

NARRATING “OTHERNESS”:

(National) Abjection as Literary and American Subjective Crises in Maxine Hong Kingston’s

*The Woman Warrior*

by

Eileen Jingyi Li



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*For Kellie, who lives.*



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the narrative strategies employed in Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts*. Many scholars have already commented upon the text's bizarre division between adult-Maxine as the memoir's authoritative narrator and child-Maxine as a fictional character within the text. However, less attention has been directed toward understanding the bifurcation of the memoir's central "Maxine" into narrator and character as reflective of the ongoing identity racialized and gendered identity crises Maxine experiences as a Chinese American girl. In positing the memoir's complicated narration as evidence of the psychological anxieties Maxine experiences by virtue of her marginalized status, this thesis argues that Kingston, the actual author of *The Woman Warrior*, foregrounds the continual, damaging effects racism and sexism enact upon women of color. In this manner, the text's narration can be read as the literary landscape within which Maxine struggles to consolidate both her narrative authority and her legitimacy as an American subject. Such a reading is essential toward emphasizing that, contrary to assertions which mark assimilation into American society as the end of one's struggle with racialized and gendered identity crises, individuals of marginalized identities must deal with the psychological injuries inflicted by governing hegemonic structures so long as the aforementioned structures exist.

Through the scope of Julia Kristeva's theorization of abjection and Karen Shimakawa's conceptualization of national abjection, my thesis contextualizes Maxine's identity crises and narrative frustrations as both American and literary subjective crises. In this study, the term "American subjectivity" refers to the quality of "Americanness" that is not only structured by dominant national discourses, but also shapes what it means to be recognized as legitimately "American". Likewise, the term "literary subjectivity" denotes the characteristic of enjoying both narrative authority and psychological interiority while actively engaging with, instead of passively observing, one's own lived experiences.

The first chapter defines Kristevan abjection as a subjective crisis and provides sociopolitical background on the historical formation of "Asian American" as an identificatory category. These two contexts ultimately generate Shimakawa's theorization of national abjection, an analytical framework capable of addressing the subjective crisis in Chinese American literature. The second chapter analyzes the ways in which Maxine experiences national abjection vis-à-vis her struggling between silence and speech as effective modes of communication within the American classroom. The third chapter looks at Maxine's bullying of her silent, Chinese, female classmate as not only a crystallization of racialized and gendered self-hatred, but also evidence of the ways in which the subjective crises instigated by national abjection demands that Maxine must abject another. The final chapter examines Maxine's failure to force the silent girl to speak as representative of the fact that, under national abjection, Chinese American females are fundamentally barred from the category of "Americanness". In conclusion, then, this thesis begins to unpack the extent to which female protagonists of color's narrations of Otherness are instead read as inspiring triumphs over one's marginalized identity so as to deny the continued domination of racism and sexism as psychologically damaging structures within American society.

**Keywords:** Abjection, narration, Otherness, literary subjectivity, American subjectivity, subjective crisis, narrative authority, *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston



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## SHORT TITLES

AS: Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.

“Encounters”: Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Encounters with the Racial Shadow." *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. By Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 77-117. Print.

*Powers*: Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Rodiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. PDF.

TWW: Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage International, 1976. Print.



## INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Maxine<sup>1</sup> asks: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family... from what is Chinese?" (5-6). Throughout the rest of the text, Maxine attempts to answer this rhetorical question by re-imagining the lives of her female relatives and Chinese female mythological characters against the backdrop of her own memories as an adolescent. *TWW*'s investment in the imagination and lived experiences of a Chinese American girl undoubtedly characterizes the narrative as a larger unpacking of Chinese American feminine identity. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes, "it is, in fact, essential to recognize that the entire *Woman Warrior* is a sort of meditation on what it means to be [a] Chinese American [girl]" ("Autobiography" 160).

For scholars of literature by women of color<sup>2</sup>, this articulation of the self amidst a greater identificatory labyrinth of "Chineseness," "Americanness," and femininity is precisely what generates the text's narrative complexity and nuanced social commentary—hence *TWW*'s literary value and subsequent canonical status in contemporary Asian American literature.<sup>3</sup> As King-Kok Cheung writes, Kingston's narrative strategies "fractur[e] Chinese and white

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<sup>1</sup>Inspired by King-Kok Cheung in her book *Articulate Silences* (1993), in this thesis, I refer to *TWW*'s unnamed narrator-protagonist as 'Maxine' for convenience. Likewise, I use 'Kingston' with regards to the author of the text. While *TWW* is marketed as memoir and/or autobiography, I choose not to conflate its author with its protagonist in accordance with Foucault's postulation of what Laura Hyun Yi Kang coins "the noncorrespondence of narrator, writer, and author": "It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator: the 'author-function' arises out of their scission — in the division and distance between the two" (Kang 36, *Language* 116). For a more thorough critique of the problematically ethnographic implications of assuming the synonymy between *TWW*'s protagonist and author, see: Kang 2002, Li (2000), Ling (1998), and Wong's essay "Autobiography as Guided China Town Tour?" (1998).

<sup>2</sup> See also: Cheung's book *AS* (1993), E. Kim (1981), Ho (1999), Kang (2002), Quinby (1998), and Wong's essay "Encounters" (1993).

<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the literary and cultural popularity enjoyed by *TWW*, see: Wong's essay, "Autobiography" (1998) and Wong's introduction to *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* (1999).

American orthodoxies to make room for renewed gender and ethnic identities and for sexual, racial, and international politics grounded in reciprocity rather than in domination” (*Articulate Silences* 78). For Linda Morante, these literary tactics of resistance and subversion enable Maxine to resolve the racialized and gendered identity crises she experiences in the face of American Sinophobic racism and Chinese patriarchal misogyny. According to Morante, by the end of the memoir, Maxine “has ‘translated’ the wordless ‘anger and sadness’ of her life ‘among ghosts’ into a... self that speaks eloquently to us. She too has become a woman and a warrior” (82). In other words, to Morante and other scholars/readers with similarly idealistic views<sup>4</sup>, the end of *TWW* marks Maxine’s success in coming to terms with her race and her gender, allowing her to fully embrace her identity as a Chinese American woman.

Although I take issue with such an overtly optimistic claim, this is not to say that my position mirrors that of Frank Chin’s famous criticism of *TWW*. Chin blasts Kingston for bastardizing Chinese myths and culture with the intention of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Chinese (Americans) as exotic and sexist—a project which, according to Chin, deliberately panders to a white readership.<sup>5</sup> In touting the myth of an “authentic” Chinese American experience, such an argument problematically essentializes Chinese American identity. Additionally, Chin’s allegations ignore that *TWW*’s intersectional themes work to undermine the aforementioned denigrating, Orientalist stereotypes *while* addressing the reality of Chinese patriarchal misogyny.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also: Cheung’s essay “‘Don’t Tell’” (1988), Parrott (2012), and the “positive” reviewers cited in Kingston’s essay, “Cultural Mis-Readings” (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Chin writes of Kingston: “Kingston, with a stroke of white racist genius, attacks Chinese civilization.... She, the victim of Chinese misogyny, says that ‘The Ballad of Mulan,’... is the source of the misogynistic emphasis of Chinese ethics. She takes Fa Mulan, turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universality.... Portraying Chinese culture as despicable, bashing the men, pitying and freeing the women, have become ends in themselves. To white America, [Chinese American men] are nothing more than actors playing the parts of Chinese in a Charlie Chan movie” (155).

<sup>6</sup> For further criticism on Chin and the racist, sexist, ethnographic undertones characterizing mis-readings of *TWW* in

Still, my own reading of *TWW* departs considerably from Morante's optimistic reading. My grievances with Morante rest in the fact that her assertions promote two troubling conclusions: firstly, that the value of *TWW* lies in its quasi-happy ending of Maxine defeating the psychical nemeses that were her childhood identity crises; and secondly, that one's marginalized identity is a "problem" which can be likewise "resolved" and "overcome" so as to emerge as an American completely recovered from the psychological damage stemming from having experienced various forms of oppression.<sup>7</sup> As Anne Cheng argues in her book, *The Melancholy of Race* (2001), such positivist readings overlook "Kingston's particular brand of haunted racial identity... in favor of an alternative narrative: the narrative of ethnic euphoria" (70).

By referencing Cheng's term "haunted racial identity," I am not suggesting that Kingston insists that all Chinese American women are doomed to suffer eternally by virtue of their minority status. Aside from being profoundly depressing, such a reading denies women of color the possibility of ever learning to love themselves. I am instead arguing that, just as the process of finding "a uniquely Chinese American voice to serve as a weapon for [Maxine's] life" remains unfinished by the end of *TWW*, the real-life navigation of self-acceptance against the contradictory messages exuded by enduring forms of social oppression likewise manifests as a lifelong project (E. Kim 154). To deny such truths would efface the reality that, as lasting social structures, racism and sexism continuously produce traumatizing effects on one's psyche. Likewise, positivist readings like Morante's fail to recognize that the lives celebrated by the clichéd maxim "Existence is resistance" are the very ones consistently undervalued and undermined by white, patriarchal hegemonic structures.

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general, see: Wong's essay "Autobiography" and Yunte Huang (2002). For more reading on Chinese patriarchal misogyny, see: Koo et al. (2011), Lu (1995), and Yalan Huang (2015).

<sup>7</sup> For further reading on the neurotypical, racist implications of interpreting assimilation into American society as a process of "healing" from the trauma which marginalized persons encounter due to their marginalized status, see: Juliana Chang (2012) and Anne Cheng (2001).

In essence, it is imperative that we, as readers in a politically fraught climate, remain vigilantly aware of the pervasive psychological effects of institutionalized oppression *and* remind one another that, by virtue of their very presence, individuals of marginalized identities defy the sociopolitically disenfranchising forces seeking to erase the former's existence in the first place. As one of my Chinese American friends summarizes beautifully in their explanation of the significance behind their tattoo of their name in Chinese: "I got this... as a reminder to myself that the things that exclude me from being a full person in this country are also the things that make me beautiful and whole. I'm a queer Chinese girl surviving under white supremacy, and I'll survive as long as it takes to see my people prosper and flourish."

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which the narrative strategies used by Kingston to describe Maxine's racialized and gendered identity crisis can illuminate the Othering effects of racism and sexism emerge as recurring, yet-to-be-conquered maladies within Maxine's psychological landscape. By narrative strategies, I am referring specifically to *TWW*'s (indistinct) alternating between the voices of temporally removed, wiser adult-Maxine and self-invested, overly emotional child-Maxine. While possessing the retrospective sensibility and maturity that ultimately grants her narrative authority over *TWW*, adult-Maxine spends the entirety of the text only passively observing and retelling the stories of others. Since *TWW* mostly focuses on individuals that are not Maxine, adult-Maxine's distanced narration subsequently deprives child-Maxine of interiority until the memoir's final chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," in which child-Maxine emerges as a primary character for the first time. This bizarre yet subtle division between the two Maxines ultimately deprives Maxine, child or adult, of literary subjectivity. In this study, the term "literary subjectivity" refers to the enjoyment of both narrative authority *and* psychological interiority while actively engaging with,

instead of passively observing, one's own lived experiences.

This is not the first study to examine *TWW*'s peculiar narrative style as reflective of Maxine's ongoing struggles against Sinophobic racism and Chinese patriarchal misogyny. In *AS*, Cheung uses feminist scholar Alice Jardine's theorization of "dominant discourse" to understand the ways in which the splitting of Maxine into adult-narrator and child-character represents a larger psychological struggle. She notes that *TWW*'s narration, "reflecting the sensibility of a [Maxine] older and wiser..., undercuts the 'truth' of [child Maxine's] explicit statements," the latter of which are couched in racialized and gendered self-hatred (78). Yet, I find that Cheung's feminist applications of dominant discourse do not sufficiently address racism and sexism's *lasting* devastating impact on Maxine's psyche *or* adequately demonstrate that, even at the end of *TWW*, there is more work that needs to be done. Thus, in turning to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as an analytical framework for understanding the psychological strategies used to define one's self, I will more clearly chart the enduring effects of racist, sexist American and/or Chinese paradigms on Maxine's articulation of *her* self. The tormenting ramifications such dominating, oppressive discourses engender on Maxine's psychological state likewise materialize in the narration's confusion between adult and child-Maxine's voices, the latter of which functions as a larger project to consolidate literary subjectivity for both Maxines as a whole.

In my first chapter, "Subjectivity and (National) Abjection" I provide background on Kristevan abjection as a theoretical framework. Kristeva's seminal work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), allows me to contextualize abjection as a subjective crisis—that is, as the process through which one defines the self vis-à-vis a perpetual naming and casting down of an Other. I then turn to Asian American performance studies critic Karen Shimakawa's theory of "national abjection." In her book, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*

(2002), Shimakawa demonstrates how Kristevan abjection provides a foundation for her own theorization of “national abjection”—an ontological vehicle through which the U.S., via anti-Asian domestic/foreign policy and cultural productions, has defined its idealized national identity of “Americanness” against a branding of Asian (Americans) as perpetually Other. The constitution of this “Americanness” necessitates the creation of a racial Other and the subsequent expulsion of said Other. Additionally, in this thesis, I employ the term “American subjectivity” to describe this quality of “Americanness” that is not only structured by dominant national discourses, but also shapes what it means to be recognized as legitimately “American”. In the ken of this legitimacy, I argue, the subject is “immune” from having one’s identity strictly read through racist and/or sexist paradigms. Overall, I find such theoretical background useful in examining the ways in which the racist, sexist treatment Maxine encounters as a child generates the racialized and gendered *subjective* crises with which she struggles for not only the majority of her life, but beyond the ending of *TWW* as well.

In my second chapter, “Subjectivity, Silence, and Speech,” I demonstrate the ways in which national abjection shapes Maxine’s childhood through her constant struggle between silence and speech as viable mediators for self-expression in American society. In analyzing Maxine’s elementary education experiences, I argue that Maxine localizes her racialized and gendered anxieties within her attempts to have her verblancy heard or even understood by her American teachers.<sup>8</sup> Drawing upon Cheryl Glenn and Susan Sontag’s evaluations of what Patti Duncan coins, “Western theories of subjectivity[’s]... implying that American identity is structured around acts of speech,” I posit that, due to her status as a Chinese American girl, Maxine fundamentally cannot attain coherency as a legitimate American subject (22). Abjecting

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<sup>8</sup>As Cheung observes, “‘American’ is always synonymous with ‘non-Asian’ or ‘un-Asian’ in Maxine’s usage” (AS 81).

discourses governing American society denote that Maxine, as abject, must be perpetually read as silent and/or unintelligible. In other words, in spite of her extensive efforts in navigating America's privileging of speech over silence as the most effective form of communication, Maxine fundamentally cannot "speak" herself into American subjectivity.

In my third chapter, "Subjectivity and Self-Hatred," I read the scene in which Maxine bullies her silent, female, Chinese classmate in an attempt to force the latter to speak as a crystallization of racialized and gendered self-hatred. Building upon Wong, I argue this passage functions as a moment in which Maxine, frustrated by the lack of subjective maneuvers afforded to her as a Chinese American girl, desperately attempts to assert her superiority over the silent girl by condemning the girl's silence in the same ways in which Maxine herself has also been punished by her American teachers. That is, Maxine's abjection of the silent girl constitutes a larger project of consolidating her own American and literary subjectivity.

In my fourth and final chapter, "Subjectivity and the Failures of Abjection," I examine the ways in which child Maxine's narrative authority and perceived American subjectivity unravel as a result of the silent girl's nonresponsiveness throughout the entire encounter. Extending the arguments of Wong and Cheng, I argue that this disintegration of child-Maxine's literary and American subjectivity exemplifies the performative constructedness of *TWW*'s narration—that is, the degree to which Kingston deliberately renders Maxine's narrative voice multi-vocal so as to obscure the psychological toll she experiences for narrating her Otherness. This performative constructedness is further revealed in the scene immediately following the bullying passage, in which Maxine falls sick with a mysterious and extended year-long illness. By undoing Maxine's aspirational literary and American subjectivities and by having Maxine claim that her bizarre illness was a just punishment for her actions (despite its actual description

proving otherwise), Kingston subsequently pressures the reader to critique the ways in which Maxine, child or adult, constitutes a literary speaking voice in *TWW*.

Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to explore the ways in which national abjection generates *TWW*'s narrative investment in Maxine's literary and American subjective crises. Such an extensive cataloguing of the psychological effects of Maxine's struggle with the aforementioned identity crises does not strive to charge Maxine with having (at one point) internalized racialized and gendered self-hatred. Rather, this study seeks to demonstrate the instability and illegitimacy of an authentic "Americanness" from which marginalized peoples are excluded, given "Americanness's" epistemological roots in abjection. Lastly, this study begins to unpack the extent to which mis-readings of female protagonists of color's narrations of Otherness as inspiring triumphs over one's marginalized identity effectively fail to address the continued domination of racism and sexism as psychologically damaging structures within American society.

## CHAPTER I: SUBJECTIVITY AND (NATIONAL) ABJECTION

Kristeva opens *Powers* by defining abjection as a defensive response to a threateningly vague Other, the abject:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects... But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

Here, Kristeva lays bare the multiple affective trajectories through which abjection threatens to undo the subject: worry, desire, refusal, unease, disgust, and fear. In the most basic sense, abjection is defined as a “violent, dark [revolt] of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside”; that is, abjection is the aversive reaction to a menacingly indefinable peril (Kristeva 1). Additionally, although Kristeva initially characterizes abjection as a revulsive response, it is also important to note that such a response makes salient one’s abhorrence for the Other while simultaneously expelling or jettisoning said Other by “turn[ing] aside” (1). In other words, abjection is both the process of rejecting that which is not felt to be the subject *and* the act of naming what has been abjected: the abject.

Yet, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the abject can be defined as just that which has been abjected. According to Kristeva, a defining feature of the abject is its status as “a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (1). It is particularly crucial to fixate on Kristeva’s choice of grammatical conjunction—the use of “or” suggests that the abject

can inhabit either location but not both at the same time. However, Kristeva's continued elaboration of what exactly makes the abject so frightening betrays this binary localization: she writes that the abject "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated"; it is "like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion" (1). Here, Kristeva's spatial approximations between the abject and the subject reveal that, for the abject, "outside" and "inside" are not necessarily mutually exclusive spaces. By measuring the distance between the abject and the subject as "quite close", Kristeva hints that the abject's externality is ambiguously relative to the subject and, by virtue of its ambiguous relativity, thus unstable. The instability of the abject's "outsideness" emerges more explicitly through Kristeva's likening of the abject to "an inescapable boomerang" (1). After all, boomerangs are capable of movement; furthermore, they can move further away *from* and closer *to* an object. Thus, if the abject possesses boomerang-esque mobility, its ability to migrate both to and away from the subject implies a similar capacity to flexibly move between "outside" and "inside".

Henceforth, for Kristeva, it is perhaps the abject's ability to travel freely between these two sites that makes it so threatening. To possess the capacity to trespass also denotes an ability to transgress; it is this transgressive quality which ultimately "eject[s] [the abject] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 1). In other words, existing ontological frameworks used to make sense of reality lack the epistemological apparatuses needed to understand or define the abject. This indefinability constitutes the very essence of the abject; Kristeva later writes that the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order.... [It is] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). It would be more accurate to say, then, that the abject inhabits a third space that is neither outside nor inside, but rather, the space of the Other.

Consequently, although it might be tempting to equate the abject with the object, it

becomes abundantly clear here *this is not the case*. While an object's ontology still draws from the same epistemological framework used to define the subject, the abject is even *less* subjective than the object, as the abject must be jettisoned from the dimension of "the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" so as to concretize the binary between the subject and the object (Kristeva 1). Even Kristeva eventually gestures toward this inability to locate the abject within the binary classification of the subject and the object: the abject "remain[s] here *excluded* but in a strange fashion: not radically enough between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established.... As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside or Outside (7, emphasis in original). If the abject does not adhere to conventions of dualistic organization, it cannot be located at any one specific point within such a system. In other words, there is no space for the abject in the dialectic between the subject and the object, and yet, this *lack* of space is what simultaneously characterizes the abject as abject and sustains an exclusively subject-object oriented reality. Thus, as impossible, intolerable, and unthinkable, the abject hazards undoing the very ontological hierarchy it defies altogether.

In addition to undermining the ontology which the subject uses to legitimize itself, the abject also menacingly threatens the subject through the former's uncanniness. Kristeva specifies that abjection occurs when the subject recognizes itself in the uncanny, or, what Freud defines as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very similar" (620).<sup>9</sup> The abject, as "a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness", cannot be named using the subject's existing epistemological framework; it is "not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there

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<sup>9</sup> In the words of Juliana Chang in her book *Inhuman Citizenship* (2012), "The uncanny is not disturbing... simply because it is unfamiliar, but rather because it is both strange and familiar at once" (17).

is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (Kristeva 2). Here, the abject’s uncanny likeness to the subject (“It lies there, quite close”) poses an ontological threat to the subject, as to be *alike* to the abject in any manner would risk making the subject into the abject as well (Kristeva 1). After all, given the abject’s degrading status as Other, “who... would agree to call himself abject?” (Kristeva 209).

Earlier, I had characterized abjection as a reactionary, defensive process against the threatening abject. Having shown that the abject is capable of invalidating governing ontological conventions, it would thus be more appropriate to contextualize abjection as a subjective crisis sparked by a confrontation with the abject. Let us recall that the abject’s status as Other threatens to render the subject’s default, epistemological framework irrelevant and defunct. In terms of the subjective crisis, then, the abject’s uncanniness devolves the subject’s understandings of the distinction between “I” and “not I”. If such a distinction between subject and not-subject is essential to one’s self-definition, then to acknowledge the abject is to risk self-destruction (“[I]f I acknowledge it, [it] annihilates me”) (Kristeva 2). Threatening in its uncanniness, the abject endangers the subject’s sense of self; it is unsurprising, then, that for Kristeva, “Abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (2). To cast down the abject is to re-fortify one’s understanding of the self while expelling that which threatens to compromise one’s perceived selfhood altogether<sup>10</sup>; consequently, abjection is a rite of passage in both establishing and securing the subject’s self-conceptualization. In other words, abjection lays the foundation for subjectivity while simultaneously delegitimizing the epistemological framework the subject uses to define itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Later in *Powers*, Kristeva explicitly marks abjection as a (painful) means of securing subjectivity while simultaneously excluding that which would undo such perceived selfhood: “suffering as the place of the subject. Where it emerges, where it is differentiated from chaos. An incandescent, unbearable limit between inside and outside, ego and other” (140).

Having provided a brief summary of Kristevan abjection, I now turn to Karen Shimakawa's theory of national abjection. In *National Abjection*, Shimakawa argues that the abjection of the Asian Americans is an operation to the constitution of the American national subject. Shimakawa writes: "Asian Americanness[']s... constantly shifting relation to Americanness [is] a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans... that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship" (3, emphasis in original). While this abjection of Asian Americans characterizes the formation of Asian American political and cultural identity, it also allows for the U.S. to create and name an Other against which the former can concretize "Americanness" as decisively not-foreign, not-Asian, not-Other. In this way that "Asian Americanness functions as *abject* in relation to Americanness," Shimakawa asserts that national abjection is "a descriptive paradigm... posit[ing] a way of understanding the psychic, symbolic, legal, and aesthetic dimensions of national identity as they are performed (theatrically and otherwise) by Asian Americans" (3-4, emphasis in original).

Since Shimakawa situates national abjection as a critical lens through which the historically situated formation of Asian American identity can be analyzed, it will be necessary here to offer both historical and sociological background for the formation of "Asian American" as an identificatory category. In the 1850s, the large influx of Chinese laborers to the U.S. instilled the general belief that Chinese immigrants were a threat to (white) American blue-collar laborers and their jobs.<sup>11</sup> As a byproduct of this rapidly spreading Sinophobic sentiment, in 1882,

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<sup>11</sup> In a Marxist critique of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Lowe notes the paradoxical relationship between anti-Chinese sentiment and the U.S.'s dependency upon immigrant Chinese as a cheap, expendable labor source: "Theoretically, in a racially homogenous nation, the needs of capital and the needs of the state complement each other. Yet in a racially differentiated nation such as the United States, capital and state imperatives may be contradictory.... In late-

the American government implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act, which completely prohibited entry and reentry of resident alien Chinese. The rhetoric of this legislation extended beyond that of cracking down on immigration restrictions so as to tighten national security. As Lisa Lowe notes in her book *Immigrant Acts* (1996), “By excluding and disenfranchising the Chinese in 1882, the state could constitute the ‘whiteness’ of the citizenry and grant political concessions to ‘white’ labor groups who were demanding immigration restrictions” (13). In other words, the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first of many maneuvers enacted by the U.S. to concretize its constitution of “Americanness” in the face of an increasingly diverse racial and ethnic citizenry.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S.’s use of legal apparatuses to define “Americanness” against “Asianness” can be further charted in the government's anti-Chinese naturalization laws. For example, aside from labor-centric concerns, the U.S. Supreme Court also justified the Act with conclusions from previous court cases<sup>13</sup> that Chinese immigrants were perpetually un-assimilable and thus, un-American: “[The Chinese] remained strangers in the land, residing apart by themselves, and adhering to the customs and usages of their own country. It seemed impossible for them to assimilate with our people or to make any change in their habits or modes of being” (*Chae Chan Ping*). Additionally, even *before* the Chinese Exclusion Act, naturalization was often denied to Chinese plaintiffs on the grounds that they did not meet the standards of morality and literacy that were absolutely necessary to carrying out the “high, difficult, and sacred duties of an American citizen” (*Kanaka Nian*). More simply put, American courts argued that, since Chinese

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nineteenth-century America, as the state sought to serve capital, this contradiction between the economic and political spheres was *sublated* through the legal exclusion and disenfranchisement of Chinese immigrant laborers” (13, emphasis in original).

<sup>12</sup> In writing “first of many maneuvers,” I am referring to Trump’s foregrounding of the Muslim Bans and the U.S.-Mexican Wall as the primary objectives of his administration. Evidently, to this day, the U.S.’s preoccupation with preserving the “whiteness” of its “Americanness” shades much of its domestic policy.

<sup>13</sup> See also: *In re Ah Yup* (1878) and *In re Kanaka Nian* (1889).

immigrants did not want to, or perhaps, *could not* assimilate into American society, they were not capable of becoming Americans. Such assertions ultimately justified the government's denial of naturalization and immigration to those of Chinese descent.

The American government's exclusionist rhetoric stretched far beyond 1882, as anti-Asian immigration and naturalization laws were continuously enacted until the 1965 Immigration Act (the latter of which repealed former sanctions against Asian immigration). Lowe argues that this historic anti-Asianness<sup>14</sup> has become fundamental to the American imaginary of the ideal citizen subject: "The American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally" (4, emphasis in original). Here, Lowe's situating of the U.S.'s racist, xenophobic treatment of Asian (Americans) in alignment with the U.S.'s legal and cultural production of idealized "Americanness" parallels Kristevan abjection's drive to construct a border between the subject and the object.<sup>15</sup> In essence, then, the U.S.'s historical *abjection* of Asian Americans can be read as an attempt to define the American *subject* against the threat of and in opposition to the Asian American *object*. In light of the stereotype of the Asian American as perpetually foreign and of the Kristevan object's fundamental indefinability and Otherness, I likewise posit that "American subjectivity" is the quality of being recognized by dominant national discourses as legitimately American.

By "legitimately American," I am not referring to just legal legitimacy—after all, as of 1943, Asian immigrants became eligible for American citizenship. Rather, I am referring to sociopolitical legitimacy as well. Asian American cultural scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu, Steve Louie, and Glenn Omatsu have argued that "Asian Americanness," as a "*self*-defined

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<sup>14</sup> By "historic," I am also thinking of the Japanese internment camps after Pearl Harbor.

<sup>15</sup> Let us recall Kristeva's explanation of the necessity of abjection: "Abjection [is] my safeguard"; "how can I be without border" (1, 4). Similarly, Shimakawa writes: "it is through abjection that... borders/subjects are constituted" (9).

political and social coalition/identity”, arose specifically in response to the U.S.’s continued refusal to incorporate Asians into the legal *and* sociopolitical formations of “the American” (Espiritu 80, Louie and Omatsu 69, Shimakawa 2, emphasis in original). An example of the ways in which Asian Americans are refused American sociopolitical legitimacy can be found in the stereotype of Asian Americans as the “model minority.” First appearing in 1966 magazine articles and now used almost exclusively for those of Asian descent, the model minority stereotype refers to the generalization that individuals of a certain race are intelligent, hard-working, financially secure, and content with their sociopolitical status in American society (Shimakawa 13, Zhang 21).<sup>16</sup>

While seemingly positive, such a stereotype actually bears overwhelmingly negative connotations of Otherness<sup>17</sup>. In fact, from a semantic viewpoint, the term “model minority” effectively captures the abject nature of Asian Americans in reference to American racial consciousness. As Shimakawa observes, “The ambivalence of abjection is coded into the oxymoronic term itself... [as it] embraces Asian Americanness as exemplary of the correct embodiment of Americanness, even as it marks the group out as distinguishable from ‘normal’ Americanness” by virtue of their status as a racialized minority (13). In other words, while capable of emulating cultural signifiers of whiteness, according to the very definition of “model minority,” the Asian American’s raced body also automatically precludes itself from the

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to also stress that the model minority stereotype has been used “to suit the changing political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances” (Zhang 21). Most notably, during the Civil Rights Era, the lauding of Asian Americans as a model minority was used to delegitimize the outrage shared by African Americans and feminists. As Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung have observed, the portrayal of Asian Americans as the model minority “counter[ed] images of violent and vociferous African Americans and feminists..., demonstrat[ing] that familial stability, social mobility, and ethnic assimilation could be achieved without militant social activism. Thus, the Asian American model minority became the symbolic antithesis of militant Civil Rights activists and feminist groups” (75). Shimakawa agrees: “Asian Americans [are] singled out... over and against what [are] seen as other, less tractable, more antihegemonic racialized minorities” such as African and Latinx Americans (13).

<sup>17</sup> Psychologists and other researchers have noted the model minority stereotype’s harmful effects on Asian Americans’ mental health, academic performance, and even physical health. For further reading, see: Iwamoto et al. (2015), Thompson et al. (2010), Trytten et al. (2012), and Yi et al. (2016).

category of “whiteness.” Given my earlier argument that whiteness has been historically been conflated with Americanness, and vice versa, Asian Americans can be conveniently jettisoned for the purpose of concretizing an “authentic” “Americanness”.

Although I have extensively charted the denigrating Otherness ascribed to Asian Americans via national abjection, it is also critical to stress that, as a “category both produced through and in reaction to” national abjection, “Asian American” is fundamentally unstable (Shimakawa 2). By “unstable,” I do not mean that the identificatory group itself is a useless and invalid classification. Instead, I am arguing that, just as abjection itself is an unstable process, so too is “Asian American” as a construct of abjectness. Even though abjection allows for the subject to secure its selfhood, such self-definition is only actualized via a *perpetual* expulsion of the abject. As Kristeva writes, “From its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.... [Abjection] does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges [the subject] to be in perpetual danger” (2-9). In other words, due to its frustrating indefinability, frightening uncanniness, and menacing Otherness, the abject constantly threatens the very ontology of the subject’s self. As a result, although “it is through abjection that... borders/subjects are constituted... by definition, that process of constitution can never be complete (Shimakawa 9).

Consequently, in addition to its status as “the [im]possible, the[in]tolerable, the [un]thinkable,” the abject is so hazardous precisely because it forces the subject to continuously define itself against an Other. This is evident in the historical background I provided earlier on the formation of “Asian American” as an identificatory category. When the U.S. needed to cement whiteness as integral to “Americanness” in the face of racial minorities who could not be located within the racial binary of “black” and “white,” the government enacted the Chinese

Exclusion Act and denied naturalization to those of Asian descent. Similarly, when the U.S. needed to prove that “Americanness” was accessible to *all* marginalized peoples in order to delegitimize those protesting (and rightly so) otherwise, American mainstream media denoted Asian Americans as a model minority—a political maneuver which, while praising Asian Americans for their ability to conform to American societal and economic norms, also reinforced the notion that, as a model *minority*, Asian Americans were not truly “American”.<sup>18</sup> In essence, just as the Kristevan abject possesses the capacity to boomerang between the “inside” and the “outside,” so too does “Asian Americanness”, as defined under national abjection, claim the ability to constantly shift either closer to or further away from “Americanness”.

Under the scope of national abjection, the ontological instability of “Asian Americanness” implies a similar volatility in the definition of “Americanness”. To further solidify the interrelatedness between the perpetual nature of abjection and the instability of “Americanness” as a construct of the nation state, I find it useful here to turn toward Homi Bhabha’s analysis of the colonial stereotype. In “The Other Question” (1983), Bhabha notes the colonizer must anxiously repeat and re-present the colonial stereotype so as to “produc[e] the coloni[z]ed as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (23). On the one hand, such a move enables the colonizer to assert the authority of their understanding of the colonized and so, mark the colonizer as superior to the colonized. On the other, such a process also implies that the epistemological rubric used to differentiate the colonizer from the colonized “fail[s] to specify the limits of [its] own field of enunciation and effectivity” (“The Other Question” 23). In other words, the colonizer’s need to constantly

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<sup>18</sup> American contemporary cultural and sociopolitical treatment of Asian Americans has largely worked to preserve the myth of American exceptionalism; that is, that the American Dream is attainable for any individual in spite of the latter’s gender, race, able-bodied-ness, sexuality, and socioeconomic status—when historically, this has not been and still is not the case. For further reading on Asian Americans and the myth of American exceptionalism, see Chang’s introduction to *Inhuman Citizenship*.

describe and define the colonial stereotype exposing the colonizer's own subjective insecurity, effectively exposing the inherent instability of the colonizer's ontological apparatuses. Similarly, given the U.S.'s need to constantly abject Asian Americans, the sociopolitical and cultural maneuvers enacted by the U.S. to consolidate "Americanness" against "Asian Americanness" are likewise volatile.

If the xenophobic and racist paradigms governing national abjection are unstable, they are also fundamentally illegitimate and thus open to interrogation. In scrutinizing the ontological hierarchy in which "Asian Americanness" is excluded from "Americanness", we can not only question and problematize the notion of "Americanness" itself, but demand for a new conceptualization of "Americanness" as well. As Bhabha writes in the introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), "The... 'minority' is not a space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest" (4). *This* is the value of studying national abjection in Asian American literature—to begin evacuating the hegemonic impulses underlying "Americanness" and thus make space for individuals who have historically been barred from such an identificatory category. In other words, through examining national abjection as narrated by those historically denoted as abject, we can subsequently fracture the existing hegemonic discourses governing American subjectivity.

Thus, while Shimakawa uses national abjection to critique Asian American theatre, I argue that my adapting of her model can nuance analyses of Asian American literature as well. Shimakawa asserts, "Abjection is at once a specular and affective process: one abjects [the

Other]... through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*) that which is designed abject and recognizing one's own bodily relation to abjection" (19, emphasis in original). Likewise, Shimakawa argues, "There is [also] a way to conceive of [abjection] from the perspective of... the one inhabiting the body and space of abjection, and that this constitutive and dynamic relationship between seeing and being, between seeing and feeling, is what makes *performance* a particularly fruitful site at which to examine the process of national abjection that produces Asian Americanness" (19).

It is critical to note here, however, that literary narration is also capable of extensively delineating the rapport between "seeing and being, between seeing and feeling" (Shimakawa 9). That is, in narrating Otherness, literary characters of marginalized identities in American society can furnish incredibly complex psychological landscapes for their readers. And it is within these landscapes that readers can begin to not just *look at*, but also *see* the psychical dynamism underlying Asian Americans' "seeing and being... being and feeling" their own abjectness. Let us recall Bhabha's justification for the importance of exploring the ways in which literary narration mediates a nation's cultural and political ontological self-definition: "To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (*Nation* 3). In other words, in examining the literary narration of Otherness as experienced in the U.S., we can begin to pressure the governing ontological frameworks which produce such frameworks. As Kristeva writes at the end of *Powers*: "For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit becomes inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first" (141). Only by exploring narrations of Otherness can we begin to challenge the abjecting discourses dominating the U.S.'s national formation; only then,

can the national imaginary of the ideal U.S. citizen be opened to all marginalized individuals.

## CHAPTER II: SUBJECTIVITY, SILENCE, AND SPEECH

As I have mentioned in my Introduction, *TWW* is canonized in Asian American literature for its unpacking of Chinese American identity. Nevertheless, the text delays its most explicit and critical exposé of a racialized identity crisis until the final chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”—which is also the only chapter in which Maxine shrugs off her status as an omnipresent, omniscient narrator and becomes an actual character within the text. Much of the chapter describes Maxine’s unfavorable experiences with growing up as a quiet Chinese American girl. Initially, however, Maxine’s relationship with silence is, if not positive, at least neutral. She remembers being a reserved kindergartener, remarking that “during the first silent year, [she] spoke to no one at school” (165). Despite the fact that her reticence had caused her to “[flunk] kindergarten” and invited derision from her peers<sup>19</sup>, Maxine insists that she had “enjoyed the silence” (166).

Yet, by first grade, classroom emphasis on speaking sours Maxine’s attitude toward silence; she asserts: “It was when I found out that I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery” (166). While such an aversive response to speaking could be attributed to childhood shyness, Maxine specifies that it was when she “had to speak *English* for the first time [that she] became silent (165, emphasis added). Here, Maxine’s deliberate singling out of the act of speaking English implies a causal relationship between a compulsion to speaking (in English) and her resulting silence; thus, it is important to note that Maxine’s suddenly-induced voicelessness is one of a linguistic origin.

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<sup>19</sup> Maxine implies that her quietness engendered a lack of social awareness, the latter of which, in turn, rendered her susceptible to mockery. Because she talked very rarely, her only instances of socialization in the classroom included making “motions and even... some jokes” (166). She further emphasizes her social ineptitude in a cringe-worthy depiction of her inability to discern between well-meaning hilarity and mean-spirited amusement: when her classmates laugh at her for drinking out of a toy saucer, she “did it some more,” not knowing that “Americans don’t drink out of saucers” and instead interpreting her peers’ condescension as light-hearted humor (166).

From here on after, however, Maxine learns that in the American classroom, quietness and speaking difficulties connote as much social defect as does silence. For not speaking in the first grade, Maxine is assigned “a zero IQ” (183). Here, the American education system equates silence with stupidity, and Maxine is clearly shamed by this branding of brainlessness; even into late adolescence, she constantly attempts to prove that she is not, as her first grade zero IQ would suggest, dumb.<sup>20</sup> Quietness is just as much of a marker of aberrancy; Maxine recounts that her “teachers referred [her] sister and [her] to speech therapy” for their unusually soft whispering (172). And lastly, imperfect speaking is equally as undesirable, particularly evidenced by the fact that a teacher punishes Maxine for stuttering by putting her “in the low corner under the stairs again, where the noisy boys usually sat” (167).

It is not coincidental that, in Maxine’s American classroom, silence, quietness, and speaking difficulties signify an equal degree of socially unacceptable shortcomings. In her seminal work *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (2004), Cheryl Glenn argues that the Western premium placed on speech as *the* principal mode of self-expression has inevitably cast its converse, silence, as a weakness. As Glenn observes, in ancient times, Greek, Judaic, and Christian writings distinguished speech as a definitive marker of humans’ advanced intelligence in comparison to animals; consequently, “language has long represented the specifically human way of transcending biology and achieving humanity, culture” (3). However, it is important to note that, while this emphasis on speaking as a signifier of “power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself” inevitably marks silence as its “seeming obverse,” the true underlying binary

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<sup>20</sup> Haunted by the implications of her zero IQ, Maxine obsessively strives for external validation of her intelligence. The severity of Maxine’s insecurity becomes most explicit in her hateful attitude toward a stalkerish, mentally retarded boy. Paranoid that her parents are conspiring to marry her off to him due to their shared stupidity, Maxine desperately attempts to convince her parents of her intellect. She bemoans that while she “studied hard [and] got straight A’s... nobody seemed to see that [she] was smart and had nothing in common with this... birth defect” (195). Maxine’s extreme fear of being thought of as dumb jarringly surfaces in an explosive, ableist tirade against her parents; she defensively screams: “I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I’m not, I’m not retarded. There’s nothing wrong with my brain... I’ve brought my IQ up... They say I’m smart now” (201).

division is not one between speech and silence, but rather, one between coherency and incoherency (Glenn 3). As Susan Sontag remarks in her essay, “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1969), in Western cultures, “unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility” are all bracketed under the larger umbrella of “silence” (3). A verbal economy that prizes speech as the currency of intelligibility implies that silence’s negative connotations do not lie in its denoting of an absence of speech, but rather, in its flagging of *an inability to communicate in the discourse most universally recognized as legitimate*. It is not enough that one is capable of speech; one must also be able to speak clearly and intelligently in order to be understood and respected. Accordingly, then, all the repercussions Maxine experiences for speaking imperfectly, too quietly, or not at all are ultimately charges against her unintelligibility.

However, Maxine’s incomprehensibility is not just one of verbliness—it is also one of being abject as a Chinese American girl. Even as a child, Maxine learns that, as foreign and unfeminine, Chinese femininity is already abject. Maxine observes how repulsive the “strong and bossy” voices of “normal Chinese women”<sup>21</sup> are to Americans: “You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn’t just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears” (171-172). In noting Americans’ abhorrence of traditionally Chinese, feminine modes of speaking, Maxine underscores the doubly abject status of Chinese women within the context of national abjection: their loudness signifies a lack of femininity; their Chineseness denotes foreignness and un-Americanness. Given how Chinese femininity implies social unacceptability, it is unsurprising, then, that to distinguish themselves from these repulsively raucous Chinese women, “American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make [themselves] American-feminine” (Kingston 172).

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<sup>21</sup> As Patti Duncan notes in her book, *Tell this Silence* (2009), by “normal Chinese women,” Maxine means immigrant Chinese women who have either resisted or entirely rejected assimilation (23).

Yet, this attempt to assimilate to American codes of femininity still engenders unfavorable behavior, as in order to become American-feminine, the Chinese American girls end up “[whispering] even more softly than the Americans” (Kingston 172). As Amy Ling observes, “Volume here is a trope for confidence and power. In the social hierarchy of Maxine’s worlds... Chinese American girls have the softest voices of all, the least power (176). Consequently, the little subjectivity these Chinese American girls do gain by inventing an “American-feminine speaking personality” does not ultimately free them from the modes of self-expression reserved for the abject. In “straining to reject one model [Chineseness] and to imitate the other [Americanness], [Chinese American girls] have no confident sense of self, for to whisper is to have no voice, and to have no voice is to be powerless” (Ling 176). In other words, given national abjection’s conflation of coherency with subjectivity, abnormally quiet Chinese American girls are still barred from ever achieving total comprehensibility in American verbal *and* subjective discourse.

It is particularly significant that the classroom functions as the space in which Maxine learns of the inescapably abject status of quiet, Chinese American women. As Lowe argues, by situating Maxine’s struggle with communicating within the classroom, “the story emphasizes that education is a primary site through which the narratives of national group identity and reproduced, dramatizing that the construction of others—as *enemies*—is a fundamental logic in the constitution of national identity” (Lowe 56). The classroom consequences of Maxine’s Chinese-American-feminine-quietness reinforce national abjection’s devaluation of Chinese American femininity. For failing to speak, she is assigned an IQ of zero and subsequently branded as stupid; for failing to speak perfectly, she is put in time-out; for failing to speak loudly enough, she is diagnosed with a linguistic impairment severe enough as to require therapeutic

remediation (Kingston 167, 172, 183). In other words, humiliation and social degradation figure as institutionalized punishments for Maxine's linguistic and subjective incoherency.

The fact that these sanctions occur within the *public* space of the classroom thereby draws attention to the fact that Maxine learns of her Otherness as the latter is *performed*. Let us recall Shimakawa's reasoning for using national abjection to analyze Asian American plays: "Abjection is at once a specular and affective process: one abjects... through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*) that which is designated abject" (19). In essence, Maxine's American teachers' *looking at* Maxine enables their judging of her behavior as socially unacceptable, ultimately causing them to deal out the aforementioned punishments which force Maxine to realize her abjectness. Moreover, abjection can be "conceive[d]... from the perspective of the one being looked at (or looked past/through), the one inhabiting the body and space of abjection" (Shimakawa 19). In this manner, by suffering such alienating treatment in a public space, Maxine can begin to understand that her silence is read as abject not only by her teachers, but also by her classmates. Consequently, through Maxine's narration of the ways in which she realizes her abjection vis-à-vis the classroom ramifications she endures for her silence, Kingston makes salient to the reader of the institutionalized trajectories through which abjection shapes the psychological landscapes of the abject.

Given the doubly-abject nature of being both silent and a Chinese American girl, is it any surprise that Maxine ultimately views the two traits as interrelational and even interchangeable? Frustrated and perplexed by the murky relationship between Chinese American femininity and silence, Maxine attempts to normalize her quietness, as she notes that, "since the other Chinese girls did not talk either, [she] knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). The decisive tone Maxine employs in staking such a claim as truth evidences that Maxine has been

effectively conditioned into accepting national abjection as the governing metric for Americanness and so, normalcy. As a result of the teachers' racializing and gendering her unwillingness to speak, Maxine pathologizes silence as a Chinese, feminine problem—a practice which, in turn, echoes Orientalist stereotypes of Asian feminine silence.

In order to better understand the implications of “Asian feminine silence,” I will now provide a brief overview of such a trope's historical negative connotations. Traditionally, Asian silence carries overwhelmingly negative connotations; Cheung writes: “Orientalist discourse causes quiet Asians to be seen as devious, timid, shrewd, and above all, ‘inscrutable’ ... or docile, submissive, and obedient” (AS 2).<sup>22</sup> However, to be Asian, female, and silent is to be even *more* abject, as Orientalist stereotypes and sexist paradigms collude to mark Asian feminine silence as a signifier of disenfranchisement and weakness. For example, Orientalist portrayals of Asian women in Western art, history, literature, and media typecast Asian women as shy, quiet, and demure, ultimately idealizing Asian women as erotic “China dolls” or “Geisha girls” (Fong 95). While in reality, many Asian cultures do uphold quietness, submissiveness, and obedience amongst (especially female) children as desirable traits, it is important to note that these qualities also emerge as survival tactics against racism (Chan 276, Tong 20). Regardless of the reasons behind this tendency toward silence, as argued earlier, Western privileging of speech over silence<sup>23</sup> as a definitive marker of fortitude and confidence inevitably casts Asian American feminine silence as a hallmark of weakness and passiveness (AS 2, Gere 206, Glenn 3).

The extent to which Maxine has internalized self-denigrating readings of Orientalist silence as a result of abjecting experiences in the classroom is more aptly revealed in a later tirade against her mother. Maxine blames her mother for her perceived stupidity: “It's your fault

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<sup>22</sup> For more reading on the negative connotations of Asian silence, see: Jun (2012).

<sup>23</sup> For further reading on the Western privileging of speech over silence as the most legitimate, most effective form of communication, see: Glenn (2004) and Sontag (1969).

I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ" (201). Here, the hysteria of Maxine's accusations gesture toward a deeper, more troubled tone of desperation. The degree to which Maxine's speech impediments hinder her academic success is reflective of how her subsequent inability to communicate makes an already-difficult process of assimilation even more difficult to the point where it becomes nearly impossible. By locating the cause of her inability to speak properly within her ethnic origin, Maxine characterizes her quiescence as an inherited and so, racialized impairment. Because her immigrant mother could not teach her perfect English, because her mother could not train her in the language that America does not abject as foreign and unintelligible, because her mother is Chinese, Maxine believes herself doomed to a life of linguistic and racial abjection.<sup>24</sup> After all, in a nation where Chineseness and coherence are mutually exclusive, what else would a difficulty in speaking English signify, if not perpetual alterity?

Ultimately, Maxine's attempt to normalize her silence by diagnosing it as a Chinese, feminine problem reveals a growing conscription to such stereotypes as truth. Furthermore, Maxine's conclusion that "silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" hints at a more serious, troubling reality: that, under national abjection, to be a Chinese American girl denotes that one will be forever read as "silent" (Kingston 166). As I have argued earlier, silence is so damning in American society precisely because of its implying of an inability to communicate, to be heard, to be *understood*. Additionally, as argued in Chapter I, Asian Americanness has historically been designated as decisively not-American and so, abject. In light of these two observations, it is thus possible to conclude that the "Western theories of subjectivity... [which] imply that American

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<sup>24</sup> In her essay, "When Ghosts Dream (2010), Belinda Kong highlights the abjecting, racist implications of diagnosing subpar spoken English as an immigrant, maternal inheritance: "The Chinese mother functions as the symbolic locus not just of cultural but linguistic otherness. Whether solely or primarily Chinese-speaking... the Chinese mother is often represented as one who resists linguistic assimilation and absorption" (102-103).

identity is structured around acts of speech” *do not apply to Chinese American girls* (Duncan 22). In other words, as abject, Chinese American girls must be read as incoherent so as to mark verbal coherency as a trait exclusive to “true” Americans. When Maxine’s American teachers brands Maxine as unintelligible, the evidence justifying such a labelling does not lie in her vocal silence, but rather, in her *raced and gendered body*. As Bhabha argues, “Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as ‘common knowledge’” (“The Other Question” 30). That is, by inhabiting a body automatically recognized by governing American discourses as both Asian-raced and female-gendered, Maxine occupies a physically restrictive space in which she is perceived as abject.

As argued in Chapter I, the abject is rendered vulnerable to the subject given the latter’s authority to name the former. Consequently, then, Maxine’s abject body makes Maxine herself defenseless against national abjection’s compulsion to cast her down as incoherent. As Sontag observes, “Somebody’s silence opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence” (9). In Maxine’s case, this analytical development follows a circular path: the subjective silence denoted by Maxine’s abjectness causes her to be read as literally silent; read as fundamentally unintelligible, Maxine is further expelled from American subjectivity. Thus, Maxine’s repeated failures to speak properly or at all within the American classroom do not denote a biological inability to speak. Instead, Maxine’s struggle with speaking functions as a parable for Chinese American girls’ ineligibility for American subjectivity, regardless of the extent to which they attempt to conform to national abjection’s standards for “Americanness”. In other words, as an abject Chinese American girl, Maxine fundamentally cannot “speak” herself into American subjectivity.

## CHAPTER III: SUBJECTIVITY AND SELF-HATRED

As I have argued in Chapter 2, in *TWW*, the primary conflict with which Maxine struggles in her quest for American subjectivity is not one between silence and speech as viable modes of self-expression, but rather, one between her Chinese American femininity and “real” Americanness as legitimate subjectivities in the U.S. This poses a paradoxical subjective crisis for Maxine, precisely because since her raced, gendered body perpetually denotes abjectness, she can never be acknowledged as authentically “American.” The pressure that this Catch-22 dilemma enacts on Maxine’s psyche finally boils over in one of the memoir’s most famous scenes, in which Maxine viciously bullies her silent, Chinese female classmate in an attempt to force the latter to speak.

In previous readings, scholars such as Wong and Cheng have largely attributed this moment’s climactic significance and bizarre nature to the racial and gendered self-hatred evident in Maxine’s brutalization of the silent girl.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter, however, I will extend their arguments in order to draw attention to a largely overlooked aspect of this scene: the narration’s almost exclusive focus on Maxine’s memory of this event in the space of the memoir. Thus, I analyze the bullying scene as a moment in which Maxine attempts to escape the contradictory implications of her own abjectness by abjecting another. The subjectivity child-Maxine tries to achieve through intra-abjection is two-fold: Maxine relies upon her racialized and gendered self-hatred to achieve American subjectivity, whereas she depends upon her overtly self-invested narration (which deprives the silent girl of interiority) to realize her literary subjectivity.

Firstly, I argue that the great extent to which the bullying scene materializes as an explosion of racial and gendered self-hatred ultimately characterizes this encounter as a moment

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<sup>25</sup> See also: Chang (2012), Cheung (1993), Duncan (2009), Morante (1987), and Parrott (2012).

of intra-abjection (that is, an abject abjecting another abject). Initially, Maxine posits that her animosity toward the silent girl is predicated upon the latter's quietness; in Maxine's first explicit assertion of her own feelings for the girl, she states: "I hated the younger sister, the quiet one" (173). However, throughout the confrontation, Maxine's hatred escalates the more she fixates upon the silent girl's physical features:

I looked into her face so I could hate it close up. She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face.... She stood still, and I did not want to look at her face anymore; I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down.... I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop; her head would fall backward. I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck. I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more. (175-176)

Here, Maxine's physical characterization of the silent girl echoes the objectifying tone of scientific examination; she mentally dissects the girl's appearance, scrutinizing the latter's "black bangs..., pink and white [cheeks]..., [and] weak neck" (176). Maxine's cataloguing of the girl's appearance grows more scathing as Maxine punctuates each physical trait with the statement "I hated". Maxine herself even explicitly refers to the interrelatedness between her contempt for the girl and the latter's physicality; at the beginning of the passage, she acknowledges that she "looked into [the silent girl's] face so [she] could hate it close up" (Kingston 176). Such an assertion implies that Maxine deliberately searches for validation of her animosity for the silent girl in the latter's physical body, thereby begging the question: what exactly does the silent girl's appearance signify that, in turn, provokes such enmity from Maxine?

On the most obvious level, the silent girl's physical appearance refers to an American

racial stereotype of Chinese femininity.<sup>26</sup> As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism* (1979), Orientalism paints those of Eastern descent as “passive, seminal, feminine, [and] even silent and supine” (138). Predictably, such heuristics inform physical stereotypes of Asian American women as well. In his analysis of Chinese representations in current American news media (2014), Alan A. Lim notes that mainstream news articles and news reports often describe Chinese women as “‘petite,’ ‘thin,’ ‘pale,’ and [having] ‘straight... jet black hair’”—all physical traits which, in turn, adhere to the trope of the delicate, “docile... ‘passive’ and ‘obedient’” Eastern Asian woman (15). These stereotypes are not restricted to contemporary representations of Chinese American women; in their study of images of Asian (American) women in multicultural advertising (2005), Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung note that historically, American advertising and popular media have represented Chinese women as hyper-feminine and physically fragile.<sup>27</sup>

Evidently, then, Maxine’s description of the silent girl’s appearance reproduces the image of America’s stereotypical Chinese girl: the silent girl is pale (“Her cheeks were pink and white”), thin (“I grabbed her by the shoulder. I could feel bones”), and has straight jet black hair (“I hated her for her China doll haircut”) (173, 176, 179). Nonetheless, Maxine’s physical

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<sup>26</sup> Or rather, the silent girl’s physical appearance refers to one of many American racial stereotypes of Chinese femininity. Others include, but are not limited to the ‘Tiger Mother,’ the ‘Dragon Lady,’ and the ‘China doll’ (Lim 15, M. Kim and Chung 75-76). While the silent girl adheres to the China doll stereotype across many aspects (quiet, demure, physically delicate, hyper-feminine), I choose not to label her as such due to the China doll’s historical erotic implications—the latter of which do not manifest in Maxine’s characterization of the silent girl. For further reading on the sexualization of Chinese women based on the China doll trope, see: M. Kim and Chung (2005).

<sup>27</sup> M. Kim and Chung document the historical interrelatedness of physical stereotypes of Chinese women and the degree to which such tropes signify racial inferiority or submissiveness. For example, in the early twentieth century, American advertisements for household items relied upon images such as that of the “porcelain doll-like Chinese wom[an]... to market the distinctive appeal of their products” (74). Such representations were largely successful, as their Orientalist signifying of Eastern Asian, feminine weakness “reinforced White America’s moral and masculine superiority over the foreign elements of the East” (74). Similarly, in the Civil Rights era, the use of images of “submissive [Eastern] Asian women... to counter images of violent and vociferous African Americans and feminists” reiterates the fact that mainstream media’s depiction of Eastern Asian female bodies intentionally encourages the latter to be read as devoid of subjective agency (M. Kim and Chung 75).

characterization of the silent girl extends beyond these trademark tropes. Obsessively, Maxine also expounds upon the girl's fleshy cheeks, microscopic pores, weak neck, choice of pastel clothing, papery skin, breadstick fingers, cutworm-like ears, black eyes, and teeth size (176-180). Typically, such a comprehensive description provides more than enough particulars to construct a highly specific, individualized representation of a person. However, it is important to note that, in spite of the meticulousness with which Maxine itemizes nearly every aspect of the silent girl's appearance, in the end, the only image conjured up by Maxine's description is that of America's stereotypical image of the quintessential Chinese girl. Paradoxically, Maxine's hyper-detailed account of the silent girl's physical appearance strips the latter of any distinctiveness, instead hyperbolically reducing her to a carbon copy of the archetypal Chinese American girl. Here, the perspectives of the reader and Maxine collapse: since the reader can only visualize the silent girl through the information that Maxine provides, the reader must assume Maxine's abjecting gaze and also read the silent girl's body as a stand-in for America's idealization of the stereotypical Chinese girl.

Given that Maxine despises the silent girl for the latter's physical appearance and that the silent girl's body designates archetypal Chinese femininity, it follows then, that Maxine hates the silent girl *because she represents the American racial stereotype of Chinese femininity*. The bullying scene's themes of racial and gendered self-hatred further manifest in the fact that Maxine's violence against the girl intensifies the more she fixates upon the latter's appearance. Initially, Maxine maintains her distance from the girl, only "look[ing] into [the latter's] face so [she] could hate it close up" (175). At this point, Maxine only fantasizes about hurting the girl; she muses: "I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face" (175). However, it is only after Maxine spends greater time examining the girl from all

angles to further rationalize her animosity (“I walked around her, looking her up and down... I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more”) that she begins to actually physically harm the girl (175). For example, Maxine’s assertion that she hates the silent girl’s weak neck is immediately followed by her taking “the fatty part of [the girl’s] cheek... between [her] thumb and finger” (175).

This pattern continues throughout the entire encounter: Maxine’s initially cursory cheek pinch morphs into a painful squeeze after she notes her disgust for the girl’s fleshy skin; the squeeze transforms into a forced restraint of the girls’ movement after Maxine remarks upon her distaste for the girl’s straight hair (She tried to shake her head, but I had hold of her face”) (175). Thus, Maxine’s interspersion of each description of the silent girl’s various physical attributes with not only reaffirmations of the former’s enmity, but also accounts of her increasing violence, reiterates that the roots of this assault can be located within racialized and gendered self-hatred. In other words, the more Maxine reads the silent girl’s body as the archetypal Chinese American girl, the more Maxine is provoked to horrific degrees of physical brutality. Let us recall Shimakawa’s observation that abjection “is at once a specular and affective process: one objects... through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*) that which is designated abject and recognizing one’s own bodily relation to abjection” (19). By looking at the silent girl and seeing her only for her Chinese femininity, Maxine recognizes the ramifications of her being also read as Chinese feminine. In this way, then, the degree to which visually encountering the silent girl provokes Maxine’s disgust and revulsion ultimately mediates Maxine’s abjection of the silent girl.

Having demonstrated that racial and gendered self-hatred motivate Maxine’s physical and verbal abuse of the silent girl, it is now possible to read this scene as a moment in which Maxine

attempts to abject another Chinese American female so as to consolidate her own American subjectivity. Let us recall Chapter II's analysis of silence and speech as viable modes of self-expression, in which I demonstrated that American classrooms in *TWW* demonize silence and so accordingly penalize silent individuals via social degradation. In essence, then, Maxine's bullying of the silent girl for the latter's quiescence parallels the punishments Maxine herself endures for also failing to speak. When Maxine's teachers command her to talk and she does not (or rather, is unable to) obey, Maxine experiences abjection via the humiliation of being forced into time-out and ascribed a zero IQ. Maxine's abuse of the silent girl abjects the latter in a more severe manner. For example, the extreme violence Maxine enacts against the silent girl causes the girl to devolve into a pathetic mess: "Snot ran out of her nose. She tried to wipe it on her hands, but there was too much of it. She used her sleeve" (178).

The indignity that the silent girl experiences as a result of Maxine's harassment incurs additional shame vis-à-vis Maxine's insults; Maxine disparages the girl for sobbing: "You're disgusting.... Look at you, snot streaming down your nose, and you won't say a word to stop it. You're such a nothing" (178). Here, Maxine's narration acquires a voyeuristic tone, as her sneering depiction of the silent girl relies upon an exploitative display of the latter's anguish. Consequently, Maxine exacerbates the humiliation to which the silent girl is subjected: in addition to suffering Maxine's bullying, the silent girl is also reduced to a pitiful caricature via Maxine's voyeuristic narration. As a result, the social and literary degradation that the silent girl experiences at the hands of Maxine mimics the abasement Maxine endures earlier for also remaining silent.

Essentially, Maxine's mistreatment of the silent girl replicates the American teachers' abjection of Maxine herself, thereby revealing Maxine's deferral to national abjection as a model

in establishing herself as superior to the silent girl in terms of American subjectivity. At school, Maxine's teachers condescendingly command her to say "I" and "here," believing that Maxine's inability to pronounce such simple words denominates mental obtuseness (167). In the bullying scene, Maxine reproduces this patronizing, domineering tone in her instructive attempts to have the silent girl enunciate basic words and phrases: "Say 'No....' Say 'Hi....' Say your name.... Say, 'Where are you?'... Say, 'Ow....' Say, 'Let go....' Say, 'Leave me alone....' Say, 'Stop....' Cry, 'Mama....'" (177-178). By emulating her own teachers' belittling injunctions to speak, Maxine assumes the authority of her American teachers while abjecting the silent girl.

However, as mentioned in Chapter II, Maxine is not penalized for her silence; rather, all the negative repercussions she incurs are sanctions against her race and gender. Due to national abjection's refusal and inability to acknowledge Chinese American women as authentically "American", Maxine cannot be "heard" (that is, understood) by her teachers in spite of all her communicative attempts. The nature of Maxine's abjectness is thus cyclical: Maxine is punished for her raced and gendered body (which denotes silence) and for her silence (which signifies Chinese American femininity). And at this point in the memoir, Maxine has undoubtedly realized the double-entendre of her abjectness—particularly evidenced when she screams at the silent girl, "If don't talk, you can't have a personality" (180).

In her essay, "Encounters with the Racial Shadow" (1993), Wong notes that this moment represents Maxine's internalization of the Orientalist privileging of speech over silence as a viable means of self-expression: "Talking means having the power to define oneself, to resist the definition of others (89). However, with national abjection as an analytical framework, the implications of Maxine's statement become more nuanced. As demonstrated in Chapter II, Chinese American girls can never "talk" in a manner that is understood by American society as a

means of defining oneself. Unintelligible in their attempts to secure self-definition, Chinese American women subsequently cannot resist the U.S.'s designating them as abject. However, if we recall that Maxine hates the silent girl due to the latter's stereotypical Chinese femininity, it follows that, by bullying the silent girl, Maxine is punishing the latter for both her stereotypical Chinese femininity *and* her silence. So, when Maxine definitively pronounces that not speaking erases one's potential for individuality, she implicates the silent girl's lack of assertiveness (evident in her quiescence) and lack of Americanness (implicit in her Chinese American femininity) as well. In other words, Maxine's attacking of the silent girl for the latter's silence and physical Chinese femininity is, in reality, a punishment of the silent girl for her abjectness.

As I have argued earlier, the rationale behind Maxine's abuse of the silent girl overwhelmingly echoes the abjecting logic of the degradation she suffers under her teachers. As Cheng argues, Maxine's adoption of such abjecting practices marks this scene as the moment in the memoir in which Maxine comes "closest... to being what she associates with 'Americanness'" (75). Under the lens of national abjection, the vague 'Americanness' to which Cheng references becomes more definitive: the damning influence Maxine's teachers hold over her self-esteem and social status mirrors the privilege they, as American subjects, enjoy in their abjecting treatment of Maxine. As Cheng observes, "Abusing the [silent] girl allows for a self-identification with whiteness/American pedagogical authority..., which serves to mask even as it exposes a racial identification... between the girl and [Maxine]" (78). That is, within national abjection's binary division between the subject and abject, Maxine believes that she will be able to secure some degree of American subjectivity in her abjection of another Chinese American girl. Ultimately, this practice of abjecting another individual via authoritative discipline allows Maxine to momentarily enjoy not only the power of her American teachers, but also the

superiority of subjects recognized as legitimate under national abjection.

The abjecting themes underlying Maxine's bullying of the silent girl also emerge in the fact that, the more Maxine fixates upon her disdain for the silent girl's appearance, the more she is able to conjure up an image of her own idealized self. Thus, it will be helpful here to turn back to my earlier configuration of abjection as a subjective crisis. As Kristeva writes, abjection is instigated by the threat of "the Other [settling] in place and instead of what will be 'me'"; such a confrontation with the Other ultimately "causes me to be" (10). This practice of defining the self against an undesirable figure characterizes the entire bullying scene. For example, by hoping for "a stout neck" and "tough skin" in contrast to the silent girl's "flower-stem neck" and "fleshy skin," Maxine lays bare her own aversion to being physically typed as Chinese-feminine while revealing her contempt for the Orientalist connotations of weakness associated with such physical traits (176).

Here, Maxine's simultaneous staging of the emerging image of her own idealized self and magnification of the silent girl's various physical traits exemplifies how Maxine's concretization of her fantasy self is contingent upon her proximity to a physicalization of what she fears herself to be *and* of what she wants to be the least. As Sheng-mei Ma notes, the bullying scene can be read as a moment in which Maxine "reacts violently toward a girl, who, like a mirror, reflects what [Maxine] perceives to be her own image" (36). Maxine's reliance upon the dichotic division between herself and the silent girl to elevate her own aspirational Americanness above the trope of abject Chineseness echoes national abjection's ontological, differentiating process of consolidating subjectivity. As mentioned earlier, to admit physical or verbal similarity with the silent girl would be to confess a shared identification in the quiet girl's "represent[ation of] the residue of racial difference which dooms Chinese Americans to a position of inferiority in a

racist society” (“Encounters” 89). Unsurprisingly, then, Maxine’s synchronization of the description of her own appearance with the physicalization of the silent girl (“Her skin was fleshy.... I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails”) reveals Maxine’s intent to posit her body as the opposite of that of the silent girl. Given that the silent girl’s carriage signifies Chinese American femininity, it thus becomes apparent that Maxine’s distancing of her own appearance from that of the girl is another example of Maxine attempting to establish herself as an American subject in contradistinction to the silent girl’s Chinese-feminine abjectness.

I have thoroughly examined the ways in which Maxine’s bullying of the silent girl constitutes a larger project of Maxine endeavoring to secure American subjectivity for herself. I now turn to an analysis of the manner in which this passage also actualizes Maxine’s consolidation of a literary voice (which signals the emergence of an authorial persona). Firstly, I will emphasize that the bullying scene’s exclusive focus on Maxine marks a departure from adult-Maxine’s narrative perspective throughout the rest of *TWW*. In an interview with Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (1998), Kingston remarks that Maxine herself “hardly appear[s] in the book”; instead, Kingston asserts that Maxine mostly functions as “the observer of [other] people’s shenanigans” (37). Kingston’s evaluation of (the lack of) Maxine’s presence as a literary figure in her own memoir ultimately rings true. For example, four of *TWW*’s five chapters focus on either women from Maxine’s family or Chinese mythological figures instead.<sup>28</sup> It is not until the memoir’s fifth chapter (and the chapter of this thesis’s interest), “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” that Maxine’s narrative focus shifts to herself.

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<sup>28</sup> Chapter one, “No Name Woman,” imagines the life of Maxine’s deceased paternal aunt; chapter two, “White Tigers,” recreates the myth of Fa Mu Lan; chapter three, “Shaman,” recounts Maxine’s mother Brave Orchid’s experiences as a medical student and subsequently doctor in China; and chapter four, “At the Western Palace,” describes Brave Orchid’s sister Moon Orchid’s immigration to the U.S. and following attempt to reconnect with her estranged husband who had left for the U.S. decades earlier.

And yet, even within this chapter, Maxine describes her childhood self with the narrative distance of an older, more mature voice. This becomes evident in adult-Maxine's narration of the elementary education experiences analyzed in Chapter II of this thesis. Maxine frames her account of the events as memories: "At first it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk"; "It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery"; "I remember telling the Hawaiian teacher, 'We Chinese can't sing 'land where our fathers died''" (166-167). Here, adult-Maxine's use of the past perfect and the past perfect continuous tense further situates these occurrences as incidents temporally removed from *TWW*'s adult narrator. By distinguishing her memoir's overarching narrative voice from child-Maxine's experiences, adult-Maxine introduces a retrospective viewpoint ("At first it did not occur to me"; "It was when I found out"), which, in turn, widens the gap of cognitive maturity between adult-narrator and child-Maxine (166). Such storytelling strategies ultimately establish this chapter's child Maxine as a character both narratively and temporally separate from the grown-up Maxine that is the narrator of *TWW*. As a result, the narrative voice for this portion of "A Song for Barbarian Reed Pipe" examines the antics and grievances of child-Maxine from the perspective of an observer. This observant narration prevents the reader from fully identifying emotionally with child-Maxine, thereby depriving her of narrative authority and, ultimately, both Maxines of literary subjectivity. By literary subjectivity, I mean the enjoyment of both narrative authority *and* psychological interiority while actively engaging with, instead of passively observing, one's own lived experiences.

However, in the bullying scene, this outsider-narrative voice disintegrates as Maxine-the-narrator and Maxine-the-character collapse into a single persona. In this passage, the narration shifts from past perfect and past perfect continuous tense to an almost exclusive use of the past

tense: “I hated”; “I walked”; “I squeezed”; “I pushed”; “I pulled”; “I screamed”; “I grabbed” (176-179). Under the use of the past tense, the narrative and temporal distinction between adult and child Maxine begins to disintegrate. The privileging of the past tense allows adult-Maxine to directly engage with child-Maxine’s assault of the girl, thereby underscoring this scene’s stand-out depiction of Maxine (child or adult) as an active character instead of a passive one.

Additionally the constant repetition of “I” in this passage allows child-Maxine to superimpose her voice over that of adult-Maxine, ultimately rendering the reader unable to discern where child Maxine’s interiority ends and where adult-Maxine’s retrospective narration begins. As a result, the merging of adult and child-Maxine’s narrative perspectives simultaneously foregrounds the dynamism of child Maxine’s psyche and authorizes child-Maxine’s narrative voice. In this manner, then, the bullying scene allows child-Maxine to secure narrative authority and both Maxines to concretize their literary subjectivity.

Child Maxine further cements her status as a literary subject vis-à-vis her self-invested narration’s (child-Maxine is a narrator now) deprivation of the silent girl of any interiority. As mentioned earlier, Maxine’s painting of the silent girl as the archetypal Chinese American girl strips the latter of discernable individuality, thereby forcing the reader to read the silent girl only for her abjectness. The silent girl’s lack of dimensionality further manifests in the fact that Maxine’s narration does not offer any insight into the girl’s psychological condition. This is particularly demonstrated in the fact that Maxine makes salient the silent girl’s suffering only through the latter’s *physical* evidencing of distress. The visual clarity with which Maxine describes the silent girl’s crying bespeaks exploitative voyeurism: “Snot ran out of her nose. She tried to wipe it on her hands, but there was too much of it”; “she... cried steadily, so much water coming out of her”; “quarts of tears but no words” (178-179). Maxine succeeds each of these

observations not with greater analysis of the silent girl's feelings, but rather with accounts of her own actions and/or thoughts: "'You're disgusting,' I told her"; "I grabbed her by the shoulder. I could feel bones" (178-179). Here, it becomes evident that Maxine chooses to delineate the condition of her own mental state at the expense of speculating upon the silent girl's obviously tormented psyche. This selective emphasis on Maxine's perspective over that of the silent girl ultimately saturates Maxine's narration with elements of narcissism. Regardless of the obviously grievous extent of the silent girl's anguish, in the end, the zeal with which Maxine directs her narrative attention toward herself reveals that the sole purpose of Maxine's narration is to elaborate her own psychological state.

Recalling that the stakes of the bullying scene lie in Maxine's consolidation of her own (literary) subjectivity, it becomes apparent, then, that Maxine deliberately limits her characterization of the silent girl's emotionality in order to ensure that the reader can identify with only Maxine and not anyone else. In another example of the strictly physical nature of Maxine's description of the silent girl's crying, Maxine observes: "I could see the two duct holes where the tears welled out" (Kingston 179). To reference the cliché, "Eyes are the windows to the soul." However, the sentimental diction normally associated with descriptions of crying is notably absent from Maxine's depiction of the silent girl's sobbing eyes, as Maxine instead employs a tone of clinical coldness. By removing emotionality from the silent girl's characterization, Maxine prevents the reader from comprehending the silent girl's interiority. Ultimately, such a narrative choice excludes the possibility of the reader understanding this experience from the viewpoint of the silent girl with the clarity that the reader understands Maxine's own thoughts.

Maxine's refusal to humanize the silent girl also aids in the development of Maxine's

own literary subjectivity. In contradistinction to the silent girl's limited subjectivity, Maxine's own subjectivity manifests almost explosively. As mentioned earlier, the bullying scene overflows with Maxine's reiterations of her own subjectivity vis-à-vis her repetitive "I's." Consequently, in the vacuum of the silent girl's literary abjectness, Maxine's self-invested narration actualizes as narcissistic excess. In juxtaposing the silent girl's lack of subjective agency with Maxine's surplus of "I", Kingston draws attention to the egotistical roots of Maxine's narration. That is, Kingston suggests that Maxine's discriminating attention hints at the extent to which her narrative voice throughout this scene signifies an obsessive preoccupation with concretizing her own literary subjectivity.

Ultimately, Maxine's narrative strategies and description of the silent girl throughout this passage demonstrates the extent to which Maxine views her abjection of the silent girl—via bullying and limited characterization—as a means through which she can consolidate her American and literary subjectivity. Now that we understand how Maxine has applied this model of (national) abjection in an attempt to constitute her own identity, let us now explore more carefully the curious, inert quality of the silent girl, the latter's absolute refusal to engage with Maxine, and what such traits ultimately mean for the *TWW*'s meditation on national abjection.

#### CHAPTER IV: SUBJECTIVITY AND NARRATION

In Chapter III, I extensively catalogued the ways through which Maxine's bullying of the silent girl can be read as an attempt to concretize Maxine's American and literary subjectivity. However, it is important to note that in spite of the frightening escalation of Maxine's violent abuse of the girl, the latter remains eerily inert throughout the entire encounter—an inertness which notably affects Maxine variously. The silent girl's refusal to speak frustrates Maxine to the point where the latter breaks down in tears; additionally, after the incident, Maxine falls sick with a mysterious illness which she believes is divine punishment for her bullying of the silent girl. Let us recall my argument in Chapter III that the bullying scene marks the moment in the memoir in which Maxine's narration is most invested in herself as a character. How, then, does the failure of Maxine's forcing the silent girl to speak generate the aforementioned psychic and biological effects, and what do these consequences ultimately convey about abjection's role in the constitution of Maxine's identity?

Thus, in this chapter, I argue that the silent girl's refusal to speak directly results in Maxine's failure to realize either American or literary subjectivity: the silent girl's enduring nonresponsiveness simultaneously prevents Maxine from successfully discharging her racial and gendered anxieties onto another body *and* causes Maxine's narration to gradually devolve into chaos. The dissolution of Maxine's narrative authority and her self-perceived social superiority to the silent girl in this passage emphasizes the performative constructedness of Maxine's abjectness and narration. Consequently, I argue that, in this way, Kingston actively engages the reader in critiquing the means through which Maxine constitutes a speaking voice in *TWW*.

Firstly, I examine the ways in which the silent girl's nonresponsiveness undoes the modicum of American subjectivity Maxine had seemingly achieved in her tormenting of the girl.

In Chapter II, I had established that Maxine believes that she will be able to claim the authority of her American teachers if she replicates their demeaning attitudes in her bullying of the silent girl. To put more succinctly: Maxine finds American-esque power in punishing the silent girl for the latter's Chinese femininity. Maxine's faith in abjection as a mode of procuring American subjectivity surfaces in the fact that she synchronizes the description of her aspirations toward an un-Chinese, un-feminine body alongside her contemptuous evaluation of the silent girl's appearance: "Her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft.... I hated fragility.... I wanted tough skin, hard brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which I cut straight across to make stubby fingers (176). As argued extensively in Chapter II, on the most obvious level, the narcissistic tone Maxine employs in juxtaposing her own aspirational appearance with that of the silent girl shames the silent girl for the latter's physical likeness to America's stereotype of the Chinese feminine ("She was baby soft.... I hated fragility") (176). Following this logic, if the silent girl is stereotypically Chinese feminine (read: un-American) and so an inferior individual, it is possible to conclude, then, that as the silent girl's physical opposite, Maxine is more "American" and subsequently superior to the silent girl.

However, it is important to note here that, as much as Maxine relishes in claiming greater American subjectivity over the silent girl, such a hierarchy of "Americanness" fundamentally depends on the existence of the latter. Echoing this sentiment, Wong asserts that Maxine's degradation of the silent girl allows for the former to "repres[s] and projec[t]" her own Chinese feminine alienness ("Encounters" 88). Through the lens of Kristevan abjection, the implications of Wong's argument on the necessary presence of the silent girl become more clear. Kristeva writes that the constant expulsion of the abject is essential in safeguarding one's subjectivity, as "if I [were to] acknowledge [the abject], it annihilates me" (2). Here, Kristeva characterizes

abjection as a practice of self-preservation; by casting down an Other, one is able to shore up their own subjectivity. Yet, this survival mechanism becomes more nuanced for Maxine, who, as abject in American national discourse, is always already confronting the damning ramifications of her own abjectness. The effort it takes to constantly manage the paradox of one's abjectness would eventually exhaust one's psyche to the point of total dissolution; accordingly, abject individuals such as Maxine require avenues through which they can disavow their own abjectness so as to preserve their own psychological stability.

Consequently, by repressing and projecting her own Chinese American femininity onto the silent girl, Maxine can not only "try on" American subjectivity, but also temporarily escape the subjective crisis posed by the contradictory implications of her own abjectness. Thus, the silent girl's body's functionality as a receptacle for Maxine's racial and gendered anxieties is indispensable for Maxine's maintaining her own psychological stability. It is important to consider the significance of this theorem's converse as well: that is, in the absence of the silent girl and her Chinese femininity, Maxine would have no abject figure against which she could compare herself and subsequently elevate herself as more "American." Hence, to stake any claim for subjectivity in national abjection, Maxine must negotiate her racialized and gendered self-hatred upon another body that is not her own.

Given that the purpose of the silent girl's body is to relieve Maxine's frustrations with national abjection, it would be tempting to assume that the silent girl's nonresponsiveness perfects her ability to absorb Maxine's psychological anxieties. Recalling Maxine's dictum, "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" and Wong's observation that in this scene, "Talking means having the power to define oneself, to resist the definition of others", it follows that, by not talking, the silent girl does not possess the means to defend herself against Maxine's

brutalization (Kingston 180, “Encounters” 89). After all, in the discourse of national abjection, “silence obliterates identity” (Morante 78). Theoretically, then, the silent girl’s quiescence would strip her of the ability to resist abjection, effectively transforming her into a powerless object that Maxine can manipulate for her own ends.

Yet, this is ultimately not the case. It is true that in the absence of speech, the silent girl can only be read by Maxine for her Chinese femininity—a reading, which, in turn, allows Maxine to construct her own aspirational Americanness. However, it is crucial to note that ultimately, the body that Maxine conjures up for herself is exactly that—just aspirational. Aside from having callused her hands, dirtied her nails, and worn black clothing, Maxine never confirms that she has actually attained the other physical traits over which she obsesses (Kingston 176-177). Instead, Maxine’s narration of her ideal physicalization remains within the realm of the hopeful, the imaginary: “I *wished* I was able to see what my own neck looked like.... I *hoped* it did not look like hers; I *wanted* a stout neck.... I *wanted* tough skin.... I *wanted* to grow big strong yellow teeth” (176-178, emphasis added).

Here, Maxine’s narrative voice betrays her in the quest for airtight American subjectivity—one cannot long for something they already have. Consequently, Maxine’s desirous language suggests that, in fact, Maxine *does not possess any of these qualities*. Such a revelation painfully accentuates Maxine’s desperate yearning for American subjectivity, which, in turn, underscores the fact that Maxine has not actually liberated herself from her own abjection. Thus, Maxine’s discharging of her subjective crisis onto the body of the silent girl backfires. The silent girl’s nonresponsiveness *does* create a vacuum in which she can only be identified as stereotypically Chinese feminine; however, in the vacuity of this intra-object space, Maxine’s abjection of the silent girl ultimately boomerangs back onto herself. In essence, this

backlash only further objects Maxine, as it reiterates for the nth time the extent to which Maxine herself is read as perpetually Other owing to her race and gender.

Thus, the silent girl's quiescence further unravels Maxine's perceived American subjectivity, as the repetitive stressing of Maxine's own abjectness reveals that Maxine shares more similarities with the silent girl than the former would care to admit. As Wong argues, Maxine's consolidation of American subjectivity ultimately does not succeed, as she fails to realize that "however scrupulously she insists on her difference, the larger society will not bother to distinguish between" Maxine and the silent girl ("Encounters" 89). Underlying Maxine's fantasization of an American body is the insinuation that, as much as the silent girl is read as a stereotype for the Chinese feminine, Maxine too inhabits a body which national abjection refuses to acknowledge as legitimately American. Wong reiterates the futility of Maxine's attempts to separate herself from the silent girl: "Manners can be changed, but not skin color; as the Other, Chinese Americans will always, to some degree, be spurned" ("Encounters" 90). In essence, just as how Maxine's teachers cannot comprehend any of Maxine's communicative attempts, national abjection likewise will not allow for the distinction between the two girls as separate individuals.

Consequently, while Jill M. Parrott argues that the silent girl's voicelessness makes her "psychologically and rhetorically victorious" via its delegitimization of Maxine's racialized and gendered self-hatred, it is important to note that this is not the case (383). Parrott draws upon Gere, Glenn, and Sontag's conceptualizations of silence as a rhetorical strategy of power. However, as argued in Chapter II, *the object cannot gain subjectivity in the eyes of the subject regardless of which communicative model the former uses*. In other words, the silent girl's quiescence does not actualize as a psychological or a rhetorical victory: psychologically, she

suffers dehumanizing treatment under Maxine; rhetorically, she lacks the ability to verbally defend herself or communicate her pain. In this case, silence does not denote a refusal of national abjection; rather, it bespeaks that Chinese American girls are fundamentally barred from maneuvers toward individualistic agency, whether such maneuvers subvert *or* accommodate to existing rubrics governing American subjectivity. The silent girl is not “victorious”; quiescence is not “her chosen instrument of power” anymore than abjectness is her voluntary identificatory category—American racism and sexism mandate voicelessness as her only mode of communication (Parrott 383). Likewise, regardless of how far they deviate from or how much they conform to the stereotype, both Maxine and the silent girl cannot escape the de-humanizing significations of their physical bodies. Under the logic of national abjection, by inhabiting Chinese feminine bodies, the two girls will be forcibly shuttled into the singular identificatory category of the abject.

Moving forward, Maxine’s American subjectivity is further fractured by the fact that the silent girl’s enduring muteness causes Maxine to fail her core objective in trying to force the former to speak. At the beginning of the passage, Maxine declares the intent behind her actions to the girl: “‘You’re going to talk,’ I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak and the small. ‘I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl’” (Kingston 175). The arrogance hinted in the self-assured connotations of Maxine’s use of the present continuous tense (“I am going to make you talk”) and explicitly demarcated in her confessions of perceived superiority (“My voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the... weak and the small”) exemplifies the extent to which Maxine views her pressuring of the silent girl to speak as evidence of the former’s own strength and superiority (175). Yet, as Yoon Sun Lee notes in her book, *Modern Minority* (2013), “The [silent] girl’s thingness conquers [Maxine], who finally

breaks down in tears and confessions of her own weakness” (101). The girl’s unwavering refusal to speak over six pages eventually exhausts Maxine; toward the end of the altercation, an overwhelmed Maxine explodes at the silent girl: “Why won’t you talk?... You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you?” (180).

By this point in the passage, the silent girl’s nonresponsiveness has weathered down Maxine’s supposed dominance. Earlier, Maxine had prided herself in her determined boldness. However, here, Maxine’s brazenness has cracked under her inability to understand the reasons behind the girl’s silence. Even more interesting is the fact that Maxine insists that all her physical aggression and degrading insults stem from a position of benevolence. One could posit that the condescending, self-absorbed tone Maxine uses in contextualizing her cruelty as an ironical act of charity is evidence that Maxine still believes herself superior to the silent girl. However, it is also important to note that, in this moment, Maxine’s exasperation at the silent girl’s enduring quiescence parallels Maxine’s resentment of her own inability to speak properly and clearly in the company of others. Earlier in the memoir’s chapter, Maxine’s retrospective narration is shaded with hints of frustrated bewilderment at her inexplicable silence and stuttering: “I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak.... When it was my turn, the same voice came out, a crippled animal running on broken legs” (166, 169). In spite of her varying degrees of verbal fluency, Maxine cannot evacuate her speech of the incoherency that signifies abjectness. The futility of Maxine’s struggles henceforth makes agonizingly clear to Maxine and to the reader her nonexistent American subjectivity.

Thus, Maxine’s desperate insistence of her good intentions reveals that, to a certain extent, Maxine views her bullying of the silent girl as a parable for her own assimilatory difficulties. That is, Maxine’s brutalization of the silent girl can be read as both intentional,

malicious abjection *and* a vain endeavor toward confirming the possibility of Chinese American girls emerging as coherent American subjects. If Maxine can somehow conquer the impossible task of forcing the silent girl to speak, then Maxine's own dreams of being recognized and understood as authentically American might become less like fantasy and instead more like a viable reality. Yet, Maxine does not succeed in actualizing either objective: her exhaustive efforts mirrors the fact that as a Chinese American girl, Maxine likewise can never erase her body's signification of Otherness. That is, as much as Maxine fails to "Americanize" the silent girl, Maxine likewise fails to "Americanize" herself.

Through Maxine's falling short of realizing American subjectivity, Kingston pressures the reader to recognize the performative nature of Maxine's abjection of the silent girl. As I have extensively catalogued in my thesis thus far, when scrutinized under the scope of (national) abjection, the straightforward obstinacy of Maxine's narration begins to dissolve, thereby exposing an underlying, massive web of complicated and, at times, contradictory motivations and end-goals. Maxine is driven to brutalize the silent girl out of a paradoxical desire to both adhere to and reject the racialized and gendered ontological hierarchy established by national abjection. Similarly, Maxine seeks to make the silent girl into both an abject figure against which Maxine can concretize her own Americanness *and* an emblem of hope that someday, Chinese femininity and Americanness will not be mutually exclusive identificatory categories.

The discrepancies inherent in Maxine's project of bullying the silent girl reveal the logical fissures in adopting the model of abjection in negotiating Maxine's own identity crisis. As Wong argues, "The accommodationism to which [Maxine] has committed herself does not offer a true solution to her identity problem. That immediate options are nonetheless lacking is a thought too frightening to admit to awareness" ("Encounters" 90). To acknowledge the

fundamentally contradictory nature of her rationale in abusing the silent girl would be to come to terms with the agonizing truth of the impossibility of assimilation, of ever being accepted as authentically “American.” Likewise, to confess the continuous damage her psyche endures would be to justify her exclusion from the American imaginary of a psychologically healthy citizenry. Consequently, Maxine’s self-assured narration in this passage can be read as an elaborate narrative construction disguising her ongoing, chaotic navigation of the labyrinth that is her disturbed psyche. Thus, Maxine’s meretricious insistence on the narrative and American superiority of her “I”-ness vis-à-vis her refusal to humanize the silent girl to either herself or the reader stresses the great lengths to which Maxine must resort in order to maintain a self-invested narrative voice throughout the entire encounter.

The staged nature of Maxine’s self-invested narration is further revealed in the fact that the silent girl’s nonresponsiveness instigates the disintegration of Maxine’s imposing physicality. At the beginning of the encounter, Maxine’s body assumes an intimidating presence: “I walked around her, looked her up and down... so tough” (176). The commanding authority signified by Maxine’s carriage is further realized in her harsh, physical treatment of the girl: “I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek... between my thumb and finger.... I had hold of her face.... I gave her another pinch and a twist.... I squeezed again harder.... I reached up... and took a strand of hair. I pulled it.... Then I pulled the other side” (176-177). Here, the controlled precision Maxine enacts in assaulting the silent girl bespeaks authoritative physical fortitude. By specifying the deliberate accuracy of the various injuries she inflicts upon the silent girl, Maxine implies that her superiority over the girl is one of both American subjectivity and physical strength.

However, eventually, the rigidity of Maxine’s imposing stature cracks under the pressure

of the silent girl's refusal to speak. Toward the end of the altercation, Maxine's frustration at the silent girl's unwavering quiescence manifests in a breakdown of the former's physicality: "I was getting dizzy.... My knees were shaking, and I hung on to her hair to stand up" (181). Here, the power differential Maxine had previously used to distinguish herself from the silent girl disappears, as Maxine's intimidating physicality is compromised to the point where she must resort to clinging onto the silent girl in order to remain upright. In crumpling at the silent girl's feet, Maxine becomes even weaker than the silent girl—which accordingly implies that, in this moment, the silent girl is superior to Maxine. Such a reversal of positions of power has devastating ramifications for Maxine's own subjectivity, as if Maxine is inferior to even the silent girl, it follows, then, that Maxine is even more abject than the silent girl—an implication which ultimately thrusts Maxine into the least-subjective-space possible. The dramatic spectacle of Maxine's gradual physical deterioration subsequently accentuates the immense amount of energy Maxine invests in abjecting the silent girl, thereby again emphasizing the constructedness of the former's earlier imposing demeanor.

In addition to having the integrity of her physicality compromised, Maxine also experiences a total regression in her coherency. Maxine begins the bullying scene by speaking comprehensibly: her "voice steady and normal," Maxine commands the girl to speak (175). Maxine's verbal clarity is further exemplified in her ability to articulately blast the silent girl with a number of insults, threats, and bribes: "If you're not stupid... what's your name?"; "I'll honk you again if you don't say, 'Let me alone'"; "You're such a nothing"; "I'll get you some toilet paper if you tell me to" (177-179). Yet, by the conclusion of the bullying scene, Maxine's speech devolves into the incommunicability which classroom abjection has taught her to fear so much: "I screamed, not too loudly... I started to cry.... Sniffling and snorting, I couldn't stop

crying and talking at the same time” (Kingston 179-181). Overwhelmed by the nonresponsiveness of the silent girl, Maxine eventually acquires the latter’s incoherency as well: “her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating” (181).

As demonstrated previously, by patronizingly demanding the silent girl to speak in the same way in which her own teachers had commanded her to talk, Maxine believes she might achieve some degree of verbal coherency, and thus, coherency as an American subject. Cheung agrees; she writes: “Young Maxine can become articulate in Western discourse only by parroting self-denigrating Western assumptions” (AS 90). Yet, this is evidently not the case, as in this passage, Maxine still fails in becoming verbally articulate. That is, Maxine’s bullying of the silent girl further damages the former’s American subjectivity by transforming her into the silent girl’s verbal equivalent. As Wong writes, Maxine’s “attempt to make [the silent girl] ‘talk’ hurts [the protagonist] even more: instead of eliciting validating of [her] superiority, it compels [[her] to admit affinity with the weak” (“Encounters” 101). In spite of the great effort she exerts in attempting to force the silent girl to speak, at the end of the altercation, Maxine is still just as verbally incoherent as she was in the classroom. Maxine’s abjection of the silent girl does not secure the former intelligibility as both orator and American subject; rather, it only re-emphasizes her own abjectness. Thus, if Maxine’s failure to compel the silent girl to speak accomplishes anything, it is not the consolidation of American subjectivity, but rather, the revelation that performing national abjection as an exercise of power ultimately fails in concretizing an immaculate American subjective authority.

The disintegration of Maxine’s verbal coherency ultimately undermines Maxine’s narrative authority as well. In Chapter II, I argued that the bullying scene’s fusion of adult and

child-Maxine's perspectives lends narrative authority to child-Maxine, thereby bestowing upon her the dimensionality and interiority she should theoretically enjoy as the main subject of the memoir. However, upon further examination, this is not the case. In collapsing the divide between adult-Maxine's retrospective distance and child-Maxine's self-invested thoughts, Kingston actually destabilizes the coherency of the memoir's overarching narrative voice. This is particularly evident in the fact that child-Maxine's narration devolves into nonsensical chaos toward the end of the passage. Overwhelmed by the silent girl's quiescence, child-Maxine loses the ability to logically organize her narration of her thoughts and actions:

“You're so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?” Sniffling and snorting, I couldn't stop crying and talking at the same time. I kept wiping my nose on my arm, my sweater lost somewhere (probably not worn because my mother said to wear a sweater). It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person....

“I don't understand why you won't say just one word,” I cried, clenching my teeth. My knees were shaking, and I hung on to her hair to stand up. Another time I'd stayed too late, I had had to walk around two Negro kids who were bonking each other's head on the concrete. I went back later to see if the concrete had cracks in it. (Kingston 181).

Here, child-Maxine's narration of her inner thoughts loses the systematized stability which had originally promoted child-Maxine from secondary character to the memoir's central literary subject. Maxine's elaboration of her own crying state is literally derailed with the parenthetical musing of the likely nonexistence of her sweater. Likewise, Maxine's return to describing her distress is again interrupted with a memory of watching two of her classmates fight after school. The inclusion of these aforementioned thoughts distracts the reader from the narrative progression of Maxine's bullying of the silent girl, thereby diverting the reader's attention from

totally investing in Maxine's current experience. Furthermore, the addition of speculations and recollections unrelated to the silent girl fractures the singular narrative voice child-Maxine attempts to construct by co-opting adult-Maxine's narrative authority. After all, Maxine's meditation that she had "probably not worn [her sweater] because [her] mother said to wear [one]" is a reflection only accessible via adult-Maxine's retrospective analysis. The fact that this brief re-emergence of adult-Maxine's temporally distant voice is hastily overwritten by child-Maxine's descriptions of the bullying incident indicates that in this moment, adult and child Maxine are struggling for narrative dominance. The opposing temporal locations in which each Maxine is attempting to contextualize the bullying scene (adult-Maxine the past, child-Maxine the present) distorts the logical progression of the narration so much that it eventually crumbles into temporal and (ir)rational disorganization.

The dissolution of child-Maxine's narrative authority in this scene again accentuates the synthetic quality of her narrative voice as a whole. In desperately pursuing literary subjectivity, Maxine forges an "I" that strives to ignore the incompatibility of her adult and child perspectives in favor of establishing a singular narrative voice. As the logical coherency of Maxine's narration begins to crack under the strain of attempting to concretize her literary subjectivity, Kingston draws the reader's attention again to the elaborate constructedness of *TWW*'s narrative voice. As Wendy Ho notes in her book, *In Her Mother's House* (1999), "[Maxine's] narrative is traumatized in attempting to make rational sense of [the] trauma" she experiences at the hands of national abjection (132). By frustrating the singularity of the narrative perspective in this scene, Kingston highlights the extent to which both adult and child-Maxine's narration is fundamentally agitated by the contradictory implications of Maxine's abjectness. In essence, then, the bullying scene is a spectacle of Maxine's Otherness: the reader literally witnesses both the construction

and the dissolution of Maxine's American and literary subjectivity vis-à-vis observing the boomerang effects Maxine's performance of abjecting the silent girl enacts on Maxine herself. And if the bullying scene is a performance, Maxine's performative superiority can consequently be understood as a "costume" of American and literary subjectivity. Here, the fact that the subject cannot concretize subjectivity even when adhering to the subject's governing epistemological rubric (à la national abjection) becomes abundantly clear: Maxine's "costume" of performative superiority is ultimately a phony substitution for the real, unachievable dream of ever becoming recognized as legitimately "American".

I finally now turn to the aftermath of Maxine's bullying of the silent girl as further evidence of the performative nature of the narrative voice in *TWW*. After this passage, Maxine falls mysteriously ill and is bedridden for an entire year:

The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. There was no pain and no symptoms, though the middle line in my left palm broke in two. Instead of starting junior high school, I lived like the Victorian recluses I read about. I had a rented hospital bed in the living room, where I watched soap operas on t.v., and my family cranked me up and down. I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me. I could have no visitors, no other relatives, no villagers. My bed was against the west window, and I watched the seasons change the peach tree. I had a bell to ring for help. I used a bedpan. It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened. (181-182)

By prefacing the description of her illness with the assertion that "the world is sometimes just," Maxine implies that her mysterious disease is the divine punishment she must suffer for her unspeakable torture of the silent girl (181). Anne Pehkoranta agrees; she writes that Maxine's illness allows for the bullying scene to "en[d] in poetic justice" (9268). However, the apparent "just" nature of Maxine's year-long illness is revealed to be equally as false as Maxine's

perceived subjective superiority to the silent girl. After all, it is worth noting that the illness does not result in any actual negative consequences for Maxine. For the duration of her illness, Maxine “live[s] like the Victorian recluses [she] read about” and is waited on hand and foot by her family (182). Maxine also enjoys a year-long reprieve from experiencing abjection in the American classroom, as this illness forces her to stay at home “instead of starting junior high school” (182). Moreover, Maxine herself even explicitly acknowledges that overall, the experience was enjoyable rather than devastating: “There was no pain and no symptoms.... It was the best year and a half of my life” (182).

The fact that Maxine’s description of her illness undermines her characterizing of the disease as karmic retribution for her past actions again highlights the extent to which Maxine attempts to constitute a logical, stable narrative voice in *TWW*. In incorrectly qualifying her illness as a “just” punishment, Maxine tries to deal out a logical conclusion to the bullying incident. However, as explained earlier, the illness’s positive effects on Maxine’s psyche realizes the unnaturalness of this event, thereby drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that the subjective crisis Maxine experiences in abjecting the silent girl remains largely unresolved. After all, even sick and at home, Maxine is still a Chinese American girl and thus abjected in the U.S.; her somewhat catatonic state is but a futile escape from the reality of her Otherness.

Furthermore, while Maxine spends six pages providing a description of her bullying of the silent girl multi-layered in its psychological nuances, she dedicates only one paragraph totally devoid of complexity and interiority to explaining its aftermath. Thus, Maxine’s offering of the illness as a “conclusion” to the complicated drama of the bullying incident is both an unsatisfactory and half-hearted attempt to overlook the subjective damage she has dealt to herself in assaulting the silent girl. In striving to smooth over the extensive psychological damage she experiences in

bullying the silent girl, Maxine reveals that she is willing to compromise even her narrative authority so as to present the illusion of having overcome and moved on from the racialized and gender identity crisis she experiences as a result of national abjection.

Thus, the fact that the silent girl's nonresponsiveness prompts the dissolution of Maxine's self-perceived literary and American subjectivity reveals the extent to which abjection is fundamentally incapable of concretizing airtight subjectivity. As Kristeva writes, performing abjection as a means of constituting a stable identity is doomed to fail; eventually, "the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be *narrated* but *cries out*... with maximal stylistic intensity" via a sudden explosion of the "language of violence" (141). In essence, the revelation of the contradictions underlying Maxine's motivations in abjecting the silent girl and such revelation's rupturing of child-Maxine's narrative authority represents the "language of violence" under which child-Maxine's narrative voice suffers as a result of attempting to concretize her subjectivity, American or literary, via abjection.

## AFTERWORD

At the end of “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Maxine re-tells the legend of Ts’ ai Yen, a Han Chinese woman kidnapped and raped by the chieftain of a barbarian tribe. Eventually, she gives birth to the chieftain’s children. In Maxine’s rendition of the myth, when Ts’ ai Yen is eventually returned to her family, she shares songs she learned from her time with the barbarians—songs which Maxine notes, were adopted into Han Chinese culture over time. Maxine thus concludes *TWW* with the statement: “It translated well” (209).

Scholars have generally read Ts’ ai Yen’s bilingualism in Chinese and the language of her foreign captors as parable for Maxine’s own success in negotiating a balance between her “Chineseness” and “Americanness” at the end of *TWW*. As mentioned in this thesis’s introduction, Morante believes that, by ending the memoir on this note, Maxine signifies that she has “translated the wordless ‘anger and sadness’ of her life ‘among ghosts’ into... a self that speaks eloquently to us” (82). Cheung echoes this sentiment: at the end of the memoir, Maxine “has worked the discords of her life into a song” (*AS* 94).

Yet, just as Maxine’s illness does not function as a meaningful follow-up to the dramatic and traumatic bullying scene, the ending sentence “It translated well” likewise fails to contain all the nuances of being abject in the U.S. The strange psychological violence Maxine experiences in the bullying scene remains unaddressed, unresolved. To assume that the statement “It translated well” denotes Maxine’s ability to eloquently communicate her new, fully healed American self to the reader would be to ignore that the psychological injury manifested in her earlier narration extends to the end of the memoir and beyond. Adult-Maxine as narrator never further muses on the implications her childhood-bullying of the silent girl poses to her own subjectivity; instead, the memory of the bullying is suppressed to the point where it begins to

veer into the realm of the unconfirmed, the imaginary. In essence, then, *TWW*'s narration's refusal to unpack the psychological injuries incurred from the bullying scene emerges as a hallmark signification of the severity of the psychological damage—it cannot be talked about, cannot be called upon again. Doing either of the aforementioned actions would risk jeopardizing Maxine's understanding of self once more. Thus, the memory of the bullying incident must be abjected, expelled from the very narrative so as to assert Maxine's apparent recovery from the event. Suppress, erase, forget—in this manner, Maxine's narrative authority survives via the hopeful statement, “It translated well.”

Effectively, then, it is not Morante's idealization of a psychically healed, consummate “self” that speaks eloquently to us by the end of *TWW*—rather, it is a convoluted, multi-faceted psyche still struggling with the psychological effects of national abjection which makes itself so salient at the conclusion of the text. And today's political climate requires, more than ever, a careful examination of national abjection as an ontological formation for those of marginalized identities. As long as hegemonic structures such as racism and sexism continue to exist, the task of managing the psychological ramifications engendered by such constructs likewise endures as a prominent dynamic within the lives of marginalized peoples. Denying such a relationship would preserve the authority of historically false notions of “Americanness” as an identificatory category open to all; to dismantle such abjecting constructs requires a vigilant, persistent awareness of the fundamental illegitimacy underlying such conceptualizations of “Americanness”. Only after doing so can we then open up “Americanness” to all.

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