Cultural Mythology and Anxieties of Belonging:
Reconstructing the “bi-cultural” subject in the fiction of
Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Annie Proulx

by

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The thesis considers the construction of cultural identity in the writings of Toni Morrison, Annie Proulx, and Amy Tan. It consists of three chapters, one dedicated to each of the writers. In the examination of these writers the focus is upon the construction of the “bi-cultural” subject in the contemporary United States. The paradigm of analysis is constructed through discourses of space, landscape and physical geography.

The first chapter is devoted to Toni Morrison and is divided into two sections dealing with the novels Beloved and Jazz. The first section examines how spatial discourses disrupt binaries that marginalise the black community. It concentrates upon the location of the “porch” in the novel and parallels it with the “porch” as a black spatial icon. The Jazz section examines the idealised space of the City. It focuses on the material layout of American Cities and discusses its relationship to constructions of American cultural identity. The debate is used to highlight how the geographical marginalisation of communities parallels their cultural alienation.

The second chapter is split into two sections, the first focuses upon The Joy Luck Club, the second concerns The Kitchen God’s Wife. Tan’s work is discussed in relation to cultural geographic debates about mythic geography. It deals with the different ways in which Tan’s texts try to palliate cultural anxieties about “belonging” by constructing a culturally soothing mythic location. An idealised version of the Chinese-American community is sustained through her constructions of both San Francisco and China, which she employs and negotiates in different ways in the two texts.

The third chapter examines three Proulx texts, Postcards, Accordion Crimes, and Close Range Wyoming Stories. The chapter explores the different ways these texts negotiate cultural belonging in relation to geographic migration. Postcards is considered in relation to the literary discourse of migration. In Accordion Crimes the employment of similarly positivist conceptions of the construction of a “home” in North America is examined. The final section examines the problematic nature of “location” as both geographically and textually soothing.

The Epilogue suggests the possible extension of the thesis and foregrounds the importance of the materiality of spatial construction to the cultural anxieties the thesis examines.
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Introduction

Partiality and Representation

Foucault best captures the enormity of the task facing those who wish to traverse the treacherous terrain of representation when he writes that "the visible order, with its permanent grid of distinctions, is now only a superficial glitter above an abyss."¹

Written texts contain an often hidden geography and an examination of that geography may clarify the unreflected ideologies of the text [... it] may also undermine dominant cultural representations of the other, by revealing that they are less regularities of nature than conventions of a situated – geographic – imagination.²

Both quotations are taken from James Duncan and David Ley's introduction to the collection *Place/Culture/Representation*. The latter provides a paradigm for the concerns of this thesis. The first quotation provides an imperative warning, one that is fundamental to the approach of the thesis, to debates about cultural anxieties of belonging as explored in the work of Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Annie Proulx³. The Foucault quotation suggests the precariousness of the term “representation”. It serves throughout as a reminder of the unavoidable partiality of any engagement with such a discussion. The complexity of “representation” is foregrounded in the quotation and this mirrors its status in the thesis.

This thesis is not framed by a formal “Conclusion”. This is partly as a result of the Foucauldian warning about the partiality of any examination of representation. However, the decision to refuse concluding the thesis is because to do so would be to

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² Duncan, Ley (eds.), 13
attempt coherence. My aim here, through an examination of the writers’ engagement with spatial discourses, is to expose the point at which "bi-cultural" communities are constructed. Rather than regarding the authors as representative of the communities in which they are situated, the thesis argues that these communities exist through their construction in the texts. Critical preoccupations with arbitrating the authenticity of these writers’ voices elide cultural anxieties indicated by the desire to construct and define the communities themselves. My interest is in examining the force of these anxieties within the text, and only to a lesser extent, their reflection in critical engagement. Proulx’s texts, for example, tackle these anxieties head on as she problematises their constructions in her novels. The thesis, therefore, deliberately undermines attempts to see Morrison and Tan as “representative” of any discrete community. I am also concerned to explore Proulx’s understanding of the subject’s desire to locate themselves in those communities. I suggest that a new discussion is established as the novels are unpacked as mythic constructions meeting a predominating cultural need to locate the subject.\textsuperscript{4} The thesis aims to situate the “bi-cultural” subject, and debates the use of the term as a palliative. I examine “bi-culturality” as a salve that engenders the anxieties it elides in contemporary usage. The presumption that these authors offer a mythically succouring version of “bi-culturality” is un-packed. The desire to position, or locate, the subject is examined. Positionality is explored in terms of the problematics its very use engenders.

\textsuperscript{3} It is important to mention at the outset of the thesis that my choice of editions has largely been dictated by what I have observed to be most readily available in the United Kingdom. Bibliographic citations include the novels’ first publication in the United States.

\textsuperscript{4} For a fuller discussion of the construction of Myth see Chapter Two. Although all three chapters engage myth not in terms of classical or religious mythology, but rather as a narrative strategy.
When I was six I was in a playground in Richhill, a small village between Armagh and Portadown in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. I was playing a group game with my cousins, I think it was about guarding a rope bridge, a piratical game but I do not remember clearly. We had not been playing long when the game was stopped by a contemporary of mine. I had shouted an instruction and my accent had been detected by the lad. He didn’t know whether or not I was English, he just recognised that I was not local. He came over and asked me whether I was Catholic or Protestant. I didn’t properly understand the question although I knew the answer was reasonably important. I was aware that I probably did not want to say Catholic, but I had no idea what Protestant meant and was nervous about the consequences of getting the question wrong, so I replied; “I’m neither, I’m Church of England”. My response was met pretty blankly and we went on with the game. I do not think either of us really knew what we were talking about but we both knew that there was definitely a wrong answer and I hadn’t given it.

This minor incident is paradigmatic for me of both the force of Foucault’s warning and of the way in which the thesis engages with the complexity of “representation”. I am English, but came to be fascinated with Ulster and the problematics of representation that stories like the one narrated above encapsulates. I became aware that representational complexity as grounded in cultural anxieties of belonging would be the focus of my work: the discourses people and communities invest heavily in to locate and represent themselves, how they construct that locatedness in and through the binding of material and conceptual representations.
However, I came very quickly to understand that my own anxieties of belonging informed my critical position and that, as I proceeded through my first degree, I preferred to engage with a culture discrete from personal associations, and develop a discursive relationship with those anxieties rather than bog myself down in an analysis that would necessarily suggest a particular kind of investment on my part. This is not to say that I do not believe myself to be heavily invested in the following discussion, but that the peculiarity of claiming affinity with a place as the above story performs, would complicate my position in ways in which I would probably have been unable to manage.

The consideration of locatedness, rootedness and belonging, as being simultaneously problematised by the very desires they engender, has informed much of the work undertaken in the following chapters. It is also important for this introduction as it contributes to its structure. The introduction will focus upon debates specific to the United States, and the literature selected here, in order to extrapolate peculiarly American anxieties of belonging. It will then examine, briefly, the relationship of cultural geography to anxieties of belonging as literary construction. The suggestion here is that the theoretical cross over materialises the debates foregrounded in the novels. It is central to the thesis that representation be understood as a political and material trope. The establishing of the texts’ relationship to material space – the physical geography of the United States - and its reworking in literary representation forms the thesis’ basis. This position will be explored in different ways in relation to Tan, Morrison and Proulx.

The three authors’ divergent engagements with anxieties of belonging forms the apex of the argument, as representation is posited as fundamentally materialised. The separation between the fictionality and material location, and the degrees to which the
novels rupture or elide that binary are the central concern of the thesis. The geographic strategies through which texts construct the idea of “home” on a personal, familial and a communal level, will underpin this discussion. The texts’ representations of these “fictional” or mythic locations as a palliative for anxieties of belonging is the conceptual focus. This reinforces the exploration of the novels’ engagement with cultural mythologies which are often constructed in criticism as being proffered by the texts in question. The thesis differentiates between the mythologic needs the texts identify and perform, and the idea that these same texts actually work to succour those anxieties.

The centrality of space and location to America’s mythic constructions is difficult to overstate. From the Puritans’ dream of the “City on the Hill”\(^5\), through Jefferson’s agrarian myth, to Whitman and Thoreau’s pantheistic veneration of the natural landscape and the cultural currency of frontier mythology as constructed in Mark Twain’s tales, Cooper’s Leatherstocking narratives, and the Cowboy industry as a whole, space has always played a crucial role in the construction of the American ideal. Denis Cosgrove states this in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*:

A central feature of this social formation, so central that it occupied more legislative time in the Congress’ first century than any other issue and has dominated American historiography since Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of the frontier in 1894, was land. The allocation, division, pattern of ownership and production from land is crucial to historical understandings of American social relations and American culture. Since landscape is a cultural expression of social relations with the land it can be argued that America is in some respects an articulation on a continental scale of the landscape idea. [...] The ideas of perspective and the rational ordering of space stand at the origins of America, in

the maps of Toscanelli and at the pivot of its republican ideals, in the rectangular grid of the rural landscape and the blocks and axes of Washington.\(^6\)

Cosgrove’s privileging of spatial discourses and the idea that ‘landscape’ is a peculiarly American construct is reinforced by Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner in their introduction to *Mapping American Culture*:

Open space is a driving force in American culture, but the closer attachments of place […] may be more influential.\(^7\)

Here the writers foreground both the notion of “open space”, the purportedly available unconstructed land, and the concretised location of the home, or “place” as being “driving forces” in American culture. The emphasis upon discourses of space in American iconic and mythic construction is indicated by another cultural geographer, Dolores Hayden, in her text *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*. Initially she politicises the space of the home indicating why it is a peculiarly American mythic construct:

The dream house is a uniquely American form, because for the first time in history, a civilization has created a utopian ideal based on the house rather than the city or the nation.\(^8\)

Hayden goes on to discuss the relationship of the idealised space of the dream home to the notion of the ideal City\(^9\). Her discussion is based upon an understanding of these two

\(^6\) Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, (London: Croom Helm, 1984) 162 – 188. For a fuller discussion of Cosgrove’s “landscape” ideal see Chapter Three which focuses primarily on Proulx texts.

\(^7\) Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner, eds., *Mapping American Culture*, (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992) 3/4


\(^9\) See discussion of Hayden’s work in Chapter One, part two that focuses on Morrison’s *Jazz* and its relationship to the space of the City.
constructions to America’s re-invention of itself in cultural terms, and how what were initially American spatial discourses are imitated across the globe:

In addition to having the highest rate of home-ownership, the United States had the very tallest skyscrapers in the world. Spatial patterns – skyscrapers downtown and detached single-family houses in suburbia – were imitated from Paris to Nairobi.  

Cultural geographers such as Hayden, Steiner and Franklin recognise the fundamental importance of discourses of space to American mythic versions of its ideal subject, and their relationship to the “dream” home or homeland the United States. They highlight the ways in which contemporary American culture reinvigorates these paradigms through engaging and disrupting notions of locatedness and belonging.

However, the centrality of space to idealised American discourses of belonging and the cultural anxieties locatedness is employed to alleviate are not only registered by cultural geographers. Foucault’s warning about the enormity of the task and the pre-eminent partiality of any encounter resurfaces. Steiner, Franklin and Hayden have been drawn upon here to suggest a position which is occupied by a great number of scholars in the field. For example, Wilbur Zelinsky, author of *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, is not cited in the introduction, but his work features heavily in the following chapters where he is used as a discursive figurehead. Equally, the discussion here of the complexity of the literary heritage of spatial construction barely scrapes the surface. In terms of the thesis it is in fact invoked rather than instituted. The centrality of the discourse forms the underpinning for the discussion rather than the subject for discussion itself.

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10 Hayden *Redesigning the American Dream* 225.
As well as emphasising the fundamental importance of space to American ideology it is also important to focus upon certain facets of the discourse which inform the thesis as a whole. One of the concerns of the thesis is an examination of fragmentation and rupture as a product of an investment in spatial myths. I argue that violence forms the centre of textual encounters between the desire for an idealised space and its material construction. This is demonstrated through three authors in disparate ways, as the chapter synopses indicate. The centrality of this violence is recognised in cultural geography, in the literary analysis of both canonical and non-canonical American texts, and in some of the novels themselves. Wendell Berry states in his text *A Continuous Harmony, Essays Cultural and Agricultural* that most Americans are:

Moving about on the face of this continent with a mindless destructiveness ... that makes Sherman’s march to the sea look like a prank.  

A sentiment echoed by Steiner and Franklin. They place spatial discourses centrally in their analysis of constructions of American culture, refusing to sentimentalise this relationship. They indicate the violence of American spatial occupation and the subject’s identifications with the spaces they occupy. Locatedness may be fundamental to the construction of the self but that does not necessarily indicate a comfortable relationship to ideal spaces. As W. D. Meinig argues in the forward to *The Making of the American Landscape*:

We may cry out and protest of direct threats to our own surroundings, but in general so much of our response to landscape and history seems almost pathologically crippled.

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The violent disruption predicated in the desire for locatedness and the rupture the subject or community experiences as a result of that overwhelming need is posited here. The conceptual distance between the mythic ideal and the materialised discourses that they frame engages the three writers who form the subject of the thesis. The rupture of the subject/community by mythic ideals of locatedness forms the crux of the discussion of Morrison, Tan and Proulx.

This engagement is bound by another discursive complexity. The critical focus of the thesis as engendered in the title is upon the idea of the “bi-cultural” subject. The idea of bi-culturality is closely tied to constructions of community and its material location in the United States. The thesis argues that space and discourses of location dominate discussions concerning anxieties of belonging. Equally essential to any understanding of those anxieties is that the subject is dually positioned. The subject identifies itself as being simultaneously “American” and a member of another community. This process of definition can be a concern of the text itself or the debate about bi-culturality can circumscribe the text/s and author. The author’s ethnicity is sometimes used in criticism to appoint them to a certain position in cultural iconography. Morrison is constantly privileged as a conceptual figurehead for discursive analyses of the position of the black-American subject in both literary and political debates. Tan criticism centres on the question of whether or not her novels are a paradigmatic representation of the San-Francisco Chinese-American community. Proulx is not co-opted critically in parallel ways. She raises her concerns about cultural marginality and anxieties of belonging in the quotations she chooses to open her 1996 novel *Accordion Crimes*:

Without the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be “white” – they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others engaged
in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity. CORNEL WEST *Race Matters*

*Camiante, no hay camino,
Se hace camino al andar.*

Traveler, there is no path,
Paths are made by walking. ANTONIO MACHADO

The critical concerns of the thesis are foregrounded here, both in terms of my discussion of Proulx’s novel and for the thesis as a whole, through Proulx’s explicit disruption of the “white” hegemonic community. She sets out to complicate the insider/outsider binary suggested in the use of a black/white dichotomy. She does not upset the pairing to evade it but rather, as is suggested by the second quotation, she investigates the mechanisms by which the binary is instituted. The acceptance of an ethnically focused hierarchy is what empowers. I am concerned with the various disruptions this hierarchy encounters as it is employed in relation to myths of belonging. I scrutinise the location of belonging that situates the subject as constantly at a remove from idealised spaces. The focus is upon how this conceptual distance automatically precludes them from the status of ideal subject or central community.

This is not to suggest that there is no material hierarchy that excludes societal groups. Instead, the idea that separation and debasement is taken to be fundamental to American cultural constructions of the idealised subject is a central concern. The engagement with social and economic marginalisation, therefore, may be influenced by the distinct cultural community with which the subject identifies, but the marginalisation of that group is not predicated as being engendered solely through one community’s

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14 This is clear in the mythic trope of the socially and economically upwardly mobile protagonist.
discursive battle with a central monolithic/hegemonic “American” cultural position. The complication of the discursive split is foregrounded, rather than placing emphasis upon one element’s subjection by/to the other.

The subject position as materially disenfranchised informs the thesis through the engagement of cultural geographical paradigms in this analysis of contemporary American fiction. The interdisciplinary nature of the exploration does need to be navigated cautiously, as suggested in my reference to Foucault. The linking of the two schools of thought is celebrated but cautions are frequently issued and are kept in mind throughout the thesis. Stuart White discusses the potential fruitfulness of such a combination:

In the following pages I address the dilemma [...] of how to communicate the mutual necessity of the object world and the non-accidents of time in creating what we term landscape [...] I argue that narratives [...] may provide us both instruction in landscape interpretation and a medium for bringing to geographic landscapes the immediacy they deserve.15

Just as White recognises the role literature can play in understanding the material landscape as constructed, so Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman in their introduction to Modernity and Identity argue that the force of representation needs to be understood culturally. They argue that the elision of the power of representation should be the concern of contemporary cultural theory:

But the symbolic violence meted out through the built environment is doubly insidious, because doubly unannounced: first because the built environment appears “natural”, “material” and “functional” to the viewer in a way that other symbolic goods do not; and secondly because previously landscapes effectuated their symbolic control directly in their role as landscapes. Now they do so in the mask of the vernacular.16

15 Stuart White, “Commentary”, The Journal of Cultural Geography Spring/Summer 1984 4:2 100
This position is developed by David Harvey in his essay “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity”:

Struggles over representation are [...] as fiercely fought and as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar [...] by the same token, the creation of symbolic places is not given in the stars but painstakingly nurtured and fought over, precisely because of the hold that place can have over the imagination.¹⁷

Harvey suggests that privileging representation in a discussion of the material landscape is discursively powerful as it makes explicit the ideological co-option of the material environment. This naturalised ideological force is encapsulated by Jonathan Smith in his essay “The Lie that Blinds – Destabilizing the Text of Landscape”:

People who live in big houses seem with only rare exception to be the sort of people who deserve to live in big houses. Big houses say so many complimentary things about their owners.¹⁸

These theorists reinforce a politicised and material understanding of representation. It is crucial to the concerns of the thesis that the textual locations I discuss are predicated as “representation” is understood here. They are political and material manifestations. The warning about the politicisation of representation is paramount. It ensures that the texts are not treated as somehow removed from the politics of space, but it also politicises the terms of representation. In this instance the thesis does not focus upon the difference between “African-American” as opposed to “Black-American”, but is concerned with what the hyphen itself represents. Or to phrase it another way: what political or material role does the hyphen itself play?

¹⁷ Harvey, Mapping the Future, Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner, eds., 23.
¹⁸ Smith, Place/Culture/Representation, Duncan, Ley, eds., 83.
The necessity for a qualified engagement is expressed by various theorists and critics. For example, in his essay "Homeless/Global: Scaling Places" included in the collection, *Mapping the Futures*, Neil Smith issues this warning in the following terms:

The critique of the universal subject has itself become near universal, but the more difficult question is how a political subject or a coalition of subjects can be reconstructed without on the one hand replicating the assumption of a white, male, ruling-class subject, and on the other reverting to a radical individualism. This familiar epistemological dilemma seems to require a negotiation of privilege based on different subject positionalities and is usually thereby seen as a quintessentially local project, but the reconstruction of the political subject(s) is at the same time intensely global.\(^{19}\)

The thesis attempts an engagement with the particularities of the subject position as negotiated by the writers discussed, and the communities they are taken to represent. This is extended to explore how these particularised positions engender binary fractures on a larger scale.

Smith sums up this position, one the thesis parallels, as follows:

A politics of scale can also become a weapon of expansion and inclusion, a means of enlarging identities. Scale offers guideposts in the recovery of space from annihilation.\(^{20}\)

The disruption of reality/fantasy, insider/outsideer oppositions is considered here in terms of Smith's politics of scale. The discussion of Morrison, Tan and Proulx is concerned with the role the hyphen itself plays in their versions of identity and belonging. Therefore, the concern of the thesis is not with the choice of term, i.e. "Chinese-American", "Asian-American" weighed off against the "American" part of the bi-cultural binary as white/male hegemony. Another way of framing this interest is through the assertion that the thesis deals primarily with borders. Patricia Price echoes an

\(^{19}\) Smith, *Mapping the Futures*, Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner, eds., 112-3.
understanding of this proviso in her essay “Inscribing the Border: Schizophrenia and the
Aesthetics of Aztlan”. She recognises the representational force of materialised
construction as well as considering the problematics of equivocal subject identifications:

Borders no longer function [...] to cordon off States from one another and
constitute them as discrete geographic entities. Borders can also be
discontinuous, fragmented, refracted across space and scale.21

Price recognises the contemporary fragmentation of borders as being central to an
understanding of United States’ cultural identifications. Having stated her awareness of
these ruptures she goes on to suggest the potential in recognising that partiality and
equivocation:

Within this uncertain late modern landscape, where borders either shimmer and
vanish or become more starkly drawn, there is an additional layer of confusion,
[...] contemporary power re-mappings involve not just debordering and
rebordering, but also a panoply of wholly new borders, which are erupting at
multiple scales and in unlikely places.22

It is this critical equivocation, and the interest in the border itself, which forms the focus
of the first chapter of the thesis. This chapter focuses upon two Toni Morrison novels,
Beloved (1987) and Jazz (1992). It engages Price’s interest in the border, examining
Morrison’s engagement with liminality in both texts. The chapter examines the extent to
which the novels offer a mythic palliative, which counters the cultural marginalisation of
black-communities in contemporary America. The argument of the chapter is that
anxieties of belonging, and the desire to produce strategies to counter a binary, which
dislocates black-American communities from any kind of hegemonic rootedness, produce

20 p. 114 op. cit.
21 Patricia Price “Inscribing the border: schizophrenia and the aesthetics of Aztlan”, Rob Kitchin (ed.),
22 Price 101.
particular critical responses. This cultural anxiety leads to discursive engagements that secure the texts as offering mythically recuperative paradigms of black identity that the texts themselves do not sustain.

In the first section of the chapter, "Beloved: Cohesion Produces Collapse, the Embrace of Liminality," the discussion focuses upon the text's exploration of boundaries. It examines the different spatial negotiations of the protagonists focusing particularly on the character of Denver and her relationship to liminal space in the novel. It is suggested that the porch as abstract space is embraced as the potential point of rupture for the hierarchised boundaries the text tackles on all levels. As the novel encounters the problematics of ownership for the black subject as occupying simultaneously both sides of a subject/object binary a spatial reading of the novel is used to disrupt that binary. The space of the porch is then considered as a material location, examining the consequences for the novel's discursive employment of the space when it is understood to be a piece of Black vernacular architecture at the heart of the idealised space of the American home.

The second section of the chapter, "Jazz: Rupture, Ambivalence and 'The Concrete Thrill of Borderlessness'" develops the consideration of liminality begun in the discussion of Beloved and the space of the home into an examination of the idealised spaces of the City. It considers the ability to reconstruct binaries that secure locatedness as being profoundly ambivalent. The focus of this section's interest is an examination of the material construction of American cities and their relationship to the subject's cultural mapping of the City as played out in the novel. It suggests that Jazz does not institute a recuperative version of construction, whereby the subjects are empowered by his/her ability to arbitrate their own construction. It argues, rather, that the text is fundamentally
equivocal about the consequences of such an understanding whilst maintaining that rupturing hierarchised binaries in an embrace of borderlessness itself is thrilling. The text refuses to be drawn from the collapse of one set of binaries into the institution of another. It is the text's maintenance of the “thrill of borderlessness” which grounds its fundamental radicalism. The text does not produce a mythic set of preferred borderings, as it is often constructed in criticism. Morrison refuses to be converted from novelist to mythmaker, and the relationship of both novels to material discourses is used, overall, to demonstrate her rupture of the myth/reality binary as employed in Morrison criticism.

Amy Tan's novels *The Joy Luck Club*, (1989), and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, (1991), form the textual focus of the second chapter: “Amy Tan as Mythmaker: Anxieties of Belonging and the Culturally Soothing ‘Synthetic Region’ ”. Where the first chapter has been concerned with rupturing readings which locate Morrison as a constructor of myth, suggesting that through materialised spatial discourses the novels can be understood differently, the materialisation of space in Tan’s novel is used to demonstrate the text’s desire to constitute themselves as mythic narratives.

Again the readings are set up in contrast to popular critical positions on the author. The contention here is that considerations of Tan as a subaltern writer, and critical debates that engage with her as being a problematic representative of the Chinese-American community, elide the work the texts perform in order to function convincingly as myths. The chapter examines the narrative strategies both texts employ in order to construct an ideologically complicit reader. In the discussion of *The Joy Luck Club*, entitled “*The Joy Luck Club – The Reader as a Member of its Cultural Community*”, the focus is upon Tan’s construction of a culturally soothing mythic community into which
the reader is initiated as s/he is educated so as to read the stories "correctly". It explores the idea that within the text there are correct reading patterns, and that much of the work of the novel is not to construct a polyphony of voices. Instead the novel attempts to secure the reader as a member of a community of understanding that the text constructs. The idea of the text as a myth is then explored through the text's construction of location. The argument is that Tan does not construct an idealised China offset by a concrete San Francisco. She, in fact, constructs two mythic locations, San Francisco and China, and that the two locations are manipulated to produce an idealised space for the Chinese-American community within the novel. It is this mythic location which cultural geographers identify as a construction through which communities attempt to alleviate anxieties of belonging. Tan's construction of a "synthetic region" which acts as a cultural palliative is extrapolated as being a paramount contemporary American anxiety. Whereas Morrison is critically described, commonly, as a myth maker, and Tan is frequently embraced as ambivalent and polyvocal, the argument of the thesis is that these discursive positions should be reversed in relation to the authors.

This is advanced by the second section of the Second chapter, "The Kitchen God's Wife - The Materiality of Discursive Authority". It continues to focus on the narrative strategies Tan employs to construct a discursive didacticism that is elided in the text's self-proclaiming structures. It considers Tan's development of the discursive community constructed in her first novel to employ narrative arbitration as a material and political force. In both sections of the chapter Tan's children's stories are used to make explicit her didactic schema. From *The Joy Luck Club* she lifts one of her tales and turns it into

\[\text{See Chapter Two.}\]
The Moon Lady. (1992). When considering The Kitchen God’s Wife I use her second children’s story, The Chinese-Siamese Cat, (1994) to highlight the strategies she lifts from her second novel. She takes the discursive considerations of the novel and condenses them in these tales. In fact through her children’s stories she takes the final step the novels tentatively mount as she turns the narratives, literally, into myths.

The third and final chapter, “Proulx, Problematising Positionality” is concerned with three Proulx novels, Postcards, (1994), Accordion Crimes, (1996) and Close Range, Wyoming Stories, (1999). It considers the idea of “bi-culturality” and argues her place in a thesis concerned with the bi-cultural subject by suggesting that understandings of bi-culturality are predicated upon a version of ethnicity that needs radical re-working. It argues that Morrison and Tan become critically silenced as they are reproduced as cultural signifiers for discrete bi-cultural communities, and that the same relationship to identity politics works to the exclusion of Proulx.

Proulx’s disruption of binaries of bi-culturality is paralleled by her discursive rejection of the idea of the culturally soothing ‘synthetic region’. The chapter explores her rejection of cultural myth making. It maintains that Proulx challenges notions of the recuperation of the subject through mythic identifications. She predicates the subject’s relationship to idealising discourses of space as being fundamental to the production of rupture and violence she identifies cross-culturally, and not as the result of any particular community’s place in the racialised hierarchies of the contemporary United States.

The chapter establishes Proulx’s rejection of the recuperative force of cultural mythography, and identifies the centrality of violence, rupture and fragmentation to her textual constructions of American iconography. The first section of the chapter,
"Postcards, Literary and Cultural Iconography. A Redrawn Discursive Map?" examines her reworking of fundamental American myths and the violence she suggests they produce in her first novel, Postcards (1994). The focus of the second section is the novel that engages directly with the idea of bi-culturality and its relation to the mythography of the United States in her novel, Accordion Crimes (1996). "Accordion Crimes, American Immigrant Experience as Paradigmatic Subject Position" examines Proulx's disruption of the binary which locates the American subject as constructing his/her identity in relation to two discrete cultures.

The third and final section of the chapter, "Close Range – Wyoming Stories – The Return to the Synthetic Region?" explores Proulx's negotiation of potentially recuperative locations. It suggests that, like Morrison, Proulx refuses to reproduce the binaries she has ruptured. She does not locate the violence of 'bi-cultural' identifications at the National level whilst embracing regionalism as a culturally sustaining space. Instead, Close Range, Wyoming Stories (1999) takes the rupture and violence predicated in Proulx's earlier fiction as the centrally defining construct for the cultural identifications the characters make. The thesis argues that Proulx takes the ruptured binary Morrison makes explicit and Tan tries to manage, and treats the rupture as definitively American. Proulx takes the desire to construct idealised spaces as fundamental to American self-identification and predicates the violence it produces as a defining American trope.

The Epilogue considers the possible extension of the thesis. It reflects upon the necessary absences of the thesis suggesting other writers’ examination of parallel concerns. It re-asserts contemporary concerns about the succouring potential of mythic
spatial constructions, reiterating that current conceptual frameworks re-institute fragmentation and cultural anxiety the moment they are employed.
Morrison as Icon

Race isn’t a metaphor. Color isn’t a metaphor. It doesn’t feel like a metaphor. It hurts as if it’s my skin. I feel sick. I hate myself. I make you hate me. I separate. I come back. Forgive me. This is the best I can do.¹

My dark face is close to me I want to join she whispers to me she whispers I reach for her chewing and swallowing she touches me she knows I want to join [...] I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house [...] doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing²

In 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. She is an internationally famous critic as well as novelist and currently teaches at Princeton University, New Jersey. These aspects of Toni Morrison’s life are well documented, as is her position in the African-American canon. The first quotation here is taken from Toi Derricotte’s *The Black Notebooks*, published by Norton in 1999 and as the back cover to the Norton edition states it has been acclaimed as “the most profound document I have read on racism in America today, [it] challenges all our preconceived notions of what it means to be black or white, and what it means to be human.”³ The second quotation is taken from *Beloved*. It is the protagonist named in the title who speaks. The references to “separation” and “joining” semantically link the two excerpts.

Toi Derricotte and Toni Morrison form part of the literary vanguard through which contemporary Americans come to consider constructions of race. They are central to the African-American community/ies’ conceptualisation of their cultural and political marginalisation. This chapter recognises the centrality of Morrison to the political and

³ Derricotte, Back cover. The first is a quotation from *Sapphire*, the second is not attributed.
literary schools of thought that work with her texts to construct and to challenge understandings of what it means to be Black and American in the United States. The centrality of Morrison’s position to such debates creates a desire to produce cultural and political alleviation as part of that criticism, which the texts themselves do not perform. The force of Morrison’s critical engagement engenders debates which obscure alternative approaches to the construction of identity in Morrison’s novels.

Through an analysis of spatial construction in two Morrison novels, *Beloved* and *Jazz*, it is argued here that the understanding of Morrison’s texts as culturally and politically located as specifically American spaces will lead to a reworking of the idea of mythic flight in Morrison’s texts. A discussion of paradigms of material location and belonging will offer a different conceptual framework through which to examine constructions of the marginalisation of the black community and ways in which she suggests they can be countered.
**Beloved: Cohesion Produces Collapse, the Embrace of Liminality**

"The work that I do frequently falls, in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called fantastic, or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable. I'm not comfortable with these labels. I consider that my single gravest responsibility (in spite of that magic) is not to lie."^4

For the last two centuries, the quintessential American intellectual, political and architectural dilemma has been: dream house or ideal city?^5

The first quotation is Toni Morrison's given by Will Zinsser, in his text *Inventing the truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir*. The second is a quotation from cultural geographer Dolores Hayden's text *Redesigning the American Dream, The Future of Housing Work and Family Life*. Morrison's quotation privileges "myth" as she discusses predominating responses to her novels. What the quotation also suggests is the cultural baggage the term carries. Here "myth" is surrounded by conceptions of fantasy, a binary often instituted in a division between the fantastic and the real; the "myth" and the fact.

This chapter focuses upon two Morrison novels, *Beloved* and *Jazz*, and examines the critical preoccupation with myth in Morrison criticism and suggests a redefinition of the term. The discussion of *Beloved* will focus upon the spatial configuration of subjection. It will look at the characters' negotiation of textual locations as they attempt to construct a subject identity whilst engaging with the material force of the fragmentation of the self engendered in the position of the slave. This section, having mapped the spatial discourses in the text will then examine its relation to material spaces, specifically in this text, the "porch". It will suggest that the porch is a "Black" space by

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looking at the liminal space’s architectural history. It will explore one character, Denver, and her relationship to the porch. I argue that the novel does not engender mythic flight, but rather reinforces the notion that the fragmentation of the self is produced by a binary that asks the actual to be divorced from the conceptual, ultimately reproducing the collapse. By recognising the iconic force of the “home” to American identifications as presented by Hayden, it will be argued that only when the materiality of liminality is embraced do the characters function in relation to their subjection.

*Jazz* is examined as an extrapolation of the fragmentation instituted in an acceptance of insider/outsider binaries which constitute the Black community as existing simultaneously on both sides of the binary and neither. Having embraced the space of the liminal in *Beloved*, *Jazz* explores the consequences for the Black subject as arbiter of inscription. Morrison does not suggest that any recuperative strategy can be teased from the paradigm’s collapse, but rather that an explicit delineation of its strategies and elision offers the opportunity to consider the construction of the black subject. Denver steps off the porch in *Beloved* from which Dorcas, Joe and Violet enter the City in *Jazz*. The dichotomy of the “home” is displaced into the idealised space of the “City” and narrative strategies are allowed to play. The emphasis upon play is crucial. Morrison allows inscription free reign. She does not, as some critics suggest, situate constructedness as offering a paradigm through which to negotiate identity, she rather recognises it as an ambivalent force. Therefore the chapter examines Morrison’s rupture of a mythic/factual, or insider/outsider binary. It does not suggest that having done this any strategic invocation of a preferred model is propounded.

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5 Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* 231.
Before considering the novels themselves the focus will be upon the cultural
anxieties predicated in the critical employment of “myth” in Morrison analysis. As
Morrison’s quotation hints, it is not that the texts themselves produce a response which
foregrounds “myth”, it is rather that the work “falls in the minds of people into that realm
of fiction”. The choice of verb here, the idea of the work “falling” rather than actively
seeking such a conceptual location emphasises the cultural work being done by the
reading community as well as the propensity of the texts to represent such a position.
This chapter will suggest that the criticism itself produces a set of anxieties which it then
attempts to alleviate. The responses do not critically engage the texts as much as they
focus upon the desires and anxieties they regard the novels as performing.

Having established a particular version of myth in Morrison criticism the chapter
will then consider the relationship of the novels to conceptions of cultural anxiety and
mythic iconography. It will explore their relationship to cultural geographical paradigms
and the texts’ use of spatial construction. Dolores Hayden’s quotation foregrounds
spatial anxiety as a peculiarly American concern, it also provides a point of entry for both
Beloved and Jazz. The notion of the idealised “home” and the relationship of the subject
and community to home as a location securing a sense of belonging will be discussed
with reference to Beloved.

This chapter will, through an analysis of the two texts, argue that Morrison’s
novels do not function primarily as a mythic palliative to the African-American
community. It posits that the desire to construct them as such is a direct consequence of
the anxieties of location the novels perform without offering any specific solution. The
texts produce specific negotiations with actual American spaces which complicate the understanding of them as “fantastic”. Suggestions of unreality produce a critical separation from the “truth”, as Morrison terms it here. Positioning her texts as “mythic” or “fantastic” relegates them politically as they are critically separated from the “material” world. Thus Morrison is marginalised through this critical identification.

Myth will not be constructed as an alternative to the discursive position of the contemporary African-American community, a fantasy version of their lived discourse, but rather as paralleling that discourse both in terms of positionality and materiality. Construction, particularly in terms of space, is the focus of this chapter. Having established its relationship to what is frequently considered to be mythic flight in the novels, the materiality of that construction is emphasised in a discussion of the texts’ relationship to the lived, material spaces of the United States.

Morrison maintains that her works are commonly understood to be “mythic”. How we construct an understanding of the term itself is the subject of the second chapter of this thesis, focusing on Amy Tan. The primary concern in this discussion of Morrison is not to construct a definition of myth, but rather to separate Beloved and Jazz from the binary of mythic fantasy and magic, or as it is commonly paralleled, the aesthetic versus the political, to suggest that the positionality of the texts does not sustain such a split in analysis.

The desire to construct a productive political position from the novels is morphed into the recovery of a culturally positive set of discourses. These are understood as Morrison producing, through the texts, a mythic position for the African-American community. This addresses anxieties about the cultural marginalisation of the
community and ascribes to the texts the power to over-ride the binary they are seen to operate within. The cultural and political ostracism of the African-American community is recovered through the linking of “fantasy”, or “myth” with a material political position. For example, in *A World of Difference, An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels*, Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, state:

The division within the black self is transformed into an energetic and inspiring lifestyle that manages to embrace the contradictions engendered by oppression. Through creative reconstruction of the past […] Morrison restores myths and rituals to the black community.6

In fact, it is not that Morrison “restores myths and rituals to the black community” but rather that the desire of the critic and reader here is for this to be the case. The idea that Morrison’s fiction is primarily concerned with a suitable African-American myth is one that Cynthia Davies advances in her essay “Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”:

The combination of social observation with broadening and allusive commentary gives her fictions the symbolic quality of myth, and in fact the search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison’s central themes.7

“Myth” may be a primary concern of Morrison’s, however, the enthusiasm with which this desire is appropriated by critical thought diverts attention from the complexity of her discussion of it. It instead becomes a search for the mythic paradigms that can be identified within the texts. Morrison’s complication of the term, through the discussion of “truth”, or through the sheer complexity of the narrative positions the critics note, potentially undermines the discussion of that construction. Practically unsustainable

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claims are made for the texts' recuperative mythic force, for example, by K. Sumana in

*The Novels of Toni Morrison, A Study in Race, Gender, Class*:

Morrison succeeds brilliantly in her latest novel, *Jazz*, in arriving at the solution of gender solidarity in terms of fictional art, for the dilemma of African women [...] To conclude, even before Morrison finishes her ambitious trilogy about the historical odyssey of African-Americans we may already recognise her as one of our most important international novelists.⁸

The evangelism of this position may be a result of its political expediency. However, Sumana’s discussion aligns *Jazz* with the idea of the sacred text. The claim that the novel produces a “solution” is tied to Morrison’s status, as Sumana makes claims for Morrison’s “importance”. The indication that *Jazz*’s recuperative value sustains Morrison’s position suggests a process of reification. Sumana regards the text’s value as produced through its “myth” which distances it from critical equivocation and, in fact, tries to secure a reading for a novel which, when Sumana writes, has yet to be written. Philip Page suggests a more mediated position in his discussion of Morrison, *Dangerous Freedom, Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison’s Novels*. Yet he seems surprised at the possibility that the binary of myth and reality can be problematised in the writings of an author who is critically acclaimed, by privileging the mythic potential of her work for the African-American community. He comments upon the binary as he sees it in her work: “Morrison’s fiction is also curiously realistic and mythical”⁹. This is not an observation that he considers at any length and it is this elision which is the focus of interest of this chapter.

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Critics also note that the desire to construct the mythic within the texts is something that the texts works directly against. This is particularly noticeable in discussions of *Jazz*. The narrator of *Jazz* has received a great deal of critical attention through an engagement with the unreliability of the narrative voice, something, again, Morrison foregrounded in her work on the text:

In *Jazz* the dynamite fuse to be lit was under the narrative voice - the voice that could begin with claims of knowledge, inside knowledge, and indisputable authority [...] & end with the blissful epiphany of its vulnerable humanity and its own needs [...] a doorway never needing to be closed [...] I want to imagine not the threat of freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness.10

Here, Morrison privileges the partiality of the narrative voice, and this position will be discussed at length in the second part of this chapter which deals exclusively with *Jazz*. What is foregrounded here is the understanding that the voice is "human", partial. In criticism, the desire for the recuperative power of the mythic, the potential for the alleviation of cultural anxiety if the text is given an authoritative voice that can be extrapolated to Morrison herself, is common. This quotation is taken from Eusebio Rodrigues' essay "Experiencing *Jazz*", which has been published in a number of critical collections dealing with Morrison but here has been taken from *Toni Morrison, New Casebooks*. Rodrigues is discussing the end of *Jazz*:

At the very end the narrator-goddess, awakened by the mysterious power of human love, acutely conscious now of the "division" of the divine she had mentioned in the epigraph, intensely aware of her own aloneness and of her need for a hand and for a healing of division, utters a loud, silent plea that is almost human: "If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because, look, look. Look where your hands are now."11

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Rodrigues constructs the narrator instantly as "goddess" and then works to over-ride the separation, or binary, that he himself recognises. It is the desire to secure what Rodrigues connotes here as the "goddess" in the narrator or the text which can be located in much Morrison criticism. What Rodrigues names the "goddess" is the desire for the political and cultural arbitration of anxieties of belonging, and the myths which succour those anxieties. If, however, a different theoretical paradigm is engaged, in this case that of cultural geography, the discursive weight of critical concentration shifts.

This is something Darlene Erickson gestures towards in her discussion of Beloved in her essay “The Black Search for Place in America”:

Part of my own fascination with the places described in Morrison’s discourse is the fact that they are actual places, places I have known [...] Morrison was born in Lorrain, Ohio in 1931 and when she constructs the stories of her characters, she puts them in real places [...] One can still see ‘safe-haven’ houses, like the one called simply ‘124’ in the novel Beloved in many small Ohio towns and cities.12

This extract highlights the importance of the relationship between textual locations and the physical landscape of the United States, and in this it is unusual. What Erickson draws attention to is that she finds the location of the black community in physical locations empowering:

What it seems to me Toni Morrison is doing in her novels is offering an antidote for the lack of history, the lack of place many blacks have felt in this country. Their sense of homelessness is explained; and it is made understandable.13

Erickson argues that the reference to a specific location offers the black community a place in which to feel rooted. However, Beloved establishes a relationship with the geography of the States which not only maps a site of origin for the black community, but

also radically challenges the cultural location of that community. Through an analysis of space, and its relationship to the physical landscape of the United States, the full scale of Morrison's re-appropriation of not only cultural history, but also landscape, is foregrounded.

What Erickson recognises is the conceptual force of a material relationship to the land and history as being empowering in *Beloved*. It is not the myth of origination which sustains but an actual sense of the physical origins of the community she identifies both herself and the novelist as belonging to. This is not to suggest that the fact/myth truth/fantasy binary is being re-instituted. It is not that Morrison’s texts are culturally valuable because they contain identifiable material references to specific places as well as mythic flight. It is that focusing upon the binary erases the text’s re-negotiation of these oppositions. The materiality of a mythic position complicates a paradigm of recuperation. It focuses attention upon on the problematics of a material negotiation of a culturally and iconographically marginalised position.

The cultural network the novel is commonly predicated upon is shifted when *Beloved* is examined in its relation to the material landscape of the United States. This discussion focuses, as a result, upon the “home”. It is explored here as a material African-American construction, in terms of vernacular architecture. Through this negotiation of physical space images and icons which are central to mainstream white middle-class self-representation are radically re-figured. American discursive hierarchies are challenged through the formation of an understanding of the black community’s central role in the construction of the average American home. Here, *Beloved* is first

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examined to denote the discursive centrality of space to the text. This will lead to a discussion of the relationship of spatial discourses in *Beloved* to Black vernacular architecture. The marginalisation of the central role Black Americans have played in the construction of the “home” – as Hayden argues a concept at the heart of American cultural aspiration – parallels the elision of their cultural position. This is foregrounded in the text, the historical and cultural amnesia about the history of slavery, and the subjection of a community as their position in discursive hierarchy is silenced.

The centrality of the home is examined here, both as material location and as a conceptual space at the heart of American identifications about cultural aspiration and cohesion. It is taken as a paradigm for the text’s problematising of mythic construction as a palliative to cultural anxieties about belonging. The material and the mythic work together in *Beloved* to construct alienation and marginalisation as simultaneously tangible and iconic. The force of this combination is where the discursive power of the novel can be located. Morrison emerges as central to African-American identity politics, but not necessarily as a saviour. The problematisation of her status as myth-maker re-politicises, or re-materialises what is commonly described as “mythic” discourse, which may destroy the cultural palliative but equally serves to halt the process of reification in which the text begins to be co-opted when it is categorised as recuperative myth.

*Beloved*, Morrison’s fifth novel, was first published in 1987. It is set in Ohio, the State of Morrison’s birth, in the mid Nineteenth Century. It is centred upon the legacy of slavery in a family consisting of three generations of women, both dead and alive, who inhabit the house, “124”, simultaneously: Beloved and her sister, Denver, Sethe, their mother, and Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law and community matriarch.
Sethe escapes slavery in Kentucky on the “Sweet Home” farm, to settle with Baby Suggs in “124” and is forced to attempt to kill her own children when her ex slave-master comes to reclaim her and her children, but Beloved is the only child to die. Her two sons flee the trauma they are unable to cope with, but inform the text through references to their absence. The novel is based upon the true story of escaped slave Margaret Garner. At the outset of the novel Beloved, named after her tombstone - it is the only word Sethe can afford - returns to “claim her retribution”\textsuperscript{14} and the text develops discursive relationships between the women of the family, both dead and alive, and the communities in which they live. The black community is encountered, in the main, through specific characters: Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs’ friend and a paternalistic figure in the novel, Paul D, another slave who escapes “Sweet Home” and becomes Sethe’s lover, Ella, one of “124’s” more vocal neighbours, and Lady Jones, Denver’s one-time teacher. The white community is primarily predicated through the various owners of the “Sweet Home” farm.

The conflict between the women living in “124” is played out through spatial conception. The understanding of the centrality of the “home” as location of belonging and iconographically central is clearly recognised here through the means by which the women in the text negotiate their sense of self and their relationship to the communities which circumscribe them, both black and white. Whilst the battle to construct and arbitrate space is fought between Baby Suggs and Beloved, with Sethe and the home as territory, it is Denver who ruptures their relationship to their location and allows a potentially productive relationship to the space of the “home” to be engendered.

\textsuperscript{14} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}, Back Cover.
Before discussing Denver's negotiation of this position the spatial constructions of Beloved and Baby Suggs need to be delineated. Baby Suggs and Beloved personify diametrically opposed spatial demands. Beloved's energy is solely engaged in the maintenance of the subject. Baby Suggs' motivation, her very survival, is met by a different kind of discursive need, she defines herself in relation to the position she maintains within the community: here the local black community. She demonstrates this in the "religious" services she holds in the local "Clearing". The "Clearing" is a central mythic space within the novel, but it is central to the text not only as a space for the performance of ritual and myth, it is also negotiated as central to the construction of the self as a physical location. It also reinforces the idea of Suggs as personification of the power of the collective. The "Clearing" offers a model, then, for spatial construction in *Beloved*:

The Clearing - a wide open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.¹⁵

The suggestion here is clearly that Baby Suggs arbitrates this spiritual and communal space. She sits centrally whilst the "worshippers" wait in the periphery to be invited into the sacred space. The anxiety about spatial construction the text ultimately performs is not present at this point in the narrative. The idea that the "Clearing" is at this point unproblematically Suggs' space has various conceptual repercussions. Her ability to arbitrate it so as to allow her community entry privileges a positivist understanding of the ability to control space. This stands in direct opposition to the spatial arbitration performed in slavery. The idea that one needs to be invited institutes a hierarchy of
ownership. This parallels the dichotomy at the heart of learning to regard oneself as an autonomous individual that all the characters struggle with. Suggs appears to have conquered this fragmentation of the self in her control of the pseudo religious space. However, it also gives her power over the other members of the community, thus paralleling the slave/slave owner relationship when she constructs their identity as worshippers in the space of the Clearing. The respectful understanding of someone else’s space allows the possibility of becoming conceptually free, but the hierarchy Suggs invokes, however benevolently, engenders subjection, which is ultimately what the community rebel against when they turn their backs on both Suggs and Sethe.

These positions are articulated in the novel in various ways as characters come to terms with the idea of an autonomous construction of the self here expressed through a spatial paradigm. Two locations are contrasted throughout the novel: the slave land of Kentucky and the farm known as “Sweet Home” where Sethe has escaped from, and the Ohio safe house “124”. As well as the heavy irony explicit in the titling of the Kentucky farm, it also forms a crucial locational absence within the text. Just as Sethe’s children cannot bear to stay at “124” after Beloved’s murder, so “Sweet Home” is a constant reminder of the idea of home as a purely negative space. It is home as absence representing everything the slave community want to escape. The idea of home as the fundamental horror is just one of the ways in which Morrison performs the complexity of finding a way to write about the trauma of slavery for a United States. It is not only as devastation for the black community, but also that such a fundamentally nihilistic set of conceptions are central to the iconic legacy of North America, the “home” as absence.

15 Morrison, Beloved, 87.
It is based upon a fragmentation of the self which the characters in the text try to negotiate.

For example, when one of the slaves at "Sweet Home", namely Sixo, has a romantic assignation, his understanding of the equivocal nature of conceptual arbitration is performed in his respect for other people's ownership of space. He visits his planned meeting place before he meets his lover there to establish that his plans fit with the previous owner of the space:

It took three months and two thirty-four mile round trips to do it. To persuade her to walk one-third of the way toward him, to a place he knew. A deserted stone structure that Redmen used way back [...] Sixo discovered it [...] and asked its permission to enter. Inside, having felt what it was like, he asked the Redmen's Presence if he could bring his woman there. It said yes.\textsuperscript{16}

This negotiation of space emphasises the distinct understanding Suggs has of the "Clearing". Here Sixo speaks directly to the "Redmen" and they answer him. The "Clearing" is differentiated by being an un-owned space, in that we are told it was "a wide-open place [...] nobody knew for what" \textsuperscript{17}, but although this suggests that it is a space open to Suggs' purposes it is equally an unmediated space. It is not an "empty" space, but rather a place that is not understood as a location. "Nobody" knows its function, it is not that it has never had one. Suggs re-creates a location, she arbitrates space by constructing the "Clearing" as a spiritually reviving location for her community. She is central to its role, clearly evidenced by the way in which the space is physically negotiated. She is able to \textit{sit in the clearing} whilst other wait among the trees. The problematics of this inscriptive power are in fact what drives Baby Suggs to despair. As has been suggested the idea of taking territory and constructing it for your own purposes

\textsuperscript{16} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}, 24.
is registered as an ambivalent force within the narrative as it directly parallels the slave-owner’s delineation of the slave as property.

The choice of the term “ambivalent” is important, as Suggs epitomises the dilemma of inscription as both potentially dominating and recuperative. She desires to construct a spiritually sacred space for the community and for a period achieves this. Equally her aim at “124” is that it should provide a safe space for her family. Suggs’ decimation is the collapse of the binary of inscription. It is instanced by the slave-owner’s invasion of her “home” in his attempt to recapture Sethe and her children. Here she recognises the failure of her discursive limits to exist as a materially safe space. At the same time, however she comes to understand that the material consequences of her inscriptual strength engenders resentment in those she desires to secure the space for, as they understand her behaviour as re-invoking a hierarchy they are attempting to leave behind in their lives as a “free” community. Suggs comes to realise that the hierarchy which ensures her position in the community is in fact what is serving to destroy it. The first part of the collapse occurs when Suggs organises a picnic celebrating the escape of her daughter-in-law. The scene is described as follows:

Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry [...] Baby Suggs’ three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve) [...] Too much they thought. Where does she get it all? [...] Why is she and hers always the center of things? [...] preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. [...] Loaves and fishes were His powers – they did not belong to an ex-slave [...] who had not even escaped slavery -had, in fact, been bought out [...] the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled for pride.18

17 Morrison Beloved, 87.
18 Morrison Beloved, 136/7.
The reference to Suggs’ status, the idea that she is privileged, places her as being both higher and lower in the stratification that the community cannot bear but is unable to function without. It is the resentment registered here that leads directly to the attempted massacre of Sethe’s children. The community are sufficiently embittered that although they hear the slave master is returning to claim his property they don’t warn those at “124”. It is that Suggs is being destroyed both by her inscriptual force and incapacity that she recognises in a conversation with her friend, a benevolent ex-slave named Stamp Paid:

“Big trees like that, both of em together ain’t got the leaves of a young birch.”
“I see what you mean,” she said, but she peered instead at the white house.”
“You got to do it,” he said. “You got to. Can’t nobody Call like you. You have to be there.”
“What I have to do is get in my bed and lay down. I want to fix on something harmless in this world” [...].
“You blaming God,” he said. “That’s what you doing.”
“No Stamp. I ain’t”
“You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?”
“I’m saying they came in my yard.”
“You saying nothing counts.”
“I’m saying they came in my yard.” [...]
“You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?”
“I’m saying they came in my yard.” [...]
“What you looking for? A miracle?”
“No, she said. I’m looking for what I was put here to look for: the back door.”

This dialogue encapsulates Suggs’ rupture through her attempts to inscribe material and conceptual space. The end of the passage gestures at her earlier reversal of the subjugation of the slave within the home. It refers to Suggs arrival at “124”, when one of her first actions was to shut off the back door, or slave-entry to the house. The idea that she is now reverting to the physical reflection of their marginalisation is just one facet of

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19 Morrison Beloved, 178/9.
her new understanding of her in/ability to materially renegotiate location. Equally, her focus upon the invasion of her yard and the sense of defeat is tempered by her refusal to return to what had been her “safe” space. Here Stamp Paid urges her to return to the “Clearing” and the wording of her refusal is important; she refuses to set up the meeting because she wants “to fix on something harmless in this world”. The notion that the location of spiritual security for the community is “dangerous” institutes exactly the problematic nature of inscription Suggs has come to be defeated by.

There is clearly the suggestion that the discourse of the white-man cannot be over-ridden and that it is futile to attempt it. However, the conception that a dominating version of place or space is inevitable as the subject exists in relation to that hierarchy is not a position the text maintains. It also foregrounds the possibility that somehow the network itself is radically reworked. The inescapability of the discursive hierarchy of inscription is invoked by the text at various points and it is not only displayed through Baby Suggs. At one point the novel traces another of the “Sweet Home” slaves’ escape, and refers exactly to the idea of the landscape being beyond the slaves perceptual control just as their subjectivity has been:

He went home. A route that took him smack dab through the middle of the cemetery as old as the sky, rife with agitation of dead Miami no longer content to rest in the mounds that covered them [...] Outraged more by their folly in believing land was holy than by the disturbances of their peace.20

What is crucial here is that although Suggs is beaten by her recognition of conceptual hierarchy the text itself does not perform the same rejection of material complexity to engage in mythic flight. The suggestion that the force of the inscriptual complexity the

20 Morrison Beloved, 155.
text registers is inevitably disintegration and collapse is disturbed and refigured by the character of Denver.

However, before discussing Denver’s renegotiation it is important to locate Beloved in the spatial debate which dominates Sethe through the two positions embodied by Baby Suggs and Beloved. Baby Suggs’ collapse is produced by her understanding of how untenable a negotiation of space as it maintains the right to ascribe meaning whilst simultaneously re-invoking the hierarchy an ex-slave aims to subvert in the process. She is concerned entirely with the relationship of herself to her community. Her location and her spatial conception of safe space, the “home” space, dominates her. Beloved parallels Suggs’ overwhelming proximity to discourses of the location of the self, but whereas for Suggs that is entirely contingent upon her relationship with the community, for Beloved her conceptual life is solely occupied with maintaining the space of the subject.

Throughout the novel Beloved struggles literally to maintain the space of the subject. Her anxiety throughout the text is that her physical form will disintegrate. Whereas Suggs’ collapse is engendered in her relationship to the community, Beloved embodies the collapse. The sense of the internal tension as physical fragmentation is central to Toi Derricote’s version of being a black woman in the contemporary United States, and as such, mirrors Beloved’s espousal of this position in the novel:

Sometimes I think that eventually every identity breaks down to some self that has to learn to live between loneliness and connection, stuck in some primal way […] we are nothing more than some kind of spirit-movement walking through the world clothed in a story of our life.21

Beloved’s existence throughout the novel is caught up in her ability to sustain that fragmented position internally. When she first arrives at “124”, her exhaustion is
understood ostensibly as being the result of a long journey, a paralleling of Sethe's journey from Kentucky to Ohio. Just before Beloved arrives at the house Denver recollects her mother telling her of her thoughts as she collapses at one point on her flight: "Well, at least I don't have to take another step," 22. Beloved's arrival parallels Sethe's, as her weakened physical state preoccupies much of the narrative:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down [...] Everything hurt her but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids [...] It took her the whole of the next morning to lift herself from the ground and make her way through the woods. 23

But the parallel is immediately subverted by the choice of analogy for her exhaustion:

Women who drink champagne when there is nothing to celebrate can look like that [...] But their skin is not like that of the woman breathing near the steps of 124. She had new skin, lineless and smooth. 24

Beloved is not only invoking her mother's journey, she is "new"; whilst exhausted by her travels she is covering new territory, conceptually and physically. It is her space as a "new" subject, the negotiation of herself as a "self" which dominates her. Beloved notes the tenuousness of her materiality as a subject:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it [...] Pieces would drop maybe one at a time [...] Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. 25

Having found and occupied "124" she enters into what is ostensibly a battle for Sethe's affection, but is, in fact a continuation of the struggle to maintain the conceptual space she has delineated for herself. Beloved, unlike the other characters who inhabit

21 Derricotte, 78.
22 Morrison, Beloved, 30.
23 Morrison, Beloved, 50.
24 ibid.
25 Morrison, Beloved, 133.
“124” demands the house exclusively, driving Paul D out first and then attempting to do so with Denver, and ultimately Sethe herself. As one of the female members of the Bluestone Road community notes of Beloved’s arrival “This was an invasion”\(^{26}\). Beloved, having secured the house, makes Sethe lock the doors. She then dominates within the domestic space:

Beloved didn’t move; said “Do it,” Sethe complied. She took the best of everything – first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how she had suffered [...] They grew tired, and even Beloved, who was getting bigger, seemed nevertheless as exhausted as they were [...] But the pain was unbearable when they ran low on food, and Denver watched her mother go without [...] the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade [...] paying attention to everything about Beloved, [...] everything except her basket-fat stomach.\(^{27}\)

Sethe’s physical diminution parallels her daughter’s corporeal expansion. It is equally clear that Beloved is growing large on the identifications she is able to make as a result of the stories she is told. Her maintenance of the space of the subject expands both physically and conceptually as her mother feeds her. The battle of inscription, the ability to create a sustaining myth, is played out here. Just as Suggs is beaten by the inability to construct a negotiation of identity that sustains her family and home without ostracising them from the community, so Beloved plays out a parallel set of discursive difficulties. Beloved’s desperate need to come to conceive of herself as a discrete “I” is only tenable at the expense of those who make that construction possible.

Her ultimate expulsion, therefore, parallels Baby Suggs’ collapse as both characters are forced to recognise the impossibility of constructing a palliative myth within the hierarchies that secure their subjection. All perform the conceptual abuse they

\(^{26}\) Morrison, *Beloved*, 257.
attempt to subvert in different ways. At the centre of the novel is Beloved’s death and the idea that total absence is the only way to override the milieu they inhabit. Sethe’s only means of protection is the violation of the space of the “home”. Her only agency is the arbitration of who executes the violence. As the characters struggle with the meaning of this dichotomy they do not resolve the fragmentation of the self by flight into recuperative myth. They in fact relentlessly perform it; Suggs does so in her disavowal of the “Clearing”, the picnic she organises, and the community’s rejection of her. Beloved’s violence is clear in her relationship to her mother and in her expulsion by the community at the climax of the novel. Sethe, as embodiment of the “home”, and her understanding of it as sacred space, which she arbitrates through her murder of Beloved, is the territory upon which their differing discursive paradigms engage. However, as is demonstrated through their own fates, the meeting of the opposed discursive difficulties and the desire for them to offer a point of escape from subjection, do not liberate Sethe, they combine to force her to the point of collapse.

This collapse is played out spatially in a struggle over Sethe as “home”. The “Clearing” is definitively Baby Suggs’, and although it is deeply problematic, it is also a community space. For example, when the local community finally comes to “124” at the end of the novel to help Sethe drive Beloved out, Sethe conceives of the women in terms of the “Clearing”: “For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves.”28 When Sethe, Denver and Beloved visit the clearing Sethe initially is reminded of the liberation she felt when she first arrived in Ohio:

27 Morrison, Beloved, 241/3.
28 Morrison, Beloved, 261.
Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another. 29

This is an oft quoted passage, taken to indicate not only a central problem for the text but also a resolution to it as Sethe is critically recuperated here. This is complicated by the context of the passage. Sethe invokes the two sacred spaces, “124” and the “Clearing”. The text immediately disrupts the sense of them as in any way sacred, or rather safe, by illustrating that they provide a direct threat to Sethe herself. “124” is clearly a deeply ambivalent space, as the murdered child looks on and perceives Sethe’s comforting reminiscences of that same space. As she sits on Suggs’ stone Sethe wishes she could still derive comfort from her mother-in-law:

Just the fingers she thought. Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it down [...] Sethe bowed her head and sure enough – they were there. Lighter now, [...] but unmistakably caressing fingers [...] Still she was grateful for the effort; Baby Suggs’ long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known. 30

The narrative strategy encourages a sense of relief and a return to Sethe for the peace she had once experienced only to emphasise the decimation of any such potential recuperation:

The fingers touching the back of her neck were stronger now - the strokes bolder [...] harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly toward her wind-pipe [...] Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled. [...] Baby Suggs’ fingers had a grip on her that would not let her breathe. 31

It is Denver who intervenes to save Sethe, “Her feet were thrashing by the time Denver got to her and then Beloved.” 32

29 Morrison, Beloved, 95.
30 ibid.
31 Morrison, Beloved, 96.
32 ibid.
Denver's role here is paradigmatic of her role throughout the novel. Throughout the text Denver materially engages with the problematics of the family's position. She negotiates the fraught location of "124" by recognising the material consequences of the family's position. Unlike Suggs and Beloved she takes the point of collapse as her starting point. She conceptually and physically locates herself in relation to the site of collapse through her negotiation of the porch. She does not "pass on" her role or attempt to escape the trauma enveloping the family, instead she directly engages it.33

Denver's status as central to the negotiation of the "home" predicates a relation to the subjecting discourses of slavery and the marginality of the Black-American in the contemporary United States that does not engender a flight into myth. It rather recognises the materiality both of the need for an iconic engagement and the consequences of its espousal. This is clear from her negotiation of space in the novel. This will be explored and then considered in terms of the text's negotiation of a materially liminal space, that of the porch, and its place in American iconography as a black space.

Denver's spatial negotiation is distinct within the novel. She is differentiated from Sethe, Beloved and Baby Suggs in various ways. First is her engagement with boundaries, the way she employs liminal space. Second she is separated from the other women spatially through her name. Before discussing Denver's mapping within the text it is important to consider the conceptual remove her name creates. Denver is named after the white woman, Amy Denver, who aids Sethe with the birth. One version of Denver's separation from the other women in the novel could be performative. She

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33 Morrison, Beloved, 274. There is much critical discussion of Morrison's choice of the phrase "This is not a story to pass on", see Bibliography.
benefits from a benign association with the white community at her birth, whereas Beloved is circumscribed by her mother’s inability to pay for her to be named more fully on her tombstone.

The discursive implications of Denver’s name extend beyond her proximity to the white girl, however. The fact that she is named after a material space immediately differentiates her, but that it is “Denver”, a Western outpost with enormous cultural and literary currency impacts upon the character.

Denver is an important cultural and literary location: it is the gateway to the West, and as such informs the Frontier literature and cultural mythology about the lone hero striking out into liberated territory. Mark Twain novels such as *Roughing It*, and, in fact, Frontier fiction in general are invoked here, establishing a literary map for Denver connected with central American myths such as the Cowboy. The literary heritage of the connection maps the character onto an East – West shift, linking her to “Classic” American texts such as Kerouac’s *On The Road*, (1957). As such a narrative which is dominated by the journey from the South of the States to the “free” North, is informed here by an equally important “American” journey, that from East to West.

By naming “Denver” after such a culturally loaded material signifier her relationship to the mythic spaces of the United States is established. Her name engages her in two distinct cultural mythographies and maps her at their crux. She is complicated by her mythic status, at once informed by a discourse of liberation and expansion as

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The limits of the thesis do not allow for a comprehensive discussion of the novel’s relationship to the myth of the cowboy. However, the very inspiration for this novel, the story of Margaret Garner, links the text to the complex negotiation of the cowboy as icon. The marginality of the Cowboy’s social status, as opposed to his mythic centrality, forms a link between Denver’s centrality to the text as a result of her acceptance of her social and cultural abjection. This could be explored with specific reference to Cowboy narratives and folklore. It could also engage with the reworking of mythically central figures like the
engendered in Frontier fiction, but also as subject to the objectifying hierarchy of slavery and the journey North on the Underground Railroad.

She embraces the ambivalence of the intersection of these discourses in her negotiation of space. Unlike the three women at "124", Denver does not attempt spatial inscription; either internally as with Beloved, in relation to the space of the "home", as Sethe does, or in terms of the construction of "sacred" and the contingent engagement with hierarchies of space as with Baby Suggs. As Denver recognises, the women are paralysed by their negotiations. Suggs dies in the catatonic state she embraces rather than continuing her conceptual battles, and Denver becomes aware of the exhaustion the battle for inscription is engendering in her mother and sister. Having narrated the state of "124" when Sethe is shrinking and Beloved continues to grow, Denver makes a radical gesture:

Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave behind and go ask somebody for help.35

This episode is crucial in terms of plot development and as Denver differentiates her understanding from that of the other women in "124". She explicitly recognises "124" and its conceptual as well as physical boundedness and sets off to explore her discursive relationship to the rest of the "world". This also means she has to establish an understanding of the house and family itself. Thus she explores her position and identity as a location, recognising the struggle as central to the space of the "I". As "124"s neighbour, Ella, says "The daughter, however, appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door."36

Cowboy being reappropriated through Denver as location informing Denver as character. To do justice to the complexity of these discursive links is beyond the capacity of this chapter but important to indicate.

35 Morrison, Beloved, 243.
36 Morrison, Beloved, 256.
Denver’s radical gesture is crossing her porch. In a flashback she remembers a warning of Suggs':

"Don’t box with me. There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout."

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother’s last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. [...] And then Suggs laughed clear as anything [...] “You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you at all? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my”

But you said there was no defence.

“There ain’t.”

Then what do I do?

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.”

It came back.37

Denver’s negotiation of her grandmother’s understanding is paramount. She takes up the struggle. What is privileged here is the boundary, and her consideration of crossing it as an explicit engagement with their trauma. The primacy of the porch is fundamental. It is her definition of the boundary between her house and the “world”. On her first journey, it is the details of the porches that she notices as she walks: “The first house had two steps and a rocking chair on the porch.”38 When she comes to the house where she first looks for help, the porch of Mrs. Lady Jones’ house is personified: “The stone porch sitting in a skirt of ivy, pale yellow curtains at the windows.”39 Having made the gesture, the help the family needs is given through a negotiation of the porch:

Two days later Denver stood on the porch and noticed something lying on the tree stump at the edge of the yard. She went to look and found a sack of white beans.40

37 Morrison, Beloved, 244/5.
38 Morrison, Beloved, 245.
39 Morrison, Beloved, 246.
40 Morrison, Beloved, 248/9.
Thus the porch becomes the spatial means by which Denver begins to secure the aid of the community in the recovery of her mother, and the management of Beloved. Her initial gesture, stepping off the porch, privileges it in her understanding as a point at which the family's collapse can be played out. Denver's use of liminal space is crucial.

The definition of the "porch" as liminal space is taken here from Georg Simmel, and his essay "Bridge and Door". In his essay, "Bridge and Door", Simmel analyses two constructions he considers to be central to a discursive understanding of landscape: the bridge and the door. His understanding of the "door" serves as a useful definition of what the porch comes to represent for Denver. He defines the centrality of the door as follows:

A piece of space was thereby brought together and separated from the whole remaining world. By virtue of the fact that the door forms, as it were, a linkage between the space of human beings and everything that remains outside it, it transcends the separation between the inner and the outer.41

This definition can successfully be extended to encompass the porch. It represents exactly this threshold for Denver. It forms the point between the "inner and the outer", or by extension, the self and the other. It is this ambivalent space which she employs. The definition between the "inner and the outer" is central to the other women's conceptual collapse, and rather than trying to locate herself with the binary, she identifies with the gap between the two as defined here by Simmel. He goes on to extrapolate the importance of the door's function:

It is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, that it can place itself outside it.42

It is the loss of this conceptual freedom which Suggs gestures at and Denver employs. Through her location on the porch she is able to reconceptualise her link with the “rest of the world”. The threshold is what allows the self/community or inner/outer binary to operate. Simmel states the importance of this boundary is its potential for manipulation. The subject can institute it, but also “can [...] remove this boundary again”. The ability to situate this liminal space, to place and then reject or alter it is fundamental to Denver’s ability to profit her family through its negotiation. Simmel gestures at its importance to the self as a conceptual space:

The human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border. [...] But just as the formless limitation takes on shape, its limitedness finds its significance and dignity only in that which the mobility of the door illustrates: in the possibility at any moment of stepping out of this limitation into freedom.43

It is this very “possibility” that Denver reconstructs, and is thus able to operate effectively as a subject. Simmel’s understanding of the need to situate the border in order to establish “significance” is paralleled by the conceptual collapse of the characters in Beloved. The objectification of the slave places the women simultaneously in binary terms. They are both “inside and outside” conceptually and physically as they cannot sustain the borders of their body with dignity. Denver’s use of the porch illustrates her radical position. She does not understand herself in relation to the binary the women operate under, but rather operates within the liminal space of the porch locating herself between the community and the self. By embracing the liminal space she engenders the possibility of reworking the community/house binary whilst occupying both.

42 Frisby, and Featherstone, eds., 172.
43 Frisby, and Featherstone, eds., 174.
The liminality of the idea of the “I” to Denver, although pivotal to her understanding of the porch, is demonstrated throughout the novel. For example, whereas Sethe describes her desire to locate her children outside the “real world” Denver steps into:

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.44

Denver conceptualises her “dignity”, as Simmel terms it, also by placing those things she holds most precious at a spatial remove from her. She locates her most precious associations, those that maintain her, beyond herself:

Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped upon them [...] None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment [...] But it was gone now. Whooshed away in the blast of a hazelnut man’s shout, leaving Denver’s world flat mostly, with the exception of an emerald closet standing seven feet high in the woods. Her mother had secrets – things she wouldn’t tell; things she halfway told. Well Denver had them too.45

However, she locates this idealised space within the “real world”; in that she is not, like her mother, searching for an anterior space. She creates a safe space at a distance from herself, but it is still negotiable, she constructs it so that it is separate but, unlike Sethe, she has access. She returns to the safety of the “emerald closet”46 at various points in the novel:

During the first days after Paul D moved in, Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big.47

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44 Morrison, Beloved, 163.
45 Morrison, Beloved, 37/8.
46 Morrison, Beloved, 104. It would also be interesting to develop the discussion of the emerald closet in relation to magic realism and, for example, The Wizard of Oz. Unfortunately space does not allow for any sustained development at this point.
47 Morrison, Beloved, 104.
Denver's spatial mapping is distinct from the other occupants of "124" both through her ability to situate conceptions central to her "dignity" as a subject, and in her embrace of the liminal space of the porch. Her employment of marginality as the central space thus complicates notions of belonging and the binary force of an insider/outsider subject/object relationship, the invocation of which destroys the other women in "124".

The porch is therefore central to Denver's re-mapping of the family at "124" in relation to the Bluestone Road community. The material existence of the porch as central to American concepts of the home will be explored here as a black construction. Just as Denver recognises the materiality of her family's distress and uses the porch to get food for them, so the porch as a material space is fundamental to this discussion.

To return to Dolores Hayden's assertion, the idea of the dream home is central to an understanding of contemporary American aspirations; it is a powerful icon:

For the last two centuries, the quintessential American intellectual, political and architectural dilemma has been: dream house or ideal city?\(^4^8\)

Part of the idealised space that the home represents is the porch; the image of the swinging chair on the porch is central to mainstream America's self-representation. If we consider television series like *Dawson's Creek*\(^4^9\), an excellent representation of what America considers aspirational, the series repeatedly features scenes where various characters court, cry and debate on the porch. This is a program aimed at the young American market. It is not only idealistic in terms of a world which places the teen experience centrally, it is equally anodyne in its representation of issues facing contemporary America. What is particularly important here is that it is an entirely white

\(^{4^8}\) Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 231.

\(^{4^9}\) Williamson, Kevin (Creator), *Dawson's Creek* (Columbia Tristar, 1998-)
series. It in no way reflects the cultural diversity of the United States. It masks its colour bias in ways documented by many film critics, creating a "diversity" which somehow does not appear to ignore non-white Americans but rather erases them.

Another excellent example of this construction of the porch as a white middle-class site that protects and nurtures as it tentatively and selectively combines with the rest of the world is *The Waltons*\textsuperscript{50}. Dr Pepper and Budweiser consider it to be sufficiently "all American" as to feature in a recent set of commercials. Dr Pepper consider our understanding of its centrality as a middle American setting is sufficiently well established for it to be a viable topic of satire. A young couple, a slight, shy man and a taller blonde prom queen beauty sit awkwardly on the porch and discuss their first time, here referring to their first taste of the drink. Examples of the employment of this wholesome site in contemporary culture can be listed ad infinitum, but what is crucial for understanding *Beloved’s* relation to the cultural currency of the porch as it is currently employed, is the origin of the porch in vernacular architecture.

This is a description of the function of porches in American architecture, but it could equally be a piece of literary criticism of Morrison’s *Beloved*. It is taken from John Michael Vlach’s *The African American Tradition in Decorative Arts*:

> The porch can be seen as a piece of the house that is part of the street — or a piece of the street incorporated into the house. From either perspective it is certainly a zone of transition, which draws the resident and the passer-by together.\textsuperscript{51}

This is not radical, but the assertion of John Michael Vlach which follows this comment is pertinent to the discussion of Morrison’s novel. He asserts that:

\textsuperscript{50} Hamner, Earl (Creator)*The Waltons* (1972-1997)

It is not unreasonable to suppose that millions of African slaves upon whom the Europeans depended taught them more about tropical architecture than they cared to remember. Of the black and white immigrants who faced the American South, the African was better prepared [...] The front porch may be another manifestation of the common wisdom of black folk.52

An immediate response to this may be - if this is the case why is it not commonly recognised? One answer is implied in the quotation, in that it would not have been thinkable actually to credit the slave with the superior architectural skills. This is recognised by Wilbur Zelinsky in his text *The Enigma of Ethnicity*, where he recognises that the "steamroller impact of assimilation" 53 offers "scant opportunity"54 for ethnic architectural expression.

Vlach himself submits another possible answer:

The impact of African architectural concepts has ironically been disguised because their influence has been so widespread; they have been invisible because they are so obvious. [...] If we accept only those buildings which absolutely look African as examples of black architecture, we will remain ignorant of how successfully African architecture has been incorporated into the mainstream American building.55

Vlach places Black American architecture centrally in contemporary American culture by tracing the feature to its origin. As Sharon Zukin asserts in her chapter "Postmodern Urban Landscapes: Mapping Culture and Power" for the collection entitled *Modernity and Identity*, the idea of the vernacular, whether it be architectural or linguistic, is particularly amorphous. Pinning it to a particular model is difficult and part of understanding its force is to engage with its fluidity as a construct:

54 Zelinsky, *Ethnicity*, 72.
Vernacular, like other traditions, may be invented on the basis of an imagined past, or restored as a basis of an entirely different landscape.\textsuperscript{56}

The idea that it is difficult to ascribe a particular cultural identity to the architecture, let alone a specific architect, is what Vlach recognises in his attribution of the porch to a particular community.

\textit{Beloved} itself tackles a history almost too painful to conceive, in which Morrison uses the porch as the young black woman's threshold with the brutal white world. An understanding of the porch as a black construct in a white world institutes discourses of creation and ability as well as invoking a history of oppression. Denver's negotiation of the porch is the fulcrum to the recovery of her family and herself. \textit{If} we understand the porch as a black American construction then its central function in \textit{Beloved} displays exactly the positive liminality Simmel identifies in its role. It functions as a compound location, at once inside and outside. It is, potentially, a black construction at the centre of the aspirational iconography of the American home.

The text thus takes mythic discourse and materialises it, both in Denver's employment of spatial co-ordinates, but also in the text's gesturing towards a specific material space and its roots as an elided black construction. The porch complicates the hierarchies that subjugate, creating a conceptual gap, much as the trauma of slavery fractures the conceptual framework the women cling to. Denver uses the point of fracture as a space, a point of location, seeing it not as the site of collapse, but the only possible point of "significance".

\textsuperscript{55} Vlach, \textit{The African American Tradition} 136-8.

**Jazz: Ambivalence, Rupture and “the Concrete Thrill of Borderlessness”**

I think it is necessary to articulate the connections between material and metaphorical conceptions of space in order to understand the sources and potential of metaphorical power.57

Beloved’s materialisation of mythic spaces has been explored, and led to a re-evaluation of the parallel binaries thus instituted, and I have argued that liminal space offers a locational nexus by which to engage with conflicting discursive positions. The idea of this liminality is something Morrison is explicit about in her discussion of Jazz. It is worth reiterating Morrison’s foregrounding of liminal spaces through her discussion of Jazz in her essay “Home”:

> In Jazz the dynamite fuse to be lit was under the narrative voice - the voice that could begin with claims of knowledge, inside knowledge, and indisputable authority [...] & end with the blissful epiphany of its vulnerable humanity and its own needs.

I want to imagine not the threat of freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness.58

It is commonly noted that Beloved and Jazz form two parts of a trilogy. Equally, with this profession of her interest in the “thrill of borderlessness”, Morrison suggests here that this is a tangential shift from the discursive focus of Beloved. The discussion of the liminality of Denver’s position indicates that the border preoccupies Beloved. The establishment of this particular conceptual location informs Jazz.

In the two novels, Morrison examines through spatial co-ordinates the mapping of belonging, as a discrete subject identification, and as the black community relates to the conceptual hierarchy by which its is marginalised. Frequently in the critical engagement

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57 Smith, *Mapping the Futures* Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner, eds. 98.
with the two books forming a trilogy, it is argued that Beloved and Dorcas form one of the central bonds between the two texts. However, through the location of the “porch” there is a discernible tie between the spatial negotiator of Beloved, Denver, and the source of much of Jazz’s textual ambivalence, Dorcas. Denver’s links to the porch have been established. In Jazz, the reader is given an account of Dorcas’ loss of her parents. They are killed in a house fire from which she escapes:

   Back in East St. Louis, as the little porch fell, wood chips – ignited and smoking – exploded in the air. One of them must have entered her stretched dumb mouth and traveled down her throat because it smoked and glowed there still.59

The link through the porch here is one that plays out the materialisation of metaphorical space, as a part of the “porch” becomes lodged within Dorcas. Through her physical absorption of the porch this location is introduced to Jazz and extrapolated. Having complicated the idealised “home”, the attention of Jazz is focused on that other idealised space, “the City.”60 Through the deconstruction of these sets of binaries, which Proulx translates to other community paradigms61, Morrison posits a specific understanding of this positionality as being a consequence of the relation of white hegemony to the black population of the contemporary United States.

Jazz, Morrison’s sixth novel, and the second encompassing a trilogy including Beloved and Paradise, was first published in 1992, and features the Trace family, Joe and Violet. Jazz begins with much of the action of the text having already taken place. It is set in New York at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. It recounts the story of the couple who move from the countryside of Virginia to New York, where they

60 The conflation here is deliberate, this can be read as a citation of Dolores Hayden’s quotation referring to the City, or of Morrison’s use of the phrase “the City” throughout Jazz. Here the citation is Jazz, p.7
settle happily until Violet begins to be affected by her inability to have children. This distress signals the decline of the marriage, and Joe begins an affair with a younger woman, Dorcas, whom he ultimately kills. The narrative traces the couple’s history back to their birth, and their “originating” narratives are told in parallel to the events that occur in “the City”. The narrative ultimately moves back to the “present” as the couple continue to live on the same street where they perpetuate a relationship with the dead girl’s best friend, Felice. Stories are re-told as the reader is taken back to Virginia and encounters the characters of Joe and Violet’s childhood. Dorcas’ history is repeatedly narrated, refracted through various narrators: Felice tells Joe of the night of Dorcas’ death, and Dorcas’ Aunt, Alice Manfred, and Joe’s friend, Malvonne’s give versions of Joe’s love affair with Dorcas. I focus upon the city of New York and the spatial relationship predicated in the Traces’ journeys through the country and the city. The idealised spaces Dolores Hayden refers to will be explored in Morrison’s construction of the space of New York as a potentially idealised mythic location in American cultural geography.

Much of the focus of Jazz criticism has been upon its predication of landscape. It has concentrated upon the migration between the country and the city within the text, as Deborah H Barnes suggests:

She proffers a unique depiction of migration that interrogates the destructive and distorting effects of physical and emotional dislocation on culturally mobile blacks.62

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61 See chapter Three which is entirely concerned with a discussion of Proulx.
As well as much of the interest centring on the migration narratives, the text is also commonly understood as presenting a constructive model of experience for those who "move on up"\textsuperscript{63}, as Joe and Violet come to terms with leaving "home". This is negotiated through the narrative reconstruction of their upbringings. For Joe it is important for him to address the "loss", or rather inability to know, his mother. For Violet, it is about "finding" the person she was in the country. This is not to suggest that Morrison romanticises American rural life at the turn of the century. Nor is the desire here to engage with Williams' debates about the reciprocal mythic reconstruction of one in relation to the other. Morrison is clear about the push/pull factors in country city migration: the push from the poverty Violet's family are subject to, for example, or the lure of cities where "all the houses had separate rooms and water came to you"\textsuperscript{64}. However, the text is still considered to offer a positive model for the ability of the black community to place itself in contemporary American society:

Jazz, however, is not only descriptive but also prescriptive, [...] In it Morrison serves as the reader's cultural mentor, by inscribing a solution to the culture shock that ravages the spirits and minds of many aspiring, upwardly mobile African Americans [...] Jazz is a parable of resilience and recovery that shows contemporary blacks not only how to "move on up" but also how to survive the good life at the top.\textsuperscript{65}

The idea that Jazz is "prescriptive" is what is being challenged here. It does not create a mythic palliative to an engagement with the "Country" and the "City". It does not attempt to recuperate the Black-American subject or community through a re-working of the cultural iconography of the "City". Rather it explores the liminal space constructed in

\textsuperscript{63} Barnes, \textit{Toni Morrison's Fiction}, Middleton ed., 294.

\textsuperscript{64} Morrison, \textit{Jazz}, 106.

\textsuperscript{65} Barnes, \textit{Toni Morrison's Fiction}, Middleton ed., 294.
Beloved, suggesting that cultural recovery is not a matter of inverting ideologically dominating structures to suit the marginalised group. This discussion of Jazz will focus upon the celebration of the lack of authority, knowledge or truth in the novel, as understood through its relationship to the material American landscape, suggesting very different conclusions about any “inscriptions” this text may make upon its subjects and objects alike.

This equivocation over cultural recovery can be illustrated in terms of both Violet and Joe. Both appear to find the strength to cope with the City through a rediscovery of the country. Violet tells Felice, the dead girl’s best friend, of how she has recovered:

‘I messed up my own life,’ she told me. ‘Before I came North I made sense and so did the world[…].’
‘Who ever heard of that? Living in the City was the best thing in the world. What can you do out in the country? […]How many trees can you look at? ‘She said it wasn’t like that, looking at a bunch of trees. She said for me to go to 143rd Street and look at the big one on the corner and see if it was a man or a woman or a child. 66

This quotation seems to point to the redemptive quality of the countryside. It suggests the freedom to notice nature, here instanced by Violet’s attention to the tree, even in an urban environment. This understanding is disrupted by Violet’s post-script to her instruction: “What’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” 67. What becomes crucial here is not a country/city dichotomy. It is rather the idea of inscription which possesses Violet. She is interested in the idea of construction, but not necessarily in a hegemonic fashion. She is not concerned with overriding a common understanding, but just one that will conjure the world for herself as she wants. It is not that the country offers any form of security through a kind of natural purity. She

66Morrison, Jazz, 207-8
emphasises instead that its construction is in some way naturalised; its ideological structure is cloaked. She is explicitly negotiating her relationship to its construction.

The "City" throughout the text points to its own immateriality in making the delusion of permanence more difficult to maintain. Violet is dwelling on the freedom to construct which returns her "to herself" and points to the thrill of being free of any authoritative discourse. It is this "borderlessness" which permeates the text according to Morrison herself.68 This discursive ambivalence underpins the relation of the city to the country in this text. The country origin of Violet and Jo does not provide a comfortably secure originating point from which the couple map their development as exemplified by critics like Philip Page in his text *Dangerous Freedom, Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. His criticism predicates exactly such a reading of the "postmodern" city and its relationship to the rural sites. He suggests Joe and Violet leave the countryside to "recover" themselves in the urban landscape:

Temporal dimension always has a spatial counterpart in Morrison's fiction. The present is urban and North, whereas the past is rural and South [...] This postmodern dialectic between present North and past South provides meaning and structure to Morrison's novels. [...] The negotiations occur primarily through memory [...] in *Jazz* both Joe and Violet's memories of Vesper County must be encompassed and transcended to achieve stability.69

This argument engages Page's position. *Jazz* does not attempt "stability", it is rather the reader's anxiety which demands recovery within the novel. In *Jazz* the country and the city are constructed as two equally insecure ideological structures.

68 Lubiano ed., 9
69 Page, 29/30.
This is borne out in Joe’s negotiation of the “City”. Joe describes his natural propensity for the countryside, but goes on to explain his survival in the urban environment:

Folks thought I was the one to be counted on never to be able to stomach the city. Piled up buildings? Cement paths? Not me [...] they say the City makes you lonely, but since I’d been trained by the best woodsman ever, loneliness was a thing couldn’t get near me.  

The most important part of this extract is Joe’s reference to how he was able to inhabit both the “City” and the country. Joe cites his training as being essential to his survival. One of the features of *Jazz* is the re-telling of the narratives of Joe and Violet’s upbringing. Joe narrates his adoption and then his selection, along with his best friend Victory, by the “Hunter’s Hunter” who trains him:

“...The second change came when I was picked out and trained to be a man. To live independent and feed myself no matter what [...] I was picked, Victory too, by the best man in Vesper County to go hunting with. [...] A hunter’s hunter, that’s what he was. Smart as they come. Taught me two lessons I lived by all my life. One was the secret kindness of white people – they had to pity a thing before they could like it. The other, well I forgot it.

"It was because of him, what I learned from him, made me feel more comfortable in the woods than in the town."  

This training, however, does not just establish Joe’s skill as a hunter of animals, it is about survival in a hostile environment. The countryside here is not a stable, originating environment but one which Joe has to learn to negotiate so that he can survive. Joe’s major error is that he is mistaken in believing that the code of “the Hunter’s Hunter” is a universal one.

At the outset of the novel we are told of Dorcas’ death, but the novel traces Joe’s hunt of Dorcas, which culminates in her murder. On his urban trail Joe tracks the
“horseshoes” on Dorcas’ face. It is her acne, translated into a rural - or rather ‘hunter’s’ sign - which Joe positions centrally in his hunt. This development of the constructed nature of the “sign” - the decision to create the path through Dorcas’ acne – indicates the disruption of inscription as a hegemonic force. Through this appropriation of meaning, Joe positions Dorcas as prey. Although he reminds himself of the code of the hunter, which should protect Dorcas, he takes the hunt to its logical conclusion, defying both moral logic and the imperative of his feelings for her. Joe is unable to use the code he has learnt in this environment.

This raises questions about the materiality of experiences of landscapes, and the force of inscription as that which secures the landscape as material location. What makes the country Joe’s “home” is his training in it rather than a natural propensity. There he is able to create meaning through code, here the comforting solidity of a bond between sign and meaning is demonstrated as a fallacy.

Perhaps one of the ways in which this is most clearly demonstrated is in the “gap” at the centre of Joe’s cultural “recovery”72 in his recapitulation of his past. Joe narrates two searches simultaneously. One is for his mother, in the country, the other for his lover, in the city:

Joe is wondering about all this on an icy day in January. He is a long way from Virginia, and even longer from Eden. As he puts on his coat and cap he can practically feel Victory at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas.73

Victory, Joe’s childhood best friend and hunting partner, exists simultaneously in both and neither hunts. He is not in New York whilst Joe searches for Dorcas, nor is he

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70 Morrison, Jazz, 126-9.
71 Morrison, Jazz, 125/6.
72 Barnes, Toni Morrison’s Fiction, Middleton ed., 293.
present when Joe finds his mother's lair. The simultaneous searches mutually inscribe
one another, as does their culmination in frustration. At the end of both he has access
neither to his mother nor to Dorcas. Joe can locate his mother through his training, the
material landscape fits his conceptual framework, and through his skills as a hunter he
discovers his mother's "set". She lives practically as an animal, refusing even to
demonstrate whether or not she can speak. What is fundamental to Joe's narrative is that
he locates her space. It is a successful negotiation of the "natural" landscape:

He felt peace at the beginning [...] Although it was a private place, with an
opening closed to the public, once inside you could do what you pleased: disrupt
things, rummage [...] Change it all to a way it was never meant to be. The colour
of the stone walls had changed from gold to fish-gill blue by the time he left.74

He does not get to see his mother, and although it is presumably the setting of the sun
which alters the colour the walls appear, it is constructed so as to suggest that it is Joe
himself who effects this change. It is not an encounter with his mother that brings this
search to a head, but his access to her interior space. Joe's second hunt continues, but
where one pattern of behaviour has saved him, for example, from swamps that could
"swallow your foot or even your whole self"75 the second hunt climaxes in Dorcas'
murder.

The hunt is engendered even in the naming of the protagonist, Joe. Just as with
Denver, Morrison's naming of Joe performs a crucial role in the text. His full name is
"Joe Trace". He offers an understanding of this nominal inheritance:

"They know you at Williams place, Williams is what you ought to call yourself."

73 Morrison, Jazz, 180.
74 Morrison, Jazz, 184.
75 Morrison, Jazz, 182.
"I said, 'They got to pick me out. From all of you all, they got to pick me. I'm Trace, what they went off without.'"\textsuperscript{76}

Joe’s inadvertent linguistic play is indicative of the central ambivalence to inscription in the novel. He identifies his name as part of a code of belonging, just as he invests in his code as a hunter to offer him a means of negotiating both “the City” and the country. Throughout the novel, in fact, his inscriptive capacity is all the family materially own, exemplified in the Traces’ relationship with Felice, Joe’s dead lover’s best friend. Through her Joe and Violet learn to locate their frustrations and disappointments. Felice is a material icon around which the couple orient themselves. As demonstrated in their use of Felice, all that is left is the ability to play with the borders themselves, as their materiality is exploded within the text. The notion of a knowable landscape is undermined. This is instanced in an anti-natural image at the centre of Joe’s search:

He had searched the hillside for the tree - the one whose roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreating to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic its roots climbed.\textsuperscript{77}

The landscape does not nourish and feed. Joe survives, as does the tree Violet focuses on, by “defying logic”, or by inscribing locations. It is through a rejection of what is traditional inscriptive system, which understands the tree’s relationship to the landscape to be natural, that the tree is able to survive. As Virilio states at the opening of his essay “The Over-exposed City” published in Neil Leach’s collection of essays \textit{Rethinking Architecture, A Cultural Reader}, a disruption of traditional binaries is central to his argument. Just as Simmel re-conceptualises the inside/outside binary in his discussion of the “door” so Virilio complicates the country/city dualism:

\textsuperscript{76} Morrison, \textit{Jazz}, 124.
\textsuperscript{77} Morrison, \textit{Jazz}, 182.
If the metropolis is still a place, a geographic site, it no longer has anything to do with the classical oppositions of city/country nor centre/periphery. In fact, examining the similarities between Virilio’s conception of the contemporary city and Morrison’s own comments on Jazz will highlight the relation of the cityscape in Jazz to cultural analysis of the City as an ambivalent site. To recapitulate, Morrison describes, in her essay “Home”, her desire to light a fuse “under the narrative voice - the voice [...] with claims of knowledge, inside knowledge and indisputable authority.” Virilio argues that narrative instability is central to postmodernism:

At issue here is no longer the ‘crisis of modernity’, the progressive deterioration of commonly held ideals, the proto-foundation of the meaning of History [...] The problem now is with the narrative itself, with an official discourse or mode of representation, connected until now with the universally recognised capacity to say, describe and inscribe reality.

Through this very problematisation of inscription, Morrison explores the force of the binaries under which the black community operates as a marginalised voice. By embracing the point at which the oppositions interact, she plays out the consequences for the narrative voice and the position of the subject as arbitrator of that discursive instability, rather than victim of it. She draws attention to the possibility of complicating discursive analyses of race when it is freed from traditional racial models. She argues that although “the anxiety of belonging” is a central contemporary metaphor, it does not mean that previous discursive frameworks are not still operating:

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79 Lubiano ed., 9. For a fuller version of the quotation see page 1 of this text.
80 Virilio, Rethinking Architecture, Leach ed., 389.
81 See discussion of Wilbur Zelinsky in Chapter Two which focuses on Tan’s writing.
These figurations of nationhood and identity are frequently as raced themselves as the originating racial house that defined them. When they are not raced, they are [...] imaginary landscape, never inscape; Utopia, never home.\textsuperscript{82}

Morrison draws attention to the ideological hegemonic veil Virilio refers to. She draws a distinction between the naturalised tropes that form the conceptual framework which destroys the women of “124” and operates upon the characters of Jazz, and the ability to construct and inscribe space as a conceptual tool theoretically available to all. The quotation also places centrally the importance of space to this debate. One of the ways this is demonstrated is through Morrison’s decision to bind the essay with a spatial metaphor. The essay, “Home”, is the first in a collection called \textit{The House that Race Built}. This is a publication aimed at political engagement and re-invigoration in terms of black cultural marginalisation. The very naming of the texts suggests the importance of constructions of space and the physical location of the Black contemporary American in the United States to contemporary political debates. Morrison indicates the problematics of inscription as Joe attempts to arbitrate his relationship to the city by utilising the conceptual “training” he believes to answer the demands being made upon him. Virilio demonstrates that the collapse of narrative authority has inevitable consequences for our understandings of contemporary geographical space. He continues from identifying the problem of narrative authority to perceptions of space:

Thus, the crisis in conceptualisation of ‘narrative’ appears as the other side of the crisis of conceptualisation of ‘dimension’ as a geometrical narrative, the discourse of a measurement of a reality visibly offered to all.\textsuperscript{83}

In fact, the instances of this conceptual “crisis” are directly translatable to Morrison’s novels. The negotiation of “home” in \textit{Beloved} is ultimately achieved through Denver’s

\textsuperscript{82} Lubiano ed., 10-11
mapping of herself onto the community in such a way as to sustain both locations. In *Jazz* the collapse of the City as naturalised material space is at once terrifying and liberating. Fundamentally, however, the novel complicates the idea of naturalised space which is its radical gesture. For example, aside from the country/city dichotomy already explored, Virilio speaks of a different kind of day/night opposition in this postmodern city:

The day has been changed. A new day has been added to the astronomers’ solar day, to the flickering day of candles, to the electronic light. It is an electronic false day.\(^8^4\)

This electronic sunset is one that the narrator speaks of in *Jazz*:

But I have seen the city do an unbelievable sky. Redcaps and dining-car attendants who wouldn’t think of moving out of the City sometimes go on at length about country skies they have seen from the windows of trains. But there is nothing to beat what the city can make of a nightsky. It can empty itself of surface [...] there are bottles too, made of glass beautiful enough to rival stars.\(^8^5\)

This eulogy to what is “electronic false-night” continues for two pages. What Virilio echoes here is Morrison’s use of the adjective “thrilling” in her discussion of borderlessness. Here Virilio identifies this collapse as a “crisis”, equally, Morrison’s version encompasses fear and joy. The potential of this collapse is at once liberating and damaging, as both recognise. Morrison advances the ability to enter into the crisis, rather than to be situated within a static binary. She allows the Black community the status of subject, as opposed to object in that paradigm. The engagement itself offers a potentially radical position. However, unlike criticism’s co-option of her, she does not promise any mythic salve as a consequence, she only articulates the potential of the position.


\(^8^4\) Virilio, *Rethinking Architecture*, Leach ed., 383
Morrison’s comments are made here in the context of what she conceives to be politically empowering. This is not about liberation through the play of fantasy, it is rather that conceptual freedom is potentially radical. In fact, the collection in which these statements were published focuses upon political empowerment. The essays are concerned with the politics of the Black American citizen’s cultural position, the book is not a collection of literary theory essays. This begins to indicate the centrality of these debates to American cultural mythography, and not only theories of narrative construction.

Morrison uses space in both “Home” and Jazz as a means of foregrounding marginalising tropes in order to deconstruct them. As such spatial discourses become tools to deconstruct marginalising binaries. For Virilio this same relation of space to postmodernism is paradigmatic of urban experience internationally. Jazz can be read as offering a relationship to the actual American city which serves as a model for the contemporary bi-cultural subject’s experience in post 1990 American literature.

The distinctive representation of the City in Jazz performs much of the text’s ambivalent relation to hegemonic discourses of space. The city, or rather “the City”\textsuperscript{86}, in this text is at once specific and universal. It is clearly New York, we are told this through references to parts of the City, for example Felice cites “Tiffany’s on Thirty-Seventh Street”\textsuperscript{87} in a story about her negotiation of the space of the “home” and her relationship to her mother. Morrison, however, never names New York in the text. It could be argued that this is simply because it is the Big Apple, the City, but as further examination

\textsuperscript{85} Morrison, Jazz, 35.
\textsuperscript{86} Morrison, Jazz, p. 7 This is just one example of a phrase which is used constantly throughout the text.
\textsuperscript{87} Morrison, Jazz, 200.
will indicate there is far more to New York's special status in this novel than its privileging as the metropolis of the United States.

In Virilio's conception of the current "crisis" in contemporary space, his description uses imagery which is important to our understanding of how American urban street planning provides an excellent paradigm for the collapse of "dimension", which he suggests is an inevitable part of postmodern life. He states that:

From here on, constructed space occurs within an electronic topology where the framing of perspective and the gridwork weft of numerical images renovate the division of urban property.  

This "gridwork [...] of numerical images" is a superb description of the street references through which both the characters themselves and the readers negotiate "the City". This is not to universalise the novel, this form of numerical grid refers specifically to the urban landscape of North America. Not only does the grid-iron street pattern dominate urban developments in the States, but also the use of a numerical system to designate the urban street layout predominates. This creates a pattern of urban identity which collapses the differences between American urban locations. For example, Alice, Dorcas' Aunt, lists the places she has felt scared in:

Alice had been frightened for a long time - first she was frightened of Illinois, then of Springfield, Massachusetts, then Eleventh avenue, Third Avenue, Park Avenue. Recently she had begun to feel safe nowhere South of 110th Street.

This quotation appears to move from the general to the specific. It initially locates Alice's fear in a State, moving then from town to street, this invokes a naturalised narrative strategy, the transition from the general to the specific. I take it to be indicative

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88 Virilio, Rethinking Architecture, Leach ed., 383
of an entirely different pattern. The complexity of naming in the United States is referred to and will be explored to at greater length in the following discussion. Here critical attention is focused upon the numbering of the streets. This uniform designation will be found in almost every urban centre in the States. Streets are not only built to the same plan but they are frequently numbered in the same way throughout North American urban developments. Therefore what appears as specificity is part of the "thrilling" collapse of boundaries Morrison speaks of. Although we assume it is New York, the very fact that it could be Eleventh Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona, or Third Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee, or Park Avenue, Denver, Colorado is where the collapse occurs. This list could continue at huge length but the point is clear. All of these cities could conceivably be "the City"\(^90\). Thus the City attains iconic status through its all encompassing presence. The city is elided whilst apparently being constantly foregrounded. The location of Eleventh avenue, for example, is at once hyper-specific and entirely unreferential. Morrison’s city is at once New York and every town of reasonable size in the United States.

The United States is one of the few countries where the specific location of Alice’s fear simultaneously pinpoints and explodes location. This binary opposition is reinstituted in the use of street names. Whilst Park Avenue could be seen as a flag for New York, as a result of urban planning in North America, or rather the lack of it, it also becomes a referent for many American urban sites. An excellent example of this is the number of American towns with a "Broadway", Broadway\(^91\) could be considered as flagging New York in much the same way as the Empire State Building does, and yet the

\(^{90}\)Morrison, *Jazz*, 54.
\(^{91}\)Morrison, *Jazz*, 7.

\(^{91}\) Here Broadway is understood to represent an iconic location in American cultural and literary convention.
former exists simultaneously in many locations. It is at once a superlative signal for New York, and a reference to hundreds of towns, small and large, across the States. This can be extrapolated to include the naming of towns themselves, with many places existing simultaneously across North America, Salem for example can be found in 23 different States.92

Yet it appears that New York as a whole is differentiated from other American cities by being unnamed. However, the idea that New York is individuated through its namelessness is problematic. It invokes exactly the naturalising hierarchy the text makes explicit and the ambivalence it engages. Other cities and towns, it initially appears, are referred to in this text in a more naturalistic fashion. It could be argued that they are simply located as places of origination or sites aimed for at a future date. For example, Malvonne speaks of her son’s departure, “others said he had left for Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O.”93. This sentence can be read in terms of a naturalistic dialogue of a forgetful middle-aged lady, but here there is also negation and collapse. The Cities are indistinguishable in her memory, her son is at once in all and possibly none of them, but the most significant part of this sentence is its ending. Negation is central, she remembers these cities because they end in ‘O’, nothing. Malvonne invokes the inherent instability that undermines a secure co-option of material geography, all locations are subsumed by her inability to differentiate between them.

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92 This information is taken from: The National Gazetteer of the United States of America, U.S. Concise, 1990, (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990). These examples of Salem are defined as a “ppl”, or a populated place: “a place or area having clustered or scattered buildings and permanent human population (city, settlement, town, village)”. p. xxxii
93 Morrison, Jazz, p. 41
The location of the city in American culture is destabilised throughout the text. It maintains an ambivalent relation to its un-named iconic status. It is also ruptured by its relation to the position of narrator. Just as Joe’s ability to arbitrate his relation to the City proves partial, so the narrator is established as a partial, “human” voice. The narrator parallels the City, s/he does not engage with hegemonies of spatial or narrative construction which would afford them a security of position, or voice. Therefore, complicating versions of the discursive power of the narrator permeate Jazz. The text’s narrator at one point re-creates the hyper-specificity of references to streets with no context, suggesting that “the City” is individuated. It, according to the narrator, sends “secret messages” to individuals, “disguised as public signs [...] Covering your moans with its own”94. At other times the narrator insists that the only authoritative discourse is the City itself:

Really there is no contradiction - rather it’s a condition: [...] That’s the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to [...] You can’t get off the track a City lays for you. 95

This “condition” is no more reliable than the false opposition between the City and the country, established with the presumably “random” road layout of rural settlements. At the beginning of the novel the Trace’s idyllic origin is described as providing the kind of stable “roots” that have been dispelled in terms of rural spaces:

Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. All you have to do is heed the design - the way its laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow. 96

94 Morrison, Jazz, 64.
95 Morrison, Jazz, 118-20.
96 Morrison, Jazz, 8/9.
This description is particularly important because it refers to street planning. It is this grid-iron pattern which dominates American urban architecture, and it can be constructed as a positive position in that it offers an apparently undifferentiated system. By numbering streets the appeal is once more to a naturalised discourse that understands the landscape as refusing to recognise a hierarchical structure but rather simply a physical proximity. However, as has been foregrounded throughout this discussion it is rather that the lack of specificity, or cultural memory in the landscape, that is damaging to the subject. The apparently straightforward negotiation of location drives home the anxieties of discourse this system elides, of which Morrison states she is entirely conscious. The apparent ambivalence of the material landscape to the status of the subject invokes their marginality rather than eliding it.

Fredric Jameson offers a sympathetic position to the following argument in his text as discussed in Leach’s *Rethinking Architecture, A Cultural Reader*. His work on postmodern space provides a useful paradigm for analysis of the “City” and its grid-iron street pattern as well as the numerical system of naming which operates throughout urban American landscapes. Jameson’s perceptions of postmodern spatial relations are fundamental to an analysis of contemporary urban spaces:

> the 1811 Manhattan grid plan for urbanism [...] whose acceptance released the surrounding space to a new kind of freedom or innovation.\textsuperscript{97}

On a global scale Jameson delineates the potential of the kind of urban spatial constructs at work in much of the States. He goes on to extrapolate the consequences of this potentiality - he states:

\textsuperscript{97} Fredric Jameson, “Is Space Political?” *Rethinking Architecture* Leach, ed., 252
I find no reference to the important question of what architecture might have to do with globalisation and how it can offer possible political interventions into the new world system.\textsuperscript{98}

The problem being that the flip side to globalisation and "late capitalism is a form of standardisation, and a lifeless application of grids and prefabricated forms."\textsuperscript{99} This "standardisation" is what seems to predicate a reaction of petty-nationalism and provincialism which has depressed many who believed in the melting-pot of 1970s North America. Jameson's question "Is Global difference the same today as Global identity?"\textsuperscript{100} seems to succinctly identify Morrison's City: it is at once individuated and universal. Morrison, therefore problematises the paradigm of the postmodern subject in contemporary America, regardless of cultural identity, by making it explicit. "The City" is at once every urban environment and one specific "place". Through an examination of the work of Dolores Hayden on cultural recovery for the marginalised subject in American cities, Morrison's complicating position is substantiated. Although the City may be fundamentally postmodern, the subject's relationship to it is negotiated specifically through the experience, in this instance, of the black cultural subject.

"Even if we go far away from here to some big city, places around here keep stalking us."\textsuperscript{101} This could be a quotation from \textit{Jazz} but actually it is a reference by Hayden to the practices of the Western Apache, who reappropriate their landscape through reciting the names and stories of places with which they are connected. Hayden's text \textit{The Power of Place} explores the empowering potential of the reclamation

\textsuperscript{98} Jameson, \textit{Rethinking Architecture}, Leach, ed., 268.
\textsuperscript{100} Jameson, \textit{Rethinking Architecture}, Leach, ed., 255
\textsuperscript{101} Dolores Hayden, \textit{The Power of Place} (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995) 245.
of the urban vernacular landscape by those marginalised by America’s cultural memory.

She asserts:

Urban landscapes are storehouses for [...] social memories [...] the power of place - the power of ordinary urban landscape to nurture citizen’s public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory - remains untapped for most working people’s neighbourhoods in most American cities.  

She goes on to ask, “where are the Native American, African American, Latino and Asian American landmarks?” This question has particular potency in reference to Jazz. Although this text is set in New York, where are the familiar landmarks of the city? Where is the Empire State Building, Central Park, The Statue of Liberty? The few references to more famous streets are part of the characters’ mapping of themselves onto New York. However, one “landmark” mentioned in the text is the jewellers, Tiffany’s:

She took me shopping after that for some things her bosses in Tuxedo wanted, and I didn’t ask her why she had to stop for them on her off days, because she wouldn’t have taken me to Tiffany’s on Thirty-seventh Street where it’s quieter than when the Reverend asks for a minute of silent prayer.

Felice and her mother are only allowed to remain in the shop because they are running an errand for the mother’s white employer. This is a landmark in New York which, like many others, the black community does not have access to. Hayden makes exactly this point with a quotation from James Baldwin:

I still remember my first sight of New York. It was really another city when I was born - where I was born. We looked down over the Park Avenue street car tracks [...] The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening up a Tiffany’s on that Park Avenue.

What Hayden desires to demonstrate is the ways in which the black community is not allowed to share spatially in the nation’s cultural heritage. The community featured in *Jazz* is oblivious to the landmarks that surrounds it because it is differentiated from them and their heritage, as Baldwin illustrates. Cultural heritage is positioned in memorials and sites which tend to revere the dominant group in society, thus denying the majority of the contemporary population of the States a role in social memory. The bi-cultural population really does represent the majority. A census conducted in New York indicated that in 1990 only 38% of the city’s population was white.¹⁰⁶

The lack of landmarks with which the community can identify is what Hayden perceives to be culturally damaging, creating a sense of dislocation peculiar to the United States. She quotes public historian Michael Frisch, who regards “the relationship between history and memory” as being “peculiarly and perhaps uniquely fractured in contemporary life.”¹⁰⁷ What *Jazz* demonstrates is that what may be a global trend finds special resonance for the contemporary bi-cultural American.

The relationship of the bi-cultural citizen to the city is foregrounded in various cultural groups’ access to the city. Hayden illustrates this clearly through the work of Kevin Lynch. Lynch’s work indicates that “mapping can raise political consciousness.”¹⁰⁸ He asked Anglo-American citizens, African Americans and the Latino community to map Los Angeles as they saw it in the 60s and 70s. What is striking about these maps¹⁰⁹ is the conceptual space the various communities identify in the survey feel they occupy in the urban sprawl. The maps indicate, as possibly one would expect, that the white

community has access to far more of the city than other communities in Los Angeles. This has a direct bearing upon *Jazz*. The inaccessibility is demonstrated in Alice’s mapping of her fear, but it is nowhere more clearly exemplified than in the following paragraph:

> It is worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue safe from fays [...] and perfectly ordinary people can stand at the top, get on the streetcar, give the man a nickel, and ride anywhere you please, although you don’t please to go many places because everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops [...] and every club, organisation, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable.10

This paragraph foregrounds the experience of the black community in North America as espoused by Morrison in this text. Although there is the sense of access to all inscribed in the Constitution, what the narrator goes on to exemplify is inscription as practice rather than idea. This extract suggests the circumscription to which the black community is subject. The sense that the community provides is framed by what is not included in the neighbourhood, namely the bank and the highschool. This not only reintroduces the social hierarchy of American urban development, it also suggests the ways the city is fragmented as communities form self-sustaining units. This is not necessarily because of a desire to regroup but, as Alice suggests, as a result of fear.

Hayden makes exactly this point when she talks of the Chinese community’s reclamation of its cultural heritage in New York:

> New York Chinatown [...] was not the result of some nationalistic clannishness as the prevailing common sense in the United States presumes. [...] Togetherness for Chinese Americans was balanced by a sense of spatial exclusion.11

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She goes on to explain how making marginalised communities aware of the ways in which they have inhabited the States is fundamental to a renegotiation of American conceptual hegemony in the future. She aims to encourage, through community projects, the reclamation of sites which record the contribution of marginalised communities to America’s development. She quotes Benmayor and Tchen, who, she states:

> Are asking for an extremely subtle evocation of American diversity, which at the same time reinforces our sense of common membership in an American, urban society. Public space can help to nurture this more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American.\textsuperscript{112}

Dolores Hayden presents a positive model for making explicit the “crisis” Virilio delineates through the recovery of bi-cultural heritage in space. Morrison states a general aim to battle for a reconfiguring of the black community’s position in contemporary American politics. Both have specific agendas. It is not being suggested that Jazz operates to any political agenda. As Morrison suggests, it offers an opportunity to re-read the urban black community by drawing attention to discourses that naturalise conventional structures of “race”. It is possible, however, to read the text as presenting a paradigm for the conceptual elision of the black community, and by extrapolation other bi-cultural communities, in the contemporary American city.

*Jazz* offers a superb portrait of the “crisis” in contemporary American culture, whether semantic rupture or the collapse of our understanding of “dimension”. It grounds this portrait in a community whose experience can be effectively translated for 62% of New York’s population, a figure which continues to grow.

\textsuperscript{111} Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 50.
\textsuperscript{112} Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 9.
Amy Tan as Mythmaker: Anxieties of Belonging and the Culturally Soothing 'Synthetic Region'

We lived on Waverly Place, in a warm, clean, two-bedroom flat that sat above a small Chinese bakery [...] My mother named me after the street that we lived on: Waverly Place Jong, my official name for important American documents.¹

Waverly Place, a “two block alley”² as Tan describes it, lies between Merchant and Sacramento streets in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The description of the area in Tan’s first novel, The Joy Luck Club, begins, “We lived in San Francisco’s Chinatown”³ and continues in intricate detail over two pages:

At the end of our two-block alley was a small sandlot playground [...] the medicinal herb shop [...] next to the pharmacy was a printer [...] Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market [...] At the corner of the alley was Hong Sing’s, a four-table cafe.⁴

What is striking in Tan’s writing is the specificity of geographical detail. The novel’s relationship to the physical geography of San Francisco is not only tightly woven. The novel also constructs a voice for the Chinese-American community through the narrative’s proximity to the physical, geographical “reality” that is San Francisco’s Chinatown. When that proximity is mapped in relation to Waverly Place, however, a very different set of discursive relationships is presented. What is highlighted in conjunction with the desire to locate narratives in the “real” Chinatown - to locate in physical geography - is an equally powerful desire to occlude. Waverly Place is indeed a two block alley, but it is famous for having three Chinese temples on it. The three temples on a “two block alley” mean that it has more Chinese religious buildings per

³ Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 89.
⁴ Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 90/1.
block than any other street in the United States. What is interesting about this elision is how it can be read in relation to the inclusion of two pages of locational detail about the home of "Waverly" - the child named after the street - about the local area and about her relationship to it. Why leave unmentioned what would apparently be the most privileged facet of a street used to negotiate North American and Chinese notions of identity and location? Particularly when the discourse here is about Waverly's understanding of her cultural and psychological position as a young Chinese-American girl.

I am not suggesting here that Tan is to be criticised for not giving a more accurate portrayal of the street itself, but the question of elision in Tan's work leads to an examination of the construction of location in Tan's novels. Through this question the nature of the origin of "location" will be raised. In examining Tan's use of elision in her narrative strategies, both locational and in the construction of cultural identity, I will demonstrate that rather than predating a relationship with an actual Chinese American community, in the "real" City of San Francisco, Tan constructs both. The strength of Tan's novels, by which I mean their massive popularity, may be understood through their production of complex narrative structures which provide a nourishing cultural mythology for the contemporary Chinese-American community, whilst appearing simply to delineate it.\footnote{It could be argued that this reference to the community's construction parallels Benedict Anderson's discussion of the "natural" construction of National identity in \textit{Imagined Communities}. Space does not allow a development of the similarities at this point, it is noted, however.} What Tan seems to invoke, through her use of specific locations in San Francisco, she, in fact, engenders. This construction not only responds to the anxieties of belonging identified in the novel as being particular to the contemporary Chinese-American community but, according to cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky, it also
represents the desire for a satisfying cultural origination which is not peculiar to any single community.

Tan's novels operate in a specific discursive relationship with the Chinese-American community. The cultural mythology she creates in various ways in the two novels discussed here, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, also provides a satisfying paradigm for an international community of readers. As the readers are initiated into the structures of reading, and the discursive community she engenders, the reader comes to "belong" to a culturally identified community through shared understanding. Tan creates not so much a Chinese-American community as a community of perception with a set of desires and anxieties. She then frames these needs through her particular version of the Californian Chinese-American community and its cultural anxieties. Thus we can come to be members without belonging in an ethnographic sense.

That such a network of desires is culturally predominant is clearly delineated by cultural geographers such as Wilbur Zelinsky in his work *The Cultural Geography of the United States*. The set of cultural anxieties he outlines provide a model for reading geographical paradigms. The complex interrelation of geographical and literary discourses is one that cultural geographers such as Sharon Zukin, in her essay "Postmodern Urban Landscapes: Mapping Culture and Power" recognise:

The cultural value of modern cities must be explored, explained and affirmed by contemporary artists and intellectuals. This group establishes the proper perspective for viewing the historical urban landscape. By their labour as well as their cultural products - especially cultural critique - they act as a critical infrastructure in the postmodern urban landscape.6

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Zukin’s assertion privileges certain literary/geographic constructs as being central to our understanding of the operation of both discourses upon one another: “the city”, she suggests is best explored as a textual network. This complicates the idea of the geographic construction as a concrete entity. I examine “the city” and the “home” as textual constructions in Tan’s novels. The centrality of the home as a basic conception, one to which we have relatively unmediated access, as opposed to the complex theoretical discourse about textuality and interpretation, needs to be unpacked. This becomes crucial in relation to Tan because it is exactly this unreflexive centrality which needs to be examined. The home as a construct does not maintain a “natural”, discursively innocent position, the very nature of its influence is suggested by its use as a cornerstone in debates about ethnicity and origin. Tan’s strategies for alleviating the cultural anxieties that underpin her texts can be understood through exactly the same use of “cornerstone”, or “naturalised” constructions. The discursive weight of these naturalised terms needs to be unpacked and made explicit.

Having pinpointed the construct of home and notions of belonging in physical locations as being textual in the main, it is important to discuss the anxieties at play in that discursive space. Zelinsky sets up the crisis in contemporary notions of belonging in terms of anxieties of location:

A heightened landscape sensibility or activism is only one of the potential cultural or psychological responses to the disappointments of our contemporary world [...] flailing about, singly or collectively for firmer, more authentic modes of anchorage, many of us have tacitly rejected the faith that ruled supreme for two to three hundred years [...] we have turned to look backward in time toward genuine or contrived ancestral communities [...] In spatial terms the safest haven appears

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7 This discursive link is developed in Chapter One.
to be located somewhere between the cold, faceless bureaucratic state and the incertitudes of kith, kin, and hearth – in the renewal of regional identity.  

It is exactly such a space of the "local", the home as a space “anchored” to a particular community or district, which I posit as a satisfying but conjured space in Tan’s novels. It is this location she attempts to maintain as a physical reality. Zelinsky goes on to comment on this cultural need and how it manifests itself in contemporary (the book was first published in 2001) cultural preoccupations:

There are other factors beside the rediscovery of ethnicity that can help account for the current surge in regional sentiments, in effect the restoration of cultural areas as they were, or rather as they should have been.  

The idea that what is presented as reconstruction is in fact an act of creation is important here because the praxis Zelinsky suggests results from such a construction:

Now we have transnationalism, or rather transregionalism and trans-ethnicity, at the intimate scale. [...] These essential features bear repetition: self-consciousness, a sharing of identities and cultural heirlooms with the world at large [...] In a larger sense, this penchant for the making or remaking of culturally soothing habitats represents the American Dream [...] for in a recognisable way, such a synthesising has been going on in the United States for more than two hundred years in the grandest, most fully consummated of artificial culture areas – the modern nation state.

We have in America an ideal example of the synthetic region at the macro scale [...] it was fashioned essentially de novo without the ancient roots, the real or imagined age-old traditions, that budding European nation-states were able to bank on so effectively.  

What Zelinsky usefully indicates here is how the synthesis of various notions of rootedness functions to produce a “culturally soothing habitat”. It is just this cultural creation that can be traced in the novels of Tan. In her first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, it is precisely this provision of a relatively

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unproblematic trans-regionalist/trans-ethnic society which, I suggest, is being reconstructed as opposed to constructed. In observing the elisions in Tan’s texts and by unpacking her narrative strategies the “synthetic region” Zelinsky cites can be examined at the very moment of its creation.

What Zelinsky delineates as a cultural phenomenon, identifiable in various micro and macro North American communities, is the phenomenon that informs Tan’s texts. He identifies it as one of the predominant forces in contemporary cultural survival. It is not surprising, therefore, that the kind of narrative which answers or “soothes”, to use his phrase, is hugely popular.

This approach to Tan helps to answer questions constantly raised in recent criticism of Tan’s texts, particularly when her own stance on her work privileges debates about location. She is also publicly concerned with understandings about “Americanness” in relation to the concept of a “Chinese heritage”. When asked in an interview for the “Achievement” website in November 1995 what the American Dream meant to her, Tan responded:

  I realise now that the most important thing [...]is an American Dream – in looking at people living in other countries, in looking at the life my sisters had not growing up in this country – is the American freedom to create your own identity. I think it’s uniquely American.11

Here Zelinsky’s foregrounding of debates about belonging, and the fictionality of that sense of rootedness can be understood in relation to Tan’s notion of the positive potential of the construction of identity. What she considers liberating is the power to construct, and what Zelinsky suggests is that construction is culturally powerful not only for those

10 Zelinsky, The Cultural Geography of the United States, 176-182.
who construct but also equally for those who invest in the construction. Just as Tan finds that capacity to be fundamental to her notion of “Americanness”, Zelinsky suggests that those who feel less empowered by the idea of construction, those who are in fact fearful of its fundamental fictionality, seek a reassuring version located outside of their own capacity to construct. This “location” can be identified in the culturally satisfying versions of belonging Tan offers in her novels through the community of understanding she creates.

There is a long running debate about the discrepancy between her enormous public appeal and her relative lack of critical recognition. This emphasis on what is culturally satisfying in Tan’s work offers an alternative response to Tan’s fiction as opposed to the two main schools of criticism which tend to dominate readings. However, an examination of the operation of culturally reassuring discourse in Tan’s novels will cover much that is privileged in these debates, and as such they foreground useful areas for discussion.

The following two quotations from the Hall of Arts interview highlight the two debates around which Tan criticism centres; the first is ethnographic and anthropological in nature and relates directly to the second which is best described as a combination of post-colonial and feminist readings:

When you read about the Civil War, a lot of people, like my husband, can say my great-great grandfather fought in the war. We have the gun and all that kind of stuff. I have a good imagination, but I could never imagine my ancestors having been in any of this history because my parents came to this country in 1949. So none of that history before seemed relevant to me. It was wonderful going to the country where suddenly the landscape, the geography, the history was relevant [...] You see the undercurrents of change and culture and that is history

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12 The Hall of Arts Amy Tan, 5.
I think going to China was a turning point. I couldn’t have written *The Joy Luck Club* without having been there, without having felt that spiritual sense of geography.\(^{13}\)

The third quotation is from an interview Tan gave in *The Detroit News* and reinforces the privileging of the relationship between Tan’s keen awareness of physical location and her ability to write her first novel:

> It was only when she went to China for the first time to meet her half sisters that she felt the kind of closure, the completing of the circle, so to speak, that enabled her to approach *The Joy Luck Club*. “I could see the geography of my ancestors,” she recalls.\(^ {14}\)

Once again these quotations foreground issues of belonging. It is an understanding of *The Joy Luck Club*’s relation to China as a discursive cultural “authority” in the bicultural subject, in this case Chinese-American, which is frequently focused upon in debates about Tan’s novels. This discourse supports an ethnographic and anthropological understanding of the novels which takes them to task as sociological records of the community they “purport” to represent. It commonly centres upon the ways in which her textual representations are “inauthentic”. This critique of Tan can be seen most clearly in Palumbo Liu’s *The Ethnic Canon*:

> I use the term ‘sugar sisterhood’ then to designate the kind of readership Amy Tan has acquired, especially among white women, through acts of cultural interpreting and cultural empathy that appear to possess the authority of authenticity but are often products of the American born writer’s own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese [...] Chinese cultural presence is worth investigating not only because a history of controversy exists in Asian-American cultural politics concerning issues of authenticity, but also because Tan’s books have been showered with praise precisely for their *details*.\(^ {15}\)

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What Liu foregrounds is the notion that Tan’s texts are flawed because they are culturally “inauthentic”. He is propounding the view that Tan produces a Western fantasy of the East that panders to Western misconceptions by seeming to reinforce them with some sort of anthropological credibility. He goes on to critique *The Joy Luck Club* with specific reference to its mythic version of China in relation to what he perceives to be recognisable San Francisco:

Shoshona’s outing is to not just any science museum but to the Exploratorium; the trendy restaurants Rose dreams of [...] are Café Majestic and Rosalies [all actual locations in San Francisco]. In contrast, [...] the fish in the Fen River are not identified, [...] the levelling of descriptive details in the “Chinese” segments is an important source of pleasure for white readers, who accept and appreciate it as a “mythic” treatment of remote but fascinating China.¹⁶

Here Liu draws a clear distinction between the representations of the two locations, China and America, and emphasises a disparity in their representation. The example demonstrates anxieties about detail and “authenticity” of the kind Zelinsky suggests is an overwhelming contemporary cultural force. It also highlights the ways in which this critical focus diverts attention from an examination of the powerful mythic constructions at its centre. Liu’s critique of this binary is called into question when the construction of San Francisco is not privileged as an “actual” location set against the mythic version of “China”. As I have suggested, the construction is, in fact, of a third location not situated in this binary which predicates both at a safe distance to sustain its own status as an actuality. That is, the mythic location of the Chinese-American community in a mythic San Francisco.

¹⁶ Liu 186-7.
This establishment of a binary consisting of the Chinese as mythic/exotic Orientalism versus the conceptual "reality" of the western United States invokes a post-colonial theoretical paradigm which is problematic in relation to Tan's work. Liu establishes the idea that Tan's "inauthentic" version is one of the major reasons for the texts' massive cross-cultural popularity, in that the texts feed on an oppressive white, Western notion of the exoticised Oriental "other". The conflation of an ethnographic/anthropological inconsistency with a kind of colonialist fantasy of the East is common in Tan criticism. In fact the second major critique of Tan's novels concerns their validity as voices for the subaltern female. Liu introduces post-colonial discourse in the conclusion to his criticism of *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club*:

Origin stays put, long suffering but autotelic, awaiting rediscovery and homage [...] White readers, their voyeurism concealed and their curiosity indulged by "naturalised" explanations, are thus relieved of possible historical guilt, free to enjoy Chinese life as depoliticised spectacle [...] A reassuring projection of universal women obscures the role of the West in causing the very historical catastrophes from which Tan's mothers too gladly escape.17

Here the anthropological attack of misrepresentation is conflated with debates about exoticisation and the politics of Tan's position as a so-called collaborator with what is described as "White Western fantasy". This is a common critical synthesis in terms of Tan. Critics frequently combine debates about Tan's "representation" of "China" as a physical location with her issues of representation as doubly oppressed "post-colonial" and "female" subject. Many critics, such as Marianne Gooze in her collection *International Women's Writing – New Landscapes of Identity* (1995), invoke critics such as Spivak and Hall in relation to Tan, to question Tan's texts in much the same way as Liu.
Although this introduces essential debates about representation and subjectivity in contemporary bi-cultural American fiction, it is problematic in relation to Tan. It is difficult primarily because it elides the peculiar relation of China to America both textually and historically as compared to other Asian nations. The conflation establishes a false binary: China has never been a Western colony, it does not have an historically colonial relationship to the West. The association of China with other nations and their construction as part of Western nation empires has certain consequences for criticism. Instead of focusing on a post-colonial discursive binary encompassing The United States and China, the relationship is complicated by predicking the United States in Tan’s novel as being as culturally sustaining as her version of “China”. Issues of representation then become subject to a different kind of critical scrutiny. “China” and “The United States” come to function both as exoticised, mythic landscapes whilst their cultural value is equally predicated upon a physical/actual version of the countries as sustaining realities. The exposure of Tan’s discursive manipulation of “Chineseness” in relation to debates about post-colonial and feminist models of oppression in fact leave an equally important construction unmasked. Her version of the “United States” through “San Francisco” becomes naturalised in contrast to the exotic/mythic China. Its manipulations are not called into question and so the binary is sustained. The rupturing of China/North America as a post-colonial binary places the focus back on the construction of American, or “Chinese-Americanness”, as opposed to a debate which sets the two locations up in discursive opposition to one another.

17 Liu, 197-199.
It is Zelinsky’s understanding of the nature of cultural anxieties about origin and location which offers a different paradigm to this binary. China and America are primarily constructed to answer a particular set of cultural anxieties, not just for the White readers’ fantasy of the East, but for the contemporary reader’s anxieties about belonging. This chapter focuses on the strategies which Tan’s texts employ to alleviate cultural anxieties, raising the possibility that those desires/needs are addressed through the textual creation of a “soothing habitat”.

Constructing a working definition of Myth

Tan’s texts, in various ways, create a community of understanding that is culturally soothing. Another way to express the successful means by which her texts operate is to suggest that the novels construct a satisfying contemporary mythology. A working definition of myth highlights the narrative/reading strategies that make an understanding of the construction of myth so pertinent to an examination of Tan’s texts. Dan Nimmo and J.E. Combs offer a useful starting point in their text *Subliminal Politics, Myths and Mythmakers in America*:

Our definition of myth: a credible, dramatic, socially constructed representation of perceived realities that people accept as permanent fixed knowledge of reality while forgetting its tentative, imaginative, created and perhaps fictional qualities.\(^{18}\)

This definition is useful in that it privileges the mechanisms by which myth comes to represent itself as actuality. Thus it naturalises, or disguises, its own fictionality so that its social force is fully felt through a veiling of the questionability of the authority of its

voice. Malinowski as quoted by Anne Birrell in her text *Chinese Mythology*, makes the same point more directly:

Myth serves principally to establish a sociological charter or a retrospective moral pattern of behaviour [...] not an idle tale, but a hard worked active force.19

Malinowski reinforces the idea that the myth is socially powerful through its construction of what appears to be a reiteration of past models, in particular the idea that a set of social rules is predicated upon a natural relation with a "traditional" moral framework. He also suggests that the narrative sophistication of myth lies in its ability to present itself as simply an "idle tale". Anne Birrell in *Chinese Mythology* places an important emphasis on the dynamism of this notion of myth as a cultural force which constantly adapts itself to sustain ever changing ideological demands, "Mythologies evolve to meet the exigencies of social, intellectual and political life".20

The highlighting of narrative strategies and sociological function in myth can be usefully applied in a discussion of Tan's novels. Tan's texts have predominantly been critiqued ethnographically and anthropologically. This demonstrates the means by which narrative strategies similar to those employed in the structure of myth can be veiled in texts. This can occur to such an extent that the focus is shifted from the text to its relationship to the "real" – in Tan's case the physical realities of China and California and the Chinese-American community. Part of the power of myth is to effect this shift in focus. Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Myth and Meaning* makes two statements in particular that are pertinent to this consideration of the reading of myth:

20 Birrell, 20.
[Myth] It gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe. 21

It is impossible to understand myth as a continuous sequence. This is why we should be aware that if we try to read myth as we read a novel or a newspaper article, that is line after line, reading from left to right, we don’t understand the myth, because we have to apprehend it as a totality and discover that the basic meaning of myth is not conveyed by the sequence of events but [...] by bundles of events even though these events appear at different moments in the story [...] There is a kind of continuous reconstruction taking place in the mind of [...] the listener to a mythical story. 22

The ideas, presented here, that both the construction of “understanding” is illusory, and that myth demands to be read in a specific discursive style are fundamental to the approach I wish to employ in relation to Tan’s novels. The notion of illusion is crucial as it reinforces the suggestion that a narrative structure is being veiled. The construction is ideologically powerful, both through the production of a culturally satisfying narrative, and also through the way it disguises how this discourse becomes naturalised as “understanding” rather than interpretation. What Lévi-Strauss also makes plain is that the myth teaches the reader to read in a distinct fashion. The idea that “there is a kind of reconstruction taking place in the mind of the listener,” is central to reading Tan’s text in the light of constructions of mythology.

An important distinction exists between the novel and the myth as constructed by writers like Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski, and Anne Birrell. The understanding of myth is predicated upon it being a communal, or societal production. As Malinowski states, it is a kind of “sociological charter” and the critics do not focus upon authorship, as it is not understood to have a single creator. This is important in terms of extending this criticism

22 Lévi-Strauss, 44-5.
to the construction of Tan’s novels. The focus here is not the legitimacy of claiming single authorship for mythical narratives. It is rather that the community of understanding Tan’s texts seek to establish through various narrative strategies construct a contemporary myth which satisfies the contemporary cultural demands set out by Zelinsky.

The idea that “illusion”, or the veiling of discourse, is central to mythic narratives, and that they educate the reader in a particular interpretative role is central to examining the workings of Tan’s novels. Her two novels set about constructing this role in distinct ways, but in all three texts one particular facet of mythic narratives is crucially employed. This is the role of silence in myth. The importance of silence is foregrounded by Italo Calvino in his essay “Myth in the Narrative”:

"Myth feeds on silence as much as on the spoken word; [...] hence myth acts on the fable like a repetitive force [...] the myth-value would thus be something you finally encountered if you kept on obstinately playing with the various narrative functions."

This quotation reiterates the force of repetition in the structure of mythic narrative which is a feature of Tan’s novels. It also emphasises that it is through the unpacking of narrative “play” that we come to see the force of the veiled “myth” or “myth-value” as he defines it. It also privileges the role of silence. The power of silence in the mythic narrative and the suggestion of the force of “illusion” when predicating a community of understanding play central roles in an examination of Tan’s novels.

Through a reading of her first text, *The Joy Luck Club*, I will examine the construction of that community of understanding. I will look at mythic narrative

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strategies and how they are employed to create that community. I will also focus upon
the strategies that educate the reader, initiating a specific mode of “reading”, which
ensures that the text comes to function as myth. This will include a discussion of the uses
made of ellipsis and elision in the novel, and the means by which silence operates in her
novels. Tan has her own term for it in this text. At one point one of the narrators, Lena
St Clair, speaks of the “magic of the unspeakable”\(^{24}\), and it is this very illusory “silence”
which needs to be considered here. Particular emphasis will be paid to one tale which
Tan lifts from the novel and prints separately as a children’s story, *The Moon Lady*.

In her second novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Tan tells “her mother’s story”. She
fictionalises her mother’s narrative of her life in China before immigrating to the United
States at the end of the Second World War. Here I will examine Tan’s employment of
forms of communication as possessing immense cultural power. I will look at how she
sets up public forms of discourse, such as banners and newspapers, as being able to
change communal behaviour in the face of political, and even military oppression.
Having suggested that certain forms of language have particular cultural currency I will
examine the means by which these narratives come to be culturally sustaining in their
recuperative power. Not only are certain narratives foregrounded but their material force
is also carefully sustained in the face of cultural anxieties about rootedness and
belonging. Thus the “unequivocal” power Tan’s novel suggests some form of
communication can sustain is undermined. I will then go on to discuss the crystallisation
of these discourses in her second children’s story *The Chinese Siamese Cat*.

\(^{24}\) Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, 103
The Joy Luck Club – The Reader as a Member of a Community of Understanding

Tan’s first novel was published in 1989. It features four pairs of mothers, all first-generation Chinese immigrants, and their daughters. The text focuses on the negotiation of identity between these Chinese women and their acculturated Chinese-American daughters. The women are Suyuan Woo, and her daughter Jing-mei, or “June” Woo, An-mei Hsu and her daughter Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo Jong, and her daughter Waverly, and finally Ying-Ying St. Clair and her daughter Lena.

The narrative begins with the death of one of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, an event which acts as a catalyst for the remaining women to examine their ideas of community and understandings of their cultural position. Suyuan’s daughter, June, is asked to make up the fourth in the mothers’ mah jong club, the Joy-Luck club, which the mothers had established upon arrival in San Francisco. The narrative then traces this set of relationships as the mothers narrate their experiences in China before emigrating to the United States. In an attempt to communicate with and educate their daughters, and through the forging of some kind of cross-cultural understanding the mothers reveal long-kept secrets. The plot is driven by the remaining mothers’ insistence that June must make a “pilgrimage” on behalf of her mother to meet her long-lost Chinese half-sisters. The trip is constructed as being reflexively sustaining for both the mothers and daughters as they come to understand both themselves and one another better through the narration of the stories.

The text has a fairly complex narrative structure. It is divided into four sections each of which is prefaced by a kind of “parable” printed in italics and with no named narrator.
This "parable" is then linked thematically to the section it precedes. Within each section the different women get to narrate their own tales, with the exception of Suyuan Woo, whose narratives are spoken by her daughter, June. Each of the mothers and daughters tells two stories, again except for June who narrates four. The narratives are also separated along generational lines; the first and fourth sections belonging to the mothers, the second and third to the daughters, again with June crossing that boundary and speaking all four sections, at times for herself, and at others on her mother's behalf.

One of the central debates surrounding this novel concerns the nature of the narrative voice. For many readers Tan's use of multiple voices is believed to be an excellent example of a fragmented, post-modern "subaltern" voice undermining and subverting dominant, singular occidental masculine voices. Terry De Hay, in the essay "Narrating Memory" is indicative in his reading:

> Multiethnic American Women's literature, like other marginalised literatures, often uses this deconstruction of the traditional realist narrative metalanguage to produce alternative narrative patterns to those of the dominant culture and to destabilise the "hierarchy amongst discourses" within the text.25

The use of many different narrators to build up a polyvocal structure does not guarantee any kind of subversive/subaltern multiplicity of readings, although this is a common conception in terms of stylistic radicalism. In fact, Tan's narrative structures are tightly managed in this text in an attempt to secure a specific interpretation of the narratives she constructs. The use of such a large number of narrators does not necessarily create a polyvocal ambivalence, but rather engenders an imaginative community through which the reader is educated in ways of reading. The sheer number of narrators is fundamental.

to the process of learning a particular reading strategy as the reader maps his/her way between them. Through the mothers' and daughters' stories a mythic version of contemporary San Francisco is constructed which is posited on constructions of "China" and "The United States", discourses these women successfully learn to negotiate. This community, in fact, only exists as a set of narrative relations which create a specific understanding – it is this shared understanding which engenders the comforting sense of belonging for the reader to a "synthetic region". The comfort of myth as explaining our place in the world is what The Joy Luck Club's narrative structures perform.

Tan attempts to establish a set of relationships that conjure a Chinese-American community whose origin or point of conception she veils. Origination is deliberately veiled because to make any explicit statement would be to betray the fictionality of the text's version of that community. It is the silences, or narrative gaps between the various stories, as well as between the four sections, that are fundamental to the construction of this contemporary mythology. The understanding that is created between the different narrators as the reader learns to negotiate his/her way through the text is located in the gaps between narratives as the reader is educated in the correct way to read silences in this text.

It is through an examination of the complex narrative strategies employed in this novel – as will be seen, for example, in the following discussion of the strategic manipulation of silences and the use made of repetition - that I will demonstrate the texts' mirroring of mythological narrative structures. The means by which the text attempts to arbitrate reading exposes the mythic constructions that underpin the discourses the text

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26 Zelinsky The Cultural Geography of the United States, 177.
struggles to veil and naturalise. Tan constructs San Francisco, by forcing our attention on other things, and allowing us in her own words to “be drawn by the magic of the unspeakable”.27

Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested that myth is read in a fundamentally different way to the novel. He indicated that rather than reading from line to line that in myth the structure leads the reader, “by bundles of events even though these events appear at different moments in the story.”28 In The Joy Luck Club Tan employs a similar narrative strategy, and uses it to secure a certain reading of these events as they are presented. As Strauss suggests, through the repetition of certain narrative values in various events throughout the text the reader learns to “reconstruct” their understanding as the novel develops. An excellent example of this is Tan’s framing of the novel. The very first page of the 1998 Vintage edition is headed The Joy Luck Club. Beneath this heading appears a single paragraph introducing the novel. No author is given. The introduction provides the reader with a potted third person biography of Tan, suggesting that she is not its author. However, it does quote Tan:

She visited China for the first time in 1987 and found it was just how her mother had said: ‘As soon as my feet touched China, I became Chinese’.

In the last section of the novel Tan returns to this theme through Jing-mei Woo, who has travelled to China to be reunited with her estranged sisters:

The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different […] my mother was right. I am becoming Chinese […] she said she knew all about genetics. So there was no doubt in her mind, whether I agreed or not: Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese.30

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27 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 103.
28 Lévi-Strauss, 44-5.
29 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, Frontispiece
30 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 267
The relationship between narrators is extremely complicated. In the first section we presume the biographical paragraph was if not written by Tan, certainly authorised by her. Therefore, before the narrative has formally begun we have three different narrators; the publisher, Tan, and her Mother, who come together to authorise this version of cultural negotiation. By the end of the novel in the recapitulation of this homily, - it is simply an extended version – we also have Jing-mei and her mother Suyuan. What is interesting here is not so much the emphasis on experience or biography - whether or not Jing-mei is Amy Tan - but the power of the multiple narration to cohere into some kind of consensus and thereby validate the narrative voice.

As such, these two narratives form a paradigm for the way in which Tan uses multiple narrators to support certain modes of understanding. These quotations first indicate how layers of narrators are used to reinforce flagged narratives that each speaker subscribes to, and the reader is to accept. Here through the reading structure that Strauss discusses, which the reader has learnt by the end of this text, the versions are interpreted as a cluster of events, with bearings upon one another, rather than in a traditional linear fashion. The second version, therefore, is read in the light of the first. Value is reconstructed in the final short narrative as it is informed by the discursive weight of the previous version and its three narrators.

However, there is one crucial difference between the first and second quotations, what Tan tells us has already happened to her: "I became"- is still a process for Jing-mei; "I am becoming". The choice of "becoming" rather than "became" as spoken by Jing-mei is also fundamental to this stylistic manipulation. The suggestion that things are as yet unconcretised in an imperfect tense belies the didacticism of the narrative. The sense
of a continual process parallels the reader's constant reconstruction of discourses of belonging in relation to new narrative events. What is privileged is the process itself, the reader's skill at understanding is predicated through June's continual "becoming". The reader has learnt and accepted, as June does, the strategies of "becoming". The narrative veils this through the structure of repetition. The ending parallels the sense of "reconstruction" but it also refers back to the opening of the text, suggesting a mode of interpretation which cannot pinpoint an originating moment. The two "events" - Tan's journey in relation to June's - can only be understood in relation to one another. One does not pre-empt the other. Textually Tan's version precedes June's, but June is just coming to understand this discourse. Tan, however, has already assimilated this cultural convention. One possible reading places the first narrative as being both pre-emptive and post-dating to the second. In fact, the two occupy both positions simultaneously, precluding, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, a "left to right" reading.

*The Joy Luck Club* is riddled with anxieties about whether or not the reader will understand whose perspective to accept. The first section of the book is the most explicit in its desire to indicate to us which narratives the reader is supposed to align her/himself with and which to question. An excellent example, and one which reiterates what has been said about the manipulation of process, is Jing-mei's comments as she joins her aunts taking her mother's place at the mah jong table. At this moment she becomes a member of the Joy Luck Club. This section opens with an example of Jing-mei's ability to interpret/translate, and also emphasises the importance of knowing which narrative understandings, or readings, to privilege. What ostensibly occurs is the education of
Jing-mei in a particular kind of discursive sophistication, but what is paralleled in Jing-mei's development is the education of the reader:

Listening now to Auntie Lin bragging about the virtues of her family in China, I realise that Auntie Lin is oblivious to Auntie An-mei's pain. Is Auntie Lin being mean, or is it that my mother never told anybody but me the shameful story.31

Here Jing-mei's ability to recognise her access to what may have been a privileged narrative and to negotiate between different levels of access is established. Jing-mei then distances herself from the narrative understandings of her mother to form a discourse between them, suggesting simultaneously a discursive gap and reciprocity:

My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.32

This distance is central to the operation of the text, and one that is played out between all the daughters and mothers. It presumes that they will come to a more fundamental understanding, whilst maintaining that such a negotiation is precarious. This space also posits a third person/figure. The gap referred to here is not filled simply by the mature Jing-mei. Jing-mei has not developed into a fully fledged member of this community of understanding, she is still "becoming", or being initiated, at the end of the novel - it is the educated reader that occupies this space. This reader, or rather the trained reader, has become proficient not only at recognising this "gap/bond" but has also been taught to understand what it is gesturing towards.

The text at this point features little narratives which serve as practice runs through which the reader is educated:

“Did you know Lena move to Woodside?” Asks Auntie Ying with obvious pride [...] But it’s good investment. Better than paying rent. [...] So now I know Auntie Ying’s daughter, Lena, told her about my being evicted from my apartment [...] Still what little we say to one another often comes back in another guise. It’s the same old game, everybody talking in circles.33

This “digression” is a veiled instruction to the reader. It encourages the reader to think of the narrators as speaking in a “circular” fashion, and thus to employ a circular reading strategy. It predicates an understanding, which Jing-mei has developed and shares at this point with the reader, whereby narratives are understood to operate continually upon one another, not only in linear fashion, but in a complex, reciprocal re-working. A new narrative not only “expands” upon the last, but is, in fact, in dialogue with it. Also, as Jing-mei indicates, this dialogue will not be explicit. What is being said “often comes back in another guise”34, indicating to the reader that s/he has to be vigilant for these repetitions, and to actively unpack them in relation to previous versions. This narrative ascribes a very specific role to the reader/listener to such narratives, and through the repetition of the structure the reader is positioned, both by veiled instructions such as the notion of “talking in circles” but also by the narrative structures themselves.

A specific mode of understanding is reinforced through various strategies played out in the novel. The discursive use of repetition, or a “circular” style as advocated in the veiled instruction, is also figured through other means in the text. Much criticism focuses on the mother/daughter relationship that is central to this novel. The four pairs of women are ostensibly constructed through this particular paradigm, but what is fascinating about this relationship is that it functions as another educative strategy.

33 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 38.
34 ibid.
The rhetorical force of the "maternal" is heavily relied upon in this text. The recollection of a mother’s childhood reinforces the experiences of their own children. The mothers not only appear to give the daughters an originating version of their own anxieties, but in some unusual twist of logic the "maternal" narrative is asserted as a cultural value, supporting tales regardless of whether or not those narratives are "maternal". This is clearly illustrated by the third story in the text, a tale narrated by one of the mothers, Lindo Jong. In this narrative Lindo establishes a spurious authoritarian voice through which the tale educates us to acquiesce in a specific way. It is not just the "mother" that is being secured iconographically, but rather the reader’s ability to "read" correctly. This is the opening of Lindo’s story, “The Red Candle”:

I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents’ promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing. A daughter can promise to come to dinner, but if she has a headache, if she has a traffic jam, if she wants to watch a favourite movie on TV, she no longer has a promise.35

This opening is important for a number of reasons. It not only sets up a particular relationship with the reader but immediately is engaged in the business of according status to certain readings. The line which follows this section, “I watched this same movie when you did not come,”36 makes it clear that Lindo is speaking directly to someone, the supposition being that it is her daughter, Waverly, as she then goes on to talk about her grandchildren. But at the opening it is equally rhetorically aimed directly at the reader. The reader is placed between the speaker and the supposed listener, and as such is accused of not understanding. Here the term being re-evaluated is "promise", the word is repeated four times in these few lines, but what is crucial is not so much the

particular construct that is being re-determined by the mother, in this case Lindo, but rather her authority to arbitrate meaning.

Once again it would appear that the “Chinese” mode of understanding is simply set up in antithesis to the “American” way, the narrative continues:

I watched this same movie when you did not come. The American soldier promises to come back and marry the girl. She is crying with a genuine feeling and he says, “Promise! Promise! [...] my promise is as good as gold.” [...] But he doesn’t come back. His gold is like yours, it is only fourteen carats.

To Chinese people, fourteen carats isn’t real gold. Feel my bracelets. They must be twenty-four carats, pure inside and out.37

It seems that the opposition of the American fakery, in terms of cinema, a privileged American cultural medium, is set against “Chinese” culture through the differing value of “promises”. This proffers an empirical calibration of value – the number of gold carats attributable to different value laden sentences, which therefore simply prizes the “Chinese” culture more highly. However, this is an instance of the text once again veiling its strategies. By this point it has been made clear to the reader that Lindo is not speaking directly to him/her, but s/he is crucially reintroduced in the interpretative space between the two. The distinction drawn between cultures is necessary for the creation of a discursive space for this “new” mythological community of shared understanding. This is the next section of the story:

Twenty-four carats, pure inside and out.

It’s too late to change you, but I am telling you this because I worry about your baby. I worry that someday she will say, “Thank you, Grandmother, for the gold bracelet. I’ll never forget you.” But later, she will forget her promise. She will forget she had a grandmother.38

37 ibid.
38 ibid.
Here, ostensibly, Lindo is speaking to her daughter, but the discursive space of the "baby" is also that of the reader. S/he is as yet uninitiated in the ways of reading, and thus is being educated by the "grandmother" not to "forget her" or rather her cultural value. The only difference is that Lindo "hopes" the grandchild will "hear" this story. However, the reader is guaranteed exposure to it, and what becomes paramount is that the reader is able to "understand" it.

This narrative can be understood to deal primarily with a difference in cultural mode: the notion of "Chinese" familial loyalty as a verbal discourse is set up against a "Western" narrative of romantic love which is, according to Lindo, decidedly less "sincere". It is also, however, about belief and association. Lindo’s version of the film is more concerned with the foolishness of the girl for believing one version of "promise", when hers is the "sincere" or "accurate" one. What the text now attempts to secure is the reader’s alignment with Lindo. One strategy for this is through reference to the actual, for example in terms of the "weight" of the "real" bracelets. Another mechanism employed in the text is through reference to early childhood memory. What is interesting here is that the spurious nature of such memories could be expected to secure our resistance, rather than sustaining Lindo’s narrative authority. Having told the tale of the film Lindo launches into a second story, but she is careful to draw a distinction between the film’s narrative and her own:

And suddenly - Her eyes look straight down and she knows now she loves him, so much that she wants to cry. "Yes," she says at last, and they marry forever.

This was not my case. Instead, the village matchmaker came to my family when I was just two years old. No, nobody told me this, I remember it all. It was
summertime, very hot and dusty outside, and I could hear cicadas crying in the yard.\textsuperscript{39}

Here the narrative shift is supposedly "supported" by the distinction between a reported version and a "memory", but surely this is undermined by Lindo’s age – "I was just two years old [...] I remember it all"\textsuperscript{40} – this is presented without irony. In fact it seems to offer this as a credible statement to be taken seriously as an authentic memory. Tan frequently invokes memory throughout \textit{The Joy Luck Club}, and she often does so in exactly this vein, asserting that the maternal characters sustain incredibly lucid memories of their early childhoods. These discursive devices may appear insignificant but they sustain a false binary which underpins much of the text’s culturally satisfying "synthetic region". In much the same way that the negotiation between tales works throughout the narrative - so as to sustain, and to veil their very construction – memory functions as a space free from discursive anxiety. It offers an apparent source of origination for the "current" negotiation – possible for the reader or the "baby". It also seems to be protected from the anxieties of "fictionality" because of its being "owned" by the speaking subject. It is this very idea that the text foregrounds, that there is a greater "distance" between repeated tales and those "remembered" by the speakers. Such discursive proximity, suggesting that these narratives are somehow "more true", is culturally comforting. It not only offers a sense of origination, but also seems to sustain a "truth" which is reassuring. It is Tan’s employment of this use of memory which she sets up so emphatically at the opening of this text.

\textsuperscript{39} Tan, \textit{The Joy Luck Club}, 50.
\textsuperscript{40} ibid.
She sustains such an understanding throughout the text in various ways. The "maternal" voice is one of origination, but also one to be regarded as "authentic". In Tan's novel it carries discursive authority. Another means by which this form of "reading" or "understanding" is predicated is through the italicised introductions which open each section. The second section begins with the tale of The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates whereby a child comes to understand that her mother is narratively wise and ought not to be questioned:

"How do you know I will fall?" whined the girl.
"It is in a book, The Twenty Six Malignant Gates, all the bad things that can happen to you outside the protection of this house."
"I don't believe you. Let me see the book."
"It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me."
[...]"What twenty-six? [...]The mother still did not answer.
"You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything! And the girl ran outside, jumped on her bicycle, and in her hurry to get away, she fell before she even reached the corner."[41]

The placement of this short narrative serves not only to introduce the discourse of maternal narrative authority in the following stories of the daughters, it also forms a link with the previous tales. It highlights the ways in which the reader comes to understand the operation of narrative in this text. It flags certain discourses in an attempt to secure their discursive value. This narrative authority is crucial to the text's construction as particular discourses are then employed to demonstrate the validity of privileging certain voices within the text. These are not necessarily always maternal voices, but that is certainly the case in this example.

This narrative also foregrounds the American/Chinese binary, paralleling Lindo's narrative. Here, the ability to "read" is introduced both literally and
metaphorically to underline the discursive space of the "synthetic region" of understanding. The child in this narrative both fails to understand her mother's meaning, but is also excluded from the narrative by her inability to understand Chinese. This not only re-introduces the critical space between the two cultures as the English speaking child cannot speak her mother's language, but once again places the reader in the space between the mother and daughter. She cannot "read" the narrative in any sense, but this is negotiated for us so that the reader may not read the text, but unlike the girl, we come to "understand" its meaning. The text, once again, seems to set up an exoticising version of "Chinese" culture, both through the notion that it is incomprehensible, but also by suggesting a fatalist mythically predestined understanding of culture. I am not suggesting that these arguments cannot be made with critical force, but rather that this serves the text in that it veils/disguises the means by which the text co-opts the reader.

The location of the reader between mother and daughter demands a particular understanding on the part of the reader. This stylistic device is used repeatedly, compounding its force. It can be seen, for example, in the narrative of Ying Ying's daughter, Lena. In the first narrative Lena simply demonstrates the force of the kinds of narratives we are being asked to accept and maintain. Again, this section opens with a short tale from Lena's grandfather, which continues the layering strategy of the narrative with the addition of another narrator. But it is important as an example of another stylistic device. Lena's adolescence parallels the reader's resistance to a mode of discourse to which s/he is being positioned in an attempt to secure acquiescence. Lena's refusal to accept the didactic nature of the narrative allows discursive play in which the

anxieties of the reader to the kind of authority the narrator unquestionably has can be addressed.

The section opens with:

When I was little, my mother told me my great-grandfather had sentenced a beggar to die in the worst possible way, and that later the dead man came back and killed my great-grandfather. Either that, or he died of influenza one week later.  

It seems here that Lena allows us to resist the opening version, she questions the deterministic narrative where the behaviour of the grandfather is re-visited upon him. However, what the story continues to do is to assert that whilst this version is somehow “improbable” or in discursive terms “fictional”, the narrative is then devoted to proving that in fact the first narrative is the one to be “read” and the second to resist. The next paragraph details the beggar’s death:

“This traitor,” read the executioner, “is sentenced to die the death of a thousand cuts.” But before he could even raise the sharp sword [...] they found the beggar’s mind had already broken into a thousand pieces [...] “I thought this was the worst I would ever have to endure. But I was wrong. The worst is on the other side.” And the dead man embraced my great-grandfather with the jagged pieces of his arm and pulled him through the wall.  

At this point the reader discovers both that this is “fictitious” and that Lena doesn’t know the circumstances of the death. At this point the narrative appears to support the “metaphoric” understanding of this story as her mother “misunderstands” the question. Whilst Lena speaks of the victim of the “death of a thousand cuts”, her mother believes she is asking about her grandfather, and suggests that he really did die of flu:

I once asked my mother how he really died. She said “In bed, very quickly, after being sick for only two days.”

42 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 102.
43 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 102.
"No, no, I mean the other man. How was he killed? Did they slice off his skin first? [...]"

“That man has been dead for almost seventy years. What does it matter how he died?”

I always thought it mattered.⁴⁴

What the end of this quotation suggests is that the story of the “thousand cuts”
does matter, and the rest of the tale sustains this. The only means by which Lena can
“save” her mother from what appears to be severe depression, and possible death is
through this narrativising of “the magic of the unspeakable”⁴⁵, a phrase of Lena’s. What
is crucial is the ability to “tell” and understand the mode of discourse, so that it will be
read productively. By the end of the story Lena is able to re-narrate the story of her
grandfather, and through it she can redeem her mother:

I still saw bad things in my mind, but now I found ways to change them [...] I saw
something else.
I saw a girl complaining that the pain of not being seen was unbearable [...] the girl
pulled out a sharp sword and told her mother, “Then you must die the death of a
thousand cuts. [...] The girl said “Do you see now?”
The mother nodded: “Now I have perfect understanding. I have already
experienced the worst [...] And the girl grabbed her mother’s hand and pulled her
through the wall.⁴⁶

Through this narrative the structures which initiate the understanding of the “synthetic”
community predicated between the listener and the speaker are reinforced and reiterated.
The “speaker” is also privileged as both an authoritative and an “understanding” voice,
thus reasserting the acquiescence to its discourses. Lena has the authority to narrate and
this is displayed explicitly. Her resistance is registered and managed successfully. This
plays out the readers’ resistance within the text subsuming him/her by the end of the tale
into a position paralleling Lena, by reconstructing a complicit reader.

⁴⁴ Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 102/3.
⁴⁵ Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 103.
By the third section of the text this has been demonstrated so many times that the reader is presumed to be initiated and the subtleties by which s/he is coerced at the outset give way to a more openly stated discourse. Again a narrative opens the section, American Translation, Lena’s, which concerns the authority of voices, and the closely arbitrated ability to see or perceive. Lena’s discursive authority, the ability to understand and “save” her mother in narrative, has been established. One should understand the remarkable power of the story-teller by this point in the text. Such an acknowledgement is reinforced by the openness of her referral to this mode, the relationship between narrative authority and an understanding of the conceptual world inhabited by the conjured synthetic community: “To this day, I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen.” Similarly, there is a suggestion that this is a natural relationship: “If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold. Which means, I suppose, one thing is always the result of another.” Lena then distances what could be perceived as prophecy from a mysticism whose authority she cannot begin to underpin at this point, followed swiftly by a list of examples to emphasise the empiricism of this particular version of her mother’s stories:

But she does not predict when earthquakes will come, or how the stock market will do. She only sees bad things that affect our family. And she knows what causes them [...] One time when I was growing up [...] She said the new baby in her womb would fall out dead, and it did [...] And just after my father died last year she said she knew this would happen. Because a philodendron plant my father had given her had withered and died, despite the fact that she watered it faithfully. She said the plant had damaged its roots [...] The autopsy report she later received showed my father had had ninety-percent blockage of the arteries.

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The reason for this set of stories is then stated:

I remember this ability of my mother’s, because now she is visiting my husband and me in the house we just bought in Woodside. And I wonder what she will see.50

The reader by this point in the text is pre-disposed to recognise the discourse Ying Ying advances as being invested with a certain truth as a result of the correlation already established between her ability to perceive and the discursive weight that capacity maintains throughout the text. The Joy Luck Club is a text which consciously arbitrates reading and perception around a desire to manage a kind of mythological construction of “home” as a space. Tan creates a mythic geography for the Chinese community in her version of San Francisco. This “synthetic region” is reinforced in the kind of mythology she attempts to construct, and this is crystallised in her first children’s story, The Moon Lady.

Before turning to the “moon lady” narrative it is necessary to examine some of the anxieties about how to manage space and place which permeate The Joy Luck Club and the ways these anxieties are established. When Rose Hsu Jordan’s marriage is collapsing, for example, she identifies the house as the one object she will not forsake. By refusing to give it up, she asserts both her autonomy and her individuality:

I thought about putting an end to this torture and signing the divorce papers. And I was just about to take the papers out of the coupon drawer when I remembered the house. I thought to myself, I love this house [...] “I’ve already found a place,” I said quickly, because right then I knew where I was going to live [...] “you can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away.”51

49 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 149.
50 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 150.
51 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 192-196.
Rose's tale also introduces another of the ways in which space and place dominate this text. She learns to "fight" her husband through re-negotiating her relationship with a "Chinese" family icon. Mr Chou is "guardian of a door that opened into dreams [...] and I would slide headfirst, in through Old Mr Chou's door, and land in a house without doors or windows". The story plays out her management of her current situation in relation to both "American" ways to resolve problems of identity – in this particular story this is embodied in the figure of the "psychiatrist"; and through "Chinese" means of negotiation, - in this example this is engendered in a tripartite relationship between Mr Chou, Rose herself, and her mother. Once again this establishes the binary which sets up "American" understandings of behaviour against "Chinese" behavioural analysis. This could easily lead back to debates about the accuracy of these representations – the "false" distinction this text seems to insist upon in terms of modes of behaviour and understanding between what is represented as being "Chinese" as opposed to "American".

The text seems to invite such criticism in the way that it privileges certain "Chinese" understandings of space and place, such as Tan's invocation of the concept of "Fung shui" and Chinese geomancy in The Joy Luck Club. There are many references to "balance", the harmonies of "yin" and "yang" and notions of the ways in which spatial relations influence the fate of the characters. For example, Ying-ying Saint Clair recognises events before they happen through an understanding of the ways in which things are spatially out of balance. The "natural" relationship between one set of circumstances and their predication of a set of events is constructed through an

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52 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 186.
understanding that buildings have been misplaced and space used poorly or unwisely.

Here, for instance, is Lena’s sense of her mother’s power:

One time when I was growing up in San Francisco, she looked at the way our new apartment sat too steeply on the hill. She said the baby growing up in her stomach would fall out dead, and it did. When a plumbing and bathroom fixtures store opened up across the street from our bank, my mother said the bank would soon have all its money drained away. And one month later, an officer of the bank was arrested for embezzlement.55

and Ying-Ying refers to her own understanding with similar conviction:

Look at this end-table [...] All around this house I see the signs. My daughter looks but does not see. This is a house that will break into pieces. How do I know? I have always known a thing before it happens.54

There are many points in all the women’s stories which flag a Western popular culture image of “Chinese” understandings of space in terms of fung shui and geomancy. A cataloguing of them would perhaps re-invigorate the debate about the ways in which Tan manipulates popular cultural “Chinese” tropes at the expense of the community she is seeking to “represent”.

What is interesting, however, aside from these features, are the uses of space which such constant privileging of a popular notion of “Chinese” space elide. In other words, the critical focus will now be upon how space is predicated in elliptical discourses in The Joy Luck Club. This is demonstrated in the example given at the opening of the chapter in the naming of Waverly Jong, and the complexity of referents in her being named after a specific street in San Francisco’s Chinatown.

The tale in which Waverly’s naming is discussed is Lindo’s55 second narrative. In many ways Lindo’s penultimate narrative frames the text. The opening and final

54 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 243.
55 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 149.
narratives are concerned with Jing-mei Woo's physical journey from California to China. Lindo's narrative completes the preparations for the journey. Similar strategies have been examined in terms of imposition of discursive authority, but here Lindo's tale privileges a particular understanding of home and location rather than didacticism concerned with correct reading. In this first example she deals with the notion of "home" itself:

That evening An-mei and I went to work and searched through strips of fortune cookie papers, trying to find the right instructions to give your father [...] But I knew the right one when I read it. It said: "A house is not a home when a spouse is not at home." 

As with Lindo's previous narrative, by addressing herself to "you" she appears to be speaking "directly" to her daughter, but equally the reader is similarly placed in a precarious relationship to both Lindo and Waverly, somewhat intrusively between them hearing this "private" family narrative. She then goes on to extend this notion to a specific geographical location:

Waverly. It was the name of the street we lived on. And I wanted you to think, This is where I belong. But I also knew if I named you after this street, you would soon grow up, leave this place, and take a piece of me with you. 

The suggestion that Waverly is named after a specific street in San Francisco is far more complex than it initially appears, and part of the reason for this is the point at which it occurs within the text. Waverly tells us herself, in her own narrative, "Rules of the Game" that she was named after this street in the first tale to be narrated by a "daughter", rather than Jing-mei who represents both herself and her mother. The narratives of Waverly and her mother are placed at both ends of the text, and make the same narrative

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55 Waverly's mother.
statement about Waverly’s naming and its relationship to notions of belonging. They offer a justification for Waverly’s understanding of herself, and a point of origination for that understanding. This mode of conception is not only offered as a paradigm of Waverly’s consciousness, but is also the explanation for a set of understandings which underpin the ways in which the “daughters” in this text come to understand themselves. In this sense location, in terms of identification, seems to serve as an originating discourse against which the “daughter” can rebel. It is not just the mother which Waverly will reject, and then come to understand, but it is also the location itself which becomes a comfortably negotiable construct. The daughters re-interpret their relationship with their physical “origin”. They come to regard it as a potentially malleable construction. It is flexible enough to be reconstructed positively whilst maintaining a relationship to location which does not question its status as tangible, or “real” and thus comfortably secure and stable.

This can be demonstrated more clearly through an analysis of Waverly’s narrative. Apart from Jing-mei – whose narratives are distinct in that she speaks both for herself and her mother - Waverly’s is the first in a sequence of “daughter” narratives. Because Chinatown does not necessarily have to be subsumed here into debates about authenticity, one can examine other reasons for the use of such apparently specific locational detail as a narrative device. Waverly’s narrative opens with a very specific description of her childhood location:

We lived in San Francisco’s Chinatown [...] We lived on Waverly Place, in a warm, clean, two bedroom flat [...] at the end of our two-block alley was a small

56 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 264.
57 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 265.
sandlot playground [...] next to the pharmacy was [...] at the corner of the alley was [...] My mother named me after the street that we lived on.  

This seems like authenticating detail but it is in fact crucial to the foregrounded narrative about Waverly’s rebellion as a junior chess champion, the “story” in Waverly’s section which receives the most narrative time and the most critical attention. The tale seems to deal primarily with Waverly’s snowballing success as a junior chess champion, and the idea that she is employing a “Chinese” style of thought and concentration which is enabling her continuing success. In conjunction with her rapid achievements as a chess champion, however, is a discursive employment of space. As she begins to play and win she tells the reader:

Soon I no longer lost any games or Life-Savers, but I lost my adversaries. Winston and Vincent decided that they were more interested in roaming the streets after school in their Hopalong Cassidy cowboy hats.

By this point, although Waverly has gained some power within the home, it does not yet extend beyond the domestic and her brothers, who, whilst recognising her ascendancy, prefer to “play” in the local streets. These are streets which Waverly still feels able to negotiate spatially. Up to this point her chess success has only been within the domestic sphere and has not impinged upon her spatial relationship with the outside world. Therefore she is uninterested in out-door play spaces. Immediately after this mention of her brothers’ spatial habits she says:

On a cold spring afternoon, while walking home from school, I detoured through the playground at the end of our alley. I saw a group of old men [...] I ran home and grabbed Vincent’s chess set, [...] I came back to the park and approached a man who was observing the game.

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58 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 89-91.
59 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 95.
Here, she begins to negotiate space external to the domestic differently – in relation to her new preoccupation. She perceives the space of the playground through her paradigmatic interest in chess and thus comes to recognise its potential in new ways. However, with her increasing chess acumen, her “play” is hampered. The two spatial developments seem to happen in direct inverse proportion to one another:

I attended more tournaments, each one farther away from home [...] The Chinese bakery downstairs from our flat displayed my growing collections of trophies [...] I no longer played in the alley of Waverly Place. I never visited the playground [...] I went to school, then directly home [...] but I found it difficult to concentrate at home.61

Spatially, it becomes clearer that Waverly’s negotiation of the neighbourhood, and her belonging to it, are as crucial to her development of her sense of self as the fights for autonomy with her mother. At the end of her first section Waverly argues with her mother, but what is interesting here is not the fight itself but Waverly’s reaction to it:

I ran until it hurt and I realised I had nowhere to go [...] the alleys contained no escape routes [...] I felt myself growing light. I rose up into the air and flew out the window. Higher, and higher, above the alley, over the tops of tiled roofs [...] until everything below me disappeared and I was alone. 62

This frustrated relationship Waverly narrates between her desire for escape and its spatial construction parallels the adolescent rebellion engendered in the fight itself, but her ability to fly “above” the alleys suggests a deceptive level of distance. Here she is able to define herself against the alleys, but they both metaphorically and literally provide a framework for that rebellion. The location of “San Francisco’s Chinatown” forms the parameters against which Waverly defines herself. Just as she sets herself up in opposition to her mother’s will, her narrative establishes her in relation to this incredibly

60 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 95.
61 Tan, The Joy Luck Club, 97/8. – Italics mine
specific environment. The details are necessary not because they authenticate the narrative in terms of anthropological accuracy, but rather that they provide the identifications which the subject, in this case Waverly, constructs itself in relation to. Waverly's manipulation of this construction of location is the strategy that the reader is educated in throughout the text. It is this specific understanding of location as an ideologically comforting "synthetic region" which Waverly demonstrates and the reader comes to be included in.

The idea that adolescent rebellion is as much in relation to the locational security of origin as a rejection of maternal authority is picked up in Waverly's second narrative. Here, as an adult woman, she fights with her mother once again. This time the fight is concerned with the right to determine one's own relationship to location. Waverly misunderstands her mother and conflates "Taiyuan" with "Taiwan" causing a rift as the two fail to comprehend one another's position. However, through an analogy with San Francisco Waverly comes to understand her mistake. She finishes the fight with the following sentence; "And really, I did understand finally. Not what she had just said. But what had been true all along." By this point in the text the reader is sufficiently adept at the structures of meaning within the novel to recognise that what exactly is "true" does not need to be stated. The construction and arbitration of "location" is understood to be practised in specific ways.

Waverly also recognises here that what is paramount is a synthetic bonding of the "Chinese" version of "Taiyuan" and the "American" version of "San Francisco". She does not simply parallel the two situations. What is fundamental here is that through

mutual understanding Waverly and her mother come to create a mythologic or “synthetic” space between the two in which they understand one another and they can both “speak”. It is at this point that they then begin to talk of travelling to China together. Thus they re-position this synthetic region back in the tangible, asserting that it exists beyond the community of understanding. The suggestion is that they will develop their knowledge of one another on the journey. This once more veils the “fictionality” of this “community” and draws the attention of the reader away from its constructedness and back to the Chinese/American binary. This also privileges negotiation of location as being capable of managing cultural misunderstandings.

This narrative strategy is reinforced by the trope of the journey being central to both Lindo and Waverly's relationship, and that of Jing-mei and her mother. It is not the journey itself which offers some kind of redemption, but a new understanding of the relation of origin in terms of geography to constructs of identity. China does not become an originating force which the daughters have previously failed to recognise. Rather, what these young women have to form is a mythological understanding of locational origin that will sustain them.

San Francisco here becomes the “Golden Mountain” as it is known by the Chinese American community in this text. The City serves as a mythic/originating cultural location. Yet the ways in which Tan becomes embroiled in debates about her textual use of the city of San Francisco - which is specific and yet seems to belie its own referentiality - can be circumvented. The “synthetic region” of the city needs to justify itself in terms of a kind of empiric origination to ensure its culturally secure status. However, it simultaneously needs to remove its materiality to the level of the mythic for
it to be sustaining in its role in a narrative which produces a particular understanding of the "self" in the community she conjures.

San Francisco has been examined as a mythic construct, equally, therefore, the conjuring of "China" as a location needs to be re-examined: but not examined in relation to the "actual" contemporary location of San Francisco. Tan once again privileges the authenticating binary by setting up a deliberate parallel to the "real" San Francisco. This is achieved for example by referring to actual San Francisco restaurants. These references mask the city's role in the text as a discourse by foregrounding particular "real" locations. Tan uses these concrete signposts to offer a point of identification to the "newcomer". In fact the culturally innocent subject is constructed simultaneously in China and America. The reader is taught how to locate him/herself in relation to both - they are made material through reference to locational particularities to create a secure point of identification for the reader. But both discursive locations are constructed mythically, San Francisco is as much an exoticised, idealised space as China is in *The Joy Luck Club.*

In the opening section of the first tale of the novel, "The Joy Luck Club", Jingmei talks about her mother's version of her first trip to Kweilin, at the outset of the war:

"I dreamed about Kweilin before I ever saw it," my mother began, speaking Chinese. "I dreamed of jagged peaks lining a curving river, with magic moss greening the banks. At the tops of these peaks were white mists. And if you could float down this river and eat the moss for food, you would be strong enough to climb the peak. If you slipped, you would only fall into a bed of soft moss and laugh. [...] And when I arrived, I realised how shabby my dreams were [...] when I saw the hills I laughed and shuddered at the same time. The peaks looked like giant fried fish heads trying to jump out of a vat of oil [...] Can you see this? [...] so you can see how quickly Kweilin lost its beauty for me [...] I sat in the dark corners of my house with a baby under each arm [...] I could only see the dripping bowels of an ancient hill that might collapse on top of me. *Can you imagine how*
it is, to want to be neither inside nor outside, to want to be nowhere and disappear?^64

This tale is important for a number of reasons, it features a fairytale/mythic narrative style, introducing mythic discourses to the text. The creation of a “magic” kingdom in the opening sentences sets Kweilin up as both an actual City, and a mythic space which exists in more than one location. We are told that Suyuan is speaking “Chinese” but this story is translated on multiple levels. It is in English but it also begins in the recognisable form of a fairy-tale. It allies us to the fairytale by gesturing to our understanding of such narratives and removes the anxiety of being able to form a “concrete” or descriptive picture of the city. This is crucial for what Tan offers here is a paradigm for immigrant experience. The hill could be replaced with the “Golden Mountain” or San Francisco. The tension between the dream of the naïve traveller and the bitter experience of the reality of integrating into a new community is made explicit. Jing-mei’s mother’s last sentence could form a part of any of the daughter’s discourse in relation to their understanding of their “bi-culturality”. Although the text seems to be dealing with quite a distinct set of discourses – such as the fear of Japanese invasion in China in the Second World War, and the threat to the survival of her twin daughters, the use of a mythic style highlights another.

Anxieties about belonging and home also underpin the other major mythic narrative. In the first section of the novel, “Feathers from a thousand Li away” Ying Ying St Clair narrates the final tale, entitled “The Moon Lady” in which she tells us the Moon Lady’s mythic narrative. This is a version of an Ancient Chinese myth about Cheng/Heng O, the one-time bride of the Master Archer Yi, a hero in Chinese mythology

^64 Tan, The Joy Luck Club 21/2. – Italics mine
because he saves the world from destruction. In her text *Chinese Mythology* Anne Birrell discusses the most popular versions of the Moon Lady tale:

She is not the moon goddess as such but is said to be the “essence of the moon” [...] the earliest account [...] introduces the motif of a toad, the creature she metamorphosed into on the moon. This motif denotes immortality because of the toad’s sloughing off of its skin and its apparent rebirth. [...] Another world-wide motif that occurs in the Ch'ang O moon myth is the theft of a gift of the gods and the punishment of the thief [...] Heng O fits this pattern of the trickster in several respects: she stole the gift of the drug of immortality [...] she metamorphoses into an ugly creature with the saving grace of immortality.  

Birrell goes on to quote the myth:

Yi asked the Queen Mother of the West for the drug of immortality. Yi’s wife, Heng O, stole it and escaped to the moon. She was metamorphosed on the moon and became the striped toad Ch’an-ch’u, and she is the essence of the moon.  

It is this story which is retold in Ying Ying’s tale. The changes Tan makes are not enormous, but what is of interest are her reasons for deciding to manipulate the narrative in certain ways. What Tan does is to take an ancient Chinese myth and mould it into a Chinese-American myth. Just as San Francisco needs to work both as an actual, originating, empirical location and as a kind of mythic origin, so the use of Chinese myth in this text is not a way for the community to understand itself in relation to an “alien” community. It does not function as something to define oneself against. It is instead subsumed so as to retain its privileging “Chineseness”. While the story still serves debates about cultural authenticity, it also offers a model for the Chinese-American community as it presently exists. Tan went on to lift her version of the story from *The Joy Luck Club* to print it as a children’s story in its own right suggesting exactly this ideological function for the narrative.

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65 Birrell, 144/5.  
66 Birrell, 145.
In *The Joy Luck Club* the story of the Moon Lady is presented to us as the child Ying Ying witnesses it being acted on stage on the day of the Moon festival. This falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, by the Chinese Lunar calendar, and is traditionally when the moon is celebrated. Ying Ying is a wilful four year-old who plays whilst her family are napping. She accidentally falls into the lake upon which her family are sailing for the celebration of the Moon Festival. She is picked up and placed on the shore where the people who rescued her presume she will be reunited with her family. Left alone she wanders and comes across the performance of the myth which she then goes on to relate. Tan’s tale and her version of the myth both privilege discourses of belonging. The end of the story doubly reinforces this. It is what we are to understand both from the story itself, and the means by which the myth is narrated for Ying Ying. The idea of belonging is underscored by Ying Ying’s separation from her family as she stumbles upon the performance. Before the story starts she tells us, “I now felt I was lost forever”\(^{67}\), and at the end of the play she makes clear how we are to read both the myth and her experience of it:

> At the end of her singing tale, I was crying, shaking with despair. Even though I did not understand her entire story, I understood her grief. In one small moment, we had both lost the world, and there was not a way to get it back. \(^{68}\)

The section ends with Ying Ying speaking:

> But now that I am old, moving every year closer to the end of my life, I also feel closer to the beginning. And I remember everything that day because it has happened many times in my life. […] How I lost myself. I remember all those things. And tonight on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, I also remember what I asked the moon lady so long ago. I wished to be found. \(^{69}\)

\(^{67}\) Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, 79.

\(^{68}\) Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, 81.

\(^{69}\) Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, 83.
This reiterates Tan’s attempts to ensure our acceptance of this version in the assertion of the power of recollection, and at the same time repeats the kind of pattern visible in the discourses of the Cities of San Francisco and Kweilin. The narrative draws attention to the myth’s “actuality” through reference to the specific date of the Moon Festival, but the myth is constructed in such a way as to establish that the narrative’s primary concern is with belonging. In fairy story fashion, and in keeping with the style of this novel, the homily at the end cannot be resisted. In this case the overweening desire the text aims to satisfy is the desire for origination; mythic, syncretic location with the comfort of the specific to legitimise the discourse.

In terms of the story itself Tan alters the plot in interesting ways. The most important of these is her introduction of the notion of romantic love and ideas of belonging into a story which does not usually manage such paradigmatic concerns. According to popular legend Heng O was indeed the wife of Yi and did steal the peach of immortality, which the Queen of the West had given him as a reward for his heroic acts. However, Heng O does not exist in Chinese mythology as the eternally pining wife. The morality of this myth tends to dwell on her selfishness. She is often represented as a three-legged toad. This is demonstrated in Birrell’s version of the myth where Heng O is punished for her crime through her metamorphosis into a toad, but is given “the saving grace of immortality”70. The common version of the tale is not concerned with a romantic understanding of Heng O’s relationship to her husband. The construction in Tan’s version of a romantic separation, however, gestures at all sorts of Western originating myths and codes, from Eve to the curiosity of Snow White. There is, for

70 Birrell, 145.
example, in Tan’s version of Heng O’s physical description a predication of a “Romantic”, or fairy tale heroine:

Her hair was now so long it swept the floor, wiping up her tears. An eternity had passed since she last saw her husband, for this was her fate: to stay lost on the moon.\textsuperscript{71}

The “Moon Lady” narrative functions not so much as an “authenticating” Chinese myth but is rather a striking collapse of two genres of myth. This story is as much Rapunzel as it is the Heng O myth. Tan produces a myth which offers a parallel to the anxieties of the immigrant in an embryonic community. It is not simply a myth for the Chinese-American community. Rather, the myth itself deals with anxieties about belonging on a deliberately abstract scale. Being lost is privileged, (Tan asserts in her version that the Moon Lady is lost on the moon.) The tale also gestures at journey and location on a mythic scale (she is expelled from a life with her husband to the “alien” location of the Moon). It is a potent example of Tan’s construction of cultural mythology. Two sets of myth are conflated to alleviate a particular set of discursive/mythic anxieties.

Tan’s decision to reproduce her version of the Heng O, or “Moon Lady” myth as a children’s story underlines her use of this myth as a culturally instructive re-working of the Chinese original. Its separation from \textit{The Joy Luck Club} implies that the story does have a cultural significance that allows it to be read in its own right. It also reinforces the notion that the idea of belonging is central to the anxieties of the Chinese-American community as she understands them. Perhaps the reason that her writing becomes so self-reflexive – both in its direction of the reader, and in its critical reception, lies in the fact that she herself is anxious about the ability of the author to arbitrate cultural

\textsuperscript{71} Tan, \textit{The Joy Luck Club}, 81.
mythology. Does Tan feel the need to keep a strangle hold on interpretation because the very nature of what she is trying to produce needs to be engendered by the community rather than one author? Or does the critical and public reception of her work suggest that she is not only successful in this attempt but also that The Joy Luck Club is co-opted in certain ways because it taps into a fundamental contemporary cultural anxiety, and as such needs to be written as mythology to serve the broader needs it purports to address?
The Kitchen God's Wife – The Materiality of Discursive Authority

The Joy Luck Club's narrative strategies construct a community of understanding. This community represents the "synthetic region" which Wilbur Zelinsky argues performs a culturally satisfying role in contemporary society. In The Kitchen God's Wife Tan employs very different discursive tactics, but, as with her first novel, a sustaining "mythological" narrative is conjured. Here, although debates about location and the ability to narrate are still foregrounded within the text, the strategies and emphases on the recuperative power of communication are entirely different. In The Kitchen God's Wife communication in various forms, from conversation through to newspapers and banners, figures centrally as the sustaining discourse. What is predicated in this novel is the material power of the narrative. Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities places emphasis upon an understanding of the conceptual force of particular narrative structures in his analysis of the formation of the idea of the "Nation":

Why this transformation should be so important for the birth of the imagined community of the nation can best be seen if we consider the basic structure of two forms of imagining which first flowered in the Eighteenth Century: the novel and the newspaper.72

What can usefully be taken from Anderson's argument about the role of both "forms of imagining" is their conceptual importance in the formation of an "imagined community". He is particularly interested in this construction on a national level, however. It is not the construction of the Nation State that forms the focus here, but rather Tan's employment of privileged forms of discourse in her construction of a mythically rooted Chinese-
American community. In the case of Tan’s novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* what is particularly interesting is the means by which she employs one of these “forms” in conjunction with the other; within the parameters of the novel newspapers play a crucial role. What Tan constructs in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is the kind of “imagined community” Zelinsky speaks of. It is a “synthetic region” which appeals in terms of its being both materially local and soothingly transregional. Anderson is useful therefore not because Tan creates a version of the Nation in her text. It is rather that the cultural currency Anderson suggests specific instances of language can sustain are fundamental to Tan’s novel. The idea that linguistic forms can maintain the construction of an “imagined community” finds a parallel in the role newspapers, as well as other public forms of communication, play in Tan’s novel.

The cultural currency of newspapers, and their role in the formation of a community of understanding is stated clearly by Anderson in the introduction to *Imagined Communities*:

> We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that [...] The significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers – is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, [...] yet each simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. [...] at the same time the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.73

It is this idea of the newspaper as central to a concept of communal understanding which performs in specific ways in Tan’s novel. Through this paradigm of the newspaper, as a

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73 Anderson, 35/6.
conceptual linking device for the community, Tan refracts specific political and cultural concerns. The text privileges certain forms of communication as possessing the power to materially alter behaviour and action on a public as well as personal level.

Through this understanding of linguistic force, just as in *The Joy Luck Club*, the text operates to maintain the reader's place as complicit with the structured "community". *The Kitchen God's Wife* attempts to locate within certain forms of "communication" a material, or physical power which reinforces the suggestion that the reader can invest in, and be recuperated by, certain versions of communication. *The Kitchen God's Wife*, unlike *The Joy Luck Club*, does not try to secure an authoritative position for the speaker. It rather masks anxieties about the power of "communication" as a political and social tool.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife* a collapse between the creation of a physical "home" or sustaining location and the communicative version of the "home" takes place. The reader is encouraged wholeheartedly to invest in the discursive force of "construction". Construction can usefully be explored in relation to this text for its conjuring of both the physical building of location and it's linguistic resonances.

In the OED "construction" is defined as follows:

**Construction:**

1 – the action of constructing.

1a) The action of framing, devising or forming, by the putting together of parts; erection, building.
b) of immaterial objects, systems, organizations, etc.
c) The art or science of constructing.

2a) The manner in which a thing is artificially constructed or naturally formed; structure, conformation, disposition.
b) The mental building up of materials; constructive faculty

4a) A thing constructed: a material structure; a formation of the mind or genius.

II [...] The action of construing and connected sentences.
a) the action of syntactically arranging words in a sentence.
6 – The action of analysing the structure of a sentence and translating it word for word into another language; construing, translation.
7 – The construing, explaining, or interpreting of a text or statement; explanation, interpretation, meaning, sense.
8a) Interpretation put upon conduct, action, facts, words etc. the way in which these are taken or viewed by onlookers, usually with qualification. 
b) to make a construction – to give an explanation or meaning to; to explain or interpret in a certain way.
9 – Law 
a) The explaining or interpreting of the words of a statute, deed, or other legal document.
b) A particular explanation or interpretation put upon a law etc. 74

What this definition serves to highlight is the difficulty the reader finds in conceptually separating one form of “construction” from another. This is most clearly indicated in 4a where the dictionary offers a definition of “A thing constructed”. It is at once “a material structure” and “a formation of mind or genius”, and it is this potential for conflation which is played on so successfully in The Kitchen God’s Wife.

In the novel the notion of physical construction – the act of building – is collapsed into the idea of syntactical construction. The latter is invested with a sense of material power. It is through this agglomeration that “communication” attains much of its discursive force within the novel. What the text is at pains to maintain, therefore, is not only the authority of the speaker, but that narratives sustain a communal force which can outweigh physical, political, and even military strength. The text asserts the power of the speaker to construct not solely for the purposes of self-identification, but also as an inter-subjectively sustaining paradigm. It is here that the recuperating force in this novel is located. Mythological discourses serve to allay the cultural anxieties of the reader and the reading community they predicate. The “fairy-story” or myth in this text performs a specific role: it conjures an unproblematised discourse that enables those who identify
with it to mask anxieties about location and belonging. This parallels its function in her first novel but it is a means to a different discursive end.

*The Kitchen God's Wife* was first published in 1991. It features the relationship of Pearl Louie Brant, and her mother, Winnie Louie. Pearl suffers from multiple sclerosis, a secret she has kept from her mother, and, at the outset of the novel, Winnie has told her daughter nothing of her life in China before she immigrated to the United States as the wife of Pearl’s Chinese-American father. The novel opens with Pearl narrating her journey to her mother for the funeral of “Auntie Du” and asserts the communicative gap between the two women. The body of the text is taken up with Winnie narrating her life to her daughter, as the two are forced to expose their secret narratives by Winnie’s best friend, “Auntie Helen”. Helen believes herself to be suffering from a brain tumour and insists that if the two women do not tell one another their secrets she will tell them herself. The text then focuses upon Winnie’s life in China from the 1920s through to the end of the Second World War, it features both her first husband and children, but also the two women Pearl has called “Aunts” – Grand Auntie Du, and “Auntie Helen”, or Hulan. However, the novel is framed by life in contemporary San Francisco, as the novel ends in the “present” with Winnie’s attempt to re-negotiate her relationship with her daughter.

Initially, it would appear that Tan’s two novels are structured in relatively similar ways: In *The Joy Luck Club*, different narrative voices are deployed to construct a sense of community as groups of mothers and daughters come to “communicate” with one another. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* also foregrounds mother daughter relationships: Pearl,
the American born daughter, to her Chinese mother, Winnie. In a similar vein to *The Joy Luck Club* the action of the novel is spurred by a family crisis. In the first novel it is the death of June’s mother that forces June to take her mother’s place at the mah jong table, and leads to her discovery of her mother’s past. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife* it is the combination of the death of Auntie Du, and Auntie Helen’s promise that she will tell the mother and daughter each other’s secrets before she dies which prompts the mother/daughter dialogue between Pearl and Winnie.

Both novels are concerned with the emotional or conceptual “distance” which separates the women. In *The Joy Luck Club* June narrates the first section and discusses the conceptual distance she had felt between herself and her mother:

> My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.75

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* opens with the daughter reflecting on the lack of understanding that exists between herself and Winnie as she is driven home from her mother’s house with her husband:

> I quickly hand Phil a tangerine, then turn back toward the window so he does not see my tears. I watch the landscape we are drifting by: the reservoir, the rolling foothills, the same houses I’ve passed a hundred times without ever wondering who lives inside. Mile after mile, all of it familiar, yet not, this distance that separates us, me from my mother.76

Pearl’s version of the lack of understanding suggests a spatial conception of their inability to comprehend one another, whereas June’s version from *The Joy Luck Club* privileges the idea of translation. *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, however, sets up an interior/exterior relationship – Pearl realises she sees the houses but not who “lives
inside”. It also establishes a spatial discourse which reinforces the “distance” between Pearl’s American upbringing and the absent narratives of her mother’s Chinese history. Whereas *The Joy Luck Club* foregrounded debates about narrative control, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* privileges the selection of narratives and, once told, their communal role. Pearl is not simply preoccupied by her lack of understanding of her mother’s stories, but rather invokes a space, or “landscape”, between them. Thus she gives spatial coordinates for the narratives that will span the gap, they will cover “mile after mile” unlike in *The Joy Luck Club* where the tales need to be “understood correctly” here they are given space for their enunciation. Equally, through the invocation of “landscape” the, as yet, untold narratives are spatialised and physicalised: the materialisation of their separation is suggested in the literal distance between mother and daughter which Pearl describes.

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club* also appear to set up similar relationships to the material landscape of San Francisco. Waverly Jong’s references, in *The Joy Luck Club*, to the Chinatown she remembers growing up in appear to be paralleled by Pearl’s mention of specific streets. This is Waverly’s description of her childhood neighbourhood:

> At the end of our two-block alley was a small sandlot playground with swings [...] The best playground [...] was the dark alley itself [...] the medicinal herb shop [...] Next to the pharmacy was a printer who specialised in gold-embossed wedding invitations [...] Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market.77

At the opening of *The Kitchen God’s Wife* Pearl sets off to visit her mother in her shop in Chinatown. She narrates her journey as she walks San Francisco’s streets:

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As I turn down Ross Alley, everything around me immediately becomes muted in tone. It is no longer the glaring afternoon sun and noisy Chinatown sidewalks filled with people doing their Saturday grocery shopping [...] On the right-hand side of the street is the same old barbershop, run by Al Fook [...] Across the street are the same trade and family associations.

However, what these associations serve to highlight are, in fact, the very different means of negotiation by which the two texts operate. Pearl’s close observation of the street where her mother works continues from above as follows:

Including a place that will send ancestor memorials back to China for a fee. And farther down the street is the shopfront of the fortune-teller. A hand-written sign taped to the window claims to have “the best lucky numbers, the best fortune advice,” but the sign taped to the door says: “Out of Business.” [...] And now I am at Sam Fook Trading Company, [...] It contains shelves full of good-luck charms [...] I’ve called this place the Shop of the Gods ever since I can remember. It also sells the stuff people get for Buddhist funerals – spirit money, paper jewelry.79

Whereas Waverly’s narrative in *The Joy Luck Club* was a recollection of her childhood, in Pearl’s narrative the reader is escorted along the road with Pearl, being directly spoken to of the things which draw her attention as she walks. What is important about Pearl’s version is that, unlike Waverly’s, it is not concerned with recollection, but rather privileges a specific discourse. Pearl’s “observations” concern ancestry and Chinese religion culminating in her version of the shop next door to her Mother’s. The text yokes the personal and the cultural through the mention of “Buddhist funerals”. At first this final detail seems extraneous, and could perhaps be cited as an example of Tan’s use of “authentic” detail. However, Pearl’s narrative continues as follows:

Spirit money, paper jewelry, incense, and the like.

“Hey Pearl!” It’s Mr. Hong, the owner, waving me to come in. [...] “Hey Pearl,” Mr Hong says when I walk in the door, “I got some things for your mother

79 ibid.
here, for the funeral tomorrow[...] "Okay." He hands me a soft bundle. I guess this means Grand Auntie’s funeral will be Buddhist. [...] I don’t think Grand Auntie ever gave up her other beliefs, which weren’t exactly Buddhist, just all the superstitious rituals concerning attracting good luck and avoiding bad. On those occasions when I did go up to her apartment, I used to play with her altar, a miniature red temple containing a framed picture of a Chinese god. [...] It was like a Chinese version of a Christmas crèche.80

This extract employs one of Tan’s typical narrative patterns, that is the collapse of observation, recollection, and the essentialist “experience” which makes questioning the discourse difficult for the reader. In this example Pearl conflates the “current” – her collection of the paper money for Grand Auntie Du’s funeral – with the “past” - her recollection of her Aunt’s house as a child. Tan does this in order to reinforce the particular version of “religion” the reader is being presented with through Du’s religious practices both during her life and at her funeral. This is not simply to establish Du’s behaviour but to personalise and essentialise religious discourse so that the version of Buddhism presented is apparently “personal”. It then pre-empts any difficulty with claims that Tan is claiming anything other than a partisan, and thus not culturally suspect version. Also, through the associations linked to the version, it is difficult to question narratively, the “evidence” – in this case the funeral rites – of her beliefs, as they are immediately supported by Pearl’s recollection of her. This use of observation in association with “experience” and recollection is a strategy that was examined at length in The Joy Luck Club, and therefore one example from The Kitchen God’s Wife will suffice.

The incident in which Pearl picks up the paper money for her Aunt’s funeral also introduces one of the novel’s central discourses. Through a set of casual and personal

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links Tan privileges "Chinese" religion and ancestry. This is partially achieved through the plot, in that ostensibly the narrative is concerned with the death of Auntie Du and her funeral arrangements. It is also through the strategies examined above, the collapse of association and recollection. Pearl speaks directly to the reader, for example as she guides us along the road, "It’s Mr Hong, the owner, waving me to come in,"\(^{81}\) thus employing a parallel strategy to those used in Tan’s first novel to align the reader with the speaker.

This opening chapter serves to establish a personal link to the “altar” or shrine, which will then go on to play a central role in the narrative. It is through the altar that the reader is introduced both specifically to the myth of the Kitchen God, after which the text is named, and to the discursive power of “construction”. The presentation of the shrine as a “plaything” is central to this particular discourse. It suggests both the notion of manipulation and the ability to physically alter the discourse of belief, and also posits a familiarity with religious tropes. The text deliberately sets up a cosy relationship with the Chinese Gods, both in relation to Pearl’s negotiation of the locality and in her recollections of the shrine itself. What is foregrounded here is not a conception of religious observance but rather the ability of the individual to find uses for the religious space which cater to their individual needs. This is true of both Pearl and Auntie Du. Pearl makes use of the altar as a plaything, Auntie Du is selective in her allegiance to different religious practices. The introduction of religious narratives through Pearl’s remembrance and Du’s selectivity also privileges the idea of religious, or “sacred”,

\(^{81}\) Tan, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, 18.
narratives as being predominantly manipulable stories. In this respect they parallel the “altar” in that the narratives themselves can be “played with”, or selectively employed.

The altar, therefore, establishes at the outset of this novel that the space of the “sacred” is one that can be manipulated and reconstructed without suggesting that such discursive and physical “play” is ideologically suspect. This is highlighted by two narratives which frame the text. The first is the myth of the Kitchen God, the second, Auntie Du’s funeral. The two work in conjunction with one another as once again the personal and “cultural” are collapsed. This conflation reinforces the cultural value to be gleaned through the manipulation of inherited narratives. In this text inherited narratives, and the right to play with them, include religious discourses.

The Myth of the Kitchen God is cited by Qi Xing in *Folk Customs at Traditional Chinese Festivals* as follows:

On the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month there is in China the custom of offering sacrifices to the Kitchen God [...] he was [...] an envoy of the Jade Emperor [...] He would record from time to time peoples merits and misdeeds and went back to the Palace in Heaven every year on the 23rd day [...] to report his observations to the Emperor.

According to legend [...] young man named Zhang, who was married to a virtuous dignified looking woman, Guo Dingxiang (Lilac)[...] The husband worked in the field and the wife at a loom. In less than three years, they accumulated a big fortune. Soon Zhang took a woman named Haitang (Crabapple) as his concubine. She was a jealous woman, who was lazy and like to enjoy life. He and Crabapple lived a life of dissipation and in less than two years they had squandered all their money and became penniless. Crabapple, who loathed living in poverty, left Zhang [...] soon Zhang became a beggar [...] he broke down in front of a house at its doorstep [...] housemaid found him and brought him into the kitchen and let him warm himself up and eat his fill. Zhang was very grateful [...] The maid told him her mistress was a kind-hearted, widowed lady without any kith and kin. At this, the mistress appeared [Zhang realises that it is his first wife Lilac.] He was so ashamed of himself that he crawled into the stove chamber trying to hide himself. [where he is burnt to death.] Lilac, recognising that the man was her ex-husband, was quite sad and upset. Unhappy, she too died a few days later. [...] The Jade Emperor had intended to punish him severely. But since Zhang had later realised his wrong
The Jade Emperor changed his mind, and instead, made Zhang the Kitchen God.\footnote{Qi Xing, \textit{Folk Customs at Traditional Chinese Festivals}, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988) Square brackets my own, circular brackets the author's, 64-66.}

Before the narrative of the Kitchen God appears in Tan's novel the title of the first chapter sets up a particular relationship to religious discourse; it is entitled "The Shop of the Gods". This title gestures towards "Edenic" perfection, as suggested by phrases such as "the food of the Gods" and at the same time inverts the traditional hierarchy by placing the mortal as arbiter of the Gods' fate. The introduction here of the agency of the purchaser again establishes the hierarchy of discursive play whereby the narrator can constructively select and employ the "Gods". Having mentioned the "altar" as a childhood recollection, in the first chapter of the novel, Grand Auntie Du's funeral then takes place, and afterwards Winnie tells Pearl that the altar is Du's Bequest to her:

"Don't forget," my mother says to Phil. 'Grand Auntie's present in the laundry room [...] She turns on the light, and then I see it, sitting on the clothes dryer. It is the altar for Grand Auntie's good-luck god, the Chinese crèche. "Wow! Tessa exclaims. "A Chinese Dollhouse." [...] The altar is about the size of a small upturned drawer, painted in red lacquer. In a way, it resembles a miniature stage for a Chinese play [...] Running down the sides are wooden panels decorated with gold Chinese characters. "What does it say?" I ask my mother.\footnote{Tan, \textit{The Kitchen God's Wife}, 52/3.}

Before the story is told the idea of play is reinforced both by Tessa in her description of it as a "dollhouse" and by Pearl's allusion to theatricality and "play". The narrative continues as follows:

"And who is this on the inside, this man in the picture frame?"

The picture is almost cartoon like. The man is rather large and is seated in regal splendor, [...] "Oh this we call Kitchen God. To my way of thinking, he was not too important. Not like Buddha [...] Maybe he was like a store manager, important, but still many, many bosses above him." Phil chuckles at my mother's Americanized explanation of the hierarchy of Chinese deities. I wonder if that's
how she really thinks of them, or if she's used this metaphor for our benefit.
"What's a kitchen god?" says Tessa. "Can I have one?"
"He is only a story," answers my mother.
"A story!" exclaims Cleo. "I want one."
My mother's face brightens [...] "It is a very simple story," she says to Cleo in a
soothing voice, "how he became Kitchen God. It is this way."

This lead in to Tan's version of the myth employs a narrative strategy she uses
frequently. Just as she structures narratives in The Joy Luck Club to secure our place in
the "community of understanding" here she is careful to establish the value of this myth
is not as sacred religious text, "he is only a story,". Also "observation" is in fact Pearl's
commentary on her mother's "construction" of the God. At this early stage in the novel
Tanforegrounds storytelling, inheritance, and the recuperative force of mythical
reconstruction. At this point Winnie is ostensibly telling the story to her granddaughter.
Both Pearl and the reader become the indirect audience. Although just as with The Joy
Luck Club fairy story or mythology are employed for their educative force, they are also
used to create a community of listeners, which includes the reader, and not only the direct
object of the narration. Winnie then tells Pearl's daughters the myth and Pearl directly
states this conceptual link for the reader:

And my mother begins, I am struck by a familiar feeling, as if I am Cleo, again
three years old, still eager to believe everything my mother has to say.
"In China a long time ago," I hear my mother say, "there was a rich farmer
named Zhang, such a lucky man. Fish jumped in his river, pigs grazed in his land,
ducks flew around his yard as thick as clouds. And that was because he was
blessed with a hardworking wife named Guo. She caught his fish and herded his
pigs. She fattened his ducks, doubled all his riches, year after year. Zhang had
everything he could ask for – from the water, the earth, and the heavens above.
"But Zhang was not satisfied. He wanted to play with a pretty carefree
woman named Lady Li [...] When Lady Li later chased his wife out of the house,
Zhang did not run out and call to her, "Come back, my good wife, come back."
[...] In two years time, all of Zhang's land was empty, and so was his heart. His
money was gone, and so was pretty Lady Li, run off with another man.

84 53 ibid.
"Zhang became a beggar, so poor he wore more patches than whole cloth on his pants [...] "One day, he fell over and faced the sky, ready to die [...] when he sat up, he saw he was in a kitchen, near a warm fireplace. The girl tending the fire explained that the lady of the house had taken pity on him – she always did this, with all kinds of people, poor or old, sick or in trouble.

‘What a good lady!’ Cried Zhang. ‘Where is she, so I can thank her?’ [...] Ai ya! That lady was none other than his good wife Guo!

"Zhang began leaping about the kitchen looking for some place to hide, then jumped into the kitchen fireplace just as his wife walked in the room.

"Good wife Guo poured out many tears to try to put the fire out. No use! Zhang was burning with shame [...] In heaven, the Jade Emperor [...] declared, ‘I make you Kitchen God [...] from then on, people in China knew Kitchen God was watching them [...] and once a year, seven days before the new year, Kitchen God flew back up the fireplace to report whose fate deserved to be changed, better for worse, or worse for better.’ "The end!” shouts Cleo

Unlike the version of “The Moon Lady” in The Joy Luck Club, Tan’s version of the myth of the Kitchen God is much more closely allied to “traditional” versions of the myth. However, the alterations that Tan does make shift the focus of the narrative. As the title of the novel suggests Tan’s interest seems to be in the figure of “Guo”, or the faithful wife, rather than the God himself. His dissipated and cruel behaviour is emphasised, as well as the idea that his very wealth stemmed not from his own capacity for work and good luck but from his wife. In many versions of the myth at the outset the couple are perceived to work hard, but in Tan’s version Guo “doubled his riches year after year”.

The emphasis on the fortitude of this wronged woman finds many parallels with both the plot and thematic concerns of the novel. The narrative which Pearl is about to begin “for her daughter” tells of her life with a cruel, abusive and ungrateful husband and the parallel with the Kitchen God’s wife is clear. The narrative, therefore, forms a mythological equivalent to Winnie’s troubles. It forestalls the action of the novel, leading us to expect Winnie’s eventual emotional and psychological success over her first
husband. It also serves as another example of the collapse of narratives in an attempt to secure one through its dialogue with the other. Winnie’s life seems to bear physical or experiential witness to the cultural currency of the myth of the “wife”. It is she who features and is recuperated, rather than the feckless Kitchen God himself.

However, although this is one of the most obvious functions of the Kitchen God myth, its function as the exemplar of the positive nature of “construction” is located in the reaction to the myth rather than the tale itself. Having finished the story Phil, Pearl’s husband, makes what appears to be a cultural translation between the “Chinese” myth and the children’s mythic heroes:

“Sounds like Santa Claus,” says Phil cheerfully.

“Hnh!” My mother huffs in a tone that implies Phil is stupid beyond words. “He is not Santa Claus. More like spy – FBI agent, CIA, Mafia, worse than IRS [...] And he does not give you gifts, you must give him things. All year long [...]”

“Well, that’s a pretty inexpensive way to get some good luck,” I say. “Cheaper than the lottery.”

“No!” My mother exclaims, and startles us all. “You never know. Sometimes he is in a bad mood. Sometimes he says, I don’t like this family, give them bad luck [...] Why should I want that kind of person to judge me, a man who cheated on his wife? His wife was the good one, not him.”

[...]

“Great!” says Phil. “So now she passes along this curse to us. Thanks Grand Auntie, but no thanks [...] “It was Grand Auntie’s gift to you [...] She only wanted to leave you something good, [...] “Maybe the girls can use the altar as a dollhouse,” I suggest [...] My mother stares at the altar, not saying anything.

“I’m thinking about it this way,” she finally announces, her mouth set in an expression of thoughtfulness. “You take this altar. I can find you another kind of lucky god to put inside, not this one.” [...]

But now I’m worried [...]. I’m not exactly superstitious. I’ve always been the kind who hates getting chain letters [...] And while I never sent the duplicate letters out as instructed, I never threw the originals away either.86

Through the discussion of the fate of the altar discursive construction is placed as a central thematic concern before the narrative which makes up the body of the text,

85 Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife, 52-5.
Winnie's story of her life in China, begins. Winnie not only narrates the mythic narrative but also, more importantly, demonstrates the cultural force of narration. She establishes that both the physical space of the altar and its discursive space can be deliberately arbitrated. Tan uses Pearl to pre-empt a disavowal by the reader of this notion of discursive manipulation, by having Pearl express anxiety about the conscious "disturbance" of religious discourse. This is expressed through her public rejection of "chain letters", which works here as a paradigm for Pearl's reaction to the altar. The choice of the "chain letter" is particularly important as it privileges ideas about superstition rather than suggesting that the altar should be taken as a sacred or "religious" discourse. This again, however, is a strategy for making the reader comfortable with the discursive manipulation by undermining any potential elevated status for the discourse.

The novel, therefore, opens with Pearl as the primary narrator. After the acceptance of the altar, however, the narrative shifts, and the body of the text is taken up with Winnie's narration of her life in China. Towards the end of the novel Pearl takes up the story in the present, but the text is not framed by Pearl's narration. Winnie narrates the final chapter of the novel, it is only five pages, but this final section is crucial to the trope of construction as both a physical and discursive force. By this point in the narrative it has become clear that it is a possibility that Winnie's cruel first husband could be Pearl's father. This final chapter is entitled "Sorrowfree" and is the name of a lake in Nanking. It is also the name Winnie chooses for her daughter's new Goddess. The conclusion of the narrative deals with her selection of the God for her daughter's altar:

So then we went next door, to Sam Fook Trading Company. [...] "This time I've come here to shop, something for my daughter [...] This is for Pearl. I

86 55-56, op. cit.
promised Auntie Du. For long time already I have been thinking about this, before Pearl told me about her sickness.”

And then I was thinking [...] about the time she told me about the MS [...] I blamed Wen Fu. After Pearl went home, I cried. And then I saw that picture of the Kitchen God, [...] so happy to see me unhappy. I took his picture out of the frame. I put it over my stove [...] Right then my smoke detector went off [...] Oh I was scared [...] but then I listened again. And I knew: this was not Wen Fu’s ghost. This was like a bingo blackout. This was like a Reno jackpot.87

As well as reinforcing the parallel between Winnie and the Kitchen God’s wife, this is another example of Winnie’s arbitration of discourse. She creates the positive link to the mythic narrative which she herself constructed at the outset of the novel. This positive construction is further developed by Winnie’s “creation” of a new Goddess for her daughter at the end of the novel:

Suddenly Mrs Hong clapped her hands together. “Where is my head today?” She walked to the back of the store, calling to me. “It is back here. The factory made a mistake. Of course, it is a very nice statue, no chips, no cracks. But they forgot to write down her name on the bottom of her chair. My husband was so mad [...] So I bought that mistake. I fixed it, [...] wrote her name on the bottom. [...] I could see this lady statue in her new house[...]

When Pearl came to drop off the children [...] I took her upstairs to my bedroom [...] What are you looking at? Oh that statue. You never saw that before [...] her smile is genuine, wise and innocent at the same time. And her hand [...] that means she is about to speak, or maybe she is telling you to speak. She is ready to listen. She understands English [...] But sometimes when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world.88

The “creation” of the God forms the culmination of the text and the strategies by which it has attempted to secure from the reader a collusion with the notion of the recuperative power of positive “construction”. The narrative, however, through the choice of “Sorrowfree” as the Goddess, makes a much larger claim for the political force of such

reconstruction. The Lake, just on the outskirts of Nanking, is somewhere Winnie figures as having positive associations for her. In fact, her reference to the Lake and its recuperative powers conjure a specific relationship to it:

And as we left the city, we passed Sorrowfree Lake. Even in wintertime it was beautiful [...] It looked as if it had not changed one leaf since the first emperor. I was sorry I had not come there for a walk to feel that kind of unchanging peace in my heart.89

What is important about this relationship is that the Lake figures as a space which didn’t proffer peace, but “could” have and so its positive connotations are created by Winnie’s conceptualisation of it. It is also important because the reference engenders the Lake’s proximity to the city of Nanking itself. What the text elides through this emphasis upon the “unchanging peace” of Lake Sorrowfree is the history of the Nanking at the point at which Winnie is a resident. Nanking is still at the centre of political controversy over sixty years since the events that took place there in the late 1930s. Tan gestures at these events but attempts a positive construction of the horrific history of the City. This construction is not solely an attempt to mask the Nanking Massacre but it is also a means of making its discourse expressively manageable. Tan’s employment of historical discourse parallels her characters’ management of traumatic narratives in the novel. Winnie exemplifies this at the outset of the novel when she is debating how she is to tell her daughter of her experiences of the war in China:

When I came to this country, I told myself: I can think a new way. Now I can forget my tragedies, put all my secrets behind a door that will never be opened [...] all I had to remember was to call Formosa “China,” to shrink all of China into one little tiny island [...] Even I was scared my old life would catch up with me. But then China turned off the light, closed the door, told everyone to be quiet. All those people there became like ghosts. We could not see them, we could not hear

89 Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife, 222.
them. So I thought I really could forget everything. [...] But then Helen wanted to come [...] So I said that Helen was my sister-in-law [...] I could not use the real story why Helen should come here [...] That was even more complicated to explain.90

This narrative, before Winnie begins to tell the "secrets" Helen is threatening to expose, is important for a number of reasons. Not only does it collapse the idea of the story, or spoken narrative, with the construction of the house itself in the image of China as a silenced house, but more importantly, it foregrounds the power of storytelling. Here it is not predominantly because the narratives of her youth have been suppressed, or that she finds them too traumatic to repeat but because they are of no "use" to her. It is the potential cultural force of narrative which is so crucial to an understanding of Tan's version of China and San Francisco in this text. This "cultural" force impacts at both a personal and social level in terms of its ability not only for the narrator to arbitrate his/her position but also because it offers the means for subverting social/political hierarchies which the narrative can undermine in its re-telling.

This is precisely how Tan employs the historical discourse she gestures at through choosing Nanking as a location in the narrative, as well as the emphasis upon Lake Sorrowfree as an "unchanging" positive force. To give a brief synopsis of the controversy that surrounds events in Nanking in the 1930s I quote from the Princeton Memorial website, which is designed to give a basic outline to those with no previous knowledge of the set of atrocities known as "The Massacre of Nanking":

In 1928, the Chinese Nationalist Government moved the capital of China from Peking (Beijing) to Nanking. The city normally held about 250,000 people, but by the mid 1930s its population had swollen to more than 1 million. Many of them were refugees, fleeing from the Japanese armies which had invaded China.

90 71-2, op. Cit. Italics mine.
On November 11, 1937, after securing control of Shanghai, the Japanese army advanced towards Nanking from different directions. In early December, the Japanese troops were already in the outskirts of Nanking.

On December 9, the Japanese troops launched a massive attack upon the city. On the 12th, the defending Chinese troops decided to retreat to the other side of the Yangtze River (Yangzi Jiang). On December 13, the 6th and 16th Divisions of the Japanese Army entered the city’s Zhongshan and Pacific Gates. In the afternoon, two Japanese Navy fleets arrived. In the following six weeks, the occupying forces engaged in an orgy of looting and mass execution which came to be known as the Nanking Massacre. Most experts agree that at least 300,000 Chinese died, and 20,000 women were raped. Some estimate the numbers to be much higher – 340,000 and 80,000 respectively. The Japanese government to this day, maintains that the death toll is greatly exaggerated, and some politicians have even claimed that the Massacre itself is a fabrication.

This synopsis is useful not only as a reasonably clear introduction to a set of events in World War Two which receive relatively little European attention – i.e. the role of China and Japan in the Second World War, but far more importantly this extract emphasises the controversy over the narrative of these events which is accepted as accurate, or “true”.

As well as the huge discrepancies in the figures, particularly in reference to the numbers of women raped, the extract emphasises that at the centre of this historical controversy is a debate as to whether it happened “at all”. There is still a Japanese faction that does not accept the “Massacre” as a historical reality. This is most important when examining Tan’s use of Nanking in The Kitchen God’s Wife. The quoted excerpt forms part of an introduction to photographs of the Nanking Massacre. The tone of the piece is therefore clearly disdainful of the notion that anyone would question that the Massacre happened at all, although it does allow for huge discrepancies in terms of casualties.

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91 This is taken from the website –
http://www.princeton.edu/~nanldngfhThody_historyofthenajngmassre.html
There are various fascinating discussions of the available historical material, as well as the relatively famous novel by Irene Chang, The Rape of Nanking, see bibliography.
What is being suggested here is not that Tan’s lack of specific reference to the
Massacre, or “Rape” as it is otherwise known, indicates some question in her own mind
as to the validity of the claim for such an atrocity. Neither, however, do I think that the
narrative sustains the suggestion that she is unable to cope with the “atrocity” as a result
of some kind of aporia which parallels the relative discursive silence which surrounds
this major event in Twentieth Century history. Rather, this is an excellent example of
what Winnie prefigures at the outset of her story. Communication is a positive cultural,
and at some points in the narrative, political force. It is one that she employs in the
reconstruction of her life in the West, and she states that the reason she has not
resurrected her history up until this point is because she has not conceived it to be
socially or personally “useful”. It is this which Helen indicates to her is her mistake.
Hulan recognises the potential of narrative. The ability to recover stories is tremendously
powerful for Pearl, as in the most literal sense Pearl is given a possible genetic link for
her MS. However, in keeping with the structure of the novel, the narration also places
Winnie, paralleled by the Kitchen God’s wife, as arbitrator, both of narratives and the
events they construct.

The Rape of Nanking, therefore, is gestured at both by Winnie and Hulan’s short
stay in the city, as well as through the narration of Winnie’s repeated rape by her
husband. This occurs as a motif of violence and repression throughout the text. It seems
to encode both a general sense of the brutality of war on a personal scale, in Winnie’s
struggle with her husband Wen Fu, as well as China’s overcoming of “the aggressor”,
Japan, on the grander scale. What Tan does, therefore, is to focus upon the “unchanging
beauty” of the landscape of Lake Sorrowfree, which she frequently references in relation
to Nanking. And by placing Sorrowfree centrally at the end of the text, she not only reintroduces the associations of Nanking, and the atrocities now associated with the name as well as the city, but she uses those associations for a positive narrative. This text does not elide the selectivity of narration but rather foregrounds the practical power of such an understanding of storytelling.

This understanding of the power of narration is performed in various ways throughout the text. It features in Winnie's version of her childhood, where once again she physically locates "constructive" narration. As she grows up she inhabits a rejected space which she comes to refigure as redeeming both spatially, as she demonstrates autonomy within it, and narratively, as she learns to be constructive with the physical and narrative remnants she finds there. The rejected space is a greenhouse that had been a male bastion in previous generations. When Winnie's Uncle develops a new interest in greyhounds, the greenhouse falls into disuse and Winnie starts to spend time there:

After he abandoned it, the greenhouse was used only as a strange storage place. When New Aunt sat down [...] and broke a chair — into the greenhouse [...] That place was where things went when someone decided they belonged nowhere else. When I was little I used to sit on the broken chairs [...] I would have pretend-tea with my unknown ancestors. Every year more things were thrown in there that nobody wanted, and I saw them all. [...] I found a painting of a pretty woman, [...] looking straight ahead, so somber I almost didn't recognise her. "Mama?" [...] I imagined her climbing out of her picture frame [...] that was the kind of place my mother and I belonged to, only that kind of place.92

Here she constructs the neglected greenhouse as a personally positive space through which she develops a relationship with her mother. Their relationship privileges the greenhouse as being responsible for their ability to communicate with one another. This physical space parallels her ability to work productively with narrative remnants. It also
predicates a very specific correlation between space and story-telling. This relationship is further complicated by its relation to the kind of cultural value the telling of myth encapsulates in this novel. The cultural force of myth and its recuperative power is inextricably bound to the version of narrative power this text advances for the story-teller. This is demonstrated by two episodes in this novel. The first is the parallel between Winnie’s “greenhouse” and the “secret box” Winnie gives Pearl as a child. This box is a place for Pearl to keep her girlish privacies. Before Winnie begins the story of her youth she breaks into Pearl’s box. In it she finds the Order of Service for Pearl’s father’s funeral. This causes her to reconsider her narrative of Pearl’s origin. Pearl’s gesture of grief – the keeping of the Order of Service - convinces Winnie that Pearl did “love” her “father” and that she was not displaying the temper of her potential biological parent, “Wen Fu”. It is this discovery that allows Winnie to contemplate the narration of her story as its ending, or “meaning”, is altered by the discovery of this remnant. Her attitude to the discovery not only reinforces ideas about construction and narrative but also espouses a collapse between the material and the discursive as located in remnants of language, in this case an old Order of Service.

The second example is that of the fairy story Winnie constructs as her version of her mother’s disappearance. She tells the story of her mother’s last day, repeatedly inserting different scenarios. What is central to her mother’s disappearance is a love affair with the man she may or may not have run away with. Winnie centres her understanding of the couple’s relationship on the materiality of language and its physical

relationship with the self and the community. Even the version of the story Winnie is
told has a newspaper clipping as its source:

She (Winnie’s mother) had met a student [...] a man named Lu, a Marxist [...] New Aunt said she knew all about him, because after my mother left, New Aunt searched through her belongings and found a newspaper story about a student[...] it must have been the same student [...] Why else would my mother have saved the article?
The newspaper story [...] was very badly written. A tale of inspiration and heroes [...] like an old revolutionary tale, something like this, very romantic.  

Here, the text features the element of fairy tale or myth which binds the narratives of Winnie and Pearl to the Kitchen God’s wife in a mythic parallelism, as the dead mother is reincarnated both as Mother and as Goddess. It also reiterates the link between the material and discursive importance of the story. It is valuable not only because it forms the structure of the tale, but also because it has been printed and kept as an artefact. The story does bear a close resemblance to fairy tale, but the heroism featured is linguistic – Lu is educated by the Marxists, who liberate him by teaching him one thousand characters in ten days. Lu having gained his “freedom”, then promises to help others:

He learned enough until he was able to pass examinations and get into Fudan University. And because he was so grateful for being able to change his life, he vowed he would someday write about the hardships of peasants and laborers, to be their mouth, to tell their story, to tell them they could change their fate. 

It is the material and political force of language, in this case a potentially revolutionary force, which is privileged. The lovers are separated, Winnie’s mother is forced to marry another man, but language is still foregrounded even at the end of the tale when Winnie’s surmises about the reasons for her mother’s disappearance:

Sometimes I think my mother was finally chased away by those other wives. They made her life miserable [...] teasing her for reading newspapers. 

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93 Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife, 104.
94 Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife, 105.
Winnie goes over her mother’s last day, and focuses on one of her purchases:

Maybe she found out Lu had died. She was reading the newspaper, the one she bought at Foochow Road. Perhaps she had bought it earlier in the day than I remembered. And she read that he had been shot, killed while teaching more peasants how to read.  

Unable to resolve her mother’s disappearance Winnie locates the pain in order to make it bearable. She describes it as follows: “In my heart, there is a little room. And in that room is a little girl [...] she is always waiting [...] her mother runs in.” Again we have a spatialisation of the discourse, as well as a fairytale ending. However, what is fundamental in this episode is the understanding of language which privileges its power. It is both a vehicle within the narrative, and a positive reconstruction as it sustains and repeats the story through its form as a newspaper excerpt.

This is not the only example of the paradigmatic use newspapers are put to in this text. They come to represent this very material political force at various crucial points throughout the narrative. One of the pivotal examples of this is Winnie’s “chance” meeting with her second husband and saviour, the Chinese American Jimmie Louie:

Yes, yes, your father! Just like that, five years later, our past and future bumping into one another on a strange street in Shanghai. Can you imagine? If I had not gone to see Peanut, if I had not stopped to read a silly magazine, if he had not been looking for a newspaper – one minute later, and our lifetimes would have missed each other. I ask you, isn’t that fate meant to be?  

The discourse of myth and fairytale is central to this parallel of her version of her mother’s love affair, but equally although the role of the newspaper seems incidental, the idea of a reading community, and therefore a community of mutual understanding has a

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very material force here. It is this “fated” encounter which prompts Winnie to leave Wen Fu. The concretisation of linguistic power plays a two-fold role at this point. Winnie is imprisoned, an event engineered by her husband, who refuses to recognise that they are divorced. Winnie’s predicament through reports in the local papers, comes to establish her as a kind of folk hero, again paralleling her own version of her mother. In a fugal fashion the motif of wronged but righteous wife comes to be played out in various forms and through various characters. The function of myth is played out in exactly the kind of repetition Lévi-Strauss warns the reader to be aware of. The link between these repetitions and the material function of language as a physical presence is fundamental to the political power of the narratives or myths in this novel.

This point is made in its most overt political form by the references Tan makes to the literature drops the Japanese made on cities before their invasions. When Winnie is living in Nanking, she gives a vivid account of the city’s terror as the Japanese planes fly overhead, ostensibly on their first bombing campaign:

I [...] was about to put the steaming chestnut in my mouth, when – a shout in the street: “Japanese planes! Disaster is coming!” And then we heard the airplanes, faraway sounds, like thunder coming [...] And we knew the bullets and bombs were coming [...] “Now we are dying! Hulan cried. [...] If people were screaming, we could not tell - the planes were roaring loud above us [...] And then the sounds seemed to be going away [...] The planes flew back and forth, back and forth, and people’s heads were going up and down, up and down, as if we were bowing to those Japanese planes [...] We all whispered the same thought: “No blood.” Then Hulan shouted: “No blood, only snow! [...] Big flakes of snow covered the street, lay on the backs of people crouched on the ground. And when I looked up, I saw snow falling from the sky, each flake as big as a sheet of paper. A pedicab driver in front of us picked up one of those flakes, and it was a sheet of thin paper. He handed it to me. ‘What does it say?’

The paper showed a happy drawing of a Japanese soldier with a little Chinese girl sitting on his shoulders. “Japanese government,” I said, “If we do not resist, good treatment will be given to everyone, nothing to fear. If we resist, trouble follows for everyone.”
And then I heard a Chinese soldier screaming in the street. He was kicking the paper snow, like a crazy man. “Lies! Lies!” he cried. “That’s what they said in Shanghai. Look what they did to us! This is what’s left of our army! Only rags to mop up China’s blood.”

This incident establishes the primacy of linguistic force in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. Rather than giving an account of the controversial massacre in the City of Nanking, Tan focuses upon the “pre-cursor” to the “Rape of Nanking”, the delivery of propaganda literature. Immediately after this “warning” she and Hulan leave Nanking. What Tan sets up is a battle of narrative wills. The “snow” and its force are set up against Winnie’s ability to speak for the “silent” – in this case the pedicab driver who is unable to read the leaflet. This directly parallels the hero in the fairytale of her mother’s early life, and his promise to narrate tales for those unable to write their own accounts. The text goes on to discuss a feeling of foreboding but it is proceeded by the protagonists’ exit which then, like the silence of the “snow”, means that Tan frames the Nanking Massacre negotiating it through silence and alternative narratives rather than any explicit version of it.

Also, in this particular struggle the distinction between physical violence and propaganda is collapsed. The leaflets and planes physically cow the citizens, literally smothering them in “snow”. Here it is the sheer magnitude of the drop and its ability to silence – suggested by the repeated use of the image of “snow”- which is as disturbing as the words on the papers. The image of the soldier kicking the words encapsulates not only the frustration of a man who recognises the Japanese leaflets as propaganda but also the collapse between the physical and the narrative in his attempt to kick language. It also conjures a hierarchy whereby the power of material narrative is clearly indicated.

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Newspapers play a crucial role in this text. They come to represent a community of understanding in a very physical sense. It is the ability to construct the narrative in a physical sense which is awarded such political cachet in this text. It is through this materialisation of discourse that the subjects can come to locate themselves, and by extension the community. The ability to arbitrate positionality is constructed in this text as empowering. The oppressor/oppressed relation is extrapolated from the individual to the group through the strategy of the repetition of tales delineated by various characters’ narratives, as demonstrated in the discursive interweaving of Winnie, Wen Fu, Winnie’s mother and lover, and ultimately the Kitchen God.

The materialisation of discourse has been explored through Tan’s employment of Newspapers in the text. The role of Newspapers is paralleled in the text by Tan’s use of banners. She uses the newspaper as the most overtly political form of linguistic materiality. Banners function in a similar mode but form a discursive link to religious, rather than political construction. Here the argument comes full circle, as the discussion returns to the function of Pearl’s Aunt and the use of religious discourse as a set of tropes arbitrated by the individual. Banners form the bond between this privileging of individual construction over any particular religious custom and the material force of language.

At the outset of the novel Pearl narrates Grand Auntie Du’s funeral, the scene seems to function primarily as a comic interlude whilst emphasising the conceptual distance between Pearl and her mother, but the Banner is privileged in a very specific manner:

Above the casket, a white banner made out of ten feet of butcher paper is stuck to the wall with masking tape. The banner is covered with large black
characters, and the whole thing ends with an exclamation point, just like political billboard slogans I once saw in magazine photos of China.

“What does it say?” I ask my mother quietly.

“ ‘Hope that your next life is long and prosperous.' Nothing too special,” my mother replies. “I didn’t write it [...]”

The wooden clapper and the bell sound again, faster and faster. Suddenly the white paper banner tears away from the wall, and the family association wishes for lucky and long life spiral down and land draped across Grand Auntie’s chest like a beauty pageant banner. My mother and several of the older women jump up and cry “Ai-ya!” Mary’s son shouts “Perfect landing!” and laughs hysterically. The monk and nun continue chanting with no change of expression. But my mother is furious. “How bad!” she mutters. She gets up and walks out of the room.

Pearl does not comprehend her mother’s fury. But just as Lévi-Strauss comments, the text arbitrates understanding through the use of cyclic narratives. The collapse of the Banner, in fact, frames the text. Winnie returns to the reasons for its descent at the very end of her tale. Thus this new version of Du’s “beauty pageant” moment impacts upon the opening narrative and causes the reader to reconsider both “stories” in the light of one another – a mechanism directly paralleled in *The Joy Luck Club*.

At the end of her story Winnie is emphasising to Pearl Auntie Du’s strength of character and the pivotal role she played in Winnie’s escape from her husband and China:

[...] I knew the other bad word you used, the one you say she when you raise your fist with one finger sticking out. We have the same expression in Chinese, and others – even worse than you probably have in English. You think Grand Auntie was just an old lady? When somebody treated her bad – oyo! – all those expressions popped right out. Go do this! Go do that! I think that’s what she was saying at her funeral when that banner fell down on top of her.” [...] And we started laughing again. I was giddy. Here my mother had told me the tragedy of her life. Here I had just been told that Wen Fu might well be the other half of my genetic makeup. Yet we were laughing.

And that’s how I knew it was the right moment to tell her.

I took a deep breath and said it as casually as I could: “Maybe we have something else we can blame on that bad man.” And then I told her about my illness.  


Here the Banner functions as a prime example of how to construct a positive narrative and to arbitrate meaning in the most politically powerful way. Here the fall is registered as resistance, an example not only of Du's "strength of character" but also as paradigmatic of the battles of the "harmless" old woman against the oppressor, be it Chinese, Japanese or American. It is this that Pearl intuits from the story as she realises she can now narrate a satisfying version of the origin of her illness which holds the demonised Wen Fu responsible. This story is one that she feels able to tell her mother, and so the secrets which spur the novel are shared at its conclusion. The relation of the materialisation of discourse is demonstrated as being fundamental both to recognising linguistic "meaning" and to employing it in a social or political context. This is not simply about the translation of what was written on the banner - what is important here is the translation of the gesture - Winnie explains to Pearl what Du's gesture, like Pearl's use of the finger, means. But as the language suggests here it was a "passive" gesture - "that's what she was saying [...] when that banner fell down on top of her". The complexities of this idea are not as crucial to Winnie's tale as her ability to produce it.

Banners, like newspapers, form the central means by which the text espouses a very specific relationship to language as discourse and as physical object. It is the radical possibilities this bond presents which Tan plays on in this novel. This relationship is clearly demonstrated in a final example from the text. The political context of Tan's novel is figured through her protagonists' personal relationships, for example in Winnie's struggle to leave her oppressive husband for the politically and culturally enlightened American. Another instance of this is the political struggle Tan presents through the battle for ascendancy within the home between her own Father, the Japanese and her
husband. Again this power struggle takes the form of a contest over the ability to materially locate meaning. Winnie is told by a servant the of the moment when the Japanese came to demonstrate their power over the once powerful Chinese family:

He sat in his chair, very powerful, never moving one inch. The Japanese officer continued walking around the room, running his hands along your father’s magistrate table, the backbones of great books, the scroll paintings on the walls. He hinted he would like to have valuables like these hanging in his own house [...] “Jing Sao-yen,” the Japanese said, ‘we need your good sense [...] everything can stay intact.’ And the officer swept his hand out toward the four scroll paintings on the wall. ‘Like these,’ he said. “At this point your father stood up and threw his cup of tea against one of those paintings! It’s the truth. Those four paintings were over two hundred years old, and he ruined one of them with the toss of a cup.”

This display of autonomy by Winnie’s father is immediately undermined by the Japanese authorities by a public inscription which over-rides his private display:

“The next day he looked worried. But I thought it was because we were now going to lose the house [...] And then, two days later, a banner went up along the front wall facing the street, and a big poster was nailed to the front gate. Both proclaimed that Jiang Sao-yen, owner of this house [...] supported the new government in China, that of the Imperial Emperor Hirohito. This same news was announced in all the local newspapers as well.

After Winnie’s father’s public humiliation, the declaration of him as a Japanese sympathiser, he suffers a stroke, which renders him unable to speak. The loss of voice clearly parallels the role language and discourse have played in his downfall, but it also reaffirms the inextricable bond in this text between the physical, political and linguistic. Power is constructed through this paradigm with “construction” forming the apex. In the culmination of the narrative of Winnie’s father she tells of how after his humiliation at the hands of the Japanese he is then further degraded by her husband Wen Fu. However, in a final gesture of his authority within the family Jiang Sao-yen “miraculously”

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103 Ibid.
recovery. At this point Winnie is still in prison, awaiting an opportunity to divorce Wen Fu who still lives with her father:

But one day, San Ma and Wu Ma both came [...] then I saw they were wearing white and I knew why my father’s wives had come.

“Dead?” I said. [...]  
“It was like a miracle [...] It was like this, [...] I went into his room five mornings ago [...] Really, he was more trouble than a baby [...] That morning I was so exasperated I shouted, ‘Goddess of Mercy, open his mouth!’ Suddenly he was staring at me [...] For almost seven years he says not one word – now ‘Give me something proper to eat.’ I ran downstairs as fast as these old legs could carry me. [...] ‘What’s become of this room? Why is it so shabby looking? [...] He said, ‘How can there be no money?’ [...] ‘He said, ‘I’m not talking about paper money. The gold, the gold, you fool!’

[...] “And then guess what happened? Right away Wen Fu said, ‘What gold? Where is it? And your father looked at Wen Fu, as if his son-in-law had a wooden head. ‘Here!’ he said, ‘in this house of course. Gold ingots thick as your fingers, as much as you weigh [...]’ And then your father scratched his cheek. ‘Let me think – behind which wall [...]’

And now, five days later, the walls and floors in your father’s bedroom are completely torn apart, and Wen Fu is ready to pry open another room.” [...] Terrible! To see all our gold go to such a bad man [...] San Ma frowned. “There’s no gold in that house. Haven’t you heard anything we said? We knew your father. [...] He woke up one last time to leave us a little joke, to leave Wen Fu a curse.”

“Then the house is being destroyed for nothing!” I cried “For nothing?” said San Ma. ‘Do you think we did not suffer as well living with Wen Fu?’ Do you think you were the only one pressed under Wen Fu’s thumb? Now your father is ordering Wen Fu around. Now Wen Fu is chasing your father’s dreams. Now that house is falling down on top of him. Not for nothing!”

Ostensibly the explanation offered is one appealing to religious or “superstitious” understandings of the wronged “ancestor”. However, this incident also provides the culmination to a discursive battle between the two men. The wilful destruction of the home by Wen Fu demonstrates the material force of narratives in this text. Construction, or in this case de-construction come to be understood as inseparable through the materiality of language, and it’s relation to political power.
Therefore, the community of understanding created in *The Joy Luck Club* is present in this novel in a different form. Rather than recuperation through a mythic location, in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* the location shifts to be posited through the material, or political force of language and its ability to unite and empower as it represents. Also, as with *The Joy Luck Club* and its relationship to Tan’s children’s story *The Moon Lady*, the material and political force of linguistic construction is crystallised through her story *The Chinese Siamese Cat*, written on completion of *The Kitchen God’s Wife*.

The story features a family of cats which inhabit the house of “the Foolish Magistrate”. It tells of how whilst the parent cats are used by the Magistrate to write his rules on scrolls with their tails, their naughty kitten clumsily knocks ink all over herself and then wipes her nose on a scroll changing the ruling. Because the foolish magistrate’s laws are cruel the inadvertent change in fact benefits the people. However, when he sees his people’s reaction to his apparent generosity he changes all his laws from restrictive to relaxed and rewards the wise cat by ruling that all cats should resemble the naughty kitten who is accidentally covered in ink:

> “Now for the third rule,” said the magistrate, “from now on, all Chinese cats shall have dark faces, ears, paws and tails – in honor of the greatest felines, Sagwa of China.”
> That’s why Chinese cats may look like Siamese cats, but are really Chinese cats, with their dark faces and paws and ears and tails.\(^{105}\)

This story is interesting for a number of reasons, not least that it opens with the assertion that it: “is the story about the Chinese Siamese cats. You see they are not really Siamese but Chinese cats”\(^{106}\) and ends as quoted above with the distinction being re-inforced. In

fact, although this tale gives an originating myth for the features it describes – the dark face, tail and paws - it also displays a prominent anxiety about the distinction between what is “Chinese” or “Siamese” that it seems unable to sustain. Why, indeed this difference needs to frame the text is unclear, except that the originating version is more important than the appearance of the cats.

This anxiety, however, is just an indicator of what links this narrative to *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. What the tale privileges is the power of construction and its relationship to political power. It takes a number of the thematic concerns of the novel and presents them in a simplified narrative form. Just as with the novel the primary concern is linguistic. The Magistrate is said to be foolish because his rules are restrictive and the tale centres upon a rule to ban singing: “From now on, people must not sing until the sun goes down.” Tan simply establishes the connection between political autonomy and freedom of expression. Here the cats are crucial, whilst they perform for the Magistrate Tan insists that they maintain a form of linguistic autonomy – they are not merely the vehicles of the Magistrate:

Mama Miao and Baba Miao were very smart. They did not need the Magistrate to guide their tails. They knew how to write the words all by themselves. Of course the Magistrate still told them what to write.

And in this respect the naughty kitten is the final link, she too has autonomy, we are told she can read. What is also emphasised is that her problem is her clumsiness:

“Sagwa, meaning melon head, was named this because she was always getting into trouble [...] knocking into vases and clawing banners.”

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What then happens is Sagwa’s fall into the inkpot and her trampling on the “rules” which blots out the “not” meaning that the rule is now that people must sing from morning until night. What this story is ostensibly about is the origination and appearance of the “Chinese-Siamese Cat”. However, thematically it is rather more concerned with inscription, language and the right to arbitrate meaning. The text also clearly delineates the relationship between physicality and power. It is neither the authority of the Magistrate, nor the physical force of the cat that accounts for political power. What is fundamental about the kitten is that its actions are accidental thereby locating the political force with neither of the protagonists. The text privileges an understanding of the political and social currency of expression and its ability to liberate. When the community realises that it is a rule that the people must sing, they sing in praise of their ruler. The idea of a community of understanding is reinforced here: it is also inexorably bound to an idea of communal expression, and the force of such an expression.

The Moon Lady and The Chinese Siamese Cat both serve as condensed models of Tan’s cultural concerns and the narrative strategies through which she manages them. In The Joy Luck Club she initiates a mythic reading pattern which aligns the reader with the cultural community she constructs in the novel. This predicates a culturally soothing location for its discursive inhabitants and through narrative co-option the reader comes to occupy a central position in that position. In The Kitchen God’s Wife focus shifts from the predication of that community to establishing the material force of language. Morrison institutes binaries in order to disrupt them. Tan engages in them order to concretise their potential. The desire to ensure the discursive force of the construction of narrative is not produced as an ambivalent source of potential marginalisation. It is
embraced as the point at which the subject can co-opt construction. Tan uses language in order to reproduce myths for the material advantage of the story-teller and the community their position is taken to espouse.
Although I sleep in dust awhile
Beneath the barren clod
Ere long I hope to rise and smile
To meet my Saviour God
If he exists.¹

"The Myth industry is the only one that has always boomed and never gone bust"²

The first is a quotation from Proulx’s first published text, Heart Songs, the second is Duncan Dayton in his essay, “Out West: An American Journey.” Having examined in depth Tan’s relationship to mythic geography, the focus is now upon Proulx’s apparently very different understanding of the palliative nature of myth, and her texts’ response to the idea of a culturally sustaining location³. Proulx does not suggest that in refusing mythic identifications the individual is liberated. She rather exposes the American iconographic map as it is constructed. In this respect she would appear to be maintaining a position antithetical to that of Tan, and parallel to Morrison, in that they both expose mythic construction as potentially damaging to the subject. Unlike Morrison, however, Proulx could be described as a mythologic misanthrope. She suggests that the co-option of myth as a sustaining discursive location for identity is fundamental to the violent fragmentation of the subject she identifies.

This chapter will focus upon Proulx’s management of this endemic violence. This chapter is devoted to three texts: the first is her first novel, Postcards, first published in 1992. In this section the focus will be upon Proulx’s reworking of central “American”

³ This is a notion that was discussed in some detail in the previous chapter and can be ascribed primarily to Wilbur Zelinsky.
mythic icons. Postcards sets up complex discursive relationships with the American canon. She complicates and undermines central tropes through her negotiation of the myth of the frontiersman as literary trope, for example. She achieves this through establishing a textual relationship with American classics such as Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. For example, the protagonist of Postcards, Loyal Blood, is partially the result of a metamorphosis of Huck Finn into contemporary idioms. She also presents a version of the land through the paradigm of the farm. This works in opposition to the Jeffersonain agrarian myth, another fundamental mythic trope⁴. This engagement with literary tropes that are central to contemporary American culture’s conception of its literary heritage is linked to Proulx’s equally central debunking of classic American myth, through the inversion of the central North American trope of Western travel. The notion referred to here is the idea of the frontiersman, and his relationship to tropes, both literary and historical, of expansion and the development of the individual through the movement West. Postcards engages with central mythic and literary tropes to expose not only their constructed status, but also to examine the conceptual stronghold these myths possess in a way that parallels Morrison. Proulx exposes the potential for mythic exploitation as it limits the conceptual freedom of the subject. This examination is predicated primarily through a re-working of “textuality”. Inscription becomes an ambivalent, but inexorable force, rather than a liberating discovery of the autonomy of the individual.

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⁴ As discussed by Western historians and literary critics such as Leonard Lutwack, or Henry Nash Smith, see bibliography.
The second section is devoted to Proulx's epic novel *Accordion Crimes* that was released in 1996 in Great Britain. I examine Proulx's debunking of the libertarianism and the central mythic status of "autonomy" in American literary and cultural heritage. Attention is then focused upon another American narrative: in *Accordion Crimes* Proulx deals with the establishment of the nation, as the text concentrates upon wave after wave of various immigrant communities settling in the United States. The text, for example, deals with various immigrant groups including; first generation Italian immigrants, third generation Polish-Americans, Cajuns and Mexican Americans. Again, a central violent destructiveness in the process - commonly described as assimilation - is foregrounded as the product of the competition with other cultures to settle in North America. Through complicating subject/object relationships Proulx disturbs understandings of assimilation and ideas about what the identity tag "American" means. She interrogates it the construct of the "American" both as it stands alone and hyphenated in a bi-cultural relationship such as in identifications such as German-American, or Irish-American.

This section will examine how this is achieved through an analysis of Proulx's subversion of the object/subject binary. Proulx's version hyphenated identities are tense negotiations, frequently at the point of collapse. This will consequently involve a discussion of the relationship of naming to identity as predicated on the novel. Just as Proulx complicates understandings of textuality in *Postcards*, the attention to naming in this novel offers a critique of another set of restrictive cultural "morés" by exposing their mechanisms.

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5 Here employed in a Brechtian sense, the novel is episodic.
The third and final section will focus upon her most recent set of short stories, *Close Range Wyoming Stories* which was published in 1999 in Great Britain. It will examine how Proulx moves from the debunking of various central mythic and theoretical positions to her encounter with what Tan is so concerned to create, the synthetic region. It will look at whether or not Proulx presents the region as somehow sustaining. This will pay particular attention to the relationship between her previous attacks on what have been presented rather as delusions, as opposed to culturally sustaining myths, in her version of Wyoming. It will focus on how the text works in relation to other Western narratives, and ask whether or not it appears to seek a place in that canon. It will also examine whether or not Proulx’s “Wyoming” in any way approximates the narrative function of Tan’s “San Francisco” or whether, more in tune with Morrison, Proulx promotes the idea that certain critical mythic positions can indeed be culturally sustaining. I suggest that Proulx foregrounds the violence and destruction of the region’s character. She implies that it can be discursively managed if it becomes explicitly dangerous and negative, rather than the omnipresent undercurrent to an apparently positivistic set of cultural ideals.

However, before moving to these three sections certain critical questions need to be addressed to further clarify Proulx’s position in this thesis.

*How does Proulx come to feature in a thesis concerned with bi-culturality?*

*Or*

*How does Proulx, a writer whose family have resided in Connecticut since the early Seventeenth Century, come to be understood to be a bi-cultural writer?*
In an examination of Proulx's texts certain assumptions need to be made explicit. In the analysis of both Morrison and Tan, the discussion has focused upon spatial constructions combining both literary and cultural geographic theory. This remains the model for the discussion of Proulx. However, in the case of Tan it was necessary to engage to a certain extent with the critical positions which dominated discussion of her work. It was equally important whilst discussing Morrison's work to examine the way in which identity politics informed debates about the politics of mapping. Proulx's public cultural status informs criticism of her. Debates about "ethnicity" in the contemporary United States, as well as issues surrounding the politics of identity, relate to Proulx's positioning. Proulx's texts produce a discourse fundamental to an understanding of literary and spatial constructions of identity. This chapter will clarify how she comes to feature in a thesis considering space and "bi-culturality".

Proulx's position as a member of America's cultural elite, indicated below in a short biography, complicates both her textual position and that of readers and critics approaching her work. Her texts do not guarantee any particular kind of reading as a result of her position. The cultural position of the author in contemporary critiques cannot be ignored in these debates as ideologically or critically innocent. For example, Morrison is often regarded as a bastion of "African-American" or "Black-American" writing. This perception of her, by many, including herself, problematises readings of her texts despite possibly privileging them. Also, Tan's place as a "Chinese-American" author can be seen to produce a solipsistic debate about her positionality and her voice, which actually stifles critical discussion rather than engendering it. In both these cases

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6 Reading she gave in Manchester and her response to those kinds of questions.
the bi-cultural or ethnic identity of the author clearly informs critical work on the authors. The same critical preoccupations inform attitudes to Proulx’s texts and their co-option, or lack of it, by current critical debates.

Annie Proulx is the oldest daughter of a family of five girls. She descends, through her mother, directly from a lineage of farmers, inventors, millworkers and artists who have lived in Connecticut since 1635. She attained both a BA and an MA, and in fact began to pursue a PhD, which she abandoned to become a freelance journalist. Two of her three novels, Postcards and The Shipping News, won prestigious awards – the PEN/Faulkner, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. This synopsis suggests both a well established cultural heritage, and an academic security. An uncritical version of bi-culturality would find such homogeneity difficult to embrace, in that it does not sustain common suppositions about bi-culturality. The notion that bi-culturality clearly negotiates between what would be regarded as the privileged Anglo-American cultural position and a marginalised ethnic community. There is also frequent conflation in debates about ethnic marginalisation with an economic marginalisation which presupposes a division between the middle-class community, and a specific ethnic bond. What needs to be explored here are the cultural assumptions which sustain such a version of bi-culturality and by extension ethnicity. Does Proulx’s central placement in an Anglo-American community culturally exclude her from ethnic and bi-cultural debates? This would certainly seem to be the case. Although her novels clearly engage with debates about American cultural heritage - Accordion Crimes, for example, foregrounds “American” immigration and assimilation – there is a profound critical silence

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7 This synopsis is largely taken from the Lit Links website on Annie Proulx: http://www.befordstmartins.com/litlinks/fiction/proulx.htm
surrounding her work. The only novel to receive any serious level of critical attention, *The Shipping News*, is discussed primarily in relation to its Newfoundland location. In this sense Proulx is clearly aligned with debates about space, location and cultural identity. However, her other texts are not included in critical anthologies that deal either with notions of “bi-culturality”, “regionalism”, or “Place and Location in the United States” thus eliding their geographic cultural focus. It would appear that her place as hegemonically privileged in American society erases her critical status. She suffers a lack of “epistemic privilege” which the “cultural identities” of Tan and Morrison, however problematically, flag up.

My interest lies in this critical silence, paralleling my examination of Tan’s work. Having identified how her status constrains critical attention I examine the theoretical position of “bi-culturality”, and by extension “ethnicity”, to re-introduce Proulx into the critical foray. Through the establishment of a particular understanding of these terms I construct a specific theoretical framework. What, then, is commonly understood as “cultural identity” will give way to a contemporary preoccupation usually described as “positionality”. A proliferation of interest in identity politics extends into an overweening anxiety about the American subject’s understanding of their “identity”. As a consequence a desire for a “culturally soothing” location predominates, in an attempt to stave off fragmentation.

Proulx, however, explores the consequences of these collapses in cultural identity. She examines how the constructs that we expect to soothe through their concretisation themselves fragment and rupture concepts of “identity”. She offers a crucial point of

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8 A long list of anthologies, both critical and literary could be provided here.
entry through her exposure of these constructs. This exposure may allow a shift in critical praxis as it engages with “bi-culturality” and “ethnicity”. These terms are fractured through Proulx’s texts’ discursive relation to literary and cultural theory, which can be usefully examined in Proulx’s use of space and location. Her textual versions of geography and “place” construct locations that both parallel the fragmentation of ethnicity and they also mirror current cultural geographical debates about the collapse and re-invention of spatial cultural boundaries. Thus what can be identified in Proulx is a profound shift in conceptual understandings of the subject through her engagement with social and cultural debates about ethnicity and location. Literature’s performance of this is considered by some cultural theorists to be the inevitable consequence of the development of postmodern thought about the construction of identity, community and space. As Sharon Zukin illustrates through reference to other theorists in her essay for the collection *Modernity and Identity*:

An Italian theorist of contemporary design today extols imaginary landscape as the only space left for creativity: If in fact post-industrial society is formed by a hyper-industrialized system having no exterior and no empty spaces, the only virgin territories in which project and production manage to develop are those of the imaginary.\(^9\)

She also states the case more deliberately:

The cultural value of modern cities must be explored, explained and affirmed by contemporary artists and intellectuals [...] By their labour as well as their cultural products – especially cultural critique – they act as a critical infrastructure in the postmodern urban landscape.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) This is something that is covered in both in the introduction at a theoretical level, and also considered in the Chapter which focuses upon Tan.


\(^11\) ibid. p. 229
I raise the possibility that such concerns are literary in their scope and will examine "bi-culturality" and "ethnicity" as they will be understood in the following analysis.

What happens when terms such as "bi-culturality" and "ethnicity" are interrogated?

The introduction to this thesis examined the discursive relationship between cultural geographic theory and literary critique and analysis. The aim is to establish how the disparate understandings of culture work well together to expose fissures and cultural anxieties. It is also to foreground how the terms themselves contribute to this reconceptualisation of critical approaches. The names chosen inform cultural attitudes to issues of race and the "ethnic" subject. The terms which we use, in fact, inform the parameters of the discussion. This discussion in the introduction paid particular attention to notions of "literature" and "criticism" and its relationship to more "realist" schools of geographical thought. It also considered notions of "identity politics" and race, but this topic needs to be examined in more detail as Proulx specifically challenges the orthodoxy of these terms as they are currently employed.

"Bi-culturality" or "ethnicity" becomes a inherently problematic for all American citizens, and not solely those differentiated along colour, or racial lines:

In the new millennium, we must radically rethink the fundamental relationships among person, community and place, as well as the meaning of ethnic identity, for all of us, not just for immigrants and traditional ethnic groups.12

All ethnic groups, without exception, are socially constructed and — a closely related thesis — that they are all of recent origin.13

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12 Zelinsky, Ethnicity, 154.
13 Zelinsky, Ethnicity, 25.
These quotations are from Wilbur Zelinsky’s latest text, *The Enigma of Ethnicity - Another American Dilemma*, published in 2001. What they foreground is not only the constructedness of notions of ethnicity, but also that concerns about cultural identity are now of paramount importance to the American community as a whole. This is suggested by the prevalence in contemporary mass culture of debates about “ethnicity” which crops up as a political concern in the chapter on Morrison. It is not suggested here that “ethnicity” is experienced by communities in a translatable fashion, rather it maintains a primacy as a current cultural anxiety regardless of individual cultural origin. This new understanding of a what is thought to be a relatively established set of relationships through which to conceive “ethnicity” and “bi-culturality” is mirrored by Patricia Price in her article for *The Journal of Social and Cultural Geography*, “Inscribing the Border: Schizophrenia and the Aesthetics of Aztlán.” She conveys a similar sense of the seismic shift which needs to be acknowledged in contemporary conceptions of identity politics:

Within this uncertain late modern landscape, where borders either shimmer and vanish or become more starkly drawn, there is an additional layer of confusion [...] contemporary power remappings involve not just debordering and rebordering, but also a panoply of wholly new borders, which are irrupting at multiple scales and in unlikely places.

This is not simply to suggest that Proulx can be allocated a different place in a hierarchical relationship to American cultural hegemony, but that the boundaries that could be said to circumscribe or elevate her are being exploded and drawn anew. Wilbur Zelinsky, therefore, highlights the necessity for a reconceptualisation of our understanding of the term “ethnicity” by focusing upon its relative newness – the term’s

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14 For further discussion of the role of bordering in ‘ethnicity’ and anxieties about belonging see the Morrison and Tan Chapters.
15 Price 101.
first usage is recorded by him as materialising in the mid twentieth century. He also discusses the kind of “soothing” functions ascribed to ethnic commonality in contemporary American society and the damage such a relationship to the term engenders:

On the one hand, there is the celebration of Ethnicity, the “feel-good” policy that papers over the fissures and inequities of an unjust social system, on the other, the closely allied practice of cryptoracism. In essence we have denial, making genuine multiculturalism into a non issue.

As well as establishing ethnicity’s partial nature he also draws a crucial distinction. What he highlights is the difference between race and ethnicity:

Because of changing perceptions, conflicting claims, and differential success in lobbying efforts, the racial classifications appearing on census forms have varied significantly from one decennial enumeration to the next since the late nineteenth century. One generalization does emerge. There has been profound, hopeless confusion between the two concepts of race and ethnic identity.

This distinction is one that is compounded in contemporary culture on both sides of the Atlantic. He separates the two to suggest that until the difference is made explicit the inevitable consequence is the kind of response to the term suggested by the hermetically sealed ethnic group. This is gestured at in his reference to ethnicity’s bandying about as a “feel-good policy” which he develops in his discussion of the ethnicity industry. He argues that ethnicity “papers over” the violent disruptions of race politics in the States. This is clearly paralleled in Proulx’s work, as will be examined with specific reference to Accordion Crimes. He quotes Joel Kovel’s text White Racism: A Psychohistory. “Racism is ultimately indivisible from the rest of American life, a fact few of us wish to face”.

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16 Zelinsky, Ethnicity, 44.
17 Zelinsky, Ethnicity, 228.
18 Zelinsky, Ethnicity 12/13.
19 See chapter in The Enigma of Ethnicity entitled “Expressions”
20 Zelinsky, Ethnicity 202. Original source not available.
This is antithetical to the cultural understanding evident in Tan’s version of ethnicity. There is clearly a difficulty with Zelinsky’s thinking which will be tackled in the latter part of this chapter. The “synthetic region” he suggests, in his text *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, is an identity palliative and is clearly implicated in his deconstruction of ethnicity, but it is not a critical discrepancy he develops. The idea of ethnic regionalism is one that will be examined in considering Proulx’s text *Close Range, Wyoming Stories* which engages with these debates in complicated ways.

At this point, however, it is important to emphasise the separation of “race” from “ethnicity” for the purposes of a rethinking of Proulx’s position. Ethnicity seems to be closely allied to epistemic privilege, in terms of the marginalised voice’s right to speak and the critical attention paid to this voice. The idea of a discussion predicated upon authorial race would open up an entirely different set of discursive questions, which as Zelinsky implies, are less culturally comfortable. There is a central collapse in people’s understanding of the differentiation of the terms, “ethnicity” and “race”, but, Zelinsky argues, this conflation is now more powerful than the distinction itself:

The cultural commonalties believed to define the [ethnic] group are regarded as being racial in origin. The fact that there is no anthropological basis for such a belief is irrelevant. Perception is what counts.

The aim here is to re-introduce the separation between ethnicity and race. Then ethnicity can develop as a culturally significant term which is not inextricably bound to racial

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21 Wilbur Zelinsky performs an important function here. His engagement with these debates provides a useful vocabulary for my discussions, hence his prominent presence in the thesis. However, this is because the debate is little theorised, particularly in terms of the relationship of Cultural Geography to Literary analysis, and not because I align myself wholeheartedly with his critical position. The thesis does not allow me the space to explore my divergence from his thinking, but registering my dissension from his position is a necessary addition.

22 Zelinsky, *Ethnicity* 44.
conceptions. This offers the potential for a different set of debates about race which may engage with the levels of racial hostility identified by Proulx, particularly in Accordion Crimes. The endemic violence and anger she identifies suggests that its prevalence demands urgent attention. By extension, the critical silence her hegemonic position seems to guarantee is disrupted. The chapter’s critical focus will be upon the positionality of the voice under the re-worked definition of ethnicity.

There is a deep sense that contemporary Anglo-American culture does not wish to engage fully with a conceptual paradigm based upon race, preferring the illusion that race and racism are not primary cultural forces. The epitome of such a contemporary cultural position would suggest, for example, by placing a discussion of racism centrally the discourse is not tackled but performed and foregrounded. Two critical responses act as counters to such an argument. Cultural theorist E. San Juan counters this position here:

Race, not ethnicity, is the explanatory and hermeneutic concept needed to describe the heterogeneous terrain of conflicting cultures in the United States. Race, not ethnicity, articulates with class and gender to generate the effects of power in all its multiple protean forms. Ethnicity theory elides power relations, conjuring an illusory state of parity among bargaining agents. It serves chiefly to underwrite a functionalist mode of sanctioning a given social order. It tends to legitimize a pluralist but hierarchical status quo.

The second is a more general response to the notion of critical and cultural circumscription given by Denis Cosgrove. He argues:

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23 This has particular resonance given reactions on both sides of the Atlantic to 11th September 2001.

24 This is seen to privilege racial discourses without attempting to engage them, it is an argument frequently advanced in coverage of the BNP. This centres upon the idea that the party gains authority as their position is seriously engaged, rather than undermined by the discussion.

The censored image marks the boundaries of permissible discourse [...] making it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it.26

These two theorists emphasise the fundamental importance of being explicit about cultural iconography. Zelinsky speaks directly of the consequences of the elision of race from concepts of cultural identification in the United States. What will be advanced here is the notion that Proulx’s novels, specifically Postcards and Accordion Crimes, present a parallel understanding of race and ethnicity. Rather than offering the kind of comforting mythic location constructed in Tan’s texts, Proulx makes explicit the violently fragmented identities produced by what Zelinsky identifies as a peculiarly American set of cultural constructions, or myths. Therefore, the idea that ethnicity and race are fundamentally separate have a number of consequences for Proulx criticism. The first: racism, rather than ethnic identity, is overwhelmingly present in contemporary American culture, is an idea that permeates Proulx’s Accordion Crimes. Or rather, her novel’s engagement with ethnic difference foregrounds a violent and dysfunctional myriad of relationships which is more closely allied with our understanding of the term “racism” or “racial tension” than our version of “ethnicity”.

The second is that, having separated the ethnic from association with racial tropes, the term “ethnicity” itself needs re-examination so that Proulx’s position as an ethnic writer is more clearly drawn. That Proulx may be an ethnically conscious and circumscribed writer without being a member of a particular racial group is supplanted by another set of concerns. There is an anxiety about the nature of ethnicity and how it has

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26 Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, The Iconography of the Landscape, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 288. The part of the quotation framed in speech marks is a quotation from Jackson Lears.
come to elide more uncomfortable debates about how to manage your cultural identity in a predominantly hostile community of cultural identification and affiliation. Proulx addresses this. The distinction between race and ethnicity is posited. As a consequence, the term ethnicity needs revising. This will lead to an examination of Proulx’s position in such an identification.

Zelinsky himself highlights the difficulty that European-Americans are included in the set of anxieties that he focuses in his foregrounding of racism as a primary motivating force:

In apotheosizing ethnicity we must overcome [...] serious intellectual difficulties. First the concept is seldom, if ever applied to seriously assimilated Euro-Americans or to the bearers of the ancestral English culture.27

This presumption, it is suggested, is to some extent countered by Michael Steiner, and David Wrobel in *Many Wests, Place, Culture and Regional Identity*. They suggest that the concern for ethnic grounding as a commingling of anxieties about location and origin is a profoundly European-American one:

Although Euro-Americans may seem the least likely regionalists – gripped as they are by mobility, mass culture, Manifest Destiny and the conquest of nature – a desire for regional identity looms in their lives.28

Here, the idea of the region as the synthetic location surfaces once again. It is this notion that will be explored in the third section of the chapter. However, the quotation does reiterate the European-American longing for such a location, suggesting being “European-American” does not automatically preclude you from an ethnic identity. In fact, until this community is embraced as being a mixture of ethnic groups, how is the question of race

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to be properly addressed? Their exclusion performs the elision which actually supports "crypto-racism"\(^{29}\) and maintains the pseudo ethnic hierarchy San Juan laments.

This debate has been highlighted for the purposes of re-aligning Proulx. There is an assumption that as a result of our understanding of bi-culturality - as the negotiation of the centre with the periphery - that those who would identify most strongly with the groups currently conceived of as the European-American community are then somehow beyond ethnic boundaries of cultural identification. Zelinsky raises the difficulty but focuses primarily on a colour line preoccupation with race. This may seem to be the inevitable consequence of the privileging of racial origin in a discussion of ethnicity. However, a possible alternative is that just as the separation of the terms privileges the complexities of the understanding of ethnicity. The consequence of such a debate is equally as open to scrutiny the cultural baggage of the term "race". This is not to suggest that racism is not predominantly a problematic composite term which compounds racial distinction along lines of both colour and origin. What this allows is that as well as recognising racial anxiety as a driving cultural force, the idea that perception is what counts here is maintained, as with the idea of ethnicity.

Therefore the kind of endemic cultural violence and fracturing based upon competition between communities currently understood to be ethnically or race driven is opened up. Communities are, in effect, "racialised", or, given the present discussion, positioned as they are admitted to the debate. This can be conceptually embraced even when the groups actual origin, as a result of its "eurocentric whiteness", is practically impossible to divine. In fact, this would seem inevitable, given the complexity of the

\(^{29}\) See the previous discussion of Zelinsky's term.
State's racial and ethnic make-up. Therefore the recognition of inter-community hostility and the fracturing of the subject, which preoccupy literary theory as well as novelistic production, comes to be recognised as a central feature of American mythic structures and construction. The centre is not the Euro-American community. It is a set of discourses which maintain the fracturing violence placing communities in a competition for epistemic and cultural privilege. This discursive competition results in the fragmented subject at a loss to negotiate an identity. It is predicated on a conflation between a postmodern conscious arbitration of community affiliation, and a set of codes whose access is determined by blood ties and lines.

Proulx directly confronts the reader with this possibility in the quotations with which she opens *Accordion Crimes*:

> Without the presence of black people in American, European-Americans would not be “white” – they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others engaged in class, ethnic and gender struggles over resources and identity. 30

This is a quotation from Cornel West, *Race Matters*. Proulx breaks down the notion of race – in terms of “racism” - with a reference, in fact, to ethnicity. This reinforces what could be achieved by breaking down and being explicit about the cultural currency of these terms. It leads to an examination of the consequences of their materiality for cultural theorists, novelists, and most importantly, the reader, both as an individual, and as a member of a reading community.

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His loneliness was not innocent.31

An adequate evocation of these dispiriting commonplaces of life (human indifference and isolation) would call for the sensitivity and skill of a poet, qualities that society has tended to discourage, for they can expose that which seems better hidden.32

Only people go crazy, not cultures, not societies. Even the chaos of identities, and of strategies, in the world today is the effect of real, and highly structured, forces that are constantly felt in the lives of those trying to get from one day to the next.33

The first is a quotation from *Postcards* itself, the second and third quotations set the context for the following discussion. What Yi-Fu Tuan, in his essay “Place and Culture, A Theoretical Perspective, Analeptic for Individuality and the World’s Indifference”, expresses in the second quotation is an anxiety about both the lack of current literary inscriptions of social anxiety, and the problematics of such a venture. This inscription is something that Proulx attempts and, I would argue, succeeds in producing in her first novel. The third, a quotation from Jonathan Friedman’s essay: “Narcissism, Roots and Postmodernity; the Constitution of Selfhood in the Global Crisis”. This establishes that although the progression of the protagonist is discussed in relation to a literary and mythological heritage, a case is not being made either on the basis of the individual character, novel, or novelist. Rather, this provides a spring-board for a discussion of the complex re-working of discourses of heritage, rootedness and inscription in *Postcards*.

31 *Postcards*, p.331
33 Friedman, *Modernity and Identity* Friedman and Lash eds., 363.
Postcards follows the fates of the Blood family and the farm they run in Cream Hill, Vermont. It features Loyal Blood and his attempted escape from the crime which frames his identity for the rest of his life. During sex Loyal accidentally kills his girlfriend, Billy. He buries her on the farm, and is so traumatised by his action that he becomes unable to bear physical contact with women. He is driven from the farm and spends forty years travelling West across the United States. Over his life he communicates with his family solely by postcards and is thus unaware of the disasters which befall the family in his absence. The novel, as well as tracing his journey, follows the collapse of the farm and its consequences for the people left to subsist on it. His mother and sister Mernelle are left to cope after a bungled insurance scam which results in the imprisonment of Loyal’s father, Minkton, and his brother Dub. Whilst in prison Minkton commits suicide and on his release Dub, having deserted the family farm, attempts to re-invent his relationship to the land through a career in real-estate. Left with the farm Jewell, Loyal’s mother, decides to sell it, and although there is a sense of her regaining her autonomy after her husband’s suicide the text is relentless in its tally of fragmentation and destruction. Jewell dies alone, Mernelle is left to nurse her dying husband in isolation, Dub’s business collapses and Loyal is uncontactable throughout the novel. The farm itself is traced in its decay, and the real-estate development a cousin attempts on the land also meets with disaster.

Proulx sets up Postcards’ protagonist, Loyal Blood, in a discursive relationship with novels considered to be American “classics”. This literary relationship will be examined to establish how Loyal counters fundamental American literary myths. This will then be extended into a discussion of the text’s parallel countering of mythic tropes.
The ideals of particular interest here are both the frontiersman as central iconic figure and the trope of Jeffersonian agrarian Eden. The novel deconstructs and undermines such American mythic iconography through the re-working of the protagonist. However, this is also achieved through the central role the farm plays in the novel. This will move the discussion from an initial focus on Loyal Blood himself to an extended examination both of his relationship to the “homestead”, an important factor in the re-working of American myths, and the treatment of “land”, both as property and “home” in this novel.

This discussion of the land will feature the role of real-estate and as a result discussion of value as it is produced in the text. Consideration will also be given to the construction of the landscape as inviolably hostile to productivity, and the consequences for the construction of both subject and community identity when the wildness of the frontier is re-invoked in fragmenting and distorted ways. Finally, the focus will be upon the construction of the landscape and its relation to inscription in the novel. This will take the form of a discussion of both maps and written texts in the novel. It will examine how an understanding of textuality and inscription informs the perception of the hostility of landscape and its relationship to the development of the subject.

The inversion of familiar, or unconscious, assumption is something at which Proulx is masterful. On the simplest level there is her choice of location in *Postcards*. The novel is originally set in “Cream Hill, Vermont”. The location serves as the driving force for the text. It is where Loyal Blood escapes from, and as such becomes the apex around which the characters negotiate themselves. In fact Cream Hill, Vermont exists. In her text *Vermont Place-Names* Esther Munroe discusses the etymology of the village:

In the Northwestern part of town is Cream Hill. A small hamlet that takes its name from a nearby hill, also called Cream Hill [...] local authorities say that the
name Cream Hill derives from the fact that the land was so fertile the cows gave as much cream as they did milk.\textsuperscript{34}

The "Cream Hill" of Proulx's novel in no way promulgates this image of plenty. There is a suggestion here that the locality is associated with manifold production, at least in terms of milk yields, a sense of luxury – in farming terms – which equates with the tourist version of Vermont, as beautiful, bountiful, and in some sense removed from the everyday anxieties of contemporary American life. The numerous literary and photographic offerings testifying to Vermont's edenic qualities can be cited, but the quotation of just one example suffices at present. This is taken from "Region, Power, Place" by William Bevis:

Regionalism and the idea of uniqueness of place share a rich, escapist history in American pastoral/agrarian tradition. The country place, say Maine or Vermont, is attractive, quaint, relaxing; because of its distance from power, and from the present time of power, being impotent, it is unthreatening and easy to love.\textsuperscript{35}

It is precisely such impotence which Proulx focuses upon, but not because of its cocooning separation. It is instead, as Tuan suggests, a fragmenting isolation which is featured and not in the traditional American sense of "splendid isolation". The choice of such a luxuriant setting establishes the novel in a pastoral/agrarian tradition. Proulx's choice of setting enables the text to work against this expectation so as to explode it. The inversion of "Cream Hill" as an idyllic location into a centre of decay and fragmentation is an excellent initial example of the way the text explodes literary and cultural American mythology.

\textsuperscript{34} Esther Munroe, \textit{Vermont Place-Names}, (Vermont: Stephen Greene Press, 1977) 63.
\textsuperscript{35} William W. Bevis "Region, Power and Place" \textit{Reading the West – New Essays on the Literature of the American West} Michael Kowalewski ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 22/3
As well as the novel’s unrelenting sense of fragmentation and rupture in wo/man’s relationship to the land, in plot terms, the narrative structure plays an important role in the text’s development. The novel features postcards in that most chapters open with a postcard which in some way impacts upon the novel. They are not solely Loyal’s correspondence with his family. The postcards are from various sources and addressed to many different recipients including the whole Blood family. The relationship of the form of the postcard to the text, is central. They foreground the Blood family’s mutual isolation, and, as a privileged form of communication within the text they place a particularly fragmented form of discourse centrally.

This central rupture is countered by a set of chapters entitled “What I See”. The relationship of these consciously narrated sections to the pattern of collapse within the story itself is fundamental to the text’s version of a mythic relationship to the land. This is compounded by the introduction of “The Indian’s Book”, which sets up debates about textuality and authorial control mirrored in the “What I See” sections. These sections, the “What I See” and “Indian’s Book” chapters therefore perform an essential function within the text. Unlike the rest of the chapters they do not open with postcards. The “What I See” chapters are narrated in such a way as to distance them from the rest of the text, as the reader is made privy to the observations of the foregrounded “I”. This disrupts the relationship between character/narrator, as the speaker’s perspective is pushed to the fore. “The Indian’s Book” chapters also raise questions about the observer, and perspective. Loyal, relatively near the beginning of his journey, gives a hitchhiking Indian a lift; they part company after Loyal is apparently wiped out by a tornado, or

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36 The nature of textuality and its relationship to the inscription of the land is one that will be examined later in the chapter.
possibly is attacked by the Indian. The actual events are elided within the text. After the attack Loyal is left with the Indian’s notebook. The novel then traces Loyal’s discursive battle with his own narrative as he struggles to write in the Indian’s book. Thus questions about inscription dominate these chapters as do debates about textuality.

However, the mythic link between inscription through the Indian’s book paralleled in discourses of ownership or occupation of land does not produce a sense of progression. Nor do the “What I See” sections perform cohesively. They rather highlight the conceptual space between perception, textuality and the understanding of the “I” in a symbiotic relationship with the land. A further exploration of the discursive rupture suggested here is necessary to demonstrate how these sections operate. However, it is important to examine the rupture of American mythic iconography before it can be traced through its relationship to the land. Much of the force of the disruption is that it counters central iconographic tropes about the relationship of the American literary and mythic hero and his relationship to land as frontier and agrarian fantasy. Suffice to say at this point the sections emphasise the destructive power of subscriptive myth as opposed to its recuperative force.

The novel is both thematically and narratively complex, the focus here is Loyal’s relationship to central American mythic and literary heroic narratives. At the outset of the narrative Loyal’s path is established:

Even before he got up he knew he was on his way. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way.

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These are the opening lines of the novel. Loyal then informs his family that he and his girlfriend are lighting out and the narrator informs us of the irony of Loyal’s position:

“Got something to say. Billy and me has had enough of this place. We’re pullin’ out tonight. She’s waitin’ for me right now. We’re pullin’ out and going out west, someplace out there, buy a farm, make a new start. [...] Down on the town road he thought it was a sour joke how things had turned out. Billy, always yapping about moving away, getting out, making a new start, was staying on the farm. He who’d never thought beyond the farm, never wanted anything but the farm, was on his way.38

What this does is to establish at the outset of the novel a very particular negotiation of American mythic tropes. They combine here to set up a re-working of those myths which undermines their succouring status. There are three narrative strains at play here. The first is of the adventurer leaving home to explore his/her destiny:

American whites keep leaving home: *Moby Dick, Portrait of a Lady, Huckleberry Finn, Sister Carrie, The Great Gatsby* – a considerable number of American ‘classics’ tell of leaving home to find one’s fate further and further away. The story we tell our children is of Huck Finn lighting out for the territories. A wealth of white tradition lies behind these plots.39

Proulx undermines this central literary convention through Billy’s murder. It is made clear that Loyal is the reluctant centre of this forced journey, rather than, for example, the idea of escape, as central to *Huck Finn*. There is no sense in *Postcards* of escaping to anything. The disturbance of the central myth is that the “crime” is never discovered. In this sense Loyal’s escape from or to anything is utterly impalpable. This establishment of a malign, incommunicable and yet powerful force is the inversion of the wealth of tradition of American classic heroes searching for something tangible.

It also directly counters the literary tradition which stems from the *Huck Finn* genre, the *On the Road* literary and filmic narratives which trace the protagonists’

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“lighting out for the West”. Here the convention whereby the characters come to develop emotionally and psychologically as a result of their journeys is blasted. From Kerouac’s culturally central text to films like Thelma and Louise, and Spike Lee’s Get on the Bus the idea that although events may not turn out as planned, there is still a sense of moral and personal development which stems entirely from the notion of frontiersmanship and an encounter with the American landscape is relentlessly undermined in Postcards. The idea that Loyal has developed as a subject as the result of the journey is one that the text plays with and destroys. The novel returns him to the beginning as he dies believing he is seeing Billy’s burial site. The journey has taken him nowhere developmentally. There is no recuperative discourse. The road trip West defies the filmic and literary genre in its consistent construction of alienation and the rupture of the subject.

The “heroic” adventure is further undermined by Loyal’s relationship to the “West” itself. The aim to be in the West features in many American “classics”. Therefore as well as undermining the idea of the fruitful journey so popular in the “Road Movie” genre, Proulx disrupts the idea that the possibilities for the protagonist on arrival in the West will achieve anything except the further dislocation of the character making the identification. The pattern is hugely familiar, from Wister’s The Virginian, to Guthrie’s The Big Sky. Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath, provides perhaps the most sympathetic parallel to Proulx’s novel. Like Postcards Steinbeck’s novel paints a bleak picture of the opportunities the west presents for the eastern farmer. Here the role of the protagonist sets up an interesting foil to Loyal. Tom Joad, Grapes of Wrath’s protagonist, breaks his parole conditions to flee with the family, and whilst travelling

west with them is involved in another murder, which forces him to leave his family. However, the central differences are the writers' invocation of moral law. What sustains the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is that on both occasions not only are Tom's actions understood, but they are in fact condoned. The deaths add to his heroic status performing more in the vein of the traditional notion of a tragic flaw. Loyal's suffocation of his girlfriend is not paralleled by Tom Joad's *Othello*-like sense of over-weaning jealousy or a protective heroism invoking fair play. The central feature of Loyal's action would seem to be his total insensitivity. Any heroic complexity is sublimated into Loyal's flight. The action of leaving is left to carry the conceptual weight of the guilt and remorse the reader might expect, as are his panic attacks caused by his inability to stand contact with women.

Therefore, Loyal complicates the "heroic" status of the individual striking out West. This is achieved both through the impetus to travel and his reaction to it, but also through the conflation of Loyal's chosen professions. He is established at the outset as a farmer, stating his lack of desire to leave the farm. However, he is also privileged as a natural trapper:

> He kicked out the window and stepped over the raking glass onto the porch, leaving it all, the trapline, the rough little Jerseys [...] That part of things was over.

Throughout the novel his relationship to trapping is complex, he is a talented trapper and foregrounds a common trope of the trapper's sensitivity to the landscape, or understanding of nature:

> His own feeling for where to look he couldn't explain. It was like trapping, part instinct for the way animals might move through a country, part feeling for the

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millennial landscape, an interior knowledge that suggested where lakes and mud
wallows, where sinkholes and fissures had been in that vanished world. [...] It’s
not like the bones. The bones are dead, just remains, but the tracks – look,
something alive, a living animal made the tracks. It’s like hunting.41

This introduces another central American mythic trope; the idea of the frontiersman or
trapper as somehow more in touch with “America” than those who discursively
manipulate it. Loyal indicates this in a comment he makes about the experts whom he
takes on tours hunting for bones:

Most of these guys, these experts out here, are experts on bone identification, they
know the literature, they got minds like Einstein, but they never hunted or trapped
and they don’t have the feel for the way animals think and move. It’s something
you got to be brought up with.42

This version of the trapper’s intimate understanding of the land and thus an elevated
relationship to the land is common to classic Western expansionist novels. This is stated
by John Milton in his text, The Novel of the American West:

The mountain man, who was explorer, trapper, trader, and scout, may well be the
epic hero of America; in almost every respect he surpassed the cowboy in
legendary deeds.43

This quotation establishes the primacy of the mythic status of the frontiersman or
mountain man. It also, through its extrapolation of the term, clearly illustrates how Loyal
could be defined as such a figure. Loyal’s western travel makes him reluctant explorer,
the other three professions are those that he predominantly survives by. However,
whereas this quotation illustrates Loyal’s relationship to the trope, other critics emphasise
a textual discrepancy, as J. Golden Taylor puts it in “The Western Short Story”:

The mountain men, some one hundred years after their demise, likely carry the
most romantic connotations of any figures in the annals of the West.44

41 Proulx, Postcards, 177.
42 Proulx, Postcards, 183.
44 J. Golden Taylor “The Western Short Story”, Gerald W. Haslam (ed.) Western Writing, (New Mexico:
University of New Mexico Press, 1974) 94.
Throughout the text Loyal is never presented as a romantic hero, best evidenced in the centrality of his girlfriend, Billy’s murder. This is underlined by his inability to maintain even the most mundane form of sexual contact with the women he encounters. Loyal, thus plays an ambivalent role in the contemporary reworking of this cultural trope. In some ways he fits the traditional conception. For example, in his text, “The Writer and his Region” J. Frank Dobie asserts that:

One may read Deserts on the March and study mountains of documents on erosion, restoration of grasses, plant ecology and thereby become a useful technician, but the rhythm of the grasses and of the soil that grows them cannot be documented.  

This would seem to directly echo Loyal’s statement of his understanding of the land and its fundamental untranslatability. However, despite the establishment of parallels to the frontiersman’s romantic mythic status, the narrative produces a profound ambivalence to such a positive position. At the end of the novel Loyal releases a coyote from a trap. The description is an obvious parallel to his accidental murder of his girlfriend at the outset.

Loyal narrates Billy’s hostility to him in his dying moments:

And now he knows: in her last flaring seconds of consciousness, her back arched in what he’d believed was the frenzy of passion but was her convulsive effort to throw off his killing body, in those long, long seconds Billy had focused every one of her dying atoms into cursing him. She would rot him down, misery by misery, dog him through the worst kind of life.

He then narrates the coyote’s hostility as he decides to release her from his trap. The parallel is made explicitly:

He didn’t think there’d be anything under the rabbithush. But as he came in to pull the trap and stake he saw her, a late-season coyote with a strong red color […]

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45 Haslam ed., Western Writing, 22.
46 Proulx, Postcards, 103.
The crimped red hair, the extraordinary expression on the animal's face, in her body language, mingling appeasement, fear, anger, threat, resignation, pain, horror, and more, the terrible and thrilling sense of her life's imminent end. Billy.

The fur was no good [...] The foot didn't look too bad [...] He got up and pulled the tarp away in almost one motion. She was gone. 47

This narrative conflation of Billy's death with the coyote's release is crucial to an understanding of the re-working of the cultural tropes discussed here. In some senses Proulx inverts central myths, such as the idea of Loyal fleeing, rather than escaping, to a new life. However, the text predominantly complicates these central constructions, it is not simply a matter of reversing the binary. By fracturing, or making ambivalent the connection between the tropes and their recuperative power, a critical space is produced in which questions about their value are given the space for expression. This can be seen in the above example. The coyote is not released simply because of remorse. The paragraph opens with an important observation, "the fur was no good." - the animal was valueless to Loyal as an object. His release of it therefore is economically motivated. Although a connection to Billy is stated, a sense of remorse does not operate as the motivating force which drives Loyal to release the animal.

This complication of value is played out throughout the text through Loyal's profession as a trapper. Whilst on the one hand this buys into a central romantic notion of the frontiersman and his connection to the land, on the other the image of the tricked victim, produced initially through Billy, is relentlessly reproduced in the violence engendered by his trapping. This is reinforced by a character discussing the nature of the "Old Hat Man", Loyal in his old age:

47 Proulx, Postcards, 296/7.
Paula’s face was cold. She thought of innocent animals cruelly pinned, their mouths dry with fear while this old man with the hard blue eyes crept toward them, talking, talking, but carrying a bloodstained stick.

But he was already in new stories [...] She did not want him to tell the story about the wild ducks with the string through their guts [...] the string sawing at raw tissue. \(^{48}\)

This central ambivalence is most clearly illustrated in Proulx’s choice of the name “Loyal Blood”. It invokes family ties, rootedness and, obviously, loyalty, for the man who deserts his family having murdered his girlfriend and is never able to communicate meaningfully with his family again.\(^{49}\)

However, not all critics support the position of the frontiersman as central mythic figure as Dennis Cosgrove in his chapter “America as Landscape” in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* indicates:

> It is the fact of cultivation rather than appropriation which is significant [...] The original settlers – the hunters, trappers and wildmen of the frontier, those most directly engaged with American nature – are not the true Americans. The virtues of the new nation are to be found, as Jefferson was later to put it, in the hearts of those who labour in the earth. \(^{50}\)

What this leads to is an examination of the role of the landscape and land in *Postcards*. The text fragments the agrarian edenic myth just as it creates an ambivalent position for the commonly painted “romantic” hero. The hostility and violence produced in Proulx’s text echoes that indicated in Loyal’s relationship to his actions and status. Also, by looking at the text’s treatment of land and value, primarily through a discussion of real-estate in the novel the destabilisation of central American cultural tropes will be further explored.

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\(^{49}\) For a more detailed discussion of naming, see the following section which focuses upon *Accordion Crimes*.

\(^{50}\) Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* 176.
In the opening to his text *Beyond Geography* Frederick Turner suggests that he does not regard his text as an exploration of the cultural geography of the United States. He sets it up in rather different terms:

This, then, is an essay in spiritual history. As such it is necessarily tentative, but at last it is founded on that surest of realities: the human spirit and its dark necessity to realize itself through body and place.\(^{51}\)

The choice of phrase, the idea of a “dark necessity” is important, it suggests that there is nothing redemptive about a realisation of the “spirit” through an understanding of “place” which is central to this discussion. As Cosgrove suggests, just as the frontier myth acts as a source for many American literary classics, so the idea of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal has been a powerful mythic trope, Proulx destabilises this in *Postcards*. The comforting version of farming life in the States is undermined throughout the novel. The Blood farm itself collapses as the novel progresses. Initially Loyal’s focus would seem to sustain a redemptive role: “The farm had answers for any question,” \(^{52}\) but this is immediately disrupted as the second part of the sentence equivocates about that sense of security: “But no questions had ever come.”\(^{53}\) The farm seems unsustainable because of the escape of the protagonist, but its failure stems from a hostility more deeply grounded, it is not simply a result of bad management. Dub suggests the endemic sense of an ever-failing battle with the landscape:

“What’s new, said Dub, burying himself in the dark corner, wrenching the pump handle until the water shot out. Began to fill the buckets. “Oh the farmer’s life is a happy life.” He sang the old Grange song with the usual cracked irony. Had anybody ever sung it another way? \(^{54}\)

\(^{51}\) Frederick Turner *Beyond Geography – The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983) 7.\(^{52}\) Proulx, *Postcards*, 26.\(^{53}\) ibid.\(^{54}\)
The family’s failure in the face of a hostile landscape is made more explicit through the relationship of decay to fertility. Even when the idyllic fantasies of Loyal – his desire to buy and establish his own farm – are presented they are rooted in a sense of decay.

“Damn nice farmland,” said Loyal, looking over the richest soil in the world, a million years of decomposing grass layers, unrolled in earthy floors on each side of the road.  

References to decomposition re-invoke the rotting corpse of Billy which forms the axis for Loyal’s journeys. As the novel develops this sense of decay and fragmentation overrides any sense of resurrection or the recuperative power of nature. This is made explicit when Loyal purchases his own farm in an attempt to live out the recuperative agrarian fantasy:

So there he was, fifty-one years old and in North Dakota. The farm a curve of earth [...] Why the hell was he buying this, he wondered, [...] Imprisoned in his mind [...] was the image of his slanting field crowned by scribbled maples, not this bony square of dirt. He didn’t even know what to do with it. [...] He couldn’t think of it as his farm, and he called it ‘the place’ . . In the back of his mind he had believed and not believed that the work of a farm would set him right. .. He still had his anger, hot as new blood. And hated it in himself. 

The myth is not sustainable for Loyal in any form. Proulx undermines the agrarian potential of the idyllic Vermont small farm through its economic failure and Loyal’s inability to resurrect his spirit through agrarian life. This is reinforced through a sub-plot that runs through the text. An urbanite, known as “the Dermatologist”, as well as by his name, “Dr Witkin” buys up a portion of the Vermont farmland. Initially he epitomises a positive relationship to the land as he attempts to live out his wilderness fantasy. The text, however, allows the fantasy homesteader no leeway. Although he becomes obsessed

54 Proulx, Postcards, 43.
55 Proulx, Postcards, 62.
56 Proulx, Postcards, 210/11.
with his project it does not fit with the wilderness expectations of *Walden* or critical accounts of the trope as redemptive fantasy. Leonard Lutwack discusses this “redemptive fantasy” in his text *The Role of Place in Literature*:

> Instead of venerable bastions, the ideal American house is a small affair, indistinguishable from its natural surroundings [...] or at best, as Hawthorne suggested, simple structures that can be torn down after forty years of service.  

It is precisely these tropes which Proulx ruptures in her version of an “obsession” predicated upon an idealised American landscape. Firstly, the homesteader clearly finds no “benignant” power in his newly purchased fantasy wilderness. Proulx entitles the section “The Dermatologist in the Wild Wood”:

> Dr Franklin Saul Witkin, forty-seven, stoop shouldered, urban in habitat but haunted from childhood by fantasies of wilderness, sat on the stone wall staring into the chaos of his purchased landscape. There was too much to look at. [...] If he walked into the woods, land tilted, trees thronged like gnats, the air turned sallow, and he was lost [...] once at the camp he felt uncertain. It was as if the journey between his two lives was the realest thing of all, as if the journey counted more than arriving at the end.  

Here the text destabilises another landscape fantasy as the dermatologist is unable to translate his fantasy of ownership into a relationship with the landscape in any meaningful or recuperative way. Denis Cosgrove gestures towards this succouring trope for the Dr Witkin in his relationship to the land:

> America was a very concrete reality to be transformed from wilderness waste to a cultivated garden [...] To those less directly engaged upon the land [...] American land seemed to offer a chance to realise one or other of a multitude of ideals, beliefs and values: social, political, religious, and environmental.  

As Proulx develops the dermatologist’s relationship to his fantasy landscape another mythic trope’s supportive force is made ambivalent. The text takes the application of the

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fantasy to the landscape and makes explicit the apparently inevitable rupture. The dermatologist’s frustration at the conceptual failure is made explicit:

The kernel of life, tiny, heavy, deep red in color, was secreted in these gabbling woods. How could he understand it?\(^{60}\)

He began to put the chaos of nature in order. The sinuous woods music, once so beguiling, had taken on the discordance like a malfunctioning speaker.\(^{61}\)

In fact the discordance of nature, as opposed to the idyllic relationship gestured at by Lutwack, or desired by the dermatologist himself ultimately drives his son to suicide. Rather than the “civilising agency” of the woods, the noise referred to initially as a “malfunctioning speaker” becomes unbearable for the son who inherits the plot:

If he had another place to go he’d go there. The stinking camp. His father had put every dollar he made into it [...] He hated the camp [...] Noise was driving him crazy [...] He drove up the hill. The jet trail filled the windshield. The noise unbearable. And at the camp ran inside for the rifle. A silvery capsule at the head of the vomiting trail. He pulled the trigger. Again. Again. You bet! You bet!\(^{62}\)

The complex relationship of the fantasy to the fragmenting, or decaying landscape are brought together in a cultural fantasy which conjures Proulx’s refusal to allow the reader any escape into a recuperative fantasy. In his inability to “order” nature, the dermatologist stumbles across the decaying form of Billy. The reaction of the doctor refracts Loyal’s guilt through his own malfunctioning fantasy:

In startled recognition, pulled back his hand from the white curve of skull.

Larry, he thought for a moment, somehow Larry had gotten out of the Bronx cemetery and under the wall. [...] A pioneer grave. Some early settler’s wife, exhausted by childbearing, or perhaps scalped and slain by Indians, or killed by typhoid or pneumonia or milk fever. He had blundered into the cool privacy of

\(^{59}\) Cosgrove *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 161.

\(^{60}\) Proulx, *Postcards*, 187. A further unpacking of the myth can be undertaken through an examination of the role of colour, and particularly red, in this novel, however, space does not allow for it here.

\(^{61}\) Proulx *Postcards*, 280.

\(^{62}\) Proulx *Postcards*, 336-9.
her grave. [...] In respect he undid the day’s work, dragged the stone back to the wall and levered it home again. He would not desecrate a grave.63

The potential succour the mythic relationship to the land the doctor craves collapses here as his respect supports Billy’s eradication and decay as a body in the land. Billy’s death is never acknowledged as a result of Dr Witkin’s “respect” for the customs of burial. This ambivalence about cultural, or moral value, is refracted throughout the text. Proulx deliberately compounds the complex relationship of value to land by foregrounding economic values. The text displays the destruction of the individual, in this case “Billy” as a person, rather than simply a body, through a misplaced faith in the possibility of ownership. The dermatologist provides a counter to Loyal’s decision to release the coyote. Whereas Loyal’s apparent kindness is motivated by economic realism, the Dr’s actions are based upon his version of the mythic, or cultural, value of land. As a result ideas about ownership and belonging are exploded here. Proulx foregrounds the urbanite’s ability to economically privilege his association with land and a particular site. She then demonstrates that any emotional or cultural extension of that sense of belonging is fallacious. The gap between the two states is highlighted, and Proulx indicates the fantastic (in this sense to be read as ridiculous) nature of the trope. Thus exposing the individual’s isolation from his own sustaining narratives.

The complex relationship of “value”, both emotional and cultural, to land is explored through the text in its version of real estate. Ownership as an ambivalent concept has been examined in relation to the dermatologist, but the potential recuperative power of real estate as an industry has yet to be explored. David Harvey makes explicit the role of real estate, or the value of land in contemporary cultural anxieties in his essay,

63 Proulx, Postcards, 282/3.
"From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity".

This is a critical response to his famous previous work *The Condition of Postmodernity*. He states:

The whole settlement of the United States should be understood as one vast venture in real estate speculation. To say, therefore, that place construction is a given in the logic of capitalism's production of space is not to argue that the geographical pattern is determined in advance. It is largely worked out a posteriori through competition between places.\(^4\)

Real estate speculation is offered as alternative analeptic as Dub begins his temporarily successful career as a realtor. Just as Loyal harbours a fond notion of his relationship to farming and trapping for much of the text, for a certain period Dub is evangelistic about real estate's status and power as an ideal American relationship of individual to land. His initial efforts parallel that sense of the adventurous romantic American hero discussed in relation to the frontiersman. Dub's first postcard informs his mother of his intentions:

Try this for size. I'm living in Miami and going to real estate school. [...] This is a garden of Eden even with all the Cubans [...] Rt. Now living in a kind of dump, but you wait [...] this is my opportunity [...] I refuse to accept the fate life handed me. I will make my own fate.\(^5\)

This is followed by a postcard proclaiming both his economic and romantic success; the two cohere in important ways:

In a couple of weeks you and Mermelle and Ray will get an invitation to a wedding. You guessed it! Mine! Her name is Pala [...] In real-estate too [...] I want you all to come down. Be my guests at Biscayne. I'm sending airfare for you.\(^6\)

The idea of the son striking out to establish himself as an economic success in spite of family difficulties would seem to be a cast-iron literary version of the American Dream.

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\(^4\) David Harvey, *Mapping the Futures*, Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner. eds., 6

\(^5\) Proulx, *Postcards*, 157. This is one of the postcards printed as if it were hand written.
This is not sustained by the plot as Dub is forced to leave Miami and move out of real estate:

An old and murderously tense mood persisted. There were too many strange people, too much strange money in too few hands.

On a hot afternoon she heard on the car radio that the four white police accused [...] had been acquitted up in Tampa. In minutes the city vomited blood [...] She did not want to drive alone in Miami again [...] The glossy city emptied, the money-men and investors fleeing with condos unsold, office towers unleased, undeveloped properties foreclosed. Pala picked Houston [...] "I would like to get out of real estate. All of it [...] They left the month Christo began to fit the pink plastic around the bay islands [...] There would be nothing like it in Houston."67

Harvey suggests this is the inevitable consequence of the speculation itself. He warns of the difficulties of succumbing to the overweening strength of such late-capitalist cultural forces:

Profitable projects to absorb excess capital have been hard to find in these last two decades, and a considerable proportion of the surplus has found its way into speculative space construction. The lack of wisdom in much of this is now becoming clear.68

The inevitability of the speculation as a fundamentally destructive force is echoed in the disastrous morphing of the Vermont farm house as a speculative ruse. Jewell describes the plots that are carved on what was once the Blood family home: "Jewell looked up at Loyal's - now Ott's - field and caught her breath [...] too small for anything but cemetery plots thought Jewell."69 What is crucial to Dub's version of real estate is not its economic viability. It is Dub's evocation of the industry's appeal to him which, in part, echoes Harvey's statement as to its precariousness. What is also predicated is the sense of decay

66 Proulx, Postcards, 205.
67 Proulx, Postcards, 320-22.
68 Harvey, Mapping the Futures, Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner, eds., 8.
69 Proulx, Postcards, 151.
and violence as being central to his pleasure. This is reiterated at various points in the text:

"There was something he loved in the smell of decay."\(^{70}\)

Disney World they will call it when it's done. Expensive plastic shit, he thinks. But winks and says to himself, thanks a million. ...I love this, he thinks, the shriek of jets [...] the deals and dirt, the eroding beaches, the sense of being in a foreign and lethal place. Home.\(^{71}\)

Here the final sentence crystallises the hostility, alienation and violence which is pivotal to *Postcards' relationship to literary and cultural American mythology. It also suggests that a recognition of the malignant core of those tropes is more valuable than the cultural and emotional currency they are commonly constructed as offering.

It is crucial, therefore, to examine the construction of this violence and hostility as a powerful cultural force. What has been suggested up until this point can be usefully paraphrased by Yi Fu Tuan:

The familiar, when looked at closely, may turn into its opposite: fissures in understanding and a certain indifference can emerge at what seems a thoroughly genial birthday party.\(^{72}\)

James Duncan, in his essay "Sites of Representation, Place, Time and the Discourse of the Other", reinforces this point. He also leads into the following examination of the mythic hostility and violence it has been suggested Proulx presents as ideologically central to American cultural negotiations in *Postcards*:

Only when we seriously explore those representations which we find self-evidently false can we begin to question the representations which we find self-evidently true. Only then will our own sites of representation become visible to us.\(^{73}\)

\(^{70}\) Proulx, *Postcards*, 275.

\(^{71}\) Proulx, *Postcards*, 227.

\(^{72}\) Yi Fu Tuan, *Mapping American Culture* Franklin, Steiner eds., 32.

\(^{73}\) Duncan, *Ley* eds., 54.
Having examined Proulx's destabilisation of central mythic tropes it is important to consider the construction of this violent and hostile alternative cultural core. Two structural features of the novel are particularly important to any discussion of the misanthropy identified thus far. They are the "What I See", and the "Indian's Book" sections. By focusing on these features some of the particular discursive strategies will be identified.

In the first instance the text was examined as a re-negotiation of certain central mythic tropes. These were foregrounded through the particular movement of the plot and an examination of Loyal's position. In fact, the "What I See" sections are crucial to the construction of Loyal as maintaining a particular position in a conversation with American epic and romantic heroes. A critical distance is imposed in the self-proclaimed narrative shift engendered by these sections. It is not simply the omniscient narrator; these sections inform a particular kind of perspective directly related to versions of landscape which will be expanded. Through their literal and metaphorical elevation they offer particular sites from which to view the narrative. They also work in complex ways to reinforce one another as well as the progression of the narrative itself. An example has, in fact, already been cited. When Dub divulges his understanding of alien and "lethal" home - it is, in fact, expressed in a "What I See" section which immediately distances it from the body of the text and privileges it.

To return to Loyal himself, his re-negotiation of an agglomerate hero of Jeffersonian agrarianism and frontiersmanship is played out significantly in the "What I See" chapters. This becomes particularly clear when the chapters are examined as a group rather than in the body of the text. The first "What I See" chapter traces his initial
journey and suggests a sense of adventure which adds a specific dimension to the journey. As well as travelling with the protagonist, his journey is being traced from a differentiated point, that of the speaker in the “What I See” chapters. As such Loyal’s journey is mapped by these chapters. His travels are traced from a distance as he is observed making his way across the American landscape. The choice of “landscape” as a term is important as it invokes a particular relationship to the land. Jonathan Smith discusses this in his essay “The Lie that Blinds” from the collection Place/Culture/Representation. He differentiates between the character that acts as part of the landscape and the observer:

A landscape situates its spectator in an Olympian position, [...] It is this partial escape from the temporal flux which landscape, treated as scenery, unfailingly represents as an occurrence.74

Dennis Cosgrove, in his text Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape develops this point by discussing the ideological consequences of the particular position of the observer of landscape and their relationship to what they view. He argues that the naturalism of the observer’s view disguises its ideological force:

In landscape we are offered an important element of personal control over the external world.75

This idea is developed in the Iconography of the Landscape, edited by Cosgrove and Daniels, in J.B. Harley’s essay, “Maps, Knowledge, Power”.

It is asserted here that maps – just as examples of literature or the spoken word – exert a social influence through their omissions as much as by the features they depict and emphasise [...] the map maker has always played a rhetorical role in

74 Smith, Place/Culture/Representation, Duncan, Ley, eds., 78-9.
75 Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, 18.
defining the configurations of power in society as well as recording their manifestations in the visible landscape. This is precisely what Proulx produces and manipulates in the “What I See” sections. As well as recording the landscape and tracing Loyal’s journey so as to create a conceptual map of his journey, she plays with the relationship of the characters observed to the narrator.

These chapters, for example, as a group, privilege and rework the relationship of the journey as travelled to its physical predication in terms of the roads Loyal travels and the observations of his journey made along the way. This emphasises his journey as a movement, it also concretises the journey itself as different locations registered. These differences are not simply his transition across the States but also the mediation of position between the speaker and the protagonist, whether it is Loyal, or in other instances, Dub or Jewell. By implication, a conceptual mapping of the United States which allows the reader to make sense of the journey is conjured. For example, the reader, in order to understand the narrative, has to map the relationship drawn in these sections in relation to the information. A conceptual map of the States is implicit for the reader as expressed through the “What I See” sections initial version of his travels. For example States are listed as he passes through them:

In Pennsylvania the vineyards are spaced farther apart. [...] The levelness of the land disturbs him with its easiness [...] Miles of snow fence [...] The soil in Indiana a deep brown-black.

Specific reference to locations in the “What I See” chapters of sections I and II sustain this implicit map. What initially seems like the detritus of the journey, the “Plaster

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76 Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, 290-303.
ducks on withered lawns” that are passed, are part of a structure of transition which plays an important role to the sense of Loyal’s progression West. The first section opens thus: “The land levels as he comes down out of the trees and into miles of vineyards,” establishing movement. This is soon extended into a particular drive from Vermont through Pennsylvania as quoted above. The landscape is made tangible through Loyal’s reaction to its physical presence, in this instance the grit that fills the cab: “He passes old trucks [...] He is worried about his own tires. [...] He turns off onto a gravel road but [...] dust chokes him. Grit in his mouth”. As his journey continues the narrator recognises the next change of state and muses on Loyal’s progression:

The soil in Indiana a deep brown-black. The cattle sing into its blackness [...] In the diner hunched over the cup of coffee he wonders how far he is going.

In this initial chapter Loyal is not actually named, but referred to as “he”. This underlines the conceptual distance the chapter conveys. It performs an important function which is further illustrated as the opening section proceeds. The reader is invited to position “he” as Loyal, and through a simple conceptual step the reader begins to position Loyal in terms of his surroundings. The reader maps Loyal onto the landscape, from an elevated separation which initially naturalises the difference between the observer of the landscape, and the subject who perceives themselves as a part of their surroundings and

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77 This is taken from the first “What I See” chapter, Postcards, p.34/5 but each of the chapters gestures at location in various ways.
78 Proulx, Postcards, 34.
79 Proulx, Postcards, 34.
80 Proulx, Postcards 35.
81 Proulx, Postcards 35.
not conceptually distinct from them. Proulx then uses that distance to make explicit the ideological separation it usually elides.

The second "What I See" opens in what could be argued to be a direct response to its own positionality. "What I See. Loyal, going along the roads". This picks up on the notation of the road observed in the initial chapter. More importantly, however, the "I" sees "Loyal" the subject has been isolated and the confusion between the speaking "I", the reading "I" and the acting "I" is temporarily redrawn to align the reader with the speaker. Throughout the text the relationship between these three identifications, the "I" is continually altered, and thus complicated. This is just one of the strategies by which the complexity of perception – so fundamental to the problematising of myth's power – is foregrounded. The text, at this point, develops the sense of journey and its tangibility through a cataloguing of the natural differences Loyal observes as he travels. This, it could be argued, is an oblique reference to frontiersmanship and an understanding of location through a knowledge of indigenous plants. The notation, however, of specific natural phenomena, it is suggested here, serves a more complex purpose. Both the speaker and the actor, in the first chapters, map the environments through which they pass by their perceptual knowledge of it, their ability to "recognise" what they "view" for example the "dark soil" as being indicative of "Indiana".

The references to particular States, as Loyal journeys through them, is reinforced throughout the "What I See" chapters. The construction is reinforced through the conceptualisation of Loyal's physical movement in these chapters. The mapped version

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82 This differentiation is Denis Cosgrove's and he explores this relationship in detail in Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape.
83 Proulx, Postcards, 68.
of the States is so securely established that in the latter “What I See” chapters Loyal’s own distance from this version of location becomes the focus. In the early excerpts the distance between Loyal’s own perception of the landscape he travels through and that of the speaker in these chapters is difficult to differentiate. As the text traces his decline the discrepancy between the speaker’s cartographic identifications and Loyal’s own perception appear to be more clearly drawn. The first excerpt is from chapter 49, the second 54:

He’s not sure where he is. So many roads look the same, the repetitive signs, the yellow stripe to the horizon [...] He comes on a few landmarks, unchanged since he drove along this road a long time earlier [...] He thinks he is going east but does not cross the Missouri. Instead, turns west-northwest on an old man’s reckless hunch. What difference does it make? Gets to Marcelito, California [...] The Stream of migrant labour flows north and east, south again, then west [...] It’s easier to get into the Stream than out again.84

He is on the wrong road, caught in heavy traffic. He cannot make out the route signs until he is abreast, too late to get into the right lane and manoeuvre the exit. Where the hell is he? [...] He is on a back road. The traffic is thinner. But it’s all wrong. He is turned around in some way. He should be moving into the dry country, but instead sees cemeteries, dots and pots of plastic flowers. [...] God, it has to be Minnesota. He’s going east, must have driven northeast all the way across South Dakota. Turned around. Completely turned around. ... And beside an empty field, on an empty road taut as stretched wire, with a final stutter of worn-out pistons the truck breaks down. Worn out, worn down, used up. That’s all, folks.85

These two excerpts are quoted at some length, in part, to highlight their similarities. There is a familiar sense of the elision between speaker and character, for example, Loyal’s panic at not knowing where he is morphed so that it is impossible to tell who is speaking in “God, it has to be Minnesota.”. The speaker is then re-invoked in the following sentence: “God, it has to be Minnesota. He’s going east.”

84 Proulx, Postcards, 308/9.
85 Proulx, Postcards, 327-9.
This, however, is not as significant as the consequence for the speaker’s cartographic sense as Loyal loses his bearings. There is a suggestion here that unless the character knows where he is, the speaker is unable to locate him or even identify the landscape he is surrounded by. This notion hugely complicates the separation gestured at in the opening “What I See” chapters. The differentiation between speakers and an understanding of landscape is entirely subject to perception. It is not simply that Loyal’s view is privileged, it is rather that “What I See” is presented as being entirely circumscribed. Neither the character, who is subject to the movements of the narratives, nor the observer, or nameless speaker, can escape the positionality of viewpoint. This profoundly constrictive, version of perception and orientation directly results from the misanthropic explosion of myth as succouring.

The text performs its paralysing force when it implicitly ratifies perception as circumscribing and controlling through the “What I See” chapters. This inability to recognise the power of perceptual location when naturalised culminates in the final chapter of the novel, a “What I See” chapter. Although the previously quoted excerpt, that ends “Worn out, worn down, used up. That’s all, folks,” is deliberately evocative of a cartoon ending, in a particular rhetorical strategy the end of movement is not the end either of the narrative, nor of these particular segments. The property that was once the Blood’s farm is traced in its final decay. The idea that there is something beyond the bethetic cartoon ending, however, is misleading. The text is not recuperative, but rather emphasises the solipsism of perception. It undermines the very construction of Loyal’s path as a developing narrative.
The novel is circumscribed textually by Loyal's own version of his life's progression. It is also bounded by textuality as a controlling discourse in and of itself:

**What I See**

Loyal, rolled up in something, seeing through closed eyelids. The stiffening lungs seize, the heart is drowning.

The Indian's book falls open. He is astonished to see the pages are the great, slanting field. At the top of the field a black scribble of trees, a wall. And through the waves of darkening he sees the wind streaming down the slope of land, rolling down the grass, the red awns combing the sunlight, flashing needle stems, the close-stitched earth, the root, the rock.  

This version of the protagonist's death plays with common tropes about life flashing before one's eyes at the point of death. It also, it could be argued, gestures towards ideas about original sin and the idea that his life has been controlled by the crime. However, it is not Billy's murder that is at the forefront, but the landscape of "home" and the site of her burial. The Indian's book and notions of textuality are conflated here to underline the restrictive nature of perception and view. These two concepts are inextricably bound with mythic conceptions of landscape and space in American culture. As Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner argue in *Mapping American Culture*: "I take Space to be the central fact to man born in America [...] it is geography at bottom". Proulx's construction of a particular relationship between "space" and "view" or perception, repositions central American cultural myths and literary tropes. This is engendered by the text's use of texts and textuality within the narrative. An examination of the role "The Indian's Book" demonstrates how the particular conflation of space and view comes to be negotiated in a textual debate.

The text occupies a central physical and conceptual space within the narrative. Even at the end of the novel, it is foregrounded, mentioned even after the protagonist as it
“falls open” revealing the farm to him. The battle throughout the novel, still being played out at the last, is for ownership, in this case of the book. The novel contains three sections entitled with particular reference to the book. However, references are made to it continually throughout the novel. A power struggle which mirrors the desire for ownership traced in the dermatologist’s relationship to his homestead, and the breakdown of the ideologically secure position of observer of the landscape, is established through the text’s negotiation of a natural phenomenon, a tornado. The Indian “reads” the landscape and warns of a tornado. Thus a relationship between perceptions of the landscape and communication in written and verbal form become inextricably linked:

They sat in silence. After a while the Indian opened his suitcase and took out a notebook. [...] He scribbled [...] “I’m singing The Friendly Song. It goes “The sky loves to hear me.” I want to be friendly with the sky. [...] The aspen leaves, green wet silk, tore loose from the trees. The Indian caught a cluster, [...] “See that,” said the Indian “Tornado,” said the Indian. “The sky loves to hear me,” he bawled. 88

The naming of a character “The Indian” and his clearly established links to the natural landscape clearly invoke the literary figure of the Indian in the frontier fiction briefly discussed. It is something the text plays on. Having predicted the tornado Loyal is then affected by it in a very particular fashion:

“A tornado can do freakish things,” said the doctor. He leaned at Loyal. [...] ‘You hear about [...] houses shifted two feet without breaking a teacup. In your case it seems to have taken your car and pulled off your shoes and stockings as neat as could be. You were lucky you weren’t in that car. We’ll probably never be sure exactly what injured you, but in a manner of speaking, you’ve been partially scalped.’

There was no sign of the Indian. 89
The text plays up the irony of the moment through an emphasis upon the freakish nature of tornadoes which at once explains the particular consequence but also heightens the suggestion of the power of selection as the implication is clearly that he's been mugged by the Indian rather than suffered a peculiar natural phenomenon.

The suggestion that the Indian is in some way responsible for Loyal's scalping, either through his power of nature or by his direct physical attack, introduces a discourse which at once invokes the literary and cultural tension between the American "hero" and the "Indian", and destabilises it. The battle seems at this point to be either a physical one or a struggle as to their ability to predict and arbitrate weather reflecting their status in terms of landscape and an understanding of nature. It is, in fact about inscription\(^9\), and becomes entirely textual, as the ending demonstrates.

Tension about ownership of the book, or rather the right, or ability to inscribe through it, runs throughout the novel. The first chapter devoted entirely to the book follows Loyal's first attempts to make it his own:

He carried the Indian's book around with him for years before he started to write in it [...]. The Indian's hand was impossible [...] There were strange lists. On one page Loyal read: Sacrifices

Lamenting.

[...]In another place the crooked sentences said: "The dead live. Power comes through sacrifices [...] Would sacrifices be scalps, Loyal wondered under his cowboy hat."\(^91\)

The re-appropriation begins with "reading". Loyal, in his reference to "scalping" reintroduces his particular relationship to the Indian, and assigns a certain power to his discourse, as well as establishing the fact that this is a very particular discursive

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\(^9\) For a fuller discussion of "inscription" as a spatial construct see Chapter One and the discussion of space in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

\(^91\) Proulx *Postcards*, 106/107.
relationship, that of the cowboy to the Indian. Loyal’s confidence grows and after years he feels able to begin to write in it:

But most of the book was still empty, as if the Indian had recently started to extend the paths of earlier volumes. Some of the page headings seemed useful enough.

Income
Expenses [...]

On the page for birthdays the Indian had written. ‘My son Ralph born Aug 1938 died of diarrhea Aug 11 1939 [...] Loyal crossed out the Indian’s notations. On the Birthday page he wrote his own name and birth date, then those of his family. [...] many nights that winter he wrote [...] things he planned to do, [...] When he turned the light out he saw the blue night fitted into rectangles of window glass, the crumpled earth glowing with phosphorescent metals, the blurring wind and stars.

The Indian’s book. His book.92

This final sentence invokes a textual ambiguity which parallels Morrison’s Beloved. In Beloved one pivotal sentence offers a paradigm for the novel’s tensions: “This is not a story to pass on” 91. As Morrison parallels the tension between “the Indian’s” book and “his” book conveys a central ambiguity. Is this an aggressive repetition reiterating that although Loyal crosses out the Indian’s words it is still “his”? Or is it a transitional statement: from the Indian to “him” i.e. Loyal? The deliberate vagueness forms a crux for the text’s discursive ambivalence about ownership and perception as empowering forces. This is to suggest that it is Loyal’s anxiety about his ability to inscribe which informs his relationship to both the text and the space he occupies. The text does not invoke an understanding of the “Indian” as somehow pre-eminently powerful through some divine access to the land. In fact, his own identity is complicated by the text’s refusal to place him in a concrete familial context. He performs rather like the farm as a shifting nexus from which Loyal tries to distance himself whilst identifying through him.

For example, in all three “Indian Book” chapters Loyal is faced with the difficulty of performing his relationship to Billy on paper. In the first chapter he attempts to write her name:

Tentatively, barely pressing the pencil against the paper, he wrote ‘Billy,’ but erased it a minute later. [...] he wanted to write something about the watch, but on an empty page could manage only a stiff, insufficient sentence, ‘The watch I gave her’.94

The discrepancy between the third person narration of the event and Loyal’s inability to write highlights Billy as a textual point of collapse. When it comes to Billy’s story Loyal is unable to write it. The notion of writing is picked up again in the second “Indian’s Book” chapter:

He had written a question in the Indian’s book, a warped spiral bound notebook with stippled orange covers. Was everything all right with him before Billy? And knew the dirty answer. 95

The materiality of the notebook is established through the relatively detailed account of its appearance. Describing the notebook as an object highlights the idea that the question of the state of their relationship is also concrete. It is a concrete, or “real” question. The answer is unsayable but knowable, and once again Proulx plays on the difference between Loyal’s knowledge and his inability to construct it. “He knew the dirty answer”, but he does not write it and so it becomes conspicuous in its absence. In the final “Indian’s Book” chapter Loyal returns to his preoccupation about whether Billy’s death has constructed his life:

And through the rage Loyal tasted an evil satisfaction that adrenaline had stalled his fit. Although no secret was unfolded. And wrote that night at the top of the

93 Morrison, Beloved, 274/5.
94 Proulx, Postcards, 108.
95 Proulx, Postcards, 153.
page in the Indian's book. *Only One Way*, then scored the words out until the pen tore the paper, shut those thoughts down.¹⁶

This illustrates once more Loyal's desire to write his way out of the difficulties, but, more importantly, it provides the point of their occlusion. Just as the landscape does not provide answers, no secret is divulged as to Loyal's own co-option of the events that frame him. Textuality and inscription do not operate as the flexible means by which the subject comes to recuperate itself, anymore than the notion of the mythic West or the American literary and cultural romantic hero provides a sustaining version of American individualism.

Inscription as papering over an irrecoverable rupture is suggested most clearly in the relationship of the book to the postcards. Loyal is a textual figure, not simply as a character but for his family and himself. Through the book he attempts to write himself and finds his origin displayed through it at his death. For his family he exists only as text. The postcards do not allow any form of reciprocity for the reader. It is therefore a particular form of textuality, a very specific form of communication. As Mernelle, his sister, rails, towards the end of the novel:

Damn him, he sends his damn postcards every year or so but never lets us know where to write. You realize he don't even know Pa's dead? [...] Sends his dumb bear postcards. How many of those bears have we got to see? What makes him think I want to hear from him? I don't care about his damn postcards. What now? Put some kind of notice in every paper in the country, "To Whom It May Concern. Jewell Blood lost [...] will her eldest son who hasn't been heard from for twenty years call home?" [...] At least I know where to get hold of Dub. At least I can call him up. I got an address. I don't need to wait for a postcard.¹⁷

The postcards may be read to indicate a particular mode of postmodern fragmentation. Particularly apparent here is the change in Mernelle's attitude, she who as a young

¹⁶ Proulx, *Postcards*, 236.
woman was wooed in this particular textual form. But, as suggested, this assumption of value is complicated by Loyal’s relationship to the book. Equally, he does not choose postcards because in a seminal moment they reflect his isolation. It is instead because when he escapes the clutches of his first sexually induced panic attack he grabs hundreds:

He dragged for breath, kicked the plate [...] he stumbled against the door. His hands were full of postcards. [...]if he was going to die he wanted to do it outside, not in here. [...]In an hour or so he could breathe more easily. The front seat was strewn with postcards, seventy or eighty postcards all showing the same thick-bodied bear [...] 'Must be worth about eight dollars,' he said aloud and took a cold pleasure in the minute gain.  

Here, again economic value is the only one that is explicitly given to the textual form. Loyal’s textual and perceptual distance does not provide a perspective from which anything is achieved. This parallels the “What I See” chapters, the speaker that narrates what they “see” does not see anything more from the elevated cartographic position, Loyal’s critical distance is not enabling.

Whilst specific American literary and cultural tropes are exploded the very recuperative ability of the narrative itself is destabilised. It is not simply that the narratives need to be co-opted in different political forms to empower the reading and speaking community. The moment the speaker or reader falls into the trap of operating under the assumption that inscription is empowering in landscape, as demonstrated by the disintegration of the value of land all s/he services is his/her own partialness. This is also the case when textuality is regarded as an enabling discursive force, as seen through the Indian’s book. Identity is circumscribed by the forces that supposedly sustain it. The subject is forced to a point of collapse by the faith it cannot sustain. This has been

97 Proulx, Postcards, 249-50.
98 Proulx, Postcards, 33.
examined in Loyal, the dermatologist, and through an examination of the text's own versions of space, landscape and textuality as cultural forces.

*Postcards* deconstructs central American literary and mythic tropes. In their place it does not offer an alternative version which sustains the reader or the characters. It rather examines the consequences for both community and individual of subscribing to some of the tropes which are understood to be pivotal to any understanding of an “American identity”. This is both as it is constructed by the American canon, and also in its negotiation of specific cultural myths which still permeate all forms of contemporary American cultural production: the aspiration of the individual, the journey West, and “Cowboys and Indians”.
**Accordion Crimes: American Immigrant Experience as paradigmatic subject position.**

In this way Heironim learned that to be foreign, to be Polish, not to be American was a terrible thing and all that could be done about it was to change one’s name and talk about baseball. 99

These days everybody is ethnic, might as well make money on it. 100

I bet you think this fucking country is real, he said.

“Real what?” 101

You hear the one about the guy got in a plane crash and everybody’s killed but him? He’s in some wild place, Alaska, I don’t know. So he stumbles around for a week, not a sign of human beings, he’s half crazy. Then he comes to a tree and there’s a rope hanging down and on the end of it is a dead nigger. Guy says, ‘praise God, civilisation.’ Get it?

[...] But it couldn’t happen. There’s no place in North America farther than twenty miles from a road. [...] It was in *National Geographic*. 102

All of these quotations are taken from Proulx’s novel *Accordion Crimes*. They are intended to give a flavour of the novel, but more importantly to indicate parallels to *Postcards* as the text clearly displays the hostility and violent ambivalence previously discussed. There are, in fact, striking similarities as *Accordion Crimes* further explores conceptions of textuality and ownership. However, the intention is also to illustrate the novel’s employment of this violence in relation to a very different discursive paradigm. Here the focus is upon the text’s version of the American immigrant experience and the debunking of the American Dream through the relentless elision and debasement of the aspirant. *Accordion Crimes* focuses primarily on the relationship of the immigrant to cultural, economic and epistemic privilege. Whilst some of the discursive strategies

merge with those discussed in *Postcards*, particularly in its focus upon “America” as a construct, it is necessary to be clear about their specific function here before the implications of such a position is explored in overall relation to both texts.

*Accordion Crimes* follows the journey of a little green accordion as it is brought to the United States, by its loving creator, a Sicilian, in the late nineteenth century. The novel then follows the fate of the accordion and traces the lives of those into whose possession it falls. The accordion’s journey takes it to all quarters of the United States, from Maine, Louisiana, Montana, Iowa, and Texas to name just some of the narrative sites. The accordion decays as the novel progresses and, in fact, the text ends with the accordion’s “death”. It is destroyed as it is smashed to pieces by an oncoming train. The complexity of object/subject relations in this novel is central, as displayed by the choice of an object for protagonist. This will be discussed at length further into the analysis. Before entering into that discussion it is important to examine the novel’s presentation of the immigrant experience, and the dialogue this sets up with cultural myths about immigrant assimilation into American culture. As is suggested in the quotation from the opening of this section: “These days everybody is ethnic, might as well make money on it.”

Proulx has a specific understanding of the ethnic or race make-up of the United States. This is privileged in the opening quotations which Proulx chooses to frame the novel:

> Without the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be “white” – they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity. *Cornel West Race Matters*

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104 Quotations on the opening page of *Accordion Crimes*.
The emphasis here is that the social problems the United States predicates are not produced primarily as a result of colour-line racism. The inference here is that the binary of "black" "white" hostility, or even multi-ethnic identity as opposed to an "Anglo/white" caucus is delusory. It masks a complex set of hostilities produced in all cross-cultural encounters. The novel's focus on various immigrant groups' experience of acculturation or assimilation into American culture draws upon the set of relationships this quotation from Cornel West foregrounds thematically. The use of quotations at the opening of the novel sets up the text's distinctive relationship to differing forms of narrative, and the distinction between certain forms of communication upon which the text plays. A textual hierarchy which is at once invoked and dismissed is clear from the novel's introduction which ensures that the reader is unable to extract the "fictional", and thus somehow less culturally significant, nature of the text by stating that the text is a mixture of discourses. She does not enable the reader to separate, or deconstruct them:

Necessarily historic personages mingle and converse with invented characters. In some cases invented characters have been placed in real events; in others, real events have been slightly or greatly fictionalized [...] Throughout the book appear real newspaper advertisements, radio spiels, song titles, scraps of verse, labels on common objects and lists of organizations; mixed in with them are fictional and invented advertisements, spiels, posters, song titles, verses, labels, objects and lists. 105

This initial statement is carefully constructed with the clauses denoting "fact" and "fiction" closely mirroring one another semantically. This similarity in textual reference, for example, "song titles" as both "real" and "fictional", sustains the categories whilst occluding them. The reader is lead to invest all s/he reads with a constructed fictional reality. The proviso guards against a dismissal of the narrative as fictional but does not

105 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 15.
run the risk of having to guarantee its status as actual as no specific claim is made for fact at any identifiable point in the narrative.

The centrality of the American immigrant experience to the mythic construction of the States and the American subject is not controversial. Wilbur Zelinsky in *The Enigma of Ethnicity* states how central he perceives the assimilation of the bi-cultural subject as being to American cultural mythology:

> The idea of assimilation and conformity to national norms is deeply embedded in the reigning American ethos and is implicit in the notion of American exceptionalism.\(^{106}\)

The centrality of their position is stated even more simply by Oscar Handlin in his text *The Uprooted*:

> Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were America [...] to adequately describe the course and effects of immigration involved no less a task than to set down the whole history of the United States. \(^{107}\)

Proulx absorbs the centrality of the immigrant experience within a construction of the United States mythic iconography. She then works the discourse, just as she uses the literary tropes discussed in relation to *Postcards*, to demolish them. Proulx does not suggest that the formation of a bi-cultural subject acts to comfort and sustain a fragmented identity. Bi-culturality does not perform either as Zelinsky suggests, in the creation of a sustaining location as suggested by Yi Fu Tuan in his article “Place and Culture – a Theoretical Perspective”. Here he provides an analysis of the state of the subject which mirrors Proulx’s construction of the immigrant or bi-cultural subject in *Accordion Crimes*:

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Indifference – is there an experience which allows us to cover with one word all suffering [...] the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski’s answer is ‘yes’: it is indifference – the world’s indifference. [...] Isolation and indifference too often and too deeply felt corrode the fabric of culture and society, and will discourage the production of a “synthetic region.” Nor does the text soothe cultural fragmentation through even the stouthearted from weaving new links.

He argues that culture acts in society as an “analeptic” or salve to this sense of isolation and indifference:

I have offered the idea that place and culture are a salve, or (more positively) an analeptic – a creative solution – for the threatening awareness of being alone in a world that is ultimately unresponsive.

It is at this point that his argument diverges from Proulx’s text. *Accordion Crimes* identifies the isolation and indifference experienced by various subjects throughout the text, but culture, here foregrounded through music - the accordion - is not a creative solution. Culture is not presented as social glue, it is the product which ensures the subject’s isolation/decimation, and emphasises their profound isolation from the communities they try desperately to inhabit.

The identification of the subject’s ability to succour itself by cultural means is something the text returns to again and again. In a parallel fashion to *Postcards*,


108 For a discussion of the term see the chapter on Amy Tan.

109 Yi Fu Tuan, *Mapping American Culture* Franklin, Steiner, eds., 40/2.

110 Yi Fu Tuan, *Mapping American Culture* Franklin, Steiner, eds., 39.

111 This argument is one that Tuan attempts to counter. At the end of his essay he suggests, in Bakhtinian fashion, that even the most disturbing texts do not undermine the potential of the analeptic power of cultural construction:

Just as culture can admit... raw, disruptive emotions... these partings of the curtain are just that: if I plunge into a tough-minded book I do so, after all, in an armchair, and I count on the disturbing message to dissolve as soon as I close the book and rejoin the family in the common tasks and rituals of culture. Moreover, the literary work, by its own art, contains and attenuates the stress of human isolation and conflict, 45.

The assumptions here about the role of literature as a cultural force need deconstruction at some length. At this point it is sufficient to cite once more Proulx’s conscious manipulation of just this kind of textual
Accordion Crimes underpins the gap, or fissure, between the promise of cultural security and its effect on the subject when s/he subscribes to its potential force. This is simply expressed in the first narrative as the Sicilian accordion maker leaves his comatose wife to emigrate with his son, "And so the accordion maker veered onto a fatal course" 112. The choice of "a fatal course" as opposed to "his" is important here. The man himself is murdered shortly after his arrival in a lynching of Italians in New Orleans, but the suggestion here is not personal. It is not only his path that ends in destruction, but the suggestion is that the path is endemically fatal, not only for him.

This idea is picked up in the following narrative. It is traced throughout the novel through two central motifs. The first, is through the cultural significance of naming, the second, is music. The idea that naming forms a cultural bond and in some sense community security is explored through various communities. I am going to focus on three, the German-American families, the Franco-American community, and a Mexican-American family, but parallel constructions can be traced in Proulx's versions of the Polish-American and Cajun-American groups, for example.

In the first instance a group of three Germans converge in Iowa and establish three farms. They name the settlement Pranken:

Loats suggested they name the settlement Trio.

"Nein, nein, no." said Beutle, holding up his hands, [...] It is these Pranken, these paws, that will build our farms and the town. [...] "so call it Pranken then," [...] but when they filled out the papers at the county seat, the word was written down as Prank. 113

hierarchy by refusing to admit the text as entirely 'fictional'. It also engages with debates surrounding cultural theory and its negotiation of literature which is discussed in the introduction to the thesis.

112 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 24.
113 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 59.
This predicates translation, the confusion between the German for "hands" and the idea of a joke. But the text emphasises the circumscribing nature of the discrepancy. The settlement fails, and with the onset of war the families are ostracised. Ultimately the children attempt to assimilate into American culture rejecting their homesteads, and in a parallel mode to *Postcards* the value of the land is exploded as the child who inherits the land loses all in a stock-market crash having mortgaged the farms to buy shares. Before the failure of the farm, the choice of name is discussed:

"If we'd called it *Hände*," said Loats, "it would of turned into Hand, a not bad name. But Prank? A joke. Your life place becomes a joke because language mixes up!" Every year thereafter he petitioned to change the name of the town, suggesting in turn, Snowball, Corn, Paradise, Red Pear, Dew Buggywhip and Brighteye. (later his suggestions were bitter: Forget it, Roughtown, Hell, Wrong, Stink.)

This version of naming is closely allied to many of the means by which vast swathes of the States came to be named, as explained by Robert G. Athearn in *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America*:

The choices frequently reflected the flamboyance of that frontier. [...] They tell us much about the hopes and aspirations of those who suggested the names [...] examples [...] taken from Colorado [...] Gold Lake [...] Edena [...] some of the names were influenced by geography or even social conditions, Whiskey Spring [...] Horseshoe [...] Tin Cup, Bachelor [...] or they were grimly realistic in their choices [...] Dead Wood, Bitter Creek [...] Paradox [...] Dull Center, [...] Tombstone.

This list underpins the heritage Proulx employs in her version of this event. The crucial difference is that whereas these names are taken to signify expectation in Athearn's reading, in Proulx's text the names are performative rather than simply constantive. In

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this respect naming negotiates David Harvey's realignment of the relationship of
landscape to construction in his essay "From Space to Place and Back again: Reflections
on the Condition of Postmodernity":

Heidegger persists in seeing authentic communities as materially and physically
rooted in particular places through dwelling, rather than being constructed solely,
as so frequently happens in postmodernist rhetoric, in the realms of discourse.  

Proulx does not present a version of communities that places them as solely constructed;
she examines what occurs when such a belief is subscribed to. The accordion's next
owner is a Mexican-American named Abelardo Relámpagos' family. Here the shift is
from the settling first-generation Germans to a man who is an American of some
generations if birthplace is taken as the central cultural marker. The text remarks,
however, that this is not what identifies the individual:

Relámpagos had been in this place centuries before there was Texas. They had
been American citizens since 1848 and still the Anglo Texans said "Mexicans."  

The invocation of a binary identification insider/outsider is invoked here. But it is
undermined by the revelation that Abelardo is not a blood relation of the family. The
isolation he feels a victim of is one that he helps to construct:

Yet for the rest of his life he woke in the morning expecting the smell of the river,
and from beyond it the imagined perfume of that beautiful and tragic country
where perhaps he had been born.  

Proulx places the German-American community and the Mexican-American community
next to one another. Through the juxtaposition of their narratives she exposes the cultural
fallacy at their centre. Whereas one of the German community’s patriarch’s mourn the

\[ 116 \text{ Harvey, Mapping the Futures Bird, Curtis, Putnam, Robertson, Tickner, eds., 14.} \]
\[ 117 \text{ Proulx, Accordion Crimes 98.} \]
\[ 118 \text{ Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 100.} \]
loss of German culture in their community, the Mexican family, because of the Matriarch, Abelardo’s wife Adina, propound the theory that the family’s cultural salvation lies in assimilation. Loats, the German indicates what he perceives to be fallacious about the rejection of German culture by American society:

And never forget that Abraham Lincoln was descended from a German immigrant named Linkhorn [...] Some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them have come over. But when the whole man has come over heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight [...] And what else drops? Jesus, Jesus and Christ, [...]Handel, Mozart [...]Goethe drops, Kant and Hegel [...] They don’t see that everything that is good in America come from the Germans.”

Throughout the novel different communities propound their central role in constructing America, whilst in various ways attempting to feel part of the Nation. As a result America as a cultural mass comes to be figured as a central lack or gap. The space in which the nation’s cultural heritage is forgotten or erased, as the Poles, Germans, Norwegians etc. claim a centrality to its creation which they assert has been erased by the other. The community cited is arguing itself, according to Proulx, about a parallel centrality.

As well as this central gap the German’s assertion that to maintain a relationship with a source culture as being essential to a conception of the self is disturbed by the counter-assertion Adina makes. She asserts that her children’s future is only aspirational if they embrace American culture. Just as one of the German’s cites the German language as being fundamental to the community’s survival, so Adina argues that her children must distance themselves from anything Mexican, including Spanish, to become American:

119 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 73-76.
For her part she had given them a start with American names: Baby, Chris, Betty. All except [...] Crescencio, already defeated by his name, and poor Roselia who had died in their crib [...] Why not the names of Indians, then? Why not do them a favor? Go ahead, put them as low as you can get.  

Adina stands opposed to Loats, although both recognise the significance of naming culturally. It could be argued that she recognises the fraughtness of translation unlike the Germans who discover its complexities having named the town “Prank”. However, Adina’s attempts to arbitrate the cultural destiny of her children, which proves as futile as the German community’s effort to sustain itself through preservation of the German culture and language.

The recognition of cultural power and the subject’s inability to employ it creates ambivalence. The indifference Yi Fu Tuan discusses is played out as the strenuous efforts different communities make to provide a culturally sustaining position for themselves proves futile. However, the discursive force of such attempts is not simply registered as being beyond the arbitration of the subject. Although the various communities offer different versions of cultural identification, the discursive weight these relationships carry are parallel. They instigate a specific pattern whereby whatever the myth or community narrative may be, subscription to it binds the subject as their investment in the discourse paralyses their conceptual development. This is most clearly demonstrated in the third section of the novel entitled “Hitchhiking in a Wheel-Chair”. The story focuses upon a family of French descent who arrive from Paris and via Quebec end up living in Maine. As a result of poverty the family are forced to disperse and the younger children are placed in an orphanage. Like Abelardo Relámpagos a complicated relationship to family and heritage is established. Here, in fact, it is taken one stage

120 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 106/7.
further as the children do not even know that their siblings live with them in the home. They are established as being without a familial and cultural root in this respect. Therefore, in another shift of position and cultural affiliation, in this story it is not the parents’ complex relationship to a non-American culture which dominates the narrative. It is, instead, that the protagonist, Dolor Gagon, attempts to recuperate a cultural identity through an association with the French-American community he was born into but does not know. In this story the accordion becomes the only inheritance of the orphan Dolor, who is told as a child not that his parents abandoned him, but that they died in a fire. Dolor begins to play the accordion and becomes desirous to know more about his “roots”. He discusses this with a Franco-American with strong French sympathies, a woman named Emma whom he also desires:


“That’s the truth,” he said. “They do hurt.”...

Emma, short and rumpy, [...] said, seems funny, you being French but can’t talk it.

“Yeah.” He knew all about how funny it was, his name taken from him, the language lost, his religion changed, the past unknown, the person he had been for the first two years of his life erased. He saw how a family held its member’s identities as a cup holds water. The person he had been as a child [...] had been dissolved by the acid of circumstance and accident. He was still that person. He would return someday, like an insect cracking out of its winter case, he would wake speaking, thinking in French [...] his lost family would come back. And he always saw this transformation occurring in a warm room dominated by a wood-burning stove. There was a blue door and someone coughed. In French.121

The fantasy that dominates this monologue, that there is some core to the individual that “the acid of circumstance” cannot destroy suggests a positivism to Dolor’s position which is belied by the narrative as it progresses. His faith in his innate connection to the language and the culture does not empower him. Instead Proulx manipulates the
discursive investment so that he is literally disabled by the identification. He replies to
Emma immediately when she tells him that his name means pain, and gives the example
of "pain in the legs", that he suffers from leg pains. This "pain" is linked to French
culture in manifold ways. It is tied to Emma, the accordion, and the French language,
Dolor admits, for example, that he desires Emma because she represents a blood
community that he desires and envies:

He felt the pain in his legs again [...] He knew he wanted Emma, most deeply
because she was French [...] the complex interconnection of blood extending up
over the border and to the St. Lawrence south shore [...] uncles, cousins, second
cousins, aunts, sisters-in-law [...] the wealth of blood [...] this desire became a
template for distorted thoughts and for no reason he began to check if he was
pissing blood.122

This quotation demonstrates both this desire for the community and the destructive
impact the distance he perceives between himself and his fantasy has upon him. Dolor
becomes paralysed after Emma's husband is killed in a traffic accident. Dolor's paralysis
mirrors Loyal's physical response to Billy's death as his inability to move is tied to his
guilt about his desire for Emma, which itself is rooted in his desire to belong to the
French community. It is also apparent that the identification he makes with the
significance of the French language and culture engendered in the translation of his name
becomes a physically controlling force.

There is a temporary reprieve for Dolor as he marries Emma's sister. The desire
on Dolor's part for the family connection is complicated by Mitzi's response. She takes
him to a shrine where a "miracle" is performed and Dolor is "cured". However, as Dolor
comes to understand that unlike her sister, Mitzi is keen to disassociate herself as much as

121 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 172/3.
122 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 176/7.
is humanly possible from all things French because she believes them to be socially
retarding, he is forced into a deepening crisis. She asks that they drop the French
surname, having already insisted that she call him "Frank" rather than "Dolor"

Frank, there's no sense in being French, in staying here. You don't talk French,
you don't know who your parents went or where they came from, nobody
remembers them, they were just passing through for sure," [...] "Gagnon stays.
The only thing I got of my people is that name." ¹²³

So he maintains the surname but agrees to sell his other major connection to the French
community as he perceives it, the accordion. The pains in the legs return, and Dolor
commits suicide leaving a note stating only "I am happy". ¹²⁴

This narrative demonstrates the constrictive nature of the individual's subscription
to cultural values which produce a cohesive framework for identification. It does allow
Dolor to reconstruct himself as French only to the extent that he understands that he is not
a member of the community in the way that his fantasy demands, and so feels nothing but
the acute isolation of the cultural remove which he inhabits.

Up until this point the arbitration of cultural identification has been examined
predominantly from a linguistic perspective. However, the accordion itself is also
absolutely central to the text's version of community, cultural identification. It operates
to demonstrate the complexity that is engendered by the mythic status of immigrant
myths of assimilation and aspiration. The untitled "Introduction" which frames the
complexity of fictionality finishes with a reference to the accordions which feature in the

¹²³ Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 196.
¹²⁴ Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 198.
text, "The accordions are what you might expect"\textsuperscript{125}. In fact, the casual nature of this statement is indicative of the strategic employment of the instrument in the novel.

In one sense the accordion plays a relatively straightforward objective correlative role. As it becomes the property of the various characters it is frequently used in an attempt by the communities to represent a very concrete version of their cultural identity. Many of the communities identify it as being very specifically theirs. For example, The Relampagos encourage their talented sons to play their accordions at a school show and tell session. Dolor's fantasy of assimilation comes closest to realisation when he attends an accordion jam in Quebec:

He was in a room of French people. There were similarities in bone structure [...] He told himself these were the people from whom he had come, he was genetically linked to those around him. He felt a curious thrill [...] He believed that on that evening he had understood and spoken French.\textsuperscript{126}

However, just as the linguistic version of assimilation paralyses, so the co-option of the accordion as culturally sustaining simply exposes the fissure which alienates the subject from the cultural fantasy. This is most straightforwardly demonstrated by the same accordion's assimilation into so many communities. "The little green accordion" travels and is loved by various cultural communities, even the journey itself emphasises the fantasy at the root of the ways in which its owners respond to it. It ironises its own status as an object of cultural identification through its role as an untranslatable icon as it clearly moves, and so translates, from group to group.

The role of the accordion as cultural authenticator is offset throughout the novel by the binary position that it identifies the immigrant status of the owner. This reinforces

\textsuperscript{125} Proulx, \textit{Accordion Crimes}, 13. – although the page itself is not numbered
\textsuperscript{126} Proulx, \textit{Accordion Crimes}, 183.
its role as a cultural signifier, but suggests that the inevitable consequence of that recuperation is alienation. So, for example, when the Relampagos children play their accordions in school they are not greeted with the praise of the teacher for their skill as musicians. Instead she reprimands them:

"The accordion is not a good instrument. It is a rather stupid instrument. Polacks play it [...] At recess they whispered, what is a polack? Angelita knew. "A white bear that lives on the ice."
Baby imagined white bears in a row playing their silvery accordions. 127

The accordion is used in similar ways throughout the novel to invoke exactly this kind of inter-community hostility. It is this Proulx identifies in her opening quotations as being a cultural basis for race relations in the States. That they are not a predicate of colour, but rather about an endemic cultural hostility and mis-identification that produces hostility between communities and alienation for the bi-cultural subject.

This particular understanding of the subject’s relation to a fantasy of community and belonging which will extend both to the immediate or local identifications and yet still sustain a sense of belonging as an American is what Proulx explores and explodes in the narrative. Through the accordion she complicates the cultural values the States foregrounds of the immigrant fantasy of development – both cultural and financial. This is achieved through the disruption of codes of value. The accordion’s cultural status becomes ambivalent as it is seen clearly as a cultural symbol which is then belied in its transition from community to community. Equally, its value is deliberately complicated to embody the difficulties of ascribing cultural value to codes in the hopes that they will sustain and redeem. The accordion, although often an object of affection to its various

127 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 114.
owners deteriorates throughout the course of the novel. By the end it is decrepit and ruined, it is also culturally valueless in the sense that it can no longer make music:

Now he discovered a small green accordion and took joy in the find [...] At home he thought he’d clean it up a little [...] and he put it in the sink [...] detergent [...] sprayed it with WD-40 inside and out [...] what the hell it was only for her to look at. \textsuperscript{128}

Ultimately it is discarded and destroyed as it falls onto train tracks, where it is burst apart by an on-coming train. However, as it blows apart the reader is reminded of a part of the story which is never explicitly referred to after its occurrence. A stranger approaches Abelardo Relampagos when he works at washing dishes. He is given money for acting as a middleman for the collection and distribution of “packages”. He is not involved directly with the business and never inspects what he is delivering. He is rewarded with huge sums of money, which he is too scared to spend or acknowledge. So he dismantles the accordion and hides the money within it. The narrator is careful to indicate that even when examined, the owner would have to know where to look, or the money would remain hidden:

He got a can of shellac and a small brush [...] and glued the bill into an interior fold of the bellows. It was entirely invisible, could not be discovered except by knowing fingers, could not be seen even if someone removed the ends and looked into the bellows.\textsuperscript{129}

Even at this point the amount of money involved has not been disclosed, the section finishes with the sentence:

In the bellows of the green accordion were fourteen bills of the thousand denomination\textsuperscript{130}.

\textsuperscript{128} Proulx, \textit{Accordion Crimes}, 368.
\textsuperscript{129} Proulx, \textit{Accordion Crimes}, 119.
\textsuperscript{130} ibid.
The accordion, from this point onwards, becomes self-ironising as its value is literalised, as is the mis-identification of its worth as both a physical and cultural object.

Up until this point the examination of the symbolic complexity of the accordion has been relatively straightforward. However, the accordion functions, as many objects within the text do, to fracture the binary insider/outsider, acculturative potential of the immigrant American dream. This binary can be understood in terms of the identificatory perception of self/other. In *Place/Culture/Representation* this discourse is thoroughly explored. Jonathan Smith, in his chapter “The Lie that Blinds” offers a warning to an unproblematised approach to an exploration of the self’s relation to the other:

>(The project of encountering the other) – the project is alluring: I only hope that it will not be brought to a premature termination by an optimistic plunge into the seas that are teeming with real alive and quite implacable sharks.  

This hostile and literally dangerous encounter directly reflects the fragmentation of this negotiation in *Accordion Crimes*. The characters’ attempt to plunge into a sustaining location identifying themselves against a concrete cultural opposition, and this involves a re-adjustment. The sense of the “I” in relation has to be re-negotiated in relation to an attainable culturally secure position. Rather than shoring up their identifications this constantly serves to alienate and disable them. There is a suggestion that this cultural antagonism is peculiarly engendered by the identifications the United States predicates as an iconographic landscape. This is an argument Harvey foregrounds in his essay “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity. As was quoted in reference to the value of land in *Postcards* he states that:

The whole settlement pattern of the United States should be understood as one vast venture in real estate speculation.  

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131 Smith, *Place/Culture/Representation* Duncan, Ley eds., 90.
What is particularly important for this consideration of *Accordion Crimes* is his development of this point:

Competition between places produces winners and losers. The differences between places to some degree become antagonistic.\(^{133}\)

It is this sense of competition in landscape settlement which Proulx identifies as morphing into a cultural struggle identifiable not only between communities but also within the subjects themselves. Denis Cosgrove develops this in his discussion of landscape in *Social Formation and Symbolic landscape*; landscape as engendering a compounding of the self/other, or as he identifies it here, the insider/outsider binary as being a fraught distinction particularly in terms of landscape:

The opposition between subject and object, insider and outsider (are) – the central contradictions of the landscape idea.\(^ {134}\)

Here Cosgrove identifies the specific difficulty of conceptions of landscape: that it produces a false distinction between the person identifying the landscape as being in some sense removed from it and disguises the discursive strategies of their selective viewing. What Proulx ruptures through her treatment of the accordion, as well as other objects within the text, is the binary itself. The subject/object framework that maintains the distinction produces a false distance for the subject, according to Cosgrove. Proulx tackles the notion of a false distinction through the collapse of the binary. Through her manipulation she disturbs the idea gestured at by Harvey in his identification of the competition between landscape as being a central force in American cultural

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\(^{133}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{134}\) Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 37.
development. Proulx explodes the myth that the construction of the subject when predicated upon an identification with an object, be it physical or cultural, will sustain and support the sense of the community and the individual’s “self”. She also demonstrates that the investment in the culturally determining power of the object in itself subverts the subject/object binary. It presupposes that the cultural authority and its power to determine is not with the self/subject but is in fact somehow contained within the object/other. This transfers agency from the subject to the object making the subject object and vice versa.

That this disruption in Proulx is violent and hostile is identified by Richard C. Poulsen in his text The Landscape of the Mind: Cultural Transformations of the American West as being an inevitable consequence of the transition of identification recognisable in Proulx’s novel:

Violence is a euphoria of self-realization: violence is a clear expression of the transforming image. 135

The violent collapse of the subject/object insider/outsider self/other binary operates as a centrally disruptive discourse in Proulx’s novel. The accordion works centrally in this capacity. The cultural investment in it as an object frequently un-nerves those who recognise that it has been meaningful to previous owners. Dolor registers his anxiety about the object’s signification of its previous value:

There was something about the green accordion that repelled him. He could feel how the buttons had been worn by the earlier owner’s fingers, the strap twisted to fit another’s thumb. [...] A ghostly player moved into the circle of his arms whenever he took up the accordion. 136

136 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 176.
Yet the sale of the accordion appears to be the event that drives him to suicide. Equally when the accordion falls into the possession of a Cajun man named Octave, he also recognises it as identifiably separate in its character, yet perceives there to be a dialogue between them:

Octave did not like playing with the old man and Buddy [...] He wanted the accordion. He played the accordion better than any Malefoot that ever lived, [...] he wanted the green accordion because it sounded good and loud [...] but most of all because it had looked him in the eye [...] Of course he knew it was his own eyes reflected but figured the odds were a million to one they could line up with the mirrors that way. It made the instrument powerfully alive, looking at him, watching him, saying, "what you gonna do? You gonna git me? Better git me, nigger, or I git you." It was a scary thing. 137

Throughout the text the accordion signifies a compound subject/object relationship. It is, effectively, the protagonist whose journey we trace across the United States. The novel opens with its conception and creation by the Sicilian accordion maker, and ends with its "death", as it is hit by the train. This clearly engenders a differentiated response to it as an object, which when considered in relation to the cultural constructions discussed here, would appear to rupture its currency as object and symbol.

In the discussion of Postcards the constrictive power of literary and cultural myth was explored as a constrictive suckering force. Here it is being argued that the immigrant cultural myth of assimilation and the relationship of the self to the other is what creates an inter-community hostility and a fragmentation when absorbed by the subject as providing a means of constructing the "I". Therefore the rupturing of subject/object relationships is not privileged in a particular discursive relationship to the accordion. The complexity of ascribing objects, be they symbolic or literal, with an iconic force for the individual is played out throughout the text. Sometimes the gestures to this relationship
are deliberately casual, belying the discursive reworking which conjures such an understanding. For example, at the outset of the novel when the Sicilian and his son, Silvano arrive, his son is so hungry that he attracts the attention of a barrowman who feeds him and then jokes with him:

Once, moved by his hungry stare, a vendor gave him an overripe banana [...] "Hey [...] your mother must have craved these fruits when she carried you. You are fortunate you do not have a great banana-shaped birthmark on your face."38

The flippant gesture to the accordion in the introduction is mirrored here, this would appear to be a relatively straightforward literalising of the boy’s hunger. However, the narrator continues the reference:

Silvano did in fact have a birthmark but it was on his belly and in the shape of a frying pan, the cause of his perpetual hunger. 139

The “joke” is inverted. Silvano does not need a representation of his hunger, in the form of a banana shaped birthmark, because his hunger is, in fact, produced by its symbol.

The most complicated reworking of the subject/object relationship is played out in the section of the novel entitled “Don’t Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand”. In this section of the novel the accordion has become the property of the Malefoot family, who are, in fact, related to the French-American family that feature in the previous section, “Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair”. The Malefoot’s complex blood lineage, stemming many counties and mixes with other immigrant groups are described as a massive fungus spreading across the United States:

The Malefoot family – their enemies said the name derived from malfrat, or gangster – was a tangled clan of nodes and connecting rhizomes that spread over the continent like the fila of a great fungus.140

137 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 226.
138 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 32.
139 ibid.
140 Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 203.
Therefore the family are a members of a diverse community, thus differentiating them from the longing for a community which Dolor feels, and results in his marriage into the family, or “fungus”. The story focuses upon a different kind of isolation, that of grief. Mme Malefoot, the mother of the branch of the family which feature in this section, is frozen in her grief for her daughter who was accidentally shot. Her daughter-in-law visits a traiteuse who constructs a spell which will open the grieving woman’s heart so that she will recognise and appreciate those she meets after its inception. The encounter, however, goes wrong, and instead of her immediate family happening upon her in the state of vulnerability constructed by the traiteuse, she happens upon a photographer. In a sub-section entitled “A strange encounter” the photographer drives past the Malefoot house to see the grief stricken woman in her yard:

The photographer struggled to drive in a straight line [...] and came abreast of the Malefoot yard to see a middle-aged woman limping around the corner in nightgown and mud-caked slippers, face swollen with weeping trailing a pointed shovel [...] The photographer slowed, stopped, aimed her camera through the greasy window, thought better of it, got out, leaned on the hood, sighted through the clear air at the bereft woman [...] the woman did not lift her head. [...] The woman looked up. Through her tear-filmed eyes the female figure at the gate, heroically large against the rising sun, holy in its streaming rays, seemed to her to be the angel of Belle come to console her mother. [...] she seized her hand and dragged her toward the door. Inside the kitchen the photographer sat at the table, ill at ease. [...] Mme Malefoot understood this perfectly. If her daughter was called back to Paradise at least she would have photographs of home to ease her loneliness [...] She took her into every room [...] coaxed her to the porch and up the outside stairs to the room where her father lay sleeping [...] Mme Malefoot understood. The angels were calling her child back to them. She had the photographs of home and they would be developed in heaven. [...] And she drove away like an ordinary person, but of course that was part of the disguise.\footnote{Proulx, Accordion Crimes, 219/220.}
Mme Malefoot is delirious in her grief; however the narrative also disrupts the object subject relationship in here paradigmatically. The of object/subject binary is complicated here. The photographer is the object of Mme Malefoot’s desires, but she is also the “subject”, as Mme Malefoot’s grief is an object the photographer wishes to display. The binary of outsider/insider, equally is disrupted, as the photographer is not an observer but central to the construction of events in her role as object of desire, she is at once entirely in control and utterly beyond any sort of determining power. The physicality of object/subject relations are themselves fractured as Mme Malefoot recognises the object world as being a disguise through which the spirit of her daughter operates, thus realigning the reality as a sophisticated heavenly device. Again, this is clearly presented as being a result of the woman’s overwhelming distress, however, the discursive collapse re-occurs throughout the novel, but its compacted here in such a way to work superbly as a paradigm for this kind of object/subject collapse.

The novel constantly realigns discursive frameworks so that the construction of the notion of inside/outside or subject/object circumscribes the conceptual possibilities of the characters that engage with them. Here, the photographer’s initial audacity, produced through her confidence in her role as photographer is reciprocated with an equally forceful conception which operates in contradistinction to it and yet is managed in parallel with the photographer’s continuing to take pictures. Through these versions of the characters understandings they come to be more than versions of events, they become not only the events themselves, but also the scope for what can occur. The opening quotations suggest that “racism”, understood as inter-community hostility which privileges one cultural group over and against another. The role of these communities,
and the construction of the subject in relation to them, is exploded throughout the novel. An investment in such a divisive hierarchy serves to isolate the individual and forces them to become subject to their own fantasies whilst recognising the intangibility of those fantasies’ ability to offer them a cohesive sense of self. Mme Malefoot is crucial in her delusional grief, as she is one of the few characters who is not forced to recognise that gap. Insanity produced by grief becomes one of the few mental states which allows constructs of identification to support and sustain the self. The fulfilment of the bi-cultural identification, as an outsider/insider object/subject binary when played out demonstrates ludicrousness of what it apparently promises. Only those who are clinically insane\(^{142}\) can work the binaries in their favour and enjoy the sense of inclusive identification they appear to offer. This is developed through the section by the inclusion of another “observer”. In this section the accordion is owned by two men, the first a Malefoot, the second Octave, whose sister, Ida, attempts to record the lives of the black women she meets. She keeps boxes and boxes of narratives she’s recorded in various forms over the years:

Her apartment was filled with notebooks, yellow snapshots, studio photographs, diaries written on paper bags […] She’d done it on her lousy salary: used-book shops […] trash cans and Dumpsters, asking everyone she met, you got any books or letters or whatnot about black women, any black women, everywoman? She thought of Octave and his green accordion […] She’d sent a letter years ago, sent it by way of Lamb […] Never heard. Wasn’t that the old evil thing, brothers and sisters losing each other? Wasn’t it the old, old thing, families torn up like scrap paper, the home place left and lost forever?\(^{143}\)

\(^{142}\) Offered as an ideal state of being earlier in the novel in the “Goat Gland Operation” section, when one of the German’s wives is committed, and there is a resulting conversation covering both the number of women being driven mad, and the idyllic life these women enjoy.

\(^{143}\) Proulx, *Accordion Crimes*, 247/8. Although the argument here focuses upon positionality, this excerpt could usefully be discussed in relation to textuality and inscription which is extrapolated here in relation to *Postcards*. 
Ida’s collection of the stories that she never “constructs” counters the insanity of the photographer’s encounter with Mme Malefoot. Neither are able to construct a meaningful or positive position from the isolation they constantly observe. Positionality does not offer a means of cultural recovery. Identification with a community neither sustains nor supports. *Accordion Crimes* explodes the myth of bi-culturality as a culturally soothing construct, but suggests rather that the binary sets two cultures at odds within the subject leaving them isolated from both and aware of the distance they inhabit from either.
Close Range – Wyoming Stories: The return to the synthetic region?

There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it. ¹⁴⁴

Open space is a driving force in American culture, but the closer attachments of [...] place [...] may be more influential. ¹⁴⁵

The emphasis here is upon cultural persistence, rather than upon the striking out in new directions that is so important in migrant (and especially American migrant) lore [...] There is a regionalizing involved in our highly mobile culture, but it does not conform to classic regional theory. An applicable theory must take into account values in transit, what I am calling place-on-the-move. ¹⁴⁶

Annie Proulx’s Close Range, Wyoming Stories was first published in 2000, and marks Proulx’s contented settlement in Wyoming. This collection of short stories includes “BrokeBack Mountain”, which was initially published separately. The stories feature different Wyoming characters, predominantly ranching families and, as her acknowledgements demonstrate, weave together various folk-tale and anecdotal narratives. This discussion will focus upon particular stories within the collection. The following quotation is Jessica Firger writing a review of the text for the New York State Writers Institute - Writer’s Online Magazine. She gives a sense of the collection:

In this latest volume, Proulx has returned to the short story with a collection of eleven “Wyoming stories.” Whether as the literal setting of the tales or as a metaphorical shadow looming over her characters’ lives, Wyoming in all its hard and terrible glory lies at the center of this volume. As the narrator of one story admits: “I wasn’t going to leave Wyoming. You don’t leave until you have to.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Mondale, Mapping American Culture Franklin and Steiner eds., 3/4.
¹⁴⁶ Steiner, Mapping American Culture Franklin and Steiner eds., 56
As Firger suggests the collection foregrounds its setting both through the title and discursively throughout the text. This is not to suggest that Wyoming serves as a synthetic region in the way in which Tan constructs San Francisco. It rather provides a grounding within a particular state, but not a location as a binding force through which the narratives are tied. For example, could a useful parallel be drawn with the role of San Francisco in *The Joy Luck Club*, or *The Kitchen God's Wife*? Not exactly: the inference is not that Proulx's employment of location deliberately sets up a dialogue in with a cultural heritage, but rather that she explodes Tan's kind of synthetic region. This is achieved through an examination of Proulx's particular use of a set of discourses which surround regional literature and ideas about regionalism in contemporary culture. What makes *Close Range* distinct even from Proulx's other novels is the exploration of the discursive space which drives characters' collapse in *Postcards* and produces alienation and paralysis in *Accordion Crimes*. It is not that Wyoming provides a discursively positive space but rather that its existence is taken as central by the characters in ways in which Proulx's previous protagonists are entirely ignorant. There is a suggestion that this awareness is part of people from Wyoming's make-up, but before discussing this in greater detail, the discursive framework which leads to this conclusion will be explored.

Finding region an important factor in literary studies is still often seen as the equivalent of being an over-enthusiastic salesman with a special marketing territory.

This is Michael Kowaleski discussing the role of regional literature in his text *Reading the West*. He outlines a familiar discussion about the role of regional literature and it's

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148 See Amy Tan chapter.
149 Kowalewski ed., 8
frequent denigration as a genre. He discusses why this particular literary category receives such scant critical attention:

Why has the “region” been neglected as a critical category? The critical assumption seems to be that region or “a sense of place” is not an imaginative factor that can be internalized and struggled with in the same literarily rewarding ways that writers struggle with issues of race, class, gender [...] region may be condescended to by critics or ignored as a category because many of them simply lack a vocabulary with which to ask engaging philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions about what it means to “dwell” in a place, whether actually or imaginatively.150

This re-introduces a theoretical gap discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Namely the mutual discrepancy in conceptual thought between certain types of literary construction and its relationship to cultural geographical discussions dealing with the construction of “region” and its discursive presentation. For example, geographers discussing the merits of “regional fiction” privilege it on the grounds that it is in some way more intimately connected with the landscape than other forms of fiction. George Stewart addresses this in his essay, “The Regional Approach to Literature”:

A closer definition of regionalism would require the work of art not only to be nominally located in the region, but also to derive actual substance from that location [...] natural background - as it effects human life in the region, particular modes of human society which happen to have been established in the region and to have made it distinctive. [...] The student who reads a regional book [...] at least he can say [...] of the places - “I have walked here; I have climbed this pass; I too have seen the little clouds run south.151

Stuart raises here some issues that are frequently expressed in discussions of “regional” fiction. In particular is the notion that the literature must identify the landscape truthfully, that the identification of the locale is paramount, and that this will both inform and include the reader. This raises particular concerns in relation to both Proulx and her

150 Kowalewski ed., 7
151 Haslam, ed., 42-47
text Close Range, but also sets up a distinctive relationship with ideas about landscape and space on a theoretical plane. First, this version of regional fiction creates a particular version of fiction’s relationship with nature and landscape. It privileges an understanding which plays on Cosgrove’s version of landscape in very particular ways. Cosgrove’s discussion of the relationship of the “insider” to the spectator and the ideological underpinnings of such a position have been discussed in the discussion of Proulx’s Postcards. However, quoting the pertinent Cosgrove passages will clarify reference to them in this context. Dennis Cosgrove in Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape makes clear the distinction between the spectator viewing the landscape and those who work within it:

In landscape we are dealing with an ideologically charged and very complex cultural product.\textsuperscript{152}

To apply the term landscape to their surroundings seems inappropriate to those who occupy and work in a place as insiders. Herein is a clue to the status of the landscape concept [...] the insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture, or tourist viewpoint.\textsuperscript{153}

What is suggested by both literary and geographic critics dealing with region is that this particular distinction is erased. The reader becomes simultaneously “insider” and “spectator”. This is not because of the mythic collective production played out in the text. It is rather as Kowaleski suggests that the reader of regional literature is physically intimate with the landscape. Kowaleski demands that the fiction somehow “derive actual substance” from the region. It would seem that these critics require factually accurate fiction as regards the landscape referred to, that it should be a “real” textual impression.

\textsuperscript{152} Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, 11.
\textsuperscript{153} Denis Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape 19.
Gesturing at realism in artistic reproductions of landscape is addressed by Cosgrove in his discussion of its iconography:

 [...]For an important, if not always literal sense, the spectator owns the view because all of its components are structured and directed towards his eyes only. The claim of realism is in fact ideological. It offers a view of the world directed at the experience of one individual at a given moment [...] when the arrangement of the constituent forms is pleasing, uplifting, or in some other way linked to the observer’s psychological state; it then represents this view as universally valid by claiming for it the status of reality. [...] The collective life within it are all implicitly denied. Subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and viewer - those who control the landscape - not those who belong to it.\textsuperscript{154}

Here Cosgrove recognises the ideological underpinning of the supposedly innocent rendering of realistic identifications. It is important to place Proulx within the discursive parameters that are being established between Cosgrove’s “insider/outsider” distinction. But also to draw attention to his making explicit the ideological framework of certain artistic versions landscape, and the demands that writers like Kowaleski privilege when discussing the status regional fiction.

So, is Proulx a “regional” writer, and if so, how does her collection of “regional” short stories construct their ideological framework to negotiate the position of the reader and author to those “inside”? In fact, the particular negotiation of the insider/outsider construct in regional fiction as advanced by Kowaleski can be seen as an extension of the discussion of the object/subject binary considered in relation to \textit{Accordion Crimes}. Proulx is particularly interested in exploding this polarity in the novel, and so it is not surprising that \textit{Close Range} parallels the interest in cultural construction and the self-sustaining binaries it creates and upholds. In \textit{Postcards} and \textit{Accordion Crimes} it is the conceptual distance between the sustaining fantasy and its lived consequences for

\textsuperscript{154} Denis Cosgrove, \textit{Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape}, 26.
misidentification which forms the crux of the binary's deconstruction. In *Close Range* the mythic gap between the succouring power of mythology and folklore and the isolation of the subject is foregrounded in the consciousness of the protagonists. Their very ability to live with mythologic incapacity becomes the central "regional" feature. Ambivalence looms large and seems to be engendered by the landscape itself.

This relationship is initially established through the fantastic nature of the Wyoming landscape. The extremes of weather, and the dramatic landscape of the West is often cited as engendering a certain attitude to discourse in its dwellers. Bernard De Voto is quoted by Robert G. Athearn in *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America*, he states: "History is the social expression of geography and western geography is violent, [...] the West is actively, not passively violent toward living things."155 This ties in neatly with Proulx's textual understanding of the fundamentally violent and disruptive relationship the American subject maintains with American landscape and iconography.

Athearn also attempts to establish the Western "character" for the reader:

"A man in the States [...] might have been a liar in a small way, but when he comes west he soon takes lessons from the prairies [...] streams run uphill and Nature appears to lie some herself."156

Proulx refers directly to the deceptive and exaggerating nature of the Wyoming landscape. This is taken from the short story entitled "The Blood Bay":

The winter of 1886-7 was terrible. Every goddamn history of the high plains says so [...] He crossed into Wyoming Territory thinking it would be warmer, [...] that night he froze to death on Powder River's bitter west bank, that stream of famous dimensions and direction an inch deep, a mile wide and she flows uphill from Texas.157

155 Athearn, 231/2. Original source not located.
156 Athearn, 227.
Therefore, Proulx could be identified in quite straightforward fashion as being a "regional" writer. She provides an "authentic" version of the landscape, one that Kowaleski, or other local readers could identify. However, this discussion is not concerned with providing a literary "regional" model which Proulx fits. Instead, what Proulx produces plays on the security which Zelinsky identifies as a paramount contemporary anxiety about belonging being answered by a "synthetic region". What is produced is not a palliative to cultural anxiety, or to employ Tuan's own term, "an analeptic". *Close Range* is explicit about those anxieties and the isolation which results when the subject puts their faith in what are essentially fantasies. She exploits what Kowaleski is at pains to distance himself from, the idea of cultural construction being a sales pitch.

The quotation which cites the "uphill river" makes reference to the coverage of the 1886/7 winter. Whereas the previous discussion has focused upon the citing of geographical "fact" the transition here is not to explore Proulx's use of historical data, but rather her use of various genres of discourse, such as historical texts. What she foregrounds, in a fashion that parallels the *Accordion Crimes* acknowledgements', is the fragmentary nature of representation. In the *Accordion Crimes* acknowledgements, Proulx establishes a complex discursive relationship that she then manipulates throughout the text. Equally in *Close Range* she authenticates her regional voice, by citing "real" Wyoming locations: "Buzzy Malli, proprietor of the Arvada Bar, who asked for a story set in that town and got it- "The Blood Bay". However, as in *Accordion Crimes*, her voice is also established through citing her intimate knowledge of her Wyoming as a
discourse as well as a concrete landscape: “I am also an aficionado of local histories and for years have collected memoirs and accounts of regional lives and events in many parts of North America”159. In just the kind of collapse Cosgrove cites as ideologically loaded she places herself both within the culture and outside it. The acknowledgements recognise her status as viewer both as a scholar, but also literally as an observer: “gripping plane rides with John over the landscape,”160 but this is countered by the notion of her as an inhabitant “that real-life anecdote was the takeoff point for the story.” 161

The acknowledgements do conflate the insider/viewer binary but they also institute manifold discursive forms which initially bind, but then serve to corrupt a stabilised narrative community. This is achieved through the implication of a cohesive construction which the text then deliberately fails to provide. There are numerous thankyou’s which include gratitude for songs, poems, artwork, memoirs - written and verbal, scholarly works, anecdotes, folklore - both local and international, histories and she refers to her own memories and experiences of the landscape. However, the text itself does not weave these narrative strains to provide a cohesive or authentic version of Wyoming.

This disruption of the communal force of narrative, as an analeptic to isolation, is one that pervades the text. It is combined with the “regional” communal feature of the fantastic nature of life in Wyoming to create what is at once a particular communal code, and at the same time a recognition of the inability of communication to provide the subject with a sustaining myth. This myth which would locate the subject as being a

159 Proulx, Close Range, 8.
159 Proulx, Close Range, 8.
160 Proulx, Close Range, 7.
161 Proulx, Close Range, 8.
member of a community operating as Tuan’s “analeptic”. This is established at the outset in the acknowledgements:

The epigraph “Reality’s never been of much use out here” comes from an anonymous rancher [...] The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place.162

The idea that the North American landscape is “unforgiving” could be the epigraph to the other Proulx novels discussed here. Wyoming becomes an “ideal” location in that its local mythology embraces the ideas of hostility and ambivalence Proulx observes as being endemic to North American cultural mythology. As she indicates this recognition of the distortion of a naturalised understanding of realism does permeate the text. The following example is taken from the first story in the collection, “The Half-Skinned Steer”. This narrative is important because it sets up many of the discursive disruptions that are played out throughout the text. “The Half Skinned Steer” features one man’s journey back to Wyoming for his brother’s funeral; Mero, the surviving brother insists he’ll drive from Massachusetts to Wyoming. Interwoven through the narration of this driving trip across the States is another tale. It is a narrative Proulx refers to in her acknowledgements. She states that “The Half Skinned Steer” is “based on an old Icelandic folktale.”163 Here the folktale is narrated along side Mero’s trip across the States. Once again Proulx toys with the classic American narrative: the road trip.164 What is narrated is a recollection of Mero’s but at this point the narrative voices remain

162 Proulx, Close Range 9.
163 Proulx, Close Range, 8.
164 See discussion of Postcards.
distinct. It is, in fact, Louise, Mero’s father’s girlfriend, who narrates a story of the goings-on on a nearby ranch:

So he leaves the steer half-skinned there on the ground and he goes into the kitchen, but first he cuts out the tongue [...] dinner is chicken and dumplings, one of them changed-color chickens started out white and ended up blue, yessir, blue as your old daddy’s eyes.
She was a total liar. The old man’s eyes were murk brown.¹⁶⁵

The play here with the reader's expectations clearly invokes the notion of the fantastic in the regional discourse of “Wyoming”.

The collection also supports Cosgrove’s discussion of the ideological nature of the “reality” of landscape. Proulx’s enthusiasm for this particularly fantastic landscape is that it provides an “ideological” to use Cosgrove’s term, or discursive rupture. The landscape’s explosion of an understanding of reality also complicates the relationship of the observer to what they see, and makes explicit questions as to the role they play in its construction. This is an argument Stephen Duncan develops in his essay “Sites of Representation, Place, Time and the Discourse of the Other” in

Place/Culture/Representation:

The naturalizing tropes of representation that privilege vision, expertise, first-hand experience and descriptive accuracy through careful reporting are so deeply entrenched in our culture that we often fail to question much that is presented as self-evidently true.¹⁶⁶

The act of will which is concretized, or we might say reified, in a landscape is no longer centered on the person who made it. It stays put [...] without the aid of deconstructive critics, the author is decentered.¹⁶⁷

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¹⁶⁵ Proulx, Close Range, 32.
¹⁶⁶ Duncan, Place/Culture/Representation, Duncan, Ley eds., 43.
¹⁶⁷ Smith, Place/Culture/Representation, Duncan, Ley eds., 80.
The "naturalizing tropes" are what *Close Range* works to explode in complicated ways. Not only through the exploitation of the anti-naturalism she cites as being a part of the landscape, but also through her representation of forms of communication in the text. Duncan develops the relationship of space and geography to realism and naturalism in such a way as to extend Cosgrove's position in its examination of how that naturalisation is exposed:

It seems that spatial control and geographical distance may be crucial to the naturalization and stabilisation of pretensions. [...] Irony is a representational discrepancy, a symbol out of place.  

What Proulx plays upon in *Close Range* is exactly this understanding of "irony" both in terms of space and geography but also in forms of communication. She exposes their inability to perform the function which purports to be their very existence, the linking of subjects in meaningful discourse. This is then developed to examine the parallel abyss of meaning for other culturally significant symbols, maps, folklore and myths.

Cosgrove and Duncan refigure "real" landscape within the text to create an ideological repositioning of naturalised understandings of the relation of the subject to their landscape. This can be demonstrated through an examination of the role of maps in the stories. Maps resurface throughout the stories but this discussion will focus upon the first story in the collection, "The Half-Skinned Steer". The opening narrative has been used to illustrate Proulx's use of "regional" features to underline a textual ambivalence about the distinction between reality and fantasy. In a similar mode maps are employed to destabilise their apparent authority. For example, J. B. Harley, in his essay "Maps, Knowledge, Power", discusses the map's role in maintaining ideological control through

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168 Smith *Place/Culture/Representation*, Duncan, Ley eds., 85/6.
the naturalising of their power structures. He focuses upon the idea that they are constructed so as to be seen to be recording facts rather than constructing information:

Map motifs continue to be accepted as geopolitical signs in contemporary society. To own the map was to own the land.\textsuperscript{169}

He goes on to suggest that the powerful conflation between the map as a representation of fact and a political statement:

What appears at first sight to be a cartographic ‘fact’ may also be a cartographic symbol [...] we still have to grapple with maps as unique systems of signs whose codes may be at once iconic, linguistic, numerical, and temporal, and as a spatial form of knowledge. Maps are pre-eminently a language of power, not of protest.\textsuperscript{170}

This notion of the map’s power to construct and maintain whilst disguising their structures of power directly parallels Cosgrove’s version of the structures which adopt landscape as a “realist”, ideologically cloaked, discourse. Once again Proulx distorts such realist versions of landscape through her use of maps in the narrative.

“The Half-Skinned Steer” serves as an excellent example of the text’s relationship to mapping and its discursive security. At the opening of the story Mero sets out to drive back to the ranch on which he grew up. His initial musings on his return to the homestead suggest a nostalgic, culturally sustaining relation to the land through his mapping of it:

The country poured open on each side, reduced the Cadillac to a finger-snap. Nothing had changed, not a goddamn thing, the empty pale place and its roaring wind [...] landforms shaped true to the past [...]With the lapping subtlety of incoming tide the shape of the ranch began to gather in his mind; he could recall the intimate fences he’d made.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{169} Cosgrove, Daniels eds., \textit{The Iconography of Landscape}, 296-8.

\textsuperscript{170} Cosgrove, Daniels eds., \textit{The Iconography of Landscape}, 299-301.

\textsuperscript{171} Proulx, \textit{Close Range}, 313/.
Here Mero’s relationship to the landscape conjures exactly the secure understanding Cosgrove discusses in terms of the position of the landscape to its subject. It also predicates a relationship to the landscape which secures its mapping as fact; Mero’s “view” is “true to the past”. However, as he gets closer to his destination the mapping and the landscape both become obscured for him:

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How could he not recognize the turnoff to the ranch? [...] the map of the ranch in his memory was not bright now, but scuffed and obliterated as though trodden. The remembered gates collapsed, fences wavered, while the badland features swelled into massive prominence. 172
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This can be understood as the fading memory of an elderly man, the decay paralleling his own mortal failings. However, the idea that the familiarity of the route is endemic to his confusion complicates such a straightforward reading. That path well “trodden” should comfort and secure is a common mythic trope: here it is destabilised as its very familiarity is what causes the alienation. As the story develops the two narratives, the old Icelandic folktale - the story of the half-skinned steer, becomes blended with Mero’s journey. Ultimately he fails by the roadside, never making it to his brother’s burial and the satiation of his desire to beat his brother and see him “dropped in a red Wyoming hole.” 173 The relationship to the landscape is explicit:

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His blurred shadow strengthened whenever the wind eased. Then the violent country showed itself, the cliffs rearing at the moon [...] the black tangles of willow bunched like dead hair. 174
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Once more the hostility of the landscape is invoked, but here the focus is upon the relationship of the two tales to one another. The final paragraph of Proulx’s tale conflates

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172 Proulx, Close Range, 36/9.
173 Proulx, Close Range, 22.
the two stories. Louise’s prophetic tale of a mistreated steer – he was effectively flayed alive and left half skinned as the rancher dines - is conflated with Mero’s final moments in the Wyoming countryside:

He walked against the wind, his shoes filled with snow, feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper. As he walked he noticed one from the herd inside the fence was keeping pace with him [...] It tossed its head and in the howling wintry light he saw he’d been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer’s red eye had been watching him for all this time. 175

This disruption of the relation between the subject and the landscape is fundamental to the discussion of two sets of discourses. One of these is the relationship of the text to mythic, or folk, narratives which will be developed later in the discussion. The second is the relationship of discourse, or rather communication itself to the text and landscape. The idea of inscription, as discussed in relation to Accordion Crimes is re-invoked here. Mero’s mapping does not form a productive discursive relationship to the landscape, not only does it collapse for him but he ultimately is mapped in relation to the story he recollects on his journey. 176 Communication does not aid him on his difficult journey which rather debilitates, ultimately securing his position as its victim. He is subject to the steer’s discursive force, he is unable neither to “escape”, nor “return” but secured in his isolation as his story views him.

The failure of communication to sustain, whatever form its take reoccurs throughout the stories. Another example is taken from the story entitled “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World”. The story features a ranching family, the Touheys, and

174 Proulx, Close Range, 40.
175 Proulx, Close Range, 41.
176 It would also be possible here to draw a link between the explicit textuality of Mero, the description of him as a “man cut from paper”, and to Ida’s paper existence in Accordion Crimes and the arguments advanced in the discussion of Postcards.
features Ottaline, the lonely daughter of the family. The story traces her isolation up until she meets her husband, we are told:

Ottaline went up to her room, listened to cell-phone conversations on the scanner. [...] “Hey is it rainin there yet?” “Is it rainin yet?” she repeated. It was raining everywhere and people were alive in it except in the Red Wall country.  

It is not only that Ottaline grasps scraps of conversations, Proulx also parallels that particular relationship between insider and outsider already discussed. Ottaline is not a part of the conversation, she is an observer, and yet she does not circumscribe the narrative she overhears with her own version of its meaning, she does not narrate it. Rather she attempts to place herself within the discourse, repeating the question thus pointing up her isolation even from the mundane. The scanner is her sole contact with the outside world, “She craved to know something of the world, but there was only the scanner,” and it is in no way a source of comfort for Ottaline in her isolation. The scanner complicates Ottaline’s relationship to those she listens to, as she is more invested in the conversations than those actually taking part. In, again, another story, “Job History”, the narrative is framed by references to forms of communication which bind the individual family history with the wider States through information disseminate in various forms of media. Two types of news are paralleled, the events of the family, and the news as reported on radio, television and in the papers. The story opens as follows:

Leeland Lee is born at home in Cora, Wyoming [...] in 1950s his parents move [...] There is no news on the radio. A blizzard has knocked out the power.  

The following quotations are taken as the narrative of Leeland’s life is developed:

177 Proulx, Close Range, 142.
178 Proulx, Close Range, 146.
179 Proulx, Close Range, 91.
In the fifth grade [...] he falls off the school's fire escape and breaks his pelvis [...] On the news the announcer says that the average American eats 8.6 pounds of margarine a year he never forgets this statistic [...] Highway 16 is the main tourist road to Yellowstone [...] Vietnam and Selma, Alabama are on the news. 180

And so, throughout the narrative the link is privileged between the family and the historical progression traced through references to the news. The story ends as follows:

The oldest son comes back and next year they plan to lease the old gas station and convert it to a motorcycle repair shop and steak house. Nobody has time to listen to the news. 181

The news does not impact upon the characters in any sustaining fashion, the discrepancy is highlighted between Leeland's memory of certain isolated facts, and the narrative progression which is gestured at by the reference to news "stories". Equally, the news which frames "Job History" actually highlights its peripheral status. Although the term "news" privileges particular communications as being important, it is used here to demonstrate the conceptual distance it maintains from those to whom it is communicated. The family's final utter indifference to the news underscores its liminal status within the community. What is traced is the indifference to both narrative strains, the ending undermines the authority of a particular form of narrative, i.e. the privileging of particular discourses as "news". However, there is no suggestion that the personal history of the family communicates in any more meaningful way. Both discourses are reduced by their relation to one another, once again privileging ambivalence and isolation as the overweening response, in both narrator and reader, and, by extension, for the story's narrative community.

180 Proulx, Close Range, 91/2.
181 Proulx, Close Range, 98.
In this way the text performs its own indifference as well as paralleling it in constructions of communication. However, it is not only ambivalence that is constructed. The texts in Close Range perform the alienation of the subject both as product of the environment, in some senses regionalising it. Equally they construct a relationship to folktale which performs a similarly destructive function to the grander epic American myths discussed in relation to Postcards, or the notion of acculturation as exploded through her version of the immigrant experience of the American Dream. This is clear in “The Half-Skinned Steer”, the folktale combines with the classic journey west to secure the annihilation of the protagonist Mero.

This relationship to mythology and folktale is placed centrally in the text by the shortest, and therefore perhaps most striking story in the collection. “55 Miles to the Gas Pump” is clearly a reworking of the Bluebeard myth. The story is only one page and is quoted in its entirety here:

Rancher Croom in handmade boots and filthy hat, that walleyed cattleman, stray hairs like curling fiddle string ends, that warm-handed, quick-foot dancer on splintered boards or down the cellar stairs to a rack of bottles of his own strange beer, yeasty, cloudy, bursting out in garlands of foam, Rancher Croom at night galloping drunk over the dark plain, turning off at a place he knows to arrive at a canyon brink where he dismounts and looks down on tumbled rock, waits, then steps out, parting the air with his last roar, sleeves surging up windmill arms, jeans riding over boot tops, but before he hits he rises again to the top of the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk.

Mrs Croom on the roof with a saw cutting a hole into the attic where she has not been for twelve years thanks to old Croom’s padlocks and warnings, whets to her desire, and the sweat flies as she exchanges the saw for a chisel and hammer until a ragged slab of peak is free and she can see inside: just as she thought: the corpses of Mr Croom’s paramours – she recognizes them from their photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN – some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, and all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels, some bright blue with the remnants of paint used on the shutters years ago, one wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee.
When you live a long way out you make your own fun.182

Here Proulx takes a famous and well-established myth and apparently "regionalises" it – there is the sense of the indomitable Wyoming wo/man unfazed by the fantastic nature of "real life". More importantly however is the sense of the central placement of alienation both within the story, as well as its relationship to the collection as a whole. Both the Croom's are encased within the gruesome fantasy at the centre to the novel and its presentation of the murders. Just as the Sicilian's wife hovers as a living corpse in her coma over the novel Accordion Crimes, so the collection of rotting bodies are simply presented as the inevitable consequence – not of the isolation predicated in the landscape necessarily - but rather of the desire to inscribe that absence with cultural meaning. This version of inscription dominates the novel. Mero in the opening narrative is circumscribed by the "myth" of the steer. In "Pair a Spurs" the protagonist becomes literally tied to the object of his desire – a pair of beautifully engraved spurs – although he is not able to differentiate his desire for the spurs from their owners. Initially he molests the women who wear them, and ends up subsisting by being close to the spurs as they become lodged in the part of a stream he cannot get to, and so simply sits on the bank. In "A Lonely Coast", the characters embark on a trip which ends in devastation with many of the characters dead:

By the time the cops came Ornelas was shot through the throat and though he did not die he wasn't much good for yodeling. Elk was already dead. Josanna was dead, the Blackhawk on the ground beneath her.

You know what I think? [...] I think Josanna seen her chance and taken it. Friend, it's easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse.183

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182 Proulx, Close Range, 279/80. The scanner complicates Ottaline's relationship to those she listens to, as she is more invested in the conversations than those actually taking part,
183 Proulx, Close Range, 230.
"The dark impluse" could be substituted with the "violence of the countryside" observed by the narrator in the opening story. The parallelism of the resignation to the hostility of the landscape to the character's understanding of their position as subjects is explicit here. Characters speak of it. However, there is no suggestion that they are able to arbitrate it. Knowledge may dislocate a naturalising ideological construct but once the community subscribes to myth here it re-tethers itself, and the violence of the relationship is played out with its fullest force.

An examination of "The Bunchgrass at the Edge of the World" demonstrates the text's engagement with mythology and folktale. It will illustrate the complex negotiation of inscription and cultural iconography on both a regional and national scale. Through this extrapolation Proulx's disruption of cultural mythology, the reification of ethnicity as differentiation on a local scale is made explicit. The story deals with the isolation of Ottaline primarily, however the tale does trace the fates of the family as a whole as well. They are introduced to us as follows:

The country appeared as empty ground [...] Nothing much but weather and distance, the distance punctuated once in a while by ranch gates, and to the north the endless murmur and sun-flash of semis rolling along the interstate

In this vague region the Touhey's ranched – old Red, ninety-six years young, his son Aladdin, Aladdin's wife Wauneta, their boy Tyler, object of Aladdin's hopes, the daughters, Shan and (the family embarrassment) Ottaline.184

This sets up the narrative, and privileges important discursive strains that the text employs throughout its development. One of the most prominent of these is the story's relationship to the land itself. The text at onceforegrounds and erases Wyoming. The State is famous for its open spaces and vastness, as suggested in the title of novels such as
Gretel Erlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, an homage to Wyoming. It could be argued, therefore, that *Close Range* privileges its distinctive setting, placing the location centrally in the opening sentence. However, the text is not predicated on a common trope of "Wyoming". The ground is not "vast" it is "empty [...] nothing" and most importantly "vague". There is a sense of space but it is very inscriptive ambivalence is foregrounded rather than openness and "space" as a particular iconographic "Western American" understanding. The location is privileged, it is described to the reader before the protagonists identifying it as being part of the Wyoming location, but it is also disrupted, it is "Nothing". It is not set up so as to offer any kind of cultural map for the family. Its specificity attempts at once to conjure a location without offering any conceptual/contextual clues to the reader or the characters themselves.

The family itself is then presented to the reader, at which point the text's relationship to mythology is clearly established. Access to mythological tropes trains us to expect "Aladdin" to play a central role in the narrative. The introduction of such a famous hero of social exclusion suggests that the reader will witness his social ascendancy. However, "Ottaline" becomes "Aladdin" as it is her social exclusion and desire which preoccupies the text. Ottaline's isolation is expressed in her eves-dropping on other's conversations on the scanner. Her loneliness is also foregrounded in her relationship to a disused tractor on the farm which parallels Aladdin's lamp as it becomes a way for her to express her desires and frustrations, and states its desire for her. It also introduces the common fairy/folktale trope of the ability of objects to transcend object/subject binaries so as to arbitrate the plot for their owners. For example Aladdin's  

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lamp, Jack’s beans, Cinderella’s slippers. Throughout the tale Ottaline’s size excludes her from social interaction as she is regarded as asexual in her vastness. When she first becomes aware that the tractor is speaking directly to her it expresses its feelings for her. As their relationship develops Ottaline the mythologic status of their encounter is made explicit, Ottaline asks:

"Are you like some enchanted thing? A damn story where some girl lets a warty old toad sleep in her shoe and in the mornin the toad’s a good-lookin dude makin omelettes?"

"Naw. I could tell you they had a guy work at Deere a few years ago got fired out a space program for havin picnics with foreigners and drinkin vodka but they couldn’t prove nothin […] He worked me up, fifteen languages. Want to hear me say somethin in Urdu? Skively, skavelly"

"You could tell me that but I would not believe it. Some lame story."

And it seemed to her that the inbuilt affection for humans the tractor harped on was balanced by vindictive malevolence.

"That’s right, I was lyin."

This complicates the text’s relation to mythic discourse. As with its engagement with Wyoming as trope it is at once foregrounded and displaced. As well as establishing the unreliability of the tractor’s own iconographic status Ottaline observes its “malevolence.” This is fundamental to the tale’s progression. Ottaline attempts to placate the tractor by beginning its renovation. However, she is wooed and marries neglecting the tractor once more. At the beginning of Ottaline’s chats with the tractor it tells her of its hatred of Aladdin. Aladdin ultimately dies fulfilling his fantasy of flying a plane which crashes into the tractor. The possibility that the tractor has “killed” him, just as it claims to have murdered another rancher that crossed its path is left hanging, as is the malevolence of the land and its control of those that attempt to arbitrate it:

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185 It would be interesting to pursue a discussion of Ottaline’s relationship to the tractor as sexual objectification and sublimation but time does not allow for it here.

186 Proulx, Close Range, 150-1.
"He is actin up, [...] YOU GET DOWN HERE!" Wauneta shouted at the plane. As though obeying her it touched the ground, sending up a puff of dust and made two more prodigious hops before the left wheel caught the iron frame of the abandoned tractor and the plane fell on its face [...], he is dead."

This quotation plays on the mythic version of the fantastic not only through the suggestion that the tractor is responsible, but with the invocation of fairytale discourse, Aladdin creates a "puff of dust", puffs of smoke, dust, clearly gesture at mythic tales. The suggestion that it is the combination of malevolent machinery which has combined to ensure his death is immediately reworked by Wauneta who insists that it was the overriding of her superstition that has ruined them. Wauneta’s "wedding wheat" planted at her marriage to Aladdin was cut when Ottaline was married. This is what she identifies as being their ruin: "That’s what cuttin the wheat’s done." However, the final word is left to Old Red, the ninety-six year old, who although peripheral in the majority of the narrative offers the folk moral at the end of the story:

"He done it hisseif," called old Red from the porch. It was clear to him the way things had to go. They’d plant Aladdin. Ottaline and her scytheman would run the ranch. Wauneta would pack her suitcase and steer for the slot machines. The minute she was out of sight he intended to move out of the pantry and back upstairs. The main thing in life was staying power. That was it: stand around long enough and you’d get to sit down.

There is a deliberate engagement with notions of recuperation as sustained in relationships to the land, suggested here in the choice of the verb "to plant" for Aladdin’s impending funeral, and to mythology which this story, and many of the others in the

188 Proulx, Close Range, 162.
189 Proulx, Close Range, 162.
collection dislocate and disrupt. The idea that the "analeptic" to isolation and alienation is produced at the regional level is exploded.

Through Postcards, Accordion Crimes and Close Range Proulx performs a manifold attack on positivist versions of positionality. She undermines them as sustaining through their relationship to the subject/object insider/outsider binaries which demand polarity for the cultural anchor to remain secure. She disrupts the binaries themselves and explores the relationship of the subject to their identifications so suggest the means by which inscription comes to circumscribe rather than empower. "The Bunchgrass at the Edge of the World" provides an excellent paradigm for the performance of mythic discourse, either in relation to land or to the idea of iconographic narratives themselves. She demonstrates the characters' relationships to their cultural/mythic maps, and the means by which they are bounded by them. She does not then offer an alternative polarity but traces the possibilities for alienation and isolation predicated by those her characters subscribe to. Close Range neither narrates a synthetic region, nor offers an alternative to it. It rather suggests the rupture of subject/object relationships potentially engendered in its construction, whether it be iconographically tied to Wyoming or some other "vague" region.

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190 Space does not allow for each story to be examined in similar detail, but "Brokeback Mountain" would be particularly worthy of further discussion at another point.
Epilogue

I had intended to offer an account of North American space which acts as a model for discussion for other fictional accounts of anxieties of belonging, and although I refer to two particularly apt novelists, the concern of this final statement has shifted as a result of September Eleventh.

Had I had the space I would have been particularly keen to explore texts by the Vietnamese-American author Robert Olen-Butler, such as *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, or his more recent work, *Tabloid Dreams*. I would also have discussed *Native Speaker* by the Korean-American Chang-rae Lee. In order to tackle these writers I would have wanted to engage these “bi-cultural” authors’ position on both sides of the “self/other” binary as constructed in warfare. This would have meant a detailed discussion of both the Korean and the Vietnam Wars, not possible within the confines of the thesis.

However, this Epilogue not only gestures at some of the material I have been unable to cover but it is also recognises the harrowing re-affirmation of the “materiality of space” the thesis considers in the light of the events of 11th September 2001. I use one example, indicative of the immense amount of material available. The following quotation is taken from “The People’s Geography Project”, an online resource established by cultural geographer Don Mitchell. This collection of websites provides material from newspapers, journals, television and the web itself. First and foremost, however, they serve as an information memorial to those killed:

This site is dedicated to the memory of Joe Ferguson. Joe was on the plane that crashed into the Pentagon. For more than a dozen years, Joe had worked in the geographical education division of the National Geographic Society and was a great friend of geographical education. He died while he and his colleague, Ann
Judge, were escorting 3 Washington DC students and three teachers to an environmental field camp in the Channel Islands of California.¹

The sheer scale of events makes them difficult to conceive, but the particularity of the suffering, as well as the iconic collapse of the World Trade Centre Towers, is foregrounded:

The Twin Towers were not just symbols of global capitalism (though they were that). They are also places that people worked. While we have heard a great deal about the traders and bankers, we have heard far too little about the janitors, maintenance workers, and others who make buildings - and cities - work. Many were killed.²

Many of those who saw the collapse of the two World Trade Centre Towers were confused as to whether or not they were watching fact or cinematic fiction. It serves as a poignant reminder of the deep "place", or rather the intense role, such spatial iconography will always play in American cultural anxiety.

¹ http://www.peoplesgeography.org/pgtcindex.htm, The People's Geography Project, 26/11/01
² This is cited in "The People's Geography Project Website", in their commentary entitled "Urban Form, Public Space, and civil liberties, on the website. It is taken from a CBS website: http://www.cbsnews.com/now/story/0,1597,311458-412,00.shtml
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