

## **Nonlinear Time in American Literature: Language, Tradition, and Storytelling in Cisneros, Kingston, and Wideman**

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The concept of time impacts the individual and the community in ethnic American literature<sup>1</sup>. All cultures have their own unique histories, but some are outside and some are within the influence of American culture; this must be accounted for in literary criticism. In an interview with Ulrich Eschborn published in *Callaloo*, John Edgar Wideman discusses his understanding of time and history, establishing a theoretical concept that frames this explication of his work as well as works by Sandra Cisneros and Maxine Hong Kingston. Great Time, a concept that Wideman has adapted to his writing, is a “nonlinear, ancestral time” and a “medium in which the living and the memory of the dead, in which past, present, and future, come together” (Eschborn, 984). Wideman says that

there are material representations, but there are infinite kinds of slides and preparation and movements back and forth. I think that’s probably somewhere at the bottom of Great Time. And that’s why I associate it with an ocean because it’s a continual movement, continual shifting, a continual set of possibilities none of which ever ends the story. It’s simply pass in, pass out. (Eschborn, 985)

History, for mainstream America, resides in the realm of material representations of the “end” of the “story”: the artifacts and archives, the tangible items used to create a picture of people and events that have passed. This is the surface and the currents that ride beneath it, visible to popular culture. The more difficult and painstaking task is to see the various levels and movements as simultaneous rather than stratified. Viewing time as “a continual set of possibilities” allows for authors to rewrite the popular understanding of history and to engage with the long-forgotten past and the complicated present concurrently. The issues people deal with today have existed in some form in the past: slavery, genocide, gender oppression, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Ostendorf for an overview of this term’s usage in the literary studies.

xenophobia are all parts of American culture that the mainstream society chooses to think of as strictly in the past. Great Time, then, allows for these issues to be discussed in both literature and life because the “continual set of possibilities” refuses to accept that events stay in the past with no consequences or repercussions for the present. In this study I will discuss specific stories from three short story cycles—Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and John Edgar Wideman’s *Damballah*—to examine the different ways language, storytelling, and tradition are used to negotiate between the non-linear and linear frameworks of time.

An integral part of ethnic American literature is the vernacular language the author is familiar with. It informs the connections between the community and the writing. Truthfully representing speech and voice seems important for both the ethnic community and the non-ethnic readers so that meaning is conveyed in the text. However, problems arise when readers assume the purpose for ethnic American literature is to be factual and historiographical. All three short story cycles I focus on are works of artistic creation, which means that they were crafted in a meaningful and purposeful way. As Bonnie TuSmith reminds us in *All My Relatives*, “[g]iven that autobiography, like any other genre in literature, is an artistic construct, Kingston’s ethnicity should not make her work ‘social history’” (49-51). Although Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* is the only text in this study that forthrightly claims to be autobiographical, each work has at least one section where the author discusses the importance of writing in their lives and in the personal stories that inform the texts. In this respect, the language employed and the traditions described are closely entwined with the act of storytelling, but it is important to understand that, as one scholar reminds us, “the narratives do not necessarily illuminate the cultures at large” (Cheung, 163).

Wideman explains that “language . . . [is] not a passive business. The language instructs the story, and the story instructs the language” (Eschborn, 993). Language, tradition, and storytelling are intricately connected in the ethnic American literature examined in this study.

As Wideman notes, “for a culture, it’s crucially important to have these voices that tell good stories—that tell powerful stories—because it’s a way of claiming the language” and claiming space for the ethnic American community in mainstream American culture. Communities can survive in isolation but there is no upward mobility, no change or progress. Individuals can achieve upward mobility if they step away from the community, thereby severing ties with their culture and past. The conundrum persists until departed individuals come back to the communities to tell their stories, thus helping their respective communities to move out of isolation and “claim” space in the larger mainstream framework. This process of removal and return is evident in *The House on Mango Street*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Damballah*. Focusing on the concept of nonlinear time, I will now examine sections of each short story cycle to explore the needed negotiations between past and present, as evident through the authors’ use of language, traditions, and storytelling.

### **Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street***

Maria Elena de Valdes examines the way writing and language function through Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and notes that the young narrator Esperanza’s “style is one of subtlety, understatement, and generosity” (85). These three qualities—and I would add gentleness—contribute to the reader’s understanding of the purpose of language throughout the vignettes. Cisneros has a purpose for creating a text about a working-class barrio in poetic and literary language. Valdes observes that when Esperanza “reflects on social hostility or the brutality of wife beating, it is not with violence or rancor, but with firm determination to describe and to escape the vicious circle of abused women” (85). The juxtaposition of gentle language and “generous” description with the “understated” acts of violence makes them seem all the more vivid and outrageous. It makes them more painful and, by having a young girl counter them with her flowing and flattering words, shows that these acts can be combated without violence. The author herself acknowledges the “‘responsibility’ associated with being a ‘woman

who has the power to speak' and is privileged enough to be heard in order to tell the stories of the 'powerless'" (Grobman, 47). The "power to speak" involves an understanding of and proficiency with language to ensure the community can hear their own voices; it is deliberate speech that takes into account the audience. If the reader views oppression of and violence towards women as a key social criticism inherent in the work, it is understandable that Cisneros would create a narrator who is "generous" to the perpetrators in her community because "to describe" in order "to escape" helps the community avoid blame, ostracization, and isolation.

The community of *Mango Street* wrestles with the internal (Spanish) and external (English) communication of the individuals and community. In "No Speak English," a vignette with a fairytale-like tone, *Mamacita* is described as a magical creature brought from another land, who does not fit in the Chicago barrio: "All at once she bloomed. Huge, enormous, beautiful to look at . . . I couldn't take my eyes off her tiny shoes. Up, up, up the stairs she went" in a mysterious fashion matched only by her refusal to come down (Cisneros, 77). It seems as if *Mamacita* cannot transplant her old life into the new country. "Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph," and Esperanza's idea that a home represents the person and vice versa is clear here: the magical *Mamacita* is suited for life in Mexico (Cisneros, 77). Mexico and America are connected in the vignette by the repetitious vocalization of change and these phrases of threes sound similar to subconscious incantations to bring her back home. The language itself is rhythmic and soft, which clashes with *Mamacita*'s assumption that English "sounds like tin" (Cisneros, 78). The fairytale quality is simultaneously child-like and complicated. It conveys a 'no fear' attitude about the unknown. Fairytales exist in most cultures, and, by describing *Mamacita*'s struggle with language that reminds the reader of those familiar stories, Cisneros is able to create a bridge of accessibility across the two languages and the two cultures.

Although she shows a mutual accessibility exists, Cisneros hints that blending cultures is not as easy as the language would indicate. *Mamacita*'s husband seems to believe that

speaking English will make her feel at home in the community, but speaking English implies commitment to this land and not her own. One would assume that her presence in a Spanish-speaking community in Chicago would alleviate some of the fear of transitioning to a foreign land, but it does not. I suggest that because *Mamacita* is living in this community Cisneros is implying an internal fear of communication exists; a fear of English itself cannot be the only thing keeping her inside if there are others who speak her native language close by. Her only remnant of home is her baby boy, who, “to break her heart forever,” unknowingly betrays her by singing “the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V. No speak English, she says . . . No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can’t believe her ears” (Cisneros, 78). The baby boy consumes mainstream American language and culture but she cannot join him in that synthesized life which is simply “not the same.” In refusing to attempt to blend her Mexican and American life, *Mamacita* accepts the notion of linear time because she cannot return to happiness from the “homesick[ness]” (Cisneros, 77).

Naming has an important symbolic role in the language studied here. Behind the names there echoes pieces of the past within the character and the other people associated with that name. In “My Name,” Esperanza explains that her name means “hope” in English and it has the near opposite connotations in Spanish (Cisneros, 10). She recalls the story of her great-grandmother who was “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry. Until [Esperanza’s] great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off,” indicating the young narrator has knowledge of the long history of women’s suffering (Cisneros, 11). The ancestral Esperanza “looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” but the narrator refuses to “inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros, 11). That Esperanza will not passively “inherit” a life of oppression is only possible because she is aware of her potential fate. The ability to trace her name and what it signifies back through time gives Esperanza the more important and significant ability to change the outcome of her situation. Her proposed action indicates a willingness to have that necessary internal and

external communication that *Mamacita*, for example, seems incapable of. Esperanza decides she “would like to baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like the real [Esperanza], the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (Cisneros, 11). This implies that she moves away from the negative aspects of her Mexican heritage but simultaneously avoids direct identification with the American culture she is growing up in: “Zeze the X” (the X implies an unknown, unidentified variable) has no historical or cultural connotations and the narrator is claiming space for herself.

Scholars have addressed the issues of gender oppression through physical violence and cultural oppression through shaming in *The House on Mango Street*<sup>2</sup>. My purpose in following suit is to examine the extent to which the tradition of oppression is alleviated by a sense of nonlinear time. King-Kok Cheung argues that for ethnic American female writers, “[t]he unspoken or unheard testimonies become powerful indictments on the page, and it is through the written word that [the protagonists] give voice to their grievances and eventually find redress” (164). Enforced and problematic gender roles are evident throughout the stories where women are consistently confined indoors by their husbands and fathers because they are too beautiful to be looked at by other men. As one scholar puts it, “[b]oth houses and local communities are arbitrary; like borders, they enclose people within the safety of familiar or intimate territories, but can, at the same time, become prisons” (Bolaki, 7). They are “arbitrary” in that, regardless of who occupies them, there is a force of male domination that insists on “enclos[ing]” women. Without the sense of nonlinear time, women find it difficult to learn from the past and work to erase the “arbitrary” borders imprisoning them.

In “A Smart Cookie,” Esperanza’s mother sighs and talks to her daughter “while cooking oatmeal,” a slow, mundane, domestic task, about the life that she missed out on: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? . . . Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want

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<sup>2</sup> See Cruz, Grobman, and TuSmith for in-depth analyses of these themes in *Mango Street*.

to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. Yup, she says disgusted, stirring again. I was a smart cookie then" (Cisneros, 91). Keeping up appearances (i.e. looking mainstream, upper-class) to avoid being made to feel ashamed preoccupies life so that women cannot focus on self-fulfillment or self-improvement. Cisneros makes clear that the border between ethnic and mainstream can be blurry and paradoxical:

She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown . . . She used to draw when she had time. Now she draws with a needle and thread, little knotted rosebuds, tulips made of silk thread. Someday she would like to go to the ballet. Someday she would like to see a play. (Cisneros, 90)

These are valuable skills often attributed to an ideal woman from the dominant culture. The mother is intelligent, talented, and capable of artistic and practical work. Cisneros does not draw a clear border, but hints that one exists when it does not need to. Not knowing how to get downtown on the subway suggests that Esperanza's mother has no purpose downtown (typically the center of wealth) and does not leave her community. However, the latter part of the passage begins to internally rhyme, and brings to mind a poetic force that surrounds her mother—as if her mother is a woman deserving of poetry and other beautiful things.

Cisneros reflects on the concept of shame in an anecdote that crosses two vignettes: "The House on Mango Street" and "A Rice Sandwich." In the first vignette Esperanza recalls: "Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front . . . You live *there*? *There* . . . You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded" (Cisneros, 4-5). The simple repeated question "You live *there*?" demonstrates the power of language to leave the Other speechless. Furthermore, that Esperanza feels "like nothing" at such a young age indicates the perverse casual shaming that mainstream culture culpably engages in. This experience in the young girls's life is echoed in "A Rice Sandwich": the nun assumes Esperanza can see her house from the school, to which the young narrator "nodded even though [she] knew that wasn't [her] house" and cried because,

“even if they’re not yelling,” she feels a strong sense of sadness, disrespect, and shame from being talked down to (Cisneros, 45). Regina M. Betz adds that this reaction toward Esperanza’s home is “patronizing” because nuns “typically [have] neither possessions nor wealth”; the shame is greater for Esperanza because their material reality is probably similar (20). Cisneros is making clear that the concept of a house has far greater implications for this community than mainstream readers may expect. Laurie Grobman implies that Cisneros’ focus on the home is “also connected to the idea of cultural oppression, for Esperanza’s dream house accords with the myth of the American Dream” (46). The shame Esperanza feels in these two vignettes supports this, as the nuns bring attention to the fact that the Dream has not been realized since her home is in shambles. Perhaps that is why *Mamacita* feels such resentment towards English and the community: she sees that her house (and life) in Mexico is far superior to what she will have in the Chicago barrio.

The introduction to *The House on Mango Street* helps the reader understand the purpose of and need for storytelling in Mexican American culture. Cisneros describes her goals in the third person, tracing the ideals her younger self strived for: “She wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children’s nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico” (Cisneros, xvi-xvii). Tracing and erasing the physical and imaginary boundaries allows for the ability to overlap stories and events and demonstrate the fluidity of time. The idea that “people who are busy working for a living deserve beautiful little stories, because they don’t have much time and are often tired” resonates throughout the stories (Cisneros, xvii). Cisneros “suggests that the ‘place by the window’ . . . allows for the imagination to be free,” in that it allows time for reflection on the past and dreams of the future to collide (Grobman, 44). By offering this suggestion, Cisneros implicates time as non-linear in that the oppression of working-class Mexican Americans can be alleviated by creating “beautiful little stories” out of the past, which will give them the power to imagine freedom for themselves.



Cisneros effectively demonstrates the feasibility of the “imaginary act of crossing and bridging” “individualistic and communitarian ideals” between the opening and closing vignettes, “The House on Mango Street” and “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” (Bolaki, 9-10). In the first vignette, the narrator describes her family’s movements with identical phraseology, but in the last vignette it evolves: “. . . but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros, 109-110). As Esperanza tells her stories, the “sad” memories of Mango Street come to the fore and she is able to deal with the paradox of belonging and not belonging. She inadvertently fulfills the request that the three sisters make in the longest short story, “The Three Sisters.” Esperanza is told: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you” (Cisneros, 105). The image of a circle indicates a cultural view of time as non-linear. Esperanza admits: “One day I will go away . . . They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros, 110). Although her movement is also circular (going away and coming back), it is not cyclical; she is able to get “out” of the cycle of oppression and abuse.

### **Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior***

Stories in *The Woman Warrior* “pass in [and] pass out” through ancient China and modern day America. In the short story “White Tigers,” the second of the collection, the reader is taken through the training of Fa Mu Lan, a legendary Chinese warrior. The language Kingston uses during the mythical narrative is often short and direct. The old teacher says, “Little girl, you have now spent almost a day and a night with us . . . Do you think you can bear to stay with us for fifteen years? We can train you to become a warrior” (Kingston, 26). The teachers are direct in their language and syntax and do not complicate things. They do not waste time and want a decision for the next fifteen years to be based on twenty-four hours, which indicates a complex understanding of time. As the narrator describes her training, she

leaves important linguistic clues to these concepts. She says, “[t]he two old people led me in exercises that began at dawn and ended at sunset so that I could watch our shadows grow and shrink and grow again, rooted to the earth” (Kingston, 28). The flow of words here mimics the movement of the shadows, and it demonstrates that words are connected to the physical world and physical movements. Words have a power that exists alongside physical power, a key concept to the implied author, Maxine, and her own training. Furthermore, the prominent flow of daily cycles juxtaposed with the powerful flow of words parallels the idea of the words themselves existing alongside the passage of time. The emphasis on being physically grounded in the earth is important to the story; it is not about the physical exercises but about the mental awareness and presence that a nonlinear view of time necessitates.

The direct yet flowing language that Kingston uses helps the reader visualize that basic and crucial attention to time necessary for growth. Fa Mu Lan’s father decides that “We are going to carve revenge on your back . . . [and] [w]e’ll write out oaths and names” so that even if Fa Mu Lan “got killed, the people could use [her] dead body for a weapon”: that is, words can be used as weapons of retribution (Kingston, 41). The words “fluttered down [her] back row after row,” creating a sense of physicality inherent in the words themselves, and when personified in aviary terms, preempt change (Kingston, 41). “It hurt terribly . . . pain so various . . . The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay [her], the light would shine through [her] skin like lace” (Kingston, 41). The pain caused by the words is “various,” just as the injustices have been various, which again connects the physical world with words. The words represent different people and time that exist and have existed. Her training as a warrior delves deeper than physical prowess: Fa Mu Lan has been taught to understand a world where pain is present but can be dealt with and can be avenged. The image of “lace” shows the pain can be turned into something beautiful, and, by “carving” past events into an intricate creation that can be used after death, Kingston is demonstrating the importance of nonlinear time for the survival of that beauty.

The importance of language for the ability to talk-story is taught to Fa Mu Lan (just as it is taught to Maxine by Brave Orchid), and her teachers reinforce its value. Survival is not enough because a warrior must be able to recount her struggle when she returns: “Then they asked me to talk-story about what happened in the mountains of the white tigers . . . [I] made them laugh. ‘You tell good stories,’ they said” (Kingston, 33). Describing events is an integral part of the learning experience. In order for her teachers to know what she has gone through, Fa Mu Lan needs to be able to express her experiences and the lessons she received. Telling “good stories” seems key to moving on in her training. She is learning to experience the physical world but also represent it truthfully and artfully with words: “I needed adult wisdom to know dragons . . . I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (Kingston, 35). Adult wisdom, then, requires acceptance of paradoxes, but what does this mean for the modern day narrator? Is the lesson that, in order to fight, one must understand that not everything makes sense, that not everything is logical or rational? Ethnic writers are able to understand the paradoxes in present society because ethnic and dominant cultures in America are interconnected in ways that are often beyond common comprehension, and paradoxes are apparent—especially when we view time as nonlinear, as always moving.

The short exchange when Fa Mu Lan first returns home is revealing and reminiscent of her first meeting with the old people. When her family is speculating about where she was (among them magic and prostitution), Fa Mu Lan replies that she “met some teachers who were willing to teach [her] science” (Kingston, 40). This connects to Brave Orchid’s history as a student of science and magic; nonlinear time blends together the lives of the narrator’s ancestry, bringing the importance of learning in and of itself to the fore. Learning to be a warrior or a doctor was considered male-dominated domains, but the myth of Fa Mu Lan draws a string through generations that blends together centuries of powerful, intelligent women. There is no explanation or response to Fa Mu Lan’s claim of learning science because her father changes the subject by immediately saying “I have been drafted,” to which Fa Mu Lan replies, “No,

father . . . I will take your place” (Kingston, 40). This straightforward and minimalistic style of speech exists in the lack of explanation that transcends generations. The difference is that Fa Mu Lan knew exactly what her father was talking about whereas Maxine and her siblings are often left in the dark when it comes to understanding their elders.

These misunderstandings are evident in the short story “At the Western Palace,” in which the implied author describes Brave Orchid’s and Moon Orchid’s reactions and understanding of the American-born children. One tradition is to serve candy to make Moon Orchid’s “first American day” “sweet”; by refusing to eat the candy, the children “put the bad mouth” on their aunt (Kingston, 140). Brave Orchid thinks, “Who would think that children could dislike candy? It was abnormal, not in the nature of children, not human . . . They were so stupid, surely they weren’t adults yet” and “you had to sweeten their noisy barbarous mouths” (Kingston, 140). She continues to lament over how “greedy . . . [and] impolite (‘untraditional’ in Chinese) her children were” (Kingston, 140). The words “greedy,” “impolite,” “abnormal,” and “stupid” are all incredibly negative and seem almost too strong to be directed toward the children to whom she has neglected to explain traditions: “She opened the front door and mumbled something. She opened the back door and mumbled something. ‘What do you say when you open the door like that?’ her children used to ask when they were younger. ‘Nothing. Nothing,’ she would answer . . . She never explained anything that was really important. They no longer asked” (Kingston, 140-141). Brave Orchid does not involve the children in traditions, and it becomes a two-way street of ignorance. The children do not understand where the parents come from and the parents do not understand why the children do what they do; there are assumptions made by both generations that result in a lack of communication.

Traditional mannerisms also seem to collide and confuse both the older women born in China and the children born in America. Moon Orchid is unsettled by the American mannerism of making eye contact and believes they stare “as if they were looking for lies. Rude. Accusing” (Kingston, 154). The presumably patriarchal mannerism of women avoiding eye contact, being

“demure” or submissive, is the exact opposite of the mainstream American mannerism, in which it is “impolite” not to do so. Kingston demonstrates the lack of mutual understanding between the generations by using the word “demure,” which, for a mainstream reader, connotes modesty or reservedness and has little to do with making eye contact. Furthermore, one could argue that the children “barely talk” to the adults because they lack common interests and traditional understanding. This is supported by Moon Orchid’s claim that “they were not modest” because they do not deny compliments: the two generations do not understand the other’s response to social situations (Kingston, 155). There is a disparity in the generational understanding of modesty and pride, which is even further shown by instances where Brave Orchid “did not understand why they were ashamed of the things they could do” and yet does not convey to her sister the reason for their “vanity” (Kingston, 155).

Brave Orchid is involved with mainstream culture when it benefits her to explain her children’s ignorance of Chinese culture. In China, families put up pictures of their ancestors and Brave Orchid “put up [her] own pictures because later the children would not have the sense to do it,” telling Moon Orchid the reason is that “[i]n America you can put up anybody’s picture you like” (Kingston, 142). The notion that conceptualizing ancestry and contextualizing it in a modern lens is essential to ethnic American understanding of time; the American born children cannot innately understand Chinese traditions and Brave Orchid lacks the desire to learn about her children’s American culture. They “do not seem like much” to Brave Orchid because they are not fully engrossed in Chinese tradition, but she ignores their success as American-born children. Rather than become involved in their education (both formal and informal) she thinks they may have just stolen trophies “from the real winners” because “the Ghost Teachers and Ghost Coaches” cannot “tell smart Chinese from dumb Chinese” (Kingston, 149). Despite the lack of overt explanation, the fact that Brave Orchid displays both the Chinese and American items is a visual representation of nonlinear time in that each generation is covertly teaching the other about its traditions.

Many scholars have discussed the importance of talk-story in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*<sup>3</sup>. The emphasis of storytelling in the culture has significant implications for both the structure of the stories and the meanings behind them. Talk-story is not always consciously didactic and even the lesson given may not be the one intended. The narrator, Maxine, begins to realize this when she says that "[w]hen 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" (Kingston, 24). By using "adults" the narrator is implying that women are complicit in this idea of success and "fail[ure]." The narrator challenges this path by immediately following it with her own—that of the heroine, someone set apart from the normal community and yet held in high esteem. Through storytelling, readers are given information to better understand the inherent cultural values that dictate much of the narrator's life. The narrator continues: "I had forgotten this chant [of Fa Mu Lan] that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She 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" (Kingston, 24). Brave Orchid, whether consciously or unconsciously, uses storytelling to show her daughter an alternate route in life, an ideal that was worth fighting for. The difference between "said" and "taught" is important here because storytelling encompasses much more than just the straightforward story. Brave Orchid says one thing (the culturally acceptable idea that women grow up to be wives and slaves), but, in teaching "the song of the woman warrior," allows her daughter's imagination to expand and envision a life for herself outside of the culturally acceptable and anti-feminist future that has been decided for her. The experience of listening to ancestral stories and imaginatively embodying the strength and pride of old is crucial to the importance of representing time as nonlinear in ethnic American literature. The hope for this alternative path exists because although it is a different time and in a different

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<sup>3</sup> See Acón Chan, Parrott, and TuSmith.

context other than war, the same values the woman warrior myth espouse are being re-appropriated and instilled.

Kingston makes use of representative figures, such as the greedy, bloodthirsty barons, as Maxine declares: “From the fairy tales, I’ve learned exactly who my enemies are” (Kingston, 57). The barons whom Fa Mu Lan defeats are similar characters to the capitalistic employers “business-suited in their modern American executive guise” who are “impossible to meet eye to eye” (Kingston, 57). The language here implies that they are imposters, the ancient barons dressed up to blend into their new culture. How does the narrator know “exactly” who the enemy is? The representative figure of ‘baron’ fits the mold of the American “boss” whose concern is personal gain without regard for who is hurt in the process. As if to replace their absence, the narrator discusses her extended family and how “[i]t is confusing that [her] family was not the poor to be championed. They were executed like the barons in the stories, when they were not barons” (Kingston, 61). Storytelling is not always directly applicable to one’s real life situations because of the nonlinearity of time—the woman warrior of the story was able to directly avenge her family through combat, but the narrator’s ability to avenge her family lies in her proficiency with words and storytelling. Just by hearing a story does not mean it can be transplanted to one’s life—the story needs dissecting and digesting in order for real life application to occur. Neither warrior is able to bring back those who were killed, but they can prevent more from being taken by the enemy. The power of storytelling lies in the ability of the storyteller to teach the listener about ways in which to do that. The process involves and needs the knowledge of past generations in order to rethink history as nonlinear by applying that knowledge to the present.

This is further evidenced by the narrator’s claim that

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The ideographs 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.” (62-63)

There is a plea in this passage that calls back to the past but simultaneously harkens to the future. The circularity of leaving and returning is evident in the plea for Kingston’s “people [to] understand” that she has the ability and responsibility of expressing the “words at [their] backs.” Storytelling is inherently oral, and that “the reporting is the vengeance” has important implications for ethnic American authors who engage in this oral tradition. The story gives an alternative way of life: one of freedom and success—of respect and love—which is not the norm. The act of storytelling gives the protagonist the hope and imaginative thrust to solve her own predicament—to not only rely on the ancestral “pole fighters” or signifying “birds” for her success and greatness, but on her own observation and expression. The overlapping of traditional myths with stories from the present day exemplifies the notion of nonlinear time as a means to explore the past and bring it into the present.

### **John Edgar Wideman’s *Damballah***

The use of ancestral time in John Edgar Wideman’s works is a key feature in the scholarship surrounding his literature<sup>4</sup>. Wideman traces the names of his ancestors and those who lived alongside them back through different cultures and continents, showing how all people are connected, how all stories are connected—and that when this knowledge is applied, transformation can occur. Wideman makes it clear that language is a tool that links people and stories. This is most evident in the culminating story of *Damballah*, “The Beginning of Homewood,” in which Wideman creates a web of women named Sybil, from Greek mythology through to his runaway-slave great-great-great grandmother Sybela Owens. These women were all “caged” and “robbed of speech” but also held a “pride” and “resistance” that resonated and reinforced the community with whom they “had been sent to suffer” (Wideman, 196). There

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<sup>4</sup> See Byerman, Hoem, and Weets.



is resistance to shame that travels throughout the generations but, by the 1950s in Homewood,<sup>5</sup> there are few who “had not broken” and there is little semblance of the personal strength of the past (Wideman, 196). Later in the short story Aunt May speaks about Sybela’s “freeing kind of power” and how, as a young girl, May “[f]elt all the life running out [her] and something new filling [her] up at the same time. Just as clear as a bell [Sybela] heard her say [May’s] name. And say so many other things there ain’t no words for but they all rushing in so fast felt [her] whole self moving out the way to make room” (Wideman, 201). This narrative circles back to the opening short story and to Orion’s ability to speak—without words—to the nameless boy, transmitting the power to understand “nonlinear, ancestral time.” May was “told” “to live free all this time and be a witness all this time. And told [her] come a day [Sybela’s] generations fill this city and need to know the truth” (Wideman, 202). However, as *Damballah* progresses, the generations slowly lose the ability to “live free”; there is a lack of “truth” known to Tommy’s generation and the role of the storyteller is to return and retell the stories that bear “witness” to freedom and truth.

Tommy also becomes caged in physical and verbal defeatism, which is evident throughout the story. In the short story titled with his name, Tommy laments: “Man, they sure did fuck with this place. What he thinks each time he stares at what was once the heart of Homewood. Nothing” (Wideman 157-158). The “they” is ambiguous; does it refer to the white people who left or the African Americans who stayed? The single-worded sentence “nothing” is powerful because of its isolation in that paragraph. There are things built up, but there is no meaning or no use for them. They waste space. There is no trust, no flow of business, no community—the ‘they’ becomes more powerful when it does not refer to the community. The “heart of Homewood” could be symbolic of Sybela Owens and the strength that she carried with her that is no longer there.

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<sup>5</sup> This decade is based on the Family Tree included in the introductory material of *Damballah*.

The language in “Tommy” does more than just shock the mainstream reader with its vulgarity; Wideman skillfully crafts sentences that mimic the character’s thought process and emotions. Tommy “still [has] no ride of his own so he’s still walking. Nothing to it . . . walking his hip walk, making something out of the way he is walking since there is nothing else to do, no place to go so he makes something of the going, lets them see him moving in his own down way, his stylized walk which nobody could walk better even if they had some place to go” (Wideman 159-160). When there is “nothing” left for him in Homewood, he can “make something” out of his physical body and then “stylize” it to emphasize his creativity and control. This reflects Wideman’s control over the “stylized” language—the act of writing and “asserting . . . ownership” over the language—creates a sense of purpose that is lacking in Tommy’s generation (Eschborn, 993). For some time at least, Tommy is able to find a space for creation, imagination, and freedom from the cage; he has a sense of pride that resists the defeatist attitude. This harkens back to the feelings of pride and resistance the reader associates with the past, with Sybela, and provides an example of why nonlinear time is essential for negotiating between the past and present.

The defeatist attitude returns as Tommy continues walking and ponders the degradation of Homewood: “Thinking it be a bitch out here. Niggers write all over everything don’t even know how to spell. Drawing power fists that look like a loaf of bread” (Wideman, 160). The simile is striking. The narrator is criticizing the power his people have given away, which Keith Byerman notes is evident in Tommy’s “use of the word *nigger* [because] in this context [it] indicates a return to a derogatory, insulting connotation” and the contradictory nature of their struggle (22). The community needs empowerment—the town has disintegrated into poverty, into a place where they need bread just as much as they need solidarity, and the two images become blended together. Tommy uses an extended metaphor to compare Homewood to “somebody’s mouth they let some jive dentist fuck with. All these old houses nothing but rotten teeth and these raggedy pits is where some been dug out or knocked out and ain’t nothing left

but stumps and snaggleteeth just waiting to go . . . nothing but filth and germs and rot. And what that make me?" (Wideman, 160). All of this rot and decay is the result of letting go of one's accountability and control. It speaks to the physical description of Homewood, but also to the community's lack of ability to change it or take responsibility for its demise, and the narrator ties himself up in the ambivalence. The relationship between the home and the inhabitant is strikingly similar to Esperanza's dilemma previously discussed, but Tommy lacks Esperanza's ability to "out."

In "Hazel," the events that take place are not direct results of racism, but their source can be found there. Wideman includes a hint of this black and white divide within the first three sentences of the story: "The day it happened Hazel dreamed of steps. The black steps her brother Faun had pushed her down. The white steps clinging to the side of the house she would not leave till she died" (67). The reader is immediately hooked because we do not know what the "it" is, but, by describing the steps, a clearly ominous symbol, as black *and* white, Wideman ensures that this divide is on the reader's mind throughout the story. He is hinting at the historical pressures that indirectly affect the present lives of the characters.

The issue of passing for white is loaded with cultural significance and viewing time as nonlinear reminds us that the attitudes (and the ideology that defines them) still exist today. Gaybrella describes her Grandmother Maggie in loving and race-loaded terms: "Looks like a white lady, don't she? . . . *That's your grandmother. It's a shame she didn't live long enough for you to see her. But she was too delicate, too beautiful. God didn't make her for living long in this world*" (69). Passing for white, which gives Gaybrella a strong sense of self-worth (in being "too delicate, too beautiful"), causes her to act selfishly because she lives to uphold a certain picture of herself. The worry of passing for white controls everything and she gets so caught up in the minutia of it that she cannot put herself in Hazel's place—it is not about happiness but it is about being "good" or, in racial terms, being "white." Gaybrella's preoccupation with passing for white is what characterizes the narrator's description of events: the unknown "it" is described as

happening “on a Tuesday because her mother” could not take her mind off “that uncouth Bess” who “married below her color but that’s where her mouth always wanted to be anyway. Out in the street with those roughnecks and field-hands and their country nigger ways” (Wideman, 74). “Uncouth” means “lacking good manners, refinement, or grace” and is a harsh description of a sister who is kind enough to do Gaybrella’s laundry every week. Gaybrella feels “calm” when she “wash[es] out” the dirty laundry, which fits the white male ideal of (black) women as domestic slaves. Thinking about her cultural past makes her so anxious she literally “wash[es]...out” the images from her mind. Her aversion to the “filth and dirt of this world” clouds her judgment. She disdains the “lies of men, their nasty hands” and it makes Gaybrella’s “heart feel good to know [Hazel]’ll always be neat and clean and pure” (Wideman, 76). Gaybrella seems to associate the more vulgar aspects of male sexuality with the “roughnecks” “out in the street,” and by keeping her daughter away from people “below her color” she hopes to keep her white image “pure.”

In “The Watermelon Story” Wideman’s talented use of storytelling is evident. The language is peculiar to May and the language shapes the stories: “As he listened he heard May saying the words and remembered it was her then. May who told the story of the accident.” As we see in the story, storytelling blends together events, time, space, language and traditions. Wideman makes this clear in the last short story, where the implied author is himself. Storytelling allows the reader to have and/or understand experiences they have not personally encountered. Ethnic authors have a unique position within storytelling because it is both a narrative tool as well as a means to sort through the past. Storytelling in printed text can lose the effect of body language, intonation, etc., but by effectively using language it is a tool used to bridge the gap between mainstream America and ethnic American communities.

In “The Beginnings of Homewood,” the narrator describes “reading a story” which was a “letter [he] began writing . . . but never finished, never sent, a letter which became part of the story [he hasn’t] finished either” (Wideman, 193). There is “something wrong with the story”

because he “never finished the letter . . . The letter remains inside the story, buried, bleeding through when [he] read[s]” (Wideman, 193). Real life remains “buried, bleeding” through all of the stories by all of these authors. The nonlinearity of time is evident in the statement that “In a way the story came before the letter” (Wideman, 193). The implied author also ponders the difficulty of connecting the stories to real life, and the necessity of it. Aunt May’s stories “exist because of their parts and each part is a story worth telling, worth examining to find the stories it contains. What seems to ramble begins to cohere when the listener understands the process, understands that the voice seeks to recover everything, that the voice proclaims *nothing is lost*, that the listener is not passive but lives like everything else within the story” (Wideman, 199). This is applicable to all three works discussed in this paper. Just as the story transcends the physical boundary of book and reader, so too do its themes with regard to time—they too stretch from Wideman’s time to our own.

## **Conclusion**

Wideman’s claim that through storytelling one can assert “ownership” over language is vital for all three authors analyzed in this study. Maxine Hong Kingston is able to claim her place in a culture that does not easily give women space for success, freedom, and individuality by countering the patriarchal language and stories with her own, and by challenging male-centric stories and traditions. Both the mainstream American and traditional Chinese cultures are patriarchal and, as such, many of the underlying stories and issues overlap between the cultures. Tradition and language are closely interconnected in *The Woman Warrior* for this reason. Cisneros claims “ownership” by shedding light on the dark past of aggressive patriarchal tradition and cultural shaming to bring back pride and confidence in her community. Her stories highlight the dichotomy between poetic, gentle language and the violent repressive male culture that she has to stand up against; as such, the soft language highlights the unnaturalness of the violent acts. Furthermore, language is not an isolating barrier for

Esperanza, but it is for some in the community; Cisneros may be, through example, promoting change in the communal perspective so as not to fear English or the blending of cultures. Wideman's stories are anchored in the richness of African American English, where the vernacular is an easily transferable and integrated part of the mainstream culture. The historical ties he explores with language—using language as a record of past and present and as a way to explore their connections—embody the notion that time is nonlinear.

*The House on Mango Street*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Damballah* directly address issues that span through time. In order to “out,” the cyclical nature of these issues necessitates a return to the past to learn for the future. As such, the past directly affects the present. These authors take ownership of time to create space for the traumas of the past in both the dominant culture and in the American canon. For any reader willing to listen, these three works can be tools and talismans for a more equitable, hopeful future.

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