Chapter 4

Transgression of Generic Boundaries:

Resistance towards Narrative/ Generic Conventions

My whole struggle is to change the disciplines, to change the genres, to change how people look at a poem, at theory or at children’s books (Gloria Anzaldúa).

The dilemma and confusion Kingston and Cisneros experience in defining the margins of the Self seems to affect their craftsmanship, the method of telling a story too. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, China Men, The House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo* defy rigid classifications concerning autobiography, novel, poetry, memoir, short story and history. Just as constructs of cultural and gender identities are dismantled and allowed to form new hybridized selves in a Third Space, these writers experiment with techniques, and several genres are mixed together to form something new. An overlapping of boundaries of different genres occurs in their works challenging age-old concepts of writing novels. They break up time just as they break up the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy, separating their books from more traditional, chronological autobiographies at the same time mixing enough ingredients, realistic details to make the status of these novels questionable. In a way the uniqueness of genre seems to illuminate Kingston’s and Cisneros’ concept of identity, Selfhood. To articulate they must break through the numerous barriers that condemn them to voicelessness, and in the process they transgress various generic boundaries too. Their treatment of gender, ethnicity and cultural conflict throw light on the need for creating
new methods of narration. These much popular novels exemplify Edward Said’s claim that “exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms” (Critical Inquiry 15: 225). By introducing new narrative forms they seem to raise questions about the role genre plays in defining cultural, gender roles and particular ethnic identities. By locating gender and culture in their manipulations of genre and mythology and looking at the gendered categorization of generic forms, readers can also locate the place of Chinese-American and Chicano identities in their conception of gender, culture and genre. The resistance shown towards acceptable generic conventions reveals the ambivalent state of their identity.

Much of the power of these four works lies in Kingston’s and Cisneros’ attempt to undermine a ‘master narrative’ of history and identity in America. Although these writers skilfully parody and disrupt accepted notions of history, autobiography and novel and destabilize those categories with their stand point on gender and cultural identities, they are unable to escape completely the boundaries of genre. What evolves is a hybridized form of narration occurring in a ‘third space’ not fully disregarding traditional methods of narration, accepting what is necessary and adding useful changes to explain the predicament of their ethnic minority status. Readers find a connection between genre and the ideology that gave rise to it. Kingston’s and Cisneros’ repetition of traditional genres, albeit in altered forms in a way contribute to reinforcing those forms. Actually they seem to answer Gayatri Spivak’s question, “Can the subaltern speak?” These two ethnic writers never fully escape genre because they must write
within and against the constraints of generic forms in order to comment upon them and manipulate them. If they abandon the forms completely, the cultural resonances so crucial to their disruption of hegemonic conceptions of Chinese American and Chicano identities, gender and history, would be lost, but their adherence to those forms raises questions about their ability to fully subvert or escape the ideologies that inform those genres.

What actually takes place in their case is a cultural translation, an attempt to make meaning of cultural differences. The concept of cultural translation is useful in formulating a cultural identity for those who struggle between two cultures and/or languages. They succeed in translating the past to construct their future and in breaking the chains of the (ghosts) past that bind them. The trope of translation is crucial to this project of generic redefinition. Translation allows a form of mobility that is bound by debt to the “original,” and that at the same time is enriched by coming into contact with another idiom or culture; therefore it can open the way for new configurations and constructions of American identity that make room for creative fusion that does not destroy difference. The function of translation is important in narratives of growing up between or “on the border of” cultures. The prefix trans- suggests the act of traversing, and translation is sometimes taken to mean a simple movement of meaning from the “original” language or the source text to the translated language.

It is Homi Bhabha’s notion that translation is a generative and creative activity. For Bhabha, Third Space is the site where cultural translation takes place and ensures
that the “meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (37). The intervention of the Third space makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process and can avoid the trap of binary thinking and enable other positions to emerge. The Third space, or “in-betweenness,” opens up new possibilities to avoid oppositional thinking and offers a different strategy to defend against the appropriation and interpellation of dominant cultural hegemony. This point is particularly useful in approaching these two ethnic women writers. The dehyphenated identities, (Chinese American and Mexican American) take the place of neither/nor as well as of both/and at once. It is more like a third space in which they are caught in-between. As Bhabha suggests, “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” (7). In weaving the old cultural references from Chinese, Chicano and American backgrounds into their work, Cisneros and Kingston also bring out that “newness”

Ethnic American texts often revise forms such as the künstleroman an important subtype of the Bildungsroman. It “represents the growth of a novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist’s artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft” (Abrams 133). Novels of development by ethnic American writers often interrogate and expand the trajectory and destination of the künstleroman through their dialogic subtleties and instances of productive ambivalence. The künstleroman is a genre that posits a linear and progressive movement (from innocence to maturity or from a lower to a higher stage). Its projected resolution is
social integration that takes place through substitution of adult “normality” for youthful “individuality”. Kingston and Cisneros’ stories of growing up to be writers are not told in a chronological manner, but the readers’ understanding of the narrators gradually becomes clearer from stories about others and from myths and from their reactions to these stories. They ladle into their stories, besides these, historical facts, songs etc. so that there appears to be a collage of genres in their works. The comment made by David Leiwei Li on Kingston’s writing is significant in an analysis of both writers’ craft, “The purpose is to show that [their] writing has many layers, as human beings have layers” (American Literary History 2: 483). Hence the writers’ craft and identity/selfhood are intertwined and interconnected.

Critics have applauded Cisneros’ introduction of an innovative form of prose in her *küstleroman* novel, *The House on Mango Street* which transcends the boundaries of several genres while maintaining the lyricism of poetry and the impact of the short story. Diane Klien has commented on the unique formal qualities of *The House on Mango Street* noting that its structure neither linear nor traditional and that it is a hybrid of fictive and poetic form. She compares it to an impressionistic painting in which the subject is not clear to the viewer until he/she moves back a bit and views the whole.

Each poetic piece in this collection of forty-four vignettes is remarkable for her vivid, sensual, concise descriptions of life in the Latin-American urban community and for her colourful characterizations and lively dialogue integrating English with Spanish words, phrases, and idioms. What Cisneros achieves in *The House on Mango*
Street with its fluid boundaries is a new model of identity. She demonstrates through this poetic piece the interconnectedness of the narrative form of a piece of literature and the creation of a coherent self. The forty-four poetic fragments which constitute the story bring into focus the hybridized identity of Esperanza, the narrator protagonist. As Maria Elena de Valdes points out in “The Critical Reception of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*” the implied reading plan of this novel is a strategy of weaving rather than of telling a tale.

*The House on Mango Street* is a post-modern model which weaves a tapestry of apparently isolated vignettes into a poetic unity... The open-ended entries on different characters come together only slowly as the tapestry takes shape, for each of the closed figures are also threads of the larger background figure which is the narrator herself...The implied reading plan weaves a portrait of Esperanza from the forty-four figures (*CLC* 118:177).

Out of the forty-four vignettes in the novel, fifteen are descriptions of the people. A large number of the events Esperanza recounts reveal important and interesting information about others in the neighbourhood. In these profiles, Esperanza starts with a brief description of how she comes to know them, where they live, what they look like, some general background and then, very subtly enters their minds. Esperanza is seen fluctuating from a limited point of view where she can only report what she can see and hear to an omniscient point of view where the neighbours’ own
thoughts and feelings are expressed. This is done only with female characters; Esperanza appears less able to connect with the males in the neighbourhood.

Even though one year in the life of Esperanza is drawn before us, the development is not that of the traditional plot. The forty-four pieces create self-contained images of alienation, poverty, wife-beating and rejection. Readers get a complete/closed picture of these images; still they are conscious of the open nature of the narrator’s introspection. Each of the closed images adds another figure to the tapestry that contains the picture of Esperanza. These images present the lives and impoverished existence of the narrator’s mother, her sister Nenny, Cathy, Blanca, Alicia, Lucy, Rachael, Marin, Edna, Rosa Vargas, Elenita, Ruthie, Lois, Mamacita, Rafaela, Sally and Minerva. These individual images are not blurred or hazy. They are complete in themselves except for the open-ended reflections of the narrator which deal with the narrator’s search for an answer to the enigma: how can she be free of Mango Street and the house that is not hers and yet belong as she must to that house and that street. The series of these stories end with the ultimate reflection, “but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (HMS 101). Esperanza’s search for her ‘true’ self ends there. She realises that hers is not an authentic or true identity but an identity which is hybridized, which carries the burden of several influences and cultures. The narrative plan is made out in such a way that Esperanza achieves a mature realization of her own ‘self’ in the end. Cisneros has paid more attention to the evolution of the protagonist’s character than to following
traditional methods of storytelling. Rather she invents a distinctive style of narration to bring out the character of Esperanza to light.

This small classic of Cisneros’ has great popular appeal because of its seeming simplicity, non-intellectual themes and its rebellious, colloquial tone. Many critics have taken note of the poetic quality of *The House on Mango Street*. Speaking on her craft Cisneros admitted that she had tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language she could find and that language in *The House on Mango Street* was based on everyday speech. It is, as she says, “very much an antiacademic voice- a child’s voice, a girl’s voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican” (Introduction xv). This is the reason behind the colloquial tone and anti-literary inflection of her novel.

The simplistic conversational tone and the intimacy with which the protagonist speaks have led many to view the content of the text in mimetic fashion, as a direct reflection of reality, and to view Esperanza as Cisneros. Readers often come to the conclusion that this small book is one of the autobiographies of Cisneros. Responding to the issue of whether or not her book is about her, she acknowledges the autobiographically- inclined beginnings of *The House on Mango Street*: “When I began it [in 1977, as graduate student in Iowa City], I thought I was writing a memoir. By the time I finished it, [in 1982], my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical” (Introduction xi-xii).
Yet in consideration of the question concerning whether or not she is Esperanza, Cisneros vaguely responds, “yes. And no. And then again, perhaps may be” (Introduction xix). The point of view of the author and the standpoint of the narrator seem to conflate so well in the novel that it defies classifications. The two perspectives appear to merge so well that critics like Rodriguez equate Esperanza’s choice to leave Mango Street to Cisneros’ betrayal of her own community to become more Anglicized. But Cisneros fully accepting the hold of culture on her, makes her protagonist admit that it is imperative that she would return to Mango Street or rather she would carry the Mango Street in her heart. In a way Cisneros as a Chicana writer stands for other writers of her community who experience simultaneous exclusion and inclusion in both mainstream and ethnic cultures, a kind of “bordered” condition or “interstitial” situation as pointed out by Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa that Chicanas, women of colour, and other groups embody and occupy. Cisneros acknowledges her feeling of being neither-here-nor-there while studying in the University of Iowa. She reveals that while she was physically present in the class, emotionally she felt totally out of it. “Coming from a working class background, an ethnic community, an urban community, a family that have books in the house, I just didn’t have the same frames of reference as my classmates. It wasn’t until [I] realized and accepted that fact [I] came upon the subjects [I] wanted to write about” (‘Writer’s Notebook’ 71).

She chose for writing this novel, a street child’s voice deliberately, to be an antithesis to the very polished kind of writing of her middle-class classmates. By rebelling against their writing style she stumbled upon the voice that dominates in The
*House on Mango Street.* These confessions reveal that her first novel clearly borders on autobiography but has enough fictional elements to make it a novel. In “*En Otras Voces: Multiple Voices in Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street*”, Beth L. Brunk asserts that Cisneros’ construction of a multiple and shifting narrative point-of-view in *The House on Mango Street* works to reveal the social realities of the urban, poor, Chicano community in which the protagonist grows up. The twelve year old protagonist narrator Esperanza is fluent in a variety of voices. Cisneros swings between an adolescent and a mature voice, between limited points of view and omniscience, and between a speaking voice and a writing voice. The fluidity of the narrative and the relationships created between the opposing voices makes this novel occupy in an ideal Third Space.

Esperanza’s angle of seeing is dynamic. Sometimes it is clearly a twelve year old’s innocent, juvenile perspective whereas on other occasions it is an adolescent’s thoughts embedded in a complex adult vocabulary. A more mature Esperanza speaks at times with the experience of Mango Street within but behind her. In the story “And Some More” Esperanza, her sister Nenny, and her two friends Lucy and Rachel are seen discussing thirty different names, Eskimos have for snow and the various names for clouds. Soon, they resort to name calling. This name calling is indicative of their age. It is something that children do when they are bored with a game. They believe that name calling can hurt another as much as anything else they could say or do. However, at the end, one says that yelling “your ugly mama’s toes” is “stupid”. Esperanza writes “Who’s stupid? Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza and Nenny” (*HMS* 38). This episode reveals
her in-between age, very suitable for depicting the in-between cultural situation the author finds herself in America. She is not beyond the name calling game, but in the end shows that she is breaking away from this age, possibly maturing more quickly than the others.

A special effect is created between the child’s innocent report of a situation and the readers’ knowing interpretation. In this case, the child does not fully understand what is happening but the reader does. The most obvious example is found in “The Earl of Tennessee”. The child knows that Earl is married. A number of people have seen her but no one can quite agree on what this woman looks like. Some say that she is a blonde; others are of the view that she is a tall red-head. Esperanza says that they “can never agree on what she looks like” but they all know that Earl and this woman “walk fast into the apartment, lock the door behind them and never stay long” (HMS 71). She is puzzled over this mystery. Her childhood innocence prevents her from understanding that Earl’s “wives” are more than likely prostitutes, something that an adult reader can easily infer.

Sometimes she sounds like an adult looking back on past experiences. This mature voice appears primarily through prose of which only an experienced author is capable. One such occasion is found in “Darius and the Clouds” where Esperanza reflects on her surroundings: “You can never have too much sky. You can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky, and sky can keep you safe when you are sad. Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies are few and so are flowers and most
things that are beautiful. Still, we take what we can get and make the most of it” (HMS 33). Another passage in which this mature voice appears through content includes “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”, Esperanza says, “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (HMS 110). This voice is much more mature than the twelve year old Esperanza who calls her friends “chicken lips”. This is an author who realizes the value of writing down life, who realizes what her writing will do for others.

Cisneros says in her essay “Do You Know Me?” that she “wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation” (78). The techniques used to achieve this poetic effect, such as creative similes and metaphors, repetition, intertextuality identified by motifs, and conversations between the stories reveal a more mature voice, the polished style of an experienced author. It is still the viewpoint of twelve–year-old Esperanza but with a poetic sensibility. Esperanza describes Earl’s dogs as not walking “like ordinary dogs” but they leap and somersault like an apostrophe and a comma” (HMS 71). In “The Three Sisters” she describes Lucy and Rachel’s dead baby brother as a “little thumb of a human in a box like candy” (HMS 104). Her father tells her that her grandmother is dead and then “crumbles like a coat and cries” (HMS 56). These imaginative similes are a sign of an experienced author.

In addition to the use of this poetic device, Cisneros employs repetition at the end of stories for a poetic effect. “Those Who Don’t” ends with “yeah. That’s how it
goes and goes" (HMS 28). “Four Skinny Trees” ends with a series of repetitions for emphasis and a feeling of contemplation: Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not reach. Four whose only reach is to be and be” (HMS 75). The “Four Skinny Trees” is an important piece in the narrative development of identity. In her personification of the trees, Esperanza expresses a similarity between them and her: “They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine” (HMS 74). The image’s point of reference situates text and narrator in a constrictive urban setting. “Four who grew despite concrete” then proceeds to develop the identity of the enunciating voice mired in a place where she and the trees do not belong: “Four who do not belong here but are here”. At the level of plot, the trees serve as an emblem of survival in a hostile environment: “Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street” (HMS 74-75).

The image of the trees acquires its fullest significance at the symbolic level, at which stage the text manifests its intertextuality in the incorporation of the universal significance of trees: “Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes
and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their hairy toes and bite the sky with 
violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep” (HMS 74-75). The image 
of the four skinny trees serves to express Esperanza’s character development and the 
will to assert her identity. Against the many odds of her harsh environment and 
dominating culture, she must struggle, like the trees, to grow and to survive. Like the 
trees, she must be tenacious in her aspiration to greatness.

With these techniques Cisneros has created a work which defies the boundaries 
of poetry, prose and fiction. Accepting what is desirable in all these genres she has 
moulded a new form of writing to suit her purpose in The House on Mango Street. She 
denies acknowledged notions of writing a novel by incorporating elements of poetry, 
short story, autobiography and novel to create a hybridized kind of novel which defies 
categorization. Still she has retained enough of the form and the elements of novel in 
The House on Mango Street to be grouped under the genre ‘novel’. She indulges in what 
Bhabha calls ‘mimicry’ by imitating and retaining what is absolutely needed to make 
this work be grouped under the title ‘novel’. By “straddling two cultures” and by 
successfully resisting the stranglehold of both ethnic culture and American culture on 
her, she has evolved into a new being in a creative Third Space and produced works 
occupying a similar space, neither a novel nor an autobiography or short story 
collection.

Abounding in social and emotional impressions of Celaya Reyes, Cisneros’ 
Caramelo is also surfeited with family legends, gossip, tirades, songs, footnotes, and
even a couple of film reviews. The metaphor allegedly holding the story together is the woven rebozo of the title--a caramel coloured cloth that has accompanied the Reyes women through three generations. Here she draws a large canvas— unlike that of *The House on Mango Street*—of the family history of Reyes family thickly packed with interesting political, historical and topical details. But overall effect is that of her first novel. In *Caramelo* too she concentrates on proving how the structure and form of the novel could stand for the self/identity of the protagonist. We get a definite picture of Celaya’s true story from the stories of others she narrates. Her ability to tell her story depends upon her ultimate understanding that it exists in a dialogical relationship to others’ stories. Here also she tries to expand the margins of the genre ‘novel’ by inserting elements of autobiography and history and by having discussions on the technique of novel writing almost similar to what Salman Rushdie does in *Midnight’s Children* raising this novel to the level of metafiction.

The novel does not follow chronological order, nor does it use a consistent verb tense. Both these aspects reinforce Lala’s narrative ability to cross spatial and temporal boundaries in the act of excavation she conducts, telling the story of her family members, especially that of her grandmother. Lala tells Parts One and Two in the past tense; in Part One, she recounts the Reyes family’s extended return to Mexico when Lala was a child, whereas in Part Two, she reveals her grandmother’s and father’s personal histories. In Part Three, the section of the novel Lala narrates in the present tense, Lala addresses the Awful Grandmother’s move to the US, the grandmother’s subsequent death, and her own family’s move from Chicago to San Antonio and back.
The epigraph that begins the novel—“Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira[Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie]”—and the final line of the chronology that ends the book—“All over the world, millions leave their homes and cross borders illegally”(C 439)—reinforce the connection Cisneros makes between storytelling and migration. We discover toward the end of Sandra Cisneros’s novel Caramelo that Celaya “Lala” Reyes, the novel’s female adolescent narrator tells the story of her grandmother and the Reyes clan in order to help her grandmother’s ghost “cross over.” As Lala stands in a hospital room over her father’s unconscious body after he has suffered a massive heart attack, she and her grandmother’s ghost argue about his “destiny.” They eventually strike a deal: if Lala will tell her grandmother’s story, one that is inextricably tied to the family’s entire history, the Awful Grandmother—whose real name is Soledad—will allow her son Inocencio to live. Soledad explains to Lala that her inability to speak clearly about her own experiences, whether alive or dead, literally traps her “in the middle of nowhere”:

“[I]t’s so lonely being like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between floors. You have no idea. What a barbarity! I’m in the middle of nowhere. I can’t cross over to the other side till I’m forgiven. And who will forgive me with all the knots I’ve made out of my tangled life? Help me, Celaya, you’ll help me cross over, won’t you?

—Like a coyote who smuggles you over the border?

. . . You’ll tell my story, won’t you, Celaya? (C408)
In this crucial conversation, Lala notes that her ability to become her grandmother’s narrative surrogate depends on her understanding of the storyteller as a type of narrative coyote. A coyote is a controversial figure who violates boundaries by smuggling individuals across the US-Mexico border. Cisneros’s figurative use of the term “coyote” illuminates and links two of the primary concerns of the novel: migration and storytelling and the resulting sense of selfhood or identity. Time and time again, Cisneros shows that the Reyes family’s decades of migration bequeathed to Lala, the family’s narrator, a “tangled mess” (C 188) of family history even as she also draws attention to Lala’s ability to talk: “How can I explain? Talk is all I’ve got going for me” (C 353). Cisneros’s use of “coyote” also underscores the illicit, transgressive, and quite unorthodox properties of Lala’s narrative voice. Because Lala’s Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano/a family members cross many geographical—and in the case of her grandmother, supernatural—boundaries, their stories of migration demand a narrative voice that likewise has the ability to transgress boundaries. Thus, like a coyote, Lala smuggles her grandmother’s story and her own family history from the past to the present, from Mexico to the US, from the dead to the living, and from one person to another, ladling into this mixture bits and pieces of interesting anecdotes, political insights and cultural accounts. Cisneros deploys the narrative coyote explicitly in this moment and implicitly throughout the novel to represent the relationship between migration stories and narrative structure.
Cisneros’s use of Lala’s “talk,” then, translates Said’s vision into a new narrative practice. To create Lala’s migratory narrative voice, Cisneros expands the definition of what it means to be a migrant. *Caramelo* clearly embodies Salman Rushdie’s impulse to think of migration metaphorically as a means of “bearing across” (278). In a 1984 essay on Günter Grass, Rushdie defines a “full migrant” as one who “suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption” from place, language, and social environment (277-78). According to Rushdie, Grass is a representative figure because like most of us, he is only “a half-migrant . . . a maybe-only-one-third-migrant”; his estrangement is not from place or language but “from his past” (277, 279).

Although Rushdie acknowledges the more orthodox definition of migration as a movement across geographical borders, he is more interested in it as a metaphor. Here, Rushdie draws an analogy between movement across space and language; language use is a “sort of migration” because we all use language to translate our experiences into intelligibility so that others can understand them. Cisneros’s narrator is, like Rushdie’s Grass, a migrant—“a borne-across human” and a “metaphorical being”—even if she is never an immigrant to one country from another like her father and grandmother.

The plot structure allows Cisneros’s migratory narrator to violate temporal boundaries as a means to uncover and reveal the complexity of the Awful Grandmother’s character. Accordingly, Lala first introduces Soledad to the readers in Part One as the Awful Grandmother who is “like the witch in that story of Hansel and Gretel. She likes to eat boys and girls. She’ll swallow us whole, if you let her” (C 23).
Verbally abusive to all but her eldest son, Inocencio, the Awful Grandmother of Parts One and Three is anything but a sympathetic character. In Part Two—the section of the novel Lala tells after the Awful Grandmother’s death, which is narrated in Part Three—Lala narrates the transformation of Soledad into the Awful Grandmother: “[T]his story is from the time of before. Before my Awful Grandmother became awful, before she became my father’s mother. Once she had been a young woman who men looked at and women listened to” (C 91). Structurally, to get to the present tense of the text in Part Three, the reader must read Soledad’s past first.

In Part Two, Cisneros uses Lala’s poignant and humorous co-narration of Soledad’s painful life to document an individual history of loss, betrayal, and strength as emblematic of migratory Latina experience. This section of the novel is the most meta-narrative; Cisneros constantly reminds us that Lala is the predominant, but not sole, narrator of Soledad’s story and consistently highlights the importance of language to granddaughter and grandmother alike. When Lala asks her grandmother’s ghost, “Who’s telling this story, you or me?” Soledad responds, “You” (C 97). This being a bivocal narrative, readers know that Lala would not be able to retell Soledad’s story without the knowledge Soledad imparts, and Lala wisely asserts that “it’s the stories you never talk about that you have the most to say” (C 109). Readers learn from Lala that multiple migrations affect Soledad’s life, and a double migration in particular defines her youth: her mother’s death, which is a crossing over of sorts, and her subsequent move to Mexico City. After her mother’s death, Soledad does not learn the complex craft of shawl making that made the women in her family revered and unique: “It is only
right, then, that she should have been a knitter of fringe as well, but when Soledad was still too little to braid her own hair, her mother died and left her without the language of knots and rosettes” (C 94). Her mother’s death and her father’s abandonment leave Soledad without a “language” for self-expression. Lala explains: “Oh, if only her mother were alive. She could have told her how to speak with her rebozo [shawl]” (C 105). To underscore Soledad’s inability to “speak” about the things her mother would have taught her—the family and ethnic history the rebozo embodies; the artistic and intellectual creativity the craft of shawl making requires—Cisneros figures Soledad as mute time and time again in Lala’s retelling: “Poor Soledad. She understood Eleuterio because she was as mute as he was, perhaps more so because she had no piano” (C151). Soledad’s muteness about her own painful past traps her “in the middle of nowhere” (C408) and necessitates the formation of Lala’s migratory narrative voice.

As with her grandmother before her, Lala’s migrations cause her to feel alienated and unable to define her identity in a consistently viable way. Not surprisingly, Cisneros represents Lala’s identity crisis and sense of confusion spatially. After the Chicana “perras,” dogs, as Lala calls them, attack her one day after school, she runs:

first back toward the school, then along the access road north, thinking I can cross over on the next overpass. But before I even get there, I can see some girls waiting there for me too. . . . There’s no choice but to scramble over the chain-link fence and make a run for it through the interstate. . . . A pickup honks and changes lanes to avoid me, I don’t care, I don’t care. . . . I don’t care,
I never belonged here. I don’t know where I belong anymore. (C 356)

This moment figures her crisis and search for Self as a series of “crossings.” Her movement (in the form of running) paradoxically saves her even as another movement (crossing over the interstate) puts her at risk. The paradox here is a symbol for the formation of her identity: the migrations with her family put her sense of self at risk even as those very migrations define who she is as a Mexican American female and as a storyteller. Lala finally finds temporary respite in the guardrail in the “middle” of the interstate, where for the first time since her grandmother’s death she hears Soledad call her full name: “Celaya” (C 357). Soledad’s willingness to speak in order to save her granddaughter inaugurates the existence of the narrative coyote.

Her voice carries Lala over to the other side of the highway. Still, Lala continues to repeat her grandmother’s story precisely because at first she refuses to listen to her grandmother’s voice. Whereas Cisneros represents Soledad as partially mute, she represents Lala as partially deaf. As a result, when her family decides to move back to Chicago, Lala elopes to Mexico City with her first love, Ernie Calderón, “a good Catholic Mexican Texan boy” (C 365) who, like Lala, is simultaneously masculine and feminine and who has a “heart like a soft-boiled egg” (C 369).

Like Soledad, Lala is abandoned by her love, albeit in a more literal fashion. Whereas Narciso gives his heart to another even as he remains married to Soledad, Ernie makes love to Lala the night before their “wedding” and then leaves her alone in Mexico
City because of a spiritual crisis. After Ernie abandons her, Lala puts on the grandmother’s *caramelo rebozo* (caramel-coloured shawl) for comfort: “I get dressed, tie the Grandmother’s *caramelo rebozo* on my head like a gypsy, and start sucking the fringe. It has a familiar sweet taste to it, like carrots, like *camote*, that calms me” (C388). She acknowledges: “[E]ach and every person [is] connected to me and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*” (C 389). The *caramelo rebozo*—the shawl that Lala inherited from Soledad, who inherited it from her own mother, who made it—makes explicit the connection between Lala’s and Soledad’s stories, which is a connection even Lala begins to recognize and appreciate at this moment.

Images of physical crossings of borders abound in *Caramelo* and depict the Reyes family as a clan of “borne-across humans.” In the first short chapter of the book, Lala paints the picture of her extended family “racing” from Chicago “to the Little Grandfather’s and Awful Grandmother’s house in Mexico City” in separate cars that together evoke the colours of the Mexican flag: “Uncle Fat-Face’s brand-new used white Cadillac, Uncle Baby’s green Impala, Father’s red Chevrolet station wagon bought that summer on credit” (C 5). The fact that these cars—Cadillac, Impala, and Chevrolet—are “typical” American models reinforces the connection between the US and Mexico that Cisneros consistently underscores. The Reyes brothers’ and their families’ annual returns to Mexico represent only a small portion of the multiple migrations the members of the family make. Eleuterio Reyes, Lala’s great grandfather, first emigrated from Spain to Mexico, upon fleeing after witnessing a murder in a bar where he worked as a piano player. Narciso Reyes, Lala’s grandfather, was shipped off
to the US by his mother, Regina, during the Mexican Revolution, and upon his return to Mexico, he migrated across Oaxaca as a bookkeeper for the Mexican National Roads Commission. Inocencio Reyes, Lala’s father, “chose to take the road and join his brother Fat-Face [in the US] hitching trains and picking up women. At least this is how Inocencio imagined it” (C207). Soledad—Lala’s Awful Grandmother, Narciso’s long-suffering wife, and Inocencio’s adoring mother—moved to Mexico City from San Luis Potosí after her mother’s death and her father’s subsequent abandonment of her; after Narciso’s death, she joins her sons in the US. Lala’s immediate family moves from Chicago to San Antonio and back to Chicago.

Cisneros presents the creation of Lala’s narrative ability as consumptive; Lala literally and figuratively consumes the biographies of other women as an imaginative “cheap ticket out of here” (68). The physical reality of her lived environment accordingly produces her ability to appreciate other women’s “biographies . . . the thicker the better” (68). In a circular manner, the lack of private space in which she can write her own history produces her desire to consume other females’ histories. In keeping with this moment in the text, we see that Lala’s storytelling ability emerges out of the tension between consumption and production: she consumes her grandmother’s story as a means to tell her own. Lala’s ability to “hear everyone else’s” thoughts in conjunction with her own is a crucial characteristic of her role as a narrative coyote. Her ability to tell her story accordingly depends upon her ultimate understanding that it exists in a dialogical relationship to others’ stories. Cisneros’s revision of Woolf’s
architectural metaphor articulates a mode of female storytelling that is more communal and public than private.

Lala’s co-narration of her grandmother’s history in Part Two, “When I Was Dirt,” most obviously manifests the communal nature of her migratory narrative voice—her ability to consume and re-narrate others’ stories and the resulting unique form that her narration assumes. In the epigraph to Part Two, Cisneros introduces the idea that the stories Lala will tell are not solely her own: “‘When I was dirt’ . . . is how we begin a story that was before our time. Before we were born” (C 89). Cisneros’s pronominal decisions are very telling here, for Lala’s use of the pronoun “we” before she repeats a similar line with the singular pronoun “my”—“before my time”—reiterates her narrative’s preoccupation with the concept of communally told stories. The Chicano word and concept rascuache, which is a word Lala uses to define her family’s house in San Antonio, helps illuminate the communal aspect of her narration. In his assessment of Oscar Zeta Acosta, Ilan Stavans cites the Chicano critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto’s definition of rascuache:

To be rascuache is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness, to seek to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down. It is a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries. . . . rascuachismo is an underdog perspective—a view from los de abajo, an attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability, yet mindful of stance and style” (qtd. in Stavans 6).
Cisneros’s narrator fully elaborates those aspects of rascuache that Ybarra-Frausto asserts make it subversive within the US cultural context; consequently, the term is useful for our investigation of the illicit and transgressive properties of the narrative coyote. Lala’s narrative overturns the typical form of the bildungsroman by rejecting a single narrative language as well as a single narrative voice; in turn, both of these aspects contribute to the communal character of Lala’s narration.

Lourdes Torres evaluates Cisneros’s and other Latino/a writers’ use of code-switching, which is “the alternation of two languages in a verbal or written text” (76) such as the use of Spanish words and “creative English renditions of Spanish words and phrases” called “calques” (78). Torres would call Cisneros’s rejection of a single narrative language a subversive “artistic choice with political ramifications” (76). Torres writes: “In the United States, the presence of large and small Latino/a communities across the country, increasing numbers of Latino/a immigrants, and the US/Mexican border means that code-switching in literature is not only metaphorical, but represents a reality where segments of the population are living between cultures and languages; literary language actualizes the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities” (76).

Cisneros’s code-switching crafts Lala’s migratory narrative voice as one that necessarily crosses linguistic boundaries in order to represent the reality of her bilingual and multicultural family. Cisneros fashions Soledad’s and Lala’s different uses of
Spanish not only to construct their co-narration in Part Two, but also to express their unique subject positions and voices. Cisneros frequently does not translate many of the Spanish words and phrases Soledad uses to describe herself or her culture when she shares her story with Lala, such as “so this part of the story if it were a fotonovela or telenovela could be called Solamente Soledad or Sola en el mundo” (C 95), “chaparrita,” “Like nosotros, los pobres” (C 98), “atole con pan” (C 111), and “qué microwave oven, ni qué nada” (C121). Soledad’s Spanish, which is her beloved first language, represents her identity as a Mexican born in Mexico, and although multiple ethnicities and two nationalities inform her identity—she is Mexic- Amerindian and permanently moves to the US before her death—Spanish is the language she most fervently associates her ethnic identity with. In contrast, Cisneros translates almost all of Lala’s Spanish. This represents Lala’s Chicana identity, a hybridized identity that is the direct creation of US/Mexican relations and that, as the concept rascuache indicates, self consciously inhabits the two cultures that inform it.

Although the two women’s Spanish is distinct, the names Lala frequently utilizes to label herself and her grandmother reveal the shared rascuache nature of their bilingual narrative as well as their similarities as storytellers: “Metiche, Mirona, Mitotera, Hocicona—en Otras Palabras, Cuentista—Busybody, Ogler, Liar/Gossip/Troublemaker, Big-Mouth—in Other Words, Storyteller” (C 351). As is typical in Lala’s narration, Cisneros first italicizes the Spanish words and then translates them directly to explicitly communicate what she wants a monolingual reader to understand. Still, Torres asserts that in Cisneros’s other work, her “use of both
languages doubly rewards the bilingual, bicultural reader” (84) because, as Cisneros posits, Chicanos are the readers who can make out everything in her texts. Indeed, one has to be a bilingual reader to catch the “subtleties” of Cisneros’s translation. Although words such as “troublemaker” and “big-mouth” that describe the storytellers are gender neutral in English, in Spanish, all adjectives are gender specific. Thus, Lala and Soledad are not simply “troublemakers,” but rather female troublemakers. Soledad’s and Lala’s Spanish enables their rascuache narrative to speak to different communities in different ways, and as a result, their co-narration irreverently redefines the form of a typically monolingual kunstleroman.

Cisneros’s employment of two voices in Part Two likewise represents a subversive “artistic choice with political ramifications” (Torres 76). Jacqueline Stefanko asserts in an article on Latina narratives that “[d]ue to the shifting, unstable terrain they inhabit, Latin American (migrant) women writers question and reject the assumption that a unitary, synthesizing narrator is capable of telling the stories they have to disclose, instead of opting for a narrative stance that includes multiple voicings” (51). Lala’s narration fulfils Stefanko’s claims about Latina narratives because it is bivocal; in turn, the “multiple voices” in Part Two also make the narrative communal. The bivocal narrative assumes two forms, and the first and more prominent occurs when Lala is the main speaker and Soledad provides uncanny interruptions:

[Lala] Is there anyone alive who remembers the Awful Grandmother when she was a child? Is there anyone left in the world who once heard her call out
“Mamá?” It was such a long, long time ago.

[Grandmother] ¡Qué exagerada eres! It wasn’t that long ago!

[Lala] I have to exaggerate. It’s just for the sake of the story. I need details.

You never tell me anything.

[Grandmother] And if I told you everything, what would there be for you to do, eh? I tell you just enough . . .

[Lala] But not too much. Well, let me go on with the story, then.

[Grandmother] And who’s stopping you? (C 91-92)

Although Lala is the primary speaker, Soledad’s voice is nevertheless important, for Lala would not have a story to tell without the details her grandmother provides. As elsewhere in the novel, Lala’s role here as a narrative coyote is to translate her grandmother’s experiences both literally (responding to the Spanish adjective “exagerada” with the English verb “exaggerate”) and figuratively (changing the form of her Grandmother’s story from a private, solitary narration to one that is public and communal). In Chapter 25, “God Squeezes,” Soledad tells an abridged story of her life to her granddaughter in order to justify her actions—“Because I wasn’t bad, understand?” (C119)—and Lala interrupts. In both cases, the listener provides narrative direction, clarification, and commentary on the primary speaker’s narration, reinforcing the importance of both figures in the communal retelling. In Part Two, Lala’s and Soledad’s *rascuache* “multiple voicings” constantly interrogate and complete one another’s narrative perspectives; thus, they both function as narrative coyotes. As they exchange details about Soledad’s past, they “smuggle” them over in two languages from
the dead to the living, from the past to the present, and from the individual to the
communal. In doing so, they violate supernatural and narrative borders.

Their communal narration in Part Two can also be understood in terms of what
Said labels “disruptive articulations.” For Said, the “historical problem of modernism”
was the moment when “the subaltern and the constitutively different suddenly achieved
disruptive articulation exactly where in European culture silence and compliance could
previously be depended on to quiet them down” (223). Although Said focuses on the
relationship between the colonizer and the subaltern, and the concomitant voice and
silence, this hierarchy attempts to achieve, his discussion about “disruptive
articulations” can be applied to other “ruling paradigms” and the “established
boundaries” these paradigms create (qtd. in Stavans 6).

Cisneros employs Lala’s migratory narrative voice to subvert and disrupt a
number of hierarchies such as those based on language, gender, race, ethnicity, class,
and nationality as a means to assert the right of the voiceless to speak. For example,
both Soledad and Lala repeatedly emphasize Soledad’s isolation and demonstrate that
her isolation silences her. Soledad tells Lala, “You have no idea what it was like to be so
alone, to be left like the saying ‘without a mother; without a father, without even a dog
to bark at me’” (C 102), and Lala informs the reader that “there was no one, you see, to
guide her” (C 106). A number of circumstances contribute to Soledad’s isolation: for
most of her life, Soledad is an abandoned racial and ethnic other, and until her marriage
to Narciso, she is pathetically poor. Because of Soledad’s subject position, her story is
one that should have remained silent but nevertheless finds articulation when both women act as narrative coyotes. When both Soledad and Lala finally “talk” about Soledad’s history and Lala’s heritage, their female voices represent “disruptive articulations” about how migration narratives should be told.

Cisneros uses Lala’s and Soledad’s “disruptive articulations” to unravel the grandmother’s story; consequently, the narrative is *rascuache* not only in the form it assumes, but also in the content it excavates and documents. Lala’s migratory narrative voice is *rascuache* precisely because it excavates, reclaims, and preserves the concealed and forgotten memories of her grandmother, the Reyes clan in general. As a consequence of this impulse to give “the underdog perspective” (qtd. in Stavans 6), one of the primary concerns of the novel is how migration can erode personal, familial, and historical knowledge.

In the introduction to Part One, Cisneros uses Lala’s interpretation of a family photograph to symbolically inaugurate Lala’s “excavation project.” As Lala looks at a picture of her family on vacation in Acapulco, she notes that she is the only one missing from the photograph, although she was there: “[I]t’s as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach asking, . . . A souvenir? A memory” (C4)? When Lala aligns herself with the photographer, she explicitly defines herself as one who documents and preserves “recuerdos” (memories). In this introductory moment, Cisneros illuminates Lala’s ability to cross temporal boundaries in order to tell her family’s buried memories; as a narrator, she figuratively travels to her family’s past in order to remember someone
else’s memories and to summon a past moment to the present. Her ability to bear her family’s experiences across time enables what Said calls the “painstaking recovery of implicit or internalized histories” that mark all “ethnographic quests”. Lala’s “ethnographic quest” to uncover and co-narrate her grandmother’s story additionally exemplifies Rushdie’s expanded understanding of migration in terms of how language translates experiences (the Reyes familial history and Soledad’s tortured past in particular) into something more concrete and intelligible (Lala’s actual narration and co-narration).

Lala’s rascuache “excavation project” and “ethnographic quest” directly dictate the thematic and narrative specifications of the text. For a number of reasons, Soledad’s life history is central to Lala’s “excavation project.” First, Lala becomes a narrative coyote to help the Awful Grandmother “cross over”; thus, co-narrating Soledad’s personal history provides the opportunity and impetus for Lala’s narration. Second, Cisneros repeatedly draws parallels between Lala and Soledad, and in Part Three, Lala unwittingly repeats many aspects of Soledad’s past in uncanny ways. Lala needs the knowledge that spatial and temporal migrations have erased to know and to tell her own story. Her ability to know the past comes not only from her own experiences, but also from the past, her grandmother shares with her. Lala-Soledad relationship has structural implications throughout the novel. Through Lala’s excavation, reclamation and preservation of Soledad’s story in conjunction with Lala’s own, Cisneros ties together the narrative coyote’s roles and the structure of the text. In particular, the narrative direction Soledad gives Lala directly dictates the novel’s plot structure. In Chapter 21,
“So Here My History Begins for Your Good Understanding and My Poor Telling,” which is the first chapter in Part Two, Lala begins to retell her grandmother’s story. As stated earlier, her grandmother repeatedly interrupts Lala with specific narrative directions.

Soledad commands her to be “careful” and to tell “[j]ust enough but not too much” (92). The title of the chapter emphasizes the relationship between the co-narrators and the importance of Soledad’s story to Lala, especially since the reader is not immediately sure if “my” refers to Lala’s story, Soledad’s story, or both. This pronominal ambiguity once again underscores the communal nature of the story and of the migratory narrative voice. To further demonstrate their narrative relationship, Cisneros deploys Lala’s self-conscious adoption of her grandmother’s narrative direction to “tell you just enough . . . but not too much” as the plot structure of the novel.

McCracken argues that the rebozo is the “central motif” of the novel as it simultaneously represents “ethnic identity,” “family history,” and migration and female artistic creation can also be added to it. As Lala begins to suck the strands of her grandmother’s shawl, another moment of consumption, she slowly begins to recognize the various strands the shawl connects. These are clues that Lala’s narrative has given us all along through its “just enough, but not too much” structure. In one of the novel’s multiple footnotes, Cisneros asserts that the rebozo represents the various Amerindian and imperial cultures that have historically comprised Mexican ethnic identity:
The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere.

It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial course of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons (C96).

Lala’s family likewise embodies the mixture of the Amerindian (her grandmother and great-grandmother) and the Spanish (her great-grandfather and his male descendents) that make up the rebozo’s heritage; in addition, her Chicana mother adds another knot to the Reyes family history and expands Lala’s mestizo heritage. The rebozo also represents both spatial and temporal migrations. In Part Two, Lala explains that the “art of las empuntadoras is so old no one remembers whether it arrived from the east, from the macramé of Arabia through Spain, or from the west from the blue-sky bay of Acapulco. . . . Perhaps, as is often the case with things Mexican, it came from neither and both” (C92-93). Here, Lala underscores multiple possible origins of the rebozo—Arabia, Spain, and Acapulco—that mimic the migration of the Spanish conquistadors out of southern Spain (the land of the Moors), across the globe, and ultimately into the “new world.” She also notes that “no one remembers” its exact origin, calling attention once again to time’s ability to erode cultural memory. The caramelo rebozo’s most important symbolic role is to represent ethnic female artistic production and innovation; consequently, it functions as an analogue to storytelling. Lala and Soledad both figure
the art of the *rebozo* makers, as a creative act that is passed down in a matrilineal fashion, from mother to daughter to granddaughter, and is reinforced by a female community of shawl makers. Soledad’s mother, Guillermina, learned the art from her own mother and practiced with the women in her community of Santa María del Río: Guillermina’s mother had taught her the art of counting and dividing the silk strands, of braiding and knotting them into fastidious rosettes, arcs, stars, diamonds, names, dates, and even dedications, and before her, her mother taught her as her own mother had learned it, so it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on.

This artistic practice includes individual artistic innovation, which Cisneros figures here as the “flourish” that each woman adds as her own act of artistic self-naming, and connects one woman to another, one culture to another, and one strand to another. In other words, like Lala’s migratory narrative voice, the art of *rebozo* making is more communal than private. Because the art of shawl making dies with Guillermina, Lala’s migratory narrative voice, her “talk,” replaces her great-grandmother’s art. This explains why Cisneros figures the art of *las empuntadoras* (shawl making) and the art of *la cuentista* (the female storyteller) in stunningly similar terms. Lala understands that “a life contains a multitude of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the who of who one is” (C 115), just as her great-grandmother understood how to link the silk strands of the *rebozo*. By retelling her grandmother’s past, Lala links her personal history to her familial history, and thus “it hits me at once, the terrible truth of it. I am
the Awful Grandmother” (C 424). Like the knots that connect the rebozo, the story comes full circle: after Inocencio travels to Mexico City to retrieve Lala, the family moves back to Chicago, and Inocencio has his fateful heart attack; only then do Lala and Soledad’s ghost finally meet and begin to “talk.” As Soledad pleads with Lala to tell her story, part of her rationale is that her story will save Lala: “I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? There’s no sin in falling in love with your heart and with your body, but wait till you’re old enough to love yourself first. How do you know what love is? You’re still just a child” (C 406).

When Soledad shares her history with Lala to redress the absence of knowledge their various migrations enact, Lala finally becomes aware of the power of the storyteller as a border crosser who excavates, reclaims, and preserves histories. Lala not only comes to believe that “You’re the author of the telenovela of your life (C345),” but also recognizes that the story of her own life is deeply indebted to those of her family:

And I realize with all the noise called “talking” in my house, that talking that is nothing but talking, that is so much a part of my house and my past and myself you can’t hear it as several conversations, but as one roar like the roar inside a shell, I realize then that this is my life, with its dragon arabesques of voices and lives intertwined, rushing like a Ganges, irrevocable and wild, carrying away everything in reach, whole villages, pigs, shoes, coffeepots . . . (C 424)
Cisneros shows here that the “talk” that “intertwines” is a multivocal expression of “several conversations” at once; the “talk” of storytelling ultimately crosses the borders between the self and the other.

Cisneros’s voluminous and at times encyclopaedic experiment with migration and narrative voice underscores the importance of aesthetics to the reclamation of suppressed and forgotten histories. If, as Said claims, “exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can . . . provide us with new narrative forms” (225), then Cisneros’s narrator illuminates exactly what that narrative form looks like. Cisneros treats migration in *Caramelo* not only as a theme, but also as a narrative opportunity and strategy. As a result, her use of migration as a constitutive narrative category in and of itself forces us to rethink other hierarchies with which we are so familiar: citizen and migrant, margin and centre, colonizer and colonized, and subject and object of narration. Cisneros deploys the illicit properties of the narrative coyote to excavate and preserve various marginalized or misrepresented histories—ranging from the history of the Reyes clan (loosely based on Cisneros’s own family), to a retelling of US-Mexico border relations, to the documentation of a constellation of American, Chicano, and Mexican cultural artefacts and icons. Yet she also uses the narrative coyote to reveal how storytelling shapes the communal and personal histories it documents. Cisneros invites her readers likewise to cross borders; any reader of *Caramelo* has to be willing to traverse linguistic, cultural, and epistemological boundaries in order to fully reckon with the complexity of her migratory narrative.
Just as her contemporary Sandra Cisneros indulges in a free handling and mixing of elements of different genres Maxine Hong Kingston shows herself to be adept at genre crossing between autobiography, memoir, history, and fiction in her first two novels *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* and *China Men*. These two have generated a rethinking of the traditional expectations of autobiography as a truthful representation of a writer’s life and that of novel including only fictitious at the same time seemingly realistic accounts of the life of protagonist. They have also problematized the constructed nature of identity, and brought attention to the existence of collective literary protagonists and multiple points of view, thus raising questions about the need for revision of genres that were often androcentric and Eurocentric in nature. Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* (which were criticized by Chin as cartoonish ‘Chinkie autobiographies’59) accomplished something that no Chinese American writer had before: a full-bodied mix of memoir, biography, history and oral history, poetry, storytelling and mythology that conveyed the Chinese American transnational experience and redefined Chinese individual and community identity in America, ripping them free of essentialist conceptions. Kingston remade Chinese American cultural identity, but rather than a hyphenated ‘50–50’ admixture she created a new representation of Chinese American Diaspora subjects and their experiences.

The structure of *The Woman Warrior*, as David Leiwei Li says in “The Naming of a Chinese American ‘I’: Cross-cultural Significations in *The Woman Warrior* “is a Chinese box of “talk stories”, through which Kingston conceives and perceives herself”
Chinese phrase for story telling is ‘talking-story’ and it defines the narration of both books. Kingston makes free use of the oral tradition of storytelling in this autobiography/short story collection/ memoir turned novel, jumping from the story of her aunt in “No Name Woman” (the story of a third person which was told by a second person to the narrator who then tells the story as a narrative in the third person), to the tale of the legendary Fa Mu Lan in “The White Tiger” (follows the same pattern of the first story except this time the story is told as a first person narrative), to the story of yet another strong woman, her mother in “Shaman” (the story of a second person which was told by that person to the narrator who then tells story in the third person with many first person quotations) then on to the story of Moon Orchid in “At the Western Palace” (a second person’s story as it was seen and participated in by the narrator) then ending with another tale of the ancient Chinese woman poet, Ts’ai Yen (tells the narrator’s own story in connection with it) in “Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”. These “talk stories”, as a whole constitute a unique kind of semiotic system exemplifying different levels of female existence. These levels complement and contrast with one another to form a vigorous dialogic process of moulding Maxine’s ‘self’. By becoming a teller of tales from that of a listener of her mother’s stories, Kingston has completed her rites of passage: the girl has become a woman and a writer. She appears to be imitating the traditional kunstlerroman, albeit in a different form. It does not tell the life of the narrator chronologically. The linear structure is abandoned to adopt a more flexible style of narration. Even though the tale is told not chronologically, our understanding of the narrator gradually becomes clearer as we learn about her reactions to the stories she heard in her youth.
She has modified both the form of Chinese Oral stories and that of *künstleroman* to suit her American identity. In an essay on *The Woman Warrior* and the female *bildungsroman*, Patricia Chu suggests that in some versions of the aunt’s story Kingston draws on material she is familiar with as an American writer. This includes novelistic portrayals of fallen women in the Anglo-American literary tradition, which, according to Chu, allow Kingston to give voice to the aunt’s motives; she thus corrects the patriarchal strain of the story and at the same time revises it “for maximum literary effect” (103). Kingston acknowledges having used *The Scarlet Letter* as a source for “No Name Woman,” and Chu’s discussion of *The Woman Warrior* in the context of the *bildungsroman* tradition stresses the writer’s “integrity as a creative artist whose individual vision is informed by awareness of her political position as an ‘ethnic’ American writer, but who consciously departs from her diasporan culture’s folklore and fact for valid artistic reasons” (96). Kingston is indebted to both literary traditions, Chinese and American and has freely made use of both to create a fascinating and complex narrative of multiple voicing.

Kingston deals with the necessity of maintaining and creating multiple ideological positions, of always letting the numerous voices echo in her own articulations. The narrating voice as it emerges in *The Woman Warrior* is thus always full of echoes of other voices, and never autonomous. Kingston does not merely wish to write an authoritative “marginal” text. She wishes to celebrate marginality as a position of writing and not to postulate a new source of authority or a new hierarchy.
Estelle Jelinek has suggested that personal narratives of men and women are fundamentally different. The emphasis by women is on “the personal, especially on other people, rather than . . . their professional success, of their connectedness to current political or intellectual history” (56). Men, on the other hand, “tend to idealize their lives or to cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import: (56). The refusal of women to cast their lives into heroic moulds or to universalise their experiences is in fact a radical form of resistance to patriarchal values. Virginia Woolf consciously tried to avoid the traditional stable and authoritative “I”. In A Room of One’s Own which Kingston echoes, Virginia Woolf said: “‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being . . . call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please” (6). Denying universality, absolute values, and an autonomous self are crucial to writings of all marginal groups.

The attempt “to tell ancient stories [in] a new American way” (Pfaff 26) links Kingston’s project with translation. Several critics have drawn attention to this trope in ethnic writing and in The Woman Warrior in particular, focusing on linguistic puns, instances of successful and failed translation, and accusations of betrayal; these critics apply the insights of translation theory, from Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” to recent postmodern interventions by Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Kingston has changed the famous Chinese myth of Fa Mu Lan to suit her purpose. When accused of tampering with the original story of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston defended herself saying that this was her version of the story, American version of the myth. Although Kingston has moulded the myth to make it American,
the version of the Fa Mu Lan story in *The Woman Warrior* is faithful to some of the basic plot elements of the story, whilst changing others. Traditional versions tend to emphasize the character's battles and hardships as a woman warrior rather than her transformation into a warrior-figure. Kingston’s story, unlike traditional versions, opens with the childhood heroine’s encounter with an old couple who train her in martial arts, skills essential for her transformation into a woman warrior. Part of this training is the girl’s endurance test in the land of the white tigers, which gives this section of the text its name. She must survive without food, shelter or warmth in an inhospitable climate, alongside the white tigers as a rite of passage in her transformation into the figure of the woman warrior. She then leaves her mentors and teachers in the mountains and returns to her village, ready to avenge the wrongs done to her family and fellow villagers. Kingston has also added the next section of the tale, when Fa Mu Lan's parents carve a list of grievances onto her back, which it is her mission to avenge. Thus equipped, Fa Mu Lan gathers an army of village men and, disguised as a man herself, leads her army to victory after victory, pausing only long enough to give birth to her child. Kingston's version ends in line with traditional versions, with the woman warrior returning to live a life of filial piety with her parents-in-law.

Many of the elements of the Fa Mu Lan story added by Kingston correspond to fragments of other and equally well-known parables. Thus, the back-carving incident corresponds to the popular story of Ngak Fei, a male heroic figure who has characters carved on his back by his mother, also demanding his service in honour of his kin
people. Similarly, many elements of Kingston's Fa Mu Lan story reflect classical Chinese narratives of warrior revenge and peasant revolution. These connections have led many commentators to lament Kingston's inability to render Chinese myths and parables faithfully in her work. Responding to charges that she has not represented her Chinese American community with fidelity, Kingston asks, “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision?” (“Cultural” 63). Some critics complain that Kingston has blended Fa Mu Lan’s legend with the story of Yue Fei, a male general of the Sung dynasty, from which she borrows the word-carving episode. Critics’ responses to Kingston’s modification of the original legend of Fa Mu Lan have become common knowledge; even critics such as Wong, Chen, and Liu, who praise Kingston for her feminist revisions, argue, looking at specific passages of the first section of the story in particular, that it creates an “‘Oriental effect,’” to use Wong’s term. Several ingredients of the heroic story have lost their significance in America which is why the second section opens with the assertion “My American life has been such a disappointment” (WW47). The warrior’s wise old mentors become “medium[s] with red hair”; “fighting and killing,” which for the warrior have a higher purpose, are not “glorious but slum grubby”; and “martial arts [in the narrator’s world] are for unsure little boys kicking away under fluorescent lights” (WW 52-53). Similarly, Maxine’s enemies in America are rewritten from tyrannical emperors into racist “business-suited” executives (WW 50). In translation terms, the narrator cannot translate the Fa Mu Lan myth to “the letter”—that is, she cannot choose a literal translation that re-enacts the part of the warrior because killing does not serve her in America. In the end of the chapter, she once more settles for a “free” translation that renders “the sense” rather than “the letter” of the story
transforming the warrior into “a word warrior.” Although she shares “the words at our back” with Fa Mu Lan, it becomes clear that for the narrator, it is “the reporting [that] is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (WW 53).

Kingston’s use of China narrative transcends its original contexts. Her translocation of Chinese mythology signifies cultural replacement and re-positioning that help her form a distinctive identity of her own. She creates her own mythology within the myth of Fa Mu Lan. That paradoxical borrowing emerges as a border issue of bridging instead of separating. She has to separate herself from her ancestral village and its traditions and enter the complex multicultural reality of her American experiences. Paradoxically, her fantasy of China has saved her from a totally depressing fate in America. The Chinese mythology functions as a semiotic empowerment in the process of identity formation. Through the interpenetration of fantasy and reality in a multi-layered narrative, she has moved beyond her misogynistic heritage. In her autobiographical novel, Kingston has been able to use the narrative process itself to reject the cultural negations she describes and to claim her femaleness as a source of strength both rooted in her cultural heritage and affirmed beyond that heritage. In doing so, she enriches her multicultural literary heritage and makes it truly her own.

Considering, for a moment, the distinction between a translation that respects “the letter” and one that renders “the sense” or “spirit” of the original (which Derrida discusses in “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”) and placing it in an Asian American
context, Frank Chin and other cultural nationalists seem to privilege the letter as the only way justice can be done to tradition; for such critics, tradition has been emasculated by Asian American feminists and mainstream American cultural productions. Chin attacks a host of Asian American women, including Kingston, who “Christianize China” through forms like the autobiography, which “demand the destruction of all Chinese history” (The Big Aiiieeee! 11). Chin denounces “Christian conversion” as “cultural extinction” with great anger in The Big Aiiieeee! (18).

His explanation shows the way the “Christian concept” in America “allows women their freedom and individuality” and thus promises to save them from the misogyny and barbarity of Chinese culture (The Big Aiiieeee! 24). Looking at Chin’s critique of Kingston’s mistranslations, and citing a passage from “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” which he interprets as “a mantra of materialism,” Nguyen casts Chin not only as “a sexist or misogynist” but also as “a historical fundamentalist” (150). In his words, “Chin’s writings reveal a determination to assert the ‘reality’ of history as a material, indisputable fact against the alleged distortions of writers like Kingston” (149). Put in terms of translation, there is no such thing as free translation or translation at all for Chin: the original is absolute and is not to be subjected to interpretation.

The Woman Warrior mediates between fact and fiction and depicts the tension produced by identification and misidentification but intensifies this tension by depicting the dual interventions of both Chinese and American cultures in the auto
biographer’s psyche. *The Woman Warrior* avoids the pretence of seeming "empirically" or "objectively" truthful and explicitly invoke other literary genres. This invocation illustrates the fictional impulses inherent in the autobiographical genre and, more importantly, reveals a more urgent task: the autobiographer's negotiation with other cultural narratives as a means of situating the self.

*The Woman Warrior* integrates a number of alternative narratives, including stories that either take place in China or stem from Chinese folkloric tradition. Yet as *The Woman Warrior* unfolds, Maxine develops an equally ambivalent relationship toward Asian narratives, demonstrating that those stories that seem the most empowering might in fact be the most disabling. For instance, her understanding of her inability to be like the legendary woman warrior must have had a debilitating effect on her.

The personal, oral histories of China experienced by the first generation are re-interpreted by their children. This is often difficult for the second generation; as the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* puts it: ‘My mother says that we like the ghosts, have no memories’ (WW151). This lack of lived Chinese memories – and the first generation’s varying ability to explain their past clearly – leads to conflict and confusion about what to believe. The second generation may well wish to escape the emotional responsibility of taking on older relatives’ suffering, but they also need to understand their family’s traumatic stories in order to make sense of their own lives in America. The self-contained power and sheer persistence of the traumatic ‘memories’
of the key characters, and of violent myths and fables, seem to imply that the melodramatic, horrific country they describe is the essential, transcendent China.

Another reason for not having memories and for the loss of an authentic American tradition is the secretiveness of the Chinese parents themselves. Some of the secrecy is because of the immigration authorities and the fear of deportation, but not all of it is for that reason as is evident from this passage:

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their off-spring 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.

How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don’t even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table, before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if asked. You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chop-sticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, step over a brother
whether it’s during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly (WW 185).

A number of specific terms from Said’s *Orientalism* provide a fruitful and illuminating context for interpreting the self-orientalising strain running through Kingston’s treatment of history and memory. Said defines the orientalist stance in this way: “Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-a-vis the Orient; . . . his location includes . . . the kinds of images . . . that circulate in his text -- . . . which add up to . . . ways of . . . containing the Orient, and . . . representing it or speaking in its behalf” (20).

In their manner of representing China and ‘speaking in its behalf,’ Kingston offers ample evidence that orientalism is alive and well in the United States. The traditional, colonial vision of the Orient, as described by Said, was “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (22). Furthermore, European scholars and diplomats had formulated a set of ‘Oriental’ characteristics: “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendour, cruelty, sensuality” (22). True to Said’s model, Kingston’s China is a site of passionate love and vicious hatred, violent death and miraculous survival, incredible virtue and shocking evil – and it undoubtedly haunts those who escape. The terms like ‘despotism’, ‘splendour’, ‘cruelty’, ‘sensuality’, ‘haunting memories’ and ‘remarkable experiences’ are useful. The polarization of categories of Chinese Americans gave rise to two distinct traditions of Chinese writing in and about America: a "high," cultural tradition and a "low," working-
class tradition. The infamous conflict between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, whom he accused of being "un-Chinese" and a "fake," can be explained in terms of Chin's privileging of the "low" tradition of Chinese American writing as the "authentic" tradition. Chin accuses Kingston of practising an unauthentic Orientalism inherited from the apologetic autobiographies written in the Chinese American "high" tradition.

The genre of autobiography is often identified as the mechanism by which Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese America determine the relation of the reader to Chinese American texts. In his 1985 essay, significantly titled "This Is Not an Autobiography," Frank Chin complains that the dominance of the autobiographical genre within the Chinese American literary tradition has generated the assumption among Occidental readers that, because all Chinese American writing is life writing, it therefore offers authentic insight into the reality of Chinese American culture and experience. He argues that autobiographers “characterize Chinese history and culture in terms of Christian stereotypes and tell of the same Cinderella story of rescue from the perverse, the unnatural, and cruel Chinese into the one true universe” (109). This Orientalist narrative is authenticated, in Chin's argument, by the status of the text as autobiography and therefore as an authentic encounter with Chinese culture. What the narrative leaves out, then, is the constitution of the Chinese American subject as American.

The dynamics of Orientalism versus Occidentalism in Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical writing are seen as following in the hybrid Chinese American tradition.
established by Wong and Lowe. Frank Chin criticizes her for offering her readers Orientalist stereotypes, but he also criticizes the readers who are satisfied to accept these stereotypes. However, it is precisely this reception of *The Woman Warrior* as somehow representative of an authentic Chinese American experience that Kingston documents and rejects in her 1982 essay, "Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers." In that essay, she recommends that the hyphen in "Chinese-American" should be removed because it gives equal weight to both sides; rather, Chinese should be used as an adjective so that a "Chinese American" would simply be a type of American citizen. Kingston makes this claim in the context of white reviews of *The Woman Warrior* that failed to notice her Americanness and instead focused upon her as an exotic Oriental. For example, she highlights the following passage from one such review in the *Saturday News Leader* of Springfield, Missouri:

Maxine Ting Ting Hong Kingston is a Chinese woman, even though the place of her birth was Stockton, California." This does not make sense. Because I was born in Stockton, California, I am an American woman. I am also a Chinese American woman, but I am not a Chinese woman, never having travelled east of Hawaii, unless she means an “ethnic Chinese woman,” in which case she should say so (qtd. in “Cultural Mis-readings” 58).

In fact *The Woman Warrior* is characterized by a complex interplay of Chinese and American discourses. Orientalism versus Occidentalism. Kingston, at various points in the text, adopts alternating perspectives on her Chinese and American selves. For
example, after Maxine is forced by her mother to demand “reparation candy” from the druggist who accidentally delivered medicine to their home and brought the bad luck of illness upon them, we are given an Occidental point of view on an Oriental interpretation of the incident. In contrast, when she complains that people always knew that they lived above the laundry, she adopts an Oriental point of view and invokes Occidental stereotypes of Chinese Americans in service industries. Readers know what Chinese food signifies in Chinese American autobiography, but Kingston gives us live monkey brains on the one hand and fast-food burgers on the other. Readers’ idea of what Chinese family relatives signify in terms of authenticating the ethnic credentials of the Chinese American autobiographer is not taken into account when Kingston gives us a suicidal "no-name" aunt, who only exists in a fictional recreation, on the one hand, and on the other, the multiple "true" stories in *China Men* of how her father may have arrived in America. Kingston thus radically disrupts the conventions of Chinese American autobiography by unsettling the idea of stable and understandable racial difference. It is not only the "Chineseness" of the genre that she subverts. Rather than culminate in the personal American success that is conventional in earlier narratives, Kingston's memoir tells us about the birth of her artistic self, so that the conclusion of the narrative turns back upon itself to become the genesis of its own beginning. Kingston's work exemplifies the subversive power of the entire genre of Chinese American autobiography. She uses the assumed competence of a white readership to subvert Orientalist images of Chinese America, even as she undermines the stable racial identity of mainstream white America. Like the Chinese American autobiographers who preceded her, Kingston does this in order to question the adequacy of specific racial
discourses to represent ethnic authenticity and thus to undermine hegemonic definitions of racial authenticity.

In feminist revisions of autobiographical works, two aspects—identity as fragmented and the genre's intertextuality—have prompted scholars to focus on narratives such as *The Woman Warrior*, Audre Lorde's *Zami*, and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which demonstrate that the process of racial and gender identification, especially for women of colour, resists the linearity, transcendence, and coherence found in traditional autobiographies. Furthermore, these texts also negotiate with the “complex imbroglio” of other narratives, alternately critiquing dominant culture's involvement in certain kinds of narratives, revising these narratives to address social issues, relying upon narratives outside the purview of dominant culture, or sometimes engaging all three actions simultaneously. It is hardly surprising, then, that *The Woman Warrior* resides as a particular favorite among feminist scholars. Yet, in spite of the feminist revitalization of the autobiography as a politically charged and multi-faceted genre, the general interpretation of Kingston's text as representing a “victory” against dominant culture ironically substitutes transcendence with subversion. For example, Smith's interpretation of *The Woman Warrior*, invokes the language of transcendence and individualism even as it critiques traditional autobiographies: “Using the autobiography to create identity, [Kingston] breaks down the hegemony of formal 'autobiography' and breaks out of the silence that has bound her culturally to discover a resonant voice of her own” (1117).
The most fundamental objection to *The Woman Warrior* concerns its generic status: it’s being labelled as autobiography rather than fiction, when so much of the book departs from the popular definition of autobiography as an unadorned factual account of a person’s own life. Jeffery Chan attacks Knopf for “distributing an obvious fiction for fact” (36). Talking about the non-fiction label on the covers of *The Woman Warrior* Kingston says, “[t]he only correspondence I had with the publisher concerning the classification of my books was that he said that Non-fiction would be the most accurate category; Non-fiction is such a catch-all that even “poetry is considered non-fiction” (“Personal” 24).

In spite of all this criticism *The Woman Warrior* can be considered fictionalized in a number of ways. On the most obvious formal level, it violates the basic concept concerning autobiography as an ordered shaping of life events rooted in the so-called external world. The term autobiography denotes a chronologically sequenced account with verifiable references to places, people, and events. *The Woman Warrior* is at best only nominally autobiographical as it is so engrossed in the inner life of characters that the outer world appears to be vague. Major part of the book is recollection and imagination with a little bit of information on a few public places and events from the outer world thrown in here and there.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston explores the relation between a mythic, three-dimensional reality represented by China of the mind, and a flat literal reality equated with America. “In its exploration of the shifting line between history and memory,
fiction and nonfiction, dream and fact, Kingston challenges western rational ways of seeing, classifying, ordering” (Sue Anne Johnson 139). The very difficulty of categorizing Kingston’s work may cause readers to question the very notion of categories, the dichotomous classifications upon which western systems of logic depends. By laying claim to her own voice, Kingston refuses the role of racial or sexual Other and invents herself as speaking subject. When she moves from silence to articulation, she is actually moving away from her roots in the Chinese to that of American. Still, what she attains towards the end of the book is the synthesis of an intensely personal language neither Chinese nor American. It is a way of seeing that draws from, and challenges, all the traditions she has inherited. Chinese myth and tradition, western literary styles and American popular culture- all are the raw material for Kingston’s alchemical imagination. She has created a multi-layered narrative pattern to disclose the different strands of traditions she has inherited and which are close to her heart. She means this when she says in an interview that literary forms “reflect patterns of the human heart” (Pfaff 18). This comment shows how she views herself as a writer. For Kingston, the artistic form is part and parcel of the human spirit. What she achieves in The Woman Warrior is a blurring of boundary between a non-fictional autobiography and a fictional retelling of her life story.

China Men, Kingston’s book on the history of Chinese Americans followed close on the heels of the publication of The Woman Warrior, using the same techniques –the blend of myth, legend, and history. The book was written, impelled by her need to understand the men with whom she is connected: her father, grandfather, great
grandfather, brother and mythic figures. Just as in the case of her previous work, there is confusion over categorization in this family history in epic form which recounts the odyssey of a family of male sojourners across America and away from womenfolk and children in China. Although both books are found in the fiction or Asian American literature section their publishers had labelled them under autobiography in the case of *The Woman Warrior* while *China Men*, a work of history, is categorized as nonfiction/literature clearly indicating the confusion over generic boundaries. Like its predecessor *China Men* also participates in the transgression of generic boundaries, for this history makes room for fables, myths, family lore and personal accounts as well as official laws and documents. Still they share different narrative structures: *The Woman Warrior* located mainly in the landscape of China follows a circular pattern in which myths and memories are interwoven with present-day lives while *China Men* in the setting of the Gold Mountain follows a more linear pattern in which myth and history are abruptly disconnected from each other. Even though Kingston rarely appears as a character in *China Men*, as this story concerns with the story of her father and forefathers, it is often termed as autobiographical. Donald Goellnicht begins his article on *China Men* saying, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s second (auto) biographical fiction, *China Men*” (36), thereby alluding to its autobiographical nature. This categorization of *China Men* as (auto) biographical than historical seems to be encouraged by the way Kingston crosses genres in this book.

In this (auto) biographical narrative, Kingston searches for and reconstructs the history of her forefathers through a complex narrative that access memory, “talk-story”,...
imagination, historical facts and documents, Chinese legends and folklore, and
newspaper articles. Her narrative arrives at knowledge of her ancestors’ identities and
histories, as well as her own, via these sources. The multiple and self-contradictory
versions of the histories she presents, exposes and challenges dominate American
history as a monologue that has silenced and erased the histories of Chinese Americans.

Kingston foregrounds the disparity between the ideal of liberty America
promises and the American government’s systematic denial of liberty to the Chinese in
America in her chapter entitled “The Laws”, which documents the material conditions
of Chinese American experience. Despite a treaty signed in 1868 that America and
China recognized the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and
allegiance, the Chinese in America were driven out, denied the opportunity to apply for
naturalization, and prohibited from entering certain states. Chinese women were denied
the right to immigrate to America and were not permitted to enter America under the
same immigration regulations as Chinese men until 1952. Moreover, the American
government enacted laws that established job ghettos for Chinese by prohibiting them
from owning land or real estate (this prohibition ensured, for a time, that the Chinese
would never become citizens because property ownership was a condition for
citizenship), and outlawing their employment by governments at all levels from
municipal to national. The taxes levied against the Chinese and only the Chinese reveal
this job ghettoization: she cites fishing and shellfish taxes, miner’s tax, and laundry
taxes. If they were of the fortunate few allowed to enter America, then, the Chinese
found that they could not live, work, or be educated where they chose; they could not
marry without risking deportation; they were forbidden to send money to their families in China.

Even though Kingston’s father, Ed and his friends are only too ready to become Americanized, America does not accept them. America excludes Ed and others outside the dominant group by refusing them access to liberty, and also by refusing them access to history. She tries to claim America for her ancestors. Kingston’s task is not an easy one, for she must construct her ancestors’ histories from sources that are either silent, or what we would call unreliable-memory, myth and folklore, the imagination, and ‘talk-story’. Moreover, she must reclaim certain male ancestors from forgetfulness in her familial history as well as in American history, foregrounding, as she does so, what little difference exists between these unreliable sources of information and other sources such as photographs, historical and legal documents, and newspaper articles.

Not only must Kingston depend on these sources of information for constructing familial histories, but she must also construe certain facts from silences maintained to avoid deportation, “There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China….’Don’t tell,’ said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know” (WW 213). Maxine is reluctant to even speak her father’s name: “Think Virtue, my father’s name. I hesitate to tell it; I don’t want him traced and deported” (CM 29). For Kingston, these silences and erasures from history exert a pressure of the unspeakable which demands to be spoken.
Kingston writes several versions of her grandfather Ah Goong’s history. She first locates him in China as an old man to whom only Maxine’s mother, Brave Orchid, will listen, “What he liked telling was his journeys to the Gold Mountain . . . he travelled there three times. Left to himself, he would have stayed in China…or stayed in the United States . . . but grandmother forced him to leave both places” (127). Later, Kingston relates three additional versions of Ah Goong’s final years:

He was inside the earth when the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire began . . . . Some say he died falling into the cracking earth . . . Some say the family went into debt to send for Ah Goong, who . . . was a homeless wanderer . . . It cost two thousand dollars to bring him back to China . . . Maybe he hadn’t died in San Francisco, it was just his papers that burned; it was just that his existence was outlawed by Chinese Exclusion Acts . . . He had also been seen carrying a child out of fire, a child of his own in spite of the laws against marrying (149).

Kingston challenges us to accept as truth all the information she collects from stories, photographs, and official documents like her mother’s graduation certificate, and equates it with the truth presented by dominant American history that has ignored their existence. Maxine’s great grandfather Bak Goong and other sojourners like him, send their monthly wages home to China, reserving only enough for gambling, enjoying a restaurant meal, and a photograph taken every year. These yearly photographs document both the passage of time and Bak Goong’s presence in Hawaii as unquestionable facts.
While Bak Goong’s photograph proves his presence in Hawaii, the absence of Ah Goong or of any other China Man from the photograph taken after the railroad was built does not prove that China men were not involved in the work, “‘Only the Americans could have done it’, they said, which is true . . . . While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs” (143). The photograph tries to prove that Americans present in the railroad photographs built America. American history may record events that the dominant group deems suitable, but such a history account cannot control alternative histories such as Kingston’s. The very fact that a parallel Chinese American history exists and contradicts dominant American history attests to the latter’s failure as an all-powerful monologue. Kingston reconstructs both a personal and communal past from photographs, other documents fusing memories of lived experiences and fantasy and imagination, guessing at what must have happened.

In China Men, Kingston depicts all facets of diasporic experience. She speaks about the construction of identity in an alien land and the discovery of a divided, polarized identity. When they ask you to find out what a China Man you are, it indicates that Chinese Americans realize their Americanness. Kingston herself openly wonders about her ancestral land, “I want to discern what it is that makes people go West and turn into Americans. I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there” (CM89). We also learn how for years Chinese struggled to migrate to America, the difficulties and disappointments they experience. We get a graphic picture
of Kingston’s father’s migration as a stowaway in a ship—“The father’s friends nailed him inside a crate with no conspicuous air holes. . . . He felt caught” (50-51).

Kingston’s single most compelling achievement in *China Men* is her appropriation of American history with the stories of her grandfathers, uncles and father as ‘the founding ancestors’ of an America that ‘they had invented and discovered’. These men not only claim a history for their own, but also reclaim a history of their own. Kingston presents the identities of her father and male relatives as fluid, provisional, with changing names, switched roles, unexpected beliefs and multiple histories. Her ideas and polyphonic writing style effectively de-centred essentialisms concerning Chineseness, Chinese Americanness and Americanness. Chinese Americans are neither Chinese nor like Euro-centric Americans—she tries to prove this with the help of these stories. Kingston was a key figure in presenting identity, as Stuart Hall says, not as an ‘established fact’ but ‘as a production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation’ (qtd. in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* 110). For instance, the transformation her father undergoes from studious grave little boy in China to a happy-go-lucky young man in America to the cursing, swearing man readers see later shows that identity is never an established fact. It is a continuous production. Kingston’s genre-bending, poly-vocal style of writing stands for the multi-layered nature of Chinese Americans’ identity.

A close examination of the function of mythology in *China Men* makes clear the breakdown of generic distinctions in this book. While Kingston’s use of mythology has
drawn criticism from other members of the Chinese American community, her manipulations of those myths enable her to question the basic assumptions of the generic forms of history and autobiography. The use of myth helps her to find a way to insert Chinese Americans’ story into American history and to search for her own Chinese American identity.

Kingston in *China Men* undermines traditional notions of history by questioning the meaning of objectivity in the narrative of history. By inserting Chinese American mythology and Chinese American people into Anglo-American history, she exposes the mythological roots of Anglo-American history questioning its claim to objectivity. She understands that myth is the narrative that gives meaning to history that allows history to function as truth rather than as just another story. She borrows myths and adapts Chinese folk legends to create American stories. Its opening chapter ‘On Discovery’ resembles a fairy tale about a man named Tang Ao who sails to the Gold Mountain, which is another name for America, where he is captured and dressed and treated like a woman. She may be ironically speaking about the loss of masculinity of Chinese men after coming to America. She claims not only the Chinese myths to narrate the story of her Chinese ancestors, but also claims the right to appropriate American literature, and other literatures that feed into it. From the beginning, her work has been characterized by its dialogical relationship with the Euro-American canon. She has said, “I feel that I’m descended from Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Virginia Woolf” (Pfaff 15). In *China Men* there are plenty of allusions to Euro-American literature. It begins, like all fairy tales, and like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “Once upon
a time”. One long section, “The Making of More Americans”, alludes to Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*. Kingston alludes to Odysseus when the narrator hears the songs of the sirens in Hawaii. Another episode retells the King Midas story.

In the story entitled “The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun” there is an auditory pun on the story of Robinson Crusoe. Lo Bun Sun is a shipwrecked pirate, like Robinson Crusoe and the story is a familiar one. But the use of a Chinese name is enough to cast it in a new light. The story dismantles the myth of the Great White Adventurer civilizing the ‘native’ as the basic assumption that the sailor is white, is to be changed. Kingston has described *China Men* as a sequel to William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*. *China Men*’s first episode narrates a mythical discovery of America. In ‘The Brother in Vietnam’ there are references to Shakespeare and Thoreau. The Brother’s farewell to his high school English students echoes Thoreau: “The last thing he tried to teach them was: ‘The military draft is not an American tradition. Protest against it is a longer tradition’” (CM 285). The same chapter also includes a bizarre reading of *Romeo and Juliet*.

In *China Men*, Kingston alludes not only to Joyce, Defoe, Thoreau, Homer, and Shakespeare; but to movies: *The Wizard of Oz, From Here to Eternity, City Lights*, and *West Side Story*. These references stand for Kingston’s claim of America as her homeland. This is one narrative technique by which Kingston claims her identity, as that of a Chinese American as she is fully conversant with both Chinese myths and Euro-American Literature. She constructs this work in such a way that the hybridity of her American Identity is strategically represented.
Kingston reinstates the Chinese Americans who were erased from Anglo-American history pointing out their contribution in building the nation America. The character Ah Goong tells himself, “he was an American for having built the railroad” (149). By participating in this part of American history, by having an erotic relationship with the whole landscape, and by becoming an American Masculine ideal, Ah Goong can claim a place as a Chinese American. In one unforgettable scene, he is so overcome by the beauty of the scenery that he ejaculates out of a hanging basket into a valley yelling, “I’m fucking the world” (132). This type of language that feminizes the land and puts it in terms of possession is characteristic of a great deal of the writing about Western expansionism and the frontier.

Kingston radically disrupts the conventions of literary forms by incorporating elements of different genres into her autobiography turned historical document turned novel, letting it stand for on the identity of an Ethnic American who is under a conglomeration of influences. Her manipulation of generic forms opens up a space for her to explore Chinese American identity and to imagine the different shapes it can take. She invented new literary structures to contain different versions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who were also story-tellers. She played with words and form, and hence the uniqueness of her stories.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros have experimented with literary forms extensively, violating boundaries of novel-writing in order to create a viable ‘third
space’ where their multicultural and multilayered identities go on evolving into something new. This experimentation is carried further in their subsequent works. Post modern writers, in general, display this aptitude for trying new forms of writing; still the contribution made by both Kingston and Cisneros is no less admirable. We can say that both Kingston and Cisneros through these representations have succeeded in bringing out the dilemma and confusion, involved in constructing an identity which is true to their ethnic background and American culture.