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Writing 'Kinography': Narrating the Self through Family and Kin in
The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café

by

Lara Mark Sauer

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto



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Abstract

Storytelling plays a vital role in the identity construction of the first and second generation narrators of The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café. Oral histories of family, passed from mother to daughter, form what Kingston deems 'ancestral help', or a complex weaving of the stories of female kin; through the reconstruction and subsequent writing of these stories, the narrators reconcile the Chinese and American mythologies that are a result of leading a dualized cultural existence. Thus a new genre is formed: neither a biography nor an autobiography, but rather a 'kinography', one which acknowledges the importance of family and kinship.

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Introduction

Being a first generation Canadian born to Chinese and Filipino parents, I have found that, as an adolescent and an adult, I have always been caught in a kind of 'identity limbo'. As an adolescent I wanted to identify myself away from my Chinese-Filipino roots, refusing, for instance, to take the Chinese 'chia-shiu-bao' to school for lunch, fearing awkward questions from my classmates: I preferred a 'Canadian' lunch of a peanut butter and jam sandwich. I remember my embarrassment when visiting friends would question why my family had coins placed at the threshold of each doorway in our house; I did not want to tell them that it is a Filipino custom used to bring good luck.

Later, as an adult, not only would I feel ashamed of my adolescent sensibilities, but would find myself in an identity limbo of a different kind: I worry about how to create a love and respect for the Chinese and Filipino culture in my children, who will be half Chinese / Filipino and half Caucasian.

My search for a situated, balanced identity brought me to the novels The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café. The narrators of these novels demonstrate the same identity crises, the same 'clash of mythologies' between the mythology that is their traditional culture and the mythology that is the place of their birth. This thesis seeks to examine the means by which these narrators construct a new notion of identity, predicated not away from, nor on the family, but *through* the family; this is done via the oral histories that are passed to each narrator by her mother.

Chapter One

The Woman Warrior

In The Woman Warrior, the narrator's quest for identity is shaped and formed by the 'talk-stories', or oral histories, that her mother, Brave Orchid, relates to her. The 'talk-stories', each telling the story of a female predecessor, provide a link to the past for her daughter; they form what the narrator calls "ancestral help" (p. 8). However, these 'talk-stories' are, to the narrator, a confusing melange of the fantastic and the factual:

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

(p. 5-6)

Having been so inundated with 'talk-stories' throughout her childhood, the narrator cannot distinguish between American 'movies' and Chinese tradition; she is caught between these mythologies and is attempting, through the novel, to find a balance between them.

The narrator herself speculates on the effect of her mother's talk-stories, and interjects during their retelling: "whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories. . . to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities" (p. 5). These 'realities' must be differentiated from factual truths, as the narrator states near the end of the novel that the talk-stories still " 'scramble me up' " (p. 202); the stories do not assist her in separating fact from fiction, but rather introduce her to her female predecessors and

the reality of her connection to them. Through her writing she finds 'ancestral help', a link to her female kin, in each talk-story.

Brave Orchid begins the novel with her story of 'No Name Aunt', a relative who is ostracized by her fellow villagers in China for her adultery; her story illustrates the ramifications of jeopardizing the community's welfare. "We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (p. 3), states Brave Orchid. Significantly, Brave Orchid's sister-in-law has been deprived even of her name; she has been rendered identity-less. This section of the novel is called 'No Name Woman', a fitting literal and metaphorical title, for one may see that the narrator herself is also a 'No Name Woman'. Not only does she remain unnamed throughout the novel, but at this stage of her narrative, is still searching for her identity and hence is unformed and nameless. As the novel is a *process* of identification, the narrator's identity is in a constant state of change and therefore does not wish to limit herself to the same name throughout.

No Name Aunt's story illustrates the dichotomy of mythology present throughout the novel, between Chinese and American values. Both the narrator and Brave Orchid demonstrate that they have re-invented No Name Aunt's story to suit their own mythologies, the narrator the American, Brave Orchid the Chinese. The narrator clearly feels ambivalent about her aunt's story, as she speculates that her aunt was raped (p. 7) and then "[was] in love" (p. 9); she asserts that "my aunt could not have been the lone romantic" (p. 6). There are also confusing elements in Brave Orchid's version of the talk-story, as she claims to have been living with No Name Aunt at the time of the villagers'

raid (p. 4), and yet could not have been present; the narrator notes that "my mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt . . . should not have been living together at all. Daughters-in-law lived with their husbands' parents, not their own" (p. 7). In addition, Brave Orchid informs her daughter, "don't let your father know that I told you" (p. 5), suggesting that she may have fictionalized her story. In fact, the narrator states that "emigrants . . . must try to confuse their offspring as well [as the Americans], who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways -- always trying to get things straight" (p. 5). In spite of the ambiguity on both Brave Orchid and the narrator's parts, however, the story still stands as proof of the importance of community and kin. As the women of the village are expected to maintain family traditions while their husbands are away (p. 8), No Name Aunt, through her affair, jeopardizes the welfare of the community. The narrator notes that "the villagers punished [No Name Aunt] for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them . . . adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food" (p. 13). The narrator's need to fictionalize her aunt's story is revealed when she states, "unless I see [No Name Aunt's] life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (p. 8). The narrator attempts to replace the Chinese realities of village survival with her own American mythologies of rape, romance and love.

No Name Woman's story is told by Brave Orchid as a warning to her daughter: "'You must not tell anyone. . . what I am about to tell you'" (p. 3). This caveat is passed from mother to daughter in an effort to 'save face' for the family; Brave Orchid tells the narrator, "'Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us'" (p. 5). Kinship and the importance of community is so

central to the Chinese family that Brave Orchid fears a similar exile: " 'You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful' " (p. 5). Brave Orchid's version of the talk-story has served its practical purpose of warning against possible 'inappropriate' relations and hence endangering the welfare of the kin group. The narrator notes that her mother's interpretation of No Name Aunt's history is lacking in any detail that is not merely conducive to Brave Orchid's warning:

If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore,
whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to
begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well-
sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told
me once and for all the useful parts. She will
add nothing unless powered by Necessity. . .

(p. 6)

As a result of her mother's warning, the narrator attempts to differentiate herself from her aunt. The narrator is caught between the Chinese and American mythologies, articulated in No Name Aunt's story; she wants to be attractive to boys, and yet does not want to risk the wrath of the family in attracting the 'wrong' one, as No Name Aunt had done. As No Name Aunt's lover was a fellow villager, her 'crime' was considered doubly heinous, virtually incestuous. Among the villagers, "parents researched birth charts probably not so much to assure good fortune as to circumvent incest in a population that has but one hundred surnames" (p. 12). The narrator consequently takes precautions to keep herself from a similar fate: "I used to add 'brother' silently to boy's names. . . it hexed the boys. . . and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as girls" (p. 12). Of course, she notes, she hexes herself in the process, promoting herself

as a sisterly figure, and hence, "no dates" (p. 12). She heeds her mother's warning by making herself romantically unattractive: "If I made myself American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone else -- the Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese boys -- would too" (p. 12). However, although her 'unattractiveness' to the 'Caucasian, Negro and Japanese boys' would suit Brave Orchid's Chinese mythology, it is at odds with her American mythology of romance and love.

At the conclusion of the section 'No Name Woman' the narrator writes, "my aunt haunts me -- her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes" (p. 16). Both the narrator and her aunt need for No Name Aunt's story to be told. For the narrator, the act of writing provides both emancipatory effects from, and a connection to, family. In contrast, No Name Aunt, through the retelling and reinventing of her story, is remembered, is given a voice despite her relatives' demands that she be forgotten. She is 'haunted' by her aunt's ghost, for her aunt is an inseparable part of her self, a complex tapestry of kin and their stories. Significantly, her tribute to her forgotten aunt is not in the traditional style of paper 'origamied into houses and clothes', but in paper printed with the written word. It is fitting that the narrator recognize her aunt in such a way, one which both is opposition to traditional Chinese techniques and celebratory of her Chinese ancestors. The narrator is already, as a now mature writer, demonstrating the possibility for balance between Eastern and Western cultures. As a hybrid herself, she reflects her dualness in her writing: she writes, rather than speaks, her aunt's story, despite warnings not to repeat what she had been told.

'White Tigers' further illustrates the dual mythology in the narrator's life. The narrator relates the story of the legendary Chinese heroine, Fa Mu Lan, who is the epitome of the filial daughter, and then compares her life to that of the woman warrior's to find it lacking: "my American life has been such a disappointment" (p. 45). She has so internalized her mother's story that she cannot distinguish between the warrior's life and her own.

By the end of this chapter, though the narrator clearly does not see herself as being heroic, she realizes that she and the woman warrior are not so dissimilar. She states, "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 a 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" (p. 53). Just as Fa Mu Lan is inspired and motivated by the words of family carved into her back, so too is the narrator inspired and motivated. The narrator, however, is motivated by a duality of words, a duality that reflects her Chinese and American mythologies. While she is inspired by her kin-stories, she is also anxious to dis-identify herself from names imposed on her by others: 'chink' and 'gook'. The multiplicity of words placed upon her is such that they 'do not fit on [her] skin'; she must, obviously, reconcile the two mythologies / identifications. The narrator finds her vengeance not through the physical, but through the metaphorical. Through her writing, she reports her vengeance on the American equivalent of Fa Mu Lan's robber barons:

'Order more of that nigger yellow, willya?'
the boss told me. 'Bright, isn't it? Nigger

yellow.' 'I don't like that word,' I had to say in my small, bad-person's voice that makes no impact . . . 'Did you know that the restaurant you chose for the banquet is being picketed by CORE and the NAACP?' I squeaked. 'Of course I know.' The boss laughed. 'That's why I chose it.' 'I refuse to type these invitations,' I whispered, voice unreliable.'

(p. 48-49)

However, despite the uncertainty in her voice, she progresses through the novel to finally express her resentment of what she perceives as her parents' belief that she is stupid (p. 201-202). To accomplish this, she first needs to work through her competing Chinese and American mythologies, a dualism that is exacerbated by her mother's ambiguous talk-stories.

"Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (p. 19). Brave Orchid's talk-stories so pervade the narrator's early life that she admits that she cannot differentiate between fact and fiction, even by the conclusion of the novel: " 'I can't tell what's real and what you make up' "(p. 202), she tells Brave Orchid. Brave Orchid, however, suggests that she tells talk-stories not only to acquaint her daughter with her ties to her female ancestors, but also to ensure that she too will not be forgotten. She demonstrates this desire when she asks her daughter to move back home, strengthening family ties: " 'I can't turn around without touching somebody. That's

the way a house should be" (p. 108). The words spoken from Fa Mu Lan's mother to the warrior woman as she carves family grievances into her daughter's back could have come from Brave Orchid herself, delivered to the narrator: "'Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice . . . and you'll never forget either'" (p. 34).

The narrator recognizes, as an adult writer, the strength of her mother's talk-stories, and their power to link female kin. She states,

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story . . . I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about . . . Fa Mu Lan . . . I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother . . .

(p. 19-20)

This passage illustrates the potential for reconciliation of mother-daughter differences through talk-story, a scene which is repeated later in 'Shaman'. The narrator shows that this mother-daughter bond through oral storytelling is indeed possible, and desirable; it represents the mediation of the Chinese and American mythologies. Interestingly, the narrator finds this mediation as a child, and remembers it as an adult searching for identity. However, her childhood perception is visible later in the above passage when she states, "[my mother] said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (p. 20). Yet Brave Orchid never made such a claim; the narrator's childhood memories are of neighbours and great-grandfathers voicing their disapproval of female children: "

'Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds . . . there's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls' " (p. 46). Brave Orchid has, conversely, encouraged her daughter to assert herself through the talk-stories of Fa Mu Lan and the 'cutting' of the narrator's tongue (p. 164). The narrator's belief that Brave Orchid thought her daughter was destined to become a slave or a wife illustrates the tension that the narrator feels between her Chinese and American mythologies; while she internalizes the negative statements about female children and attributes them to her mother, she still believes that she can be a warrior: "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. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (p. 19).

The narrator, however, is further conflicted by the traditional notion of filiality presented in the chapter. While Fa Mu Lan, the epitome of the filial daughter, promises to become a dutiful daughter-in-law, the narrator refuses to accept the man she thinks Brave Orchid has chosen as her husband:

My throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling. I looked directly at my mother and father and screamed. . . 'I can make a living and take care of myself. So you don't have to find me a keeper. . . I am not going to be a slave or a wife. . . I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife! "

(p. 201)

The narrator articulates the anxiety she feels numerous times throughout the chapter; she is clearly testing her voice and its limits. As a child, she recalls that she

would throw temper tantrums when other emigrant villagers would say that " 'feeding girls is feeding cowbirds' " (p. 46). She questioned her mother when she realized that she and her brothers were treated differently: " 'Did you have a full-month party for *me*? Did you turn on all the lights? Did you send *my* picture to Grandmother? Why not? Because I'm a girl? Is that why not?' " (p. 46). These tantrums and questions illustrate the progression of her identity formation; she moves from illiterate protests to vocalizing her confusion and displeasure.

She moves quickly to describe her experience at college, where it is clear that she is still exploring the tension between mythologies, and how it might be resolved. In an attempt to rebel against Chinese beliefs , she spites herself:

It was said, "There is an outward tendency in females," which meant that I was getting straight A's for the good of my future husband's family, not my own. I did not plan ever to have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency.
I stopped getting straight A's.

(p. 47)

The narrator demonstrates confusion and ambivalence through her actions and through her further vocal rejections of anything Chinese; when asked as a child what she wanted to be when she grew up, she replied, " 'a lumberjack in Oregon' " (p. 47). Even as an adult, she notes, she still acts out when she is angry, in a manner which is not acceptable to traditional Chinese people: "I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at

other people's tables but won't invite them to mine" (p. 47-8). Each of these acts of defiance represents a step in the path to identity. The narrator is working through her ambivalence, moving from a state of silence to one of voice, and ultimately her discovery of such will lead her to write. She will continue her mother's chronicles not in the oral tradition, but one newly formed, a new tradition of 'kinography' which celebrates the importance of family and perpetuation of talk-story.

The talk-story of Chinese mythology is released with the narrator's opening of the metal tube which holds her mother's medical diploma: "When I open it, the smell of China flies out . . . a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain" (p. 57). The talk-story of Brave Orchid's encounter with the 'Sitting Ghost' is a metaphor for her spiritual strength. This strength is inevitably linked to family when the narrator speculates on Brave Orchid's school photograph: "[Brave Orchid] stares straight ahead as if she could see me and past me to her grandchildren and grandchildren's grandchildren" (p. 58). The narrator describes her mother's gaze in the photograph as 'spacy', meaning her eyes do not focus on the camera; in a later photo she notes that "in this picture too my mother's eyes are big with what they held -- reaches of oceans beyond China, land beyond oceans . . . now her eyes include the relatives in China" (p. 59). Both statements illustrate Brave Orchid's tie to kin of past, present and future. 'Shaman' demonstrates the appropriateness of Brave Orchid's name, for she shows that she can contend with both reality and mythology, or as the narrator puts it, "flesh or ghost" (p. 92). In contrast to the 'spacy' eyes her mother possesses in her graduation photo, the narrator states that "in America my mother has eyes as strong as boulders" (p. 59); this 'boulder' metaphor is

paralleled in Brave Orchid's talk-story, in which she calls the 'ghost' which oppressed her a 'boulder'.

At medical school "[Brave Orchid] would live for two years without servitude. She would not have to run errands for my father's tyrant mother . . . or thread needles for the old ladies" (p. 62). With her husband in America, Brave Orchid is a woman free from the constraints of family and thus opts to spend the money her husband sends on education, an obviously modern notion as the villagers believed that, given the female's 'outward tendency', education or even feeding females is akin to throwing money away (p. 47). The narrator notes that

not many women got to live out the
daydream of women -- to have a room,
even a section of a room, that only
gets messed up when she messes it up
herself. The book would stay open
at the very page she had pressed flat
with her hand, and no one would
complain about the field not being
plowed or the leak in the roof.

(p. 61)

Brave Orchid builds a unique kinship with the other female scholars at the school, with whom she shares this special bond of being educated women. Through talk-stories, these women form and strengthen their kin bonds (p. 65). Although most of her classmates' stories are of ancestral ghosts, Brave Orchid's is a metaphor for the life of loneliness she left behind. Brave Orchid herself comments on the metaphorical nature of these 'ghosts' during one of her classmates' talk-stories: " 'How do we know that ghosts are the

continuance of dead people? Couldn't ghosts be an entirely different species of creature?" (p. 65-66).

Brave Orchid's experience with her personal, 'sitting' ghost is one which she finds "pressing [and] sapping her" (p. 69), and she reacts with verbal confrontation:

"I do not give in . . . there is no pain you
can inflict that I cannot endure. You're
wrong if you think I'm afraid of you.
You're no mystery to me . . . You cannot
even assume an interesting shape. Merely
a boulder."

(p. 70)

This suggests that the 'ghost' suppressing Brave Orchid is not merely a ghost but a metaphor for something else, that is, the inactive, separated state she lived without children, husband, or kin. Her classmates "call back" (p. 71) Brave Orchid's self after the encounter, fearing that it may have been led astray by the ghost. The narrator examines this ritual after her mother's description of her encounter with the Sitting Ghost.

Normally, the female members of the family perform this ritual, "chanting their descent line" (p. 75) to call the separated self back to the village. However, "the students at the To Keung School of Midwifery were new women, scientists who changed the rituals" (p. 75), and though "no blood bonded friend to friend . . . they had to figure out how to help my mother's spirit locate the To Keung School as 'home'" (p. 75). To do so, they used their kin bonds as women and friends to "make her come back to them" They called out their own names, women's pretty names . . . horizontal names of one generation. They pieced together new directions, and my mother's spirit followed them instead of the old

"footprints" (p. 75-76). When Brave Orchid relates her encounter with the Sitting Ghost to her new kin, she describes a creature of:

No true head, no eyes, no face, so low
 in its level of incarnation it did not have
 the shape of a recognizable animal. It
 knocked me down and began to strangle
 me . . . For ten years I lost my way. I
 almost forgot about you; there was so
 much work leading to other work and
 another life . . . But I returned . . .
 outwitting Wall Ghosts en route. (The
 way to do that is to go straight ahead; do
 not play their side-to-side games . . .)

(p. 73)

However, she asserts, the "danger is not over" (p. 73); she needs the assistance of her friends to " 'rid the world of this disease, as invisible and deadly as bacteria' " (p. 74). Together this group of 'new women' eradicate the ghost.

The narrator examines her mother's midwifery practice and in it imagines Brave Orchid's forgiveness for female babies: "I hope this holeless baby proves that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl . . . she never said she herself killed babies, but perhaps the holeless baby was a boy" (p. 86). Here in 'Shaman' the narrator seeks evidence that shows that her mother does not harbour the same ill feeling towards female babies as the villagers, and hence towards the narrator herself.

The narrator calls Brave Orchid's these talk-stories of gorillas, blue-eyed babies and the holeless baby "pictures to dream" (p.86). However, they assume a nightmarish quality, and in defense, the narrator delineates the line between the Chinese and the American, the sleeping and the waking:

To make my waking life American-normal,
 I turn on the lights before anything untoward
 makes an appearance. I push the deformed
 into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the
 language of impossible stories. Before we
 can leave our parents, they stuff our heads
 like the suitcases which they jam-pack with
 homemade underwear.

(p. 87)

At this stage of the novel, the narrator is obviously ambivalent about her mother's talk-stories; her nightmares are in Chinese, the 'language of impossible stories', and she likens these dreams to 'homemade underwear'. She feels she has been stuffed with these stories, and is obviously doubtful about their usefulness. However, she goes on to describe other ghost stories told by Brave Orchid, stories of 'big eaters', Chinese legends who ate fantastic foods and amounts. "Big eaters win" (p. 90), the narrator states, and then notes that "my mother has cooked for us: raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons . . ." (p. 91). In spite of the narrator's ambivalence towards her mother's talk-stories and her uncertainty about how Brave Orchid feels about her, it is clear that Brave Orchid is genuinely concerned for her welfare; if big eaters win, then Brave Orchid ensures the success of her children by feeding them similar foodstuffs as the legends ate.

In comparison to the narrator, who struggles with her Chinese and American mythologies, her mother "could contend against the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them" (p. 92). These 'hairy beasts' represent the mythologies Brave Orchid encounters: those of the flesh in China, the ghosts in America; unlike her daughter, however, she deals with her mythologies in the same manner: by confronting, or 'eating' them. The narrator uses her mother's method of confronting mythologies in contrast to her own: she proceeds to describe her childhood filled with ghosts, or foreigners. "Much as I dream recurringly about shrinking babies, I dream that the sky is covered from horizon to horizon with rows of airplanes, dirigibles, rocket ships, flying bombs, their formations as even as stitches . . . I must figure out a way to fly between them" (p. 96). The preceding passage is a poignant metaphor for the narrator's attempt to reconcile Chinese and American mythologies, represented respectively by the baby nightmares and the machines. The narrator's 'waking' American life is populated by "Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts . . ." (p. 97), and yet, as a child, she obviously clearly demarcated between her Chinese and American lives. Nonetheless, aspects of Chinese mythology still pervade this 'American' life. She recalls that "it seemed as if ghosts could not hear or see very well" (p. 98), and describes how shocked she was when the 'Garbage Ghost' parroted back her taunts. Brave Orchid concluded, "'the White Ghosts can hear Chinese. They have learned it. You mustn't talk in front of them again' " (p. 98)

The chapter proceeds to describe a conversation held between Brave Orchid and the narrator when the latter comes home to visit as an adult. Brave Orchid illustrates her

notion of family when she attempts to convince the narrator to move back home: " 'I can't turn around without touching somebody. That's the way a house should be' " (p. 108). The narrator explains that she cannot return, as " 'I've found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there . . .' " (p. 108). Her description of places that are 'ghost-free' demonstrates that as an adult, she has reconciled her Chinese and American mythologies, that although she still dreams of "shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes" (p. 109), she can contend, or 'eat' them. Away from the talk-stories which stuff her head 'like homemade underwear', she feels more able to probe what "is a cheat story and what's not" (p. 206), and yet still allow space in her life for the talk-stores that have "tested [her] strength to establish realities" (p. 5). Obviously, then, they have ultimately been successful.

'At the Western Palace' introduces another notion of kinship similar to that of Brave Orchid's at medical school; without kin bonds, one is led astray. However, in the case of Brave Orchid's sister, Moon Orchid, the familial bond that she shares with Brave Orchid is not supportive, as Brave Orchid makes Moon Orchid aggressively pursue her husband. Shortly after Moon Orchid's arrival, Brave Orchid is eager to start planning how to win Moon Orchid's husband back for her sister, but Moon Orchid is content merely to be in the presence of her sister and her sister's family: " "I'm here. You've done it and brought me here.' Moon Orchid meant that they should be satisfied with what they had already accomplished" (p. 124).

Moon Orchid has difficulty adjusting to the American habits of her nieces and nephews; she struggles to reconcile her traditional Chinese mythology with the American she has encountered. " 'Good morning Aunt,' they said, turning to face her, staring

directly into her face. Even the girls stared at her when they did that. They looked directly into her eyes as if they were looking for lies. Rude. Accusing" (p. 133). In another instance, Moon Orchid notices that her nieces and nephews never deny a compliment, which is traditionally considered appropriately modest in Chinese custom (p. 134).

Moon Orchid's delicate nature, her inability to perform manual labour with any effectiveness, and her reluctance to confront her husband directly contrast with her sister's demeanour. Brave Orchid's responses to her sister's anxiety reflect this contrast; for example, when Moon Orchid voices her protest, " 'If I see him face to face, what is there to say?'" (p. 126), Brave Orchid replies, " 'I can think of hundreds of things . . . Oh, how I'd love to be in your place. I could tell him so many things. What scenes I could make' " (p. 126). Brave Orchid is a "dragon" (p. 109), a warrior woman, as evidenced by her name; however, her confrontational behaviour does not suit her sister.

Clearly Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid live in worlds of opposing mythologies: Moon Orchid in the world of the simple (p. 136), Brave Orchid of practicality. When Brave Orchid urges her sister to evict Moon Orchid's husband's new wife, Moon Orchid replies, " 'I wouldn't mind if she stays . . . She can comb my hair and keep house. She can wash the dishes and serve our meals. And she can take care of the little boys.' Moon Orchid laughed" (p. 130). Brave Orchid's response is more practical, and is commanding: " 'You must make it plain to your husband right at the start what you expect of him. That is what a wife is for . . . You have to establish these things at the start. Don't begin meek'" (p. 130-131). Moon Orchid also has difficulty performing simple manual tasks:

It infuriated Brave Orchid that her sister held up each dish between thumb and forefinger, squirted detergent on the back and front, and ran water without plugging up the drain.

Moon Orchid only laughed when Brave Orchid scolded, 'Oh, stop that with the dishes. Here. Take this dress and hem it.' But Moon Orchid immediately got the thread tangled and laughed about that.

(p. 135).

Moon Orchid, though unschooled in the ways of American life, copes while her mythology remains unchallenged; however, this mythology is made vulnerable with the appearance of her long-separated husband. Her anxiety and fear at meeting him is well documented; she states, "I'm scared. Oh, let's turn back. I don't want to see him . . . Don't leave me by myself" (p. 144).

Clearly Moon Orchid is leagued with the Chinese (p. 149) and the simple; it is the clash between these mythologies and those of the American and aggressive that drive her insane. When her sister announces that they are going to confront Moon Orchid's husband, Moon Orchid states, "I can't move. I can't do that in front of all those people -- like a stage show. I won't be able to talk." And sure enough, her voice was fading into a whisper. She was shivering and small in the corner of the seat" (p. 150).

This encounter drives Moon Orchid mad, a condition which Brave Orchid describes as such: "The difference between mad people and sane people . . . is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (p 159). Talk-story and kinship are closely related in this chapter, as

Moon Orchid's talk-stories are used by her sister to assess Moon Orchid's mental state, which is in turn determined by the kin bonds which she is offered. As Moon Orchid is only capable of dealing with Chinese mythologies, her encounter with her American (p. 153) husband has disrupted her sense of place; Brave Orchid claims that her sister has misplaced her 'attention' (p. 157). Her stay in a mental institution, however, "makes her happy" and allows her to "[make] up a new story" (p. 160) as it allows her to form new kin bonds based on shared mythology. Moon Orchid claims,

'I am so happy here . . . Isn't that wonderful?
 We are all women here. Come. I want
 you to meet my daughters.' She introduced
 Brave Orchid to each inmate in the
 ward -- her daughters . . . 'And, you know . . .
 we understand one another here. We speak
 the same language, the very same. They
 understand me, and I understand them.'

(p. 160)

Moon Orchid continues her descent line through these 'daughters' who participate in the same talk-story. Her self is called back by these kin just as Brave Orchid's self was summoned back by her classmates in 'Shaman'. The importance of 'kin' in all forms is essential to the construction of identity, and occasionally these kin are more supportive than blood relations, as in Moon Orchid's case.

'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe' addresses the identity construction of the narrator herself. She begins by 'talking-story' on the nature of her writing:

it wasn't me my brother told about going
 to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me

what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs . . . Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot . . . If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.

(p. 164)

Her ability, given a scarce few observations made by her brother, to twist the story into a complicated tapestry attests to the effect her mother's talk-stories have had on her: she has internalized them so that now both Chinese and American mythologies, represented in this passage by the legend of the 'knot-maker' and the narrator's brother's observations, combine to form a new mythology for the narrator. Significantly, she describes a knot whose intricacy 'blinded' its maker; the knot-maker weaves mere string into beautiful and yet utilitarian objects, and yet his creation 'blinded' him just as talk-stories can 'blind' their teller, obscuring the line between fact and fiction. The confusion created by the obscuring nature of talk-stories and experienced by the narrator mirrors the metaphorical blinding of the knot-maker.

This confusion of mythologies continues at elementary school, where the narrator cannot understand the "American 'I' ":

The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies.
How could the American 'I', assuredly wearing

a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes,
 the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness
 that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese
 has to write her own name small and crooked?
 No, it was not politeness; 'I' is a capital and 'you'
 is lower-case.

(p. 166-167)

Her confusion reflects not only the clash of mythologies she experiences as a Chinese-American, but the importance of relationship in Chinese culture. The Chinese ideogram for 'self' "has seven strokes, intricacies" and actually contains part of the ideogram for 'generation'. Hence there is no notion of the self independent of one's descent line; one is inextricably linked to kin and family. The narrator's confusion is understandable, given the independent "American 'I'", "the middle so straight". In fact, she is accustomed to the practice of sacrificing strokes to politeness, of detracting from the self to accentuate the 'you', or the family denoted in the ideogram. However, she notices that the opposite is true for the 'American', where " 'I' is a capital and 'you' is lower-case."

Silence and voice are used differently when surrounded by one's kin, the narrator notes. At Chinese school, she states, "we chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft, some boys shouting, everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice" (p. 167). As the narrator has difficulty speaking the American 'I', so has she difficulty speaking in 'American' school, where she must speak of the self, of the independent 'I'; in Chinese school, however, surrounded by and chanting with kin, she feels more comfortable. She draws comparisons between silence and voice between the two schools: "The boys who were so well behaved in the American school played tricks

on [the teachers] and talked back to them. The girls were not mute. They screamed and yelled during recess, when there were no rules; they had fist-fights" (p.167).

The shifting and confusing nature of the mythologies are, for the narrator, once again, demonstrated through talk-stories. Brave Orchid clearly recognizes the necessity for her daughter to adapt to American customs, and thus she 'cuts' the narrator's tongue. When the narrator asks her mother for an explanation, Brave Orchid replies,

"I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied.

Your tongue would be able to move in any language . . . You'll be able to pronounce anything."

"But isn't 'a ready tongue an evil'?"

"Things are different in this ghost country."

(p. 164)

Despite her attempts, however, her daughter remains, as a child, unable to find her voice.

Interestingly, however, as "the other Chinese girls did not talk either, I knew the silence had nothing to do with being a Chinese girl" (p. 166); the silence rather is due to her attempts to become 'American-feminine'. "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" (p. 172).

Hence a clash of mythologies arises, not only between Chinese and American, but between school and home, where these roles of voice and silence are played out.

The tension proves to much for the narrator as a schoolaged child, who torments another Chinese girl in an attempt to make her speak: "we invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in

"Chinese school" (p. 172). The narrator's hatred for the 'quiet girl' (p. 174) reflects her own inner turmoil at the clash of Chinese and American mythologies; during her torment of the girl she asks,

'Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl? What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you're going to have to work because you can't be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife . . . Nobody's going to notice you. And you have to talk for interviews, speak up right in front of the boss.'

(p. 180-181)

The narrator projects her fears and confusion for her own future onto the quiet girl, whom the narrator sees as a mirror image of herself. She thinks that Brave Orchid literally cut the frenum of her tongue for her to speak more, and yet she finds herself unable to talk in 'American' school; hence she likens silence to failure. She attempts, then, to distance herself from the quiet girl; she states, "I hoped [my neck] did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck" (p. 176), "I hated her clothes -- the blue pastel cardigan . . . I hated pastels; I would wear black always" (p. 177), and "I could see her tiny white teeth, baby teeth. I wanted to grow big strong yellow teeth" (p. 178).

She states that "sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese" (p. 183). She notes the difficulty in positioning herself within either mythology, describing her efforts in developing an 'American feminine' speaking voice and the belief among emigrant villagers that first generation Chinese-

American children are a kind of 'half-ghost': "they would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. They called us a kind of ghost" (p. 183), and "my mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories" (p. 167). Brave Orchid is speaking of collective memory, of a link among generations; Brave Orchid's belief that her American-born children lack this collective memory keeps her from telling them about Chinese customs and holidays, leaving the narrator to make inferences: "From the configurations of food my mother set out, we kids had to infer the holidays. She did not whip us up with holiday anticipation or explain . . . the adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask" (p. 185). The narrator wonders, "How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness" (p. 184). She suspects that "maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (p. 185). Indeed, she has addressed the very nature of talk-story, especially in its transition from oral to written as in The Woman Warrior. In the narrator's case in particular, more of the talk-story will be constructed as she reconciles Chinese and American mythologies.

As the ghosts have no collective memory and "the Han people won't be pinned down" (p. 185), emigrant villagers "lie to Americans" (p. 184) in order to keep from drawing attention to themselves:

Tell them you were born during the San Francisco earthquake. Tell them your birth certificate and your parents were burned up in the fire. Don't report crimes; tell them we have no crimes and no poverty. Give a new name every time you get arrested;

the ghosts won't recognize you. Pay the
new immigrants twenty-five cents an hour
and say we have no unemployment.

(p. 184)

As in 'At the Western Palace', the issue of sanity emerges, the narrator stating that "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (p. 186). Interestingly, the narrator's definition of insanity relates to silence and voice, her mother's to talk-story.

The narrator prefaces the story of her ultimate vocalization with "I 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" (p. 189). She describes her disheveled appearance (p. 189), and her limp (p. 190), affectations she adopted deliberately to make herself 'unsellable' as a wife or a slave in America. More significantly, she describes the "adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked" (p. 189). These imaginary people, of whom the legendary Fa Mu Lan is one, are a result of the narrator's internalizing of her mother's talk-stories, and cause the narrator to participate in the stories' recreation. The affectations and what she believes is 'crazy' behaviour she thinks will keep her safe from being sold as a wife or a slave. However, she notes that "if I made myself unsellable here, my parents need only wait until China, and there, where anything happens, they would be able to unload us, even me -- sellable, marriageable" (p. 190); in this statement she demonstrates the magnitude of her confusion between what is talk-story and what is reality, for Brave Orchid asserts later that she never had any intention of selling her daughter (p. 202).

The narrator's vocal outburst, directed at her parents, is the culmination of her desire to make herself known to her kin, especially her mother, and to explain herself, as the ability to do so would deem her sane; she begins with amassing a list of "over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me" (p.197). She believes that "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" (p. 198). She senses that she is the family oddity, and seeks their recognition. However, Brave Orchid is unwilling to listen:

I had probably interrupted her in the
middle of her own quiet time . . .

Starching the shirts for the next day's
pressing was probably my mother's
time to ride off with the people in her
own mind. That would explain why
she was so far away and did not want
to listen to me. 'Leave me alone,' she
said.

(p. 200)

The building of the list, and Brave Orchid's seeming reluctance to hear it make the narrator feel "something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside" (p. 200). Finally her "throat burst open" (p. 201) and she vocalizes "the hardest ten or twelve things on my list all in one outburst" (p. 202), telling her parents that she refuses to let them make her "a slave or a wife" (p. 201). Brave Orchid, "who is champion talker" (p. 202), refutes her daughter's allegations, saying, "I didn't say I was going to marry you off . . . Who would want you? Who said we could sell you? We can't sell people. Can't

you take a joke? You can't even tell a joke from real life . . . Can't even tell real from false' " (p. 202).

The narrator's outburst represents the ultimate clash of Chinese and American mythologies, represented by mother and daughter respectively. The narrator realizes during her outbreak that she and her mother, mythologies themselves, have misunderstood one another; when the narrator complains that Brave Orchid has always called her ugly, Brave Orchid replies, " 'That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite' " (p. 203).

'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe' demonstrates, ironically, that the narrator must leave home to gain some perspective on her mother's talk-stories and how the talk-stories which once caused confusion can actually be used to reconcile the competing Chinese and American mythologies. She asserts, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation . . . Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts" (p. 205). She says as much in 'Shaman', where she tells Brave Orchid that she has "found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there" (p. 108). When at home among her family, she catches colds and other mysterious illnesses (p. 182); she cannot distinguish between fact and fiction and these illnesses are symptomatic of her inability to do so. Away from home, however, she enjoys the simplicity, the logic (p. 204) and states, "I continue to sort out what's my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (p. 205).

In spite of the necessity for the narrator to live away from her family, she concludes with a talk-story that demonstrates the influence of her mother's talk-story,

which she introduces as: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (p. 206). So it is with all talk-stories that are passed from one generation to another: each story, whether oral or written, is reconstructed through each teller, so that the ending belongs to the younger generation. Significantly, the narrator has admitted to Brave Orchid that she also creates talk-stories, evidence that despite the outburst that caused Brave Orchid to ask her to leave the house, the narrator still continues to make herself known to her mother; she tells "what I really think" (p. 205) to ward off the "throat pain" (p. 205) she experiences when she suppresses her thoughts.

The beginning of the final talk-story, given to the narrator by Brave Orchid, describes the narrator's grandmother's insistence that the whole family go to the theatre: "'I want every last one of you at that theater,' my grandmother raved . . . 'I don't want to watch that play by myself. How can I laugh all by myself? . . . I want everybody there. Babies, everybody'" (p. 207). The narrator's contribution to the talk-story, a story of a Chinese woman who is captured by barbarians and subsequently joins their tribe, is an allegory for the narrator's search for identity, a search for a reconciliation of mythologies. Like Ts'ai Yen, the narrator lives among 'barbarians', or American ghosts, who possess their own, separate mythology, represented by the "music [that] disturbed Ts'ai Yen; its sharpness and its cold made her ache" (p. 208). The conclusion of this hybridized story, "Ts'ai Yen . . . brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well" (p. 209) is a metaphor for the

emergence of a new, reconciled mythology, one which incorporates Chinese and American, the Han people and the ghosts, mother and daughter.

Chapter Two

Disappearing Moon Café

Disappearing Moon Café charts the family history of four generations in a style that is decidedly more melodramatic, in its narrator's words (p. 138) than The Woman Warrior. This style is in keeping with the nature of the narrative. However, Disappearing Moon Café, like The Woman Warrior, addresses the necessity of kin bonds to Chinese immigrant women, and the importance of family talk-stories to the narrator's development of self.

Significantly, the Wong family tree is given prior to the narrative, and even prior to the table of contents; its placement indicates the importance of the lineage of the family and, with subsequent close reading of the narrative, is notable in that it provides dramatic irony. It illustrates that the secrets and ensuing trials of the Wong family are misplaced, that while the family was worrying about the possibility of an incestuous relationship occurring between Beatrice and Keeman, one was actually in progress between Suzanne and Morgan. The characters of the novel never really discover the true parentage of the four first-generation Wong children, which is revealed in the family tree. As Keeman's mother admits to her son, “ ‘who knows for sure? It could have been [Choy Fuk], but I’m inclined to think your real father is the right one’ “ (p. 158). The dramatic irony intensifies when Mui Lan speculates as to whether her grandson John is really Choy Fuk's son, in light of 'the waitress' revelation that Keeman is not: "Mui Lan . . . began to get suspicious. If Keeman, who else! No, she made herself stop though. She could see for

herself that her grandson John was the splitting image of Gwei Chang. It was obvious that John was his grandson" (p. 168). The irony is, of course, that although John may be Gwei Chang's grandson, he is not, as the family tree shows, Mui Lan's biological grandson. The placing and very inclusion of the Wong family tree serves to distance the reader from the characters in order to heighten the sense of tragedy in the novel; in Mui Lan's words, the story of the decline of the Wong family is indeed "a rather minor tragedy made major" (p. 188).

The narrator of Disappearing Moon Café, Kae Ying Woo, like the narrator of The Woman Warrior, has her identity shaped by talk-stories, although they are not named as such. Kae traces her descent line through reconstructed talk-stories, starting with 'Search for Bones', a section which not only tells of her great-grandfather's literal search for the bones of preceding Chinese migrant workers, but serves as a metaphorical introduction to Kae's search for kin bonds. In the section following 'Search for Bones', 'Waiting for Enlightenment', Kae begins with:

I'm so very disappointed. I've been brought up to believe in kinship, or those with whom we share. I thought that by applying attention to all the important event . . . the intricate complexities of a family with chinese roots could be massaged into a suant, digestible unit. Like a herbal pill -- I thought I could swallow it and my mind would become enlightened.

(p. 19)

Kae does not realize at this stage of the novel that the enlightenment for which she is waiting entails that she first recognize that she is a vital, active participant in her family.

She can, and does, achieve this recognition and subsequent enlightenment through her writing.

Kae's quest for familial truth and links to kin is mirrored in her great-grandfather's 'search for bones'. In this first section of the novel, Wong Gwei Chang begins his search for the bones of Chinese labourers to send back to China for proper burial, according to Chinese custom. Wong Gwei Chang, as he begins his search as a young man, clearly does not feel the ties or responsibility to kin: "At first, he actually dreaded the macabre work. What were a few dried bones to him, except disgusting?" (p. 12) His great-granddaughter, at a corresponding stage in her life, also questions her ties to kin and how she consequently identifies herself: "legitimate, traditional and conventional were the adjectives to wear in those days, especially when I suspected my own identity might be . . . defective" (p. 41). However, just as her great-grandfather comes to realize the importance of maintaining links to the past, so does Kae. Wong Gwei Chang notes,

By then, he understood. By then, in the peace of the forests, he had met them all – uncles who had climbed mountain heights then fallen from them . . . uncles who had clawed to their deaths in the dirt of caved-in mines. By then, he wasn't afraid and they weren't alien anymore. Like them, he would piece himself again from scattered, shattered bone and then endure.

(p. 13)

He comes to respect the difficulties of the lives of his ‘uncles’, migrant workers accorded little respect by their superiors. In like fashion, through the writing of Disappearing Moon Café Kae comes to respect the difficulties her female ancestors faced in living and working in a foreign land devoid of kin bonds. Both Wong Gwei Chang and his great-granddaughter construct their individual sense of self from the ‘bones’ of their forebears and ‘endure’ as links in a kin descent line.

As in The Woman Warrior, the narrator of Disappearing Moon Café traces her descent line through her female predecessors, primarily with the help of their respective mothers’ talk-stories; however, an important distinction to make between the two novels is that the descent line of Brave Orchid’s family is never at risk as is the Wongs’. As a result, Disappearing Moon Café focuses on the kin relations of the one family much more than The Woman Warrior: where the latter includes talk-stories of legends and other historical figures, the former examines the one family exclusively. Of course, the Wong family’s strife originates with the threat to the continuation of the Wong name; any threat to a Chinese family’s descendants is a serious one, for it suggests “the possibility of ten thousand years of desolate wandering for [the] untended soul” (p. 29)

A clash between Chinese and American mythologies is evident from the onset of the novel, in the subtitles of the first and second section. These sections ‘Search for Bones: Wong Gwei Chang’ and ‘Waiting for Enlightenment: Kae Ying Woo’ demonstrate a shift in naming through four generations. Traditionally, Chinese names are written with the family name preceding any given names; however, in the narrator, Kae’s, case, the positions have been reversed. The novel thus illustrates the same clash of mythologies between generations and cultures that is central to The Woman Warrior.

The first and second generation Chinese-Canadians of Disappearing Moon Café, in keeping with Canadian tradition, place their given names first, as illustrated in the Wong family tree. Those family members born in China, however, maintain the Chinese tradition of writing the family name first.

As in The Woman Warrior, the narrative of Disappearing Moon Café begins with a warning from mother to daughter: "there has been much trouble in our family. It's best that what I tell you does not go beyond these four walls" (p. 23). However, this warning is prompted in the latter novel by the birth of Kae's baby: the propagation of the descent line, or "quite the sentimental occasion" (p. 23), prompts the continuance of kin stories. Kae notes: "thus the story -- the well-kept secret that I had actually unearthed years ago -- finally begins to end for me with the birth of my son" (p. 23).

The identity-forming and identity-maintaining aspects of kin and their accompanying talk-stories are introduced immediately in Kae's narrative; she describes Mui Lan, her great-grandmother, who

missed the daily sweep of woman-talk
from morning till night . . . Mui Lan's
nightmare was loneliness. She arrived
[in Gold Mountain] and found only
silence . . . She looked around for women
to tell her what was happening, but there
were none. By herself, she lacked the
means to know what to do next. Without
her society of women, Mui Lan lost substance.

(p. 25-26)

Mui Lan's plot to bring a concubine for her son so that he might continue the family name reflects not only her desire to propagate the descent line but her loneliness and her need for control: "frustrated and isolated from the secluded life she understood, Mui Lan had to swallow bitterness, so she made her suffering felt far and wide" (p. 31). However, she, like Brave Orchid, demonstrates that, as a Chinese emigrant, she does not understand the logistics of the mythology of the new land. Mui Lan's husband scolds her, "'We're not in the village any more! Those old-fashioned ideas don't work here'" (p. 30). His scolding mirrors the conversation Brave Orchid has with her brother-in-law, where he tells her, "'I could get arrested if the Americans knew about you. I'm living like an American . . . Look at [Moon Orchid]. She'd never fit into an American household'" (p. 153).

The narrator of The Woman Warrior faults Brave Orchid for her shortcomings, for example, her inability to speak at American school because Brave Orchid cut her tongue (p. 165). In a parallel structure, Kae indicts her great-grandmother, although she questions her own need to assign blame: "Why do I need to make this ancestress the tip of the funnelling storm?" (p. 31). She determines that such indictments protect her kin, those to whom she feels closest: "isn't it my privilege to assign blame, preferably to the one I understand the least, the one farthest away from me and from those I love?" (p. 32)

Here at the beginning of the novel, Kae reveals her ambivalence and confusion about identity and the role family plays in forming this identity; as she contemplates her friend Hermia's parentage, she notes,

What a coward I was! I was afraid of risks,
and I had to cling to the ground . . . I wallowed
in petty detail and ignored the essence.

Legitimate, traditional and conventional were the adjectives to wear in those days, especially when I suspected my own identity might be as defective.

(p. 41)

Kae comments as an adult and parent. Reflecting on her younger speculations on her family and her own identity, she concludes that she had been overly concerned with the labels of legitimacy and illegitimacy, and hence neglected some fundamental truths about family and identity formation. She demonstrates her naïveté and subscription to such fictions as legitimacy later when she admits that she, as a teenager, "felt so ashamed for lustng after [Morgan], this blasphemer who was assaulting the integrity, the sacred legitimacy, of [her] family origins. The honour of ancestors and descendants was at stake!" (p. 85) Yet Morgan was the first to tell her the truth about her lineage, and Kae, like the narrator in The Woman Warrior, claims a desire for 'authenticity': "All I ever wanted was authenticity; meanwhile, the people around me wore two-faced masks, and they played their lifelong roles to artistic perfection" (p. 128). In her own search for reconciliation of mythologies, the narrator of The Woman Warrior too desires authenticity, a clear division between the real and the fictional, but is constantly confused by talk-stories.

Several characters act as Kae's guides, assisting her in defining and subsequently rejecting notions of 'authenticity' and 'legitimacy'; one of these characters, Hermia Chow, notes, "'Kae, I see it in your eyes . . . that drive to . . . create . . . Women's strength is in the bonds they form with each other'" (p. 39). Hermia assists Kae in her processes of writing and self-identification: she argues for the importance of family and kin bonds,

particularly among immigrant women. Chi is one character for whom kin bonds are particularly important for the construction of identity; of her, Kae notes,

Although they didn't have a thing in common,
Chi and Bea became inseparable . . . Chi . . .
seemed profoundly happy to stay umbilically
attached to my mother. Like a hatchling, Chi
must have had to imprint immediately lest
she get misplaced again – maybe permanently.
Following an instinct for survival in a hostile
situation, she had to assume an identity,
preferably one which would nurture her back.

(p. 130)

Without kin bonds, Chi is unformed; in Bea she finds these bonds, which often are more supportive than familial bonds. This strength of kin, rather than familial bonds, is paralleled in Moon Orchid's relationship with her 'daughters' in the mental asylum.

Chi's closeness to Bea consequently causes Kae to consider Chi a second mother, or "transparent" (p. 127). When Kae reveals to Chi that "Mother finally told me the whole story" (p. 130) of the Wong family history, Chi proceeds to tell her a different version of the past, one which Kae prefers (p. 132), for "with Chi, there is no discussion, reality is what it is" (p. 132); this revelation of what Kae perceives as pure fact is consistent with her desire for 'authenticity'. "'Chi, I want to know the real truth!' " (p. 132) she announces, to which Chi astutely replies, "'No you don't . . . you want to hear about smut, and guilt' " (p. 132). In contrast, Bea's story of herself and Keeman is dramatic, in verifying Chi's labels "princess" (p. 131) and 'artiste' (p. 145); it tells of their birth, "one born out of infidelity, the other of mercenary intrigue" (p. 132). Having been told the

same story by Morgan, her mother, and finally Chi, Kae uses a melange of all three to construct her version of the story, just as the narrator of The Woman Warrior cannot separate the stories she has been told from her own.

This notion of kin bonds is first introduced in the novel in Fong Mei's letter to her sister; she describes the dangers the other immigrant women take in trying to keep her from harm in the immigrant holding station: "I thought they were so brave to risk themselves for me – a stranger not even from the same village, after all. Yet, here in this hostile environment, we are all like family" (p. 43). Just as Moon Orchid in The Woman Warrior, she finds support in strangers instead of family, and not surprisingly, suffers the loss of this support when she enters the Wong family. In Disappearing Moon Café, emigration to Canada suggests that for the novel's first generation female Chinese-Canadians, kin relationships are more supportive than familial relationships.

Just as in The Woman Warrior, the immigrant women of Disappearing Moon Café experience a clash of Chinese and North American, or Canadian mythologies, as illustrated in the letters between Fong Mei and her sister. Clearly Fong Mei's sister does not understand the difficulties Fong Mei experiences as an immigrant woman and Mui Lan's daughter-in-law; in response to Fong Mei's 'tear-stained' (p. 44) missive, her sister writes, "you are so lucky to have entered lofty doors! How hard can it be to perform your duties as daughter-in-law, when your new family welcomes you with such fanfare?" (p. 48)

The next section of the novel proceeds to demonstrate how mistaken Fong Mei's sister is in her perception of Fong Mei's life. Interestingly, she considers drowning herself, not because she gave birth to an illegitimate child, as No Name Aunt, but because

she has *not* given birth and is thus blacklisted by her mother-in-law. “ ‘I’m just a dead girl-bag anyway, useless to everyone. Let them stomp on me! ” (p. 49) Kae speculates, “Without other young women to compare herself to, Fong Mei couldn’t have realized how feisty her words proved her to be” (p. 50). Without the kinship of other women, not only is Fong Mei cannot unable to compare her situation with others’, but she is lacking in any support system. In her situation, kin bonds would be more helpful than those of her family.

Due to their lack of supportive female kinship, Fong Mei and Mui Lan have more in common than they expect, yet Mui Lan emphasizes the importance of carrying on the Wong family name to her daughter-in-law, and is willing to go to any lengths to ensure its continuance. The novel demonstrates the consequences of pursuing one mythology at the expense of the other. Mui Lan informs Fong Mei: “our customs are clear and practical . . . If the first wife cannot bear a son, then she stands aside for another. That way the family is assured of a yellow, ‘lucky’ road” (p. 60). Although she realizes that the Chinese practice of taking a concubine is illegal in Canada (p. 61), she pursues her plan to the demise of the family.

Kae questions the link among Chinese immigrant women; clearly, although Mui Lan misses the company and talk of female kin, she cannot see her daughter-in-law as a fellow woman. Mui Lan informs Fong Mei, “ ‘don’t believe for a moment, you foul female-stench, with your modern-day thinking about rights and freedom-ah, that you’re too good for this bargain. What are you but just a woman! ” (p. 63) Mui Lan adheres to the traditional Chinese mythology of the mother-in-law’s dominance over her daughter-

in-law. However, cognizant as she is of her family's history and as steeped as she is in Canadian mythology, Kae wonders,

But my great-grandmother was a woman too.
 What did she mean by that? Was she referring
 to the substance we as women have to barter
 away in order to live? . . . How we turn on
 ourselves, squabbling desperately among
 ourselves about our common debasement? . . .
 And how willingly we fuel the white fire
 with which to scar other women. What
 choices did she have?

(p. 63)

It is impossible to recognize and support women deemed inferior as kin while simultaneously maintaining Chinese traditions such as concubinage. Without any feeling of kin bond, each of the Chinese female immigrants in Disappearing Moon Café turn on each other in self-serving malice; Fong Mei discovers that "Mui Lan had struck a baby deal with the waitress long before approaching Fong Mei. Why Mui Lan had bothered to waste an entire morning debasing Fong Mei and forcing her to her knees was beyond comprehension . . . It made her despise Mui Lan and her son all the more" (p. 93).

With the births of Bea and Keeman, the hostilities between Mui Lan and Fong Mei escalate; Fong Mei feels that her daughter "gave her mother enough armnipotence to vie for power and launch a full-fledged mutiny (as one can do only from deep within the ranks)" (p. 134). Having fulfilled her duty as a daughter-in-law in giving birth, she now can claim a higher status as a mother as well as a wife. Rather than ease relations between the women, Bea's birth heightens them, causing Fong Mei to tell her husband, "

'Because of all the trouble you [and Mui Lan] have caused, the Wong name is shit' " (p. 135). Mui Lan's response is similar: "'You don't care about this family's name. All you care about is yourself!' " (p. 135) Although these accusations seem hypocritical, given the deceitfulness of both parties, they are understandable, for they represent the politics between immigrant women in a foreign land with no kin bonds of support. Both Mui Lan and Fong Mei appeal to Chinese tradition, the maintenance of the family name, as an excuse for their behaviour, but, as Hermia informs Kae, the politics between the women is not so much about Chinese mythology as it is about 'orphan children':

'Grown women are orphan children, are we not? We have been broken from our mother's arms too soon and made to cling to a man's world – which refuses to accept us – as best we can, any how we can. And of course, let me tell you, many of us are just barely hanging on by the skin of our teeth.'

(p. 138)

Even later in the novel, when it is revealed that Keeman might not be Choy Fuk's son, Fong Mei "still held Beatrice back, holding her hostage with a tenacity which could not be justified by maternal motives alone . . . she simply could not admit that Keeman might not be Choy Fuk's son without casting suspicion on her own children's patrilineage" (p. 163). Not only does Fong Mei refuse to allow Bea and Keeman to marry because of the possibility of incest, but to avoid casting aspersions on her own reputation. Mui Lan and Fong Mei's actions are exonerated through the writing of the novel, where the telling of

their stories illustrates the difficulties of their situations and generate an understanding for their troubles.

Both the narrators of The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café, in attempting to generate this understanding, romanticize their aunts' suicides or suicide attempts: Kae assumes that Suzie dies as a result of suicide (p. 214), and the narrator of The Woman Warrior romanticizes the events that lead up to her aunt's suicide. Both 'suicides', Suzie's attempt in Disappearing Moon Café and No Name Aunt's actual suicide in The Woman Warrior demonstrate attempts by these women to escape the traditional Chinese mythologies in which they find themselves. Suzie compares the complexity of her situation to being tied in knots (p. 189) not of her own construction. While the mention of knots resonates with the narrator of The Woman Warrior's storyteller-as-knotmaker comparison, Suzie's 'knot' is one of her family's doing, of family secrets and edicts. Her suicide attempt represents an inability to reconcile her family's mythology of secrets with her desire to be free of them. As she asserts on several occasions, " 'I want out! Out! For God's sake, let me out!' " (p. 177). Similarly, No Name Aunt's suicide was also caused, her niece speculates, by her inability to live the mythology of the village.

When considering the histories of her female predecessors, and Suzie in particular, Kae admits that, as a chronologer of her family's past, she

can still get protective of the women in my family, how I can give them all sorts of excuses for their littering. In the telling of their stories, I get sucked into criticizing their actions, but how can I allow my grandmother and great-grandmother to stay

maligned? . . . I prefer to romanticize them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins. In each of their woman-hating worlds, each did what she could.

(p. 145)

Kae the writer chooses to romanticize her grandmother's and great-grandmother's stories not only so that they may be absolved, but because, as their descendant, she is obligated to ensure that they are not misunderstood and subsequently maligned through history; it is her responsibility to 'save face' on behalf of her deceased forebears. Indeed, she confirms.

if there is a simple truth beneath their survival stories, then it must be that women's lives, being what they are, are linked together. Mother to daughter, sister to sister. Sooner or later, we get lost or separated from each other; then we have a bigger chance of falling into the same holes over and over again. Then again, we may find each other, and together, we may be able to form a bridge over the abyss.

(p. 146)

Clearly, those who have separated and fallen into these aforementioned 'holes' are the emigrants Mui Lan and Fong Mei, while those who have 'found' each other and formed important kind bonds are the first and second generation Wong descendants. Bea, Fong Mei's first generation Chinese-Canadian daughter, has clearly found a kinship with Chi,

while Kae and Hermia share a kin bond. The clash between Chinese and American mythologies is illustrated in the difference between the Wong family's female immigrants and their first-generation daughters; while the immigrant Fong Mei is lacking any female kinship, her daughter "was . . . fiercely loyal . . . to the little circle of local-born friends . . . Friends growing up in Chinatown were allies, necessary for survival . . . They nursed each other, offered each other protection . . . their bonds . . . sinewy and strong" (p. 164-165). Once again, as with Moon Orchid, the strongest and most supportive bonds are not necessarily familial. In fact, Kae speculates, "one generation between mother and daughter, and already how far apart their goals and sentiments. They shared a common experience, but while Fong Mei hated [Canada], which had done nothing except disqualify her, Beatrice had grown up thoroughly small-town canadian" (p. 164).

In evidence of this same kin bond which is used to describe Bea's relationship to Chi, Hermia helps Kae find forgiveness and understanding for her female ancestors; she suggests: " ‘why don’t you write about women trying to fit in any how they can do it?’ " (p. 138) Though the focus is on the women’s stories, the narrator does not emphasize them to the exclusion of the men, in contrast to The Woman Warrior, which deals with female talk-stories alone. Hermia suggests that Kae write about the women’s stories as Kae’s ancestors, as immigrants, lived in a new country without the benefit of kin bonds, unlike the men, who gathered in social clubs (p. 108).

Before she can write on the difficulty of women’s lives, however, Kae must first discover the truth of her family’s history. She admits, at the beginning of the section entitled, ‘Ties to the Land – a Ticket Out’ that “when I was little, I refused to go to sleep because I had to stay up to wait for . . . An event or whatever . . . Now at thirty-six, I’m

still waiting. In fact, the feeling is even stronger. I am obsessed by it. ‘It’ makes me restless” (p. 121). ‘It’ is the desire to know her family’s true history; it is only in uncovering the truth about her predecessors that she will be able to construct a true sense of self. She observes, “why is it so hard to get answers to questions I’ve been asking all my life? . . . people are almost never what they seem. Some take longer than others to reveal themselves; some a whole lifetime; some never – they have that much to hide” (p. 121-122). Morgan remarks that “‘if nobody speaks of it, then it never existed. Damn clever, those chinese’ ” (p. 161). Again, Chinese mythology and Canadian mythology are at odds: the Chinese notion of ‘saving face’ conflicts with the Chinese-Canadian, second generation narrator’s ‘obsession’ to know the truth. In addition, the conflict is exacerbated by Kae’s desire to write the Wong family history; a written account is a breach of tradition, of saving face, which is much worse than talking-story, especially when the narrator was warned by her mother, in the same vein as Brave Orchid, that the story she tells ‘must not go beyond these four walls’.

However, Kae’s obsession stems from her need to trace her descent line, regardless of how sordid. She likens the difficulty in uncovering her family’s history to a knot, a symbol present in The Woman Warrior to also denote complexity; Kae states,

My private life is what I find confusing.
 At home, I must work at unravelling
 knots . . . Knots of guilt; knots of
 indecision . . . Do not panic lest we get
 more tangled! We must pick, trace, coax
 and cajole each knot out. One at a
 time, even when we know there are

hundreds more.

(p. 123)

She needs to connect to her female kin in a way in which her grandmother and great-grandmother were unable. She limns a picture of life in Gold Mountain without female kin for support, and thereby generates compassion for her ancestors' situation. She too must absolve them from their sins before she can accept them as female kin.

While attempting to find forgiveness for her ancestors, Kae must simultaneously address her own construction of identity. In a section entitled 'Identity Crisis', Kae describes a moment of revelation when she rendezvous with Morgan Wong: "at the end of my quest I found somebody else in my place. Somebody who was more enduring than I, more inquisitive, even when the truth stung. Somebody who could log the thoughts I didn't even know I had in me" (p. 162). Her description of a self 'more enduring' than she echoes the sentiments in 'Search for Bones', where Wong Gwei Chang recognizes the sacrifices of his 'uncles' and his connection to them. Instead of the adolescent intent on labels of illegitimacy, Kae "grew up suddenly . . . that little venture . . . changed my life" (p. 162). She hears Morgan tell another talk-story, one which precipitates this emotional growth: "I . . . listened to yet another version of another story" (p. 163) which she can later compare to her mother's, and Chi's, version of events.

Indeed, Kae's 'identity crisis' closely parallels the narrator's in The Woman Warrior: "I almost yelled at my mother, 'Why didn't you tell me! . . . Look at the identity crisis you left me with!' " (p. 191). Both Kae and The Woman Warrior's narrator blame their mothers for their 'identity cris[e]s'; interestingly, however, Kae blames her mother

for her mother's reluctance to speak of their family history, while the narrator of The Woman Warrior faults her mother for confusing her with talk-stories. Though both initially fault their mothers for these crises, albeit for different reasons, they ultimately link back through them and to previous generations to construct a new identity.

Both narrators of Disappearing Moon Café and The Woman Warrior create their stories from the talk-stories given them by their relatives; however, Kae is more open about her expository practices. She notes, "in writing I feel like a drunk weaving all over the road . . . How many ways are there to tell stories? Let me count the ways!" (p. 185). Kae is emancipated through her writing; instead of the 'coward' bound by labels of legitimacy and illegitimacy (p. 41), she can, at the end of the novel, count a myriad of ways to present her family's history. In fact, in a section entitled 'The Writer', she deliberates, "I could create another scenario" (p. 179), and considers whom she could ask for details; this desire for narrative detail mirrors the narrator's in The Woman Warrior when she remarks on her aunt's clothing (p. 6) or her mother's hairstyle (p. 60). Both novels include indictments delivered to their narrators by the narrators' respective mothers to not speak of the families' secrets; as Kae notes, "Like my mother, I will speak of other times only if they were happy ones. Yes, yes, Hermia agreed wholeheartedly with me, only happy mentionables for the family record; another unspoken chinese edict among many" (p. 180). Kae continues to speculate:

Maybe this is a chinese-in-Canada trait,
a part of the great wall of silence and
invisibility we have built around us. I
have a misgiving that the telling of our

history is forbidden. I have violated a secret code. There is power in silence, as this is the way we have always maintained strict control against the more disturbing aspects in our human nature. But what about speaking out for a change, despite its unpredictable impact!

(p. 180)

Thus the narrators of both novels have violated the abovementioned 'secret code'; through their writings, their reconstructed talk-stories, they have each purposefully left their mothers' warnings unheeded for the sake of the 'unpredictable impact' of language. Their expressions, however unauthorized, have led both to a new concept of self, Kae as independent from traditional forms of labeling, and the narrator of The Woman Warrior as one free from Chinese mythology and yet still closely tied to her mother's talk-stories.

These first and second generation narrators, who write instead of tell their family stories, and who defy their mothers' injunctions not to reveal intimate family secrets, have created a form of writing which is best termed 'kinography'. In searching for a notion of self, their writing does not separate them, despite their inconventions, but rather links them to their female predecessors. Kae speculates that her confidante, Hermia, who often offers insight into the Wong family events, would phrase the concept of kinography this way:

Hermia asks Kae: 'Do you mean that individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch

them -- past and future, no matter how slightly? Do you mean that an individual is not an individual at all, but a series of individuals -- some of whom come before her, some after her? Do you mean that this story isn't a story of several generations, but of one individual thinking collectively?"

(p. 189)

"'In the end, entire lives are nothing but stories'" (p. 209), asserts Kae near the conclusion of Disappearing Moon Cafe. Given that 'women's lives, being what they are, are linked together' (p. 146) through stories, then indeed, entire lives and histories are nothing but stories to be reconstructed by each generation. Kae believes that "'my actual life, and what I do in it, is the real resolution to this story'" (p. 210), and that she must "'give meaning to three generations of life-and-death struggles'" (p. 210). Hence she decides to "not take the job at the Howe Institute, now that I'm going to be a poor but pure writer" (p. 216). She, like the narrator in The Woman Warrior has so internalized and finally accepted her family's history that she chooses to continue working in the medium which allowed her to work through her ambivalences about her family.

Final evidence that Kae has progressed in her search for identity occurs when Hermia asks her whether she would rather "live a great novel or write one" (p. 216), and Kae replies, "'I'd rather live one'" (p. 216). Kae's response indicates that she has accepted her family's history as her own, for, as she noted earlier, "'this story isn't a story of several generations, but on one individual thinking collectively'" (p. 189). Despite the family secrets, incest and intrigue, she has accepted the responsibility as a female

descendant of the Wong family to ensure that the story continue through her writing. She would rather, she attests, live a great story as her family's, in spite of its difficulties, instead of write one, distanced and sterile. As a female descendant, she recognizes her active role in the family.

Conclusion

I am her only novel.

The plot is melodramatic,

hot lovers leap out of

thickets, it makes you cry

a lot, in between the revolutionary

herorics and making good

home-cooked soup.

Understand: I am my mother's

novel daughter: I

have my duty to perform.

--- Marge Piercy

The novels The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café are examples of the power of storytelling; its power lies in its ability to transform and connect lives through its resonance. However, this power only remains vital if it can inspire resonance, and is hence predicated on the assumption that the stories continue to be told. Storytelling plays an essential part in the two novels, bridging the mythology gap between mother and daughter, who represent the Chinese and American mythologies of the countries of their birth; in the case of Disappearing Moon Café, an even wider generational gap between grandmother / great-grandmother is spanned. This bridging, the need to connect to one's descent line, not only maintains the history of the family but helps each narrator reconcile

the mythologies which have prompted her identity crisis. In continuing the family history through writing rather than the traditional mode of oral storytelling or 'talk-stories', each narrator asserts her own, new mythology, newly formed, a third which incorporates the old, traditional Chinese mythology and adapts it to the new, American or Canadian one. In addition, the adaptation of writing the talk-story allows for resonance in those not necessarily in the descent line of one's family. It permits space for kin, or 'those with whom we share', those with whom one may share a special bond, one even stronger and more supportive than the familial bond.

This, I believe, is the strength of The Woman Warrior and Disappearing Moon Café: they have the power to resonate with others; they have the ability to generate new kin.

I am one of those kin.

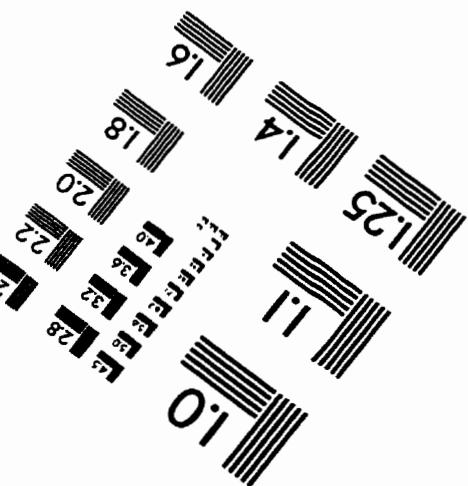
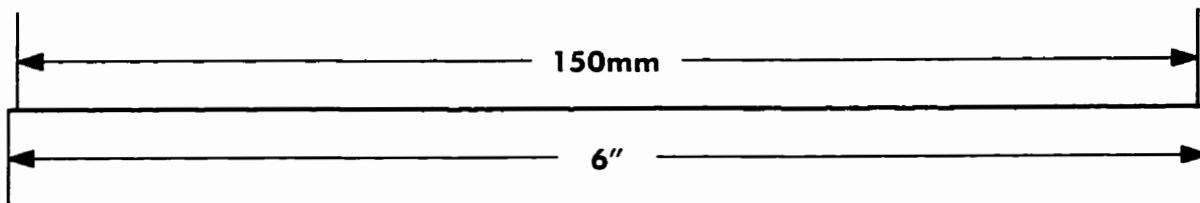
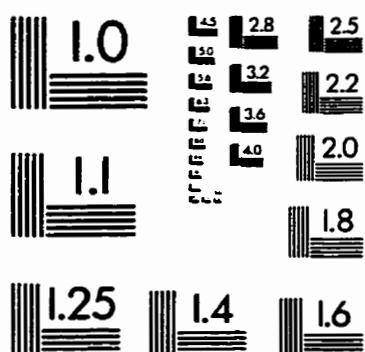
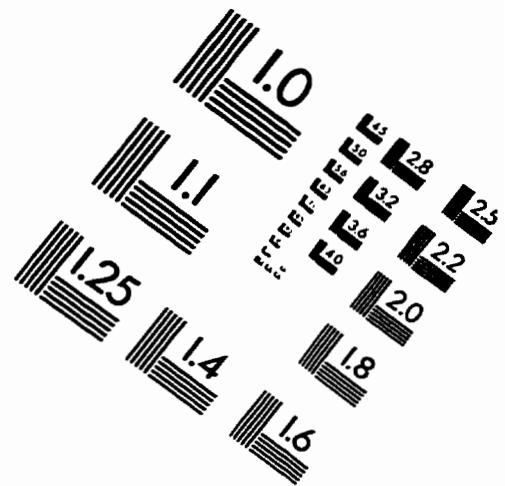
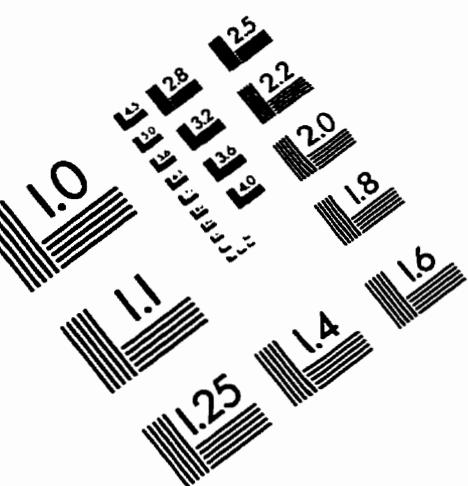
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