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Katie Suzanne Skrove

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THE POWER OF VOICE - CULTURAL SILENCING AND THE  
SUPERNATURAL IN WOMEN'S STORIES: ALLENDE'S *THE*  
*HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*, KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN*  
*WARRIOR*, AND MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Katie Suzanne Skrove

June 2002

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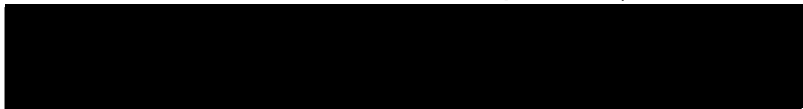
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June 2002

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a study of female voice and silencing as well as on the use of the supernatural in selected works of literature from three different cultures: Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Each of the works centers on the importance of expression of voice, and each of the works chosen attests to the fact that women's voices have been muted, in particular the voices belonging to women of color. Additionally, in each work, ghosts or spirits are used to develop the idea that women have been silenced in the past as members of particular cultures. Through the use of the supernatural, women characters are empowered to not only end self-imposed silences, but also to create and develop their own individual voices.

My intent in this thesis is to explore and explain the notions of female silencing and the importance of coming to voice as well as to study how the use of the supernatural in these works empowers women to tell their stories as females of the past, the present, and the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT . . . . .	iii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
CHAPTER TWO: <i>THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS</i> . . . . .	18
CHAPTER THREE: <i>THE WOMAN WARRIOR</i> . . . . .	48
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>BELOVED</i> . . . . .	84
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION . . . . .	124
WORKS CITED . . . . .	136

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Each of the writers of the works presented in this thesis steps out of the traditional literary canon as they produce texts that not only reflect their respective Latin American, Asian American, and African American cultures, but also employ unusual devices to develop their stories. They can all be identified as writers of the Americas who have different backgrounds but who share literary strategies. Isabel Allende, in *The House of the Spirits*; Maxine Hong Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*; and Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, create texts that challenge previous notions of voice and silence. Each literary work, written through the lens of three different cultures in the Americas, presents the notion that women's voices are important. Each author portrays the cultural silencing of women, as they make it clear just who is responsible for that silencing.

In each of the works, the "magical" is presented as truth through creative strategies. Each author faces challenges, as they write about their respective cultures. Each literary work incorporates the spirit world, yet each

story must be compelling and believable or the story fails. The magical spirits must be authorized in a way that shows they represent a type of realism and the truth, and they must stand for the universality of the messages they impart. The ghosts and spirits used in each of the three works empower their female characters; the three authors also make visible repressed histories.

According to Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting*, ghosts are present in the folklore of almost every culture. They provide a means "to identify and revise the cultural past" and a way to "[give] body to memory" (29). Writers across the Americas use ghosts to solve the problem of creating a means of narrating the past in ethnic experience. Ghosts exist "wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (29). Ghosts and spirits, in the three works presented in this thesis, are used to restore and empower women's voices in the telling of their stories.

The power of voice, in particular the female voice, provides a central theme within each of the three works from the Americas. Voice has become a key term for contemporary feminists, with all of its many connotations.

The term voice appears in all types of literature, psychology, history, and philosophy, and refers to the individual or group use of language. Voice expresses who we are; it is the color and texture of the language used to reflect identity, and it is central to our communication. As individual as a fingerprint, every person has a voice that needs to be heard. Through voice, both spoken and written, we learn of the past and we understand our place in the present. According to Susan Lanser in *Fictions of Authority*, "book titles announce 'another voice,' a 'different voice,' or resurrect the 'lost voices' of women poets and pioneers: fictional figures ancient and modern, actual women famous and obscure, are honored for speaking up and speaking out" (3). Marginalized communities -- people of different ethnic backgrounds, women, and people outside the norm -- have written about the notion of "coming to voice." For the collective who has been silenced in the literary canon, voice has become a term of power and identity (3).

Voice translates into the particulars of both women's and men's language. Women's language has been stereotyped as "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, and chatty, or weak, trivial,



ineffectual, tentative, hesitant . . . and marked by gossip and gibberish" (Lanser 10). On the other hand, men's language has been stereotyped as "capable, direct, rational, strong, forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious, effective, sparing and masterful" (11). In the past, women have found it necessary to conform to societal notions of language. Faced with the possibility of being ignored or disqualified, some women writers have resorted to the use of male pseudonyms for credibility in authority, for example 19<sup>th</sup> Century novelists George Sand and George Eliot. However, contemporary women authors use voice to overcome the imposition of censorship or silence, whether explicit or implied. Representing the forbidden in the literary canon has become all the more popular in contemporary fiction and nonfiction of the West. Many women writers evoke voices "on the margins of fiction and history that both mask and enable the most challenging fictions of authority" (15). Contemporary women authors have experimented with both varying definitions of voice as well as unusual literary formats to convey their ideas.

Women once hesitant about challenging the rules and codes of patriarchal society now do so without fear, as

evidenced by Isabel Allende in her novel, *The House of the Spirits* in 1982, and Maxine Hong Kingston in her autobiographical work, *The Woman Warrior* in 1975. Both authors challenge the traditions of their communities, and they both use ghosts and spirits to aid their characters in finding individual, as well as collective voices. Likewise, Toni Morrison, in *Beloved* in 1987, counters the master narrative. She deploys the ghost figure to tell the forbidden story of slavery and she does so through unusual time sequences and fragmented language. *Beloved* uses this ghost figure to empower the protagonist in order to remember and to bear witness.

The importance of the power of voice for women in Latin America can be evidenced through a history of its literature. In Latin American culture, the persuasiveness of *machismo* has made feminist writing difficult to compose and scarce to find. While male authors have been writing for centuries, since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, their female counterparts have only recently been heard. Authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortazar, the Boom writers, and others are critically acclaimed, but it wasn't until the twentieth century that women writers enjoyed some of the same success. Gabriela Mistral is the

first Latin America author to receive the Nobel Prize for literature (Basnett 248-9), and follows the emerging history of her counterparts: 19<sup>th</sup> Century writer Ana Roque in Puerto Rico, and 17<sup>th</sup> Century author Sor Trez de La Cruz.

Indeed, during the feminist movement of the late 1960's, earlier works by female authors were reexamined as literature of merit. In the 1980's, attention finally began to focus on Latin American female writers and the voices of authors such as Silvina Ocampo, Rosario Castellanos, Clarice Lispector, and Luisa Valenzuela were finally heard. Their works became powerful tools for Latin Americans, as men realized they had sisters and mothers with voices, and women watched as their works gained international fame as well (Basnett 251). According to Debra A. Castillo, feminist theory in Latin American lags behind feminist practice and is characterized as subordinate to other discourses. Women's texts are frequently misread as not recognizably innovative and what is still needed is a reexamination of those texts and a rethinking of theory based on the reading of those texts (5).

Women in colonial Latin America were offered three basic choices from which to exercise power: "the home, with its caste system of discrimination against younger or lower-class women, the convent, and the brothel" (Bassnett 250). While women may have asserted some power within these structures, they certainly have enjoyed little power outside their narrow confines. The situation for Latin American women has undergone change, most notably in the past thirty years since the Civil Rights movement during and after the 60's. Women began writing about the problems of living in a patriarchal society, and of being female in Latin America. There are now young scholars and writers whose attitudes have been shaped by debates about feminism and women's particular problems. Among those women who write, there are now many who tend to disregard the literary models of their male counterparts; they instead create works that are often fragmented and marginally fictionalized - a woman's type of writing (Castillo 26-27).

A result of living and reacting to the pressures of being a woman in a patriarchal society can be silence. Eventually, according to Castillo, the woman must break her silence and write. Only in this breaking of silence

can the writer hope to alter the existing opposition, and to initiate some type of change in the oppressive system (43). The new revolution of Latin American women's writing results from generations of the repression and subjugation of women. History includes the fact that, in the past, land inherited by a woman was managed by her husband; when married in the Catholic Church, women had little recourse for unhappy marriages; and women were expected to represent the home and manage domestic affairs without questioning the affairs of their husbands. Subjects that were once forbidden for women to speak about have become acceptable subjects for fiction. Latin American women's discontent seems to have found a voice at last in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Bassnett 262).

Another culture of the Americas witnessing a change in its notions of the power of female voice in literature is the Asian American community. The Asian American literary movement crystallized in the 1960s and was energized by the struggle for civil rights and by anti-Vietnam War activism (Huntley 46). Though it had been preceded by Asian immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the production of internment literature during World War

II, the movement gained momentum after the immigration reforms of 1965, creating major changes in the composition and size of America's Asian population. The term "Asian" now replaces the old designation "Oriental," a term with negative connotations of "exotic otherness and marginality" (Huntley 46-7). According to King-Kok Cheung, "attitudes toward Asian and Asian American reserve have been mostly critical or patronizing" (2). Quiet Asians are seen as "devious, timid, shrewd . . . in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable - or as docile, submissive, and obedient, worthy of the label 'model minority,' just as silent women have traditionally been extolled" (Cheung 2).

Although Asian women in America enjoy an improved social status over what was experienced in their homeland, they still face race discrimination. According to Elaine Kim, "Although sexism has been an issue in Asian American communities, racism has usually been pinpointed as the more important barrier to social and economic equality for Asian American women" (250). Asian American women, whose labor force participation and whose education level is higher than white females, earn significantly less than both white men and white women (251). Though well

represented at the university, Asian women are underrepresented in professional and managerial ranks in comparison to their white counterparts (251). Asian American female jobs tend to be in clerical fields and "in the so-called 'Asian' jobs - in laundry work, garment factory work, food services, personal services, and paid domestic labor" (252). Asian American writers, like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, address the problems that Asian women face as they "[overcome] obstacles peculiar to gender, culture, and race" (Cheung 3). In particular, they tend to address the "multiple problems of speechlessness and stress the importance of breaking silence" (3). They depict silence as being imposed in several ways: by the family who wants to maintain dignity and honor, by the ethnic community, or by the dominant culture who wants to prevent voicing of minority experiences (3).

Maxine Hong Kingston's publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976 created a force in the evolution of Asian American literature, as it did what no other work by an Asian American writer had done -- it earned both critical acclaim and popular success and it also brought attention to works by ethnic minority writers (Huntley 57). It did

not do so without criticism, however. Asian American male writers such as Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, while they express appreciation for some women writers, have objected to Kingston's attempts to portray her experiences from a Chinese American point of view (Kim 198). They allege that her primary concern for publication of her autobiography is the marketplace, and that *The Woman Warrior* represents her attempt to "cash in" on a "feminist fad" (198). Chinese writer Ben Tong accuses Kingston of "selling out . . . her own people by addressing herself to a predominantly white readership gift-boxing old cliches about China and Chinese Americans" (198).

According to Kim, "these and other criticisms of Kingston's perspectives suggest that the critics are suffering from anti-female biases" (199). However, Kim posits, Kingston is not anti-male; "*The Woman Warrior* is an attempt to sort out what being a Chinese American means," particularly in the United States (199). Although Kingston has stated that sexism has been the "primary question in her own consciousness," *The Woman Warrior* is also the depiction of the experience of the "contemporary American born daughter of Chinese immigrant parents" (199).



The power of voice can also be examined through the lens of the African American female literary experience. African American women have faced a long struggle for authority in their attempts at writing in "white/male-supremacist North America" (Lanser 120). African American feminist critics, in the past two decades, have made "amply clear", that "devaluation, neglect, and misreading of black women's writings are pervasive practices in which white men, white women, and black men have taken part" (120). Fiction by African American women and fiction about African American women have been "marginalized not only as insufficiently 'universal' but as insufficiently 'female' and insufficiently 'black'" (121). Contemporary female African American writers, such as Toni Morrison, have been faced with a double dilemma -- they must accommodate the black culture they are writing about, while also responding to mainstream culture. Morrison had to find a way to portray the history of the slave story and its "unspeakable" truth to a black culture and for a broader audience as well. She writes a novel where she "speak[s] the unspeakable;" her narrative takes us "to the site of a black woman's silencing by naming at once the crimes and the criminals who have wrought that silencing, and from

the fragments of 'rememory' to make voice whole" (138). In writing about the silencing of her main characters, and their subsequent coming to voice, she must reveal the horrors created by enslavement, and thus, face alienating her broader audience. Morrison breaks the "silence of a story" that "nobody wants to talk about" (Williams 126).

Morrison's ideas for her novel, *Beloved*, originated in 1974 when she was editing *The Black Book*, an often overlooked publication that chronicled 300 years of black history in scrapbook fashion (Mobley 189). Interestingly, this technique was also used by Chicano writer Elizabeth Martinez in her compilation of *500 Years of Chicano History*. *The Black Book*, which told a "complex story of oppression, resistance, and survival" (190) was published at a time when people feared "the Black power movement of the 1960s and early 1970s would be reduced to faddish rhetoric and mere image rather than understood for its cultural and political implication" (190). Morrison was apprehensive that the African past would be romanticized and ultimately devalue "300 years of Black life on American soil before it was fully recorded, examined, or understood for its complexity and significance" (190). This, indeed, is the charge sometimes leveled at Alex

Haley's *Roots*. In *The Black Book*, Morrison found the story of the slave woman who killed her child rather than have her child face a life of slavery, which formed the historical basis of her novel, *Beloved*. Giving voice to this historical woman became her quest as she set about recording and preserving the truth of African Americans who had survived the trauma of the slave experience (190).

Until the 1940's, literature of both Anglo and African American writers depicted Black women in a stereotyped fashion. Often female characters were developed as a context for other problems and dilemmas society needed to solve (Christian 2). The mammy figure, represented by such characters as the fictional Aunt Jemima, was the most prominent figure in southern white literature, a figure "in direct contrast to the ideal white woman" (2). As critics of the period reveal, the mammy figure tended to be heavy, nurturing, kind, and submissive as opposed to the ideal white woman figure who is frail, incapable of doing hard work, and beautiful in a fragile way. The white woman was depicted as one weak enough to need protection, as in *Gone with the Wind*, which the mammy figure and consequent males provided (2).

In Toni Morrison's novels, written in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, women are depicted in a more realistic fashion as she explores the plight of the black woman in history and the more recent past. Morrison looks at the black woman as a girl and then as a grown woman, who finds strength by examining the world around her, while simultaneously looking within herself. Friendship between two women or girls is often used as the lens through which the contradictions of life and experience are viewed: "Her heroines are double-faced - looking outward and searching inward, trying to find some continuity between the seasons, the earth, other people, the cycles of life and themselves" (Christian 25). In moving away from the traditional stereotyped roles in black women's literature, and by omitting the mammy figure, Morrison and her contemporaries illustrate how far black women writers have moved from the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Morrison's characters illuminate the black woman's past and present their experience in the United States, as they go about attempting to record history and then transform it (25).

Morrison's novels "indict the domination and violence associated with white supremacy," yet at the same time

they capture and celebrate African American language, the "linguistic melody of black culture" (Williams 13). Morrison states, "The language, only the language . . . . It is the thing that black people love so much - the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion" (13). Morrison, and other African American writers, are "concerned with what happens when people lose their language and then remain excluded from the dominant discourse" (13). There is a healing power in language, often shown in the African American folk tradition, and it is this healing that Morrison and her counterparts use to create a sense of self-identity in their characters that enable them to reclaim their lives.

Each of the works discussed in this thesis, the Latin American, Asian American, and African American tale, centers on the power of voice for women. Although the notion of silencing is treated differently in each book, especially in regards to ethnicity, the idea is developed that women must speak in an effort to right the wrongs in their world, and women must also write and record their findings for the future of their cultural literary inheritance. The magical or supernatural effects created

in each book work to empower each author's female characters. It is through these spirits from the past that the women characters learn to find their own voice, creating a unique harmony of sound for future generations of women.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*

Sometimes a writer . . . has the  
ability to speak for others who  
have been kept in silence.

Isabel Allende, Cohn

In *The House of the Spirits*, Isabel Allende creates characters who use language and the power of voice to reclaim their past and to preserve memories. It is through the use of the supernatural that Allende provides a means for her female characters to express a female voice as they also relate their history. Allende, part of the feminist literary awakening in Latin America, uses her fictional story to empower women as she relays what has been silenced in the past. Through the novel, written in 1982, we glean a 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Chile through the female lineage presented, although Chile does not necessarily stand for Latin America. The story of the Trueba women parallels the history of Chile. Chile has an Andean population that struggles with its Spanish colonial inheritance. Part of this struggle is spiritual, in the

mixing of native and Catholic beliefs, giving rise to the rhetorical use of the supernatural.

Four generations of women appear in the novel: Nivea, Clara, Blanca, and Alba -- great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and daughter. Both Clara and Alba play the role of historian. Clara keeps track, in a non-chronological order, of the incidents in her daily life that she deems important. Alba, following in the path of her grandmother, recognizes the importance of preserving history, which leads her to record and organize the notebooks kept by Clara. Clara maintains these notebooks to bear "witness to life" (Jenkins 62). Allende explores the relationship between silence and voice as her female characters learn to speak through the act of writing, while existing in a patriarchal society that "ordain[s] silence as the appropriate expression of female experience" (63). Women were expected to do no more than carry on polite conversation. Allende allows women in the novel to establish a voice, while specific figures convey their beliefs in the transcendence of the spirit through the medium of ghosts.

The spirit world establishes a mood in the text. Spirits allow women to empower each other as they fight



predestined roles, roles that include arranged marriages and bearing many children: "She wondered if she was pregnant again. Despite cleansings with vinegar and spongings with gall, [Nivea] had given birth to fifteen children, of whom eleven were still alive . . . " (Allende 3). Finally, ghosts and spirits help to define and energize the two main characters in the novel, Clara and Alba. Authors have long used ghosts to make their work more suspenseful and their plots more complicated, but, according to Ruth Jenkins, the use of the supernatural in the European canon tends to marginalize or discredit it: "Formal realism" tends to be the norm, "the understandable and ordinary rather than the unexplained and fantastic" (61). Allende uses supernatural elements as a "specific rhetorical strategy" that "expose[s] and counters" cultural and gender roles (61).

Allende uses ghosts and spirits to create psychic and emotional space. Ghosts and spirits provide the women in the novel means of resistance. As a child, Clara is forbidden to contact the world of the spirits: "Her father forbade her to read the future in cards and to invoke ghosts and mischievous spirits" (Allende 77). During Clara's self-imposed silences, however, she turns to the

spirit world for comfort and escape. Her mother, Nivea, understands, "that the more limitations and shocks her daughter was subjected to the madder she became" (77). During a period of nine years of silence, from age 10 to 19, Clara realizes she possesses the power to predict the future and to contact the world of the dead. She escapes from a male-dominated world by bonding with other female spirit-seekers; in particular she becomes friends with the three Mora sisters and continues this relationship throughout her life. During a second period of silence, she escapes from her loveless marriage with Esteban Trueba by associating with the outcasts and the needy; she thus finds her own identity as a caring, benevolent woman. She associates with whom she chooses in spite of her Trueba's authority. Her final act, when she returns to life as a spirit herself, justifies her belief in the power of the supernatural, as she is able to help her granddaughter survive cruel and unjust political conditions.

Throughout the novel we are introduced to "women with green hair or no navels," women with mermaid bodies, tables that move, objects that lift, tarot cards, spiritualists who gather to talk to the dead, and then walking and talking ghosts (Foreman 370). The "Magical

Realism" used in the novel is not the same as the surreal or the fantastic; rather, it "presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected" (370). Allende states that she records "incredible or magnificent facts - which, in Latin America, are not hyperbole, because that is the dimension of our reality" (Cohn 374). At times the spirits abandon the house, but they do not go far away.

Although covering the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the novel is based on the military coup that ended Salvador Allende's rule in 1973 and depicts its bloody aftermath. The characters in the novel are based on real people and actual political figures. Salvador Allende, Isabel Allende's uncle, was the socialist candidate who came briefly to power before being killed by a military coup. Pedro Tercero Garcia, Blanca's lover, "represents famous poet-singer, Victor Jara, whose hands were also mutilated" (Foreman 379). The Poet, whose death follows the President's, is Pablo Neruda. Additionally, Allende's female characters are based on her own family members and friends active in the implementation of a new government in Chile (379). Indeed, Allende dedicates the text to the

women in her family, who while suffering political upheaval, nevertheless enjoyed upper class status and privilege. She represents this kind of background with her depiction of the wealthy landowner and patron, Esteban Trueba. The Trueba family, including its women, is above the peasantry, even though members sometimes seduced the lower class.

In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende juxtaposes female characters with traditional patriarchal figures. In relations between patron and tenant, father and child, and husband and wife, men dominate through, at times, cruelty and intimidation; the women in the novel offer power through intelligence and morality and, at times, magic. The key male persona in the novel, and the one who most represents Latin American authority, is Esteban Trueba. Trueba is the head of the family, which he attempts to control with all of his power; he is also a senator with political influence. It is Trueba's voice, in a first person narration, that the reader hears throughout the novel. We see him emerge from a humble family citizen to become both an abusive landowner and a man influential enough to undermine the new government, helping to bring about a counter-revolution. He rules his

land with an iron fist and has no qualms about keeping his tenants in poverty or about raping women workers who are employed by him. Of a horrible temperament, Trueba treats violently peasant girls, his ranch workers, his wife and daughter, and his political enemies. Consumed by rage, he breaks furniture constantly and even cuts off three fingers from the hand of his daughter's lover. He does not recognize the error of his ways until he is close to dying; only then, because he is taught by the women around him, does he see he has been wrong (Earle 550). He achieves political standing in the novel, only to ultimately realize that the consequences of his acts are not what he desires at all, and that the military coup he has aligned with is corrupt. He finally accepts the fact that his wife does not, and will never, love him, and that he has estranged himself from any positive relationship with his daughter.

On the other hand, the women in the novel, Clara, Blanca, and Alba, represent intuitive understanding and awareness of the past and present. Throughout the narrative, their role is "the preservation of moral and social conscience and civic responsibility" (Earle 551). Clara Del Valle's name "literally means light, brightness,

lucidity - one who lights the way" (Foreman 375). Trueba calls her "Clara, the clearest." Following her death, her son Jaime muses that "she seemed to be detaching herself from the world, growing ever lighter, more transparent, more winged" (Allende 289). Clara's association with the spirit world further develops this persona. Her daughter's name, Blanca, means white, and her granddaughter's name, Alba, means dawn, the beginning of light (Foreman 375-6). Although Clara records events throughout her life, it is Alba, her granddaughter, who understands the role of writing in understanding the past. Allende illustrates through writing, that the release from the bonds of pain is possible, and it is through writing that one is able to break from the past. The past in this novel refers to a semi-feudal state of affairs, a social situation threatened by the invasion of communist ideas.

According to Susan Bassnett, the novel is "essentially the story of women's emergence in contemporary Latin American society" - the story of women coming into their voice (252). Clara's mother, Nivea, who gives birth to fifteen children, is a suffragette. Even though the women's movement is only just beginning, she realizes the need for change in the status of her

counterparts; she reflects on the styles of the day when she states, "they had all agreed that until women shortened their dresses and their hair and stopped wearing corsets, it made no difference if they studied medicine or had the right to vote, because they would not have the strength to do it, but she herself was not brave enough to be among the first to give up the fashion" (Allende 6).

Clara continues her mother's efforts because, instead of choosing to live as a middle class wife, she defies Trueba and acts as a steward to the poor. She prefers working on her notebooks and contacting the spirit world by herself and with her friends, rather than simply reigning over the estate her husband has furnished. Her daughter, Blanca, continues with her mother's charitable works, has a secret, continuing love affair with a poet/singer revolutionary, bears an illegitimate child, but never stands up to her father. Alba, Blanca's daughter, also involves herself in altruistic endeavors as she attempts to alleviate suffering and hunger among the disenfranchised and those who are political victims. She also becomes involved in student protest and has a relationship with a revolutionary leader, defying her father in the process (Bassnett 252).

According to Bassnett, the women depicted in the novel can be divided into three categories, each typifying a different aspect of universal womanhood:

The line from Nivea, down through Clara, Blanca and finally Alba, narrates the story of the middle-class woman's emergence as a political animal, aware of her public role and determined to take an active part in the way the world is run. The line from Pancha Garcia . . . is the line that results in the horrific figure of Esteban Garcia, secret police chief and self-made tyrant . . . the third line is personified by Transito Soto, the whore who rises through the skilful use of her own body and her wits to the ultimate ironic position of being the only person who can arrange for Alba to be released from the torture chambers of Esteban Garcia.

(253)

The subtle emergence of female power in the novel is best exemplified in the character of Clara. To enable her to survive as a woman dominated by an overbearing husband, she retreats into a world of ghosts and spirits, a world where silence is her saving defense. Both of the times



she falls into voluntary silence "involve solidarity with another woman and a rejection of masculine control" (Swanson 156). Her first silence follows the death of her sister, Rosa the Beautiful, and lasts for nine years. Clara had predicted a death would occur, as part of her supernatural powers, but she had no idea it would be her sister. She doesn't speak; she is terrified that Rosa died because of her prediction. Her mother attempts to explain that she cannot bring on events, only see them in advance, but Clara, a "small, silent shadow" does not hear her (Allende 34). Ironically, Rosa's death occurs because of an error. The glass of brandy that Rosa drinks is laced with rat poisoning and meant for Severo Del Valle, her father, who aspires for the Liberal Party candidacy to Congress. For young Clara, this is an additional assault on her good sense and her solidarity with her sister; she loses her because of the evil games of men. Even though Clara sees her sister's future through her supernatural powers, the shock is ultimately too great, resulting in self-imposed silence.

Clara's senses are assaulted when she accidentally witnesses the ongoing autopsy of Rosa. As she peers into the autopsy room, located in the servant's quarters of the

house, Clara sees Rosa's body on the kitchen table where their meals were normally prepared by Nana. Her body has a gash down the center and her intestines lay beside her on the salad platter. As Clara watches, she imagines that Dr. Cuevas, "that kind, sweet, wonderful old man" has transformed into a "dark, fat vampire" while his assistant stands, "with his shirt stained with blood and his eyes drunk with love" (Allende 38). As she witnesses the horror, Clara believes she sees a "supplicating and humiliated expression" upon her dead sister's face. She quietly watches the doctor complete his tasks and she also watches the assistant commit a type of "symbolic rape" on the dead Rosa (Swanson 156). Watching this scene, Clara becomes frozen until the first lights of dawn appear and "only then did she slide back into her bed, feeling within her the silence of the entire world. Silence filled her utterly. She did not speak again until nine years later . . ." (Allende 39). Her new awareness of death and its subsequent grief, and her new awareness of the evil inherent in men signal an end to her innocence and an end to her childhood. Clara's solidarity with her beloved sister is severed because of the corruption of the world.

Clara thus begins her engagement with the world of the supernatural.

To end her nine-year silence, Clara announces she is to be married to Esteban Trueba. They marry and have a daughter together. Because of his cruel, controlling treatment of her, Clara removes herself from her husband, both emotionally and spiritually, escaping into her own world of ghosts and spirits. Esteban Trueba gives only the best to Clara; he provides her with a palatial estate with servants and also a ranch home at Tres Marias. Trueba believes that he has given all the refinements of life to his wife, but when "the shipment of furniture and household goods [he] had ordered to surprise her arrived at the door, all she said was how 'lovely' it was" (Allende 178). He is continually dismayed that no matter what he purchases for her, she pays no attention and retreats to her notebooks and her tarot cards. In Trueba's mind, he has fulfilled the duties of a noble husband and he cannot comprehend her reticence. His daughter maintains a distance as well, but he is not able to see his own faults as he believes he is a good husband. Eventually, he attempts to commit rape again to prove his misguided manhood, but his body fails him. Unable to

understand the needs of his wife and daughter, he exists in the limited, narrow world he has created.

The second time Clara invokes her silence comes after Trueba violently strikes her, knocking out her teeth. This fight follows her defense of their daughter's relationship with Pedro Tercero Garcia, a peasant with Marxist beliefs. This second reaction is not a retreat into silence, but rather a reaction to a wrong. For Clara, she commits an act of rebellion against her husband who has unjustly harmed her (Swanson 159). When Trueba finds his daughter, Blanca, with Pedro, he reacts by charging her with his horse and by beating her mercilessly. When Clara sees her bloody, beaten daughter, she retaliates by saying, "Pedro Tercero Garcia hasn't done a thing you haven't done yourself . . . you also slept with unmarried women not of your own class. The only difference is that he did it for love. And so did Blanca" (Allende 200). Clara is, of course, correct, and Trueba is unable to control his rage. Clara has exposed the coveted double standard. Clara then removes the wedding ring she has worn for twenty years and never speaks to her husband again, making a conscious decision to "reject patriarchal values" and to acknowledge the

"material reality of class struggle" (Swanson 160).

Clara's retreat into silence and the supernatural world is the only recourse available to her and the only way she can maintain both her dignity and her spirit in the face of patriarchal authority.

Trueba finds he must get used to the fact that his wife prefers the company of her spiritualist friends, and that his home is continually filled with not only telepathists, and fellow séance members, but also of the hungry, the artistic, and the needy whom Clara attempts to help. In this realm, Clara reigns supreme, "she holds court with her friends" as they attempt to contact extraterrestrial beings and "carr[y] on conversations with the other world" (Cohn 380). Clara and her friends take over sections of the house and these sections are later partitioned off for her during Trueba's terms in office (380). Trueba is fascinated by Clara and even spies on her by drilling peek holes in the bathroom wall. However, he is not able to possess her, and when he tries to control her, she moves farther away: "Clara did not belong to him . . . if she continued living in a world of apparitions, three-legged that moved of their own volition, and cards that spelled out the future . . . he

wanted control over that undefined and luminous material that lay within her and that escaped him" (Allende 96). Clara finds individual fulfillment and empowerment as a woman, in spite of her husband's controlling behavior.

What Trueba does not understand is that Clara has won; she has refused to let her husband retain total control of her and she has abandoned the normal desires of a woman of her means as she retreats into her own private world. Clara's self-imposed silence towards her husband is preferable to a life with him and she finds a satisfying success by rebelling against him. Clara's notebooks also signal her defiance of his control. She insists on "narrating events in terms of their importance rather than in chronological order," events such as the death of her beloved dog, Barrabas, and other personal experiences (Cohn 380).

Throughout his marriage to Clara, Trueba diminishes in size. No one else seems to notice, but he realizes his clothes have become loose and that his sleeves and pant legs are suddenly too long. He does not know why he is shrinking, and "he did not tell a soul, just as he never talked about his pain, because it was a matter of pride" (Allende 181). Clara begins to look larger and taller,

but he convinces himself it is only an optical illusion. Trueba admits, "before, I had always felt like a giant next to her, but when I lay down next to her on the bed I saw that we were almost the same size" (Allende 293). This juxtaposition of size differences reflects the relationship between the married couple. While Trueba appears to be growing literally smaller, Clara, in her world of silence towards her husband and her involvement with the spirit world, appears to grow larger, and more importantly, stronger. As her marriage progresses, the rigid class and gender roles begin to loosen, but only because Clara gains strength and knowledge of her world and her place. She travels alone for the first time, becomes a working woman, and has a friendly relationship with Pedro Segundo Garcia, the peasant worker at Tres Marias, in spite of her husband (Swanson 160). Clara creates her own life, ignoring her husband's rule by surrounding herself with her daughter, her granddaughter, her political causes, her spirit world, and her notebooks.

Trueba undergoes a learning process throughout the novel, culminating in his final awareness that he has been selfish, and that the women in his life are capable of understanding what confuses him. His fantasy world is

subverted with reality when his granddaughter is arrested and he realizes, "his ideas were not as clear as they had been and the line between what was good and what was bad had blurred" (Allende 399). Just as Clara's retreat into the spiritual world is an escape into a better place, Trueba also lives in a fantasy world - the fantasy of a pure patriarchal order - that is broken by the spirit of his wife, daughter, and granddaughter (Swanson 163-4). But his learning process continues and by the end of the novel, he has moved to Alba's position. Allende presents a tale of affirmation - that "the human being can survive even the worst of horrors and even the most entrenched reactionary can change and find peace" (Bassnett 254). The novel is about forgiveness and about moving on. Through Trueba, we see that change and awareness are possible, even for the most domineering of men, and even for countries with evolving political systems.

Allende deploys two points of view in *The House of the Spirits*. Trueba's first person narration occurs frequently throughout the text, while the third person narration of the family's history is the account of first Clara and then Alba. Although it first seems that a male is central to both the plot and the structure of the work,



as Trueba recalls the distant past, it is Clara and Alba who deliver the principal messages of the novel. Allende demonstrates that while the "male, patriarchal leaders and writers focus on major, significant events as they chronicle and control the course of history, the women, like Clara in her notebooks, center more on the trivial" (Magnarelli 44). According to Magnarelli, "Allende proposes that our focus has been misdirected historically as we have allowed male narrators and patriarchal discourse to determine what is of consequence and what is irrelevant" (44). When describing Clara's notebook writing, Allende says, "She was already in the habit of writing down important matters, and afterward, when she was mute, she also recorded trivialities" (9). Allende posits that these trivialities have had more influence on historical events than we might realize, that the course of history is often changed by the "ostensibly insignificant" events (Magnarelli 44). For example, although Trueba's rape of a peasant girl seems only to serve as an index of character, this act leads to a son who later imprisons and tortures Alba, which significantly changes the direction of family history (44-45). The female narrators "are portrayed and perceive themselves as

a part of a historical continuum of all those women who came before and will come after" (45).

Presented as the central narrator, Trueba embodies the patriarch, one who does everything to keep his power. Allende seems to be saying that patriarchs like Trueba have attempted and will always attempt to maintain their position(46). Indeed, Alba tells us in the epilogue that it is Trueba who suggests that they write the story of their family's history. But it is Alba who does most of the labor -- the writing, and Clara as well(47). The framing device in the novel, which consists of beginning and ending with the voice of Alba, defuses the male voice.

As the novel comes to its climax, Allende provides the most powerful use of the supernatural. The supernatural is used in the novel to empower women to fight injustices, and also to provide women with a means in which to express their voice. This is best exemplified when Alba is taken prisoner by the military regime that has overtaken the socialists. When Alba is captured and taken prisoner for her aide and support of the socialist regime, she comes close to giving up all hope, as she endures beatings, rapes, and finally imprisonment in the doghouse -- a small, filthy, dark structure built for

solitary confinement. When her life has become unbearable and she is facing death, the spirit of Clara comes to her and tells her she must write the story of her circumstances: "Grandmother Clara . . . appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive . . . . [She] brought the saving idea of writing in her *mind*, without paper or pencil, to keep her thoughts occupied," thus saving both her sanity and herself (Allende 414). The doghouse is filled with the people of her past and the people of her life as she "took down their words at breakneck pace, despairing because while she was filling a page, the one before it was erased. This activity kept her fully occupied" (414). When the guards lift what is left of her body out of the doghouse and return her to her torturer, Esteban Garcia, "she did not recognize him. She was beyond his power" (415). The spirit of Clara, Alba's grandmother, provides the means for her to survive and also the means to both express her voice and to expose the corrupt political system. Clara's words empower Alba and allow her to be restored both spiritual and emotionally. Alba's "mental" writing signals the beginning of her development as a woman and as a writer. She wants to survive in order to

tell her story, to avenge the wrongs of her past by telling the story that will challenge the existing conditions in her society.

Patricia Hart argues that the magical and supernatural elements in *The House of the Spirits* are a metaphor for passivity in both Clara and Blanca and it is Alba who must break from this passivity in order to accept responsibility. She states that Clara uses her clairvoyance as an excuse for inaction. Hart feels that remaining silent for nine years is the index of passivity. She alleges that since Clara has seen the future, there is no point in fighting the inevitable. Blanca also is passive; she drifts into marriage with someone she doesn't really know or like because she believes her lover dead. Blanca also cannot make up her mind to live with Pedro Tercero, putting him off year after year, decade after decade. Hart feels that both women do not face the problems of their lives directly. She posits that it is Alba only who takes responsibility and breaks the chains of passivity that keeps the women in the Trueba family from meeting life fully. According to Hart, Alba learns to be assertive and determined from her grandfather, Esteban Trueba, who tries everything he knows to win

Clara's love. She feels that as far as love goes, this example is stronger than the one Clara presents with her "crush" on Pedro Segundo, and Blanca, who won't commit to live with her lover. Hart presents Clara's clairvoyance as an excuse for letting the future come to her instead of going to it. She makes no attempt to leave her husband and seek love elsewhere. She preserves the marriage so she will not have to make any decisions and she can remain in the grand house, even though "she does not care to speak to the man who pays the expenses" (54).

Allende, herself, has stated that her own grandmother was a model for Clara and that she really possessed telekinetic powers. When examining the behavior of the three women characters, it is important to note that they lived during different generations. By Alba's generation, the rules of matrimony and husband-wife roles had changed. Clara's passivity, if we can call it that, was a means for her to survive in her intolerable marriage, just as Alba had to survive her torturous situation when imprisoned. Clara, and Blanca as well, were not presented with as many choices as Alba, who grows up in a different time period, the 1970s. For Clara, a divorce is out of the question and so she is forced to learn to live as well as possible

under the conditions presented. Allende also shows that silencing is not reserved for women characters only. Clara's son, Jaime, also faces the impossibility of fighting against a male authority, and he too becomes silent. Instead of arguing with his father, "he acquired the habit of silence and soon discovered it was more comfortable" (Allende 332). Jaime, like Clara, goes on with his life and his work as a doctor, finding the only way to tolerate Trueba is to ignore him. Trueba runs his home like a dictator; standing up to such a man would not bring desired results, in fact, it would likely bring severe punishment. Through this example, Allende solidifies her point that Trueba, who represents the political dictatorship that existed in Chile, is consumed by power.

Clara's avocation of writing in her notebooks, consorting with friends and spirits, and aiding the poor are escape techniques, but, more importantly, they are her life's work. It is through these means that she finds an outlet for her assertiveness and her love. The character of Ferula, Trueba's spinster sister, provides an example of what a woman could expect if she overtly went against the wishes of her husband or brother. Ferula breaks the

rules of the patriarchal society when she falls in love with Clara. Trueba becomes aware of her passion for Clara and violently banishes her from the family home. He supports her by sending her money throughout her banishment, but Ferula chooses to live in poverty in a convent. After an absence of six years, Ferula returns to the Trueba home in spirit form. She boldly marches up to Clara and kisses her on the forehead, then walks out, leaving the family in shock. Clara, however, knows that Ferula is a ghost, "despite the fact that nothing in her sister-in-law's appearance in any way betrayed her state" (Allende 148). Clara and Esteban travel to Ferula's home the following day. In the nondescript, poverty infested neighborhood, they find Ferula's home, which was in "a long passageway of ruined houses, all exactly the same: small, impoverished dwellings built of cement, each with a single door and two windows" (149). When they find her dead, Clara asks to be left alone with her. In an attempt at "returning to her in death the infinite attentions that Ferula had given her in life," Clara carefully washes and dresses Ferula for burial (151). Then she kisses her forehead just as Ferula had done in her own house as a spirit a few hours before and tells her "the truth is that

since you left me no one has ever loved me as you did"  
(152).

Ferula is an example of what would happen to a woman who cannot assert her identity. Ferula becomes a non-existent person; she exists only to serve others. Since she has no individual or familial identity of her own, she creates one with her wigs and theatrical costumes. When found by Clara, Esteban, and the priest in the two room tenement, Ferula is "festooned like an Austrian queen, she wore a moth-eaten velvet dress and petticoats of yellow taffeta" (Allende 151). She is also wearing the bizarre curly wig of an opera singer. Father Antonio explains that she liked to wear used clothing - found in the garbage or purchased at second-hand stores: "'she would make herself up and put on these wigs, but she never hurt a fly. On the contrary, until her last, she always said the rosary for the salvation of sinners'" (151). When Clara calls in her husband and Father Antonio to make the burial arrangements, they found the "unopened envelopes of money Esteban had sent his sister once a month for all those years" (152). Clara understands that Ferula would want the money to go to the priest for charity, but Esteban does not understand. He shouts, "Why did she have



to live like this when she had more than enough money?" (153). Clara answers him by saying gently, "Because she didn't have anything else" (153). Since she had been forced to live without family and without personal love, Ferula sacrifices herself and her own comfort for others. She dressed up in eccentric costumes to create identity and to become someone else.

Trueba despises her "spirit of sacrifice, her severity, her vocation for poverty" as it makes him feel guilty and seems to be a "reproach toward his own egotistical, sensual, power-hungry nature" (Allende 152). As a patriarchal tyrant, Trueba deploras what he believes are feminine qualities - qualities of sacrifice and selflessness that Ferula, as well as other female characters in the novel, possessed. The female desire to serve others, in direct contrast to his own selfish exploits, has to be eliminated and erased in order for Trueba to feel he retains superiority in his own patriarchal world. Ferula's experience exemplifies the few choices available to a woman in a traditional Chilean culture. If Clara had chosen to leave her husband, she would not have fared any better.

Blanca has a choice to make as well. She chooses to remain in her childhood home, never committing to her lover, Pedro Tercero, because of the dangers of his life style. She is not being passive; she consciously makes a decision not to share Pedro's way of living. He is a reactionary who lives in a house of boards and corrugated metal, and although he moves to an apartment for Blanca, he cannot provide a safe place for their daughter to grow up. When faced with the decision, Blanca states, "she could not let Alba grow up there, playing with other children in the street and on the steps . . ." (Allende 312). This is not a passive statement made by Blanca; she is aware of the ramifications of both decisions and chooses the more intelligent one.

It is a tribute to the character of Clara that she asserts herself in a patriarchal culture. Her husband's estate is a microcosm of Latin American at this time. Although she remains physically silent for many years of her life, her voice surfaces in her notebooks and in her relations with those other than her husband. In addition, her silence is instrumental in Trueba's change. Without the thinking and reflecting that he does in his narrations, he would not have reached the point at the

end where he is able to help Alba and to understand that he is wrong. Clara most effectively teaches him through silence.

In addition to the help she receives from the spirit of Clara, Alba finds power her own voice through the feminine bonding that occurs following her imprisonment. When Alba is released from her torture chamber, she is taken to a concentration camp where she is brought back to life by a group of caring women. The women in the camp sing "The Ode to Joy" as they rally around each other in support and spirit. Alba finds camaraderie with these women, and is reunited with her old friend Ana Diaz. Ana finds a notebook and gives it to Alba to begin her writing. The women spend their days singing, giving voice to their solidarity. Even though the guards bang on the walls insisting they stop, the women refuse and only sing louder. Alba regains her strength and begins to realize that "the days of Colonel Garcia and all those like him [were] numbered, because they [had] not been able to destroy the spirit of these women" (Allende 429). From here, Alba is able to begin her writing.

Although Garcia and his corrupt regime almost silence Alba, she prevails. With the help of the women in the

camp, and through the spirit of her grandmother, Alba is able to compose her notebooks, giving a voice to her family and to all women silenced in the past. It is through the use of the spiritual world and feminine bonding that feminine voice is able to be heard. Through the power of writing and the power of voice, Alba is able to make sense of her world and to break the power of abuse as she exposes the past. The writing recorded in the notebooks by the female characters in *The House of the Spirits* depicts both the importance of individual voice and the transcendence of the female spirit.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

If you don't talk, you can't have a personality.

Maxine Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Kingston relays her story in a part-fictional, part-autobiographical manner. The work depicts Kingston's effort to learn to use her own voice and also to find empowerment as an Asian American while living in a dual world that consists of what is honorable in the Chinese culture, and what is accepted in the American culture. Giving voice to ghosts of past family members while listening to stories of empowerment as well as finding strength within herself to overcome cultural obstacles, enable the author to eventually find her own voice. By breaking the silence of cultural oppression that she finds in her outside life as well as inside herself, Kingston learns to become a woman warrior. Like the characters in *The House of the Spirits*, Kingston must also fight the established tradition imposed in her own patriarchal society; however, her primary battle is somewhat different. Kingston's major battle is with the Chinese culture itself and she experiences continuous

confrontations with a society that demands its citizens follow traditional sexist roles.

In traditional Chinese society women were considered fit for "procreation and domestic work" only (Huntley 109). Confucius "categorized women with slaves or *xiaoren*, a word which also means 'inferior men'" (109). Since women were confined to the home, society found it unnecessary for them to learn to read or write; only courtesans, and not wives and daughters, were educated (109). In her autobiography, Kingston portrays the "culturally embedded patriarchal assumptions that define Maxine and the women in her family" (109). In the Chinese tradition followed by her mother, women's lives were defined by the *Three Obediences* and *Four Virtues* of Confucian philosophy. The *Obediences* required a woman to obey her father and brothers while unmarried, to obey her husband in marriage, and then to obey her sons when she was widowed. The *Virtues* required chastity and obedience, and the perfection of domestic skills. Women were supposed to be silent and acquiescent, and the custom of foot-binding ensured their immobility (109).

Girl children were, and still are, considered less desirable than boys. In China, when a girl baby is born,

the family is disappointed and the infant often ignored, or worse, sold to someone who wanted to raise a servant (Huntley 109). In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston remembers that on Saturdays, her uncle came to take the boys in the family shopping. When Kingston and her sister expressed the desire to go along, the uncle shouted, "No Girls!" The females were left home to clean the house and prepare dinner (Challener 85). She also remembers that when a girl was born, no family celebration was held. However, when a boy was born, the family followed the Chinese tradition of engaging in a month-long party. Pictures of male babies were sent to relatives; no pictures were sent of female offspring (85). Additionally, she remembers her neighbors and family saying things like: "There is no profit in raising girls," "When you raise girls, you are raising children for strangers," "Better to raise geese than girls," and "Feeding girls is like feeding cowbirds, there's no benefit in it" (85). Experiencing such blatant sexism encouraged Kingston to write her autobiography.

Kingston opens her autobiography with her mother's admonition "you must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you" (3). Brave Orchid, Kingston's mother, proceeds to tell her daughter a "talk-story," a secret story with

an underlying lesson for the young Kingston. "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (5). The book is made up of five "Talk-Stories," each contained in itself. Brave Orchid tells these stories to her daughter in an effort to teach her not to embarrass or humiliate her family and also to teach her about life. Each of these stories is a woman's story that explores not only the adversity that women face, but also the dilemma faced by women who are first generation Chinese American as they learn to balance culture, voice, and self.

In the first talk-story of the novel, "No Name Woman," Kingston describes one of the many Chinese cultural obstacles that the young Kingston faced in her childhood. Brave Orchid relays the story of her ancestral aunt, a married woman in China who, although her husband had been gone for several years, becomes mysteriously pregnant. This pregnancy, of course, threatens the established and accepted behavior of cultural Chinese tradition. As a citizen of "old China," the aunt was watched by the village, which began counting the months her husband had been gone to America. She was convicted before she was tried and the village orchestrated a raid



against her - led by the man who impregnated her. In the raid, the aunt's home is destroyed, the stock slaughtered, and her personal possessions annihilated. Although the true story is never told - was she raped, was she forced into sex? - and we never know if the story is true, Kingston makes it her quest to explain what happens to her nameless aunt in an effort to provide a voice for her. She essentially gives a voice to one who is voiceless. Kingston realizes that "women in old China did not chose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil" (Kingston 6). No Name Woman's real husband, who was part of an arranged marriage, left for America immediately after their first night together. The second man, Kingston imagines, "was not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed" (Kingston 7). He might have said, "If you tell your family, I'll beat you. I'll kill you. Be here again next week" (Kingston 7). Women were conditioned to do as they were told without question in the patriarchal society of traditional Chinese society. Because they were forced to assume subservient roles, No Name Woman did not know how to reject the sexual advances of the man. It is the society that is responsible for this subjugation of its

women that is to blame for No Name Woman's death - not the aunt herself, Kingston surmises.

Kingston then proceeds to imagine a new story about her nameless aunt and her motivations, creating an image of a woman in love who spent time in front of her mirror in an effort to tempt the man. The premise of this alternate story of her aunt's plight displays Kingston's hope that perhaps her aunt was searching for affection and love. Ostensibly, this aunt's love was a romantic love, and it was returned by her lover. Kingston then, however, returns to the reality of her nameless aunt's situation, her betrayal, and ultimately her severe punishment. The nameless aunt realizes, upon giving birth, that the child is doomed to namelessness in the Chinese culture. Because of this realization, she commits a murder-suicide. Following the raid on her home, No Name Aunt gives birth in a pigsty - and then kills both herself and her baby by drowning in the family well.

Kingston is haunted by the story of her ancestral aunt, and she feels, after fifty years of neglect, that her relative must be resurrected and given a voice. If Kingston remains silent, she risks becoming like her nameless aunt, who spent her short life in silence. She

knows she must find her own personal voice during her lifetime. Feeling guilty, she has already kept the woman's story a secret most of her life, but she fears retaliation from her family upon telling it. After finishing the story, Brave Orchid orders her daughter not to tell that she knows the history of her aunt: "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her" (Kingston 5).

This statement develops two points about both the present and the past cultural mores and also about mother-daughter relationships. Not telling her father, and keeping the story silent, testifies to the fact that the culture is patriarchal and the father's authority is unquestioned (Challener 84) but it also points to an alliance between mother and daughter to exclude the father. To Kingston, since she is not allowed to ask about her relatives, No Name Woman has become a ghost, a ghost who remains forever hungry and who haunts her relatives. Ironically, the Chinese relatives that were supposed to support and help her provided no assistance. They were not successful in keeping No Name Woman from the man who impregnated her and they did not fight back when her home was ransacked - they simply accepted both. The opening

pages of the novel exemplify how men can silence women, and more importantly, "testifies to the longer history of Chinese women being abused and then silenced by men" (84). By recording this history of her aunt in her novel, Kingston takes revenge on a culture that denies its women a voice. By acknowledging her story, Kingston restores her voice.

The story of No Name Woman is told to Kingston by her mother and from her mother's point of view. Kingston's narrative voice tells the story in her own words, from her own point of view. Thus, she is faced with making sense of her mother's story and the reader is faced with making sense of Kingston's story, who was originally just the listener. We have to assume that Brave Orchid told the story to her daughter to teach her a preventative moral lesson -- that women who have sex outside of marriage bring shame to the Chinese family and face severe punishment. However, Kingston, in her interpretation as she "writes" the talk-story, presents the reader with a different emphasis and conclusion. Based on patriarchal society in traditional China, women were to do as they were told; they were not allowed to comment, question, or rebel. To Kingston, the patriarchal beliefs of this

society are responsible for No Name Woman's adultery. Since she followed the rules and did as she was told, she was not strong enough to fight off the man who impregnated her. Kingston views the story, not as a lesson reinforcing silence, but as a lesson emphasizing voice. If she remains obedient and silent herself, she faces a fate like her nameless aunt. She must not only provide a voice and a story for her aunt, but she must also find her own personal voice to survive. No Name Woman was attacked and abandoned and then forgotten by her family and by her society because what happened to her posed a threat to the established order of this patriarchal society; Kingston, if she hopes to attain her own voice, must fight against this very same traditional society. The first talk-story of her autobiography, then, establishes this intent.

Both *The Woman Warrior* and *The House of the Spirits* explore the concepts of cultural silencing and the attainment of voice. In both works, keeping silent results from being a woman in a patriarchal society because in both societies, an appropriate expression for women is silence. In *The Woman Warrior*, the talk-stories Brave Orchid tells her daughter are meant, on one hand, to instruct her to be passive, to do as she is told, and to

make the correct choices so as not to bring shame to her family. On the other hand, they empower her, which may be what Brave Orchid intentionally plans. When her ancestral aunt commits suicide, the aunt not only loses her voice, but more importantly, she also loses her place in the family and is never spoken of again. Kingston must tell her story to expose the past and to give her nameless aunt voice. It is in the writing of her story that Kingston is able to end the cultural silencing of her ancestor, thus freeing herself and other women of her society. In *The House of the Spirits*, when Clara is silent for nine years, her husband to be, Esteban Trueba, considers the "prolonged silence . . . a virtue" (Allende 88) displaying the male viewpoint toward a woman's place in his world. Like Kingston's need to write about her aunt in order to provide her with a voice and a story, Allende also gives witness to the saving power of writing. Through both Clara and Alba's power of voice, the truth of their experience is conveyed in writing, exposing the society they live in and giving a voice to the women in the Latin American society as well. Clara's silences are the result of living in a patriarchal society, but they also become instrumental in change for her husband and her society in

general. No Name Woman's silence provides the impetus for change, because when young Kingston hears the pitiful story of her ghostly aunt, she begins to plan to make her own life and the lives of those she loves different.

Ghosts and legends are used in the novel as symbols of empowerment and as female role models for women as well. In a lecture delivered in Kyoto, Kingston stated that she had sought a term to use for her novel that matched the situations and language of women. She settled on the term *ghost*, "first of all to reflect immigrant woman's indirect interaction with society. She also noted the range of meanings *ghost* embraces - threat and coercion mitigated by indefiniteness, seductive beauty or charm" (Sato 199). For her, the term signified a cross-cultural translation and represented aspects of Chinese-American culture (200). She was interested in addressing an audience that shared a kinship like the one between Kingston and her ancestral aunt, one that was "Chinese-American in consciousness" (200). In *The Woman Warrior*, the term *ghost* can be given different definitions depending on the context of each talk-story. In the first talk-story, *ghost* is a derogatory term, used by the Chinese to label one who has disobeyed the traditions of

Chinese society. When a member of the Chinese society fails to follow the implicit cultural rules, they must be separated, becoming "them" and not "us"; they lose all status in the society and thus, become a ghost.

In "White Tigers," the second talk-story of the autobiography, Kingston tells the story of the legendary female Chinese warrior, Fa Mu Lan, who is another type of ghost. Unlike No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan is a heroic ghost, someone for the young Kingston to emulate. The talk-story provides the story of this empowered woman warrior who fights in her father's place in war and then returns to her traditional place in her family. It is, interestingly, told in both third and first person point of view, making the reader wonder if the story is about the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, or about Kingston herself. Following No Name Aunt, this talk-story signals the beginning of Kingston's search for voice and search to become empowered as a woman, so it becomes appropriate for her to speak in first person. She begins by remembering that the story was one she remembers chanting as a child, then tells the actual tale by using "I" as if she is the character of Fa Mu Lan. After the call from a bird, Kingston states, "I would be a little girl of seven the



day I followed the bird away into the mountains" (20). By actually becoming the legendary woman warrior, Kingston's own identity transforms as she becomes strong enough to gain the power and voice she will need to succeed as a female faced with dual paradoxical cultural roles.

The legend begins when Fa Mu Lan is only seven years old, at which time she (or Kingston) leaves her home to live and train with two older people. Here she trains rigorously both mentally and physically for fifteen years, then returns to her home to fight for her village. Although her story seems to be one of female empowerment, it is significant that Fa Mu Lan can only fight the enemy only when she is disguised as a male. Even though she seems to be an unconventional character who asserts herself - "both fighting and writing being male preoccupations - it still sanctions patriarchal values" (Cheung 166). Like the female writer uses a male pseudonym to be taken seriously, so must Fa Mu Lan take on the persona of a male (166). When she returns from battle, she returns to being a subservient female, as her culture dictates. She must fulfill her wifely and filial duties to her husband's family: "Now my public duties are finished. I will stay with you, doing farmwork and

housework, and giving you more sons" (Kingston 45). Even though she has become "perfect" as a woman warrior, her cultural duties as a Chinese woman are most important. The point of the talk-story, of course, is that one must fulfill these duties and that sacrificing oneself for their society is more important than individual success.

Kingston is empowered by the story of Fa Mu Lan but in a different way than intended by her culture. While the members of the Chinese society hoped she would understand the importance of submission and duty to one's family, Kingston understood the legend to be one of female empowerment through hard work and dedication. Her mother, who understands what her daughter will need to succeed, verbalizes this dual message when she tells her, "I would grow up a wife and a slave but she taught me the song of the warrior woman. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (Kingston 19-20). Kingston dreams of becoming a woman warrior like Fa Mu Lan but she wants to be a modern day warrior. Instead of using a sword, "to behead the cruel and greedy land barons of ancient China, she will use a pen to slash the modern day misogynists and report their cruelties" (Challener 86). At the end of the second chapter, Kingston notes that ancient Chinese warriors

carved names of their enemies on their backs. Like them, she too has words, "chink" words and "gook" words too (Kingston 53) carved into her back. Here Kingston draws attention to the racism that has shaped her childhood and permeated her identity. Through her own harsh discipline, Kingston learns to overcome inarticulateness by taking speech therapy and learns to develop her own voice solely through strenuous work. Her discipline pays off, however, as "her status progresses from retarded pupil to straight "A" student and finally to writer" (Cheung 166).

In the center of the autobiography is the story entitled "Shaman." This talk-story is about Brave Orchid who is identified as a *Shaman*, a person with healing powers who is a medium between the physical and spiritual worlds. Clara, as depicted in *The House of the Spirits* had similar powers. The chapter falls in the exact center of the work because Brave Orchid was the most important figure in Kingston's childhood (Challener 91). Although the book is narrated by Kingston, other women's voices add depth to the story. In particular, the voices and stories of Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid are heard using first person point of view within Kingston's narrative. According to E.D. Huntley, the first person point of view dominates,

"as the primary narrative voice is joined by the voices of Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid, women who also claim the first-person point of view and employ the "I" to articulate their own experiences of rebellion and anger" (84). Kingston allows them to tell their own story because they represent examples of female strength and empowerment to emulate, even though they must struggle as well.

By example and through story-telling, Brave Orchid inspires her daughter to be more than just a subservient wife. This talk-story is told in Brave Orchid's own voice and depicts how she immigrated to the United States late in life to work beside her husband in a laundry. Here she bears six children and empowers them with the tales of legendary warriors like Fa Mu Lan and, of course, herself, as she earned a medical degree in midwifery in China before immigrating. She tells her daughter that "she will be 'a wife and slave' while firing her imagination with stories of the woman warrior" (Kim 203). Brave Orchid has lived an extraordinary life and she relays her stories to her daughter. She deems it important to tell her about being ranked first in her medical school classes and about surviving after her husband left for America and her first

two children died. Brave Orchid provides a model for her daughter, a model of intelligence, independence, and determination and she teaches her daughter to be both resilient and successful.

Brave Orchid provides an example of empowerment in dealing with ghosts. One of the most powerful examples of her amazing adventures is her dealing with "Sitting Ghost" while in medical school in China. When told that the other students avoid a room said to be haunted by a ghost, Brave Orchid decides to spend the night alone in the room and to confront this ghost. When she is attacked in the night by a presence that attempts to suffocate her, she simply stays and confronts it. The next day, she leads the other students in a ritual of calling her back to life to counteract the effects of the previous night. The women chant and fill the room with smoke, thereby releasing the power of the ghost. Through her leadership skills and refusal to be frightened, she displays the empowerment needed to take charge of the situation, providing a model for the other students.

Ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* are examples of either empowerment or destruction. Through Brave Orchid's stubbornness and determination, Fa Mu Lan's skill and

bravery on White Tigers Mountain, and Ts'ai Yen's creation of songs of identity at the end of the book, we see how ghosts empower women. Through No Name Women's unending silence and ultimate death, and Moon Orchid's eventual madness in the fourth chapter, we see how ghosts can also destroy women. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende, using magical realism, depicts ghosts as spirits of female bonding and compassion. Allende's use of the supernatural, whether in the form of the power to know something before it happens or in the form of spirits who walk and talk and provide assistance to women in need, operates on a single level - that of assistance and empowerment for women. Kingston's use of the supernatural employs ghosts, in both a negative and a positive context, to tell the stories of the victims of Chinese servitude and the stories of the winners as well. Both authors use the supernatural, in the form of ghosts and spirits, to enable their characters to discover language and voice as they ultimately claim their identity by writing their personal stories. Their characters must come to terms with the ghosts of their pasts as they realize the importance of merging one's cultural past with one's present and future.

"At the Western Palace," the fourth talk-story, develops Kingston's connection between ghosts, voice, and sanity. This talk-story is about Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's sister, and is written in third person. Unlike "Shaman," Kingston maintains a distance from the characters in this talk-story, and even refers to her mother in third person, as Brave Orchid. The use of third person generalizes the tale, making it not only Kingston's story, but also a story for all Chinese women. Moon Orchid, according to E.D. Huntley, is nearly voiceless; she has no opinion except that of whoever happens to be instructing her, and willing to agree with others, she is fearful of acting independently. She cannot narrate her own story and must rely on another who can tell the story of the history of female immigrants. She cannot find the independent spirit that would allow her to transcend one life for another and is unable to articulate her ideas in her own voice (85). Moon Orchid is essentially a living "ghost." In this section, Moon Orchid is dragged by her sister to see the husband who had previously deserted her. Moon Orchid had been left in China while her husband, who eventually became a doctor, came to America. Brave Orchid brings her sister to America and insists she confront the

man and reclaim him. Moon Orchid cannot make the necessary transition from Chinese to American ways and although her sister pinches and slaps her, is unable to say a word. When she finally sees her husband, "all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out" (Kingston 176). Moon Orchid ultimately goes mad and is placed in a mental institution, where she eventually dies. According to Juhasz, "the association of women with madness is shown as the alternative to their achievement of self-identity" (182). Since it is too late for Moon Orchid to learn to "speak," she is not able to claim her voice, resulting in madness.

The connection between silence and madness is further exemplified when Kingston states: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women" (Kingston 186). She realizes how close this insanity could come to her when she says, " I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at our house? Probably me" (189). Kingston "struggles to comprehend the legacy of craziness and conventionality, of curses and



blessings, bequeathed her by her mother, who is at once a vessel of traditional culture and a courageous fighter in a harsh environment" (Kim 255). The narrator portrays her own childhood silence as being so overpowering as to engender insanity, as she struggles with the dual role of a girl with a Chinese upbringing and a girl in an American school and society.

"Kingston . . . in the end does not succumb to the silence that imperils her childhood and adolescence" (Morante 78). She eventually discovers her voice and is finally able to use it - both orally and in writing. Different from Clara's chosen inability to speak in *The House of the Spirits*, Kingston's voicelessness comes from being a Chinese girl in an American school and, unlike Clara's silence, is not chosen. Adhering to cultural rules becomes confusing to Kingston, and this becomes clearest when she is in school. In her fifth and last chapter entitled "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Kingston recounts her own personal struggle to speak English and later to speak up for herself. In Kindergarten, when she was asked to speak English for the first time, Kingston became silent. In fact, during her entire first year at school, she remained silent. She

learns to turn herself "American feminine" by speaking in a voice that can barely be heard. Her teachers demand that she speak up when she whispers through recitations, and when told to be louder, she becomes silent once more. To be attractive to the American culture, she learns she must not use the "strong and bossy" tones of Chinese women (Huntley 103). To Kingston, this creates confusion as she is caught between the two worlds. The Chinese American community is, "shaped by allegiances to the traditions of the old country, silence is gendered, connected with and imposed upon women who are expected to manifest the voicelessness expected of the ideal Chinese woman" (103). Kingston has heard all her life that Chinese woman should be silent; however, her reality is the opposite - the Chinese women she knows are both opinionated and verbal (103).

Kingston accuses her mother of cutting her frenum when she was a baby. When she asks her mother why she did it, her mother replies, "so that you would not be tongue-tied . . . your tongue would be able to move in any language . . . languages that are completely different from one another" (Kingston 164). The symbolic cutting of the frenum represents both the effort her mother makes to

aide her daughter in speaking and also the handicap she gives her by making her different. For three years, Kingston "covered [her] school paintings with black paint" (Kingston 165). She flunked kindergarten because her teacher misinterpreted her silence as dullness, and when noticing that other Chinese girls had trouble speaking concluded, "the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (Kingston 166). In Chinese school, she finds she is able to speak and play like a normal child, but in American school, she whispered. Chinese tradition looks down on someone, especially a female, who speaks assertively. Using "I" or bold speech displays selfishness or concentration on individual self instead of society's whole.

One girl who refuses to speak in the Chinese school becomes the victim of Kingston's anger and aggression. The girl, who resembles Kingston physically and socially, would "whisper-read but not talk. Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles" (Kingston 173). Kingston's anger grows until she confronts the girl alone in the cloakroom at school. However, even though she becomes violent with the girl, she cannot get her to talk. The girl cries - and Kingston cries along with her,

understanding their similarities. The silent girl provides an example of the results of not finding a voice, Kingston's greatest fear. The silent girl represents Kingston's alter ego and "her hatred of the girl is her hatred of the unassertive self" (Garner 123). Kingston becomes mysteriously ill after the incident, possibly brought on by the "fear that as she was not able to get the child to talk, so she will not be able to rescue her own reticent self, that she is doomed to be a victim" (124).

According to E.D. Huntley, there are three types of silence in *The Woman Warrior*. She defines the notion of silence and its corollary, *coming to voice*, and writes about their influence on Kingston "as part of an ancestral culture that defines silence as the virtue that best displays a woman's femininity" (101). The first type of silence displays "the reticence of the marginal individual who refrains from speech because to speak up would be to claim an authority which one does not have" (101). This description fits the young girl who Kingston attacks in the girls' cloakroom at school because she will not speak. The second type of silence, according to Huntley, is manifested by a person's lack of fluency in a language,

and is shown by Kingston when she enters kindergarten. Since she speaks Chinese at home, Kingston is not able to converse in English. She is unable to speak to anyone and consequently fails kindergarten. For three years she remains almost mute, keeping her thoughts and imagination from all who might see them. Her silence is a type of refuge for the young Kingston, who waits to reveal herself to the world. The third type of silence identified by Huntley is a silence that "confers taboo status on certain subjects that might create problems or jeopardize life in American" (102). Her mother prefaces her statements to Kingston with admonitions to be silent, and Kingston notes that she and her siblings wouldn't tell even if they could, as they do not know the taboo information. They know instinctively that some secrets are not to be discussed with non-Chinese individuals because to reveal them might mean deportation or cause disgrace to the family. Rituals must be followed, even though they are never explained, and Kingston is punished when she fails to conform to these unarticulated customs (102).

Two types of women are portrayed in *The Woman Warrior*, women whose stories are characterized by their use of language, or by the antithesis - women who are

characterized by the absence of language. For some women, silence is permanent, exemplified by No Name Woman and by Moon Orchid. The harmfulness of silence is also exemplified by the schoolmate who will not talk. Kingston understands that she must not follow the paths of these women and writes her narrative to give voice to them. No Name Woman does not cry out when her home is attacked, nor does she identify the father of her child; she later dies without a word or protest. Moon Orchid, the opposite of her sister, is weak and frightened. She whimpers and refuses to talk to her husband when he is confronted (Huntley 86).

The other type of woman shown in the novel is the woman who speaks up, who takes control of her given circumstances and acts upon the situations presented to her. Brave Orchid, whose strong voice dominates much of the novel, Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, and Ts'ai Yen, whose story ends the novel, are women with a voice, and are women for Kingston to emulate. Brave Orchid is decisive and confident in her dealings with her daughter. Fa Mu Lan not only speaks for her people, she also wears the words of the oppression of her people on her back where her father carved them. Ts'ai Yen speaks through

her words as she creates music and poetry based on her experiences in the barbarian camp (Huntley 86).

Existing between two worlds herself, Brave Orchid sometimes struggles with daily communications in regard to her daily life as well as in the rearing of her daughter. Although she is both powerful and vocal, she has difficulty communicating with the non-Chinese world and is often misunderstood. Because she was raised and educated in China, Brave Orchid retains beliefs from the patriarchal culture of her past. Although there is no strong male character in the book, as Trueba was depicted in *The House of the Spirits*, the effects of Brave Orchid's previous training are clear in the sometimes confused and misguided lessons she gives to her daughter. While Clara and Alba lived under strict patriarchal rules of silencing and submission enforced by the male figure in their lives, Brave Orchid lived under the unconscious rules of her powerful Chinese upbringing. On the one hand, she retains her maiden name when she marries, but on the other, she tells horrible stories of dead babies and female slavery to her daughter to teach her Chinese rules and customs. She also lacks the needed skills in English and is not able to "translate one culture into another," thereby she

does not provide the complete role model that Kingston needs. It becomes clear that Kingston must find her own way to develop her own voice that combines her ancestral culture equally with her American culture and home (Huntley 103). Finding a voice that has authority to make the world listen is her first step towards articulation of self (103). This she must do alone.

Eventually Kingston learns to use the voice she develops in school and then she learns to talk back. It is to her mother that she exercises her new found power and it is through this talking back that Kingston is able to finally stand alone. "I had grown inside me a list of over 200 things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (Kingston 197). She must establish herself as a talker, as American instead of Chinese, and she must define herself separately from her mother (Juhasz 183). She specifically attacks her mother's talk-stories when she says:

And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or,



'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. Ha! You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work. (Kingston 202)

Kingston eventually must leave her home and her mother's Chinese way of talking, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that my mysteries are for explanation" (Kingston 204). Kingston learns to see, as Juhasz points out, that she must see her independence from her mother as a complete thing by itself: "Independence must be understood in order that connections can occur again, but a connection, finally, between two different people rather than between two people who together make one identity" (183). This achievement is exemplified by the story of Ts'ai Yen, a Chinese poet born in 175 AD, at the end of the novel. Ts'ai Yen is a powerful woman because she can speak and because she can write, paralleling Kingston's growth. The story of Ts'ai Yen is begun by the mother, but finished by Kingston. According to Juhasz, "in this way we see how the connection between

mother and daughter, both storytellers, both women warriors, has been reestablished but on terms that now both allow for separation and admit attachment" (184). They each subsequently tell their own versions of the story as they create the talk-story together. The two women have achieved a sense of reconciliation together and it becomes clear that Kingston has made peace with the traditions of ancient Chinese cultures as she continues a life based on the cultural traditions of American society (Challener 105).

Kingston must also learn to develop a voice that is powerful enough to be heard in her community as well. While she is employed in an art store, she is told to order supplies of a pigment that he describes as "nigger yellow" (Huntley 89). When Kingston informs her boss that she disapproves of his word choice, he ignores her, since she speaks in her "bad small-person's voice" (Kingston 48). She is fired from another job when she "squeaks" to her boss that the restaurant he has selected for a banquet is being picketed by CORE and the NAACP (Huntley 89). Her voice lacks the authority needed to present a strong opinion, and the members of the American culture see no reason to listen to her (89).

Throughout the novel, Kingston points to those women who commit suicide or are institutionalized because of their failure to find their own individual voice and to assert their selfhood. By developing her own voice and becoming assertive, Kingston risks being named crazy by her family, being an outcast, or worse, becoming a ghost herself. Like Brave Orchid, she must learn to conquer her own ghosts by creating her own talk-stories and by writing. She realizes that Brave Orchid's talk-stories are used as a means to remember and preserve her cultural past. Kingston must hear the stories, understand the meaning behind the stories, but ultimately she must make sense of the stories presented to her by creating her own. Like Clara and Alba in *The House of the Spirits*, it is through her writing that she can make sense of the past. By arranging her "stories" in an order and with an emphasis that makes sense to the writer, the ghosts of their pasts are laid to rest as they find the empowerment needed to preserve this past and to forge a new future.

Ghosts for Kingston, according to Gayle Sato, "imply both insubstantiality and solidity," and "represent both poetry and practicality, isolation and integration" (205). Even though these seem to be conflicting definitions, the

ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* represent the terms in both senses. When No Name Woman looks at her newborn child, she sees the loss of family the baby "ghost" represents: "A child with no descent line would not soften her life but only trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose . . . . Full of milk, the little ghost slept" (Kingston 15). Fa Mu Lan understands her separation from her community as a kind of ghost existence, "we will be so happy when I come back to the valley, healthy and strong and not a ghost" (31). Brave Orchid describes what she cannot do in terms of ghosts: "Medical science does not seal the earth, whose nether creatures seep out, hair by hair, disguised like the smoke that dispels them. She had apparently won against the one ghost, but ghost forms are various and many" (83). Moon Orchid, when faced with speaking to her long lost husband, says, "Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts" (153). Ts' ai Yen, who lives with the ghosts of her past, shapes her ghosts into song. The five talk-stories presented in the novel display two relationships to the ghost world - one must enter it to develop individuality

and voice, and leave it to create identity with family and community (Sato 206). Kingston must come to terms with the ghosts that alienate her from her culture, but she must also see the positive meanings of this identification with the ghosts of her past.

According to Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting*, ghosts in women's stories tend to be connected to reproductive issues. The ghosts often "arise from traumatic memories of rape, abortion, or miscarriage; possessed bodies are described as pregnant, or ghosts themselves may appear as pregnant; the conjuring of ghosts is sometimes represented as a form of child labor" (25). In *The Woman Warrior*, the story both opens and closes with a story of a woman who has been raped. No Name Woman's story in the beginning of the novel is used as a lesson that a woman's body, because of its reproductive powers, must remain under tight control. Ts'ai Yen, in the end of the novel, is taken forcibly from her home to become a barbarian's concubine, then she is forced to leave her children with him and come to America. Kingston attempts to release her aunt from the tight control of cultural restrictions in Chinese society by transforming her aunt into a "vaporous ghost" (26). This ghost is symbolic of

the non-traditional woman because the "spectral body offers an alternative to the anchored, all too physically defined bodies of women trapped in the role of guardians of a changeless, patriarchal culture" (26).

The talk-stories that are delivered by Brave Orchid empower Kingston in two ways. First the stories of the ghost of No Name Woman empower her to give voice to the voiceless; the stories of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan provide an example for her to rise above the cultural limitations she faces as a Chinese American; the strength and determination of her mother's story teaches her to find this strength within herself and reach for the highest possible success; and the stories of Ts'ai Yen show her that she and her mother can create a new talk story together that exemplifies the courage that overcomes ethnic and familial barriers. Secondly, the stories and ghosts that make up her relationship with her mother and her culture provide Kingston with an understanding of how words and the story-telling process can empower her. This encouragement aids Kingston in ultimately finding words to tell her own story and that of other women faced with cultural restrictions. In *The House of the Spirits*, Clara, most importantly, is empowered in a similar manner

when she provides her granddaughter with the motivation to stay alive while imprisoned by listening to the voices in her mind and by writing down the story of her life as well as the lives of her people. Alba further begins to organize and record her own notebook of stories for the future of herself, her family, and her people.

It is the use of language and the power of voice through the supernatural that provides the central metaphor for both women's stories. In *The House of the Spirits* Clara uses silence as an acceptable resistance when she chooses not to speak for nine years and also when she deliberately refuses to speak to her abusive husband. Silence in this novel represents a form of resistance, and for Clara, also a form of survival. The use of language displays the power that is needed to break from a position of voicelessness, a position of powerlessness. This coming to voice is aided through the use of the supernatural. Clara escapes into her spiritual world as a means of escape from an abusive, patriarchal society, and then further utilizes her powers to return as a ghost to enable her granddaughter to complete what she has started. Similarly, in *The Woman Warrior*, it is language that provides the release from oppression for Kingston. By

being silent, she essentially conforms to the cultural edicts taught to her by her mother and her culture. In breaking this silence through the empowerment of ghosts and legends prevalent in her mother's talk stories, Kingston is able to successfully record her journey. She develops her own sense of self worth, and is able to articulate this mastery through her words. By writing her autobiography, she is able to speak for all women of Chinese American descent. It is through the power of language that she finally reaches a medium where she is able to make peace with the cultural traditions of her culture while also honoring and embracing the traditions of the American society. Both works depict women who, in recording their histories and the history of their people, ultimately and successfully empower their own voices.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *BELOVED*

And no one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they're afraid of it - which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four . . . . The collective sharing of that information heals the individual - and the collective.

Toni Morrison, Williams

*Beloved*, referred to as a "ghost story" by its author, depicts the power of the supernatural to aid in the attainment of female voice. In this novel the character of Beloved is a ghost who comes back to life to haunt her mother for taking her life. Most importantly, Beloved is representative of 60 million dead slaves (Morrison, Cover page); specifically, she is symbolic of generations of mothers and daughters, as Morrison centers

her novel on the female victims of slavery, who were separated from and lost to each other. Through the use of a ghost figure, female voice is attained by examining the horrors of one's cultural past and by understanding the cultural oppression that resulted from this past. Morrison's ghost figures represent those who died as witnesses and victims of slave atrocities. Voice must be given to these ghosts that represent mother/daughter separation and the atrocities of slavery before a type of healing can occur and a voice can be given to the survivors. Morrison seems to be saying that the past must be addressed and reconciled before the present and future can be lived. The return of Beloved, eighteen years after her murder, provides the impetus for her mother, Sethe, to remember and speak of the past, thus breaking her self-imposed silence. The presence of Beloved enables her to remember and then to tell this story in the hope that it has the power to heal. Denver, Beloved's sister, is also empowered by her and is able to find a voice by the end of the novel as well. Finally, it is through the power of a community of African American women that the power of voice is manifested and the silence is broken.

In her novels, Morrison "writes against silence, recording the truth of black women's lives" (Williams 5). She is "interested in language that can heal and create self-identity. At the same time, [her] mute characters descend into madness or delirium as a way of emphasizing the extreme alienation of their artist figure who remains to find form for silence" (5). We see a similarity to *The House of the Spirits*, the Latin American tale that showcases Clara's muteness as a form of rebellion, but also as a way to retain her sanity. She heals herself by writing in her notebooks and also, through her intervention as a spirit, by helping her granddaughter survive. In *The Woman Warrior*, the Asian autobiography, Kingston also descends into silence and a type of madness, and it is only through writing and talking that she is able to find fulfillment and empowerment as a woman caught between two worlds. In all three works, one of the ways that ghosts are utilized is as a form of empowerment for females. Alba is empowered by Clara's ghost, Kingston is empowered by the legendary warrior Fa Mu Lan, and Sethe, in *Beloved*, is ultimately empowered by the ghost of her dead daughter.

When interviewed by Marsha Darling in 1988, Toni Morrison stated that the character Beloved was representative of the murdered child of Sethe, but also of the "collective grief of the Middle Passage" and the slave ships (Williams 151). Morrison says that Beloved is a ghost returned from the dead, but also "another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully in her questions and answers, her pre-occupations, with the desires of Denver and Sethe" (Williams 151). Morrison also states that "the language of both experiences, death and the Middle Passage - is the same" (151). The language Beloved speaks becomes the voice of historical loss; Beloved herself is the historically forgotten and silenced Black girl that Morrison brings back to life through language. Beloved is representative of all the unrecorded people who died on the way to America. According to Morrison:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming

responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for. They are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived - there is lore about them. But nothing survives about . . . that. (151-2)

Beloved, then, is not only the representative of the dead, she also becomes the link between the past and the present.

By creating a character that is essentially a ghost, Morrison displays African beliefs in the continuing presence of the dead (Williams 152). The ghost, Beloved, represents the unvoiced and unheard horrors that occurred on the slave ship (152). When she kills Beloved, Sethe makes the choice to murder her daughter rather than submit her to a life where she must undergo the horrors of slavery (152). Morrison feels that the unspoken grief of the past will destroy both the present and the future. For her, "the act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember" (152). She gives voice to the unknown slaves without

names thrown overboard, as well as those who were marked and destroyed by slavery (152). In so doing, she is successful in giving form to the muted and silenced voices that have been left out of history, as well as to the strong Black woman who traditionally has been omitted from literature.

The story Morrison tells in *Beloved* has roots in actual history. Morrison read about and borrowed the event from the true story of a woman named Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, was a runaway slave from Kentucky (Mobley 193). Garner's committing of infanticide was caused by the presence of slaveholders who caught up with her in Ohio. Her story became one that abolitionists used in their writings and it also became a reminder of the atrocities of slavery (193). In *Beloved*, Morrison combines this history with her own fiction centered on a single family, a family who represents the historical and emotional legacy left from the slavery era. The story unfolds in a fragmented fashion in two separate plot lines. It begins in Cincinnati in the home to which Sethe has escaped in the present, right before *Beloved* returns from the dead to haunt her family. Through the use of flashbacks and fragmented time sequences, the events that

occurred twenty years earlier are depicted. These flashbacks are often told from different perspectives, with each one adding more information than the previous one. The story is primarily told through the eyes of Sethe, the mother who killed her infant daughter in an effort to keep her from a life of slavery.

It is through the physical and emotional destruction of Sethe, and through the depiction of her descent into a world of near insanity brought on by the return of her murdered child, that Morrison displays a journey similar to that depicted in the novels formerly discussed -- a journey of coming to voice and empowerment. In the beginning of the novel Sethe is depicted as a strong female who has survived impossible conditions. When Paul D reunites with Sethe at 124 Bluestone Road after not seeing her for a period of eighteen years, we witness his attitude, and possibly a prevalent one, toward a strong female. The last time Paul D saw Sethe she was pregnant with her husband, Halle's, baby. She had given birth to her child by herself: Paul D "was proud of her and annoyed by her. Proud she had done it; annoyed that she had not needed Halle or him in the doing" (Morrison 8). Sethe is a new type of woman who shows her strength when she states

that she will never leave her home even though it is possessed by spirits: "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running - from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth" (15).

Paul D. sees her as Halle's girl - "the one with iron eyes and backbone to match" (9). Sethe is a survivor, and even though she asks herself "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she?" she goes on, "condemned to life and to sanity, and the spirits [she] sees are as real as the history they endure" (Rigney "Story" 234). Not only must she go on, she must also eventually tell her story in order to survive, and she is helped first by Paul D, to whom she tells one of her past stories.

When Paul D first arrives at the home, he is at first dismayed by the red lights associated with the spirit world that inhabit Sethe's home. Sethe explains, however, that the spirit is not evil, "just sad" (Morrison 8). She encourages him to enter, and Paul D, who seems concerned yet accepting of the spirit, comes in. As he observes the changes in her after his long absence, he notices her eyes, "did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched



out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held" (9). He becomes aware that although Sethe has survived, she had undergone something horrible -- and even though it did not break her, it extinguished part of her self. Although she refuses to speak of her experiences, Paul D can see that someone or something has "punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (9). Paul D's observations are further developed when the red light and shaking caused by the spirit ends. He looked at the spot where the grief had soaked him, "the red was gone but a kind of weeping clung to the air where it had been" (10). The "weeping" refers to an unconscionable pain that the spirit represents. Further evidence of pain is given when Sethe tells him that her two boys ran away because of the spirit in the house just before her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, died. When Paul D later kisses her beaten and scarred back, the spirit returns, shaking the house and knocking things over. He screams for the spirit to leave and then yells: "God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!" (18). Paul D's concern and compassion for Sethe begin to awaken her need to speak of her past.

Sethe is unable to voice any of her past experiences to Paul D at first, but in the hope of finding what happened to her husband, she eventually tells him one of the horrifying events that occurred before she made it home. As a slave, Sethe was owned by Mr. Garner at Sweet Home. After his death, his wife asked Schoolteacher, a racist, sadistic man, to come and help her organize things and run the farm. Schoolteacher comes, but not to help the slave master or to teach, which should have been his intent; his real purpose, ironically, is to take notes, and "to do scholarship on the measurement of black craniums" (Rigney "Breaking" 143). Life at Sweet Home becomes unbearable, and the slaves decide to attempt escape. Schoolteacher captures two of the runaway slaves - Sixo and Paul D, and subsequently kills Sixo and returns Paul D to Sweet Home. Although Sethe learns what happened to the runaways when Paul D returns to Sweet Home, she still runs. Her children had already been sent to her mother-in-law in Cincinnati in preparation for the escape, and so Sethe, her breasts full of milk for her already born daughter and pregnant as well, runs. While hiding in a barn, Schoolteacher's nephews commit a horrendous, violent act on Sethe. She experiences the cruel injustice

of being held down while they take her milk. Her eyes rolled out tears when she is able to explain to Paul D:

'Them boys found out I told on em.

Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.'

'They used cowhide on you?'

'And they took my milk.'

'They beat you and you was pregnant?'

'And they took my milk!' (Morrison 17)

The taking of her baby's milk is a horror she has not voiced before. In addition to the unspeakable act and unknown to Sethe, her husband Halle was watching from a loft in the barn. Paralyzed, he is unable to find the power to help her, and subsequently goes mad. Sethe reports her abuse to Mrs. Garner, and when Schoolteacher finds this out, with no consideration for her as a woman or for the fact that she is pregnant, he has her beat mercilessly. The ultimate cruelty that causes Sethe to run from Sweet Home is not the beating she receives that creates the "tree" on her back, but the act of Schoolteacher's nephews who take her milk. The white men "not only violate Sethe in an act comparable to rape, but

they also violate the sacred state of motherhood and the African spiritual values which, for Morrison, that state represents" (Rigney, *Voices* 68). Sethe, like other characters in Morrison's novels, is linked with the powers of nature. The "tree" on her back, as Amy Denver first calls it, resembles a choke-cherry tree, an image of nature and one that exemplifies Sethe's great power and ability to survive (69). It is this strength that eventually allows her to find her voice. She survives the beating, escapes, and with the help of a young White girl named Amy Denver, gives birth and returns to the home where she has sent her children; she reunites with Baby Suggs, at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati.

When Schoolteacher returns to take her and her children back to Sweet Home as slaves, Sethe responds by attempting to kill all of her children, and is successful in killing one of them -- Beloved. This act of murder is something Sethe will not speak of, to anyone, including Paul D, yet it is only through the eventual voicing of this unspeakable act that she will be able to free herself and enable herself to move on. According to Barbara Rigney, "the disintegration of family, and the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter . . . is perhaps the

greatest horror of the black experience under slavery" (Voices 68). Sethe can be equated with the archetype of the African Great Mother, who has all the powers of nature, but can also "kill as well as create" (69). Sethe exemplifies this when she murders her child, who then is recreated as a ghost. Rigney equates Sethe with the mythological Demeter; she is the "phallic mother" who not only represents enduring mother love, but one who also "resolves polarities of creativity and destruction" (69). As Eva in *Sula* embraces her son before she sets him on fire, and as Pilate Dead almost literally loves her granddaughter Hagar to death in *Song of Solomon*, Sethe slits her daughter's throat because "The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing - that part of her that was clean" (Morrison 151) (Rigney, *Voices* 69). Sethe's love is so strong that she kills her baby daughter to keep her from a life of slavery by whites. Her love is so strong that "like Demeter, she can also reverse history, resurrect that daughter, bring her back from dark water as tall and 'thunderblack and glistening'" (Rigney, *Voices* 70).

According to Wilfred Cartey in "Africa of My Grandmother's Singing," within the historical African view of nature, "nothing is dead, no voice is still. An essential continuity is preserved between earth-mother and child" (Rigney *Voices* 70). The truth must be told and will be told. The daughter she kills to keep from Schoolteacher and the whites coming to bring her back to Sweet Home and to slavery, is part of Sethe and her lost heritage. Her daughter is also the representative of sixty million or more -- "victims of the effectively genocidal campaign that was slavery" (70). The African Great Mother, however, has been muted by slavery and the political realities of history and Sethe, too, is the victim of this same silencing (70). Sethe speaks with her body instead of her voice as she commits her murderous act, because as a slave that is all she has the power to do. As she does so, however, she establishes her place in history, as her act is published for all to see, documenting the nature of the most brutal of all institutions -- slavery (70). The historical memories from the past become the truth of the present.

Morrison uses the term "rememory" to signify a type of racial memory, a historical memory "that future people

cannot escape or forget" (Rigney, *Voices* 74). Morrison has written that there is "no time" in the novel, "especially no time because memory, pre-historic memory, has no time" (74). Rememories for Sethe, and for all the characters in *Beloved*, deal with the reality of slavery: "The rememories are a catalogue of atrocities, gross sexual indignities, a denial of human rights on every level" (Rigney "Story" 229). Morrison depicts the reality of slavery and the attempts at escape at Sweet Home in Kentucky. Also, through Paul D, she depicts the reality of the chain gangs as well as the reality of performing tasks with the degrading 'bit in the mouth,' in Georgia (229), an act that also effectively silenced Black slaves. As Morrison chronicles the Black experience in the South through Sethe and Paul D's rememories, the unconscionable horror that was slavery is presented as an event so horrible and unimaginable as to make Sethe kill her own daughter in an effort that assures she will escape it. She tells Denver that she must not go there -- to the past, because even though it is over, it is still waiting there for her. This is why Sethe had to get all her children out, including *Beloved*. Denver asks, "If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies" and Sethe

responds with the comment that, "Nothing ever does" (Morrison 36). This, of course, sets the stage for the ghost of Beloved to return because in African American folklore the dead are not dead - and they sometimes return.

When Beloved emerges from the water, she is fully dressed and sopping wet. She returns to her mother's home unseen and unknown by anyone. Because she was never a slave and because she was killed at age two, Beloved has no recent memory. However, she nevertheless has a memory of slave ships and the capturing and transporting of slaves in the Middle Passage (Rigney *Voices* 74). Her experiences are relayed in a series of fragmented, poetic images. She brings the distant memories of slaves being packed onto slave ships in the Middle Passage as she describes the experience:

I am always crouching      the man on my face is  
dead      his face is not mine      his mouth smells  
sweet but his eyes are locked . . .      some who  
eat nasty themselves      I do not eat      the men  
without skin bring us their morning water to  
drink      we have none      at night I cannot see  
the dead man on my face . . . in the beginning



we could vomit      now we do not      now we  
cannot. (Morrison 210)

Thus she depicts the events so horrific and traumatic, that, through her fragmented language, only begin to express the historical horror that must be told. Through the character of Beloved, using *I* and *we*, Morrison brings us the shared voices and the shared memories of millions of slaves whose lives were taken.

According to Deborah Horvitz in her article entitled "Nameless Ghosts," Beloved stands for all African American women whose story will never be told. She represents the spirit of all African women who have witnessed the atrocities of being dragged onto slave ships and all black women who desire to trace their ancestors back to their mothers on such ships and beyond (93). Beloved is the haunting symbol of all mothers and daughters who were separated through the institution of slavery (93). Like the ghost of Clara in *The House of the Spirits* who returns to help her granddaughter survive and tell her story, and No Name Aunt in *Woman Warrior* whose story provides a lesson for Kingston, Beloved is also a figure who will ultimately assist those existing in the present. The child-ghost Beloved, who comes back to life, is not only

Sethe's murdered daughter, now 20 years old, but also, according to Horvitz, Sethe's own mother in a combined persona (94). As Beloved was separated from her mother, so was Sethe cruelly separated from her own (94). Sethe's own mother was hanged, for reasons unbeknownst to Sethe, with the speculation being that she was caught attempting to escape. For Sethe, however, her mother's attempt at escape is unforgivable as in doing so, she left Sethe behind. Sethe remembers her mother as one who deserted her, as does Beloved, who comes back as a ghost to haunt the mother who abandoned her as well. Both women come from the other side; Sethe's mother comes from the geographic other side of the world - Africa, while her daughter, Beloved, comes from the physical other side of life - death (94).

Most importantly, Beloved's arrival signals the beginning of the onset of Sethe's painful memories and her coming is the impetus that allows Sethe to reunite both memories and to speak what had been the unspeakable (Horovitz 94). Beloved comes to relay messages from the past to Sethe. She relays her message through a fragmented dialogue from the ship showing that she, too, like Sethe, has been separated from her mother. It is

when Beloved comes home that Sethe is able to remember her own mother, to understand the connection between the two, and to realize the connection between all mothers and daughters who experienced the horrors of slavery. Sethe is then able to speak of the atrocities, and thus begin a type of healing (94).

Beloved's presence forces Sethe to recall her own past and her mother's language, which frightens her. Although she had chosen to ignore her past, Beloved's presence brings her memories back and she tells Beloved and Denver of the language "she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back" (Morrison 62). But pictures and words come into her mind and she knows that such memories are stored -- as in the image of Paul D's rusted tobacco tin that holds memories too painful to bear -- that one can never lose (Horvitz 95). Her remembering and telling of these forgotten memories is the impetus that begins her slow metamorphosis toward healing (95). She remembers being told that her mother "threw them all away but you" (Morrison 62). Her mother's children from white fathers and through the act of rape are not named and are thrown away. But Sethe, who came

from a black father, is given a name and saved. Sethe remembers that her mother's spirit came to her when she was about to give birth to Denver.

Like Clara, in *The House of the Spirits*, empowers her granddaughter to hang on and survive her brutal torture, Sethe remembers the spirit of her mother empowering her when she can no longer walk on her swollen feet.

According to Horvitz, Sethe feels her dead mother's presence through the image of her mother's dancing feet. She describes the pain of her emerging child as pain that feels like the ramming of an antelope. When the image of the antelope is connected to the image of the dancing mother, Sethe sees, "the link between the unborn Denver's kicks and the dead ma'am's kicks as she danced" (96).

Sethe was empowered then to survive the birth of her daughter and the beating that produced her scarred back, and now, in the present, is empowered to begin to tell her story to her daughters. Beloved demands that her mother tell the story of her life, both before she lived at Sweet Home in the memory of her mother, and also right after she left slavery and slit her daughter's throat (96). As a ghost, Beloved becomes the listener, encouraging her mother to find her voice and to tell her story. Beloved's

presence forces Sethe to speak, and then to listen to her own voice as she remembers her own mother's language and dances.

Another reference to language and the supernatural occurs when the three women, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, go to the clearing where Baby Suggs used to preach. Baby Suggs represents female power as a healer who helped to cure Sethe's ravaged back and to bind her milk-filled breasts. She also conjured spirits in the clearing where she preached, made a feast for ninety people from two buckets of blackberries, and then returned in spirit form when needed (Rigney *Voices* 69). It is significant that following the murder of Beloved, Baby Suggs experienced a type of silencing as she decided to quit preaching, the pain of her part in the event taking away both her desire and her voice.

Like Clara comes to Alba in *The House of the Spirits* in an effort to soothe her troubled and tortured spirit, the spirit of Baby Suggs returns to Sethe in the clearing as she sits on Baby Sugg's rock. Her effort to soothe her daughter-in-law is first manifested in her rubbing the back of her neck, recalling the comfort that she was able to bring Sethe in the past. Eventually, however, the

In making the reference to the circle of iron, Beloved is referring to the realities of being enslaved, and being forced to wear iron around the neck, and also to the bit in the mouth that Paul D describes -- the iron that silences. Both are remnants of the horror from the past lives they, and other African Americans, historically experienced. Baby Suggs seemingly choked Sethe in an effort to make her understand that the past may be too horrible to pass on, that it will not be easy to do, that it is frightening, and that it may hurt or kill her to do so. While Sethe was just beginning to experience a sense of family, with her daughter Denver and the girl Beloved, and also the possibility of a relationship with Paul D, she is caught up short with the choking. Her brief happiness is juxtaposed with the reality of the truth -- the truth that is too difficult to voice. This is what Baby Suggs must tell her, as she manifests herself in spirit form, and she chokes her to show her this even though it inflicts great pain.

Further evidence of the difficulty of telling her story is shown when Sethe tells the story of her beating. She realizes after the beating, that she bit off a piece of her tongue when they opened her back: "It was hanging

by a shred. I didn't mean to. Clamped down on it, it come right off. I thought, Good God, I'm going to eat myself up" (Morrison 202). The pain of her past and also her strength is surviving the brutality of the beating is exemplified in the violent biting off of her tongue. Without her tongue, she will have no voice, no means of telling her story, and the difficulty of expressing the horror looms larger. Like Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* who believes her mother has sliced the frenum of her tongue resulting in her lack of voice as she is caught between two worlds, Sethe, too, metaphorically is handicapped in her world. Her story is so hideous, however, that the telling of it will be as painful as slicing off one's tongue.

The ghost of Beloved, unlike the ghosts in *The House of the Spirits* and *The Woman Warrior*, becomes one of destruction. Horvitz compares the relationship that develops between Sethe and Beloved as similar to a slave-master relationship. Beloved eventually begins to attempt to devour her mother like the men without skin from the slave ship who "[chew] and [swallow]" their prey (Morrison 216). Beloved hungers for her mother, never letting her out of her sight, and then begins to attempt to possess

her, to become her. She finds a way to get rid of Paul D and excludes Denver from her relationship with her mother as she attempts to dominate Sethe. "Sethe is as haunted by the girl's presence as she was by her absence because possession of any kind involving human beings is destructive" (Horvitz 97). Such a possessive and destructive relationship compares to the white-slave relationship where slave masters attempt to own their slaves (97), ignoring the fact that they are fellow human beings. Unlike the spirit of Beloved, in both *The House of the Spirits* and *The Woman Warrior*, ghosts are used for empowerment. In the former, Clara returns as a symbol of strength for Alba, and in the latter, Kingston is empowered by the stories of spirits such as Fa Mu Lan and her No Name Aunt. In *Beloved*, the ghost must destroy first, as Beloved almost does to Sethe. Similarly, however, the ghost of Beloved eventually forces Sethe to speak, to tell the story of her past, and to come to terms with that past.

Through Morrison's writing style, the voices of African American women of the past and present are heard and statements about the linear progression of time are made. According to Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting*,



Sethe generally responds to Denver's persistent questioning in "rambling incomplete reveries" about the past that she finds "unspeakable" (75). Sethe's language is halting, conveying the difficulty of speaking about a painful subject, with the broken rhythm of short, choppy sentences: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay" (Morrison 35) (Brogan 75). Beloved's language is also short and abbreviated and punctuated by spaces (Brogan 75). Beloved's lines, in addition to her repetition of certain phrases, such as "a hot thing," and also the absence of time markers, such as "again again night day" (Morrison 212) create a surreal, nightmarish effect (Brogan 75). Her details on life in the grave recall the Middle Passage of slaves on the way to America (75). Her fragmented language reflects the traumatic nature of the experience. When Beloved speaks of the difficulty of describing her experience, asking "how can I say things that are pictures" (Morrison 210), she brings us back to the description Sethe gives of her slave past that is a "timeless" picture that she finds "unspeakable" (Morrison 58) (Brogan 75).

According to Horvitz, Beloved has more than one voice. In the pages of fragmented, unpunctuated writing,

she is the voice of the women on the slave ship. Later she uses almost the same words as Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved. When she screams, "I am not dead Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her now we can join a hot thing" (Morrison 213) she shows her wish to merge with her lost mother (Horovitz 99). Morrison is referring to the African women whose stories were never told. Beloved represents all the generations of tortured and abused women who have been removed from their mothers or daughter, leaving an empty space within them, and she does this with her speech (99). The dialogue between Sethe and Beloved displays the lost connection between mother and daughter. According to Marilyn Mobley, Morrison uses the "call-response" pattern of the African American oral tradition in her dialogue. The fragmented writing of the two women constitutes voices "which speak to and comment on one another" (193), amplifying the narrative for the reader.

Eventually, the two voices, Sethe and Beloved's, merge, as expressed by Sethe's words, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison 214), as Sethe merges with the past. According to Horvitz, the American and African Beloveds join together by the end of the novel as well.

They join together as "symbols of the past - exploding, swallowing, and chewing -- and fuse with these same images in the present" (100). The gap between America and Africa is bridged just as the present and the past are connected, the dead and the living, and the flesh and the spirit (100). But they are joined in a negative way -- in a shared horror because of the devastating effect of violence from the "men with no skin" (101). Morrison writes of the women who were lost to the institution of slavery, women whose stories were not told and not written, as women who are "disremembered," meaning that they are not only forgotten, but also women who were destroyed (101).

In *The Woman Warrior*, it is only when Kingston is able to fuse the two worlds in which she exists into one -- the Asian and the American -- that she is able to find dignity in her world and is empowered to write about her experiences for future women. Alba in *The House of the Spirits* is similarly empowered to pay tribute to her past and to her oppressors by recording and organizing the notebooks that will tell the truth to the Chilean women of the future. But unlike the experiences of Kingston and Alba, the characters in *Beloved*, while they do learn to

voice the events of the past, cannot completely overcome the horrors that they and their ancestors have undergone. Morrison makes this clear in the last chapter of her novel when she writes, "It was not a story to pass on" and repeats "This is not a story to pass on" (274-5). While both Sethe and Denver have experienced a type of release from the past by the end of the novel because they have learned to speak, it is not enough. The reality of the black experience with slavery is too large -- too much to overcome, too shocking for the reader and for future peoples to comprehend, and possibly too painful to be remembered. They must begin the process, however, and join together to begin the remembering.

The statement at the end of the novel acts as a paradox in that one of the central themes of the novel is the need to confront the past so that a type of healing can occur (Horvitz 101). Stories crucial to Black experience and to American history must be told because it is "imperative to preserve continuity through story, language, and culture between generations of Black women" (Horvitz 101), which is what Morrison attempts to do with her novel. Sethe could not pursue her future until she had confronted her past, and Denver had to learn to leave

her home and use her voice to find help from the community to assure a future. Sethe is not able to tell her mother's story, nor is she able to tell about the murder of her child because the pain is too great, she cannot bear to hear any mention of her past: "Every mention of her past life hurt. The hurt was always there -- like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (Morrison 58). But implied in the novel is the idea that not acknowledging this past prevents a life in the present. It is a responsibility -- one must remember and tell the past for the individual self and for the collective good (Horvitz 102). This, of course, is Morrison's intent in writing her novel.

In the climactic scene at the end of the novel when Sethe mistakes white Mr. Bowdin for Schoolteacher coming to take her children back to slavery and tries to kill him, she confronts the reality of her past. Beloved, who is pregnant with the "stories of the past" (Horowitz 102), disappears back into the water from which she came for she is no longer needed; she has fulfilled her mission in bringing the past into the present. Although Sethe cannot be healed, she has undergone a change. She sees the possibility of a life with Paul D, who "wants to put his

story next to hers," she has seen the power and support of her community, and thinks she could be her own "best thing" (Morrison 273). The female bonding she experienced briefly with her daughters and the sharing of stories of the past have enabled her to begin a type of healing. It is through the words and the stories shared in the present and for the future that empower her to find the power that leads to healing (Horvitz 102).

While Beloved represents the past and the victims of the slave experience, Denver represents the future of the African American woman. This is seen as Denver overcomes silencing and develops her own voice by the novel's end. At first, Sethe describes Denver to Paul D as one who is charmed when she says, "Nothing bad can happen to her. Look at it. Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver. Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it - which meant' she wasn't going to make it either - she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill" (Morrison 42). Just the fact that Denver survived her impossible birth is evidence that she is special. Sethe believed that she must keep the experiences of her past from Denver, that the future "was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42).

She believed the life they were living now was the "better life she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one" (42). All that mattered to Sethe was keeping the reality of that life from her daughter. She is successful in keeping the past from Denver, but she must isolate her in order to do so. This, of course, is not beneficial to the girl, who must eventually confront the past as she moves into her role as representative of the future.

When Denver was young, she would leave her mother and grandmother's house at 124 Bluestone Road and visit the teacher Lady Jones in the afternoon. Here she witnessed other children with slates in their hands learning to read and write. Curious, she spied on the teaching, finally getting enough courage to enter the house. Denver is eventually allowed to be part of the teaching and she practices her letters and sentences daily. The other students ignore her, however, and she has no idea why. It is only when she is confronted by one of the children, a boy named Lord Nelson, that she learns the terrible lesson she must hear about her mother's past deeds. The boy boldly asks her a question that is ultimately responsible for silencing her for two years. Like Clara in *The House*

*of the Spirits* and like Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, Denver, when faced with the unspeakable, with pain that is too much to bear, responds by using a self-enforced silence as a means of coping. The question that the boy asks her puts a stop to her education, "[he] asked her the question about her mother that put chalk, the little *i* and all the rest that those afternoons held, out of reach forever" (Morrison 102).

Her silence results because she cannot hear, or she refuses to hear: "For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration but which gave her eyes a power even she found hard to believe" (Morrison 103). It is only when she hears the ghost of her younger sister, Beloved, that she awakens from her silence: "For two years she heard nothing at all and then she heard close thunder crawling up the stairs" (103). Denver's hearing was cut off by a question and an answer she could not bear to hear, and it is returned by the sound of Beloved, who represents the past, climbing the stairs. That it is the ghost of her dead sister that awakens her hearing again is significant in that it is the presence of Beloved who finally makes Denver move into maturity and voice.



Beloved's presence is both destructive and enabling. It is Denver who benefits from Beloved's presence in a much less destructive way than Sethe does. She indirectly benefits from the return of her dead sister as Beloved inspires her to grow and mature. At first Denver is glad to have the ghost of Beloved with her because she is no longer lonely and isolated. She begins to develop an intense dependence on Beloved and without her, feels she has no soul of her own. She realizes that she "shouldn't be afraid of the ghost. It wouldn't harm me because I tasted its blood when Ma'am nursed me . . . But it would never hurt me . . . She played with me and always came to be with me whenever I needed her. She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (Morrison 209). It is only when Beloved's increasingly evil actions toward Sethe get out of control that Denver realizes her mother is being destroyed and she must step out of the situation and find help if they are to survive. She also realizes that you cannot own someone else and that it is dangerous to even desire to. Denver begins to understand that Beloved represents the horrors of the past and that she must go to the community of Black women to assist her: "The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her

mother from Beloved . . . She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243).

It is the spirit of Baby Suggs who enables Denver to take her first step. Baby Suggs is symbolic of the past and all women who have lived through the slave-master relationship and experienced slavery. She, herself, has no self, and indeed no name, as she is called "Jenny" by her master, Mr. Garner, who she doesn't correct until she is freed and leaves him. She tells her true name, Baby Suggs, to Brother and Sister Bodwin when she gets to Ohio. She has little frame of reference for her name, as she doesn't know what happened to her husband and of seven babies, she has only one child, Halle, that she has been able to keep. As she is about to die, she tells Denver and Sethe that "the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free" was that "was no bad luck in the world but white-people . . . They don't know when to stop" (Morrison 104). She understands that the spirit world is everywhere -"in the houses, in the trees, in the rivers, manifested in hellish light or in hands that reach out to caress or to strangle" (Rigney *Voices* 80), and she becomes a spirit for Denver in her need.

When Denver stands on the porch contemplating where to go for help, it is the spirit of Baby Suggs who comes to her: "Her throat itched; her heart kicked -- and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything" (Morrison 244). She chides Denver into leaving the porch by recounting her history: "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my" (244). Like Clara's spirit, who empowers her granddaughter in *The House of the Spirits*, the spirit of Baby Suggs provides the impetus for Denver to leave the porch and go for help.

Denver also represents the oral language that will find a form in the written (Williams 160). She learns to read and write, unlike her mother, sister, and Paul D, and when she asks the community for help, they respond by sending her notes with gifts of food that enable the family to survive since their mother no longer works. Denver is able to read these notes as well as to converse with the women in the community. It is language that saves the family from destruction, and language that will

assure Denver's future. As she continues to grow, it is implied that Denver will be able to use the tools of written discourse that will enable her to tell the story that represents the past (160), which is what Morrison has done in writing this novel -- the passing on.

It is not a single woman who helps Denver; it is a community of women who not only help, but also prevent another tragedy from occurring. The crowd of women, strong Black women, march together to Sethe's house and perform the exorcism that is necessary to release Sethe and Denver from Beloved's spell. Denver first hears the group as a mumbling, then as a unified group, women who do not step foot in the yard, and then she hears a type of praying. The voices grow louder as the women begin to use the power of their voices to sing, chant, and pray. Like the song that Beloved tells her mother that she remembers from a distant childhood, songs constitute power in family and power in voice. Women's songs, according to Rigney, are "often codes, ways to break an enforced silence; they constitute a protest . . . [they] represent subversion, and they speak the lost language of Africa" (Rigney "Breaking" 139). The group of women search "for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the

back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees" (Morrison 261) (Rigney "Story" 234). Sethe is prevented from attacking Mr. Bowdin who she thinks is Schoolteacher coming again to take her children, and Beloved is sent back to the water from which she came. The group of Black women represent the carriers of voice, and of wisdom: "The crime of history is that the mother-voice of memory and wisdom [is] silenced, however briefly, whether by the iron bit in the mouth . . . -- or by the creation of memories too traumatic to recall" (234). The most important affirmation of female community is what ultimately releases Sethe and Denver from the power of the past and provides them both with the signal that represents the beginning of their social integration and independence, and propels them onward towards the possibility of a brighter future.

Morrison's novel is about silence as well as language, according to Rigney, "whether the silence is metaphysical or physically enforced by circumstance" ("Breaking" 142). Like Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, who must learn the language of her surroundings, African

Americans must speak and write in a language that is not theirs. Historically, the white culture has enforced such silence through illiteracy, and also through the metaphorical and actual placing of "the bit in the mouth" (142). The insertion of the bit inevitably results in "the wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back" (Morrison 71). The message of Morrison's novels "is to give a voice to the voiceless, to speak the unspeakable on the part of the speechless, and to tell how 'offended the tongue is, held down by iron'" (Morrison 71) (Rigney "Breaking" 142).

In *Beloved*, however, the silence is broken by the women in the novel, women who speak louder than words in the face of the greatest adversity: "What a roaring," writes Morrison (181). It is in the remembering that the characters in *Beloved* are able to tell the story of the past. It is also through the ghost of Beloved and what she represents, in addition to the community of women, that they are empowered to make meaning of their individual and collective lives and to pass the story on. Morrison writes about a people who have been denied the power of language to tell their story. Before they can tell the story, however, they must confront and understand

the "ghosts" of the past. Only then can the individual and the community work together to learn from the past and to experience a type of healing. A people whose history has been erased by silence and forgetfulness must find the power to keep the lessons of that history in the memories of all people -- however painful.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Each of the works selected for this thesis provides a reflection of a woman's place in a particular culture, specifically Latin American, Asian American, and African American cultures. Each is penned by a modern woman writer who aims to reflect both the past and the future of the women in its culture and its history. Even though they reflect very different backgrounds, the works are similar in their messages. Each work centers on the universal messages of the importance of women gaining their own voice and in learning to transfer that voice into the future. Also, most importantly, each story uses the past as reflected by spirits and ghosts to create a memorial of the past, to mourn that past, and then to take the lessons learned from this past into the future of all women.

The authors' use of the supernatural in each of these works ultimately serves to do two things: first, when spirits and ghosts enter the text, they are primarily used to eventually give voice to their female counterparts as they empower them; second, they provide a context for



making the past, both individual and collective, visible to those who have no memory of it. Thus, the ghosts and spirits are representatives of memory; and also indicated is a mourning for this memory of the past. How one remembers the past of the individual family or their cultural group as a whole is what helps define their culture. Whether Asian, Latin, or African, one's memory of the past defines ethnicity; ethnic identities are created by examining a past each group claims as their own. According to Kathleen Brogan in her introduction to *Cultural Haunting*, "Memory confirms who we are. Yet collective memories . . . are in fact repeatedly reinterpreted over time in answer to changing needs, so that the present is informed by a past that in turn is continually revised by present perspectives" (130). The use of the supernatural helps the characters in the works gain access to what has occurred in the past, and to aide in helping them decide what is most valuable about the past that can be taken into the future. Of course, the memories the ghost or spirit brings back can be painful. The character doing the remembering is faced with the problem of: "how to remember safely, what to remember, how to recollect group memories no longer handed down whole,

[and] how to connect memories of the past meaningfully to the present" (131). The ghosts in each of the three novels discussed represent painful memories.

In *The House of the Spirits*, although Clara spends much of her time attempting to access the past through the spirit world, her attempts result from her desire to escape intolerable conditions that are a part of her cultural life in a patriarchal society. When Clara returns in spirit form to help her granddaughter, it is because she understands the horror of the dictatorship that is both her past and Alba's present. She is able to empower Alba to survive the torture inflicted on her by the corrupt political regime and the bastard son of her grandfather. The spirit also empowers her to begin to organize and add to the notebooks her grandmother kept in an effort at understanding and exposing the painful past. Through the mourning and recording of her past, she defines her ethnic identity.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese spirits come back to haunt the present, spirits that serve as a reminder of a past history. Kingston dedicates her book to her No Name Aunt whose story is told to her by her mother. Kingston feels she must honor the painful memory of her aunt, who

died shamed and silent, by giving voice to her story. In mourning her aunt, Kingston mourns all women who were deemed insignificant and erasable in the Chinese culture, whether dead or living, legendary or real. Giving voice to her aunt's story helps Kingston establish her own dual Chinese-American identity.

In *Beloved*, the novel's ghost is a symbol of all the nameless victims of slavery whose presence makes visible this erased history. The ghost of *Beloved* comes back to haunt her family and to force them to recall the horrible legacy of slavery and its effect on the African Americans it destroyed. In learning to speak about a past that is "unspeakable," and by mourning that past, the characters in the novel experience a type of healing that allows them to move into the future. It is the ghost that is primarily responsible for this confrontation of painful memories; *Beloved* comes from the water, from a grave of the unrecorded deaths of those on the slave ships.

In addition to using the supernatural as a symbol of past memories, each story also uses ghosts to bring about revenge. Through the use of the supernatural, each author takes revenge on cultures that deny women voice. Allende takes revenge on the position that Latin American women

have had to succumb to in their traditionally patriarchal society. In telling the story of her grandmother's past, she gives voice to all women as she weaves their stories into female history. Kingston avenges the silence imposed on Asian American women by writing about her ancestors and about Moon Orchid, her aunt who descends into madness. She confronts the ghost of No Name Aunt as well as the ghosts of all women who have been denied voice. Morrison avenges the hurt of generations of Black people who were slaves and gives voice to those who have no names and no history. *Beloved*, representative of 60 million dead, comes to destroy and to revenge the wrongs of the past. However, through the power of strong women, Sethe, Denver, and the community of women, the past is confronted and the truth is told.

In each of the three works, the issue of silencing is closely tied to voice and empowerment. The Latin American society is one that believes silence is an appropriate expression of female experience. Clara was silenced twice as a young girl and again as a woman in *The House of the Spirits*. Both times, her silence resulted from intolerable actions and abusive situations that were the result of a patriarchal society. While physically mute,

however, she still invested time in recording events, including trivial ones, in her notebooks. Her voice is further heard through her granddaughter who will write the story of Chile's history. Ultimately, it is Alba's voice that is used to teach Trueba, the symbol of patriarchy, about lessons of life, love, and family. Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, is silenced when she is a student in an American school. Learning a new language proves to be difficult for her and other Chinese children as well. When she finally speaks, Kingston can only whisper. Feeling handicapped and confused about which cultural traditions she is supposed to follow, Kingston remains unassertive throughout her childhood. It is through the stories of legendary Chinese warriors and her own mother's history that she eventually comes to voice. Sethe, in *Beloved*, is silenced by a past that is too horrible to speak about. She slowly begins to remember and speak of events from her past, but is unable to speak of the most horrible one. Denver too, is silenced for several years when she realizes, through a young boy's question, that her mother committed what seems an unforgivable act. It is through *Beloved*, who represents the past, that they are

able to begin to heal and to tell the story that is "unspeakable."

One of the most important modes of creating voice in women characters centers on the female community and is evident in each of the three works. Female friendship, both individual and community generated, aids in creating women's voice. Each work depicts, as a centerpoint, the importance and empowerment of love of friends, mother-daughter love, and love from a community of women. Clara finds friends that are also spirit seekers; in particular she makes friends with the Mora sisters, who remain lifelong companions that provide relief from the demands of a patriarchal society. She also manages to keep both her daughter and her granddaughter living with her for most of her life. She doesn't always live with her husband, as he travels between two homesteads, but her daughter always lives with her; in fact, her daughter chooses to live with her mother over her lover. Clara intervenes when Alba is near death from torture, and after her release, a community of women care for her. These women bond together to jointly empower Alba to survive. Part of their plan to bring her back to life involves singing. They sing together loudly, to the dismay of the

guards, giving voice to their solidarity. Through the relationship with her spirit grandmother and through the power of feminine bonding, Alba is empowered to begin her writing.

A type of mother-daughter bonding is also evident in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston is certainly empowered by her mother, Brave Orchid, who, by providing examples and through story telling inspires her daughter not to be subservient. She provides a model of intelligence and independence for Kingston. On the other hand, she presents stories that uphold Chinese traditions to Kingston and sometimes has difficulty communicating in English. This duality in Brave Orchid's existence serves to amplify the duality her daughter faces as well, when caught between the values of two cultures. When Kingston first speaks back, it is to her mother. The community of spirits of both her ancestors and her culture's legendary heroines also inspire Kingston, and this group of women are who are responsible for her ultimate success in recording her story and the history of other women who face similar difficulties.

In *Beloved*, Denver, who represents the future, is

empowered by a community of Black women who forcefully exorcise the ghost of Beloved from her hold on her family. Denver is also empowered by her mother, by Beloved when she first knows her, and by Baby Suggs when she returns as a spirit. Sethe, when surrounded by her daughter, Denver, and the ghost Beloved, experiences some happiness. She is also able to witness the spirit of both the mother she never got to know and her mother in law, Baby Suggs. Similar to the female community in *The House of the Spirits*, it is a group of women who ultimately save Sethe and then empower Denver to speak and write as she passes the story on.

Although the messages are similar, each of the works discussed utilizes various strategies to develop their ideas of cultural silencing and the supernatural. Each of the works challenges the traditional structure of acceptable canonical literature. Allende, in *The House of the Spirits*, uses primarily a male point of view throughout the work. Through the use of first person narration, Esteban Trueba's words are central to the plot and structure of the work, yet the novel's messages are centered on the females and their situations. It is appropriate that the male character dominates the



discourse and focuses on significant events, while the female characters center on the meaning of the events. Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, organizes her chapters as "talk-stories" where she narrates the stories in a multi-voiced text. Each story is a woman's story that explores the difficulty of merging two cultures. In the center of the talk stories is one about the background of Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, whose lessons are both positive and negative, and deliver the messages of the book. Morrison, in *Beloved*, develops her story through flashbacks and time sequences that are not linear. She develops two plot lines in her story, while telling each from different points of view, and uses fragmented language to do so. *Beloved's* dialogue is composed of a series of poetic fragmented images, while Sethe's language is halting, displaying the broken rhythm of short, choppy sentences.

Also different are the cultural backgrounds that form the framework of the books. However, all three women writers transcend the difficulties their cultures present as they write about the past, make sense of the past, and then move women into a non-silent future. In the Latin American culture, the ideology of machismo and the powerful patriarchal voice, have been responsible for the

lack of women's writings until the last 30 years. Colonial Latin American women were offered only three choices from which to exercise power - the home, the convent, or the brothel. Allende writes about a society that believes silence is an appropriate expression of female experience. The Asian culture, like the Latin, historically is a patriarchal society as well. In addition, Kingston points out, according to traditional Chinese culture, girl children were less desirably than boys. Women, who were supposedly fit for domestic work only, were supposed to be silent and obedient. Kingston is warned about what happens to people who do not follow the cultural rules through her mother's stories or lessons. At the same time, she is also taught the stories of cultural heroes in an effort to empower her towards voice and language. Black women have been depicted in a stereotyped fashion in pre-1970s literature. A Black woman could be cast as a mammy figure, or she could be a domestic worker or a slave. The Black women who emerged from Morrison's novels in the 70s and 80s were strong and complex; they were women, unlike their predecessors, who illuminated the black woman's experience and whose realizations were sometimes painful.

Allende, Kingston, and Morrison, thus, challenge the notions of female silencing and coming to voice, and they do this by using the supernatural, in the form of ghosts and spirits, to empower their women to create stories of the past and then to pass these stories on. Within the framework of their three ethnic identities, there are similarities to be found in each of their stories of voice empowerment. They also each clearly point out the importance of both challenging and writing about the history that precedes them. They all believe that it is important to confront the past, remember it, mourn it, and then record it for the benefit of future generations of women.

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