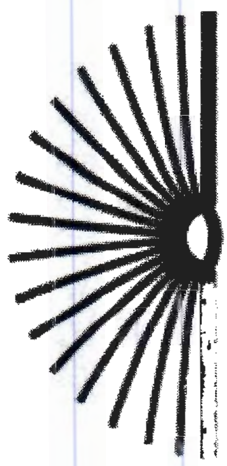

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Post-Memory and History in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Aleksandra Izgarjan and Aleksandra Nikčević-Batrićević

A postmodern understanding of history renders it is a system of signification by which we make sense of the past. Maxine Hong Kingston's and Amy Tan's critical approach to history underlines the fact that our perception and understanding of events is unavoidably determined by the present moment. In their novels, Kingston and Tan create layer upon layer of memories of second-generation immigrants, shaped by their immigrant parents' stories about the native country they have lost. The second generation lives in post-memory, determined by their parents' nostalgia and exile, which causes a communication gap between generations. By giving voice to women and immigrants, the motive for their writing becomes obvious: to render visible previously invisible and marginalized groups and to insert their (his/her) stories into the dominant historical discourse.

1. Introduction

Memory, as Edward Said observed, is to a certain extent a nationalistic attempt to construct loyalty to a country, tradition, and religion and to develop an insider understanding of that country. The study of memory, with its focus on the past events which can be conveniently used for political purposes, has been especially prevalent in the early twenty-first century, marked as it has been by rapid changes, mass societies, and crumbling family and social ties (Said 2000: 176). The connection between memory and identity is one of the central themes of the novels of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. For Kingston, words come before memories and sharpen one's vision (Kingston 1987: 177). In turn, memory presents a basis for writing, whether it is related to a real event or the desire of the

writer to construct a world which is unattainable to them. As Kingston states:

> I think that my stories have a constant breaking in and out of the present and past. So the reader might be walking along very well in the present, but the past breaks through and changes and enlightens the present, and vice-versa. The reason that we remember a past moment at all is that our present-day life is still a working-out of a similar situation (Kingston 1987: 177).

Tan also commented on the ways her work depends on the interplay between memory and imagination:

> What I draw from is not a photographic memory, but an emotional one. When I place that memory of feeling within a fictive home, it becomes imagination. [...] And as I write that possibility, it becomes a part of me. It has the power to change my memory of the way things really happened. [...] For me, writing from memory is more about remembering my psychological place in the world at different stages of my life. [...] My memory, then, is entirely subjective. And that, I think, is the kind of memory that is simultaneously the most unreliable and the most authentic element a writer can infuse into her work (Tan 2003: 108, 110).

Generally, the corpus of research of Kingston's and Tan's work can be broadly put into three major categories. The main group comprises works which discuss the socio-cultural struggle that their characters experience as first- or second-generation Chinese immigrants in American society (Butler Evans 1989, Li 1998, Wong 1999, Huntley 2000, Shu 2001, Bloom 2003, Snodgrass 2004, Adams 2005, Grice 2006, Izgarjan 2017). In particular, early research on Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* revolved around the issue of whether the novel is a work of fiction or a memoir and whether it can be regarded as representative of the life of Chinese Americans in the U.S. (Hsu 1983, Myers 1986, Wong 1995, Woo 1999). Debates on the (in)authenticity of her representation of the Chinese American experience have surrounded Tan's novels as well, and both authors have responded repeatedly over the years to this criticism which they perceived as unsound (Kingston 1982, Rabinowitz 1987, Wong 1995, Wong 1999, Tan 2003). The second group focuses on the dynamics between the mother and daughter characters in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* (Frye 1988, Heung 1993, Shen 1995, Hamilton 1999). The third branch of scholarship examines the linguistic aspects of the two novels in questions, especially Kingston's and Tan's usage of code-mixing, intertextuality, and story-telling as their hallmark narrative strategies (Souris 1994, Cook 1997, Lee 2004, Lim 2006, Izgarjan 2007). However, despite Kingston's and Tan's focus on the importance of memory in their novels, very few scholarly

works (Xu 1994, Ho 1999, Lotfi 2014) examine this aspect of their oeuvre. That is why we have decided to explore the dynamics between memory and history in their two novels *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, with particular emphasis on a postmodern approach to this topic. In this article we will focus on Kingston's and Tan's postmodern understanding of memory and history as subjective constructs that are open to reinterpretations which brings new readings to these two ground-breaking novels.

2. Memory and Post-Memory

In the opinion of Marianne Hirsch, our imagination feeds on a desire to know what the world looked like and what people felt before we were born (Hirsch 1998: 419). This desire is even more precious for those who came into this world after it was irrevocably changed. Hirsch writes about a specific kind of exile lived out by the children of immigrants who have left their homeland forever. However, this homeland lives in their memories and they talk about their past and native land so vividly that their children grow up feeling exiled from this world that they have never visited and will never see because it is impossible to return to it. Through their parents' memories, the children internalize this lost world to such an extent that they can imagine streets, houses, and rivers they have not seen. Although the past was destroyed, it still has the power to survive as a fantasy in the minds of immigrants and their children. Fantasy is made much more powerful by being infused with a sense of permanent loss. The very fact that the home country was destroyed by a sudden act of violence (be it World War II, the Chinese Communist Revolution, or the Holocaust in Europe) makes it inaccessible to the children of the immigrants. Immigrants transfer to their children their feelings of being in exile between two cultures. The second generation thus yearns not only to know this lost world, but also to create it anew, to resurrect it. For the survivors, memory is indispensable not only as an act of reminiscence, but also as an act of mourning (Hirsch 1998: 419).

Hirsch calls this secondary memory or the memory of the second generation -- post-memory. Its power lies in the fact that its connection to the object or source of memory is transmitted not through reminiscence but through imagination and creativity. Post-memory is characteristic of those who grow up hearing the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events they are not able to comprehend completely (Hirsch 1998: 420). Hirsch developed the theory of post-memory to explain the lives of the descendants of Holocaust survivors, but as this article will show, it can be successfully applied to the members of second-generation immigrant families whose childhood has been shaped by memories of the homeland their families belonged to before they immigrated. Although they themselves have not experienced the trauma of dislocation, they still remain in

the exile of the diaspora. For example, Brave Orchid, the mother of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, teaches her children that China is the central nation and the family's only point of reference. She perceives living in the United States as transitory and something that has to be endured before going back to China: "Someday, very soon, we're going home, where there are Han people everywhere. We'll buy furniture then, real tables and chairs. You children will smell flowers for the first time" (Kingston 1977: 90). However, when the Chinese Communist Revolution makes return to China impossible for the narrator's parents, the family struggles with the knowledge that they will have to remain in the United States, where they are viewed not as members of the Central Nation, but only as second-rate citizens. The only recourse for the narrator's parents is to live in their memories of the China they used to know.

Kingston's and Tan's characters fit Hirsch's definition of people living in post-memory. Both *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* contain passages of first-generation Chinese American immigrants reminiscing about their native country and trying to pass on their memories to their American descendants, only to realize that this process is impeded by the barriers of the two different languages and cultures they and their children belong to. Another obstacle to the successful transmission of the Chinese culture and language is the illegal status of Chinese immigrants in America. Many immigrants have to be careful what they tell their children, since they do not want their children to inadvertently reveal some family secret at school or to their American circle of friends. As Kingston explains in her novel:

> Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America. The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways – always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence (Kingston 1977: 10).

Ho notes that "[t]his is a trickster's advice for survival in a racist society. Lying, for example, has a long tradition in the political memory of the Chinese living in this country, it stems from America's history of violence and discrimination against the Chinese" (1999: 122).

Tan's characters also cannot speak about the lives they left in China. For example, Lena St. Clair comments upon her mother's reluctance to talk about the circumstances that led to her immigration to the United States and the way she left behind her Chinese identity:

> My mother never talked about her life in China, but my father said he saved her from a terrible life there, some tragedy she could not speak about. My father proudly named her in her immigration papers: Betty St. Clair, crossing out her given name of Gu Ying-Ying. And then he put down the wrong birthyear, 1916 instead of 1914. So, with the sweep of a pen, my mother lost her name and became a Dragon instead of a Tiger (Tan 1989: 107).

Another character of Tan's, Lindo Jong, gives a similar description: "It's hard to keep your Chinese face in America. At the beginning, before I even arrived, I had to hide my true self" (Tan 1989: 294). Since members of the second generation cannot fully understand their parents' immigrant experience, they have trouble translating it to themselves, which points to a communication gap between the first and second generations.

3. Memory, Post-Memory, and History in *The Woman Warrior*

For the narrator of Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, the search for self turns into the search for a home, a place where she can belong and be herself. However, first she has to create a definition of home in order to be able to find it. As it turns out, this is not an easy task for a person born in the US to Chinese immigrant parents. Her mother teaches the narrator and her siblings only directions to her home in China, a place her children have never visited. Consequently, the narrator repeatedly asks herself whether her home is the US, China, or some place in between. As she says: "I could not figure out what was my village" (Kingston 1977: 54). For her, China is not so much a physical space, as it is a construction her parents created to blunt the pain of nostalgia that never ceases to gnaw at them. By tenaciously holding on to their Chinese identity and memories of the country they left behind, they avoid assimilation into American society. Yet, China is the ultimate puzzle for the narrator, which she tries to solve, hoping that that will lead her to some resolution. During childhood, she exists in the realm of post-memory, on the margins of the world her parents have painfully reconstructed in exile. She cannot completely believe the stories her parents tell of China and she cannot dismiss them altogether, since she has no way of checking their veracity. She can only construct her own versions of the stories about a country she has never visited, but in which she grew up. "In the process of articulating her conflicted narratives of self, [the narrator] depicts her ongoing struggles with this polysemic originary myth of a past homeland as part of re-envisioning a more radical politics of memory, identity, culture, and community in the United States" (Ho 1999: 122). Finally, the narrator must convince the reader that her memory is the "true history," a continuous process ever renewed, a mythology, a folklore, a living, cyclic embrace of the universe that, like the individuals in the village, 'depend on one another to maintain the real" (Kemnitz 1991:

177). Throughout the novel, the narrator maintains this double vision, encountering cultural dualities and contradictions of the communities to which she belongs while she tries to discover what is true and what is false.

The narrator's subjective, modern experience, which Hutcheon calls "ex-centric" (Hutcheon 1988: 60) includes a critical perspective aimed at both the Chinese and American communities. Her position on the margins enables her to expose racism and sexism in disparaging attitudes toward women in Chinese society and the racist attitudes and norms of beauty in the US that prevent her from fitting into American society. By creating layer upon layer of intricate memories, the narrator subverts the notion that there is just one story and one history, and undermines the hegemonic discourse which insists upon the unchangeability of official records. Similar to a palimpsest through which sediments of the original meaning sometimes become visible, Kingston does not try to hide the narrative strategies with which she undermines the dominant text and genre conventions. On the contrary, she carefully establishes an event, only to later refute the narrator's description of it, which is in keeping with the postmodern tradition of subversion of the factuality of history. Hutcheon suggests that historiographic novels in their overt metafictionality "acknowledge their own constructing, ordering, and selecting processes, but these are always shown to be historically determined facts" (Hutcheon 1992: 92).

Beginning with the first chapter, the narrator presents the reader with several versions of the story her mother told her and each new one cancels the previous one, teaching the reader to become wary of the authority of the "original." Kingston applies the same strategy successively in each chapter. The story of the warrior woman told in the first person is filled with subjunctives and improbable plots, sharply juxtaposing the world of fantasy that belongs to China and the gray reality of American suburban poverty. As she, the narrator, grows up in the US, there are no wise old people, magic birds, and beads from Chinese tales to help her combat racial and sexist prejudice. The episodes about Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid stand in stark opposition to the "true versions" of the same events told by different protagonists. For example, after dedicating a whole chapter to the confrontation between Moon Orchid and her husband, she opens the next chapter with the narrator admitting that she was not present during that event and that she only heard about it from her siblings: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs" (Kingston 1977: 190). Kingston underlines the trickery of memory as she shows Brave and Moon Orchid reminiscing about the glorious days in China from which they fled nonetheless. The end of the chapter "White Tigers" shows the narrator's painful realization that she has been living in post-memory, that the China she knows through the stories of her parents, the China they grew up in, the land they considered their true home, no longer exists. It disappeared

in the chaos of World War II, the Communist takeover and the Cultural Revolution that followed. The news that the system of values which held the country together has been destroyed renders the narrator's parents powerless and for the first time she sees them crying. Despite the fact that she realizes that there is no China to return to, the narrator's mother, even in her old age, longs for this vanished country, comparing it to her life in the United States:

> Human beings don't work like this in China. Time goes slower there. Here we have to hurry, feed the hungry children before we're too old to work. [...] 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. Time was different in China. One year lasted as long as my total time here; one evening so long, you could visit your women friends, drink tea and play cards at each house, and it would still be twilight. It even got boring, nothing to do but fan ourselves. Here midnight comes and the floor's not swept, the ironing's not ready, the money's not made. I would be still young if we lived in China (Kingston 1977: 98).

4. Historiographic Metafiction: Digging up Memory and History

Kingston's and Tan's archeological project of digging up the memories of their parents and other members of the Chinese immigrant community leads them to discover both the durability and ephemerality of memory. Evoking the lost world of immigrants, they reveal deposits of language, culture, customs, legends, and myths. Their endeavor breathes life into traditions and the people who cultivated them, so that they become alive once again for the readers of their novels. Equally importantly, Kingston and Tan bring into the foreground of their novels memories of women, thus abolishing the silence that was imposed on women, and revealing their suppressed stories. By giving voice to women and immigrants, the motive of their historiographic metafiction becomes obvious: to make visible previously invisible and marginalized groups and to insert their stories into the dominant historical discourse. Their project accordingly contains elements of autobiographical fiction, since it brings out the private and suppressed lives of ex-centric people. As Hutcheon notes: "To elevate 'private experience to public consciousness' in postmodern historiographic metafiction is not really to expand the subjective, it is to render inextricable the public and historical and the private and biographical" (Hutcheon 1992: 94).

The strategic positioning of the chapters in both novels enables the authors to examine the theme of the reliability of history. The narration oscillates between different versions of the same event, reality and fantasy,

history and myth. Kingston and Tan undermine the authority of institutionalized history by contrasting it with various stories of immigrants as counter-memory which negates its content (Cheung 1993: 104). Both authors use autobiographic fiction to underline the link between memory and fiction.

Oscillations between reality and fantasy, memory, and history in Kingston's and Tan's novels reflect the feeling that their characters are constantly translating themselves from English into Chinese, from oral into written discourse, and vice versa. This process of translation reveals two ways of thinking and being. This is most clearly reflected in misunderstandings between mothers and daughters in Kingston's and Tan's novels. In their battles of words, mothers and daughters, who are products of two different cultures, speak two different languages and create two different narratives. However, for Kingston's narrator, the problem of the veracity of memory undermines her attempts to come to a definite answer to her questions about her childhood. When, for example, she tries once and for all to establish whether her mother cut her frenum in order to hurt her and turn her into a silent Chinese girl or to liberate her and make her move easily in any language, she is incapable of ascertaining any definite version of the event. She cannot remember what happened because she was too small and once again she depends on the memory of her mother who does not want to give her any details.

> She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of nail scissors. I don't remember her doing it, only her telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry – and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird's, cut. […] Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified – the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue (Kingston 1977: 146).

This deliberate act of non-memory locates the whole event in the realm of fantasy. While she can still check some details with her peers from the Chinese American community, the narrator is at a loss when it comes to her mother's memories of China. For her, the central problem is not whether the events described really happened, but whether she understands the stories properly, since they are told in Chinese. Dissatisfied, she starts to question the reality of her parents' stories. In the final confrontation with Brave Orchid, the narrator accuses her parents of telling her lies in order to confuse her. The hesitant concession of her mother who admits that Chinese "like to say the opposite" (Kingston 1977: 237) forces the narrator to question her own interpretations of her parents' memories and whether what she is writing as her own memories of her childhood and her family life is "truth" or a "lie." The consequence of the confrontation with

her mother is the narrator's growing sense that the truth is relative and this elusiveness becomes the impulse behind her text.

5. Memory and Post-Memory in *The Joy Luck Club*

In Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, the impulse for narration is similarly framed by autobiographical circumstances. Tan was inspired by her mother's memories of China and she promised her that she would not forget the stories she had heard (Tan 2003: 109). As with Kingston's novel, *The Joy Luck Club* also features layers of the memories of first- and second-generation immigrants. The novel opens with the death of Suyan Woo, which serves as a trigger for narration. "To preserve the memories of an individual might not be of a great significance in a non- migrant context, but for migrants, each death reminds them that there is a danger of memory loss which is equated to the loss of some part of the identity that was brought to this new world" (Lotfi 2014: 145). Suyan's female friends, who founded The Joy Luck Club with her, are afraid that when they die, their stories and memories will die with them, since their children do not remember anything they have told them.

> [T]hey see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. [...] They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation (Tan 1989: 40–41).

The novel centers on storytelling, and consists of 16 stories divided into four cycles of narration: two belonging to the Chinese mothers and two to their American daughters. Each cycle is preceded by a prologue featuring a generic mother and daughter, which shapes the emotional curve of the stories within it. The first prologue sets the framework of the whole novel by portraying an immigrant mother who wants the best for her daughter and raises her to be an American, but when the daughter grows up, the divide between them is so vast that the mother no longer knows how to bridge it and to tell her stories to her daughter.

> Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English (Tan 1989: 3):

Both the mothers and daughters in the novel see storytelling as a way to gain a better insight into their lives, to face the past and problems in their relationships. Thus storytelling, as a form of remembering, serves to fill the void and create balance. Each mother and each daughter is searching for her identity, trying to understand the Chinese and American parts of it. According to William Boelhower, memory plays a crucial role in the process of understanding of ethnicity (Boelhower 1987: 87). Through memory, people become connected to the world of their ancestors and perceive themselves as members of an ethnic community and are capable of creating and understanding ethnic discourse. When the parents die, cultural heritage is transferred to their children, but they must be capable of remembering in order to be able to put together the pieces of their heritage. The theme of quest for identity is a leitmotif of each narration in *The Joy Luck Club*. The daughters need to understand the immigrant past of their parents in order to be able to understand themselves. Therefore, the novel largely consists of two processes: narration and listening. The stories of the first-generation immigrants' past serve as a foundation for the second generation's cultural identity in the present.

The first cycle of stories comprises the mothers' stories about their childhood in China and the daughters' stories about their childhood in the US. It is obvious that both the mothers and daughters live with the burden of the past. As Mistri aptly states, it is not so much that they live in the past, as that the past lives in them (Mistri 1998: 255). Each story in the first cycle depicts a crisis that determined the character of the narrator. Suyan Woo's story about the origins of the Joy Luck Club serves as a background for other stories, since it is marked by the loss of family, home, and language. However, despite the painful legacy of their mothers, the daughters have never taken the stories about China seriously in their reluctance to identify with them. June Woo comments that she grew up listening to some version of a Chinese fairy tale of how her mother escaped Kweilin while Japanese troops advanced during World War II. With the fall of Kweilin, the whole of the southwest Chinese front collapsed. Too exhausted and ill to take care of her two infant daughters, Suyan leaves them by the road. She is transported with other refugees first to Chungking and then to the US and never manages to find her children again. Lindo's story tells how her family pushed her into an arranged marriage at the age of 12 after it lost everything in a flood. An-mei recounts losing her mother who became a prostitute and had to abandon her family. Ying-Ying describes losing herself and her child in a loveless, arranged marriage in China. Yet, as Ben Xu observes, the members of the club are not guided by mere survival stories. They transmit to their daughters the memories of their victimhood, but from these memories their narration always shifts to the stories about how they surmounted the circumstances that limited them. Thus the mothers transform the very process of remembering into a battle with the past from which they emerge victorious (Xu 1994: 7). They want to pass on to their

daughters this perception of memory as a source of strength, but in the first part of the novel their daughters are incapable of coming to terms with the memories of their childhood and their mothers' past.

In contrast to their mothers' stories, the daughters recount growing up in Chinese families in America and grappling with the challenges of assimilation into the dominant culture and society. In these stories, the mother figures are perceived as larger than life. They demand that their daughters be perfect, obedient Chinese girls, but at the same time successful in American society, which turns out to be an impossible task. Once they start school, the daughters become more drawn toward English language and American customs in their desire to blend in. They stop being interested in hearing their mothers' stories about China and their Chinese stagnates. One of the daughters, Rose Hsu, remarks: "I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people's thoughts – all in English – so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw" (Tan 1989: 214).

The daughters are paralyzed by their painful memories of misunderstandings with their mothers. Especially Lena St. Clair's story gives an account of growing up with a mother who lives in post-memory. Ying-Ying St. Clair is obsessed with her life in China and everything she lost by moving to the US. Lena feels burdened by her mother's memories of her ruined marriage which caused her to lose her baby, high class status, and wealth. As she grows older, she stops listening to her mother's complaints and makes no effort to translate Ying-Ying's Chinese for her American father who speaks only English.

The families live surrounded by silence and unspoken hurts. It is obvious that the memories of Suyan, An-mei, and Ying-Ying negatively affect their daughters. Instead of explaining their background to them and instilling in them a sense of ethnic pride, Suyan's, An-mei's, and Ying-Ying's stories invoke fear in their daughters, which makes it more difficult for them to embrace their double identity as Chinese Americans. June comments that whenever her mother assured her that her Chinese origin would forever be a part of her, she would panic, seeing herself "transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, all those things my mother did to embarrass me" (Tan 1989: 307).

The stories of June, Lena, and Rose are marked by the same imbalance that is apparent in their mother's stories. They are not satisfied with their life, their careers, houses, and on top of that, Lena and Rose are facing divorces. Lindo and Waverly Jong's stories stand in marked opposition to this triad of mothers and daughters. Lindo's memories of her childhood in China start similarly to those of the other members of the Joy Luck Club, but in telling how she managed to extricate herself from an arranged mar-

riage and emigrate to the US, she imparts an important lesson to her daughter that she should not accept unfavorable circumstances but instead strive to overcome them. Her mother's strategies that she absorbs as a child enable Waverly to become a chess champion and later a successful businesswoman. Her and Lindo's stories are marked by similar misunderstandings between mother and daughter as are present with the others in the novel, but Lindo and Waverly come across as more balanced than the other characters.

As Tan's narrators provide layers upon layers of memories and narrations of past events that constitute the history of their families and communities, the vision of history as monolithic and unchangeable is replaced by the plurality and temporality of experience. "Existence of multiple layers of truth, by different characters shapes the framework of the novel's discussion on the notion of discursive quality of memory. Characters of Tan's story are aware of the fact that recalling is subject to amendment, open to interpretation and mixed with fantasy" (Lotfi 2004: 146). In one poignant moment in the novel, as her mother is telling her the ever-changing story of how she fled the approaching Japanese army, June Woo becomes aware of multiple versions of her mother's and ultimately her family's history.

> It was the story she would always tell me when she was bored, when there was nothing to do [...] She would snip the bottom of a sweater and pull out a kinky thread of yarn, anchoring it to a piece of cardboard. And as she began to roll with one sweeping rhythm, she would start her story. Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine. [...] I never thought my mother's Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The endings always changed. [...] The story always grew and grew (Tan 1989: 243).

Until one day June hears a completely different ending to the story. Her mother confesses that while escaping she left her two twin daughters by the road because she was too tired to carry them. After that, there are no more stories. June's approach reflects her demeaning attitude towards both her mother and the culture she comes from. Just like the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, June prefers the Western way of thinking with a clear-cut distinction between reality and fantasy. But when, after her mother's death, she receives a letter from these long lost half-sisters, June embarks on a journey in search of her identity, embodied in the legacy of her mother that she has to transmit to her half-sisters. Trying to unravel the mysteries of her mother's past, she encounters the Kweilin story several more times. Every time the narrator changes, the story changes as well. An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-Ying, who knew of Suyuan's guilt and desire to find her daughters, tell June of her mother's tenacity, motherly love, and hope that she would one day be reunited with her children. In China, she hears from her father

and his relatives' painful stories about the war and deprivation after it. She understands that her family's Chinese past is part of her and that her mother's legacy continues to live in her just as the members of the Joy Luck Club had told her. The novel's ending confirms the importance of memory and storytelling, as well as the connection between the first and second generations (Izgarjan 2008: 346). We can see this trend "where the mother's confessional nature of uncovering secrets [...] is related to home and the desire to unite truly with it. in order to gain a true Chinese identity" (Lotfi 2014: 145) in Tan's subsequent novels as well.

6. Conclusion: The Enduring Power of Memory and History

Following on from David Carroll's insights, Hutcheon notes that "the new and critical 'return to history' is one which confronts 'the conflictual interpenetration of various series, contexts, and grounds constituting any ground or process of grounding. [...] it does so by first installing and then critically confronting both that grounding process and those grounds themselves. This is the paradox of the postmodern" (Hutcheon 1992: 92). As we have seen, Kingston and Tan also first establish an event only to later question its veracity by providing different versions or challenging the narrators. Kingston compares such storytelling with an intricate knot whose maker goes blind while making it. This method of complex design of the past points to the basic feature of historiography: the imaginative reconstruction of the process of examination and analysis of the records and survivals of the past. In its focus is "the problem of how we can and do come to have knowledge of the past" (Hutcheon 1992: 92). It is important to note, however, that neither Kingston nor Tan question the existence of the past or whether something happened in the past. Their critical approach to history rather underlines the fact that our perception and understanding of events is unavoidably determined by the present moment and our subjectivity. That is why Kingston's knot making and Tan's unraveling of yarn are such apt metaphors for their own methods of reconstituting and reevaluating history and memory. They are inextricably linked to storytelling and fictionality. Kingston and Tan emphasize in their novels that history is a human construct determined by race, ethnicity, and gender as they reveal to the readers blank spaces in institutionalized history.

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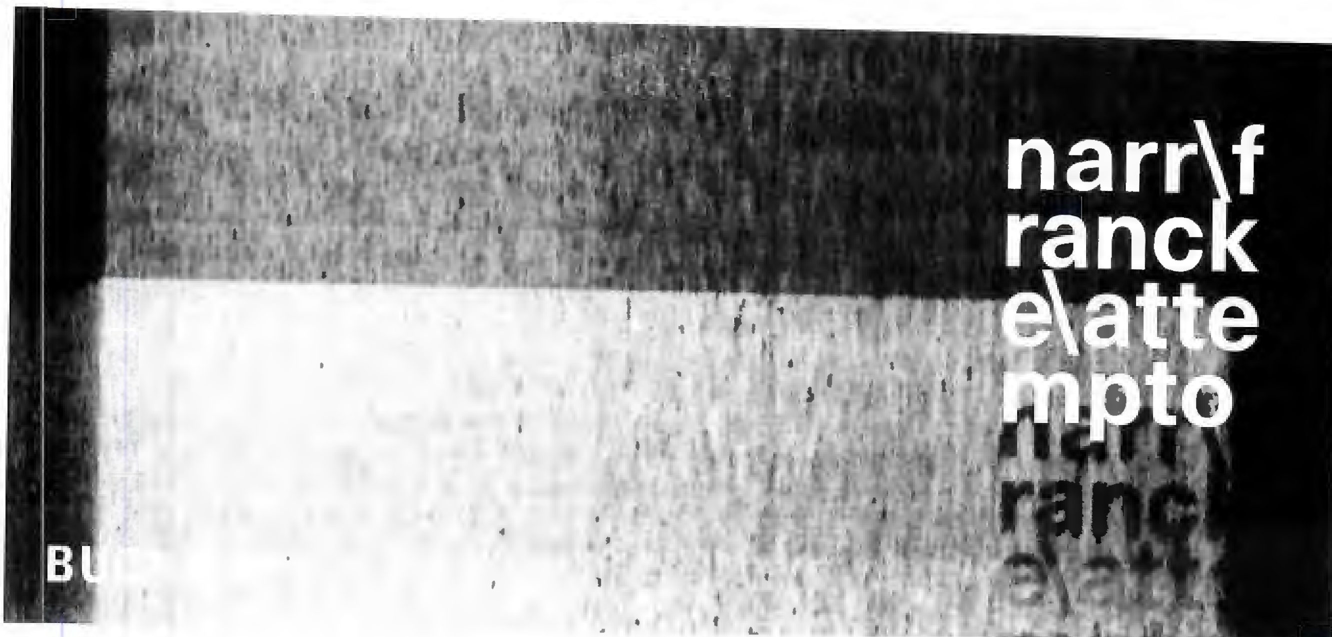

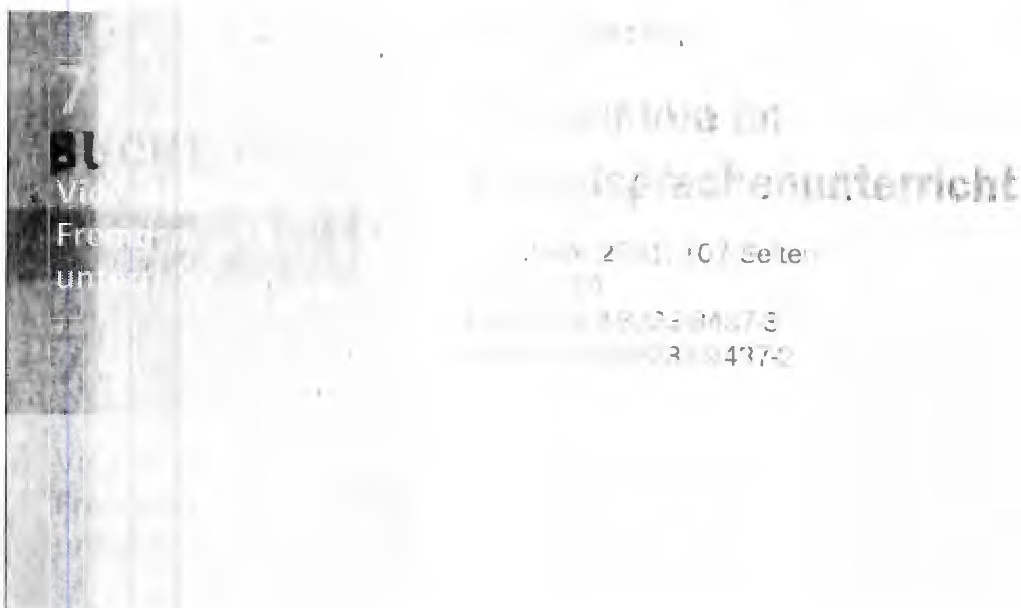

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