

## Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works

Olivia Grenier, *Ball State University*



“Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works” reflects upon the stylistic choices of Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros in their respective works, “No Name Woman” and “Woman Hollering Creek.” Both strategically include either moments of or full iterations of translation culturally and linguistically. When incorporating translation at any degree, a potential barrier could arise: a barrier from comprehension, a barrier from translation, a barrier between author and reader, or a barrier between cultures. Throughout this essay, I will be discerning the stylistic choices of Cisneros and Kingston concerning their inclusion of translation but also their overarching storylines to evaluate whether their work disrupts the presented cultural barrier or whether the presented cultural barrier disrupts their work.

Truly *reading* literature extends beyond mere reading; it can become a type of conversation, but in order to embrace that rapport between the author and the reader, the text must be made available. When reading literature that has been translated in the sense of culture and language, the expectation of the reader varies. Cultural nuances that exist within the native language of a text may be lost in translation. Few, if any, languages offer a seamless translation, which makes literary conversations challenging due to a presented linguistic barrier. Cultural barriers are often presented alongside linguistic barriers. Translation offers a sense of mobility between the author’s culture and the reader’s experience. However, in order for a text to be accessed by a multitude of readers, its translation is *not* free from a type of debt to the original language and culture. Translation can either be halting to the reader, or translation can be a type of avenue, a border that, when crossed,

leads to newfound understanding. These notions are dually expressed in Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" and Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman."

"Woman Hollering Creek" is peppered with Cisneros's Spanish culture through implementing various words and phrases. These moments serve as a transmission of culture, and they are successful due to the words and phrases being identified with italics and then followed by an English translation. This specific strategy welcomes a monolingual reader, or a reader who is not well-versed in the Spanish language, into the story alongside Cleófilas. Cisneros assures the reader that they do not need to extend their mind further than the page since the translation is made readily available. However, with this strategy of coupling Spanish with English, one language may be put at a deficit. Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" is the telling of a family story from a Chinese-American protagonist. In comparison to "Woman Hollering Creek," Kingston's text is entirely translated in the sense of culture. "No Name Woman" was written in English; however, it was written by an author with a Chinese-American perspective. Kingston was able to comprehensibly transmit her Chinese culture in an American society. However, that was not achieved without some community backlash. "No Name Woman" begs the question of whether or not cultural ties were severed or weakened in order to construct a Chinese story for an American audience. When discerning the effects of translated texts, it begs the question of whether the literary conversation is mutually enriching to *both* the author's culture and the reader's experience. Cisneros and Kingston disrupt the cultural and linguistic barriers of translation with specific stylistic choices that welcome, rather than exclude, the monolingual reader into the literary conversation while still respecting the native cultures of their texts *and* staying true to their own linguistic liberties as authors.

Translation presents the possibility that there will be discrepancies on a linguistic level. Unique grammar and semantic structures will not always be seamlessly transitioned into a different language, which could impede the reader's comprehension and thus their connection with the literature. Translation of culture presents the possibility that certain expressions of cultural niceties may be subdued in order to uphold the comprehensibility of the literature. Both presentations are confronted with a positional cultural barrier. Allison Fagan says that as authors negotiate their own linguistic identities, there is now "the question of whether, and when, and how much to translate" (58). In this sense, translation can offer a type of mobility in itself to evoke a crossing of borders (Fagan 58). Bolaki commends translation for gifting language a form of mobility, but recognizes a "debt" that is bound to the original text (40). The intention of production implores the literary conversation to ask whether this construction is simply trying to resolve translation conflicts for the sake of presenting a coherent story. Cisneros displays this favorable type of mobility by representing

*both* Spanish and English in “Woman Hollering Creek.” While the essence of a barrier is to present a divide, Cisneros is able to create a harmony between languages. Cisneros’s opening paragraph is one sentence that sets up the scene for her female protagonist, Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández. Along with the culturally significant character names, Cisneros begins the coupling of Spanish and English early on. This sets the precedent for the importance of this “marriage” between Spanish and English: “...over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado* –on the other side –already did he divine the morning...” (Cisneros 43). The Spanish words are italicized and followed by an English translation, which maintains the plot and heightens the cultural significance of the story. Through the coupling of Spanish and English, the reader is further introduced to Mexican culture due the English translation being provided by Cisneros, which supports her intention of welcoming a variety of readers into the cultural and literary experience that is “Woman Hollering Creek.”

Extending beyond the literal words on the page which form this connection between Spanish culture and English readers, Cisneros’s opening line sets up the very barriers, linguistic and cultural, that are central to the plot of her story. Cisneros’s newlyweds are moving from Mexico to Texas. While the characters are literally crossing borders, the layout of the words on the page also displays the border between Spanish and English languages that Cisneros was able to bridge with an em dash. Cisneros’s literal and stylistic choice to present barriers showcases her implicit intention not to divide but to harmonize languages. When confronting potential cultural barriers in translated works with harmony in mind, there appears to be a “reconciliation” between languages as opposed to a form of domination in Cisneros’s work.

Deciding to incorporate translation could be a type of double reward for both the monolingual and multilingual reader, which Kingston and Cisneros portray respectively in their texts. Torres says that “much of the Latino/a literature written in English in the US incorporates Spanish at some level” which is exemplified in “Woman Hollering Creek” (76). Throughout “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros identifies her culture by italicizing Spanish words and then following them with an English translation, like when she notes the title of popular telenovela “Tú o Nadie. ‘You or No One’” (44). This display of language could cast Cisneros’s culture as the “other,” as a cultural barrier itself. However, when looking at the translation above, instead Cisneros is *welcoming* the reader into the cultural conversation with Cleófilas and her neighbors by translating the title of the television show they watch. So, in that regard, Cisneros’s culture is not at a deficit, instead she is acknowledging the barrier and providing a bridge.

Torres continues to say that in the United States, the presence of Latinx immigrants

is increasing, which suggests that the coexistence of languages in literature is also representative of “literary language actualizing the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities” (76). Inclusion does not promote exclusion. Cisneros’s intentional inclusion of Spanish into her text represents her culture and the culture of her characters without excluding the reader or “othering” her native language. Torres says that frequently “these Latinized texts tend to provide special pleasure to the bilingual reader; monolingual readers may not have complete access to the text and while they can often decipher the meaning from context, sometimes they must resort to a dictionary” (83). Torres notes that a dictionary or a reference book may *not* help find the translation for which readers are searching, which only strengthens the cultural barrier that is present with translated works. However, Cisneros writes in a way that is accessible to both monolingual and bilingual readers. The English translations after her Spanish words and phrases are a stylistic strategy that dually supports the reader’s comprehension and combats the presented barrier. While most of the Spanish words and phrases are translated, there are few that stand proud in italics absent of an English follower: “*telenovela* episode,” “...going to go to the *farmacia* and buy a hair rinse,” and “Bad luck. *Mal aire*” (Cisneros 44; 51). These words and phrases are still definable by the monolingual reader through context clues, which makes for a more academically enriching reading experience. With that, the bilingual reader is *doubly* enriched because, while these words and phrases are defined, their familiarity serves as a point of personal relevance which allows the reader and the characters to not only see culture but see themselves in one another. Cisneros’s co-existence of languages dismantles the presented cultural barrier by harmonizing cultures but also by welcoming and embracing the readers.

This skillfully incorporated point of personal relevance for the bilingual reader is also seen through Cisneros’s incorporation of the Mexican myth, La Llorona. Cisneros writes, “The natives only knew the *arroyo* one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood ...the townspeople shrugged because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name” (46). The monolingual readers of “Woman Hollering Creek” are similar to the townspeople in this way. The inclusion of Spanish and the premise of this cultural myth is not a concern to the comprehensibility of the story, but to a bilingual reader the story will now have a new layer of cultural depth. The monolingual reader, or reader who is unfamiliar with the myth, will gain general knowledge through Cleófilas’s thought process: “Is it La Llorona the weeping woman? La Llorona who drowned her own children. Perhaps La Llorona is the one they named the creek after, she thinks...” (Cisneros 51). With Cisneros’s skillful writing, “Woman Hollering Creek” reveals a door for connection to its bilingual readers without excluding its

monolingual readers, which supports a mutually enriching reading experience.

Maxine Hong Kingston establishes similar cultural realities to Cisneros in “No Name Woman” through the personal curiosity of her first-generation Chinese-American protagonist’s retelling of a family story. The “story to grow up on” is a devastating tale about how her aunt was humiliated and excluded from her own family and village due to her pregnancy outside of marriage. This rejection led her to commit suicide, killing herself and the newborn baby. The notion of storytelling and community are leading factors in Kingston’s text. It is from this story that the protagonist “believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do my father mysterious harm” (Kingston 6). This maturing female is lead astray about the nature of sex; she correlates sex and her aunt with harm. Her mother is trying to instill fear into her because she, like all women, has the potential to become pregnant. Unplanned pregnancy is a risk of further humiliation for this family, as they warn their daughter, “Don’t humiliate us” (Kingston 6). The cultural connections within Kingston’s preamble are evident due to the female, first-generation protagonist. These connections may have been lost if “No Name Woman” was not formatted this way. Kingston’s way of transmitting culture offers a sense of mobility that has the ability to unify cultures.

Bolaki writes that while Kingston “has been praised for extricating Chinese myth ...through her translations...” she has also been “condemned for twisting and distorting the meaning of the original in order to please her white sisters” (42). The criticisms of Kingston’s work may stem from the footnote, “Transcription errors may remain,” which alludes to there being moments of the text not all will understand due to the cultural barrier translation creates. However, “No Name Woman” was originally written in English (Kingston 7). So, these “transcription errors” are cultural, not linguistic. Yes, ‘No Name Woman’ translated well, as Bolaki suggests, but beyond accessibility, Kingston was able to create a space for culture to reside in a prolific way. Diverse literature presents the possibility of a cultural barrier to arise, but the intention of the authors like Kingston to create such spaces of cultural translation could dismantle that barrier before it becomes invincible.

The barrier of cultural transmission is prevalent in Kingston’s “No Name Woman” due to her representing her own identity as a Chinese-American woman. The story reveals how a Chinese woman’s community harasses her to the point of suicide, a death the family does not mourn. Instead, it is a death that allows for dismissal of the woman’s prior existence entirely in order to free the community of her wrongdoings. Kingston writes, , “Those of us in the first American generations have to figure out how the invisible world of the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in a solid America” (2). While the “us” in this quote is grouping the character in the story to others who had to assimilate to American

customs, the “us” can also extend beyond the text to represent Kingston herself as a Chinese woman in America.

Kingston’s syntax in her quote represents the barrier of culture. The dichotomy between “invisible” and “solid” presents a cultural barrier, while the verb “fits” evokes the possibility of harmony. Bolaki notes that this remark appears early in Kingston’s work, which requires the reader to quickly map out the invisible world from the solid world: “[The quotes] apparently rigid distinction between the “invisible” and the “solid,” which one quickly maps onto China and America respectively” (40). This polarity suggests a type of divide between cultures which Bolaki says conveys “a sense of incommensurable, and thus untranslatable, differences” (40). Kingston does not let the cultural barrier deter her protagonist and her readers from embracing the two cultures that characterize her adult life. By including the verb “fits” in “...how our childhood *fits* in solid America,” Kingston authorizes a sense of possible appeasement. Kingston is grappling with the sentiment of culture through her protagonist, who relates to the reader’s point of view because of her outsider status. Kingston’s narrator, who closely resembles Kingston herself, is transcending borders and disrupting cultural barriers by revealing newfound insights to her own personhood while trying to comprehend her aunt’s life story. Kingston’s intentional stylistic choice with syntax disrupts barriers while transmitting culture to the reader.

Literature welcomes a conversation between the author and the reader, but is one required to do more? Fagan reminds that there is an inherent mistrust with translation. With Latinx literature, Fagan says there are “interpretive possibilities by manipulating the role of Spanish in English (and vice versa)” (59). Translation poses as a barrier in itself due to the perils of translating culture. Torres notes that in “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros translates “*la consentida*” as “princess,” which is not a direct translation; the direct translation of that Spanish phrase would be “the spoiled one” (Torres 85). This particular translation shows priority to the monolingual reader’s comprehension as opposed to the understandability of the culture. Fagan describes the translation of the author’s work and the access to readers as a type of “fight for control over linguistic identity” (59). Translation allows for accessibility and a heightened range of readership, but that may expose the original text to a type of debt. However, is this debt to the original text or to the reader’s experience? While Cisneros’s inclusion of Spanish followed by an English translation does welcome the monolingual reader, Torres says that with that translation strategy, readers “do not have to leave the comfortable realm of his/her own complacent monolingualism” (78). But shouldn’t readers be deemed skillful enough to resolve any difficulty in a text instead of the author spoon-feeding them? Not necessarily, according to Torres: “main--stream readers expect to gain access to other worlds, not be made aware of their limitations” (82).

For Kingston, she embraces the curiosity of other cultures through her Chinese-American protagonist's own personal conflict between hearing her family's portrayal of her aunt and her own desire to retell her story: "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" (Kingston 7). Both Kingston and Cisneros dismantle the cultural barriers presented by translation by actively *wanting* to welcome a variety of readers to their texts. In this sense, translation does present a cultural barrier, but one that is permeable by artistic intention.

This permeation prompts the question of why might an author feel the need, or the want, to include a second language or transference of culture into their text? Fagan mentions that while "opposing one language to the other suggests a clear-cut equivalency that potentially distracts readers from the complexities of existing between or among languages," the inclusion of two languages, although with the intention of presenting the languages as equals, may create a barrier within itself (59). With two languages to view and digest, they could be a distraction as opposed to a helping hand. Fagan continues to say, "But the glossary, when examined closely, can also work to unintentionally or even subversively highlight those linguistic complexities" which is what Cisneros achieved (59). Cisneros in "Woman Hollering Creek," confronted the potential linguistic barrier with harmony in mind. While mindful of the possible complications of coupling Spanish and English in one story, Cisneros mindfully and skillfully intertwined the two languages to produce a more realistic and significant story not only for readers but also for her own identity. The purpose of translation is to welcome, not to exclude, which is a sentiment Kingston also represents. Kingston presents transition in a cultural rather than linguistic sense, which results in a more assimilative translation (Bolaki 44). With the culture of Kingston's story being rooted in a dominating, patriarchal society, translation in a similar sense can be a tool of domination. However, for Kingston, she strategically decided to choose harmony. As Bolaki notes, "... translation can be better described as a lost-and-found space" (55). Keeping with that belief, for Kingston, more was found than lost. Kingston's work may have been criticized for distorting the meaning of the original story, but the attempt to tell Chinese stories in an American context welcomes more readers to the literary conversation (Bolaki 39; 42). Both authors *wanted* to include translation into their texts, into their stories, to welcome a wider audience to experience *their* culture.

Translation gives texts mobility, but also a sense of evolution. Instead of forming a barrier, translation demands flexibility. The inclusion of culture and native languages within a text alongside the overarching English-American frame could either exist comfortably or uncomfortably depending on the author's stylistic intentions. For Kingston and Cisneros

alike, both authors achieved a balance of culture that harmonized language and disrupted the distinct culture barrier by embracing their native culture while simultaneously welcoming the monolingual reader. When confronted with a border, Kingston and Cisneros created a bridge. As Bolaki said in response to “No Name Woman” translating well, “I propose another phrase ...one that articulates, in its very assertion, the promise and perils of translation: ‘Something gives.’” This “gives” could denote one text being at an expense from another, but when concerning Cisneros and Kingston, this “gives” is more in association with that of a gift. Translation *gives* culture a widely accessible expression. These authors were able to transmute the presented barrier into a border that fostered newfound understanding for the readers while remaining truthful to the author’s moments of culture.



## Works Cited

- Cisneros, Sandra. "Woman Hollering Creek." *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 44-56.
- Bolaki, Stella. "‘It Translated Well’: The Promise and the Perils of Translation in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*." *MELUS*, vol. 34, no. 4, winter 2009, pp. 39-60. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A214711140/LitRC?u=munc80314&sid=summon&xid=34a040e9>.
- Fagan, Allison. "Translating in the Margins: Attending to Glossaries in Latina/o Literature." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 39, no. 3, spring 2016, pp. 57-75. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A458680420/LitRC?u=munc80314&sid=summon&xid=58e5357f> .
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman." *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Accessed as PDF File.
- Torres, Lourdes. "In the Contact Zone: Code-Switching Strategies by Latino/a Writers." *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 1, spring 2007, pp. 75+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A164423122/LitRC?u=munc80314&sid=summon&xid=ddfaf7e1>.
- Wang, Jennie. "The Myth of Kingston’s ‘No Name Woman’: Making Contextual and Intertextual Connections in Teaching Asian American Literature." *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1996, pp. 21-32. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44378291.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A766b317cab91f690007ce93c5abb3017>.