

**“At the Western Palace”: The Dehumanization of Whiteness,
Americanness, and Chinese-Americanness
in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior***

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Abstract: The dehumanization of whiteness in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) inheres in the overarching ghosthood metaphor. While first generation Chinese American immigrants in *The Woman Warrior* attribute the power of transforming people into ghosts to the United States of America as a country, the questioning of a person’s humanity by calling them a “ghost” is not reserved for white people alone. Chinese American immigrants also run the risk of losing their humanity and becoming ghosts if they renounce their relatives and their heritage. The husband of the first-person narrator’s Chinese aunt, Moon Orchid, is an example of a Chinese American man, who turns into a ghost on account of swapping his Chinese wife for a much younger American one. The clinic in which Moon Orchid’s husband works, a chrome and glass Los Angeles skyscraper, becomes a vehicle for the metaphoric representation of the United States as the Western Palace – also the title of the fourth of the five chapters of *The Woman Warrior*, exemplifying narrative techniques employed by Kingston in order to render the above mentioned dehumanization.

Keywords: Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, point of view, narration, ghosts, whiteness, white Americans, Chinese Americans, Chinese immigrants, white people, barbarians, savages

How do we know that ghosts are the continuation
of dead people? Couldn’t ghosts be an entirely
different species of creature? (Kingston 77)

The dehumanization of whiteness in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) inheres in the overarching ghosthood metaphor present in the opening epigraph, which captures the characterization of whiteness in the narrative, referring not only to the representation of ghosts as supernatural beings, but also to the portrayal of whites as dehumanized and at least partly separate from humanity. First generation Chinese American immigrants in *The Woman Warrior* attribute the power of transforming people into ghosts to the United States of America as a country. Yet the questioning of a person’s humanity by calling them a “ghost” is not reserved for white people alone. Chinese American immigrants also run the risk of losing their humanity and becoming ghosts if they renounce their relatives and their heritage. The husband of the first-person narrator’s Chinese aunt, Moon Orchid, is an example of a Chinese American man, who turns into a ghost on account of swapping his Chinese wife for a much younger American one. The clinic in which Moon Orchid’s husband works, a chrome and glass Los Angeles skyscraper, becomes a vehicle for the metaphoric representation of the United States as the Western Palace—also the title of the fourth of the five chapters of *The Woman Warrior*.¹ Glass and chrome are only a facade of

1 Toming Jun Liu suggests that in the Chinese language the term “western palace” is also a

luxury, comfort and opulence covering the arduous immigrant reality encapsulated in the following statement: “This is a terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away.... Even the ghosts [white people] work, no time for acrobatics” (122), “I can’t sleep in this country because it doesn’t shut down for the night. Factories, canneries, restaurants—always somebody somewhere working through the night. It never gets done all at once here” (123-24). According to Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother, who utters the above-cited words, the demands on human beings in the United States have a negative impact on relations between people, estranging them from one another. The article explores the following aspects of the perceived process of dehumanization on American soil in *The Woman Warrior*:

- narrative techniques, including experimentation with a viewpoint, employed by Kingston in order to render the avowed dehumanization;
- the conflation of whiteness and Americanness in the mentality of at least some first generation Chinese American characters;
- the Moon Orchid character as the greatest victim of the dehumanization taking place in the United States;
- Moon Orchid’s husband as a Chinese American man whose own humanity becomes significantly compromised on American soil;
- and the undermining of what a whiteness studies scholar, Ruth Frankenberg, terms as the “self-naming” power of whiteness (13).

The conscious and strategic uprooting of Moon Orchid’s husband from his Chinese American heritage is placed in the article in the literary context of Asian American characters, who regret the severing or loosening of the ties with their homeland communities. The article is written in the spirit of New Historicism, which assumes that “literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably” (Veeser xi), refusing to “observe strict and fixed boundaries between ‘literary’ and other texts” (Montrose 26): hence the juxtaposition of Frankenberg’s and Arkush and Lee’s sociological research with Kingston’s Chinese American autobiographical fiction underlain by her real life experience.²

The discussion of the dehumanization and dehumanizing quality of whiteness as well as Americanness centres in the above-mentioned “At the Western Palace” chapter. Unlike other chapters of *The Woman Warrior*, “At the Western Palace” is narrated in the third person, selective omniscient point of view. The choice of the third person narration is strategic, capturing the distance in relations between people and also indicating the first person narrator’s distance towards depicted events. At other points of the narrative the narrator consistently chooses the first person narration even while recounting the events in which she does not participate directly. The narrator’s distance is the most palpable in the passages referring to her closest relatives through official

Chinese idiom for a “second wife” (12).

2 I wish to stress that the ample critique of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* does not probe the problems raised in the article. I cite the criticisms which are closest to the perimeter of the themes discussed here, that is, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s “Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the Ethnic Experience,” Cheng Lok Chua’s “Mythopoesis of East and West in *The Woman Warrior*,” and Toming Jun Liu’s “The Problematics of Kingston’s ‘Cultural Translation’: A Chinese Diasporic View of *The Woman Warrior*.”

terms of reference like Brave Orchid or Brave Orchid's husband, rather than mother or father. The narrator's impersonal stance in the chapter magnifies an air of estrangement hovering over interpersonal relations in the United States. This estrangement is the most conspicuous in Moon Orchid's encounter with her husband, when the narrator compares both of them to the colonists of the Chinese land. Greeting Moon Orchid, her husband says "hello" "like an Englishman in Hong Kong," to which Moon Orchid answers "hello" "like an English telephone operator" (138). The third person mode of narration not only exposes the estrangement of people from one another, but also their estrangement from themselves. Self-estrangement, as well as self-irony of the narrator, is visible when she depicts herself in the following words: "There was indeed an oldest girl who was absent-minded and messy" (152). Significant portions of "At the Western Palace" chapter are focalized through Brave Orchid's and Moon Orchid's points of view. In particular, the focalization of the narration through Moon Orchid's point of view further accentuates the loosening of human ties on American soil. Moon Orchid relates everything that she witnesses in Brave Orchid's household in the third person, magnifying the overall distancing effect of the third person narration employed by the narrator in the chapter. Moon Orchid's third person narration within the third person narration adopted by the first person narrator for "At the Western Palace" chapter renders her estrangement from the new environment in which she finds herself. Moon Orchid focuses on Brave Orchid's children and all their daily, mundane activities. Meticulously documenting everything that they do, she resembles an ethnographer studying her subjects. After retreating into madness, Moon Orchid still describes the children's proceedings in the house, but no longer changes her intonation and no longer poses any questions.³

The passages of "At the Western Palace" focalized through the viewpoint of Moon Orchid's husband show the acme of estrangement from the people who deserve respect and acknowledgement from the man who looks at them or rather through⁴ them at that particular point of the narration. Initially, Moon Orchid's husband fails to recognize Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid as his relatives, addressing them as "Grandmothers" and reflecting on what he perceives as the ugliness of their faces: "These women had such awful faces" (176). During an ensuing conversation Moon Orchid's husband⁵ does not refer to Moon Orchid's and his own daughter as "our daughter," but as "her daughter," which again accentuates the husband's distance (177). A slightly different perspective of the events narrated in "At the Western Palace" chapter appears at the beginning of the following and last chapter of the book, entitled

3 Reconciling herself to Moon Orchid's madness, Brave Orchid defines insanity as telling the same story time and again (184).

4 Reaching for the term "looking through," I draw on the typology of vision established by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In the epilogue to the narrative, the *Invisible Man* declares that his narrative recounts "what was going on while your eyes were looking through" (439). "Looking through" signifies the visual sweeping of the surface of one's body without delving beneath.

5 The name of Moon Orchid's husband is never revealed, possibly for two reasons: potentially to stress the narrator's distance to this particular character or to give an air of authenticity to the text that was constructed as the first person autobiographical narrative and that was defined by publishers on the book cover as a memoirs, although Kingston herself defied this classification, identifying the book as a first person novel, whose narrator should not be identified as herself even if the narrator's life is based on her own.

“A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” While “At the Western Palace” chapter presents an elaborate version of an encounter between Moon Orchid and her husband, the opening of “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” offers a bare version. The bare version emerges from a short conversation between the participant in the events, the narrator’s brother, and the narrator’s sister. Reading the conversation, the reader may have an impression that it is the narrator herself talking to her brother. Only at the end of the conversation does the narrator announce that she did not talk to the brother in person, but obtained information through her sister. As in “The Laws” chapter of *China Men*, Kingston illustrates the process of retrieving information, vouchsafing her brother’s version and her sister’s personal opinion on the events. Polyphony and a sudden shift of narration from third person back to first person reinforces the postmodern aesthetics of the narrative. The bare version recounted in the afore-mentioned conversation is very short on details, suggesting that the narrator fills the gaps in information with her imagination. Not acknowledging the role of her imagination directly, the narrator still admits that her stories are “twisted into designs” (189).

The portrayal of whiteness as dehumanized and dehumanizing is one more juncture in *The Woman Warrior* when whiteness and Americanness are discursively closely linked. Both were often linked in white mentality. The white conservative discourse and popular imagery often equated whiteness and Americanness. For example, for white women investigated by sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, “the two place markers ‘white’ and ‘American’ at times operated interchangeably” (Frankenberg, “Whiteness and Americanness” 66). Kingston shows in *The Woman Warrior* that whiteness and Americanness may be synonymous not only in white mentality, but also in the perception of first generation immigrants—in this case first generation Chinese Americans. While Kingston’s later works, *China Men* (1986) and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), make a concerted effort to anchor Chinese Americans in the fabric of Americanness, *The Woman Warrior* shows the people who do not necessarily unequivocally identify themselves as Americans and they are aware that a significant portion of American society denies them such an identification. The narrator herself grapples with self-identification, claiming that she “could not figure out what [her] village was,” trying to “understand what things in [her] were Chinese” (6).⁶ Brave Orchid corrects Moon Orchid when she identifies Chinese Americans living in Chinatown as Americans: “These aren’t the Americans. These are the overseas Chinese” (157). For Moon Orchid, their long time residence in the United States suffices to make them Americans. If on this occasion Brave Orchid identifies Chinese Americans living in Chinatown as the Chinese, at a different point she draws a distinction between the Chinese and Chinese Americans living in the United States. After reconciling herself to her permanent residence in the United States, she declares that she does not trust the Chinese: “They’re Chinese, and Chinese are mischievous.... I’m too old to keep up with them. They’d be too clever for me” (126).

“At the Western Palace” explicitly defines the United States as the “ghost country” (176) and as “the land of ghosts” (178). The narrator reaches for the term

6 The narrator’s attitude diametrically contrasts with that evinced by the protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing, who is disenchanted with himself after saying: “We came from the Tropic of Cancer” (42).

“the land of ghosts,” depicting the encounter between Moon Orchid and her husband. “The land of ghosts” signifies the land of people who significantly compromised, if not totally breached, the ties with other human beings, especially those whom they should particularly treasure on account of pre-existing bonds. As mentioned earlier, Moon Orchid’s husband is an example of a ghost-like figure because of the irreverent attitude towards his former wife. In her discussion of Moon Orchid’s and her husband’s estrangement, the narrator stops short of laying all the responsibility on the husband. Instead, she accentuates the power of the United States to estrange people from each other: “Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts” (178). The above passage illustrates the extent of Moon Orchid’s and her husband’s estrangement from each other. In the context of the passage, being a ghost equals being a stranger to someone else. The image of “ghosts passing car windows” implies a very transient contact marked by impersonality and the lack of involvement as well as recognition. If both Moon Orchid and her husband are ghosts, both are also transparent to each other. There is no sign of respect or recognition, let alone love, in the manner Moon Orchid’s husband looks at his Chinese wife. His gaze is one of the features which in the eyes of his fellow Chinese American first generation immigrants makes him similar to white Americans. For first generation Chinese Americans, the gaze of white people serves as another manifestation of their rudeness, hostility and suspicion. Looking at Moon Orchid, her husband subjects her to a scrutinizing, inspecting gaze: “He looked directly at Moon Orchid the way the savages [white Americans] looked, looking for lies. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. She shrank from his stare; it silenced her crying” (177). An invocation of “savages” “look[ing] for lies” suggests an interrogation situation during the crossing of the American border or a deportation hearing. Smothering Moon Orchid’s crying, her husband’s inspecting, scrutinizing gaze has a disciplining power. As during the exchanges between the narrator and the racist employers, the eye contact and the verbal contact between Moon Orchid and the husband is very imperfect. Like racist bosses “impossible to meet eye to eye” (57), Moon Orchid’s husband is not interested in establishing a meaningful visual or verbal exchange with Moon Orchid. He talks down at her authoritatively, frustrating all communication. His goal is to inform rather than listen to. Like the narrator during the afore-mentioned confrontation with the racist employers, Moon Orchid barely stammers out a few words.

The imagery employed during the thwarted reunion renders the estrangement of Moon Orchid’s husband from his wife. Focalizing the narration through the viewpoint of Moon Orchid’s husband and drawing the reader’s attention to the discrepancy between the youthful appearance of the husband and the old age of Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid, the narrator claims that the front seat of the car served as a “barrier against the two women” (177). Unfolding in the cramped space of the car, the encounter symbolizes Moon Orchid’s marginality and the marginality of the husband’s former life in his overall life story. The cramped space of the car contrasts sharply with the expansiveness of the husband’s workplace—high-rise chrome and glass clinic—as well as the broader setting of Los Angeles. The meeting itself is a far cry from what Brave Orchid had envisioned. According to Brave Orchid’s design, Moon Orchid is

to make a theatrical entrance into the husband's house. She is to be dressed up as a beautiful, strange lady only to throw off her wig and reveal her identity in front of the husband and the second wife. Brave Orchid's plan founders because Moon Orchid does not share Brave Orchid's theatrical penchant and she has a more realistic outlook on the prospects of the reunion. It also turns out that the address procured by Brave Orchid is the husband's work address, not his home address. In "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the Ethnic Experience," Cynthia Sau-ling Wong argues that as a former doctor in China and a manual labourer in the United States, Brave Orchid is jealous of Moon Orchid's husband's success in the field of medicine on American soil (16). Therefore a fissure in his seemingly blemish-free American life would constitute a kind of psychological compensation for Brave Orchid.

Throughout the encounter with Moon Orchid and throughout the whole "At the Western Palace" chapter the husband's moral degeneration is blamed on his Americanization. The passages criticizing what is perceived as his typically American rude gaze are only examples of his Americanization. A series of statements focalized through Brave Orchid's and Moon Orchid's point of view characterize him as a typical American: "He looked and smelled like an American" (176), "He talked like a child born here" (177). Brave Orchid declares that he "turned into barbarian" because he married a new American wife, leaving behind his earlier wife and his parents (146). Moon Orchid's husband himself plays up his Americanness, claiming that their lifestyles and mentalities are irreconcilable. In his view, Moon Orchid would not "fit into an American household" (178), potentially antagonizing his "important American guests" (178). Insensitive as he is, he recognizes Moon Orchid's delicacy, arguing that one needs to be tough to make it in the United States (177). Without any visible qualms of conscience, he proclaims himself a good husband because he provided for Moon Orchid and "her daughter" (178). Asked by Brave Orchid why he did not definitely inform his wife that they would never be reunited, he reaches for a book metaphor, stating that his Chinese relatives "became people in a book [he] had read a long time ago" (179). Blaming the completeness of his new life for leaving his Chinese life almost completely behind, he has an impression that he "turn[s] into a different person" (179). The book metaphor functions differently in the rendition of Moon Orchid's husband than it does in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981). Unlike Moon Orchid's husband, the first person narrator of *Obasan*, Naomi, reaches for the book metaphor in order to recover the severed link with her Japanese American relatives, most of whom are already dead when she writes the narrative. Naomi fills the empty book pages of her dream with people physically lost a long time ago, while Moon Orchid's husband commits his Chinese relatives to the book he "had read a long time ago" with the aim of forgetting them (179). This kind of oblivious attitude also stands in sharp contrast to that of other Asian American literary characters who lost ties with their Asian ancestors and relatives. An example of such a character is Councilman John Kwang of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). Kwang weeps like a child while chanting a Korean song about a man who returns to his ancestral village only to see his relatives dead. Another Asian American character created by Chang-rae Lee, Frank Hata, the protagonist of *A Gesture Life* (2000), never leaves his Korean Japanese

past behind, mentally coexisting in different realities. A similar trope can be traced in David Mura's *Where the Body Meets Memory* (1995), when the narrator's Japanese American aunt looks in vain for the grave of her father, who returned to Japan, having spent World War II in an internment camp.

If looked at from a different perspective, the story of Moon Orchid's husband is one more variation on Werner Sollors' seminal distinction between consent and descent. The wife left behind, often chosen by a man's parents, symbolizes the past and descent, while the self-chosen American wife stands for consent representing the new vibrant life full of possibilities (Sollors 157). While, according to Moon Orchid's husband, Moon Orchid would not fit into his American household, the second wife apparently does because she is younger, better looking and can speak English.

An explanation of the title of "At the Western Palace" chapter comes in Brave Orchid's tale of the Emperor of the Earth and his four wives. Just as in the "White Tigers" chapter, recounting the Woman Warrior's trials in the mountains of the white tigers, the West is associated in Brave Orchid's tale with gold, the symbol of the quest for power. The Empress of the West longs for power unlike the Empress of the East, who is "good and kind and full of light" (166). Brave Orchid compares Moon Orchid to the Empress of the East, who will emerge from the dawn to raid the land of the Empress of the West and reclaim her imprisoned husband. The palace functions in the tale as the place of isolation and incarceration rather than the place where one can unfurl their potential in the way Moon Orchid's husband does in the United States. If there is anything that Moon Orchid could liberate her husband from, these are the forces that compromised his humanity. Instead of liberating her husband, she becomes trapped herself. Overwhelmed by his insensitivity and her own displacement, Moon Orchid retreats into madness.

Like her husband, Moon Orchid also turns into a ghost, but her transition into a ghost signifies something else than it does in the case of the husband. While for Moon Orchid's husband being a ghost signifies partial dehumanization and desensitization because of the breach of ancestral ties, for Moon Orchid being a ghost represents estrangement from other people and from herself. In Brave Orchid's household, Moon Orchid's attitude to Brave Orchid's children literally approximates that of a ghost. Curious of all their activities, she trails them like a ghost-like figure, observing carefully everything they do and later relating it in the third person. As mentioned earlier, the third person narration magnifies Moon Orchid's distance from the environment in which she finds herself. Unnerved by supervision, children do not reciprocate her interest. Moon Orchid's haunting of the children is fairly innocuous and free of negative connotations of the term "haunting," being underlain purely by curiosity, which in the course of time turns into attachment. Although barely any communication transpires between Moon Orchid and the children, she still develops a sense of bonding with them. Estranged as Moon Orchid is in Brave Orchid's household, she sets her roots there, achieving a level of happiness, which she is unwilling to relinquish in order to pursue her husband: "'But I'm happy here with you and all your children,' Moon Orchid said. 'I want to see how this girl's sewing turns out. I want to see your son come back from Vietnam. I want to see if this one gets good grades. There's so much to do'" (165). The dynamic ghost-haunted changes when Moon Orchid lives in her

daughter's house, where she feels spied on by "Mexican ghosts," whom she believes to plot against her life. Moon Orchid's suspicions are most probably a figment of her strained psyche because it is difficult to imagine that she would be able to overhear the Mexicans conspiring against her if she speaks neither Spanish nor English, unless she deduces it from the situational context. Being under an impression that she is haunted, Moon Orchid resembles a ghost-like figure, trying to efface herself bodily in order to evade her purported pursuers. Like a woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," she crawls on the floor, furtively glancing outside her house lest she be noticed. Moon Orchid's ordeal in the United States changes her physically in such a way as to make her similar to a ghost also in her appearance: "Her... skin hung loose, like a hollowed frog's, as if she had shrunk inside it. Her clothes bagged, not fitting sharply anymore" (180). After being committed to mental asylum, she becomes a shadow of her former self, "[shrinking] to bone" (185).

Moon Orchid's story highlights the estranging power of the United States in *The Woman Warrior* on several levels. On the most immediate level, she is displaced from her previous environment, being puzzled at diverse aspects of the new environment. Yet she still has a sense of security in Brave Orchid's household, security which vanishes when she leaves Brave Orchid's home. Ironically, Moon Orchid's ties to her relatives grow looser after she moves closer to them in spatial terms. When Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid live on separate continents, they write to each other every fortnight. After Moon Orchid moves away to a different city in California, Brave Orchid does not hear from her for several months (179). Although Moon Orchid and her husband live in the same city of Los Angeles, they meet only once. Cheng Lok Chua finds it puzzling that "a neurosurgeon's wife [Moon Orchid] dies in a lunatic asylum" (148). It is even more puzzling that her neurosurgeon husband, together with another former doctor, Brave Orchid, who sets up the whole situation, are the root causes behind her mental collapse. Eventually Moon Orchid not only grows estranged from other people in the United States, but also from herself. This is how Brave Orchid interprets her madness: "Moon Orchid had misplaced herself, her spirit (her 'attention'...) all over the world" (181-82). That is why she chants to Moon Orchid her new address in order to bring her spirit home. The passage points up the importance of location in identity formation. Brave Orchid herself is the subject of a similar incantation in the narrative when she recovering from her encounter with the Sitting Ghost.

"At the Western Palace" chapter undermines what Ruth Frankenberg classifies as the "self-naming" power of whiteness (13). Throughout the chapter white people are referred to as "ghosts," "savages" and "barbarians." Such a representation recurs throughout *The Woman Warrior*, but it reaches particular intensity in "At the Western Palace". The portrayal of whites as savages and barbarians inscribes itself in the characterization of whiteness as dehumanized, desensitized, separate from humanity or at best as an inferior, uncultivated species of humanity. The rhetoric of "savages" and "barbarians" applied to white people reverses the colonial discourse applied to people of colour. Labels "savages" and "barbarians" are by no means uncommon in Asian American literature. The protagonist of H. T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* (1937) extols Chinese culture and civilization, looking down on American "barbarians" and "savages." The label also appears in Winnifred Eaton's (Onoto Watana) and Bertrand

W. Babcock's "Eyes that Saw Not" (1902). The narrator of Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991) claims that according to the common perception in China, by coming to the United States, Ralph, gave himself over to barbarians. Similar rhetoric appears in the opening chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, "No Name Woman." The No Name Woman is expected to cherish traditional ways, which "her brother, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection" (9).

The Chinese immigrating into the United States are in danger of losing their cultivated polish and following in barbarians' footsteps. Barbarian features manifest themselves in "At the Western Palace" primarily through one's sight and speech. As already mentioned, Moon Orchid's husband has "rude American eyes" and stares directly into Moon Orchid's eyes "the way the savages looked, looking for lies" (177). The gaze problem also pertains to Brave Orchid's children and Moon Orchid is under an impression that they "fix" her with their gaze (154). Since they look people directly in the eye, Moon Orchid has suspicions about their good manners, comparing them to animals: "Even the girls stared at her—like cat-headed birds" (154), "They were like animals the way they stared" (155). Even if Chinese immigrants do not lose their cultivated ways, America still transforms their gaze. The narrator draws such conclusions after comparing her mother's (Brave Orchid) gaze in the college graduation group photograph taken years before her immigration into the United States with her gaze after settling in America. Before immigration, Brave Orchid's and other immigrant's gaze is stretched far into expanses of space and time: "my mother's eyes are big with what they hold—reaches of oceans beyond China, land beyond oceans" (70). "The land beyond oceans" to which Brave Orchid looks forward holds the promise of a reunion with her long gone husband and of the children that were still to be born. Similarly, the gaze of other immigrants is full of expectation for the future in the Gold Mountain, as they called America. According to the narrator, "that far gaze lasts only a few years after a Chinese emigrates" (71). While already in the United States, immigrants can no longer dream of the grand future, but have to focus on survival, arduous labour, providing for their family, the mundane present rather than the grand future that was to be. If first generation immigrants like Brave Orchid and her husband think of the grand future, it is usually in the context of their children and their prospective success.⁷ Depicting her mother's gaze in the United States, the narrator claims that "in America [her] mother has eyes as strong as boulders, never once skittering off a face" (70). "Boulders" imply the solid, down-to-earth disposition of Brave Orchid, who usually rests her gaze on something solid, that is, something within reach. She still can see the

7 Real life immigrants interviewed by Victor and Brett de Bary Nee in *Longtime Californ* claim to be fulfilled if their children succeed. A further fiction illustration of such a situation can be traced in "Two Lives for One," a short story by a Korean American author, Shin Yung Oh. A Korean American college student, Christine, is acutely aware that her parents sacrifice their own lives in a dry-cleaning shop to secure her future. Helping in the shop, Christine quarrels with the customers complaining about the quality of the service. Christine's parents contrast in their mentality with Brave Orchid, who chastises her children for following ghosts' ways. Christine's parents, on the other hand, tell her that she should try to become similar to their customers in order to succeed. Christine is evidently split between her loathing for the customers and her parents' expectation that she should become like them.

land behind the oceans, but now she looks in a different direction, towards the relatives left behind in China (70). The “gaze” metaphor employed by Kingston to illustrate the perspectives stretching before immigrants in the United States parallels the “horizon” metaphor employed by Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The far gaze of immigrants before immigration corresponds to the sight of the horizon, which Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is anxious never to lose. The horizon metaphor with its implications of the expansiveness of the gaze represents the wide spectrum of opportunities and yearnings that Janie hopes to see before her.

“Barbarian” features also reveal themselves through speech. Brave Orchid grumbles about her children’s “barbarous mouths” (140). According to Brave Orchid, her children resemble white people in their lack of respect for the spoken word. They share white people’s propensity to speak without prior consideration, uttering words which do not necessarily carry much weight and could just as well remain unspoken: “Ghosts are noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about anything” (214). Unlike Chinese Americans, white people do not cherish silence. Brave Orchid does not allow her children to talk during meals, except in English, which she perceives as the ghost language. While Brave Orchid herself is a “champion talker” (235), she believes that all her statements serve as an instruction.

The most estranging picture of the United States and its citizens is registered through the eyes of Moon Orchid, when she observes and tries to interact with Brave Orchid’s children. Her pronouncements on Brave Orchid’s children continue the process of the marking of Americanness as an extension of whiteness. Time and again Moon Orchid is emphatic about the fact that Brave Orchid’s children were “raised away from civilization” (155), among “savages,” “in the wilderness” (156). To her surprise, they are familiar with a watch, thermometer and the library. Touching the children, Moon Orchid checks if they have substance or are ethereal, having grown up among American ghosts. In her ethnographic approach, she also smells them, evaluating their smell as markedly different. For Moon Orchid, the children look like “sweet wild animals” or “like Indian[s], both terms vehemently contested by the children” (156). The narrator interprets Moon Orchid’s advances towards the children as an attempt to establish how easy it is to “provoke a savage” (156). Testing the limits of the new environment, Moon Orchid sees herself as a pioneer “eager to work, roughing it in the wilderness” (156). Considering Moon Orchid’s very delicate construction, the term “roughing” is a misnomer. The wilderness gets the upper hand over Moon Orchid, bearing out her husband’s statement that she lacks “the harshness for this country” (177).

The vision of the United States emerging from “At the Western Palace” is that of the country prioritizing not only hard work, but also the pursuit of money, pleasure and the hedonistic lifestyle. The action of “At the Western Palace” unfolds at the turn of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, but the perception of Americans as giving a priority to financial rewards and personal pleasure reaches back as far as the 1930s, when travellers and immigrants from China voiced their impressions of the United States. An anonymous Chinese student from Columbia University, writing in 1932 under the penname Gongwang, identified American culture as “the culture of the dollar and the art of sexual intercourse; at heart, it is nothing more than seeking pleasure” (Gongwang in Arkush and Lee 150). In his 1936 article “Impressions on Reclaiming

America,” Lin Yutang expressed similar views, claiming that Americans translated the value of a human being into their property ownership, into how much one owns rather than how one approaches other people (Lin Yutang in Arkush and Lee 160). Drawing attention to the accessibility of goods in the United States and American engrossment in capitalism, Lin observed that the American pursuit of happiness equalled the pursuit of property ownership, of amassing ever more goods: “Therefore we have life, prosperous life, under American democracy, because there are vast numbers of cars, magazines, and radio receivers” (163). Lin emphasized the availability of goods to “the ordinary man,” who is “the cornerstone of American democracy” (163).⁸ A proliferation of goods struck some Chinese travellers to the United States as emblematic of American uniformity. Yin Haiguang, a pro-Western, iconoclastic, Taiwanese professor, who spent several years at Harvard in the early 1950s, approved of American political liberalism, but evinced disenchantment with uniformity, which he found pervasive in the United States. Yin traced uniformity both in the material culture of the United States and American people themselves, whom he perceived as indistinct. Voicing his criticism, Yin says: “What America has most of are automobiles and what it has least of, I think, are things like style” (210). Yin attributed Americans’ perpetual lack of “personal style” to the mentality and lifestyle of advanced industrial civilization (212). In the afterword to an overview of Chinese essays on the United States, spanning the period between 1848 and 1987, Arkush and Lee note that China criticized the United States primarily for racism, prejudice, loose family ties, hedonism and disrespect for the elderly (301). Attributing greater ethnocentrism to Americans and lesser respect for Chinese culture, Arkush and Lee argue that Chinese immersion in American society and culture was much deeper than that of Americans in Chinese society and culture, which they link to the fact that travellers to China stayed mostly in the ports dominated by foreigners (303).

“At the Western Palace” captures one of the most sinister faces of whiteness and Americanness hidden under the overarching ghosthood metaphor in *The Woman Warrior*. The ghosts of “At the Western Palace” signify a significant breach of the link with humanity. The dehumanization of whiteness reaches its apogee in “At the Western Palace.” Assuming an impersonal, third-person stance for the chapter, the narrator magnifies the estranging quality of the American environment, in which human touch gives way to pervasive mechanization, the pursuit of materialism and hedonism. Toughness, sturdiness and solidity are the hallmarks of the American, Western world as presented by the narrator. The solidity of the eponymous Western Palace contrasts with the fragility of Chinatown. Fragile figures like Moon Orchid find no foothold in the solid Western Palace and the Chinese Americans who survive need to painstakingly guard their humanity lest they forfeit it in the land of ghosts.

8 The above cited passage corresponds to the fragment of *The Woman Warrior*: “America is full of machines and ghosts” (163). Still, if Brave Orchid and the immature narrator are suffocated by machines, Lin perceived technology as a prerequisite of American prosperity and life comfort. He was free of the terror of machines and ghosts, but his appraisal of the “vast numbers of cars, magazines and radio receivers” still strikes an ironic chord.

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