The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts and Beloved

In John Beverley's book Subalternity and Representation, he discusses the complex problems associated with the attempt of "solidarity" (38-39) with and agency for those oppressed peoples known as the subaltern, a term defined by Ranajit Guha as "a name for the general attribute of subordination... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way..." (Guha in Beverley 85) As an addendum to his initial definition he added that "We recognize of course that subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance" (85). The main qualifying aspect of the definition of subaltern, then, is that the subaltern is discussed in relationship to dominant social groups by nature of a dominant subject's class, caste, age, gender, office, etc., Those within the dominant group(s) are working in the political and economic social spheres of the geopolitical spaces the subaltern occupy, thus they become creators and sustainers of the state of subalternity discussed in Beverley's text. In addition to Guha's definition of subalternity, academic inquiry into the subject of oppressed peoples and the general state of subalternity can be defined under the broad term of subaltern studies.

Collectively, subaltern studies as a field of academic inquiry agrees that representing or speaking for the subaltern is nonproductive because it further oppresses them, and it reinforces the dominant group(s) power over them, making the opportunity for agency further out of reach for these oppressed peoples. Beverley summarizes the complex relationship academics have when involved in subaltern studies by summarizing Gayatri Spivak's now well-known claim that the subaltern cannot speak. In Beverley's text he writes "the subaltern cannot speak in a way that would carry any sort of authority or meaning for us without altering the relations of
power/knowledge that constitute it as subaltern in the first place" (Beverley 29). According to Beverley, at present the focus of subaltern studies is an attempt to find the location between where intellectuals are involved in epistemological inquiry into the political and economic struggles of the subaltern and the subaltern's own struggle for agency (Beverley 33). At present my particular interests are focused on what can be learned from a discussion of women as a subaltern presence within literary texts and how this presence helps add knowledge to and impart knowledge (40) for the wider field of subaltern studies and women's studies. In my paper I argue then, that the relationships that are made between ghost figures and their living relatives within Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts and Toni Morrison's Beloved, articulate a specific female identity and agency in these literary texts, and as a result provide those in subaltern studies with knowledge of how the subaltern, especially the female subaltern, might claim identity and agency within the dominant group(s) they live with, particularly within the U.S.

In Chapter Six of Homi Bhabha's text The Location of Culture, the author discusses in great length the term hybridity to describe the space where the colonized subject interjects "denied' knowledges" that "enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition" (Bhabha 114). "Denied knowledges" for Bhabha are those knowledges that are not accepted by the colonizing people within a particular geopolitical territory. What Bhabha wants to make clear though in his articulation of this hybrid state of the colonized is that hybridity "is not simply the content of disavowed knowledges…that return to be acknowledged as counter-authorities" (114). In addition to this "content of disavowed knowledges" Bhabha states that there is also evidence of:
the revaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial
difference - that is the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or
evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural
differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated. (114)

From Bhabha’s definition of hybridity, then, it can be concluded that the literary practice of
introducing a cultural other, a "content of disavowed knowledges" which are "counter-
authorities," to the dominant consciousness, takes place when an author writes from the point of
view of an "Other" presence, a character or entity that is a non-entity in the eyes of Western logic
and metaphysics. In this way, the author creates a "counter-authority" within the dominant
discourse of particular sites where these texts are read and taught, weakening the power that the
dominant discourse maintains over knowledge and belief systems.

In the case of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a
Girlhood Among Ghosts, Kingston writes her deceased aunt into her memoir as No Name
Woman, reflecting on her aunt's brutal ostracizing from the Chinese village where Kingston and
her mother and father lived. Kingston chooses to reveal her aunt in her memoirs as No Name
Woman because her aunt is "one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a
companion, in eternal cold and silence" (14). Here, Kingston writes her deceased aunt into her
memoir as an ancestor who brings shame, silence, and a solitary existence into her family's
history. For Kingston as narrator of her mother’s "talk stories," No Name Woman was
frightening because her mother warns Kingston "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt...She has
never been born" (15). So, for the narrator, No Name Woman was only spoken about in
reference to the act of violence and alienation enacted on her by the villagers who yelled "'Pig.'
'Ghost.' 'Pig,'" as "they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house" (5) and by her family
who kept No Name Woman nameless for the sake of protecting themselves from future ghost hauntings. In a final act of agency, No Name Woman commits suicide after giving birth to a daughter whose own presence of conception had put the narrator's aunt to shame. This type of ghost presence within the literary tradition is known as magical realism. Magical realist texts typically follow a trope of storytelling that has a distinct narrative structure described in Lois Parkinson Zamora's and Wendy B. Faris' "Introduction" to Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community. In their "Introduction," Zamora and Faris describe magical realist fiction in the following:

Texts labeled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less 'real' than those upon which traditional literary realism draws - often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, rituals - that is, in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind communities together. (3)

No Name Woman’s story is revealing in its depiction of the cultural systems that are found in Moon Orchid's "talk stories" of ghosts and the villagers' creation of ghosts through the condemnation of those community members who violate patriarchal values and codes of conduct. Also, this story instills a sense of ancestral trauma within Kingston's consciousness where family history was erased and where reclaiming ancestral memory involves the difficult process of developing a familial relationship with her aunt's ghost. Though Kingston is haunted by her aunt's ghost, she refers to her aunt in terms of family ties being reestablished through her authority as a writer:
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 origami-ed into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute. (16)

In this passage, Kingston writes of the total silencing and rejection of No Name Woman by her family and the neighboring villagers, revealing the part of her difference as a Chinese American that remains subaltern and the ancestral difference that haunts her, while helping her to negotiate acceptance into the dominant social structures of American culture by “Walking erect...not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine...and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine” (11). Here, Kingston as narrator reflects on her need to refer and defer back to her aunt's ghost as a reminder of her family history, her difference and her identity as a Chinese American woman, all against the realities the Western world offers compared to the “disavowed knowledges” and “counterAuthorities” (Bhabha 114) presented by her mother’s “talk stories”. Expressed this way, this type of self-realization experienced in The Woman Warrior serves the purpose of adding knowledge to our understanding of the interconnections felt between those that “cannot speak” (in this case the ghost No Name Woman) and those family members who are in the process of attempting to gain agency in their new geopolitical locations, in this case Maxine Hong Kingston in America. It should be pointed out, though, that authors are seen within the field of subaltern studies as part of the intellectual elite because they have gained entry into the dominant system of knowledge making and cultural
transmission. As Beverley notes regarding the writing of postcolonial literary criticism, the female author "someone say, like ... Toni Morrison – who is not exactly subaltern, who is distinguished from the subaltern precisely by having the status and prestige of an author, is being made to stand in for the subaltern" (42). In a similar way to Toni Morrison's authorial agency then, Kingston's authorial presence produces a problem for an authentic critique of the narrator in The Woman Warrior as a subaltern subject, though her aunt's ghost is written into her memoir as a voiceless, nameless, haunting presence, a female ghost who does not and did not exist as an acknowledged subject in any public or private sphere as recorded in the memoirs of the author. Kingston's presence as an author then, typifies the encounter between the dominant elite intellectual's attempt at subaltern representation, and the subaltern's attempt at creating self-determination and agency.

The special issue of agency and self-determination are discussed in great length in Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In her essay, Spivak not only precisely indicates the central problem of an intellectual elite representing the subaltern, but she also addresses the special concerns for women who are oppressed by the dominant group(s) in power. Particularly Spivak writes:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as
female is even more deeply in shadow. (83)

In this passage Spivak acknowledges the special concerns of the female subaltern as a woman who cannot contribute to colonial production like their male counterparts. As a woman pregnant out of wedlock, No Name Woman defies the dominant patriarchal codes of conduct arranged for Chinese woman in her village, and as a result, loses her ability to be a productive participant in the economic survival of her family and village. The failure to be involved in prescribed gender roles of production in her village and the defiance of accepted codes of gender conduct for women have caused No Name Woman to enter into the powerless and hidden life of the subaltern. No Name Woman acts out in revenge for this judgment from her family and village neighbors by “drowning herself in the drinking water” (Kingston 16). Her difference became her death sentence and a cycle of painful memories for those she left behind.

Trinh T. Minh-ha in “Difference: ‘A Special Third World Women Issue’” offers a way to conceptualize the claiming of female difference within dominant political and economic structures by discussing the need for Third World women across the world to strive toward a self-determination that frees them (in an imaginative sense) from the control that those in power have over their fates. In particular, Minh-ha quotes Audre Lorde's claim that “Survival,...is not an academic skill...It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (Minh-ha 80). For Minh-ha, the struggle of Third World women is claiming difference as identity, instead of accepting the definition of female identity given to them by their dominant oppressive counterparts. Minh-ha writes “How am I to lose, maintain, or gain an (fe/male) identity when it is impossible to me to take up a position outside this identity from which I presumably reach in and
feel for it?” (95). The struggle felt by the narrator in The Woman Warrior exists in both her authorial presence and her aunt’s ghost presence, which form the authority/counter-authority Bhabha defines as hybridity in relation to the identity of colonized peoples. If we follow the current notion in subaltern studies that the dominant elite intellectual can never “cognitively map, ‘let speak,’ ‘speak for,’ ‘excavate’ the subaltern” (Beverley 40) then Kingston as narrator can never completely allow her aunt’s ghost to have agency, even in her own life, though the narrator will eventually grow as a female because her consciousness grows from experiences with her aunt’s ghost. Ghost presence in The Woman Warrior, then, is a type of symbolic familial agency that allows the female non-subaltern family member who emigrates to a foreign land to develop an altered subjectivity, an internal reality formed by the relationship they must make with the dominant group(s) in power. At this point of knowledge, the female non-subaltern family member comes to realize her own "layers whose totality forms 'I' and to realize that these "layers" are becoming more complex (96).

As mentioned previously, ghost figures within literary fiction are part of a broader critique of magical realist elements. The ghost aids the entire literary work with the goal of an "assault on …basic structures of rationalism and realism" while being "subversive: their in-betweeness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women” (Zamora 6). The ghost in Beloved can also be defined as a magical realist element within Morrison’s novel because the ghost Beloved challenges her family’s internal realities while also acting as a symbolic force for the historical memory of slavery in America. In these ways, the ghost in Beloved, similarly to the ghost in The Woman Warrior, allows for the possibility of “counter-authorities” and “disavowed knowledges” to enter into
Western discourse conventions. Remembering is important both for the ghosts and for their living relatives. "Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (Morrison 58). Much like Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, then, Toni Morrison's novel involves writing into earthly existence the ghost presence of a relative for the purpose of reclaiming familial memory, collective ethnic historical events, and individual identity. Beloved not only haunted her family but also gave knowledge and "rememory" (36) for the purpose of "transfiguring and disseminating [of] the haunting with which the book begins" (Brogan 67). In addition to these similarities, the two novels also share the narration of the family's alienation by neighbors due to the memory of the family ghost's terrible death, in the case of Beloved, at the hands of her mother Sethe. As a result of their alienation, Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver all "assume a ghostlike, marginal existence in relation to their community. Ostracized by neighbors they refuse to seek out for help or pity, so they live like the undead - a state between the living and the dead. 'Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead' [3-4]" (69). Here, the ghost Beloved and her family members are existing as subaltern peoples within the already marginalized voiceless existence in Ohio, due to their struggle for freedom from the brutal history of American slavery.

The act of being marginalized within an already oppressed existence is doubly traumatic for these female characters and it forces them to acknowledge and develop immediate relations with Beloved in order to recognize the past while claiming a stake in the present in terms of identity and agency. Sethe "continues to exist in a kind of ghostly afterlife" while Denver "grows strangely insubstantial: her 'skin dissolved under [Beloved's] gaze' (118)" (69). In this way, both Sethe and Denver join the ghost Beloved in their own haunting and take on the task of
empathizing with their familial ghost. Through this experience, Sethe's living daughter Denver learns that her family and their friends have been forced into a state of inner and outer struggle. For Denver, the struggle becomes individual and collective through her growing relationship with Beloved. So it can be said that for Denver identity is a type of in between state resembling the intangible presence of her ghost sister Beloved, who is between the dead and the living.

None of the females can speak for themselves outside of their house on 124 Bluestone Road, or in the wider American political, economic and social spheres where they live. So, for all three of these female subaltern characters, difference is where the place of agency begins, after identity is claimed. W.E.B. DuBois' term of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* more precisely describes this particular phenomenon of consciousness for African Americans that is a "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (DuBois 11). DuBois' definition of double consciousness crosses ontological grounds with Bhabha's definition of hybridity and Minh-ha's definition of Third World women's difference because it similarly describes the in between nature of their identity struggles. Hybrid, difference, and double consciousness all invoke the binary opposition that is being contested today by subaltern studies groups. But they all do so by pointing to what lies in between these ideological opposing relationships. Because Sethe and Denver are experiencing life as African Americans slaves post-Civil War era, and as females who are also witnessing a familial ghost who haunts them with their past and present shared histories, they experience all three identity transforming concepts during the narrative of Morrison's novel. They each strive to "be a co-worker in the kingdom [or queendom] of culture, to escape both death and isolation," (DuBois 11). But for the Black female, this "escape from death and isolation" is doubly subaltern because, as Barbara Smith
notes "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (Smith 168). Denver first recognized this internal struggle with identity and with reconciliation of her family's history with slavery when the ghost Beloved's haunting presence began to challenge her own sense of self and reality. "...it began to irritate her, wear her out with its mischief...Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn't know what to do with...For two years she walked in silence too solid for penetration but which gave her eyes a power even she found hard to believe" (Morrison 103). Here, Denver is begins realizing she too has a certain power, which is directly connected to her emotional experiences from the contact she has with Beloved. Denver's realization of this power is perhaps an indication that she has transformed her consciousness from an unawareness of the brutalities of slavery and oppression to the frightening knowledge that she, like Beloved, may become a victim of her mother's own brutal and violent tendencies.

The female ghost Beloved's subaltern existence is especially complex within literary fiction and literary cultural practices because Beloved symbolizes multiple presences. As a ghost that haunts she wants to escape death, silence, and being hidden from the view of those that have decided her fate. She haunts her relatives to remain a presence in the lives of the living. Morrison's practice of bringing in the ghost presence in Beloved is a practice that "draws upon...often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation" (Zamora 3). This magical realist element within Beloved helps uncover the feminine difference that challenges the dominant/dominant male groups who help create and define the Black female's "invisible, unknown" (Smith 168) existence within American society. These issues of Black feminist criticism juxtaposed against
Black masculine criticism, Third World feminist criticism and magical realist theory help illuminate the complexities involved with a proper inquiry into the lives of the marginalized, i.e., the subaltern. This juxtaposition also uncovers the complexities of bringing new knowledge into the field of subaltern studies while considering the consequences of attempting to represent these "voiceless," "invisible" women within the larger group of subaltern peoples around the world.

Barbara Smith writes in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that "There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women's experience through studying our history, literature, and culture" (170) but I believe that current investigations into the experiences of minority women both within the U.S. and throughout the world, in relation to the wider experience of subaltern struggles for identity and agency, can and do provide new knowledge(s) of women of all ethnic backgrounds who are unable to represent themselves. From this study of subaltern female characters, both living characters and ghost entities within The Woman Warrior and Beloved, provide scholars in subaltern studies with a way to discuss subalternity in literary texts for the purpose of addressing the female process of gaining identity and agency in the U.S., and perhaps elsewhere. The special concerns of these women involve family memories, historical trauma, and internal realities that are specific to women, yet also are in agreement with the broader theoretical applications given to both male and female subaltern individuals. Community, family, and individual consciousnesses all play a part in these characters' attempts to be and become someone outside of the static essentialist terms of Western notions of race, gender, and class. The ghosts coexist with their living family members because these ghosts communicate and act with their family members in "relational rather than ontological" (Beverley 30) ways. They haunt their family members haunt because they are using the only means of agency they have in these literary texts as a means of entering
more forcefully the minds of the characters whose lives they inhabit. The ghosts in these texts also appear to have similar characteristics to subalternity based on "what [Henry] Staten calls a contingent, and overdetermined identity (identities)" (30) because they exist in order to make known the histories, identities, memories, and other prior consciousnesses of the living characters within these literary texts. All in all, the lives of the living family members are transformed by their experiences with their family ghost members, and the possibility for political, economic, and cultural transformation grows more likely as a result of these experiences with familial ghosts. More critical inquiry can be done within these literary works and with other works using magical realism as a storytelling device. Especially critical inquiry into how Third World feminism, Black women's feminism, African American criticism, and subaltern studies can come together in a discussion of knowledge making within other magical realist texts. An area worth deeper inquiry would involve the role of minority women in literature written by female authors, or at the very least, literary works about minority women written by male authors who have written literature from a feminine perspective. Ongoing inquiry into subalternity and the complex problems involved in performing an inquiry into this subject area of academic study is a challenge but can be done without making attempts at direct representation.
Works Cited


Notes

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