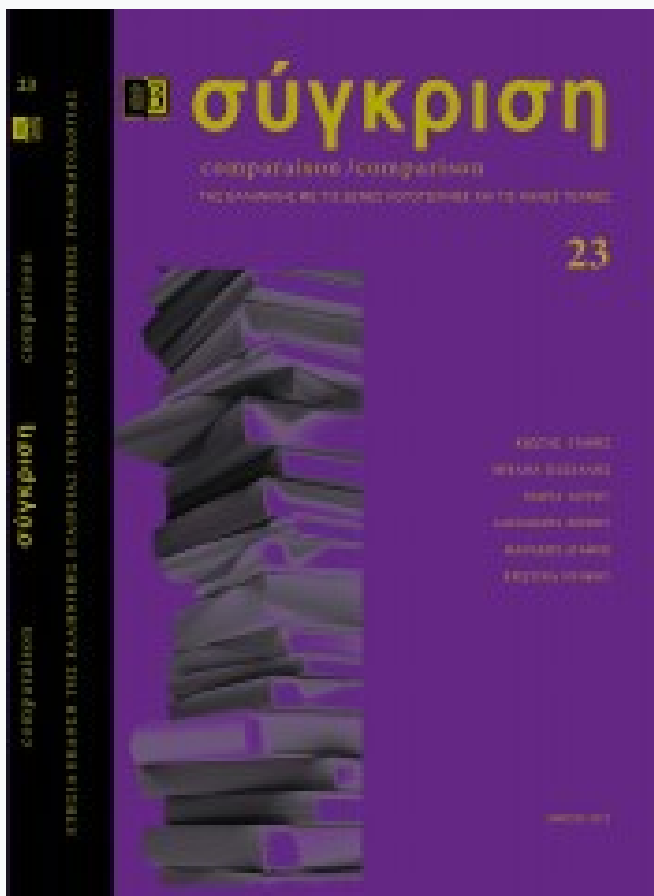


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**Από τους Μικρασιάτες στους Μικρούς Ασιάτες:  
Εγκυμονούντα Αγόρια και Κορίτσια Πολεμιστές  
ως Λυτρωτικές Συγγραφικές Μεταφορές στη  
Λιλίκα Νάκου και στη Μαξίν Χονγκ Κίνγκστον**

*Christina Dokou*

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## CHRISTINA DOKOU

### From Asia Minor to Asia for Minors: Pregnant Boys and Girl Warriors as Empowering Authorial Metaphors in Lilika Nakos and Maxine Hong Kingston

#### *Introduction*

Literature is primarily an art of metaphors. Derived from *metaphora*, Greek for “transport” or “transfer”, the word suggests the power of literary texts to playfully carry their semantic potential across time, space, convention and poetic license, and elude fixity of meaning by simply eliciting another interpretation. It also alludes to literature’s affective “transport” –what Barthes calls textual *jouissance* coming from a semantic “seam”.<sup>1</sup> Thus it is that cases where the theme of literature becomes the transformation of the human being, where, that is, the human character is granted the same dazzling potential as the endlessly trans-forming and trans-ported text, offer themselves especially well as tools in the polemic against essential(ist), “fixed” categories of humanity. It is one of these occasions that brings together two otherwise quite disparate authors: early 20th-century Greek journalist and fiction writer Lilika Nakos and contemporary Chinese-American novelist and critic Maxine Hong Kingston. Divided by time, space and nationalities, these two female authors are joined by their similar exploration of the dynamic ways in which human beings transform text-like by being transported through time, space and nationalities, challenging the binding myth of an “original” root self. Specifically, both authors will be shown to use the concept of adolescent androgyny as a metaphor for the potential for (self-)transformation that can overcome the trauma inherited from their restrictive cultural upbringing that haunts their adult creative maturation –a trauma which, in both cases, is formulated in terms of the Oriental-Occidental divide.

Lilika Nakos (1899-1988) presents a peculiar case of overachievement in Greek letters. Overcoming two World Wars, the 1922 Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Nazi Occupation famine, two dictatorships, and bitter personal tragedies, she became one of the first prominent women writers of modern Greek prose and, for many years, the only woman in Greek journalism, hailed for her activism. Her works have been regularly anthologized in Greece and abroad, while her novel *Mrs. Doremi* yielded a popular 1980s adaptation on Greek television. In the only full-length study on Nakos so far, Deborah

Tannen notes:

The critic Pericles Rodakis asserts that every woman writing in Greece today has been influenced by Nakos's style. It would be more accurate to say that every person writing in Greece today has been influenced by her style.<sup>2</sup>

Still, traditional Greek criticism not only completely ignored women as subjects and (rare) authors "because women weren't educated",<sup>3</sup> but also, when Nakos's pioneering writing came out, it was met by statements like the one by Linos Politis:

But her woman's intuition and narrative skill are not accompanied by other literary attributes, or by sufficient strength, and the style is careless to a degree. This defect becomes more evident in her later work, while her talent has lost its first powers.<sup>4</sup>

Tannen shows that the problem lay with the critics' inability to deal with Nakos's temperamental style: "Nakos has always been impulsive, careless, even eccentric [...] This cavalier attitude extends to her work as well."<sup>5</sup> The method to this eccentricity merits closer examination, to the extent that writing has been acknowledged as, among other things, a process of both self-definition and coming to terms with the world: as Emile Benveniste argues, it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity because it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as 'I,' as the subject of a sentence.<sup>6</sup> But beyond that, cultural criticism has firmly established a "growing emphasis [...] on the fact of literature as a social institution, embedded not only within its own literary traditions, but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes".<sup>7</sup> One could then explain Nakos's loose style as another way of not-positioning herself when fixity inside a culture might be detrimental; of allowing her language, as proxy of her subjectivity, to exist in a transitory mode that could work inside the socio-historical milieu she was forced to live in.

Although Maxine Hong Kingston's own life was not as disaster-fraught as Nakos's, her fictionalized 1976 biography, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, also paints a stark picture of growing up in the USA as a female child of Chinese immigrants still adhering to a culture infinitely rich in nurturing tradition, yet summarily dismissive of women as "slaves" and "maggots", and foreigners as "ghosts".<sup>8</sup> While the novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976 and became an instant classic and material for humanities courses, it has also attracted a lot of negative criticism for not representing Chinese culture in a "proper" manner,<sup>9</sup> misusing words, or twisting Chinese legends in a way offensive to Chinese national pride.<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Wong summarizes critically the attack on Kingston by male critics Jeffery Paul Chan and Benjamin R. Tong on both linguistic grounds and for "the selling out of her own people" for white fame and profit,<sup>11</sup> but Kingston herself sees primarily sexist, not ethnic bias behind such

attacks (Chin 66).<sup>12</sup> Hedging between autobiography, “autofictography”, fiction, folklore retelling, memoir and even journalism, moreover,<sup>13</sup> the narrative transports itself across the Chinese-American linguistic gap by coining words like “talking-story”.<sup>14</sup> It shows, that is, the same reluctance as Nakos’s prose in fixing itself within one standard categorical framework, as this would mean vulnerability to chauvinism. Divided in five chapters, the memoir chronicles the development of a nameless second-generation Chinese-American girl (identified with the author), through a succession of corresponding proxies from Chinese myth, or her family’s history in China, from which they were forced to flee due to the Japanese invasion and subsequent Communist revolution. These correspondences, although empowering, are often tongue-in-cheek, further contributing towards the destabilization of any fixed identity, as it also happens with the heroine that gives her name to the book: Fa Mu Lan, the legendary swordswoman and icon of filial piety that becomes Kingston’s avatar for the second chapter of the book, “White Tigers”. Critics have long debated on the relative merit of the Mulan icon within the narrative as a whole: although it is generally recognized that she is not Kingston’s ultimate proxy, one cannot ignore the fact that she is the one who names the book. Still, Fong concludes that:

[t]he warrior image is found to be unuseable” because “[r]eaders have taken her, given the title of the book, to be Kingston’s epitome. This is a mistaken conclusion, for precisely this story magnifies the young girl’s doubts rather than giving her strength”.<sup>15</sup>

Lan Dong, however, underlines the transcultural and, more significantly, metaphorical importance of “gender-crossing”:

The scenario of Mulan’s shifting positions and roles accommodates the particular agenda of female agency, which reflects some of the most important concerns of Chinese American writing and criticism since the 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

What this essay aims to do is, first, take a position in this debate by showing how the issue explored through the legend, the metaphorical, performative, parodying potential of gender (as envisioned by Judith Butler)<sup>17</sup> and variations of motherhood is pivotal in Kingston’s fiction (Chin’s interview actually places gender as the cornerstone of Kingston’s artistic exploration of Otherness: “So the Other for women is a man. At last you have found your ‘other’ characters. It’s also the maturation of the craft. To be able to work with another point of view”).<sup>18</sup> Second, by juxtaposing this metaphor to a similar device used by Nakos, it wishes to transcend this debate and suggest that perhaps the aim of both authors is ultimately *not* to find a fixed-label identity, even a hybrid one, but to engage a state of gender/genre/culture transport as a prerequisite for meaningful (creative) subjectivity.

### *From Gender-in-transit to Gender-as-transport*

Nakos's award-winning novella, titled «Μητρότης» [“Maternity”],<sup>19</sup> is in-formed by a war whose disastrous outcome shaped modern Greece. The 1922 Asia Minor “Catastrophe”, as Greeks call the outcome of the armed post-World-War-I conflict between Greeks and Turks, was marked by the Armenian genocide, and the decimation of the entire millenia-old civilization of the Asian Greeks by the Neo-Turks:

The re-rooting of nearly a million and a half people [...] forced all Greeks to reevaluate their culture, their traditions, and their significance [...] They were dazed, casting about for self-respect in a new image.<sup>20</sup>

As someone historically affected by the event, Nakos invests personally in the novella, even beyond Susan Friedman's axiom that “women's metaphors [of maternity] tend to be deeply personal statements about how they try to resolve their conflict with cultural prescription.”<sup>21</sup> By using however a boy as her alter ego, Nakos upsets an easy biographical parallelism evoking the fixity of authorial origin; and rather features for an avatar a concept similar to that represented by the Chinese swordswoman, the androgyne as an image “designed to affirm and empower the creative woman,”<sup>22</sup> while at the same time eschewing any essentialist constructions of womanhood or subjectivity that motherhood might evoke.

“Maternity” is the story of Mikali, an Armenian adolescent refugee orphan of the Catastrophe. Ostracized because of the wailing of his starving baby brother, Mikali undertakes a journey to the Greek refugee camp in search of maternal milk, but is cruelly denied because of the infant's hideous skeletal appearance. However, a humble itinerant Chinaman appears and leads Mikali to his wife, a new mother herself, who gladly offers the starveling her breast.<sup>23</sup> The story seems to sentimentally pit shrews versus submissive housewife; a closer look, though, reveals it as Nakos's ploy to plead a similar quest for survival and her woman's right to be different. The Catastrophe signaled for her generation a violent social and ideological shift from an Eastern tradition to a Western modernity, including a “queering”/questioning of gender categories that Butler calls for –as opposed to simply switching places inside the old structure– “to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize”.<sup>24</sup> It gave spasmodic rise to the modern Greek cities, classes, and ideologies, and the group of prominent authors identified as “The Generation of the Thirties”, advocates of social causes (as was Nakos herself)<sup>25</sup> who sought to mobilize public opinion towards a re-evaluation of their cultural de-faults, including women's position:

The greatest minority, however, previously almost silent in Greek letters, [...] appeared for the first time in the works of the Generation of the 1930s: woman...

Within the Generation of the 1930s, things began to change radically. Women like [...] Lilika Nakou [...] began to express themselves with audacity, power, and eloquence.... seared by the fires of Anatolia just as they entered adulthood, these writers viewed fiction not as a gentle and amusing pastime, but as a means by which they could subdue and order the chaos they saw about, and felt within, themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Mikali's quest therefore may be seen as a sociopolitical operational manual in that post-war Waste Land, where "the social groupings that develop have no continuity over time nor any stable identity over and above the individuals comprising them".<sup>27</sup> Yet Mikali is doubly alienated, both by his social status and by the queer fact that he is "with child", thus unable to work. It is a condition clearly assimilating the attributes of the Greek (refugee) woman of the 30ies, who found herself in an alien and unfriendly urban environment of a war-torn economy, yet prevented from "going into labor", because women should not work outside the house. Mikali's ostracism thus comes from the androgynous identity he is now forced to perform, the fact that he is, for all practical purposes, a "single mother" who cannot hide his predicament under the flap of his sack (a makeshift "womb"): the infant wails his existence as plainly as a swollen belly. Indeed, the terms describing his situation, "a lost soul", "always dragging about him the deafening burden that had been born for his misfortune –and its own" (245) strongly recall literary wayward daughters. Yet although Mikali must assume his mothering role psychologically and socially, he cannot physically produce milk: this mismatch of identity designates him performatively as "queer" and abject. Deconstructed, maternity, a woman-specific attribute, becomes the catalyst for a radical dismantling of the notion of fixed gendered potential and, in turn, of traditional social relations:

[...] certain existential facts of life, the most obvious of which are aging and death, are born into each individual, regardless of sex. These facts of life also include the philosophical constructs of isolation, freedom, and responsibility [...] [which] often lie dormant within an individual until they are evoked by a boundary experience, such as sickness or war or childbirth.<sup>28</sup>

The affirmation thus, through immense toil, of a boy's capacity for responsible motherhood creates a social precedent for women performing an up-to-now "masculine" social functions, that of a laborer. The metaphor of gender-bending encompasses, then, Nakos's own quest for self-affirmation, over traditional concepts of towards confronting the problem that Gilbert and Gubar detect in the writings of women facing, the Old Boys' Club known as the literary canon: "infection in the sentence",<sup>29</sup> a disease of bearing a brain-child as "monstrous" as Mikali's. Playing upon the well-known motif of T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, Friedman notes that

the association of the pen and paintbrush with the phallus in metaphors of creativity has resulted in an 'anxiety of authorship' for aspiring women writers: to wield a pen is a masculine act that puts the woman writer at war with her body and her culture.<sup>30</sup>

Thus the squalid camp is a rendition of refugee-plagued Athens, and the specific location of the novella, Marseilles, resonates "Nakos's first experience with expatriation when her mother took her to live in Marseilles at the age of six".<sup>31</sup> The prevalent mood of alienation, of being in transit with no viewable destination in sight, recalls Nakos feeling always a stranger, either as a Greek in Geneva where she grew up, or as a returned *émigré* in Greek society. She experienced directly the expatriation Kingston also faces, and which is not necessarily the product of physical emigration from East to West, but of an intellectual condition of permanent estrangement common, according to Edward Said, to all dissenting thinkers, "the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society" who become "intellectuals in exile" wherever they may be.<sup>32</sup> Deprived of a specific locus, then, the intellectual condition further destabilizes the notion of identity as anything but "transport".

Young Nakos found herself destabilized and in need for work, first as a teacher and then as journalist, after her father's sudden death in 1933, which left her in an unnatural "motherhood" –that of her own aristocratic, well-educated mother who was completely incapable of supporting herself (and finally died of starvation during the 1942-44 German Occupation).<sup>33</sup> But as then paid labor was for males only (in the Armenian camp of the story, "the men found work", leaving the women "at home"),<sup>34</sup> a woman working jeopardized her reputation as a "lady", ruining her marriageability, like Mikali's baby ruins his employment chances. Though she liked her job,

Nakos was surrounded by openly hostile male colleagues. At the newspaper, the men taunted as they passed her in the hall, 'To the kitchen! To the kitchen!' She reports that she replied in frustration, 'But the kitchen has to be stocked with food!'<sup>35</sup>

Yet, like Mikali, Nakos managed not only to survive, but to nurture her mother, writing, and activism.

Indeed, it seems as if the essence of this peculiar bond between "mother" and "ward" in both cases is their tenacity to maintain this responsibility that enhances subjectivity. There is a process in the story from Mikali's torment and overt wish for the infant to die, to the slow realization that this Derridean "response-ability" is a labor of love. Although he shivers to be "carrying such a monster", he however feels "immensely alone and lost" at the thought of his death.<sup>36</sup> The dilemma for him therefore becomes identity versus assimilation, which, in Freudian terms, corresponds to a psychological sexual amputation:

[...] bisexuality represented for Freud [...] a relation of nondualistic fluidity [...] associated with the

polymorphous sexuality he believed every 'normal' individual was compelled to give up as he or she matured, but which he suspected was not exclusively infantile or regressive, but, possibly, a route to the freedom of sexual feeling [...] civilization inevitably took from us.<sup>37</sup>

A similar love and ambivalence marks Lilika Nakos's literary career, starting with her father's violent reaction to her first story in 1928.<sup>38</sup> As Barbara Christian points out about bias, "while many of us may grasp this fact in terms of economics or social status, we often forget the toll it takes in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment".<sup>39</sup> Conditions of polemic thus transform Nakos's prose style, even as they give it a *raison d'être* and exact an unfathomable psychological cost:

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives...hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick?<sup>40</sup>

In the kindred language of Cixous's statement we can additionally recognize the shift from a physical motherhood to one designating authorship, textual pro-creation, which Nakos also follows:

As Nakos's work progresses, there is a gradual change in the depiction of mother/daughter relationships, recapitulating the development of a girl's evolving feelings toward her mother, from the uncontrolled rage of the young child to the love born of the reversal of roles which finds the mother dependent upon her adult daughter.... Moreover, the developing pattern [...] corresponds to the development of the author's relationship with her own mother.<sup>41</sup>

Since her profession put Nakos socially between sexes, like Mikali, she had to find a niche for herself that accommodated all, yet was neither singly. In the Anatolian camp, Mikali initially puts his trust both upon the "ikon of the Holy Virgin" and *her* icon, the young Greek mother who "appears" to answer his prayer<sup>42</sup> –in other words, he seeks to identify with the mothering community to compensate for his physical lack of mother's milk. It is, at the same time, an odd gesture, for Mikali-the-mother appeals to those icons also as an archetypal son, dependent on the mother for nourishment and comfort she can only give. His action single-handedly confuses all those binary categories, male-female, parent-child, nurturer-nurtured. The first concern of the young mother, however, is to determine the sex of the baby, while upon revelation of the famished infant, the chorus of old crones chase Mikali away. They call the baby "vampire", "the devil", "Antichrist" and "son of the Turk", framing the expulsion in a metaphysical or ethnic context of Otherness.<sup>43</sup> Yet the problem rather lies in the socially segregated way that they conceptualize sex. It is precisely because men are totally absent from the women's domain that they cannot accept the baby's condition as the simple fact of Mikali's natural inability to feed it himself! And it is the men's very absence that



reproves Mikali for his unusual case, for men are out to work “so that in any case they were not racked with hunger and their children had something to eat”.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the crones become the ancient Furies, twisted femininity, persecuting Mikali with cries of “Hoo! Hoo!” for his unwillingness to dispose of that part in him transcending gender divisions.<sup>45</sup>

This encounter however exposes precisely the need for such transcendence, as polarized divisions have become cumbersome and destructive in the aftermath of a grand crisis. The story does not revel in the reversal of masculine dominance that yet honors the violent hierarchy of gender, but instead points to the direction of a diffuse, boundless –since not physical– androgyny, the encompassing of the other in one’s social self. Thus Nakos is making a plea for the future Cixous imagines: “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by [...]”<sup>46</sup>

Nakos, too, turns away from her closest “Old Woman” kin, the idle ladies of the Athenian bourgeois salons she so often ridicules in her novels.<sup>47</sup> They, like the old crones, cannot stand the “horror” of Nakos’s “unfeminine” writing, symbolized here by the starving baby, whose image frequently populates Nakos’s stories, imprinted upon her during her volunteer work as a nurse for the Occupation victims of starvation (in *The Children’s Inferno* collection). It is also a paradoxical caricature of the writer: the huge head as a seat of distinct intellectual fertility, the thumb a giant phallic pen he mouths for inspiration. By parodying the performance of both “woman” and “writer”, then, Nakos thus points to the inadequacy of the existent definition of the pro-creative woman: for when the norms are disrupted, the new, amalgamated one is able to live and nurture its own. Nakos does not deny woman, but expands her, since already, “in a certain way, ‘woman is bisexual’”.<sup>48</sup> She refutes not the fact that men and women perform as bodies within limitations, but the social status quo that prohibits them from sharing –not in an exploitative “exchange of commodities”– their particular gifts. As a writer committed to social causes, Nakos tries what Marianne Hirsch proposes for writing women:

Although it might be difficult to define, we might try to envision a culturally variable form of inter-connection between one body and another, one person and another, existing as social and legal as well as psychological subjects.<sup>49</sup>

This is why, in Mikali’s utter despair and estrangement from conventional society, a solution appears *ex machine* that validates his new transcendent status. Nakos above all believes in resolutions, in activism: “Into despair is easy. The feat is to bring them out of despair. Christ was great. He extracted a solution.”<sup>50</sup> The tears Mikali sheds in the culmination of his despair<sup>51</sup> are in themselves a symbolic baptism into his new identity, a proxy of the fluids associated with femininity, the amniotic fluid and the milk that is

to flow soon, and also a repudiation of a fixed masculinity since “boys don’t cry”. The gentle Chinaman that solves Mikali’s problem, furthermore manifests this new identity Nakos advocates. As a Far-East version of the “Good Samaritan”, he is the epitome of “Otherness” in a Western context which, at that time, was anything but conversant with politically-correct multiculturalism: we are told that Mikali

had heard so many horrors about the cruelty of the Orientals! At the camp they even went so far as to say that they had the habit—like the Jews—of stealing Christian children in order to kill them and drink their blood!<sup>52</sup>

Most importantly, he also has clearly androgynous attributes: his job isn’t appreciated as other men’s is, since he sells “paper knickknacks and charms”.<sup>53</sup> Like the sliding signifier, the Chinaman has no shop, but wanders around camps and countries. He also, like Mikali and his baby-brother, is abused for his unusual appearance. Interestingly, issues of racial tolerance are connected for Nakos with motherhood, and specifically with how the author came to appreciate her formerly distant mother through the forbidden literature readings they shared: “One time my mother interrupted her reading and explained to me, ‘All the people are the same in the eyes of God. And God, whether he’s called Allah or Buddha, is One. Christ was a Jew’”—lessons that managed, according to the author, “to free my mind beyond borders and superstitions”.<sup>54</sup> Yet although the Chinaman seems to conform to the Orientalist fictions of the time that pronounced the East more “feminine” than the West,<sup>55</sup> he simultaneously subverts that stereotype by giving it a positive twist, as heralded even by his first gesture: he takes the baby from the weary boy and “tenderly press[es] it to him” in a breastfeeding pantomime.<sup>56</sup>

Once in his clean home (contrasted to the messy camp), the Chinaman’s interaction with his wife emphasizes the same effective, blissful compatibility between them. It is elsewhere observed anyway that the figure of the androgynous female in Nakos’s work is “a reflection of the fulfilling union between” men and women:<sup>57</sup> and, in nourishing the infant, the wife unconsciously repeats the man’s earlier performance of the breastfeeding gesture. The couple, in other words, is foreshadowed fully in the Chinaman, their essence together being the essence of the one: the *androgyno* (“married couple” in Greek) is combined in the *androgynne*.

Savvy readers here may perhaps point out that this “hallowed” image of the Chinese couple is as unrealistic as racist stereotypes. However, given that the latter tended to prevail then, Nakos’s gesture of a benevolent, incorporating Otherness further suggests that a subjectivity-in-transport, across racial, gender and blood-family boundaries, is superior to the closed ranks of a tight ethnic group:

the Chinese mother bequeaths to the younger generation not the national tradition, but a lesson in

humanity as naturally as she gives her milk. Thus Nakos undermines ethnocentric mentalities, racial stereotypes, and religious divisions.<sup>58</sup>

It is also worth noticing that the Chinaman himself subverts his “Otherness” by incorporating Mikali into *his* home, unlike the models of an imperialist West assimilating the East. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Chinese couples’ society is the only one that Mikali finds his queer self accepted naturally as both supplicant son and laboring mother. The boy and the couple are thus united in their joint assumption of a function that necessarily takes *togetherness* and transport-ing of features to complete: «The maternity of the title refers to the true mothering instinct of the adolescent boy and the Chinese couple, in contrast to the lack of maternity of the Greek mother».<sup>59</sup> But it is useful to point out that the maternal function fulfilled here may have an additional meaning besides nurture so that the infant may grow. The suggestion is offered by Marcia Ian in her discussion of Melanie Klein’s infantile psychosexuality theories:

Klein, perhaps more than any other theorist, demotes the phallus [...] contending instead that infants of both sexes identify most intensely with the mother’s breasts and nipples, thus privileging *them* as signifiers. Klein does not see babies or even children as particularly concerned with the genitals of either sex, but sees “the deprivation of the breast as the most fundamental cause of the turning to the father”, not the mother’s lack of a penis.<sup>60</sup>

By providing her breast for Mikali’s brother, the wife can also be said to idyllically affirm that stage of pre-Oedipal sexual ambivalence of infancy. Nakos tops the whole scene with a touch of the Divine: the pretty newborn in its golden cover, “like a little king”, points to the Nativity scene, while both the adjectives and the tone describing the Chinese home give the impression of a “Holy family”. Interestingly, the closing gesture also returns gender performativity to the metaphor of authorship, as the covering of the now-suckling brother coincides with the closing of the story. Thus Nakos also suggests that her desired creative subjectivity does not lie there, in the archetypal or physical image of the Family, but spills over to the author beyond. Finally, setting these maternal men in the general context of Nakos’s gallery of “characters who are [...] large, androgynous, competent, motherly, often moustached women”<sup>61</sup> indicates that here the author is not making a singular case for the “good Samaritan”, but adds another brushstroke to the boundless androgynous figure that seems for her best built to answer societal demands upon women “as if by way of breaking this stalemate between men and women.”<sup>62</sup>

It is precisely in the socialized dimension of the story that its closure also becomes an exhortatory opening to a reevaluation of not just old, but *any* categories of subjectivity: as Doumanis urges, “we need to move away from our own constricted reality and into other people’s worlds before we can realistically weigh up and eventually cope with our conflicts and contradictions”.<sup>63</sup> The novella offers the chance to do so by engaging our

sympathies and affirmation of Mikali's triumph, but leaving the "happily ever after" open for our performative wishes. As Butler points out,

if the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Nakos not only uses her alienation device as one of the fictional "versions of autotherapy within complex systems of psychic disintegration and reintegration"<sup>65</sup> but also opens a Butlerian space for "parody"<sup>66</sup> through metaphorical transformations in her works that become a potent tool of subversion in their seeming "adherence" to culturally familiar thematic representations. Luce Irigaray considers that the ideal subversion:

There is, in an initial phrase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it [...]

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.<sup>67</sup>

Of particular importance, finally, is the fact that Mikali is not a grown man –as he might well have been– but a 14 year-old adolescent, in that transitory state both awkward and promising, further detoured to a no-man's/nomad's land beyond geography, ethnicity, or gender. He thus becomes the ideal proxy for Nakos, both because, as Tannen notes, due to the wars, "Modern Greek prose had a late adolescence"<sup>68</sup> and because an adolescent is the hopeful germ of all conditions yet the prisoner of none –a Derridean "centre", a central signifying transitory space rife with possibilities of play:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death –to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another [...] a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn).<sup>69</sup>

Claiming androgyny in order to adapt to the exigencies of a particular culture and historical time, Nakos has constructed a story where this psychological feature further extends its flexible boundlessness by metaphors of status, age, and ethnicity in a quest that seems best incomplete, as the prerequisite for creative development rests precisely on this transitory status. Mikali's future equally remains an open issue; all the author can do is tease her emerging Greek culture to seize the hope for change brought about by the Catastrophe and, in radically and permanently upsetting categories of subjectivity, let "the milk of human kindness" flow.

### *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Warrior*

Like Nakos using the legendary dimensions of a historical exile to construct a metaphor for a subjectivity beyond identity boundaries, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* deconstructs Chinese legends and legendary dimensions of family history to create a metaphor for the process of growing up that appears to seek, but in fact dances around and challenges, not just a stable identity, but the very notion of identity as a constituent of stability. In Bradley Monsma's terms, it is nothing short of a trickster narrative:

For alert readers, *The Woman Warrior* is not so much about separating the world (both real and unreal) into fixed oppositions as exploring ways to mediate between them. The book functions like many traditional trickster stories in that it reveals the constructedness of reality.<sup>70</sup>

As for the process, although it is primarily based on the interplay between gender and ethnicity as metaphors of each other, its multiplying dimensions into legend (as both "tradition" and "written text") and age suggest that its potential for transport is not easily circumscribed by a simple equation. King-Kok Cheung's reading of the metaphor is indicative of that:

They [Kingston and Alice Walker] work their way from speechlessness to eloquence not only by covering the historical stages women writers have traveled—from suffering patriarchy, to rebelling against its conventions, to creating their own ethos—but also by developing a style that emerges from their respective cultures.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, Marjorie Lightfoot sees Kingston's chapters not only as "psychologically arranged to reveal how her individual vision evolved, as she came to be a woman warrior who is a writer", but also as reflecting the "myth/memory/experience fragmentation of content to develop this theme" in their fragmented structure,<sup>72</sup> thus emphasizing the importance of textual fault-lines as loci of semantic *jouissance*.

The implications of a mixed gender identity as a metaphor for (cultural) exile and the transport of textuality, a prerequisite for the creative artist, are apparent from the very theme of the book: "since the private sphere has long been associated with the female", according to LeiLani Nishime, "[b]y bringing the "private" Chinese-American history into the public sphere, Kingston moves its story into the traditionally masculine public sphere of American his-tory".<sup>73</sup> The result, however, does not endorse Orientalist beliefs about "feminized" Asians, but rather "the split" between identities creates an "ambiguity" which Nishime likens to the alienation device Kingston again uses to decry cultural gender woes in *China Men*.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Ruth Jenkins places emphasis on Kingston's blend of myth and reality as another feminist device, since "the use of the supernatural by women may also serve as a specific rhetorical strategy both to expose and counter the androcentric social and literary scripts that circumscribe 'acceptable' behavior".<sup>75</sup> In addition, "women

transforming traditions” in the book represent “what Kristeva would name ‘women’s time’. [...] In contrast to the linear, temporal histories recorded by Western patriarchal narratives, this monumental time measures cyclical experience”.<sup>76</sup> This “looping” effect will become important in this examination later.

The plot also converges on the theme of multi-hybrid subjectivity to counter gender oppression from the first chapter of the book, “No Name Woman”, where Maxine –the name critics have agreed on for the narrator– creatively reconstructs the story of an aunt driven to suicide by violent public and family opprobrium for bearing an illegitimate child. As in Nakos, trouble starts with an abnormally swollen belly. The negative designation of femininity here rests both upon the gender of the victim and the female “privilege” of giving birth, which becomes a curse of one more mouth to feed at a time of starvation for the villagers: the aunt’s belly is not in tandem, but at war with the enduring “roundness” of the harmonious universe as conceived in Chinese metaphysics.<sup>77</sup> Hence, ultimately, female birth and its consummate link of mother-child via feeding is designated from the start, like with Mikali, as an unnatural thing, one that has no name –and hence no semantic familiarity– and is punished by a mob (impregnator probably included) wearing terrifying ghost masks, again like a Fury chorus. Here again, the implicit danger of all birth is the reversal of maternal nourishment into starvation, for the village community but, ultimately, for the aunt, condemned to

suffer for ever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts.<sup>78</sup>

Even the death of No Name aunt by drowning with her baby symbolically links birth and death: after her violent exposure to “the black well of sky and stars”, the aunt, “[f]layed, unprotected against space”<sup>79</sup> like a terrified newborn, reclaims the watery, deep, dark, rounded womb/tomb by falling into the village well.

This ironic juxtaposition of pregnancy symbolisms, showing how even in starkest reality –starvation, exile, war– cultural metaphoricity and textual creative play rules, is not the author’s only deconstructive point. Through poetic license, the nameless ghost aunt acquires not only one, but a plurality of possible selves, psychologies, motives, and features that make her real and memorable, reinstating through textuality the (pro) creative surplus the ancestress was punished for. Kingston immediately seizes upon the upsetting the family legend by showing how, by fussing over the semantic extinction of the aunt, her parents made her unforgettable. The first words of the book are “You must not tell anyone” –the textual equivalent of Magritte’s “This is not a pipe” or “do not read this phrase”, a prime impetus for art.<sup>80</sup> Leslie Rabine cleverly compares the author’s transgression with a re-enactment of an “illegitimate birth”, the book being her upsetting

brain-child.<sup>81</sup> The same parodic and subversive performativity is evident in the chapter title, which in fact endows the aunt with the symbolically-loaded name of literary heroes such as Captain Nemo or Odysseus' "Outis",<sup>82</sup> textual charms, *mobilis in mobile*, against a bigoted, inhospitable world. In other words, Maxine's subsequent vocation in "talking-story" avenges the aunt and re-signifies female (pro)creativity as a positive, healing "roundness", all by discovering the transport potential of re-interpretation beyond fixed tradition/meaning. This is not to say that Kingston attacks bluntly Chinese culture; what she suggests is that its creative space is not single or fixed in any one "roundness" but, transporting oneself from circle to circle, creates life-nourishing surpluses.

Equally unrewarding, however, is the lot of the domesticated woman within traditional Chinese culture. The story of Brave Orchid, Maxine's indomitable and domineering mother –an apt metaphor/synecdoche for the Chinese "motherland" culture– in the "Shaman" chapter portrays a successful female doctor and housewife, excelling in a gender-segregated all-girls college and subsequent midwifery. Yet she is ultimately unable to adapt to the new American land, even when she admits that, with Communism, "[w]e have no more China to go home to" and while her daughter hopefully declares "[w]e belong to the planet now, Mama".<sup>83</sup> Both women stand on no-man's/nomad's land, yet only one can see the positive potential of transport, i.e. making "any other spot" on the planet one's own, and moving from simply being a strong woman to questioning the given precepts of wo/manhood.<sup>84</sup> Regardless of whether Kingston intended any pun on the word spot, the phrase also evokes writing as making spots on paper to put one's issues "on the spot". Maxine's mother is the one who –unknowingly?– teaches Maxine the power to exorcise traditional ghosts with spinning stories and threats of eating them (assimilating via the mouth, same as "talking-story"),<sup>85</sup> thus recognizing the power of performative transport ("Perhaps in daylight we accept that bag to be just a bag [...] when in reality it is a Big Ghost"). The importance of Brave Orchid's storytelling gift is noted by many critics;<sup>86</sup> for Deborah Madsen,

Of all the women represented by Kingston, it is Brave Orchid who most closely approaches the ideal of the Woman Warrior, though Brave Orchid lacks the self-acceptance and denial of woman-hatred that Fa Mu Lan achieves.<sup>87</sup>

She cannot realize her own trans-cultural transformative potential, because any power she gains is within her culture's normative structures. Like Nakos's female refugees and real mother, she refuses to see *herself* and her gender as a sign, and thus remains anchored to a culture made unwholesome for women, especially offbeat ones like the aunt, her daughter, or the crazy woman who is murdered by the villagers for signifying –as they think– the wrong kind of signals, or just signaling.<sup>88</sup> "Shaman" is important in terms

of the authorial metaphor, because it points to the fact that truly transporative, creative writing cannot be hedged in by traditional “prescriptions” or “recipes” (that the doctor-mom deals in): same as the crazy woman, it must take the elements that reflect one’s culture (the mirror fragments) and find new uses for them, bricoleur-like, despite the risk. Her midwife mother can only give birth to the new “woman” that her daughter will be, but cannot be re-born herself, re-enacting in a sense the Platonic division of *The Symposium* between female birth by flesh and (supposedly male-only) birth by ideas/texts. One imagines Mikali’s ghostly mother, one among many problematic mothers in Nakos’s fiction, to be a similar purveyor of his mixed legacy, and a similar instigator of his leap of bravery across the East-West divide (that in Nakos, as in Kingston, reveals many “Easts”).

Similarly, “At the Western Palace” and the first part of “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” the last two chapters, it becomes clear that even Brave Orchid cannot help her own outside her culture. Although she encourages her jilted sister, Moon Orchid, to confront her absconded husband and claim her rights as First Wife, same as Maxine tortures the silent Chinese girl at school to speak up, neither woman can hope to defeat their culture inside its own semantic playground that designates women as silent and shameful. Duplicating, respectively, the patriarchal speaking for/about, and inflicting violence on, the female, the strong woman only shames herself, simply reversing the terms of the violent hierarchy of gender, not eliminating it. Unsurprisingly, all discourses within this frame are doomed, for their text is bound to be misinterpreted. The championed Moon Orchid goes crazy, Maxine’s attempts at communication with her mother turn into sickening shouting-matches, suffocating silences, or mutual recriminations of words withheld,<sup>89</sup> Maxine’s voice quacks just because she is told that “You have what we call a pressed-duck voice” (note the equation between designation and being),<sup>90</sup> or disappears in front of a racist employer.<sup>91</sup> She has trouble talking at the American school, and even when her mother claims to have cut her frenum “so that you would not be tongue tied”, Maxine suspects it was really to silence her:<sup>92</sup> as Jeehyun Lim points out,

The tongue that is cut loose remains with the narrator as a sign of her awareness that language is in fact a battleground. In the narrator’s case, the social standards of assessing language ability always fall short of her actual language ability.<sup>93</sup>

Maxine herself recognizes that the tantrums she threw as a child against misogynistic Chinese proverbs were in vain, even though they also expressed a wish for an identity beyond traditional gender: “I’m not a bad girl,” I would scream. [...] I might as well have said, ‘I’m not a girl’”<sup>94</sup>



Subsequently, and like Nakos's protagonist, all metaphors that Maxine employs in trying to overcome the gender barrier combine images of movement, transport, fugue with androgyny. Prime among them is her wished-for white horse: "white, the bad, mournful color" for the Chinese is here combined with the transgression of praying like a Christian for it; it is also a symbol of masculinity, a means of travel, and incidentally one of the first things Maxine loosens her tongue about with her mother, thus recalling the legendary Pegasus, patron pet of talk-story practitioners.<sup>95</sup> There is also her wish "to be a lumberjack and a newspaper reporter", combining a traditionally macho profession with creative writing and roaming (as opposed to her mother's feminine model of employment, the typist, a scrivener of men's words).<sup>96</sup> Finally, her vampire nightmare<sup>97</sup> ties together the mournful pale horse with the masculine fantasy of seduction, penetration, and spilling of virginal blood, as well as Maxine's guilt for positioning herself in the limbo of cultures and genders (as vampires reproduce asexually).<sup>98</sup> These later pronouncements play against an earlier vocational wish right out of Chinese tradition, evoked as a metaphor for authorship:

Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it any more. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.<sup>99</sup>

The metaphor ties art to the exiling "out(law)", ironically loosening social ties with every knot. One must also consider the pun between "knot" and "not", especially as this book is about talking-, not writing-, story: a female author in *that* China would have been a monstrosity, the conceptual impossibility of a "naught-maker" (or a pregnant boy), yet also right there with Said's "naysayers," the felicitous curmudgeons drawing their critical power from their cultural estrangement. As Margaret Miller notes for Maxine:

to tie the old Chinese knot would be to tie herself up, to bind her own feet. So she must also reject some of the string she is presented with; there are "nots" in her "knot". All of these difficulties that Kingston experiences in sorting through the threads of her identity have formal equivalents in the literary techniques she chooses.<sup>100</sup>

The knot metaphor, coming at the very start of the final chapter, ties well with what is generally acknowledged by critics<sup>101</sup> and author alike as Maxine's definitive selfhood metaphor, the legend of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century AD Chinese poetess Ts'ai Yen, who was captured by a "barbarian" tribe, living, fighting and birthing two children among them, before she was ransomed off to marry a Chinaman, "so that her father would have Han descendants".<sup>102</sup> During her long captivity, the poetess, fascinated by the musical sound made by the hollow-reed barbarian arrows, attempted to imitate it in her Chinese

songs, thus creating a new genre which was appreciated and passed on since, as the final sentence of the story and the book goes, “It translated well”.<sup>103</sup> The elegant metaphor for culturally hybrid creativity and its potential for enduring transport emphasizes primarily the need for a novel alienation space, to where one is exiled or abducted as a prerequisite for artistic creation. The upsetting of gender norms also becomes relevant, as Ts'ai Yen, subjected to the characteristically feminine sufferings of abduction and rape, is subsequently inculcated by the barbarian dogma of a more “masculine” femininity, or rather androgyny: she becomes a successful warrior, gives “birth in the saddle” and, upon pregnancy, her husband presents her with her own mare.<sup>104</sup> The description of her riding a horse behind her husband/captor, her arms tight around his waist, recalls vividly primordial images of the androgyne as the bodily melding of male and female (as in Plato's *Symposium*). Finally, the arrow/flute itself, as a symbol of phallic masculinity yet also here female creativity, combines gender-bending with transport in art, singing when only in mid-flight from archer to target. Interestingly, even the concept of androgyny itself appears to have been for Kingston a cross-cultural item as well:

I found that whenever I come to a low point in my life or in my work, when I read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, that always seems to get my life force moving again. I just love the way she can make one character live for four hundred years, and that Orlando can be a man, Orlando can be a woman. Virginia Woolf broke through constraints of time, of gender, of culture.<sup>105</sup>

In the same interview, Kingston makes a bid for androgyny coupled with the thetic power of imagination:

What we need to do is to be able to imagine the possibility of a playful, peaceful, nurturing, mothering man, and we need to imagine the possibilities of a powerful, nonviolent woman and the possibilities of harmonious communities –and [...] that would be the first step toward building them and becoming them.<sup>106</sup>

Thus Kingston knots harmoniously together all the fixity-upsetting strands of her new, flexible, artistic identity: Chinese and barbarian/Ghost/American, male and female, of legendary past and practical present, exile and on-the-spot homemaking, “talking-story” and memoir-writing, struggle and reconciliation in a knot so intricate it indeed drives the maker and its viewers blind –to difference. The invocation of a trans-lation at the very end suggests that this process of trans-cendence and trans-port potentially goes on well still, in lieu of a full-stop.

This open-endedness of the book, then, cannot possibly be the final word, mostly because the entire book's philosophy has been avoidance of any self-complacent modes of identification (like *Brave Orchid's*). At this point, attention must be drawn to a detail in the Ts'ai Yen myth, which ties creativity to (pro)creativity and issues of gender. The irony

of the poetess's ransom for the sake of pure-blooded Chinese sons becomes apparent when we hear that Ts'ai Yen's barbarian children –sex unknown– “did not laugh, but eventually sang along” with their mother among the other barbarians.<sup>107</sup> The traditional ancestral line is forever contaminated by the ambiguously-sexed barbarian descendants the hybrid poetry engenders, and to the extent that the children are equated with Ts'ai Yen's audience, such a legitimate –multiply hybrid– child is Maxine herself. The legend, therefore, is not centripetal in the return of the enriched prodigal home, but centrifugal, banking more on the transport of artistry in time and space. Hence there is, at the very end of the narrator's maturation process, a troubling if very apposite return to the interim space of the troubled child, the “girlhood” of Maxine, which, like Mikali's adolescence, represents the liminal and creative germ of possibilities. This emphasis on the children, as well as the image of a warrior-woman, points to the adolescence chapter par excellence, the legend of Fa Mu Lan in “White Tigers”.<sup>108</sup>

The particular chapter has been the focus of much critical controversy, rightfully stemming too from Kingston's own remarks:

I put [‘The White Tigers’ chapter] at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for. Also, ‘The White Tigers’ is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond the fact that authorial intention cannot end the semantic potential of a text, it is precisely this “childish” and “past” and “not-Chinese” dimension that haunts the book's ending like a ghost, or the surplus of metaphoric transport in terms of gender, ethnicity, genre, or age. It is interesting to interject here that Kingston, in a later interview, says that “*The Woman Warrior* began as a poem. All my prose works began as poems”, while having said immediately before that poetry was the first thing she wrote as a child and that, with her subsequent books, she “wanted to go back to that free state of poetry that I had when I was a child”.<sup>110</sup> The cyclical image, so often invoked by French feminists as quintessentially female-identified, might be useful in suggesting this alternative reading of *The Woman Warrior*.

“White Tigers” opens with an unusual empowering statement: When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen”; readers also learn that “It was a woman who invented while crane boxing only two hundred years ago,” while Maxine raises her mother to superheroine: “At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story.”<sup>111</sup> There is, however, an ambiguity here: the girls “learn” from the story not necessarily what the adults are meant to teach them, i.e. awed submission to an impossible standard of womanhood that justifies misogyny –as –it does when Maxine's joy over her straight A's at school is shot down by her mother's response “Let me tell

you a true story about a girl who saved her village”.<sup>112</sup> The Chinese-American girls latch instead onto the modality of what they “could” become: the superheroines that teenagers and adolescents so readily identify with during their troubled transitional period from childhood to adulthood, when bodies transform and concerns over the self and the world begin to transcend the family circle (accordingly, Mulan’s divine apprenticeship in this retelling lasts from the age of 7 to her 22<sup>nd</sup> year), taking on a romantic absolutism. As Wong underlines:

“White Tigers”, represents the protagonist’s most sustained excursion of the imagination in order to capture the “feel” of this wholeness. As wish-fulfilling fantasy, Maxine’s account of the apprenticeship of Fa Mu Lan reflects her deepest psychological needs; by examining the arrangements she chooses for the legendary heroine, we can see what is un-welcome or lacking in her own life.<sup>113</sup>

To emphasize how child’s play affects stark reality, Maxine tells us how she mixed in her mind this “chant” of Mulan her mother taught her with the movies she watched in America, the mass-produced *wu xia pian* [films of chivalrous combat], b-rated exaggerations of legendary material that involve martial arts, swordplay and fantasy elements. Critics have also noted<sup>114</sup> that Kingston’s retelling actually combines two myths, that of Yue Fei, a male Chinese general of the Sung Dynasty who had tattooed on his back his family grievances –Paul Outka quotes Kingston as claiming the male legend to be “Ngak Fei the Patriot”, and her intention as being “to take his power for women” –<sup>115</sup> and the Mulan legend of the woman impersonating a warrior. Thus readers understand outright that this is not a pious homage to world-popular Chinese culture, as Mulan’s story has indeed become, but a discourse on transformative and transporting hybridity –that the “taint” of messing with tradition may have a necessary and empowering side. Kingston herself explicitly declares: “I’m saying I’ve written down American myths. Fa Mu Lan and the writing on her back is an American myth. And I made it that way”.<sup>116</sup> At the same time, the recourse to B-rate movies, often accused of ruining a textual source with populist simplifications, not only underscores the serious cultural impact of adaptations and transplantations, but draws attention to teen culture as a transitional yet highly powerful set of experiences whose marks affect adulthood. Mikali’s quest, also, goes through the familiar icon of the Virgin to the iconicity of a *real*, if exotic, mother. In the words of Shirley Rose, “Because she mixes what is accepted as American reality with Chinese myth and American myth with Chinese reality, readers begin to see that reality is mythically constructed”.<sup>117</sup>

Kingston’s deliberate tainting of the myth is also evident in the presentation of an almost divine androgyny as a creative and happy mode of living. Maxine’s Mulan is apprenticed under the divine old couple (later depicted as the vision of the cosmic androgyne),<sup>118</sup> whose miraculous kindness, harmony and bounty recall Mikali’s saviors, and from whom she learns to incorporate elements of her femaleness –menstruation,<sup>119</sup>

copulation, pregnancy<sup>120</sup>— smoothly and functionally in her male warrior guise. Miller, discussing the existence of many swordswomen models in Chinese legend, notes however that all these are somehow “neutered” by their function instead of blending masculine and feminine traits into an androgynous composite, like Maxine’s *Mulan*.<sup>121</sup> She contrasts starkly to both the victimized men’s and women’s rigid gender roles, drafted prostitutes or soldiers respectively, and to the Baron’s wives who, once liberated from their foot-binding, simply switch into the dominant without upsetting gender-segregation.<sup>122</sup> Those “amazons” fade into unreality, making an interesting link between androgyny and the classic quality of a text, which is inclusive of human experience, not exclusive: for Linda Hunt, “Kingston reveals her intense discomfort with this anti-social story she has used to deconstruct the socially-acceptable swords-woman myth by distancing herself from it” by falling into the conditional.<sup>123</sup> Contrasted to the footbound amazons, and to the “heavy footed and rough” male warriors (note the emphasis on the feet, a sign of not being able to transport oneself over distances),<sup>124</sup> this *Mulan* can blend the best of both sexes, fighting harmoniously alongside her husband like Ts’ai Yen.<sup>125</sup> In Deborah Madsen’s words, “she possesses the power of androgyny whilst retaining her femininity” and thus defeats “the alienation of subjective and objective experience that destroy so many of the women in this narrative”.<sup>126</sup> That is why she, with her “long period of voluntary submission to discipline”, represents for Wong, “a higher state of being –this is what is missing in the lives of the weaker women, and this, ultimately, is the only way out of her dilemma”.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, this androgyny is a metaphor for further miscegenation: during her cosmic vision that is the pinnacle of her training, *Mulan* realizes that Otherness only hides the spiritual unity underneath:

Afterwards, whenever I did not eat for long, as during famine or battle, I could stare at ordinary people and see their light and gold. I could see their dance. When I get hungry enough, then killing and falling are dancing too.<sup>128</sup>

Same as Mikali’s hunger becomes a learning path for the creation of a new, amalgamated “family” with a hint of the divine, *Mulan*’s realizing the principle of one’s own capacity to be a metaphor in the most literal sense of transubstantiation (like the self-sacrificing rabbit that magically transforms into her food) and “transmigration” makes one not just powerful, but divine. Thus Kingston is calling for the ultimate freedom of stepping outside one’s story/text and becoming the living self’s author, a poet-god in the mythical sense. It is no surprise that the totem-figure of “White Tigers” is ultimately the divine dragon, too big to be seen whole: “You have to infer the whole dragon from the parts you can see and touch, the old people would say”<sup>129</sup> –a telling metaphor for the divine potential of human imagination to construct in transport.

The power of the textualization of the human body that unlocks its potential for metaphorical transport is incorporated in the legend by the addition of General Yue Fei's story to Mulan's, making the latter indeed androgynous. When the list of family and class grievances are indelibly tattooed on Mulan's back by her parents, she becomes not just the bearer of a tradition of victimization she will upset, but a living text with possibilities of alternate interpretations.<sup>130</sup> In Dong's view, "the imagined tattooing symbolizes the challenge of the traditional construction of women's bodies and therefore proposes alternative gender politics."<sup>131</sup> She also becomes, in a sense, immortal, both in tandem with the earlier cosmic vision of text-like flesh, but also in embodying the text of her own enduring legend. This is what allows Maxine to transcend culture, time and space and find in Mulan a viable role-model for her authorship:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance –not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words–'chink' words and 'gook' words too –that they do not fit on my skin.<sup>132</sup>

One almost expects this detail which, after all, is deliberately grafted on the Mulan legend, since the battleground for Maxine has always already been Chinese language: "There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!"<sup>133</sup> Like the seeming endorsement of the swordswoman icon in the start of the chapter, however, this final statement also hides semantic pitfalls:

Kingston writes in the first person, but not without a sense of its difficulties. [...] Determined not to be so broken, she opts for the assertive and uncomplex English "I" which, however, is false to the Chinese part of her.<sup>134</sup>

Hunt, however, sees this as a gesture of empowering cultural transfer, from the original Mulan's communal grievances to this Mulan's very American individualized anger against society's treatment of women.<sup>135</sup> Still, Kingston makes it abundantly clear –by ironically contrasting her own failure to make a dent in her own environment– that she considers measuring up to the legend a joke: "I only made up gun and knife fantasies and did nothing useful",<sup>136</sup> she admits, for "after all, no bird called me, no wise old people tutored me. I have no magic beads, no water gourd sight, no rabbit that will jump into the fire when I'm hungry. I dislike armies."<sup>137</sup> As Umberto Eco notes, a mythical or legendary character "as an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations [...] must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable", and thus is "unconsumable",<sup>138</sup> while Kingston's whole course has been to avoid such atavistic fixities. The one thing that ties her to this immature revenge fantasy is the only

thing that has been shown to transcend boundaries anyway: the metaphor, the textuality. As words expand in meaning infinitely, they naturally do not fit on her skin –nor, one imagines, they ever will.

Hence the importance of the androgynous model of Mulan is, like in Nakos, its being a metaphorical vehicle for the more vital issue of authorship and the right to transcend barriers of identity like space. It is also the metaphor that transfers emphasis from the image of the Chinese as the ultimate Orientalist Other, complete with effeminizing bias, as each protagonist's ethnic selfhood is too dubious (refugee in a strange camp and second generation emigrant-born) to constitute any stable basis for racist discriminations. Thus one can disagree with Yuan Shu's reading of the Fa Mu Lan legend as ultimately failed because it cannot escape the traditional stereotypes of the dutiful daughter, or the anxieties of the "soft" Chinese-American female that she will not measure up.<sup>139</sup> A certain likeness, after all, is necessary for parodic performativity to work. The similarities between Kingston's Ts'ai Yen and Fa Mu Lan –right down to the flute songs that Mu Lan sings around the camp fire– serve as a trick in the textual structure which "folds back into itself"<sup>140</sup> to suggest the enduring openness of adolescent experiences, where the memoir might well have been tattooed on one's body, and the love-hate relationship with one's maternal culture, true; but also the eternal and rejuvenating return to inconclusiveness, "the vertiginous space between"<sup>141</sup> that always opens up more possibilities for textual transport. Thus while the final image of the celebrated poetess may be as comforting as the image of the suckling newborn wrapped in loving embrace, one must always mitigate it in the context of the earlier images of unease that peep through with alarming, yet intriguing, inconclusiveness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York, Hill and Wang, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Tannen, *Lilika Nakos*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1983, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Tannen, "Lilika Nakos and Other Greek Women Writers", *Pilgrimage*, vol. 2 (1976) 5.

<sup>4</sup> Linos Politis, *A History of Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> Tannen, *Lilika Nakos*, op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text", *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, New Jersey, Rutgers UP, 1991, p. 595.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield", *Feminisms*, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood among Ghosts*, London, Picador, 1976, p. 49, 171 and 90, respectively.

- 9** Bobby Fong, "Maxine Hong Kingston's Autobiographical Strategy in *The Woman Warrior*", *Biography*, vol. 12 no. 2 (Spring 1989) 123.
- 10** Ya-Jie Zhang, "A Chinese Woman's Response to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*", *MELUS*, vol. 13, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1986) 103. For a basic account of the philology-pro and con-on Kingston's work, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (ed.), *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, New York, Oxford, 1999.
- 11** Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience*", *MELUS*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988) 3-26.
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cuse him before his vengeful peers (Homer, *The Odyssey*, 9.366)

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**87** Deborah Madsen, "(Dis)figuration: The Body as Icon in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 24 (1994) 246.

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**90** Ibid., p. 172. The feature persists also in p. 178.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΧΡΙΣΤΙΝΑ ΝΤΟΚΟΥ: Από τους Μικρασιάτες στους Μικρούς Ασιάτες: Εγκυμονούντα Αγόρια και Κορίτσια Πολεμιστές ως Λυτρωτικές Συγγραφικές Μεταφορές στη Λιλικά Νάκου και στη Μαξίν Χονγκ Κίνγκστον

Το άρθρο ερευνά τις ομοιότητες μεταξύ του διηγήματος «Μητρότης» της Λιλίκας Νάκου και του μυθιστορήματος *Η Γυναίκα Πολεμιστής: Αναμνήσεις Μιας Παιδικής Ηλικίας Ανάμεσα σε Φαντάσματα* της Κινέζο-Αμερικανίδας συγγραφέως Μαξίν Χονγκ Κίνγκστον. Οι δύο συγγραφείς ταυτίζουν την έννοια της κειμενικής μεταφοράς και ερμηνευτικής πολλαπλότητας με τη μορφή του ανδρογυνικού εφήβου, δηλαδή ενός ατόμου το οποίο αφενός φέρει τα ψυχολογικά χαρακτηριστικά που αποδίδονται παραδοσιακά στο ένα ή στο άλλο φύλο και αφετέρου βρίσκεται σε μία ηλικία μεταβατική, γεμάτη προβλήματα, αλλά και δυνατότητες για το μέλλον. Στη Νάκου η μορφή αυτή είναι ένα αγόρι που γίνεται "μητέρα" και στην Κίνγκστον ένα κορίτσι που ταυτίζεται με τον θρύλο της παρενδυτικής πολεμιστριάς Μουλάν. Ακολουθώντας το Μπατλεριανό μοτίβο της επιτελεσματικότητας ως ανατρεπτικής παρωδίας των κοινωνικών σταθερών του φύλου, οι δύο συγγραφείς κατασκευάζουν έναν μυθοπλαστικό εαυτό που αντιπαρέρχεται επιτυχώς τις αντιξοότητες της βίαιης μεταφοράς τους σε μία άλλη γη, ιδιαίτερα καθώς αυτή εκφράζει και προκαλεί το Οριενταλιστικό χάσμα μεταξύ Δύσης και Ανατολής· τη διχασμένη κληρονομιά και ταυτότητα που επωμίζονται ως αποτέλεσμα και τα προβλήματα της ανάληψης από μέρους τους μιας ταυτότητας δημιουργού-συγγραφέως που αντιτίθεται στα σεξιστικά στερεότυπα της παραδοσιακής τους κουλτούρας.