

Self-Referential Narrative and Creative Filiation in Chinese American Writing: Maxine Hong Kingston and Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 1996 memoir – *Among the White Moon Faces* – as inviting a conceptualisation and examination of lineage conceived otherwise than (only) on a biological mode. I am interested in showing that when the question of filiation is examined from a literary perspective and focuses on different possible relations to a writer and a narrative belonging to a different generation, it is also intimately related to an attitude towards cultural heritage.

My basic postulation is that references to *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, a seminal and uniquely innovative work in (Chinese) American letters are visible on a double level, diegetic and extradiegetic, and weave a fruitful relationship not only with the conceptualisations of self-representation that emerge in Kingston's first *opus*, but also with the narrative and discursive configurations that sustain them. By tracing and analysing these different echoes and resonances it will be evinced how in Lim's and Kingston's case, the questions of heritage or, for that matter, the one of transmission, go beyond the simple following in someone's footsteps or unilateralism to which they are usually reduced, weaving into the literary field other connections than those established by chronology or aesthetics.

Keywords

Self-representation, cultural heritage, filiation, intertextuality, dialogism, discursive configurations

This article is a continuation of the analyses undertaken in my doctoral thesis,²

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² *De l'écriture de soi et ses évolutions dans les œuvres de deux écrivaines sino-américaines: Maxine Hong Kingston et Shirley Geok-lin Lim (On Self-Writing and its Evolutions in the Works of Two Chinese American Writers: Maxine Hong Kingston and Shirley Geok-lin Lim)*, successfully defended at Paris Diderot University in June 2011 (to be published).

which interrogated the discursive condition of the contemporary Chinese American location and positioning by discussing three literary works inscribed, from their peritext,³ in the horizon of expectation of self-referential writing. More precisely, published at an interval of twenty years, the diptych *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976)/*China Men* (1980) by Maxine Hong Kingston, on the one hand, and *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1996), on the other, testify to creative appropriations of this genre. In dwelling on representatives of different generations, itineraries and ethnic affiliations, my choice also aimed at limning the heteroglossia of the Chinese American writing field. I would like to extend this work here by exploring several facets of a relationship towards heritage conceived otherwise than (only) on a biological mode. For if the question of the identity of the writing subject is examined, in the case of both authors, within a family context and inescapably implying a detour – through one's parents and forebears and their stories – as well as revealing itself as necessarily declined in the light of family, collective and national history, the question of one's filiation is also intimately related to an attitude towards cultural heritage. Interestingly enough, when this question is examined from a literary perspective and focuses on different possible relations to writers and works belonging to a different generation, it mobilises notions of intertextuality, *mise en abyme* and critical engagement with the memory of literature and its dynamic.

This articulation between biological and literary filiation is forefronted from the opening of *Among the White Moon Faces*, where a paginal juxtaposition of lyrical and narrative sections introduces what I would identify as the structuring motif of the memoir:

Midlife stalled, I look for women.
Where are they my mothers and sisters?
I listen for their voices in poems.
Help me, I have fallen asleep, fallen
With sleepers. These women have murdered
Themselves, violent, wrenched from home.

Grandmother was barren. She died,
Tubes in nose and green shaky arm,
Hair yellow, a dirty dye, patches
Like fungus on a stricken pine.

³ The peritext refers to textual and iconographic elements surrounding the text such as the title and the subtitle, the name of the author and of the publishing house, the preface, the epigraph, the illustrations and so on. For more see Gérard Genette's masterful analysis of the paratext in *Palimpsestes* (1982).

I read terrible stories–
 Hate, rage, futility of will–
 And look for women, the small
 Sufficient swans, showers of stars. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 0)

The question of the existence of feminine referential figures is openly addressed from the threshold of the book by means of a first line that the punctuation marks as self-sufficient. This reinforces its revealing force of positing key (self-) referential and thematic aspects: an enunciative instance halfway through her life, in search of a community of women. The quest is outlined as one for a familial as well as for an artistic community, a quest for figures of transmission in a broad sense of the term, and it seems marked by sterility and stasis. The notion of filiation, in a biological acceptance – that locates the body in relation to an origin – or in a symbolic one – that informs and sustains one's existence and hence provides directions to and through its possibilities – is highlighted here; the text is placed under the sign of the quest for protective and inspiring tutelary figures, the identity and the subjectivity of the woman writer being compelled to shape and imagine themselves from and despite this shrivelling, ill-blossomed, discontinuous and uncertain genealogy.

Along these lines, it seems potentially enriching to read Lim's musing on cultural lineage according to a principle of active intertextuality, regarding, more particularly, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. My basic postulation is that references to this seminal and uniquely innovative work in (Chinese) American letters are visible on a double level, diegetic and extradiegetic, and weave a fruitful relationship not only with the conceptualisations of self-representation that emerge in Kingston's first *opus*, but also with the narrative and discursive configurations that sustain them. These are, to a certain extent, expected and legitimate references if one keeps in mind Lim's work on, as well as appreciation of Kingston's book – Lim as the academic, the literature scholar and theoretician. For that matter, if a lifelong commitment to the defence and study of literature in general and to the field of Asian American letters in particular were not sufficient an indicator, the Chinese Malaysian explicitly dwells on it in an interview:

Kingston is a writer I admire tremendously. She has a great deal of integrity. She is my model. Although she is not much older than I, she has achieved more, in a much more profound way in terms of writing.... She is a writer whom I deeply appreciate and admire. But my 'memoir,' perhaps deliberately, has not sought to model on *The Woman Warrior* or *China Men*.... I don't want to be a second-rate Kingston, I want to be myself. (Wang 158)

Lim's assertions and especially the comment following the adversative conjunction "but" invite the idea of the necessity of coming to terms with a literary role figure, of acknowledging her influence without being shadowed by her achievements. This operates on a double-level: on an auctorial one, to the extent that Kingston can be seen as a symbolic, imaginary, trailblazing mother, an ideal Lim refers to but wants to distance herself from to stand out; as well as on a thematic, textual and metatextual one, traces of which I will attempt to fathom here.

This interweaving of a mental literary geography and of a cultural geology suggests that here, the notion of literary filiation takes other acceptations than the traditional pitting against one's predecessors' aesthetics to include a critical reading that turns the scrutinising gaze back upon oneself. This reading that actually searches in the narrative of another the traces and the negotiations of one's own queries so as to confront them and take them to even greater depths evinces itself at a turning point in *Among the White Moon Faces* – when the narrator evokes her decision to change her career by leaving the community college and enrol in a summer seminar hosted by the feminist intellectual Nancy K. Miller:

I began the seminar almost a decade after the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Many of the stories of a misogynist Chinese immigrant society in [her] fiercely imagined book were familiar to me.... For years I had been writing to myself, the poems and stories in my desk drawer growing dog-eared and yellow. (226)

To read Lim's narrative effectively, one should then be attentive to this manner in which the subject moves forward into herself and undertakes to work and build an *oeuvre* through a creative development that practices the deference in the difference, the dialogue and the critical engagement that allow for passing judgment on one's own position and negotiating its inscription by querying the real-life itinerary of another as well as her scriptural approach and mediation of it. This strategy has the advantage of accommodating a liberation from an "anxiety of influence" exerted by a predecessor's work so well established in the canon of American letters to the point of becoming a sort of procrustean standard for publishers and/or mainstream readers, as Lim didn't fail to notice:

What I hear from a lot of writers who are now being published is that when they first go to a press, the press will say to them, 'Oh, this isn't like Maxine Hong Kingston.' What the press wants is a sure-fire

success, a product. They want you to have a sequel the way that Hollywood has a sequel to a hit. (Templin 82)

This liberation is based on the lucid avowal that whatever anxiety or distancing might be, they should be understood not only as being driven by a desire of singularity, the wish to impose a unique creative vision, but also by having to deal with the stereotypes imposing upon the reading of ethnic texts:

When Maxine Hong Kingston's first book... came out in 1976, a number of academic friends, inferring that my immigrant Asian background would tilt me toward the book, suggested strongly I check it out. I was so offended by their blatant stereotyping that I did not read the book until three years later.... (*"The Woman Warrior"* 4)

Like other Asian American writers in the 80s and 90s,⁴ Lim faced the challenge of inscribing her originality while at the same time inserting herself into a literary tradition.

For the purpose of the present discussion, I will now turn to examining some specific aspects that attest, in *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, to this (re)generating relationship to *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, undeniably a founding book in the tradition of Chinese American self-writing, one that has run a gamut of responses, from admiration or hesitation to anxiety or rejection.

As explained earlier, with Lim we address a critical and reflexive writing that engages with other imaginings and representations in search of a dialogue that enable it to test and experience itself, and this emerges from the threshold of the narrative, from its peritext and its *incipit*. With respect to the latter, I owe a terminological and methodological clarification: its delimitation will be made following Andrea Del Lungo's pioneering analyses in *L'Incipit romanesque* (2003), where he departs from the traditional approaches that often limit the examination to the first sentence only, by positing the notion of an initial textual unit – formal and/or thematic – of variable length (50-54). One could thus wonder if, in the presence of, on the one hand, a title marked by the paragenic indication "memoir" and conveying a spectral theme as well as of, on the other hand, a textual icebreaker that hails the reader by means of an expression of confusion and doubts conveyed by a narrator confronted to a

⁴ The editors of the most significant collection of interviews with Maxine Hong Kingston, Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, recall that "her voice had so stamped itself on the publishing industry as the Asian American consciousness that some young writers complained to her that they were getting 'a generic Maxine Hong Kingston rejection letter' from publishers looking for Kingston imitations," with the publishers going as far as advising them to read her work before attempting anything else ("Introduction" vii).

multiplicity of ambivalent, concealed, denied and ambiguous presences, if all these elements do not prefigure an aesthetical and ideological relation to the celebrated account of a “girlhood among ghosts.” With the aim of teasing this out, I’ll follow in the wake of Del Lungo’s conceptualisation of the incipit as a textual space which, due to its intermediate position, has a close metonymical relationship with the elements of the peritext that precede it as well as with the text that follows it (55). This understanding presents the advantage of proceeding to an examination of the inaugural sections of both narratives, before turning to the peritext.

“‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (*The Woman Warrior* 1). The Kingstonian narrative opens *in medias res*, or rather *in media verba*. The “attack phrase” (Del Lungo 55) singles out, by means of quotation marks, the speech ban while simultaneously displaying the transgressive character of the inaugural speech act. The words belong to the mother, and the narrator distinguishes her voice through diacritical signs. The narration is placed from the *incipit* under the aegis of the forbidden, the highlighting of the ban finally appearing all the more ironic since the narrator chooses to break it in a radical way. The literary enunciation proceeds to reveal the fate of an adulterous aunt who humiliated and brought disgrace not only upon her family but also upon the village, and who is now completely erased from the family lineage (1-2). Maternal speech, always delimited by quotes, seems to relay the demands and constraints of the patriarchal system – the use of the plural pronoun “us” or “we” suggesting indeed an identification of the mother with a collective voice – the injunction to silence and exclusion imposed by the old culture bespeaking an attempt to maintain dignity/face and secrecy, closely linked to cultural etiquette. The necessity to conceal the shameful event is reinforced several times over the next few paragraphs which recount this shattering event (3-5).

What the dramatic intensity of the inaugural scene announces is without any doubt the refusal of conformism and the quest for another way and/or voice. A sudden custodian of a legacy that befuddles her, the narrator first keeps it at a distance (as evinced by the quotes) but refuses to let herself be petrified by it: the warning is perceived as disturbing rather than instructive and entails questioning at the boundaries of the forbidden as well as of one’s self. The closing quotation mark that puts as abrupt a stop to Brave Orchid’s words as was given to their start, allows the narrator to gradually prepare the ground for addressing a fundamentally disturbing question. Thus, within three paragraphs are tossed off a number of critical elements defining the everyday life of immigrant Asian families; they spell out the shock of the socio-cultural change and adjustment for the representatives of the first generation – “those... who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home”

(5) – and the strict legislative measures regulating the Asian presence in the American national space, leading to specific adaptation patterns and strategies: “The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence ”(5). It is then no wonder that cross-generational communication is vexed or non-existent: “[The immigrants] must try to confuse their offspring as well; who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways” (5). Having enumerated all this on a rising tone, the voicing reaches an explosion:

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, with what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (5-6)

As noted by Sau-ling Wong, the question arising here addresses the possibility of telling the difference between Chinese traditions and their representations or distortions, or even individual peculiarities, especially in cases when one’s parents were transplanted to an “isolated ethnic community” and experience themselves, often unawares, major cultural transformations – and this even more so when the dominant society systematically denies legitimacy to their existence (“Ethnic Dimensions” 276). For if one cannot even understand what is related to Chineseness in everyday life, how can that person assert herself with confidence as a “Chinese American?”

The answer is not given directly but emerges obliquely; for if the narrator knows that her mother’s silence is definitive – “My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by necessity” (6), she shifts the focus from the result on the causes and seeks to give new meanings to the story of the unnamed aunt by offering alternative readings. It is urgent to find a meaning that can be applied to the narrator’s own life and to create a significant connection to this ancestor – to “see her life branching into mine” (8). As this passage is a well-known section and has been abundantly commented upon, I will not dwell on it here, only to repeat, for the sake of my argument, that the recreated versions are more sympathetic towards the forerunner’s figure, choosing to highlight how the expectations projected upon women were actually synonyms of restrictions, or to depict the aunt as a determined woman who chose adultery of her own will and desire. In both imagined versions the “unnamed woman” commits suicide by drowning with her newborn in the family well, refusing to disclose the name of the genitor.

With the construction of a rebellious female figure, the reader is presented, indeed, with alternative mises-en-scène of female subjectivity. But something even more transgressive takes place at the level of the enunciate act

itself, namely the presence of an enunciator who is both intra- and extradiegetic, positioning herself constantly in relation to the narrative itself. This transgression of narrative levels that Gérard Genette has termed “metalepsis” inscribes a relationship between the author and the work in the making (*Métalepse* 10). The intrusion into the diegesis is indicated, in *The Woman Warrior*'s opening scene, through persuasive narrative and stylistic rebellions. What they signify is that imagining a life for the aunt and using, to that end, fictional techniques, this does not automatically imply writing a text that would be fiction in the generic or conventional sense of the term. Accordingly, the moments of discursive disobedience are advertised as deliberate transgressions. Several warnings hail the reader, suggesting that he/she take a step in the text without expecting a historical narrative or a fictional one, but rather an interplay of the two, symbolising a search for truth through writing. Epanorthosis, already installed as a narrative strategy with the imagination of several hypotheses leading to adultery and suicide, is amplified by means of explicitly formulated speculations, conjectures, hesitations; the narration fumbles under the sign of “perhaps” or “I wonder whether” (6), trying to probe deeper into the limits of the cautionary tale in order to find useful props for self-construction. “She may have been unusually loved,” assumes, for instance, the scriptural instance (10), introducing, in search of a stronger ancestral figure, the idea of parental love for girls despite the prevailing mentality that deems them of little value.

The metaleptic situation is pushed even further, as every time the narrator imagines alternative versions of the life of her forebear, the reality of her own life, extradiegetic, is woven with the imagined possibilities and the material conditions of the aunt's story or with aspects of the lives of Asian immigrants in general. These fictional constructions enable her to reflect on purely personal realities, relevant of an American context: “I used to add ‘brother’ silently to boys’ names. It hexed the boys, who would or would not ask me to dance, and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as girls” (12). Through sudden bursts of humour that lighten up the seriousness of the text, digressions reveal facets of the double binds in a Chinese American woman's existence: “But, of course, I hexed myself also – no dates. I should have stood up, both arms waving, and shouted out across libraries, ‘Hey, you! Love me back.’ I had no idea how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude” (12). By means of this ludic metalepsis, a more mature and adult voice ironically comments on the choice of Maxine the narrator. The blurring of narrative levels entailed by this strategy shakes the certainties of self-representation and invites the reader into a relationship of complicity.

If imagination is harnessed to fill in the gaps, this is not done at the expense of the real, authentic socio-cultural background or historical subtext.

The *hic et nunc* of the story are mediated by a foregrounding of this ignored family member as a subject living in a society where, for instance, personal freedom, including that of a woman, endanger the collective survival – “The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (12), or as experiencing historical moments pertaining not only to the native country but equally shaping the relationship between China and America at the beginning of the twentieth century – as the allusion to the “hurried wedding” and the husband who “sailed for America, the Gold Mountain” (3) prove. Accordingly, the metaleptical gesture displays the questions that torment and assail the enunciator and the narrative, as well as the formal qualms that haunt them – in the line of comments such as “[i]magining her free with sex doesn’t fit.... I don’t know any woman like that, or man either” (8).

Ambiguity is reinstated with the last paragraph of the *incipit*: in relating the story of the unnamed woman, the enunciative instance underscores her Americanness revealed precisely by this courage to “name the unspeakable” that the parents fear (5); yet, other comments disclose paradoxically a set of strongly internalized superstitions testifying to her Chinese heritage: “My aunt haunts me – her ghost drawn to me.... I do not think she always means me well.... I am telling on her” (16). Her mind and reason appear as if torn between two different systems of thought and worldviews, the final lines of the *incipit* inscribing an even deeper disarray.

Consequently in Kingston’s case, delineating one’s own memorial space with words is a process that does not tolerate solipsism or condone narcissistic complacency. The act of self-enunciation breaks with a tradition of monological and monolinear autoreferential representations⁵ and exposes the very efforts towards understanding, recovering and pulling together. Self-expression can only be achieved by violating the ban—here lies the ambivalence of the maternal injunction that accompanies the entry into adulthood. The female, the feminine and the question of matrilineage are inscribed from the beginning; this is a story of women, about women, between and among women negotiating different systems of thought, modes of subjectivity and contradicting stories.

In *Among the White Moon Faces*, the section following the poem that I examined earlier is entitled “Prologue.” It is not only a reverberant space of the obsessive quest for female community and lineage, but also an introduction, *ex abrupto*, to a personal and historical context marked by syncretic and eclectic cultural and linguistic configurations:

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this tradition see Sau-ling Wong’s essay, “Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach” (1991).

The first time I heard Shakespeare quoted, it was as a joke. Malaysians speaking pidgin English would dolefully break out into Elizabethan lines, 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?' before bursting into chortles and sly looks. 'Aiyah! Dia Romeo, lah!' – 'He's a Romeo!' – I heard said over and over again of any number of men, including my father, Baba. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 1)

The playful subversion of traditional or canonical Western references through hybridised practices is immediately pointed out as underlying a darker reality. Indeed, the antonomasis is dwelt on and explicated as spelling out limiting social configurations for women, for if Romeo denotes "zany male freedom permitted under Westernization," and "there was a Romeo around every corner," there is no trace of a Malayan "Juliette" (1).

The quest for inspiring feminine figures is reiterated by a positioning in the childhood's space and time, a *lieu de mémoire* defined by the narrator through specific references and tones that convey an early awareness of the hybridity and multiplicity of her cultural environment, where Chinese, Malayan, British and American cultures blend seamlessly. Its importance is thus not only confirmed but equally increased, as it is increasingly associated with an epistemological difficulty in this context marked by omissions, subversions and double meanings: "This was Shakespeare in my tropics, and romantic love, and the English language: mashed and chewed, then served up in a pattering patois which was our very own. Our very own confusion" (1-2). The process of self-understanding and definition is faced with the difficulty of negotiating the tensions arising from contradictions and conflicts of cultures, languages, influences and desires; on this shaky ground, as if attempting to reach some confirmation and assertion of certainty, the narrator's reflections resort to a common strategy of autobiographical narratives: the reference to one's origin. The turn to a self-referential terrain is abrupt – "I didn't know about Juliet, but I knew my name" (2), and in an obvious attempt to prove that she "knows," the narrative instance dwells on the origin and meaning of the name that appears on her birth certificate. She thus enlarges on how her arrival into the world placed her directly in an ancestral line, a patrilineal and patriarchal clan, as revealed by "Geok-lin Lim," a name chosen from a list prepared in advance by the paternal grandfather. It is then Baba, her father, steeped in Western culture and particularly in Hollywood films, who names her "Shirley" in reference to the child actress Shirley Temple (2-3). Later, for her religious confirmation, she herself chooses the name of "Jennifer" after Jennifer Jones, a Hollywood actress she admires (4).

Expertly wrought as this is, it doesn't take long though for the narratorial "I" to show signs of difficulty in identifying with her full name; the "excess of

belonging”⁶ is encapsulated in one sentence sapping any feeling of confidence/sureness, revealing a deep identity confusion and crisis: “Too many names, too many identities, too many languages” (4). Any expectation of a retrospective story that would proceed to an affirmation of the coherence and unity of one’s life is thus shattered from the very introductory paragraphs. The few remaining pages of the “Prologue” can only convey a strong sense of confusion: directly, when the narrator recollects the shock of seeing Shirley Temple for the first time and whose physical appearance, so different from hers, triggers a true identity shock (2-3); indirectly, through statements pertaining much too frequently to a semantic field mapping different shades of distress, marked by words such as “confusion,” “mystery,” “uncertain,” alternating with rhetorical questions such as “what would I call myself?” (3), or musings trying to grasp with the benefit of hindsight the meaning of certain gestures or actions.

The paragraphs that express this difficulty of self-designation – “what would I call myself?”(3) – are outstandingly interesting from the standpoint of the enunciation, in particular with respect to focalisation. What the narrative undertakes, on several occasions, is to recount an event first as a subject who remembers it and to (re)present it afterwards again, as a critical voice examining the possible meanings of this event. To give an illustration of this, let me return to the question of the name: the narrator recalls that all her cousins were called by their Chinese ming (the “personal name”) – Ah Lan, Ah Mui, Ah Pei, while she remained Shirley for everyone: “‘Ah Shirley,’ my aunts called me” (2). These memories, rendered in a rather light and funny tone, are followed by reflections on the reasons underlying her father’s unconventional choice of a name for somebody belonging by birth to a traditional Chinese family. In placing these considerations under the sign of retrospective desire – “I’d like to think” – the enunciative instance imagines that this early westernisation that she is subject to is not a mere sign of colonial imitation, but Baba’s wish for her to transgress any identity attachments predestined by birth as well as any form of denial of civil liberties in the name of ancestral traditions:

It remains a mystery to me what strange racial yearnings moved Baba to name me after a blond child. I’d like to think he was not tied to the fixities of race and class, that this presumption was less colonized mimicry than bold experiment. Looking at the dozens of nieces duplicated for a domestic future, did he rebel for me? Although, unarguably, he has written in his neat English script my Chinese name on my birth certificate, he never called me anything but Shirley, a

⁶ I use here Aijaz Ahmad formulation in his study on Salman Rushdie (Ahmad 127).

Hollywood name for a daughter for whom he wished, despite everything his heritage dictated, a life freer than his own. (3)

As Rocío Davis has observed, the interpretation of the paternal decision clearly projects the author's own perspective on issues that have been a major concern in her academic career, issues that will also be at the heart of the unfolding text: "individuality in the context of Chinese girlhood, the choice of English as a marker of identity, and the need to escape the strictures of poverty and Malay society" (Davis 450). I would include to this metaleptic gesture the preoccupation with a more symbolic genealogy and artistic inheritance, as indicated by the reference to Virginia Woolf and artistic matrilineage in the last paragraph of this introductory section (5). This approach equally prefigures a scriptural undertaking more complex than a simple transcription or recounting of experiences, where self-writing is deployed as a gesture of analysis and evaluation. This memoir is not about asserting certainties, but rather about trying to understand the meaning of an action in the past or retrieving continuities, even by means of impossible-to-answer questions. It reveals the very attempts at apprehending and interpreting, awareness and understanding being particularly important in the economy of the work. Thus, if the structure of the memoir (the parts and the chapters) follow an advancing in life chronology, the "Prologue" introduces a multiplicity of perspectives, translated by a constant insertion of retrospective comments, musings and questions that complement the simple act of telling.

Like Maxine Hong Kingston's, these strategies, whose result is generic ambiguity, bespeak epistemological doubt. Lim's narrative is obviously in the tradition of its famous intertext, inscribing itself in a recognisable genealogy. Redrawing boundaries in scriptural and interpretative acts, Kingston has indeed set the tone in self-referential writing by formulating the impossibility of impermeable borders between facts and stories, truth and imagination. Lim adheres to this notion of self-writing that should not be understood as asserting certainties, but as trying to negotiate and reconcile meanings, even by means of questions without answers, as the excerpts analysed above illustrate it. She shares Kingston's doubts as to the possibility of transcribing one's experience with ease and certainty, introducing the same reflective pauses cracking the linearity of the narrative. The writing instance, no longer pretending to know everything about her life, cuts sequences that will be unravelled and replayed, never fully certain or reassured as to their meaning. Along these lines, both *incipits* foreground a narrative voice rhythmised by comings and goings between the past and the present, and inscribe a quest for self-consistency which can obviously not be accomplished on a syntagmatic mode of a retrospective, teleological, totalising account. The enunciation interweaves the two discursive registers, of the factual and of the fictive, the "I" emerging as polyphonic and

dialogical, outward and community focused, encompassing and claiming other “I”s of real and/or mythical figures that haunt it. Consequently, the questions of filiation, belonging or collective memory break the referential singularity of a univocal enunciative instance, and justify a biographical focalisation on other people or characters who are the inspiration and/or the skeletal structure of the *mise-en-scène* of one’s own self. In both cases, the *incipits* formulate the first steps of this search and signify the importance of writing as a means of affirming one’s identity, the only one able to facilitate negotiations and allow for reconciliations. Strategic locations, they impose themselves as metaphors of highly thought-out (self-)representations, directing the eye not only to the text they invest as the very instrument of the quest for self-understanding and expression itself, but also shedding a retrospective signifying light on several key elements of the peritextual apparatus. With this conviction in mind, it is to some elements of the latter that I will now turn my attention, to see how this historical and critical consciousness that animates Lim’s narrative also reveals a considerable inflection of the Kingstonian tradition.

Let me only recall here that the Malacca native writer works with, or rather starts, from her illegitimacy, of which she herself is very clearly aware: “If American culture and the English language form the singular norm by which an Asian-American identity has been recognized, then clearly I am insufficiently American, possessing as I do a personal history of multiple cultures and languages” (“Memory and the New-Born” 211). In this context, my take is that when she proceeds to inscribing an itinerary of palimpsestic and multidirectional locations and affiliations, she actually blatantly advocates a reconfiguration of the boundaries of the US literary imagination by imposing the reconceptualisation of “Chinese Americanness” as necessarily transcultural and transnational. With this gesture, the question of intertextuality conceived as filiation not only posits that inheritance is possible, but also shows that innovation, reformulation and displacement do not necessarily have to be matricidal. As such, Lim is a genuine disciple of Kingston’s – by this, I mean that not only does she inherit from her, but equally takes Kingston where she has not been or more precisely, where she will go much later.

This extension of the contours of previous modes of representation and paradigms is obvious on a both generic and thematic level and with the benefit of hindsight, especially when considered in the light of the cultural practice in vogue before the 1990s whereby Asian Americans preferred to omit the hyphen between the two words “Asian” and “American,” as Americanisation or Americanness were perceived as difficultly compatible with the expression of Asian affiliations. Kingston herself encouraged this elimination, in the same vein as her incitement to “claim America” in a context of cultural and political marginalisation and exclusion of both people and cultural productions:

[W]e ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American is double citizenship, which is impossible in today’s world. Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. (“Cultural Mis-readings” 59)

This idea mattered so much to her that she chose to reintroduce it, almost word-for-word, in *Tripmaster Monkey* through Wittman Ah Sing, male character, her alter-ego (*Tripmaster Monkey* 27).

With Lim, who deliberately positions her narrative in the memorial tradition – “[I wrote] to produce a work that would ‘stand’ on its use of language, *a contribution to the long line of other literary productions recognized as memoirs*” (Singh 139; my emphasis) – and conspicuously proceeds to it in the vein of her illustrious predecessor by means of paragenic and thematic indications and allusions from the subtitle and the title,⁷ an emancipatory evolution and renewal of interpretative frameworks is proposed.

“An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands”: in spelling the epithet “Asian-American” with a hyphen, Lim stakes a different “claim”: that to non-hierarchical multiple belongings, echoing the plural “homelands”; that to a vision driven by this hyphen relating the Asian and the American identity, or by the search for a hyphen. This kind of dialectic between roots and routes programmatically announced from the peritext challenges from the outset any notion of a unique motherland and expresses the audacity of drawing up a mapping of the self which is not limited to a single national territory. This is strongly confirmed and illustrated in the *incipit*, through the aforementioned inscription of an itinerary of palimpsestic and multidirectional locations and affiliations. What is simultaneously disturbed are the implicit, the traditional or the newly acquired valences of memoir writing by an expansion as well as a reconfiguration of the boundaries of this self-referential genre. *Among the White Moon Faces* is thus a book undermining any impulse to generic or interpretative fixity altogether by proposing an inscription of specific forms of an intertwining of these coexistent belongings and itineraries disturbing US nationalist epistemologies. For that matter, Lim has repeatedly criticised the easy antinomies as ineffective for the understanding of the other, in all of his/her multiplicity and contradictions – and the temptation to reduce a plural reality to a univocal whole: “[W]hile my memoir is chiefly read as U.S. ethnic, it is in fact transnational, threading between at least two subjectivities, a Malaysian Chinese and an Asian American” (“Academic and Other Memoirs” 36). Ultimately, even if it connects the two texts, even if it appears as the locus through which

⁷ Because of space constraints, I cannot aim at exhausting the interpretative possibilities of this issue by including a discussion of the spectral theme common to both.

transmission operates, the title subverts the initial established meanings and recontextualises them, using them as reflecting model of the text it precedes.

For all these reasons, *Among the White Moon Faces* appears as a narrative that inscribes the movement of its own memory, of the echoes and tensions between the return and the origin. It also evinces a treelike genealogy, with numerous branches where filiations disperse, their developments both vertical and horizontal. Texts influence one another, in a relational and transformational manner, according to a principle of redistribution of hierarchies. Testifying to this is the fact that in Kingston's latest work *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011) Wittman Ah Sing feels finally free to consider a similar two-continent spanning cartography and accounts for it as follows:

... I'm going to China
I regret I missed the Revolution, and ongoing
Revolutions. I was kept busy claiming
this country. 'Love it or leave it.' 'Chink,
go back to China, Chink.' I had to
claim my place, root down, own
America. This land is my land. (41)

The trip to China can only be envisaged after having "claimed" America. Undeniably, it was Maxine Hong Kingston who laid down an innovative framework in which Asian American literature could firmly establish a tradition and develop. Unquestionably, it was she who first vehemently denounced the predominant interpretative tendencies of categorising Asian American writers by foregrounding their otherness:

Another bothersome characteristic of the reviews is the ignorance of the fact that I am an America.... *The Woman Warrior* is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness. ("Cultural Mis-Readings" 57)

And undoubtedly, it is *The Woman Warrior* that stands out as not only a moment of rupture with respect to an auctorial doxa compelled to correspond to predefined criteria of ethnic literary production, but more significantly one of overcoming and redrawing of boundaries.

Nevertheless, my firm take is that only thanks to the creative and intellectual vision and investment of writers like Lim, who have been striving to impose an enlarged acceptance of "Asian American," has Wittman (and Kingston herself by the same token) managed to transcend the fissures and the fragmentation of the hyphenated subject. This character concludes, indeed, in the California native's latest book, by serenely outlining the contours of the third millennium Chinese Americanness as encompassing entity of multiple

territories and imaginaries, real and/or symbolic – what he calls “Asia America” (*Broad Margin* 41).

My own conclusion to this paper would be that the negotiation of legacy and heritage in contemporary Chinese American writing reaches multiple truths by crossing the memory of a time that is not only individual and/or North American, covering topographies and chronologies of anteriority and otherness, in order to assert them freely in a space conceived as transnational and diasporic, as well as necessarily dialogic. In Lim’s and Kingston’s case, the questions of heritage or, for that matter, the one of transmission go beyond the simple following in someone’s footsteps or unilateralism to which they are usually reduced, weaving into the literary field other connections than those established by chronology or aesthetics. These two writers’ narratives put forward a notion of filiation understood and built as a legitimising, inspiring and productive relationship with the previous or contemporary literature, where the writer extends and takes to greater depths the literary issues that “created” her, in a permanent intersection of familial, communal, national, textual and intertextual memories, where the lines between filiation and affiliation blur in literary cross-fertilisation.

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