

# **The Process of Identity in Three Immigrant Memoirs**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis examines how identity formation is presented in the three immigrant memoirs, *The Latehomecomer*, *Funny in Farsi*, and *The Woman Warrior*. My aim is to illuminate the diversity of immigrant experiences by analyzing how these experiences and processes of identity formation are presented through the genre of autobiography. The three main chapters are structured around different aspects of identity formation as presented in the memoirs. The first chapter revolves around how identity is presented and negotiated through memory, language, and agency in *The Latehomecomer*. The second chapter focuses on relationality and models of identity as presented in *Funny in Farsi*, while the third chapter investigates how identity is negotiated through gender, filiality, and authenticity in *The Woman Warrior*. The three memoirs are compared and contrasted throughout the thesis, and are further discussed in relation to the genre of autobiography.



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## Introduction

Life writing does not register preexisting selfhood, but rather somehow creates it. This inverts the intuitive idea that one lives one's life, then simply writes it down. Instead, in writing one's life one may bring a new self into being. If this is true, then in reading life narrative, we witness self-invention.<sup>1</sup>

We all tell stories. When encountering friends and acquaintances, we tell stories about situations, thoughts, and experiences. We tell these stories in order to give the other person information about who we are. The content of these stories, and in the manner we choose to tell them, reflects who we are, and how we want to present ourselves. Whether the stories we tell are fully true or not may vary. To what extent we are aware of the truthfulness of our own stories may also vary. We often choose to tell stories in a manner, and with a content, that represents what we see as the ideal versions of ourselves. While in the process of telling, we contribute to the formation of our identities. Stuart Hall argues that identity is an everlasting continuous production, and that identity formation is a process “and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, identity is not a constant condition, something a person simply *is*. A person's identity develops. Our identity is always changing, and is being transformed as we go through life, encounter new people, face new challenges, new knowledge, new countries, and new cultures. Moreover, as Hall observes, through the manner in which we represent ourselves, identity is formed. In writing one's story, one might add “writer”, “spokesperson”, “American”, “immigrant”, “victim”, or “successful” to one's identity. Does the autobiographical “I” represent herself as a heroine or as an individual who breaks free from the larger group? In what ways do the manner in which these women write “the self”, reflect identity formation? Christian Roesler, in his article “A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives”, observes that identity has narrative form since we put our life experiences into a narrative, which consists of continuity (“being over time”), coherence (different experiences are connected), and meaning (the connection of experiences over time is created into meaning for the individual).<sup>3</sup> This last part of a narrative, meaning created in retrospect, is what is

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity " Università Degli Studi di Palermo, [http://www.unipa.it/~michele.cometa/hall\\_cultural\\_identity.pdf](http://www.unipa.it/~michele.cometa/hall_cultural_identity.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Roesler, "A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives," *Journal of analytical psychology* 51, no. 4 (2006): 575.

presented in a memoir. Several stories from a person's life are presented and connected into a whole, a coherent story of the autobiographical "I's" identity.

According to Thomas Couser, "memoir now rivals fiction in popularity and critical esteem and exceeds it in cultural currency. [. . .] this is an age – if not *the age* – of memoir."<sup>4</sup> What is the reason for this genre's popularity? One answer might be found in the three memoirs in focus. *The Latehomecomer*, *Funny in Farsi*, and *The Woman Warrior* all deal with identity and the challenges and changes an immigrant encounters in a new home country. Every individual has a feeling of self, and an awareness of his/her identity. Therefore, I believe memoirs are easy to relate to. By discussing identity in various ways, the reader can either reject, or embrace the autobiographical "I's" accounts of self. This aspect of identifying with "a real person" might be why the popularity of memoirs has increased. By using autobiographical theory, and the notions of hybrid and diasporic identity of post-colonial theory I hope to shed light on different aspects of identity formation presented by these three autobiographers. The memoirs chosen are written by women with different cultural backgrounds, of different ages, and with their unique experience of being an immigrant to the U.S. Kao Kalia Yang, and Firoozeh Dumas came to the U.S. at the age of 6-8, as a result of their parents' decision and needs. Maxine Hong Kingston was born in the U.S. to immigrant parents living in Chinatown. She did not interact with Americans until kindergarten and later at school. This thesis does not seek to find evidence or attempt to prove how the identity of immigrants is formed. Rather, this thesis is an attempt to shed light on the modern immigrant experience, how this experience affects identity formation, and how identity is presented in the public medium of autobiography. How do these women confirm or break with established gender traditions and expectation within their respective cultures of origin and within the American context? How do they present their identities in connection with challenges and changes of coming to a new home country?

Identity is not an individual concept unaffected by surroundings. Social identity theory deals with a perspective that identity does not belong to a person, but it "emerges out of an interaction between the person and the situation."<sup>5</sup> A person can for instance act as a student, a child, a member of an ethnic and/or religious group, and a mother. An individual may act according to the norms within a group, but at the same time navigate these different identities in order to be part of the various in-groups. This aspect of identity formation is

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<sup>4</sup> Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Liu and Janos László, "A Narrative Theory of History and Identity: Social Identity, Social Representations, society and the Individual," in *Social Representations and Identity: Content, Process, and Power*, ed. Gail Moloney and Ian Walker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 85.

especially important in an immigrant's life. She must face the challenge of being part of several groups, from the country and culture of origin, and upon arriving the new home country where she faces new groups, norms, and expectations. Such expectations and norms are embedded in the culture of different groups. Within her family, she might be expected to help her mother in the kitchen after school, and take part in religious traditions and holidays. Within the culture of her new American friends, however, there might be expectations for her to join her friends in sports after school and to hang out during the weekend. In addition to one's individual feeling of self, an immigrant must negotiate her identity in relation to societal expectations of assimilation, integration, as member of a group, and being loyal to one's roots. In my analysis of memory, language, relationality, filiality, and gender, I will shed light on how these identities are shaped, embraced or rejected, and negotiated in the space of home (family) and at school (encounter with Americans).

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, international migration increased.<sup>6</sup> People emigrated due to trade, work, persecution, war, political conflicts, and economical needs amongst other reasons. To emigrate from one continent to another has become both more approachable and more affordable after the Second World War. Behind the facts and statistics of migration, there are people with individual stories, traumas, knowledge, languages, and cultures. When the Western countries discuss and negotiate whether or not, and which countries should take responsibility for hosting refugees or welcoming immigrants, authorities most often talk about numbers and facts. What is often neglected, is the fact that immigrants as a group consist of individuals who have different backgrounds, different value systems and worldviews. These immigrants are often expected to go through the same system, and through the same gate into their new home country. The result is varying degrees of "successful immigration."<sup>7</sup>

The focus of this thesis is the identity formation presented in three immigrant memoirs; *The Latehomecomer*, *Funny in Farsi*, and *The Woman Warrior*. In what ways do the transfer from a nation one calls home, to another nation affect a person's identity? The three memoirs discussed in this thesis cannot give an answer to such a universal question, however, they might provide answers that might be true not only for themselves but for other immigrants as well. The three memoirs in focus are written by women, a choice which is

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<sup>6</sup> Sten Pultz Moslund, *Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> What would be labeled "successful immigration" obviously vary not only within a nation but also between individuals. However, my goal is not to convey the result of immigration presented in these memoirs, but to emphasize the fact that each immigrant has his/her own individual immigrant experience.

made deliberately. The reason is my personal assumption that the role and expectations women face in the sphere of the family, community, workplace, school, larger society, and within different cultures, differs from that of men.

Memoirs give a valuable insight into an individual life. To approach such a source of privacy, which is deliberately made public, might result in a greater understanding and knowledge of the variety of individual narratives a community, a society, and a nation consists of. Why is this important? I personally believe that knowledge of the challenges and various encounters immigrants experience when settling in a new culture, as well as the manner in which these authors present themselves and their identity formation, contribute to a wider understanding of individuals, of immigrants as a group, as well as contribute to a greater degree of tolerance and willingness to be flexible when faced with individuals and opinions that do not immediately resonate with one's personal history and opinions.

When immigration is discussed, some terms are frequently used, such as integration, Americanization, assimilation, the melting pot, and the salad bowl. These terms signal expectations the host nation has to immigrants. The host nation might provide housing, work, education, and sponsors. There might also be demands for learning the language, learning about religion, culture, values, and customs. Immigrants have been met with different expectations through different times. When investigating the three memoirs I hope to convey some of these expectations and/or demands.

## **The Three Memoirs in Focus**

The Hmong American author, Yang, published her memoir, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* in 2008. Since 1975, more than 200 000 Hmong has fled Laos as a result of the alliance with the CIA during the Cold War in Laos and Vietnam. More than 90 percent of these refugees resettled in the US.<sup>8</sup> Most Hmong settled in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Yang and her family were part of one of the largest waves of Hmong refugees to immigrate.<sup>9</sup> At first, the Hmong refugees were spread over many states. However, due to the Hmong culture and values of belonging to a family and clan, the immigrants soon migrated to especially the Midwest. Yang refers to the hardships of not being close to her grandmother the first years in Minnesota. This may be an example of how the refugees were

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Yau, "The Foreign-born Hmong in the United States," Migration Information Source, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=281>.

<sup>9</sup> Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 131-33.

expected to settle where they were placed, without having knowledge of, or without regarding the value of family within the culture of Hmong.<sup>10</sup> Yang and her family settled in St. Paul Minnesota. Housing was provided for them, and a sponsor (the best friend of Yang's father) was assigned to help them in the beginning of their new American life. Yang's parents experience the expectations and demands for language learning and education in order to be able to work and provide for their family. Yang also refers to experiences of racism (such as words of abuse) during their first years in America. The family was settled in the McDonough Housing Project and her parents were expected to find work and not live on welfare for long. Moreover, the children were expected to attend school and their English skills were tested in order to decide in which grade. Many Hmong children struggled to find their place when they encountered the American schools. In addition, many schools were unprepared to receive and provide a safe environment for the new refugees.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Yang, Firoozeh Dumas was born into a middleclass family in Iran in 1965. Her father had been to the U.S. during his education, and therefore he knew more about the new home country than Yang's parents did. Dumas came to the U.S. with her family at the age of seven due to her father's work. After a couple of years, they moved back to Iran, but returned to the U.S. in 1976. Dumas also experienced the difficulties of feeling "different" when encountering the American school system. She suddenly became aware of how she, and her mother, differed from the others, and she made attempts of becoming similar to the other children at school. At the same time, Dumas tells how she and her family were met with American kindness and a genuine interest in Iranian culture.

Dumas and her family experienced the Iranian Revolution from their new home in the United States. Dumas accounts for how the revolution marked a change in how she was viewed by Americans thereafter.<sup>12</sup> Many Iranian exchange students who were in the U.S. during the revolution chose to stay and not to return to the Islamic Republic, and the number of Iranians in the U.S. increased with 74 percent between 1980-1990. According to Dumas, The Iranian Revolution, as well as 9/11 led to an increase in racism towards Iranians.

Unlike the two other authors, Maxine Hong Kingston was born in the U.S. One could question why her memoir is included in this thesis on immigrant experiences and identity formation. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* conveys

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<sup>10</sup> Mark E. Pfeifer, "'Hmong Americans' Asian-Nation: The Landscape of Asian America," <http://www.asian-nation.org/hmong.shtml>

<sup>11</sup> Henry T. Trueba, *Cultural Conflict and Adaptation: The Case of Hmong Children in American Society*. (Bristol, P.A.: Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis Inc., 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Firoozeh Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (New York: Villard, 2003), 116-17.

how Kingston was born into a diasporic family and community and had no contact with Americans before she needed to; in kindergarten and in school. Kingston's parents did not know English and did not take part in the larger American society. The immigrant shock of a new language, culture, femininity, and reality is in no lesser degree evident in Kingston's memoir than the two other memoirs. Being born to immigrant parents in Chinatown whose contact and experience with the world outside their community was extremely limited, resulted in Kingston having to negotiate her identity between the Chinese and American culture, values, and traditions.

### **Brief Summary of the Memoirs**

Before the account of theoretical framework of the thesis, a brief presentation of the authors as well as a brief summary of the three memoirs in focus will be provided.

Yang, author of *The Latehomecomer*, was born in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1980. She grew up with her parents, sister, grandmother, uncles, and aunts. Yang had a close relationship with her grandmother who told her stories about the people of Hmong, about her forefathers, and the belief in how the spiritual world influence the well-being and lives of the living. In her memoir, Yang describes how these stories are not just stories, but becomes part of her present life. Yang describes how she lives with her family in the refugee camp in Thailand, how her parents struggle to make ends meet and how, when they have decided to leave for America, they have to go through a process of physical and educational preparation before they are tested and eventually allowed to immigrate to America. Yang further describes the struggle with language, and the racism she experiences when coming to Minnesota. Descriptions and accounts of her family, myths, and stories from the Laotian jungle, are also a major part of her memoir, as are the clan meetings the Hmong families have in order to encourage, support, and help each other survive in America.

Dumas, author of *Funny in Farsi*, came to California for the first time when she was seven years old, due to her father's job. They lived in California for two years before they had to return to Iran. However, a couple of years later they had the chance to come back, this time to Newport Beach. Dumas describes her encounter with language, with the culture in both California and Newport Beach, with food, Americans, customs, and holiday traditions. *Funny in Farsi* is a memoir where each chapter is structured around concepts such as Disneyland, more than a chronological retrospective reflection on the life of the autobiographical "I". Like Yang, Dumas describes her family and their attitudes and meetings with different aspects of

America. Her father is the main figure in several of the anecdotes she has chosen to present in her memoir. Through stories about her father and other relatives, Dumas narrates her own immigrant experiences, differences between Iran and the U.S., and the challenges of identity formation. Dumas also reflects on how 9/11 affected her as an individual in regards to racism and discrimination. In contrast to Dumas and Yang who came to the U.S. as children, Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*, grew up in Chinatown with her family. Before kindergarten, Kingston's experience with Americans and American culture was very limited. As a result, she had to learn English and American ways of life first in kindergarten and later at school. Her parents did not speak English and did not encourage education. Kingston narrates her identity through stories, memories, and myths passed down to her from her mother. Her mother is presented as a major figure in *The Woman Warrior*, and together with female predecessors and mythical swordswomen, Kingston's mother represents Kingston's roots, values and traditions she struggles to position herself away from, and roles she both seeks to inhabit and reject. In her memoir, Kingston negotiates her identity as a female in between the Chinese and American culture and the confusion she herself has struggled with is in some ways transferred to the reader.

## **Theoretical Framework**

“We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present.”<sup>13</sup> In what ways do the three authors present their identities? How are their pasts presented and to what extent does the past reflect identity formation? When studying immigrants' identity formation in these memoirs I mainly use autobiographical theory. When referring to the texts I will use the term memoirs. According to Smith et al. memoir is currently the most frequently used word for life writing. The term memoir reflects a history of life writing that includes authors of different social classes, who write about periods of life, not necessarily a whole life span, and that reflect upon the writer's past life and understanding of herself.<sup>14</sup>

The memoir and the fictional novel differ in that the proper name of the author is the same as the proper name of the protagonist. Philippe Lejeune argues that when the reader becomes aware of this connection, he or she will read the text differently, as a self-reflexive

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<sup>13</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

text where the author herself is the source of knowledge and truth.<sup>15</sup> Further, Lejeune argues that the author, narrator, and protagonist of the autobiography are the same, and that this “autobiographical pact” is a contract that readers have in mind when approaching a memoir. What does this mean? I believe this “pact” creates an expectancy of genuineness on the part of the writer. Whether the writer’s account of her life is truthful or not, the writer represents her own identity. What she writes reflects her. If the memoir does not come across as truthful, it nevertheless reflects the person who has written the words. A memoir does not claim to be an objective account (by an observer) of an individual life. The person writing a memoir chooses what and whom she wants to write about, and as a result, how she wants to present herself. The way she presents herself might provide information about her identity. Due to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, I will refer to the “autobiographical I” as author/narrator/protagonist/writer (as they are all the same) in this thesis.

When producing a memoir, a text that “by engaging the past, reflects on the present”, the writer’s memory is the primary source of information.<sup>16</sup> In the act of remembering, one interprets the past within the present context, and this continuity of coherence is interpreted into meaning.<sup>17</sup> As a result, when we read a memoir, we read the writer’s interpretation of past experiences. In this manner, the writer constructs her own interpretation of her life. Kingston’s need for coherence and unity becomes clear in that she addresses the confusion as to what is true and not. Her mother’s stories and explanations do not explain or create coherence in Kingston’s life. *The Woman Warrior* is Kingston’s own interpretation of experiences, stories, and myths, and she presents stories of women’s lives that branch into her own, thus giving her “ancestral help” in her negotiation of identity.<sup>18</sup>

There are different understandings and practices of memory within cultures. Within a Western context one would say that one remembers situations and experiences that oneself has witnessed. However, as we will see in *The Latehomecomer*, memories can also be of severe historical and cultural importance, and therefore be incorporated not solely as stories, but as memories even though these situations are not witnessed by the person who remembers.<sup>19</sup> These memories can be collective, individual, and cultural, and are reinterpreted by the writer. Such stories might be presented as memories in an equal manner as individual

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<sup>15</sup> Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Vintage International Edition, April 1989 ed. (New York: Random House, 1976), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 23.



memories. The “politics of remembering”, as Smith et al. refers to, is one of the main reasons presented by Yang herself, for why she writes her memoir. The story of how the people of Hmong were left by the American troops to be slaughtered in the Laotian jungle seemed forgotten. Yang could not find any information about what her family had experienced in any of the American history books. She refers to her father’s plea for her to tell of their family’s story, and their search for a homeland.<sup>20</sup> In what ways individual and collective memories reflect identity formation is another aspect of autobiographical theory that will be addressed in the analysis.

Within autobiographical theory, the concept of space also reflects the representation of identity as well as identity formation. Boardman et al. argues that autobiographies produced in, and about, North America are “preoccupied with place, along with a focus on identity issues directly related to place: rootedness, anxiety, nostalgia, restlessness.”<sup>21</sup> In what ways do the three memoirs in focus, reflect identity in space? In what manner does space reflect their identity formation? How do the three authors negotiate their identity as Hmong/Iranian/Chinese within the, to them, new North American context? How does the space of home, of school/workplace, of neighborhood, reflect each autobiographer’s identity formation? According to Smith et al., there are two distinctions within the concept of space that need to be distinguished. Space is both location and position.<sup>22</sup> The “location” of a narrator is the “geographical situatedness” such as ethnic, gendered, or national embedded context. The “position” of a narrator is the ideological perspectives the narrator adopts herself and that she adopts towards others. Both the location and the position of the narrator might reflect how these women negotiate their role as women within the different spaces they are in. In what ways and through what situations do Dumas, Yang, and Kingston present themselves as women? Do they have to negotiate their identity as women within the family, the school, the workplace, or in religion? In what ways do these writers comment on differences in being a woman in their country of origin in comparison to the U.S.? As residents in the U.S., do they reflect on whether or not they differ from their respective cultural gender traditions and possible family hierarchies? What challenges, limitations, and/or privileges are presented? These questions will be touched on only briefly in the two first chapters, and more in depth when focusing on *The Woman Warrior*.

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<sup>20</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 273.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

When discussing space throughout the analysis, the terms hybridity and diaspora will be used. These terms can be traced back to the theory of post-colonialism. According to Franz Fanon, national consciousness should “pave the way” for a more “ethically and politically enlightened global community.”<sup>23</sup> Further, Fanon argues that if one becomes aware of one’s roots, there will be a greater understanding for individual differences. However, this has not happened. With the colonization, the notion of “the exotic Other”, as opposed to the purity of Americanness, has been part of the racist categorization of people within the same nation. An immigrant might experience prejudice and being treated as someone “Other”, than from the majority group. I believe that if one is treated as different, and never accepted, one will stop trying to become part of the majority group after some time. However, there are also examples of immigrants who, from the arrival to the host nation, do not want to become part of the new culture, learn the language, and become part of the society. Such immigrants often have a strong longing back to their country of origin, their home. This home might no longer exist, but be a nostalgic reflection of what one has hoped it would have been in the past. These immigrants might not want to grow in knowledge of their new home of residence, and they might develop a diasporic identity. In contrast to a diasporic identity, immigrants might also develop a hybrid identity. Such immigrants both keep values, customs, culture, and/or language from the country of origin, but at the same time welcomes knowledge about the new society as well as cultural practices that allows them to take part in the new society. A third group might reject their old culture and adopt the new culture in an attempt of being treated and viewed as part of the majority group. In such cases, the immigrant might experience difficulties and tension within her “immigrant group.” Different sets of values, language, customs and gender roles might create tension and become problematic for individuals, families, religious and cultural groups.

The use of language will also be paid attention to in order to address how language and identity are connected. Paul DeMan argues that memoirs cannot truly explain a person’s life, since the person one presents is an effect of language.<sup>24</sup> The way language ties in with identity formation might be investigated from two perspectives. One perspective is to investigate the way the writers use language throughout the memoir and how this might reflect upon the identity formation of the writer as an immigrant. A different perspective is to look at the stories and examples that have to do with language learning and challenges,

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<sup>23</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: a Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>24</sup> Lea Ramsdell, "Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004).

provided in the memoir by the writer herself. Mainly the latter perspective will be taken into account when focusing on language in connection with identity in the three memoirs.

This introduction has provided the theoretical framework as well as an introduction to the theme of immigration that I found necessary to the literary analysis of the next three chapters. *The Latehomecomer* is the focus of the first chapter, *Funny in Farsi* is the focus of the second chapter, while *The Woman Warrior* is the focus of the third chapter. Every chapter is structured with an introduction to the genre of memoir in the context of the respective author's country of origin, followed by an analysis of aspects of identity formation. The first chapter revolves around aspects such as individual and collective memories, as well as language and agency. In the second chapter, identity formation in connection with relationality, models of identity, and Dumas' motive for writing will be investigated. The third chapter will focus on gender expectations, filiality, and authenticity in connection with identity. These aspects of identity formation serve the overall purpose of the thesis, which is to investigate immigrants' identity formation as presented in these three memoirs.



## **Chapter 1: Memory, Language, and Agency in *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir***

*The Latehomecomer* was published in 2008, twenty-two years after Yang first came to the U.S. Yang has brought with her the Hmong roots into the American autobiographical genre. Through memories, myths, stories, beliefs and relations, Yang narrates her identity and positions herself outside of traditionally Hmong gender roles. The manner in which Yang narrates identity reflects the cultural and traditional practice of expressing individual and collective identity within the Hmong people. This fairly recent immigrant experience sheds light on the modern immigrant experience. Yang presents how her identity has been challenged and changed when encountering a new language, climate, institutions, and systems in America. I will argue that her main purpose is to tell the story of her people, not herself. She thereby breaks with traditional genre conventions. Her memoir does not end in a successful autonomous individual's identity, but rather with the death of her grandmother, the keeper of Hmong culture, and with her own achievement of writing the memoir. However, Yang does not present the publishing process as her own project. Instead, this project is presented as her family's as much as hers, and she does what she is told by her father:

It is very important that you tell this part of our story: the Hmong came to America without a homeland. [. . .] Other people, in moments of sadness and despair, can look to a place in the world: where they belong. We are not like that. I knew that our chance was here. Our chance to share in a new place and a new home. [. . .] You must think about it, and tell it the way it is.<sup>25</sup>

The focus of this chapter is how individual and collective memories are presented and how this reflects identity, how the experience of learning and having to use a new language affects identity, and lastly, how agency reflects identity in *The Latehomecomer*. Before the analysis, a brief overview of how Yang's memoir fits into the Hmong American context will be provided.

### **The Latehomecomer in a Hmong American Context**

Over the last hundred years, the Hmong people have been exposed to, and used, various forms of written languages. Western missionaries, Chinese and Southeast Asian governments, as well as Hmong scholars have made attempts at creating writing systems for the Hmong

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<sup>25</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 273.

language.<sup>26</sup> However, the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), which was created by three Western missionaries and their Hmong assistants in the late 1950s, turned out to be functional and easily learned. During the Vietnam War, the RPA was easy to use and met the need for a communicative technology. According to John M. Duffy, RPA has been accepted by Hmong all over the world and is currently the most used Hmong language alphabet.<sup>27</sup> Due to the status of the Hmong in Laos, most children did not attend school and did therefore not learn how to read and write either Laotian or RPA. Hmong saw literacy and education as a way to achieve respect in Laos, but the opportunity for education was rare to Hmong children who often were denied access to schools in Laos.<sup>28</sup> There were no written texts about Hmong life before the 1950s. However, the Hmong had another way of expressing Hmong life, history, and culture. During the years in refugee camps, an embroidery art, paj ndau (“flower cloth”) was developed. Through this narrative form of art, women expressed themselves, their lives, and their family stories, and in this way engaged in traditional Hmong culture.<sup>29</sup> Yang tells of a different traditional embroidery her mother was given by her own mother when she was married: “Little pieces of cloth carefully lined with flowery symbols and connected squared that told the history of the Hmong people, a lost story, a narrative sewn but no longer legible.”<sup>30</sup> Yang’s mother received a piece of Hmong history written in embroidery. She herself had attended school as “the only girl in her village to have the privilege of attending school with the boys. Her family could afford to do without her labor.”<sup>31</sup> To pursue an education was not a privilege for every Hmong child. Poverty, discrimination, and war prevented Hmong people from achieving educationally. Yang further tells of her mother: “If not for the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers entering their village, my mother would have achieved her dream of becoming a nurse, learned to type with quick fingers, and attracted an educated man.”<sup>32</sup>

After the arrival of Hmong refugees to America, Hmong writers have written accounts of their lives and history in both Laotian and, using the RPA, in both English and Hmong. The practice of writing within Hmong communities has not been restricted to the youngest generation who were sent to school. Hmong writers, whether published or not, used either the

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<sup>26</sup> John M. Duffy, *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community* (U.S.A.: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>27</sup> Duffy, 49

<sup>28</sup> Duffy, *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, 72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Jeannie Chiu, “I Salute the Spirit of My Communities”: Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature,” *College Literature* 31, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>30</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Laotian writing system, or RPA, when writing autobiographical texts. These personal accounts are usually written by men, and are often about war experiences or life in the Laotian jungle. Duffy addresses three reasons for writing such personal accounts. First, many Hmong have chosen to write in Hmong about life in the Laotian jungle, a life, and place, one's children can never experience. The reason for writing in Hmong is a way of emphasizing for future generations the importance of learning Hmong. Second, in addition to men's accounts of war experiences, a few women have also written. According to Duffy, these women write for the purpose of gender relations. Hmong is a patriarchal culture, but the opportunities for education in the U.S. offered women a way of challenging their subordinate status. Not only did these women criticize traditional gender roles, they also offered new ways of thinking about gender relations and the social status of Hmong women in the U.S.<sup>33</sup> The third purpose for writing is that of informing the majority culture about Hmong history, culture, and values. In these texts, Hmong writers have responded to attacks on refugees and presented themselves as "tolerant and fair-minded people and to invite city residents to reconsider the nature of the 'other' in an American city."<sup>34</sup>

One can argue that Yang uses all these three traditions of writing in her memoir. First, she dedicates her book to her grandmother and her baby brother.<sup>35</sup> Throughout *The Latehomecomer*, we learn that Yang's grandmother is full of stories about the past, and that Yang loved listening to her. In order to preserve some of these stories, Yang retells them in her memoir, perhaps so that her baby brother will get to know these stories one day. She also preserves her own life story in this way, a unique story about life in refugee camps, in the "McDonald Housing Projects" and as a Hmong immigrant in America. Second, by pursuing a degree at Columbia University and eventually publishing a book, Yang steps into the line of educated Hmong women, thereby breaking the traditional role of subordinate women in a traditionally patriarchal culture. Even though Yang does not criticize gender relations, she represents a "new status" of Hmong women. Third, Yang does what her father asked her to do; she tells the story of the Hmong. She informs the majority culture of Hmong history, how they did not have a home, how they fought and lost a war together with America, how they came to the U.S. to create a new and better future, and how this land of opportunity and freedom became reality for some of those who struggled for just that.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Duffy, *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-54.

<sup>35</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, vii.

<sup>36</sup> The University of Minnesota, "Center For Holocaust and Genocide Studies," <http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/responses/hmongMigration/part3.html>

Howard Zinn, in *A People's History of the United States*, addresses the issue of how history tends to be presented from the perspective of the conqueror.<sup>37</sup> The history later generations are presented with is often biased, and aspects of our history might be silenced. This is what Yang discovered at school:

In American history we learned of the Vietnam War. We read about guerilla warfare and the Vietcong. The Ho Chi Minh Trail and communism and democracy and Americans and Vietnamese. There were no Hmong – as if we hadn't existed at all in America's eyes.<sup>38</sup>

In the anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, Mai Neng Moua expresses how important it is “for the Hmong and other communities of color to express themselves – to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of us.”<sup>39</sup> This anthology consists of the first creative writing in English done by first and second generation Hmong Americans.<sup>40</sup> Moua's statement aligns with Zinn's agenda of making room in our history books for the voices of the conquered and silenced. Moreover, due to the strong oral tradition within Hmong culture, and no tradition of written literature, there was no published literature (as art) written by Hmong people until the anthology was published in 2002. Jeannie Chiu explains that “[...] because of their veiled role” in the War, and the social problems they have faced in the U.S., the ability and power to express oneself is especially important for Hmong Americans.<sup>41</sup> In order to avoid stereotyping, and to contribute to a greater understanding for Hmong culture, the Hmong people need to present their own versions of their own history. Yang writes her own personal, and the family's, as well as her people's history in *The Latehomecomer*. Her predecessors were born into a world where they could not be heard due to poverty, discrimination, and lack of educational opportunities. Therefore, Yang speaks on behalf of her people, her family, and herself.

The history of Hmong Americans is relatively young and there are therefore still few Hmong American writers. *The Latehomecomer* draws on the traditions of narrating (as mentioned above) but is at the same time a new type of writing within the Hmong American context in that a young writer tells of where she comes from, what she thought she would

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<sup>37</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (HarperCollins, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 201-02.

<sup>39</sup> Mai Neng Moua, *Bamboo Among the Oaks : Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>40</sup> Minnesota Historical Society, "Minnesota Historical Society," Minnesota Historical Society, [http://shop.mnhs.org/moreinfo.cfm?Product\\_ID=110&category=86](http://shop.mnhs.org/moreinfo.cfm?Product_ID=110&category=86).

<sup>41</sup> Chiu, "I Salute the Spirit of My Communities": Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature," 46.



gain, and where she finds herself in connection with culture(s), family, tradition(s) and language. Yang's memoir conveys her family's unique immigration experience. Through presenting individual and collective memories, she illuminates how the transformation from one home to a new home has challenged and changed identities, and how especially language became a factor that challenged Yang's identity.

### **Memory and Identity in *The Latehomecomer***

According to Jens Brockmeier, to remember is to interpret the past within the present context and to create a continuity of coherence in order to make meaning out of the present situation.<sup>42</sup> Yang presents her own memories of how she experienced different events and situations in her life. These memories are her own interpretations of her life, and are structured into a pattern that has become her memoir. There are different understandings and practices of memory within different cultures. In her memoir, Yang draws from both individual and collective memories.

“They [Hmong parents] teach us that we have chosen our lives. That the people who we would become we had inside of us from the beginning, and the people whose worlds we share, whose memories we hold strong inside of us, we have always known.”<sup>43</sup> This part of the opening passage in *The Latehomecomer* reflects how identity and memories are connected. To Yang, the memories and stories she has been told have become memories of her own. This reflects that her identity is intertwined with the memories of others, which she has only listened to, not witnessed or experienced. Further, as a child Yang was told that she had chosen her life. A result of this worldview is responsibility: when life becomes tough she cannot blame her family for bringing her into this world, on the contrary, she must help out as best she can since she has chosen to be born to her parents. The memoir is in itself an expression of this in that Yang presents her family as much as herself, and that she takes on the responsibility of making her family's story known by writing and publishing a memoir. For the most part, Yang refers to herself as “I” and, in accordance with the traditional American autobiography, presents her story from this first-person singular point of view.<sup>44</sup> However, throughout the prologue, Yang writes of herself in third person. How does the

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<sup>42</sup> Jens Brockmeier and Donald A. Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Amsterdam [Great Britain]: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 296.

<sup>43</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Frank E. Moorhead, "The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular," *MLN* 110, no. 4 (1995).

reader understand that “she” is in fact Yang herself? According to Lejeune, “there are three ways of indicating that the third person refers to the author of the text.”<sup>45</sup> First, the author might refer to herself by using her proper name: “She, Yang, was taught.” Second, the author can refer to the activity of writing the memoir: “She, who writes these lines, was taught”, or third, the author might provide a context that “establishes an identification between the author and the character of whom he speaks.”<sup>46</sup> Yang does not provide any of these references. One does not know whether she writes of herself, her mother, her sister, or any other female. However, Yang provides a photograph of a Hmong family of four, whilst writing of this female as a baby, of the baby’s parents, and of the female’s persona. She presents a memory of self-awareness: “From the day that she was born, she was taught that she was Hmong by the adults around her.”<sup>47</sup> The reasons why she refers to herself in third person only in the prologue might be various. First of all, there is no scientific possibility of remembering anything from the moment one is born. This memory of being Hmong is presented in a way that reflects how being Hmong is important to her; the fact that she is Hmong, and belongs to a group signals who she was, from her own perspective. By referring to herself in third person, Yang underscores that she does not pretend to have any supernatural gift of remembering, and she comes across as a trustworthy narrator. A different reason why she refers to herself in third person might be to create an atmosphere of storytelling. Throughout the memoir, the reader learns that listening to stories has been a major part of Yang’s childhood. By introducing her own story in this manner, Yang positions herself as a member of her people who takes on the responsibility of continuing the line of storytellers, and thereby the lives and memories of those who have passed away.

When looking in the mirror for the first time, Yang does not see herself, she sees “Hmong” looking back at her: “Hmong that could fit in all of Asia, Hmong that was only skin deep.”<sup>48</sup> These memories reflect how Yang interprets who she is; part of a group that has no nation of its own, and an individual who has certain physical characteristics that she interprets as being Hmong: “brown eyes, her dark hair, the tinted yellow of her skin.”<sup>49</sup> As an individual within a group, Yang carries both her own individual memories as well as the collective memories of the group. By beginning her memoir by referring to herself in third person, Yang underscores how her identity is rooted in her people, her family, and the history of the Hmong

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<sup>45</sup> Philippe Lejeune, Annette Tomarken, and Edward Tomarken, "Autobiography in the Third Person," *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 33-34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

people. Yang signals that “she” is first and foremost part of a group, and the individual “I” is secondary to this part of her identity.

## **Individual Memories and Self-Awareness**

“According to researchers in developmental psychology, we learn early in childhood what people around us and, by extension, our culture expect us to remember.”<sup>50</sup> Yang does not always provide a clear distinction between personal and collective memories. In the following analysis of memory and identity, I will attempt to distinguish individual memories from the collective memories.

Not until chapter four, does Yang introduce herself in her memoir. Since she was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, she does not hold any personal memories of life in the Laotian jungle or the escape from Laos to Thailand. When writing of her childhood, Yang does so from a happy child’s perspective. She tells of how the dust turned black in her nose and how she was a cheerful child. Such details of the dust in the refugee camp convey the bad conditions these families were offered in Thailand. On the other hand, Yang leaves it to her audience to read between the lines in order to discover this. Why? One effect of this is that she sticks to the untroubled child’s perspective, emphasizing how her childhood in the camp was not one of trauma, due to a child’s innocence and the adults’ capability of providing routines and safety while struggling to survive. Yang presents these memories of her childhood both in a childishly innocent manner, as well as with a grown-up’s retrospective wisdom: “Warm laps welcomed me. I felt the beat of many different hearts against my ear, the rhythm of life, steady and afraid.”<sup>51</sup> As a child, Yang found herself in the midst of the safe surroundings of loving adults, while in retrospect she understands how those same adults were afraid and worried about the future.

Yang also presents herself as “a New Year baby, a symbol of hope that better things were coming.”<sup>52</sup> Her family came to the refugee camp three months before Yang was born. Through descriptions of herself, Yang presents herself as a child who brought joy and future hope to her surroundings. However, Yang’s childhood in Thailand is also full of descriptions of death and sickness in the refugee camp, as well as close relationships to family, religious beliefs, and cultural values. In addition to her individual memories, Yang refers to memories

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<sup>50</sup> Katherine Nelson, "The Psychological and Social Origins of Autobiographical Memory," *Psychological Science* 4, no. 1 (1993). cited in Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

of others and through this reflects the retrospective position she is in while writing. The references to others' memories underscore how Yang is not interested in a presentation of a solely joyful and harmonious life in the refugee camp, but she juxtaposes her memories with the memories of "a man I would come to respect" who remembers rapes and murders.<sup>53</sup> Another reason why Yang juxtaposes her own memories with that of others might be that she wants to establish the relationship of trust between the author and reader. Paul John Eakin addresses questions of importance when discussing trustworthiness: "Did the events really happen? Is the narrator reliable? Are there competing narratives to which we must listen?"<sup>54</sup> By referring to "competing" memories, Yang illuminates differing aspects of the reality she presents. The terrible conditions in the camp were not for her as a child to know of, but information she has learnt later. Yang's identity is presented as a happy, creative, interrogative, innocent, trustworthy, respectful, and obedient child. When presenting her childhood memories, Yang refers to auditory memories;

I can still hear the wailing coming past our rickety gates, as mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, lamented for the person they loved, lying heavy and stiff in the clothes of the dead, being carried someplace on the surrounding hillside, to be buried in graves unmarked, mounds of earth covered by a few toppled stones.<sup>55</sup>

Yang explains how witnessing death in the camp made her scared of death and how she made all the adults in her family promise her that they would never die. Again, as a child, she did not reflect upon how and why life was so fragile in Thailand, however, as a reader one can only try to imagine the conditions she grew up in. In addition to auditory memories, Yang also refers to memories of smell: "Sometimes, as I go through the motions of my life, I come across the smell of grass and water and I travel back to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp."<sup>56</sup> She further explains how she would like to find that smell in a container so that she could "borrow [it] forever."<sup>57</sup> What does the smell of the refugee camp and the memories of that place mean to Yang? In Thailand, Yang was together with her whole extended family. She had not yet experienced any deaths in her family or any separation. Her childhood account is almost ideal in that it contains the safety and happiness every child "should" experience. Yang's personal memories reflect how being surrounded by family meant safety in her childhood. By presenting these memories of odor and sound, Yang underscores how these are her own

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>54</sup> Paul John Eakin, *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>55</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 63.

personal memories, and how she can claim to have been there and heard the cries and smelled the odors. This contributes to the establishment of trust between the reader and author. On the other hand, to the reader, this account of an almost ideal childhood seems too good to be true when knowing of the hardships, violence, and hopelessness felt by the adults. Was Yang's childhood in the refugee camps this harmonious? One can argue that Yang's account creates doubt in a reader and might result in questions of trustworthiness. At the same time, these are presented as Yang's personal memories, as well as the later acquired knowledge of how this same period of her life was extremely tough on her parents: "But I have no memories of my mother smiling in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp - only of the gentle way she took care of Dawb and me."<sup>58</sup> These retrospective comments in connection with her personal, happy, childhood memories, might (re)establish a relation of trust between the reader and author.

The difference between life in Thailand and life in America became enormous not only due to language and geography, but also because as a child Yang suddenly had to face and encounter the hardships of life on the same level as the adults in her family. She and her family are seen as Hmong, meaning someone who does not belong; "sometimes people yelled for us to go home. [ . . . ] Next to waves of hello, we received the middle finger."<sup>59</sup> She could not be protected from the hardships of life any more. As part of the family, she also became part of a consistent worrying about money. Due to money, Yang could not visit her grandmother, her parents had to work long hours, and she had to stop being the free child who could play all day long, and instead became a big sister who took care of her baby sisters and brother. One can argue that Yang's account of leaving her old life for coming to America implies the opposite of what would traditionally be expected from American readers. Her life in Thailand was full of freedom, of learning from her grandmother, and feeling safe. Upon moving to America, where the American Dream is believed achievable for everyone, Yang experienced less freedom, no possible way of learning from her grandmother, and a demand of taking the adults' role of babysitting instead of being surrounded by the safety of family.

Yang also provides a memory of almost dying in a snowstorm together with her father and sister. Being unfamiliar with the Minnesota weather, they sat out in a snowstorm. In the beginning, they found the snow amazingly fascinating. However, soon they could not see anything and the cold was biting. Both Yang and her sister eventually gave up, but her father did not: "Except for his hold, we would have been lost to the cold."<sup>60</sup> Yang explains that she

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 151.

does not remember how they got home, but that she has been told that her “father fell against the front door,” and that her mother opened the door to find them: “A puddle of wet rags on the doorstep of America.”<sup>61</sup> This story reflects Yang’s immigrant experience. She remembers the excitement of coming to a new country: “I had the feeling that my family had arrived at a place that was more perfect than we knew how to imagine. America was before me, my mother and father were close by me, and the world was open.”<sup>62</sup> As with the beautiful snow dancing in the wind, which suddenly turned into a snowstorm, so did the imagined life in America turn out to be a struggle for survival. These memories carry bitterness. The immigrants were envisioned an easier life in America, however, their new life proved to be a continuum of the struggle for survival. These reflections on the immigrant experience signal bitterness due to loss of family, loss of cultural customs, and loss of harmonious innocence.

The memories of the death of her grandmother is assigned a considerable part of the book compared to other events in Yang’s life. The detailed descriptions of her grandmother’s last weeks, the flowers, the smells, the words, indicate that this event was of great importance in the identity of Yang. Throughout the memoir, Yang’s grandmother becomes the symbol of everything associated with safety. The old woman becomes the keeper of both Yang’s past, but also of the collective Hmong past. When she dies, parts of this past die with her. The memories of life in the Laotian jungle pre persecution, and memories of traditions, stories, and shaman knowledge die with her grandmother. Moreover, her grandmother was the keeper of old myths and stories from the Laotian jungle. When she died, the storyteller in Yang’s life was gone. One can argue that the death of her grandmother slowly pushed Yang into her own role as a writer/storyteller. Yang connects the stories told by her grandmother, with that of her own stories, and with stories that reach into the future and new lives, and homes, of her people.

There are no individual memories of American friends or relationships in Yang’s memoir. The memories provided are mostly focused around family. This signals a strong tie to her Hmong roots, and might also signal an intended distancing to Americans. The childhood memories from North End Elementary School show how Yang held a strong Hmong identity. She did not take on the American emphasis on the importance of education, even though her family also stressed this aspect of a successful life in America. In some ways, Yang longs for the past. Yang’s grandmother longs for the long gone peaceful life in the Laotian jungle when she had her family close. Yang’s childhood memories seem to contain a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 126.

longing not for a place, but for a time when she had her grandmother, and the rest of the extended family close: “Life in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp was hard for people who saw it clearly [ . . . ] For us [Yang and her grandmother], in many ways, the life we had in the camp was ideal. We were surrounded by people who loved us.”<sup>63</sup> In contrast to her grandmother’s diasporic identity, Yang’s identity seems to contain a longing for the past, whilst she seems to reach for the future in hope of a better life.

### **Collective Memories and Identity**

The memory of looking into the mirror Yang presents on the first page of her memoir, reflects how being Hmong is strongly tied to her identity. She knows she belongs to a people, and that she shares a dramatic history with this people. Even though her memories from Ban Vinai Refugee Camp are happy, safe, and playful, Yang also emphasizes the seriousness of the adults around her, how death is a major part of her life, and how her life is a continuing chapter of the Hmong history. Yang often presents the lives of her parents, her grandmother, and life in the Laotian jungle in the same manner as her own personal memories. She describes smell, sound, emotions, pain, nature, and tastes from Laos as if she herself had smelled, heard, felt, suffered, seen, and tasted this. From a Western perspective, these descriptions would be categorized as fiction or a retelling of what Yang has once been told. However, due to the manner in which Yang has chosen to present these stories, one can argue that she treats them as if they were her own memories. These stories are part of her past, even though she was not born yet. This breaks with the traditional autobiographical genre in that she presents stories as if they were personal memories and in this manner violates the assumption that the autobiographical “I” presents truthful and self-experienced episodes of life. By breaking these genre barriers, Yang makes room for her cultural background and traditions within the context of the American autobiography.

A belief, or a myth, in the Hmong community is the one of how babies fly around in the skies before they are born. This is a good place for them to be and “calling babies down to earth is not an easy thing to do.”<sup>64</sup> Yang opens her memoir by referring to this traditional belief in that she was in a “conscious” state before she was born, observing human lives on earth. This belief functions as a collective memory, and is presented as a memory told by mothers and fathers to their children. Having been one such baby, ties the generations

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., xiii.

together, in that all of them have been born as Hmong because of choice. One chooses to be born “to our lives; we give ourselves to people who make the earth look more inviting than the sky.”<sup>65</sup> By choosing to be born into the family one has been born into, one has also made an active choice of belonging. The individual belongs to the clan; the clan belongs to a history, and to a future.

According to Smith et al.:

Intergenerational life writing [. . .] captures the ways in which generations carry different histories and explores those histories of everyday trauma that are embodied in the next generations. It also offers stories that position those who have suffered not only as victims of violent events but as survivors with imagination, energy, and resilience. The traumas of everyday life are thus remembered as collective and systemic.<sup>66</sup>

Yang spends the first three chapters of her memoir telling about memories from life in the Laotian jungle. She has not witnessed or experienced this life herself, but through vivid descriptions she tells of what her family saw running into the jungle as their only chance of staying together as a family, of how her parents met in the jungle and how they struggled to reach the border of Thailand. Yang also tells of her grandmother’s life before the Secret War. These stories are not just stories to Yang. They are memories of her clan, and thereby memories of her own. Even though Yang has not experienced the trauma of the war, she has lived close to people who have lived through and felt the trauma and the effects of trauma in their lives. The trauma of the older generation is embodied in Yang, and her memoir seeks to present the trauma of the past, as well as the past and future Hmong generations’ capability of survival and future.

A dream can become a personal memory. The dream might provide the individual with a new perspective on his/her life or a problem s/he is facing. Within a community, such stories might be myths, or fables, that have provided clarity and answers through generations. One of these myths is a childhood memory of her grandmother’s, a story Yang’s grandmother loved to tell often. In the village where she grew up, there was an old lady who had no grandchildren and was all alone during the days. The small children in the village went to spy on her, and watched her practice leaping from wooden stools she had put up inside her bamboo house. The old woman also invited the children into the house and showed them her hands that had an extra set of nails; “when she curled her fingers in, it was just like a tiger’s

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 30.



paw.”<sup>67</sup> One day, the old woman had disappeared and the children were told, “she had left her old life behind and started a new one.”<sup>68</sup> Yang’s grandmother added to the story that this old woman turned into a tiger almost before her eyes. The Hmong people believe there is a life after death, and that they can meet their deceased family in the next life. The story about the old woman who turned into a tiger, might have been a story of inspiration for Yang’s grandmother. The thought of leaving this life and entering a new one, full of energy and strength, like a tiger, is a positive way of viewing the cycle of life. In addition, this story of tigers and mystical, old women in the jungle, represents a past that is in danger of being forgotten. Smith et al. uses Sherman Alexie’s *First Indian on the Moon* as an example of how “the politics of remembering [. . .] is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge.”<sup>69</sup> As Alexie presents old stories from the Coeur d’Alene tribe “to memorialize every Indian who dies in the war,” so does Yang (and her grandmother) present stories of the past to bring knowledge to the future generations of how past life, and beliefs were. In addition, by retelling this story from the Laotian jungle, Yang takes the role of a storyteller who passes down stories from the generations above her to the generations under her, just like her grandmother did.

According to Smith et al., Michel Foucault argues that power is activated through discourse, and a person can only get to know him/herself through discourse. In addition, there exist regimes of discourse that decide who can tell their stories and the forms these stories may take: “Subjects tell stories of their life through the cultural scripts available to them and they are governed by cultural strictures about self-presentation in public.”<sup>70</sup> Yang has also provided a story of her own, which she wrote in second grade. Following Foucault’s theory, this means that Yang’s story is restricted by the culture, language, and practices of her surroundings. The story is about a watermelon seed that strives not to grow because it understands that if it grows, the little girl who planted the watermelon seed will eventually eat it. However, the watermelon cannot prevent growing, and understands that she will soon be eaten. She asks the moon to make sure at least one of her seeds will be blown away with the wind so that “not everything will die with me.”<sup>71</sup> When the day of the cutting comes, the wind blows all her seeds away from the little girl, “to live as their mother had wanted.”<sup>72</sup> This story reflects how the collective stories within the Hmong community have affected Yang. Further,

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<sup>67</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 219.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>71</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 148.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

the response she receives from the teacher reflects how Yang has presented herself by means of the cultural scripts available to her, and how the culture of the American school system requires something different.<sup>73</sup> What Yang's motivation and message behind this story really were, is not explained in the memoir. However, there is a clear parallel to the history of the Hmong people. They knew they would be slaughtered if they stayed in the Laotian jungle, and in order to live as their parents wanted, they had to flee from their Laotian homes. There is also, in this story, a hint of the collective hope, and expectation the parent generation had towards their children when entering America. "To live as their mother had wanted" reflects the ambitions and care these parents expressed to their children about working hard in order to achieve higher education and economical success. This story shows what an impact the collective memories had on Yang as a little girl, and how Yang produced a new story that points to a present and future hope of a better life for the Hmong. By presenting this story, Yang adds on to the collective memory of her family's immigrant experience. This story, as well as the memoir as a whole, is a contribution to the collective memory of the Hmong.

*The Latehomecomer* is written in an attempt to preserve both the collective memories from Laos, Thailand, and from the first years in America. Why should her younger siblings, born in America, work hard at school and focus on future success? Yang seems to hope to provide answers to this question by retelling, and adding on to the collective memory of her family. These collective memories shape who the group, and the individual, are, and are stories about who one is and is not. The family gatherings, which focused on "how to improve our lives in America," were arenas for telling, retelling, and utter hope and expectations towards the younger generation.<sup>74</sup> The collective memories create a collective identity which is presented as strongly founded in the past, but at the same time directly points to the future: "We didn't come all the way from the clouds just to go back, without a trace. We, seekers of refuge, will find it: if not in the world, then in each other. If not in life, then surely in books."<sup>75</sup>

What does it mean to be Hmong? Throughout her memoir, Yang refers to them as being "seekers of refuge", "in search for a home." They are a people who did not give up in Laos, and they have created a story of who they were, are, and who they will become in America. The importance of family in Yang's identity formation is impossible to ignore. When writing about her social life, there is always family involved. As a child, she lived in a

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 274.

world of “we’s”: They were Hmong, they did not have a home, they were seekers of a home, they left Laos and later Thailand together, they sought a new home in America together, Yang and her sister had a plan for education together, the family gatherings were concerned around how they (all) were to survive and make it in America, and finally, on the last pages, Yang states: “My family and I had dreamt that the road to writing and publishing a book would be much faster. Like so many others who had no experience in publishing, we had not known.”<sup>76</sup> This memoir is a result of collective memories, and collective hope for the future. Yang does not in any way praise her own accomplishment, or, like Richard Rodriguez emphasizes how his memoir is a highly individual one.<sup>77</sup> On the contrary, Yang produces this memoir as a continuation of the collective remembering. She tells “their story,” as her grandmother told “their” stories. Yang writes these old stories “for my grandmother, Youa Lee, who never learned how to write”, and her family’s new stories “to my baby brother, Maxwell Hwm Yang, who will read the things she never wrote.”<sup>78</sup> *The Latehomecomer* is a contribution to the collective remembering and “cultural production of knowledge about the past.”<sup>79</sup> Its writer, as well as its reader, is offered knowledge about the past that situates the “individual’s self-knowledge” in the present.<sup>80</sup>

### **An Individual Within the Group**

How does Yang present herself as an individual within the group? Yang tells of a period in her life when she became physically exhausted. She suffered under the yoke of her family’s past, of her parents’ present situation, the feeling of hopelessness and stagnation in their lives, and the feeling that they would never be able to live an easy life where economical problems would not control their lives. In one way, this episode of Yang’s life becomes the first pause in her life. This is no climax of the story, however, it marks a time when she had to “stand still”. So far, her life has been marked by a constant hope for a better place, a place to call home, for work, for education, for success. Suddenly, the constant collective pursuit for something better overwhelms her and she becomes sick. The history and memories of her people are hers, as if they were her personal memories. Throughout this period, she reflects upon the collective life of her people, family, her own individual situation, and how she gives

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: the Education of Richard Rodriguez : an Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1983).

<sup>78</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, vii.

<sup>79</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 25.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

up all hope for something better. However, she finds consolation in the following realization and becomes stronger again:

I relished the fall: the grass turning brown, the leaves falling, the cold air against my hot skin. Fog before my face, air came from deep inside me to gain visibility and presence in the world. A young woman emerged from the moldy house, a young woman who wanted to be a writer and tell the stories of a people trying at life, to look for all the reasons that called life from the clouds.<sup>81</sup>

This episode indicates the importance of meaning and coherence in her life. Yang needed to reflect upon her past in order to find her own voice, her own place, her own identity. After this period she does not express being whole; however, she has come to terms with who she is and her role in life, and can move on from there. In many ways this signals a “silent rebellion”, not directed towards her roots or America, not towards any person, but towards her own and her family’s destiny. After coming to terms with the Hmong history and present situation, she goes on, not with a straight back but with her head lowered to fight against the windy storm that she knows she will always face due to her being Hmong, a seeker of refuge.

“[A memoir] is a story that simultaneously is about the past, the present, and the process in which both merge; and it is about the future as well, about the future that starts in the very moment the story is told.”<sup>82</sup> Brockmeier’s view on the fusion of past, present and future, recapitulates how Yang’s memories are intertwined and shape identity. The memories Yang presents are memories of significance to her, or the identity she wants to present as her. In this way, the memoir becomes an expression of the present Yang, the one who is narrating the past with the glasses of the present. Further, in telling her story, Yang also points to the future, to what this memoir will reveal to those who read it. She does not point to the future in regards to her own individuality, but rather, to the future of the Hmong people, the group whose history, present, and future she identifies with.

## **Language and Identity**

When Yang and her family were in Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp, Yang’s whole family prepared to go to America.<sup>83</sup> The adults went to school where they learned basic phrases in English, they learned about American food, and other basic information that would help them

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<sup>81</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 210.

<sup>82</sup> Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, 250.

<sup>83</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 91.

in the transition to America. The children were sent to school where they started learning the alphabet and English words. Yang went to school together with Dawb, but after a short time, Yang was sent to the day-care center since she was not able to stay awake when the teacher started talking. At the day-care center, Yang was given a pencil and a notebook: “I did not know how to draw. I did not know how to write. I had seen other people draw. I had seen other people write. I thought writing was the easier of the two.”<sup>84</sup> She “writes” stories with her own letters and words. She tries to retell stories she has heard, as well as her own stories about life in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp and stories about the time before she was even born. Even though Yang had not learned how to write, she tried to write what she knew: “In Ban Viani Refugee Camp, I discovered the shapes of stories, how to remember them, and how to tell them.”<sup>85</sup>

This memory from her early life reflects how literacy is a social practice. Even though there was no teacher standing over her, telling her how and what to write, Yang decided to express herself and her cultural background in writing. Yang refers to other people whom she has seen writing. She also refers to stories she has been told, and in playing with “writing”, she takes part in this social practice of telling and retelling. However, Yang’s encounter with learning American ways and expressing herself in English took a different form. Sitting in a classroom while learning English is in many ways a very social learning arena, however, who Yang was, her background and persona were not brought into the learning arena. Instead, she and her sister were expected to fit into the American school system and adjust to teaching/learning practices in a culture and language very different from their own. Their first encounters with American schools resulted in being expelled, or rejected due to their lack of English language knowledge; “this is my first memory of feeling embarrassed.”<sup>86</sup> The sisters’ English was not considered good enough and therefore they were not wanted. The skill they needed in order to get into a school was English. However, they needed to get in to a school in order to learn English. This reflects a society that was not prepared to include and educate immigrants. Yang and her family used all their resources and acquaintances in pursuit of being included in the American society.

Another aspect of America that seems to have changed Yang’s identity, and view on herself, is the one of oral English. Yang explains how she felt her voice was different in English. She also thought her father’s voice was different in English; “In English, his voice

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 141.

lost its strength. The steadiness was gone; it was quiet and hesitant.”<sup>87</sup> She further tells that she hoped not all Hmong people lost their strength when speaking English. At the airport, she heard her father speak English to strangers for the first time and she noticed how he tried to ask people the same question over and over again without anyone stopping to listen. She remembered how she felt his hand turning hot and his eyes avoiding hers. Even so, she was very proud of her father and how he could take care of her. To see how a new language changes her family, and limits their social freedom, might have affected Yang’s attitude and motivation to learn English. As a child, she did not seem very interested in learning English, and she found it hard. When turning back to the notion of language learning as a social practice, Yang’s encounter with the American school does not reflect her own social approach to literacy and language learning. In contrast, Yang experiences language learning as an autonomous practice led by an authority figure within the institution of the school. Yang remembers how their teacher bruised Dawb’s arm when he saw she had a gum in her mouth. Her parents were powerless, and there was nothing they could do. From that moment, Yang began to hate school. Learning became associated with this power relationship, and learning was supposed to happen in the presence of the teacher who harmed Dawb. The learning process was no longer rooted in the girls’ social, cultural, and familiar context. This hindered learning: “Dawb was scared of the teacher, and she couldn’t learn anymore after the gum trouble.”<sup>88</sup> Later, when Yang and Dawb were placed in different classes, Yang explains how she “lost the few English words I had grown comfortable with. English was hard on my tongue.”<sup>89</sup> Within the American school system, Dawb had reached a higher level than her sister, she was older than Yang, and was therefore placed in a different class. Within the context of the school there seems to have been no room for Yang’s need for safety. This led to Yang becoming isolated and it slowed down her progress in learning English. Why does Yang include this indirect critique of the American school system? As Thomas Couser states in *Memoir: An Introduction*, it is important to investigate “how particular genres encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history.”<sup>90</sup> Yang’s indirect critique through telling of her experiences with the American schools can be seen as an attempt on reinforcing the collectivistic values of the Hmong culture into the American culture. If American schools were better prepared for immigrants, she might not have struggled many years with finding her voice, finding her place, within the American context.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>90</sup> Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, 52.

As she remembered her father's voice losing strength in the airport, Yang felt that her English was awkward and stuttering. Her solution became to speak as little as possible, and whisper the words when she could not get away with just nodding and shaking her head. Previous in her memoir, Yang refers to herself as a talkative child. In Hmong, Yang talked and asked questions and listened attentively to stories she was told. This part of her identity is lost when she must use a new language. When the teacher told Yang's parents about her silence in school, they did not understand, since she was such a talkative child at home. Yang explains: "I told them that I had no voice in English. I said sometimes when I wanted to talk, I couldn't find my voice, and then when I did – the person, a kid or a teacher – would already be gone."<sup>91</sup> Yang's experience of needing time, but not be given time to engage in social contexts when learning English, must have had a destructive impact on her motivation, and ability, of learning English. Again, this example shows how the process of language learning is expected to happen in a certain way within a specific context, without (necessarily) engaging the social and cultural background of the language learner. In Yang's case, this experience rips her off her identity of being a talkative child, someone valuable within social contexts. The aspect of identity change presented here, is not what one would traditionally expect from an American memoir. American school, education, society, and opportunities, limits Yang's self-development. She is the one who has to change and adapt. If not, she will not "make it" in the new, American society. Again, Yang criticizes this aspect of America, where easily adaptable immigrants will find their place and take the opportunities offered for them, while those who struggle with factors such as language, culture, values, and learning practices, will not be given the same opportunities.

Yang writes of how her whole family worked together as a team in order to help her learn English: "The way to speaking English was harder than just knowing the letters that made the words."<sup>92</sup> How to speak, to articulate the words in her own voice, was the worst challenge. When speaking Hmong, Yang was "free". She did not have to search her head for the correct words and sounds. In English, the whole process of speaking felt, and sounded foreign to her. Even though her family worked as a team to make life in America easier for her, Yang did not learn to speak English well enough to become comfortable in speaking English: "In school, I was learning how to write but not to talk."<sup>93</sup> One can argue that Yang, once again, indirectly criticizes. She criticizes the "English as a Second Language closet"

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<sup>91</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 147.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 149.

which is the idea of making children who do not know English well enough leave the classroom in order to read together with other children in the same situation. Yang describes this daily routine of leaving for the closet (a very small room without windows): “I felt embarrassed, odd, and different, but there was no changing it, so I pretended to be casual. [. . .] The closet was only for children like me, who were not learning English as well as they could be.”<sup>94</sup> This description reflects the stigmatization Yang must have felt, and a very visible “evidence” of being different from the other children. The language barrier Yang faced affected her whole life outside of the family context. She did not have anyone to lean on, she had no American friends (or at least she does not mention anyone in her memoir), and she was not able to express who she was, her knowledge, or participate in social situations where English was the required language. On the other hand, this daily walk to the closet, and feeling of embarrassment and difference, might reflect how Yang struggled to accept that she was different from the other children in her classroom. She was used to being part of a group of children in Thailand, while at school, she can no longer hide in a group. Yang is paid extra attention and the teachers work with her as an individual in order to help her reach a higher level at school. In contrast to the individualistic focus of the traditional autobiography, Yang’s account reveals how individuality and autonomy is not the ultimate goal for her. Rather, it is an idea, and a practice she despises and does not wish to adapt to.

Moreover, in contrast to Yang, Dawb does well “under the care of a teacher with brown hair and big green eyes.”<sup>95</sup> She wins a spelling bee and learns how to speak English without an accent. The victory provides Dawb with fifty dollars, which she gives to her father who needs a new pair of shoes. To Yang, this proved that “education was the answer to our lives’ questions, and might also be a personal epiphany, that individuality is a key to the future in America.”<sup>96</sup> Dawb became better than Yang in speaking English, and “because writing did not take voice, I liked it better.”<sup>97</sup> Yang wrote letters to her grandmother, which were full of longing and love. These letters were written in English. Why? Since Yang had never learned how to write any other language, she wrote the letters to her grandmother, who had no knowledge of English, in English. What function did these letters have? Through writing, Yang was able to communicate her biggest sorrow and longing so that her

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



grandmother “would know that I had not forgotten her in America.”<sup>98</sup> She is able to express herself through written words, not through spoken words.

Another aspect of language and identity is that of space. The “spaces of sociality, that is, relationships and actions that are formalized in communicative interaction,” reveals how language and space are connected.<sup>99</sup> Where/when do you use your mother tongue, and when do you use English? At the family gatherings, the children were encouraged to become educated people. They were being compared to each other and as a little child Yang understood that there was a difference between the good and bad children in the family: “All the young cousins were to learn not to become like the bad cousins - bad usually because they had friends and went out with them and had started speaking English at home.”<sup>100</sup> These bad cousins are compared to the good cousins: “good usually because they went to school every day and came home on time and spoke Hmong at home.”<sup>101</sup> These examples signal that expectations from the larger Hmong family clash with those from school. When speaking English at home and going out with American friends are exemplified as bad, a little girl such as Yang will struggle in language learning. If she did not have any arena to practice English, she would not advance either, and she would become isolated and uncomfortable when speaking English. When sitting at the family meetings and looking at the good and bad cousins, Yang remembers: “I knew that if I couldn’t carry the pressure of being good then surely I would be bad.”<sup>102</sup> It seems as if Yang thought she had two options. She could either be loyal to her Hmong roots, and the expectations from home, or, on the other hand, she could reject her roots, take on the American life and language, and live up to the expectations from America. I believe these signals and expressed expectations have contributed to her difficulties with language learning. In an interview with Yang from 2008, she tells how she still struggles with speaking English.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, Yang has chosen to write her memoir in English. In some ways, she connects the new language and the old Hmong stories, values, history and customs. Babak Elahi observes when studying Iranian American women’s memoirs, that “while the English language of the memoir may not perform an accented identity, it does narrate one. This narration of an accented past attempts, I would argue, to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>99</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 44.

<sup>100</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 170.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>103</sup> Dailymotion, "Interview with Kao Kaia Yang: author of The Latehomecomer," Prairie Lights Bookstore, [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgf0dk\\_interview-with-kao-kalia-yang-author-of-the-latehomecomer\\_people](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgf0dk_interview-with-kao-kalia-yang-author-of-the-latehomecomer_people).

reclaim history.”<sup>104</sup> Through masterly written English, Yang is, in *The Latehomecomer*, able to tell the world about the past, her people, and how they are, in the present, seekers of a home. Through English, Yang can communicate with the world outside the Hmong context. Through English, the hope of finding a home might become more than just a hope.

## Agency

Smith et al. writes:

Traditional forms of autobiography have often been read as narratives of agency, evidence that subjects can live and interpret their lives freely as transcendental [. . .] subjects. But we must recognize that the issue of how subjects claim, exercise, and narrate agency is far from simply a matter of free will and individual autonomy.<sup>105</sup>

Yang functions as an agent in her own memoir. She makes choices and performs acts. However, does she make choices out of an individual autonomy, or does she make choices based on her past and present surroundings? I will suggest that due to the political and social environment she lives in, she is in many ways the master of her own acts, however, to what extent she is an autonomous master may be discussed. Smith et al. refers to Louis Althusser’s work and how he argues that subjects become what institutions make of them, while at the same time, that subject does not believe s/he is “dictated” by anything but her own free will.<sup>106</sup> An example is that of Yang’s encounter with school. She explains how she chose not to play with the other children, or how she chose to whisper responses in English instead of speaking aloud. These “choices” were not made in a vacuum. Yang had experienced how American children and adults did not have time to listen to her, how she was labeled “a quiet child”, and therefore she became a product of those signals. Another example is the status of Yang’s grandmother. In Laos and Thailand, she was a shaman, a woman who received respect from other villagers even though she did not have a husband. The impossible situation in Laos and later in Thailand, gave Yang’s family only one real possibility: to leave Asia for America. When Yang meets her grandmother in the U.S. the first time, Yang’s grandmother has turned into a helpless old lady in a wheelchair who needs to have cards around her neck with pictures on them so that she is able to communicate with the stewards. Yang’s grandmother, the

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<sup>104</sup> Babak Elahi, "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006): 478.

<sup>105</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 54.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

separation of family members, and the transition from an individual in power, to a powerless individual, are all imposed by the structures of the American society, not of individual choice. Smith et al. further refers to Elizabeth Wingrove who argues that individuals are influenced by the institutions they are part of, and how these institutions carry their own ideologies. These “multiple ideologies” create a “perpetual reconfiguration.”<sup>107</sup> In Yang’s case, when her political and social surroundings change, her identity is affected, her behavior changes, and the way one sees one’s life will be revalued and rearranged. On the other hand, in agreement with Michel de Certeau, Yang is not solely a product of her surroundings.<sup>108</sup> She does manipulate the spaces and systems she is entangled in. She writes the memoir in her second language, and through this Western medium, she creates a space for herself, for her roots, for the traditional Hmong stories, and for the silenced history of the secret war. Judith Butler argues that agency is to realize and take into consideration that one is opaque. Agency is to narrate one’s fragmentation and “the way in which we are constituted in relationality”.<sup>109</sup> Yang narrates her own life in relation to her family, to Laos, to Thailand, to the larger family, to the American school, to English, to stories, to Hmong, to the role of being a little sister, and so on. Her memoir is densely filled with descriptions of herself, and her family, in relation to surroundings. Through writing the memoir she performs her identity, and at the same time, in agreement with Wingrove, Yang is manipulated by the world around her, and is not able to narrate her identity due to its constant reconfiguration. One can argue that the result is that she is never able to fully narrate her identity, only a representation of it. Moreover, Yang and her family’s story as presented in *The Latehomecomer* is a product of the time and ideologies that affected Yang at the current time of writing. Her memoir therefore represents more than her story and her voice, it represents a time as well as the multiple ideologies Yang was influenced by.

## Concluding Remarks

With *The Latehomecomer*, Yang has brought the traditional Hmong “flower cloths” into the medium of a memoir. By becoming a writer and using her second language, Yang has positioned herself outside of the traditional Hmong woman status, and taken on the responsibility of telling and informing the world about their history. Through both personal

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 64.

and collective memories, Yang has narrated her identity formation. Through episodes from her personal life, the reader is allowed glimpses of a peaceful happy child in Thailand, whose family is to some degree traumatized, but nevertheless manages to create a safe space for children to grow up in. The way Yang presents memories reflects her strong ties to Laos, a place she has never been, to Thailand, to her grandmother and family, and to the past of the Hmong people. The changing social and political environment Yang experiences when leaving Thailand for America, affects and forms her identity throughout her childhood and adolescent years. Moreover, her identity is still changing in writing this memoir. Yang narrates her life from a retrospective position that allows her to analyze, bring in new knowledge and an adult's perspective. According to Brockmeier, "life needs plots to make it more precarious and problematic, more bearable and perhaps easier to live."<sup>110</sup> Through writing this memoir, Yang is able to find or acknowledge plots in her life, to construct her past into a meaningful story which fits into the present and which may provide a meaningful foundation for future life. Moreover, *The Latehomecomer* does not conform to the traditional individualistic Western memoir. Her focus is not her individual story but the story of her family. Everything about Yang is rooted in her background, her family, their history, and their future hope. With this memoir, Yang raises her voice within the discourse of American autobiographical literature. She protests the grammatical conventions she was forced to stick to at school, and makes herself understood even though commas are missing and some words are in the wrong place. She also combines myths, stories, and beliefs on the same level as collective and individual memories, and thereby challenges genre barriers. According to an interview with Yang, she does not focus on grammar and punctuation, and perhaps rules and genre conventions: "Meaning is meaning, and if you can get meaning all the right parts do not need to be in place."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, 278.

<sup>111</sup> Dailymotion, "Interview with Kao Kaia Yang: author of *The Latehomecomer*".

## **Chapter 2: Relationality and Models of Identity in *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America***

As the title of the memoir implies, Firoozeh Dumas uses humor as the approach to tell about her life. *Funny in Farsi* is not funny exclusively for those who know Farsi; in this memoir, Dumas presents a humoristic perspective on Iranian immigrants' encounter with America. The memoir is organized into anecdotes that are not necessarily presented in chronological order. The focus of these short stories from her life is not always Dumas herself. The focus varies between different agents such as her mother, her brother, her uncle, herself, her aunt, her husband, and other people in Dumas' life. In other words, Dumas' memoir is about herself in relation to mostly her father, to her mother, and other relatives. She distances herself from them while at the same time emphasizes the close relationships, respect, and love she and her family have for one another. In the anecdotes, Dumas comments on themes like religion, gender, prejudices, and tolerance. The following chapter will focus on how identity is presented through relationality and models of identity. I will argue that through placing herself outside some of these categories, she writes herself into the model of the "successful immigrant". In many ways, she takes the perspective of an American. Moreover, how Dumas' identity is revealed through her presentation of American and Iranian culture, as well as her motivation for writing, will be discussed. Before the analysis, I will provide an overview of *Funny in Farsi* in an Iranian American context.

### **Iranian American Memoirs and *Funny in Farsi***

Erased from the public scene and privatized, the Iranian woman has for long been without autobiographical possibilities. Textual self-representation of individuals is not divorced from their cultural representation; and in a culture that idealizes feminine silence and restraint, not many women can or will opt for breaking the silence.<sup>112</sup>

According to Farzaneh Milani's observation, the history of Iranian women autobiographers cannot be seen isolated from Iranian women's sociopolitical status. It is not possible to be an autobiographer and at the same time follow the ideal of being "silent" and "restrained". Different from that of the Western history of autobiography, in Iran both men and women have historically been discouraged from writing memoirs. There are only a few memoirs

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<sup>112</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse University Press, 1992), 201.

written by Iranian men, and even less by women. The reason for this is, according to Milani, that autobiographical stories have been perceived as public unveiling, a transgression of the private barrier.<sup>113</sup> Why is writing a memoir seen as public unveiling? Eakin observes, “theorists of privacy seem to agree that space or social distance is a precondition of privacy. If we accept these hypotheses, ethical problems will arise in life writing when space is transgressed, when privacy is abridged, with the result that the integrity of the person is breached or violated.”<sup>114</sup> Autobiographical stories must, according to this quote, therefore to some extent put a person’s private thoughts, relations, feelings, memories, and experiences on display for the public. Moreover, in Iran, the question of whether or not a woman should wear a veil has been debated for over a century. Governments have both forbidden the veil and required the veil.<sup>115</sup> The first Iranian memoir written by a woman was published as late as in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>116</sup> These earliest memoirs address “misperceptions regarding the author” and are concerned with demolishing false images of the author.<sup>117</sup> Like her predecessors, Dumas deals with these images. She places herself within the category of “immigrant” and “Iranian” while she, at the same time, comments on themes that traditionally carry tension, such as religion and gender roles.

Iranian immigration to the U.S. can be divided into two waves. The first wave lasted from mid-1950s to the late 1970s when the Iranian Revolution started. This wave consisted mainly of college students, and Iranians who supported the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah.<sup>118</sup> The second wave of Iranian immigrants began with the revolution to the present. This wave consists mainly of exiles, political refugees, and asylum seekers. Dumas’ father came as a student to the U.S. during the first wave, and left with a dream of coming back with his family. He did bring his family to the U.S. before the Iranian Revolution and they experienced Americans’ change in attitude towards Iranians pre- and post the revolution.

Amy Motlagh argues that there has been a “changed periodization of Iranian American life writing.”<sup>119</sup> Najmeh Najafi, an Iranian student who came with the first wave, wrote the memoir *Persia Is My Heart* in 1953. The memoir is concerned with educating the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 7, 58-59.

<sup>114</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 161.

<sup>115</sup> Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 19

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>118</sup> Migration Information Source, "Migration Information Source," Migration Information Source, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=404#1>.

<sup>119</sup> Amy Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing," *MELUS* 33, no. 2 (2008): 18.

reader about Iran and “how to understand Iran properly.”<sup>120</sup> To some degree, Dumas’ memoir also serves this purpose of reeducating her audience. She writes about questions she and her family were met with by Americans, and how she both enlightened them but also chided children whom she found annoying. Motlagh tells of how Najafi, in her memoir, emphasizes similarities between Iran and America and “point[s] out areas in which she believes Iranian culture is superior to American culture.”<sup>121</sup> Dumas, however, is not concerned with positioning Iranian culture above American culture. She criticizes and praises aspects of both cultures, which will be dealt with in the subchapter “In Between Two Cultures”.

In the autobiographical novel *Foreigner* (1978), Nahid Rachlin conveys a critical tone towards both Iranian and American societies. The protagonist of her novel feels alienated both in Iran and in the U.S.<sup>122</sup> “Unlike Najafi, Rachlin’s heroines are alienated as individuals, not as immigrants”.<sup>123</sup> This alienation in both the Iranian diaspora and the American society is not, in general, shared by Dumas. However, in her chapters “I Ran and I Ran and I Ran” and “I-raynians Need Not Apply,” Dumas accounts for the economically and socially tough situation for her family; as Iranians in the U.S., they were rejected by both the Iranian and the American society.

The Iranian revolution resulted in many intellectual emigrants. The largest portion fled to the U.S., where many encountered racism, prejudices, and discrimination. According to Persis M. Karim, many Iranian immigrant writers “sought opportunities to speak to Western reading audiences” after the revolution.<sup>124</sup> These writers were mainly women who “suddenly obtained in a Western reading audience the opportunity to speak freely and without fear of judgment about their self-disclosure.”<sup>125</sup> Iranian American memoirs published in the late 1990s were typically either victim stories or shame narratives.<sup>126</sup> These authors present themselves as victims of the Iranian Revolution and as victims of “the invisibility of their community in the American schema of multiculturalism.”<sup>127</sup> Dumas’ memoir is neither a victim nor a shame narrative. Instead, she writes back at this trend by presenting how she, and her family, despite struggles with language, jobs, economy, and cultural differences, has managed to survive and “succeed” in America. This stands in contrast to *The Latehomecomer*,

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Persis M. Karim, "Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora," *Radical History Review*, Fall 2009 2009, 153.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing," 28.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

which is a victim story of how a people suffered in generations due to the Secret War and their status as “outcasts” in Laos, Thailand, and to some extent in America. In contrast to Yang’s memoir, Dumas’ memoir does not reveal bitterness towards the struggles they have faced. Instead, she emphasizes how she has used her background to make a new, hyphenated life in America. This will be further discussed in the following subchapters.

The Iranian American memoirs published post 9/11, have received an enormous response. Motlagh argues that the response to the memoir boom signals that Americans in general are more anxious about Muslims in the public sphere, as well as a need for debate on the “appropriate role of” members of the Iranian diaspora.<sup>128</sup> While Yang writes in order to preserve and add on to the history of her people and to educate future Hmong generations about what it means to be Hmong, Dumas has a different motivation. The questions of what it means to be Iranian, what it means to be American, and what it means to be an immigrant are dealt with only indirectly in *Funny in Farsi*. Motlagh argues that the post-2003 memoirs are focused on educating the reader, but that “recent memoirs are no longer intended exclusively to educate Americans about Iran.”<sup>129</sup> Dumas is equally occupied with educating the Iranian diaspora as well as the American readers. However, the question of whom should represent and speak for the Iranian diasporic identity, is debated.<sup>130</sup> According to Jasmin Darznik, “Iranian immigrant women have emerged as important agents in framing how American readers see and interpret not only the history, politics, and culture of Iran but of the greater contemporary Middle East.”<sup>131</sup> Dumas steps into the line of these women writers, whilst the humoristic point of view is untraditional in the Iranian American autobiographical context. Even so, she, like her fellow diasporic Iranian women writers, “challenge[s] the stereotype of the self-effacing, modest Iranian woman.”<sup>132</sup>

## **Identity and Relationality**

Hertha D. Sweet Wong argues in her article “First –Person Plural: Subjectivity and Community in Native American Women’s Autobiography”, that “a subject is not either individual or relational, but may be more or less individual or more or less relational in

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>130</sup> Amy Malek, "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 389.

<sup>131</sup> Jasmin Darznik, "Writing Ourselves into American Letters," Association of Iranian American Writers <http://iranianamericanwriters.org/critical-issues-archive-01-jasmin-darznik.htm>.

<sup>132</sup> Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley, "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's Persepolis," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 1, no. 2 (2005): 224.



diverse contexts.”<sup>133</sup> This stands in contrast to what Eakin calls both “Gusdorffian” and “anti-Gusdorffian extremes”, which labels a woman’s “process of individuation [. . .] relational” and collectivistic, while a man’s “process of individuation” is “autonomous” and “individualistic”.<sup>134</sup> Similar to *The Latehomecomer*, Dumas’ memoir differs from that of the traditional individualistic focus of the genre. Her main concern is not her own achievements and experiences, but her relatives, and first and foremost, her father. In the afterword, Dumas writes: “When I started writing my stories, I had no idea that my father would figure so prominently. Often, I would start a story about myself, and by the time I was finished, it was about my father. How this happened I do not know.”<sup>135</sup> The anecdotes that constitutes Dumas’ memoir reveal strong ties between herself, her father, and her relatives. In contrast to Yang, Dumas expresses that she was not aware of these strong ties when writing the memoir. While being a relational memoir, *Funny in Farsi* is at the same time individualistic in that Dumas, through anecdotes about her relatives, positions herself inside and/or outside the group. This subchapter will investigate how Dumas’ identity is presented through relationality.

Dumas writes of how she and her mother thought moving to America contained both excitement and fear. They did not speak English themselves, however, her father did: “We counted on him not only to translate the language but also to translate the culture, to be a link to this most foreign of lands.”<sup>136</sup> However, Dumas and her mother soon discovered that her “father spoke a version of English not yet shared with the rest of America.”<sup>137</sup> These examples reflect both how her father symbolized safety to Dumas, and how she found pride in him being an educated and widely travelled man. Even though her father did not speak English well enough to be understood, he did not give up trying to communicate in English. Dumas puts forth her father’s attitude towards English, and engagement in communicating in English, as an example of how to behave as a member of the Iranian diaspora. Dumas signals pride over her father’s approach to the English language, as does Yang when writing of her memories from the Airport.<sup>138</sup> However, when it comes to the authors’ own approach to learning English, this is very different. Dumas reveals no hesitation with learning and using English, while Yang struggled to find her voice in the new language. Yang’s parents and

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<sup>133</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 169.

<sup>134</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 191.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, 119.

relatives encouraged education as the way to success in America. Dumas' father did the same, and stories about how her uncles succeeded in education and occupation reveal how education is valued in Dumas' family. Yang's mother dreamt of pursuing an education, as did Dumas' mother. Due to their social and political surroundings, they could not achieve their dreams. Dumas herself has, as an adult, outgrown her father in knowledge and usage of the English language, but by sharing these memories, she emphasizes the importance of her father's "go-ahead spirit" in this collective encounter with America.

Another aspect of her father that is devoted focus in the memoir is his desire to become rich. One of the anecdotes is about how her father, full of hope and self-confidence, entered "Bowling for Dollars". Dumas describes how the whole family used to watch this TV show, criticizing the attendees. One day, her father decided he wanted to try: "From our sofa, bowling looked easy, and we couldn't understand why so many contestants failed to win the jackpot."<sup>139</sup> Her father, full of confidence, is invited to join the show. However, he did not come anywhere close to winning and came home with his tail between his legs: "After this brush with fame, we no longer watched Bowling for Dollars. We didn't feel the same emotional involvement."<sup>140</sup> Why does Dumas present this story? The story is not about her at all; rather, the story reflects how her father shared the American Dream of becoming rich, and to have economical freedom. She explains how he and his siblings grew up poor in Ahwaz, and had to function as a team in order to survive after their parents' death. He had experienced being poor and worked hard, and hoped for an economically better life. Both Dumas and Yang presents stories about their parents' experiences with poverty and their dream of achieving economical freedom. These stories contribute to create a bridge between the foreign immigrant and core values in American culture. The American Dream of becoming rich is shared both by the "foreign" immigrant and the American reader. Moreover, through presenting this story, Dumas functions as an interpreter between her Iranian family, and her American readers.

Through another anecdote where her father figures as the main character, Dumas tells of how the religious aspect of her identity has been formed. In telling of her "father's ham cravings" Dumas reveals how she as a little girl looked up to her father and loved being the chosen partner when he went to purchase ham: "The opportunity to spend time alone with my father was so rare that I would have done just about anything to have him all to myself."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 15.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

According to Smith et al., memoirs of family and filiation are often about a father, “by a son or a daughter whose parent was remote, unavailable, abusive, or absent.”<sup>142</sup> Dumas’ memoir is, in this aspect, very different in that she does not reveal any such relationship with her father. On the contrary, she lets her love, respect, and admiration for her father shine through. She would be his “partner in crime” if he asked her to: “Had he wanted to rob a bank, I would happily have driven the getaway car.”<sup>143</sup> This story does not only reveal a strong and loving bond between the daughter and her father, it also reveals the importance of her father in the identity formation of Dumas. She grew up not knowing why her mother and brothers refused to go near the kitchen when her dad brought the ham home. She paints a picture of herself as innocent, growing up in a family where religious rules were not taken seriously enough to teach their youngest daughter, but at the same time, she states that the family religion is Islam.<sup>144</sup> Dumas tells of the time she learned about forbidden food at school. She suddenly understood that ham would lead her father to hell. This came as a shock to her and she ran home to try to save her father’s soul. When she tells him about the consequences of eating ham, he:

[. . .] let out a hearty laugh. I started to cry. Once my father saw my tears, he sat down with me and said, “Firoozeh, when the Prophet Muhammad forbade ham, it was because people did not know how to cook it properly and many people became sick as a result of eating it. The Prophet, who was a kind and gentle man, wanted to protect people from harm, so he did what made sense at the time. But now, people know how to prepare ham safely, so if the Prophet were alive today, he would change that rule.”<sup>145</sup>

Again, Dumas creates a bridge between the American readers and the “alien” Muslim immigrants. As her father explained, and rendered the religious rules harmless for his daughter, so does Dumas for the American reader. In addition, through telling this story, she addresses her fellow members of the Iranian diaspora, and engages in a debate on legalistic religion. Through presenting what her father has told her, in Iran, not in America, signals how this anti-legalistic approach to religion was not a new Western idea for Dumas or her father, but an attitude towards religion her father brought with him from the country of origin. She writes back at prejudices against Iranians and shows how there is diversity within the national group and religious group.

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<sup>142</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 155.

<sup>143</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 85.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

In *The Latehomecomer*, Yang's parents are presented as a team that works hard towards a common aim. Dumas' parents are not presented as a team in the same manner, but rather as individuals who have their place and carry out a role in the family context. The stories about Dumas' mother are few compared to that of her father. Dumas mentions her mother in anecdotes where other relatives figure as main characters. When telling of the family's past life in Abadan, Dumas tells of how they had a backyard with a vegetable garden and chickens. She took care of the garden and studied what insects could be found in their garden. "My mother found my interest in bugs an odd and somewhat disturbing hobby for a little girl. My daughter shares that fascination with things that creep and crawl, and I tell her that a career in entomology awaits her."<sup>146</sup> These comments reflect how Dumas positions herself away from her mother and the mentality her mother represents. They did not share the interest in bugs, in fact, her mother found it disturbing. Dumas tells how she has made an active choice of encouraging her own daughter's interest and points to future opportunities and possibilities based on this interest. Dumas' bitterness is not necessarily directed towards her mother, but rather towards what her mother (in this situation) represents. Dumas' mother focused on valued skills such as cooking, not studies of bugs. In contrast to the stories about her father, which represents progress and/or attempts on progress, most of the stories and comments that involve Dumas' mother, represent the opposite.

Another example is Dumas' presentation of her mother's approach to learning English. Her mother tried to learn English through TV shows but soon found out that "the easiest way for her to communicate with Americans was to use me as an interpreter."<sup>147</sup> Dumas further comments that she had to follow her mother on every errand she had (such as the hairdresser, the grocery store, the doctor) while her older brothers were occupied with sports. To be her mother's personal interpreter was clearly not a role Dumas desired. Whether this was a result of gender difference or age difference Dumas does not tell. However, her clearly displeased comment about this role puts her mother and herself in two different categories: "At an age when most parents are guiding their kids toward independence, my mother was hanging on to me for dear life."<sup>148</sup> Why does Dumas present these episodes? There might be several reasons. Yang also presents episodes of being used as a translator and this seems very typical in immigrant families. Through comments that reveal dissatisfaction, Dumas expresses, from an adult's perspective, how this is not a progressive approach to the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

host language and life. By using her daughter as an interpreter, Dumas' mother did not learn English well enough to manage on her own, and her daughter was not able to participate in American sports and hobbies on the same level as her brothers. One reason why Dumas presents these episodes might be of addressing her Iranian American readers and putting the negative consequences of this practice on the agenda.

The two latter examples also signal how the difference between mother and daughter was not a difference that suddenly occurred with the transition to America. The difference in interests (bugs versus cooking) happened in Iran and might have been a generational difference as well as a personal difference. The fact that Dumas' brother was free to practice sports while Dumas' functioned as an interpreter might also represent traditional values and generational differences. Through addressing these differences, Dumas reflects a new generation of adults who seek progress in their own and in their children's lives. Dumas shows her fellow members of the Iranian diaspora that they have the opportunity for personal growth in America.

In her chapter, "It's All Relatives" Dumas explains how she grew up surrounded by relatives. The importance of relatives in the Iranian culture is reflected in their language: "Only one word describes their [uncle's] children in English, 'cousin', whereas in Persian, we have eight words to describe the exact relationship of each cousin."<sup>149</sup> When Dumas tells about her relatives she uses words like "a second set of parents", "warm", "affectionate", "compliments", "smart", "patient", and "feelings of being enveloped with love."<sup>150</sup> Dumas conveys a longing for her childhood's Iran where she was surrounded by relatives: "Strolling through a market in Berkeley one day, I spotted a vaguely familiar flower. I bent down and smelled a sweet pea for the first time in fifteen years. Suddenly I was six years old again and running around chasing butterflies in my aunt's garden."<sup>151</sup> This episode reflects contrasts between her life in Iran and her life in the U.S. As a child, Dumas could run around, careless, in a garden, surrounded by relatives. In the U.S., she walks through a market where she discovers a flower and a smell she has not seen or smelled in fifteen years. As with Yang, who remembers the smell of the refugee camp, which to her represents the safety of family, Dumas' memory of smell shows how the smell was not only a pleasant fragrance, but also evoked memories of safety in her aunt's presence. Relatives symbolize safety to Dumas.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

According to Adriana Cavarero:

We try to find unity which we cannot discover within our own lives, which begin and end in the unknowable. Instead we rely on others. We seek this unity in the story of others or in our own story as seen through the eyes of others. The story presupposes a listener or an audience but as well as this, as soon as we write our story, it becomes the story of our relationships with others and with the world.<sup>152</sup>

The story about Uncle Abdullah shows how telling about others and about relationships, convey the need for unity in the story of an individual. Dumas reveals how her interest in words stems from her uncle who was very passionate about words. In his library Dumas preferably read *Reader's Digest*, a magazine she received a subscription for years later. Being allowed to browse through her uncle's library, Dumas is given an opportunity to encounter literature and linguistics. Her uncle's knowledge of the meaning of words and the roots of words fascinated her. This has undoubtedly contributed to Dumas' own interest in words, languages, and might have contributed to her decision of writing a memoir. In accordance with Cavarero's quote, this part of Dumas' story becomes the story of her relationship with her uncle, and with literature and the fascination in linguistics. In *The Latehomecomer*, Yang has devoted much space for her grandmother. This relation has influenced her identity as a storyteller. However, Yang's grandmother could not write these stories, a task that is left for Yang. Dumas is influenced by her uncle's interest in language and linguistics. She is also inspired in language learning by her father, but this memoir is, unlike Yang's family memoir, solely her personal presentation.

While her uncle was interested in words, her aunt showered her with compliments: "She often told me that I was smart and patient and that she wished that I were her daughter."<sup>153</sup> Dumas emphasizes how these compliments stayed with her. Her aunt's ability to compliment and encourage her must have contributed to her becoming confident as an individual. Even though this is not said explicitly, it is as if Dumas praises her relatives for contributing to shaping her identity as an individual, and as a mother: "My sweet ameh [aunt] still delivers her kind compliments, but nowadays she tells me what a good mother I am, and I tell her what a compliment that is coming from her."<sup>154</sup> The warmth between Dumas and her aunt that is described here is more than what shines through between mother and daughter. Once again, the importance of relatives in shaping Dumas' identity is obvious.

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<sup>152</sup> Linda R. Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2011), 117-18.

<sup>153</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 97.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

Why does Dumas write about her family and relatives? “Without my relatives, I am but a thread; together, we form a colorful and elaborate Persian carpet.”<sup>155</sup> This is how Dumas sees herself. One can argue that Dumas, like Yang, writes a family memoir. Dumas writes more about relatives than about her self. However, the difference between Yang and Dumas, is that Yang writes from a position of a member of a group, a people whose story must be told by her to the world in order to add on to history. Dumas, on the other hand, writes her own individual story to fellow members of the Iranian diaspora, as well as to American readers in order to provide a larger picture on the diversity within the Iranian American group. She, her identity, is woven into this carpet of family. Her literary interest was encouraged and sparked on by her uncle, her self esteem as a smart girl, and later a good mother, was affirmed by her aunt, her father’s free and positive spirit towards religion, language, traditions, and accomplishments, as well as her mother’s traditional mentality and position have affected Dumas. She herself is not very occupied with religious rules or traditions. She has, like her father, embarked on the task of learning English (and French), and, unlike her father, she has been very successful. She has taken part in the dream her father had for his children, that they would pursue an education and earn enough to provide for themselves.<sup>156</sup> In this way, she has distanced herself from the traditional mentality of how a woman should first and foremost be married and have children. She, now as a mother living under political authorities who allow both boys and girls to pursue an education, has decided to encourage educational and personal progress in her children’s lives as well.

One could argue that Dumas presents her identity as a product of relationships with relatives. However, like Wong addresses, Dumas is relational and individual in different contexts.<sup>157</sup> The story about how Dumas learned to swim reflects independence from both her father and an aunt. Dumas tells how her father had taken on the responsibility of teaching every child, nephews and nieces, how to swim. When Dumas’ turn is coming, she does not learn easily like her cousins. Her father yells and shouts before he gives up and leaves her in the hands of one of her aunts. This aunt takes her “to the deep end of the pool and there, [. . .] let go of me [Dumas]. I sank.”<sup>158</sup> The adults concluded that she was “hopeless” and “a rock.”<sup>159</sup> Later, Dumas decided that she was ready to swim, so she taught herself how to. She

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>157</sup> Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, 169.

<sup>158</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 71.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 72.

explains this turn with that “there was nobody yelling at me in the sea.”<sup>160</sup> This anecdote reflects Dumas’ independence. She is closely tied to her relatives, but at the same time, she is independent and wanted, even as a child, to do things her own way.

In addition to relations that have contributed to shape and change her identity, Dumas also emphasizes how her relationship to languages has shaped her identity. Dumas’ mother tongue is Persian, while her father and his siblings speak a version of Old Persian, Shushtari. Dumas provides a brief history of this language in her memoir.<sup>161</sup> The reason might be that she wants to show how this heritage has affected her ability to learn new languages. She explains how Shushtari taught her “that people sometimes talk louder and laugh harder in their native tongue,” and how “it also trained my ear for accents.”<sup>162</sup> Elahi observes that most autobiographers choose to present stories that individuate them from “familial and cultural surroundings.”<sup>163</sup> The latter example of how Dumas traces her knowledge of languages back to her roots does not individuate her. However, she seems to provide these stories as a background and explanation for her progress in life. In many ways Dumas extends her heritage by applying it on new areas such as language: due to a trained ear and understanding for different dialects and languages, she had managed to become quite fluent in French during tuition in high school.<sup>164</sup> By emphasizing her knowledge of languages, Dumas seeks to bring her Iranian roots up front in order to show both the American readers but also members of the Iranian diaspora, how the Iranian heritage can be valuable in the host country. She explains how her parents had no knowledge of French and thus could not help her. However, this did not stop her, but instead she used her experience and her heritage to learn a new language. In contrast to the traditional autobiography, *Funny in Farsi* presents the roots of the individual not as obstacles in forming a new identity, but rather as a resource in the development of a new identity. Unlike Yang, who in the end of *The Latehomecomer* uses the pronoun “we” when referring to her memoir, Dumas never implies that this project is due to her family. On the other hand, both authors use their unique background, culture, experiences, and struggles to present their story. Neither of them claims to be free from relational bonds.

Dumas’ story is not a “from rags to riches story” nor a story about someone who made it despite her unfortunate background. Rather, Dumas’ story is about someone who made it *due* to her background. She presents herself as being equipped with a richness she drew on in

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Elahi, "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs," 469.

<sup>164</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 130.



order to become a successfully integrated immigrant and a successful and autonomous individual in the American society.

## **Models of Identity**

“There are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at any particular historical moment that influence what is included and what is excluded from an autobiographical narrative.”<sup>165</sup> What models of identity does Dumas use in her memoir? Why does she use these models and what does it convey about how Dumas presents her identity? This subchapter will address different models of identities and stereotypes that Dumas writes herself into, or out of.

According to Smith et al., “life writers incorporate and reproduce models of identity in their narratives as ways to represent themselves to the reader.”<sup>166</sup> What models of identity does Dumas use and/or avoid? Why? Motlagh argues that “many memoirists are members of marginalized ethnic and social groups, and the emphasis of their writing is not breaking down stereotypes, but exploiting and reclaiming them.”<sup>167</sup> The stereotypes that will be investigated in the following subchapter are “The fundamentalist”, “The oppressed female”, “The group member”, and “The alien immigrant”. Through discussing different approaches to practicing Islam, Dumas challenges the stereotype of “The fundamentalist”. By presenting her mother’s and aunt’s dreams and educational background, the stereotype of “The oppressed female” is exploited. Further, while presenting the importance of family whilst emphasizing her individuality, Dumas challenges the stereotype of “The group member”. In addition, she positions herself away from the stereotype of “The alien immigrant” through stories that ridicules her relatives. One can argue that by doing this, Dumas attempts to demolish these stereotypes. However, in the process of doing so, she writes herself into another stereotype; “the successful immigrant”.

In her presentation of religion and religious customs, Dumas presents both the “legalistic” Muslim, her mother, and the more rebellious father who, despite their family’s judgment, makes sure he has a ham sandwich every once in a while: “My mother and brothers stayed away from the kitchen while my father meticulously prepared his meal.”<sup>168</sup> By presenting varying views on religious rules within her family, she challenges the stereotypes

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<sup>165</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 39.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing," 28.

<sup>168</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 86.

that emerged after 9/11, and that Iranian diaspora organizations have wanted to reverse.<sup>169</sup> She writes not only herself, but also her father out of the stereotype of the fundamentalist Muslim. However, Dumas does not give her mother any room in the memoir for further explanation of her choice of following such a rule. By not giving her mother an opportunity for speaking, she places her mother closer to the stereotype of the legalistic fundamentalist, and herself and her father outside of the category.

On the other hand, Dumas does not allow the reader to wonder about her Muslim background. She explains:

My family and I were secular Muslims, like most of the population. My parents' idea of being religious consisted of donating a part of their income to the poor and not eating ham. The only women who chose to cover themselves head to toe with a chador were either older women or villagers. In the cities, Iranian woman preferred to dress like Jackie Kennedy or Elizabeth Taylor.<sup>170</sup>

Why does Dumas emphasize her religious upbringing? By doing this, Dumas writes herself out of the foreign veiled Muslim, and seeks to paint a picture of their religiosity that average Joe can identify with. In the article "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War", Negar Mottahedeh criticizes Dumas for simplifying and presenting Iranian culture in a humoristic way.<sup>171</sup> The effect is that she "trivializes Iran's plight in the modern world" in an attempt of making Iranian culture comprehensible to Americans.<sup>172</sup> One could argue that Dumas, at the cost of fellow Iranians, paints a simplified picture of religiosity and creates a barrier between villagers and urban Iranians.

Another model of identity is the "oppressed female" as painted in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad*.<sup>173</sup> Dumas affirms this image of oppressed women, but also seeks to present a new situation for women. Through telling about her mother's lack of education, she underscores the image of a society that does not allow women to pursue their educational dreams. However, Dumas also mentions her grandfather as "a fairly progressive man", in that he "had even refused two earlier suitors who had come for her [Dumas' mother] so that his daughter could pursue her dream."<sup>174</sup> Through this comment, Dumas exploits stereotypes because she both affirms and breaks the

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<sup>169</sup> Malek, "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade," 392.

<sup>170</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 105.

<sup>171</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War," Middle East Research and Information Project, <http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/grid>.

<sup>172</sup> Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing," 17.

<sup>173</sup> Karim, "Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora," 154.

<sup>174</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 5.

stereotypical assumption that all Iranian men oppress Iranian women. She shows how the educational system and societal traditions end her mother's dreams of becoming a midwife. Moreover, Dumas tells about one of her aunts, who, according to her father was extremely smart. Due to "times being what they were, Sedigeh [her aunt] was not allowed to pursue her education past sixth grade and was married shortly thereafter."<sup>175</sup> Dumas' father never got over this "huge injustice."<sup>176</sup> He was positive that his sister would have become a better doctor than any of her brothers. Through telling about her father's reflections and emotions on the topic, the reader is presented with an Iranian man's attitude which differs from that of the stereotype: "What an injustice to deny a mind like that an education,' he always said, his voice getting smaller and smaller, before he exclaimed: 'And you, Firoozeh, will go to a university!"<sup>177</sup> Through including these stories from her mother's and aunt's life, Dumas presents an Iranian reality very different from the current American reality. Moreover, her grandfather's and father's responses to these women, signal progress, and that the larger society is to blame for these women's fates. In this aspect, Dumas' memoir differs from some of the other memoirs written post 9/11 (such as *Lipstick Jihad*) in that she does not linger with the past, but has a positive futuristic perspective on women's opportunities within education.<sup>178</sup>

The previous subchapter, "Identity and Relationality", presented the density of relations in Dumas' memoir. She herself writes that she is just a thread without her relatives.<sup>179</sup> This reflects strong ties to the family. At the same time, Dumas offers stories from her life which signal independence from the group: in addition to teaching herself how to swim, she decides to go to summer camp even though no one in her family has ever been to a summer camp, and, due to her parents' economy, she provides money all by herself in order to pursue a college degree. This independence aligns with the traditional independence of the autobiography. Dumas presents her identity as closely tied to the group (family) while at the same time, presents stories that reveal "American" independence.

Throughout her memoir, Dumas writes herself out of the alien immigrant, the other. In contrast to Yang, who present herself as part of a group and their story, Dumas positions herself as different from other members of her family. After using her father as an example of an enthusiastic, and eager to learn immigrant, she goes on to tell about how his pride was hurt

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

<sup>179</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 103.

by the fact that Americans found him hard to understand: “What he lacked in speaking ability, he made up for by reading.”<sup>180</sup> She ridicules this “strange immigrant” who used hours to read through “warranties, terms of contracts, and credit information” whenever he purchased products.<sup>181</sup> She also ridicules his obsession with free and cheap products and food. By doing this, she takes an outsider’s perspective on him as an immigrant in America. She signals distance to his choices and actions. On the other hand, like Motlagh argues, she exploits this stereotype of an alien immigrant. She does this by presenting her father as part of the intellectual, academic group. He first came to the U.S. after being granted a Fulbright scholarship, and he even met with Albert Einstein. She also describes their past living standard in Iran. This contributes to paint a larger picture of the weird Iranian man who eats free samples at Price Club for lunch. Further, Dumas underscores the American part of her identity when presenting her experiences in France. Upon meeting the French concierge Noëlle, Dumas is suddenly not regarded exotic due to her Iranian background, but due to her Americanness. Dumas underscores her identification with America by describing her choice of typical American clothes on Bastille Day: “I put on a Hawaiian shirt, jeans, and the spanking-new Adidas sneakers I had bought for my trip.”<sup>182</sup> Her clothes are in distinct contrast to the clothes of her new French friend: “Noëlle was clad in a body-hugging red knit dress that accentuated her ample curves. The plunging neckline barely covered her enormous chest. With each breath she took, I expected her bosom to just break free and come out to watch the parade with us.”<sup>183</sup> Why does Dumas do this? One effect is to make her American readers associate with her, as fellow Americans experiencing the exotic France. In France, she is no longer the exotic Iranian, but the exotic American. Previous to describing the meeting with Noëlle, Dumas comments: “According to my books on French culture, concierges were usually old ladies living alone on the ground floor of apartment buildings.”<sup>184</sup> Dumas reveals that she herself has based her knowledge of another nation and culture on books rather than reality. She is very surprised when meeting the “plump, jovial woman in her early forties” who turns out to be the concierge. Dumas indirectly encourages the readers of not basing their knowledge of people and cultures on books. At the same time, she places herself in the same category of those who have based knowledge on books, not experience.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 135.

Smith et al. argues, “the stuff of autobiographical storytelling, then, is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences, and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences. Often these models of identity are conflictual.”<sup>185</sup> In her memoir, Dumas places herself and others within and outside models of identity. I will argue that through placing herself outside some of these categories, she writes herself into the model of the “successful immigrant”. In many ways, she takes the perspective of an American. She shows how she has taught herself English despite her parents’ poor English, how she managed to make enough money to go to college, and how she has used her talents in writing and telling stories to succeed with this memoir. She has also succeeded in her marriage to a French man, to have children, to become an American in the sense of celebrating holidays and taking part in American culture. She even, like Mottahedeh argues, presents Middle East diplomacy and political leaders as failures: “I believe peace in the Middle East could be achieved if the various leaders held their discussions in front of a giant bowl of Persian ice cream, each leader with his own silver spoon. Political difference would melt with every mouthful.”<sup>186</sup> In her attempt of writing herself out of models of identity, she ridicules, in a sometimes-disrespectful manner, the political difficulties, and tension in the Middle East. The only element left in her life that seems to be Iranian is her close ties to the family. As a member of the Iranian diaspora, Dumas represents a hyphenated identity model, which sees her Iranian roots through American lenses.

## **In Between Two Cultures**

How are American and Iranian cultural differences presented and what does this tell about Dumas’ identity? Hamid Naficy argues that “affirmation of the ‘old’ identity in the home land” usually happens within the family, and that “a confirmation of the ‘new’ identity in exile” is “syncretic and generally individuating.”<sup>187</sup> Dumas presents a development towards a syncretic culture in her memoir. However, in contrast to Naficy’s argument, both her Iranian and her Iranian American identity is affirmed within the sphere of the family. Amy Malek comments on Naficy’s ideas on syncretic cultures in her article “Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade”: “Exiles create ‘syncretic cultures’ that borrow – symbolically and materially - from the home society

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<sup>185</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 40.

<sup>186</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 75.

<sup>187</sup> Hamid Naficy, "The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles," Routledge, <http://www.hausite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt2000/08/ira.HTML>.

as well as from the new society in exile.”<sup>188</sup> Throughout her memoir, Dumas addresses differences between the American and Iranian cultures, whilst presenting how she, and her family, have chosen to borrow and add aspects of the American culture to their own.

When Dumas comments on the tradition of marriage, she does not position herself away from the traditional arranged marriages: “Marriage, in my culture, has nothing to do with romance. It’s a matter of logic.”<sup>189</sup> By using the possessive adjective, Dumas underscores how this part of the Iranian culture is also her culture. She further explains: “As odd as these logical unions may appear to the Western world, their success rate is probably no worse than that of marriages based on eyes meeting across a crowded room and the heart going va-va-va-boom.”<sup>190</sup> One could argue that Dumas ridicules the Western “superficial” choice of spouse. However, when she chose a partner, she did this the “American way”. Moreover, when presenting this story in her memoir, she underscores how her parents, who had only learned of the Western marriage tradition through TV shows and soap operas, supported and respected her choice:

Once my mother realized that I wanted to marry Francois, she said, “He will be like a third son to me”, and wiped the tears off her face. At that very moment, my mother threw aside everything she and her generation knew about marriage and entered a new world where daughters select their own husbands. She became a pioneer.<sup>191</sup>

Dumas shows both respect for the tradition of arranged marriages, but at the same time marks how she and her mother became part of a new tradition. Through addressing the theme of marriage in her memoir, Dumas shows how she respects the old culture, and at the same time incorporates the new culture in her life. In contrast to Najafi’s memoir, Dumas does not present Iranian culture and traditions as superior to American culture.<sup>192</sup> Instead, she brings forth contradicting aspects of both cultures.

Dumas does this with the theme of food. At first, it might look like she presents the food traditions of Iran as superior to that of America: “Upscale restaurants in America, calling themselves ‘innovative and gourmet,’ prepare food the way we used to. In Iran, it was simply how everybody ate.”<sup>193</sup> On the other hand, she presents several advantages with the American

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<sup>188</sup> Malek, "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade," 388.

<sup>189</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 24.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>192</sup> Motlagh, "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing," 27.

<sup>193</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 25-26.

“canned, frozen, or fast food.”<sup>194</sup> For instance, her mother, who usually prepared food together with a servant throughout the whole day, was very happy with the family’s new habit of eating fast food.<sup>195</sup>

Dumas both praises and indirectly criticizes aspects of American culture as well as Iranian culture when discussing holidays. The whole family gathers, in good old American fashion, every Thanksgiving. In addition to the turkey, they bring Persian dishes and “we give thanks for our lives here in America and for the good fortune of living close to one another.”<sup>196</sup> This collective, syncretic celebration of Thanksgiving contradicts Naficy’s previous quote that a new identity is individuating.<sup>197</sup> During the family’s celebration of the American holiday, her father expresses thankfulness for his life in America where he has the right to vote. Dumas tells how she “always share gratitude for being able to pursue my hopes and dreams, despite being female. My relatives and I are proud to be Iranian, but we also give tremendous thanks for our lives in America, a nation where freedom reigns.”<sup>198</sup> Even though Dumas underscores how she is proud of being Iranian, she presents important values and freedoms that are not to be found in Iran. One could argue that Dumas inclines towards presenting American culture as superior to Iranian rather than the opposite as done by Najafi.

When discussing her relationship to holidays, Dumas presents her identity as more American than Iranian. The focus is not, like Naficy argued, to “borrow [. . .] from the home society as well as from the new society”, but rather to take on and if not reject, at least minimize Iranian traditions.<sup>199</sup> Dumas compares the Iranian holiday Nowruz, New Year’s Day, to the American celebration of Christmas. She explains how the excitement of weeks of preparations where the whole community took part resembles the American celebration of Christmas. However, as Muslims, Dumas’ family did not celebrate Christmas: “To be left out of Christmas is the ultimate minority experience.”<sup>200</sup> Therefore, Dumas and her Catholic husband Françoise, have chosen a syncretic approach to holidays, even Christmas which she never celebrated as a child. Her experience of being an immigrant with a different culture, religious background, and being left out of the majority’s traditions, has contributed to form Dumas’s identity and her choices in adulthood. Again, Dumas marks that life in America contains new traditions, new values, new gender roles, and new opportunities. She has, based

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>197</sup> Naficy, "The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles".

<sup>198</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 75.

<sup>199</sup> Naficy, "The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles".

<sup>200</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 107.

on her immigrant experience, chosen to let her children participate in the majority's celebration. It can be that Dumas' motivation is to encourage other members of the Iranian diaspora to do the same; to let their children take part and not become outsiders. However, one can also argue that Dumas has chosen the road of least resistance both in choosing American holidays over Iranian, and in presenting herself as a stereotypical "successfully integrated Muslim" who raises her children as Americans.

Another example of how Dumas discusses the notion of "in-betweenness", is found in the chapter "The 'F Word'". Dumas writes of the difference in American and Iranian names: "All of us immigrants knew that moving to America would be fraught with challenges, but none of us thought that our names would be such an obstacle."<sup>201</sup> Before sixth grade, Dumas changed her name from Firoozeh to Julie. Dumas describes how her life felt simpler because suddenly everyone could remember her name. However, during the Iranian Revolution, some people assumed she was American and started to talk down on Iranians to her. She therefore changed her name back to Firoozeh. This story shows how one's name, which is very closely tied to identity, becomes an obstacle in being accepted and acknowledged. She also expresses how she felt "like a fake" since people treated her differently from what they would have if they knew her Iranian name. In addition, she addresses the problems of finding a job after college, but after adding "Julie" to her résumé, she started to receive job offers.<sup>202</sup> Why does Dumas present these stories? One reason might be to present the depth of identity-challenges for an immigrant. Dumas felt that she could not even keep her Iranian name, but had to take on an American name in order for her life to become easier. However, as she experienced, her roots were deeper than her Iranian name, which she was faced with whenever someone spoke down on Iranians assuming she was American. In contrast to Yang, Dumas presents stories about experimenting with an American identity in order to find her new identity.

Dumas reflect upon differences within the U.S. when writing about a woman who "refused to learn my 'impossible name and instead settled on calling me 'F Word.' She was recently transferred to New York where, from what I've heard, she might meet an immigrant or two."<sup>203</sup> These examples of discrimination due to one's name are unfortunately not unique. Therefore, by referring to such experiences, Dumas contributes to putting racism and discrimination on the agenda, and brings awareness to societal problems through her memoir.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 67.



## Why Write?

What is Dumas' motivation for writing? What does this memoir reflect of her identity? Elahi argues that the Iranian American writer Roya Hakakian, in her memoir *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*, becomes a translator: "This translation becomes a process of including English-literate American readers in on a bilingual pun that situates her identity within the American dream."<sup>204</sup> Similarly, one could argue that Dumas, through *Funny in Farsi*, seeks to function as a translator between her Iranian community and her American readers. She explains their background, their struggles with the English language, the change in attitude and racism following the Iranian Revolution, and how they approach American culture. She does this to add information, stories, and diversity to the group she is associated with, be it immigrants or Iranians. In contrast to the translator she was for her mother as a child, she now functions as a translator for her American readers in order for them/us to understand more of immigrant experiences and their situation as members of the Iranian diaspora.

Another reason for writing might be to present an Iranian family's identity as being funny, harmless, and loving. Why? After George Bush said that the Islamic Republic of Iran was part of "an Axis of Evil", many Iranian Americans experienced discrimination and hostility.<sup>205</sup> Dumas' presentation of her family is characterized by humor, and by a genuine enjoyment of each other. Her descriptions of their curiosity and desire to experience America also contribute to demolish any possibly hostile stereotypes. This aligns with Malek's argument that it has been a goal for "many Iranian diaspora organizations in the United States" to present "a public identity that is positive and explicitly counter to the representations of Iranians in various American media."<sup>206</sup> One of the most extreme examples of this, is Dumas' comment on Middle Eastern diplomacy.<sup>207</sup> This strongly signals distance from the political difficulties faced by Middle Eastern politicians. She presents herself as an individual who is not concerned with politics or international conflicts. Instead, she seems concerned with presenting herself as someone who neither has any strong or "alien" opinions nor is in any way a threat in her self.

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<sup>204</sup> Elahi, "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs," 478.

<sup>205</sup> Malek, "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade," 392.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 75.

Mottahedeh, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War".

Moreover, through her memoir, Dumas writes her identity as someone who was disadvantaged in being “outside” of the majority group, but who found a way to use this “otherness” to take part in the American Dream. In her chapter “Girls Just Wanna Have Funds”, Dumas tells of how she took different low-paying jobs, hoping to provide for her education. However;

As college approached, I stumbled upon a talent better than selling popcorn or polishing silver. I started writing scholarship essays. I wrote essay after essay about my life and my dreams and my goals. I wrote about volunteering as a clown in a children’s hospital. I wrote about being my mother’s interpreter. I wrote that ever since I was a little girl, I had wanted to go to college. And I wrote that my aunt Sedigeh should have been able to go to college but instead had to get married when she was fourteen. And the funds just flowed in.<sup>208</sup>

This might be seen as an encouragement for her fellow diasporic members to view their background as a positive difference rather than a disadvantage great enough to stop them in pursuing their dreams. She presents her family as successful, and thereby writes back at the prejudices Iranians have been faced with post 9/11. At the same time, Dumas appeals to her American readers by emphasizing the success aspect to her story rather than a plea for systemic change. This is a classic “from rags to riches” story in that her father could not provide her with college fees, and that he “repeatedly told me how bad he felt at being unable to help with my college tuition.”<sup>209</sup> Does Dumas simplify and belittle the struggles members of minority groups might encounter in their hope of pursuing education and goals equal to their American friends? Her success story might provide motivation and contribute to bring Iranian American communities positive attention, as well as expectations of progress and assimilation.

Her father’s meeting with Einstein proved to him that anything is possible for anyone in America. When he returned home he brought with him a new dream “that someday, he would return to America with his own children. And they [ . . . ] would have access to the same educational opportunities as anybody else, even the sons of senators and the rich.”<sup>210</sup> This American Dream came true, and Dumas has written herself into this dream. Both Yang and Dumas have, through education and through writing their memoirs taken part in their parents’ dreams of a better future for their children. The authors have met different forms of racism when coming to America due to difference in ethnicity and religion. Yang takes on the task of

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<sup>208</sup> Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, 129.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

clearing her people's name, and of adding stories and perspectives on history. Dumas takes on the task of adding on to the image of Iranians. She positions herself away from stereotypes and emphasizes diversity within the Iranian diaspora.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In *Funny in Farsi* Dumas narrates her identity largely through relationality. The focus of the anecdotes is often relatives, and through these stories and relational bonds, Dumas narrates who she is, and who she is not. As with Yang, Dumas tells stories about her relatives and thus reveals strong bonds to her roots. However, in contrast to Yang, Dumas shifts between relationality and individuality in her memoir. Whereas Yang takes the role of a spokesperson for her people, Dumas uses anecdotes about her family to narrate her own identity formation. Through addressing models of identity, some taken from the media, others faced by Dumas herself, she writes herself away from stereotypes. She uses this memoir, this opportunity, to position herself, and to some degree her family, away from stereotypes and to inform her audience about the diversity within the Iranian American group. Moreover, Dumas draws on her predecessors in that she addresses American, as well as Iranian American readers, and seeks to educate, criticize, and debate the role of Iranian Americans as well as Americans' attitude towards immigrants. Both *The Latehomecomer* and *Funny in Farsi* break with the traditional autobiographical genre in that neither of the memoirs presents a story about "someone who made it" or achieved total autonomy. Yang narrates how her family went through struggles both in Laos, Thailand, and America, and how they are still searching for a home. Dumas' memoir narrates how she, as an individual, used the richness of her background to find her place in America. One can argue that she honors her roots and her family, and that she, through *Funny in Farsi*, gives credit to her background for being successfully integrated. Whilst writing herself out of different models of identity, Dumas writes herself into this model of identity: "The successful immigrant". Unlike Yang, whom is a somewhat pioneer in her Hmong American context, Dumas' memoir is one in a string of memoirs published post 9/11. However, Dumas' humoristic approach, as well as her almost biographical anecdotes, break genre barriers and open up new lands within immigrant autobiographical writing.



## Chapter 3: Gender, Filiality, and Authenticity in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?<sup>211</sup>

*The Woman Warrior* has been accused of underscoring the oriental view on the Chinese community, and of presenting the Chinese culture as women oppressive and misogynistic.<sup>212</sup> However, Kingston's own questions and enquiry to Chinese Americans, implies a process within the memoir of negotiating identity in connection with ethnicity, childhood, family, stories, and social and psychological factors. In what ways have Kingston's encounter with American kindergarten, school system, culture, and values challenged and changed her identity? This chapter seeks to convey how being born to immigrant parents and growing up in a community within the Chinese diaspora have affected Kingston's identity formation. How Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, negotiates her identity in connection with Chinese and American women, the relationship between mother and daughter, authenticity and authority, and voice are aspects of identity formation that will be analyzed. I will argue that she seeks to convey her conflicting identities out of a need to explain and out of a need for acceptance by the Chinese American community, as well as for her voice to be heard in the larger community. *The Woman Warrior* is, according to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, a meditation on what it means to be Chinese American.<sup>213</sup> Kingston does this through stories about female predecessors, childhood memories, myths, experiences of her mother, and through accounts of filiality. Kingston stretches and breaks autobiographical genre barriers through violating the concept of authenticity. However, I will argue that Kingston achieves authority as autobiographer because her "lies" underscores her in-between position and confusion as to what is truth and who she is as an individual in the collectivistic Confucius context, and in the individualistic American context. This chapter will focus on how Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, negotiates her identity in connection with Chinese and American women, the relationship between mother and daughter, authenticity and authority, and voice. Before the

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<sup>211</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 6.

<sup>212</sup> Yuan Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's "Woman Warrior", " *MELUS* 26, no. 2 (2001): 206.

<sup>213</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, ed. *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

analysis of the memoir, a brief overview of the memoir in a Chinese American literary context will be provided.

## **The Memoir in a Chinese American Literary Context**

Wong argues that the phenomenon of autobiography is not solely Western in origin; “a complex autobiographical tradition does exist in Chinese literature” and can be traced back to the period of the Han Dynasty (first century A.D.).<sup>214</sup> However, acts of writing by women were seen as rebellion in the old Chinese society where women were to submit to men, where “female chastity, modesty, and restraint” were stressed, where daughters were sold “into slavery in times of hardships”, and where “widow suicides” were “encouraged and honored.”<sup>215</sup> In this society, women writing were unusual.<sup>216</sup> Upper-class women were taught that writing destroyed ones character, and working class women did not have the time or sufficient education to write.<sup>217</sup> During the Gold Rush (1848-1858), many Chinese men came to the U.S. with the hope of finding gold to bring back to their wives and families.<sup>218</sup> However, as tensions grew, laws were passed in order to restrict Chinese immigration and job prospects. Between 1882-1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese women from immigrating to the U.S. The scarcity of Chinese women writing in English is not astounding considering this history.<sup>219</sup> Kingston tells how her mother, who must have been one of very few Chinese women, came to the U.S. in 1940 in order to reunite with her Chinese husband.

The first Chinese American women writers were two sisters, Edith and Winnifred Eaton who published their first works in 1899. Their writing concerned racism, which was dealt with in different fashions in their short stories and novels.<sup>220</sup> Kingston aligns with her predecessors in that she addresses racism and discrimination. Further, during the Second World War and in the immediate period after the war, Chinese American women writers focused on women’s experiences with the war and revealed a “glowing nationalism, with a deep pride in China’s spiritual resistance, its patient, persistent rebuilding, its survival, and

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>215</sup> Amy Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition Behind Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The woman warrior: a casebook* ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Gold Rush," Encyclopædia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/237388/gold-rush>.

<sup>219</sup> Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition Behind Maxine Hong Kingston," 136.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

endurance.”<sup>221</sup> Kingston does not praise China, but writes of how her mother, together with other refugees, was forced to live in the mountains due to Japanese invasion in 1939.<sup>222</sup> However, Kingston’s focus is on the individual versus the group, more than specific war experiences.

The genre of autobiography dominates within Chinese American literature written in English.<sup>223</sup> There are, according to Wong, two types of autobiographers. There are the ones who were born and grew up in China, and there are the ones who were born and grew up in the U.S. The autobiographies of the Chinese-born writers typically focus on Chinese life in China, while the other group of writers focus on life in the U.S. as well as to explain the Chinese American community to white readers.<sup>224</sup> Amy Ling argues that “immigrant and sojourner Chinese American writers” are group oriented and take on the task of interpreting and bringing understanding for China in the West.<sup>225</sup> She further argues that the focus of American-born Chinese American writers is often more individualistic and that their purpose is “to explain themselves to themselves.”<sup>226</sup> *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Wong was published in 1952 and dealt with the struggle of being in between Chinese and American cultures and models of identity (such as the Chinese silence and the American individuality).<sup>227</sup> *The Woman Warrior* also focuses on this in-betweenness, but Kingston uses Chinese role models “who not only shares a sense of individuality but also competes well with her male counterparts in the military.”<sup>228</sup>

Where does *The Woman Warrior* fit in the context of Chinese American literature? Wong argues that Kingston’s memoir is in some aspects similar to previous Chinese American autobiographies: “Kingston retells Chinese tales heard in childhood, [ . . . ] she makes general remarks on Chinese culture, [ . . . ] she speaks of unusual Chinese foods, [ . . . ] she recounts experiences of sexist oppression.”<sup>229</sup> Throughout her memoir, Kingston negates her identity in relation to her mother, to stories she has been told throughout her childhood, and memories from the American and Chinese schools. She does this in connection with Chinese and American values and gender expectations. Kingston breaks with traditional genre

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>222</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 94-96.

<sup>223</sup> Wong, *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, 39.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>225</sup> Ling, "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition Behind Maxine Hong Kingston," 136.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>227</sup> Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's "Woman Warrior", 206.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Wong, *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, 44.

barriers and has been accused of writing fiction under the label of autobiography. She blends myths, dreams, imagination, and experiences in a way that makes the reader question her reliability as an autobiographer and the truth-value of her autobiographical story. She does not present experiences and memories differently than she presents myths, dreams, and imagination. She thereby violates what Lejeune has named the autobiographical pact. *The Woman Warrior* has received critique from Asian American cultural nationalists who accuse Kingston of presenting “exoticism and stereotypes” while “distorting Asian American reality.”<sup>230</sup> The memoir has mostly been received as a testimony and conveyance “of misogyny in Chinese culture and an effort to articulate a distinctive feminist consciousness.”<sup>231</sup>

## Chinese and American Women

“When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves.”<sup>232</sup> In the same manner as Yang learned about Hmong life through stories, so did Kingston learn about values, traditions, and expectations within the Chinese community through the adults’ “talk-story.” On the other hand, storytelling represented safety and intimacy for Yang since this often happened when she and her grandmother were alone, in a period of Yang’s life associated with safety, while for Kingston, storytelling represents bewilderment over what is true, and warnings as to how she should behave so that nothing bad would happen to her. The stories Kingston presents and retells in her memoir, always emphasizes the importance of the community. Within Confucianism, the importance of relations is crucial. According to Margaret Miller, “The western concept of individualism threatens the Confucian family, wherein ultimate value resides for the traditional Chinese and which rests on unquestioning obedience to those above you in the hierarchy.”<sup>233</sup> From a Confucian perspective, personhood is something you grow into, not something you are. A result of this thought is that a child is not seen as a person. Neither is a person who makes personal choices that contradicts relations and the consensus of the

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<sup>230</sup> Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's "Woman Warrior", " 200.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>232</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 19.

<sup>233</sup> Margaret Miller, "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," *Biography* 6, no. 1 (1983): 15.



community.<sup>234</sup> The Confucius emphasis and importance of loyalty to community is evident throughout the memoir and especially in the first chapter: “No Name Woman”. Kingston’s memoir begins with the story of her aunt. The “No Name Woman” has been ignored for fifty years due to her illegitimate pregnancy and child. Kingston imagines how the circumstances around this adultery might have been. She states how “women in the old China did not choose”, and elaborates on the possibility of both rape and incest.<sup>235</sup> She further imagines how her aunt might have taken care of her appearance “to sustain her being in love.”<sup>236</sup> However, for a woman to tend her appearance was seen as eccentric: “At the mirror my aunt combed individuality into her bob.”<sup>237</sup> This individuality was a crime within the Confucian society and underscores the difference between the old Chinese culture and the western. Kingston tells how she has taken part in the exclusion of her aunt for too long, and by including the story in her memoir, she breaks this silence and gives illegitimate birth to her forgotten aunt.<sup>238</sup> Kingston stands in between stories of the Chinese past, and the American future. She negotiates her identity as a Chinese American throughout her memoir. Through the story of the No Name Woman, Kingston negotiates her identity: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.”<sup>239</sup> Kingston overtly elaborates and adds on to the stories she retells in her memoir. At the same time, she underscores the importance of her ancestors in her own self-defining process. Why does she include the story of her nameless aunt? What “ancestral help” does she offer Kingston? This aunt, part of the collectivistic Confucius community, stood out as an individual and thereby broke with values and traditions. Whether she was a victim of rape, or if she was guilty in the crime of falling in love and giving in to sexual desire, she stood out as an individual who violated the collectivistic values of the village. When Kingston is introduced to the story of her aunt, her mother opens with an instruction: “You must not tell anyone [. . .] what I am about to tell you.”<sup>240</sup> The story is meant as a warning to the young Kingston: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born.”<sup>241</sup> The story of her aunt presents

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<sup>234</sup> Christine E. Gudorf Regina Wentzel Wolfe, ed. *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies*, Eleventh ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 183.

<sup>235</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 6, 10-11.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Leslie W. Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The woman warrior: a casebook* ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96.

<sup>239</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 8.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Kingston's cultural background. She uses her background to clarify who she is as an individual. She chooses to break the silence she has been ordered to keep, in a process of finding, and presenting, her individuality. Kingston, like her nameless aunt, stands out even though she is expected not to.

Another aspect of identity is how girls and women are of less value compared to boys and men. This value hierarchy is signaled through stories and comments from the adults in Kingston's family. She draws the conclusion that her nameless aunt delivered a girl, since "there is some hope of forgiveness for boys."<sup>242</sup> The importance of sons is reflected in many of Kingston's memories. She explains how she raged over this unrighteous difference: "When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, 'Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds' I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk."<sup>243</sup> Another example of differences between girls and boys is how Kingston and her sister were not allowed to come Saturday shopping with their uncle, as did the boys who "came back with candy and new toys."<sup>244</sup> Kingston could not escape the gender and value category she was placed in, even though she tried to please her parents and make them proud through her educational achievements. However, educational success was American values, not Chinese. Straight A's and Berkeley did not make her a swordswoman, and would not prevent her from the possibility of being sold as a slave in China.<sup>245</sup> This fear of going back to China reveals the in-between position Kingston was in. She had never been to China herself, nevertheless, the nation and the culture was an important part of her mindset, her dreams, her fears, and the frameworks of her life. Through writing this memoir, a personal account of her individual memories, one can argue that Kingston opposes her background and the restraints, as well as the devaluation put on her as a woman. According to Smith et al., "autobiographical acts are investigations into and processes of self-knowing."<sup>246</sup> By writing the self, Kingston ensures that she will not be forgotten and ignored like her aunt. She might address fellow Chinese Americans, or perhaps her own family. Whomever she aims for, by writing the self, Kingston indirectly states that she, as an individual, as a (Chinese American) woman, is of importance and value.

Kingston could never become fully American or Chinese. Her mother called her a ghost, like she did with every white person, except the Japanese: "They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>246</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 90.

ghost-like. They called us a kind of ghost.”<sup>247</sup> Not to be incorporated in the Chinese family, nor being able to include one’s Chinese life in the American, lead to frustration, silence, and fear in Kingston. She was told not to tell her American teacher that her father was a gambler: “There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China.”<sup>248</sup> Kingston is expected to keep secrets, to work in the laundry, and to behave as Chinese girls are supposed to. However, at the American school, she is expected to develop both “socially as well as mentally.”<sup>249</sup> Bonnie Melchior states that Kingston’s “gender prohibits her access to the American Dream.”<sup>250</sup> One can argue that this is a somewhat one sided perspective. The cultural and traditional community Kingston grew up in, did not value straight A’s, nor that she was accepted at Berkley, that she “marched to change the world” or that she spoke her opinion.<sup>251</sup> The lack of recognition she experienced was both due to gender and to value systems within the Chinese immigrant community. What prohibits the young Kingston is the struggle of finding her place: “I could not figure out what was my village.”<sup>252</sup>

Kingston, like Yang, connects “voice” to identity. She explains how she “became silent” in kindergarten when she “had to speak English for the first time.”<sup>253</sup> At the moment of writing her memoir, she explains how this silence, this “dumbness – a shame” still influences her when she is to speak English. She whispered, squeaked, and felt bad every time she had to speak English.<sup>254</sup> She connects this silence in the American school with the Chinese background: “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl.”<sup>255</sup> Neither Kingston nor her sister find their own voice in English. Why is that? Why does Kingston incorporate these memories in her memoir? Her Chinese values tell her she is part of a group, there is no emphasis on individuality, and she is to obey her parents. However, American values reflect individuality, and so does the language. Kingston explains how she struggled with reading the word “I”, which is rarely used in Chinese literature. Kingston explains: “At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage.”<sup>256</sup> This stands in great contrast to the act of writing a memoir. This act of self-

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<sup>247</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 183.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>250</sup> Bonnie Melchior, "A Marginal "I": The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *Biography* 17, no. 3 (1994): 291.

<sup>251</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 47.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 173.

assertion, of investigating the self, and this process of self-knowing seems therefore to reflect how Kingston has moved from having a more collectivistic (Chinese) mindset to that of an individualistic (American) one. Moreover, by taking possession over the “I”, and writing a memoir, Kingston indirectly writes back at the community’s tradition of devaluating females. One can also argue that Kingston, as a Chinese American woman, aims to pave the way for other women in her situation, signaling to them, as well as to the Chinese American community, that a woman’s life does not have to consist of being “a wife and slave”, or becoming a warrior like the mythical figure of Fa Mu Lan. At the same time, Kingston does not set up an alternative, which reflects her own confusion as to who she is, what is truth, who she wishes to be, and the general in-between position she finds herself in.

Kingston’s problems with speaking her opinion in English might come from both the collectivistic background and her problems with learning English when surrounded by family who did not know the language nor encouraged her to learn and use it. Dumas had a role model in her father who tried to speak English from the day the family arrived in the US, and Yang, when struggling to find her voice in English, received help from her family who encouraged her in order for her to succeed at school. Kingston, on the other hand, did not have anyone or receive any help like the two other authors. Kingston explains how speaking English is still a problem in her adult life: “A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day’s courage. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open.”<sup>257</sup> The cultural differences of self-assertion and individuality seem to be what made it hard for Kingston to speak English. Her father comments on how he hears Chinese everywhere and wonders whether this is because Chinese speak loudly or that he knows the language. Kingston explains, “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans.”<sup>258</sup> The “strong and bossy” voices of Chinese women stand in great contrast to women being “but wives and slaves” and once again, the ambiguity and confusion over identity is reflected. In search for an American identity, the girls chose the opposite of the Chinese women in their community.

Bobby Fong argues that Kingston “pays honor to the world of her family by presenting a vision of them to the barbarians.”<sup>259</sup> By presenting them, Kingston immortalizes and shows how her female predecessors managed to combine filiality, individuality, and self-

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>259</sup> Bobby Fong, "Maxine Hong Kingston's Autobiographical Strategy in *The Woman Warrior*," *Biography* 12, no. 2 (1989): 123.

respect. However, Kingston's presentation of her family is not marked by honor. Kingston also laments over the culture and circumstances she has grown up in, circumstances and traditions, which have prevented her from using and developing her potential. Being devalued due to gender, not learning English at home, not being encouraged educational wise, not being listened to, or trusted enough to be incorporated in secrets are all elements Kingston confronts in her memoir.

Kingston negotiates her identity in connection with not only her memories and her predecessors, but also in connection with myths. Smith argues that Kingston "reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women."<sup>260</sup> Kingston elaborates on the chant of Fa Mu Lan until the legendary woman warrior and Kingston herself are one.<sup>261</sup> This strong identification is part of Kingston's search for identity. By placing herself in the shoes of this praised woman, she is allowed to test herself and her possibilities of achieving and becoming such a praised woman herself: "From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality."<sup>262</sup> This dream of becoming someone and achieving something important is very similar to the American dream of achieving success as an individual. However, the swordswoman's achievement is not of individualistic nature, but of collective. The swordswoman takes her father's place in battle, frees prisoners, takes revenge on behalf of the family, and performs perfect filiality. Kingston expresses how her life has been a disappointment, and how she has not achieved anything of value within the Chinese community. Like Dumas, Kingston presents her roots, her background, and the group she is assumed a part of, whilst positioning herself away from the group. Dumas is a member of the Iranian diaspora, but writes her memoir as an individual by positioning herself away from relatives in order to present diversity within the group. Kingston's memoir is also a strong act of self-assertion in that she presents the collectivistic traditions and mindset of her community, whilst positioning herself away from the expectations and restrictions put on her. Both authors aim to break free from their respective groups, while at the same time emphasize the impossibility of separation from their roots. Dumas does this when discussing how she tried to take an American name, and Kingston does this by presenting herself through traditional Chinese myths and stories.

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<sup>260</sup> Sidione Smith, "Filiality and Woman's Autobiographical Storytelling," in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The woman warrior: a casebook*, ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>262</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 45.

Kingston explains how she and Fa Mu Lan have one thing in common:

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>263</sup>

Kingston also carries grievances; these words she reports in her memoir are her revenge, her battle in finding her place, an identity in-between the collectivistic Chinese community, and the individualistic American society. All these words that do not fit on her skin spill over into her memoir, and she reports the crimes done to her, to women, and to immigrants. In contrast to Fa Mu Lan, Kingston’s grievances are her individual ones. Fa Mu Lan confronts the grievances of her family, while Kingston’s act of writing the self is a confrontation between Kingston’s individual identity and the group identity of the Chinese community she grew up in. Moreover, *The Woman Warrior* stands out within its genre in that it moves between imagination/fiction and memories/experiences. The memoir stands out in that it breaks with traditional genre barriers by confusing the reader as to what is truth.

Another story Kingston presents is the experiences of another aunt, Moon Orchid. Again, Kingston elaborates on a story she has partly witnessed, partly been told. Moon Orchid was never sent for by her husband who emigrated to the U.S. thirty years earlier. She lived alone, “abandoned” in Hong Kong, but was supported by her husband.<sup>264</sup> However, Brave Orchid found out that Moon Orchid’s husband had been remarried in the U.S. She then sent for Moon Orchid so that she could “demand your rights as First Wife.”<sup>265</sup> They left for Los Angeles where he lived and confronted him. However, the confrontation was less harsh than what Brave Orchid had thought it would be, and they ended up leaving with a promise of never contacting him again. Why does Kingston present this story of her abandoned aunt? How does this story “branch into” Kingston’s life? The two sisters imagined this situation as similar to the legend of the four Empresses. However, what becomes clear is that this legend did not help Moon Orchid and was therefore not significant for the Chinese women’s lives in America. The Chinese legend had lost its power, the Empress of the East, Moon Orchid, did not win the battle and the Emperor. The two sisters are left with less than they came with. After the meeting with her husband, Moon Orchid developed anxiety and paranoia and eventually had to move to a mental asylum. Kingston is herself scared of becoming crazy: “I

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 127.

thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me.”<sup>266</sup> She sees how women and girls in her community have been labeled crazy, and she hears stories of crazy women. Kingston drew the conclusion that “insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women.”<sup>267</sup> The stories she presents of crazy women ends with death or mental asylums. Kingston suggests that these women did not behave or act as they were expected to. They broke social codes and did not yield to the consensus of the community. One such story is about a neighbor “who was chatty one moment” and “shut up the next.”<sup>268</sup> She was sent to a mental asylum and brought home by her husband two years later. He also brought his illegitimate son whom she was supposed to raise. The boy beat her to get what he wanted. Kingston writes: “She was the one who died happy, sitting on the steps after cooking dinner.”<sup>269</sup> Kingston suggests here that the woman’s death freed her from the prison her life had become. These stories of crazy women create confusion in the young Kingston as to who she is in her family. Is she the crazy one? As a child, she intentionally broke dishes, picked her nose while cooking, and limped in order to be different. She did this due to fear of being sold as a slave or to be married. In this way, Kingston became the crazy one in the family. When writing the memoir, Kingston honors these crazy women by presenting their stories, reassuring that their lives will not be forgotten. She protests a society that locked up women who did not conform to the collective. Kingston follows these women in their individualism in that she writes of them, and in that she herself publishes her own individual lies, abnormalities, and dreams.

## **Filiality and Identity**

While *Funny in Farsi* and *The Latehomecomer* reveal admiration, affection, and love for parents, *The Woman Warrior* deals with the complex and problematic relationship between Kingston and her mother. Miller states that *The Woman Warrior* is “as much a celebration of Brave Orchid as it is an autobiography of Maxine Hong Kingston, the autobiographer both separates from and rejoins her mother, her family’s and community’s chief representative.”<sup>270</sup> The memoir is full of stories where Kingston’s mother figures prominently. However, is the

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Miller, "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," 28.

memoir a celebration of her mother? Leslie W. Rabine argues in “No lost Paradise” that *The Woman Warrior* “is about separation and the impossibility of separation.”<sup>271</sup> The memoir starts with her mother’s direct speech, urging the young Kingston not to tell anyone what she is about to be told. Throughout the memoir, Kingston’s mother figures either as the main character, or as someone who plays a major part, either directly or indirectly, in the stories Kingston tells. In search for identity, Kingston seeks to separate herself from her mother and what her mother represents. At the same time, Kingston needs her mother’s stories, her memories, her values, and her warnings in order to separate from them. In *The Latehomecomer*, Yang seeks to preserve her people’s story, and presents her work as a family memoir. She reveals no need to break free from her roots, on the contrary, she seeks to function as a spokesperson for her people. Kingston, on the other hand, seeks to present her own individual memoir, however, in doing so, Kingston tells and retells the lives of female predecessors. Rabine argues that Kingston preserves the culture and the authorities she seeks to destroy by including myths and her mother’s stories in the memoir, as well as to take part in ancestral worship: “I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes.”<sup>272</sup>

Kingston’s relationship to her mother is split. She both desires to get away from her, while at the same time she cannot “bear to leave her.”<sup>273</sup> The memories of how Kingston as a child needed to let her mother know her true self, reveal a difficult relationship between mother and daughter: “I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat.”<sup>274</sup> The young Kingston plans how to tell her mother, and figures out that the best approach is to tell her mother one thing from the list each day. She gathers courage but is shortly told to leave her mother alone. Later, her “throat burst open.”<sup>275</sup> She could not hold all her worries, opinions, and fears inside anymore and started shouting at her mother during dinnertime. This ambiguity in needing her mother’s approval for her true self, and at the same time needing her individual opinion to be heard permeates the memoir. Kingston wants to be known for perfect filiality, while at the same time she wants to “leave”, go to college, “make a

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<sup>271</sup> Rabine, “No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston,” 90.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 95.; Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 16.

<sup>273</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 100.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 201.



living and take care of” herself, not listen to her mother’s stories, and other goals and wishes that reflect individualism.<sup>276</sup>

What is her Chinese background and what are her mother’s stories? Where does American achievement and capability of taking care of oneself in the American society fit in? These cultures crash and stagger against each other in the same way as the mother and daughter crash and stagger against each other. However, they also find a common tune, an ambiguous/vague understanding for each other through the story of Ts’ai Yen. The legend is about a woman who was captured by the chief of the barbarians. She had two children with the chief and she fought with the barbarians the twelve years she was with them. “Her children did not speak Chinese” and laughed when she spoke Chinese to them.<sup>277</sup> The barbarians made whistling arrows, which terrified their enemies. One night Ts’ai Yen hears the barbarians blowing flutes and she is disturbed by this music. She then starts singing a song “about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger.”<sup>278</sup> This time her children do not laugh but sing with her. She later is ransomed and married so that her father could “have Han descendants.”<sup>279</sup> According to Rabine, the legend is both an analogy for Kingston “in relation to her mother, and for the mother, Brave Orchid, in relation to her daughter.”<sup>280</sup> From Brave Orchid’s perspective, Kingston has left to live among barbarians. However, it is Kingston’s mother who left China to live in America and who “sings songs of her homesickness.”<sup>281</sup> The song of Ts’ai Yen can be both her mother’s stories from China, and the legends she tells her children; “stories to grow up on.” It might be that the adult Kingston indirectly apologizes to her mother for “laughing” at her stories and instead of trying to understand her mother, became frustrated. She has more knowledge as an adult and understands how her mother longed for China, always looking back, and how she did what she thought best for her Chinese American children in their immigrant existence. Further, it might be that the story of Ts’ai Yen reflects Kingston, and that she is the one singing of her grievances, her challenges, and disappointments. She tells of these sorrows in order for both the barbarians, Americans, as well as the Chinese Americans to know, understand, and recognize her as an individual. She creates a new space for herself in the world: “Those of us in the first American generation

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 201-02.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," 96.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 97.

have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.”<sup>282</sup> Through writing a memoir, Kingston has to reflect on her life; the stories told by “the emigrants”, the experiences, and ways of life in her community, and her encounter with the American world outside her community. In carving out her new identity, Kingston, like Dumas, looks to relations “with others and with the world” in search for unity.<sup>283</sup>

Melchior argues that the relationship between Kingston and her mother is both one of sickness and of healing.<sup>284</sup> When the adult Kingston visits her mother, she feels threatened and sick: “Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama.”<sup>285</sup> In this scene, Brave Orchid is the ghostly figure who threatens to suffocate her daughter, while at the medical school, Brave Orchid was the one who was almost strangled by a ghost whom she eventually conquered: “My mother would sometimes be a large animal, barely real in the dark; then she would become a mother again.”<sup>286</sup> Kingston tells her mother she needs to be free to leave, and that she does not belong in the old traditional Chinese community. Her mother frees her and uses a name that indicates love and protection: “Of course, you must go, Little Dog.”<sup>287</sup> Kingston immediately feels lighter and the troubled relationship between mother and daughter is suddenly one of understanding, respect, and tolerance for cultural and generational differences. In contrast to Yang and Dumas, Kingston feels captured in the patriarchal society she has grown up in. She needs to break free in order to find herself. Like Dumas, she does not reject her family and her roots, she only needs to find her place as an individual in the Chinese American context. All three authors use their roots and relations to explain their identities. However, the relationship between Kingston and her mother carries both the core struggles and the healing power for Kingston. This differs from the relation between daughter and parent(s) in the two other memoirs.

Despite the troubled relationship between mother and daughter, Kingston devotes a whole chapter for a story of her mother. In her chapter “Shaman”, Kingston tells of how her mother was left in China for more than ten years before her husband sent for her to come after him to America. During those years, Brave Orchid saved the money he sent her and was accepted at a medical school: “Free from families, my mother would live for two years

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<sup>282</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 5.

<sup>283</sup> Anderson, *Autobiography*, 117-18.

<sup>284</sup> Melchior, “A Marginal ‘I’: The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” 284.

<sup>285</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 108.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

without servitude.”<sup>288</sup> She studied hard and took the role of a leader. When she came back home to her village, she wore “a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous.”<sup>289</sup> She was welcomed by admiring villagers and was allowed to keep her maiden name since she was a professional woman.<sup>290</sup> Within this patriarchal society, Brave Orchid, who already had become a wife, found a possibility for achieving status and some level of freedom. As a shaman, Brave Orchid stayed away from those who were mortally ill and earned a reputation as a successful doctor. She fought ghosts and monsters and bought herself a slave girl whom she trained as her assistant. The contrast between the shaman in silk robes and the tired mother who works in the laundry every day is severe. The successful shaman did not, and could not, bring her reputation with her to America. She had no opportunity for earning such a reputation again. The success Kingston’s mother achieved in China could not be transformed to America. When Brave Orchid was sent for, she had to lay down her successful life in freedom, and fulfill her role as wife and mother. This story shows how also Kingston’s mother might have grievances and sorrows due to lack of freedom, and loss of a life as a respected and successful individual. As Margaret Miller states, “Brave Orchid has many of the qualities of the woman warrior”, however, in America, the land of the free, she becomes “a slave of the laundry and of the tomato fields.”<sup>291</sup> In addition, she loses against the ghost her brother in law has become, as well as the half ghosts her children have become. This ambivalence about America can also be found in *The Latehomecomer*. The freedom and safety Yang remembers from Thailand, is lost when the family settles in America. Values, customs, and roles are not transferable to America and must recede in order to “make it” in their new country. Both Yang’s grandmother and Kingston’s mother experience that the social status they had in their nation of origin is not transferable to America. When immigrating to the U.S., these women lose their powers, except the power of storytelling. Their daughter/granddaughter; Kingston, like Yang, continues the heritage of storytelling in the new nation and in a new fashion so that the stories “branch into” their own lives, as well as the lives of readers.

Smith states that Brave Orchid uses storytelling to pass “on to her daughter all the complexities of and the ambivalences about mother’s and daughter’s identity as woman in

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>291</sup> Miller, "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior," 24.

patriarchal culture.”<sup>292</sup> The “stories to grow up on” reflect how her mother does not tell stories out of entertainment, but out of a need for explaining and equipping her daughter for her life as a woman. Kingston’s memoir is also a story told out of need, a need for negotiating and explaining her complex identity to her fellow Chinese Americans and to Americans. The intention of her mother to equip her daughter reflects intimacy and love. However, Kingston’s memoir is marked by anger, frustration, disappointments, and bitterness. These grievances are directed first and foremost towards her mother, and secondly towards the value systems of the larger community. In contrast to *The Latehomecomer* where Yang praises and presents the Hmong culture, life, and family, Kingston presents her struggle with and against her mother and community. Moreover, Kingston does portray her mother as similar to a woman warrior, but also “as an old woman, tired, prosaic, lonely, a woman whose illusions of returning to China have vanished, whose stories have become peevish, repetitious.”<sup>293</sup> Kingston presents all the complexities of her mother and their relationship and leaves the reader as confused as Kingston herself has been throughout her childhood. She lets her anger as well as her affection to her mother shine through. After stating that she cannot stay with her mother, she writes how she is strongly connected to her mother: “I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in Dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter.”<sup>294</sup> As Smith argues, Kingston cannot explain her identity “outside the biography of her mother.”<sup>295</sup> Kingston’s presentation of her mother stands in contrast to Dumas’ representation of her mother in that Dumas devotes very limited space to stories about her mother. However, neither Dumas nor Kingston can explain their identities without presenting their mothers. Both authors position themselves away from the values and old traditions their mothers represent.

Brave Orchid’s life “branch into” Kingston’s life on many levels. The heroin her mother was in China is not transferable to America. The heroin Kingston tried to be in order to make her mother proud was not transferable to her mother’s sets of values. Moreover, the power of storytelling is transferred from mother to daughter: “I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep.”<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Smith, "Filiality and Woman's Autobiographical Storytelling," 59.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>294</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 109.

<sup>295</sup> Smith, "Filiality and Woman's Autobiographical Storytelling," 71.

<sup>296</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 19.

## Authenticity and Authority

Smith et al. ask, “what is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying? And what difference would that make?”<sup>297</sup> In the introduction to this thesis Lejeune and his autobiographical pact was referred to. The fact that the name on the cover, the author, and the autobiographical “I” are presumed to be the same person results in assumptions of reading an individual’s true story. However, *The Woman Warrior* is composed by memories, stories, and myths. Kingston does not even claim to tell the truth throughout her memoir: “In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt’s name; I do not know it.”<sup>298</sup> Nevertheless, Kingston describes in great detail what happened to her aunt the night the villagers came to punish her. Kingston openly imagines different scenarios of how, why, and by whom her aunt was raped or seduced. Why does she make up these scenarios, emotions, and dialogues? Kingston sets out with explaining herself to the reader through stories of female predecessors. In the chapter “No Name Woman”, Kingston explains how her aunt’s ghost haunts her, and by telling the story about her aunt, Kingston rejects the communal punishment she has participated in for twenty years.<sup>299</sup> As Melchior observes, Kingston “suggests a paradoxical truth: the past *is* present and the ghosts *are* real in the sense that they do affect our choices and our lives.”<sup>300</sup> Kingston presents her version of her true life. The destiny of her aunt and the example she is of the dangers of breaking with the role assigned you in the community, influences Kingston’s present.

Kingston does not use her name in *The Woman Warrior*, which further confuses the reader and refuses the autobiographical pact. She tells how her parents did not use her real name and how she was named Little Dog. The adults did not use their real names in order to confuse the vindictive gods:

They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways – always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 15.

<sup>298</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 16.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Melchior, "A Marginal "I": The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," 284.

<sup>301</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 5.

The name on the cover of the memoir cannot be found inside. This reflects the confusion Kingston, as an offspring of emigrants, has experienced, and underscores Kingston's search for identity. The American published memoir with Kingston's name on it reflects American autobiographical tradition, and the lack of her proper name inside the memoir reflects the in-between position she is in. Kingston explores different models of Women Warriors in her memoir, and one can argue that the nameless autobiographical "I", is in some ways a Woman Warrior. Even though she does not refer to herself as a Woman Warrior, Kingston fights a battle against silence, against confusion, against oppression, and against suffocating expectations.

Melchior further observes how the "narrator disappears completely" in the chapter "At The Western Palace".<sup>302</sup> Even so, the story contains details from both Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid's point of view, details assumed told to Kingston, and actions assumed observed by her. However, the next chapter begins with an admission: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her."<sup>303</sup> This admission breaks with the traditional autobiography in that the experiences told of are not Kingston's own, whilst the stories are told as if she has witnessed it herself when she in fact elaborated and made up details in the story. Like Kingston, Yang retells memories she has not witnessed as well as emotions and thoughts of others. However, Yang never admits to adding or elaborating on her stories like Kingston does. Rather, she retells stories heard, whilst, like Kingston, presenting them as if she was a witness. Melchior argues that Kingston's "admission threatens her autobiographical authority because she is 'making up a story' rather than 'telling the truth'."<sup>304</sup> However, does the admission necessarily have this effect? From a western point of view this admission and practice of telling breaks with what is expected from an autobiography. However, if the reader accepts the Confucius background of Kingston's community, where ancestral worship and collective identity are part of one's identity, this "adding" to the story might not be such a severe threat. By elaborating and adding dialogues, emotions, and thoughts, Kingston creates a scenario that explains how these Chinese women attempt to exercise Chinese power in America, and how they, when encountering Moon Orchid's husband, are rejected and faced with the fact that they do not inhabit any power at all: Chinese ways do not work in America, even when facing a Chinese

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<sup>302</sup> Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," 285.

<sup>303</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 163.

<sup>304</sup> Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," 285.

man. By presenting imagined situations and admitting they are fiction, whilst presenting memories and assumed lived experiences, Kingston stretches genre barriers of authenticity and authority.

In the last chapter, the autobiographical narrator returns and asks questions to previously presented “facts”. The reader does not receive any answers but is instead left with questions regarding Brave Orchid’s age, whether or not she had two children who died in China, and how serious the situation of their Chinese relatives really is. Kingston was confused as to what she could do to become extraordinary, not merely a wife and slave. She was also confused as to what were true stories and what were not. When presenting her mother’s stories, she states that: “A practical woman, she could not invent stories and told only true ones.”<sup>305</sup> However, as Miller argues, the fact that this is expressed “in the middle of a ghost story told to an audience of skeptical barbarians” reveals irony in Kingston’s truth claim and signals that she expects the reader not to believe her.<sup>306</sup> One can argue that Kingston has recreated her problem in the reader. The confusion and secrecy she has lived with, is transferred to the reader.

Another imaginary story presented by Kingston is the one of Fa Mu Lan. In this story, Kingston reveals how she dreamt of being the swordswoman. However, in the beginning of the story, Kingston criticizes “the Chinese”, and she blends Chinese and American food traditions: “Yes, I have,’ I said out of politeness. ‘Thank you.’ (‘No, I haven’t,’ I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. ‘I’m starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies.’)”<sup>307</sup> By combining her Chinese and American life in the stories, Kingston underscores how her memoir is a struggle to find an identity between two worlds. As she is positioned between truth and lies, overt utterances and secrecy, ghost stories and reality, a world of invisibility and a world of making oneself noticed, so is her memoir a mix of memories, imagination and myths. By adding details such as her mother’s personal emotions and her brother’s anger, Kingston underscores how these stories, these lives, and her life, consist of individuals, not of a community or the family as a whole.

How can the reader know what is true and not? What if nothing is true? What if everything is fictional stories that represent how Kingston feels and how she struggles? Stanley Fish argues that “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however

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<sup>305</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 66.

<sup>306</sup> Miller, "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," 26.

<sup>307</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 21.

mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not.”<sup>308</sup> The little, silent Chinese girl Kingston bullied at school was Kingston’s doppelganger and this story illustrated how Kingston was frustrated at herself for not being able to speak English at school.<sup>309</sup> She further comments how this girl never married, how her sister provided for her, and how she lived with her parents for the rest of her life. She did not achieve either in the Chinese context nor the American. Kingston on the other hand, found her voice, and through this memoir, she demands to be heard. She does not squeak and stutter when writing English. She speaks her opinion with her own voice as an individual who is rooted in her Chinese background. This memoir does not follow the traditional line of the autobiographer’s life, which ends with individual autonomy, and it does not claim truth. Nevertheless, *The Woman Warrior* presents a Chinese American woman’s struggle of finding herself in between two cultures, two value systems, and two languages.

## **A Voice in America**

Kingston’s memoir differs from that of *Funny in Farsi* and *The Latehomecomer* in that the autobiographical narrator is born in the U.S. However, Kingston’s memoir deals with the immigrant experience in the sense that she draws on the stories of her mother and how she herself must deal with encountering the world outside their home; first in kindergarten, and later in school. Kingston narrates her identity as an immigrant into the American society. Kingston’s struggle is a struggle of finding her place, as well as a struggle to break free from the patriarchal society where she is reckoned as having no more abilities than becoming a wife and a slave.<sup>310</sup>

As with Yang and Dumas, Kingston’s encounter with teachers in kindergarten and school reflects how she and her situation were not understood: “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent.”<sup>311</sup> Yang eventually ended up in a class where she received special attention and help with English. Kingston on the other hand, did not receive any special help. This led to her “flunking” kindergarten and as an adolescent she blamed her mother: “The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn’t

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<sup>308</sup> Stanley Fish, "Just Published: Minutiae Without Meaning," <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/07/opinion/just-published-minutiae-without-meaning.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>309</sup> Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," 285.

<sup>310</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 19.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ.”<sup>312</sup> The lack of English knowledge resulted in the child being reckoned as having both socially as well as mental disabilities. In addition, her teachers became worried about her since she was covering her paintings with black. The adult Kingston explains why she covered the paintings with black: “ I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose.”<sup>313</sup> When her parents were called in for a meeting with the teachers, they did not understand the reason for the teachers’ serious and concerned faces because “my parents did not understand English.”<sup>314</sup> In many ways it seems as if the family left the school happily oblivious to the struggles of their daughter. However, Kingston does not conceal how the silence at school prohibited her from developing as an individual:

My silence was thickest – total – during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top [ . . . ] I spread them [the paintings] out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas.<sup>315</sup>

Kingston’s paintings reflect that she waited for her life, for opportunities to open up one after another, and for her life to spring into a mighty opera where her voice would and had to be heard. However, Kingston’s lack of English knowledge prohibited opportunities to open up for her.

Kingston refers to grievances and bitterness but does not say whether or not she expressed this to her mother: “Why didn’t you teach me English?’ ‘You like having me beaten up at school, don’t you?’”<sup>316</sup> Due to her mother’s diasporic identity and longing for China, she did not learn English and could not teach her children English nor help them with school. Kingston writes about racism and bullying and how she:

[ . . . ] liked the Negro students (Black Ghosts) best because they laughed the loudest and talked to me as if I were a daring talker too [ . . . ] Some Negro kids walked me to school and home, protecting me from the Japanese kids, who hit me and chased me and stuck gum in my ears.<sup>317</sup>

Kingston draws a picture of a childhood that could have been much easier had she known English. Through learning the language, she could have explained herself, she could have

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 166.

understood her teachers, her classmates, perhaps had American friends, and she could perhaps have lived without fear of the different ghosts: “Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars.”<sup>318</sup>

In her memoir, Kingston draws on the heritage of her mother; the power in storytelling. The power within storytelling is the power of being heard, and the power to tell. Due to language, she can exercise this power not only within the family like her mother, but in the larger society of English speakers. She has inherited, or learnt, the ability of storytelling, and the storytelling has, like with Yang, been empowered once again by a new language, a language that ensures listeners. However, as shared with Yang, when speaking English, Kingston seems to lose all her power: “I don’t like that word,’ I had to say in my bad, small person’s voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer.”<sup>319</sup> This is her only warrior weapon; storytelling through written English.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Kingston’s memoir differs from the traditional autobiography in that she stretches genre barriers of authenticity and individuality. A broad definition of the genre is important because there are diverse ways of presenting, expressing, and negotiating ones identity. These differences are not just cultural, or religious, but also individual. To tell ones story can be of personal importance, or of collective importance as with *The Latehomecomer*.

Kingston’s memoir can be misunderstood as the memoir of a female immigrant’s journey to freedom from her roots and to individual autonomy. However, Kingston’s memoir is not one of Americanization or one of return to Confucian ideals. Kingston narrates her personal process and search for a place to dwell in between two cultures by using what is at hand; the medium of memoir, her memories and experiences, and her cultural background. She rejects the patriarchal community, the oppressive gender roles, and the silence of being neither fully Chinese nor fully American. Her journey and memoir do not end in independence and autonomy. Her memoir ends with a story based on Chinese values, which illustrated her own captivity as well as her mother’s. The struggles of being in between are still there, however, she is freed from her mother’s expectations of returning. Even though Kingston’s struggles continue, her search for and need to find a voice is achieved. Through

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 48.

this memoir, Kingston has established a voice and a demand of being heard. “If only I could let my mother know the list, she - and the world - would become more like me, and I would never be alone again.”<sup>320</sup> Kingston has eventually made it possible to be heard, and in addressing fellow Chinese Americans, she seeks to raise questions regarding identity.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 198.



## Conclusion

Immigrants' identity formation as presented in these three memoirs has been the overarching issue under investigation in this thesis. *The Latehomecomer*, *Funny in Farsi*, and *The Woman Warrior* present different aspects of identity formation. Based on my analysis and discussion of these aspects I have found that the three memoirs share various aspects of identity formation, such as the struggle with language, cultural differences in ways of life, as well as the concept of individuality versus collectivism.

Throughout the memoirs, the respective authors have presented challenges and changes of coming to a new home country. In writing their lives, their identities, they have created a meaningful, coherent, whole, that reflect both, like Cavarero observes, a need for unity in our lives, as well as self-invention.<sup>321</sup> The manner in which identity is presented in these memoirs varies. Both Yang and Kingston present memories, experiences, stories about the past and female predecessors, as well as myths and spiritual beliefs, as parts of their own present lives. Dumas, on the other hand, presents anecdotes about relatives and in this manner narrates her identity as an individual within a group and as an individual different from that of the group.

The question of authenticity has been discussed, largely in connection with *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston directly expresses that she has added on information to stories as well as made up whole stories. Like Kingston, Yang also presents myths and memories she herself cannot possibly have witnessed. Even so, these authors come across as trustworthy in that they emphasize the importance of these stories in the process of writing their lives. In contrast, Dumas does not make any such implications, or confessions of imagined stories. She does however underscore the importance of telling stories about her relatives in order to present herself. Whether the stories presented are imagined or not, I will argue that the three authors manages to create a relation of trust with the reader. By indirectly explaining their worldview, or directly admitting to having presented a fictional story, the authors invite and welcome the reader into their life narrative. As a result, the autobiographical pact is challenged, however it is still attended to.

According to Hall, the manner in which these women have represented themselves reflects their identity formation.<sup>322</sup> As members of a group, the authors find it necessary to present themselves in connection with relationships. *The Latehomecomer* is written as a

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<sup>321</sup> Anderson, *Autobiography*, 117-18.

<sup>322</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity".

family memoir and the story of the Hmong people. Yang presents this story with an aim; to tell her people's story. Through writing the memoir, Yang becomes a spokesperson for a group, and a storyteller whose responsibility is to bring knowledge and traditions on to future generations. Dumas, on the other hand, uses anecdotes in writing the self. She puts them together in her memoir and offers it to her audience as a statement of who she is. Her collection of anecdotes about relatives reflects her identity formation as an individual whose roots explain who she is, and, through positioning herself away from relatives; who she is not. Further, Kingston writes the self through fictional stories as well as allegedly true stories. She also emphasizes her relation to her mother and female predecessors and their stories. The manner in which Kingston has chosen to represent herself reflects the bewildered state she is in, her need to be heard, and the confusion of being in between two cultures. Kingston and Dumas are both individuals who identify to a lesser degree with a group, while Yang presents herself as a spokesperson and member of a group. All three authors narrate a process, be it individual (Dumas and Kingston) or collective (Yang), in search for somewhere to dwell between the culture of origin and the new American culture.

In agreement with Turner et al., the three memoirs reflect how identity is a result of interaction between an individual and a situation.<sup>323</sup> The memoirs reflect challenges with the tension between being loyal to one's roots and culture of origin on the one hand, and expectations from the larger society and American ways of life on the other. In the introduction to this thesis, I expressed a wish to convey expectations from the new home nation to these immigrants when encountering America. The demands for learning English and to succeed within the educational system, are shared by all three authors. Yang and Dumas discuss the importance of education as the gate to economical freedom and independence. They further address the expectation and value of economical freedom as well as the importance of being employed in the American society. Yang accounts for how her family embraced the value of education in America, and how they concluded that education was the key to an economically better life in their new home country. As a result, the value of being surrounded by family, listening to stories, and watch over her grandmother by the deathbed, had to be put aside in order to follow the educational road to success. Further, Kingston's mother represents Kingston's roots, which she, to a large extent, seeks to position herself away from. At the same time, parts of these roots are presented as offering the author help in the present. This paradox of needing to confront one's roots whilst needing one's roots

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<sup>323</sup> László, "A Narrative Theory of History and Identity: Social Identity, Social Representations, society and the Individual."

in explaining one's identity is shared by Dumas. Her anecdotes signal both pride and a necessity for distance from her background. In addition, Dumas' memoir signals a need for individuality and distance from stereotypes. She confronts stereotypes such as "the oppressed woman", and thereby seeks to position herself away from such gender categories as well as to build a bridge to her American audience. Yang, on the other hand, does not confront the traditional values and preference of having sons. She merely mentions this whilst expressing assurance as to how much her father loved her. In contrast to *The Latehomecomer*, Kingston addresses gender expectations to a large degree. This becomes evident in her presentation of her community's value differences between girls and boys. She protests this difference both as a child, and in writing *The Woman Warrior*, stating that she is an independent individual who's voice is worthy of being heard.

The three authors are all pioneers within the genre of memoir and within their respective Hmong/Iranian/Chinese American context. Dumas' humoristic biographical anecdotes break barriers, as does Yang's collectivistic motivated reason for writing a memoir, and her fusion of individual and collective memories. Further, the manner in which Kingston narrates her identity formation by mixing her own memories, old Chinese myths, stories told by others, as well as explicitly expressed fictional stories, breaks traditional genre conventions. Moreover, Kingston challenges the "autobiographical pact" by adding on to stories and explicitly admitting that some of her stories are not true. The three memoirs reflect how immigrants go through a process of finding a new identity, which, in all three authors' cases seeks to dwell in between one's roots and the new American culture. However, none of these authors' identities must be categorized into Chinese American/Iranian American/Hmong American. Why? What frequently occurs, is that individuals and groups are put into presupposed models of identities. An Iranian American person might be expected to have certain values, beliefs, and ways to behave. Such categories and expectations limit acceptance and diversity. Moreover, presupposed models of identities might be offensive and therefore prohibit cross-cultural understanding and relations. Dumas seeks to position herself away from stereotypes, Yang seeks to tell her people's story whilst create a space for the Hmong people in America, and Kingston seeks to break free from restrictions whilst valuing, and honoring her female predecessors. None of these authors seek an American identity, or a diasporic identity. They seek a place in between the culture of origin and the new American culture. As addressed in the introduction, immigrants, as a group consists of individuals who experience the transfer from one nation to another in different ways. These three memoirs have provided a valuable insight into the individual differences in the immigrant experience.

Some aspects are shared others are not. As stated in chapter three, the genre of memoir includes individual stories, and therefore needs a broad definition and flexibility when it comes to the manner in which one chooses to present one's identity. This freedom and variety should reflect the variety of individuals within the immigrant group, and offers richness to both the genre of autobiography, as well as to the readers as individuals and members of society.



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