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Journal

PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 103(2)

ISSN

0030-8129

Author

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Publication Date

1988-03-01

DOI

10.2307/462432

Peer reviewed

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 103, No. 2 (Mar., 1988), pp. 162-174

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462432>

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“Don’t Tell”: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*

BOTH ALICE Walker’s *Color Purple* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* open with parental warnings against speech. Celie’s stepfather threatens, “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (11). Maxine’s mother admonishes her daughter, “*You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you*” (3). Despite these explicit prohibitions, both the black and the Chinese American protagonists proceed to tell all—on paper. Their needs for self-expression are obvious: they hang onto sanity by writing; they defend themselves with words; they discover their potential—sound themselves out—through articulation.

Less obvious are the ways in which Walker and Kingston convert their characters’ sociocultural disabilities into felicities. Celie (an unschooled black) and Maxine (a Chinese American struggling to learn English) must overcome forbidding sexual, racial, and linguistic barriers. They work their way from speechlessness to eloquence not only by covering the historical stages women writers have traveled—from suffering patriarchy, to rebelling against its conventions, to creating their own ethos¹—but also by developing a style that emerges from their respective cultures. In the course of their odysseys, the destructive weapon of tradition is turned into a creative implement, and speech impediment becomes literary invention.

The heroines’ inventiveness reflects the resourcefulness of their creators, who are politically and aesthetically concerned with conveying ethnic and female sensibilities. Like so many other American writers today, Walker and Kingston must grapple with a language and a literary tradition that have long excluded their kind. But the two minority writers must also choose to write either in the “dominant” mode or in a mode that reflects their own multicultural legacies. Though both authors have mastered standard English, neither claims it as her first language, and it is far removed from the speech of the people they write about. Their common quest, therefore, is to seek ways to transplant their native dialects to their texts, even if they risk being occasionally unintelligible to the reading

majority (see Dasenbrock’s defense of “unintelligibility” in multicultural texts). The stakes are high, however. For both authors, reclaiming the mother tongue is much more than reproducing a dialect or marshaling a new vocabulary; it is also bringing to life a rich oral tradition in which women have actively participated. And if we agree with Werner Sollors that “[e]thnicity as a tenuous ancestry and the interplay of different ancestries may be the most crucial aspect of the American national character” (“Literature” 648),² these authors have instated themselves in the American tradition by hitting upon a syncretic idiom at once inherited and self-made. In *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior* alike, breaking silence, acknowledging female influence, and preserving cultural and national characteristics are a coordinated art. These “speaking texts” expose the layers of silence that have threatened to choke the colored protagonists and raise the voices that have run the gamut (and gauntlet) of interethnic differences.

Since the particular agony and exceptional progress of the protagonists are inseparable from their gender and ethnic backgrounds—for Walker and Kingston equally—the knotty problems of distinguishing between authors and protagonists and of drawing cross-cultural comparisons must be addressed at the outset. For a critic interested in examining the linguistic struggles of the black and Chinese American heroines, it is particularly difficult to adhere to the texts without referring to the black and Chinese American authors. The danger lies in foreshortening the artistic distances in these works or, worse, in seeing the narratives as representative of the minority groups depicted. Because some white reviewers treat the two books as though they were definitive descriptions of minority experiences, several black and Chinese American critics not only lash out at these reviewers for their presumption but also blame the writers for distorting the facts about their respective ethnic groups.³ Walker and Kingston do draw heavily on their cultures, but they are not cultural historians, nor are they committed to a purely realistic fictional form. On the contrary, they are feminist writers who seek

to “re-vision” history (to borrow Adrienne Rich’s word). If they are to be nurtured by their cultural inheritance rather than smothered by it, they must learn to reshape recalcitrant myths glorifying patriarchal values. Blinkering the authors by historical or ethnographic criteria denies their freedom as artists to mingle history and myth, fact and fiction.⁴ To distinguish each fictive “I” from the writer, and to avoid confusing the re-presentation of a particular experience with anthropology, I will focus my literary analysis primarily on the protagonists—Celie and Maxine—but refer to the authors when I wish to call attention to their artistry.

Similar considerations underlie my reluctance to extrapolate general cross-cultural comparisons based on the texts alone. Although informed by historical and social factors, the narratives do not necessarily illuminate the cultures at large. As women, both Celie and Maxine have been debased in their families. Celie is abused by her stepfather and her husband alike, and Maxine suffers from the antifemale prejudice rooted in her parents’ Chinese past. But to conclude from reading the two books that black men and Chinese people are misogynistic is to stereotype these groups invidiously.⁵ I am aware, however, that sexism in the two cultures draws on different roots; that black silences, deepened by the history of slavery, are not the same as Chinese American silences, which were reinforced by anti-Asian immigration laws. Celie’s repression is much more violent and brutal than Maxine’s, and her resources are at the beginning much more limited. Celie expresses herself tentatively at first because she lacks schooling; it is in school that Maxine becomes totally incommunicative (because she has to learn a second language). But such differences are not my main concerns. Despite the heroines’ disparate cultural experiences, their psychological imperative to expression is kindred. My intent is to trace the striking parallels in the protagonists’ struggles and in the authors’ narrative strategies. Gender and ethnicity—inhibitive forces when these texts open—eventually become the sources of personal and stylistic strengths.

I

Women authors and feminist critics have been unusually vocal on the theme of silence—as an artistic tool (Gubar, Sontag), as imposed invisibility (Griffin), and as the reticence enjoined upon women and felt most acutely by writers (see Gilbert

and Gubar; Olsen; Rich; and Russ). Silence runs even deeper in the work of minority women. Paula Gunn Allen observes that persons caught between cultures are most likely to be “inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them insoluble conflict” (135). Carolyn Heilbrun describes minority women as “outsiders twice over” (37), excluded both from the mainstream and from the ethnic centers of power. Some of these women are, moreover, thrice muted, on account of sexism, racism, and a “tonguelessness” that results from prohibitions or language barriers.

The three constraints are often interrelated. Both *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior* begin with women who are punished by not being allowed to speak or to be spoken about. In both, it is not the male offender but the female victim who suffers the penalty for an illicit affair: he sentences her to hold her tongue. These tales are timeless variations on the Philomela myth, in which the tongue of the raped woman is cut off: victimization incurs voicelessness.⁶ Celie and later her sister Nettie are violently coerced by their aggressors. Alphonso, who Celie thinks is her father but who is actually her stepfather, forbids her to speak about his repeated sexual assaults. Albert, Celie’s husband, prevents the two sisters from corresponding after Nettie has rejected his lustful advances. Nettie writes to Celie, “He said because of what I’d done I’d never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me” (119). The threat proves real. By hiding Nettie’s letters from Celie, Albert metes out the same punishment to Nettie that Alphonso does to Celie: the denial of communication.

Silence also entombs the no-name aunt in *The Woman Warrior*, who commits suicide after giving birth to an illegitimate child. Maxine speculates on what might have happened to her aunt: “Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. . . . His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (7). Maxine muses on her aunt’s predicament: “The other man was not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed. ‘If you tell your family, I’ll beat you. I’ll kill you’” (8). The aunt obeys, submitting without protest. She can neither talk herself out of rape nor declare her innocence afterward. When she gets pregnant, she is harassed by villagers and repudiated by her own family, even after her death.

Maxine also has a living aunt, Moon Orchid,

who has traveled from China to look for her husband in America, only to discover that he has taken a new wife. The husband snaps, "What are you doing here?" Moon Orchid can only "open and shut her mouth without any words coming out" (176). The unfaithful husband, not the wronged wife, flashes anger: "He looked directly at Moon Orchid the way the savages looked. . . . She shrank from his stare; it silenced her crying" (177).

Both the "guilty" and the innocent aunt are hushed. Maxine's family tries to erase all knowledge of the dead woman, to carry on "as if she had never been born" (3). To expunge her name, to delete the memory of her life, is perhaps the cruelest repudiation her kin could devise.⁷ No less cruel is the silencing of the living. Stared and scared into silence by her husband, Moon Orchid soon goes mad. Her niece later draws a connection between speechlessness and insanity: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (216).

Associating voicelessness with victimization and madness, young Maxine recognizes the exigency of expression, but the brutal and domineering aspect of speech gives her pause. In a haunting travesty of her aunts' stories, she tries to scold and pinch a quiet Chinese American girl into speech. "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality. . . . Talk, please talk," Maxine cries. Yet in the same breath she enforces silence: "Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you" (210). Her frustration with the mute girl reflects her own anxiety: Maxine is afraid of losing her identity, of being erased or unhinged—as her two aunts have been respectively erased and unhinged—through silence. At the same time, she cannot help linking utterance and coercion. Her protracted illness after the incident reflects her guilt and misgivings about verbal authority (and her psychosomatic attempt to evade the conflict). She views her aggressive act as "the worst thing I had yet done to another person" (210).

Not only sexist but racist repression can gag a person. Asked condescendingly by the mayor's wife to work as her maid, Sofia, the outspoken wife of Celie's stepson, answers: "Hell no" (86). The mayor then slaps Sofia, who counters his blow by knocking him down. She is consequently jailed and tortured. Celie relates, "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out

tween her teef like a piece of rubber. *She can't talk*" (87; my emphasis). The black woman who dares to return insult and exchange blows is imprisoned, brutalized, and muted. The impudent tongue is bludgeoned—to seal her mouth.

Discrimination also thickens the silence in Maxine's family, whose predisposition to secrecy is reinforced by anti-Asian immigration policies (Kim 200). Maxine writes, "There were secrets never to be said . . . immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China." Even though she and her siblings are hardly privy to these secrets, they are cautioned against confiding in outsiders. "Don't tell," the parents repeatedly admonish (213–14); Maxine comments, "[W]e couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know" (213). The adults worry so much about deportation that they bid their offspring to withhold information withheld.

Silenced at home, Maxine also fails to raise her voice at work. Her boss at an art-supply store takes pride in having coined the phrase "nigger yellow" to describe a paint color. When she tries to gainsay him, she cannot make herself heard: "'I don't like that word,' I had to say in my bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer" (57). She is also disregarded by an employer at a land developers' association, who chooses to host a company banquet in a restaurant picketed by CORE and the NAACP. Maxine again makes a feeble protest: "'I refuse to type these invitations,' I whispered, voice unreliable" (57–58). The minority protester is shown the door; her "small-person's voice," already "unreliable," is sent out of earshot and becomes wholly inaudible.

Notwithstanding Celie's quiet resignation and Maxine's impotent rage, the mayor's wife, the mayor, the police, and the bigoted bosses are all caught red-handed in the texts. The unspoken or unheard testimonies become powerful indictments on the page, and it is through the written word that Celie and Maxine give voice to their grievances and eventually find redress. At the beginning, however, composition is less a retaliatory tactic than an act of survival.

Constantly flustered, Celie and Maxine resort to writing as a way to escape mental contortions and assuage loneliness and pain. The more they are ordered to keep quiet, the more irrepressible their urge to cry out, if only on paper. Raped and impregnated by Alphonso, Celie writes to God, "Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (11). Nettie, much later, recalls, "I remem-

ber one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (122). Without the unburdening that comes with expression, the traumatic experience Celie has undergone would drive her mad. She survives by unspoken prayer: she writes to God to share the burden of knowing that her father got her with child twice and sold her babies, that her husband chose her the way he chose her dowry cow, and that her stepson split her head open with a rock. She survives by thinking, "long as I can *spell* G-o-d I got somebody along" (26; emphasis added). The word *spell* nicely connotes the almost magical healing effect of words. Nettie experiences this effect as well. She tells Celie, "[W]hen I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely* . . ." (122).

An older and wiser Celie, who has freed herself from domestic violence and the shame of incest, again expresses her unspeakable sorrow in writing. Shug, her friend and lover, has become infatuated with a boy of nineteen and, "dying to tell somebody," describes him at length to Celie, her usual confidante. Celie remains tight-lipped throughout this ordeal. "I pray to die," she writes, "just so I don't never have to speak." She finally scribbles Shug a note: "It said, Shut up" (220). This poignant exchange harks back to the period when Celie was too dumbfounded to talk to anyone and when writing was her last resort. Her note, to be sure, is also a clever way to go from mute acceptance to verbal command (as exemplified by her stepfather). But far from exerting despotic authority, the message conveys the heartbreak of one too distraught to speak.

Like Celie, Maxine must write her way out of tangles. As a daughter of Chinese immigrants, she is tossed between their antifemale prejudice and her personal ambition, between their Chinese past and her American present: "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fit in solid America." The emigrants confuse their offspring, who are "always trying to *get things straight*, always trying to *name the unspeakable*" (6; my emphasis). The greater the confusion, the stronger the need to name, and thereby to understand. Maxine tries to achieve some order in her life by writing down and sorting out her parents' jumble of totems and taboos. Even after she

has left home, when life has become less of a muddle for her, she has to keep speaking her mind to soothe her "throat pain" (239).

Celie and Maxine feel the spell of verbal power at an early age, but it takes time for them to learn to fight and create with words. In the process, they use words to describe wordlessness; writing is not the chosen but the desperate alternative to speech.

II

The difficulty of speaking is compounded for Celie by prohibition and for Maxine by a second language. Alphonso has used just about every means to silence Celie, short of cutting out her tongue: intimidation, deprivation, and false accusation. At her cry during his first rape he snaps, "You better shut up and git used to it" (11). He ensures Celie's submission by depriving her of schooling: "You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say" (19). Though the adjective accurately describes her reticence at the time, Celie is not "dumb" mentally, as Nettie reassures her. Not content with his dual attempt to stifle Celie, Alphonso (in his need to keep his sexual assault a secret) makes sure that even the little she speaks will be doubted. He tells Albert, who is about to marry her, "She tell lies" (18). Prevented both from speaking and from being believed, Celie accepts domestic violence without a whimper throughout the early part of her life. Told repeatedly that she is ugly and stupid, she hardly knows better. With little education or encouragement, she can express herself only haltingly.

Maxine's voice also falters initially. Just as Celie is judged "dumb" by her stepfather, so Maxine (who has to learn English among native speakers) is considered retarded by her American school teachers. Unable to express herself in class, in speech or on paper, she "flunked kindergarten and in the first grade had no IQ—a zero IQ" (212). She relates in haunting detail the curse that hangs over her:

My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. . . . I spread [the pictures] out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas.

(192)

Unlike Celie, young Maxine is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her external silence and her inner possibility. She does not simply paint layers of black; she paints them “over houses and flowers and suns.” To call the layer of chalk “a stage curtain” implies that it will one day rise. But only Maxine herself knows what is behind the curtain. The poignancy of the passage lies not so much in the fact of silence as in the tension between layers of black and the concealed sunlight, between the thick curtain and the resounding operas. The sense of imagination being buried alive—shrouded in black—is suffocating.

To facilitate the painful process of breaking silence, Celie and Maxine commune with imaginary beings—Celie with God, Maxine with a legendary warrior. Yet these heuristic figures also manifest the very masculine attributes that have restricted the protagonists’ self-expression. The problem with God is that he never answers Celie’s letters. Worse still, trust in him leads her to accept the status quo: “This life soon be over,” she reassures herself. “Heaven lasts all ways” (47). Worst of all, she identifies him with the oppressive father, as suggested by her response when her mother demands to know what happened to Celie’s newborn baby (Alphonso’s child): “I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods” (12). In context “He” refers to Alphonso, but grammatically the pronoun refers to its antecedent—God. Male. In Celie’s subconscious mind the almighty God merges with the all-powerful earthly father. Shug later argues that the traditional divine image does indeed epitomize male dominance: “Man corrupt everything. . . . He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God” (179). For Celie, who has been tyrannized by one man after another, God is a wrathful being: “He threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes” (179). Though writing to God is her only emotional outlet at the beginning, she writes with restraint. When she turns from a divine to a human audience—from God to Nettie—her letters become longer, more exuberant, and more dramatic.

Maxine has, right from the start, a much more congenial tutelary genius—Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior. For someone besieged by silence, self-expression is a heroic act, an offensive with verbal artillery. In her fantasy Maxine merges with the warrior, who must train rigorously and en-

sure harsh discipline before wielding a sword in battle. In her real life Maxine has to take speech therapy and work through “layers of black” before she can control the voice and the pen that are her weapons. Her apprenticeship as a writer is strenuous, her achievement remarkable. (Her status progresses from retarded pupil to “straight A” student and finally to writer.)

While the warrior legend opens Maxine to an unconventional way of asserting herself—both fighting and writing being traditionally male preoccupations—it still sanctions patriarchal values. As with the female writer who must assume a male pseudonym to be taken seriously, the woman warrior can exercise her power only when she is disguised as a man; regaining her true identity she must once more be subservient, kowtowing to her parents-in-law and resuming her *son*-bearing function. “Now my public duties are finished,” she says to them. “I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons” (53–54). Her military distinction itself attests to the sovereignty of patriarchal mores, which prize the ability to be ruthless and violent—to fight like a man. Trying to conform to both the feminine and the masculine ideals of her society, Maxine as warrior is caught in a double bind.

It is disturbing, though understandable, that the figures to whom Celie and Maxine first turn for help and inspiration hark back to those who subjugate them in real life. Celie’s God, like Alphonso and Albert, demands submission and threatens punishment. Maxine’s heroine desires only male progeny and distinguishes herself by excelling in manly exploits. Internalizing the communal denigration of women, the protagonists begin by assuming that only “manthropomorphic” beings can offer guidance, inspiration, and salvation.

III

But both Celie and Maxine overcome their initial dependence on imaginary beings. They come to command full articulation and attain positive identities as women through the influence of actual female figures: for Maxine these are the no-name aunt and Brave Orchid (Maxine’s mother); for Celie they are Sofia, Shug, and Nettie. Subdued as women, Maxine and Celie gather strength through a female network.

Maxine speculates about the aunt she is forbidden to mention and attempts to conjure the circum-

stances that could have resulted in an affair. In one imaginary version the aunt is not a rape victim but a seducer. As a rebel—a breaker of conventions—she is Maxine’s “forerunner” (9). Maxine writes, “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (10). The aunt is punished for producing an illegitimate child, for having “crossed boundaries not delineated by space” (8). In “naming the unspeakable”—presenting the prodigal aunt in the first chapter—Maxine at once sanctions the no-name woman’s nonconformity and announces her own ambition. By inventing a seditious story, she too engages in forbidden creativity.

Maxine’s mother, Brave Orchid, who at first seems an accomplice in enforcing female silence, is yet a “champion talker” (237). (Her behavior is consistently contradictory.) She enjoins Maxine not to mention the no-name aunt: “Your father does not want to hear her name” (18). Yet she herself disobeys the husband by telling her daughter the story. She predicts that Maxine will grow up to join the company of wives and slaves, yet she teaches her the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, who excels in an arena traditionally closed to women.⁸ Brave Orchid herself had defied tradition by working independently as a doctor in China—an unusual career for Chinese women at the time.

As a child, Maxine resents her mother’s conflation of fact and fancy, insufficiently aware how the eloquent and valiant Brave Orchid is inspiring her; as a writer, she herself resorts to this conflation as a narrative technique. She puts Chinese notions in American idioms, but she derives both the raw material and the strategy for her art from the matrilineal tradition of oral storytelling: “I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking story” (24).

Celie does not encounter any extraordinary women until well into her adulthood. Her first glimpse of a female existence beyond that of battered wife or slave is through Sofia, the big and outspoken wife of her stepson Harpo. Celie puts her hopes in an afterlife, but Sofia sees things differently: “You ought to bash Mr. _____ head open. . . . Think about heaven later” (47). So thoroughly has Celie internalized the tenets of female subordination and so envious is she of Sofia’s strength against Harpo, however, that she counsels her stepson to beat his wife into compliance. Confronted by Sofia, Celie confesses her jealousy. Disarmed by the confession, Sofia tells Celie: “All my life I had to fight.” “I loves Harpo,” she continues,

“But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (46). Sofia is a black woman warrior; her aggression is her means to prevent others from subjugating her. Her defiance in the face of brutal treatment provides Celie a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression.

Celie’s transformation is furthered by Shug Avery, a sexy and snappy blues singer. Just as Maxine speaks up for her adulterous aunt, so Celie defends Shug, another allegedly “loose” woman. Maxine rebels against her mother’s moral (that a woman must subordinate herself to her society, must conform to its patriarchal codes); Celie questions the values of her conservative community. The local preacher casts aspersions on Shug: “He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts . . . slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (48–49). In retelling the episode, Celie alters the moral perspective: “Streetcleaner. Somebody got to stand up for Shug, I think” (49). She does not relay the moral—that God scourges the wicked—but presents the preacher’s sermon as an unfair accusation.

Like Maxine, Celie gains strength from the woman she tries to vindicate. She learns a new language from her female idol. Shug, singer of sweet songs, also has a “mouth just pack with claws” (53): her vocal organ has built-in weapons. Celie relates how, when Albert tries to make advances to Shug, she snaps at him: “Turn loose my goddam hand . . . I don’t need no weak little boy . . .” (51). Noting and recording Shug’s brazen tongue, Celie eventually appropriates it; she will one day call her abusive husband “a lowdown dog” to his face (170).

But it is Nettie who, by disclosing the arbitrariness of social conventions and the bias of certain orthodox religious teaching, finally confirms what Celie has learned from Sofia and Shug. Describing the life of the Olinka peoples, Nettie writes to Celie that these peoples have a different version of the Adamic myth, that to them Adam was not the first man but the “first man that was white” (i.e., “naked” in the Olinka dialect), that Adam and Eve were driven out not by God but by blacks (239–40). The Olinka myth inverts the racial hegemony in America in the same way that the Chinese myth of the woman warrior partially subverts sexual hierarchy. To be sure, Nettie herself is an “object of pity and contempt” to the Olinka, whose women are “looked after” by men (149). But Nettie’s account of another world with a different set of rules, along with her singular example, makes Celie all the more

convinced that, like Sofia and Shug, she must hold her own: "our own self is what us have to hand" (238).

Writing about Sofia, Shug, and Nettie allows Celie to relive and rehearse their speech or action, thereby composing a new self. They are to her what Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, and the no-name aunt are to Maxine: feminist models daring to assert autonomy, challenge patriarchy, and shed feminine decorum. These women (notably Shug and Brave Orchid) also teach Celie and Maxine how to speak and write. By stressing the formative influence of these figures, Walker and Kingston insist on giving women their due; their protagonists draw literary strengths less from the books of men than from the tongues of women.⁹ (Nettie, who does adhere to conventional diction, is the exception that proves the rule; her prose pales beside Celie's.)

IV

Inspired by female figures, Celie and Maxine transform themselves from victims to victors by throwing angry words back at their voluble oppressors. But just as their earlier dependence on masculine idols kept them in thrall, their appropriation of patriarchal rhetoric and codes of behavior could bind rather than liberate them. The two women go beyond the violent behavior and abusive language of the tyrant to become truly themselves; their murderous impulses give way to artistic acts.

Bid to be quiet, Celie yet bears the brunt of brutish remarks. Both stepfather and husband shower indignities on her. Alphonso tells her that she is "evil an always up to no good" (13). Albert taunts, "You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. . . . You black, you pore . . . you a woman. Goddam . . . you nothing at all" (186–87). While in the past she would have absorbed such invectives, a transformed Celie now retorts, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly. . . . But I'm here" (187). She affirms her existence against her husband's alleged "nothing" by deflecting the man's abuse, turning his vicious words into a curse against him:

Whoever heard of such a thing, say Mr. _____. I probably didn't whup your ass enough.

Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice. . . .

Shit, he say. I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.

The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. (187)

Earlier she had turned a preacher's sermon into an accusation. Now her husband's scathing words lend ammunition to her curse. Her curse is, moreover, so potent that Mr. _____ soon wilts in his own house. Celie herself now has a "mouth just pack with claws": speech and act are one.¹⁰

Celie speaks with a vengeance. She says to Albert, "You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (187). The tables are turned: the woman now tells the man to pipe down. The sense of release is palpable in this secular parody of "speaking with tongues." Openly enjoying the freedom of back talk for the first time, Celie expresses herself with so much gusto that she feels inspired by forces outside herself. Her words, long dammed up by her domineering husband, now flow in torrents.

Maxine also grows up amidst sexist gibes. She is told repeatedly by her parents and relatives: "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (54). When her mother yells, "Bad girl!" (54), Maxine screams back, "I am not a bad girl," adding, "I might as well have said, 'I'm not a girl'" (55). Yet her protests fall on deaf ears, for her parents' culture disapproves of free speech, especially in women: "The Chinese say 'a ready tongue is an evil'" (190). Worse still, the Chinese language itself propagates sexism: "There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!" (56).¹¹

Yet from this very language Maxine finds the means to articulate and redress her grievances. She discovers that the Chinese idiom for revenge literally means to "report a crime" (63); to report—witness and record—the injustices done to her as a Chinese American woman eventually becomes her way of fighting back, of being a warrior. In her imaginary battle with the wicked baron—a war between the sexes—Maxine parries words with words:

". . . Who are you?" [the baron asked.]

"I am a female avenger."

Then—heaven help him—he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man. "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. 'Girls are maggots in the rice.' 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.'" He quoted to me the sayings I hated. . . .

"You've done this," I said, and ripped off my shirt to show him my back. . . . I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head. (51-52)

The warrior's back carries a text of scars, listing grievances that counter the baron's sexist language. The battle is as much a verbal match as a physical one.

Celie and Maxine speak and act aggressively to overcome domination and inhibition, but they also learn to channel anger into creativity. On discovering that Albert has for years intercepted Nettie's letters, Celie feels a compulsive urge to slit his throat—with his razor. Shug talks her into sewing instead, into holding a "needle and not a razor" (137). The violent behavior that Celie had thought necessary to get even with Albert gives way to artisanship. Sublimating righteous rage with a creative act, she develops a talent for designing unisex pants. Offering comfort to men and women alike, they emancipate the wearers from their gender-specific roles. By the end the blade has fully ceded to the needle—Celie is teaching a reformed Albert how to sew.

In Maxine's fantasy the blade the parents use to carve words on the warrior's back is both injurious and empowering. Here Kingston adroitly melds two Chinese legends, grafting the story of Yue Fei, a male general in the Sung Dynasty, onto that of Fa Mu Lan. In the Chinese sources, it is the male warrior whose back is tattooed: before he left for battle his mother carved a motto on his back, enjoining him to be loyal to his country—China. If by transferring this ordeal to the woman warrior Kingston is literalizing the painful truth of woman as text, as Gubar believes (251), she is also subversively claiming her right to recycle myths and transpose gender, her right to authorship. In reshaping her ancestral past to fit her American present, moreover, Kingston is asserting an identity that is neither Chinese nor white American, but distinctively Chinese American.¹² Above all, her departures from the Chinese legends shift the focus from physical prowess to verbal injuries and textual power. In the Yue Fei legend, only four ideographs are carved; other than being a patriotic reminder, they have no efficacy. In Maxine's fantasy, the words, arranged "in red and black files, like an army," fortify the warrior (42).

Yet for all we know, this dorsal script mirrors the sexist remarks Maxine puts into the wicked baron's mouth; those remarks echo the demeaning sayings

Maxine has grown up with—etched into her consciousness by her parents. The mementos of grievances are on her back because the Chinese American warrior is fighting against hurt she cannot see—prejudices against girls that her parents brought from old China, prejudices that make her American "straight A's" life "such a disappointment" (54). She writes, "When one of my parents . . . said, 'feeding girls is like feeding cowbirds,' I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk" (54). By transferring the insults that used to leave her speechless into the enemy's mouth and by beheading the imaginary speaker, Maxine not only excises the lump in her throat but also forgives the parents who have afflicted her girlhood.

She goes beyond forgiveness to acknowledge the source of pain as the source of strength: the parents who disparaged her have also encouraged her. Yet it takes the magnanimous vision of the daughter—her identification with the warrior—to transform the aching words into amulets, scars into escutcheon, and humiliation into heroism:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. . . . What we have in common are the words at our backs. . . . The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—"chink" words and "gook" words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (62-63)

Maxine has nevertheless redefined heroism. Unlike the mythical Fa Mu Lan, Maxine as warrior avenges herself less by brandishing a sword than by spinning words. Instead of excelling in martial arts, Maxine has learned the art of storytelling from the mother who "funneled China" into her ears (89). Brave Orchid's endless tales, which could well have clogged the memory of young Maxine, have actually nourished her imagination. From this mother tongue—her Chinese heritage—she now invents tales that sustain and affirm her Chinese American identity.

Breaking the hold of a dominant tradition is a step toward self-deliverance for artists. Judged by strict academic criteria, Celie's prose is illiterate and both hers and Maxine's smack of deviance. Kingston and Walker, however, transform liability into asset. Maxine's first tongue, which has impeded her communication in English, now invigorates her adopted language with new idioms, fresh metaphors, and novel images. The Chinese ideographs for revenge ("report a crime") are writ large

in this self-vindicating autobiography, where Maxine not only breaks her own silence but gives voice to the other wronged women in her family—the ravished aunt, the jilted aunt, and even Brave Orchid (a renowned Chinese doctor who must resign herself to being a nameless American laundress). Maxine writes in an English that is inalienably and powerfully her own because it springs from a bicultural stream: “‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too.” Even as she parrots the slurs others have directed at her—revealing the sting of racism by understatement—she exults in her intertextual self, in her felicity (and facility) as a minority writer.

Celie, though less sophisticated than Maxine, also makes “defect perfection.” Unable to produce “proper” English, she writes colloquially, yet her Black English is what enables her to assert her selfhood forcefully: “it is uneducated but personal, difficult but precise” (Fifer 158). Along with her other breaches of norms—wearing trousers, leaving her husband, taking a female lover—it frees her from the demands and strictures of dominant mores. The liberated Celie not only feels fine about her dialect but even resists her sewing companion’s attempt to teach her to “talk proper,” thinking to herself: “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (194). Putting words down the way they sound and feel, Celie allows her self to shine through the pages and endows her prose with a disarming grace.

Her seemingly artless idiom certainly outshines Nettie’s stilted diction. Where Celie learns from Shug—someone from her own language community—Nettie is taught by her guardians, missionaries who have been socialized into the dominant culture. In Nettie’s increasingly long-winded letters, noticeably more bland than Celie’s, we are hearing what issues from the tongue of Nettie’s mentors. Walker seems to imply that Celie’s vernacular idiom, because it is hers alone, is all the more “proper.”

Both Maxine and Celie have made a virtue out of necessity. Unable to speak at first, they have turned to writing for relief. Because their prose serves as a “mouthpiece”—taking cues from their mother tongues—it dissolves the boundary separating the spoken from the written word and percolates with a vigor often absent in formal writing. We can hear, not just read, Maxine’s *talk*stories, which reverberate with the lore and rhythm of the Cantonese oral tradition. Similarly, Celie’s telltale dialect talks us into her consciousness, spelling a personality.¹³

V

As they gain confidence in their female identities, Celie and Maxine find new voices and new models, supplanting martial with poetic ideals and switching allegiance from an imposing authority to a friendly muse. No longer blinkered by gender oppositions, they perceive differences among both sexes. Conventional dichotomies are dismissed in favor of personal variations.

Celie, gratified by her newfound rhetorical talent and her increasing mastery of language, evolves along with her writing—from a little girl baffled by what is happening to her to a self-aware and understanding woman, from a passive recorder of unstructured facts to a conscious artist. When she begins writing she merely jots down her immediate experience, noting the events around her with little introspection or analysis. Even in the face of outrage, such as Sofia’s disfigurement by the police, she just swallows the unpalatable fact: “Scare me so bad I near bout drop my grip. But I don’t . . . and I start to work on her” (87). Gradually, however, the facts she presents begin to generate questions and judgments. When she learns her shocking family history from Nettie, she begins to doubt the God who has hitherto made her accept everything silently. In her valedictory epistle to “Him,” she writes:

Dear God,

.....
My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa.

You must be sleep. (163)

Fed up with a god who does nothing to curb injustice, Celie replaces him with a winsome “It”: the spirit that always tries to “please [people] back,” smiling on all that people enjoy (178).

Neither male nor female, this spirit seems to relax the tension between the sexes and erase rigid gender categories. Celie learns to transcend her disgust with men and to love even Albert, the man she wanted so badly to kill and who now sews beside her. It is during her conversation with him that she explicitly challenges the putative notions of manliness and womanliness. The discussion begins when Albert tells Celie that he loves Shug because, like Sofia, she is more manly than most men:

Mr. _____ think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got

is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it.

Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either.

You mean they not like you or me.

They *hold they own*, he say. And it's *different*.

(236; emphasis added)

Celie and Albert, sewing amicably together, are not engaged in a “feminine” (and therefore “unmanly”) activity.¹⁴ Although they envy Shug and Sofia’s aggressiveness, they do not consider it unwomanly or specifically masculine—or intrinsically superior. Both sexes are allowed to craft their different lives, fashion their own destinies.

The dialogue also reveals Celie’s increasing mental agility, incisiveness, and sophistication. Though quick to retort, Celie is learning that there is another side to the cutting edge of language. She has turned from writing to the God who is “big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (176) to writing Nettie, her devoted sister. Unlike her starkly descriptive letters to God registering her oppressors’ voices, her letters to Nettie wax sweetly poetic. In one she writes: “Nettie, I am making some pants for you. . . . I plan to make them by hand. Every stitch I sew will be a kiss” (192). The intimate figure of speech threading together her three creative modes—writing, sewing, and loving—acquires freshness and distinctiveness by being so much a part of her self.

Celie’s changing style reflects her growing self-awareness. Her letters progress from a simple recording to a sophisticated re-creation of dialogues and events, charged with suspense, humor, and irony (Fifer 10). She tells of her sorrow after Shug has deserted her:

I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror. Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. Even thought you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert. (229)

Although the passage expresses the pains of a lost love, the contemplative tone, the ironical perspective, and the metaphorical language show us how far Celie has traveled as a writer and how much more in control she has become than when she first wrote to God for help. Her dialect, once broken, has assumed a lyrical cadence. The woman who was “too dumb” to learn now creates poetry.

Similarly, Maxine evolves from a quiet listener to

a talker of stories. Having transformed the military warrior into a verbal fighter, she recognizes that she herself is a powerful spinner of yarns and not just a receptacle for her mother’s tales. Although many chapters of her autobiography are in a sense collaborations between mother and daughter, the daughter becomes increasingly aware of her own contribution, especially in the last section of the book: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (240). It is toward the end of this story that the tone noticeably softens. Unlike Brave Orchid, the mother who would “funnel,” “pry,” “cram,” “jam-pack” the daughter with unabated torrents of words, and unlike young Maxine, who has “splinters in [her] voice, bones jagged against one another” (196), adult Maxine modulates her notes to the music of her second tongue, in the manner of Ts’ai Yen, the heroine of her final tale.

Kingston reinterprets the legend of Ts’ai Yen—a poet amid barbarians—and, as she has done with the stories about the no-name aunt and the woman warrior, subverts its original moral. The Chinese version highlights the poet’s eventual return to her own people, a return that reinforces certain traditional and ethnocentric Chinese notions: “the superiority of Chinese civilization over the cultures beyond her borders, the irreconcilability of the different ways of life . . . and, above all, the Confucian concept of loyalty to one’s ancestral family and state” (Rorex and Fong). Kingston’s version, by contrast, dramatizes interethnic harmony through the integration of disparate art forms.

Ts’ai Yen, Maxine’s last tutelary genius, resembles but transcends the various other influential female figures in her life. Like Fa Mu Lan, Ts’ai Yen has fought in battle, but as a captive soldier. She engages in another art hitherto dominated by men—writing—yet she does not disguise her sex, thus implicitly denying that authorship is a male prerogative. Like the no-name aunt, Ts’ai Yen is ravished and impregnated; both give birth on sand. But instead of being nameless and ostracized, Ts’ai Yen achieves immortal fame by singing about her exile. Like Brave Orchid, she talks in Chinese to her uncomprehending children, who speak a barbarian tongue, but she learns to appreciate the barbarian music. The refrain of this finale is reconciliation—between parents and children, between men and women, and between different cultures.

It is by analogy to Maxine—alienated alike from the Chinese world of her parents and the world of

white Americans—that Ts'ai Yen's full significance emerges. The barbarians attach primitive pipes to their arrows, which thereby whistle in flight. Ts'ai Yen has thought that this terrifying noise is her nomadic captors' only music, until she hears, issuing night after night from those very flutes, "music tremble and rise like desert wind" (242):

She hid in her tent but could not sleep through the sound. Then, out of Ts'ai Yen's tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. . . . She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well. (243)

Recalling young Maxine's ambivalence toward language (because it is frequently associated with dominance), an ambivalence that is in a sense reinforced by the lethal text on the warrior's back, we can appreciate all the more the poet's alternative mode of expression. The American language, Maxine discovers, can send forth not just terrifying "death sounds"—threats, insults, slurs—but stirring tunes. Caught in a cross-cultural web of Eastern and Western chauvinism, Maxine too conveys sadness and anger through high-sounding words. She does not (and does not want to) return to China, but she reconnects with her ancestral culture through writing. Instead of struggling against her Asian past and her American present, she now seeks to emulate the poet who sings to foreign music. Not only have her Chinese materials and imaginings "translated well," in the course of such creative translation she has achieved an inner resolution. As the lyrical ending intimates, Maxine has worked the discords of her life into a song.

That the injunction to silence should provoke expression is not so paradoxical as it might seem, for the relief sought by those frustrated by silence— forbidden or unable to speak—can only come through articulation. Urgent and passionate, the testimonies of Celie and Maxine are in one sense a cathartic release. Their voices, moreover, have carried them further than they had expected: from sur-

living to protesting to recognizing themselves as special storytellers. Despite the excruciating process of change both women have endured, each text conveys a sense of triumph that is due, I believe, less to the happy ending itself than to the way the final stage is negotiated, to the means by which a voice truly one's own is fostered.

To monitor the uplifting effect in these texts—texts that revolve so much around alienation and isolation—we must return to the connections between characters and authors. Walker and Kingston have allowed their protagonists to break through constraints to create opportunities. Although Celie and Maxine have suffered in their communities, they also tap communal resources: too human to be "nothing" in a white society, they turn to their ancestral cultures to emulate heroines of their own hue and to reclaim beliefs that subvert the existing hierarchy; hampered by dialects, they transform putative defects into stylistic effects. The credits for the transformation go ultimately to the authors. Anticipating Mary Dearborn's insight that "American selfhood is based on a seemingly paradoxical sense of shared difference" (3), Walker and Kingston take in the differences of being female and colored to invent self-expressive styles that bestride literary and oral traditions and project ethnic and national heritages. As they write about the voicelessness endemic to minority women, they pay tribute to the female bearers of cultures. As they venture beyond linguistic norms, they perpetuate and revitalize the polyglot strains peculiar to America.

To emphasize these achievements is not to suggest that we forget Celie's and Maxine's nightmares, accept their afflictions, or discount their losses. Their ultimate success only reminds us of the many who, despite struggle, cannot achieve personal victories. I have called attention to the triumphant overtones to underscore the protagonists' resilience and the authors' determination. These writers dare to be themselves—to listen to their own pains, to report the ravages, and, finally, to persist in finding strengths from sources that have caused inestimable anguish. Their way out of enforced silence is not by dissolving into the mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices.¹⁵

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Notes

¹ Showalter refers to these stages as *Feminine*, *Feminist*, and *Female* (13). The final stage perceived by Walker and Kingston, however, seems closer to that advocated by Cixous (Conley 129) and Kristeva (33–34), which goes beyond the dichotomy of masculine and feminine.

² Sollors takes his cue from Handlin, who writes, “Once I thought to write the history of American immigrants. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history” (3). Sollors’s theory, which he expounds further in *Beyond Ethnicity*, is endorsed by Dearborn (4).

³ Kramer, Johnson, Lewis, and Steinem are among the reviewers and journalists attacked; the attackers include Chan, Chin, Harris, and Reed (Chapple 17).

⁴ Walker admittedly “liberated” Celie (based on the author’s great grandmother) from the character’s own history (Anello and Abramson). Kingston disclaims that her writing is representative of China or of Chinese America (Islas 12). When asked whether she considered *The Woman Warrior* to be fiction or non-fiction, she answered that “it’s closer to fiction” (Brownmiller 210). She may have contributed to the generic confusion in allowing Knopf to classify her book as autobiography, though autobiography itself is often an “art of self-invention” (Eakin).

⁵ Sollors points out rightly that minority literature “is often read and evaluated against an elusive concept of authenticity” (*Beyond* 11). While this concept has its value, it does not do justice to artists uninterested in objective representation. Kingston’s book, in particular, reveals highly subjective truth, filtered at times through the lens of a girl both endowed and plagued with an unbridled imagination. The elusiveness of objective reality is an insistent motif. For instance, Maxine suspects that her frenum had been cut to stunt her speech, but her mother insists that she performed the operation so that Maxine “would not be tongue-tied,” so that her tongue “would be able to move in any language” (190). I do not know of any Chinese or Chinese American whose frenum has been cut. Maxine either grows up in an untypical Chinese American family—if there is ever a typical one—or she has made up the incident. (She explicitly writes at one point that her stories are hardly factual but are “twisted into designs” [*Woman* 189].) In any case, the episode is remarkably effective in attributing verbal difficulty and facility to the same origins.

⁶ After being raped and silenced by Tereus, Philomela weaves her story “with *purple* / On a white background” (Ovid 148; emphasis added). Walker might have had this myth in mind in choosing her title and in telling the story of Louvinie (a slave woman in *Meridian* whose tongue was cut out). See also Rowe (53–58) for the connection between enforced silences and tale spinning in the Philomela story.

⁷ Name is also crucial to personal identity in *The Color Pur-*

ple. Celie advises Squeak to insist on being called Mary Agnes, her real name, and Celie herself, though she appears completely submissive, subversively leaves out Albert’s name in her letters, thereby suggesting that her husband has no personality; that he is personified machismo: “Mr. _____.”

⁸ Juhasz observes, “In telling her daughter stories of female heroism that directly contradict many of her other messages about the position of women, the mother shows her daughter another possibility for women that is not revealed in her equally strong desire for her daughter’s conformity and thus safety in a patriarchal system” (180).

⁹ It is popular among French theorists (e.g., Derrida, Cixous, and Kristeva) to associate speech (or the authoritative voice) with the masculine, and writing (or the play on textual difference) with the feminine. But where literacy has been traditionally a male or white privilege, it is women who have been the bearers of influential oral traditions. In *China Men* Kingston notes that even the stories about her male ancestors are told to her by female members of the family: “Many of the men’s stories were ones I originally heard from women” (208). See also Rabine 487–92.

¹⁰ Brienza explicitly compares Celie’s curse to “speech acts”—words that do what they say.

¹¹ The word is 𠵹, used by women in ancient times as a self-reference, thereby “breaking themselves with their own tongues.” That word is now obsolete. For the Chinese usage of this word, see *Cihai* 2: 2510.

¹² Chin et al. argue that “Asian American sensibilities and cultures . . . might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America” (viii).

¹³ Walker said that “[w]riting *The Color Purple* was writing in [her] first language” (Steinem 90). But actually both Walker and Kingston interweave native idiom and standard English: Walker uses the two alternately through the letters of Celie and Nettie; Kingston combines the two by translating and transliterating Cantonese idioms into English.

¹⁴ Hence I disagree with Stade, who accuses Walker of emasculating Albert and Harpo (who likes to cook) “by giving them the courage to be women, by releasing the woman already in them” (266). Quite the contrary, Albert and Harpo are now free to be their own men.

¹⁵ Research for this essay was facilitated by an Academic Senate grant and a grant from the Institute of American Cultures and the Asian American Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles. I want to thank Kenneth Lincoln for his incisive reading of an earlier version of the article; Martha Banta, Rosalind Melis, and Jeff Spielberg for their thoughtful suggestions; and Gerard Maré for his bountiful encouragement and criticism.

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