

Maxine Hong Kingston's complex, multi-faceted, and paradoxical postmodernism in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts*.

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English

When Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts* was published in 1976,<sup>1</sup> the novel's reception was the epitome of controversial: while some critics saw the novel as subversively feminist, swapping a hero for a heroine living her life against the currents of the Chinese patriarchy which thought having girls was a waste resources ("Better to raise geese than girls"), others, including prominent figures of Asian American literary critique, said about the work that it reinforced Chinese stereotypes and was written purely for the enjoyment of racist Western societies.<sup>2</sup> The controversy is mainly created by Kingston's propensity to shed light on violent and old traditions such as torturing baboons and enslaving unwanted daughters, as well as by her tendency to re/invent Chinese mythology. Given that Western readers often read fiction as the testimony of a human reality, and in this case, as the voice of an "experience" that is other, or even "exotic," Asian American critics such as Frank Chin were worried Occidental readers would confirm their racism through reading her fallacious story. These concerns are all the more understandable given that her novel is categorized as autobiography and places the narrative in an absolute position of authority. Indeed, they are right: white readers often make the mistake of forcing representation on non-white novels,<sup>3</sup> and I will always defend fictional literature's ability to provide the reader with valuable insight and a

powerful voice against the *status quo*. I could quote the Combahee River Collective on “the personal [being] political,” for instance,<sup>4</sup> as well as Jean-François Lyotard when he says of the text that it can incite “the metamorphoses of [its] potential energy into other things—other texts, but also paintings, [...] political actions, decisions, erotic inspirations, acts of insubordination, [...] etc.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, I wish to argue in this paper that *The Woman Warrior* is not meant to be read as just the testimony of a young Chinese American woman trying to deal with being the “other” in the United States—let alone the representation of “Chinese culture.” *The Woman Warrior* is also, and maybe first and foremost, the fragmented and personal report of memories she doesn’t have—memories that belong to “Chinese-Chinese” voices she heard or were told to her by her own family, memories from a past she tries to piece together in order to explore her identity. Maxine Hong Kingston says, in an interview, that she prioritized what was “real” to her and her family, thus basing her narratives on the talk-stories she heard.<sup>6</sup> Writing the “real,” for her, means writing as the people talk, and Kingston argues that imagination being created from emotions and sensitivity, they cannot, by nature, be fake; on the contrary, they provide multiple stories that are equally valid. In *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, it is reported that she said the following of memory and contradicting stories: “I like the difference in seeing [her brothers’ and sisters’ and her points of view] because it could have been either way; one remembered it one way and one the other. That gives me two stories of an event.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, when she perpetuates stereotypes of Chinese culture, she does so in a paradoxical way: since the majority of these stories were told to her thanks to the “talk-story” ritual Kingston relies on imagination and stereotypes to fill in the void left by incomplete stories. Moreover, Maxine Hong Kingston's

craft makes her intention all the more peculiar, as she often uses postmodern tools in her writing, but to an anti-deconstructing end. Indeed, imagination and invention, as well as the process of Maxine Hong Kingston meandering through fragments of history and identities, connect *The Woman Warrior* to postmodern techniques despite the paradoxical goals behind her work. However, by reading a fragmented soul's searching in the midst of a fragmented verbal and imaginary heritage, and with some help from *China Men*,<sup>8</sup> a later work of hers, I will study where Kingston employs postmodern techniques and subverts the postmodern deconstructing of the self in order to actually reassign and re/construct identities.

Since I am aware that postmodern thought and critique are proteiform, I wish to clarify elements of my methodology. I focus on Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard's perceptions of postmodernism and use Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* along with Gregory Castle's *Literary Theory Handbook* for condensed help with the complex theoretical and philosophical current. From Foucault I will use the definition of institutions as entities that exercise power over populations thanks to a pre-defined, constructed and imposed understanding of knowledge;<sup>9</sup> of Lyotard, I will apply the concept of poetics preceding meaning, as well as the sign/signifier relationship needing to be challenged along with the social construct that establishes it;<sup>10</sup> then, with both critiques in mind, I will explore notions of the fragmented self and of a fluid, de-centered identity.<sup>11</sup> For the purpose of this paper, my definition of the "fragmented self" will be one of an *I* torn between two worlds—Chinese and American—, filled with contradicting family stories, and longing for paradoxes that can never seem to be reconciled. Similarly, "de-centering" the self will evoke the questioned and destabilized identity, traveling across time and space, carried by different bodies, and emerging

through so many varieties that will not only make the self complex and multiple—it will be ungraspable, ever-changing, and fluid in its characteristics and tendencies. However, in addition to the general and multi-national theoretical background described above, and since theorists of the postmodern are widely known for their combat against power structures, and because one of the most powerful system of power in our world is white, male, and of Western European ancestry, I made sure that the specific critics under whose light I shall comment on Maxine Hong Kingston's complex art primarily include critics of Asian American identity; making me, a white woman, the mere interrogator and mediator of the different arguments that will build up on my fascination for Kingston's literary world.

Jean-François Lyotard anchors his vision of art and literature in *The Postmodern Condition* in the pleasure of the artist,<sup>12</sup> and revolves his theory around the individual instead of the nation, multiplicity rather than coherence, *les petits récits* (micronarratives) versus the enlightenment's universal truths.<sup>13</sup> Best and Kellner write that: "Most postmodernist art often took delight in the world as it is and happily coexisted in a pluralism of aesthetic styles and games" (PTCI11). Maxine Hong Kingston's art in *the Woman Warrior* (and *China Men* as well) is oddly similar to those perspectives, and the reader quickly understands that she, too, will prioritize the local over what Lyotard dismisses as the modernist "grand narrative".<sup>14</sup> *The Woman Warrior* will be about her Chinese family from the hyper-locality of their small village, and even the legend of Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior more internationally known as Mulan who enrolled in the army disguised as a man so her own father would not have to go, is deeply tied to the heroine's village—and this song will follow the already textually fragmented identity of Maxine the narrator, Maxine the character, and Kingston the author throughout this strange

autobiography. Translated as “The Ballad of Mulan” in Diane Simmons’s *Maxine Hong Kingston*,<sup>15</sup> the song originally called “Ode to Mulan” features a peasant’s origin story that recalls the “populism” and the turn to “kitsch and popular culture” Best and Kellner mention in *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*.<sup>16</sup> In this ballad, Fa Mu Lan sits inside of a house doing housewife work, and when she sighs only a sow hears her and replies.<sup>17</sup> There are no expectations for her other than being where she is, “at the window weaving.” It is said that “[s]he’s longing for no one at all,/She’s thinking of no one special.” As she secretly prepares for the war, Fa Mu Lan buys a horse and armory from markets all over the area, maybe in a way not to rise suspicions (since a woman can’t fight in the army); but this geographical depiction also emphasizes how she belongs to the community and land. She knows what to find where, and seems to be at the center of four cardinal points among which she distributes her errands:

In the eastern market she bought a steed,  
At the western a saddle and cloth;  
In the southern market she bought a bridle  
At the northern a whip[.]<sup>18</sup>

Later, after having ridden through mountains and fields and placated the Tartar army, Fa Mu Lan is offered riches and a place in the government to compensate for her heroism. But the warrior turns the offer down in a way that would make the anti-power postmodernists proud, and asks instead to return to her village:

Then the Khan asked what Mulan desired:  
“I have no use for a minister’s post,  
Just lend me a famous fleet-footed camel

To send me back to my village.”<sup>19</sup>

She goes back to her tent, trades her armor and disguise for her “robes of old,” and refuses the recognition and power she well deserves, preferring modesty and the proximity of her parents. Fa Mu Lan is thus in another center: she has a choice between a position of wealth and authority that will provide her with an individuality as well as great responsibilities; or losing her self by going back to living in a community where she might no longer be a hero, and where, instead, she is part of a system. Fa Mu Lan chooses domesticity and her “robes of old” that aren’t invested with her heroism—but the postmodern paradox isn’t solved: if hyper-locality is favored over a grand narrative, what to make of the blending of the individual in the globality of the village's community? When she revisits Mulan’s legend in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston adds a non-negligible subtlety. Imagining herself as Fa Mu Lan, Fa-Ma-Xine gives her character a husband and a child whom she hides respectively in her tent and in an adapted armor, before sending them back to her village while she finishes the war. Doing this, Kingston adds another alternative to Fa Mu Lan’s story, and enriches her with individual purpose and goals as a wife and mother.

Additionally, the use of Mulan’s story thus helps introduce another aspect of Lyotard’s postmodern view of literature: the redefining of the sign/signifier relationship. Like his colleagues Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lyotard challenges the traditional sign/signifier relationship, arguing that it is based on a social construct itself relying on arbitrary rules that need to be questioned. In addition to pointing out this social consensus on which all human interactions in a same system are based, Lyotard conceptualizes a “language game” that pinpoints how institutions depend on the general consensus to exercise their authority, and,

ultimately, pit a player against another in the game. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls speech (*prise de parole*) an “utterance,” and “every utterance [emphasis in original] should be thought of as a ‘move’ in a game.”<sup>20</sup> But these moves aren’t unmotivated: “to speak is to fight,” he then adds, “in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics.”<sup>21</sup> Using the vocabulary of ancient Greek games and contests, Lyotard denounces the negative motivations behind such a natural act as talking, and argues that the same power play is attributed to literature. The power play also has the effect of engrossing language, written or spoken, with meaning and purpose, and as needing to strive for universal peace and worldly coherence. But Lyotard disagrees with this position, and prioritizes poetry and aesthetics, the “erotics of art,” over hyper-locality instead of the universal narrative.<sup>22</sup> Writing that, “[a] move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention,”<sup>23</sup> he sees literature as a domain where traditional semiotics do not necessarily apply, and where the figurative can supplant the signifier. Kingston often favors the metaphoric and the figurative in her narratives, notably when she imposes incorrect or approximate translations on her narrator. As young Maxine imagines herself as Fa Mu Lan, either in her dreams only or during the day as well (it is not clear when the story occurs or if it is part of one stream of un/consciousness), there is a passage where the future warrior wishes to learn how to interrupt her menstruations. However, her guardian informs her that it is neither possible to do so nor is it vile to menstruate, and that she should “[l]et it run’ (‘Let it walk,’ in Chinese)” (*WW22*). While I have no way of knowing the Chinese expression Kingston intended to translate, there is a suspicious coincidence in a literal translation that calls for even more patience than the adapted English version. This could illustrate how Kingston manipulates a language she should understand, and hides behind her assigned

credibility to revisit Chinese sign's (in all the senses of the term) signifiers. Similarly, closer to the end of the book, the narrator is pondering the meaning of "Ho Chi Kuei" (*WW204*). It seems difficult to find Chinese-speaking people who can agree on a specific meaning, and we read that she claims to have found that "*chi*" means "[...] grub, bastard carp, chirping insect [...]," but also "dustpan-and-broom," which, in turn, she claims to be "a synonym for wife." She also draws the same parallel between the word for "slave," stating that it is another word for "woman"—something against which Frank Chin vehemently argues in his article "Come All Ye Asian Americans of the Real and the Fake." One might rightfully argue that Kingston here is exploring language through the feminist scope: by developing new interpretations of words and expressions, she can use them in favor of a meaning that better corresponds to Maxine's experience of the expression, and therefore reappropriate language and memories. Such a stance would answer to Lyotard's point of view on language being a system in which sender, addressee, and referent share a malleable utterance that should not be frozen in normatized significance. There is also the question of authority with regards to the utterance transmitted: depending on who is the sender to the addressee and referent, and what the intention is behind the act of speech, there is more or less knowledge that goes with the message—meaning that there is more or less authority and respect granted to the utterer. From both the feminist and the Chinese American scopes, reassigning meanings even to such old terms thus involves subverting who has authority over whom, and here allows Kingston to take the reins of what defines her and her experience of "Chinese culture."

The figurative also emerges when the world of the "real" and the world of ghosts are merged into one. Lyotard calls the artist an "inventor," attributing to these inventors a

“paralogy”— an art that goes beyond traditional reason and logic.<sup>24</sup> He might as well be talking about Maxine Hong Kingston directly, since, indeed, Kingston’s narrative merges fake and real into the complex multi-layered story of her childhood and of her family. When Maxine the narrator recalls a moment in her childhood when she and her mother used to sing “Ballad of Mulan,” she mentions how the song was “given” to her by her mother (*WW20*)—to be her own, and to breathe strength into her daughter, potentially: “I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given to me by my mother.” Through remembering how she used to share the song with her mother, and through revising the world it opened in her youthful mind, Kingston affirms that the story she tells, whether it be that of herself as Fa Mu Lan or the entire book, is hers—and the process that she initiated in her autobiography should go to show that the only representation she seeks is how her and her family represent themselves in their own mythology.

Revisiting the legend of Fa Mu Lan is also the reader’s first encounter with a prolonged tale that eventually blends in with the primary narrative, and blurs whatever boundaries should separate different layers of the story. Just as postmodernism opposes coherence and celebrates the plurality and fragmentation of human life, Kingston confuses her readers with intra and extradiegetic rules that don’t apply anymore. Even though an imaginary Maxine as Fa Mu Lan recalling her dreamed adventures as an apprentice swordswoman may recall Ulysses recounting his journey to Alcinous,<sup>25</sup> the reader’s feeble literary confidence is quickly overthrown by the brutal tense change in Fa-Ma-Xine’s adventures. Going from hypothesis (“I would have to grow up a warrior woman. The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof. [...] Suddenly, without noise, I would break clear into a yellow, warm world.”<sup>26</sup>) to factuality (“The door opened, and an old man and an old woman came out carrying bowls of rice [...].”<sup>27</sup>), the narrator

integrates the heterodiegetic storyline of the alternative character she imagines being into the homodiegetic relating of Maxine's childhood.

Moreover, the reader quickly realizes that what sounds fantastical and magic is not kept distinguished from Maxine's mother's life, as shows her story at Keung School, where Brave Orchid studies medicine to become a doctor. On the contrary, both universes, imagined and lived, are part of the same world and of the same physicality. When Brave Orchid arrives at the school, she hears the younger students talking about a ghost that haunts another room on the dormitory floor. Although we already knew how deeply Maxine's mother believes in ghosts, it is the first time the reader witnesses her actually interacting with one. She calls this one Boulder, a "Sitting Ghost," and she decides to confront to in order to try and chase him away.<sup>28</sup> However, insulting the ghost and showing her confidence are not enough, and, when she comes back to her senses and the girls ask her what happened, Brave Orchid realizes she had been torn between two very different timelines and spaces: that of her confrontation with Boulder who lets her see misery and sadness over a twelve-year span, and that of the reality of the dormitory in which she is unconscious for only an hour (*WW73*). This superimposing of timeframes, along with the layering of a story into different sub-stories and parallel events, could be the simple image of a character's life flashing before their eyes while death threatens to take them—however, it also resounds with the lack of coherence postmodernism strives for. Fragmentation, here, operates to separate one same existence between multiple levels of space and time, as well as identity. Kingston explores an indeterminacy and plasticity that shows the self's shape-shifting capacities, and de-centers identity in order to let it surf on alternative eras, realities, and potentialities.

However, some of Kingston's postmodern narrative techniques are less obvious, and her complexities lie on more than intricate layerings. Her goal in both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* is to retrace her family's history and explore the memories attached, and ultimately set the "historical framework" Foucault sees surrounding the fleeting self. Best and Kellner also mention how the past may be used in postmodern art when they speak of a "[p]astiche, quotation and play on past forms" that indeed echoes with Kingston's unearthing of Chinese traditions in order to adapt and rewrite them for her family. In fact, the multi-layered stories and complex spatiotemporal frames Kingston applies in her books serve to explore a past that she either didn't know or doesn't fully understand, and allow her to create her family's own mythos. But the multiplication of perspectives and imbrication of stories within stories also serve to draw a network of relations connecting what Lyotard called "nodal points."<sup>29</sup> Nodal points for Lyotard are the individuals' localities on the social web on which rules bounce, institutions thrive, and messages circulate. Lyotard seems to say that, even though the occurring interactions are socially constructed, messages make it possible for each individual to be briefly in power: they receive the utterance, are in charge of passing it over, and may even add their own understanding of it before transmitting the message. I would argue that this does not necessarily apply to minorities: in order to be a nodal point, their voices need to be heard and amplified through transmission. However, Maxine Hong Kingston's mythologizing, along with the theoretical paradox that comes with her filling in of gaps through imagination, might provide Chinese and Chinese American minorities with a newly found voice. The paradox lies in how Maxine Hong Kingston goes against the grain of deconstructing the self that many postmodernists encourage in the wake of Derrida's theory, and explores identity in *The Woman Warrior* with the goal to re-center

selves. That way, distancing herself from what was given to her by imagining the entire mythos, subverting meaning and traditions, and trying to oppose her mother's initial wish for her not to tell certain people's stories, contribute in Maxine Hong Kingston's very non-postmodern goals.

In *China Men*, for instance, Kingston multiplies different versions of her father's immigration story and creates the modern mythology of his travels to a strange country. Usually families could not afford emigrating wives and children, and left them behind in China while the fathers immigrated to the United States. They would find a job and send money home to provide for the rest of the family (and sometimes neighbors). The men's stories are thus less dreamy and empowering; instead, they are more concrete and dramatic, as Kingston reports from her father's own words: "BaBa became susceptible to the stories men told, which were not fabulations like the fairy tales and ghosts stories told by women" (CM41). Again, Kingston offers different versions of her father's immigration. She even introduces them with "I think this is the journey you don't tell me:" (CM49), and "Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way, something like this:" (CM53). The first story depicts BaBa in a box in a boat, with tiny but discreet holes pierced for him to be able to breathe without the staff noticing a live being could be hiding in there. He observes and listens to men describing beautiful America, and waits until the journey is over. In the second story, however, he is detained by immigration and waits in jail for about a year until he is set free and signed as legal by "white demons" (instead of "American ghosts" in *The Woman Warrior*). The first story could be partially true for many other immigrants who are trafficked and expedited to other countries; the second could be false considering how long some prisoners are kept in prison for mere administrative reasons. But they both push BaBa so deeply into his self and into an ambiguous and fake mythology, that Kingston

appears again to be exploring the postmodernist paradox of her art: while she develops the ambiguity of timeless and mostly invented stories taken as truth, she recreating a self instead of deconstructing it into rootless morsels. Indeed, in both scenarios, Kingston re-centers BaBa in himself through utterly physical sensations: in the box he can only rely on his senses to feel that he is jostled around, that the weather and spoken languages change, and that he experiences fear on multiple occasions when Americans come near his box in the cargo and might notice him. He imagines them executing him, and is projected into his humanity for its basic natural emotions and bodily needs; in the second scenario, BaBa is assaulted into his physicality: an official “poked him in the ass and genitals, looked in his mouth, pulled his eyelids with a hook” amongst other brutalities. Nevertheless, while BaBa could lose himself under both inhumane treatments that bring him down to the status of an animal, he uses his powerful mind to fly over what his body endures, and eventually find a way out of both jails.<sup>30</sup>

Maxine Hong Kingston thus works toward anchoring some of her characters’ selves rather than just transcending them over their bodily existences, denied or accepted. This might be even more notably done through the retold story of her unnamed aunt, or rather re-baptized “No Name Woman” by her family. She actually opens the book with the story of the ostracized aunt even though her mother forbade her to repeat the story (“You must not tell anyone [...] what I am about to tell you” (*WW1*)), thus symbolically announcing that she is the master of this narrative, and claiming she will reassign identity to the forsaken. Thanks to Kingston’s particular style and techniques for shaping incomplete stories, she is able to create the mythology of No Name Woman, raped and impregnated and forced into motherhood, treated as a whore then terrorized out of her home by her family, before she is finally pushed to kill both herself and her newborn

baby. Through saying that No Name Woman's story is taboo and sharing the process of her annihilation, Maxine Hong Kingston writes the short story of this woman who contributed not in her thinking that she should follow what is expected from women: she expresses the dread and pain of this who illustrates unjust and cruel treatment of women.

But No Name Woman is not the only one whose voice was stolen. After Kingston spends time reaffirming the damned and drawing her mythology, she can focus on her own story and explore how her heritage influenced young Maxine into having a complicated relationship with authority and speech. Maxine Hong Kingston herself ends up talking-story the complexity and instabilities of the mythos she created, showing how she has taken over the responsibility of carrying a past that she didn't necessarily witness. This firm grasp of her origins is allowed by exploring the negative space left by incomplete memory and stories, and adding her own thread to the web of her family's history. This is a notable act from Kingston, who, towards the end of what finally becomes a more traditional autobiography, says that she had trouble speaking up as a child. "Quacking like a duck," (*WW*192) "whispering" (*WW*200), or not speaking at all describe Maxine's past relationship with acts of speech. She is self-conscious about speaking "American-feminine" at school (*WW*172), which involved not being too loud and being quiet instead, while, at home, she interrogates her mother for details about some of the talk-stories she had previously shared with her. A woman from their neighborhood, an authoritarian villager (either someone they really knew from the villager where they used to live, or a neighbor from the area of San Francisco that was now their new village), points out to Maxine's mother that her voice is so awful, she might never marry. Speaking thus became a shameful act for Kingston, and young Maxine even takes to bullying another young girl who doesn't speak at school

(*WW*176-181)—a space where judgments are made, and the kids perform their public personas (Guy Debord’s “société du spectacle”). However, if we come back to Lyotard’s utterances and think of how the French translation of “act of speech” is *prise de parole*, we may draw a corollary between the active verb of *prendre*, “take,” and Maxine Hong Kingston’s work on reappropriation in *the Woman Warrior*. We might therefore see that, by trying to unravel the events of a heritage that she can’t fully grasp, and by giving voice to untold stories and repudiated consciences, (the “abjected,” Grace Kyungwon Hong would say<sup>31</sup>) Maxine Hong Kingston might be trying to reverse the power both Chinese and American knowledge have over her. She might be applying Sue-Im Lee’s proposition of Asian American literary critique trying to “‘speak’ the material realities of hitherto ‘invisible,’ ‘disenfranchised,’ or ‘silent’ subjects,” all the while departing from the material to transcend the whole into the powerful immaterial.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, in deploying her family’s history, and in trying to understand where she comes from, Kingston regains the potency of her own voice. She claims back her discursive capacities from her confused younger self—confused by the transnational upbringing, as well as by the very thin limit between reality and what usually reads as fantasy in the Occidental world —, and from what her mother embodies. To that effect, she tries to chase away her own “Boulder,” the burden of living up to her heritage, of not knowing what is true or not, as well as the contemporaneous burden of representation on both sides of the spectrum of her dual identity. The fact that she invents myths, disassociates meaning and reallocates new ones, along with the process of re/imagining events and the gaps that puncture the stories into fragmented ones, might show how she subverts general knowledge (of China by the Chinese, and of China by the Americans) in order to build a new fantasy that will make more sense to her, and that she will be

able to proclaim as her very own. As Laura E. Skandera-Trombmey put it in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*: “[m]emory can serve as a kind of narrating subject, making coherent wholes out of meaningless fragments”.<sup>33</sup> By trying to draw a picture of her history, Kingston lets her narrative invest space and time, and writes the flow as it constructs itself. And only towards the end, after the narrator has told the stories of China before her mother finally settled in America, does Maxine get back in touch with her own self, the identity for which she explored the foundations—one that is forever haunted by talk-stories and ghosts. Thanks to the journey that took place earlier, she might thus be able to downplay the pressure some Chinese traditions, embodied by her mother who sometimes represses her voice, have over her by redefining what she doesn’t understand, what she’s been told, and by ultimately reversing on which side knowledge stands. Kingston might also be even more postmodern than some aspects of die-hard postmodernists’ positions, then, if she is able to reassign self using modernist tools. Desperately looking for her origins and the traditional justifications behind events and behaviors; re-selving selves that had been deprived from their identities to the point that even their bodily existences were annihilated; reveling in her mother’s grounding in what Western readers might enjoy as “the Chinese culture”: Maxine disobeys the rules of the postmodern way. But what makes her art so complex and unique is first and foremost the fact that the techniques she employs in order to achieve these seemingly non-postmodern goals are what we could call “postmodern” (reassigning meaning, exploring the figurative and turning it into fact, playing with narration, timelines and alternative plots), and, ultimately, bring Kingston towards an unexpected achievement. Indeed, by applying innovative discursive and narrative tools on memory and identity, two social constructs that entrap the individual in unjustly assigned

characteristics according to the great postmodern figures such as Lyotard and Foucault, she succeeds in reappropriating the past of her family, and turning it into an incredible, special, time and space-transcending mythology—that, in the end, seems to conclude in a satisfactory way as Maxine Hong Kingston ends with an ambiguous “[i]t translated well” (*WW*209).

## Notes

1. Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. Vintage International ed., Vintage Books, 1989.

2. Maxine Hong Kingston’s most vocal detractor was Frank Chin. Of *The Woman Warrior* in general, and if Kingston’s exploration of the legend of Mulan in particular, Chin said that she “rewrites the heroine, Fa Mulan, to the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization” (“Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 1–28.). In *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston* (see footnote 7), Kingston even admits to having been physically threatened by Chin, he thought her literature was so harmful to Chinese American identity.

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in “Can the subaltern speak?,” denounces forcing the “multicultural” reading on works of non-white authors; the Combahee River Collective criticizes that as well, mentioning how it’s not people of color’s roles to educate white people about race.

4. “Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1979, in Moraga, Cherríe, and Toni Cade Bambara, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2. ed., 7. printing, Kitchen Table, 1983.

5. As translated by Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas in *Postmodern Theory : Critical Interrogations*. Guilford Press, 1991, p.147.

6. Talk-stories, for Maxine, are a ritual mainly perpetuated by her mother in *the Woman Warrior*, and by her father and other male generations in *China Men*. They seem to be part of other Asian cultures and to have been explored by Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and the Hawaiian anthology *Talk-Story: An Anthology on Hawaii’s Local Writers* (1978).

7. *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*. University Press of Mississippi, 1998. p. 51.

8. Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. 1st ed., Knopf, 1980.

9. Best and Kellner in *Postmodern theory: critical interrogations*: “Against modern theories that see knowledge as neutral and objective (positivism) or emancipatory (Marxism), Foucault emphasizes that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power.” p. 50.

10. Best and Kellner in *Postmodern theory: critical interrogations*: “Indeed poststructural and postmodern theorists would stress the arbitrary and conventional nature of everything social—language, culture, practice, subjectivity, and society itself.” p. 20

11. Best and Kellner in *Postmodern theory: critical interrogations*: “Postmodern theory also rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory

abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject,” pp. 4-5.

12. Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*.

University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

13. Gregory Castle, *The Literary Theory Handbook*. John Wiley, 2013. p.40.

14. Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiii.

15. Simmons, Diane. *Maxine Hong Kingston*. Twayne Publishers, 1999. p 48.

16. Page 10.

17. The sow is mentioned in the translation provided by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley’s

*Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*.

18. “Ode to Mulan,” <https://www.yellowbridge.com/onlinelit/mulan.php>.

19. Ibid.

20. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, p. 10.

21. Ibid.

22. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*: “The new sensibility, by contrast, immerses itself in the pleasures of form and style, privileging an ‘erotics’ of art over a hermeneutics of meaning,” p. 10.

23. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, p. 10.

24. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, xxv.

25. Homer’s *Odyssey*, chant VIII. Ulysses is welcomed by Alcinous at the very beginning of his journey. Ulysses tells the story of his life and travels as a way to show gratitude, and as

conventions dictated at the time. Staying anonymous and secretive was an insult to the host, as opposed to sharing the *voyage* being a way to entertain and enrich with new stories.

26. *The Warrior Woman*, p. 20.

27. *The Warrior Woman*, p. 21.

28. A Sitting Ghost, according to Kingston's retelling of her mother's explanations, kills the living by sitting on their chest and suffocated them under its weight. The weight is psychological as well, and the soul can go crazy as a black haze takes over the individual's conscience, and tears them from the human world.

29. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, p. 15.

30. In the second scenario, immigration services try to trick him into giving the wrong answers to their questions. However, he outsmarts them and soon becomes "the legal father" in the narrative.

31. Hong, Grace Kyungwon. "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2008, p.99.

32. Introduction. Davis, Rocio G., and Sue-Im Lee, editors. *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*. Temple University Press, 2006.

33. Skandera-Trombley, Laura E., editor. "MHK and her fake books" *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*. G.K. Hall; Prentice Hall International, 1998, p. 52.

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