

# Rooted in Resistance: Correlating Memory, Heritage, and the Pursuit of Equality in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*

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## Abstract

This paper underscores the crucial role of heritage awareness in the ongoing struggle for liberation and social affirmation of African American communities. It critically examines the correlation between black cultural and spatial memory and the fight for social equality in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's work *Happy Land*, illustrating how heritage awareness and preservation function as foundations for identity, resistance, and social dignity. Through the novel, it tries to make the case on how memory and heritage empower resistance and can empower the ongoing pursuit of equality for African Americans. The study also observes that dominant groups often shape historical narratives to their advantage, marginalizing minorities and depriving the latter of the benefits embedded in their own history. Thus, passing down black heritage through storytelling empowers marginalized African Americans communities to reclaim and preserve their ancestral legacy and assert their claim to collective ownership of the American land. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the study explores how the affirmation of heritage not only fosters a sense of belonging and entitlement but also restores dignity to African Americans.

**Keywords:** Black heritage awareness, identity, dignity, entitlement to social equality.

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## INTRODUCTION

As Nikki states, being the "steward of this place" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. "Epilogue") goes beyond the implication of a sense of ownership but also implies a sense of caretaking.

are just mere concepts of the past: "Appalachia is a concept" (Perkins-Valdez, ch.1). For her, Appalachia a place whence her heritage and identity are upheld has become a mere concept of the past. Whereas,

In an era shaped by the rapid pace of modernization and its emphasis on individual freedom and material progress, Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land* shows that the concepts of heritage and identity remain major pillars in the ongoing struggle for equality, social recognition and resistance. Today, many African Americans, in the image of Nikki, the main protagonist in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*, fail to grasp the formative role of their own history in shaping their lived realities. They hardly perceive the correlation between identity and heritage. The connection between identity and heritage often appear attenuated, obscured by the social pressures of assimilation, mobility and present-oriented culture that privileges immediacy over memory. However, heritage is far from far from being a static,

antiquated inheritance confined to the past. Black heritage today actively informs the economic, social and political experiences of Black people and communities, whose histories have been marked by displacement and dispossession.

For African Americans, descendants of enslaved workers, the preservation of heritage and identity go beyond the mere label of remembrance and are woven into the testament to the resistance and adaptation that have enabled survival against the odds of enslavement, of Jim Crow and of current mass incarceration. African Americans have used these frameworks of resistance and resilience, transforming adversity into a source of collective strength and pride. Black people showed the use of prophetic traditions fused with African spiritual cosmologies, as a means of resistance and resilience through the enslaved workers' revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831. The Underground Railroad efforts of the 1800s-1865s, with reliance on family ties and inherited codes of communications, heavily relied on heritage. Similarly, the leading activists of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement articulated their struggle as the continuation of a long Black freedom struggle rooted in the earlier anti-lynching campaigns. These frameworks of resistance and resilience rooted in

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history and legacy are the focus of this paper which focuses on the case of Perkins-Valdez's characters in *Happy Land*.

Toni Morrison, in her seminal essay *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation* (1984), eloquently advocates for the necessity of understanding and preserving ancestral heritage as a fundamental tool for self-discovery. She warns that the absence of a conscious historical connection can be perilous, depriving individuals and communities of the roots necessary for growth and fulfillment. Through intergenerational transmission, both physical and symbolic, heritage becomes a source of affirmation, entitlement, and dignity.

Rooting current challenges of Black equality in the American society into heritage, Perkins-Valdez's novel *Happy Land* position itself as a mouthpiece on the importance of correlating heritage and identity in the fight for social equality, drawing inspiration from the real-life kingdom of Happy Land.

This paper makes its analysis from a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, interpreting *Happy Land* as a multifaceted strategy of resistance. It studies the mechanisms by which Mother Rita and Nikki preserve and value their ancestral heritage and identity and how collective memory serves both as a shield and a sword in the struggle for survival. Last, this study aims to awaken a renewed consciousness among African Americans to "catch a glimpse into this wealth of heritage" (*Frederick Douglass Memorial Park Conservancy Inc.*) bequeathed by their ancestors, a heritage that holds the promise of a more inclusive and empowered future, as envisioned by the narratives that continue to shape and sustain the community.

### 1- Heritage Awareness and Preservation as Foundations of Identity and Resistance

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept of heritage as a property that is or may be inherited, as well as valued objects and qualities such as historic buildings and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations. In addition, Perkins-Valdez in her novel *Happy Land* portrays heritage as a continuum stewardship, an ongoing and living pride.

Now our entire family will be stewards of this place once again, will understand this rootedness is a gift. When we call ourselves kings and queens, it isn't just a fantasy of Black pride. It means something. I am the descendant of a queen, a real queen, and I guess that makes me one, too. (Perkins-Valdez, ch. "Epilogue")

This "rootedness", which "is a gift", is not simply a symbolic fact, but stands as a reclamation of identity, and mainly knowing and embracing one's heritage. Also, it is a means to grounding oneself in

historic building and cultural traditions which are the main heritage. So, these definitions emphasize the importance of family or community memory, of intergenerational transmission, and continuity as advocated by Mother Rita, one of the main protagonists of Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*. Heritage therefore encompasses some facets as tradition, culture, birthright, property, and family and cultural background.

Through the intergenerational transmission process—Nikki expresses by saying "our entire family"—opens with how these foundational elements, serve to preserve the wealth, rich experiences embedded within heritage for future heirs. As the consequences seen in Nikki's statement when she says "I realized that maybe I would've done different if I'd known I was descended from royalty. Maybe I would've gone to college or dreamed bigger. Maybe I would've understood that the possibilities for my future were limitless" (Perkins-Valdez, ch.40). This statement then highlights how African Americans were denied knowledge of their ancestral and histories were erased. So the deficiency of the knowledge concerning their "royal and noble lineage" chipped in to limited dreams, and opportunities. Thereupon, it echoes to know that the lack of the knowledge comes from the absence of the intergenerational transmission.

For Mother Rita, the transmission process involves a collective negotiation of identity [self], whereby the kingdom memories such as land ownership, the racial violence and resistance faced from the Ku Klux Klan, the founding and leadership established by the queen Luella and her husband the king William Montgomery, the self-sufficiency, and culture are mobilized to serve as compass for subsequent generations. So, new generations, Smith writes, find their path "using the past, and collective memories, to negotiate new ways of being and expressing identity" (45). The rich narratives embedded in Mother Rita's cultural heritage thus function as a foundation for resistance and social affirmation for her people, as a marginalized community in America.

One key foregrounding element in the novel's exposition, Nikki Lovejoy-Berry, the second main protagonist of Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*, a Washington, D.C. real estate agent, is summoned by her grandmother, Mother Rita, to visit her in the Appalachian town of Zirconia, North Carolina. Once she arrives, she finds out that Mother Rita is terminally ill, and needs assistance in fighting a developer attempting to recover their ancestral land. Mother Rita has summoned Nikki to tell her about the stratagem which the Thomas brothers fashioned to evict her from her ancestral land where she lives after the loss of their large land heritage twenty years ago.

Nikki's reconnection with her grandmother, symbolically connecting the future to the past,

symbolizes what is known as the "standpoint epistemology" developed by Pohlhaus (2002)—which is a framework that analyzes how "individual's social identity" influence their understanding of the world. This standpoint theory highlights that individual like Mother Rita and the Lovejoy family in position of marginalization, historical erasure are able to conclude a turning point which puts a curb on the initial expropriation dynamic.

The influence of this framework then leads Nikki to get involved in the legal battle to reclaim the family land back. Her involvement, surprisingly, enables her to tap into the remarkable family history, the kingdom of the Happy Land: her great-great-great-grandmother, Luella, was the queen of a self-sustaining community known as the kingdom of the Happy Land. To win the battle of regaining the land, Nikki goes to the lawyer R.J, an offspring of Jola Casey, one of the friends of the queen Luella back then, to ask for assistance. Through judicial procedures, the lawyer R.J defends the Lovejoy family at the Henderson County Courthouse. Firstly difficult to gain the land back but thanks to the law of the "adverse possession" which states that if a person occupies a property for a certain length of time, in an open notorious fashion, while improving upon the land and living on it as if it is their own, they can claim title, the judge issues a temporary stay on the eviction and finally rules that Nikki's family are rightful owner of four acres out of the fifty acres left by Luella and William for their descendants as heritage. Finally, this tangible heritage serves as source of resistance from eviction, maintaining the history, expressing identity and as social affirmation and entitlement as landowner.

Despite the significant historic achievements, struggles, and rich heritage of the queen Luella and the Montgomery brothers, Robert and William, their descendants, Lorelle, Mother Rita and Nikki, continue to experience material and immaterial dispossession due to the systemic erasure of their history. This is also seen today in contemporary society, and notably in the United States. The current social status of African Americans reflects inherited fears, and unconscious traumas, reflect with acute precision the torment that Nikki faces, aligning with Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török's theory of transgenerational haunting, which posits that unresolved ancestral trauma is unconsciously transmitted across generations. This is compounded by family silences and repressed memories, factors that contribute to a pervasive sense of "trepidation" and the emergence of "vigilante groups" within these communities (Crouch 63). As mapped in *Happy Land*, the matriarchs (Luella, Rita and Lorelle) embody inherited silences. Some patches of Black history may be restrained to protect descendants from dominant oppressions, while others are lost to systemic erasure. This silence becomes a "generational wound" that Nikki must courageously face in her quest.

To address her challenges, Nikki requires a conscious reconstruction of identity that enhances her capacity to confront the distorted and repressed patches of her history imposed by dominant groups and to develop what can be conceptualized as a 'mirror stage' of self-recognition. Psychologically, such reconstruction is feasible through processes of awareness, self-definition, and preservation, particularly when supported by a rich oral tradition (McDaniel 33). This fact evidences the critical role of oral tradition in confronting and overcoming historical erasure.

The confrontation of repressed histories, whether through intergenerational transmission, physical and symbolic preservation of heritage, or intergenerational reconciliation, is essential for healing the wounds inflicted by systemic erasure. Within this framework, Mother Rita in *Happy Land* illustrates that the preservation of Black ancestral heritage transcends mere physical and symbolic acts. And in content, this preservation reflects more physical significance and symbolic facts.

In those years of our Lord, 1894, nearly thirty years into freedom, hundreds of years after our people first landed on these shores, we lifted our arms to the sky. The kingdom had been more than grass, trees, and dirt—this land had the power, wonder-working healing power, to save us. It was God's promise to the poor in spirit, our kingdom of heaven, our treasure. (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 36)

As Mother Rita, the kingdom preservation stands more than a physical and symbolic acts, because the "Kingdom" likely symbolizes what she calls "God's promise", a promised land of liberation and dignity. Furthermore, qualifying it as the "kingdom of heaven" and "treasure" spiritually signify a refuse, mirroring the Happy Land community's resilience and faith.

Mother Rita's preservation of collective memory for years becomes a social and psychological imperative intimately connected to the transmission of identity and to survival as a whole. On the one hand, emphasizing intergenerational transmission of heritage enhances Nikki in developing a mechanism of keen interest, self-esteem and self-awareness of the capacity of doing and social responsibilities she has as heirs of kings and queens. On the other hand, the belated recognition of her heritage obstructs her devotion and defers the fulfillment of her potential. Nikki's unrealized zeal in *Happy Land* is premised on an epistemic rupture: the belatedness of duty's revelation, which might have otherwise disciplined her labor into purpose. "I realized that maybe I would've done different if I'd known I was descended from royalty. Maybe I would've gone to college or dreamed bigger. Maybe I would've understood that the possibilities for my future were limitless" (Perkins-Valdez, ch 40). These brighter prospects are the ground on which the battle for equality is fought. The

depreciated sense of the self she initially had negatively impacted on Nikki's social dreams. Mother Rita's system of transmitting heritage through the means of oral tradition raises awareness in Nikki of how past events that affected their community constitute a "powerful tool in the establishment of a fundamental understanding of the connections between these past events and current circumstances" (Tulius). So, the understanding of these connections between the past—her ancestral history—and the present—her current situations—restores a resistance in her in front of forthcoming adversities in a society rife with racism. Furthermore, the oral tradition, the combination of transfer and transcription of memory through generations, is what helps Nikki develop a mechanism of "subjectivity" (Steedly 1993: 22) by developing the "I" which typically helps "escape from torture and bondage" (Mukherjee 20). Memory creates historical consciousness which empowers descendants' sense of self-reflection and awareness by increasing their connection to ancestors. Reversely, the lack of historical consciousness engenders a perilous rupture (Morrison 331) which creates a "late start" in many African Americans' personal journey, what Nikki personally experiences (Perkins-Valdez, ch. *"Epilogue"*). This fosters a collective amnesia wherein Blacks, unmoored from ancestral narratives, are condemned to an existence of destabilized identity, adrift between the void of unbelonging and the ceaseless negotiation of selfhood. "If we don't keep in touch with the ancestors, we are, in fact, lost" (Morrison 331), which underscores disconnection and this disconnection kills the ancestors who constitute historical figures: "when you kill the ancestors, you kill yourself" (Morrison 331).

As exemplified in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*, the transmission of heritage occurs through oral traditions. Where Mother Rita recounts the story of the queen Luella, Nikki's great-great-great-grandmother, to reconnect her granddaughter to family lineage. This mirrors historical African traditions where griots preserve communal memory. The novel suggests that stories are tools of resilience which can allow descendants to dream big, to get confidence and ambition: "imagination can brush the sky". For African Americans, this imagination needs that they should be "rooted in the soil" which symbolizes a deep connection to culture, community, and tradition: "It's only when you're rooted in the soil that your family once inhabited that your imagination can brush the sky" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 34). She then develops the keen sense of communal memory preservation and turns on a sense of self-definition which stands as foundation for identity and resistance.

## 2- Heritage as a Means of Social Affirmation, Entitlement to Belonging, and Dignity

Heritage, whether material (buildings, artifacts, etc.) or immaterial (languages, traditions, cultures, etc.)—serves as a means for marginalized groups to asseverate identity and to withset erasure. For

Mother Rita, these paradigms of affirming identity and opposing erasure need a kinship relationship between family members and an understanding of ancestral heritage. Nikki furthermore emphasizes that heritage serves to maintain connection as a family and a knowledge of ancestral heritage. However, losing heritage means you lose emancipation, autonomy, and connection. As in the following statements, the "kingdom" represents the moment when the kingdom members held sway over land, community, and culture. So "losing the kingdom" means they lose influence, autonomy, control, autonomy, connection, leading mainly to disconnection.

Losing the kingdom has meant we've lost connection as a family and our knowledge of ancestral legacy. We're no longer stewards of the land. Mama no longer puts her hands in the earth, and neither do any of us descendants. Maybe if we still owned a place for repair and refuge, we wouldn't have crumbled into pieces as a family. (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 21)

Through *Happy Land*, the Lovejoys experience marginalizations which portray their status as a marginalized community. These stereotypes reflect mother Rita's standpoint in pursuing her ancestral heritage for many years. The Lovejoys, one of the marginalized communities due to its social classification, have seen many of their narratives marginalized, narratives which constitute heritage and must serve as a source of affirmation, entitlement to belonging and dignity for family members. Her experience reflects how important it is to be aware of "the power of narrative: how stories shape social consciousness and identity" (Mahmood). For her, it is vital not to distort or disregard it if it comes to consider the influence of narrative.

For many years, the Lovejoys' narratives about who ancestors were, who descendants are and what they can achieve have been shaped by others. "You should know the kingdom is a local legend around here. I grew up hearing about it. There's a lot of rumors, of course. And a lot of misinformation and lies, I'm sure" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 21). However, stressing on "rumor, misinformation and lies" figures out the critical view of dominant narratives that shape their own.

In general, following the logic which highlights the values embedded in their narratives, Blacks have to reclaim their marginalized narratives. For Nikki, reclaiming marginalized narratives is about asserting identity for entitlement to belonging, owning history for dignity and refusing to be cased into stereotypes by stepping "into my new self" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. *"Epilogue"*). Furthermore, getting into a new self helps Nikki unveil a self-esteem by making a promise to herself. So Nikki promising to "be the great-great-great-granddaughter of Queen Luella's dreams" figures out her desire and devotion to honor her family

and continues a lineage of survival, creativity, and resistance.

Beneath that sun, I make a promise to myself. If I'm fortunate enough to be granted more time on this earth, I will read more books. I will plant lots of flowers. I will be the great-great-great-granddaughter of Queen Luella's dreams.

In this field, once tended by men and women stepping out of their past and into their future, I will seek the footsteps they left behind and I will walk in them. (Perkins-Valdez, ch. *"Epilogue"*)

Eghan espouses the same ideology by highlighting that by reclaiming narratives, African Americans challenge dominant narratives imposed on them and create new, more inclusive and inspiring narratives that reflect their ongoing prejudices and hopes. Mother Rita, in the same standpoint as Eghan, reclaims her marginalized family memories by not just telling her family history to her granddaughter Nikki but by confronting the dominant narratives the Thomas family imposed on her. Also, by doing so, she is doing what Nikki expresses by saying "plant lots of flowers". So, planting "lots of flowers" is a way to confront the dominant narratives imposed on them, and also to continue the culture and tradition of liberation, community-building and self-sufficiency. In other way, planting "lots of flowers" constitutes the means of reclaiming her marginalized family memories.

Mother Rita then creates new narratives that mirror the prejudices of eviction she encounters on her own ancestral land from the Thomas brothers during twenty years which cause her trauma and dismantle her healthcare system. She expresses through her narratives, her desire to reclaim her ancestral heritage which is her source of affirmation, entitlement and dignity.

As well, mother Rita's narratives serve in resolving social conflicts. In *Happy Land*, the narrative is mapped as a vital tool to put an end to social conflicts related to land. Furthermore, when the Lovejoys are confronted to land issues in front of the Henderson County Courthouse, Nikki's lawyer R.J uses her own narratives as descendant of the kingdom of the Happy Land to convince the judge based on "adverse possession" to rule Lovejoy family as rightful landowner. This triumph in front of the court shows the importance of reclaiming narratives and use them to resolve social conflicts, align with the battle of affirmation, also to advocate for entitlement to belonging and dignity. Simultaneously, the resolution of social conflicts requires more knowledge and a self-understanding which restores the importance of oral narratives. These oral narratives, anyhow, serves as "source of information" (Tulius 2013: 187) and "the best way to learn anything" (LeClair 1981: 123).

On the one hand, these paradigms of understanding and learning of narratives through actions like reading "I will read more books", planting "I will plant lots of flowers", and walking "I will walk in them" renew at the end the kinship relationship lost between the Lovejoys, even if Nikki qualifies it as "a late start" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. *"Epilogue"*). These paradigms in general help ones realize that "[w]e are subjects of our own narratives, witnesses to and participants in our own experience" (Morrison 19). This interconnection instaurates "togetherness" within the Lovejoy family. Through this dogma, memories are interlaced across generations, because "memory needs continuous feeding" (Coser 1992: 34).

Besides, narratives are shared as Nikki experiences: "I grew up hearing about it" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 21) which help preserve ancestral heritage. But, on the other hand, the misconception and unknown of narratives arouse a disconnection between family members which creates a gap within the family. This gap, anyhow, causes the deterioration of narratives in whole which leads to the systematic erasure of collective memories. Because people do not know what to believe. As R.J says to Nikki: "To tell you the truth, I don't know what to believe" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 20). So, by saying that "I don't know what to believe" points out the tensions between personal truth and imposed narratives. In general, this reflects individual's navigation in a multifaceted world where cultural, traditional and historical truths are variable and often oppressive.

*Happy Land* highlights the aftermaths of Lorelle's misconception and ignorance of narratives of her family memories and ancestral heritage. When Lorelle Lovejoy, Nikki's mother, turns eighteen, her mother asks her for help to pay the property taxes. But she refuses to pay and leaves her mother in North Carolina and goes for unclear adventures. Lorelle's disinterest in everything land ownership stands for is expressed in her taking the family history carried through storytelling for fairy tales. Had she cherished her cultural heritage, the Lovejoy family might not have lost their land. For too long, she has denied the existence of a queen and king on the land as her ancestors. Consequently, these ideologies lead to the loss of family memories and as results a lot of tales come "from some 1950s pamphlet" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 20). In addition, these create a disconnection between her daughter Nikki and her identity and ancestral heritage. What she expresses by saying "I'm learning new things about myself each day. I had a late start, but there is time to make it up" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. *"Epilogue"*). Furthermore, physically, these words "a late start" reflects her late access to education, freedom, and autonomy.

Because historically she ever knew anything about her ancestors till she turns almost forty years old. These gaps triggered from Lorelle's obliquity create a

decline in the trail of her ancestral heritage. To that end, the family loses forty-six acres due to the transgenerational disconnection between the matriarchs (Rita, Lorelle and Nikki). In conclusion, the Lovejoy family's inability to preserve their ancestral land heritage in its entirety can be attributed to a deficiency in intergenerational transmission of narratives. For many African Americans, a deep sense of "cultural homelessness" arises from the erasure or marginalization of black people's historical contributions, despite their ancestors playing a foundational role in the building of the nation. In response to this exclusion, Langston Hughes powerfully reclaims his sense of ownership and belonging this profound declaration, "I, too, am America" (Hughes). Hugue's statement underscores the urgency of preserving and sharing stories, as it is through such narratives that the past is connected to the present, empowering generations to gain awareness, honor, and uphold their heritage, preventing it from being lost to oblivion.

For the Lovejoys, a true way forward means aligning their personal path and vision with collective ancestral narratives, a stark contrast to the paradoxical reliance on official channels in contemporary America—channels often designed by those who perpetuated their marginalization "To tell you the truth, I don't know what to believe... And I've heard tales about a king and a queen, but a lot of it comes from some 1950s pamphlet" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 20). As results, it has become difficult for Nikki as well as for many Blacks to maintain their ancestral memories, because "there is no systematic attempt to maintain tradition or memories of ancestors who have come from elsewhere" (Carsten 1995: 320).

Like Mother Rita did, who fights to her last breath holding on to her family land, challenging metanarratives on Black people requires an active participation in constructing a sense of contemporary social belonging, enabling individuals to counter marginalization. As a historical account, for Tullius, custodians "[must] properly preserve a family story by carefully transmitting the content and significance of the story to following generations" (187). Narrative preservation and transmission is vital to entitlement to belonging and the fight for equality.

In general, devoted descendants like Mother Rita have to reclaim their ancestral narratives which are marginalized and challenge discourses which shape their collective memories, collective memories which symbolize their heritage for social affirmation, entitlement to belonging and dignity. It is by doing so that she carries memories and knows ancestral aspirations for her and forthcoming generations. Queen Luella hopefully affirms this when the kingdom regains fifty acres out of the two hundred acres they firstly bought: "carrying the hope that my children and my children's children would make something even better, that they'd carry with them the memory that we had tried

our best to give them something like home" (Perkins-Valdez, ch. 44). Furthermore, Queen Luella saying "carrying the hope" highly reflects her desire to break cycles of disconnection, trauma, and marginalization, and create a brilliant and better future for future generations, despite historical injustice and erasure.

## CONCLUSION

Heritage, for Perkins-Valdez in *Happy Land*, is not a stuck, predefined concept that needs no kinesis, but a continuum and living pride which each time needs a preservation and transmission across generations. This paper highlights through *Happy Land* that heritage is ever evolving, with new contextual kineses necessary for its survival. It evokes that these contextual kineses are provided by narratives. Furthermore, Mother Rita in her adventure illuminates that continuous narratives nurture the notion of ancestral heritage that is not to be taken as something static or concerning only ancestors, but a perpetual reinvention that can be preserved. When studying heritage, it is vital to pay attention to narratives which help marginalized communities like the Lovejoys to narrate their collective memories and to proclaim for social affirmation, entitlement and dignity. Mukherjee espouses the same vision by saying: "it is through such folk tales that a consciousness of their being and belonging can be forged" (22). This ideology is the root to opposite marginalization. This is necessary to liberation.

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