As I sat in the darkened theater of the Yale Rep, watching the 1987 opening performance of August Wilson's new work, The Piano Lesson, it occurred to me that new spectres were haunting America—specifically, that ghosts were populating African-American literature in growing numbers. The play's action turns on the ghost of a murdered white slave-owner who haunts the descendants of his slaves. The spectre's power must ultimately be exorcised through the invocation of the black family's own ancestral ghosts. Toni Morrison's Beloved, which dared to make a ghost a central, fully bodied character, made its stunning appearance in the same year. I recalled, too, Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow (1983), in which the emotional development of the protagonist is propelled by a series of encounters with family ghosts. Why, I wondered, this curious proliferation of ghosts?

Wilson's play went on from its New Haven tryout to Broadway, capturing a Pulitzer Prize in 1990. Meanwhile, another African-American ghost story began to draw notice: Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (1988). In this novel, the spectral appearance of an enslaved African ancestor begins the process of unraveling the title character's family curse. As in Morrison's and Wilson's works, the familiar trappings of the Gothic—the haunted house, the family secrets, endangered inheritances, imprisonment and escape, the encounter with the unspeakable, and indeed, ghosts themselves—were all generously present. Yet these conventional elements play a vastly different literary role than they do in traditional Gothic novels. The Gothic generally explores personal, psychic encounters with the taboo. At the most basic level, its ghosts function as plot device—providing crucial information, setting in motion the machinery of revenge or atonement—and, of course, as source of the pleasurable thrill we derive from the uncanny. On

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a more sophisticated level, the ghosts serve to illuminate the more shadowy or repressed aspects of characters. Like the ghosts in Shakespeare's plays, they externalize a character's state of mind or inadequately repressed feelings (“This is the very painting of your fear,” Lady Macbeth tells her distraught husband when Banquo's ghost appears to him). The ghosts in recent African-American literature, while sharing these familiar literary functions, also serve another: they signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history. The haunted narratives of Wilson, Morrison, Marshall, and Naylor undoubtedly offer us powerful dramas of the individual psyche, yet these dramas are woven inextricably into the recuperation of a people's history. Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), the first Gothic novel, gave Manfred's psychomachia an exclusively familial context, but in contemporary African-American ghost stories the individual's or family's haunting clearly reflects the crises of a larger social group. The figure of the ghost itself emerges from the cultural history of that group: one of the key elements of African religious thought to survive in syncretic forms of New World religious practice and in slave folklore is the belief in ancestor spirits (Holloway). While contemporary African-American writers often invoke the Gothic tradition, they tend to filter its conventions through African folklore and spirit beliefs. It was tempting to think that I had come upon a rich thematic vein of contemporary African-American fiction, that the appearance of ancestral ghosts, though from Walpole a popular feature of the Gothic, suggested in fact a literary Africanism.

Thinking about the ghosts in Marshall, Morrison, Naylor, or Wilson solely within the context of an African-American tradition, however, obscures a very important point: how much their haunted narratives share with other contemporary American ghost stories. Around the same time that Wilson's family called upon ancestral ghosts to exorcise its historical demons, similar ghosts were slipping into the writing of American writers of very different ethnic identities. Maxine Hong Kingston mined the ghost metaphor in the mid-seventies in *The Woman Warrior*; it appears in Native American literature as well, most recently in novels by Louise Erdrich (*Tracks*, 1988; *The Bingo Palace*, 1994) and Leslie Marmon Silko (*Almanac of the Dead*, 1991). William Kennedy's *Ironweed* (1983) is haunted by the ghosts of Irish Albany, New York. In “The Management of Grief” (1989), Bharati Mukherjee invokes ghosts to dramatize the divided loyalties and ultimate transformation of immigrants to North America. The ghost of the folkloric La Llorona (like Kennedy's and Morrison's protagonists, an infanticidal parent) weeps through the pages of much contemporary Mexican-American literature, including Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991). In *World's End* (1987), T. Coreghessan Boyle moves his narrative back and forth between seventeenth-century New York, populated by Native Americans, Dutch, and English, and a twentieth century
haunted by the ghosts of these earlier inhabitants. Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), a collection of stories documenting the lives of Louisiana Vietnamese, often stages the painful loss of old ways and the difficult cultural transition made by war refugees through confrontations between the living and ghosts of the Old Country. There are ghosts of old Ukraine in Askold Melnyczuk’s 1994 *What Is Told*, ghosts of the Sioux past in Susan Power’s 1994 *The Grass Dancer*, Cuban ghosts in Cristina Garcia’s 1992 *Dreaming in Cuban*, and a ghostly cantor in Ira Levin’s 1988 play *Cantorial*. Plainly, the contemporary American ghost story is not solely an African-American phenomenon; it is, in fact, a pan-ethnic phenomenon, registering a widespread concern with questions of ethnic identity and cultural transmission.

To examine each ethnic grouping separately—to study, for example, the influence and literary transformation of African religion in Naylor, of Chinese ancestor worship in Kingston—obscures the fact that these contemporary American works have much in common. Ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature function similarly: to recreate ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present. In doing so, these works have much to tell us about our own historical moment and the range of imaginative responses it provokes. Ghost stories reflect the increased emphasis on ethnic and racial differentiation in all social groups following the ideological upheavals set in motion by the black civil rights movement. They also register the tectonic epistemological shift we have witnessed since the seventies in the social sciences. A reevaluation of historical methodology, indeed, of what can be identified as history ("fact") versus story ("fiction"), has profoundly changed our understanding of how the past is translated and how ethnicity is constructed. The ghosts haunting contemporary American literature lead us to the heart of our nation’s discourse about multiculturalism and ethnic identity. When summoned for close examination, they reveal much about the dynamics of social and literary acculturation.

I would like to identify here a specific kind of ghost story—a story of what I would call *cultural haunting*—that, while it has nineteenth-century antecedents, has emerged in large numbers only in the last quarter of this century. The story of cultural haunting needs to be distinguished from the more familiar ghost story, that genre of short fiction that blossomed during the nineteenth century, leaving us with thrilling fireside tales of haunted houses, graveyard revenants, and Christmases past. A homespun Victorian derivative of the more fabulously draped, exotic Gothic novel, the ghost story evolved early in this century into the subtle psychological studies of Henry James and Edith Wharton and the surrealist nightmares of H. P. Lovecraft. These modern ghost stories recast supernaturalism as the hallucinatory projections of the self. In doing so, they show a family resemblance to Macbeth’s spectres, but are marked by a Freudian-era under-
standing of psychology. The idea of the internally haunted self ("Ourself behind ourself, concealed—," more frightening, Dickinson knew, than "External Ghost") becomes central: in James’s "The Jolly Corner," Spencer Brydon stalks the spectre of his rapacious alter ego; in Wharton’s "The Eyes," Culwin is haunted by a figuration of his own evil nature; in Miller’s _Death of a Salesman_, Willie Loman encounters ghosts of his own misguided ambitions. Though one can step back to generalize from the individual example—reading Wharton’s female ghosts as expressions of women’s cultural invisibility, or Loman’s haunting as the bankruptcy of the American dream of masculine success—the focus of each work is first and foremost the tortured mind of an individual. The story of cultural haunting, however, brings to the foreground the communal nature of its ghosts. When the ghost in Morrison’s _Beloved_ speaks of her life in the grave in terms appropriate to the slave ships, she clearly becomes more than an externalization of one character’s longing and guilt; her return represents the return of all dead enslaved Africans. Stories of cultural haunting differ from other twentieth-century ghost stories in exploring the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche, but also of a people's historical consciousness.

In investigating history through supernatural means, the story of cultural haunting needs also to be distinguished from historical novels that “bring the dead to life” without reference to any literal interaction between the living and the dead (Don DeLillo’s _Libra_, for example), or fiction in which characters can be said to be “haunted” by the past in purely metaphorical terms (as in Ralph Ellison’s _Invisible Man_ or William Styron’s _Sophie’s Choice_). The turn to the supernatural in the process of recovering history emphasizes the difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past, as well as the degree to which any such historical reconstruction is essentially an imaginative act. Centrally concerned with the issues of communal memory, cultural transmission, and group inheritance, stories of cultural haunting share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another. An extraordinarily hybrid category of literature drawing upon a wide range of cultural traditions, the story of cultural haunting crosses the generic boundaries of the novel, historical novel, novelistic memoir, short fiction, drama, and, to a lesser extent, the lyric. For literary antecedents we must look to Hawthorne and Faulkner, whose borrowings from Gothic romance serve their interests in memory and inheritance. These authors offer an important model for contemporary authors who turn to the supernatural to examine the troubled transmission of immigrant, slave, or native cultures. Reading contemporary haunted narratives together—tracking the ways in which themes of possession, exorcism, historical repetition, and the reconstruction of memory reverberate within and across the texts—identifies the
American ghost story as a significant and as yet unrecognized contemporary genre.

The links between these thematic obsessions establish the masterplot of the cultural ghost story, a paradigmatic movement from possession to exorcism—or more accurately, from bad to good forms of haunting. In most cases possession is established by traumatic experience, such as the loss of land or homes, deaths of family members, or acts of racial persecution. Studies of persons suffering from post-traumatic disorders have revealed characteristic “pathologies of memory” that have relevance for the shared historical traumas of some ethnic groups. Traumatized individuals suffer from an unlikely combination of amnesia and abnormally precise (and usually involuntary) recall: while the traumatized may cut off from consciousness “large realms of experience” and aspects of personality, these “failures of recall can paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events” (Mark S. Greenberg and Bessel A. van der Kolk, qtd. Caruth 418). When the individual’s distress is connected to the trauma of a group, pathologies of memory take on a cultural and political significance, reflecting a society’s inability to integrate with the present both traumatic experience and a pre-catastrophic lost past.

In Morrison’s Beloved, for example, Sethe’s mother-love and guilt lead to her possession by the ghost of the daughter she murdered to save from a life of slavery. The ghost must ultimately be exorcised by a reenactment of the murder scene, which occurs toward the end of the novel. Sethe’s understanding of memory suggests the intrusive repetition of the past evident in traumatic disorders:

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (35–36)

Sethe experiences undesired, intrusive recall so powerfully she conceives of memory as an external reality that can take possession of her (or anybody—hence, admonishing her daughter Denver, Sethe warns that her “rememory” is still dangerous, and can suck Denver in). The return of Sethe’s murdered daughter as a full-bodied and dangerous ghost is clearly forecast here. The past that resists integration into the present because it is incomprehensible or too horrific takes shape as a ghost that can possess.

The novel’s exorcism reenacts the scene of the murder with a crucial difference: Sethe points her ice pick at the white man Bodwin—an act of confusion that
nevertheless releases her by directing her anger outward; the weapon is a symbolic pointing of the finger, naming white guilt for the evil consequences of slavery. Significantly, the ghost is not completely exorcised but transformed into a safer presence, one that Morrison can tell a tale about, even though for Sethe remembering still “seemed unwise” (274). Morrison’s narrative thus completes what Sethe cannot, the full integration of the ghostly past. Pierre Janet, who early in this century studied traumatic memory disorders, observed that narrative memory reshapes and gives meaning to past experience; he distinguished this form of memory from traumatic memory, which fails to adapt the past to the present, dooming the traumatized subject to mechanical, nonverbal reenactments (van der Kolk and van der Hart 430–31). Sethe’s incorporation of the past in the form of a spirit possession resembles traumatic memory. In giving narrative organization to Sethe’s experience (the experience of the historical Margaret Garner, and by extension, of all victims of slavery), Morrison defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are integrated into our national identity.

The movement from possession to exorcism plotted by Morrison’s novel is repeated in other stories of cultural haunting. In exorcising the ghost of the slave-owner Sutter, Berniece Charles in Wilson’s The Piano Lesson trades one form of haunting for another. Her invitation to family ghosts long held at bay releases her from a paralyzing and angry mourning over her husband’s death. Marshall’s Avey Johnson in Praisesong for the Widow is also a haunted survivor. Her husband’s ghost—a forbidding internal voice of assimilation, race hatred, and self-denial in the name of upward mobility—is defeated (and therefore can finally be properly mourned) as a result of Avey’s gradual opening to other spectral voices. When, on a trip to the Caribbean, she witnesses the performance of a traditional African-derived circular dance called a “ring shout,” she has a sudden double vision: “Kin, visible, metamorphosed and invisible, repeatedly circled the cleared space together” (239). The revelation is complete when the living dancers and their ghostly African counterparts reverse roles. Avey comes to understand that “It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing. . . . All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums” (240). The “nation” dances Avey views are “shadowy forms” or ghosts of old tribal ritual dances. In enacting ritual movements, in however revised and truncated a form, descendants thus become ghosts of their own ancestors. The transformed protagonist will return home to “haunt” (255) an assimilated black New York, having been filled with the spirit of a lost African culture.

As these examples suggest, haunting turns out to be necessary to the maintenance of historical meaning. The exorcism of all forms of ghostliness would
result in a devastating loss of significance. Toward the beginning of The Woman Warrior, Kingston confesses that she is haunted by her suicidal aunt and fears a possession that duplicates her aunt’s terrible fate. The task she undertakes in her memoir is the transformation of haunting as deathly possession into a haunting that enlarges self with the selective integration of family history and Chinese legend. Kingston knows that the very ghostliness of her aunt, her erasure from acknowledged family history, gives her the imaginative room for revision. As Pierre Janet noticed, the movement from traumatic to narrative memory allows for the possibility of revision. While traumatic memory is rigidly inflexible, marked by pure repetition, narrative memory—essentially a social act—can be “adapted to present circumstances” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 431). Stories of cultural haunting record the struggle to establish some form of historical continuity that allows for a necessary distance from the past—breathing room, as it were. They can be read as cautionary tales about the proper function of memory. Possession—the dangerous incorporation of the dead—signals a failure of memory to organize history, to render it usable. Flight from history can just as easily lead to possession as a nostalgic return to the past: denied history reasserts itself, much like the return of the repressed.

Possession in haunted American fiction suggests a continuity with the past over which one has no control: history lodges within, swollen bodies (a recurring image in this literature) give birth not to the future, but to a nightmarish repetition of the past. Though it is often figured as a malignant pregnancy, possession is more often conveyed through metaphors of consumption. Cannibal and vampire ghosts abound, feeding upon the living. In Louise Erdrich’s Tracks, for example, the Algonquin cannibal ghost called “windigo” possesses characters in deep mourning for lost family members. The ghost of a Vietnamese woman who eats men alive in Robert Olen Butler’s “A Ghost Story” becomes, by the end of the tale, the consuming spirit of acculturation that feeds upon war refugees resettled in the States. Characters run the danger of being swallowed up by the very past they attempt to recover (or to deny). The ghost Beloved feeds off of Sethe, growing fat as the haunted mother thins toward ghostliness: “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (250). Consuming a past that may not nourish, the eater can be turned into the eaten—or, in a vampiric transformation, the living can themselves become ghostly. Memory is thus translated into something closer to embodiment. In psychoanalytic terms, the ghost as cannibal or vampire suggests a dangerous introjection of the dead, or mourning gone awry. The possessed one is locked into repetition, doomed to reenact the past without relevance to the present realities.

Everywhere in this literature, possession is associated with the conditions of invisibility and voicelessness. In Tracks, Nanapush and Fleur’s “windigo” spirit possession, a form of suicidal mourning, renders them speechless: “We felt the
spirits of the dead so near that at length we just stopped talking.” The names of
dead family members, Nanapush remembers,

grew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle
of the night. We were filled with the water of the drowned, cold and black, airless
water that lapped against the seal of our tongues. . . . We had gone half windigo.
I learned later that this was common, that there were many of our people who died
in this manner, of the invisible sickness. There were those who could not swallow
another bite of food because the names of their dead anchored their tongues.
There were those who let their blood stop, who took the road west after all. (6)

Here memory is a form of embodiment: Erdrich’s characters incorporate the dead
they can’t relinquish, threatening to join their ghostly kin in death (taking the
“road west” to the afterworld). Ghostliness is equated with silence. The exorcism
of the icy spirits of the dead (the completion of mourning) is consequently
described as a thawing of frozen words:

My voice rasped at first when I tried to speak, but then . . . I was off and talking. . . . I
began to creak and roll. I gathered speed. I talked both languages in streams that
ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my
own voice convinced me I was alive. (7)

The saving movement from reenactment to enabling memory is, therefore, a
movement into language. Through acts of narrative revision—which are very
often presented as acts of translation, linguistic or cultural—the cycle of doom is
broken and the past digested. Translation functions like an exorcism because it
reframes cultural inheritance, rendering the past in the terms of the present.
Translators must allow themselves to be haunted by their “source” culture in
order to render it into their “target” culture: contemporary America. In translating
history into ghost stories, authors of haunted narratives transform both
source and target cultures, reshaping the past to answer the needs of the present
and, implicitly, the future. This double-edged revisionism—which reinvents old
traditions and creates new cultural fusions—suggests a literary form of what social
scientists have called “reciprocal acculturation” (Holloway 16). The ghost that
makes present the past while suggesting its indefiniteness (and thereby possible
malleability), thus provides the vehicle for both a dangerous possession by and an
imaginative liberation from the past.

In arguing that the ghosts I track are linked to issues of acculturation in a
polyethic society, and particularly in asserting that the bloodline family ghosts
of different ethnic groups belong in fact to the same cross-cultural genre, I take
a position congruent with the directions laid out by the scholarship of Werner
Sollors. Sollors has argued forcefully for a recognition of the syncretic and often
quite modern nature of ethnic “traditions.” Along with others who join him in his
anti-essentialist position, he points to the groundbreaking work of the sociologist
Fredrik Barth, who posited in his 1969 *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* that ethnicity is not a thing but a process. Groups maintain their identity not by holding on to what Barth calls “cultural stuff” (specific food, dress, customs, symbols, language, and so on), but by establishing boundaries that mark off “us” from the heathens, the goyim, “them.” Tradition is thus less a matter of content than of form. Sollors quotes Barth:

> when one traces the history of an ethnic group through time, one is *not* simultaneously, in the same sense, tracing the history of “a culture”: the elements of the present culture of that ethnic group have not sprung from the particular set that constituted the group's culture at a previous time, whereas the group has a continual organizational existence with boundaries (criteria of membership) that despite modifications have marked off a continuing unit. (Sollors 27–28)

Barth’s rejection of an autonomous and “authentic” cultural inheritance passed down through the generations helps to explain why the current emphasis in this country on ethnic difference emerges precisely when assimilation (whether forced or voluntary) is widely though not completely accomplished. Widespread assimilation threatens an ethnic group’s self-delimiting boundaries, setting in motion a “return” to what may be largely imagined cultural sources.

For me, one of the considerable attractions of this deconstructive position is that it works against the nostalgic tendency to dissolve history (particularly unpalatable history) in the effort to achieve a sentimentally conceived identity. The lesson for the critic of ethnic writing is clear: that one must resist indulging in a naïve romanticizing of roots (hunting for the “authentic” ethnic sources of every aspect of a literary work), choosing instead to look for cultural cross-pollinations, convergences, and inventions. A comparative, cross-cultural approach has the advantage of opening up the study of “reciprocal acculturation,” whether cultural or literary.

The tradition-as-invention camp has its critics, who point to the dangers of eliding ethnic differences in the name of a too narrowly conceived “common” American culture. They are suspicious of a rhetoric of transcendence, in which the merely local is subsumed into the pseudo-universalism of white, Protestant culture. They also warn of conflating ethnicity and race, of wrongfully assuming the same acculturation choices are available to voluntary immigrants as to colonized or enslaved peoples. And they ask the compelling (and to me at least, not easily dismissable) question: how do we explain the tenacious persistence, often in the face of formidable disintegratory forces, of the culturally marked custom, the story, the verbal expression, the gesture?

I find these concerns valid, yet see nothing here to jeopardize the position that ethnicity is a cultural construct, a variable entity reshaped by consensus over time. One can resist ethnic essentialism and yet remain uneasy about the implication that ethnic culture is essentially contentless. The face-off between form
and content (boundary-marking vs. "cultural stuff" or differentiation vs. [real] difference) presents a false opposition: both are central aspects of ethnic identity. Differences in cultural content matter. Attitudes toward the dead in Chippewa and Chinese cultures, for example, produce differences in the metaphorical burden ghosts bear in Louise Erdrich’s and Maxine Hong Kingston’s works. There are also, of course, significant differences—particularly in the degree of nostalgia toward the past—in how writers within an ethnic group treat shared group symbols and narratives. If these differences are ignored, the parallels I would draw devolve into meaninglessness. Yet I believe the parallels are worth identifying. The ghosts function similarly because they are conjured in response to shared concerns about assimilation and cultural identity. Stories of cultural haunting have everything to do with the cultural transformation engendered by immigration, as well as by those involuntary and violent movements of peoples that have rendered inextricable our senses of national identity and national guilt. They are centrally related to the questions of how cultural knowledge is transmitted and how identities are constructed in polyethnic America.

The story of cultural haunting, its theoretical underpinnings, and its implications for multicultural studies, deserve a fuller analysis than can be accomplished here. I would like, however, to briefly touch upon three related aspects of American haunted narratives: the emphasis on storytelling and the narrative construction of experience; the modulation of cultural “mourning” through a generational model; and the peculiar position of ethnic writers as both “heirs” and “ethnographers.”

Like history, ghost stories attempt to bring the dead back to life. In contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative—or challenge—to “official” history. This blurring of the historical and fictional is continuous with the interest in narrative currently emerging in metahistorical discussions. History and fiction, as Michel de Certeau has argued, are closer than we have realized, not because history lacks reference to reality, but because history relies on rhetorical and narrative strategies central to fiction in order to shape a coherent representation of reality. (Historiography, in de Certeau’s view, must occlude its resemblance to fiction in order to acquire the authority of scientific truth.) We are increasingly coming to see history, in Lynn Hunt’s words, not as a “repository of facts,” but as the telling of stories. Hunt notes that history “is better defined as on ongoing tension between stories that have been told and stories that might be told” (102–103). Certainly we see in literature by minority authors, particularly in the descendants of enslaved or colonized peoples, a heightened awareness of the disjunction between official history and the lived experience of minority groups. This awareness leads to an emphasis on multiple
viewpoints, the fictionality of any reconstruction of the past, and the creation of alternative histories through the telling of unheard or suppressed stories.

The creation of narrative is central to the process of reshaping the past. Storytelling has a vital function in ethnic ghost literature; in most of the works discussed here, ghosts not only appear, but ghost stories are told: Kingston’s mother relates her battles with ghosts in China; two brothers in The Piano Lesson chill their nephew with stories about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog; in Tracks, old Nanapush tells Lulu about her family ghosts. Ghost stories like these retrieve a lost past—the China a daughter never saw, a father murdered before a son knew him well, grandparents dead of tuberculosis long before a granddaughter’s birth—in ways that give new meaning to the present. The focus on storytelling shifts emphasis away from biological to adoptive models of cultural transmission (in Werner Sollors’s terms, from descent to consent). Lineage is established through rivers of words; the oral transmission of group history and lore itself creates the group, rather than being merely its byproduct. Families don’t simply tell stories, stories create families. Descent is reinterpreted as verbal, or, in the metaphorical language of the genre, as ghostly. The transmission of stories—and most emphatically of ghost stories—creates ethnicity. Historical meaning and ethnic identity are established through the process of haunting.

The stories in haunted literature, however, tend to be tacit, multiple, conflicting, or unfinished; meaning and identity are not static, established securely and transparently. Characters struggle to piece these fragments into a coherent narrative. In Naylor’s Mama Day, a faded and water-damaged bill of sale for an enslaved ancestor provides only tantalizing fragments of sentences, ambiguous clues about a past the descendants desperately need to understand. Kingston’s mother gives her daughter confusingly contradictory stories about her past in China, leaving the daughter to piece together a narrative that—in its nonchronological, collage form—captures even as it attempts to transcend the fragmentation of inheritance. Complicating the process are the ethnic group’s own prohibitions about language, its fears that certain kinds of speech might dissolve group bonds. (“You must not tell anyone,” Kingston’s mother commands.) Partially submerged narratives powerfully, though invisibly, organize (“haunt”) social groups. While these narratives are never fully articulated, hints, metaphors, pieces of the stories abound. Uncovering an occult narrative can be compared to a ghost sighting: awareness of the haunting leads to the possibility of freedom through revision, which functions in this literature like an exorcism.

From a psychological viewpoint, the attempt to recuperate some elements of the past, to refit it for present needs, has been analogized to the process of mourning. Freud, in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” attributes the invention of ghosts to the experience of mourning for a loved one. He imagines
primitive man first confronting the reality of his own mortality when witnessing the death of someone beloved:

Man could no longer keep death at a distance, for he had tasted it in his pain about the dead; but he was nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge it, for he could not conceive of himself as dead. So he devised a compromise: he conceded the fact of his own death as well, but denied it the significance of annihilation. . . . It was beside the dead body of someone he loved that he invented spirits. . . . (14:294)

As an embodiment of the continuity between the living and the dead, the ghost evades the finality of death. It represents a compromise, or an essentially anti-thetical act: a simultaneous acknowledgment of and denial of death. Ghost stories bear the message: we exist, we continue, our dead are not dead.

Yet continuity with the past can be a source both of comfort and of anxiety, at times even of terror. The complexities and ambivalences of the culturally haunted ghost story cannot be overemphasized: the figure of the ghost carries both positive and negative valences, often shifting from one to the other in a single work. An angry ghost in Woman Warrior who threatens to “pull down a substitute” can also be a helpful “forerunner” (16, 8). Dangerous ghosts in Tracks can, in the right circumstances, be protective spirits. The connection between ambivalence and ghosts was of course explored by Freud. In Totem and Taboo he claims that the historical development of ghost belief reflects the divided emotions inherent in all close relationships, particularly those with our dead:

It is quite possible that the whole concept of demons was derived from the important relation of the living to the dead. The ambivalence inherent in that relation was expressed in the subsequent course of human development by the fact that, from the same root, it gave rise to two completely opposed psychical structures: on the one hand fear of demons and ghosts and on the other hand veneration of ancestors. The fact that demons are always regarded as the spirits of those who have died recently shows better than anything the influence of mourning on the origin of the belief in demons. Mourning has a quite specific psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivors’ memories and hopes from the dead. When this has been achieved, the pain grows less and with it the remorse and self-reproaches and consequently the fear of the demon as well. And the same spirits who to begin with were feared as demons may now expect to meet with friendlier treatment; they are revered as ancestors and appeals are made to them for help. (13:65–66)

The shift from fear to veneration that Freud plots here could be aligned with the familiar three-stage model of immigrant generational succession, in which an assimilationist second generation rears children nostalgic for the lost culture of the emigrant grandparents. One generation’s parental rejection succeeds another: proximity produces fear of ethnic difference, while greater distance (and the powerful desire to revise parental choices) yields reverence for ancestors. For Kingston, a second-generation writer, the ghosts of China maintain a demonic
charge, associated as they are with a world of nightmares and the unconscious (as a girl she dreams in Chinese). The protagonist of Marshall’s *Praisesong*, on the other hand, makes the transition from assimilating into white culture to yearning for ancestral connection. It may seem decidedly odd to apply a metaphor derived from immigration experience to contemporary African-American imaginings of a pre-slavery heritage (many generations in the past), yet Marshall’s character exhibits a “third-generation” style of triangulation, past the parents to a great-aunt, whose ghost becomes a conduit to a lost African world. Parents are also curiously absent from Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Erdrich’s *Tracks*; in both novels, a figure one more generation removed provides the crucial link to the past. The effects of relative proximity to loss described by Freud help as well to explain the ironic ending of Morrison’s *Beloved*, with its injunction not to tell a story that has just been told: the nineteenth-century protagonist’s need to forget meets the author’s (and reader’s) desire to memorialize. Like Sethe’s forgetting of the past, Morrison’s historical recovery gives expression to a survivalist instinct.

We must, however, ultimately acknowledge the limitations of Freud’s scheme, which divides the components of ambivalence into two separate periods of mourning, and of the related “three-generations” model, with its simplistic framing of immigrant generational experience. In Kingston, for example, the war of anger and nostalgia expressed in her conflicting desires for liberation and continuity draws a complicated, highly ambivalent portrait of ethnic redefinition. In African-American literature, a greater temporal distance from the African past—severely heightened by brutal forms of cultural erasure—tends to result in a more nostalgic treatment of ancestors. Yet even here, we often find the veneration of ancestral spirits is shadowed by the more frightening implications of being “haunted.”

The most dreadful of these implications is that haunting is not entirely voluntary; we can’t always choose our ghosts. The attractive possibility of adopting beneficent ancestors might suggest that ethnicity is freely and consciously constructed, but in fact these choices are often experienced as mysterious mandates. Haunting metaphors forcefully convey the reality that cultural transmission operates partly on a subrational level. The anthropologist Michael Fischer, in an essay on ethnic autobiography, argues that ethnicity is “often transmitted less through cognitive language or learning (to which sociology has almost entirely restricted itself) than through processes analogous to the dreaming and transference of psychoanalytic encounters” (195–96). The memoirist Richard Rodriguez has expressed this sense of ethnicity as, in his words, a “metaphor . . . for a knowledge that bewilders us”: “the past survives in my life, though in mysterious ways, deeper than choosing” (8–9). Ethnic identity is indeed, as Fischer notes, “potent when not consciously taught”—perhaps most dangerously potent precisely when it is transferred in subconscious ways. Much of what
Fischer calls “ethnic anxiety” is generated by a character's inability to bring to consciousness (to put into language) the murky forces that help shape identity. This view of ethnicity as a bewildering, mysterious heritage finds support in recent psychological research on the embodiment of pathology in individuals through the subconscious absorption of family narratives (White and Epstein; Griffith and Griffith), and in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s revision of Freud, which posits the unspoken transmission of the parent’s unconscious to the child. In stories of cultural haunting, the ghost’s vaporousness, its link to a twilight world of dreams and mystery, reflects the elements of ethnic identity experienced as just below rational grasp.

Cultural transmission—whether conscious or subconscious—is also complicated by the fact that there are huge gaps in cultural histories. One might easily assume—an assumption supported by the fact that much of ethnic writing takes the form of personal testimony—that ethnic writers have few problems in returning to their cultural past: because one is Chinese-American, one has more immediate, direct access to the Chinese-American experience and, by a rather large leap, to its Chinese cultural past. Oddly, though, the Old World and early immigrant past is often nearly as lost to “insiders” as it is to “outsiders” of the culture. Oceans and generations intervene, languages are lost as others are acquired; “China”—or “Africa” or “Mexico”—can seem like a myth, or a mirage—perceptible and whole only when viewed from a great distance. Most writers of culturally haunted texts—those who could be defined as ethnic “insiders”—are descendants and inheritors, but stand at varying degrees of distance from the pre-Columbian or pre-American cultures from which they have sprung. They find themselves in the unusual position of being both heirs and ethnographers.

The use of the term “ethnographer” to describe that distanced position might seem inappropriate, given the colonial context of the discipline’s birth. I have in mind Clifford Geertz’s description of anthropology as a relation between There and Here, Then and Now. The most familiar version of this model, of course, is that of the First-World anthropologist who studies a technologically more primitive, preliterate society, producing ultimately a written document that translates “there” in terms of “here.” Geertz acknowledges in a footnote that when the ethnographer belongs to the group studied—as is now more and more often the case—“special problems” arise, “including variant conceptions of what ‘Being There’ involves.” One could argue that the movement into writing, and for that matter into Western disciplinary paradigms, tends to reestablish the “then vs. now” division. Geertz shortly returns to this point: “The textual connection of the Being Here and Being There sides of anthropology, the imaginative construction of a common ground between the Written At and the Written About (who are nowadays, as mentioned, not infrequently the same people in a
different frame of mind) is the *fons et origo* of whatever power anthropology has to convince anyone of anything” (143–44).

The “same people in a different frame of mind”: Geertz refers to “Yoruba, Sinhalese, and Tewa anthropologists” who analyze their own cultures (133), but the phrase has resonance for most producers of American ethnic writing. Ethnic literature is marked by a double vision; the ghostly face of a lost past—“there/then”—can be perceived in the lineaments of “here/now”—or, to wrest another Geertz phrase out of context, we sense in this literature a spectral “There shadow of a Here reality” (145). When Here and There, Then and Now draw so close as to be nearly collapsed, ghostly metaphors tend not to appear. Anzia Yezierska, for example, who must write her way out of a crushingly proximate East European Jewish culture, does not conjure ghosts. Her writing is a liberation—much as it is for Edith Wharton, who in *The House of Mirth* (1905) shrewdly anatomizes old New York family “aristocracy,” a society she found at the time all too present, though it was already in the first shadow of its passing. Significantly, it is in her realist fiction, not her ghost stories, that Wharton takes as her chief subject her cultural inheritance. “There it was before me,” Wharton later wrote, “in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy” (207). Ghosts tend to materialize when the old social bonds have loosened, when the “same people” find themselves very much “in a different frame of mind,” distanced by changes in language, geography, education, social codes, and simply by the passage of time.

The unifying theme here—whether seen through the lens of anthropology, history, or psychology—is the need to identify and revise the cultural past. Ghosts figure in the folkloric past of virtually every culture. They are also extraordinarily useful literary metaphors in the larger process of ethnic invention and revision. The ghost gives body to memory, while reminding us that remembering is not a simple or even a safe act. Like the partially obliterated records that appear in contemporary haunted literature—the family papers mildewed and faded, stories left without endings or explanations, crucial words that resist translation—the ghost’s elusiveness conveys a past not easily accessible. At the end of his study of ethnic definition, *Through a Glass Darkly*, William Boelhower observes that an image of ancestral Italian ghosts in a poem by the Italo-American-Canadian poet Pier Giorgio Di Cicco illustrates the “absent presence” of the poet’s “originating cultural traditio” (142). Boelhower, whose thesis about ethnic identity closely parallels that of Werner Sollors, argues that all ethnic reconstruction is predicated on the inevitable absence of cultural origins (89). The curious dual force of the ghost who makes present what is absent powerfully shapes the American story of cultural haunting. As both presence and absence, the ghost stands as an
emblem of historical loss as well as a vehicle of historical recovery. It offers writers who take as their subject the survival and transformation of ethnic cultures, who recognize disconnection even as they assert continuity, a particularly rich metaphor for the complexities of cultural transmission. In confronting an obscure history and a tenuous present, writers across the spectrum of American peoples increasingly conjure ghosts to solve a single problem: how to reframe the narrative organization of ethnic experience. Ghosts are not the exclusive province of any single ethnic group; they figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future.

Works Cited


