



Visions of Whiteness in Selected Works of Asian American Literature



Klara Szmańko

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Visions of Whiteness in
Selected Works of Asian
American Literature

ALSO BY KLARA SZMAŃKO

*Invisibility in African American
and Asian American Literature:
A Comparative Study* (McFarland, 2008)

To my parents, Bożena Szmańko, Tadeusz Szmańko,
and my grandmother, Helena Golec

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"A manifest truth disappear[s] ... when one begins to detect the very conditions that made it seem manifest: the familiarities that served as its support, the darkneses that brought about its clarity and all those far-away things that secretly sustained it and made it 'go without saying.'"—*Michel Foucault, Power* 447

"You're not just a writer in an ivory tower. You are a citizen of this country and of this world, and so what are your responsibilities? As Norman Mailer puts it, are you a participant or are you an observer? ... How distant are you going to be from the material, from the readers, from the doings of your time?"—*Maxine Hong Kingston in Lim's Interview "Reading Back, Looking Forward: A Retrospective Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston"* 168

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Introduction

This book is a study of the representation of whiteness in selected works of Asian American literature. Initiating contemporary whiteness studies with her seminal work, *Playing in the Dark* (1989), Toni Morrison emphasized the need to analyze the construction of racial categories in canonical and non-canonical works of American literature by white authors, claiming that her “project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject, from the describers and imagined to the describers and imaginers, from the serving to the served” (Morrison 90). There is a similar need to critically examine both canonized and non-canonized works of so-called ethnic literature, in this case Asian American literature. The purpose of the book is to show what happens when the positions of “the described” and “the describers” are switched, when visual dynamics is reversed and the people who were traditionally cast as objects of the gaze are endowed with the power to look, evaluate and formulate critical judgements, subjecting to their critical gaze those who usually had the power to study, describe and draw conclusions about representatives of racial minorities. Participating in a dialogue on the definition of whiteness and its impact on the life of Asian Americans and other people of color, all works discussed here make whiteness visible and defamiliarize it, contributing a heterogeneous definition of whiteness, whiteness revealing its many faces, whiteness stripped of its self-assumed esoteric, mystique and indeterminacy. The exposure of whiteness allows the authors analyzed in this project to at least partly reverse power dynamics and undermine the white privilege to define and categorize racial minorities. Exercising the power to look back and to name, they empower themselves and other minorities. It is whiteness and white people featured in the works scrutinized here that find themselves in the position of the “other.” The overarching metaphor of the book is the metaphor of sight, of seeing and not seeing, of looking in order to see and of merely sweeping the surface of racialized subjects’ body with an

ethnographic gaze. Privileged insight of Asian American subjects and visual exchanges between people from different racial groups occupy a central place in all works examined in this study: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* (1996), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) as well as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003).

Whiteness studies scholars to whom I am particularly indebted in my research are Ruth Frankenberg, Cheryl Harris, Robyn Wiegman, David Roediger, George Lipsitz, Linda Frost, Valerie Babb and Gary Taylor. All of them underscore the socio-historical construction of whiteness, exposing white people's attachment to the privileges accruing to their whiteness. Of particular importance for this interdisciplinary investigation of whiteness in Asian American literature is the research of Ruth Frankenberg, who speaks of the invisibility of whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness is two-fold. White people often construct themselves as invisible by marking others, the process on which hinges the invisibility of whiteness: "whiteness makes itself invisible precisely by asserting its normalcy, its transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its transparency depends" ("Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness" 6). This mode of invisibility rests on the paradox created by whiteness, which casts itself as an "empty" but simultaneously normative space" ("Whiteness and Americanness" 64). I devote a special place to the oxymoronic construction of whiteness in the discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*. The other type of white invisibility consists in white people's erasure of their white privilege and the making of the system of racism "structurally invisible" ("Whiteness and Americanness" 70).

The invisibility of whiteness is also a recurring trope in other whiteness studies scholars' research and it is essential to acknowledge at least some of those researchers who consciously reflect on the invisibility of whiteness, emphasizing the need to undermine it. Frances Maher and Mary Kay Thompson note that whiteness "is the often silent and invisible basis against which other racial and cultural identities are named as 'Other,' measured and marginalized" (139). Annalee Newitz claims that whites "imagine themselves as racially invisible" and that "their self-image as whites is thus both underdeveloped and yet extremely presumptuous" (132). In a similar vein, Valerie Babb presents whiteness as a matter of fact thing, a non-marker, almost a non-race in the 1970s and 1980s (1). According to Babb, white people were unmarked by their race because it was never mentioned in relation to them. Race was mentioned only in relation to non-white people. Babb's observations dovetail with the color-blind rhetoric of the 1980s as well as the attempts to obfuscate the history of

discrimination against non-white people, closely linked with whiteness. Michael Vannoy Adams observes that "the category 'people of color' excludes whites on the dubious basis that whiteness is colorless—while blackness, redness, brownness and yellowness are colorful" (14). Ironically, the optic definition of color provided by Naomi Zack and cited by Adams undermines the definition of whiteness as colorless because "white" is the "perceptual experience of the presence of all colors" (14).

Acknowledging the scholars who ponder on the self-constructed invisibility of whiteness, I would also like to stress the continuity of my own research and note that the present work is the first book-length study of the representation of whiteness in Asian American literature. In my first book, my field of investigation was invisibility in African American and Asian American literature as well as African Americans and Asian Americans striving for visibility, the present work shows how Asian American authors undo the invisibility of whiteness and white people. Both types of invisibility are diametrically different. Racial and ethnic minorities in the United States were metaphorically invisible because of the negative marking attributed to them by whites. As illustrated above, whites rendered themselves invisible by unmarking themselves and marking others. Both types of invisibility depend on each other. The other type of white invisibility consisted in the masking of its own privilege and practices of oppression. All of the authors analyzed here make whiteness visible, but whiteness features in each of these works in a slightly different way, affecting the lives of Asian American narrators and characters in a different manner. White people are present in all of these works to a different extent without always coming in direct contact with their protagonists. Still, even if whiteness does not directly materialize itself in the presence of white figures, it nonetheless features prominently in the larger power structure exposed by the authors belonging to this study.

It is not without significance that all of the works under scrutiny here represent postmodernism. Mike Hill points to postmodernism as crucial for the emergence of whiteness studies as a discipline and "essential to the critique of whiteness" because "it denies even the most stubborn forms of unremarkability" (158). Each work performs the marking of whiteness in its own unique way.¹ Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) defamiliarizes whiteness in a three-fold manner. The novel presents whiteness through the eyes of the immature Chinese American female narrator, who estranges it in the figures of "ghosts" that in her portrayal gain the semblance of aliens. From the perspective of the immature narrator growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, ghosts are undesirable, unattractive, intrusive, scary and overwhelming through their sheer numbers. The

second vision of whiteness emerging from the narrative is constructed by the mature narrator, who in the 1960s and 1970s no longer looks at whiteness through the prism of first impressions, but offers a sober-eyed view of whiteness implicated in the structures of oppression. The narrative also presents the first generation of Chinese Americans' vision of whiteness; in their eyes the critique of whiteness often fuses with the critique of American lifestyle and the critique of their own children—second-generation immigrants. Finally, much of the defamiliarization of whiteness in *The Woman Warrior* takes place through the imagery of the narrative.

Kingston's *China Men* (1980) highlights the contradictions underlying the socio-historical and legal construction of whiteness: its simultaneous particularization and universalization. The implication of whiteness in oppression and exploitation of Chinese Americans and other minorities is much more tangible in *China Men* than in *The Woman Warrior*. Chinese American immigrant subjects depicted by the narrator of *China Men* come face to face with their white exploiters in the nineteenth-century United States. In *China Men*, Kingston presents an incisive analysis of white power, taking under a magnifying glass both its executive mechanisms and its legislative underpinnings.

Unlike in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, in Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* (1996) whiteness is seemingly invisible. The Korean American protagonist of the novel, Tom Pak, barely ever comes into direct contact with white people. Still, the racial upheaval of the 1990s, into which Tom as well as the Korean Americans and African Americans of the inner city neighborhood of New York are drawn, is the direct result of the urban restructuring of the 1960s, the restructuring in which the white apparatus of power played a crucial role.² Seemingly invisible, whiteness operates from a safe distance, placing African Americans and Korean Americans in particular positions in relation to each other and imparting an impression that these are two minorities confronting each other without any role of white people in the conflict. Patterning the events of the novel on the Rodney King-related riots of 1992 and the shooting death of Latasha Harlins in 1991, Leonard Chang points to larger systemic problems as responsible for the conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans unfolding in the inner city, which he terms as a "larger problem of inner city discontent" (219). Never naming whiteness directly as responsible for the "inner city discontent," Chang articulates its role through Tom's dreams, in which whiteness has a blinding quality, being the source of pain and terror.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) offers a much more explicit critique of whiteness and its entwinement in the oppression and dispossession of

Japanese Canadians during the internment of World War II and in the postwar years. Through the first-person participant narrator Naomi and her aunt, Emily, the novel levels very direct charges at the Canadian apparatus of power and white Canadians for treating Japanese Canadians like pariahs, potential spies rather than the rightful citizens. Formulating an express critique of whiteness, Kogawa still does not limit herself exclusively to overt pronouncements on whiteness, encoding a significant portion of the representation of whiteness in the imagery of the work, as it is also the case in other works analyzed here. Apart from being the color of death, betrayal, domination, repression, separation and distance, whiteness invites positive associations in *Obasan*, being also the color of light, brightness, liberation and salvation, albeit liberation and salvation at a price.

The last work belonging to this study, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), does not confine the analysis of whiteness to the perimeter of one nation, but places it in a broader, transnational context, exposing the implication of whiteness in the imperial and colonial ventures outside the United States embodied in the narrative by the colonization of Hawaii, the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. *The Fifth Book* documents the narrator's quest for peace, transcending ethnic or racial barriers as well as national borders, incorporating individuals across the racial, ethnic and national divide in the narrator's transnational venture that, ideally, is to bring definitive peace to all mankind. As in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, apart from featuring explicitly in the narrative, whiteness reveals itself to the reader in *The Fifth Book of Peace* through a whole gamut of images, bringing up positive and negative associations. On the one hand, it signifies death, mourning, loss, destruction, expansive nationalism and colonization. On the other hand, it stands for opulence, plenitude, luxury, comfort, empowerment, light, brightness and visibility.

None of the authors belonging to this study forecloses the possibility of the transformation of whiteness. In Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Kogawa's *Obasan* the potential of whiteness for transformation becomes visible through the imagery of the work. In his explicit commentary on racial relations in the United States, the narrator of Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* speaks not so much about the possibility of the transformation of whiteness itself but about the systemic changes that would solve the problem of the "inner city discontent" (219). The potential of whiteness for transformation is the most conspicuous in Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The narrator of the work speaks extensively about the need to change the national narrative of the United States from that dominated in the second half of the twentieth century by participation in what she perceives as various colonial and imperial enterprises into that of

peaceful cooperation. This need for the transformation of whiteness is best expressed in the narrative through the portrayal of two flags: that of the United States and that of the United Nations. In the depiction of the narrator, the "Red, White and Blue stands for competition and nationalism" (12). She would like to resignify the red, white and blue of the Star Spangled Banner in such a way as to make them "stand for peace and cooperation" (12) embodied by the white dove of peace on the United Nations flag.

Each of the works analyzed here subscribes to transformational identity politics. Proponents of conventional identity politics set themselves apart from other oppressed groups, prioritizing their own interests over those with whom they might strike potential alliances. Supporters of transformational identity politics treasure their cultural distinctness, but at the same time they search for points of convergence with other marginalized groups, often pursuing broader coalitions. It is not unusual for oppressed groups or individuals espousing conventional identity politics to attack other marginalized people. Transformational identity politics, on the other hand, underscores the very experience of oppression that unites all oppressed. It acknowledges the differences, but it does not see these differences as hurdles on the way to potential alliances. Throughout this study the term transformational identity politics recurs consistently. Scholars who propagated the term are Analouise Keating, Liz Bondi and Manning Marable, the latter reaching for "transformationism" (Marable 227). Still, it needs to be noted that other terms are also employed by scholars who reach similar conclusions: for instance, Judith Butler employs the metaphor of translation, coining the term "politics of translation" (169). Butler speaks about a "language between languages" that has to be found (178). According to Butler, translation is successful only if it allows "foreign vocabulary into its lexicon" (168). Kimberlè Crenshaw and other black feminist critics, including Nira Yuval-Davis, Michelle Fine, Gloria I. Joseph, and Elizabeth Higginbotham, employ the term "intersectionality" to speak about the intersecting lines of oppression involving race, gender, class, sexuality, pointing out that these lines of oppression often intersect in one individual or certain oppressed groups of people, the group of special attention to them being black women.

Solidarity with other oppressed or vulnerable groups as well as intersecting lines of oppression are at least to some extent a part of each work examined here. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the criticism of the marginalization suffered by the narrator's Chinese American family interweaves with the charges leveled against the chauvinism of the Chinese and Chinese Americans. The nationalist critics of *The Woman*

Warrior claimed that Kingston targeted first of all the Chinese and Chinese American community in her work. Through close textual analysis juxtaposed with the socio-historical reading I undermine these claims, observing that she is no less critical of the white world. Still, it needs to be observed that the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is as sensitive to gender oppression as she is to racial oppression. Both in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, one can also find solidarity with other racial groups marginalized in the United States and overtones of class sensitivity. Besides exposing the wrongs suffered by Japanese Canadians, the narrator of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* sheds light on other types of oppression and trauma associated with it, such as sexual exploitation, the ravages of the war, war-incurred orphanhood, the aftermath of the Nagasaki nuclear explosion and the plight of the elderly, especially those of a minority racial group. Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* shows the Korean American protagonist of the novel, Tom Pak, sympathizing with African Americans of the inner city, bodily defending one of them and shuddering from racial bigotry displayed by his Korean American employee, Mrs. Rhee. His already mentioned concern with the "larger problem of inner city discontent" (219) suggests that he understands the need for broader systemic solutions and cooperation between various racial groups rather than solutions involving only one side of the conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans. *The Fruit 'N Food* also brings to light exploitation within the same racial group: in this case of Korean Americans by other Korean Americans. Tom's remuneration for his work in a Korean American grocery store is below the minimum wage and his working time does not match the standards of employment either. The Chinese American narrator of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, identified as Maxine Hong Kingston herself,³ forms an alliance including survivors of different traumas, people of diverse racial and ethnic heritage. Most of them suffer or suffered from the postwar stress syndrome. Many, if not most of the survivors belonging to the narrator's veteran creative writing workshops, are white, serving as an example of whites working together with representatives of other racial and ethnic groups suffering from similar traumas and collaborating for the same cause—the cause of peace, both in a broader international sense and peace signifying mental equilibrium. The presence of white people in the veteran workshops exposes the impact of what the narrator identifies as imperial ideology of consecutive American governments on the lives of other white people who find themselves in the roles of the executors of the policies in many ways underlain by the rhetoric of the white national narrative, also undermined by Kingston in *China Men*.

Traditionally, racial and ethnic minorities have been represented as