

Motherhood as Immigration in Asian American Literature

Maggie Malin
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Malin, Maggie () "Motherhood as Immigration in Asian American Literature," *Articulāte*: Vol. 29, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol29/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Motherhood as Immigration in Asian American Literature

Maggie Malin

...

Motherhood is a prevalent theme in Asian American literature across genre, medium, and nation of heritage or origin; in such works, the journey of motherhood represents the journey of Asian American immigration. Motherhood is a multifaceted experience; in this paper I focus on the reproductive and productive aspects of motherhood, or the domains of childbirth and the workforce, respectively. If the immigrant mother represents the motherland—the country from which she came—then pregnancy and childbirth are a transitional phase akin to the overseas journey from Asia to the United States, and are accordingly represented by Asian American writers by images of the ocean. Arrival in the new land is marked by the metaphor of the mother's child, and establishment in the country of arrival is defined by labor. A mother-child disconnect is a representation of a greater generational and subsequently cultural divide characteristic of an Asian American experience that transcends one specific nation of origin. Korean American poet Suji Kwock Kim and Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong directly explore the tumult of reproductive motherhood—that is, the journey of pregnancy and childbirth—alongside narratives of sea travel in their respective poems “Fugue” and “Immigrant Haibun.” Representing productive motherhood, or the labor expected from mothers and immigrants, Chinese American author and pioneer of the contemporary Asian American literature movement Maxine Hong

Kingston features the working mother of an immigrant family in her novel *The Woman Warrior*, as does Chinese American director Daniel Kwan (with white American co-director Daniel Scheinert) in the film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

The panethnicity of the Asian American theme of motherhood is not meant as a generalization based on continent instead of country, but rather a link that, through a shared understanding, strengthens a group that is systemically conceptualized as one by an America more concerned with race than nationality. The commonality—the representation of motherhood and immigration as parallel experiences—of this panethnic category of writing ties into the overarching importance of Asian American literature, which bears insider witness to a population often overlooked by the dominant majority and gives a voice to the historically and systemically silenced.

As both immigration and reproductive motherhood are laborious, uncertain processes, especially for first-timers, mothers are tied to the same kind of narrative—a narrative of tumult, change, and insecurity—distinctive of sea travel stories. Particularly in poetry, in which the “act of meaning-making turns away from the literal, its truth bound to what can be evoked” through metaphor and imagery, motherhood’s central role in narratives of Asian American immigration is often linked with images of the sea (Alexander 18). Transpacific scholar Erin Suzuki views the ocean and the literal and metaphorical journeys it stands for as “contingent passageways, navigated through a firm understanding of one’s position and standpoint measured in a constantly changing relation to a fluid, dynamic world” (Suzuki 21). This fluid dynamism allows for the ocean to symbolize multiple journeys at one time. Korean American poet Suji Kwock Kim’s autobiographical “Fugue” frames the birth process as a seafaring epic, with phrases such as “amniotic brine” and “placental sea-swell” representing mother and ocean alike as methods of transfer “from one

world to the next” (Kim lines 1, 2, 25). In Kim’s metaphor, the mother as the womb is the place of origin, the first world, and “your afterlife,” the baby’s stillborn birth into the living world, as the new place of residence (line 21). There is a cynical weight to her narrative—the new world is a place of death for her child, who despite being “not yet alive” in her womb is “not *not*” alive in that place of origin and safety (line 13). Leaving the womb means a loss of life—in a risky transfer from one world to another, success is not guaranteed. Likewise, the journey of immigration ends in uncertain success, the promised land of the American dream often just a dream for most. Kim ties together the birth process, the ocean, and the transition from one world to the next as equal narratives of persistence amidst uncertainty and turmoil.

The ocean and the mother as means of transport are mirrored in Ocean Vuong’s “Immigrant Haibun,” a semi-biographical prose poem from his mother’s perspective about his parents’ journey across the Pacific Ocean from Vietnam. As Vuong’s mother gestates, she acknowledges the tandem occurrence of her pregnancy and her immigration: “The ship rocked as you swelled inside me: love’s echo hardening into / a boy;” this language mirrors Kim’s “placental seaswell” upon which “the ship of” her unborn child rides (Vuong, “Immigrant Haibun” lines 49-50, Kim lines 2, 6). In “Haibun,” the unborn Vuong becomes a tribute to his parents’ journey: “*If we make it to shore, [his father] says, I will name our son / after this water*” (Vuong lines 23-24). Vuong’s birth, and thus his mother’s labor, are a process inextricable from his parents’ voyage, once again drawing a parallel between the experiences of the ocean, Asian American immigration, and motherhood, which continues upon Vuong’s parents’ arrival in the States. “If you must know anything,” Vuong imagines his mother saying to him, “know that you were born because no one else was / coming” (lines 48-49). There is a lonely self-sufficiency to this

sentiment that resonates with “studies document[ing] that Asian immigrant women consider their families a unit of survival”—that in a new, unfamiliar world with different customs, norms, and expectations, the Asian immigrant mother persists with childbirth and child-rearing as a tie to a stability she struggles to find elsewhere, as well as a testament to her own capability in the face of peril and environmental upset (Moon 842). Vuong’s existence is testimony to his parents’ immigration, and to an extent, their successful survival. Through his eventual birth, Vuong’s parents establish their new life in the US, linking the progenerative facet of motherhood with the literal journey of immigration through the medium of the ocean, much like Kim.

But although motherhood may begin with childbirth, it certainly does not end there. Motherhood, particularly for Asian American women, bleeds into the realm of the workforce, making the literary focus on mothers noteworthy because the division of labor disproportionately affects this group. In a study of “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor,” UC Berkeley’s Dr. Evelyn Nakano Glenn recognizes the imbalance of “reproductive labor,” or “the physical and emotional maintenance” and “nurturing” of current and potential workers, as the “racial ethnic women[’s]” job, on top of the productive labor that directly makes money (Glenn 104). In Kingston’s biomythography *The Woman Warrior*, often viewed as a cornerstone work in the field of Asian American literature, the narrator’s mother Brave Orchid continues to work into her eighties, “[s]cabbing in the tomato fields” because her husband no longer tends to the family—he “has stopped talking” and “doesn’t cook new food” when she is out of the house (Kingston 103-4). In one alternate timeline in the dimension-hopping film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, protagonist and Chinese immigrant mother Evelyn chooses to abandon social mores in favor of seizing the present to express emotions she hasn’t felt allowed to express before: she admits that she “always hated this place” before

smashing the windowed walls of her laundromat in front of her party guests, her dual-tasked husband and business partner, and the IRS agent charged with taking the business away from her (*Everything* 1:38:31-40). (It is notable that the mothers in both *Everything Everywhere* and *The Woman Warrior* run a laundromat, with Kingston's Brave Orchid having to double as a tomato picker when there is not enough laundry work [Kingston 87]. Domestic tasks encroach on these Chinese American women's workplaces; they are offered little distinction between the responsibilities assigned to them as household leaders and as laundry workers.) As a young Ocean Vuong is practicing his writing, "the nail salon / will not leave" the Viet woman who teaches him as much as she knows of the English alphabet, the smells of "isopropyl acetate, / ethyl acetate, chloride, sodium lauryl / sulfate & sweat fuming / through her pink / I [heart] NY t-shirt" (Vuong, "The Gift" lines 10-15). Each of these mother-figures is pursued by her domestic tasks in her place of work and by her workplace tasks in her domestic space.

This tight interlacing between work and domestic life is a pattern for Asian immigrant women. In preparation for a case study of Korean immigrant mothers living in the US, Vassar College's Dr. Seungsook Moon draws on Glenn's research (among others) on Asian American labor, finding that "[f]or these women of color, historically excluded from the cult of domesticity..., the meaning of mothering encompasses the paid employment necessary for the sustenance of their families" (Moon 843). In other words, Asian American women do not have the luxury of being able to be just mothers or just workers; the socioeconomic implications of their race and gender demand that they become both. Brave Orchid's need to feed her husband being her motivation for her late-life labor, Evelyn's husband and implicit sole colleague being the same person, and Vuong's nameless mother-figure being followed around by the sillage of the nail salon are representations across media, genre, time

period, and ethnicity of the “little separation between public and private life” that Glenn identifies more specifically in Chinese American working women, and the “exclu[sion] from the cult of domesticity” that Moon sees across the female Asian immigrant population at large (Glenn 102, Moon 843).

In the way that Asian immigrant women’s professional labor is evocative of the greater double standard of responsibility for Asian women in the States, and as the ocean represents the transitional reproductive labor of motherhood and immigration, mothers themselves are symbols of the immigrant experience—as the motherland. When Kingston’s narrator returns as an adult to visit her mother, Brave Orchid chastises her for eating poorly and reminds her: “Aiaa, I’m getting so old. Soon you will have no more mother” (Kingston 102). With this threat of her own absence from the narrator’s life, Brave Orchid expresses a fear that her daughter is on the path to losing her connection with China, whether intentionally or not. The literal tie to China that the narrator is at risk of losing is Brave Orchid—she is the one who traveled overseas to raise her daughter, and it is her lineage that directly ties her children back to China, her sister who visits from the old world. She is the last transitional link in the lineage between the American-raised narrator and the history of older generations who never left China. In her absence, the narrator will no longer have this link to the country of her ancestry. More symbolically, Brave Orchid is the enforcer of Chinese customs and traditions in the narrator’s life, so in losing her mother she loses her knowledge and experience of Chinese traditions. By straying from customs she finds unusual, “act[ing] as if” a candy-eating tradition upon a visitor’s arrival is “a bother,” and moving away from a family of “children [who] made up their minds to major in science or mathematics” to be a writer, the narrator is putting distance between herself and the family she came from, and in doing so,

separating herself from her family's country of origin (121, 160). Brave Orchid follows a tradition of immigrant mothers as representations of their home countries that crops up across Asian American literature. In contrast to the "default" white American woman, Asian American lit scholars Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey T. Santa Ana identify "the 'culturally pure' Asian woman, especially in her role as mother, wife, and lover" as a signifier of "the Asian homeland" across early twentieth-century works of the genre (Wong and Santa Ana 180). *The Woman Warrior*, being essentially the first contemporary work of the genre in 1976, corroborates the truth of this trope within Kingston's own experience, and ties her experience to a greater body of works, creating a common bond that functions as an anchor for the Asian American literary domain.

Beyond being a symbol for the motherland, *The Woman Warrior*'s "focus on mother-daughter relationships" is "part of a feminist agenda to preserve memory and establish a matrilineal tradition" (Wong and Santa Ana 195). Each of the five stories that make up the novel center around a woman and her response to her intense circumstances and come from oral traditions. Most relevant are the first story, about an estranged aunt, which the narrator prefaces with her mother's instructions to "not tell anyone...what I am about to tell you," and the second and fifth stories, warrior woman folktales, which the narrator introduces respectively as a "chant that was once mine, given me by my mother" and "a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story" (Kingston 3, 20, 206). The stories being passed down are about women, by women, and for women, lending a certain gravity, a shared understanding of the severity of living a marginalized life. The narrator's mother warns her that she "would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught [her] the song of the warrior woman" nonetheless (20). She insists upon secrecy for the story of her disgraced sister-in-

law, yet passes down the story to her daughter anyway, breaking her own rule. This matrilineal storytelling resonates with the power of Asian American literature as a whole—giving a voice and thus a sociopolitical presence to a historically silenced group. Along the same lines of “preserv[ing] memory” and “establish[ing] a matrilineal tradition,” in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, we see only Evelyn’s memories—not her husband’s or her father’s (Wong and Santa Ana 195). These memories inform the decisions Evelyn makes and the skills she gains to adapt to her current circumstance, emphasizing within the plot and metaplot the strength of a matrilineal tradition and the untold potential of the Asian woman.

Like in *The Woman Warrior*, it is the mother of the central family of *Everything Everywhere* whose lineage ties the child to the homeland. Evelyn’s father Gong Gong visits the family from China while not much is heard about husband Waymond’s family at all, highlighting the link between mother and motherland. Daughter Joy is held in place by both Evelyn’s expectations—that “she [does] not end up like” Evelyn but instead succeeds beyond the laundromat that Evelyn “always hated”—and Gong Gong’s traditional, conservative mindset, which Evelyn blames for translating “girlfriend” as “good friend” when introducing Gong Gong to Joy’s (notably white and female) partner Becky (*Everything* 2:00:14-17, 1:38:31-32, 10:09-11). Even once Evelyn and Joy have reconciled, Evelyn continues to nitpick Becky, telling her she “need[s] to grow [her] hair” (2:10:43), in a similar way to her comments about Joy’s weight, while Waymond is amiable towards Becky from the start. As such, Joy’s matrilineal line is, of her parents, the more direct source of her struggle, compounded with the general anxieties of being a second generation Asian American young adult.

With this clear matrilineal line being rooted in the family’s country of origin, the representation of child as America comes with

friction. Joy explains her transition into mad nihilist villain Jobu Tupaki with the sentiment, “Everything we do gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility” (1:29:48-58). Here the image of the sea resurfaces in line with Suzuki’s observation of “transpacific Asian American literatures[’]” tendency to explore otherness by “drawing attention to how the ocean’s unknowability marks the limitations of contemporary...discourses” (Suzuki 18). For Joy, the ocean is chaos, and her understanding of herself as a queer second generation Asian American woman is in similar disarray. She represents the family’s presence in America—torn between the world she grew up in and the one her mother was raised in, desperately and uncomfortably trying to reconcile the two with each other. Jobu explains to her mother the reason behind her multiversal hunt for her: “I was just looking for someone who could see what I see, feel what I feel,” but Evelyn has seemed to fail in this capacity despite being a fellow Asian American woman of the same family (1:34:36-45). Joy’s perception of the world is shaped by the generational division between herself and her mother—a combination of the expectations of her mother’s family, to succeed in a way that Evelyn could not, her own American awareness, her inability to share her life fully with her grandfather due to the present language barrier and homophobia, and the typical identity crisis of young adulthood, among other factors. This mother-daughter disconnect represents a greater, more general generational divide between old country of origin and current country of residence and the conflicting expectations that come with honoring each.

Neither Evelyn nor Brave Orchid has an uncomplicated relationship with her daughter—each criticizes her daughter for not living up to the expectations set forth by the parents who made the overseas journey from China to the US. This complexity doubles as the Asian immigrant discomfort of uprooting one’s life for opportunity in a country no more comfortable—and perhaps less

so—than the one left behind, furthering the representation of immigration through the symbol of the mother.

But why mothers? What importance does a matrilineal tradition hold that a paternal line does not? What is the significance of the Asian immigrant woman in the American workforce? Women take center stage in contemporary Asian American literature because they face compounded marginalization—in the words of UC Berkeley Asian American Studies department’s Dr. Sau-ling Wong, “Ethnicity is, in some sense, always already gendered, and gender always already ethnicized” (qtd. in Wong and Santa Ana 171). The woman of any race or ethnicity already shares something in common with the Asian American of any gender—the historical expectation of silence, politically, socially, and otherwise. Similarly, the mother and the Asian immigrant alike are faced with unique labor that American society is not set up to assist with; when a woman falls into both categories, this expectation compounds. By putting the focus on mothers, the struggle of the Asian American has an anchor in another population long beaten down by their place in society. Just as the ocean provides a means for transition—simultaneously childbirth and immigration—mothers provide a symbol for both the journey and the work put upon Asian Americans in their experience of immigration and life afterward. At the same time, mothers represent a strength full of intent and purpose, a strength that demands effort and that is amplified by other members of the population working for the same strength. The maternal narrative in stories of Asian American immigration is an intentional trope that evokes a globally meaningful persistence in the face of a world stacked against this population.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Meena. "What Use is Poetry?" *World Literature Today*, vol. 87, no. 5, 2013, pp. 17-21. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7588/worllitetoda.87.5.0017. Accessed 2 May 2023.
- Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, performances by Michelle Yeoh and Stephanie Hsu, A24, 2022.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression." *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1985, pp. 86-108. *Sage Journal*, journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/048661348501700306. Accessed 3 May 2023.
- Kim, Suji Kwok. "Fugue." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 2018, poets.org/poem/fugue. Accessed 2 May 2023.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. 1976. Vintage International, 1989.
- Moon, Seungsook. "Immigration and Mothering: Case Studies from Two Generations of Korean Immigrant Women." *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2003, pp. 840-860. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3594673. Accessed 3 May 2023.
- Suzuki, Erin. "Introduction." *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures*. Temple UP, 2021. tupress.temple.edu/books/ocean-passages. Accessed 2 May 2023.
- Vuong, Ocean. "The Gift." *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, Copper Canyon Press, 2016, pp. 24-25.
- . "Immigrant Haibun." *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, Copper Canyon Press, 2016, pp. 14-16.

Wong, Sau-ling C., and Jeffrey T. Santa Ana. "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1999, pp. 172-226. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3175619. Accessed 3 May 2023.