

Chinese Diasporic Women's Writing, Gender and Identities: Rereading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* for Mnemonic Traces

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Abstract

This article analyzes Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* – how she constructs a Chinese diasporic feminist identity via autobiographical, familial, and ethnic collective remembrance. In analyzing this memoir, this article is concerned with how gender, identity and memory are interrelated and how they are performed in the Chinese diaspora in America. In rereading the memoir for personal, familial and collective remembrance practices, this essay suggests that Kingston conveys three mnemonic traces: memory as archeological excavation and memory as continuous revision and retranslation; memory as a tool to challenge and to subvert traditional gender ideology; and the relation between memory and storytelling, in which Kingston equates memory and voice with storytelling and silence with oppression. Kingston uses memory narratives as a strategic method to question traditional system of gender identities, roles and expectations. She excavates cultural and familial stories or collective memories, and then revises or retranslates them to understand her place and identities in America and in the Chinese diaspora. Kingston is conscious that the process of recovering, retranslating, and transmitting personal, familial, and ethnic collective memory is always fractured, negotiated, and a product of struggle. Hence it destabilizes constructions of identity and community formation along with knowledge production. Kingston notes that women are frequently the transmitters of memory – personal, familial, cultural, and collective – through their storytelling. This article illustrates that ethnic collective memory, like cultural identity, is a site of heterogeneity and difference, where some memories can perpetuate homeland and diasporic patriarchy while other memories can provide more liberating narratives for women and young girls. *The Woman Warrior* is an attempt to rewrite both Chinese diasporic memory by challenging its sexism and the national official memory of the United States by pointing to its history of gender inequality, racism, and Orientalism.

Key words

Chinese diasporic women, writing, memory, identities

Introduction: Maxine Hong Kingston's Writing and Mnemonic Traces

This article analyzes Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* – how she constructs a Chinese diasporic feminist identity via autobiographical, familial and ethnic collective remembrance. Kingston reveals in this memoir that gender, memory, and identity are dialogically related, and that one's gender and ethnic identities may be affected by personal memory, familial memory, and ethnic collective memory. I note that Kingston conveys three mnemonic traces in this book: memory as archeological excavation and memory as continuous revision and retranslation; memory as a tool to challenge and to subvert traditional gender ideology; and the relation between memory and storytelling. She excavates cultural and familial memories and histories, and then revises and retranslates them to understand her multiple identities and place in America and in the Chinese diaspora. For Kingston, remembrance practices and narratives can be used as a strategic tool or method to critique conventions of gender identities, roles and expectations. Moreover, Kingston connects memory with storytelling and voice, and silence with oppression. Counter to the masculinist Chinese diaspora's tendency to evoke memories of homeland and cultural traditions as sites of nostalgia, Kingston's writing demonstrates that nostalgia can ignore the social practice of sexual and gender inequality in both China and the Chinese diaspora, including the transportation of Chinese patriarchal ideology from the homeland to the diaspora. Kingston rewrites the collective memories of the Chinese diaspora memories and the official memories of the nation-state to reclaim a feminist postcolonial voice and space. Kingston's writing reveals that women often act as transmitters of generational, counter-cultural, or collective memories via storytelling. She also suggests that women's memories, like the collective memories of the nation-state and of the ethnic or diasporic community, are heterogeneous and hence can become sites of power struggle over truth claims among the women themselves, in this case, between the mother's version and the daughter's invention of the stories. I conclude that this feminist ethnic or diasporic memoir can be read as a commemorative act to remember the silenced and marginalized: to tell their life stories, memories, histories, experiences, imaginations, and negotiations in order to rewrite the official national memo-

ry or history and the Chinese diasporic memory in America.

The Politics of Social or Collective Memory and “Mnemonic Communities”

Memory can be understood as a dialogue with the past. Memory subjects the past to a reflective awareness, revealing the past's difference from the present. While autobiographical memory is “the way we tell others and ourselves the story of our lives” – stories of self-knowledge and life themes that provide a sense of identity and continuity – memory is also inter-subjective and social (Misztal, 2003, p. 10). Memory is social because memory is attached to membership of social groups of one kind or another and because memory is structured by language, collectively held ideas, and experiences shared with others (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p. 7). Memory exists in relation to language, symbols, events, and social and cultural contexts. For a memory to be social, it must be articulated and then transmitted. We remember as members of social or cultural groups, assuming, internalizing, or resisting certain traditions, cultural milieu, or collective representation. Memory cannot be removed from its social, cultural or historical contexts. Memory is social because the act of remembering is interactive, yet we share the social framework of remembrance with some individuals and not others (Misztal, 2003, p. 11-12).

Social or collective memory is both retrospective and prospective, pointing to the past and the future and their relation to the present (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p. 51). Social memory is a source of knowledge, providing material for a group's conscious reflection (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p. 26). Social memory changes as groups interpolate, substitute, or appropriate memory in keeping with their particular worldview (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p. 58-59). Social memory can be analyzed as narratives or guides to social identity that have the power to legitimize the present (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p. 88). As a force in history, memory can become a means of unity and legitimization, division, and falsification. Memory is affected by circumstance, context, and medium of conception and transmission. Different groups choose to commemorate different things, constructing or manipulating memories – local, familial, gender, ethnic, national – for ideological or

political ends. As creative active agent, each group validates different memories to justify the present (Fentress & Wickham, 1992).

Analyses of collective memory often lead to discussions about communities of memory or “*mnemonic communities*.” Memory communities – such as the family, the ethnic group and the nation – often socialize us to remember and forget. These communities provide us with the social contexts in which memories are embedded and mark the emotional tone, depth, and style of our remembering (Misztal, 2003, p. 160). The building of a nation is founded on a certain representation of its past. National memories are created in tandem with forgetting, for to remember everything may pose a threat to national cohesion and national identity (Misztal, 2003, p. 17). Ernest Renan, for example, argues that nationhood is founded on selective historical forgetting. However, multicultural nations such as the United States today are characterized by heterogeneity and diversity of cultures, languages, ethnicities, traditions, sexualities, and group histories. Given the contemporary processes of migration and globalization, national memory is fragmented leading to “the transformation of memory from the master narrative of nations to the episodic narrative of groups” (Misztal, 2003, p. 18). It is difficult today for democratic societies to construct a unified public memory. Recent researches on commemoration reveal a multiplicity of invented traditions and a plurality of memories. Remembrance or commemoration by groups and collectives of civil society can be seen as “a struggle or negotiation between competing narratives,” and reveals that the dynamic of commemorative rituals can involve “a constant tension between creating, preserving and destroying memories” (Misztal, 2003, p. 127). Today, different social groups – on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and religion – use memory as a screen to project their different interests, rights, controversies, conflicts, and contradictions.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston deploys memory narratives as a screen to project her identity as a second-generation Chinese diasporic woman as well as rewriting and diversifying the national memories of the United States by depicting the different interests, rights, controversies, conflicts, and contradictions that are faced by both the first generation and the second generation Chinese diasporic subjects in America. Identities are socially constructed, contingent on time, place,

and cultural contexts, and thus are fluid and unstable. Scholars have used the term hybridity, referring to that which is neither indigenous nor exogenous, to understand the complex diasporic transnational identities (Agnew, 2005, p. 12). Diasporas construct racialized, sexualized, gendered, and oppositional identities, and diasporic consciousness can live out a sense of loss and hope as a defining tension (Agnew, 2005, p. 13). While a hybrid identity can evoke a sense of immanent jouissance, for the postcolonial subject it can often lead to expressions of extreme pain and dislocation (Agnew, 2005, p. 12-13). By Chinese diasporic identity, I refer to the construction and performativity of non-essentialized Chinese identity that is characterized by hybridity or bifurcation, of making transnational connection between homeland China and the place of settlement, which is America for Kingston. By Chinese diasporic feminist identity, I refer to a feminist transnational identity that is critical of gender oppression in both China and the Chinese diaspora. For Kingston, storytelling via remembrance practices (whether mythical, historical, or invented) is what bridges homeland China and America. The identity of second generation diasporic feminist subject becomes more sutured and difficult to construct and imagined, sliding between identification and disidentification, because Kingston as an Asian female writer not only has to counter the social forces of sexism, racism, class inequality, and Orientalism, but also the Chinese homeland is only imagined and is made seemingly “unreal” by the inconsistencies of the storytelling by her mother as a first generation Chinese diasporic emigrant.

***The Woman Warrior*: Female Ethnic Diasporic Autobiography or Fiction?**

The Woman Warrior is a good example of the diverse women’s life narratives in the past few decades that have destabilized Western autobiography with its universal subject and thus have begun to rewrite the autobiographical canon by producing the possibility of multiple critical positions and voices. In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Sidonie Smith suggests that Western autobiography has played a part in serving “to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” and has designated

embodiment to the status of the Other that marks women as an “encumbered self, identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny” (Smith, 1993, p. 18, p. 12-13). Because the discourse of embodiment has been connected mostly to the marginalized, women in particular, and because it can challenge the universal subject of Western autobiography, Smith argues that women should use embodiment as a trope and a method of “talking back” to the dominant discourse (Smith, 1993, p. 20). As Smith notes, because of the interrelated positionalities of identities (gender, race, class, nationality, religion, ethnicity), the autobiographical subject “speaks not from one overdetermined position” but becomes multiply designated, “situated within diverse, sometimes congruous, often competing, even contradictory discursive fields” (Smith, 1993, p. 21). In many ways, Kingston’s writing evokes what Sidonie Smith argues are the characteristics of contemporary women’s autobiographies, characteristics that proceed from the need to explore how the female ethnic or diasporic autobiographical subject is multiply designated within diverse, sometimes congruous and other times conflicting and competing discourses, voices, and perspectives. The female ethnic or diasporic autobiographical subject can only situate herself, with sutured sensibility, within positionalities of non-unity and non-consistency. By utilizing the embodied talk-stories of female ethnic or diasporic autobiography, Kingston talks back and challenges Chinese patriarchy and the universal subject of Western autobiography.

The Woman Warrior, as noted by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “has been steeped in controversy, enthusiastically claimed, ingeniously deployed, and at times bitterly denounced by contesting interpretive communities” (Wong, 1999, p. 3). Today this book is embedded in American feminist and multicultural critical and pedagogical practices, a popular memoir taught in many feminist and literary classes. Male Chinese critics, in particular, have critiqued Kingston for presenting a “real” Chinese culture as timeless, monolithic, and exotic (Wong, 1999, p. 5). For Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, the problem that led to various controversies around the text is a question of genre. The book is marketed as non-fiction, a memoir, but much of the book is fiction – and “compromised fiction” at that. Wong argues that mainstream society’s Orientalist expectations are debilitating and should be resisted, but there should also be “creative space for Chinese American writers to articulate their sui generis experi-

ences” (Wong, 1999, p. 7). As a form that embodies subjectivity and objectivity, expression and documentation, autobiography creates in readers the expectations of privileged access to the experience of a person’s life and sometimes to the experiences of an entire people. From an intra-ethnic perspective, autobiography may be valued as a method to preserve memories and to celebrate cultural continuity and identity. From an inter-ethnic perspective, there is an element of display, intentional or not, that is unavoidable. Many readers-as-outsiders thus have a misguided assumption that the author is speaking for “their people” (Wong, 1999, p. 42). Because of its fictionalized autobiographical style of writing, which is characteristic of postmodern life writing, Kingston’s memoir has been subjected to many misreadings. Chinese male critics have argued that Kingston has exoticized and misrepresented Chinese culture for non-Chinese audiences, and non-Chinese readers may misread this autobiography in Orientalist terms as a “guided Chinatown tour” (Wong, 1999, p. 29) Wong challenges the critics who have faulted *The Woman Warrior*, for she argues they have failed to see “the difficulty and urgency of the imaginative enterprise so necessary to the American-born generation: to make sense of Chinese and American culture from its own viewpoint... to articulate its own reality, and to strengthen its precarious purchase on the task of self-fashioning” (Wong, 1999, p. 47). My task here is not to review the prolific debates surrounding the book *The Woman Warrior*, but to reread it for its remembrance practices in order to understand how memory-making is interconnected with issues of voice and silence, power and empowerment, and identity construction, however precarious, within a particular life narrative. In the latter part of this article, I will engage with three mnemonic traces in Kingston’s book: memory as archeological excavation and memory as continuous revision and retranslation; memory as a tool to challenge conventional gender ideology; and the relation between memory and storytelling, silence and oppression.

Memory as Archaeological Excavation and Memory as Continuous Revision or Retranslation

Part memoir, history, myth, folklore, fiction, personal and familial memory, *The Woman Warrior* is a postmodern collage of five short prose

narratives that tell the coming of age story of a young second-generation Chinese diasporic girl, who is not named but represents the author. Henceforth, I will refer to the narrator as Maxine and the author as Kingston. Kingston is interested in multiple themes in her memoir: personal and collective memories, identity, ethnicity, family, coming of age, cultural transition, assimilation, linguistic and systemic racism, woman as other, women's voice and agency, storytelling, cross-generational conflicts, alienation, and the difficult negotiation between two cultural assemblages for the second-generation Chinese diasporic subject. She explores the search for identity, how the self intersects with ethnic and gender identity within particular familial, cultural, and national geographies.

Kingston can be credited for her introduction of the genre "talk-story" into ethnic literature in America. Talk-story can be considered as: "community discourse, an inherited oral narrative tradition that incorporates family tales and genealogy, history, familiar adages, folklores, myth, heroic stories, even didactic and cautionary pronouncements that have been handed down – and embellished – by successive generations within an extended clan" (Huntley, 2001, p. 66). Talk-story – as the site that allows stories to be told, change, and grow into other stories – is an appropriate vehicle for Kingston to re-imagine the past, to rejuvenate, and to create a cultural community's significant narratives and collective memories.

One of the key sites of communal talk-story for Kingston is her family's Laundromat in Stockton's Chinatown, a place where customers and neighbors congregated to gossip, providing Kingston with an archive of stories, family tales, historical accounts, legends, and myths to work with in her writing. Deliberately refusing to travel to China until 1984, Kingston invents and reinvents a China that does not exist "out there" but a mythic China based on reconstructed memory (Huntley, 2001, p. 11). Kingston's China is "a constructed geography of the imagination, an unstable and amorphous landscape that owes its continued existence to fading, unreliable memories"; it is a collage of myth, memory, and impression, storytelling by her mother and the Chinese immigrants, and American popular culture (Huntley, 2001, p. 70). Realizing that talk-story can become a strategy for transmitting cultural stories from one generation to another via generational memory, Kingston is inter-

ested in recreating “the China of memory” as the setting for her retelling of familial and diasporic group stories (Huntley, 2001, p. 13). In fact, Kingston’s prose style – circular, disjointed, episodic – is suitable for such evocation of the fluid and ambiguous personal, familial and collective remembrance.

The first narrative “No Name Woman” tells the story of an unnamed aunt whose transgression of Chinese patriarchal traditions and sexual norms offers a political context for the narrator to challenge the unwritten rules of Chinese femininity she is expected to obey. The book begins with Maxine’s mother warning her daughter of patriarchal punishment for any act of gender and sexual transgression. She said: “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (p. 3). According to Maxine’s mother, the villagers organized a midnight raid against the aunt’s family, in violent revolt against the aunt’s illegitimate pregnancy. That night the aunt gave birth to the baby in the pigsty, and the next morning Maxine’s mother found her and the baby “plugging up the family well” (p. 5). The mother warned Maxine: “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (p. 5).

In many ways, Kingston’s retelling of her mother’s talk-story about her No Name Aunt is an example of what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.” With reference to the Holocaust, Hirsch refers to “postmemory” as a memory that is passed down from one generation to the next, that structures “inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). Hirsch defines “postmemory” as “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). Maxine inherits trans-generationally the traumatic “postmemory” of her No Name Aunt via her mother’s talk-story. This story is a testimony to the power of patriarchal erasure in history – the denial of women’s sexuality and existence. If a woman transgresses con-

ventional gender and sexual roles and norms, she is punished with the erasure of her name, body, subjectivity, life history and descendents from patrilineage. Moreover, Maxine's mother acts in contradiction; she retrieves the forgotten memory of the No Name Aunt, yet she also reinforces patriarchal silencing by warning the daughter to never repeat the story or act of female resistance to subjugation. Maxine is troubled by her mother's contradictory move – to excavate yet to deny, and to remember yet to forget her aunt's traumatic experiences. As a second-generation Chinese American, Maxine must attempt to understand the contradiction of both cultural assemblages: “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (p. 5-6). Maxine learns that storytelling, such as her mother's didactic and morality stories, is influenced by invention, contradiction, motives, biases, and personal and familial memory. Both the narrator and the author indulge in conjectures and revisions of narratives, by speculating on the details of No Name Aunt's life story. Was her aunt's pregnancy a result of a love affair, or a consequence of coerced sex, even rape by a member of the clan who later participated in the raid against her family? Was her aunt a resistant sexual woman, a free spirit, or a subjugated victim? Was her predawn suicide an act of spite, intended to plug the family well in order to haunt the family, the village and later generations in both China and the diaspora, and to force them to remember the collective act of injustice against her and her child? By telling the story of No Name Aunt, Kingston also points to that fact that wives of overseas Chinese migrants to America often did remarry or had affairs, and this posed a threat to patriarchal families that strategically pursued male migration as a form of family socioeconomic maintenance and advancement. No Name Aunt was certainly not the first wife of a male Chinese migrant to have an affair or to have been raped for that matter. We, as readers, are left to wonder why the villagers attacked No Name Aunt and her family, why the women villagers participated in the attack, and why Maxine's mother embellished the story. What the incident shows is that there is no straightforward oppression and enforcement of patriarchy, and that sometimes women also participate in enforcing

patriarchal ideology. Maxine knows that her family and the villagers want her to participate in this punishment by silence. She notes: “The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (p. 16). The narrator refuses to forget and erase the story of No Name Woman. Her ghost haunts Maxine, compels her to bear witness and testimony, for she alone “devote[s] pages of paper to her” after “fifty years of neglect” (p. 16).

According to Nicola King, there are two models of the process of memory in Sigmund Freud’s writing and they exist in tension with each other. The first model of memory is illustrated by Freud’s analogy of archaeological excavation, which assumes the past still exists “somewhere” waiting to be recovered by the remembering subject, uncontaminated by time and subsequent experience. The second model sees the memory process as a continuous revision or “retranslation,” reworking memory traces by later knowledge and experience (King, 2000, p. 4). I suggest that Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* negotiates this tension, writing both memory as archaeological excavation and memory as continuous revision or retranslation. The former form of memory is about a return (whether physical, cultural or psychic), a return to one’s cultural heritage or group past, homeland, matrilineal archive of storytelling, ancestors and foremothers, personal or familial history to grapple with a “truth.” The latter is about the need to rewrite, revise and re-invent new versions of familial, diasporic, communal, and national memories to identify and hence construct a feminist second-generation Chinese diasporic identity. This tension exists in the story of “No Name Woman.” Kingston is interested in finding out the “truth” about what happened to her aunt, and discovers that her mother’s truth claim of familial memory is but one version of many. Realizing memory is in flux and based on representation, Kingston is aware that rather than lamenting or ignoring the fissure between experiencing an event and remembering it, “this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3). Her mother’s story of No Name Aunt provides Kingston with a creative space to tell other possible or imaginary stories of a familial memory.

Kingston deploys memory in her writing to ignite the process of invention and imagination, and to derive some form of “truth” via personal, familial and ethnic collective memories about her own cultural

sources. By telling the story of No Name Woman, Kingston is able to imagine her aunt as a woman with agency, whose suicide or death speaks of a silenced history within a family and of the gender inequality in China and in the Chinese diaspora. Kingston's memoir reveals that imagination is needed for a memoir to create a viable version of the past. In casting the aunt as the "spite suicide" that pollutes the drinking water, Kingston provides her aunt with subjectivity and some degree of subversion. In mourning her death, Kingston gives her aunt a second proper burial. In the next section, I will examine how Kingston uses remembrance practices to challenge conventional gender ideology and system.

Memory as a Tool to Expose and Subvert Traditional Gender Ideology

Moving from a family talk-story to a well-known myth, Kingston then tells the narrative about the legendary swordswoman Fa Mu Lan (Hua Mulan) in a chapter called "White Tigers." Within Chinese patrilineal patriarchal kinship, women are devalued as others. From the emigrant villagers and her parents, Maxine frequently hears the Chinese Confucian maxims that girls are parasites and deserters of their families: "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," or "There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (p. 46). The narrator recalls: "There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!" (p. 47). At one point, she laments: "Even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (p. 48). Structural, relational, and symbolic patriarchy continues to pervade in China and in the Chinese diaspora. If Chinese masculinist social norms expect Maxine to "grow up a wife and a slave," the chant of Fa Mu Lan, a gift from her mother, holds the "power to remind" the narrator that she would grow up to be "a warrior woman" (p. 20). It is through women's talk-stories that young girls, like Maxine, learn about sexism and the possibility of women's resistance.

In reclaiming the myth or legend of Fa Mu Lan, an empowering warrior woman who vanquished an entire enemy army, Kingston provides an antidote to the submissive female. The figure of Fa Mu Lan also attests to the subversive act of "gender reversal" in her challenge of the

oppressive bipolar sex/gender system of both China and America (Ramet, 1996). By cross-dressing as a man to join the army, Fa Mu Lan temporarily ceases to be woman as other, transforming herself into a valuable fighter to defend her family and community, as well as challenging the conventional gender scripts of China. Maxine identifies with Fa Mu Lan, for both females must transform themselves into literal or symbolic swordswomen to revenge those who wrong them by reporting a crime. While Fa Mu Lan's parents carved revenge on her back in the form of the names of those who had wronged her family, Maxine also learns to inscribe vengeance on her back by witnessing and reporting the crimes of American racism. She declares:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words – "chink" words and "gook" words too – that they do not fit on my skin. (p. 53)

By retelling the stories and memories of No Name Woman (from her mother's version) and Fa Mu Lan (from the "The Ballad of Mulan" and her mother's talk-story), Kingston imagines the inner lives, passions, fears and desires of the two women. The story of "No Name Woman" reveals that women's memories can become sites of a power struggle over truth claims among women themselves, in this case, between the mother's version and the daughter's invention of the story. The story of Fa Mu Lan shows that ethnic collective memory as conveyed by cultural myths can be used to claim ethnic and gender identities. For instance, Maxine identifies with Fa Mu Lan in order to claim an empowering Chinese American female heroic role as a woman warrior. Yet Kingston's memoir reveals that ethnic collective memory as found in cultural myths or legends should not be transmitted as it is, in its "original" form. For instance, she takes a fragment of the legend of

Yueh Fei, the general who had words carved into his back, and incorporates it into her version of Fa Mu Lan. Using a feminist post-modern literary strategy, Kingston deliberately takes fragments of Chinese cultural texts and traditions – such as the stories of Mulan, Yueh Fei, and the poetess Ts'ai Yen – to retrieve and to invent a new narrative. As the author tells us, “White Tigers” is not simply the retelling of a Chinese myth but “one transformed by America, a sort of Kung fu movie parody” (Kingston, 1998, p. 97).

Both narratives of “White Tigers” and “No Name Woman” exemplify what I have argued previously, that Kingston evokes both memory as archeological excavation and memory as continuous revision and retranslation. She excavates these cultural stories and collective memories, and then revises or retranslates them to understand her place and identities in the Chinese diaspora in America. The process of recovering, retranslating and then transmitting ethnic collective memory is always negotiated and a product of struggle. Hence it destabilizes the process of identity and group formation and knowledge production. As a feminist, Kingston must be selective about what form of Chinese diaspora ethnic or collective memory she reclaims, retranslates, and then transmits. Kingston, for instance, recovers, retranslates and transmits the tales of Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen, instead of Chinese Confucian ideology, which is upheld by most Chinese diasporic males, who continue to gain privilege from these masculinist cultural traditions. While ethnic collective memory is important for reclaiming in the context of historical amnesia and partial erasure of minority history by the nation-state, ethnic collective memory, like cultural identity, should also be recognized as a site of heterogeneity and multiplicity. Whereas some memories can perpetuate homeland and diaspora patriarchy, other memories can provide some liberating narratives for women and young girls.

Kingston recognizes that gender, identity, and memory are dialogical and that one's gender and ethnic identities (Chinese diasporic woman/girl) can be influenced by personal memory (Kingston's remembrance of her own personal experiences), familial memory (the story of No Name Woman) and ethnic collective memory (cultural myths such as the tale of Fa Mu Lan). If the patriarchal Chinese diaspora tends to evoke memories of homeland and cultural traditions as sites of nostalgia, Kingston shows that the nostalgic gaze and sentiment can ignore

and disguise the practices of sexual and gender inequality both in the homeland China and in the diaspora. She attempts to rewrite and to subvert both the collective memories of the Chinese diaspora in America and the national official memories of the nation-state to claim a feminist postcolonial sexual space, identity, and voice. In the process, Kingston reveals that women are the transmitters of generational, counter-cultural, or collective memories via everyday talk-stories. If her mother carries the legacy of the oral tradition of talk-stories, Kingston, as a writer, passes on personal, familial, and cultural stories and memories through the print media. In the next section, I explore the relation between memory and storytelling. Kingston, for instance, equates remembrance practices with voice and storytelling and silence with oppression and amnesia.

Memory and Storytelling

In the chapter entitled “Shaman,” Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, plays the role of a modern warrior woman who exorcises the malevolent Sitting Ghost, earns a medical degree, and succeeds as a medical practitioner before she migrates to the United States. The narrative also reveals the shift in class status and downward mobility for the first-generation Chinese emigrant in America. Attempting to grapple with the psychic pain of her downward mobility from a life as a medical practitioner to one of menial labor, Brave Orchid tells Maxine: “You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (p. 77). If America represents a “terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away” (p. 104), China, for Brave Orchid, is remembered as a place where time is slower. She tells Maxine: “One year lasted as long as my total time here; one evening so long, you could visit your women friends, drink tea, and play cards at each house, and it would still be twilight... I would still be young if we lived in China” (p. 106). Home and a sense of belonging are thus experienced differently for the first- and second-generation Chinese diasporic subjects. While Brave Orchid and other emigrant villagers recall China and mourn it as a lost home, Maxine and her siblings view China as a haunting symbolic site of incomprehensibility. China, for Maxine and her siblings, is a place rife with sexism and age hierarchy, and America is perceived as a new cul-

tural and political home, even if life in America is fractured by sexism, racial discrimination, and class inequality. As Maxine recalls: “Whenever my parents said ‘home,’ they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China... I did not want to go where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own” (p. 99).

Kingston also explores issues of storytelling or talk-story, voice and silence. In *The Woman Warrior*, storytelling functions as a self-reflexive postmodern ethnography, a vehicle for recording and rewriting cultural values, and a means to articulate multiple and fragmented cultural identities and memories with difference. Storytelling also can become a medium for social commentary, a means to build community, and a way to recover and reclaim the ethnic group’s collective memory and history. Kingston’s “revisionist storytelling,” notes E. D. Huntley, transforms her community from one of oppression and victimization to one of self-affirmation and cultural survival. Cultural stories can validate major events within a community, ensuring that each generation participates in the oral tradition that shapes both a collective memory or history and the individuals who make up that community (Huntley, 2001, p. 94).

Walter Benjamin laments that the art of storytelling is coming to an end in the modern era, particularly with the rise of the novel (Benjamin, 1969, p. 83). I suggest that the art of storytelling is still practiced by women in their role as keepers and transmitters of stories and personal, familial, or collective memories. As Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests: “The World’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women... Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission” (Trinh, 1989, p. 121). As an oracle, the storyteller is “the living memory of her time, her people” (Trinh, 1989, p. 125). Partaking in “this living heritage of power,” the storyteller “sets out to revive the forgotten, to survive and supersede it” (Trinh, 1989, p. 126). Trinh observes that storytelling, as historical consciousness and a rich oral legacy, has been taken up by many women of color writers as they simultaneously unlearn colonial language and re-establish contact with their foremothers to write anew (Trinh, 1989, p. 148). As in postcolonial writing, Kingston attempts to make contacts with her mother and female ancestors (both biological and symbolic) in order to engage in a new revisionist form of feminist postcolonial and postmodern storytelling.

In the last chapter, entitled “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston explores the issue of voice and silence for Asian women. Kingston associates voice with storytelling and memory, and silence with oppression and amnesia. Silence occurs in many forms in this memoir: those who refuse to speak; those who cannot speak because they lack the language; those who are afraid to speak or are told not to speak; and those whose stories have been erased or marginalized by official national memory and history (Huntley, 2001, p. 68). The narrator struggles to speak, to find personal and community voices, for in her view to be silenced is to be denied basic human rights and existence. Maxine is simultaneously silenced by a Chinese misogynist society, including her domineering loud-voiced mother (who may have cut her frenum) and by American racism and sexism. Maxine’s reaction to her mother cutting her frenum is ambivalent, for she feels both “proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me” and “terrified [because] the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue” (p. 164). One wonders if Brave Orchid’s act is one of tyranny and silencing or of love, for she explains to her daughter: “I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language... You’ll be able to pronounce anything” (p. 164).

Maxine remembers her silence was “thickest” and most “total” during the first three years of school, beginning when she had to speak English for the first time. She describes her silence or timid voice as “a dumbness” and “a shame” that “cracks my voice in two.” Speaking “makes her throat bleed and takes up the day’s courage.” It fills her with self-disgust and she feels that people wince when her “broken voice come skittering out into the open” (p. 165). Maxine soon learns that her silence is the effect of racism and sexism, for: “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (p. 166). There is still an assumption by mainstream society that Asian women and young girls are voiceless and submissive. Mass media including Hollywood realist cinema perpetuate this gendered “Orientalism” (Said, 1979), a Western male fantasy of the powerless obedient Eastern women. Chinese sexist views towards women also reinforce the silencing of women and young girls. Maxine’s silence is the internalization of the Orientalist view of Asian women and the silencing

of women by Chinese culture. It is also the outcome of Maxine and her siblings attempting to differentiate themselves from the loud-voiced first-generation Chinese emigrants. For Maxine who tries to emulate American normative feminine ideals, Chinese sounds and loudness are “chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian” (p. 171). Later she tells us: “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans” (p. 172). Here, contradiction around patriarchy is once again prevalent. How does a culture that silences its women produce mothers who are domineering, loud-voiced, strong and powerful? Is Maxine’s mother loud-voiced and powerful towards her daughter and silenced by the men in her life, and why does the loud-voicedness of Maxine’s mother silence and intimidates Maxine rather than empowers her?

In her struggle to find her voice – and hence, selfhood, confidence and power – Maxine learns she must invent both a voice and a personality in the American cultural context in order to feel a sense of belonging: “Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school” (p. 172). “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (p. 180), Maxine screams at and bullies this silent Chinese girl in the school laboratory. Maxine punishes her for failing to conform to American norms and for her inability to resist the oppression of silencing: “I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute... She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft... I hated fragility” (p. 173, 176). As Amy Ling observes, the narrator lashes out at this quiet Chinese girl in “a fury of self-hatred and also of rage against the powerless position of all Chinese American girls.” She uses her as a scapegoat for her own rage over her necessity to “invent an American feminine speaking personality” (Ling, 1998, p. 176-177).

In a sense, Maxine suffers from what Anne Anlin Cheng calls “racial melancholia” (Cheng, 2001, p. xi), the complex process of racial grief and desire, racial rejection and internalization. Here, Maxine racially rejects her cultural identity and heritage and internalizes the American

norms of white femininity, resulting in a racial grief over her own place and identity. After using the silent Chinese girl as a scapegoat for her rage against her inability to control the everyday trauma of racial and sexual oppression she experiences, the narrator, as the perpetrator of violence, falls into a “mysterious illness.” The illness, which lasted for eighteen months, is characterized by an inability to speak, for which the doctors can find no cause. Having attacked the silent other that is racially the same, the narrator suffers from the trauma of being the aggressor rather than the victim. Her “mysterious illness” is the result of both guilt, for having harmed a powerless person, and hypochondria, fearing her racial and gendered body as an assimilatory gesture of self-hatred. As Anne Anlin Cheng proposes, her hypochondria can express both a fear of racial contamination and assimilatory anxiety (Cheng, 2001, p. 92-93). In torturing the silent Chinese girl, the narrator-as-child undergoes the process of psychic and embodied assimilation and the anxiety that comes with assimilation. She associates herself with “American-ness” in the repetition of violence against a powerless other, by assuming authority and power and using it to subjugate another. In the process of assimilation, she experiences “a vicious, hypochondriacal circle of identification and disidentification” in which she “manages the fear of her own bodily failures” as a racial and national abject and asserts an identification with power and health (Cheng, 2001, p. 75). As an assimilating ethnic-racial body, the narrator suffers from hypochondria, continually questioning her own bodily authenticity, etiology, and value (Cheng, 2001, p. 69). In torturing the silent girl who is like her, she also attacks her own embodied psyche and identity, and hence falls ill with “a malady of otherness” (Cheng, 2001, p. 78). The narrator’s “mysterious illness,” as Anne Anlin Cheng argues, echoes the “phantom illness” suffered by Asian Americans within the national imaginary, in which they occupy an unstable position in the “ethnic-racial spectrum” as absent present or partially invisible (Cheng, 2001, p. 69).

Maxine’s attack against the silent girl and her subsequent “mysterious illness” can be explained as an effect of internalized racism and racial shame. As J. Brooks Bouson argues, the notion of “racial shame” can help us to understand “the profound hurt felt by those treated as the racial Other, as shamed objects of contempt” (Bouson, 2000, p. 15).

Bouson notes that by dramatizing the physical and psychological abuse experienced by African Americans, Toni Morrison shows that “trauma can result not only from a ‘single assault’ or ‘discrete event,’ but also from a ‘constellation of life’s experiences,’ a ‘prolonged exposure to danger,’ or a ‘continuing pattern of abuse’...” (Bouson, 2000, p. 3). Similarly, Kingston shows that the trauma of racism as experienced by Maxine and other Asian subjects is a trauma of prolonged exposure to racial violence and abuse, and most often, very subtle manifestations such as racial semiotic violence. When Maxine works at an art supply store, for instance, her employer asks her to: “Order more of that nigger yellow...” (p. 48). Here, the racial semiotic violence in the phrase “nigger yellow” racially shames both African Americans and Asian Americans, and thus demarcates Maxine as racially other. As a result, she cannot resist with her “small person’s voice that makes no impact” (p. 48). To counter inter-racial violence, racial shame, internalized racism and the oppression of silencing, Maxine performs intra-racial violence, using the Chinese girl as her scapegoat. In her assimilatory gestures, in emulating white American norms and the perpetuation of violence, Maxine revisits the “traumatic and humiliated memory” as a racial other who feels self-loathing and self-contempt (Bouson, 2000, p. 3-4). In fact, Maxine perceives her “mysterious illness,” being bed-ridden and unable to speak for eighteen months, as a punishment by fate. Her subsequent narration of her repressed experience of racism helps her to overcome her assimilatory compulsion and anxiety to arrive at a place of self-love and self-identification.

Throughout the memoir, Maxine must deal with contradiction and disjuncture: the anxiety of assimilation, the need to recover and reclaim her cultural history, the questioning and then validation of her mother’s talk-stories, the resistance against sexism in the Chinese community and racism in the larger American society, and the need to construct her own voice and identity. She finds emancipation and some resolution to disjuncture in her storytelling, for she discovers power in her ability to tell and invent a story or narrative. As a storyteller, Maxine begins to realize the process of invention found in most narratives, including historical narratives with the weight of time and duration: “I don’t see how [the Chinese] kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along” (p.

185). Of course, such creative invention and conjectures in storytelling can be destabilizing for the hearers of stories, especially those who expect to hear “facts” and “truth claims.” Maxine says to her mother: “I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or, ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference... I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up” (p. 202). In fact, Maxine says: “I’d like to go to China and see those people and find out what’s a cheat story and what’s not” (p. 206). In her attempt to construct and perform her subjectivity and voice, Maxine must negotiate between personal experiences, family talk-stories, collective group history, cultural myths and legends, and American popular mass media. She tells us: “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (p. 205). In her attempt to leave behind her haunting girlhood of ghostly ambiguity, of too many stories and memories pervading and struggling to find a place, Maxine asserts in an ironic tone: “I had to leave home in order to see the world logically... I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t. v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with sliced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts” (p. 204). In her attempt to understand why the Chinese “like to say the opposite” of what they mean (p. 203), Maxine learns “to make [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (p. 29). In recognizing that social and cultural life is filled with paradoxes, she comes to realize that she too, like her mother, is a designer and inventor of stories and memories.

Memory is tied not only to invention but also to identity, narrative, and voice. Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, there is both a dialogue between the daughter and the mother and an internal dialogue of Maxine, as Maxine attempts to carve out her own subjectivity apart from her mother. The struggle is one of words and voice, between the mother who is a powerful storyteller and the daughter who is trying to find her own voice (Ling, 1998, p. 178). The resolution of this struggle and of the book is a narrative one, as mother and daughter collaborate in the telling of the final story of Ts’ai Yen: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk

story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (p. 206). In a critical scene, Maxine confesses to her mother that she has a list of over two hundred items weighing on her conscience “that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat” (p. 197). At this point, the narrator makes the discovery that she must become her own voice and listener, her own authority and power. Only when she reclaims her voice does Maxine realize that her mother’s talk-stories are a rich source of inspiration and material for her own writing and story making: “At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story” (p. 19-20). In Kingston’s memoir, there exist two impulses, “the pride of inheritance and a revisionist compulsion” (Ling, 1998, p. 179), or the recovery of memory and the invention and revision of memory.

As revealed by Kingston’s memoir, memory by way of storytelling is invoked to heal (her ancestral spirit No Name Woman, her and her mother’s grief as an effect of sexual and racial oppression), to challenge (those with authority and power for their erasure of the life stories of the subjugated), and to legitimate (the right to personal and collective remembrance to assert an identity that is viable and affirmative however fractured). Both individual and collective memories are sites of struggle and identification, sources of authority and a means of attack (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. vii). Memories, like stories, are “never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and social contexts of recall and commemoration” (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. vii). Memories are produced by experience and, in turn, reshape it. Memory is, therefore, tied to identity formation. While memory does provide a conscious and unconscious foundation for our subjectivity, it also “threatens to undermine it, whether by obvious gaps, by uncertainties, or by the glimpses of a past that no longer seems to be ours” (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. xvi). Yet on the positive side, as noted by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, “memory offers a certain scope for the kind of play or freedom that enables us to creatively refashion ourselves, remembering one thing and not another, changing the stories we tell ourselves (and others) about ourselves” (1996, p. xvi). We see how memory can allow a kind of freedom to refashion identities in Kingston’s memoir, how memory or “the memory crisis” (Terdiman,

1993, p. viii) is tied to identity or identity crisis, the identity of both Maxine as a Chinese American woman/young girl and her mother as a Chinese emigrant woman. Kingston reveals identity is not coherent, stable, or homogeneous, but is rather fractured and destabilized, a struggle with competing narratives, where different memories attempt to undermine identity with obvious gaps and uncertainties. However, memory, because of its fluidity and ambivalence, also provides the creative space and freedom for the writer Kingston to play with and to refashion her identity in this memoir. By invoking the invention of memory and autobiography, Kingston is able to raise epistemic questions about history, cultural production, experience, truth, and selfhood. Kingston resolves the “identity crisis” and “memory crisis” by revealing that there can be no “Truth” claims to an identity or memory. Identity, memory, historical narrative, and knowledge production are situated between non-fiction and fiction, real and unreal. Kingston, I believe, would summarize her self-definition as open and fluid, with agency and will. Yet, she also views the self as affected by multiple external forces: the ideology of race, class, and gender; American and Chinese cultural knowledge; and social structures, institutions, laws, and policies.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I argue that Maxine Hong Kingston evokes both memory as archeological excavation and memory as continuous revision and retranslation. She excavates cultural and familial stories or collective memories, and then revises or retranslates them to comprehend her place and identities in the Chinese diaspora in America. This article shows how Kingston is aware that the process of recovering, retranslating, and transmitting personal, familial, and ethnic collective memory is always fractured, negotiated, and a product of struggle. Hence it destabilizes constructions of identity and community formation and knowledge production. This rereading of *The Woman Warrior* for mnemonic traces demonstrates that not every ethnic collective memory should be uncritically reclaimed and recovered as a counter-cultural force to the partial erasure of minority history and memory by the nation-state – in Kingston’s case, the United States. An interpretation of this memoir illustrates that ethnic collective memory, like cultural iden-

tity, is a site of heterogeneity and difference, where some memories can perpetuate homeland and diasporic patriarchy while other memories can provide more liberating narratives for women and young girls. That is, gender, identity, and memory have a dialogical relation. One's ethnic and gender identity formation may be partially influenced or affected by personal memory, familial memory, and ethnic collective memory. A feminist reading of the memoir also suggests that the nostalgic gaze and desire, often invoked by patriarchal Chinese diasporic subjects and narratives about homeland memories, may disguise and ignore the reality of sexual and gender oppression in both Mainland China and the Chinese diaspora. *The Woman Warrior* is an attempt to rewrite both Chinese diasporic memory by challenging its sexism and sexual violence and the national official memory of the United States by pointing to its history of gender inequality, racism, and Orientalism. Kingston notes that women are often the transmitters of memory – personal, familial, cultural, and collective – through their storytelling or talk-stories. This memoir can be read as a commemorative act to remember the silenced and subjugated, to reinsert their life stories or narratives of personal, familial, and ethnic collective memories into the official national memory or history and the Chinese diasporic memory in America.

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