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Finding and Understanding the Elusive Self: Changing Identities in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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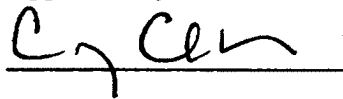
for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:



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6-2-03

Date

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Finding and Understanding the Elusive Self: Changing Identities in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

Director: Casey Charles ^{cc}

Literary critics of Kingston's contemporary classic *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's popular fiction have explored the ways these two writers use their backgrounds as Chinese-American women to inform their writing. In reading the books as feminist and/or ethnic enterprises, researchers typically emphasize the characters' mother-daughter relationships, attempts by the protagonists to balance an American reality with Chinese expectations, and links to characters' Chinese heritage. In addition, however, readers witness the characters engage in a changing, fluid identity formation throughout the texts. Both Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* dispel the traditional narrative notion of a single, linear self, and also go beyond both feminist and ethnic studies as their characters weave in and out of shifting identities.

Multiplicities involving language and cultural differences provide a platform for exploring these changing identities in both texts. Tan's and Kingston's characters try on various identity possibilities as they live with and around identities from their Chinese heritages. Always searching for the elusive self, sometimes the characters embody the Chinese immigrant, sometimes the successful, modern American woman, and sometimes both simultaneously.

Tan and Kingston further complicate identity formation with multiplicities that are not necessarily culturally dependent. Shifts in narrator and time and an elusory diegesis force the characters to confront a plethora of possibilities as they seek to understand their changing identities. The past and present, stories and legends, and former lives interweave to demonstrate the complexity of identity. Accompanying the characters in an expansion of the reader-response experience, readers, too attempt to understand the profound—and messy—nature of identity formation.

These writers transcend not only the notion of the traditional, linear narrative but also the popular belief that the minority experience differs so dramatically from the non-minority experience as to render any and all parts of it unknowable to an "outsider." Instead, Tan and Kingston—grounding their stories in the complicated exploration of identity formation—mine their unique cultural backgrounds to emphasize the human connectedness of us all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to several important people for the completion of this paper; without them, it would have taken me even longer to finish.

I thank Mark Kayll for extra duty on the domestic front, allowing me (and sometimes gently forcing me) to get the writing done.

Thank you to Kris Becker for reading early drafts and making insightful comments, as well as giving me much-needed pep talks in the beginning stages of the planning and writing.

Veronica Stewart deserves tremendous thanks for teaching me to avoid the “to be” verb.

Sincere thanks go to my committee—my advisor Casey Charles, Beverly Chin, and Joanne Charbonneau—for their extreme patience and helpful comments.

Most especially, I thank Joanne. She encouraged me to see the paper’s potential and then helped me realize that potential. Working with her has been a blessing; I thank her for her generosity and her friendship.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
MULTIPLICITIES.....	15
Cultural Differences.....	16
Language Differences.....	22
EXPANDING AND BROADENING THE MULTIPLICITIES.....	34
Changes in Narrative Voice—Whose Story Is It?.....	37
Time—Past and Present.....	45
Searching for the Diegesis.....	49
CONCLUSION.....	60
NOTES.....	65
WORKS CITED.....	67

INTRODUCTION

As humans, we constantly engage in attempts to discover meanings in our lives, and in this on-going process, we constantly re-define ourselves. We construct new identities as our roles shift from child to adolescent to adult, and these identities encompass all our past experiences, our hopes and fears for the future, and reflections on what is possible or thinkable. From the time humans first began telling stories, narrative has performed a critically important and complex psychological function. Stories can embody and celebrate a culture's history and memory; they can free the imagination of readers, engaging them in an empathetic act that breaks them out of their own of time and space; and they can test readers' belief systems by challenging them with ideas and characters that might be repugnant or alien to their ways of thinking. Stories also allow characters to create identities, often paralleling identity formation experiences of readers/listeners. Leslie Marmon Silko celebrates the radical nature of story-telling by claiming stories

are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories. (Silko 2)

Essential to human development and identity formation, stories finally became embedded in longer narratives; in these narratives, characters engage in the process of

creating and defining meaning in their lives and constructing identities from their own desires in tension with cultural and social expectations. Traditional narratives—including the epic and the novel—employ a linear form as a vehicle for describing the process of self-discovery, self-definition, and maturation from childhood into adulthood. In archetypal or mythological terms, the exile-return motif captured the pattern of meaning of the traditional *bildungsroman*: boy grows up, leaves home, engages in transformative adventures, returns to the community, marries girl with impeccable virtues, and contributes to the good of the society. Or, as Joseph Campbell describes it, the journey of the hero involves "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and life-enhancing return" (Campbell 35).

Readers learn about the hero via this thread of his life story. He fights a dragon, so we know he is valorous; he scorns tempting sirens, so we know he is loyal. The hero is described and understood in terms of what he does and says within a specific—usually chronological—time frame. But this conventional narrative provides just one method for recording the life of a character, and it tends to omit a range of experiences, relationships, and important backgrounds that may more completely tell the character's story. The traditional hero does indeed exemplify valor and loyalty, but his life and personality encompass more than simply his thoughts and actions. In addition to a valiant fighter, he is also the product of the customs, rituals, and values of his village; the influences of teachers, peers, and community members; and his family's stories, heard over the course of a lifetime. In the traditional narrative, these elements of the hero usually remain outside the reader's vision, yet they can illuminate the hero in ways his actions and even his thoughts cannot. To truly understand the hero, we must acknowledge that his story

comprises many threads that form a rich tapestry rather than a single strand. Ultimately, the familiar linear narrative form may not be as encompassing, rich, or complex as other, less traditional forms, because it constructs just this single identity. Though the hero does not keep redefining himself in the traditional linear narrative, his range of experiences nonetheless contributes to his ever-changing identity—even if he fails to recognize it. As he sees it, his story involves a single trajectory to ultimate triumph rather than a roller coaster of ups and downs, failures and imaginative re-creations.¹ And while his triumphs contribute to part of his identity, a more complete picture is possible when multiple perspectives are woven into the text.

Although many *bildungsroman* novels of the 18th and 19th centuries involved women writers, protagonists, and readers, feminist literary critics have long claimed that this typical narrative tradition actually fails to capture the woman's experience; it denies women *authentic* voice, identity, and power. "Women have inherited a sense of story in which action and affirming self-definition seem precluded not only by social environment but also by expectations of how stories work" (Frye 293). Free to explore their own agenda, contemporary women authors write polemically and prolifically about issues central to their experiences. Writers like Margaret Atwood published deliberately feminist projects like *Surfacing*, *Life before Man*, and *Edible Woman* in an effort to replace (male) narratives of oppression and patriarchal subjugation with more woman-centered discourses. However, although the stories focused on feminist issues, the narrative form remained virtually identical to the male narrative constructs in their linearity.

In contrast, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and other contemporary women writers (including Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, and Isabel Allende) seek a solution to what they perceive as the fundamental inadequacy of the traditional narrative form.

The traditional narrative voice, regardless of its position, implies unity of vision, linear progression, a comfortable beginning, middle, and end. By choosing to open up the narrative form, dispersing the points of origin and denying artificial cohesion, these minority women writers are challenging . . . patriarchal authority. Unseating the singular eye or I, they are acknowledging, and often celebrating, differences between cultures and even within themselves. (DeHay 43)

By breaking out of the traditional narrative form and introducing multiple perspectives, these authors underscore the failure of the “unity of vision” and replace it with a fluid and new definition of what constitutes identity. “The traditional *Bildungsroman* chronicles a young man’s identity crisis and its resolution in a known social world. Feminist critics find that the female novel of development has its own concerns . . . that do not fit a linear male model of steady progress” (Gardiner 126). The stories refuse to fit into tidy, static boxes and instead demand that readers look at the story lines and characters from multiple angles.

As these writers challenge the notion of a single truth and a single, concrete identity, paradoxically, their embrace of multiple truths and multiple identities paints a more accurate picture of the way people *actually* create and recreate themselves. Bonnie Melchior contends, “a self is not a product that is made, but a participatory process. Neither is the meaning of a text (or a life) linear” (Melchior 282). Like the partially

revealed hero of the typical narrative, we consist of a multitude of non-linear forces and influences acting on us everyday as we strive for coherence and construct and reconstruct our own identities. Tan and Kingston use this new narrative form with stories and legends, temporal and narrational shifts, and dreams and memories weaving to create multiple stories rather than the conventional diegesis.² These two writers challenge the assumed stability of the linear narrative and construct their texts with multiple layers. Ultimately, these layers—each perspective, supplementary story, temporal shift, and every telling and retelling of family legends—contribute to a radically different idea of character and truth than the traditional, linear narrative allows.

The rejection of a single, knowable truth serves the needs of minority women writers and the unique challenges they describe, but a multiple perspective approach to storytelling also accurately reflects the lives most people experience—men and women, people of all colors. The narratives of both Tan and Kingston are “an attempt at a self-definition that, finally, is never definitive in the sense of complete, conclusive, static. Paradox, flux, a ‘surplus of humanness,’ a defiance of fixation and categories characterize [the texts], as they characterize *life*” (Ling, “Maxine” 156; my emphasis). We are not one dimensional, single-focused individuals, even those from a supposed-single cultural background. Like Tan’s and Kingston’s protagonists/heroes, we strain against the constrictive fabric of a single identity. While DeHay and others³ maintain that ethnic and cultural backgrounds play a crucial role in both the construction (by the authors) and deconstruction (by critics) of texts by minority women writers⁴, these non-traditional narratives can capture non-minority stories as well—in fact non-linear, non-chronological forms probably do a better job telling most human stories. Although other

authors, including Faulkner and Joyce, have experimented with creative strategies such as stream of consciousness in order to stretch the conventions of the traditional novel, Tan and Kingston make their own mark by inviting readers to examine the narrative from numerous angles, which could include stream of consciousness, but also changes in setting, dreams, legends, and memories.

Tan's 1995 novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Kingston's award-winning *The Woman Warrior* problematize the structure of the traditional novel as a means of wrestling with issues of fluid identities. The texts chronicle the lives of Chinese-American women and the demands and expectations they juggle. The characters experience their lives as a kaleidoscope of multiplicities—they must try to balance pulls from their Chinese cultural past, Anglo-American peers, and Chinese-American relatives. Not surprisingly, critical discussions of these texts foreground issues of self-identity and ethnicity, especially as they relate to narrator and voice switchings and the cultural challenges faced by the multicultural characters. However, the elasticity distinguishing character development permeates other elements of the texts as well. Although they write in English, both Tan and Kingston give voice to multiple languages by manipulating syntax, vocabulary, and rhythmic speech patterns. Thus, they create the feeling of reading English, Chinese, and the broken English spoken by Chinese immigrants. In addition to manipulating linguistic conventions, Tan subverts the notion of time itself as temporal instability reaches to such proportions that her characters take shape in other times and places. Kingston's temporal changes occur as ancient legends and myths weave into the text, becoming stitches in the fabric of the protagonist's present-day life. Finally, the multitude of stories told by various characters layer and

intersect to inform the tapestry of the novel. These two writers depict non-linear, non-chronological, and expansive lives for their heroes who slip easily in and out of time, place, and stories in narrative *tours de force* that resist closure and insist on breaking boundaries.

As post-modern enterprises, *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Woman Warrior* break with traditional forms and literary expectations. Although Tan and Kingston deftly illustrate effective blendings of culture, style, and tone,⁵ they refuse to endorse the postmodernist notion of meaninglessness.⁶ Their texts instead appropriate the postmodernist technique of blending various elements to vigorously assert the *meaningfulness* of life if textual characters and readers alike are open to different perspectives and the power of human connectedness. Their claims of meaningfulness and connectedness also subvert the post-modernist “skepticism regarding generalizable and universal claims” (Di Stefano 74). Although their characters remain outside neat definitions and continue to bump against and challenge unsatisfying or unrealistic expectations, both Tan and Kingston are insistent on the universality of these kinds of experiences.

The project of these two writers reflects the multicultural backgrounds they inherit, and their work demonstrates that in spite of—and because of—difficulties, these backgrounds are replete with potential. They make sense of—and make the most of—the demands and expectations of their Chinese-American histories by envisioning a world in which multiplicities offer provocative challenges and possibilities, rather than limitations and oppressions. Literary critics typically focus on the ways the immigrant and minority

experiences impact the authors and their texts as the writers engage in a balancing act between the two cultures. Amy Ling, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Terry DeHay, for example, center their critical analyses on Tan's and Kingston's use of a dual cultural influence to inform their writing. Readers observe this duality in the play between past and present, character struggles with issues of female inferiority (stemming, in part, from a strong Confucian patriarchy), and the disassembling of the traditional narrative form (Lim 237; DeHay 29; Ling, "Writers" 235-236). Ling points out that for Chinese-American writers "their centers are not stable and single." Like African-Americans, as described by W.E.B. Dubois, the racial minority "consciousness is double, their vision bifocal and fluctuating" (Ling, "Writers" 220). The textual discourse of Tan and Kingston expands this double vision so that their narratives dispel the myth of the unitary self through explorations using multiple lenses and perspectives.

The diverse cultures tugging and pulling at the main characters provide the starting point for this exploration of multiplicities. Tan's Olivia and Kingston's Maxine feel the potent effects of both Chinese and American cultures, and these differing cultural narrative paths imply the differing identity paths that help shape the texts. Olivia, daughter of an Anglo mother and Chinese father, acquires most of her Chinese cultural knowledge from her half-sister Kwan. Throughout the novel, Kwan works as the Chinese counterpoint to Olivia's determined Americanism. By the end, Olivia acknowledges and embraces her Chinese ancestry with Kwan's help—while still maintaining her American identity—and this move toward acceptance makes up part of Olivia's narrative experience in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. "Tan's novel . . . highlights a tendency towards inclusion and limitation of loss, against cultural void, in favor of the

characters freely following intellectual and cultural drives, and in the direction of change” (Unali 143). This tendency to embrace an extensive range of experiences—especially a cultural hybridization of Chinese and American cultures—helps facilitate Olivia’s journey down multiple identity paths.

Readers see a similar hybridization in Kingston’s memoirs as Maxine attempts to balance Chinese and American ideas and ideals, often resulting in cultural battles with her mother. Maxine struggles to reconcile the hurtful, misogynistic Chinese sayings from her mother’s tongue with the empowering possibilities inherent in her mother’s stories. Her ability to reconcile the injurious sayings with the inspirational stories occurs as Maxine begins to understand that she and her mother have been victims of colossal cultural and linguistic misunderstandings. Language and communication also play a crucial role in Tan’s novel, both in her use of varying English syntax to depict nuances of broken English and in the construction of character relationships. Kwan and Olivia develop a binding intimacy through Olivia’s comprehension of Chinese, and, as a result of Kwan’s late-night ramblings in their shared bedroom, Chinese becomes the language of Olivia’s dreams.

Clearly, Olivia and Maxine wrestle with issues of multiplicities—including multiple modes of discourse, reflexivity, and destabilized identities. However, not content to simply rest with an understanding or acceptance of differences in culture and language, Tan and Kingston move beyond these obvious places of ethnic and cultural diversity and introduce myriad inconstancies in their writings. These include using ancient legends, unfixed narrators, and temporal shifts while they enrich and problematize the diegesis with ancillary story threads. By expanding and broadening the

notion of living with, in, and around multiplicities, their characters challenge the traditional hero/myth values of individualism and independence and replace them with interconnectedness.

Since readers are implicated in this enterprise, they too are invited to confront challenges inherent in being pulled in numerous directions, since, like the quest hero— and Olivia and Maxine—readers are an amalgamation of many distinct forces. This idea of a non-linear, complex identity has been appropriated by several distinct theoretical camps. Julia Kristeva joins other critics of minority texts in claiming that the lack of a coherent identity results from differences between western and eastern cultural traditions. Others, however, argue that this destabilized, discontinuous identity has its roots in basic differences between men and women; “more complex” than men, women by nature embody more fragmented identities. Still others maintain that the whole notion of a fixed, continuous identity—one impervious to changes over time—is an illusion, a trick.⁷ Tan’s and Kingston’s texts necessarily reflect their experiences as Chinese-Americans, as women, as citizens of a post-modern era, but their use of multiplicities to create fluid identities has the potential to resonate with all people. Though perhaps most often attributed to the unique demands of the minority and/or female experience, Tan and Kingston seem to suggest that the idea of living with multiple and clashing influences is universal. Thus, their inclusion of fantastical elements—temporal shifts or characters who live as ancient warriors—effectively put readers right on the same path as the characters. The unusual, sometimes supernatural events that surround Olivia and Maxine are unexpected, strange, and frightening—whether Chinese-American or Anglo-American—so that all readers share and engage in the essential and identical problem of

the formation of subjectivity alongside the fictional Olivia and Maxine. Readers identify with the characters—regardless of cultural or ethnic backgrounds—through the act of reading and interpretation. Olivia and Maxine’s experiences are as fantastic to them as they are to us, the surprised readers, caught in the same hermeneutical pitfalls.

These shifting texts challenge our understanding through their slippery notion of time itself. Throughout *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan shifts readers out of the present-day setting through Kwan’s stories. While Kwan recounts events from her past life, readers—along with Olivia—get caught up in Kwan’s stories until those tales become as present in and crucial to the text as the scenes and events in the present-time setting. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston also interweaves present and past by beginning her text with an old family story about her great aunt retold in the present. Throughout the telling of the story, past and present tenses mix to form an ambiguous picture of the shamed aunt. More startling, the narrator later in the book sheds her contemporary Chinese-American persona and becomes a legendary warrior of an ancient time. In each case, the transitions in and out of differing times add elements of multiplicity and possibility to the texts and characters. Again and again, the authors’ strategies point to a fluidity of identity, which frees the characters from limitations; at the same time, both characters and readers must accept as unreliable the traditional ideas of truth, story, and a single essential self. This process forces us to recognize the transient boundaries between past and present and allows us to see the ways memories keep the past alive and both seem to co-exist in the present.

Narratorial shifts function in a similar fashion, as they too expand the notion of unfixed but rich possibilities. Ursula LeGuin describes narrative voice as “. . . the voice

or voices that tell the story, the narrating voice” [83] and in both *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Woman Warrior*, the storytelling voices change throughout the texts. Tan’s novel begins with Olivia’s voice describing Kwan’s entrance into her life. In the next chapter, Kwan takes over the narration, relating events that happened to her in a past life while Olivia drifts off to sleep. As a child, Olivia wondered where Kwan’s stories stopped and her own dreams began; they always appeared as an indistinct intersection in the drowsy haze of her sleep. *The Woman Warrior* contains comparable changes in narration, most notably in the “White Tigers” section. Here, the narrator’s voice begins as Maxine, and changes to the voice of the girl warrior during her training period, leaving readers wondering if an immutable Maxine even exists. Changes in narrative voice further underscore the idea of *knowing* as understood by conventional writers. Readers learn about Maxine, but the unstable nature of identity insists that we can never completely know her—just as she can never completely know herself.

Shifts in narration, ruptures in time sequence, and other layerings intertwine throughout the texts as multiple storytellers/narrators and multiple versions of the same story spring up, encouraging readers to contemplate the complexity and ultimate unreliability of truth. While Maxine—the frustrated, often confused daughter—is the protagonist, she is not always the storyteller/narrator. When Maxine shares the episode of her aunt’s humiliating reunion with her husband, she includes three different tellers: herself, her brother, and her sister. Although Maxine’s version carries the most details, she suspects the other versions might be, in the end, more historically accurate. The three versions of the “same” story force readers into a hermeneutical conundrum, considering

not just who is authoring each story but also the effect of these shifting voices on the larger textual enterprise.

Although less complex than *The Woman Warrior*, Tan's text also expands the traditional notion of one story, one voice. *The Hundred Secret Senses* oscillates between Olivia as narrator and Kwan as narrator, allowing each woman's story and voice to more fully illuminate the other. Tan's careful juxtaposition of Kwan's Miss Banner narrative with Olivia's contemporary tale demonstrates the importance of multiple perspectives on the development of character and story. Ultimately, readers reach the conclusion that the changing narrators and slippery stories demonstrate that no single truth exists; we understand truths—or attempt to—from necessarily limited perspectives since no one is ever situated as the omniscient narrator or interpreter of all experience. Tan and Kingston privilege readers as interpreters of multiple perspectives, but the picture remains always only partially revealed.

The powers of imagination and connectivity lie at the heart of Tan's and Kingston's textual enterprises; not surprisingly then, Kingston resists calling her memoirs autobiographical. "After going back and forth on my classification, . . . I've decided that I am writing . . . about real people, all of whom have minds that love to invent fictions. I am writing the biography of their imaginations" (Rabinowitz 186). By acknowledging her characters' tendency to "invent fictions," (an accusation Tan's Olivia could easily make of Kwan's belief in yin eyes), Kingston calls into question the notion of stability of memory, storytelling, and identity. As the characters invent fictions in their minds, they also invent identities for themselves. Kingston's vacillations between the classifications of autobiography versus fiction mirror the fluidity of her concept of narration, with

characters who move between and around identities, constantly shifting their own “classification.” Eventually Kingston must choose one genre over the other to satisfy the publisher’s demands; her characters, however, remain free to slide in and out of identities as the fictions in their minds change.

By the end of each of the books, it becomes apparent that the meanings of the text encompass far more than those of the diegetic story. In Tan’s piece, Kwan’s tales of past lives weave so seamlessly through the text, it is difficult to know if *her* stories are ancillary or if Olivia’s present-voiced narration makes up the secondary subtext. Ultimately, both settings and sets of tales prove essential to the whole tapestry Tan creates. Certainly Kwan’s and Olivia’s stories could stand on their own, but this also reveals the complexity, dynamism, and powerful interconnectedness of human lives. In Kingston’s book, Maxine and her mother demonstrate this connectedness as readers watch their stories unfold from multiple perspectives. The mother’s story becomes Maxine’s as the daughter retells it—only to shift into first person. Is it the mother’s story again? Or is it still Maxine’s? This moving in and out of stories foregrounds the challenges, contradictions, and possibilities central to their lives.

MULTIPLICITIES

The issue of cultural identity stands out as a constant challenge facing both Tan's and Kingston's central characters. As Chinese-Americans, they find themselves weaving among three cultures: Chinese, American, and Chinese-American. Issues of identity, especially as they relate to ethnicity, help define Olivia's and Maxine's struggles and the events of both books. In addition, the stories—imagined, embellished, and re-told—allow the protagonists to explore these identities, especially as they shift and change with each new telling. The imagined stories contribute to the identity formation of each character and, along with “reality,” add to—and change—the identities of Olivia and Maxine. “[T]he power of the *The Woman Warrior* lies not in the invisible force of fantasy as distinct from reality but in the powerful interaction of fantasy with reality in determining new possibilities for female selfhood” (Frye 294). Although Frye refers here to autobiography as a narrative mode capable of capturing female identity in a new way, this mixture of fact with fantasy maintains the same kind of power for fiction texts as well. If blending the life of the imagination with actual events signifies a shift in how we understand identity in real women, fictitious women would also benefit from this expanded notion of identity. In the same way that Kingston explores Maxine's changing identities with family story re-tellings and Chinese legends, Tan imbues Olivia's identity with stories from Olivia's life and Kwan's parallel Miss Banner narrative. In both texts, the writers play with multiple stories, resulting in expanded identity possibilities for the characters.

Cultural Differences

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia considers herself unquestionably American.

Despite her father's Chinese heritage, theirs was a "modern American family. We spoke English. Sure, we ate Chinese food, but take-out, like everyone else. And we lived in a ranch-style house in Daly City. [My parents] attended church and bought life insurance" (Tan 6-7). With a Caucasian mother and stepfather and a typical American life in San Francisco, Olivia knows only one culture: American middle-class. Kwan's arrival into the household marks Olivia's first compelling indication that her own ethnicity might be more complex than she'd thought—or wanted.

[E]veryday after school, Kwan would latch on to me and tag along wherever I went. By the first grade, I became an expert on public humiliation and shame. Kwan asked so many dumb questions that all the neighborhood kids thought she had come from Mars. (11)

Following a prank by some neighbor boys, a confused but delighted Kwan ends up standing in the middle of the lawn with the sprinklers on. "Then one of Kevin's friends, a swaggering second-grader whom all the little girls had a crush on, said to me, 'Is that dumb Chink your sister? Hey, Olivia, does that mean you're a dumb Chink too?' I was so flustered I yelled, 'She's not my sister! I hate her! I wish she'd go back to China!'" (12). Olivia resents Kwan's disruption to her life, yet Kwan's presence nudges Olivia into an initial—and unwilling—awareness of her Chinese heritage.

Although Olivia and Kwan share a room as children, Olivia thinks of Kwan's stories, her own baffling dreams (are they dreams or more of Kwan's stories?), and even

their shared language simply as unavoidable characteristics of their forced relationship. The stories, her acquisition of Chinese, and a growing familiarity with Chinese culture seem to have little bearing on Olivia's life once she learns to ignore or avoid her half-sister outside the confines of their bedroom. Readers do not witness Olivia as she stumbles through adolescence with confusing ideas about her identity or ethnicity. Tan omits from her text the typically troubling aspects of adolescent identity formation that most people undergo. Consequently, Olivia's adult struggles with her shifting identities emphasize the idea that our identities are constantly in flux, even into and throughout adulthood. Readers first see Olivia truly wrestling with her identity—and its relation to her ethnicity—when she meets her husband, Simon, in college.

I noticed him right away because like me he had a name that didn't fit with his Asian features. Eurasian students weren't as common then as they are now, and . . . I had the sense I was seeing my male doppelganger. When our linguistics class formed study groups, Simon and I drifted toward the same one. We didn't mention what we so obviously shared.

(74)

Even as she acknowledges its existence, Olivia refuses to confront any issues she may have with her mixed ethnicity. Though here she fails to deal with them directly, these issues form part of the foundation for Olivia's eventual process of self-discovery and make up the heart of her reluctant, but deepening relationship with Kwan.

Later in the book, Kwan, Olivia, and Simon travel to China where Olivia begins to unravel Kwan's confusing Miss Banner stories and, at the same time, she starts to recognize her own shifting identities. The narrative focuses on Olivia's changing

relationships with Kwan and Simon, but the longer she remains in China, the closer Olivia moves to appreciating the multiple identities that make up who she is: sister, lover, American, Chinese. As she edges toward this new understanding of herself (an always-changing understanding characterized by fluidity and flexibility), Olivia also sees her relationships with those she loves in a new light. Through her nascent connection with and appreciation for her Chinese ancestry, Olivia recognizes the importance of deep connections with others, connections that can even transcend this life. Once scornful of Kwan and her own Chinese heritage, Olivia now wants to know her history, wants answers to questions about Big Ma, Du Lili, and Miss Banner. As Kwan remembers the ending of the Miss Banner/Miss Moo story, the power of Olivia's relationship with Kwan begins to emerge. Finally admitting her role in the story, Olivia participates in the telling:

“You remember how we die?” Kwan asks from behind.

I shake my head, but then recall what I always thought was a dream: spears flashing by firelight, the grains of the stone wall. I feel a snap, and my fears fall back to earth as I continue to rush through the air. No pain! How wonderful to be released! And yet I'm not, not entirely. For there is Kwan, still holding tight on to my hand. She squeezes it again.

“You remember, ah?”

“I think we were hanged.” (376)

Though Kwan doubts the hanging, both women tacitly accept Olivia's new perspective on her relationship with Kwan and with Simon, her lover in this former life. By accepting this possibility of past lives, Olivia also recognizes—even embraces—her Chinese ancestry. By finally saying “yes” to the veracity of the Miss Banner stories, Olivia allows herself to acknowledge her Chinese identity without Americanizing or ignoring that which makes her different.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan avoids constructing her narrative discourse exclusively on questions of identity as it relates to ethnicity, but those issues partially inform Olivia's actions and ideas throughout the text. The new surname Olivia assumes for her and her daughter underscores her recent acceptance of part of her identity. “She and I took Kwan's last name. Why not? What's a family name if not a claim to being connected in the future to someone from the past?” (398). By the end of the novel, Olivia begins to celebrate and understand the multiplicities alive in her life, both as a result of her Chinese heritage and the uniqueness of simply being herself.

Unlike Tan's novel, Kingston's memoirs unequivocally hone in on the frustrations, misunderstandings, and possibilities that Maxine's multicultural background fosters. Judith Melton describes Maxine's journey as

the struggle of a modern young woman to create a sustaining identity in the face of its lingering traditions. As the daughter of a Chinese family living in California, the narrator is imbued with the misogynist legacy of her ancestry, a legacy that reaches back to traditional China but still echoes in her Chinese American environment. (Melton 74)

From childhood through adolescence and into her adult life, Maxine struggles to discover a balance among her American, Chinese, and Chinese-American identities.

The first episode of *The Woman Warrior* recounts the sorrowful tale of Maxine's aunt, a woman who kills herself after giving birth to an illegitimate child. Although this section centers on telling stories and keeping secrets, Maxine's questions concerning her own identity nevertheless surface.

The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones . . . I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones. Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine. (Kingston 11)

At first, her inability to speak English and later her perception of "American-feminine" as "inaudible" sets her apart from her white classmates. She unwittingly maintains the American stereotype of Chinese women—quiet, reserved, passive—even as she attempts to reject Chinese characteristics of verbal assertiveness. Her silence at the American school spoils her attempts to shake off the yoke of her Chinese heritage. Paradoxically, her own rejection of Chinese identity cements that identity in the eyes of the Americans. At the Chinese school, the students "chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft . . . The girls were not mute. They screamed and yelled during recess, when there were no rules; they had fistfights" (167). Here participation comes easily and naturally for her. Foiled by her familiarity with Chinese culture, Maxine bends to the shape of her Chinese ancestry more than she realizes.

The stories that weave in and out of *The Woman Warrior* derive from both Maxine and her mother, and Maxine is challenged to locate her own identities in the balance between the stories. As a child born during World War II, she watched the sky for airplanes: “[T]here . . . are shiny silver machines, some not yet invented, being moved, fleets always being moved from one continent to another, one planet to another. I must figure out a way to fly between them” (96). In discovering a way to fly between, Maxine adjusts the influences in her life to include all the stories: her mother’s Chinese tales, the American life of school and city, and her own Chinese-American versions of the world. She attempts to distinguish between the real and the not-yet real, the real and the imagined. While Maxine the child, hurt and exasperated, might find the Chinese customs unbearable, as an adult, she forges a space for herself—broad enough to encompass even these unjust, often misogynistic conventions of her heritage. In the end, both Maxine and her mother participate the story. “Here is a story my mother told me . . . The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (Kingston 206). Like Tan’s Olivia, Maxine finds a way to claim her Chinese heritage without losing the capacity to define herself against and around a backdrop of multiplicities. Although she has no control of the origins of the story (or her own birth and heritage), she does have the power to determine the course of the narrative that she will create from that point of origin.

Language Differences

In both Tan's and Kingston's work, language helps define the ways characters develop, interact, and come to see their fluid identities. Various linguistic acts—shifts from English into Chinese, complexities of who is being understood (and by whom), moments of silence versus moments of speech, lies, promises kept and broken, oral storytelling—underscore the rich multiplicities and possibilities for what constitutes reality in both *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Woman Warrior*.

Although neither book incorporates actual Chinese passages into the text, both make use of differences among Chinese, English, and broken English. Changes in syntax and subject/verb agreements invoke the varying sounds of each “language.” This inclusion of multiple languages reinforces the multicultural influences and challenges facing the central characters. “For Chinese American women such as Kingston and Tan, . . . speaking in a double voice and living in a bicultural world characterize their dual cultural enmeshment” (V. Chen 3). The languages of the texts reflect this duality, both in terms of when and how a particular language is used and who is using it.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan switches in and out of Chinese, depending on her subject matter and her audience. When dealing with the pragmatic details of American life, Kwan usually uses English; she shifts into Chinese when telling Olivia a story from a past life. The differences between Kwan's two voices add to the already vivid texture of the novel. In English, Kwan asks Olivia, ““Last night, Libby-ah, who you meet? What you see? What you see after you die? Next time, open eyes”” (Tan 31). Here, without the conventional use of auxiliary verbs, the syntax of Kwan's English-

speaking voice conjures images of an immigrant Chinese woman laboring with an unfamiliar language. Though Kwan's urgency is present even when she speaks English, her English does not showcase her as an enchanting and gifted storyteller. Later in their conversation, Kwan tells Olivia part of the Miss Banner/Miss Moo story in Chinese.

“Libby-ah,” I can still hear Kwan saying in Chinese, “did I ever tell you what Miss Banner promised before we died? Of course, I can't say exactly how long ago this happened. Time is not the same between one lifetime and the next. But I think it was during the year 1864. Whether this was the Chinese lunar year or the date according to the Western calendar, I'm not sure. . . .” (32)

With correct subject/verb agreements, conventional syntax, and an effective use of rhythm and flow, Kwan's voice transforms to that of master storyteller powerfully in control of her medium.

Not only do readers witness two distinct languages in Kwan, we also hear Kwan's Chinese storytelling voice as a counterpoint to Olivia's own stories in English. While Kwan leans toward the melodic and circular in unraveling her tales, Olivia relates events with more straightforwardness and raw emotion. Olivia describes her attraction to Simon with this contemporary American directness:

I had dated other guys . . . but those relationships seldom went beyond the usual good times induced by all-night parties, stoned conversations, and sometimes sex . . . With Simon, I laughed harder, thought more deeply,

felt more passionately beyond my own cubbyhole . . . We unearthed each others' past with psychoanalytic gusto. (75-76)

A powerful storyteller in her own right, Olivia reveals her distinctly American culture through her words, just as Kwan's stories reflect her Chinese heritage. The stories, told in the language and style unique to Kwan or Olivia, seesaw back and forth throughout the book, adding important threads to the many stories told. Our understanding of Olivia—and her understanding of herself—shifts as she allows more of the Chinese experience and Chinese voices to act on her persona and the contemporary story she unravels. By the end of the book, she begins to embrace these multiple stories, though she does so without shedding the familiar fabric—language and style—of her American upbringing.

Tan takes care not to privilege one voice or one language over another. The differing voices—with their shifts in language—tell different kinds of stories and have different effects on the reader. In an essay discussing her use of standard and “broken” English, Tan describes the language of her Chinese-born mother: “Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery . . . I wanted to capture the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts” (Tan, “Mother” 198, 202). Kwan's language reflects these characteristics of Tan's mother, and it conveys a fierce energy and persistence in Kwan not immediately discernible in her Chinese storytelling sections. Readers witness some of this energy as Kwan insists Olivia not change her name to “Yee,” her father's supposed surname.

She hunches her shoulders, and drops once again to her spy pose. “Ba's name. Yee not his name, no. This true, Libby-ah! I only telling you so

you don't go through life with wrong name. Why make ancestors happy not our own?" (Tan 177)

She continues in Chinese, explaining how their father acquired the name Jack Yee, and her story compels and surprises both Olivia and readers. The intense energy of Kwan's English voice juxtaposed with her lyrical storytelling Chinese voice demonstrates the complexities and possibilities stitched within this multi-layered character.

Although accurate and honest, these character complexities sometimes lead to painful misunderstandings. Throughout Kingston's text, Maxine wrestles with feelings of confusion, anger, and resentment toward her mother, largely as a result of her mother's sharp words. As a child, Maxine composes a list of transgressions she aches to share with her mother; one night, the dam in her throat breaks and the list spills out. Maxine, indignant at the verbal abuse she contends she has suffered at the tongue of her mother, accuses her, "You lie with 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" (Kingston 202). Her mother counters with plausible explanations: "Can't you take a joke? You can't even tell a joke from real life . . . I didn't say you were ugly. That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite" (202-203). Maxine, though still angry and hurt, begins to perceive that life is not as clear-cut as she'd thought. Her mother's tongue, though sharp, maybe does not cut randomly and maliciously, it's just that Maxine has not been privileged to the complex nuances, meanings, and emotional subtexts behind the actual words.

Stunned and more confused, the guilt-ridden Maxine eventually leaves home “in order to see the world logically” (204). But this logic necessitates the loss of complexity. Maxine discovers that “colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic” (205); though confusing, perhaps her mother’s contradictions—her language of “lies”—do allow for rich possibilities. Thus, after trying on the American coat of logic and “antiseptic” experiences (or what Maxine perceives is American since it rubs against the nap of her Chinese childhood), she finally chooses not to abandon entirely the complexities and double meanings of her youth. At the end of the memoirs, she tells the Ts’ai Yen story that her mother began and she finishes. The captured poetess’s “words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger” (209). Here again language conveys a surface meaning as well as a meaningful emotional content as the music enhances and deepens the words themselves. Ts’ai Yen’s dual languages of Chinese and music symbolize the multiplicity alive in Maxine’s story and in own her life. Through her character’s plaintive song, Maxine recognizes the importance and beauty of remaining open to multiple meanings and possibilities.

Ts’ai Yen’s singing accomplishes communication in two languages—Chinese and music—and, in doing so, preserves her story for generations to come. The discourse of silence and secrets performs this same task in both *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Woman Warrior*. As characters refuse to share their stories and explain their actions, and conspire with each other to keep secrets from the outside world, they endeavor to protect their identities, culture, and power. Silence and secrets become a distinct language, a method of preserving possibility and multiplicity without fear of appropriation or repudiation from those in control, including a foreign culture and authoritative parents.

Soon after Kwan arrives in the United States, she discloses to Olivia that she has yin eyes: she can see people who have already died. Suspecting this might be misunderstood by unknowing Americans, Kwan warns Olivia, ““But . . . you must promise never to tell anyone. Never. Promise, ah?”” (Tan 15). Despite her nighttime pledge, the next morning Olivia divulges Kwan’s secret to her mother, and Kwan winds up completing a course of electric shock treatment in a psychiatric ward.

Although Kwan forgives Olivia for her betrayal—and even invites her back into her confidence—Olivia’s failure to keep Kwan’s secret results in irreversible changes for both her half-sister and herself. Besides her now spiky, coarse hair, Kwan also suffers the incessant, accusing voices of ghosts from the yin world. She tells Olivia, “[F]our bad ghosts shouted, “How can you tell our secrets?” They gave me a yin-yang tou—forced me to tear out half my hair. The ghosts branded me for having two faces: one loyal, one traitor” (17). Olivia suffers guilt in betraying Kwan, and this marks the beginning of a lifetime of perceived failings and offenses: lies, avoidances, and sharp words for her sister. Olivia “feel[s] guilty forever” (25) each time she angrily snaps at her older sister, while Kwan demonstrates unwavering loyalty toward Olivia, which then intensifies the guilt. Although as an adult she recognizes her childhood divulgence as forgivable, Olivia still wonders why “Kwan never blamed me for what happened” (18).

Olivia’s inability to keep silent about Kwan’s yin eyes costs both sisters more than harassment from ghosts and perpetual guilt. The most serious loss is that of a shared common experience: maintaining a life and language of their own, different from that of the outside world. Unique to the two of them, this shared experience of a common language and midnight secrets could afford Olivia and Kwan special power, a power

perhaps strong enough to counter neglectful parents (“With Kwan around, my mother could float guiltlessly through her honeymoon phase with Bob” [12]) and thoughtless Anglo schoolchildren (“Is that dumb Chink your sister? Does that mean you’re a dumb Chink too?” [12]). As an outsider in both her new country and new family, Kwan understands this when she asks for Olivia’s silence: she understands the power of shared secrets, and both she and Olivia crave the security that accompanies such a power. Olivia, however, can only see Kwan in terms of the Other—unknowable, different, dangerous. The unfamiliarity of Kwan’s Chinese culture and background unsettles middle-class American Olivia; consequently, Olivia allies herself with the safe, known, non-Chinese world of her mother and rejects Kwan’s offer of a secret (Chinese) allegiance.

In spite of Olivia’s childhood betrayal, Kwan’s devotion to her and their relationship remains unshakeable; it allows a version of their shared common experience to endure during adulthood. Olivia maintains, “I really think Kwan is . . . loyal, extremely loyal. She’d tear off the ear of anyone who said an unkind word about me” (24). But, as children, Olivia’s secret-telling weakens their collective power—not because Kwan rejects Olivia as a confidante after the betrayal, but because *Olivia*, with her cross words and harsh criticisms of Kwan’s unpredictable, unfamiliar behavior, rejects Kwan’s continued unspoken offer of a sisterly alliance.

The first line of Kingston’s text demands adherence to the discourse of silence and secrecy. “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (Kingston 3). Maxine’s mother then shares the bare bones account of the illicitly pregnant aunt—No Name Woman—ironically revealed to readers by Maxine’s

noncompliance with her mother's call for secrecy. Like Kwan, Maxine's mother believes in the ability of secrets to promote power and maintain a part of oneself concealed from the rest of the world. She too understands the bond and connection of the "insiders." This concealment prevents the consummate assimilation and accompanying loss of identity to the dominant culture while establishing a tight-knit community of those who share this secret knowledge.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways . . . The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence. (5)

Secrets, intentional misleadings, and silence help guarantee the emigrants' hold on their culture; hidden from the prying eyes of white Americans and their own curious Chinese-American children, these mysteries give the elders an important edge in the world of shifting powers. Secrets and silences provide the Chinese adults a measure of control and autonomy in a culture that denies them power.

Silences weave through her mother's secrets, forcing Maxine to create possible scenarios to make up for the frustrating holes in her mother's story. "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity . . ." (6). Her mother's uncompromising silence heightens the intrigue of the taboo story; in order to make sense of the minimal information she's been given, Maxine

invents a myriad of possibilities for the woman she never knew: the aunt as a rape victim; a lonely romantic; or “a wild woman, [who] kept rollicking company” (8). Through the mysterious gaps in the family legend, the dead aunt acquires the ability to live on as she was (the “real” story, unknown to Maxine) and, additionally, as endless possibilities in Maxine’s imagination.

Kingston’s discursive technique here is reminiscent of prospective narration in that her imagined tales encompass “supposition, fabulation, [and] mental simulation” (Margolin 153-154). However, her narrative moves beyond the neat definition of a simple “future tense narration” to include conjecture and possibilities. Family secrets and silences enable Maxine to imagine her aunt with multiple identities—“everything can be presented as uncertain, potential, or hypothetical . . . much is possible, but nothing has been decided yet” (154). Through the constant speculation of future generations (in this case, Maxine), the semiotic construction of the invented stories helps protect the aunt’s fragile identity from obliteration by the assimilated culture, and the stories also keep multiplicities alive through unknown—but imagined—potential.

In this section and throughout the book, Kingston uses verb tense intricacies to explore and try out multiple versions for her characters. She shifts in and out of the subjunctive and indicative moods, adding to the potential possibilities already inherent in the sheer number of changing versions. Kingston’s Maxine does not simply envision her aunt as a rape victim, shy romantic, or reckless lover. By manipulating the subjunctive and indicative moods, Kingston calls into question what has actually happened, what is fantasy, and the places where those intersect (Johnston 139; Myers, “Fictivity” 119).

[S]he shifts back and forth between speculation and assertion about her aunt's experiences and feelings: she violates the maxim of clarity. To indicate speculation, she uses the conditional subjunctive . . . To signal assertion, she uses the indicative . . . The indicative does not signal what the reader should take as fact but what Kingston . . . momentarily lives as fact. Her descriptions of her aunt's feelings test her own potential identities . . . (Myers, "Speech-Act" 134)

The move from the subjunctive phrase "My aunt could not have been the lone romantic" (Kingston 6) to the indicative "The fear did not stop but permeated everywhere. She told the man, 'I think I'm pregnant.' He organized the raid against her" (7) emphasizes the unknown and vast possibilities for the aunt—and, by association, the possibilities for Maxine herself. She calls her aunt her "forerunner" (8) and regards her tale as another contribution to her growing storehouse of identities. "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). The help the aunt offers, however, does not come in the clear-cut parable hoped for by Maxine's mother. The story is more real than a simple lesson—it is a branch of the same tree with deep roots into history, culture, folklore, and myth. Via Maxine's imagination, *No Name Woman* offers a host of possibilities, each with its own life and vitality.

Similarly, Kingston's "White Tigers" section moves between past tense and future conditional. In past tense, Maxine remembers her mother sharing the Fa Mu Lan story with her. "I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother" (20). The next paragraph switches to the future conditional as Maxine places herself in the swordswoman's story. "The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof.

The bird would cross the sun and lift into the mountains . . .” (20). This unexpected shift into the conditional continues for three paragraphs, long enough for the reader to wonder where Kingston is taking us. The list of adventures the narrator describes begins to read like the predictions of an oracle or a metaphorical list of future challenges and experiences for Maxine. But the verb form changes back to past tense immediately following a space break, and readers now find themselves in the middle of Fa Mu Lan’s story, told in simple past tense. “The door opened, and an old man and an old woman came out carrying bowls of rice and soup and a leafy branch of peaches” (21). Kingston shifts again in the middle of the story, this time to present tense. “I am watching the centuries pass in moments because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star” (27). Here Fa Mu Lan suffers from the ravages of extreme hunger and the tense change helps signify her altered mental state as a result of lack of food. However, the present tense also allows Kingston to introduce a new possibility into the legend. Her use of multiple tenses suggests the significance of the story lies not in the simple relating of facts but in the intersection of multiple possibilities and perspectives, which contribute to an expanded notion of identity. Changes in tense reflect the changes in Maxine’s own identities and reinforce the need for elasticity in the acceptance of the self.

Through the series of shifting tenses, Kingston alerts readers to changes in the narrator’s frame of mind as well as the numerous possibilities the story contains. Instead of wondering whether the bird *would* lead the narrator to her destiny or if the old couple *did* offer dinner or if the narrator *does* comprehend time, readers explore each and all of these possibilities at once. And, like the language shifts between the indicative and

subjunctive, here the changes in tense do not necessarily signify what is truth, what is fantasy. In Kingston's book, those distinctions become unnecessary; the blurring of fact with fiction encourages potentiality, open-endedness, creativity, and multiplicities.

EXPANDING AND BROADENING THE MULTIPLICITIES

Through luck, insight, and re-established connections to the past and their forgotten or rejected heritage, Olivia and Maxine prevail as characters—heroes, even—wise, strong, and fascinating in their complexity. I claim that all readers can identify with the struggles of these two Chinese-American protagonists, because we all experience the tug of various perspectives in much the same way Olivia and Maxine experience the multiple perspectives in their lives. Describing *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston remarks, “I do believe in the timelessness and universality of individual vision. It [is] not just . . . a family book or an American book or a woman’s book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book” (Kingston, “Mis-readings” 65). Kingston criticizes reviewers who have pigeon-holed her text as specifically and exclusively Chinese; instead she believes in its ability to resonate with all readers. “To say [Chinese Americans] are inscrutable, mysterious, exotic denies us our common humanness . . . These critics are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, ‘Is this work typical of Chinese Americans?’ why not ask, ‘Is this work typical of human beings?’” (57, 62). Thus, we as readers attempt to understand Olivia’s and Maxine’s challenges by finding the common threads of multiple perspectives between their experiences and our own, even though those threads may differ. However, Tan and Kingston expand this multiple perspectivity—one inherent in all our lives—by inventing further multiplicities. Although differences between cultures and shifts in language do help shape the lives of Olivia and Maxine, Tan and Kingston do not stop there. They toss the challenges of changing narrators, temporal shifts, and elusive central stories into the already-varied mix, and these multiplicities allow the intense identification between readers and characters and demonstrate the universal

complexity of the human condition and limitlessness of human possibility and connectedness.

These expanded multiplicities permit a personal identification between readers and characters by introducing elements foreign and unexpected to them both. Sudden changes in time and setting or a roaming narrative voice, however, place readers on an even footing with the central characters by stripping away the familiar and expected for *both* protagonist and reader. These expanded multiplicities allow readers direct identification with the protagonists by letting us experience—right along with them—many of the same emotions surrounding the same events. Olivia plays the skeptic to Kwan’s crazy stories of past lives while readers also doubt the stories’ reliability. Maxine admits to embellishing family legends and wonders which version reflects the “truth” just as readers, too, attempt to sort out what is “real.” As readers struggling to identify the central story or essential qualities of the characters, we find ourselves in parallel experience with the characters themselves.

This tandem process of discovery encourages both identification between reader and protagonist and, maybe more importantly, a deeper understanding of common human experiences. Kingston maintains her writing reflects how the human brain works. “I want to write according to our brain patterns” (Allen D4), and she includes readers in this project. Thus, these authors take reader-response theories to new and deeper levels. By expanding the multiplicities in their novels beyond those typically associated with minority women writers—i.e., multiple perspectives owing to differences in culture, color, and language—Tan and Kingston allow readers increased access to their characters and characters’ experiences. I share Olivia’s frustration with Kwan and her exasperating,

confusing stories about Miss Banner—not because I understand the experience of a minority woman, but because Kwan’s stories confuse me as much as they do Olivia. Readers and character engage in the same hermeneutical enterprise, internalizing the tales and grasping to find their relevance to the present.

Shifts in time, place, and narrator, uncertainties of seemingly important details; and a slippery “main story” demand that writers, characters, and readers alike maintain a flexibility and acceptance of what we cannot understand. As the multiplicities broaden beyond differences in culture, color, and language, the *possibilities* broaden as well. Catherine Lappas states that Maxine Hong Kingston is among writers who, “through a polyphonic engagement with the world, [creates] new stories that reflect her multicultural identities, with all their attendant possibilities and tensions” (Lappas 57). Although Kingston’s life story and Tan’s fiction interlace diverse elements from their Chinese American backgrounds, they also feature multiplicities that are non-culturally dependent. Lappas’ assertion that a polyphonic approach allows writers an exploration of both challenges and possibilities plays out in Kingston’s and Tan’s texts, but a multicultural background need not be a requisite for this kind of exploration. Shifts in narrative voice—as well as an elusive diegesis and changes in setting—invite readers of all backgrounds into a mutually engaging and tricky hermeneutical act that extends far beyond mere identification with fictionalized characters to a profound reconsideration of the possibilities of story-telling.⁸ In foregrounding the importance of relationships among humans, connections between past and present, and possibilities for re-defining subjectivities, these authors do not much erase cultural difference or claim it as irrelevant, but rather transcend it.

Changes in Narrative Voice—Whose Story Is It?

Besides establishing distinct character communication styles and personalities, changes in narrative voice allow Tan and Kingston to explore multiple identities and possibilities for their characters. Literary analysis of a polyvocal approach to text grows, in part, from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogics. "Dialogism . . . is the constant interaction among meanings expressed in spoken or written communication, insuring no word, ideology, or discourse is privileged . . ." (Braendlin 113). By including the threads of multiple voices throughout their novels, Tan and Kingston facilitate the interaction of multiple perspectives and meanings. At the same time, they force readers to acknowledge the importance of each narrative voice and prevent us from ranking them in a hierarchy of reliability. Each voice contributes to the narrative fabric of the other; all voices connect to create an illumination of individual and collective possibilities.

Tan's novel begins with Olivia as narrator, but her first words belie the essential nature of the book. "My sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes" (Tan 3). By making both Olivia (as narrator) and Kwan (as subject) equally present in that seemingly simple initial sentence, Tan hints at the powerful partnership between Olivia and Kwan, both as tellers of the story and inextricably bound together. This sentence also alludes to the potential pitfalls of belief, the relationship between belief and truth, and the importance of seeing and understanding. Olivia continues as narrator throughout the first chapter and into the second, but as she begins to describe her childhood dreams, Kwan's voice wends its way into the novel. "I would fall asleep, at what point in her story I always forgot. So which part was her dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect? (Tan 32). Olivia and Kwan share the task of storyteller, and the novel feels as though it belongs to both of

them. “. . . [T]he narrative acts as a mimetic representation of the way in which other voices have inserted themselves into the writer’s consciousness and contribute to an understanding of the structure of society” (DeHay 43). Kwan’s voice inserts itself into Olivia’s consciousness, expanding the idea of who Olivia is and who she can become. As a child, Olivia could not distinguish between Kwan’s stories and her own dreams; as an adult, Kwan’s stories play as significant a role in Olivia’s life as Olivia’s own experiences.

DeHay focuses her essay on the post-colonial discourses of four American minority writers, but multivoicedness has the potential to cross cultural lines to meaningfully express the multiplicity of forces in all our lives. By decentering the ego, Tan and Kingston offer a new way of seeing reality and truth. The old notion of fixed egos disappears and is replaced by fluid, interconnected stories and voices. Characters and readers cannot rely on the infallibility of a static truth, but instead must allow the multiple voices to contribute to the narrational complexity. Like the knots that fuse Olivia’s life with Kwan’s, our own points of connectedness with others grant each of us fuller possibilities.

Tan’s novel alternates between Olivia as narrator and Kwan as narrator, and, at first, it appears they are telling two different stories. Olivia’s sections focus on her relationship with Simon and her childhood memories of Kwan, whereas Kwan narrates the escapades of Miss Banner and her companions, all long dead. As the novel unfolds, these seemingly disparate tales begin to share common themes, especially those of broken promises and complicated relationships. By the end of the text, readers discover that one level of relevance of the Miss Banner stories rests in the shared identities

between Miss Banner and Olivia, and Miss Moo and Kwan. Olivia's changing identity has been shaped by her own experiences, but these experiences include listening to Kwan's stories, participating in them as a dreamer, and, as it turns out, living them in a past life.

The parallel stories created by Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* provide counterpoints between Olivia and Kwan, but the stories themselves do not embody the heart of their relationship. Olivia's shared past life with her half sister makes for interesting fiction but, alone, it cannot explain the need for Kwan's narration in what is essentially Olivia's narrative. Even if the sisters shared nothing beyond childhood experiences and occasional adult conversations, Kwan's stories would still be necessary to fully tell Olivia's story. In order to tell one story, the other(s) must also be told; just as the quest hero needs the customs, rituals and family stories, we, too are incomplete without the influences and voices from others in our lives.

Fracturing the narration among Maxine, her mother, and mythical heroines, *The Woman Warrior* does not necessarily give readers a better appreciation for the distinctly Chinese nature of their lives, but narratorial shifts reveal ways in which Maxine's life—her stories—intersect with her mother's life and the legends she tells. “. . . Kingston writes a book in which it is hard to decipher or even to distinguish certain of the voices. It becomes extremely difficult, therefore, to distinguish an author, narrator, or characters” (C. Chen 225). These narratological changes expand the possibilities of what is defined as a life: Maxine's life comprises a multicultural background, but it also includes the life of her mother, aunts, siblings, and legendary heroines. Chinese or not, this multifaceted

existence holds true for any member of a family or community, providing a platform of commonality that allows these narratives to resonate with universal power.

In the same way that the diegesis becomes elusive in these two novels, the central storyteller also defies clear definition. Kingston's memoirs spring from this same well of polyphonic experiences. She asserts, "'I' am nothing but who 'I' am in relation to other people" (Kingston qtd. in Lappas 66), and, as re-teller of her mother's stories involving other family members, Kingston demonstrates this interconnectedness. The opening paragraph of her book indicates that "her" story belongs to several people. "[M]y mother said, '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'" (Kingston 3). The experience of the aunt contributes to Maxine's own life experiences in the same way that her mother as the storyteller and her father as the brother with a disowned sister affect Maxine's changing identity. Without the experiences of those around her, Maxine would exist in a vacuum. The focused and deliberate weaving of people, tales, and experiences into her writing gives texture and fullness to Kingston's memoirs.

The mother's role in *The Woman Warrior* is conspicuous and essential as Maxine must come to terms with her mother before she can resolve some of the deepest conflicts and ambivalences in her own nature. Maxine's story cannot be realized without her mother's stories, voice, and her Chinese-American legacy. The intermingling of Maxine's stories with her daughter's stories shape the entire narrative until finally the two together can come to share a story. In recounting the tale of Fa Mu Lan, a girl who becomes a swordswoman and fights for her family, the "White Tigers" chapter is told in

first-person. The section initially belongs to Maxine as she remembers listening to her mother tell stories as she was growing up. “Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep” (Kingston 19). As the stories settle into the tale that Maxine remembers, her mother’s emerges as a central voice. The text continues in first-person and, although Maxine identifies with the Fa Mu Lan character, the presence of her mother’s voice in the storytelling remains strong. Maxine starts the tale,

After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan. . . Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously . . . I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother . . . (Kingston 20)

In the story of Fa Mu Lan that follows, we hear a voice that is at once Maxine’s, her mother’s, and Fa Mu Lan’s herself, purposefully indistinguishable, celebrating the connections they share as mother and daughter—and as Chinese swordswomen.

The seamless intermingling of voices begins in the conditional with Maxine, remembering her mother talking-story about Fa Mu Lan’s battle victories and stating her intention: “I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (Kingston 20). The very next paragraph begins, “The call would come from the bird that flew over our roof.” Without a change to third person or a space break on the page, Maxine still appears to be the narrator; however, the space break on the next page is so subtle that readers almost forget to note who is telling the story—Maxine or Fa Mu Lan. Certainly the magical details and Chinese setting reinforce the notion that the swordswoman is now recounting her own tale, but Kingston purposefully avoids setting up the story with a single, clear narrator. If this strategy confuses the reader, the confusion reflects Maxine’s own search for truth and

reliability. “[Kingston] calls attention to the process of construction, making the reader understand it as a continuous revision because he engages in continuous re-vision as a process of reading it” (Myers, “Fictivity” 121). Like Fa Mu Lan, Maxine must grow large enough to encompass multiple voices in order to better comprehend her own existences: her mother told Maxine the story; Maxine repeats it; in the course of the telling, Fa Mu Lan becomes the narrator of her own adventures. Mid-way through the legend the narrator states, “I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes. [S]ometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many” (Kingston 29). Readers, too, must join Maxine in stretching our minds wide enough for paradoxes and polyphony.

This many-voicedness and polyphony is a compelling feature of *The Woman Warrior*, and Ursula LeGuin explains “all kinds of people get to think, feel, and talk in a novel,⁹ and that great psychological variety is a part of the vitality and beauty of the form” (LeGuin 121). This potential for polyphony—indeed the *necessity* for polyphony—resides in each person and accounts for the psychological variety within all individuals. Fa Mu Lan’s voice finishes the swordswoman story (“From the words on my back, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality”), but Maxine jumps back in as narrator in the next paragraph. “My American life has been such a disappointment” (Kingston 45). Although her life fails to live up to the excitement of the swordswoman’s, Maxine nonetheless understands her life in relation to Fa Mu Lan’s adventures. Fa Mu Lan’s voice—as well as the voice of Maxine’s mother—helps define and shape Maxine’s psychological vitality. Her embracing of multiple voices allows her

a broad base of experiences and perspectives, which imbue her life with possibilities more abundant than those heard in the traditional single-voiced novel.

The use of numerous narrators also expands notions of memory. “Memory interrupts linear, conventional narratives in order to make room for multiple voices and perspectives” (Singh 18). Additionally, memory makes room for the impact of time on the characters and their experiences. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan’s memories extend beyond her current lifetime into lives already lived. Memory functions this way for everyone—it allows knowledge to be passed on and kept alive from generation to generation so it is as real in the present as it was in the past. For Kwan, these memories and the stories that accompany them weave seamlessly, effortlessly, and even logically through her thinking as she nimbly moves in and out of several time settings. For Tan’s readers and Olivia, however, the transitions between now and two hundred years ago take both concentration and faith as we struggle to make sense of the Miss Banner tales. Tan’s temporal jumps leave Olivia and readers searching for meanings and relevant connections.

Waiting in the cave to start their search for Simon, Kwan and Olivia go over the details of the Miss Banner story, Olivia listening, unwillingly absorbed.

“Is this from the holy tree?”

“Ah! You remember!”

“No. I remember the story you told.” My hands are shaking. I have a terrible craving for a cigarette. What the hell is going on? Maybe I have become as crazy as Kwan. Maybe Simon isn’t missing. And I don’t

have things in my lap that belong to a woman from a childhood dream.

(Tan 355)

Olivia cannot believe the dreams/stories spring from actual events from two hundred years ago, but as the revelations continue to unfold, she gradually loses her skepticism.

And then I think: What am I afraid of? That I might believe the story is true—that I made a promise and kept it, that life repeats itself, that our hopes endure, that we get another chance? What's so terrible about that? (361)

Readers, too, begin to understand the connections between the Miss Banner story and Olivia's life, just as we start to appreciate the unexpected possibilities of these connections. The temporal shifts give readers a specific point of identification with Olivia, because we too now understand that the Miss Banner stories chronicle Olivia's previous life and provide another point of reference in understanding her complex identity. The lacing of the stories finally reveals the complete tapestry and serves to broaden the multiplicities and possibilities of the novel.

Time—Past and Present

Changes in time also add to the possibilities available to the characters as they move through various identities. By the end of the book, Olivia sheds her doubts and embraces not only Kwan's stories but the insight they offer as well. Two years after Kwan's apparent death in the cave, Olivia remembers her half-sister. "Two years is enough time, I know, to layer memories of what was with what might have been. And that's fine, because I now believe truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future" (397-8). If, as Maurice Halbwachs maintains, "memory is one of the ways our consciousness connects items and experiences in the net of language" (Halbwachs qtd. in Singh 17), then changes in time allow characters and readers to connect to insights and understandings—to possibilities—unavailable, or at least unlikely, in a single time setting.

Maxine Hong Kingston says of her writing, "I think that my stories have a constant breaking in and out of the present and past. So the reader might be walking along very well in the present, but the past breaks through and changes and enlightens the present and vice versa" (Rabinowitz 179). Readers see this happening in Tan's work, as well, through Olivia's transformed understanding of Kwan and her stories. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* treats time shifts differently than *The Hundred Secret Senses*, yet both books use time to alter characters' and readers' perceptions of what is possible. In Kingston's text, Maxine invites readers to journey with her as she tries to come to terms with the stories and ancient legends her mother has shared. While we do not get swept up in a different plot with different characters as we do in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the

movements within and around the legends help partially illuminate Maxine's present reality.

The final section of Kingston's memoirs relates the tale of Ts'ai Yen, a woman captured by the barbarians who learns to incorporate barbarian words and music into her plaintive song, "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." Forced to live with the barbarians for twelve years, Ts'ai Yen attempts to maintain her Chinese heritage by speaking to her children in Chinese, but they merely laugh and mimic her in nonsense singsong. In the end, her children discover their ancestry and her captors learn the scope of her suffering through music. Her song—a mixture of Chinese and barbarian words and sounds—unlocks Ts'ai Yen's anguish; eventually the barbarians return her to her people. Though painful, Ts'ai Yen's time with the barbarians grants her insights into their world—" . . . Ts'ai Yen had thought [death sounds] was their only music, until one night she heard music tremble and rise like desert wind"—and, consequently, invites similar insights among future listeners to her song—"She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well" (208-209). The pain of the captivity and the beauty of the music depend on the passage of Ts'ai Yen's time with the barbarians.

This use of time leads Kingston and her readers into an exploration of larger issues surrounding time as Maxine grapples with her sometimes-tempestuous relationship with her mother. Kingston pushes Maxine and readers to look back in time to see former hurts and transgressions with new eyes. As we watch Maxine agonize over the pain of her mother's harsh tongue throughout the book and then, at the end, see Maxine

powerfully meld their two stories into one, we witness the power of time to change possibilities.

Maxine's relationship with her mother and her own struggles with her Chinese-American heritage alter over the course of the book, and the stories Maxine tells reflect this growth. The first story she relates re-tells the tragedy of her drowned aunt, and she offers two versions in addition to her mother's sparse version "powered only by Necessity" (6). Maxine longs to discover guidance from this drowned aunt and manipulates her story to resurface family secrets, hoping the aunt and her story will reveal something Maxine can use as she searches out pieces of her changing identity. However, Maxine cannot decide on an acceptable version of the story partly because her search for "ancestral help" (8) chafes against her mother's initial telling of the story.

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America. (5)

Maxine's desire to create a new story for her aunt—and along with it, a story that is coherent and satisfying—reflects her simultaneous desire to rebel against her mother's stark story and its severe lesson. Maxine never settles on a completely satisfying story for her aunt; instead, she spends years imagining possibilities and motivations for this mysterious ancestor. "My aunt haunts me—her ghost is drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her. . . I do not think she always means me well" (16). Maxine's curiosity can neither reveal her aunt's essential nature nor can it eliminate the compelling power of the original version—her mother's story.

In Ts'ai Yen's tale, however, Maxine's and her mother's stories invisibly fuse together, and Ts'ai Yen's experiences come alive. Though perhaps not happy, her story creates a glint of hope through Ts'ai Yen's music and its successful Chinese translation. With enough time passed, Maxine, too, experiences hope for her troubled relationship with her mother. At last, she reconciles her mother's stories with her own, preserving an authentic possibility for their shared character and, in doing so, allowing the possibility of reconciliation for their relationship. The elapsed time between the beginning of the book—the mother's version of *No Name Woman*—and the end of the memoirs with the Ts'ai Yen story enables mother and daughter to live and breathe within the same story. Kingston maintains that, "understanding the past changes the present. And the ever-evolving present changes the significance of the past" (Rabinowitz 179). In profound and real ways, the past lives on in the present, influencing how we perceive the present, and at the same time the present affects both our understanding of and regard for the past. An event in the present is not just a new, single incident but instead one of several in a long line of analogous events living in the memory, and these other, related events impact how we deal with the present situation. Similarly, a particular interpretation of a present situation affects what we remember (which specific details or emotions?) or understand (in what way is this old event now significant?) a related event in the past. One need not share Kingston's minority background to understand the power of time to heal wounds and change lives.

Searching for the Diegesis

Throughout both Tan's novel and Kingston's memoirs, readers must remain alert to changes in narrator and time; additionally, movements in and around fluid storylines keep readers vigilant regarding the importance of words, time, and perspective. While readers search for keys to unlock the mysteries in the pieces, the protagonists, too, mine the changing stories to make sense of their own lives. Neither Tan nor Kingston allow their characters to fall into the trap of absolute certainty. Instead, they force them to confront multiple possibilities in order to better understand the complexity and richness of their lives and to appreciate open-endedness.

Kingston creates tales from pieces of legend and reality, an embellished fiction from nonfictional sources. Yet they are "true" stories for they explain the lives of Kingston and her ancestors and the cultures they inhabited and inhabit. (C. Chen 225)

We have already seen Maxine's resistance to indefinable stories in her conflict with her mother ("You lie with stories. I can't tell what's real and what you make up" 202), and Tan's Olivia shares similar frustrations with Kwan's unending Miss Banner stories. Trapped in their shared room, Olivia spent her childhood listening to tales of Kwan's past life. "Every night, she'd tell me these stories. And I would lie there silently, helplessly, wishing she'd shut up" (32). But the authors ensure that the storytellers don't "shut up" because those stories, though confusing and tortuous, ultimately reveal truths and connectedness that the characters need while intimately admitting readers into those lives as we undergo the futile search for certainty with them.

Although the books wind up in readers' hands as written texts, an oral storytelling tradition remains integral to each. Characters spin oral tales, and these spoken tellings and retellings impact the protagonists' lives. Kwan's Miss Banner stories edge into Olivia's subconscious, making the distinction between what is real and what is story indistinguishable. In the end, she sees that the stories *are* real, clouding forever the arbitrary difference between fact and fiction. Kingston uses oral storytelling to widen possibilities for Maxine. During her childhood, Maxine follows her mother around the house participating in the familiar song of Fa Mu Lan. Later in the book, Maxine finishes a story her mother starts, now as a creator of a new—and yet simultaneously old—tale. In both texts, the fluid, ambiguous nature of the oral tradition blurs the lines of reality and expands possible truths and identities.

For both Olivia and Maxine, confusing ambiguities lie at the heart of these oral experiences—precisely because they reflect realities. The static nature of written texts distorts reality and truths; consequently, we need the indefinite or shimmering qualities of oral stories. Kingston reminds us,

Oral stories change from telling to telling . . . [but the written word remains fixed]. That really bothers me, because what would be wonderful would be for the words to change on the page every time, but they can't. The way I tried to solve this problem was to keep ambiguity in the writing all the time. (Kingston qtd. in TuSmith, 287)

By maintaining ambiguity, Kingston insists that Maxine confront the uncertainties that are an integral part of her life. At the same time, readers march alongside Maxine,

uncovering and trying to understand these uncertainties with her. Tan's readers experience similar ambiguities through Olivia's search for personal identity in Kwan's Miss Banner stories. Both characters resist the fluidity of life and want to fix truth once and for all. For them, coming to terms with life as it is—with all the ambiguities and confusion, uncertainties and unknowability—poses a threat to the stability they seek. The oral tradition underscores this fallacy of stability and forces both characters and readers to accept inconstancy and ambiguity.

Maxine remembers her childhood as a series of misunderstandings and secrets resulting from talking and not talking. Hating the uncertainties of her mother's "lies," she also feels powerless by her own inability to speak out. When startled by her parents' false occupations in her school file, she wants to tell her teacher the truth—but cannot. "My throat cut off the word—silence in front of the most understanding teacher. There were secrets never to be said in front of ghosts . . ." (183). Because children fall into the untrustworthy category with the white ghosts, adults also keep secrets kept from them, secrets that deny Maxine an understanding of her Chinese heritage.

Even the good things are unspeakable . . . From the configurations of food my mother set out, we kids had to infer the holidays. How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.

(185)

Even when Maxine's parents do privilege her with information, it often proves unreliable. She asks her mother about the stories she's heard describing flags marking safe houses

for illegal immigrants, but her mother answers, “No, there aren’t any flags like that. [The kids are] just talking-story” (183). Although Maxine disbelieves this flimsy explanation, it forces her to deal with the inherent uncertainties and ambiguities between what Maxine knows to be true and her mother’s official answers. She wants a truth, a story she can understand, count on, and predict, one free from her mother’s vague unreliability.

Although Kwan’s details concerning Miss Banner’s life remain consistent, Tan’s text still permits readers a look into ambiguous, uncertain stories, and, in doing so, encourages us to join Olivia in destabilizing fact as truth and re-instating the importance of story. While visiting China, Kwan tells Olivia the story of her drowned childhood friend, and Kwan’s description of the unlikely events leaves Olivia confused. According to Kwan’s story, both Kwan and her friend drowned, but Kwan came back to life, this time in the body of the friend.

Is Kwan—that is, this woman who claims to be my sister—actually a demented person who *believed* she was Kwan? Did the flesh and blood Kwan drown as a little girl? Even if we aren’t genetically related, isn’t she still my sister? Yes, of course. Yet I want to know what parts of her story might be true. (289)

Kwan’s tale of the drowned friend compels Olivia to look for certainty. In some ways, she wishes Kwan were crazy—then her wild stories would have a context Olivia could understand. “[Kwan] points to birds overhead. If only she said they were elephants. Then, at least, her madness would be consistent” (289-290). Instead, Kwan weaves together her unusual stories, insisting on their validity, challenging Olivia—and readers—to accept their validity even though they fly in the face of empirical knowledge.

Both Maxine and Olivia attempt a conscious rejection of ambiguity in favor of logic and predictability. Uncomfortable with the lack of answers to their questions, they strike out on their own to find the straightforwardness missing in their family traditions. Readers join Maxine and Olivia in their quest for clear, simple answers. Since reading entails, in part, sifting through details to arrive at understanding, readers engage in an internal dialogue similar to that of the protagonists. Like Maxine and Olivia, we endeavor to make sense of the nonsensical so we can understand the truth, the real story, not realizing at first that this quest for the traditional diegesis is neither straightforward nor simple, as we had hoped.

The myths and the lives in *The Woman Warrior* are integrated in the women's and girls' stories so that we cannot find the seams where a myth leaves off and a life and imagination begin. The myths transform lives and are themselves changed. (Kingston, "Statement" 24)

Faced with these seamless, confusing stories, the protagonists spurn them and instead go looking for stories—lives, in fact—more predictable and certain; along for the ride, we readers also attempt to delineate which parts of the books chronicle the real, as opposed to “just” stories.

After releasing the bottled-up hurts and anger toward her mother, Maxine ends up feeling guilty for her outburst. Her mother shouts for her to get out, to leave, and eventually Maxine follows the order. By leaving home, she forsakes her mother's confusing stories and attempts to replace chaos with order. “I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries

are for explanation” (204). Maxine hopes that by giving up her mother’s ambiguous stories and supplanting them with logic, her life will achieve regularity and predictability.

In her search for logic, she turns to books for explanations of Chinese sayings she heard as a child; if she can just define those things that hurt or confused her, those points of disorder will fall into place and lose their grievousness. Sometimes, this knowledge does dissolve the pain. “I like to look up a troublesome, shameful thing and then say, ‘Oh, is that all?’ The simple explanation makes it less scary to go home after yelling at your mother and father. It drives the fear away . . .” (205). However, even the logic of the books fails to uncover and disarm all the confusion. In trying to ascertain the meaning of a Chinese phrase, Maxine comments, “perhaps I’ve romanized the spelling wrong and it is *Hao Chi Kuei*, which could mean they are calling us ‘Good Foundation Ghosts’” (204). Here, even the logical definition she seeks fails to dispel the mysteries—with the possibility of this new spelling, the phrase now suggests “advantages” instead of the negative images she previously unearthed. She cannot determine whether the immigrants intended to criticize or praise the Chinese children born in the United States. “Sometimes [the immigrants] scorn us for having had it so easy, and sometimes they’re delighted” (205). Although Maxine rejects uncertainty to achieve logic, the logic she finds cannot truly explain away the complexities and confusions of her youth; ambiguity reigns, despite her attempts to control it with tidy book definitions.

Olivia embraces logic even as she undergoes her own illogical experiences, and Tan leaves readers to negotiate their own way among apparently unreliable and irreconcilable events. In doing so, Tan nudges us into identification with Olivia as we join her in trying to decipher the real from the imaginary. When Olivia admits that, as a

child, she watched a ghost steal her doll's feather boa, her revisionist adult eyes explain away the mysterious disappearance by blaming the dog. "Now I can think of more logical explanations. Maybe Captain took it and buried it in the backyard" (57). The dog presents a believable explanation, but later Olivia claims another ghost sighting—this time as an adult. Trying to rid Simon of his strange attachment to his dead girlfriend, Olivia solicits Kwan's help in conjuring the girlfriend's ghost. Olivia, however, witnesses a different ghost from the one Kwan presents. "She wasn't like the ghosts I saw in my childhood. She was a cyclone of static . . . pleading with Simon to hear her. Except I was the one who heard her—not with my ears but with the tingly spot on top of my brain . . ." (119). Instead of seeking a logical explanation for her supernatural vision, Olivia tucks the event back into a corner of her mind and tries to ignore it. When it crops up, she reassures herself of her sanity by focusing on the present. "On countless nights, I've awakened in the dark . . . scared about the truth. And then the sun would climb above the sill. And I'd be grateful to return to what was real and routine, confined to the ordinary senses I could trust" (120). In trying to understand the complexities of her life, Olivia turns to logic again and again, even when faced with the unexplainable—indeed, especially when she confronts events or stories that resist categorization.

After Kwan insists Du Lili is older than Big Ma, Olivia tries to understand the contradiction between her observations of Du Lili as a middle-aged woman and this new information, but soon gives up. "To me, yin isn't yang, and yang isn't yin. I can't accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth" (277). And once she's heard Kwan's questionable story of the drowned friend, Olivia's insistence on logic and on discovering the one real truth grows. She says to Simon, ". . . I need to know for sure what really

happened” (291). Her need for logic denies her access to the truth she claims to seek by blinding her to different ways of knowing and understanding.

In the end, Maxine and Olivia come to understand the need to admit multiplicities into their lives in order to experience the world more fully. They accept the multiplicity of the world: myths, stories, and experiences exist together to make up life and their own changing identities. “[The authors] have too many stories to tell to focus their narratives on a single person or on the tracing of a single event. [They] accept the Bakhtinian philosophy that there is no one truth, but rather many coinciding truths that can, and should, be told” (C. Chen 222). Though speaking of Toni Morrison and Kingston, Chen’s assessment accurately describes Tan’s work as well. By the end of each text, protagonists and readers embrace multiple stories and multiple truths as *the diegesis*; accepting the coinciding stories and truths is simply a necessity of living and of acknowledging multiple identities.

Just before Maxine launches into her shared poetess story, she observes changes in her world as a result of leaving home. She claims to “enjoy the simplicity” of her adult life, but, as we’ve already seen, “now colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic” (205). By acknowledging the now-sterile quality of her experiences, Maxine tacitly questions the wisdom of giving up ambiguity for clarity. Besides the loss of intensity in colors and smells, she also admits she no longer sees spirits—but wonders if this sight would have disappeared as a natural evolution of growing up. While she appreciates the multiplicities of her childhood, she also believes losing them was inevitable, suggesting that perhaps she should resist placing too much importance on the loss.

In this paragraph, readers watch her struggle with the gifts from her mother: ambiguity and uncertainty. Before she can begin their co-authored story, Maxine must decide what to do with these gifts, whether to reject them as she tried when she left home, or embrace them as her mother does. Finally, she settles on a compromise. "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205). In order for her to accept the truth of ambiguous, uncertain stories, Maxine chooses to open herself to it all. Electing to "sort out" the meanings in these various experiences, she remains open to many possibilities—and readers take their cue from her, accepting the text as Kingston herself intended. "The power of imagination leads us to what's real" (Rabinowitz 182). Although confusing and sometimes infuriating, maybe her mother's stories describe life more effectively than the logic Maxine longed for. This possibility of multiple stories blossoms on the following page when Maxine begins the tale of the kidnapped poetess. She opens with, "the beginning is [my mother's], the ending, mine," (206) demonstrating her ability to accept at last her mother and then to meld her mother's stories with her own. Here, the thorn of ambiguity becomes the flower of a shared story as Maxine finally pays tribute to and acknowledges truths composed of uncertainty and multiplicities.

Kwan attempts to explain a similar idea to Olivia as she finishes the story of her drowned friend, Du Lili. Even Kwan admits the swapping of the girls' bodies and personalities arouses suspicion in the village, but Big Ma and Du Yun solve the problem by simply pretending there is no problem.

By the time we reached Changmian, Big Ma and Du Yun had decided they would pretend nothing was the matter with me. This was the attitude

people had to take with many things in life. What was wrong was now right. What was right was now left. (286)

This abandonment of logic initially baffles and frustrates Olivia. For most of her life, she attempts to understand Kwan's stories and odd explanations through the eyes of logic and reason, but by the end of the novel, Olivia begins to accept their ambiguity and uncertainty. Two years after Kwan's death, Olivia realizes, "I now believe truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future. [Hope] can survive the odds against it, all sorts of contradictions, and certainly any skeptic's rationale of relying on proof through fact" (398). Although it takes a mysterious death and her daughter's miraculous birth to shift Olivia's ideas about truth, she ultimately understands the power of multiplicities to bind the unexplainable and the ambiguous into a meaningful definition of life. Traveling with Olivia for nearly 400 pages, readers cheer her acceptance of the improbable and magical and derive hope through her—and our—discovery that maybe people we've lost live on in other forms.

Tan and Kingston carefully move their characters and their readers to this conclusion—that multiple stories and perspectives, including contradictions and ambiguities, construct our identities—even as these identities change with each new story, perspective, contradiction, and ambiguity. At the outset, both protagonists and readers resist this notion, because it flies in the face of single-thread stories as defined by the Western tradition. "By assuming fluidity throughout the text, Kingston assumes a nonparadigmatic stance and challenges the frequently monolithic Western tradition" (TuSmith 287); Tan's writing achieves the same effect. Because the strength of this tradition influences both readers and characters, we journey together through the tales,

myths, and experiences, asking the same questions and looking for the same answers regarding the characters' identities. Eventually, we see the world with Maxine and Olivia, though we may lack their Chinese ancestry or ethnic background; the *process* of discovery is universal, even as it paradoxically reveals the idea that people are made up of multiple identities. All heroes share the potential for multiple identities as humans living in community with others.

Kingston says of her own work, "I think that my books are much more American than they are Chinese. I felt that I was building, creating, myself and these people as American people, to make everyone realize that these are American people" (Rabinowitz 182). If Kingston considers her characters chiefly American, then personal identification with them by non-Chinese Americans makes perfect sense. In addition, the experiences of Maxine and Olivia demonstrate our common humanity that stretches across all cultures as they invite us to explore the depths of their lives. Olivia says at the end of the novel, "I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true" (399). In order to appreciate and understand Kwan's agenda, we must join Olivia in embracing a multitude of expanded possibilities—changes in narrator and time and a shifting diegesis. By opening ourselves to these unexpected, non-Western ideas, characters and readers gain a deeper awareness of their lives and the possibilities in the world.

CONCLUSION

These two writers, then, have expanded the life of the traditional male hero to the lives, dreams, myths, pasts that intermingle in the dizzying layers of the stories of nontraditional female heroes. Gone is the traditional, linear concept of a narrative. Gone is the artificial notion of a single, immutable, and essential identity. Instead, Tan and Kingston describe multiple, shifting identities—identities always in motion as a variety of influences inform and intersect to problematize the notion of fixed characters. Both Olivia and Maxine need stories, dreams, and memories to shape themselves as characters. Sometimes Olivia is a plain-talking American photographer, a guilty half-sister, or nineteenth century Miss Banner—and sometimes she is all three. Maxine's character includes, at times, a revisionist family historian, an angry, rebellious adolescent, and a brave swordswoman. Regardless of which influence currently shapes a character's identity, Tan and Kingston demonstrate again and again the necessity to abandon the conventional idea of a static identity. They describe new, richer, more complex heroes who keep emerging and re-emerging in kaleidoscopic shiftings of meaning. These heroes speak to everybody, because we can all understand the ways that events in the present, experiences from the past, and intimations, hopes and fears about the future all collide in a single individual. Olivia and Maxine try to find a hermeneutical principle that will illuminate a way through their morass of memories, cultural and familial expectations, and personal dreams to forge meaning out of fragments of reality and fiction.

Articulating life demands the inclusion of many, sometimes discordant and contradictory voices, experiences, memories, and hopes. Trying to tell this story by the Aristotelian logic of a beginning, middle and end seems both insufficient and pointless.

People—all people—construct meanings from fragments, cultural memories, songs, stories, myths, and experiences. The meanings themselves may shift depending on the purpose of a story, whose point of view is presented, or even when and how the story is remembered. And as the meanings shift, the identities do too. When Maxine explores different options for the life of her drowned aunt, the meaning of the aunt's life—and her illegitimate pregnancy—dances among several possibilities. Maxine plays with these possibilities: she could draw inspiration, learn her mother's lesson about being "loose," unlock a key to her family's avoidance of open communication. Even here when the core story remains fixed, the meanings can shift profoundly. As the meanings change, their inclusion becomes even more critical, because Maxine's identity is situated in these changes.

Beginning at the beginning and ending at the end ignores Maxine's shifting identity: for her, there is no beginning and no ending, just stories, memories, and myths present—in some form—throughout the text and Maxine's life. When the text's field of vision expands to include experiences outside the traditional, narrow thread of start to finish, we see that no one truly fits this simple, unsatisfying linearity. Narratives based on Aristotelian logic give one version of identity, but, in the end, one is not enough. In fact, even the multiple identities presented in Tan and Kingston's texts cannot present all the possible, imaginable identities—but these books demonstrate the necessity of inclusivity, especially of nontraditional materials. They encourage readers to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate the complexities of forging identity in ever-shifting realities.

Allowing identities to remain inconstant demands a lack of hierarchy in the identities themselves—each is as valid as the next. What is important is the existence of

the multiple identities within a single person as that person grapples with new insights, new bits of information about past and culture, new encounters and imaginative ways of assimilating bits of one's life. In a letter to James Wright, Leslie Marmon Silko describes the stories her Aunt Susie and the old-timers used to tell.

[T]here actually is "the story" of a particular telling, the story that will never again be told in quite the same way with quite that same context.

[W]hat seems to be more and more clear is that each version is true and each version is correct and what matters is to have as many of the stories as possible and to have them together and to understand the emergence, keeping all the stories in mind at the same time. (Wright 86-87)

Although not neat and predictable, Silko's ideal of maintaining as many stories in her head as she can parallels the need for characters and readers to maintain their many, multiple identities at once. Each identity is true, in the same way that each of the old-timers' versions is true. And each identity—like each version—informs and affects every other identity. Olivia's identity as Olivia—photographer, lover, sister—is no more or less legitimate than her past life as the missionary Miss Banner. As Kwan poignantly illustrates in the climax of the book, all identities weave together, in this case enabling Kwan to finally fulfill her promise to Miss Banner/Olivia. By breaking out of the typical, single-thread narrative, these stories, with their changing identities, insist that readers and characters re-think the notion of subjectivity; we must acknowledge all identities and their attendant possibilities as equally important, equally valid.

Shifting identities demand the presence of multiplicities, and Tan and Kingston force us to confront the profound philosophical implications of embracing—even

seeking—multiplicities. One character can be daughter, writer, and/or swordswoman, and this willingness to accept all identities affords the character freedom through immense possibilities. However, if she acknowledges and accepts the entire spectrum of multiplicities, she will eventually confront identities both troubling and frustrating. A complete embrace of shifting identities necessitates being open to identities that leave the character feeling uncomfortable and even—paradoxically—limited. As a young girl, Maxine would have gladly traded her own mother, her Chinese heritage, and her confusing childhood stories for a middle-class American household. However, those aspects of her identity are always present; what Maxine does with those difficult identities provides yet another possibility for her shifting identity. She has no control over the beginning of the Fa Mu Lan story, but she does have control over the end. Similarly, Tan's novel concludes with Olivia and her daughter dancing to Kwan's music box. Even after Kwan's death, Olivia and Samantha draw strength from their connection to her and an identity larger than themselves. "If people we love die, . . . we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. I lift my baby into my arms. And we dance, joy spilling from sorrow" (399). Recognizing the importance of multiplicities allows characters—and readers—possibilities, but it also demands an acceptance of heartbreak, heartbreak that can turn to joy with patience and hope.

Through their texts, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston encourage readers to see beyond the limits of the conventional narrative to an expanded understanding of character and identity. While the traditional novel captures a story, Tan's and Kingston's texts attempt to capture characters, characters that move in and out and through fluid identities. A single story, single setting, or single memory no longer restricts us. They

all knit together to form a fabric to which pieces are added for every new experience, story, memory. In this model, the conventional narrative becomes one of many stories that begins to reveal the hero/protagonist; however, readers know that, ultimately, the hero's identities are too numerous, too varied, and too changeable to ever be fully articulated or understood. Through the multiplicities offered by Tan and Kingston, readers at least glimpse a bigger piece of the tapestry than was previously possible in the traditional novel.

If, as Michael Holmquist suggests, “[L]iterature . . . is . . . answering and authoring the text of our social and physical universe” (Holmquist 318), then Tan and Kingston help us to see how to answer and author our own lives: by including all the lives and stories of those who precede us and those who travel the journey with us in a quest for interconnectedness. Maxine asserts that her No Name Aunt fails to offer help unless Maxine sees how their lives connect, and so it is with readers and these two texts. We must learn from Olivia and Maxine to embrace the potential of multiplicities and extended identities, to confront the world with the 100 secret senses. Only then will we begin to see more fully where we came from, who we are now, and what we are capable of becoming.

NOTES

¹ In her study of female and male autobiographies, Estelle Jelinek suggests that this narrow, linear focus reflects the kinds of lives men actually lead—distinguishing them from lives of women. Male autobiographies utilize “a style that seems to reflect their primary socialization towards achieving the goal of a successful career” (Juhasz 223).

² Narratologist Gérard Genette invented the term “diegesis” to describe the central story line (228), and his narrative theory is useful in analyzing many texts in which there are multivalent levels present in the narrative discourse. For example, he refers to the outside world as “extratextual reality,” the fictional frame is the “extradiegetic level,” and the stories within the story is the “metadiegetic level.” More recent narratologists like Mieke Bal, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Debra Malina substitute “hypodiegetic” to describe these inner stories (Malina 145). However, the stories in Tan’s and Kingston’s texts extend beyond the idea of framing stories or stories within stories. For these two writers, every story is as central to the narrative discourse as the others—making it impossible to tell which is extradiegetic, metadiegetic, or even hypodiegetic. In essence, diegesis describes every story in the texts.

³ See, for example, Sandra M. Boschetto’s treatment of identity in Allende’s *House of the Spirits* and Malini Schueller’s analysis of oppression and identity formation in *The Woman Warrior*.

⁴ In an interview with Washington Post writer Henry Allen, Kingston points out the fallacy in labeling her work as essentially minority or feminist. “I don’t think I’m only a feminist writer, or an ethnic writer, but I am writing at a time when feminism and ethnic studies are popular, so people find that in my writing” (Allen D5).

⁵ M. H. Abrams describes postmodernism as a movement in which writers “blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, [and] the serious and the playful . . . [S]ome postmodernist writings . . . reveal the ‘meaninglessness’ of existence and the underlying ‘abyss,’ or ‘void,’ or ‘nothingness’ on which security is conceived to be precariously suspended” (120).

⁶ In this appropriation of postmodernist techniques, Tan and Kingston differ from postmodernist writers like Robert Coover, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme who tend to stress the hopelessness of life in their writing.

⁷ Margaret Miller more thoroughly explores these ideas, especially as they relate to identity (Miller 18 n. 18).

⁸ Donald P. Spence maintains that the spiral pattern of narrative recursion, “resembles real life” (Spence 193). Although Tan and Kingston employ a somewhat different discursive technique from narrative recursion (in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*, several parallel stories constitute the diegetic storyline rather than stories within stories within stories, etc.), the analogy to real life—for all people—nonetheless rings true.

⁹ Although Kingston’s text is classified as memoir rather than novel, she and others acknowledge the degree to which fiction plays a role in the textual construction. In an analysis of Kingston’s fictional text *The Tripmaster Monkey*, Lourdes G. Bafiez points out that Kingston uses the same narrative technique (stories and dreams) to relate the fictional narrative as she does in *The Woman Warrior*. For further discussion of Kingston’s inclusion of fictional elements in her memoirs, see Melchior, Rabinowitz, Smith, and TuSmith.

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