The women’s movement is probably the key historical event forcing a revision of the modern feminist family. In the 1970s feminists promoted the metaphor of sisterhood as a challenge to patriarchy. In their call for global sisterhood, feminists would create an alliance of women everywhere based on the commonality of women and in opposition to the patriarchal societies within which women live. In the United States, for instance, “sisterhood” has been used effectively to enlist the sympathies of women on behalf of a variety of reforming causes and to enjoin women to activism. It is the recognition of sisterhood as both subject position and object of study that justified the founding of women’s studies programs. As a powerful slogan goes, “sisterhood is powerful.” Sisterhood has traditionally acted as a powerful emotional bond. In other words, sisterly relations have been a means for providing comfort, and, most important, empowerment in the practical realm of social relations. “Feminists have proposed a family of sisters based on their presumed psychological, biological, and cultural identity to and with each other” Michie notes. “The figure of the sister protects a feminist family by suggesting that the family of women is capacious enough to contain all women no matter how different from each other they may appear to be” (3).

Throughout the 1970s, the metaphor of sisterhood has been the dominant model for female and feminist relationships. The construction of sisterhood also comes from the feminist desire to separate from the maternal discourse. Marianne Hirsch traces this evolution from motherhood to sisterhood as characteristic of the feminist family romance. She points out that in the 1970s, feminist writing was permeated with fears of maternal power and with anger at maternal powerlessness. In order to bond with her sisters in a relationship of mutual nurturance and support, the daughter attempts to separate from an overly connected or rejecting mother. With its possibilities of mutuality, the paradigm of sisterhood has the advantage of freeing women from the biological function of giving birth, but still offers a specifically feminine relational model. Sisters, they believe, can be “maternal” to one another without allowing their
bodies to be violated or regulated by patriarchal laws. In functioning as mutual surrogate mothers, sisters can replace mothers. In this feminist family romance, sisters are better mother, providing more nurturance and a greater encouragement of autonomy.

While sisterhood may be powerful, it is by no means unproblematic or completely benign. “Sisterhood” as proposed by second wave feminism has been increasingly challenged from both within and outside feminism. As Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orback put it in their discussion of female friendship, “the ideology of ‘sisterhood is powerful’ has, in some ways, served to obscure much … pain” (21). The word “sisterhood” not only pretends a homogeneity of experience that is difficult to prove or to imagine, but also performs an idealizing function that has little in common with the reality of familial sister relationships. It contributes to women’s denial and suppression of the difficult aspects of their sister relationships instead of making them work through these difficulties in a productive way. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner have pointed out that the trope of familial relations itself suggests the contradiction inherent in this formulation: in practice many find that familial relations are not always comforting or empowering, and quite frequently just the opposite. Families are often only the most private sites of warfare, of expressions of dominance and fields of hierarchical values, and never more so than when they masquerade as benevolent social extensions of natural relations, of benign patriarchal power, or even of liberal democratic principles. They argue, “The insistence on sisterhood as a characteristic (rather than ideal) trait of women has led to what we see as a distressing split between theory (and ideal), on the one hand, and the everyday experience of many women, particularly those less privileged in any way” (4).

While the ideology of sisterhood has been challenged in feminist discourse, an analysis of biological sisterhood is noticeably absent from psychological views of female relationships. Christine Downing’s work in this area has been seminal. Downing claims that “[a]lthough feminists have written often enough about the power and beauty of ‘sisterhood,’ they have rarely acknowledged those actualities of kinship experience that underlie the metaphor” (154). She provides a comprehensive survey of female sibling relationships in fairy tales, Greek myth, Sumerian and Egyptian myth, depth psychology, and contemporary and historical feminist psychology. In her provocative study of sisterly relations, Downing points out the limitation of classical
psychoanalytical theory of sibling relationship in that while both Jung and Freud attempt to analyze such relationships, they never touch on the sisterly relationship. Since classical psychoanalysis does not allow a space for restructuring female relations, Downing notes that contemporary psychoanalytic feminists such as Luce Irigaray have shown their concern that women must move beyond the mother-daughter relationship into all woman-woman intimacy, and recognize a sister in the mother.² Their analysis of women’s relations has established a positive identificatory model for the development of female subjectivity and allows us to negotiate new relations with each other. Downing suggests that sisters do not have to choose to be “utterly dependent” or “utterly free” of each other as daughters might have to do with respect to mothers. Sisterhood, then, becomes a playground, or, more sinisterly, a battlefield, in which issues of the outside world can be rehearsed and worked out in the relative safety of a relation between female equals (20).

Interestingly, in the last decade, while the conflicted mother-daughter bond has garnered much attention from feminist literary critics, less scholarship has appeared on the representation of sisters in literature. Toni McNaron’s The Sister Bond is a rare example of studies of the roles that sisters play in literature. It is a collection of essays that explores the sisterly relationship among middle-class, white women writers in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth. The work has been insightful in that it shows not only how women use their sisters as a repository for troublesome or painful aspects of self, but also how they see in their relationship with sisters a chance to comprehend an expanded self. Unfortunately it does not extend the discussion to cross-racial sisterhood. McNaron herself acknowledges: “It is a serious weakness of this collection that it does not include the lives of black sisters, sisters from Continental or Third World cultures, and those from diverse class backgrounds” (5).

Michie’s Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture is another insightful study of the sister relationship that characterizes many autobiographies and literature by women. Michie explores both the possibilities and the limitations of the metaphor of sisterhood within the lexicon of feminism. She argues that the familial term “sister” both reveals and obscures the complex quality of women’s relationships to one another. For, while the ideal of sisterhood suggests a close-knit bond between women united against patriarchy and provides a safe space in which to articulate the friction between them, it also covers over numerous differences
irreducible to the paradigm of the nuclear family. Sororophobia, Michie proposes, provides a paradigm for reading these conflicts by recalling “competition, racism, betrayal, argument, homophobia, classism, jealousy, envy, [and] hostility” into the vocabulary of feminism, not simply to suggest a “phobic” relationship between women, but also to suggest that which must be negotiated in order to form more effective and cohesive feminist coalitions. “Sororophobia,” Michie writes, “is about negotiation; it attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women . . . . [It] is not so much a single term as it is a matrix against and through which women work out—or fail to work out—their differences” (10). Turning a feminist analysis on feminism itself, Michie points toward work that might be done between women in order to strengthen their alliances without covering over their difference. It becomes apparent that she intends to apply the term to all forms of negotiated connections between women. It is disappointing, however, to note that among Michie’s impressive range of texts, she does not choose to work through a cross-racial alliance in any context, nor does she look at the maid or domestic “other” women in her exploration of different patterns of “otherness” (Monteith 36-7).

In fact, fiction by contemporary ethnic American women abounds with pairs of sisters who work out issues of identity and difference with relation to each other. For instance, in the novels of Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Christina Garcia, and Alice Walker, the traditionally idealistic sisterhood is often challenged in terms of its validity and general application. Instead, they adumbrate a radically alternative figuration of sisterhood. In their works, the relationship between sisters is not only located as a structuring principle, but also as a space where differences between women is constructed, displayed, and negotiated. I argue that the sister relationship has a more complex role to play in the larger context of female identity formation, a context that has been revised by feminist psychoanalytic views of women’s psychosexual development, notably by Downing, Michie, and Irigaray. The functions of sisterhood are ambivalent and paradoxical, for differences between sisters are often cultural and racial. Their narratives not only portray the psychological significance of sisters in the development of a sense of self in women, but also use the sister bond to problematize the individual’s relationship to her community.
I. The Sister in the Chinese-American Family

In her earlier novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), Tan has powerfully contributed to the mother-daughter dynamic. In her third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she shifts her focus from the mother-daughter relationship to the bond between sisters. The novel calls attention to the heterogeneity of Chinese-American family relations. In the Chinese-American community, the question of cultural difference is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as generational conflict between the Chinese-born first generation and the American-born second generation. Rather than confirming the cultural model in which “ethnicity” is passed from generation to generation, Tan’s story explores the “ethnic” relationship between women of the same generation. The family drama unfolds across the axis of the sibling bond. Tan deals with how the horizontal crosscut holds the identity and threatens its existence at the same moment.

In this paper, I will explore both sisterhood as an institution and as narrative structure in contemporary American women’s literature. In particular, I will examine how Amy Tan uses sisterhood as a structure for the representation and containment of cultural differences among women. Rather than an idealized construction of sisterhood, Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* not only offers a sophisticated exploration of the ideology of sisterhood, but it also emphasizes the influence of the sister relationship in developing ethnic consciousness and identity. For Tan, “sisterhood” encompasses not only the biological bonds between women, but also the emotional and spiritual ones as well. The bond between the two half-sisters in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is filled with ambiguity caused by simultaneous feelings of sameness and difference. Psychologically, the sister has been recognized as an integral part of the self. All the key events in Olivia’s psychological development—her separation from Simon, her denial of her heritage and rejection of her sister, her guilt, her growing appreciation of Chinese culture, and her longing for meaningful relationships—all are connected to her sister Kwan and their evolving relationship. Kwan becomes, in the words of Christine Downing, an unconscious guide to Olivia’s journey toward self, toward psyche, that is, toward an increased consciousness of her roots and ethnic identity. Ultimately, Tan takes advantage of the domestic trope of sisterhood to explore cultural differences among contemporary women. Her novel reveals a feminist’s anxiety to recognize one’s difference from the other woman and to
II. Sister as the Ethnic Other

The sister relationship proves to be atypical because the two women are half-sisters and they grow up separately in totally different cultures. While Olivia Bishop was born and raised in San Francisco, her half-sister, Kwan, grew up in China. Kwan did not come to the United States until long after their dying father confessed to Olivia’s mother that he had a daughter in China. Upon learning the existence of her sister, Olivia expresses strong fear and anxiety that seem to confirm Freud’s theoretical concept of sibling rivalry. She is scared that Kwan would take her place when she arrives.\(^3\) Tan’s representation of the sibling relationship, however, is more complicated than a traditional sibling relationship. As Mink and Ward argue, sibling relationships in the contemporary family are complicated by various joinings and disjoinings (3). Unlike the traditional treatment of sisterhood, Tan repaints the Chinese-American family portrait to fit the modern frame. She chooses to show how the development of cross-cultural and cross-racial sisterhood influences female identity formation.

The unfolding relationship between Olivia and Kwan shows that Olivia’s repulsion toward her sister comes from their racial and cultural difference rather than winning the parental attention and affection. In other words, the sisterly relationship between Olivia and Kwan is not simply a biological given, but already culturally defined. The sister in this novel represents the racial and cultural heritage that Olivia denies and yet is inescapably drawn toward. Indeed, Kwan serves as the ethnic other against whom Olivia must define herself. For Olivia, because of her racial and cultural difference, Kwan is an immediate source of resentment and embarrassment. During her first entrance into the text, Kwan, an eighteen-year-old, is described as “a strange old lady, short and chubby” (10). Kwan is clumsy and barely able to speak English. With her yin eyes, she introduces the world of ghosts to Olivia. Kwan’s belief that she can speak with spirits is another source of humiliation. Throughout her childhood, Olivia refuses to play with her, and constantly yells at Kwan that she embarrasses her. For instance, in the very scene where Olivia is taunted by her friend’s racial slurs, she expresses her strong desire to differentiate herself from Kwan, yelling out: “She’s not my sister! I hate her! I wished she’d go back to China!” (12) This scene sets up the
axes of difference between the two sisters—West and East, self and other—that will remain the structuring principle of the first half of the novel.

The sister relationship in this narrative seems to follow the basic pattern of polarity. In the beginning, the sisters seem to take on opposite roles. Kwan represents the threatening other from the East. She becomes both metaphor and metonymy for the difference between East and West, for she simultaneously embodies difference and acts as points of entry to “larger” cultural differences, providing access to the mysteries of Chinese culture. By contrast, Olivia is all American except for her Asian features; she is rational and skeptical as well. Thus, in order to maintain her American identity, she refuses the close sisterhood that Kwan wishes to establish, and attempts to establish a boundary between self and other. As Helga G. Braunbeck explains, “Polarity is caused not only by the need for differentiation from the other who is at the same time so much like the self, but also by the need to find one’s own field of identity” (159). But the symmetry of the novel, with its careful opposition between the two sisters, is undercut by a close reading of the sisters’ early relationship. When Olivia’s mother neglects her, Kwan is pushed into the role of substitute mother. The duties, the responsibilities and the constant activities that accompany this role influence their relationship. Supplanting Olivia’s own indifferent mother, Kwan becomes her guide and protector, assuring her, “Libby-ah . . . I never leave you.” Kwan’s love for Olivia is absolute and unconditional. Even Olivia sometimes wonders, “How can I not love my own sister? In many respects, she’s been more like a mother to me than my real one” (23). Interestingly, the sisterhood is presented as a distinctive variation on motherhood.

As Olivia “transfers” her desire for the mother to Kwan, the relationship between Kwan and Olivia is played out within the parameters of a vertical mother-daughter relationship.

Furthermore, Olivia’s childhood has been shaped by her sister and deeply marked by her sister’s stories. Night after night in their shared bedroom, Kwan attempts to use her tale of reincarnation to construct her relationship with Olivia. She takes Olivia back to a former life, when she was Nunumu, a loyal sister friend to an American, Miss Nelly Banner, who has attached herself to a group of English missionaries in Changmian during the Taiping rebellion (1851-1864). When Nunumu saves Miss Banner from drowning, the two women’s lives become entwined, and with her heroic
act, Nunumu takes on the responsibility for Miss Banner’s life and well being. Kwan tells Olivia that because of the rescue, Nunumu’s and Miss Banner’s lives had “flowed together in that river, and became as tangled and twisted as a drowned woman’s hair” (42). Since childhood, she had taught Olivia to remember her stories of friendship and loyalty, preparing her for a crucial recognition that she was Miss Banner. Gradually Olivia also develops the hundred secret senses with which one converses with ghosts and remembers “dreams as other lives, other selves.” As she looks back on her childhood, Olivia claims, “she had planted her imagination into mine. Her ghosts refused to be evicted from my dreams” (32). Kwan’s ghost-filled visions eventually invade Olivia’s psyche. She can no longer identify the boundaries between her own dreams and episodes in Kwan’s stories, as she asks, “So which part was her dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect?” As she matures, Olivia finds that she has inadvertently absorbed much about Chinese superstitions, spirits, and reincarnation. At some subconscious level, she recognizes her sister’s influence but avoids it.

Olivia’s conflicted enmeshment with her sister continues even in adulthood. Although Olivia still scorns and at the same time fears her sister, she recognizes her own unfairness and ingratitude for all Kwan has done for her. Olivia has always relied on Kwan’s generosity and expects her help. For example, Kwan is used in Olivia’s love triangle. Before meeting her, Olivia’s boyfriend and future husband, Simon, was in love with a girl, Elza, who died young. Afraid of losing him, Olivia uses Kwan’s difference to advantage. She asks Kwan to convince Simon that they are destined to be together. After her marriage to Simon, Olivia is still haunted by Elza’s death. Her unquiet presence has always disturbed Olivia’s marriage. Living under the shadow of Elza, Olivia suffers an emotional breakdown. After separating from her husband, Olivia attempts to sort out the psychological uncertainties and the emotional chaos of her life. Her confusion is highlighted when she cannot determine which surname to use: Yee (her Chinese father’s name), Laguni (her stepfather’s name), or Bishop (her husband’s name). All of a sudden, she realizes that her life is devoid of meaningful ties and suitable identities.

Obviously, her identity crisis is mainly caused by a lack of cultural wholeness rather than by her marital problem. The psychological portrait of Olivia intersects with the problems of identity formation. Like many of Tan’s characters, Olivia is also
struggling with ethnic identity, finding herself not really Chinese and not Anglo American either. With a Chinese father and an Anglo-American mother, Olivia seems overly conscious of her Asian features. Even as an adult who appears to be comfortably assimilated into American culture, Olivia is plagued with questions and doubts about her Chinese ancestry, and she steadfastly continues to resist any suggestion that she and Kwan might have far more in common than a shared father. As E. D. Huntley notes, “The presence of Kwan in Olivia’s life problematizes Olivia’s relationship with and position in a cultural group to which she belongs by heritage—Asian Americans” (140). As Olivia reflects upon her life: “Being forced to grow up with Kwan was probably one of the reasons I never knew who I was or wanted to become. She was a role model for multiple personalities” (174). For Olivia, Kwan represents the ethnic and racial origin that she can neither fully embrace nor abandon.

III. The Sisterly Bond

Throughout the years, Olivia treats Kwan rudely and dismissively, yet her older sister remains devoted to her and is determined to awaken Olivia to the reality of the spirit world. Kwan never gives up her loyalty and determines to help her sister recover her self and her marriage. To this end, the two travel to China, where Kwan believes they lived another life together in an earlier century. The journey to China, as Wenying Xu states, is “literally a journey toward self and wholeness” (368). In China, she begins to believe Kwan’s tales of incarnation, and becomes less resistant to the world of yin. It becomes clear that Kwan’s fidelity to Olivia and Nunumu’s to Miss Banner are not unconnected: the past lives on in the present. Olivia has to accept the possibility that Kwan was indeed Nunumu and Olivia was Miss Banner. Olivia eventually comes to appreciate the emotional bonds with her sister and rediscovers her ties to her own culture. In order to reach a reconciliation between these two sisters, Tan ultimately offers a simplistic solution that demonstrates how Olivia achieves a tentative moment of cultural wholeness through identification with the sister whom she had long neglected and whom she had often dismissed as an other.

The second half of the novel also disrupts the tempting symmetry of the opposition between Kwan and Olivia by making Kwan herself an embodiment of multiple identities. It anticipates what has become familiar to us as poststructuralist notions of identity by making Kwan an elusive and ambiguous character. In China the
representation of Kwan becomes deeply involved with a sister-friend, Buncake. Kwan and Buncake were like sisters. Unfortunately, one day both of them were drowned. Kwan lost her body; Buncake, her spirit. In a mysterious way Kwan’s spirit possesses Buncake’s remaining body. Olivia is amazed at hearing such an incident and begins to wonder at Kwan’s real identity: “Looking at her is like viewing a hologram: locked beneath the shiny surface is the three-dimensional image of a girl who drowned” (289). Olivia repeatedly casts this notion of identity into question. Is Kwan benignly insane, or does Kwan truly see beyond reality? Is she Kwan, Nunumu, or both? Seeming to refuse a static or binary conception of ethnicity, Tan replaces notions of identity with multiplicity and shifts the emphasis for ethnic “essence” to cultural hybridity. As Kwan’s identity become destablized, she is too “other” to be easily integrated through the neat trick of polarization. To acknowledge the fact that Kwan is her sister, Olivia, however, must bridge that otherness and become—if only temporarily—more like Kwan. When Olivia becomes more like Kwan, it in effect undermines that very emphasis on difference in the early part of the novel. In the end, Olivia must suspend her disbelief: “I listen, no longer afraid of Kwan’s secrets. She’s offered me her hand. I’m taking it freely. Together we’re flying to the World of Yin” (363). As Olivia recognizes her ethnic identity through her acceptance of her sister, the sister bond seems to endure.

IV. Kwan: The Disappearing Sister

Olivia’s concluding narrative functions in a number of ways as a paradigm for other stories that need resolution. In the end, Tan stresses the facile resolution of differences in which sisterly solidarity is forged. As in the ending of The Joy Luck Club, the narrative attempts to celebrate a moment of cultural wholeness and reconciliation. Thus, the ending works hard to repress the differences between the sisters and promotes sisterhood as an institution that de-emphasizes cultural difference. Kwan disappears mysteriously in the dark caves of Kweilin to secure the reunion between Olivia and Simon. After Kwan’s disappearance, Olivia and her estranged husband are reunited, and she gives birth to a baby girl, who is suggested to be Kwan’s reincarnation. Unali notes, “Kwan is sacrificed in the end of the novel in order to allow the survival of the other characters” (5). But she did not go further to explain why she is sacrificed. I would suggest that for Tan, Kwan’s disappearance in China is
a necessary sacrifice to the exigencies of novel-writing, family reproduction and sisterhood. Kwan can live only as a ghost of the other, or rather as a daughter. Tan absorbs the difference in terms of Olivia’s motherhood so that Kwan is welcomed and integrated into the familial enclosure. This family picture is a re-envisioned Asian-American family, an acceptance of her ethnic other into the family where the difference can be contained. It is also a feminist family romance that is reproduced with the fantasy of sisterhood as if it would avoid the universalist assumptions. In the process of novel writing, Tan has gestured toward, and ultimately contained the specter of ethnic and racial otherness by embodying it in the figure of a sister who appears and disappears.

Ultimately, Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* can be read as a novelistic commentary on and reaction to a larger sisterhood. Through the sisterly relationship, Tan not only foregrounds interracial friendship between sisters but also articulates a feminist’s anxiety in relation to the ethnic and racial other. In the postcolonial age of increasingly cross-cultural interactions, the “other” woman has provoked much anxiety and desire for feminists. Many feminists have become obsessed with how to manage the otherness that is represented by the other woman. Contemporary feminist writers and scholars are seeking possible solutions to contradictions and collisions involved in the cross-cultural encounter between women. While confronting the cultural other, they tend to propose either idealistic or simplified strategies. Some feminists emphasize the universality or commonality. Their desire to create a bond with the other woman causes them to gloss over difference, thus reducing the cultural other to the same as “me.” Others, regardless of cultural diversity, promote political alliances in the interests of power struggles. Some even appropriate the other woman to remedy existing deficiencies. In particular, Tan engages with ideas of what may be socially and politically desirable in women’s friendships and coalitions. Her narrative returns to the cross-racial and cross-cultural sisterhood thus can satisfy the feminist’s simultaneous desire of recognizing the other woman and appealing to a feminist sisterly solidarity that can smooth over the differences among women.
Notes

1 See further discussion of sisterhood in Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, bell hooks’s “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women,” and Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol Dubois’s *Unequal Sisters*.

2 In *Speculum of The Other Woman*, Irigaray identifies the shift from the mother, not to the father and husband, but to sister, female love, or woman friend. She replaces the hierarchical heterosexual model with two peer women between whom the self/other distinction is undone.

3 Freud sees the sibling relationship primarily in terms of rivalry for parental attention and affection. He assumes that sibling interaction is shaped by the prior importance for each of their relationships to their parents.

Works Cited


Michie, Helena. *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture*. 154


