

# Retold Stories, Untold Histories



Retold Stories, Untold Histories:  
Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko  
on the Politics of Imagining the Past

By

Joanna Ziarkowska

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## INTRODUCTION

“What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?” asks Jamaica Kincaid, an Antiguan-born writer. “Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me? . . . Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and if so, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?” (620). Kincaid’s question, relevant for all colonized and marginalized groups, addresses the issue of the hegemony of historical representation, written from the perspective of the dominant culture, which efficaciously erases and silences people like Kincaid. Such history belongs to, reflects on and represents solely its writers, thus rendering the Other(s) either invisible or insignificant in the historical narrative.

*Retold Stories, Untold Histories* concentrates on demonstrating how Kincaid’s question is addressed by Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko and why it is identified as one of the most critical themes in their writings. The rationale behind juxtaposing two writers from diverse cultural contexts originates in the fact that both Kingston and Silko share the experience of historical and cultural marginalization and, more importantly, devise similar methods of rendering it in creative writing. Maxine Hong Kingston, second-generation Chinese American, entered the literary scene in 1976 with the publication of the now canonical *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, followed shortly by the thematically connected sequel *China Men*. In 1989 Kingston published *Tripmaster Monkey*, which introduces the lively character of Wittman Ah Sing, who reappears in her autobiographical *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003) and the recent *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011). Leslie Marmon Silko, of the Laguna Pueblo, debuted in 1978 with *Ceremony*, one of the most influential texts in the ethnic canon. In her later works, *Storyteller* (1981), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), *Gardens in the Dunes* (2000) and most recently *The Turquoise Ledge* (2010), she consistently focuses on Native American cultures and their reformulations in the contemporary context. Writing from the perspective of two distinct marginalized groups, Kingston and Silko share the view that the official version of national history may be seen as a narrative of misrepresentation and the exclusion of people who either greatly contributed to the building of the country or occupied the territory of the present United States long before its creation. In their texts, both

writers engage in a polemic against a history that, using its legitimizing power as a scientific discipline, produces and perpetuates stereotypical images of Chinese and Native Americans and, more importantly, eliminates the two groups from the process of constructing the national narratives of origins that monitor and control the borders of what constitutes American identity. Despite apparent differences in cultural and historical contexts, Kingston and Silko share an enthusiasm for employing unconventional tools and sources for offering creative reconstructions of a past which had been silenced or repressed. Therefore, it is possible to trace the narrative strategies and discursive methodologies that the two writers employ to introduce literary discourse as a possible site for reconstructing and creating alternative versions of history, and through this creative act, assert the presence of their cultures in the American past. This approach to rewriting history, developed by Kingston and Silko, is present in the literary texts of ethnic writers representing culturally diverse marginalized groups, a fact which reflects its applicability emphasizing the connections and fluidity between the public discourse of official history and the private stories distributed at a micro level within ethnic communities.

### **Misrepresented Histories and Histories of Misrepresentation**

The histories that Kingston and Silko question, challenge and rewrite are often referred to as histories of absence due to their tendency of focusing on the cultural mainstream and its perspective, systematically silencing and erasing those occupying the cultural margins. The beginnings of the Chinese presence in the U.S., a theme often taken up by Kingston, is saturated by the image of an unwanted and unskilled Chinese laborer, unable and unwilling to embrace American values. As Huping Ling observes, the first historical analyses, exemplified by L. T. Townsend's *The Chinese Problem* (1876; the title best illustrates the author's approach to the topic) and S. L. Baldwin's *Must the Chinese Go?* (1890), lacked methodological sophistication; their content was often brief and descriptive, and inevitably ideologically biased (460). The first more insightful scholarly work, Mary Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration* (1906), was based on the analysis of local newspapers and public records, and demonstrated how the author approached her subjects as participants in, and creators of, culture rather than "coolie" workers devoid of cultural and historical backgrounds. Coolidge's work, however, was not representative of scholarship on Chinese immigrants of the time which, with its overemphasis on the immigration experience, immigration policy and the



anti-Chinese sentiments of the general public, offered a one-dimensional picture of the group.

The 1960s and the development of the Civil Rights movement brought an important change in the approach adopted in the writings about the Chinese. Works from that time tend to look at the Chinese in a wider context and combine history with sociology, include the voices of the “common people,” and for the first time, introduce a feminist perspective to the study: Some examples include S. W. Kung’s *Chinese in American Life, Some Aspects of Their History, Status, Problems and Contributions* (1962), Gunther Barth’s *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States 1850–1870* (1964), and Stanford Lyman’s *Chinese Americans* (1974).

On the other hand, the 1960s witnessed the emergence of another stereotypical term to describe Asian Americans, namely “model minority.” In January 1966, William Peterson published an article on Japanese Americans’ successful struggle to enter the American mainstream in the *New York Times* (20–21). The same year, a December issue of *U.S. News & World Report* featured Chinese Americans as another example of a “Success Story.” According to Keith Osajima, the year 1966 marked the birth of the image of Asian Americans as a “model minority” (449–58) which, apart from being another stereotypical label, served an important ideological goal. In 1966, at the peak of the Civil Rights movement, the protests of Afro-American communities were becoming not only more and more conspicuous but also openly militant. The characterization of Asian Americans as a model minority served the goal of contrasting them with Afro-Americans, who were described as everything but industrious, docile, well-mannered, hard-working and self-disciplined. Asian Americans were praised for “not complaining about or protesting against difficulties”; moreover, they dealt with their problems themselves instead of “burdening Americans with their needs by seeking government aid and welfare assistance” (Kim 177).

The 1980s continued the changes initiated during the Civil Rights era and further explored the themes of the Chinese American population and its history, which had been either marginalized or completely ignored. Scholars began to see the Chinese American past in connection with social, economic and political conditions and to recognize its interconnectedness and influence on the shape of history. Similarly, some scholars began to concentrate specifically on countering Asian women’s exclusion from historical analysis. Notable examples include *Chinese in America, Stereotyped Past, Changing Present*, edited by Loren W. Fessler (1983), Judy Yung’s *Chinese Women of America, A Pictorial History* (1986); and Stacey Guat-Hong Yap’s *Gather Your Strength Sisters: The Emerging Role of Chinese Women Community Workers* (1989).

Unquestionably, the 1980s and 1990s brought an increase in perspectives in the study of Chinese Americans, and issues such as the anti-Chinese movement, Exclusion Acts and immigration experience ceased to be the sole focus of scholarly exploration of the subject of Chinese American history. As Reed Ueda points out, there are numerous aspects of Asian American history—historical demography, social structures of the Asian American population, the role and structure of the family, social psychology as well as political culture—that, for many years, remained *terra incognita* and are being explored only now (119–22). The rise in scholarly studies on Asian American history and diversity is by all means a positive change yet, as scholars and historians observe, it is not sufficient to erase the pervading image of a “coolie” worker from the general consciousness. Gary Okihiro notes that in 1992, still, the books that “fill[ed] most of the shelf space of Asian American collections” were those devoted to anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese movements, as if only this subject was the essence of the Asian presence in America. Sucheng Chan, in the introduction to her *Asian Americans: An Interpretative History*, acknowledges that a “good work of synthesis can be produced only when there is a sufficient number of sound monographs to serve as its foundation” (xiii). Due to the strong anti-Asian bias in the older works and the uneven quality of current scholarship, Chan admits that perhaps it is too early to attempt such an endeavor. However, as college and university students across the country express their interest in “a more ethnically diverse curriculum” (xiii), there is a compelling need for such a succinct history.

The process of constructing more culturally sensitive Chinese American histories also exposed the problem of the selection and availability of sources. In his criticism of Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989), L. Ling-chi Wang draws attention to the fact that Takaki insufficiently “acknowledged tribute to researchers who have *labored in the trenches* in the past two decades of Asian American studies” (89, emphasis in the original). The choice of words is not coincidental here and illustrates the difficulty and laboriousness of the work done by scholars in looking for the presence of Asian immigrants in documents, archives and personal collections, often neglected and deemed unimportant. The recovery of the Angel Island poems illustrates the tedious character of examining such a record and “the near possibility of [its] disappearance without further trace” (C. Wong 10). In 1970 on Angel Island, park ranger Alexander Weiss noticed characters inscribed on the walls inside the wood barracks where Chinese immigrants used to be held. Concluding that the characters must have been left by the immigrants awaiting entry to the U.S. or deportation, he informed his superiors who, however, were not interested in his discovery. Believing in the importance of the discovery,

Weiss contacted Dr. George Araki from San Francisco State University, who, together with photographer Mark Takahashi, examined and photographed the barrack walls. The writing discovered by Weiss turned out to be poetry written by the Chinese; poetry whose content greatly illuminates the picture of the Chinese immigrants (Lai and Yung 9–10). Another example demonstrates the need to redefine historical methodologies and the obvious benefits. Judy Yung, author of two books on Chinese American oral history, admits that in the process of looking for answers to questions concerning her identity, history textbooks failed completely (4). Yung was looking for the history of her ancestors in America and her special interest in Chinese women only made the task more difficult and arduous. Under such circumstances, while the voice of Chinese immigrants seems to have faltered when clashing with the mainstream construction of the past, oral history offers countless possibilities. “Oral histories,” writes Yung, “despite the drawbacks of faulty or selective memory and retrospective interpretations, added life and credence” to the study of Chinese Americans, allowing them to tell their own story from the bottom up (4). Yung’s 1999 book, *Unbound Voice*, which attempts to integrate Chinese American women’s history into the mainstream, uses oral history as its primary source of information. One of the main benefits of oral history is that it “allows ordinary folks . . . [to] speak for themselves, fill in historiographical gaps, and challenge stereotypes, as well as validate their lives” (511). Yung believes that conventional sources alone, “devoid of human voices and stories, would be equally incomplete, a skeleton without any flesh,” and thus the best approach to reconstructing history is one that combines the study of historical documents and oral history (512). Yung’s book demonstrates how much can be gained from a combination of conventional and alternative sources, especially in the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of a particular group.

In early historiography on Native Americans, invisibility and misrepresentation emerged as the two major patterns of historical representation. The defining historical narrative was usually constructed as “the mythic tale of progress” (D. Morrison 11) in which the demise of the Indian population was a dire yet inevitable consequence of the forces of history at work. Native Americans, if mentioned at all, were presented as primitive, often appealing in their exoticity, and yet doomed to extinction due to their moral, social, religious and political inferiority. Thus, their gradual elimination was not only justified but also natural. When, in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” the Native population was cast in the role of the “vanishing race,” an image used and reproduced countless times in years to follow.

On the other hand, if Native Americans were included in the historical discourse of the nation, their representations were products of white fantasies rather than the findings of historical studies. As Michael Dorris, a Medoc writer, puts it, “for five hundred years Indian people have been measured and have competed against a fantasy over which they have had no control. They are compared with beings who never really *were*, yet the stereotype is taken for truth” (Dorris 100, emphasis in the original). Dane Morrison adds that “our histories have painted a picture of the first Americans that reflects a distorted impression of our own culture, tracing our own ambivalences and anxieties about carving ‘civilization’ out of the wilderness” (7).

As in the case of Chinese American history, a noticeable shift in the approach to history writing took place in the 1960s with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, which directed public attention to social and political issues raised by minority groups. According to Ellen Fitzpatrick, however, the change in perspective dates back to even earlier times, namely the 1920s and 1930s. Fitzpatrick links this shift with the effects of World War I and the overpowering sense of pessimism and insecurity that ensued. In consequence, “[m]any scholars,” Fitzpatrick claims, “challenged the fundamental leitmotif advanced by students of the American past who equated historical change with progress and advance of liberal democracy. They pointed instead to a darker, more sobering view of the trajectory of American history” (101). This shift was most noticeable in historical writing on Native Americans during the interwar years. The works that appeared at that time nurtured the ambition to reveal the “Indian side” of the frontier story. Some of the examples mentioned by Fitzpatrick include William MacLeod’s *The American Indian Frontier* (1928), Verner Crane’s *The Southern Frontier, 1670–1732* (1929), Chapman Milling’s *Red Carolinians* (1940), Loring Priest’s *Uncle Sam’s Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865–1887* (1942) and the groundbreaking work of Angie Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (1934). The insistence on depicting Native Americans as victims of history, however, while demonstrating a significant shift in the adopted historical perspective, did not develop a historical analysis that would escape the trap of producing another stereotypical and one-dimensional representation.

The Civil Rights movement and the changes that it introduced into the way of perceiving American society prompted another generation of historians to include the experience of people who had previously been excluded, “incorporate the insights of other disciplines” and examine “fresh types of sources” (D. Morrison 15). In Native American studies, this new idea of pluralism in historical studies, christened the New Indian

History by Robert F. Berkhofer, aimed “to see beyond traditional white prejudices and scholarly specialties so as to portray native peoples in their own right, acting for their own reasons in light of their own cultural norms and values” (“Cultural” 36). Some of the historians who have written in the spirit of the New Indian History are Francis Jennings, James Axtell, R. David Edmunds, Frederick E. Hoxie and Richard White, to mention just a few.

Parallel to the emergence of the New History School was the introduction of ethnohistory into the domain of academic disciplines. James Axtell, one of the leading practitioners of ethnohistory, recalls that in the 1960s, when he was entering the academic profession, very few people dealt with the history of Native Americans. Those who did write about the indigenous people were mostly anthropologists, who relied on methodology known as ethnohistory, a combination of anthropology and history. The applicability of ethnohistory in the study of Native Americans soon proved fruitful and efficient, and publishing opportunities offered by journals such as *Ethnohistory*, the journal of the American Society for Ethnohistory, and *William and Mary Quarterly*, have contributed to the field’s development (Porter, “Imagining” 350).

One of the reasons why ethnohistory became an attractive model for approaching Native American histories is that it takes as “its most proper subject *culture* as opposed to *society*,” and tries to perceive cultures as a “*whole*” with “all of their social parts and sub-codes” which “interact functionally and symbiotically to produce a single cultural organism” (Axtell 13). Such an approach to historical research allows us to seek answers not only in traditionally used “reliable written documents” but also in anthropology, archeology, sociology, religion, art and other academic fields. Furthermore, the presentation of tribes as agents of historical change rather than as passive subjects swept away by the “winds” of history helps avoid casting Indians in the subordinate role of victims, like for example in Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Century of Dishonor* (1881) or more recently in Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970).

However attractive, the ethnohistoric approach did not solve all the problems stemming from unanswered questions about the methodology of historical writing. A case in point is the much-valued *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991) by Richard White. His widely acclaimed book, which examines Winnebagos, Wyandots, Seneca-Cayugas, Shawnees, Delawares and other tribes inhabiting the region, is seen as illustrating a shift in the study of Native American history (D. Morrison 10). However, while for some the book is a groundbreaking work, for others it is an offending

example of how Indian history should not be written.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Susan A. Miller (Tiger Clan/Seminole) claims that White, writing about tribes whose descendants are alive today, “ignores the people whose history he is examining.” This approach to the writing of history resembles the familiar pattern of extraction of Native resources such as timber and minerals by outside interests that give back nothing to the Native community and move on when the easy profits play out” (101). The example shows that even ethnohistorical works written by scholars dedicated to a more truthful presentation of Indian history do not solve the problem of devising a formula for writing about the Native American past that would be satisfactory for Indian and non-Indian historians as well as descendants of the examined tribes.

Indeed, the debate over the shape of Native American history remains a fierce and heated one. Apart from a recurring postulation that American Indian history should “include Indians’ versions of events” (Mihesuah, Introduction 1) questions that have to be addressed are “Who is doing the writing? Why? And what do the subjects have to say about this?” (Wilson, “American” 23). Angela Cavender Wilson (Wahpatonwan Dakota) asserts that the field of Indian history is dominated by white, male historians who rarely care what the Indians have to say about their work. The most common product of such an approach is a non-Native perception of American Indian history rather than a true grasp of the Indian past. To achieve this, Wilson claims, it is not enough to put the Indians at the center of history; it is also necessary and ethically required to consult tribal and family historians (24). Writing Indian history inevitably engages the difficult issue of ethics. Non-Native historians are repeatedly criticized for instrumentality in their approach to tribal people and their culture, as well as an evident failure to consult Native Americans on their interpretations of history, not to mention the permission to use cultural materials.

The project of producing Native American history written from and sensitive to Indian cultures also calls for a redefinition of historical methodology, which has traditionally privileged the immersion in empirical data whose findings are expressed in a progressive narration. However, concepts such as chronology, linear progress and written documentation are alien and irrelevant to many Native cultures. As Vine Deloria explains in

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1 For *The Middle Ground*, White was awarded the following awards: the Francis Parkman Prize for best book on American history (1992); the Albert J. Beveridge Award for the best English-language book on American history (1992); the Albert B. Corey Prize for the best book on U.S.-Canadian history (1992); the James A. Rawley Prize for a book on the history of race relations in the United States (1992).

*God Is Red*, “the idea of keeping a careful chronological record of events never seemed to impress the greater number of tribes of the continent” (98). Some of the tribes devised a method of winter counts or calendar sticks which indicated important events in a community’s life. However, the ultimate goal of such practices was by no means an attempt at an accurate record of past events (99). The preoccupation or, some might say, obsession with chronology and progress is an exclusively Western idea, the origin of which Deloria links with Christianity and its emphasis on a need to record the experiences of humankind. In tribal religions, on the other hand, important events such as the appearance of various folk heroes who brought sacred ceremonies “did not depend on history for their verification” (103). What was of great importance was the appearance of the hero and its consequences for the community rather than its location in time. If there is a point of reference in tribal stories, it is a geographical location rather than a date (Howe 164).

A source most appropriate for reconstructing Native histories, oral tradition, also used in Chinese American historiography, is at the same time one of the most distrusted methodological tools. An often cited argument against the incorporation of oral history into the study of “history proper,” as many would call it, is its unreliability and temporal nature. This view remains valid only if one refuses to reject Western privileging of the written word over the spoken one. As Peter Nabokov explains, “memorized history . . . can preserve intimacy and locality over astonishing time depths. . . . It is called into being during and for interpersonal situations. It nurtures the family and community and cosmic continuities of which it speaks” (144). Although oral history is radically different from Western history and difficult to incorporate into a historical mode of writing, it must be included in American Indian history in order to “truly gain a grasp of the field” (Wilson, “Power” 101) and be considered reliable and representative by the Native population that is an integral part of it. Contrary to popular opinions, tribal stories which build up Native American oral history are not merely entertaining tales, or amusing pieces of fiction, but central components of tribal history, culture and identity. Moreover, even if they include details of past events which are necessary for a traditional reconstruction of history, dates are the least important, as the essence of the stories is that they are “transmissions of culture upon which our [Indian] survival as a people depends” (Wilson, “Power” 111). Angela Caveneder Wilson explains that

the historical and mythical stories provide moral guidelines by which one should live. They reach the young and remind the old what behavior is appropriate and inappropriate in our cultures; they provide a sense of



identity and belonging, situating community members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world. They are a source of entertainment and of intimacy between the storyteller and the audience. These stories, much more so than the written documents by non-Indians, provide detailed descriptions about our historical players. They give us information about our motivations, our decision-making processes and about how nonmaterial, nonphysical circumstances . . . have shaped our past and our understanding of the present. They answer many other “why” and “how” questions typically asked by the academic community. (“American” 24–25)

And indeed there were scholars who, having undergone a change in the way of perceiving stories, would fully embrace Wilson’s ideas. During the 1970s and 1980s, Julie Cruikshank worked with several elders from the Yukon Territory who were interested in documenting their memories and tribal stories. In the course of the interviews, Cruikshank grew to understand how crucial stories are not only to historical understanding but to cultural constructions (6–7).<sup>2</sup> Robin Ridington recalls his experience with the Beaver Indians of the Prophet River reserve when he was doing fieldwork in 1964, an experience which dramatically redefined his views on writing Indian histories. Like Cruikshank, Ridington approached tribal members with the same set of fixed assumptions about what kind of information he wanted to extract from them. Naturally, he dismissed stories as they “were not the scientific data [he] required” (129). During conversations with a tribal elder, Japasa, Ridington grew to understand the function and importance of stories in the tribal worldview.<sup>3</sup>

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2 In 1990 Cruikshank published a book which is the fruit of her interviews with the elders: Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (1990).

3 Contemporary life provides examples of how important stories are and the need for a wider recognition of this fact, especially in academic circles. In the 1980s, the hereditary chiefs of two Canadian tribes in northern British Columbia, the Gitksan and the Wet’suet’en, petitioned the British Columbia Supreme Court for a settlement of land claims in a case known as *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. The foundation of their argument was oral tradition: narratives, songs, dances. Tribal representatives argued that “these ancient traditions demonstrate linkages between people and place, that they are far more than literal history” (22). The initial decision of the court from 1991 rejected the argument, but in 1997 the Supreme Court of Canada reversed this ruling claiming that “the laws of evidence must be adapted in order that this kind of evidence can be accommodated and placed on an equal footing with the types of historical evidence that courts are familiar with, which largely consists of historical records” (Cruikshank 6–7).



Recent publications testify to the change that has occurred over the last decade in the approach needed to develop a culturally sensitive historical methodology. In an attempt to escape the trap of duplicating another story of Euro-American conquest, Indian and non-Indian historians concentrate on indigenous perspectives and ontologies to better understand the multi-layered processes that shaped relationships between natives and white settlers. The histories that are thus recovered not only facilitate understanding of the past but, more importantly, illuminate the present moment. As Philip Deloria asserts “[h]istory, for Indian people and for historians of Indian North America, does not simply revolve around abstract questions of identity, ‘what happened when’ issues, or ‘objective’ assessments of the past. Rather, every historical narrative has the potential to change lives and policies in the contemporary world” (4). Deloria’s important publications, *Playing Indian* (1998) and *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004), pave the way for new approaches to indigenous histories and set the routes of new explorations.

## Literary Histories

Twentieth-century theoretical discourses deny history the status of a scientific discipline which, in an authoritative language of facts and dates, provides unmediated accounts of the past. As a product of a nineteenth-century positivist approach, history so conceived was based on a methodology of thorough immersion in empirical data in the form of written documents, which produced an objective account of past events. Nineteenth-century historians thus believed that as long as they remained true to the facts, history would produce knowledge about the past equal in precision and objectivity to other exact sciences. However, as Hayden White once pointed out, most of them “did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its representation—a purely discursive one” (*Tropics* 125, emphasis in the original). Thus, White demonstrates that the work of the historian does not merely amount to recording facts; rather, it is implicated in and cannot be divorced from the processes of selection, organization and constructing a narrative, and these inevitably convey ideologically-influenced views on the shape and message of history. “What historical discourse produces,” writes White, “are *interpretations* of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands” (*Figural* 2, emphasis in the original). History then does not appear in its “pure form” but is accessible only by way of language and “our experience of history is indissociable from our

discourse about it; this discourse must be written before it can be digested as history; and this experience, therefore, can be as various as the different kinds of discourse met with the history of writing itself" (*Figural* 1).

Furthermore, this discursive construction of history invalidates the Enlightenment view of treating fiction as the antithesis of history. Unrestrained by the demands of realistic representation, fiction was seen to represent everything that history was not: an expression of the forces of imagination encapsulated in a literary form. However, what such a distinction ignored was the fact that both discourses, literary and historical, organize events into narratives, which inevitably involves the use of literary conventions. As White has observed,

no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story. . . . The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (*Tropics* 84)

No historical events are intrinsically tragic, comic, romantic or ironic, as White explains in his ground-breaking *Metahistory*. Instead, it is the historian who sees them as such and “emplots” them accordingly. This approach to historical discourse acknowledges that narrativity, previously strictly associated with fictional discourse, is in fact its most natural mode of representation and production of meaning. It is therefore unsurprising that the topic of narrativity in history has provoked extraordinarily intense debates which have engaged critics and historians representing diverse views. Whether rejected by the French *Annales* group as a non-scientific and ideological strategy, approached from a hermeneutical perspective by Paul Ricoeur and Hans Georg Gadamer, embraced as a natural and efficient kind of historical explanation by, for instance, Louis O. Mink, or studied in all its manifestations as one of many discursive codes by, among others, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, narrativity allows to situate history among other non-historical discourses and reconceptualize it as an interdisciplinary endeavor. As H. Aram Veese has observed, such an approach, enthusiastically embraced by New Historicists, “has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics” (Introduction ix).

These new opportunities are also explored in literature, which actively engages in and reflects on the debates on the constructedness of historical

representation. One of the examples of writing which consciously questions the authoritative status of history and “revisits it imaginatively” is Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction.” In defining “historiographic metafiction,” Hutcheon explores the same topics that are of concern to historians: the discursive structure of history, the transparency of representation, objectivity and the neutrality of the presented material (*A Poetics* 92). The reconceptualization of history as undertaken in literature also serves revisionary, corrective and therapeutic purposes. For instance, in *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub assert that in the face of the “yet unresolved *crisis of history*” surrounding the Holocaust, “literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witness in the given categories of history itself” (xviii, emphasis in the original). Nancy J. Peterson, in *Against Amnesia*, examines writings of contemporary ethnic women in which the past is approached as a wound and trauma that can be healed by reconstructing history through literature and rectifying the harms caused by historical misrepresentation or a complete lack of representation. Peterson’s project exemplifies how contemporary shifts in theory of history allow marginalized people to reenter or enter for the first time, a field which in the past consistently refused to give voice to their perspective.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko belong to this group of minority writers who discover that in order to narrate the stories and experiences of their lives and communities, it is necessary to adopt the role of a historian who would recover the lost histories and produce counter-histories informed by their unique perspectives. The strategies employed in the analyzed texts revolve around such tools of historical reconstruction as language, visual images, maps, memory and historical and literary genres which are artistically remodeled from intrinsically Western or Anglo-American inventions into sophisticated forms of alternative histories. *Retold Stories, Untold Histories* is thus divided into five chapters which examine each form of engagement in and intervention into the historical discourse.

In chapter one the focus falls on the process of devising a language capable of articulating concerns about traditional historical representation. An attempt is made to illustrate this as a progression from silence, through the mastery of the skill of translation of minority and dominant languages to the act of appropriation of the dominant language and its subversive employment to produce counter-histories. The birth of historical consciousness and the recognition of the need to break the silences that envelop ethnic histories constitute the first step in a progression from silence to the formation of historical voice. Since Kingston’s and Silko’s

protagonists often inhabit multilingual and multicultural spaces they are involved in the continuous processes of negotiating and “juggling” languages. Similar to the process of ethnic identity formation, which entails a balance between disparate cultures, the language of historical articulation is marked by both languages and emerges as a product of linguistic and cultural translations. The final stage of coming to voice in the historical debate is the conscious and deliberate act of language appropriation, which allows the writers to offer alternative interpretations of historical events.

Chapter two, “History in Photographic Images,” examines photography as a tool for historical representation often used to serve the dominant ideology and how it is subversively reemployed by Kingston and Silko. However, their discussion of the use of photography as a tool of historical reconstruction does not conclude with the mere acknowledgement of “visual manipulation” on the part of the dominant culture, often the main theme in various analyses of photography’s participation in the creation of historical narratives. Instead, Kingston and Silko appropriate this Western technology to produce “counter-images” which are framed according to their needs and sensitivities. Since their approach to photography oscillates between a belief in its documentary value and a well-grounded mistrust, they neither uncritically embrace photography as a method of authorizing “their past” nor decisively reject it as ideologically suspicious. Rather, they transform photography into an effective strategy of resistance to stereotypical images of Chinese and Native Americans.

Chapter three examines how Kingston and Silko employ the concept of maps and mapping space as an intervention into the narrative of national history. The theoretical framework for this discussion is provided by J. B. Harley’s analysis of the mechanism of the production of meaning in cartography. Regarding maps as a form of cultural text, Harley posits that like all discursive productions, maps are never “innocent” and are always implicated in the processes of asserting and exercising power. Turning theory into practice, Kingston and Silko appropriate and deconstruct the language and conventions of cartography to produce meanings alternative to the ones offered by Anglo-American maps. If traditional maps are used by empires to mark their territories, Kingston’s map depicts space as belonging to and shaped by the dispossessed, namely Chinese Americans who historically were forbidden to own land. Silko, on the other hand, deconstructs the concept of national borders, as her map illustrates their artificiality and inability to regulate and control the continuous and unrestricted movement of people and ideas. By demonstrating that, to a great extent, the production of meaning depends on the cartographer, both writers challenge the official version of history as the only legitimate one and suggest alternative trajectories of history’s spatial movement.

Chapter four examines the limitations and possibilities of memory as a strategy for recovering the lost, forgotten and suppressed histories. As an unverifiable source, memory is treated with suspicion and caution in historical studies. However, in the case of minority histories, large parts of which were unrecorded or erased, memory often emerges as the only recourse to the past. Kingston and Silko's interest in and preoccupation with memory is to a large extent a manifestation of an "obligation" to remember the past which is imposed by the elders on younger generations. Thus, memory has to be protected from the forces of forgetting, regardless of the fact that success here can only be partial. In accessing the past through memory, its fallibility and unreliability may be seen as a hindrance to the project. On the contrary, since memory cannot fill all the gaps in an incomplete historical record, imagination is conflated with memory to produce meaningful narratives of the past. Thus, the issue of the veracity of such historical representations becomes marginal and it is the active engagement in the writing, rewriting and remembering of the past that gives agency to marginalized groups.

In Chapter five, I analyze how Kingston and Silko adopt and transform one historical and two literary genres, the chronicle, autobiography, and novel, to again intervene in the master narrative. While it is generally acknowledged that ethnic literary productions depart from and escape the Western division into genres, I argue that these transformations are dictated by the search for a form that would become a vehicle for the dissemination of ethnic histories and at the same time encapsulate and remain sensitive to ethnic values and traditions. Western genres, as products of different histories and sensitivities, are unable to do so. By crossing and recrossing genre boundaries, not only do Kingston and Silko question the rationale behind constructing divisions between history and literature, fact and fiction, genres and authentic and inauthentic experiences but they also point to the fluid and unfixed character of concepts such as identity, ethnicity, narrative and memory.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTERRUPTING HISTORICAL SILENCES: IN SEARCH OF A LANGUAGE OF HISTORICAL ARTICULATIONS

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (59). This powerful statement locates language at the core of the identity formation processes and identifies it as instrumental in the act of articulating one’s subjectivity. Anzaldúa also rightly points out that language acquisition is never a solely linguistic process: with language one acquires a culture, worldview and history. Speaking a language provides a sense of belonging to a community and becomes a declaration of allegiance to its other speakers. Being unable to speak a language, on the other hand, is a marker of difference and stimulates an exclusion process which clearly divides the world between “us” and “them” categories.

Inevitably, language is entangled in practices of exercising power which give voice to one group while silencing another. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, language “partakes in the white-male-is-the-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations” (6). Patriarchal cultures classify speech, along with writing, as distinctively male attributes that women are not meant to possess and use as tools of self-articulation. Likewise, postcolonial critics claim that “[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language” which allows for the establishment and preservation of colonial order (Ashcroft et al. 6). In the context of asymmetrical power relations, it is the language of the male/white/imperial center that becomes a medium through which concepts such as “truth,” “norm” and “reality” are defined. One of the most visible manifestations of such linguistic dominance is the act of bestowing new names on colonized people and places which results in linguistic and physical displacement of the original tenants.

The recognition of the power-related implications inherent in the mastery of the language of the dominant group has not been lost on various marginalized groups in the United States. For the early twentieth-century immigrants the moment of language acquisition marked the beginning of life as an American—a life in a new country, culture and, as the subtitle of Eva Hoffman's autobiographical *Lost in Translation* explains, "a Life in a New Language." Mary V. Dearborn, in her study on gender and ethnicity in American literature by women, *Pocahontas's Daughters*, emphasizes that speaking English, preferably without an accent, meant the possibility of full integration into American society. For such immigrant writers as Mary Antin, Anzia Yeziarska or Martha Ostenso, familiarity with English allowed them to insert their foreign selves into American rhetoric and expand the definition of an American so that they were no longer excluded (Dearborn 71–96).

The situation is different, however, when the new language is at the same time the language of the oppressor. Joy Harjo, a Muscogee/Creek poet, addresses this problem in the 1997 anthology of literature by Native American women, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*:

Many of us at the end of the century are using the "enemy language" with which to tell our truths, to sing, to remember ourselves during these troubled times. Some of us speak our native languages as well as English . . . Some speak only English . . . because the use of our tribal languages was prohibited in schools and in adoptive homes, or these languages were suppressed to near extinction by casualty of culture and selfhood. (21)

However, instead of lapsing into silence, Harjo nevertheless chooses articulation even if in the "enemy's language" since "to speak at whatever cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction" (21). Echoing Simon Ortiz's seminal essay "Towards a National Indian Literature," Harjo claims that the final product of this "reinventing" is a language that is no longer at the colonizers' service, but carries emblems of Native cultures and emerges as an alternative to silence and an unwilling adoption of the vocabulary of the dominant group.

A similar predicament of linguistic entrapments marks the experience of Asian immigrants in the United States. The population of the first Chinese immigrants consisted mostly of uneducated peasants fleeing difficult economic conditions in their country (Yin 12–16). Acquiring English quickly became a matter of necessity rather than choice and often, due to dramatic differences between English and Chinese, it was a long and laborious process. Asian immigrants' struggles with English constituted a source of humor for generations of Americans. Chinese English became an



object of ridicule because of its “high-pitched, sing-song tones, tortured syntax, the confounding of *l*’s and *r*’s, the proliferation of *ee*-endings and the random omission of articles and auxiliary verbs,” as illustrated by a popular cliché of Chinese laundry workers’ saying “no tikee, no washee” (Kim 12). For later generations of Asian Americans, like for instance Maxine Hong Kingston’s Wittman Ah Sing (*Tripmaster Monkey*), who is a fifth generation Chinese American, the relationship toward English is not devoid of ambivalence. It is not the lack of fluency in English that poses problems but the necessity to mediate between Chinese, often spoken at home, and English, the language of the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> Hence, English, as the language spoken in a multi-cultural context, does not function as a finite store of grammar rules and vocabulary but undergoes a constant process of modification as it is marked by the ethnicities of its speakers.

Historically, for Chinese and Native Americans, English is implicated in the mechanism of silencing and erasing subjectivity. American historical narratives are replete with images of “yellow peril,” “coolies” and “vanishing Indians” which endlessly perpetuate ethnic and racial stereotypes. Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko develop a keen awareness of both the important limitations and promising possibilities involved in the use of language that renders their groups invisible and inaudible in the first place but whose mastery facilitates participation in the mainstream culture. In an interview with Elaine Jahner, Silko expresses her belief in the vitality of English in the following words: “English is a bastard language, inherently open and expansive. I love its expansiveness and inclusiveness. . . . Look at the many people who have created a form of English that is their own . . . You can arrange and rearrange the language” (48). In a similar vein Kingston explains that when writing *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, she “was claiming the English language” to tell a story of Chinese Americans (Rabinowitz 72). Kingston’s and Silko’s agenda of illuminating their characters’ linguistic entanglements depends heavily on demonstrating how English, “the enemy’s language,” becomes altered and transformed when used in ethnically diverse contexts which, in the long run, leads to the conscious and deliberate use of the language as a tool of empowerment.

The process of “marking English with difference” progresses gradually and takes place in several dimensions. First of all, it entails recognition of the superiority assigned to speech in Western culture, as elucidated by

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1 According to Edna Paisano, in 1993 eighty percent of Chinese Americans spoke Chinese at home (qtd. in Cutter 228).

Jacques Derrida in his early “Signature Event Context.” While in many non-Western traditions the relation of silence and speech is not always built on direct oppositions, in the American context it is, and the protagonists of Kingston’s and Silko’s works, in order to write themselves into American history, have to shed speechlessness as a synonym for passivity and invisibility and become articulate. Second, they have to situate themselves in relation to dominant English, “englishes,” to use Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s term,<sup>2</sup> and “foreign” languages, such as Keresan and Chinese. Not only does this process involve appreciating bilingualism and biculturalism but it also calls for the mastery of translation between two different languages and thus cultures. The final stage demonstrates complete appropriation when “the enemy’s language” emerges as a vibrant medium for defining ethnic subjectivity and deconstructing a dominant historical discourse.

## Historical Silences

The silences that envelop the protagonists of Maxine Hong Kingston’s and Leslie Marmon Silko’s works take on different forms and are the result of manifestly discriminatory practices present in the culture. In Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, silence/speech dynamics reflect the ideological agenda of privileging articulateness over reticence as an expression of American individualism. Maxine, the narrator,<sup>3</sup> receives her lesson on the superiority of speech early in her life when her silence is qualified as zero IQ and results in her “flunking kindergarten.”<sup>4</sup> Her growing up is informed by differences in the cultural evaluation of silence: in Chinese culture, “silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” whereas in America speechlessness is equated with absence of intellect and personality (*WW* 150). The forces struggling to shape Maxine’s identity are her mother’s talk-story in Chinese, and a desire and anxiety to fit into the American context. In time, Maxine comes to the realization that “without the discursive power of language there can be no communication, no knowing, no identity, no self as a linguistically constituted

2 In *Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define “english” as a form of English transformed in the colonial context and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world.

3 Following the method applied in literary criticism of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, I use “Maxine” as a reference to the textual figure, not Kingston herself, and treat the narrators of the two books as one character.

4 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (London: Picador, 1981) 164. Subsequent quotations marked *WW*.

subject" (Goellnicht, "Father" 125), and learns how to mediate between her Chinese heritage and the American cult of individualism.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in Native American cultures, the relationship between speech and silence differs considerably from the Western pattern. Speech and silence do not stand in opposition but complement each other, as is expressed in N. Scott Momaday's words: "one does not necessarily speak in order to be heard. . . . In the Indian world, a word is spoken or a song is sung not against, but within the silence" (Momaday, *The Man* 16). Thus, silence and speech are linked in a relationship that does not mirror the concept of binary oppositions. Moreover, as Paula Gunn Allen explains:

Traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and they are never patriarchal. . . . In tribal gynocratic systems a multitude of personality and character types can function positively within the social order because the systems are focused on social responsibility rather than on privilege and on the realities of the human constitution rather than on denial-based social fictions to which human beings are compelled to conform by power individuals within the society. (2–3)

Consequently, language avoids being implicated in practices of discrimination and oppression. Instead, access to language is granted regardless of tribal position or gender and the choice of not using it, of remaining silent, is not a marker of deficiency of agency.

There are silences, however that, due to their special nature, have to be confronted and fought at whatever cost. These are historical silences which result in grossly limited participation in shaping the picture of American national history. Such silences, Kingston and Silko agree, have to be broken in order to forcefully reassert one's right to historical representation which has been dominated by mainstream ideologies that, despite drawing a picture of multicultural America, are often aimed at preserving racial and cultural purity in defining the shape of American historical experience.

While silences in *The Woman Warrior* are involved in the process of subjectivity formation in the gendered context of a mother-daughter relationship, *China Men*, a companion to Kingston's first book, resists speechlessness in order to recreate the past of Maxine's male family

5 My goal here is the exploration of one dimension of silence, namely historical silence, which does not exhaust the motif of speechlessness in Kingston's works. For an extensive analysis of the silence motif see, e.g., King-Kok Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*" (163–189); King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993).

members and, in a wider context, all male Chinese immigrants to the United States. Initially, the reconstruction process turns out to be virtually impossible to initiate. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine has to learn how to benefit from her mother's never-ending and confusing stories; in *China Men*, Maxine has to deal with her father, who chooses silence as a strategy for surviving in America. According to Carol E. Neubauer, an important difference between the two books lies in the availability and abundance of material: for *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston possessed limitless material from her mother, whereas for *China Men*, all she had at her disposal was a silent father (18). Regardless of how many times Maxine bombards her father with burning questions about the past, all she ever receives in return is a refusal to speak: "You say with the few words and silences: No stories. No past. No China."<sup>6</sup> As David Leiwei Li points out, the father's silence does not have its source in Chinese patriarchal culture but may be a result of "the exclusion law and the fever of the Red Scare that silenced Chinese Americans" (Li, *Imagining* 59). Fighting the father's silence is thus less an expression of gendered subjectivity than it is a precondition for the formation of historically circumscribed American identity.

The father's insistence on continual silence has its sources first in the experience of discriminatory treatment brought about by his immigrant status, and second, in the inability to advance in the social hierarchy as a rightful citizen. BaBa's American experience is one of economic exploitation, racial exclusion and finally emasculation, which even further emphasizes the perception of Chinese immigrants as a racial and cultural Other. The opening story of *China Men*, "On discovery," is borrowed and adapted from an eighteenth-century Chinese novel, Li Ju-Chen's *Flowers in the Mirror*, which King-Kok Cheung describes as "probably one of the first 'feminist' novels written by a man" (*The Woman Warrior* 113). The story features Tang Ao, who sets off for the Gold Mountain but, unexpectedly, is captured in the land of women and is forced to adopt female attributes. His bound feet, made up face, pierced ears and sewn lips, in contrast to the usual association with the dynamics of patriarchal cultures, become metaphors for the situation of Chinese men in America, where their masculinity is questioned, negated and ridiculed. On entering America the same transformation is experienced by BaBa who, separated from his wife, seeks contacts with white women. However, his awkward flirtation in broken English, "You like come home with me? Please?," inevitably ends with humiliating refusals: "No honey. . . . No" (CM 67).

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6 Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (London: Picador, 1981) 18. Subsequent quotations marked CM.

The episode illustrates the mechanisms of exclusion—legislative bans on the entry of Chinese wives into the United States and anti-miscegenation laws—which created the image of Chinese men as emasculated and asexual. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe demonstrates how these juridical practices produced a “technology” of simultaneous racialization and gendering of Asian American subjects, which oppressed Maxine’s father and other Chinese immigrants (Lowe 11).

BaBa’s silence is doubly disturbing as it is an expression of his humiliation and, second, it contrasts sharply with his Chinese destiny to become a scholar. At the party organized to celebrate his birth, BaBa received Four Valuable Things: ink, an inkslab, paper and a brush, which were meant to become his future attributes. Interestingly, all four objects are inextricably connected with language, verbal expression and articulateness, which stand in sharp opposition to silence. In China, BaBa’s destiny was to become fluent in the art of words, but in America his education and learning are undervalued and ignored: despite his refined taste and artistic literacy, BaBa, unable to speak English, is perceived as one of many illiterate Chinese immigrants employed in laundries and gambling houses.

The political and cultural consequence of BaBa’s silence is the absence of a historical voice narrating the Chinese American presence in the national history. As it is impossible to retrieve the voice of the constantly silent father, Maxine proposes her version of the past as a counter-text to the grand narrative of American conquest and expansion, which situates Chinese Americans in the position of undesirable (and yet economically indispensable) aliens. Her technique, so well developed in *The Woman Warrior*, is based on the affirmation of language, speech and stories which facilitate the transition from silence (and invisibility) to articulateness (and cultural and political participation).

The story of Bak Goong, the great-grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains, who decides to go to Hawai’i in order to work on sugar cane plantations, demonstrates the mechanisms of breaking historical silence and reshaping American history. Bak Goong, lured by riches promised by the agents of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society, leaves for Hawai’i to improve the impoverished life of his family as well as to satisfy his insatiable hunger for adventure. The great-grandfather, like Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, is a “talk addict” who uses stories as a source of strength, hope and consolation. Exhausted by the hardships of plantation work and frustrated with degrading conditions, Bak Goong resorts to stories as a source of comfort and consolation. Although his stories add color to the lives of other Chinese workers, they are not merely a form of entertainment. Bak Goong feels an urge to keep talking about

life on the plantation as it seems to be his sole way of preserving his sanity in difficult conditions: “He needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas” (CM 101). The great-grandfather, unlike BaBa, has to give voice to his thoughts since silence threatens the erasure of subjectivity and, consequently, insanity.<sup>7</sup>

Bak Goong’s reliance on stories is a manifestation of heightened sensitivity to words and language. The great-grandfather finds pleasure in listening to other workers and distinguishing sounds and variations of different languages: “One group spoke the language so queerly that he laughed out loud. He imitated their *thl* sound blown out of the mouth with big, airy cheeks and spit. . . . Sputtering and spitting as he shouted out the *four*, which has that *thl*, he called out the rhythm for lifting and hauling” (CM 95, emphasis in the original). Therefore, it is Bak Goong who is the most severely affected by the ban on speaking during work imposed by the overseers: “Shut up. Go work. Chinaman, go work. You stay go work. Shut up” (CM 102).

His frustration intensifies until, one evening, the great-grandfather decides to rebel against the silencing rule and tells his companion a story that inspires a rebellion. There was a Chinese king who was awaiting the birth of a male heir. When the baby boy finally came into the world, the royal couple, to their horror, discovered that the prince had cat ears. The parents decided to keep the fact a secret and the prince grew his hair long so that no one would see his shameful ears. After many years, the king, tired and frustrated with keeping the secret, went to a winter field and dug a hole into which he shouted his secret: “The king’s son has cat ears” (CM 117). In the spring, when the grass grew high and the wind blew through it, the people heard the words and discovered the royal secret. The men listening to Bak Goong were mesmerized by the story. The next day, they dug a large hole for themselves and finally broke their silences addressing their families and revealing their secrets: “Hello down there in China!”; “I miss you. What are you doing right now?”; “I’ve been working hard for you, and I hate it”; “I lost all my money again”; “I’ve become an opium addict” (CM 118). From the day of the “shout party,” Bak Goong ignores the silence rule and freely expresses his thoughts, knowing that in two years, the cane will grow high and the stories will be disseminated by the wind. Thus, the act of breaking the silence, apart from introducing a gesture of rebellion against the

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7 In *The Woman Warrior*, the motif of silence as a marker of insanity is illustrated by the example of two protagonists: Moon Orchid, Maxine’s mother’s sister who, unable to defend herself verbally, dies in an asylum; and Crazy Mary, a Chinese girl from the neighborhood, who shares the fate of Moon Orchid.