly demonstrates the contingency of privacy, is a memory, which, as in Lucy, is not necessarily crippling but is future-oriented. This memory does not erase private enjoyment, does not erase that “one day [Esperanza] will pack [her] bags of book and paper. One day [she] will say goodbye to Mango” (110), but simply mediates it and makes it more politically responsible and sophisticated. Thus, though the text remains open-ended, the statement “[t]hey will not know I have gone away in order to come back” also asks us to remain open to the generative potential of distance and play, a recreational potential to be realised in the future. In Wong’s words, “even the artist’s plea for room to play has important implications …” for the political work of ethnic Americans (211).

To conclude by returning to the narrower concerns of the Bildungsroman, like her narrator who does not wish to inherit the ready-made house of her barrio, Cisneros renovates “the rented cultural space” of this genre (Gutiérrez-Jones 310). Unlike Gutiérrez-Jones who locates this revision primarily in Cisneros’s questioning of the individualist focus of the Bildungsroman, I agree with Japtok who suggests that several ethnic texts take the notions of ethnic solidarity and community not as what their versions of the Bildungsroman need to establish by the end in order to counter the individualism of the traditional Bildungsroman, but “as their point of departure” (133). As he clarifies this distinction, “Rather than being responses to the traditional Bildungsroman,
these novels converse with its ethnic revision” (133). What he does not stress in his account, but which has been stressed here, is that one of the most important factors which dictates the above revision is that of gender. After all, Cisneros dedicates The House on Mango Street to the women (“a las mujeres”). A similar pattern is at work in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, and, as I will show, Lorde adds further strokes to this design through her lesbian biomythography, which I explore in the last chapter.

The fictional “house” which Cisneros builds with her Chicana and feminist architecture accommodates within its fluid walls a multiplicity of worlds simultaneously. The kind of development outlined in The House on Mango Street for its protagonist is not one from ethnicity to Americanness, but neither is it one that blindly submits to communal precepts. Cisneros maintains a healthy distance from both closures. The result is an inescapable hybridity. But, returning to questions of aesthetic and political value, one might insist, is this good enough for a politically self-conscious ethnic American woman writer? The Bildungsroman, with its contradictory, hybrid and compromising nature, does not appear to be the most suitable terrain for radical politics. Yet, just as these features are “intrinsic to that way of [everyday] existence” refined by the traditional Bildungsroman (Moretti 12), I have shown that they are also appropriate for another mode of existence, notably what is defined by a process of constant negotiation and border crossing.

Through the articulation of in-between and third spaces in The House on Mango Street, Cisneros carves a space which becomes the meeting ground of several of the dichotomies that define ethnic female identity: the discourses of individualism and solidarity; the realms of the private and the public; and the categories of gender and ethnicity. Contesting the boundaries of these pairs through the articulation of borderlands exposes the injustice of ‘moral dilemmas’, which request the curtailment of personal freedom or the sacrifice of certain allegiances in order to do service to others. Challenging the fact that the diverse loyalties of ethnic subjects are mutually exclusive is a political act that serves to multiply the sites of identification and allows people who grow up in the interstices of varying territories to claim a more inclusive and potentially empowering subject position. As already suggested, the outcome of this encounter in the borderlands, as exemplified in Cisneros’s text (and as will be investigated in subsequent chapters), also finds expression in criticism with a series of syncretic terms such as “interested disinterestedness” and “the politics of private enjoyment”. These
unsettle fixed oppositions and deconstruct unnaturally imposed boundaries between Extravagance and Necessity, “individuality” and “normality”, pleasure and purpose.

Patell recommends that we strive “to find a middle ground between extremes of individualism and communitarianism and to apply this insight to our practices of reading as well” (192). In this respect, we can learn something from the hybrid and compromising nature of the Bildungsroman. Our readings should maintain a safe distance from totalising interpretive paradigms which depend on fixed binaries. Hence, when it comes to Cisneros’s text, it would be misleading to read it as the embodiment of the communitarian ideal, whether this reading is idealised as an alternative to modern alienation, or is meant to validate stereotypical assumptions about minority texts (by Western readers/critics), or is predicated on the need for communal solidarity and ethnic unity (by ethnic groups). Similarly, it would be unfair to treat the text as an indulgence, an experimental and playful artefact that serves no social or political function, on the grounds of which ethnic female writing is frequently criticised by cultural nationalists. Approaching the text as a didactic narrative teaching blind submission to communal responsibility and measuring its importance according to such utilitarian service denies the text “a redeeming literary value”, in Felski’s words (After Feminism 162). On the other hand, focusing exclusively on its formal qualities and imposing Western interpretive tools similarly fails to locate, along with the commonality between mainstream and ethnic literary technologies, the specific and different ways in which the text as a Chicana narrative is situated within discourses of play, privacy and individualism. An intermediate or third space—“a consciousness of the borderlands”—needs to be invented for our readings, one that makes room for a clash of interpretations and in which contradictions can turn out to be productive.
"It translated almost well but not quite": The Promise and the Perils of Translation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

In the previous chapter, I touched upon issues of betrayal and responsibility by locating within the context of narratives of growing up the kind of moral dilemmas ethnic American women writers are made to face. To the question “Must a woman writer choose between individualism and community”, which the ethnic American female *Bildungsroman* tries to resolve through an attempt at synthesis, this chapter adds a similar one: “Must a female translator choose between feminism and nationalism”, to evoke King-Kok Cheung’s title?1 Compared to the “polite indignation” of *The House on Mango Street* (Quintana 72), which seems to have made Cisneros’s text immune to accusations of betrayal for its invocation of discourses of “private enjoyment” and of “a room of one’s own”, Kingston’s depiction of “female anger”, as Jeffery Paul Chan in *New York Review of Books* describes it (41), has apparently condemned her project of translation in *The Woman Warrior*. Her desire “to tell ancient stories into a new American way” (Pfaff 26), which Kingston justifies on the basis that stories need to adapt to new circumstances in order to remain alive, has been condemned by a group of Asian and Asian American critics (the most notorious being Frank Chin). For the proponents of cultural nationalism, Kingston has emasculated an authentic ethnic tradition, failing to challenge orientalist stereotypes and producing, in Benjamin Tong’s words, “a fashionably feminist work written with white acceptance in mind” (20).2 This turns her into a traitor and opens her project to the accusations often brought against translation.3

In this chapter, starting from the spatial connotations of the word translation (the prefix *trans*- suggests the act of traversing), I want to compare the directionality of

---

1 The title of Cheung’s essay is: “Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?”
2 See Wong’s “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” for a discussion of *The Woman Warrior* in relation to questions of generic purity, ethnic representativeness and cultural authenticity.
3 The association of betrayal with translation has a long history. The tag “les belles infidèles”, coined in the seventeenth century, equates infidelity in translation with infidelity in marriage, and has served to feminise and to sexualise translation (Chamberlain 314-5). In Chicana literature, as mentioned in the previous chapter, *La Malinche*, a Native American woman who became Cortés’s mistress and interpreter has become the embodiment of treachery and betrayal.
translation with the trajectory and destination of the Bildungsroman. In the first chapter I looked at the “trope of coming to America” in Lucy and the ways in which it shapes the coming of age narrative with which it coincides. As I suggested, Kincaid constructs a narrative of “bound motion” through a form of travelling in the West/Indies which challenges ideas of finished Bildung and its assimilationist overtones. If in Lucy memory and mobility mediate Kincaid’s Caribbean and American “dis/locations”, in Elvira Pultiano’s phrase, gesturing towards a fluid belonging to place, what happens in the next generation? Kingston’s The Woman Warrior treats this theme through its protagonist, an American-born girl of Chinese descent who grows up in America adapting her mother’s Chinese talk-stories in order to make them more relevant to the present. Because she engages in what could be termed “cultural translation”, in this chapter I will use this trope as an alternative trope to “coming to America” or to “becoming American”.

As already mentioned, the Bildungsroman has been approached as a genre which posits a linear and progressive movement but which ultimately operates within a narrative economy of exchange, “compromise” being its “celebrated theme” (Moretti 9). This pattern seems to be recycled in readings of contemporary narratives of development by women of colour which conflate “the coming of age” with “the coming to America” plot and in immigrant accounts of generational conflict, in particular mother-daughter plots. George argues that novels like Esmeralda Santiago’s When I was Puerto Rican, Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine and Kincaid’s Lucy sustain an idea of development according to which growing up away from home does not entail a process of accumulating experience and multiplying affiliations. Instead, it initiates a process of absorption and replacement whereby one’s identity is cleared of “other languages, places, accents and affiliations” to become “truly” American (George 142). George makes the link between translation and the Bildungsroman, which I would like to explore in this chapter, more explicit when she writes: “The America” that is the destination of such novels of formation “is the imagined nation signified by … a monolingual tongue (English or rather American English) and a determined assimilation of all difference into this national story” (136).

George’s scenario recalls Crèvecoeur’s vision of the American citizen as one “who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced” (44). In his famous Letters from an American Farmer he was the first to establish the dismissal of the past as the necessary step to that of
becoming a true American, what Sollors casts as the tension between “descent” and “consent” in American culture in his influential study Beyond Ethnicity. Although our discourses become increasingly populated with terms such as hybridity, transnational subjects and postnational diasporas, which render theories of the melting pot old-fashioned, a Western “imaginary of development” (Escobar 21) and assumptions of American exceptionalism, despite being theoretically discredited, still play a role in the ways certain minority texts are read, taught and marketed. George, for instance, examines the framing devices of the novels she considers and illustrates the extent to which they strengthen the well-worn thesis that First World women are more privileged than their Third-World sisters (142). The implication is that women anywhere else should aspire to become like Western women in order to enter what Chandra Mohanty calls “the development process” (72), and that this process of modernisation has to happen through emancipation from ethnicity. The question of how imperialist and domesticating this assumption is becomes disguised under discourses familiar to the Bildungsroman and to the humanist project, which render development and progress in apparently universal terms or simply as a movement towards improvement and enlightenment; a movement, for instance, from silence to voice or from darkness to light. A story of development that revolves around these poles makes an appeal to the fundamental rights of a human being, and in this way seemingly transcends Western or American agendas.

Leslie Bow is another critic who suggests, working within a specifically Asian and Asian American context, that novels such as Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, another female Bildungsroman, result in a simplistic story of progress that contrasts oppressed Asian mothers to their emancipated, that is Westernised, Asian American daughters. Bow investigates the ways in which feminist plots of empowerment and sentimental discourses of mother-daughter relationships, in particular accounts of trauma, can result in universalising gestures that smooth out racial conflicts. Despite George’s recognition that there are local instances of resistance in the texts she reads, their subversive character, as she makes it clear, is mostly buried under more pronounced plots which displace attention away from such poles of resistance. The same applies to Bow’s reading.

The Woman Warrior does not concern a physical journey to the West, but uses the metaphor of translation to “claim America”, which is how Kingston defines her project,
especially in her subsequent novel *China Men* where she places a Chinese American history next to the official account which has relegated the presence of immigrants and their contribution to the transformation of America to the margins. Taking into consideration Kingston’s ambitious project, I want to examine how her distinct practice of translation problematises the trajectory and the destination of the *Bildungsroman* by gesturing towards a more dynamic model of affiliation and belonging than one predicated on exchange and absorption.

My examination of the trope of translation in Kingston’s work synthesises and builds on previous approaches to this theme, but its main contribution lies in shedding light on the further applications of this trope in literary study. The framework I am using combines insights in philosophy, translation theory, cultural studies and literary analysis. Although in the individual sections of this chapter I point to the ways in which my reading departs from previous examples by turning to aspects of translation not dealt with in depth in relation to Kingston’s text, here I will briefly summarise some of these approaches with the aim as well of navigating the reader through the various sections of the chapter.

On several occasions, in interviews and written pieces, Kingston has explained that through her writing she tries to transform Chinese myths in order to capture the ways they have been “transmuted by America” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 58). Given that in *The Woman Warrior* Chinese myths are part of the maternal heritage and thus of the mother’s tongue, translation can be primarily construed in this text as oral transmission from mother to daughter, which is how Spivak also approaches translation in “The Politics of Translation” using as her example Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (195). The first and the third sections of the chapter investigate the dynamics between the mother’s tongue and the daughter’s “writerly” acts of translation, the first focusing specifically on the dilemmas of the daughter as a feminist translator. The fourth section complements the discussion by considering the seductive nature of “the father’s text” (the target or American language “text”) and the ways it affects the mother-daughter relation. Other than Kingston’s own comment that she tells Chinese stories in a new American way, which has made a reading of her work through the trope of translation possible, *The Woman Warrior* has sections which focus on the difficulty of translation in a narrow sense (the Chinese phrase “Ho Chi Kuei” that remains untranslatable in the book is a well-known example), or that could be interpreted as a comment on the familiar debate
in translation theory (the opposition between a literal or “word-for-word” translation that translates “the letter” and a free translation that translates “the sense or spirit” of the original). In the second section of the chapter, I look at this distinction by drawing on Derrida’s work on translation and focusing on instances which have not been read before through this lens. Finally, The Woman Warrior with its famous closure that reads “It translated well” echoes the messianic character or utopian dimension usually associated with translation, which is supposed to bridge the gap between cultures and reconcile languages. This is a theme addressed in the entire chapter, but also one examined more narrowly in the last two sections where I propose the revised ending “It translated almost well but not quite”. Before moving to the sections of close reading outlined above, I would like to offer a more general account of translation and of the ways in which it can prove to be a useful trope when it comes to exploring narratives like Kingston’s of growing up between cultures.

The Promise and Perils of Translation
Translation is usually theorised on the basis of the original language or the source text and the translating or target language to which we want the text to be rendered. Although these points frame translation, they do not circumscribe its field of possibility. Most translation theorists agree that the translated text is “more than the sum of its parts”, to recall Bhabha’s definition of “the third space” (“The Third Space” 211). Translation bears the traces of the positions that inform it, but transforms both original and target language. It is “a third discourse” (Benito & Manzanas 18) that resembles the mestizo language that Chicano writers produce by negotiating linguistic and cultural borderlands. Translation inevitably performs a work of domestication, since its basic task is to rewrite the foreign text in domestic cultural terms; as Lawrence Venuti explains, a translation inscribes the original “with domestic intelligibilities and interests” (Scandals 11) while attempting to capture the meaning of the source text in another language. Translation, in other words, both voices and exceeds the original. Like memory, it has an inherent ambivalence for “it is a place both of sameness and

---

4 With reference to this antithesis, the chapter entitled “Shaman” includes another frequently cited scene, in which the narrator’s mother asks for “reparation candy” and where the use of a “literal” translation results in a shameful misunderstanding (153–4).
5 See Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”, in particular the definition of “pure language”, and Venuti’s “Translation, Community, Utopia” for the utopian dimension of translation.
6 The original, of course, does not always coincide with the mother tongue. Translation could involve turning what is not in one’s mother tongue into the mother tongue.
otherness, dwelling and travelling” (Min-ha 10). Like the trope of “bound motion” used in the first chapter, translation allows a form of mobility which is bound by debt to the “original”, and which at the same time is enriched by coming into contact with another idiom, that of the translating language.

This debt is, of course, mutual as translation involves a two-way movement: the original undergoes a change; its life is prolonged through translation and the transformation to which it is subjected confirms the fact that the original is a living organism capable of evolution. This is Benjamin’s familiar idea of the “afterlife” (72). Benjamin compares the transformation of the original through translation to “a maturing process” (74). As he explains, “Of all literary forms [translation] is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (74). Derrida also emphasises the reciprocal relation between original and translation. In his view, if we accept that translation is indebted to the original, this “is because already the original is indebted to the coming translation” (The Ear of the Other 153). The latter point is made more clear in “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation”, in which Derrida presents translation not only as “transformation” and “travel” but also as “a treasure trove [trouvaill<f” in that it discovers “what was waiting, or ... sleeping in the language” (198). Rey Chow also stresses the need for mutuality in translation between source and target:

Because of the multiple transformation and amalgamation between source and target text, translation, in the broader sense of cultural rather than merely interlinguistic, is useful for exploring narratives of diasporic formation. Stuart Hall describes diaspora identities, as “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew” (235). Such confrontation in the contact zones productively transforms languages and cultures. The traffic between them functions as a tool that measures cross-cultural encounters and ideally it ensures that there is reciprocal redefinition and mutual relationship.

Translation is also a perfect trope of mediation for those who have to negotiate the demands of original and host cultures, to find ways to connect the past with the present and to create a new space out of the multiple spaces they inhabit. These people cannot settle for either the original, which, as I will suggest, for second-generation immigrants like the protagonist of The Woman Warrior is mediated and thus already translated, or for the seducing target text which masquerades as unified and homogenous. Such subjects
grow in-between original and target, and this uneasy position “on the border” is what has always interested the Bildungsroman. Moretti, for instance, argues that the genre favours the technique of *bricolage* on the formal plane and that of “compromise” on the ideological. In his words, the Bildungsroman does not “shape consistent worldviews” but tries to shape “compromises among distinct worldviews” (xii). Moretti concludes that “both morphological *bricolage* and ideological compromise … have a lot in common: they are both adjustments: pragmatic, contingent, imperfect (although usually well-functioning)” (xii). Although one needs to examine the different meanings Moretti ascribes to compromise, translation can be allied with a form of *bricolage*, since the interpenetration of languages which it implies, suggests that a translated text is composite, held together by different discourses, voices and languages. Moreover, as Martha J. Cutter notes, translation appears to serve “the conflicted necessities of both compromise and bridging” (582). In what follows, I will try to explore how these issues interact in *The Woman Warrior*.

In the previous chapter I suggested that the contemporary Bildungsroman retains its mediating function without necessarily resolving tension through a reactionary closure. The genre still remains a hybrid and contradictory form driven by the promise of integration and synthesis. As in the traditional Bildungsroman which strives to reconcile self and society so that the protagonist can construct a coherent self and achieve wholeness, Kingston wishes to bridge the gap between two cultures in *The Woman Warrior*. Her protagonist faces a challenging task: “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (13). This task attests to Michael Fischer’s notion that “ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual … [rather than] something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic …” (195). The present Bildungsheld, like so many of her predecessors who, in Jeffers’s words, need to “find out [things] for [themselves]” (93), is then encouraged from the beginning to actively construct her identity on the basis of pre-existing material.

However, the rigid distinction between the “invisible” and the “solid” in the above quotation from the first chapter of the text, which one quickly maps onto China and America respectively, conveys a sense of incommensurable, and thus untranslatable, differences. Yet, the verb “fits” enacts the “promise” that Derrida associates with
translation (The Ear of the Other 123); “through translation one can see the coming shape of a possible reconciliation among languages” (123). This “utopian projection” does not eliminate the asymmetries involved in projects of translation, but, as Venuti puts it, “does express the hope that linguistic and cultural differences will not result in the exclusion of foreign constituencies from the domestic scene” (Reader 488). As I want to suggest, The Woman Warrior gives voice to this promise while at the same time acknowledging the perils, or to use Venuti’s title, “the scandals” of translation.

In an interview Kingston comes back to the idea of solidity, which she also proceeds, elsewhere, to associate more explicitly with the English language. She reveals that with The Woman Warrior she wanted “to record, to find the words for, the ‘ghosts’, which are only visions. They are not concrete; they are beautiful, and powerful. But they don’t have a solidity that we can pass around from one to another” (“Eccentric Memories” 178). Derrida would say that this ghostliness points to the difference or “excess” that is part of any signification, and which in the case of translation becomes even more pronounced since one confronts the difference of both the original and translating language. This heightened difficulty, however, does not mean that one does not embark on translation. As Derrida writes in his later work, Spectres de Marx, the “intellectual” has an obligation to let the ghost speak, to give back to it the voice that it does not have or has not yet acquired (279).7 Kingston uses translation, even when this seems abusive, as an act of fidelity towards her Chinese heritage. In words which echo Benjamin’s idea of the “afterlife”, the way she keeps old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way.

The casting of the past for second-generation immigrants, like the narrator, as an incomprehensible text that awaits translation, in particular its association with the ghostly and the invisible, also resonates with what Benjamin describes as the process of “liberating] the language imprisoned in the [original] work [through] recreation of that work” (80), a point which presents translation as a form of “exorcism”.8 Kingston has described the experience of learning English as especially liberating. She has used the image of “the stage curtain” in her work, a metaphor that she also employs in The Woman Warrior. In Through the Black Curtain Kingston writes, “All my life I’ve looked for

7 In “Ghosts and Voices”, Cisneros suggests that Chicanas do not write by “inspiration” but by “obsession”. As she explains, “Perhaps later there will be time to write by inspiration. In the meantime, in my writing as well as in that of other Chicanas and other women, there is the necessary phase of dealing with those ghosts and voices most urgently haunting us, day by day” (73).
8 See Ken-fang Lee’s “Cultural Translation and the Exorcist”.
those black curtains; I want to part them, and to see what is on the other side” (5). As she adds in the same book, “When I learned English, I wrote that the black curtains rose or swung apart” (5).9

Just as the basic task of translation is to rewrite the foreign text in domestic cultural terms, Kingston’s project to “get things straight” or “name the unspeakable” (13) through the solid medium of the translating language, cannot take place without a degree of “domestication”. In Shu-ching Chen’s words, “[The unspeakable] cannot be named without being immediately misnamed” since “once we start to name what was unnamed and speak what was unsaid, we simultaneously impose on it a kind of logic of signification that was not there originally” (34). Or, to put it in terms relevant to the process of translation: “Any translating replaces the signifiers of the foreign text with another signifying chain, trying to fix a signified that can be no more than an interpretation according to the intelligibilities and interests of the receiving language and culture” (“Introduction” 171, my emphasis). In the case of The Woman Warrior the young protagonist’s wish to bring order is justified given that she is surrounded by a confusing mass of cultural data. One of the most telling sections which conveys the plight of hyphenated subjects and which deconstructs the binary between original and target revealing both to be already translated or hybrid, is found in the first pages of the book:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (13)

Under these circumstances, a “fluent” translation (Venuti, Scandals 12) becomes seductive in that it offers to drive “the ghosts” away, to produce something normal, natural, and transparent. Young Maxine may be tempted to bring transparency and clarity through translation, but the translation dilemma for Kingston is more complex as she has to find a way to translate the original without fixing its “possibilities”. Like a translator in the strict sense, Kingston has to choose between a translation that remains

9 According to Cutter, it is “the extreme dichotomy between the linguistic systems of English and Chinese” which makes translation such a central trope in Asian American literature (584). In an interview with Neila C. Seshachari, Kingston compares the English with the Chinese language: “You speak Chinese and then the written language is completely different. There’s no system. It’s one word at a time. But all of a sudden, with the 26 letters in the English alphabet you can write anything, so I just felt I had the most powerful tool, and I felt free to express myself”.

135
faithful to the source text while at the same time “smoothing down its lumps and bumps in the process of ... accommodation to target-language conventions” (Sturge 26) and one that tries to incorporate “the foreignness” (the linguistic or cultural difference) of the original by means of the translating medium. The second seems to serve what Patricia Chu suggests is the strategic “choice” of the Bildungsroman, a point to which I will return when I further clarify the distinction between a “fluent” and a “foreignising” or “resisting” translation. The Bildungsroman as a genre lends itself to translation and cultural migration, but, in addition to claiming American-ness, ethnic American writers who choose this genre also wish to ground their stories in specific ethnic histories in America, asserting them as both ethnic and American (Chu, Assimilating 16).

Turning to several instances of translation in The Woman Warrior, I will trace the ways in which the narrator reassesses her “craving for coherence” (Hsu 434) and excels in a new version of the traditional Bildungsroman’s “art of living”: “the art of translation”. As her Bildung unfolds, her effort to produce a translation that translates well is undercut by a residual force or “remainder” that ruptures its unity and naturalness (Venuti, Scandals 10). Such a practice of a “resisting” or “foreignising” translation (Venuti, Reader 12) makes room for foreign traces within something that translates almost well but not quite, to evoke Bhabha, thus challenging both the assimilative violence of translation and the Bildungsroman’s drive towards a single and unambiguous closure. In what follows, I examine how this double critique takes place by blending translation theory with more local approaches to the Asian American Bildungsroman.

"Minoritising" Translations: The "Japanese Hamlet" and the Asian American Bildungsroman

In an article David Palumbo-Liu sets out to examine the “particular and inconsistent attractions of the universal to ethnic minority cultures” (“Universalisms” 189). Questioning the dichotomy “assimilation versus cultural nationalism” as a choice seldom made by Asian American writers, he focuses instead on the “ambivalent modes of constructing cultural texts that exhibit both an allegiance to the notion of the universal and an uncomfortable sense of disenfranchisement from the ideal structure” (190). Palumbo-Liu acknowledges the desire of the minority to claim the universal— similarly, Kingston wants to convince that what she writes should be approached as
American—but proposes an alienation effect, what he calls a “double-take” inserted within the discursive performance of the universal which serves to “evince ... the friction of minor/dominant negotiations and forestall the terms’ automatic referencing of the old constellations of meaning” (204). To convey this idea of difference in unity, which is what the quotation directly above suggests, he uses the idea of the “Japanese Hamlet” (194) from a short story by Toshio Mori published in 1939. In this pairing, Japanese designates the “particularity of racial and ethnic enactments” of a universally translatable predicament, which is what the other constituent of the pair connotes: Hamlet represents “our common psychic dilemma” (Palumbo-Liu 204). Placed next to the proper noun Hamlet, the qualifier Japanese (another qualifier may very well be used in its place) challenges the content that has been poured into the universal container. As Palumbo-Liu explains, given that the content of the universal has been monopolised by the dominant, the challenge for the minority subject is to “intervene and appropriate, rename the universal differently” (202).

Palumbo-Liu’s emphasis on the transformative power of this difference, which can rename the universal, escapes the narrative economy of exchange under which the traditional Bildungsroman operates. The partial and inconsistent attraction to the universal belies Moretti’s pattern according to which an individual ultimately sacrifices individual freedom for “the happy belonging to a harmonious totality” (65). In Palumbo-Liu’s schema, this belonging is never total since there is always room for a residual presence that is not absorbed and, thus, actively moulds the universal. It still remains to investigate what kind of intervention on the part of the minority subject has the power to do that. One expects, for instance, that the kind of reified difference of orientalism and exotic discourses of the other are unable to achieve this goal. It is also necessary to clarify who has the power to rename the universal since the kind of “mobility” which Palumbo-Liu is proposing will clearly not apply to the average minority subject. Concentrating, then, on Asian American writers who have a relative power to attempt that, we can turn to the attraction and the strategic choice of the Bildungsroman.

Chu, who has written on the Asian American Bildungsroman, makes the following suggestion about the “choice” of the genre: “The authors must either find a frame of reference accessible and acceptable to ‘mainstream’ Americans or accept a smaller

---

10 As Kingston states in “Cultural Mis-readings”, “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” (57-8).
audience and continued invisibility” and “[ethnic writers] turn to the Bildungsroman for a repertoire of representational conventions that purport to transcend … political differences while providing an idiom for addressing them indirectly” (Assimilating 16). Chu’s point about the reasons why Asian American authors choose the Bildungsroman can be interpreted in the light of the ideas presented above. Exploring the “universally turbulent” process of growing up, the Bildungsroman can create conditions of identification among diverse audiences, and in the case of ethnic Americans convince that their stories have the right to be called American. Viet Thanh Nguyen reiterates the second point when he writes that through the Bildungsroman “Asian American authors have adapted a form that is well-suited to do the work of claiming America, which involves illustrating its prejudices, demanding its professed rights, and being implicated in its contradictions” (151-2). If we linger on the last of these for a moment, that is on the genre’s contradictions, the argument seems to be that attempting to follow the Bildungsroman’s patterns (as it has been schematised in Western narratives) to the letter, in the sense of producing a perfect imitation of the genre, proves uncomfortable for ethnic American writers. Lowe writes about the tension “between the nationalist desire for resolution through representational forms [like the Bildungsroman] and the unassimilable conflicts and particularities that cannot be represented by those forms” (4). A “translation” that would obliterate such particularities would turn out to be a wholesale appropriation of the “original” by the target culture in that it would fail to adequately articulate an important part of the reality of the ethnic subject’s experience. Although it would claim Americanness for ethnic subjects, it would frame such an experience from a universal/Western perspective rather than “ground[ing] it in highly specific ethnic histories in America” (Chu, Assimilating 4). It would thus be complicit in perpetuating the invisibility of ethnic Americans or of an ethnic American past/culture and fail to assert it as both ethnic and American. Chu registers this simultaneous inscription in her study through the use of the unhyphenated pair “Asian American”, which, using italics, she represents as both Asian American and Asian American. Kingston also opts for the unhyphenated pair since as she argues, “Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 60), which, in recalling Palumbo-Liu’s “Japanese
Hamlet", suggests that the *Asian* (in Asian American) can rename what it means to be or to become *American*.¹¹

The idea of inserting within the universal an element that will redefine its content can be served by a specific type of translation. Venuti distinguishes between a “fluent” and a “minoritising” translation. Fluency, in the context of translation in the strict sense, consists among other things “of a stress on linear syntax, immediate intelligibility, avoidance of polysemy, elimination of obscurity … in short strategies which have a flattening effect” (Kwiecinski 187). The second privileges a more “heterogeneous discourse” (*Scandals* 12), such as for instance the incorporation at significant points in a translation of forms that deviate from Standard English, forcing the major language to become “minor” (*Scandals* 10). Although Venuti is convinced that translation cannot escape entirely from a domesticating move, it can release the “remainder” that can “redirect [its] ethnocentric movement so as to decenter the domestic terms that a translation project must inescapably utilize” (*Scandals* 82). The remainder seems to be, then, a counter-discourse that undermines from within, or in alternative terms, a parasite that invades the host’s house: it disrupts this space but feeds on the same food as the host.

Derrida’s idea of translation as a practice of “elevating” while “preserving” or “resurrecting” the body of the original, in his discussion of the “relive”, which he proposes in a specific translation situation, can be also invoked here and adapted productively.¹² For Derrida, such a practice of translation, which emerges from a commitment to deconstruction, responds to the pressure of translating something using another language, while also registering the foreignness of the original. Although for Derrida “the double motif of the elevation and the replacement” is proof of the assimilative violence of translation, a movement which is inevitable (Venuti, “Introduction” 173), I see a potential of resistance in this ambivalence or duality. Here, one can also invoke a politics of the spectre to extract the subversive potential of such a

---

¹¹ In an article on the question of “untranslatability” in Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*, Harryette Mullen concludes with a comment on Cisneros’s choice to capture Mexicans in one of the stories of the collection as “Mericans” (17). This could be approached as a similar intervention as the one I am examining in Asian American fiction, that is, as an attempt to rename “the American” as a category.

¹² Derrida proposes an unusual French rendering of Portia’s line, “when mercy seasons justice,” in *The Merchant of Venice* in which the word “seasons” is translated as “relive”, the same term he used for the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. For Derrida, *relive* signifies “the double motif of the elevation and the replacement that preserves what it denies or destroys, preserving what it causes to disappear” (Venuti, “Introduction” 173).
form of return that Derrida articulates in *Spectres de Marx*. Initially used to critique Western metaphysics and logocentrism and acquiring a variety of names such as Derrida’s “différence”, Adorno’s “negative”, De Man’s “aporia”, Lyotard’s “différend”, Deleuze’s “nomadic” and Bhabha’s “hybridity” (Spanos 195), the spectre never ceases to haunt the centre which banishes it, reducing it to an abstraction. In the case of translation, the remainder testifies to a spectral silence that begs to be heard. The ghosts in Kingston’s text claim a political space. Their palpable presence demonstrates what Lowe argues about Asian American narratives, namely that they “are driven by the repetition and return of episodes in which the Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation” (6). As in the case of Morrison’s *Beloved* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Almanac of the Dead*, to mention two other examples of ethnic texts which use ghosts to evoke histories of slavery and Indian decimation, the ghosts of *The Woman Warrior* voice the silenced histories of exclusion, racism and sexism which have been erased from dominant versions of American history. The spectral voices that haunt Kingston’s translations defy the assimilationist logic of the *Bildungsroman* and frustrate the genre’s will to closure. In the following section I turn to the ways in which Chinese American novels of development envisage closure in the *Bildungsroman*.

**Translation and Marriage in the Asian American *Bildungsroman***

Going back to the marriage of opposites which the narrator aspires to at the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, if translation as reconciliation hides violence and attempts of mastery, is it possible”, as Barbara Johnson asks about both marriage and translation, “simply to renounce the meaning of promises or the promise of meaning”? (142-3). As Kingston writes in *Tripmaster Monkey*, “Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated” (108, my emphasis). Kingston is particularly attracted to projects of peace and reconciliation and she often uses the trope of marriage in both a literal and metaphorical sense in order to bridge oppositions such as those between man and woman, Chinese and American, feminism and heroism, fiction and autobiography, fantasy and reality. It is not a coincidence that the “marital” frequently gives its place to the “marital” (Williams 90-91), in texts such as *The Woman Warrior* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, a shift which many Asian American critics have condemned for perpetuating the stereotype of the emasculated Chinese and Chinese American man.
The trope of marriage is considered to be the end *par excellance* of the traditional (and in particular female) *Bildungsroman*. It is a necessary closure in that it harmonises social differences (think of the symbolic resolution of *Pride and Prejudice*), and instead of a rupture or a violent break conjures an image of a peaceful continuity between the old and the new. Marriage, for Moretti, "becomes the model for a new type of social contract" (22); the individual willingly limits his freedom to be bound to another person, which also marks his/her reconciliation with the social order. In American culture, marriage, in particular marriage that is the result of romantic love, "functions to naturalise consent relations" (Sollors 223), which is what replaces descent relations (relations of blood), and thus secures assimilation.

If marriage and assimilation as the telos of *Bildung* are imagined as "volitional consent" (Sollors 151), the case very often is that they stand for compromises. Translation as a form of marriage, "in particular of a deluded and exploitative one" (Johnson 142), might serve as an emblem of assimilation and thus of an equally reactionary closure in ethnic American versions of the genre. Nevertheless, just as the *Bildungsroman'*s drive to a final normative closure, marriage, has been demystified, similarly when it comes to translation, the process cannot masquerade as ideologically neutral, in that asymmetries between languages and cultures are rendered more and more visible. Situating the practice of a resisting translation which can counter a domesticating one more firmly in the Asian American *Bildungsroman*, I will both retain and deconstruct the parallel of translation with marriage by proceeding to associate the practice of a resisting translation with "romance". To clarify the above, Chu explains that marriage (in the literal sense), despite its central place in the Anglo-American *Bildungsroman*, is "a missing plot" in Asian American fiction given the histories of exclusion, which banned Asians from entering America, as well as a series of laws against miscegenation (*Assimilating* 18). These histories of violence created a gender-imbalance that gave birth to the well-known "bachelor" novels set in various Chinatowns in the American West (Chu, *Assimilating* 18). Interestingly, what replaces the plot of marriage is the plot of "interracial romance". This plot, as Chu explains, compensates for the lack of the marriage plot by functioning as a mediator or catalyst of the process of assimilating while suspending assimilation (*Assimilating* 19-21, my emphasis).13

---

13 Moretti in his study on the European *Bildungsroman* distinguishes between plots of "classification" and plots of "transformation" using the tropes of marriage and adultery respectively (7-8). My choice of
Chu adds that another type of plot that compensates for the plot of marriage is the plot of “authorship”, which often turns some of these Bildungsromane into Künstlerromane. The latter comment, given that it moves from the literal to the metaphorical (from “flirting” to writing), further supports the idea of envisaging a resisting writing or translation in terms of a metaphorical romance. Though romance, in the literal sense, may be equally implicated in unequal power relationships, the contract between the two parties is not as binding as that in marriage. 14 Derrida’s discussion of the “hymen” in Dissemination is useful here. For Derrida, this sign renders the opposition between inside and outside “undecidable”. Like the hyphen, it is both a barrier and a sign of interaction. It implies communion but also hinders it (Derrida, Dissemination 209-218). Although romance suggests a form of coupling, this remains un consummated: the intact hymen or the presence of the hyphen forbids intercourse but not interaction. While there is a dynamic and mutual transformation of texts, none is surrendered entirely and forever to the other. 15 In the case of women writers in particular, romance with “America”, as I will show, becomes further problematised through the persistence of the “mother-daughter romance”, a specifically feminine variation of the “romance plot” in Asian American novels of development.

The idea of romance then, as I see it, both retains and revises the promise of marriage, criticising its finality and fixity. Romance suspends the fairy-tale like ending “they all lived happily ever after” but does not obliterate what Marina Warner associates with the fairy-tale genre, that is, a “heroic optimism” (xvi). Similarly, in the case of the Bildungsroman, the two voices of young Maxine and mature Kingston combine an attitude towards translation and reconciliation that recognises both the promise and the perils of translation. The fairy-tale like ending of the novel, “It translated well”, as I will marriage and romance to distinguish between different types of translation also serves the distinction between assimilation and assimilating drawn by Chu. Chu opts for the present participle assimilating to distinguish between assimilation as something finished (and with connotations of Americanisation) from an attempt at integration that suggests unity without incorporation (Assimilating 6). My choice of romance rather than adultery agrees with Kingston’s comment that “some marriage” of opposites has to be attempted. While adultery gives up such an effort through betrayal, romance does not entirely abandon the contract.

14 Of course, relations defined by law or marriage are not as immutable as those defined by nature or blood, considering that marriage can be terminated (Sollors 150). Still, as consent relations have also been naturalised, the distinction I draw introduces another contract, not so much touched by “law”, and, thus, less rigid.

15 Even in Tripmaster Monkey where Kingston resolves the narrative through marriage, her use of parody in the episode of the protagonist’s spontaneous and unconventional marriage challenges the idea of it as “an eternally identifying act” (see Williams 91).
illustrate in the sections that follow, to the extent that it hides the assimilative violence of translation, is undercut by the release of a remainder, which forces the text to reconsider its ambitious project, making room for productive imperfections.

"La belle infidèle": The Feminist Translator and Her Dilemmas

Cutter summarises the “translation dilemma” that the narrator faces as her story of Bildung unfolds in the five sections of the book in the following terms: “How can she translate the sexist Chinese stories she hears about her ancestors into a positive cultural legacy that she can use in the difficult world of America?” (13). Given the word “sexist” in the quotation above, I would like to approach this translation dilemma as a dilemma more specific to the female translator who stands before a male tradition of texts. According to Lori Chamberlain, a refusal to translate would “capitulate to that logic that ascribes all power to the original” (which is heavily patriarchal in the case of The Woman Warrior), and would thus make the female translator feel as if she were betraying her own self. On the other hand, by choosing actively to subvert the “offensive” text, the translator would also end up a betrayer, albeit from a different perspective (326). To use Kingston’s case to illustrate this double bind, she has been praised for extricating Chinese myth from its patriarchal network of signification through her translations but has at the same time been condemned for twisting and distorting the meaning of the original in order to please her white sisters. The question returns then: must a female translator choose between feminism and cultural nationalism?

In the case of the “No Name Woman”, which is the first chapter of The Woman Warrior, the narrator rewrites her mother’s brief account of an adulterous aunt who killed herself and her illegitimate baby by drowning in a well, and whom the villagers, including her family, have turned to a ghost, erasing her memory and identity “as if she had never been born” (11). In embarking on a process of “rememory” and translation, the narrator refuses to participate in the aunt’s punishment by submitting to the power of the original or official story, which her mother, being a keeper of tradition, also disseminates. Instead, she manages to “locate herself differently” in the aunt’s story (Gilmore, Autobiographies 175), trying to maintain a subtle balance between using her aunt as a proxy for her own dilemmas and “keeping her distance”, to recall Esperanza’s relation to the women of the barrio in the previous chapter. The idea of “ancestral help” is differentiated from that of “ancestral worship”. The narrator is very much aware of
the risk involved in becoming a mouthpiece of the ancestral culture. Like Kincaid's Lucy, who “would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone” (36), the narrator states, “You can't entrust your voice to the Chinese, ... they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them” (152). Thus, although the narrator wishes to locate herself in a maternal descent line, which, as Pin-chia Feng argues, reverses “the search for the father” in the male Bildungsroman (3), she is equally aware of the risk involved in fashioning herself in the image of an original, be it male or female. Such an idea of imitation risks making the protagonist a replica of her mentor, here the aunt, and can thus jeopardise her effort to create a separate identity. In this case, given the end of the aunt’s story, that is, her suicide, survival is at stake. The aunt threatens to consume the person who summons her. This is a fear that the narrator expresses at the end of “No Name Woman”:

I do not think [my aunt] always means me well. I am telling on her and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute. (22)

How does the narrator, then, translate her aunt’s story ensuring that she is not sucked into the well and at the same time that she satiates the aunt’s “hunger”? First of all, she pays her debt to the aunt in a different currency, which recalls Derrida’s conception of translation as (an impossible) “conversion” (“What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 184) in his reading of The Merchant of Venice. While Chinese give food to their dead as a kind of “ancestor worship” so that their ghosts do not remain hungry, the narrator devotes “pages of paper to her aunt, though not origamied into houses and clothes” (22). Imagining that through these pages of translation the narrator cleanses the aunt’s story of its patriarchal content, one wonders whether this alone can do justice to the aunt’s erased subjectivity. Can words ever satiate a hungry body? Or, why is the narrator afraid that her aunt “does not always mean her well”?

If we look more closely at the kind of transformations to which the narrator subjects her mother’s story, we notice first of all that she is interested in the aunt’s motivation behind her transgression. Unlike her mother who “has told [her daughter] once and for

---

In Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice Shylock has a contract according to which his debtor has to pay him “a pound of flesh”. Shylock insists on a literal translation of this contract but Portia asks him to absolve his debtor and settle for money. For Derrida, Shakespeare’s play is perfect for a discussion of translation in that “everything in the play can be retranslated into the code of translation and as a problem of translation” (“What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 183).
all the useful parts" (13), the incompleteness of her account invites acts of Extravagance, to use a key term of the previous chapter. As in Lucy where fertile moments in the present open doors to the past, the aunt's story is "a pre-text" (Cheung, Articulate Silences 84) that unlocks the creative powers of translation for Maxine, who wants to make the story more than a cautionary tale told by her mother when she reaches puberty. William Boelhower writes that "immigrant autobiography stands for the opening gift that puts ethnic autobiographers under obligation to it" (226). According to his account, which explores this economy of gift, ethnic autobiographers feel that they have to reciprocate the gift. In this case, the narrator, although she is indebted to her mother for the story, cannot merely immerse herself in it. On the contrary, because there are gaps that she has to fill in order to make it relevant to her life, she investigates various possibilities and imagines multiple versions for the aunt's crime of adultery. In one version the aunt is a rape victim, passive and helpless: "Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil" (14). But, quickly, the narrator turns to a different version. As Ruth Robbins puts it, because the narrator "is living in the most individualist society in the world", driven by her desire to make the aunt's story relevant to that society, she "reads a kind of Americanized dreaming into the outlines of the Chinese story, using the culture she does know (from the movies) to read the culture she does not know" (176). In this second version, the unnamed aunt is "a wild woman" with an agency of her own ("No Name Woman" 16).

For Maxine this translation seems necessary in that the more passive version of her aunt cannot be of any assistance to her. As she says, "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (16). Derrida illuminates how the demand for relevance, in the sense of producing a univocal and idiomatic translation, what I have also described as a "fluent" translation, often becomes an excuse for assimilation and domestication (Venuti, "Introduction" 170). In the case of the "No Name Woman" story, the narrator's feminist revision is a success in that it redirects the violence inflicted upon the aunt by her patriarchal community, but leaves the story open to be inscribed with domestic intelligibilities that impose a certain interpretation of events. One cannot help but wonder, for instance, whether between using the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a rape victim and building the aunt's story "upon a white bourgeois feminist

17 I refer to the narrator with the name Maxine to differentiate her from Kingston, the author.
politics of desire that stresses individuality and a feminist politics of desire that foregrounds sexual autonomy" (Chen 20), there is another alternative. Both seem domesticating translations: the first flirts with orientalism whereas the second confirms George’s story of the need for less privileged women “to be versed and schooled in the ethos of western feminism” (Amos and Parmar 7).

While the feminist plot of empowerment that the narrator superimposes upon her aunt may be problematic, it could be argued that the same applies to the story of the aunt’s victimisation, in particular the scene of the raid of the aunt’s house by the angry villagers who seek redemption for her transgression. Toming Jun Liu has analysed this violent scene in detail showing how the stylistics conveys the sense of “a fecund night of primitiveness out of which European rationality must develop”. To recall an earlier argument, Bow contends that feminism proves conservative when it is used to obscure other sources of conflict and difference in ethnic texts (108). In exaggerating the repressive nature of Chinese culture, The Woman Warrior seems to reproduce orientalist stereotypes and, thus, could be seen as failing to provide a contextualisation of the aunt’s tragedy; a point which I will proceed to problematise.

In an essay on The Woman Warrior and the female Bildungroman, Chu suggests that Kingston is drawing on material she is familiar with as an American writer for her version of the aunt’s story. This includes novelistic portrayals of fallen women in the Anglo-American Bildungroman, which, according to Chu, allow Kingston to give voice to the aunt’s motives, and thus to correct the patriarchal strain of the story, and at the same time to revise it “for maximum literary effect” (“Cultural Self-Inscription” 103). Kingston acknowledges having used The Scarlet Letter as a source of the “No Name Woman” story, and Chu’s discussion of The Woman Warrior in the context of the genre is useful for the ways in which it examines Kingston’s revision of DuPlessis’s model, structured strictly around “the quest” and “the romance plot” in the female Bildungroman. Still, with her argument that the daughter corrects the mother’s “unfair” story (“Cultural Self-Inscription” 103), Chu, however unintentionally, pits one woman against the other while reducing the aunt to a trophy exchanged between the two. Whether we take the simple unadorned version of the mother or the more embellished variation of the daughter, the aunt is left “mute, the object rather than the subject of observation, analysis and imaginative projection”, as Chu herself acknowledges (“Cultural Self-Inscription” 103). She is the “subaltern” who cannot represent herself
and therefore has to be represented by the narrator who becomes the privileged interpreter of her story. The original is then liberated only to become subordinated to another master discourse.

The same kind of antagonism between women is inevitable if we consider another interpretation. Wong, who reads The Woman Warrior through the lens of “Necessity” and “Extravagance”, suggests that Kingston paints the aunt as an “extravagant” figure in at least the more daring version of the story. The aunt features as a fallen or truncated artist; “as a tragic artist with no art form ... without benefit of clay, paint, pen or musical instrument, she works in the only medium she has—her life—eventually sacrificing it for the few ephemeral manifestations of sensuous beauty that come her way” (Wong, From Necessity 193). In accordance with DuPlessis’s pattern in the female Künstlerroman, the niece, for whom the aunt is her “forerunner”, is in a position to complete the aunt’s story by writing it down (93). In doing this however, she becomes prone to the dangers already mentioned. Her translation tells a particular version of the story in accordance with her need to fit it into an American context.

Though written in English, The Woman Warrior, as a whole, as Kingston states, has moments which remain dark to its monolingual native speakers, as they are only accessible to Chinese speakers. Kingston’s acknowledgement in “Cultural Mis-readings” that she has “sneaked” jokes and puns into an English text (65) seems to be an example of the way the foreignness of the source text can be registered within a translation, via domestic terms, claiming from within a space of resistance. In “No Name Woman”, although Kingston contends that she is not writing “history” and that she does not “slow down to give boring exposition, which is information that is available in encyclopaedias, history books...”—adding that “some readers will just have to do some background reading” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 64)—history creeps into the text. For instance, at the very beginning of this opening chapter, we have the reference to an important date, 1924, and to a series of “hurry-up weddings” which took place just before the Chinese women’s husbands sailed for America (11). This is what frames the drowned aunt’s story providing context to the tragedy, although it is not further glossed. Considering Kincaid’s comment about how she uses history, it ultimately depends on the reader whether more attention will be paid to these “hurry-up” references.18

18 David Leiwei Li explains that the date 1924 was when the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act expanded to exclude all Asians from entry as immigrants, even Chinese wives of US citizens (199).
Moreover, Kingston's fluctuation between the use of "perhaps" and the conditional present perfect tense (the second is used more in the chapter "White Tigers") on the one hand, and the use of declarative or assertive sentences in the past tense on the other, introduces an element of indeterminacy in her translations. Kingston tends to opt more for what Wong describes as "an interrogative" rather than "a declarative modality" ("Sugar Sisterhood" 195). Such a mode presents the narrator's versions as merely a set of interpretations rather than a univocal and coherent translation, thus acknowledging the instability of translation. Speculation on whether to cast the aunt as "the lone romantic", or comments such as "imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though" (16), interrupt the flow of the translation and without being entirely alienating provide points of reflection for the reader whose participation in the exotic story they momentarily disrupt. While the narrator uses these moments of hesitation to suggest, for instance, that because her aunt could not have been free with sex she must have been raped, readers might also want to treat this as a self-reflexive commentary on the practice of translation being deployed at that very moment, a practice that imposes Western standards of rebellion and agency upon the aunt, or on the contrary a comment that forces Western readers to conclude that feminist awareness does not exist in a country like China. The function of these hesitations and intrusions can be compared to a translator's practice of adding a note or putting words in brackets to signal the inadequacies of translation. Derrida does not see such notes as "an operation of translation" but as "commentaries, analyses or warnings" (The Ear of the Other 155, my emphasis). The heterogeneity and discontinuity they create decentre a smooth process of translation, forcing it to question its own premises.

On the level of style, the foreignness and specificity of the original is also conveyed through "a bicultural idiom" (Cheung, Articulate Silences 21) or "a linguistic [not in the strict sense] double perspective" (Cook 134). Below we find an instance of the double repertoire to which Kingston, like other ethnic writers, often resorts in order to capture the process of constructing a hyphenated identity. Rather than being a harmonious ensemble, this repertoire involves, to use Amy Ling's words, abrupt "shift[s] in gears" ("Dialogic Dilemma" 174). The following sentence describes the aunt's pains to make her hair beautiful, a scene which reveals the Chinese emphasis on detail:

19 In other sections from the novel, Kingston uses literal parenthetical explanations to foreground the difficulties of translation: "Let it run ('Let it walk' in Chinese)" (35). There are many other occasions where the text is self-reflective.
She brushed her hair back from her forehead, tucking the flaps behind her ears. She looped a piece of thread, knotted into a circle between her index fingers and thumbs, and ran the double strand across her forehead. When she closed her fingers as if she were making a pair of shadow geese bite, the string twisted together catching the little hairs. Then she pulled the thread away from her skin, ripping the hairs out neatly, her eyes watering from the needles of pain. (16)

Kingston concludes with the statement: “I hope that the man my aunt loved appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn’t just a tits-and-ass man” (16, my emphasis).

Here, the American idiom, what Ling calls “a male-locker room or fraternity-house” discourse, is abruptly incorporated within a poetic paragraph (“Dialogic Dilemma” 173). Venuti’s suggestion is that the incorporation into the target language of elements which deviate from the Standard language, such as vernacular forms and “jarring lexicons”, can force the major language to become “minor”. As Benjamin writes, translation has the power to test the tolerance of the target language by inviting it to assume unaccustomed forms (80-1). Quinby seems to draw on such ideas when in relation to The Woman Warrior she notes that the American idiom becomes twisted into unusual shapes, forced “to reveal its intricacies in the way Chinese ideographs do” (132). The way Kingston, for instance, captures Chinese rhythm in American English and transforms ideograms into vivid landscapes (several passages in “White Tigers” can serve as examples) has already been documented.20 In the case of the previous chapter, the Spanish language in Cisneros’s work returns in disguise in the form of a proliferation of diminutives.21

In the scene cited, Kingston introduces a popular contemporary code in what might otherwise be taken as an archaic story, thus disrupting the engrossed reader. An example of a domestic remainder, released at a significant point in this translation, namely “tits-and-ass man”, interrupts the exotic consumption of an account that describes Chinese women’s routine. It reveals not only the pressure put on Chinese women by their own culture but also how their attention to fine detail “is wasted in the US” where the male gaze focuses only on “gross anatomical parts”, as Ling puts it (“Dialogic Dilemma” 173). To this I would add that the story can be also read allegorically as a cautionary remark addressed to American audiences, who, because of their propensity to focus on

---

20 See Ken-fang Lee (p. 107) for the way ideograms are related to translation in The Woman Warrior.
21 Cisneros explains: “If you take Mango Street and translate it, it’s Spanish. The syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects—that’s not a child’s voice as is sometimes said. That’s Spanish!” (See interview with Oliver-Rotger).
“solid” parts, risk rendering invisible, with their mainstream gaze, the histories of ethnic people in America. Kingston uses here the American idiom to modulate the Chinese but, as I will show, she also engages in a reverse practice. In accordance with the double vision that hyphenated subjects acquire, the diverse aspects of the cultures and languages that shape their identity are mutually transformed by means of the corrective lens of each other.

“Impossible Conversions”: Translating the Letter or the Sense?

Moving to a second instance of translation in “White Tigers”, this chapter has a twofold structure. In the first part, the narrator, drawing on the chant of Fa Mu Lan, tells the story of a girl who is taken away from home by a bird, is educated in martial arts by an old couple, and returns home to take her father’s place in battle, leading an army against a tyrannical emperor. After taking revenge, she resumes her duties as a daughter and wife. The second, shorter part of the story, which is clearly demarcated with a blank line followed by the sentence “My American life has been such a disappointment” (47), makes explicit the narrator’s desire to reenact the myth and translate herself into an American version of the female warrior.

The warrior in Kingston’s version is a composite figure, as becomes evident from the beginning of “White Tigers” in which the author reveals the raw material out of which she synthesises her tale: “I couldn’t tell where [my mother’s] stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. And on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at the Confucius church. We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill” (25). The story is then already “a translatory battle”, in Johnson’s phrase (147), in that it is partly inherited, partly imagined and partly modified. Kingston describes it as “a Chinese myth transformed by America, a sort of Kung Fu movie parody” (qtd. in Gao 12).

I will not dwell on the various responses made by critics on the modifications to which Kingston subjects the original legend of Fa Mu Lan because the debate has been, if not exhausted, then at least excessively rehearsed. Suffice it to say that even female critics such as Wong, Chen and Liu, not to mention Chin, have argued, looking at specific passages of the first section of the story in particular, that it creates an “‘Oriental effect’, to use Wong’s term (“Sugar Sisterhood” 187). Instead, I want to

22 For the multiple intertexts of “White Tigers”, see Wong (“Traditional Sources”) and Gao.
examine how translation is used to bridge the gap that literally (through the blank space) separates the two sections of “White Tigers”.

Comparing these two sections we notice that the details of the first are reframed into a new cultural landscape, moving the reader from the “White Tigers” Mountain to the “Gold Mountain”, which is how the first Chinese immigrants had seen America. The tension between “identification” and “misidentification” (Lee, “Poetics of Liminality” 23) between the female warrior and the narrator gradually builds up; correspondences are established between the two figures, but as the second section unfolds, the links in that chain become more precarious: “If I could not eat perhaps, I could make myself a warrior like the swordswoman who drives me” (49); “A descendant of eighty pole fighters, I ought to be able to set out confidently, ... I mustn’t feel bad that I haven’t done as well as the swordswoman did; after all no bird called me, no wise old people tutored me” (50). In the narrator’s universe several of the ingredients of the heroic story lose their colour, degrade and become transformed into something prosaic: The warrior’s wise old mentors become “mediums with red hair”; fighting and killing, which for the warrior have a higher purpose, are not “glorious but slum grubby”; and “martial arts [in the narrator’s world] are for unsure little boys kicking away under fluorescent lights” (52). The narrator cannot use the warrior’s weapons in America where her resistance is futile: “From the fairy tales, I’ve learned exactly who the enemy are. I easily recognize them—business-suited in their modern American executive guise” (50). But, as she adds, “When urban renewal tore down my parents’ laundry and paved over our slum for a parking lot, I only made up gun and knife fantasies” (50).

Similarly, unlike Fa Mu Lan who manages to harmonise quest and romance, to use DuPlessis’s familiar plot division in the female Bildungsroman, Maxine expresses her frustration over conflicting scripts of femininity: “I was having to turn myself American feminine or no dates” (49). While Fa Mu Lan leaves home to get training in martial arts, the narrator goes to college and tries to prove her valour to her community by getting “straight A’s” (47). Like the warrior who at first is young and weak, the narrator’s movement is from being considered a retarded student to getting a scholarship to study in Berkeley: “I went away to college—Berkeley in the sixties—and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy” (49). Like the warrior, she puts on a male disguise; she becomes a student and later a writer, roles, which like that of the soldier, were long considered to be male preserves. The detailed description of
the warrior’s apprenticeship in martial arts in the first part of “White Tigers” can be seen as mirroring the narrator’s difficulty in acquiring a voice, which is explored in the last chapter. Her apprenticeship, however different, is strenuous and long. Her drawings at school move “through layers of black” (149) before the narrator can control the voice and the pen, just as the woman warrior goes through trials of hunger and loneliness. Besides, as it is mentioned at one point, “the god of war and literature” is the same figure (41).

Fa Mu Lan defended the peasants against the tyrannical barons and landowners, but now the narrator’s relatives in China who are not landowners are killed and punished by the communists. Within the moral framework of the Fa Mu Legend, villains are easily identifiable. The narrator, however, has difficulty applying a similar principle to the complexities of her life. Her predicament is summarised by the phrase “I could not figure out what was my village” (47). She still attempts to configure herself as a new Fa Mu Lan, but realises that the battles she must fight are very different from the ones Fa Mu Lan faced. Being on the border of cultures, she explains, “To avenge my family I’d have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I’d have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia” (50).

The correspondences or equivalences that the narrator tries to establish between myth and reality, then, do not seem to work very well. Recalling Derrida’s discussion of the conversion of flesh into money, Maxine is faced with a similarly difficult conversion. She cannot translate the Fa Mu Lan myth to “the letter”, in other words choose a literal translation (re-enact, that is, the part of the warrior), because, as much as anything else from the warrior’s life, killing does not serve her in America. In the end of the chapter, she once more settles for a free translation which renders the sense rather than the letter of the story, transforming the warrior into a word warrior: “The [Chinese] idioms for revenge are [in English] report a crime and report to five families. The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53). What the two warriors have in common, as the narrator reveals, is “the words at our back” (53).

Kingston’s blending of different sources in her version of the story has been heavily criticised, in particular her added scene of the word-carving incident in which the warrior’s parents inscribe a list of grievances on her back, a scene that is not part of the
original; so has her final mistranslation which renders “revenge” as “report” (Cook 143). The battle the narrator has to win at the end of this second chapter, a battle that Kingston is still fighting perhaps, is to convince her local community to see that a translation ethics cannot be restricted to a notion of fidelity (to translating the letter), and thus to recognise her loyalty in betrayal: “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them” (53). Like Esperanza’s “play” in The House on Mango Street, the narrator’s translation can serve a “Higher Necessity”, but the community has to be able to see that.

It could be argued that the ending of Kingston’s version, where Maxine chooses reporting over revenge, is proof that she has internalised her society’s values by agreeing to learn how things are done in this country. Kingston, unlike other Asian American authors, has “a well-known stance against violent resolution to ideological difference” (Ling, Narrating Nationalisms 117). Her comment on the political/polemical genre she is avoiding has something of the conservative logic ascribed to the Bildungsroman. Slaughter, drawing on Moretti’s comment that the Bildungsroman tells the story of how the French Revolution could have been avoided (73), argues that the genre wishes to “displace the logic of revolution and armed rebellion”. In his words, the Bildungsroman conceives “human becoming as most appropriately accomplished through discourse” rather than violence, which is the contemporary equivalent of class reconciliation through sentimental marriage in Moretti’s overview of the genre.

Although Kingston is proposing an “active non-violent identity” as an alternative to violence (Maini 259) and critiques “the dominant perception of the pacifist as passiveist” (Williams 97), the closure of the Fa Mu Lan story has been seen as conservative. Sidonie Smith, for instance, suggests that within the warrior’s story of empowerment, which is a legend about Fa Mu Lan’s “perfect filiality”, lies a more subversive one: the story of the locked women who became female avengers (“Filiality” 66). As the narrator

---

23 See Nguyen for the ways in which Chinese American authors like Frank Chin and Gus Lee use the Bildungsroman to enact a process of “remasculinization” through violence in order to counter racial emasculation at the hands of American society.

24 Although Kingston’s work offers examples of a non-violent activism, she has been criticised for her fixed choice of American settings in her novels (See interview with Seshachari for such criticisms).

25 Kingston states: “The genre I am avoiding is the political/polemical harangue, which I dislike because a) it keeps the writer on the surface of perception; b) it puts the Asian-Am. writer on the same trip as the racist; we provide the other half of the dialogue, the yin to his yang, as it were, c) the blacks already wrote that way in the 50’s; all we’d do is change black faces to yellow, no furthering of art” (qtd. in Li 45).
describes them, "They did not wear men's clothes like me ["me" implies that she is impersonating Fa Mu Lan], but rode as women in black and red dresses.... When the slave girls and daughters-in-law ran away, people would say they joined these witch amazons. They killed men and boys" (47). Instead, the female warrior returns home to resume her domestic duties and becomes committed to promoting peace. After the war, she tears down the palace of the tyrannical emperor: "We'll use this great hall for village meetings, ... Here we'll put on operas; we'll sing together and talk-story" (47). As in the case of Tripmaster Monkey, which finishes with Wittman's theatrical play, warfare is supplanted by the community bonding that artistic practice promotes.

According to Heller, the shift of emphasis in quest narratives (with which the Bildungsroman is associated) from heroism which depends on physical strength to heroism which involves "intellectual endeavors", anticipates their "feminization" (5). The first part of the "White Tigers", while using war imagery, gestures towards this direction. The word-carving incident, for instance, prepares for the narrator's choice of the pen as a more appropriate weapon in her American life. Moreover, when the female warrior becomes pregnant, a complication of the story that is not part of the original legend, she is described in the following terms: "I was a strange human being indeed—words carved on my back and the baby large in front" (42). The improbability of going through pregnancy and going to battle at the same time suggests that eventually the narrator chooses the more pacifist way of undoing wrongs, which is also traditionally seen as a female act. As the narrator puts it, "I dislike armies" (51).

At this point, I would like to return to the debate concerning what counts as a relevant translation: one that respects the letter or one that renders the sense or the spirit of the original. Chin and the other cultural nationalists seem to privilege the letter as the only way justice can be done to the original, which has been emasculated by several Asian American feminists and through mainstream American cultural productions. Kingston can be aligned in a way to Portia from The Merchant of Venice, who, according to Derrida's reading, asks Shylock to translate his oath, cast in a Judaic discourse of "justice" that respects the letter, into "the merciful" discourse that underwrites the Christian state. Portia asks Shylock to reconcile himself with a translation that pays his debt rendering "the sense", rather than "the letter", of the original (Venuti, "Introduction" 171). The association I draw here between Kingston

---

26 See Venuti's "Introduction" for this debate (p. 170).
and Portia comes from Chin’s attack on a host of Asian American women, including Kingston, who “Christianise China” through forms, like the autobiography, which “demand the destruction of all Chinese history” (11). One cannot help but wonder why Chin denounces “Christian conversion” as “cultural extinction” with such anger in The Big Aiiitth! (18). His explanation attributes it to the way the “Christian concept” in America “allows women their freedom and individuality” and thus promises to save them from the misogyny and barbarity of Chinese culture (24).

We could, however, associate such a forceful reaction against Christianity on Chin’s part with issues of translation and argue that along with the appropriation of feminism as a tool of Christian conversion, he also opposes the “free domesticating strategies that render the sense or spirit of the foreign text, which Christianity has favoured in the history of Western translation”, as Venuti explains (“Introduction” 171). After all, the Confucian order, though different from Judaism, which becomes associated with “literalising strategies” in Derrida’s reading of Shakespeare’s play, is a hierarchical system of thought that values ancestral worship, and, thus, a translation that respects the letter. Nguyen provides further support for this point although he arrives at it via a route that does not pass through translation. Looking at Chin’s strong critique of Kingston’s distortions, and citing a passage from “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” which he interprets as “a mantra of materialism”—the passage repeats the phrase “It matters” several times—Nguyen casts Chin not only as a sexist or misogynist but also “as a historical fundamentalist” (149). In his words, “Chin’s writings reveal a determination to assert the ‘reality’ of history as a material, indisputable fact against the alleged distortions of writers like Kingston” (149). Put in terms of translation, there is no such thing as free translation or translation at all for Chin: the original is absolute and is not to be subjected to interpretation, for its “letter” is sacred.

By translating flesh to word, or violence to peace, opting to translate not “the letter” but “the sense” of the original, one could argue that what Kingston sacrifices is the body of the original. This is done on two levels: the subversive body is congealed or frozen by writing—one recalls the witch amazons for whose reality the narrator “cannot vouch” (47)—and the “body” of the original myth is not respected. The Bildungsroman, as we have seen, is often cast as a conservative genre in that it tries to legitimise a closure that values discourse or a peaceful resolution, an outcome which often disguises the violence that makes such a closure possible in the first place. In the case of “White
“What happens to the flesh of the text, the body ... when the letter is mourned to save the sense”, Derrida asks in “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” (184). As in the retelling of the aunt’s story, which ends with the disturbing physicality of the aunt’s drowned body (“wet hair hanging and skin bloated”), suggesting that “translation will not make full restitution” (Derrida, “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 194), the body of the warrior, the vengeful body, which is dematerialised through metaphorisation, can never be banished entirely despite its metaphorical or rhetorical use as a semiotic system. A similar point was made in the previous chapter, where the tears at the end of Lucy revise the closure of At the Bottom of the River, pulling from the river and bringing to the surface the body of the previous text. The transgressive potential of the body is also central to the following chapter which turns to Lorde’s work. Of Kingston’s text Sidonie Smith writes that bodies are “everywhere” in The Woman Warrior (“Identity’s Body” 273). We have encountered so far the drowned body of the “No Name” aunt and Fa Mu Lan’s body with words carved on its back, but there are also the bodies of the girls floating in rivers, the stoned body of the madwoman, and the narrator’s cut frenum distributed across the five narratives of the text.

The body’s return in The Woman Warrior can be compared to the incorporation of “foreignising” strategies within translation. If, to return to “White Tigers”, the sense the narrator keeps from the original is that “the pen is mightier than the sword”, which turns the physical body into a metaphor, the literal and the material are resurrected.

27 Portia paradoxically resorts to “a more rigorous literalism” since she persuades Shylock to reassess his “translation” by arguing that even if he wanted to remain faithful “to the literalness of the bond” (Venuti, “Introduction” 172), he could not, since according to the wording of it he has to obtain his pound of flesh without shedding one drop of blood, which is impossible. In Kingston’s case, it is the futility of using the warrior’s means of resistance, as documented by the narrator through a series of correspondences, which leads to a similar closure.
Translation, as Derrida puts it, preserves “the mournful and debt-laden memory of … the body that [it] elevates, preserves and negates” (“What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 199). The flesh-and-blood body returns like a spectre at the very end of the chapter where, as already mentioned, the narrator phrases her affinity with the female warrior on the basis of “the words at our back”, adding that she has so many words that they do not fit on her skin (53). In Spectres de Marx Derrida clarifies that the spectre, unlike the spirit, is a return to a “corps”, a corps “more abstract than ever” (202), but still a corps that does not lose its materiality despite abstraction. “In the case of the specter”, as Assimina Karavanta writes, “there is a body, which implies a lived experience at stake, even if the body is dead and not present before our eyes” (116), as with the “No Name” woman’s body. The image of the warrior’s mutilated back in “White Tigers”, with its idea of “excess” and lack of fulfilment, returns as a reminder of the body that is partly erased and partly preserved through the recasting of the woman warrior as a word warrior.

The idea of converting the flesh into something which “elevates” it, both preserving and betraying it, is also expressed through wordplay in the phrase “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (49). The phrase brings the Western collocation “double bind”, used metaphorically to suggest a dilemma or problem, together with the literal Chinese practice of foot binding. This is an example of what Rufus Cook sees as an attempt “to assimilate the two opposed cultures” (143). I would rather describe it as an attempt to bridge the two through what Shirley Lim calls an “ethnopoetics” (“A Case for Ethnopoetics” 53). Kingston’s image here is one of Asian-American particulars, an idiom specific to Asian American experience. The evocative image of the word warrior (with the words carved on the female warrior’s back) permanently changes the way we can turn to the well-known European metaphorical expression “the pen is mightier than the sword”. Similarly, “the double binds around my feet” seeks to propose a new history of the phrase. Kingston almost suggests that the mainstream or customary use of the term “double bind” has obscured an alternative origin or etymology. (The phrase was initially coined by an anthropologist and subsequently used in psychology to refer to contradictory demands made on an individual). The binds on the narrator’s feet are not literal. They are metaphorical in that through this phrase she denounces the perpetuation of patriarchal practices in her community. As she states, “I refuse to shy my way any more through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the
stories” (53). Although the binds on her feet are not literal, Kingston’s combination of words in this translated version “resurrects” once more the literal and the material within a metaphorical use, which, if it were to stand alone, would elide the referent through a process of objectification.

“Dwelling in Travel”: Translating the Mother’s Tongue

“Shaman”, along with the last chapter, throws additional light upon the narrator’s development as split between conflicting life scripts and as “a girlhood among ghosts”. In the first part of this chapter, the narrator tells a story of modernisation and feminist liberation. Like Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother, infiltrates a male realm (the university), where she becomes educated in the Western ways of studying medicine and proves her valour by exorcising “the sitting ghost”. The title “Shaman” suggests that Brave Orchid manages to blend Chinese traditions with Western scientific methods, and thus represents an example of hybridity from which her daughter could learn. The women students at the School, which Brave Orchid joins, are described as “new women, scientists who changed the rituals” (72). The second half of “Shaman” returns to the narrative present and describes the mother’s fall of status in America. She may have outwitted the sitting ghost and the seller of little girls in China, but ghost forms are various and many. The mother transports her habits and practices in America without questioning their applicability and asks her daughter to translate according to “the letter”, a choice which results in a complete gap of communication. As the narrator describes her mother’s attitude towards bargaining in America, a practice that is culturally specific and may not exist at all as a concept in some cultures, “She stood in back of me and prodded and pinched, forcing me to translate her bargaining, word for word” (78). Thus, while the mother represents a role model for her daughter, Maxine has also to transcend its limitations. This second section of the story in particular investigates the complexities that surround the mother-daughter relationship, which accrue when it comes to the function and uses of this trope in ethnic literatures as I argued in my first chapter, and at the same time, as I hope to show here, raises interesting questions about the process of translation.

In the classical Bildungsroman, the various characters that the protagonist meets on his way to adulthood, who function as mentors or parental substitutes, often represent competing philosophies of life battling for the Bildungsheld’s education. In the
prototypical text of the genre, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, the protagonist affiliates with a group of travelling actors to escape his bourgeois background as a merchant's son but ends with the Society of the Tower, which includes aristocratic members. In *The Magic Mountain*, as Russell A. Berman explains, different mentors introduce different life choices to Castorp: Settembrini stands for reason and progress, whereas his opposite Naphta defends a reactionary romanticism (86). The protagonist is confronted with the task of integrating the two opposing philosophies. As Berman suggests, by depicting his protagonist's effort to do so, Mann "plays the two positions against each other" and "exposes the inadequacy of each" (87). Similarly, in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Paul is among the children of his time who "were the in-betweens", as Jeffers describes it (144), since he "has to negotiate his own combination of powers inherited from each of his [so different] parents" (Jeffers 146). To add a female novel of development to this brief list, Fraiman in her analysis of *Jane Eyre* argues that Jane is caught up between a middle-class and a working class formation, which demonstrates the existence of double standards and competing class ideologies for women at the time. According to Fraiman, Bronte's text raises the question of who Jane's mother will be: the bourgeois Mrs Reed, her aunt in whose house she grows up before she goes to school, or Bessie, her working-class nurse (97). The fact that Jane has a problematic class status (she is an orphan who stays with her aunt and uncle but is treated neither as a relative nor as a servant) renders the above question even more pressing.

In the case of *The Woman Warrior*, the competing forces are "Chinese" and "American", although, as noted, neither of the categories is "pure". Maxine also has a problematic status in relation to the two cultures she tries to integrate. The ambiguous label "Ho Chi Kuei" (182), which her community assigns to her, though not translated in the text with certainty, refers to a ghost-like subjectivity. Maxine is neither sufficiently Chinese nor sufficiently American. To Chinese who refer to foreigners with a term that Kingston chooses to translate as 'ghost', then, the second generation is ghost-like, that is, almost Americanised. The same applies, however, to the way Americans see Maxine. Given that they have relegated ethnic histories to the footnotes of the American national narrative reducing immigrants to ghosts, Maxine, although born in America, remains invisible, just like the immigrants. The question then, as with *Jane Eyre*, seems to be: who will the narrator eventually join, or what will the endpoint of her Bildung be, assuming that she wants to provide the hyphen with one of "the two slight marks that
gives the arrow its certainty”, to use Wendel Aycock’s description in his poem “Hyphen-nation”.28 As I want to argue, it is precisely the narrator’s reluctance to identify completely with either original or receiving culture that makes her “imperfect” translation resisting. Although it frustrates her initial desire to make the invisible world of the first Chinese immigrants fit the solid life in America, translating from a position of “a Ho Chi Kuei” means that translation is almost the same (here “same” means white or mainstream American) but not quite.

Looking at “Shaman” in more detail, I would like to read a few passages as examples of a translation that releases the remainder: a translation which betrays the original but which simultaneously preserves it by “surrendering”, at times, to its “rhetoricity”, to evoke Spivak (“The Politics of Translation” 189). According to Barbara Johnson, the turn to the foreign language serves “to renew the love-hate intimacy with the mother tongue” (143). As she describes this relationship, “We tear at her syntactic joints and semantic flesh and resent her for not providing all the words we need” (Johnson 143-4). “Shaman” in particular articulates the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter by depicting the daughter finding it impossible to “stay at home with the mother[’s] tongue” (Johnson 144), but at the same time unable to cross over to the other side entirely. This is a pattern of “bound motion” that we have also encountered in Kincaid’s work: in At the Bottom of the River, which partly adopts the mother’s tongue but also rebels against it; and in Lucy where a similar movement defines the protagonist’s relationship to Mariah, the mother’s substitute in America. In the case of Asian American literature, looking in particular at the romance plot, Chu suggests that whereas male authors portray their characters as “abjecting” the Asian mother soon enough to pursue their Americanisation through white partners, female protagonists in women’s texts are caught in a double movement (both forwards and backwards), being unable to secure clear boundaries (Assimilating 11). The “mother-daughter romance” is a pattern which “writes beyond the ending” of the traditional Bildungsroman, according to DuPlessis. In this case, it also suspends assimilation without precluding the process of assimilating or of “moving to America”.29

---

28 Sitting atop the hyphen provides a marvellous view, but no direction. Does one face forward or backward? Look ahead or behind?

Lacking the two slight marks that gives the arrow its certainty
The hyphen is incomplete; there is nowhere to go. (qtd. in Shell 263)

29 See note 13 for the distinction between assimilation and assimilating.
In the following passages from “Shaman” what is striking is the ambiguity and dialogism, which unsettle expectations the minute they are established. In most of the scenes between mother and daughter, the maternal figure brings deep ambivalence. To give an example, reflecting on her mother’s gifts, the narrator states:

My mother has given me pictures to dream—nightmare babies that recur, shrinking again and again to fit in my palm. To make my waking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories. (82)

Contrary to the suggestion that ethnic authors owe their creativity to the gifts they inherit from immigrant stories, which serve as “the original donors” (Godelier 52) that nourish them, Kingston’s narrator, given the above confession, has inherited nightmares. The description seems to construct once more the binary opposition that associates America with the normal and China with the deformed or abnormal. Chinese appears as intelligible, similar to the language of dreams. The implication apparently is that the narrator needs to decode or liberate (as Benjamin’s translator does) their repressed meaning by turning to the English language, just as she turns on the light to exorcise the ghostly visions of the night. Still, her dreams are in Chinese, which suggests that there is a certain space, that of desire and wish-fulfilment, that remains untranslatable. This uncanny element can return to undermine the “transparency” of translation. In the case of Jane Eyre, as Fraiman convincingly argues, the “primal scene” which traces Jane’s strong relationship with her working-class nurse, constructing a less sanctioned narrative of female formation (one that has to be suppressed for Jane to acquire a more acceptable middle-class education), returns to defer, as much as possible, the novel’s closure. In The Woman Warrior, given the ambiguity that characterises it, the pendulum never ceases to swing (not even at the end, as opposed to Bronte’s text, where a more conservative closure is necessary).

Another example of language as both “a site of return” and “a site of change” (Min-ha 10) is a scene towards the end of the chapter. This is a scene that renews the love-

---

30 Kingston explains that she wanted to rewrite stories but avoid fixing them: what would be "wonderful would be for the words to change on the page every time, but they can't. The way I tried to solve this problem was to keep ambiguity in the writing all the time" (qtd. in interview with Islas 18). For ambiguity and dialogism in The Woman Warrior, see Schueller and TuSmith's "Literary Tricksterism."

31 As Kingston states, “My subconscious is Chinese isn’t that weird? At night in my dreams I speak to Earl [her husband] in Chinese!” (“Susan Brownmiller Talks” 177)
hate intimacy with the mother (or with the mother’s tongue), advancing a movement away from it, only to subvert it later and conclude with a note of reconciliation. This is consistent with the forti-da effect that we have encountered in *At the Bottom of the River*. Brave Orchid sits by the bed of her daughter, who, no longer being a girl and having left home, has returned for a brief visit. The daughter is for a moment afraid of her mother’s ghostly vision: “What did she want, sitting there so large next to my head?” (93). Their conversation highlights their generational conflict and cultural differences. Once more the daughter “translates” her mother’s abnormal impressions into rational explanations. When the mother expresses her amazement at her daughter living long enough to have white hair, the narrator replies: “Hair color doesn’t measure age, mother. White is just another pigment, like black and brown” (95). The mother answers to this comment in the following way: “You’re always listening to Teacher Ghosts, those Scientist Ghosts, Doctor Ghosts” (96). Similarly, when the mother explains that “time was different in China” and that she “would still be young if [she] lived in China”, the daughter replies “unfeelingly”: “Time is the same from place to place ... The reason you feel time pushing is that you had six children after you were forty-five and you worried about raising us” (98). The daughter goes on to discredit the mother’s beliefs, stressing the psychological damage that they have caused her, a speech she also rehearses with much more force in the last chapter:

I don’t want to hear Wino Ghosts and Hobo Ghosts. I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there [away from home], where I don’t catch colds or use my hospitalization insurance. Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama. (101)

Does the narrator’s wish to be in a “ghost-free” place resemble Esperanza’s dream of a house of her own, which, as noted in the previous chapter, has been interpreted by some critics as a private place of no responsibility? Has she forgotten that Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have also been treated as ghosts by Americans? What makes it difficult to condemn the narrator for such a betrayal is the ambiguity that is being sustained until the end. When Brave Orchid calls her daughter “Little Dog”, a Chinese endearment she had not used for years, the apparent movement away from the mother is interrupted. The intrusion of the mother’s tongue renews the love-hate intimacy the moment the balance was beginning to be overturned. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s account can be used to unravel this scene. She writes: “Language is the site of return,
the warm fabric of memory, and the insisting call from afar, back home” (Minh-ha 10).

For the narrator “the warm fabric of memory” is nourishing but does not smother her:

A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. [My mother] has not called me that endearment [that is “Little Dog”] for years—a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter. (101)

The daughter who has struggled to make her life “American normal” is triggered by the mother’s utterance that opens up memories to “dream the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here” (101). In Minh-ha’s words, “memory and language [and I would add translation too] are places … of dwelling and traveling” (10). The narrator returns to some of the imagery transmitted by the mother (her problematic gifts), such as the image of the shrinking babies, but at the same time uses that memory of the past in order to nourish a dream that concerns the future (“a Chinatown bigger than the ones here”).

One of the passages cited above, in which the narrator considers the ghostly dreams she has inherited from the mother, concludes in the following way: “Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear” (82). Unlike Lucy, who wears new underwear for her trip to the US and thinks of how uncomfortable the new can make one feel (4), Kingston’s narrator reflects on how burdensome the old can be when one wants to fly away. I agree with Ling, though, who focuses on the dialogic character of the book, that the sentence does not only communicate negativity: “Pride in parental love that defies poverty and hardship” seeps through the dialogic layers of the sentence (“Dialogic Dilemma” 177). The suitcase, like the narrator’s dreams, becomes another trope of “bound motion”.

The narrator leaves home but also carries part of it with her; a suitcase, filled not only with homemade underwear but also “full of sentences, proverbs and noises”, in other words fragments of the maternal heritage (Minh-ha 21).

Another scene that invites a similar way of interpretation is when the narrator talks about their family’s hard conditions of life in America during summers: “When the thermometer in our laundry reached one hundred and eleven degrees on summer afternoons, either my mother or my father would say that it was time to tell another ghost story so that we could get some chills up our backs” (82). Here, it is hard to
decide whether the narrator laughs at her parents' obsolete methods or reclaims the relevance of the ghosts in the present. The scene, although it conveys the incommensurability of differences between cultures, posits an equivalence, which momentarily works. Hyphenated subjects are *bricoleurs* who choose what they have at hand in order to respond to the difficult tasks in front of them. As the narrator explains with reference to her local community, feeling both proud and frustrated, "I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (166). Centre and peripheries or modern American and more "primitive" immigrant practices, as in the above example, alternate and shift in the text, providing critiques of each other.

As with the previous stories of *The Woman Warrior*, style with its abrupt shifts also conveys opposing feelings, such as judgment or criticism and empathy or nostalgia. To give an example, in one instance the narrator describes her mother, who is unable to use her medical diploma in America and consequently takes up a host of menial jobs, in the following way: "She would walk to Skid Row and stand in line with the hobos, the winos, the junkies and the Mexicans until the farm buses came..." (96). The use of American slang here captures the distance of the daughter from the mother but does not foreclose empathy. Slang forms part of the daughter's lexicon and is a way through which Kingston claims America. The mother's language is different: notice the passage immediately preceding the daughter's response, which is sensitive to sound and rhythm: "The tomato vines prickle my hands; I can feel their little stubble hairs right through my gloves. My feet squish-squish in the rotten tomatoes, squish-squish in the tomato mud the feet ahead of me have sucked" (96). The contrast between the two passages emphasises how foreign both the American language and the setting are to the mother. The juxtaposition creates friction which presents the two languages grating against one another. The mother appears incongruous to the setting, but the language, however hostile in placing the mother next to the winos, the hobos and the junkies, is realistic in that the mother as a Chinese immigrant is relegated to the margins of the dominant society along with other marginal constituencies. In a way, both the mother's poetic description of the tomatoes pricking her hands and the daughter's more colloquial version are sensitive to the mother's impoverished conditions in America. The second

---

32 To the dozen of reviews which have praised her text as "ineffably Chinese", Kingston replies, "No. No. No. Don't you hear the American slang? Don't you see the American settings? Don't you see the way the Chinese myths have been transmuted by America? ("Cultural Mis-readings" 58)
exposes American policies of discrimination and exclusion from within, using an American but non-standard language, which has come to be identified with various youth subcultures and ex-centric groups. The use of slang as an in-group language that creates commonality is thus enlisted here to convey empathy with a person that seems completely foreign to it.

Seduction and the "Father's Text"

If “Shaman” is about the mother’s effort to “appropriate the space of her daughter’s autobiography” (Barnes 162) for her own story, as well as about the daughter’s frustrated attempt to look elsewhere in order to complement the mother’s “impotence”, the closing chapter of The Woman Warrior, to which I will now move, is about the seductive but dangerous appeal of “the lover’s text”, borrowing Elizabeth L. Barnes’s terms (168). As Barnes describes the pull exercised by this text, “There is hope that ‘the mother’s text’, the sad history of wrongs and disgrace…will be subsumed in the lover’s identity” (168). The mother is, then, to be replaced by the lover in Barnes’s account of nineteenth-century American novels where female characters find husbands to mark the end of their successful maturation and, consequently, the end of their own story. Rephrasing the above pattern in terms of translation, is the mother’s tongue or the source text to be similarly replaced in The Woman Warrior by the target or the lover’s text?

Tomo Hattori makes a similar argument to Barnes’s, but he casts the “lover” as a “father” and grounds his analysis in a contemporary context. Looking at various psychoanalytic readings of The Woman Warrior by feminist critics, Hattori cautions that the association of Chinese with the maternal in many of these readings (that subscribe in particular to Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic) establishes America, however unintentionally, as “the father’s land” which “justifies its oppression of others as an expression of a concerned desire to see the child/minority mature in a healthy and responsible way” (128, my emphasis).33 Equally problematic are attempts to “forcibly fit textual analysis into a dominant feminist motif, say from silence to voice” (Li, Imagining 58), which is a usual practice when turning to the Bildungsroman, and which,

---

33 Hattori sees the “willingness of critics [such as Leslie W. Rabine] to relegate the Asian mother to the maternal, preverbal, pre-oedipal realm of the semiotic” as an instance of “psycholinguistic orientalism” (133).
moreover, seems just and political. Yet, as I have argued, such a movement, if realised through a geographical or ideological journey from the Third to the First World is more than problematic for the kind of stereotypes it perpetuates. Thus, descriptions such as Ling’s of the narrative trajectory in The Woman Warrior, according to which “Kingston transforms her victim’s state of cut fraenum into a victor’s state of full-throated song” (Between Worlds 130), or Linda Morante’s title “From Silence to Song: The Triumph of Maxine Hong Kingston”, may fail to raise questions of translation, such as in what language the triumphant song is rendered and in what ways this language mediates the seemingly neutral process of coming to voice.

The last chapter of The Woman Warrior, entitled “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, is structured around the thematic motifs of silence and voice. It opens with the recollection or pseudo recollection of an extremely violent scene, namely the cutting of the tongue: “[My mother] pushed my tongue up and sliced the fraenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of scissors. I don’t remember her doing it, only her telling me about it … The Chinese say ‘a ready tongue is an evil’” (148). The image of the tongue is central in this chapter not only as a bodily organ but also as a metonym of language (just as in Lucy it is a trope of both sexual and verbal mobility). This is another example of the way the relation of “letter” to “sense”, which is central to translation, is explored here. The narrator is “tongue-tied”, as the mother tells her, which is why her tongue has to be liberated, but the expression is also used figuratively since the chapter documents the narrator’s long struggle to overcome her speechlessness at school and acquire a proper voice. As the mother explains to her daughter, “I cut [your tongue] so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language” (148). The “cutting” of the “native tongue” which features as a prerequisite of translation recalls once more Derrida’s examination of “what happens to the flesh of the text … when the letter is mourned to save the sense” (“What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 184). This scene, then, is a further example of the violence (in its fleshly incarnation) that is endemic to projects of translation.

Throughout The Woman Warrior, and in particular in this section, Maxine expresses her frustration not only over her parents’ confusing signals but also over the immigrants’ overall secrecy. Their silence is mistaken for an inherently Chinese characteristic, which makes “the solid America” particularly appealing for the first American-born generation. The following passages cast the Chinese immigrants’ culture
as “untranslatable” to the children who are lost in the dark, “invisible” world of their immigrant parents:

I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell,’ said my parents though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know. . . . From the configurations of food my mother set out, we kids had to infer the holidays. . . . The adults get mad, evasive and shut you up if you ask. You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. . . . You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly. (164; 166)

The narrator has a first encounter with the seducer’s text at school; only, at this point she is still afraid to allow herself to be seduced by it. Early on, Maxine becomes aware that her silence “had to do with being a Chinese girl” (150). She makes this connection when she observes that “the other Chinese girls did not talk either” at school (150). It is in the institutionalised space of the classroom where silence becomes negatively coded. Before that she would enjoy the silence but when she realises that she has to talk, it “became a misery” (150). The teachers yell “louder” at the silent Chinese pupils, managing in this way only to “scare the voice away again” (150). Maxine’s teachers are at a loss when it comes to interpreting her paintings which are covered with black paint. The narrator sees the black as “full of possibilities” and imagines the stage curtains she has painted swinging open to reveal “mighty operas” (149). For her American teachers, this state of blackness, this “thickest, total” silence (149) is indicative of the student’s inability to be normal. The teachers invite the parents to school and suggest that it is their fault: “The teachers pointed to the pictures and looked serious, talked seriously too, but my parents did not understand English” (149).

Like Kincaid, who uses public recitation to expose the way school interpellates students to become uniform and obedient in spheres beyond the strictly educational, Kingston questions similar processes initiated in the classroom, gesturing towards what Lowe calls “an aesthetics of infidelity” (131). The next chapter returns to this aesthetics of resistance by adding to it Lorde’s transgressive spelling and celebration of bodily asymmetry. In the case of The Woman Warrior, the transgressive spelling comes from what Quinby, drawing on the striking differences between the Chinese and the English language, calls “a technology of ideographic selfhood” (125). This technology is opposed to the techniques employed by Western autobiography and the Bildungsroman,
which, to remind us of Jameson’s point in the previous chapter, are “machines designed to construct centered subjects” (182). The following passage from the text is revealing of this difference:

The Chinese ‘I’ has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American ‘I’, assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; ... I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black centre to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. (150)

Maxine cannot stay at home with the mother tongue because it is a language of repression, a tongue that “breaks” its own female speakers with the “female ‘I’”, which stands for ‘slave’, as the narrator has noted in a previous instance (49). But, if the mother tongue cannot provide all the words the narrator needs, neither can the American, whose transparency is here interrogated. In the passage cited, she is baffled by the “I”’s façade of autonomy; she waits for its black centre to melt and expand into strokes. One recalls Woolf’s account in *A Room of One’s Own* of “a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’”, a letter “as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding”, but in whose shadow “all is shapeless as mist” (98).34 Maxine’s refusal to pronounce according to the teacher’s demonstration serves as a protest against the pressure of monolingualism, which the reference to the strokes that the narrator waits to expand exposes. For Quinby, “the American ‘I’ systematically denies its multiplicity and interconnectedness, masquerading as self-contained, independent subjectivity and imposing its will on others, often in the name of justice” (132). Similarly, American culture hides under the hegemonic fiction of “Americanness” the fact that it has always been “a translated text”, indebted to a multiplicity of ethnic histories forming the landscape that the shadow of this narrative obstructs.

Given the narrator’s inability to understand concepts such as ‘I’, we are surprised by an outburst towards the end of the chapter, where the presence of this letter is overwhelming. The passage is worth quoting at length:

34 Similarly, the narrator’s observation that the American ‘I’ is confident and straight whereas the Chinese has to write her name “small and crooked” (150) resonates with Woolf’s description of a phallic, male ‘I’ that “had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked” (98). For Maxine, however, the distinction male/female is also complemented with the distinction Chinese/American. The American ‘I’ is both phallic and imperialist.
I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teachers Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships.... Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife.... I'm getting out of here.... It's your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ. I've brought my IQ up, though. They say I'm smart now. Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays.... I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away ... I'm going to college. And I'm not going to Chinese school anymore. (180, my emphasis)

The narrator seems eager to denounce her parents as failures, and turn to a different set of mentors, notably her teachers. The possibility of going to college, which the American teachers have suggested to the narrator, seems to assuage her fear that she will end up a wife or a slave, which is what ordinary women in China (as opposed to warriors, who are exceptions) end up becoming. In “White Tigers” Maxine has similarly presented herself “wrapping [her] American successes around [her] like a private shawl (53)” in order to prove her worth in a society (her Chinatown) for which “girls are maggots in the rice” (45). One also remembers the “didactic” effect of Moon Orchid’s failure to regain her bigamous husband on Brave Orchid’s daughters. After this incident, “Brave Orchid’s daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics” (144, my emphasis).

Smartness and high IQ are juxtaposed in this chapter with the failure of speaking English, for which the parents are responsible, a comment that recalls Johnson’s assertion that “if we are impotent it is because Mother [the mother tongue] is inadequate” (144). Contrary to the impotent parents, foreign teachers taught the narrator how to pronounce words and how to get scholarships. Stories which “have no logic” and “scramble [her] up” (180) are differentiated in the narrator’s mind from essays, which are structured, “in lines”, as she puts it, and are therefore more clear and more sophisticated. In a later passage of the same chapter, the dictionary acquires an immense power in that it “drives the fear away” by providing “simple explanation” (182-3).
Even after her outburst in front of her mother which allows her to voice her complaints, Maxine, however, realises that her ability to speak, to liberate the repressed through a language that is antagonistic to the mother tongue, does not cure her “throat pain”: “So I had to stop, relieved in some ways. I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died” (179, my emphasis). In accordance with Derrida’s definition of “relief”, the narrator’s throat pain is preserved, suggesting, as in “White Tigers”, that there will always be an “untranslatable element” or a remainder to frustrate closure.35

Another way the American-born narrator tries to overcome the “impotence” associated with the mother tongue is by dissociating herself from all “the retards” (TuSmith, “Literary Tricksterism” 291), who, being failed models of assimilation, are unable to translate. In an earlier chapter, “At the Western Palace”, the narrator has already told the story of Moon Orchid, who ends up in an asylum because she cannot translate.36 She now provides a three-page account of “insane people” “who couldn’t explain themselves” (166). Crazy Mary, for instance, came to America to be with her immigrant parents when she was a toddler. However, as she was not born in the US, unlike her brothers and sisters who “were normal and could translate”, Crazy Mary proved a failure. On hearing the story, the narrator expresses relief for being “born nine months after my mother emigrated” (167). In this account, failure to translate becomes synonymous with abnormality.

Maxine describes even more harshly a “mentally retarded boy who followed me around, probably believing that we were two of a kind” (174): “His lumpishness was sending out germs that would lower my IQ. His leechiness was drawing IQ points out of the back of my head” (175). To assuage her fear that they are not alike, she tells herself, “I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect” (175). Like the little silent girl whom she tortures in the basement in order to force her to speak, the boy functions as the narrator’s “double”, or what Wong calls “the racial shadow” (From Necessity 77). In her investigation of the motif of the “double” and of processes of projection in an Asian American context, Wong comes up with the

35 Derrida associates the “relief” (which conveys simultaneously the act of replacing and the act of preserving), with “relief” in the way it is used in the armed forces, the relief [relief] of the guard, which also applies to the use of the verb “to relieve” in English (“What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation” 196).
36 See Cutter’s “An Impossible Necessity” for a reading of this chapter in relation to translation (in particular to Benjamin’s notion of the “pure language”, pp. 598-9).
following pattern: “A highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent” (From Necessity 92). In terms that return us to the controlling metaphor of this chapter, namely translation, I see this reminder as a “remainder” as well, a residue that complicates the attempt to produce a smooth translation.

The narrator tries to differentiate herself from the girl in order to alleviate her anxiety of not being entirely assimilated. She thus splits herself into an assimilated American self and a muted or ghost Chinese identity, a split symbolically represented in the middle line of the narrator’s palm “breaking into two” after the incident of the torment (163). The narrator is almost but not quite "white" when it comes to the way she is perceived by mainstream Americans. In her waking life she acts as if she is assimilated, but her dreams, anxieties and projections suggest something else. Wong argues that the difference between the two girls is “merely one of degree” in that the mainstream American would not really bother to differentiate between the two (From Necessity 88). This is a difference that the little girl tries to stretch further in order to pass as American or normal. Her words, however, reveal the similarity that she tries to hide underneath her difference from the silent girl: “I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute” (156). Like Lucy, who notices Mariah’s pleasant smell and claims a powerful, offensive odour, the narrator is bothered by the girl’s “neatness” (159). She notices the girl’s “tiny white teeth” and wants to grow big strong yellow teeth (160): “I hated fragility … I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop … I wanted a stout neck” (158). The difference is that unlike Mariah, the little girl is also Chinese American, and, by forcing her to speak, Maxine adopts the method of her schoolteachers forgetting for a moment how she herself has been made to adopt the standards of the dominant class, which equates speechlessness with being Chinese and, thus, dumb.

The narrator projects her anxieties about assimilation upon these figures whom she casts as mad women and monsters or retarded so that she can claim to be normal through a process of differentiation. Just as in The Woman Warrior the figure who cannot translate is cast as a betrayal to assimilation, disability, as I will argue in the next chapter, often becomes a betrayal to the ideals of American self-improvement. As Wong notes, the girl seems “indifferent to the promised benefits of assimilation” (From Necessity 90),
which the narrator lists by repeating all the stereotypes that decide whether a girl is American-feminine:

Do you want to be like this, dumb, your whole life? Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl? Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you can’t be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife…. And you, you are a plant…. If you don’t talk you can’t have a personality. (162)

Ironically, it is the cheerleader and the pompon girl who, in the girl’s mind, are presented as smart whereas the Chinese become the epitome of dumbness. Because the girl seems not to be lured by these benefits of assimilation, she remains “untranslatable”. She can thus return at any time to haunt the narrator’s major translation scenario, just as the disabled and multiply inflected body in the following chapter challenges, in its numerous guises, conceptions of wholeness and normalcy.

The retarded boy disappears after the narrator has “talked him out” along with the things she blurs out in front of her mother: “I never saw him again or heard what became of him. Perhaps I made him up, and what I once had was not Chinese-sight at all but child-sight that would have disappeared eventually without such a struggle” (183). The reference to the distinction between child-sight and Chinese-sight is interesting. On several occasions the narrator has revealed that, not unlike Esperanza in The House on Mango Street, she has “frivolous thoughts” and that “there were adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked” (170). We wonder what are the things that she sees, and in what way they are relevant to her Chinese heritage rather than merely representing hallucinations. The fact that the retarded boy disappears when the narrator exorcises him need not be approached as an element of the fantastic; it recalls a motif in the Bildungsroman to which I have referred in earlier chapters. Often, figures other than the main character fulfil a certain narrative function, which is why they are written out of the narrative once this is done. They represent routes which the protagonist chooses to take but in most cases avoids, such as for instance the excessively spiritual path that leads to madness or death in the case of the “Beautiful Soul” in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. In this case, the story of the retarded boy represents a possibility of development, which the narrator is eager to denounce through an assimilative translation. Since for her the boy represents dumbness and threatens to lower her IQ, the moment she declares in front of her mother that she is smart, the fear disappears.
The process of becoming normal (a movement, say, from zero to high IQ, the story of "making" Harvard, as George calls it (138)) entails the sacrifice of all the abnormal narrative elements that belie this narrative of progress, serving as counter-examples to the story that America wants to tell itself. If Kingston's narrator complains that she has child or Chinese sight, and with this she means that she is suffering from a wild imagination, her newly acquired American eyesight restricts the field of her vision. Logic and clarity make it impossible for her to see all these others, the crazy Janes, the retarded and the numerous ghosts with which The Woman Warrior is populated. Yet, it is precisely when the narrator declares her desire to go to college and expresses her contempt for her kin and kind that a host of "others" appear for whom such a story of progress is not yet available. The text does not forget all these people who through subplots intrude into the narrator's story, appropriating space for their own. These figures, it could be suggested, are the remainder that the narrator's translation releases; an energy that hovers at the margins, making translation uneasy. A similar process takes place in The House on Mango Street where, as I have argued, Esperanza's desire for a transcendent space is interrupted by a movement which brings her back to the ordinary space of the barrio and its marginalised women.

To return to the reference to the child sight, which the narrator overcomes, it seems to me that what it suggests is that along with what Maxine gains she also becomes aware of what she loses, that is, not simply the innocence of a general and universal childhood, but also the gift of a more particular or Chinese sight. The following passage represents this process of gaining something and losing something else in terms of an exchange, reminiscent of Moretti's suggestion about the Bildungsroman:

I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing... I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (182)

Though on the surface valorising the American life style, this passage also has an ironic effect. The narrator weighs what she has gained and what she has lost by choosing to leave her mother's house. Even though seeing the world logically has allowed her to

37 Kingston has described the ghosts as "shadowy figures from the past" or "unanswered questions about unexplained actions of Chinese, whites and Chinese in America" (qtd. in Gao 34). About their function in the text, see also Dasenbrock.
reassess her former stereotypes about China (she now knows, for instance, that “they don’t sell girls or kill each other for no reason”), she adds:

Now colours are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic. Now when I peek in the basement window where the villagers say they see a girl dancing like a bottle imp, I can no longer see a spirit in a skirt made of light, but a voiceless girl dancing when she thought no one was looking. (183)

I would like to draw attention once more to the verb ‘see’ in the above quotation. This is important in that it is customary to describe the pattern of movement in the Bildungsroman, not only as a passage from silence to voice but also as a movement from darkness to light. The question that can be raised is who decides which is more enlightening or a better sign of maturation. It all depends on the content of these terms, a content which is not static but rather dynamic. A clear or perfect vision can be containing, just like a smooth translation that seems natural and transparent can be domesticating. The line between clarity of vision and myopia becomes problematised here. People who are short-sighted usually see colours as more blurred and objects as having less clear margins, as being more dispersed. Similarly, without their glasses they might be seeing things which are not there. The protagonist acquires a clear vision but her world has now fewer colours. In a previous scene of the chapter, Brave Orchid describes the Chinese word for ‘eclipse’ as “frog-swallowing-the-moon” and she proposes to “slam pots together to scare the frog from swallowing the moon” (152). The narrator, who has learnt to see the world logically replies, “On the other side of the world they aren’t having an eclipse, Mama. That’s just a shadow the earth makes when it comes between the moon and the sun”, to which the mother responds: “You’re always believing what those Ghost Teachers tell you. Look at the size of the jaws!” (153, my emphasis). The daughter is unable to see the jaws; similarly, the adjective “antiseptic” suggests that she has lost her sense of smell as well. What she has exchanged for the simplicity and logic of her American life, a more objective as opposed to a more idiosyncratic and subjective vision, is the magic and colour of her Chinese heritage. The distinction between these two ways of seeing the world mirrors what translation can be like, either a practice of containing multiplicity and difference or, on the contrary, a practice of “disseminating” it. It remains to examine whether the narrator’s Bildung concludes with this exchange or whether she claims a double vision that escapes such a
closure. I will now turn to the last section of this final chapter of *The Woman Warrior* to examine the kind of destination that it offers.

**"It translated almost well but not quite": Making Room for Imperfections**

The last chapter of *The Woman Warrior* closes with two stories: that of the grandmother’s love for the theatre and the retelling of Ts’ai Yen’s myth. Kenneth B. Klucznick suggests that this last chapter effectuates a change in the narrator’s “orientation” to translation, which he mainly captures through Derrida’s distinction between the “proper” and the “common”. In his words:

Maxine’s orientation to these two stories is strikingly in contrast to her orientation to the story she hears in the opening pages of the narrative. She no longer drives to make these stories clearly meaningful for her understanding of herself.... She does not search for intention and desire in these stories; rather she simply offers them. The only way she is present in the stories is implicitly, and as a listener. She lends an ear to them without attempting to translate them into her self. (Klucznick 193)

A certain change in orientation seems, indeed, to have taken place as becomes clear from the comparison of various moments across the chapters of *The Woman Warrior* where the narrator uses motifs of crossing and bridging to suggest that translation is a “laborious” task, a practice of “crossing boundaries not delineated in space” (15). In “No Name Woman” she says, “Unless I see [my aunt’s] life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (16, my emphasis). Similarly, in “White Tigers” we read: “When I dream that I am wire without flesh, there is a letter ... that floats above the night ocean between here and China. It must arrive safely or else my grandmother and I will lose each other” (51, my emphasis). Finally, in “Shaman”, we encounter the following description: “When the sky seems clear in my dreams and I would fly, there are shiny silver machines, some not yet invented, being moved, fleets always being moved from one continent to another, one planet to another. I must figure out a way to fly between them” (90, my emphasis).

Unlike the first two stories where the narrator is anxious to trace the correspondences between original and target in detail, to make them fit so that the past is made more relevant to her present, in the last story the anxiety of translation is cast aside. The chapter starts with Maxine confessing that she wants to become “an outlaw
knot-maker” (147), which in light of the story of the knot that blinded the knot-maker, which she tells here, betrays a more playful attitude towards translation on her part. It is one that makes room for imperfection and which takes translation for what it is, an imprecise tool. At this point, the narrator also reveals the translation practice that she has been using so far. Comparing her embellished version of Moon Orchid’s story with her brother’s, she notes: “His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking much room” (147). Nevertheless, although she recognises that her translation is not that “economical”, she still chooses to be an outlaw knot-maker. Knots of course are metaphors of textuality, and here perhaps the narrator presents herself as an “abusive” translator, who, by “untying old meanings and retying new ones” (Quinby 141), seeks to recuperate the message of resistance lost in the original through the translation. Yet, the question that can be raised is whether the change in orientation to the practice of translation reflects the narrator’s awareness that in her effort to make the stories of her predecessors relevant to her life she has twisted them, inscribing them with her own desires, intentions, and hermeneutical needs. Along these lines, the “lending of the ear”, as Klucznick calls it, or what could be seen as a gesture of simply offering the two stories in the end as counter-gifts to her ancestors, may be her way of countering the assimilative violence of her domesticating translations.

The story of Ts’ai Yen tells the tale of a Chinese woman who has been kidnapped and forced to live in a strange, “barbarian” land and in this way it is reminiscent of Brave Orchid’s story. At the same time it is the story of a woman who manages to turn battle whistles and cold flutes into a song that communicates her sadness even to her barbarian children, who laugh at her language. Though in this last instance of translation the narrator appears more as a listener than a translator, surrendering more than other times to the original, this surrender is not total, for there is still “a selective focus [if not] a sustained embellishment” in Ts’ai Yen’s story (Wong, “Traditional Chinese Sources” 33). For instance, the return to China, which closes the original story, (and where it is told that Ts’ai Yen’s songs were brought to China to be sang to Chinese instruments) is not foregrounded in the narrator’s version. Kingston does not want to stress this

38 As Quinby explains, the narrator translates the ancestral stories following a Chinese practice, “the knotted cord”, which was used to keep records and communicate information in China (141).
outcome because her goal in translation is not preservation of the original as it is but, rather, creative adaptation of it.

Ts'ai Yen in Kingston’s translation does not cross safely to any bank. She uses Han (ethnic Chinese) language for her song but Barbarian music. Hearing her children one night blowing on flutes she composes a song, which “matched the flutes … Her words seem to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger” (186). Ts'ai Yen almost manages to speak in the barbarians’ language; her song is so high that it matches the flutes. Sometimes the barbarians “thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering” (186, my emphasis), which means that her song, though in another language, manages to translate and communicate to them. Thus, Kluznick is right to assert that Ts’ai Yen’s songs “occupy that borderland which is translation” in that they are available both to the Han and the barbarians (193). Ts’ai Yen, and by extension Kingston, finds a middle way, distinct from the dominant culture’s demand that one should translate everything into their language or remain inscrutable. Her song is a hybrid or synthetic formation which reveals once more that translation is a way of putting things together and mediating, while not erasing, difference. If we place this closure in the context of the Bildungsroman, we have an important change from the conceptualisation of maturation as a unilateral, unidirectional project; as an arrival (both physically and ideologically) to a fixed and clear stage where individual difference becomes normalised and one’s identity contracts rather than expands. The outcome here is more in line with what Shirley K. Rose calls “cross-cultural literacy” (3), an education which redefines the hyphen (-) from a sign of “minus” to a sign of adding and multiplying, thus gesturing towards what, in the previous chapter has been captured through the trope of the “borderlands”, “a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101).

The importance of producing a translation that brings together without obliterating difference is also expressed structurally in this last chapter of The Wom an Warrior. Kingston opts for a “bipartite” structure in that the beginning of the story is the mother’s and the ending the daughter’s: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine (184). The two stories are connected yet separate (although it is hard to tell where the beginning ends or where the ending starts, or which is the daughter’s part and which is the mother’s). It is also interesting to notice how the connection between
the two stories is not forced but suggested. The movement from the mother’s story to the daughter’s is made subtly, in such a way that the second is not privileged over the first. Both stories tell of the importance of art, and the narrator starts her own in the following way: “I like to think that at some of those performances, they heard the songs of Ts’ai Yen …” (185, my emphasis). In her familiar “anti-declarative” style, Kingston takes the mother’s story of the grandmother’s love for the theatre as a gift, a bequest that she carries forward, while honoring the debt to her predecessor by reciprocating the gift. Ling succinctly summarises this new economy of gift: “The mother-tongue must be both refused and embraced, both preserved and modified, both acknowledged and gone beyond” (“Dialogic Dilemma” 178).

Given the different responses The Woman Warrior has received (the Chinese see it as American, the American as Chinese and some Chinese Americans view it as an atypical narrative of their experience),39 the final assertion “It translated well” cannot be taken for granted. The ending is more a wishful resolution rather than an actual one.40 If we consider once more Kingston’s project “to claim America”, which is central to her earlier work, The Woman Warrior is interesting in that it proves not only the private story of a girl’s Bildung but also “the story of a cultural moment, its uncertainties and desires” (Fraiman 144, my emphasis). By engaging in translation, a laborious task which according to Derrida is (im)possible,41 the Bildungsroman, to borrow Hirsch’s title, cannot but remain somewhere between “great expectations and lost illusions”. And The Woman Warrior does that, for it allows its protagonist, like many of its predecessors in the Bildungsroman,42 to glimpse and hold in her imagination something that she cannot achieve to the end, notably a perfect translation, by bearing witness to both its promise and its perils. I do not see this imperfection as a compromise, which is how Moretti approaches the closure of the classical Bildungsroman. The revised ending, “It translated

39 See Kingston’s “Cultural Mis-readings” for these responses.
40 The original “Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” interestingly communicates the difficulty of connecting languages and worlds that are different:
   Barbarian and Han lands are different, with different customs.
   Heave is separated from earth; mother and child are
   Scattered east and west.
   Alas, my woe is vaster than the sky.
   Even though the universe is immense, it cannot contain my
   Suffering. (qtd. in Wong “Traditional Sources” 35)
41 In “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation”, Derrida alludes to the “im-possible possible of translation” (193).
42 See Jeffers and Gohlman for a similar argument in the traditional and contemporary Bildungsroman. Jeffers, in particular, explores how Anglo-American practitioners of the Bildungsroman inscribe in their novels their heroes’ (and their time’s) frustrated nostalgia for a Greek wholeness (the ideal of some universale which the English take from German humanism).
almost well but not quite”, which I have proposed, attests to instances of uncomfortable and resisting translation in Kingston’s text. Rather than seeing these instances as precluding cross-cultural understanding, I approach them as tools which function against appropriation or assimilation.

The Woman Warrior responds to the central ethical and political question of translation, notably how to attend to the specificity of the “text” that one translates through “a translation ethics grounded in differences” (Venuti, Scandals 188). In the previous chapter I suggested something similar, showing how Cisneros captures the idea of “community in difference” with the trope of a private space, which is at the same time experienced as open; one that allows a possibility of affinity that maintains distance and respects difference. In the following and final chapter, Lorde’s commitment to difference in Zami and her cancer diaries is built upon her body, which, in its asymmetry and multiple disabilities, constructs another version of a powerful imperfection that challenges normalcy and wholeness. The Woman Warrior does this through moments of return, in particular of the body, uncanny presences, ambiguity and the use of “an ethnopoetics”. These elements “make waves” (Cheung, An Interethnic Companion xiii) to a smooth translation, estrange both original and target thus leading to mutual redefinition, and challenge the closure of the Bildungsroman. Although the “journey” to America is made, to return to George’s trope of “coming to America” with which this chapter started, it also remains incomplete in several ways. The narrator avoids taking the step that could be construed as final, confirming Susan Ashley Gohlman’s point that the Bildungsheld’s ceaseless task is to “start over”: “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (The Woman Warrior 183). In the end, “it translated almost well but not quite”.
Chapter 4

“In the name of grand asymmetries”: Body Bildung in Audre Lorde’s Work

Audre Lorde’s Bildung begins “not with a continent, or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body” (Rich, “Politics of Location” 212). If trauma and the mother-daughter relationship nourish Kincaid’s serial autobiography, the body as a site of experience, knowledge, development and resistance is a key player and part of a continuously renewed project of learning and teaching in Lorde’s work. This chapter explores the aesthetics of embodiment deployed in three texts. I list them according to the chronological order of events from Lorde’s life which they narrate: Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, The Cancer Journals, and the section from A Burst of Light entitled “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer”.1 The first traces Lorde’s growing up as black and lesbian in New York in the forties and fifties, and is an unfolding of her “life and loves” (Zami 190), as the author herself describes it. Although she has coined the term “biomythography” to describe a new genre, which Kaplan includes in her examination of “out-law genres” (128), the text has been read within the framework of the lesbian Bildungsroman or as a “Coming Out” story, the most popular kinds of lesbian fiction produced in the seventies and early eighties according to Paulina Palmer (41). The other two texts, published before and after Zami respectively, consist of journal entries, speeches, and essays, and concern a later stage in Lorde’s life, focusing in particular on her struggle with cancer (breast cancer in the case of The Cancer Journals, which metastasises into liver cancer in “A Burst of Light”). Both have been read as autothanatographical texts or autobiographical narratives of terminal illness (see Egan), but Lorde uses a number of forms which blend the diary with the critical essay and the manifesto, all of which contribute to an understanding of her personal struggle in its social and historical context. In this chapter, I will also show how these forms, which bring autobiography into crisis by inscribing disability, pain and death into its fabric, are connected to and can stretch further the genre of the Bildungsroman, politicising and radicalising it.

1 All page numbers from The Cancer Journals, “A Burst of Light” and Sister Outsider (including “Uses of the Erotic”) refer to The Audre Lorde Compendium. Page numbers from poems are from Lorde’s The Collected Poems.
Because of the narrative overspill of the above three texts, I would like to approach them as part of a whole, a Book of Life and Death, in Lorde’s words ("A Burst of Light" 323), which charts the tribulations and the transformations that the body undergoes. Smith’s questions are pertinent here:

How is the body the performative boundary between inner and outer, the subject and the world? … Is the body a source of subversive practice, a potentially emancipatory vehicle for autobiographical practice, or a source of repression and suppressed narrative? (Subjectivity 23)

Lorde traces the adventures of the material body as it becomes inscribed by culture and turned into an object of domination and control on the one hand, and on the other, tries to resist those enforced inscriptions by becoming a locus of self-expression, eroticism, survival and political struggle. Her texts produce in their own ways what Brooks sees as inextricably connected: “a semioticization of the body” and “a somatization of story” (xii). As I will argue, the erotic, the scarred, the surviving and “the extraordinary body” are the protagonists; corporeality and embodied experience define the Bildung of Lorde’s texts, turning them into a story of “body Bildung”.²

Before I turn to the texts, I would like to make a few introductory comments about the place of the trope of the body within the Bildungsroman as well as within the contexts of contemporary lesbian fiction and black American literature. In the first chapter I have noted that most novels of development end with images of disembodiment and transcendence. Like Waugh, who exemplifies this point using a list of male authors in particular, Smith describes a state of “somatophobia” in Western autobiography, and traces this to the emergence of “the universal human subject”, or, in alternative terms, the “unencumbered subject” (Subjectivity 5). Like the Cartesian self who prevents interruption retreating into his Room to become “one, both singular and whole”, as described in the second chapter, the subject of Reason tries to escape the constraints of embodiment, which tie human beings to contingency and frailty. In order to achieve sovereignty, all marked features should be eliminated.

Moretti writes that the Bildungsroman “has produced a phenomenology that makes normality interesting and meaningful as normality” (11). The heroes it has opted for are normal, in the sense of unmarked, but not uninteresting. The normality articulated by

² I have borrowed the term from Susan Derwin’s essay “Body Bildung in German Classicism”. Derwin investigates how fragmented female figures and corpses in Goethe’s work embody and contain the anxiety of the male pursuit of Bildung, and how “the corpse (of Bildung) awakens to stalk the text” (267).
the genre is “an interesting and lively normality—normality as the expulsion of all marked features, as a true semantic void” (Moretti 11). His account elides the assumptions that underlie normality, in particular the violence that enforcing such an ideal presupposes. This chapter proposes to investigate such questions by focusing on constructions of the normal and the abnormal body. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson investigates the figure of the unmarked subject, which is at the centre of American liberal ideology, from the perspective of the newly established discipline of disability studies in the humanities. As she explains in her study on “the extraordinary body”, the democratic subject excludes the disabled figure from the ideal of democracy through normalising sameness and stigmatising difference. The disabled figure is regarded as a betrayal to the ideals of American self-improvement and as a form of pollution. Turning attention to its representations in literature and culture, allows us to enquire into the premises that construct the “normal” and the “whole body” and to assess their implications when it comes to representations of selfhood and identity in American culture. The Bildungsroman and the personal narrative of illness offer an appropriate means through which Lorde raises these questions from a number of different but interrelated angles.

Elaine Scarry notes, “It is only when the body is comfortable, when it has ceased to be an obsessive object of perception and concern, that consciousness develops other objects” (39). Lorde’s multiply inflected and signified body is never comfortable. It is not only subjected, like other “normal” bodies, to the inescapable law of mortality, which cancer makes even more imminent in her case, but also to the law of social control. The latter is especially pressing when the focus is, as in Lorde’s work, on the abject body: the coloured, gay, ill or disabled body, to mention some of the bodies associated with abjection. As Kathleen Kirby explains, although we all live our bodies as “volumes”, that is as composed of depth and surface, interior and exterior, “for subjects from marginal groups the margin of the body may prove more palpable, central, defining, and affecting” (13, emphasis in the original).

Elizabeth Alexander asks in relation to the black body: “Why is the self not conceived as an a priori whole? (714). Lorde’s story of bodily “fragmentation and reintegration”, to use Alexander’s title, needs to be situated within a history of slavery and appropriation of the black body, both literal and discursive. For Alexander:
These images literalise what is historically and metaphorically true in African-American women’s writing: It is the fissure, the slash of the Middle Passage, the separation from the originary, that which the physical scar shows and alludes to—all that is an intractable part of African-American women’s history—that makes possible the integrity of the scar, the integrity of the body’s history, and a record of what the scar performs. (714)³

In a similar vein, Garland-Thomson writes about the tension created by the need in African-American women’s work, such as Morrison’s and Lorde’s, to “simultaneously embrace and transcend the individual and collective history of oppression”, to both “incorporate” pain and “surmount” it (116). The body is the locus where such tension is played out, and, as Garland-Thomson notes, it is the source of both “freedom” and “condemnation” (104). A similar point was made in the first chapter in relation to the Caribbean Bildungsroman, which articulates the tension between fragmentation and wholeness that is endemic to the process of decolonisation.

With her insistence on the body and on embodiment Lorde, like Kincaid in Lucy, situates herself in a discursive territory previously occupied by others, whose power of representation she now contests by claiming the right to own, control and write her own story of her body. Lorde not only reclaims the black body from a history of racism and devaluation in Zami but also from medical discourses (in The Cancer Journals in particular) as she tells her own story of “reconstruction”. If the Bildungsroman is predicated on the continuity and integrity of the self across time, and if disability and fragmentation threaten one’s self and disrupt the apparent plot of one’s life, Lorde’s achievement is that she manages to reassemble and imaginatively reconstruct the scarred body as far as possible, thus making continuity and survival viable in the midst of marginality and death.

In The Cancer Journals cancer is presented both as a disease that strikes Lorde’s body and as one of the faces of the “dragon” (14) that she associates with a “malignant” American society (60). Just as I have tried to depathologise trauma in Kincaid’s work by reading her melancholia as a form of critique against discourses of American individualism and neocolonial practices, Lorde’s writing not only anticipates anti-assimilationist discourses of “commonality in difference”, as I will argue, but it also opens a way for the project which Garland-Thomson makes central to the development

³ See also Carol E. Henderson’s Scarring the Black Body.
of disability studies in general: to “move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity” (6).\(^4\) Margaret Kissam Morris writes that in mainstream American society, in particular, “an obsession with youth has rendered the subjects of aging, disease, and dying undesirable topics for public discourse outside of medical, psychological, and religious contexts” (176). In Lorde’s case, these themes become firmly located in the difficult historical, social, and political realities that define American life.

Turning to literary representations of the lesbian subject, Marilyn Farwell and Felski trace a similar movement away from the deviant and monstrous lesbian subject constructed by medical and scientific discourses to the non-bodily and often utopian subject of the seventies and eighties. If the second was used as a way of depathologising earlier representations of the lesbian subject, it did that at the expense of the body’s materiality, to which the bodily grotesque subject that features in postmodern lesbian literature seems to react. The question which may be raised in relation to this later stage of development is whether such representations may be seen, if not as pathologising the lesbian subject, at least as aestheticising it, reducing the body once more to a metaphorical or “metafictional” function.\(^5\) Felski, in particular, investigates this change in the context of the lesbian novel of development. Unlike David H. Miles who formulates the decline of the Bildungsroman in terms of a shift in “The Picaro’s Journey to the Confessional”, in Literature After Feminism Felski suggests that contemporary lesbian novels have revised and thus returned to the picaresque, which has “turned out to be a perfect match for contemporary Americans obsessed with the romance of the road and the glamour of the outlaw” (110). Exploring a series of recent lesbian novels such as Jane Delynn’s Don Juan in the Village (1998) and Michelle Tea’s Valencia (2000), she argues that “there is no Bildung here, no education of the protagonist or the reader, only sardonic, street savvy reportage of life at the edge, of bad girls set loose in the city in search of drugs and sex” (114). We are certainly miles away from the encoding and careful disguise of lesbian identity within multiple layers of signification in Woolf’s and

---

\(^4\) There is of course a lot of debate as to determining what is included under the rubric of “disabled”, but Lorde’s work has been read in this context.

\(^5\) Farwell sees the “horrid smells, the violence and the sexual sadism as well as the sexual confusion of cross-dressing” in postmodern lesbian novels as “metafictional discussions about lesbian and female representation in language and narrative” (170).
Gertrude Stein's fiction; contemporary lesbian novels shock with their hard-core images and their openness about sexuality and desire. Drawing on Farwell, Felski welcomes the ways in which the lesbian picaresque, which is playful and self-conscious, revises "a staple genre of the 1970s and 1980s", by which she refers to the coming-out novel, in particular its preaching tone and happy closure of "romantic love à deux" or idealised images of community (114).

Bonnie Zimmerman, who charts the plot of the lesbian *Bildungsroman*, argues that it is, in many ways, "closer to the classic *Bildungsroman* than is the heterosexual feminist novel of awakening" ("Exiting" 245). Zimmerman identifies as the starting point of many novels of lesbian development written in the seventies "the exit from patriarchy" and, as its happy destination, an alternative version of what in the second chapter I have identified as "the communitarian ideal", that is, the "Lesbian Nation" ("Exiting" 245-7). Although mythic concepts of sisterhood, which is what the Lesbian Nation denotes, "nourish the imagination", as Nicki Hastie is right to note, their "political optimism is dated" and so is the notion of a utopian separatism. The exit from patriarchal structures into a lesbian "wild zone" is an illusion, and more recent novels, as Zimmerman illustrates in *The Safe Sea of Women*, deconstruct the idea of unity suggested by the image of the Lesbian Nation, thus challenging static notions of self and community.

What is the place of a lesbian novel of development by a black woman writer like Lorde within the above developmental scripts of the lesbian novel, or, to put it in other words, do discourses of race qualify Lorde's portrayal of lesbianism and vice versa, given her dual allegiance to race and lesbian sexuality? In "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview" and in "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered", Ann Allen Shockley and Jewelle Gomez both agree that, in the latter's words, "there is a distinct gap in the picture where the Black Lesbian should be" (122). If Zimmerman's title "What Has Never Been" is appropriate for her overview of lesbian feminist literary criticism, it is even more so for the question of the place of the black lesbian in fiction and for black lesbian criticism. But, as Barbara Smith concludes in her essay entitled "The Truth than Never Hurts", "Black lesbians and specifically black

---

6 See Catharine R. Stimpson's "Zero Degree Deviancy" for a brief discussion of different lesbian modes in the English novel.

7 According to Zimmerman, as in the straight version of the genre, the journey of identity formation could lead to a return to heterosexuality (one version of "home" as accommodation to society), death (in the more tragic endings, reminiscent of earlier female novels of development), or to the discovery of a lesbian community (a more empowering version of home, that is, "Lesbian Nation").
lesbian writers are here to stay. In spite of every effort to erase us, we are committed to living visibly with integrity and courage and to telling our black women's stories for centuries to come” (805).

Thus, contrary to the white lesbian aesthetic from which critics like Felski largely derive the patterns they ascribe to the lesbian novel, black lesbian fiction with its commitment to politics and its struggle against racism and invisibility has different goals and priorities. It might then be uncomfortable with dissolving racist and patriarchal structures of oppression under merely textual/narrative structures and positing the lesbian as metaphor, “a privileged signifier”, in Zimmerman’s words, of deconstruction (“Lesbians Like This and That” 7). As Margaret Homans puts it, “There are specific historical reasons why bodily definitions of the human should appeal to some black feminists at just the moment when they are anathema to white poststructuralists” (415). At the same time, however, given the history of the black body's scarification, told through slave narratives and stories of sexual abuse, the pervasiveness of scientific racism against the black body, and the sustaining of a post-slavery mythology of blacks as sexually promiscuous, black lesbian women writers are expected to be equally reluctant to write literature of “bad girls” indulging in sadism or in search of sex, thus risking their exposure once more to the curious white gaze.

In the light of the above predicament, I agree with Garland-Thomson who suggests, in a different context (that of disability studies), that writers like Morrison and Lorde find in the marked and disabled female body the “safe” space they need in order to negotiate the above tensions (104). The grotesque sexual body that Felski writes about becomes transformed into the “extraordinary body” of black women writers in my recasting of Garland-Thomson’s theory. This is a “safe” space to create an empowering identity in that it escapes the stereotype of the sexually voracious black woman, but as already argued, is at the same time a source of freedom and condemnation since it depends on the marginalised and disabled body in order to utter its critique of the privileged norm. In other words, what decides its success is the extent to which the transformation of an abnormal into an extraordinary body will occur. This is a task that is problematic, as I will argue, since it risks romanticising marginality and oppression as
a form of power or failing by embracing despair. While Garland-Thomson locates this strategy of revision within a disability studies perspective, in the case of Lorde's work it also serves her lesbianism in that it helps her representation of the lesbian subject escape both the “non-bodily” and the “postmodern grotesque” stages mentioned above. Lorde’s work occupies, then, another version of “a third designation” to the one analysed by Garland-Thomson.

Bearing in mind how black lesbian novels have to negotiate complex parameters, I will proceed first to trace moments of bodily formation and deformation in *Zami* focusing on the ways in which the body perceives and internalises the sensations, experiences and projections of the external world, incorporating both good and bad. In the second section, I will explore how Lorde’s assertion of her own right to control her body in both *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals* becomes a tool of critique which denounces the drive to uniformity, exposes the economics of disease in America and challenges its cultural meanings. Finally, in a section that examines Lorde’s personal struggle with cancer in *The Cancer Journals* and in “A Burst of Light”, I will argue that she constructs “a poetics of death” that becomes a model of an active, responsible and political “art of living”. The thread that binds all these sections together is, of course, the body. What emerges from Lorde’s work is a body that “demonstrates, needs, wants, hurts, inherits, disgusts” (Egan 7), or, to use another black poet’s words, “bleeds to life” (qtd. in Lauter 411).

**Imprinting the Body: Lessons of Survival and Emotional Tattoos**

The climactic moments of coming to consciousness about identity are played out on the body in *Zami*. Just as the onset of menstruation marks the beginning of Kingston’s story, Lorde starts with the time when Audre “was three and a half and had gotten [her] first eyeglasses” (35), explaining that at five years old she was “still legally blind” (21). This detail is indicative of what Lorde does throughout the novel. She does not miss the opportunity to give “the reader a corporeal landmark in her life’s chronology”

---

8 It may also undermine efforts to translate illness and disability into something normal by emphasising its “exceptional qualities” or by even presenting it as an enviable experience. See Hemdl’s enquiry into the “normal” and the “normalising” which complicates simple dichotomies (see “Our Breasts”, pp. 239-40).


10 I will use “Audre” and “Lorde” to distinguish the main character and Lorde’s younger self in *Zami* from Lorde the author and her older, more mature self.
(Alexander 701), “insistently reminding the reader of her bodily reality” (709). This reality departs from the norm in its otherness. Main characters in fiction, in particular in those novels of development which have structured the category of the Bildungsroman, rarely have physical disabilities. Lorde, however, like Kingston’s protagonist, stresses her problems with sight and speech, giving us from the outset a sample of her multiply disabled and marginalised body: “Despite my nearsightedness, or maybe because of it, I learned to read at the same time I learned to talk, which was only about a year or so before I started school” (21).

The narrator explains that “the doctors at the clinic had clipped the little membrane under my tongue so that I was no longer tongue-tied” (23), which reminds us of a similar scene in The Woman Warrior. Contrary to this act, which reflects the violent entry into the symbolic, Audre learns to talk and read through her own will. While she is at the library with her mother, a librarian approaches her and reads her a story in order to calm her down. The girl stops crying, takes the book from the librarian’s hands and, mesmerised by the power of “the black marks” which by now she can distinguish as separate letters (they are in a larger print and thus visible to her eyes), says for whoever is around: “I want to read” (23). The whole incident, which focuses on the physical body and its limitations, becomes a pretext for Lorde to talk about silence, voice and authority just as she uses her personal suffering and her choice not to wear a prosthesis after her mastectomy in The Cancer Journals to denounce the malignancies of American society. As Lorde comments on her inability to talk (this is one of the moments in which a mature narrator intervenes to compensate for what the child cannot yet articulate): “[T]o this day I don’t know if I didn’t talk earlier because I didn’t know how, or if I didn’t talk because I had nothing to say that I would be allowed to say without punishment” (21-2).

While she was still at school, Lorde writes, she had “no words for racism” (81). However, she manages to communicate its devastating effects through the eyes of a child who tries to understand why she is not treated like the other children and through a language that returns to the ways the body registers marginalisation and violence. While Audre’s first school is not openly racist, the second’s racism was “unadorned, unexcused and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it” (59). In her first school, the principle of segregation, which distinguishes between white and black, operates covertly. The teacher divides the class into two groups: “the Fairies” and “the
Brownies”. The names are supposed to be neutral but as the mature narrator notes, filtering the experience lived by the child, “In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and color usage, I don’t have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies. But for two glorious times that year, I made it into the Fairies for brief periods of time” (27-8).

The school provides an early platform to excel in upward mobility skills; the desired goal is to join the Fairies, in other words to become white. As in Kincaid’s and Kingston’s work, school enforces discipline and uniformity. The acquisition of literacy is an important stage in the slave narrative, but often in the Bildungsroman, especially in the case of the Caribbean or of the ethnic American one, formal education collides with the native culture and is used in order to fashion a colonial or an assimilated subject. While the narrator manages to join the good students’ group two times, the stereotype of the black as cognitively disabled is perpetuated by the teachers who punish Audre for breaking her glasses, using this as an excuse to cover their repeated acts of racism. In another scene the teacher doubts that Audre has completed an assignment on her own. Her sentence “I like White Rose Salada Tea” (29), which uses collage (Audre clips words out from a newspaper ad for her sentence), is more elaborate and sophisticated than other students’, which is why the teacher humiliates her in front of the class. Audre’s first awakenings as to her inability to shape her life and control things take place during her school years.

The scene with the elections is particularly evocative. Sister Blanche announces that they are going to hold elections for two class presidents, one boy and one girl, and that the voting should be according to merit and effort and class spirit. The person, however, who ends up being elected is the prettiest girl in class with her “blonde curls” (61) and, no need to mention, the standards of prettiness are those of the white society. Audre, who is described indulging in fantasies of winning and of breaking the news to her mother (“Oh, Mommy, by the way, can I stay later at school on Monday for a presidents’ meeting?” p. 62), cannot comprehend the reason why she is not elected: “How could this have happened? I was the smartest girl in the class… It was as simple as that. But something was escaping me. Something was terribly wrong. It wasn’t fair” (63).

In her second school, the narrator continues to be puzzled by people’s behaviour. Once more a more mature voice mediates the narrative of a younger self’s inability to
see and understand: “What was it that kept people from inviting me to their houses, their parties, their summer homes for a weekend? Did their mothers caution them about never trusting outsiders? But they visited each other” (82). It is the younger self which speaks when Lorde says “There was something here that I was missing” (82). And it is the more mature narrator who offers an explanation: “On the deepest level, I probably knew then what I know now. But it was not serviceable to my child’s mind to understand, and I needed too much to remain a child for a little bit more” (82).

The process of rationalisation that the child goes through, the unanswered questions and the urge to provide answers, recalls another incident which takes place on a subway train when Lorde is still a little girl and which is narrated in Sister Outsider. Audre’s new blue snowpants meet the sleek fur coat of the white woman sitting next to her when the woman “jerks her coat closer to her” (193). Audre looks around to see what has repelled the woman believing that there is “a roach” when she suddenly realises that there is nothing “crawling up the seat between us”: “It is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch…. No word has been spoken. I’m afraid to say anything to my mother because I don’t know what I’ve done…. Something’s going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate” (193).

In this scene, the sense that something is wrong is conveyed through the other’s bodily gestures. The concept of the border, which has been central to the previous chapters, not only as a site of imaginative intermingling but also of pain and violence, is here the skin, “a border which feels”, in Sara Ahmed’s words (91, emphasis in the original). The skin registers how bodies are touched by other bodies; the skin is, in the words of Didier Anzieu, “an envelope which emits and receives signals in interaction with the environment; it ‘vibrates’ in resonance with it; it is animated and alive inside, clear and luminous.” (qtd. in Chinn 195). The act of withdrawal is here meant to protect the white body’s boundaries from the risk of contamination represented by the black body of the girl. Through this act of withdrawing, bodily space becomes “reconstituted” (Ahmed 92). The white woman redefines the boundaries of her body or “takes form”, in Ahmed’s words, at the expense of the girl whose body becomes deformed and abjected (93). It is ironic that the girl thinks that there is a roach between the white woman and her. To the white woman, the black body is synonymous with such a creature.

Lorde grows up with no words for racism because her parents never discuss it at home and teachers pretend that it does not exist. The narrator describes her classmates
in her second school making fun of her braids and leaving notes at her desk that she “stinks” (60). The teacher sends a note to her mother “asking her to comb [Audre’s] hair in a more ‘becoming’ fashion, since [she] was too old, she said, to wear ‘pigtails’” (60). She also felt it was “her Christian duty to tell me that Colored people did smell different from white people but it was cruel of the children to write nasty notes because I couldn’t help it” (60). With irony and bitterness, Lorde writes of the teacher’s consolation to little Audre that if she could “remain out in the yard the next day after the rest of the class came in after lunchtime, she would talk to them about being nicer to me!” (60).

The teacher, like Lorde’s mother, tries to pretend that racism is not behind the children’s attitude. They merely need to fix their manners just as Audre has to try and look more decent. Lorde tells of a similar incident in an early scene which illustrates her mother’s response towards racism, summarised by the phrase “if you can’t change reality, change your perceptions of it” (18). Walking with her mother in a “still racially mixed area with control and patronage largely in the hands of white shopkeepers” the narrator remembers as a little girl people spitting upon her coat or shoe, which her mother attributes to low class manners, “impressing upon [her daughter] that this humiliation was totally random” (17-8). It is only later that Lorde realises that her mother’s power is a façade, an attempt “to hide from us children the many instances of her powerlessness” (17).

Another formative or rather “deformative” moment for Audre is a Fourth of July trip she takes with her parents to Washington. Lorde writes about her rude awakening when a white waitress refuses to serve them ice cream in the parlour because they are black. Significantly enough, the journey to Washington takes place “on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child” (68), and is offered by her parents as a graduation present. Therefore, it can be approached as an embedded miniature narrative of Bildung within Lorde’s biomythography. The motif of the journey, which often marks the beginning of a novel of development, appears here to be inverted. What starts as a Fourth of July trip to “the fabled and famous capital of our country” (68, my emphasis) ends with a realisation of the “travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country” (69, my emphasis). The craving for ice cream culminates in a feeling of nausea when the waitress segregates Lorde’s black family:
The waitress was white and the counter was white and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. that summer I left childhood was white and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all. (71)

The scene, built on colour symbolism and the contrast between black and white, recalls Invisible Man's loss in the whiteness after his accident at the paint factory in Ellison's eponymous novel. Its outcome can be also interpreted in the light of Alexander's comment that Lorde "in-corporates the intellectual and physical aspects of her life, reminding the reader that the metaphysical resides in a physical space, the body" (697). Abstract things are physical before they "metabolise" to become metaphysical (Alexander 709), which once more establishes the skin as a border that feels, registering the way people respond to otherness. The physical body is that which first reacts to the social environment in a similar way that it reacts to extreme heat or cold. In this scene, the nausea the girl feels inverts the white woman's nausea in the incident at the subway. Audre experiences racism initially on the level of the body and, like the white woman, tries to expel what threatens to overwhelm her, the whiteness. Before becoming incorporated, the ice cream and everything that it symbolises becomes expelled. Lorde, as we will see, later rewrites this scene of incorporation in terms that suggest that even the worst sustenance can be nourishing and empowering.

The above incident clearly belies the effort of Lorde's parents to make their children "believe that they had the whole world in the palms of their hands for the most part, and if we three girls acted correctly—meaning working hard and doing as we were told—we could have the whole world in the palms of our hands also" (18). Unlike Lorde's father who pretends that nothing "anti-american" (70) has happened in Washington, Audre fantasises writing an angry letter to the president, reporting, like Kingston's young protagonist, the racist incident.

The American dream of equality is not glimpsed in New York or in Washington. Instead, Lorde finds a version of it in Mexico. Light and dark, white and black have different significations in different communities as they are interpreted in dissimilar ways. The description of "brown faces of every hue meeting mine" (156), which is what Audre finds in Mexico, contrasts starkly with the previous one where whiteness is overwhelming. The narrator sees for the first time her colour being "reflected upon the
streets in such great numbers” (156). As she confesses, this “was an affirmation for me that was brand-new and very exciting. I had never felt visible before, or even known I lacked it” (156). Words such as progress, awakening and visibility, which have a central place in discussions of the Bildungsroman, recur as part of Audre’s experience of Mexico. Mexico is portrayed as “a land of color” in which people said “Negro” and meant something “beautiful” (173). The fact that she is noticed wherever she goes “felt like a promise of some kind that I half-believed in, in spite of myself, a possible validation” (173). Lorde knows that it cannot change her life, which means that she is aware of the danger of romanticising Mexico. As Eudora, one of her lovers whom she meets in Mexico, tells her, “Chica, you can’t run away to this country, or it will never let you go. It’s too beautiful” (170). Still, as Lorde acknowledges, living in Mexico “put me actively into a context that felt like progress, and seemed part and parcel of the waking that I called Mexico. It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible” (173).

If Lorde’s body is marked through violence, it also marks and becomes marked through desire. Brooks writes that “the body or a part of the body becomes a place for the inscription of messages pre-eminently through scenarios of desire, which endow [it] with an erotic history and thus with narrative possibilities” (47). So far we have mainly encountered scenarios of violence, both literal and discursive (from the narrator’s cut tongue to her exclusion from American democratic ideals), which proliferate after Audre leaves her parents’ home to make it alone, culminating in the amputation of her body told in The Cancer Journals. At this point, I want to turn to those moments that play a determining part in the shaping of Lorde’s sexual identity.

Audre’s first attempt to imprint or write upon a desired body takes place when she is four years old. It is an erotically charged scene which tells of a brief encounter she has with a little girl, Toni. Audre longs for someone close in age that she would not have to be afraid of, unlike her mother, and for someone to share secrets with, just as Esperanza does in the vignette entitled “Boys and Girls”. Lorde tells us that she grew up feeling “like an only planet isolated in a hostile firmament” and that she used to fashion little figures out of clay (35). Like Goethe’s young Wilhelm, who speaks of his puppets as potentially coming to life, Audre loves the “live” colour that “the rich, dark brown vanilla”, which she uses to make her figures more “real”, brings to “the pasty-white clay” (36). In this scene she is portrayed creating from earth, giving life out of clay, both re-enacting “a cosmogonic myth” (Raynaud 240) and becoming acquainted with her own skin colour.
She confesses her wish that the figures were real: “No matter how hard I prayed or schemed, the figures would never come alive. They never turned around in the cupped palm of my hand to smile up at me and say ‘Hi’” (36). This narration, coupled with Audre’s encounter with a little girl told immediately after, could be an alternative version of the story of Pygmalion and Galatea in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, which according to Brooks emblematises “the interplay of eros and artistic creation” (22). Audre’s prayers come true when she meets the evanescent girl “with the honey-brown skin”: “My lifelong dream of a doll-baby come to life had in fact come true” (37). Pygmalion, who had created the statue of Galatea after having been disappointed with women, was praying to Venus to give him “one like the ivory maid” as his wife. Unlike Pygmalion who in the end gets the ivory maid after the statue becomes flesh, Audre has a momentary encounter with a real person whose fleshiness she doubts in a reversal of Pygmalion’s surprise to find himself touching a human body when he was expecting a statue. In both cases, however, it is the touching which makes the other’s body come into existence.

Brooks lingers on the importance of the “image of [Pygmalion’s] fingers making an imprint on the yielding surface of [the statue’s] breast” (23). In our case, we have an alternative or “lesbian” version of this encounter. Lorde notes that on hearing that the girl’s name is Toni, the image comes out as “boy” (38) but what is in front of her is “most certainly a girl, and I wanted her for my very own—my very own what, I did not know—but for my very own self” (38). Sarah E. Chinn describes Audre’s touching of the little girl as an “erotically charged foreplay” which almost gives way to the main event (188): “I wanted to take off her coat and see what she had on underneath it. I wanted to take off all her clothes, and touch her little brown body, and make sure she was real” (40). This is phrased in such a way that foregrounds the curiosity to know, which starts from the body. Audre resorts to touch in order to confirm what she sees. In Chinn’s words, “Touch is the guarantor of the real” (188). This, as I will show, becomes further stressed in The Cancer Journals where Lorde, unable to distinguish a false or prosthetic breast from a real one, turns once more to the clarity afforded by touching. Other sensations also add to the eroticism of the scene. Toni places a candy

---

11 In her correspondence with Mary Daly in Sister Outsider, Lorde objected to her use of goddess images from only the white, Eastern European, Judaeo-Christian traditions. The comparison I establish between the incident narrated in Zami and the myth of Galatea and Pygmalion is not supposed to assimilate the first under the better-known one, but on the contrary add it to such a mythology of erotic recreation.
into Audre’s mouth: “I closed [my mouth] around the candy and sucked feeling the peppermint juice run down my throat, burning and sweet almost to the point of harshness. For years and years afterwards, I always thought of peppermint lifesavers as the candy in Toni’s muff” (39). Lorde remains mesmerised by the girl: “Was her bottom going to be real and warm or turn out to be hard rubber, molded into a little crease like the ultimately disappointing Coca-Cola doll?” (40) The moment of certainty is deferred as her mother catches her “in the middle of an embarrassing and terrible act” (40).

The mother of course, as in Kincaid’s work, never ceases to be the first object of desire for Audre. As Lorde writes before describing the above encounter with Toni, “When I was around the age of four or five, I would have given anything I had in the world except my mother, in order to have had a friend or a little sister” (34). Despite her difficult relationship with her mother, whom she describes as wishing to turn her into “some pain-resistant replica of herself” (101), Lorde never relinquishes this figure. The mother is a precursor to her lesbian identity, just as the unnamed aunt in the first chapter of The Woman Warrior is described as the narrator’s “foreunner” (15). Lorde seeks to place her mother in a West Indian line of lesbian women: “I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma” (15). Lorde also “queers” the Carriacou tradition of women “working together as friends and lovers” through adopting the name Zami, a point to which I will return. In this way, she blends her Caribbean heritage with her lesbianism just as Kingston’s protagonist mediates between different cultures and allegiances through translation.

One of the mother’s metonyms in the novel, one which both eroticises the mother-daughter relationship and locates it within a West Indian background, is the “mother’s mortar”: “It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly” (71). The resilience of the mortar matches Audre’s vision of her mother as “a powerful woman” (15), connecting the two in her mind: “I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, ... The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object always made me feel secure and somehow full” (71-2). When Audre menstruates for the first time when she is fifteen, the process of pounding West Indian spice with the mother’s mortar is elaborately described. Lorde is presented engaging with Caribbean folk culture and its rituals. In a sensual scene which conveys
smells and tastes through “a child focaliser” (Otano 27), Lorde sexualises the Carriacou ritual of pounding spice, celebrating her “new, and special, and unfamiliar and suspect” body (77) and a woman-identified sexuality, as the fantasy of incest with the mother suggests:

The feeling of the pestle held between my curving fingers and the mortar's outside rounding like fruit into my palm as I steadied it against my body.

All these transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied. (74)

I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm shameful, but secretly utterly delicious.

Years afterwards when I was grown whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother … our touching and caressing each other's most secret places. (78)

Lorde takes all those elements which are considered abject, taboo or sources of shame, such as menstruation and incest with the mother, and with them constructs an intense scene of pleasure and power. I will return to this scene of Lorde's “kitchen erotics” (Watson 155), in particular the imagery of blood, when I look at her conception of pain and the importance of integrating death into life. Reclaiming the abject body as a site of empowerment is a project that Lorde continues in The Cancer Journals where the amputated body becomes a powerful means of cultural critique.

If we turn to Audre's encounters with her lesbian mentors, we can pick up elements that illustrate the determining force of the previous scenes. It is interesting that Zami does not provide sufficient context about the reasons or the circumstances that turn Lorde to lesbianism. What is elaborately dramatised and considered typical of earlier coming-out stories, in other words the frustrating process of “unlearning”, which is what allows a heroine to make her exit from patriarchy and discover an alternative community, is not given any space in Zami. Unlike, for instance, the best-selling novel Rubyfruit Jungle by Rita Mae Brown, but like Jeanette Winterson's Oranges are not the Only Fruit (at least in this respect), Lorde “is constructed as lesbian from the outset and is not

12 Palmer explores this motif in Elizabeth Riley's All That False Instruction (1975). Other motifs central to the lesbian novel of self-discovery, according to Palmer, are those of rebirth, awakening and the journey (41).
socialized into heterosexuality” (Griffin 68). A heterosexual relationship, which leads to an abortion, is mentioned until suddenly Audre announces: “That summer I decided that I was definitely going to have an affair with a woman—in just those words” (119). There is no sense of guilt, which is an expected stage the protagonist goes through after “coming out”, and Lorde expresses paradoxically through her confusion what having an affair with a woman means: “I had no idea, or even what I meant by an affair. But I knew I meant more than cuddling under the covers and kissing in Marie's bed” (119); a comment that I think both refers to a serious sexual relationship as opposed to “playing gay-girl” (201) as well as to a serious commitment with another woman that escapes the merely sexual.

Of her very first sexual encounter with Ginger, Lorde writes: “I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for ... remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time” (139). There is, then, an implication that she is reliving her first erotic encounters with women such as her mother and the little girl Toni through her adult relationships. The brown doll she used to fashion as a girl reappears during the final encounter told in the book with Kitty/Afrekete and so is the movement of the mortar. Audre uses the juice of avocado to mould Afrekete’s body: “Out between her legs stood a little jointed brown doll, her smooth naked body washed by the bubbles rising up from the air unit located behind her” (248); “The tidal motions of your strong body mashed ripe banana into a beige cream” (249). Scenarios of bodily marking and mythical recreation proliferate in the erotic scenes and intimate moments narrated in Zami: “Little hairs under her navel lay down before my advancing tongue like the beckoned pages of a well-touched book” (248). The moment that stays deferred in the scene with Toni, in other words the unveiling of the body, becomes stressed in further encounters. With Muriel, who has had a mastectomy, the scene of Audre undressing her lover’s scarred body becomes even more significant in that it exposes to sight what Lorde also proceeds to expose in The Cancer Journals: “Delight. Anticipation.... I unbuttoned [Eudora’s] shirt ... In the circle of lamplight I looked from her round firm breast with its rosy nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale

---

13 I am aware that theories of initiation of sexual desire (heterosexual or lesbian), which look at the impact of early childhood experiences, may be problematic, but one cannot help noticing that earlier sexually charged scenes are replayed in Zami.
keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder and arm down across her ribs” (167).

Audre’s secret wish that “she could tuck [Toni] up in the folds of my pillow, pet her during the night when everybody was asleep”, making sure that “she didn’t get squeezed when my mother folded up my bed” (38), gradually gives way to a mature lesbian identity. The encounters with the women are not unidirectional. Lorde writes in a poem entitled “Recreation”: “My body writes into your flesh the poem you make of me. I made you and take you made into me” (296). Similarly, in Zami we read: “Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognise her” (255). Lorde’s lovers shape her and are in turned shaped by her. As Jennifer Gillan puts it, “In the spaces between homes and between women she discovers possibilities for change and growth” (210). The words Lorde uses to suggest these possibilities are very similar and directly relevant to the coming-of-age motif of the novel. When she tells Eudora that she wants them to make love, the words give life, as if “some half-known self come of age” (167). When Eudora breaks up with her, Audre feels transformed: “in that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths” (175). With Muriel, she recognises that “she opened me to a world of possibilities that felt like a legacy left me by Eudora’s sad funny eyes and patient laugh…. Muriel and I were making the lessons become real together” (209). Finally, Kitty/Afrekete teaches her “roots, new definitions of our women’s bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before” (250). As she closes the novel, “I never saw Afrekete again, [as with Toni], but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo” (253).

AnaLouise Keating reads Audre’s encounters with the women as illustrating “a process of interactional identity formation where self-change occurs only in the context of the others” (Women Reading 159). As she explains, naming in the text has a “performative” function: the assumptions that Audre’s lovers have of her create her accordingly. One telling example is Audre’s first attempt to participate in a lesbian relationship with Ginger. Ginger, who is not from New York, sees Audre as “a slick kitty from the city” (131), and expects her to be an experienced lover: “What was it that Ginger had discovered or invented in her own mind about me that I would now have to
pretend to fulfil?” (135). Afraid to “lose some face I never had” (137), Audre assumes the role of the experienced lover attributed to her by Ginger and overcomes her initial state of fear. Although Keating suggests that it is the words that have this performative effect, the scenes with the women also foreground the transformative power of touching. Lorde, as we will see, posits the erotic as the root of all human creative power. In Zami, after her first encounter with Ginger, Lorde wonders, “Had some beautiful and mythic creature created by my own need suddenly taken the place of my jovial and matter-of-fact buddy? (140). Or, to give another example, when she is with Eudora she writes: “The way my body came to life in the curve of her arms, her tender mouth, her sure body-gentle, persistent, complete” (169). Eudora’s scarred body becomes in this scene “the mark of the Amazon” (169). Sometimes, the effect is disappointing, but, still, the idea of creation and recreation, which recalls the incident of giving life to clay or of exploring Toni’s body, is evoked: “[Muriel] was not my creation…. Muriel looked like a buttery angel, fallen from grace, become all too human” (239).

The mythic recreation of these women does not, however, undercut their reality. Lorde does not idealise them but juxtaposes descriptions that have mythic overtones with ordinary ones, such as when she describes Ginger as having “pads of firm fat upon her thighs and round dimpled knees” (136). Moreover, Zami follows a double movement quite similar to that which I have described in The House on Mango Street. Lorde’s text is a biomythography so everyday life and myth become blurred, just as in “A Burst of Light” Lorde describes her days as a “combination of the mundane and the apocalyptic” (333). As in Cisneros’s text, which plays with the binary house/House that denotes a distinction between the contingent and the timeless ideal or between “synchrony and diachrony” (to use Sanborn’s terms), Lorde’s lovers are like her last one: Kitty/Afrekete. Kitty is an ordinary girl Lorde meets at a party in the last chapter of Zami, but Afrekete is a goddess from Dahomean mythology and an important trickster figure. Lorde describes Kitty in an italicised passage as a goddess (“Your brownness shone like a light through a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked from your skin”), but the typography of the paragraph suddenly changes, going back to ordinary font (251). We are no longer in the dream as Lorde continues with the

---

14 For the ways in which African myths inform Lorde’s work, see Keating’s Women Reading, Provost, and Ball.
15 Italics are not used consistently in Lorde’s work. See Raymond for some of the functions of the formal experiments in Zami.
“prosaic” information that Kitty and she had “to get up to gather the pits and fruit skins ... because if we left them near the bed for any length of time, they would call out the hordes of cockroaches that always waited on the sidelines within the walls of Harlem tenements” (251). In an earlier scene, similarly in italics, we read about Afrekete’s magical fruit, but, once more, the image of the goddess turns into Kitty who “bought the fruits in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s or in the Puerto Rican bodegas within the bustling market over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the Central Railroad structures” (249). Lorde takes us to immense heights but always returns us back to the ground, conjuring with her web of references, both spatial and temporal, a specific historical and cultural moment or site. The author does not advocate lesbian separatism or promote withdrawal from social or political reality and its responsibilities; Audre’s ecstatic moments with her lovers never consume the self entirely, just as in The Cancer Journals and in “A Burst of Light”, as we will see, the menacing quality of death does not make Lorde relinquish hope for a better earthly existence in favour of a heavenly unknown one. Female (and lesbian) Bildung is not “stuck in the bedroom” (qtd. in DuPlessis, Writing 4), nor is its aim to achieve a rare spiritual purity, an escape from the body through a gesture of sublimation that elevates by disembodying.16

The return to the ground, which the previous scenes enact, does not of course preclude change. Lorde descends from the roof altered, just as Esperanza in The House on Mango Street leaves in order to return all the more ready to help her community. Perhaps the scene which illustrates more effectively this double movement is the one on the last page of the novel. This movement can be compared to the juxtaposition between vertical and horizontal movement, which is a pattern I have adapted from Wong in my second chapter. Lorde is with Kitty on the roof and the text once more reverts to italics: “Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power” (252). In the next paragraph we witness yet another typographical shift. The two lovers, we find out, do not escape together, closing the novel with an idyllic union, which is a conventional ending of earlier coming-out stories, but instead come down from the roof:

16 DuPlessis cites Nancy Miller’s comment that the old plot of marriage in the female Bildungsroman is not challenged and that female Bildung is still “tied to the erotic and the familiar” (Writing 4). The plots that DuPlessis juxtaposes are either marriage or a retreat to spirituality which in most cases culminates in illness and death (see also first chapter, p. 20). These roles are distributed accordingly to the female figures in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister.
It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches of Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous beautiful sea. It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve’s Moon ... (253)

Lorde’s movement toward transcendence is mediated by another movement that brings her back to Harlem, just as Esperanza in The House on Mango Street is brought back to the ordinary space of the barrio. To recall a point made by Wong in relation to the vertical and the horizontal, “The horizontal plane is not only the locus of coercion and stagnation, needfulness and arrested development; it is also the locus of human habitation, attachment, reciprocity” (From Necessity 158). In Lorde’s case, the two women return to a place which may not be ready to accept them yet, but the tone of the passage makes a promise and is optimistic: “It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve’s Moon, but the mothers and fathers smiled at us in greeting as we strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand” (253, my emphasis).

Against Uniformity: Transgressive Spellings of the Body
Alexander succinctly summarises Lorde’s project: “Lorde is preoccupied with things bodily: that which is performed upon the body versus what the body performs and asserts” (697). This gives flesh and blood to the familiar dialectic between individuality and the demands of socialisation dramatised in the Bildungsroman. Lorde puts forward the asymmetrical and excessive body. There are several scenes in Zami where she juxtaposes her own conception of right against a public one that tries to secure conformity and assimilation. This is an important trope in black women’s autobiography.

The protagonist’s first rebellious acts take place through writing. Just as Lorde chooses to capitalise Harlem and spell America with lowercase letters in Zami, Audre refuses to write in straight lines at school: “I had never been too good at keeping between straight lines no matter what their width” (25, my emphasis). This comment alludes through a subtle pun to her choice of lesbianism later in life. She also explains that as a child she did not like “the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly” (24). The only reason she remembers to put on the Y, which for her destroys the “evenness of AUDRELORDE”, was because her mother insisted: “No deviation was allowed
from her interpretations of correct” (24). On the basis of this description, we can agree with Alexander who interprets the "ji" "as a prosthetic limb or breast" that Lorde declines in an act of disobedience against the first authoritarian figure, the mother (705). This rebellious act inaugurates her later celebration of asymmetry through the refusal to wear a prosthesis. Alexander connects the two acts in noting that Lorde has to "articulate her own grammar of physical significance" (701). Although in both cases she is punished for not abiding by the established norm, Lorde is gradually asserting her right to claim her body and identity. In the above scene she is constructing "a new spelling of her name", a gesture she also repeats towards the end of her biomythography through spelling her name once more, this time collectively, by adopting the name "Zami": "A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (255).

Watson writes that "Lorde's adolescence is narrated as a series of transgressive liminal moments that defy her mother's way of negotiating the world by honouring its unspeakables" (155). Lorde's effort to break the silence recalls the American-born generation's struggle to "name the unspeakable", to exorcise the silence of the first Chinese immigrants in The Woman Warrior. In Zami, in addition to the above scene of spelling her name differently, as already mentioned, Lorde tries to acquire words for racism, which remains an unspeakable reality at home. She also rewrites her mother's euphemisms of the body, those "well-coded phrases" that mask "the sensual content of life" (32).

Another instance that demonstrates Audre's subversive practices is the ritual of pounding spice with the mother's mortar, which I have already briefly described. Lorde dwells on the new pattern of movement she discovers while pounding the spice: "The downward thrust of the wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly and then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat. Back and forth, round, up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down" (78). While Audre takes pleasure in this innovation, her mother reprimands her for "playing with the food" and instructs the proper way of doing the job: "Now you do, so!" she brought the pestle down inside the bowl of the mortar with dispatch, crushing the last of the garlic....

17 For this ritual of naming Lorde draws on West African systems of naming (See Hall, Conversations with Lorde 149). "Zami" means "the friends" (from "les amies") in patois, and Lorde uses it to articulate "a submerged conceptual and physical reality of Caribbean life" (Davies 117). See also Chinn for the echoes of "disability activism" she sees in Lorde's collective naming (195).
Thump, thump went the pestle, *purposefully*, up and down, in the old familiar way" (79-80 my emphasis). The scene can be read as one that prepares the way for socialisation into a procreative sexuality (the compulsory heterosexual) rather than a "recreational/recreational", or lesbian in this case, to use Sanborn's distinction mentioned in my second chapter. As Lorde observes, "[I]n my mother's kitchen there was only one right way to do anything" (80). Finally, while working as a secretary copying letters for a woman who takes advantage of the power she has, Audre, in ways which remind and extend Bartleby the Scrivener's passive resistance in Melville's story, types "snatches of poems or nonsense phrases into the middle of straight formal sentences" (189).

These incidents conjure a kernel of individuality that resides in the body and that struggles against the homogenising effects of a normative culture. Lorde not only resists agents of oppression like her mother and her school, but also communities that she herself chooses to join; communities which, however much they empower her, exert on her their own pressures. Already from her first experience in the group she forms while still in High School, "The Branded", her sisterhood of adolescent rebels, she is aware of how "we never talked about our differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the others" (81), by which she refers to her visibly black body. In the same way that she tries to reverse her mother's silence as an adolescent, Lorde refuses to honour the unspeakable. The "sacred bond of gayness" is never sufficient enough for Audre, since there is always something, which, when she tries to name, gives her the feeling that she has "breeched" that bond (181). "We're all niggers", Muriel, who is white, used to say, suggesting that lesbians were equal outsiders to "niggers" (203). Lorde, however, knows that this is not true: "The ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false" (203). As a lesbian woman, Audre is treated differently by her straight black friends, and as black she is not treated the same by white lesbian women. In the Marxist circles she moves in while she is in Mexico, her lesbianism is problematic because it is considered to be "bourgeois and reactionary" (149), and in the gay bars of New York the bouncer always asks her for her "ID to prove I was twenty-one" (180). But Lorde knows better: "We would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black since of course gay people weren't racists" (180).

The lesbian bars are complex sexual theatres which function on the basis of role-playing (butch/femme) and a strict system of recognition which uses clothes as a means
of “broadcasting one’s sexual role” (241). Although the bars cross class boundaries and proprieties, they are marred by rigid rules, and the confusion which surrounds them recalls Kingston’s disorientation amidst the complicated cultural systems of the first immigrants: “If you asked the wrong woman to dance, you could get your nose broken in the alley down the street by her butch, … And you were never supposed to ask who was who, which is why there was such heavy emphasis upon correct garb” (Zami 221).

Lorde finds the bars a welcoming “ritual of togetherness” (206), but is at the same time critical of the ways they reproduce the problematic dichotomies of the world outside: “Role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes towards women which we loathed in straight society” (221). As she clarifies her objection to this practice, “It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to ‘the life’ in the first place…. But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/subordination, rejected what they called our confused life style, and they were in the majority” (221).

Role-playing is no longer the game it was for her and Gennie when, being teenagers, they would put on costumes to impersonate a myriad of identities: from “Bandits, Gypsies, Foreigners of all degree to Witches, Whores and Mexican Princesses” (88). She finds herself both unwilling and unable to fit in the rigid performing of the gay bars. As she confesses in the prologue to Zami, “I have always wanted to be both man and woman” (7). Questions of race play a crucial part in disseminating the right roles in the bars: “By white america’s racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing femme had very little chance in the Bag” (224). The stereotype of the non-feminine black woman, which Linda Brent fights by appealing to the sympathies of her white audience in Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, remains here unchallenged, even when the issue is raised within lesbian circles. Lorde notes that she “is not cute or passive enough to be femme and not mean or tough enough to be butch”, and adds that “non-conventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community” (224). Socialisation in the Bildungsroman operates, of course, within a heterosexual paradigm which is structured on the binary male/female. More fluid states of being are tolerated up to a certain extent, but then have to be either integrated or abjected. And the gay bars, which for Lorde “reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it” (220), were not excluded from this practice, however different their version of the “compulsory”.

Critics have looked at the function of androgyny in the prototype of the genre, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. The amazon-like women and the actresses who appear wearing
male attire open up possibilities beyond the binary male/female in the text, just as the gay bars in Zami are expected to, but in the end such possibilities become domesticated by the Tower, an institution that has secretly manipulated Wilhelm’s education. Because the idea of androgyny can only be accepted as a metaphor rather than a bodily reality, as Catriona McLeod argues, the women in Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship are either refashioned into feminine, marriageable material or are killed into art. What remains of them is “garments without occupants, disembodied voices, vanishing bodies” (McLeod 424). Lorde’s version of androgyny in the prologue of Zami, where she writes “I have always wanted to be both man and woman”, is articulated in highly corporeal language: “I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving” (7). The kind of subjectivity she is portraying is fluid and not contained within binaries of passive and active, female and male: “I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven” (7). Her description is irreducibly sexual: “I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasise the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way” (7). As much as the bars oppose this “confused” style of living, Lorde claims her right not to submit to rigid formulas of behaviour and life.

Throughout Zami Lorde refuses to relinquish any aspect of her identity, recognising that there is no privileged space or discourse. As she writes, “The question of acceptance had a different weight” for her (181). The following passage with its incantatory tone, becomes a hymn to difference:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.

(226)

Lorde gestures here towards what Adrienne Rich has called “a politics of location” or what is also known as “coalition-in-difference” (De Hernandez 256). The above passage is indicative of other moments in Zami where Lorde reworks and anticipates ideas from theoretical discourses, concepts from lesbian feminist theory, “popularising them in fictional form” (Palmer 60). This is a characteristic which, according to Palmer, reveals

---

18 For the representation of the female figures in Goethe’s Bildungsroman, see Kowalik, Heitner and Fry.
the political commitment of lesbian fiction (60). For instance, Lorde notes on one occasion, “We talked endlessly about how best to create that mutual support which twenty years later was being discussed in the women’s movement as a brand-new concept” (179). This technique of incorporating theoretical discussion gives the text the self-reflexivity it needs so that it can challenge idealised conceptions of unity and rigid coming-out formulas, without, however, becoming a theoretical essay or a political manifesto.19 Although Lorde partly relies on the stock of images and characters drawn from the lesbian Bildungsroman and the coming-out story, this is one of the moments where she deconstructs some of its static formulas and assumptions. This self-consciousness could be seen as continuous with the Bildungsroman’s generic impurity, its liberty, according to Fritz Martini, to include philosophical and other kinds of reflection so as to fulfil its educative function (24).

Given Lorde’s permutations of self and the proliferation of homes (Harlem, Stamford, Mexico) in Zami, it is obvious that individual development becomes for her dispersed across a variety of directions. More importantly, the imagery of the piece she uses when she refers to “the journeywoman pieces of herself”, instead of “cracking the self into self-pitying pieces” (Gardiner 115), revises the traditional Bildungsroman’s emphasis on a unitary self, constructing a more fluid identity. Lorde writes, “At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing” (226). Like Cisneros, Lorde’s journey starts with a dream for “the house of myself” (43): “The first time I ever slept anywhere else besides in my parents’ bedroom was a milestone in my journey to this house of myself” (43). As Lorde explains, while she lives with her parents, there is no acceptable reason for retreating into one’s room and closing the door: “A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence” (83). Even though she finds the privacy she seeks after she leaves home, Lorde’s journey ends with what she calls “the house of difference”: “It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference” (226).

19 Setting out to write fiction was a challenge for Lorde considering that she works mainly in a poetic medium that does not favour linearity. As she has explained in an interview, poetry and prose make different demands upon writer and reader. Poetry has to make the reader feel whereas prose works more with “the left mind”; it has to engender thought and make the reader understand (qtd. in Hall, Conversations with Lorde 168-9). See also an interview with Adrienne Rich.
Such an awareness and preoccupation with difference starts from the first attempt to enter a lesbian relationship, in other words from the couple. As already mentioned, Lorde’s depiction of her dyadic relationships with women is not idealised. There are scenarios of bitterness, betrayal and control. Assessing from a distance her relationship with Muriel, Lorde sees what her younger self would refuse to acknowledge. As she explains, Muriel and she had been “so starved for love for so long that [they] wanted to believe that love, once found, was all powerful” (210). Blending humour with seriousness, Lorde notes that the two lovers “wanted to believe that [love] could give word to my inchoate pain and rages; that it could enable Muriel to face the world and get a job; that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne” (210). After Muriel’s betrayal, Audre burns her hand with boiling water, and the ring Muriel gave her in “a ritual joining, a symbolic marriage” (201) “has to be cut away from the scalded swollen flesh” (233). Audre spends the day in embarrassment for what she has done, feeling self-conscious about how other people interpret it: “They covered up the scars and the discolored skin, and I no longer had to give explanations of what had happened” (236). As Lynda Hall writes of this scene, “The body becomes a social text open to be read by others, and the flesh visibly presents a narrative to be witnessed” (417). Lesbian love does not prove able “to heal all the deficiency sores of long standing” (Zami 210), but it certainly aids healing, as becomes evident in The Cancer Journals as well.

Lorde’s final relationship with Kitty/Afrekete is brief and remains inconclusive. The two women do not live happily ever after, which is the kind of cliché ending for which novels of lesbian development have been criticised. Zimmerman, in a chapter of her study on the lesbian couple, writes that lesbian lovers often appeared as either possessive or as “immature children escaping from real life and responsibility” (The Safe Sea 77). By separating Audre and Afrekete, the text also rejects the romance of sisterhood, or of lesbian nation as an ultimate haven and stable home, and insists that home is “far from uncomplicated and certainly not comfortable” (Gillan 217).

Thinking about what a possible relationship with Kitty/Afrekete would be like, Lorde wonders, “Would it be possible—was it ever possible—for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both” (246). Still, the encounter with Kitty/Afrekete starts in such a way that creates a good basis for “a new ethics of
interconnection” (Chinn 197). In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston brings together the mother’s story of the grandmother’s love for the theatre with her own version of the Ts’ai Yen story through the phrase “I like to think”. This “anti-declarative” style, as I have argued in the previous chapter, does not force the connection between the two stories but merely suggests it. In *Zami*, walking together with Kitty towards her house, Kitty turns to Audre and asks her “Can you spend the night?” (247). Lorde sees in this simple phrase “a batch of delicate assumptions built into my poet’s brain” (247). As she explains, “[I]t’s very syntax allowed for a reason of impossibility, rather than of choice—’I can’t,’ rather than ‘I won’t’” (247). Even the phrase ‘spending the night’, as Lorde adds, “was less a euphemism for making love than it was an allowable space provided, in which one could move back or forth” (247).

**From the Personal to the Political: Cancer and Its Meanings**

The trajectory Lorde traces in *The Cancer Journals* is from “diagnosis [to] treatment, distress and accommodation” (Egan 218). The female body starts as whole, then a part needs to be amputated to enable the whole to live, but the body can be restored to some semblance of originary wholeness through prosthesis; or at least this is the myth that the American Cancer Society, “the loudest voice of the Cancer Establishment” (56) tries to sustain, a myth that resonates with the story of the Fall from Eden or with the cyclical pattern of the quest narrative, with which the *Bildungsroman* is associated. Lorde adamantly refuses a false breast: “Prosthesis offers the empty comfort of ‘Nobody will know the difference’. But it is that very difference which I wish to affirm, because I have lived it, and survived it, and wish to share that strength with other women” (48). Even though she looks “strange and uneven and peculiar” without a prosthesis (33), Lorde concludes, “[E]ither I would love my body one-breasted now, or remain forever alien to myself” (33).20

To learn to love herself after the operation, Lorde needs time to come to terms with “her new and changed landscape”, her single-breasted body (34). This is not an easy

---

20 Prosthesis is the everyday application of what Donna Haraway has described as the cyborg in her well-known manifesto. Haraway has been criticised for using only those cyborg aspects of women of colour, like Cherrie Moraga and Lorde, which serve her theory. According to Homans, Moraga (and I would add Lorde) “inhabit ambiguously both a cyborgian ideology and an older, more romantic one” (411). Homans mentions the “somatic nostalgias for the mother’s body” (411) as proof of this ambivalence, but one could also add Lorde’s reaction to her severed breast, which in *The Cancer Journals* she associates with “the real me” (5).
process. Cancer is interpreted as a betrayal by Lorde’s own body. It alienates her from it and splits her into myriad parts. Scarry writes that “the body tends to be brought forward ... when there is a crisis of substantiation” (127). In Lorde’s case, as Jeanne Perreault explains, “The body becomes the locus of tension about identity: ‘I have a body’ struggles with ‘I am a body’” (19). In other words, the body acquires its own identity outside the self. Lorde finds herself watching it from the position of a spectator. Trying to write after her surgery, she observes, “What seems impossible is made real/tangible by the physical form of my brown arm moving across the page; not that my arm cannot do it, but that something holds it away” (40). And while she is being treated for cancer of the liver, she writes “So here I am at the Lukas Klinik while my body decides if it will live or die (292, my emphasis).

In her study on the representation and discourses of physical disability in American culture and literature, Garland-Thomson argues that the disabled figure undermines the fantasy of American autonomy and self-reliance since it challenges “the power of a self-governing will” upon the body (45). The disabled figure is presented as having a body that has been “violated” by external forces and, thus, is incapable of maintaining stable boundaries. Indeed, Lorde writes after her surgery, “I have ceased being a person who is myself and become a thing” (26). Garland-Thomson clarifies why this loss of control is dangerous when she draws a parallel between “physical instability” and “political anarchy” (43). A disabled body is a source of contamination and appears “in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality” (Garland-Thomson 43).

Lorde’s sentence quoted above concludes in the following way: “[I have] become a thing upon a Guernsey cart to be delivered up to Moloch, a dark living sacrifice in the white place” (26). By presenting herself as a dark sacrifice, she construes America (the white place) as responsible, thus challenging punitive notions of illness that attribute the fault to the patient, a point to which I will return when I place Lorde’s thoughts next to Susan Sontag’s discussion of illness as metaphor.

Lorde criticises prosthesis as “a norm for post-mastectomy women” (50). In her view, in as much as it offers to resurrect as far as possible the bodily part which used to exist, prosthesis creates a frustrating desire “of wanting to go back, of not wanting to persever through this experience [of cancer and post-mastectomy] to whatever enlightenment might be at the core of it” (43). This “regressive tie to the past” (43), as
Lorde calls it, is buttressed by the Cancer Establishment’s concentration on cancer as a cosmetic problem which prevents women from developing other sources of coping with the disease.

Lorde’s reference to enlightenment here does not imply a wish to transcend the body’s needs once it is amputated; to see this amputation as redemptive or to invest it with transcendental meaning. Lorde insists on the material body even though it has betrayed her. When women choose prosthesis “not from desire, but in default” (51), they are not given the time they need to “come to terms with the changed plans of their own bodies” (45). Lorde asks after her surgery, “What posture do I take, literally, with my physical self?” (35). Her stance towards disease starts from observing the needs of her altered body. On numerous occasions she writes about the changes she has to make to her life and work so that her now more vulnerable body can cope; changes ranging from nutritional vigilance, relaxation exercises, interventions in her timetable of work: “no more long-term loans, extended payments, twenty-years plans” (327). Although, as argued, physical disability threatens the ideal of autonomy and self-government, Lorde does not oppose the need for such an ideal to exist, but merely the ways it is used to enforce normalcy. Her attention focuses on the disabled figure, in particular women who suffer from cancer. As she writes, “Every woman has a militant responsibility to involve herself actively with her own health” (58).

Lorde believes that silence and rage metabolise into disease. We have seen for instance how, in the ice cream scene in Zami, anger at not being recognised as a human being becomes incorporated and emerges as a physical symptom. In a similar way, in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, the part of The Cancer Journals which was originally given as a speech, Lorde pleads with her audience to stop “swallowing” in silence their everyday “tyrannies” by which they “sicken and die” (13). Despite this, she refuses to see herself as a passive victim who could have avoided disease if she had been a happier person. On reading a letter from a doctor in a medical magazine “which said that no truly happy person ever gets cancer”, Lorde wonders for a moment whether she had “really been guilty of the crime of not being happy in this best of all possible infernos” (59). Her reflection on the guilt internalised by patients resonates with aspects of Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor. Sontag explores the “mystifications surrounding cancer” (98): the narratives, metaphors, and myths which have “contributed to the fictions about a specific cancer personality” (55). Though
psychological theories of illness start from a wish to assert the triumph of will power over disease, they end up stigmatising illness and “placing the blame on the ill: patients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they have deserved it” (Sontag 58).

Lorde shares aspects of Sontag’s critique of illness as metaphor: “This guilt trip which many cancer patients have been led into is an extension of the blame-the-victim syndrome. It does nothing to encourage the mobilization of our psychic defenses against the very real forms of death which surround us” (Cancer Journals 59). For a moment she hesitates: “Was I wrong to be working so hard against the oppressions afflicting women and Black people? Was I doing all this to merely avoid my first and greatest responsibility—to be happy?” (59-60) Happiness is supposed to be the destination of the Bildungsroman. In his introduction to his study, Moretti investigates the place of happiness as value in the European Bildungsroman and the kind of narrative rhetorics it generates, thus distinguishing between plots of “classification” and “transformation” in English and French versions of the genre respectively (7-8). Happiness is posited as the highest value, “but only to the detriment and eventual annulment of ‘freedom’” (8), in accordance with Moretti’s economy of exchange within which the Bildungsroman operates. Happiness becomes equated with immobility and “a repugnance to change” (8) in his paradigm. Moretti, for instance, places it against the values of mobility and constant transformation which, according to him, fascinate the French rather than the English novels. (The first strive for freedom and individuality in a never ceasing attempt to escape the closure of happiness). Lorde’s critique of happiness has nothing to do with principles of textual organisation and plot differences. Her “plots” and scenarios are not textual in nature, but still reveal, in their own way, how happiness, the so-called neutral and universal destination of Bildung, can become deadly. Her critique of the American ideal of happiness is worth quoting at length:

In this disastrous time when little girls are still being stitched shut between their legs, when victims of cancer are urged to court more cancer in order to be attractive to men, when 12 year old Black boys are shot down in the street at random by uniformed men who are cleared of any wrong-doing, when ancient and honorable citizens scavenge for food in garbage pails, and the growing answer to all this is media hype or surgical lobotomy; when daily gruesome murders of women from coast to coast no longer warrant mention in The N.Y. Times, when
grants to teach retarded children are cut in favor of more billion dollar airplanes, when 900 people commit mass suicide rather than face life in America, and we are told it is the job of the poor to stem inflation; what depraved monster could possibly be always happy?

The only really happy people I have ever met are those of us who work against these deaths with all our energy, recognizing the deep and fundamental unhappiness with which we are surrounded, at the same time as we fight to keep from being submerged by it. But if the achievement and maintenance of perfect happiness is the only secret of a physically healthy life in America, then it is a wonder that we are not all dying of a malignant society.... We are equally destroyed by false happiness and false breasts, and the passive acceptance of false values which corrupt our lives and distort our experience. (60)

Happiness becomes synonymous with complacency, callousness, self-interest and profitability in Lorde's description. Living in a world of material privilege which insulates us from the confrontation with mortality that other less privileged people have to face on an every day basis, makes the pursuit of happiness superficial and dangerous. The myth of health and well being which, in Lorde's view, America sustains by encouraging its people to protect themselves from painful feelings and to avoid examining the reality of their lives, implies blindness to the other and a ruthless individualism. Happiness remains tied to a feeling of "repugnance for change", as in Moretti's scheme, but clearly Lorde's extensive comment is firmly located in a critique of American culture and politics. Lorde asks, "What would it be like to be living in a place where the pursuit of definition [and I would add happiness] within this crucial part of our lives was not circumscribed and fractionalised by the economics of disease in America?" (308)

Lorde's "economics of disease" refers not only to the greed of a society like the Cancer Establishment but also to the idealisation of perfection in American culture and literature since Tocqueville and Franklin, and to the various social malignancies that such a fiction perpetuates. In The Body Silent Robert Murphy writes that disability is approached in America as a form of betrayal of the Puritan ideal of continuous improvement. As he puts it, "We [disabled people] are subverters of an American Ideal, just as the poor are betrayers of the American Dream" (116-7). Thus, in the scene in The Cancer Journals where Lorde goes for the first time to her doctor's office without wearing
a prosthesis and is confronted by a nurse who tells her that not wearing one “is bad for the morale of the Office” (46), the nurse’s words hide an anxiety about the loss of control and agency, which the American myth of autonomy and power tries, in vain, to eradicate. Similarly, the discourse of “happiness” that Lorde scorns is used to caution the Americans about what they could become (in other words, ill) if they were to betray their fundamental obligation to be happy, what Lorde associates with a “superficial” mentality of “looking on the bright side of things”; “an euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening or dangerous to the status quo” (59). Instead, as she notes at the beginning of The Cancer Journals, Lorde wishes to show “the rewards of self-conscious living” (3).

The extent to which individual mobility and agency are circumscribed by the practices of America, which shows that Bildung is situated and takes place in context, is also expressed in Zami through Lorde’s references to historical events of significance that become blended with the protagonist’s life-style choices and portable homes. Lorde builds upon a chronological coincidence to elaborate the homologous structures of power that obtain in the public and private spheres. She mentions, for instance, the Rosenbergs’ struggle and explains that for her “it became synonymous with being able to live in this country [America] at all” (149). She leaves for Mexico after they are electrocuted, and when she finds out that a law has been passed which “decides against separate education for Negroes” she wonders whether “there could possibly after all be some real and fruitful relationship between me and that malevolent force to the north of this place” as “the court decision in the paper in [her] hand feels like a private promise, some message of vindication particular to [her]” (172). On another occasion when she is having an affair with Muriel, a white woman, she contemplates leaving New York “homesteading somewhere in the west where a Black woman and a white woman could live together in peace” (202).

In “A Burst of Light”, Lorde is also tempted for a moment, as in The Cancer Journals, to give in to punitive notions of disease, which, according to Sontag, have a long history (59). In the latter’s words, “Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one” (Sontag 59). On being told that her breast cancer has metastasised, “a concert of voices from inside myself” (22) compete in Lorde’s head: “So what had I done wrong and what was I going to have to pay for it
and WHY ME?” (320).21 The discordance of the voices she hears is, however, somehow settled: “But finally a little voice inside me said sharply: ‘Now really is there any other way you would have preferred living the past six years that would have been more satisfying?’” (320). Lorde captures the play of conflicting views, which the scene here dramatises. Instead of surrendering to punitive or moralistic approaches to illness, she claims the more transgressive narratives for herself and also constructs her own.

Punitive narratives of illness and death have a striking similarity with plots of literature. This is not a surprise since both are constructions, stories we tell about them. DuPlessis briefly explores the associations of disease and death for female heroines in the traditional Bildungsroman, which sustain the punitive history of illness that Sontag addresses as a theme outside literature in her study. Remembering Lorde’s fear that she might be responsible for her cancer because she has not tried to be simply happy, one recalls the plot of death as closure in the female Bildungsroman. In DuPlessis’s words:

Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the “social script” or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually. Death is the result when energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality, … are expended outside the “couvert” of marriage or valid romance: through adultery (Mme. Bovary, Edna Pontellet), loss of virginity or even suspected “impurity” (Tess of the d’Urbevilles, Lily Bart), or generalized female passion (Maggie Tulliver, Monica Widdowson). (Writing 15)

Unlike Sontag, who wishes to apply the “against interpretation” strategy when it comes to illness (99), and who exposes the dangers of metaphoric thinking about illness and health, Lorde becomes empowered by investing cancer with her own counter meanings that inform the ways she chooses to live her life. Like Sontag, Lorde refuses to see cancer as a curse or a punishment, a disease that should be approached with disgust and shame. In “A Burst of Light” she dismisses “secrecy and stoicism”, which is how women have been “schooled” to fight pain and disease: “Surrounded by other women day by day, all of whom appear to have two breasts, it is very difficult sometimes to remember that I AM NOT ALONE” (48). Lorde’s basis of community formation starts from a recognition of each other’s somatic commonality. On many occasions in Zami, Lorde laments the isolation of women, the ways in which they

21 See Robbins’s “Death Sentences: The Sense of an Ending? Living with Dying in Narratives of Terminal Illness”, Price-Henndl’s Inward Women (pp. 1-19), and Egan for theoretical approaches to autothanatographies and narratives of illness.
themselves contribute to their invisibility. In the case of this text, what remains hidden or masked is not cancer and mastectomy but lesbian identity, though the result is still the same: “I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street unacknowledged and unadmitted” (Zami 58).

Garland-Thomson notes that “unlike the ethnically grouped, but more like gays and lesbians, disabled people are sometimes fundamentally isolated from each other” (15). This is also true for those whose disabilities are not visible and who are pressured to try to pass as “able-bodied”. Prosthesis, for instance, is part of what Robert McRuer calls a system of “compulsory able-bodiedness” (91), which works in a similar way to Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality”. Lorde’s rewriting of the above scene to make it refer to both lesbian women and post-mastectomy ones, affirms Kafer’s point, but also complicates the discussion adding the factor of race. In a society where the heterosexual and able-bodied subject is the privileged norm, there is pressure to pass as both, even if you are neither of them, but black women are, in most cases, unable to pass as white: “Sometimes we’d pass Black women on Eight Street—the invisible but visible sisters—or in the Bag or at Laurel’s and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other’s eyes” (Zami 180). The paradoxical “invisible but visible” refers to their visibility as black women and to their invisibility as lesbians. Lorde further rewrites this scene: “[W]e seldom looked into each other’s Black eyes, lest we see our own aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness. Some of us died inside the gaps between the mirrors and those turned-away eyes” (Zami 226).

The demand for “a normal body”, on which the choice of prosthesis is based, pays no attention to women’s own perception of who they are. Lorde writes that “where normal means the right color, shape, size or number of breasts, a woman’s perception of her own body and her strengths that come from that perception are discouraged, trivialized and ignored” (51). Like Kingston, Lorde is affirming the fact that there are various sizes and shapes of being a woman. She asserts this against an establishment that wants to impose a single “right” that incorporates difference through a façade of sameness, just as the process of assimilation as Americanisation requests that one sheds the various aspects of their identity for the sake of unity or belonging. Both are processes of ensuring normality, whether they aim at disciplining the body or a person’s memory and language, as in many immigrant and ethnic narratives of Bildung. Lorde makes this connection evident when, talking about employment discrimination against
post-mastectomy women, she heavily criticises “prosthesis as a solution to employment discrimination” (52). To her, this is “like saying that the way to fight race prejudice is for Black people to pretend to be white” (52). Rather than assimilation, Lorde advocates the recognition of difference, which will make room for human variation and embrace vulnerability as normal.

Lorde affirms the right to define and claim her own body. As she asserts in The Cancer Journals, “I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable” (47). She uses body building/Bildung as “a technique of self-production”, in Elisabeth Grosz’s term (143), to fashion an empowering body, although, as I have shown, this new body is also a collective one, a “bridge and field of women” (Zami 255). Much like the extraordinary body that bodybuilders show off, Lorde parades her body not as a spectacle empty of any deeper meaning but as what Garland-Thomson calls a “politicized prodigy” (131). In Zami Lorde writes about her choice of an “Afro” hairstyle, which she calls “natural” while everyone around her calls it “crazy” (182), including her “Black sisters” who “collect money between themselves to buy [Audre] a hot comb and straightening iron” (181). What other people call “crazy”, Lorde infuses with value, taking pride in her choices. As she writes on another occasion in Zami: “I was ... full of myself, knowing I was fat and Black and very fine” (223). When she goes to her doctor’s office in a scene from The Cancer Journals already mentioned, her single-breasted body is made more prominent through a single earring “dangling from my right ear in the name of grand asymmetry” (46). Finally, she takes herself and the other women who design and wear their “own asymmetrical patterns and New Landscape jewelry” to be “in the vanguard of a new fashion” (52). Writing on Exceptionalism as the grand narrative of American writing, Madsen suggests that such a rhetoric can be adopted as “a counter-discourse” and as a strategy for “writing back” by ethnic writers like Native American and Chicanos. Lorde’s “exceptional body” seems, likewise, both to evoke this mythology and turn it against itself.

Unlike Sontag, Lorde resorts to some of the familiar imagery surrounding cancer, such as the imagery of warfare that the former finds disturbing for its cruel euphemism.22 Although Lorde has famously stated that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house”, she appropriates rhetorical and real power by revising

---

22 According to Sontag, military metaphors and metaphors of invasion construct diseases “as an alien ‘other’, as enemies in modern war, and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims” (97).
such images of warfare: “I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior” (13). This revisits the previous image of her as “a dark living sacrifice in the white place”. In both Zami and The Cancer Journals, Lorde blurs two important components of her identity, her lesbianism and her post-mastectomy status, and uses a topos in lesbian fiction and myth: the image of a woman-identified and single-breasted community, the Amazons. These legendary creatures are not only her models for a lesbian identity but also the precursors of her bodily problem: “How did the Amazons of Dahomey feel? They were only little girls” (25). A note explains that the Amazons have their right breasts cut off to make themselves more effective archers (25). Lorde recognises her affinity with them because, like the Amazons, she sees a purpose in her sacrifice: she has to remove her breast to allow the whole, the rest of the organism, to survive and fight for change in society. In Zami she initially invokes the Amazons for help to construct a lesbian identity: “There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sisters Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey” (176). In The Cancer Journals she returns to these figures in a similar attempt to find models of lesbian women with cancer: “Where were the dykes who had mastectomies? ... I wanted to share dyke-insight” (37). Choosing exposure of her “abnormal” body, Lorde constructs a modern version of Amazons as both army and protestors, which reminds us of Kingston’s translation of the swordswoman into a word warrior who reports rather than revenges injustices in The Woman Warrior. “What would happen if an army of one-breasted women descended upon Congress and demanded that the use of carcinogenic, fat stored hormones in beef-feed be outlawed?” (Cancer Journals 10). The freakish Amazons with their single breasts are turned from grotesque figures into politicised ones, their myth becoming updated or translated to serve a contemporary purpose.

In “A Burst of Light” she writes that cancer “at times takes on the face and shape of my most implacable enemies, those I fight and resist most fiercely” (334), such as racism, heterosexism, apartheid (321), and America’s imperial interventions into the affairs of other countries and peoples.23 As Sontag recognises on rereading Illness as Metaphor in the light of her later work on AIDS and its meanings, “Of course, one cannot think without metaphors. But that does not mean there aren’t some metaphors we might well abstain from or try to retire” (91). Lorde asserts that visualising the

process of cancer “inside my body in political images is not a quixotic dream” (334, emphasis in the original). Because cancer has “an anonymous face”, it is sometimes easier “to turn away from the particular experience into the sadness of loss” (334), and Lorde, who is eternally bound to “the particular”, refuses, in what seems contrary to Sontag’s view, to see cancer “as if it were just a disease” “without ‘meaning’” (Sontag 100). She needs to connect it with all the other aspects of her identity that have been similarly constructed as abnormal and ugly. Cancer is not a “private” issue, “nor a secret personal problem” but rather political (48); it is “another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph”(269), and thus provides Lorde “with important prototypes for doing battle in all other areas of [her] life” (321). This is why, whether she is talking about cancer, blackness or lesbianism, she is writing about how one can fight the despair born of fear, silence, anger and powerlessness in managing to survive: “Racism. Cancer. In both cases, to win the aggressor must conquer, but the resisters need only survive” (317). The fact that she writes in the introduction to The Cancer Journals that she does not “wish [her] anger and pain and fear about cancer to fossilise into yet another silence” (3, my emphasis) inserts her struggle with cancer into all the other struggles mentioned above.

“A Burst of Light” does something similar. Lorde writes, “It takes all of my selves, working together, to effectively focus attention and action against the holocaust progressing in South Africa and the South Bronx and Black Schools across this nation, not to speak of the streets” (308). The next sentence repeats the opening of the previous one but proceeds to locate illness inside her: “It takes all of my selves working together to fight this death inside me” (308). Here Lorde moves from settings of death all over the world to the death inside her. It is hard to pin down what the second sentence refers to: whether “inside” refers to her body and to cancer or whether it points to the ways she has incorporated the violence around her which has metabolised into cancer. As with her poetry, which keeps the reader suspended and challenges the pressure of sentence closure, one phrase here is able to mean differently depending on the words with which it makes contact, the words that precede and the words that follow (Avi-Ram 206).24 In this case, the sentence that completes the meaning of the two previous

---

24 See Avi-Ram on the *apo koinon* (in common) technique used by Lorde in her poetry. *Apo koinon* is a figure of speech in which “a single word or phrase is shared between two independent syntactic units” (Avi-Ram 191), recreating meaning. This technique agrees with Lorde’s vision of the erotic and with her
sentences—“Every one of these battles generates energies useful in the others” (308)—connects once more the personal and the political, the private and the public.

A Poetics of Death: Ars Moriendi as an Art of Living

Lorde states that the purpose in writing The Cancer Journals is “to sort out for myself who I was and was becoming”, but her writing is also available “so that anyone else in need or desire, can dip into it at will if necessary to find the ingredients with which to build a wider construct” (41). Lorde summarises her twin projects of learning and teaching in ways which once more embed a narrative of Bildung in her biomythography:

Growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in america [sic] requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die.... I carry tattooed upon my heart a list of names of women who did not survive, and there is always a space left for one more, my own. That is to remind me that even survival is only part of the task. The other part is teaching. I had been in training for a long time. (30, my emphasis)

In The Cancer Journals Lorde uses the lessons acquired in Zami. As she writes in the introduction of the first text, “The weave of [a woman’s] everyday existence is the training ground for how she handles crisis” (3). Her decision to write about her experience so “that the pain [was] not be wasted” (9) recalls Eudora’s advice in Zami to “[w]aste nothing, Chica, not even pain. Particularly not pain” (236, emphasis in the original). Similarly, from The Cancer Journals she distils lessons which she puts to use in “A Burst of Light”, having prepared herself to cope with a possible recurrence of her disease. The narrative overspill of the three texts exemplified in the constant rewritings of passages, as already illustrated, conveys Lorde’s efforts to come to terms with her amputated body and “integrate this crisis into useful strengths for change” (4). Just as Kincaid rewrites trauma in book after book, opening up new spaces of resistance and agency, Lorde constructs “a poetics of death” that becomes “an art of living”. Both Kincaid and Lorde salvage histories of trauma from the depth of silence, turning them into powerful

understanding of community and coalition since it allows two senses together to “meet/and not be/one” (Avi-Ram 207).

25 Eudora reappears in a dream in The Cancer Journals before Lorde’s surgery. The same happens with Gennie, one of the first close people to Lorde, who died, as we find out in Zami.

26 I have adapted the term “poetics of death” from Beatrice Marima Guenther who uses it to read the work of Balzac and Kleist. One of her chapters addresses Bildung and Mortality.
tools of cultural critique. In Lorde's case, the menacing quality and finality of death, although they cannot disappear, become vehicles of knowledge and empowerment.

Lorde describes the pain of separation from her breast “as sharp as the pain of separating from my mother” (17), a parallel which has resonance with the idea of physical weaning. Walter H. Sokel has described “narratives of weaning” or of “existential education” as a genre that bears relevance to the Bildungsroman. As in the texts Sokel discusses, where the goal is to move “from the space of angst ... toward open vistas” (341), Lorde’s words foreground the transformative potential of pain and loss: “Breast cancer, with its mortal awareness and the amputation which it entails, can still be a gateway, however cruelly won, into the tapping and expansion of my own power and knowing” (41). Lorde emphasises the idea of human responsibility and the need to abandon a comfortable existence. De Beauvoir’s words echo in her head: “It is in the recognition of the genuine conditions of our lives that we gain the strength to act and our motivation for change” (322). In Lorde’s case, imprisonment within inauthenticity and bad faith, to evoke the discourses of existential philosophy, seems, however, a less severe death sentence considering the reality of death in a malignant America which she graphically describes on numerous occasions. Her critique is also further contextualised in that it invokes discourses of race. In the following passage she specifically addresses black people: “For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America”, Lorde writes, reminding us of a similar image in The Woman Warrior where the protagonist learns that “sometimes dragon is one, sometimes many” (34), “we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive” (14). As she adds, “Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we still will be no less afraid” (14).

While change and growth acquire sinister overtones when thought within the context of narratives of terminal illness such as cancer, in that they conjure images of cells proliferating and the fear of metastasis or of an imminent death, Lorde manages to articulate them differently in The Cancer Journals and in “A Burst of Light”. She stresses the love of the women around her through this moment of radical change in her life: “I am on the cusp of change, and the curve is shifting fast. In the bleakest days I am kept afloat, maintained, empowered, by the positive energies of so many women who carry
the breath of my loving like firelight in their strong hair” (308-9). In all her references to change, she is not making an attempt to ignore pain, but rather looks for what she names in *Zami* as “a way through or beyond pain” (239): “One of the hardest things to accept is learning to live within uncertainty and neither deny it nor hide behind it” (“A Burst of Light” 333, emphasis in the original). Every word and phrase she uses stresses movement and transformation: “If I can remember to make the jump from impotence to action, then working uses the fear as it drains it off, and I find myself furiously empowered” (42); “To stretch as far as I can go and relish what is satisfying rather than what is sad. Building a strong and elegant pathway toward transition (335). Lorde distinguishes between “fear and anxiety”: she aligns the first with “semi-blindness” and adds that she can learn to work through this state; but the second “is an immobilising yield to things that go bump in the night, a surrender, to namelessness, formlessness, voicelessness and silence” (8). This distinction resonates with the difference between “bound motion” and immobility examined in the first chapter. Lorde seems to speak for a kind of bound motion when she writes, “As a living creature I am part of two kinds of forces—growth and decay, sprouting and withering, living and dying, and at any given moment of our lives, each one of us is actively located somewhere along a continuum between these two forces” (293).

“A Burst of Light” opens in the following way: “The year I became fifty felt like a great coming together for me. I was very proud of having made it for half a century, and in my own style. ‘Time for a change,’ I thought, ‘I wonder how I’m going to live the next half’” (269). The sentence immediately after that reads: “Two weeks before my fiftieth birthday, I was told by my doctor that I had liver cancer, metastasized from the breast cancer for which I had had a mastectomy six years before” (269). Given this twist of fate, is Lorde’s “time for a change” meant to be ironic? One recalls a number of scenes in *Zami* which raise a similar question. Contemplating the loss of her job and the difficulties of being away from home, Lorde writes, “Being out of work brought a lot of new and starkly instructive experiences. It meant pawning my typewriter, which gave me nightmares, and selling my blood, which gave me chills” (105). On another occasion she reflects on her education with the following words: “How meagre the sustenance was I gained from the four years I spent in high school; yet how important that sustenance was to my survival” (82). The imagery gets even more concrete making sustenance literal: “Remembering that time is like watching old pictures of myself in a prison camp
picking edible scraps out of the garbage heap, and knowing that without that garbage I might have starved to death” (82). The theme of incorporation is introduced again when while working at a factory, which hires unskilled people and exposes them to radiation, Audre chews and spits out the X-ray crystals she has to count “with her strong teeth” flushing “the little shards of rock down the commode” in order to make more money by tricking her employers (146). Alexander writes about this incident, which must have contributed to Lorde’s subsequent illness, that the chewed crystals, like the plastic that Kingston’s protagonist yearns for, “are nonfood but nonetheless ‘metabolised’” (709). Alexander uses the word ‘metabolise’ to suggest that Lorde’s protagonist takes in both good and bad and that both can shape the self.27 Finally, choosing to undergo a dangerous abortion, Lorde phrases the battle within herself in terms which recall the existential narrative of education: “Even more than my leaving home, this action [abortion]… was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That’s what living was all about. I clung to that and tried to feel only proud” (111).

Lorde’s reaction to pain and power has similarities with the work of other women of colour. Estella Lauter cites a poem by black poet Ntozake Shange where she writes that “we need a god who bleeds now/whose wounds are not the end of anything”, closing the poem with the verse “not wounded I am bleeding to life” (411). The image recalls the closure of Zami, which portrays Lorde “coming out blackened and whole” (5), or her paradoxical assertion in The Cancer Journals that “in the process of losing a breast I had become a more whole person” (43). The qualifier “blackened” can be interpreted both as something positive and negative. Blackened could be the effect of burning, which is why the previous phrase reads “to the others who helped, pushing me into the merciless sun” (Zami 5), or it could be proof of a powerful, “dark” voice.28 In both cases, the asymmetrical and the wounded body reassess life and wholeness. Lauter reads Shange’s poem as “revaluing the physical vulnerability of women” (412). When the poetic voice presents herself as “bleeding to life”, she moves beyond pain, showing how what is considered woundedness can also be seen as natural, a source of knowledge.

---

27 Poetry allows her, as Lorde explains, to “metabolise” what happens in the world and to “present it out” again (qtd. in Hall, Conversations with Lorde 146).
28 In a poem Lorde writes of her mother trying “to beat me whiter every day/and even now the color of her bleached ambition/still forks throughout my words” (qtd. in Keating, Women Reading 151). Lorde juxtaposes a truly black body to her mother’s “bleached” one. In Zami we find out that the mother’s skin is lighter and this is why she can pass as white.
A Burst of Light’ Lorde suggests something similar when she reclaims “vulnerability as armor” (328).

Claudine Raynoud points to a “thematics of blood” which runs through Zami, confirming Lorde’s preoccupation with the material body (227). Besides the method of abortion Lorde resorts to, inserting “a long slender catheter through [the] cervix into [the] uterus” which “like a cruel benefactor” promises to “wash away my worries in blood” (110), blood appears as “the result of natural processes coming to fruition” (Lauter 412) when in Zami Lorde describes the onset of her menstruation in the scene with the pounding of the spice, already mentioned. There, body Bildung acquires a flesh and blood dimension. As Lorde pounds the spice “a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach” (78). This connection is described as an erogenous zone, an “invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed” (78). As Lorde continues, “That thread ran over my ribs and along my spine … into a basin that was posed between my hips … and within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information” (78). Menstruation in this scene does not appear as a disability, which is how Freud and late nineteenth-century physicians defined it, constructing women as castrated and suffering from an “eternal wound”. On the contrary, the blood, which is often associated with impurity and pain, becomes a source of knowledge and the body is constructed as a site that engenders that knowledge.

The above scenes could be also approached in the light of Susan Stanford Friedman’s point that Lorde reclaims “each of [her] liabilities within the system of multiple oppression” “as a creative source of strength”. As she adds, “[Zami] transforms multiple jeopardies into multiple strengths” (Friedman, “Beyond Gynocriticism” 17). It would be a mistake to approach this form of learning through pain as merely an inverted or truncated version of Bildung, one that is invested in the romantic myth of the margin. Palmer suggests that lesbian novels of development create such inverted images in that their protagonists “unlearn” rather than learn “a series of positive lessons” (41-2). Lorde’s work, however, claims marginality not as “a site of deprivation” but as “a site of resistance” (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 149). Lorde does not romanticise her experience but, nonetheless, uses it as a tool of empowerment since she cannot sacrifice
the political space from which she is writing. Like Kincaid’s narrator, her tools are her “memory”, her “anger”, and her “despair”. Perhaps what separates these two heroines is that Lorde’s fictional counterpart also turns to the support of a community of women, a thing that the more individualist Lucy finds hard to do.

Lorde’s version of “the art of living” is then “not a turning away from pain, error but seeing these things a part of living and learning from them” (qtd. in Hall, Conversations with Lorde 96). For her, however, this characteristic is “particularly African” and one which “is transposed into the best of African-American literature” (Conversations with Lorde 96-97). In “A Burst of Light” she is more explicit about this idea. Reflecting on various methods of dealing with cancer, she writes, “I thought of the African way of perceiving life as experience to be lived rather than problem to be solved” (321). Lorde’s determination to find a way “to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it” (7), conjures a different form of agency, which, when seen in the context of the Bildungsroman, challenges the myths of individualism, heroic mastery and disembodied transcendence that give the illusion of total self-determination or even immortality in the traditional male novel of development. Towards the end of “A Burst of Light” Lorde notes that living with cancer “has forced me to consciously jettison the myth of omnipotence, of believing or loosely asserting that I can do anything, along with any dangerous illusion of immortality” (335). This, however, does not become synonymous with impotence. As she continues, “But in their place, another kind of power is growing, tempered and enduring, grounded within the realities of what I am in fact doing” (335). Summarising some of her daily actions, Lorde writes: “I work, I love, I rest, I see and learn. And I report. These are my givens. Not sureties, but a firm belief that whether or not living them with joy prolongs my life, it certainly enables me to pursue the objectives of that life with a deeper and more effective clarity” (335). Lorde’s “education in mortality”, to use Jeffers’s term (65), is enhanced by “observing how other people die, comparing, learning, critiquing the process inside of me, matching it

---

29 See also Wilson’s Persuasive Fictions on the non-chronological editing of A Litany for Survival, a film made on Lorde’s life, whereby images of Lorde in health are blended with images that show her health deteriorating. This technique, which for Wilson, invites the viewer “to see the skeleton beneath the monument’s surface” (120), also becomes enhanced by the form of the diary in The Cancer Journals, which, compared to retrospective narration, “is more fraught with anxiety” since it cannot guarantee positive resolution (Couser 54).

30 Lorde mentions Ellison, Baldwin, Morrison and Walker and also lists a series of African writers who have influenced her such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Achebe, Tutuola, Flora Nwapa and Leslie Lacy (Hall, Conversations with Lorde 96-7).
up to how I would like to do it” (322). Even when it comes to dying Lorde maintains her wish to be different and asserts her will: “I much prefer to think about how I'd want to die rather than just fall into death any old way, by default, according to somebody else’s rules. It’s not like you get a second chance to die the way you want to die” (316). Perreault is right, then, to suggest the following paradox: Lorde’s writing “lives close to the vulnerable and uncertain flesh, and yet enjoys rhetorical authority, sureness and even righteousness” (30). As she writes in The Cancer Journals, “Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?” (17)

The Art of Love: Uses of the Erotic

Lorde stresses that there are “other ways of being black” beyond pain and victimisation (qtd. in Hall, Conversations with Lorde 73-4). In this she is allied to Toni Morrison whose work “affirms the human ability to survive pain, loss and the denial of both self and culture without abridging experiences of passion, beauty, attachment, and joy” (Garland-Thomson 116). Like Morrison, who has emphasised in her work the power of communal healing, Lorde turns to the life force of the erotic. She particularly stresses the support and love of other women. In The Cancer Journals she acknowledges the help of a female network of friends and lovers: “To this day, sometimes, I feel like a corporate effort, the love and care and concern of so many women having been invested in me with such open-heartedness. My fears were the fears of us all” (21). In Zami, the text on several occasions becomes a hymn to the women who have contributed to her education. The prologue of the novel begins with the question “to whom do I owe the power of my voice”, and continues with an acknowledgement of names. The epilogue lists the women whom Lorde calls her “journeywoman pieces” (5), feminising the masculine trope of the “journeyman”. In Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, the protagonist goes through experiences and situations only to find out at the close of his narrative that there has been a mystical third term at work guiding his education all along, the Tower. As he famously admits at the end of the novel, he does not deserve his happiness but he wouldn't change it for anything in the world. His attainment of wholeness, as it has been argued, takes place at the expense of the “bodies of the female characters whose death or suffering is a necessary sacrifice so that Wilhelm can achieve his Bildung” (Barney 369). Lorde, on the contrary, posits a more complex form of choice and responsibility, concluding The Cancer Journals with the following phrase: “I would
never have chosen this path, but I am very glad to be who I am, here” (62). Her narrative, much like the previous examples by Cisneros and Kingston, contrasts, as Garland-Thomson notes, with “the cultural self articulated in Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance’ or Thoreau’s Walden … which repudiates all forefathers and influences, seeking to develop identity through differentiation” (128). Lorde, in contrast, writes in Zami that “we carry our traditions with us … new living the old in a new way. Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance” (255). In every text she acknowledges the help of these women, including those disabled figures that both Goethe and Emerson aestheticise as grotesque or abject, such as Eudora with her scarred breast, fat DeLois and moribund Louise Briscoe with “her huge bloated body” (4).31 In her imagination, various shapes of women “join Lynda and Gran Ma Liz and Gran Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they were all warriors. In libation, I wet the ground to my old beads” (104, emphasis in the original).

In The Cancer Journals Lorde explains that “support will always have a special and vividly erotic set of image/meanings for me now” (29). Although she says that “right after surgery I had a sense that I would never be able to bear missing that great well of sexual pleasure that I connected with my right breast” (62), this feeling soon subsides. Lorde writes about her rediscovery of masturbation asserting the healing aspects of the erotic: “I found I could finally masturbate again, making love to myself for hours at a time” (17). Her understanding of the erotic is not only sexual, as her essay “Uses of the Erotic” demonstrates. Nor does it point to an individualistic and narcissistic form of pleasure. Another erotic set of images constructed by her imagination is “floating upon a sea within a ring of women like warm bubbles keeping me afloat upon the surface of that sea” (29). The women who surround Lorde are not only the army of the powerful warriors, the Amazons, but also everyday women who mother and protect her with their warmth and love. In Zami, her descriptions of erotic encounters with women

31 See Garland-Thomson for Emerson’s invocations of “invalids” in “Self-Reliance” (42). In relation to Goethe, the function of the women in Wilhelm Meister has been read as metaphorical based on conventional elements of the sentimental, romantic or grotesque traditions. For the figure of Goethe’s Mignon, see Carolyn Steedman’s Strange Dislocations, which aims at finding “a home” within other works of literature for the character whose narrative Goethe suppresses in Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (42). Although her perspective does not come from disability studies, because Mignon’s “acrobatic” body is disabled in many ways, Steedman’s project could be aligned with Garland-Thomson’s in some aspects, in particular as concerns the need to de-aestheticise disability.
demonstrate the creative power associated with touch or with the erotic. In *The Cancer Journals* and in “A Burst of Light”, the erotic becomes a source of healing.

Lorde’s classic definition of the erotic as “the sustenance of our power” (110) in “Uses of the Erotic” has contributed significantly to envisaging a way beyond pain. If she lives “against a background noise of mortality and constant uncertainty” (330) or within a malignant society, Lorde also has an “erotic kernel” within herself. Lorde compares this kernel to the plastic packet of white, uncoloured, margarine her family used to buy during World War II, which had a tiny, intense pellet of yellow colouring in the middle: “When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitises and strengthens my experience” (“Uses of the Erotic” 110).

Although, as Alexis De Veaux is right to notice, Lorde’s essay “did not overtly address what a later generation of black feminist theorists would define as the burden of a historical legacy overshadowing black women’s bodies and therefore the particular difficulty of reclaiming an erotic black female body” (221), the author, nevertheless, made a point of distinguishing the erotic from the strictly sexual, in particular from attempts to equate it with pornography. Lorde defines the erotic as a form of sharing which is not satisfied through “certain proscribed erotic comings-together” as is the case, in her view, “within the european-american tradition” (111). In her words, the erotic encompasses “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love in its deepest meanings” (108-9). Our “deepest cravings” are feared because “once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (109). This requires a constant evaluation of our lives, a “responsibility projected from within of us”, which replaces other sources of satisfaction such as “marriage”, “god”, “an afterlife” (109) and resists a settling “for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected ... the merely safe” (109). For Lorde, recognising the power of the erotic in our life, letting it “illuminate and inform our actions upon the world around us” (110), “can give us energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (111). The erotic then is suspicious of any closure or resolution; it is what sustains us as “subjects in process”.

228
Lorde also posits the erotic as the “bridge” that connects the spiritual and the political (108). Like Anzaldúa, Lorde finds dichotomies such as the one between the two realms above to be false. She dismisses the ascetic position as one “of the gravest immobility” and reclaims the power of feeling, which is what motivates fighting for change (108). For her, the erotic is “the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy” (109). Erotically satisfying experiences are not merely sexual. Among them she lists “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (109), but in all these cases she is placing herself against the renunciation of passion. Moreover, she stresses that the erotic “forms a bridge between the sharers [of joy] which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (109). It is interesting to situate Lorde’s understanding of the mediating function of the erotic within accounts of the role of the aesthetic realm in the Bildungsroman. Just as Schiller (whose theory had an immense influence on Goethe) argues that beauty can reconcile conflicting sensuous and spiritual impulses, the Bildungsroman tries to create a harmonious synthesis between two seemingly irreconcilable realms, namely individuality and the demands of socialisation. As I have argued, however, the genre operates within an economy of exchange that reveals its assimilative violence and its drive to closure. Lorde’s description of the force of erotic power goes against such a notion of reconciliation in that the erotic is “a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling” (109, my emphasis). It thus serves as a “remainder” which undermines any fantasy of absolute reconciliation or closure.

Although Lorde does not think “about [her] death as being imminent” (330), the uncertainty with which she lives “fuels [her] resolve to print [her]self upon the texture of each day fully rather than forever” (330). Avoiding making long-term plans, she writes that “this is no longer a time of waiting.... It is a time enhanced by an iron reclamation of what I call the burst of light—that inescapable knowledge, in the bone of my own physical limitation. Metabolised and integrated into the fabric of my days” (325). She is determined to resist giving herself over “like a sacrificial offering to the furious single-minded concentration upon cure that leaves no room to examine what living and fighting on a physical front can mean” (333), but devotes time to treating her body and stresses that this is something which she considers “an act of political warfare” (332). The erotic seems to be behind such a struggle for change and constant perfection since
it is a constant “measure” which encourages “excellence” (107). Like Cisneros, Lorde stresses the need to take care of the individual body, the organ that becomes part of a whole. This is not to promote self-indulgence, but on the contrary to guarantee a responsible entry into a corpus, a return to it in such a changed way that one can contribute all the more to its purposes and causes. As Zimmerman writes, “Our ultimate challenge may be to inscribe personal experience onto a body politic that can then take part in reconstructing the public and private institutions that presently control our lives” (“Transliteration” 682).

The entry of the individual body into a collective one does not, of course, suggest absorption of the first by the second. As Mary Douglas explains, “The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” (115). I have shown how Lorde challenges the unmarked norm which casts the marked body as an agent of pollution, defying the American liberal ideology with her corporeal otherness. Just as she re-assembles her body and invests asymmetry with new power, she also resists unity that implies incorporation when it comes to larger homes or communities. Lorde’s quest in Zami is to bring “the journeywoman pieces of [her]self” not into a single unitary self, but to construct “a house of difference”. Her amputated body similarly teaches her, however cruelly, to accept the integrity and individuality of each part, its freedom to disagree or even to betray the whole. This does not make the possibility of solidarity and unity impossible. Lorde’s version of a healthy body politic is one where the individual is a member of the corpus but also retains a sense of autonomy.

Deploying an aesthetics of embodiment which draws on the devalued characteristics of her body, Lorde, in Zami, constructs the modern black body as an “extraordinary body”, one that incorporates pain and moves beyond it. Similarly, in The Cancer Journals and in “A Burst of Light” she salvages “a poetics of death” from the abyss of silence and turns it into a tool of knowledge, empowerment, activism and teaching. What seems to signify deviance and immobility and, thus, be excluded from narratives of growing up, becomes here the basis on which Lorde constructs a powerful “art of living”. Her differentiated and multiple body challenges the “socially integrative purpose” (Watson 193) of a genre like the Bildungsroman, as well as the more specific American ideals of selfhood which have informed it. Bodies surround the body of Lorde’s work, move in and through her words: Lorde posits an erotic body which, in being connected to other
bodies, shares moments of joy and strives for continuous change; an unveiled body which resists expectations of “normality” asserting its right to be different; an excessive body which despite belonging to multiple communities is not contained by any of them; a fragmented and asymmetrical body which claims its own wholeness and harmony; a scarred and moribund body which is not passive or static but constantly transforming; a body “made in earth” (Zami 7), both mythical and vulnerable; a body that “bleeds to life”. What seems a private experience, her unfolding of life and loves and her battle with cancer in Zami and her cancer diaries, sharpens the critical and political tone of Lorde’s work infusing her personal struggle with an urgency to strive for change in society, however difficult. This urgency, articulated all the more powerfully by a disabled and multiply inflected body, is “contagious” as it spreads from the author’s to the reader’s body. As Lorde writes in “A Burst of Light”:

This is why the work is so important. Its power doesn’t lie in the me that lives in the words so much as in the heart’s blood pumping behind the eye that is reading, the muscle behind the desire that is sparked by the word—hope as a living state that propels us, open-eyed and fearful, into all the battles of our lives. And some of those battles we do not win.

But some of them we do. (293)
Coda

In America we have only the present tense.

Canto XVI, 97, 4: They err — ‘t is merely what is call’d mobility ...
In French, “mobilité”. I am not sure that mobility is English; but it is expressive of a quality which rather belongs to other climates, though it is sometimes seen to a great extent in our own. It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without losing the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute. (Lord Byron, “Notes to Don Juan” 752)

What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one.... Like some days you might say something stupid, and that’s the part of you that’s still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama’s lap because you’re scared, and that’s the part of you that’s five. And maybe one day when you’re all grown up, maybe you will need to cry like if you’re three, and that’s okay... Because the way you grow up is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. (Sandra Cisneros, “Eleven” 6-7)

“Bound motion”, and all the other hybrid or syncretic terms which I have used throughout the four chapters, points to a new “mobilité” in the Bildungsroman which defines the contemporary “art of living” or “the art of the present”. Crucial to this mobility is the ability to move among multiple cultures without abandoning one place for another. What this mobility offers, then, is an apprenticeship to a new form of grammar that makes room for more than the present tense, which is what Rich criticises in the first epigraph.

Bound motion, as I have used it in the first chapter, points to a state in between mobility and immobility through which the memory of the past is retained without obliterating movement in the present. In this way, nostalgia coexists with a critique of fixed origins. Similarly, the notion of “play” in the second chapter suggests both a playful and a responsible stance, just as the house the protagonist longs for evokes a
space that is both closed and open. Translation in the third chapter retains the traces of multiple languages and inscribes another borderlike state. Through this practice, emotional bonding with the past and with the mother tongue does not sacrifice the protagonist's separation from it. Finally, in the last chapter, living against "a background noise of mortality and constant uncertainty" captures yet another liminal space, which can be a source of knowledge and empowerment. Although borderlands offer space for imaginative play and ambivalence, they are also sites of acute cultural conflict. The chapters, I hope, have demonstrated that it would be misleading to approach hybridity as a game. The kind of fluid mobility that the texts construct can be useful but, as the second epigraph suggests, is not necessarily comfortable or painless.

The state of inhabiting borderlands and the attempts at balancing opposites are underlined by the emphasis on the spatial rather than the linear in the texts. Memory and trauma do not work in a linear fashion in Kincaid's work, the vignette in Cisneros's short story sequence allows the simultaneous coexistence of contradictory narratives, and the collage of narratives in Kingston's memoir frustrates distinctions between past and present. In Lorde's case, the alternation between the planes of myth and reality similarly lies outside the scope of linear narrative.

Central to this spatial dimension is also the double movement that drives most of the texts: trauma and mobility, privacy and affiliation, vertical and horizontal, play and responsibility, myth and reality; in these ensembles, one element interrupts or nuances the other without encompassing or absorbing it, sustaining a productive tension. The boundaries between dichotomies are challenged, and new hybrid spaces that write beyond the closure of the Bildungsroman are fashioned. Like the account of growing up told in the third epigraph of this short conclusion, the texts are layered and can, thus, accommodate competing possibilities and enable plural identities to coexist simultaneously. Painful, necessary, useful, or all of them together, as this art may be, there is no need to abandon totally one stage or culture to enter another one successfully: There is room to play in Cisneros's text; Kincaid can continue her simultaneous travelling in the West/Indies; Kingston her efforts "to fly between continents"; and Lorde reinvent herself as a modern Amazon or warrior poet.
Bibliography


Barnes, Elizabeth L. “Mirroring the Mother-Text: Histories of Seduction in the American Domestic Novel.” Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in


---. Interview with Maria-Antónia Oliver-Rotger, January and February, 2000. 19 Sept. 2006

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/interviews/vg_interviews/cisneros_sandra.html>.


Cliff, Michelle. *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise.* Watertown: Persephone, 1980.


Rivera, Tomás. “... y no se lo tragó la tierra/... and the earth did not part.” Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1971.


