The Silencing Effect of Canonicity: Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan’s Novels

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In the past twenty years, novels such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, and works by an array of African American women writers have become relatively common occurrences on university syllabi. The inclusion of these female authored texts is often a function of their difference from the grand narratives of “traditional” American literature. University instructors and literary critics alike have tended to highlight traditionally oral forms of narration, especially women’s oral story-telling, found in many of these ethnic women’s texts as equal to the traditional grand narratives of Western literature. While the attention given to these authors has broadened our definitions and understanding of what we consider literary, it has at the same time highlighted these authors’ difference to such an extent that they remain always in some respect outside of or in opposition to a traditional conception of the canon. In some cases, the effect of this limitation has been to valorize texts that fit into the neat models of what writing by ethnic American authors should do and has relegated writers who do not fit into these models to the outskirts of our critical interest. Thus, certain writers become naturalized as intrinsically important, while others are relegated to the realm of the popular.¹

In the realm of Asian American women’s literature, we can see this exclusionary effect in discussions about Amy Tan’s works. The criticism about Tan’s works centers on the way that the
dialogic nature of talk-story functions either to create or to bridge
gaps between bi-cultural, bilingual immigrant mothers and their
Americanized second-generation daughters. In particular, since
Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* underscored the Chi-
nese tradition of “talk-story” as a major trope in Chinese American
women’s narratives, focus on this specific oral tradition has
become the center of much of the critical work being done about
Chinese American women writers. However, in the case of Tan’s
texts, this critical focus on the importance of talk-story serves to
limit the interpretive work to be done on these texts. Studies of
Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), and *The Hundred Secret Senses*
(1995), have correctly identified patterns of tension in her texts
that result from the conflict between the oral storytelling of Chi-
nese mothers (what has been identified as talk-story) and their
American daughters’ initial resistance to and eventual acceptance
of that mode of narration. Critical work on Tan’s texts has largely
ignored aspects of that corpus which separates it from the work of
writers like Kingston—the importance of written texts and the
literacy of Chinese mothers. Consequently, by failing to recognize
that Tan highlights the crafting of written texts as important, critics
also have failed to appreciate fully Tan’s representation of her
Chinese mothers and the work that these texts do within a broader
context of literature.

This critical shortcoming may be recognized and perhaps recti-
fied with a reassessment of her work through the lens of *The
Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001). This novel’s intense focus on the
literary quality of women’s writing may allow us to recognize that
literacy in the form of writing and written texts represents an
important and often more effective means of transmitting cultural
memories and cultural identity across generational lines than talk-
story. Furthermore, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is not a completely
new development in or deviation from Tan’s previous themes, but
represents a more fully developed reworking of issues about
identity and language than we can find in many of her works. Through an analysis of the importance of written texts, this study
will demonstrate the ways that Tan’s works present literacy and
writing in order to reveal the critical problems with identifying
non-Western narratives only through an understanding of oral
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traditions. The misreading of authorship in The Bonesetter's Daughter mirrors the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion necessary in both forming and reacting to the literary canon and the silencing function that imposes limits on the possibilities of recognizing literary value.

Throughout Tan's novels, talk-story promotes multiple levels of misunderstanding between both Chinese-speaking mothers and English-speaking daughters and between persons who speak different Chinese dialects. As a linguistic strategy, talk-story in Tan's novels often fails to convey clearly the speaker's message to her audience. Some critics have attempted to complicate the use of talk-story in their analysis of Tan's work, but they never see literacy and written narrative as an alternative. Judith Caesar indicates that while Tan's use of a multi-voiced talk-story narrative is noteworthy, even more significant is who speaks in the texts. Following the usual line of argument that privileges orality, Caesar specifically argues that by privileging the accented and fragmented speech of Chinese immigrants, Tan gives their voices validity in the same way that African American writers have validated the vernacular speech of black communities (170). Caesar's arguments demonstrate the way that literary critics have found value in Tan's work through an interpretation of Chinese speech as a rhetorical device. Chandra Tyler Mountain recognizes that the memory fueling these stories "becomes the agent involved in redeeming cultures; it becomes a political struggle against the negation of cultures" (42). Consequently, many critics have recognized talk-story as a source of agency for Asian American women writers because it allows them a mode of discourse not constricted to the confines of traditional Western narratives.

In her article "The Semiotics of China Narratives in the Con/Texts of Kingston and Tan," Yuan Yuan comes closest to recognizing the limits of talk-story in Tan's novels by arguing that they embody a distinct aspect of loss. Throughout her novels, Tan's characters emphasize that their immigration to the United States after World War II caused an erosion or loss of their cultural memories. Throughout her texts, Chinese-born mothers attempt to perpetuate these cultural memories in the stories told to their American-born daughters, but often with mixed results. For the daughters, these talk-stories do not represent a stable text but
depend solely on the mothers' memories. Thus, the mothers' continual revision of their stories often signals an erasure or loss of China as referent for the American-born listeners. As Yuan argues, "In short, China lies at an absolute distance from the present remembrance, irretrievably lost beyond recall, made present only through a narrative that invites forgetting instead of remembering" (293). Using China as the missing "prior text," Yuan calls attention to the inability of oral talk-story in Tan's novels to establish and maintain an intergenerational cultural memory of China as a cultural homeland, but she does not attempt to find alternative contexts within Tan's work.

The problems caused by talk-story, or oral communication in general, occupy a major place in Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, when Jing-Mei describes not understanding her mother's story about the time her mother spent in Kweilin during World War II. Jing-Mei states that she never saw the story as anything more than a "Chinese fairy tale" because "the endings always changed" (25). Her mother's constant revision of the story's ending did not provide a narrative that Jing-Mei was able to recognize and claim as her own. Jing-Mei understands what her mother was attempting to tell her only after Suyuan finishes the story for the last time. Gasping with the stunned realization that the story had always been true, Jing-Mei asks her mother what happened to the babies in the story. Suyuan "didn't even pause to think. She simply said in a way that made it clear there was no more to the story: 'Your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies'" (26). Jing-Mei can only begin to understand the story's significance when her mother gives it a recognizable ending and imposes on it a narrative structure that Jing-Mei recognizes.

The misinterpretations and misunderstandings of Suyuan's story are representative of those throughout the body of Tan's work. In part, these miscommunicatons are a result of faulty translation. Translation, as Ken-fan Lee points out, "suggests not only literal transformation but also cultural and psychological interaction" (107). A successful translation entails more than a desire to understand; a successful translation also entails ability and cultural knowledge. Throughout Tan's novels, these failed attempts at communication are in part produced by a tension
between persons who have different understandings of how stories, culture, and language are supposed to work.

Far from being complete failures, the tensions produced by competing forms of narration are somewhat alleviated through Tan’s portrayal of the didactic nature of the mothers’ voices. Winnie Louie’s narrative, which comprises the bulk of Tan’s second novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, provides a specific example of a mother who must teach her daughter how to listen and understand her stories as she speaks. In this text, Winnie narrates secret pasts and truths “too complicated” to tell to her American daughter, but can only speak in the English she has not wholly mastered. Winnie says that she will tell her daughter “not what happened, but why it happened, how it could not be any other way” (100). In the narrative that follows, Winnie uses talk-story to narrate her own history, but as she talks she must help her daughter understand both her broken English and what remains untranslatable. While the story chronicles the life of a young Winnie from orphan to abused wife, the narration consciously draws attention to the language that it uses.

Though Winnie speaks to her daughter in English, she must attempt to teach her the Chinese words that when spoken have no translation. When Winnie is in urgent need of money from her dowry account, she sends a telegram to her cousin Peanut that reads “Hurry, we are soon taonan” (259). She continues with her explanation of the necessity for funds, but is cut off with a question about what the word means from her listening daughter. Winnie tries to answer her daughter by explaining the significance of the word since she cannot translate its literal meaning. She says,

This word, *taonan*? Oh, there is no American word I can think of that means the same thing. But in China, we have lots of different words to describe all kinds of troubles. No, ‘refugee’ is not the meaning, not exactly. Refugee is what you are after you have been *taonan* and are still alive. And if you are alive, you would never want to talk about what made you *taonan*. (260)

This passage demonstrates the voice that Tan develops for her Chinese mothers by balancing the simplicity of diction with vivid imagery to illustrate the narrative. It also demonstrates the confusion and misunderstanding common in exchanges between Tan’s
mothers and daughters. However, once she has explained and developed the idea of *taonan*, she can use the word throughout the rest of her narrative in place of a less specific English translation. Later, when she tells her daughter how fear can change a person, she says “you don’t know such a person exists inside of you until you become *taonan*” (270). While the true significance of the word is always missing from the narrative, her daughter can begin to understand the importance of the word through her mother’s instruction. Therefore, talk-story cannot be read as a complete failure, nor should it be ignored in Tan’s texts. However, talk-story cannot function properly for these Chinese mothers and American daughters without a source of mediation.

In Tan’s novels, often the source of that mediation comes through the vehicle of the written text. For instance, in *The Joy Luck Club* the differences between Chinese dialects become evident when Lindo Jong cannot communicate with her future husband, Tin, because of his Cantonese dialect. Although they are both in a class to learn English, even that mode of communication is not wholly available because they can only speak the “teacher’s English,” which consists of simple declarative sentences about cats and rats. During English class, the two must use written Chinese characters to communicate with each other. Lindo sees those written notes as an important conduit for their relationship. She tells the reader, “at least we had that, a piece of paper to hold us together” (263). Though Lindo and Tin cannot understand the Chinese dialects that each one speaks they can understand Chinese characters written on paper. While the two may be unable to speak to one another, the universality of a written Chinese character allows them to communicate clearly across the boundaries of speech.

This use of written texts reoccurs in the relationship between Lindo and Tin as they use written texts to facilitate their courtship. An-mei tells Lindo that in the movies, people use notes passed in class to “fall into trouble,” so they devise a plan to “pass a note” to Tin (263). Because they work in a fortune cookie factory and can control the fortunes, the women decide to arrange a marriage proposal by putting the message in a cookie. Earlier, these fortunes were seen as both powerful and foolish by Lindo and An-mei, but appropriated for their own use, the fortunes become a valuable
form of written communication. Sorting through the many Americanized fortunes, they settle on “A house is not a home when a spouse is not at home” to cross the boundaries of both translation and propriety (264). Because it breaks with Chinese custom for a woman to initiate a marriage proposal, Lindo uses the fortune cookie to “ask” Tin to marry her in a language and a custom that is not her own. The English writing must be translated (because Tin does not know the meaning of “spouse”), but the physicality of the text allows Tin to take the message and translate its meaning outside of the immediacy of speech. The use of a text, in this case an English text, allows Lindo to determine her future using the silence of the writing at a point when the vehicle of talk-story could not work, even with another Chinese-speaking person.

Lindo’s use of the fortune cookie is an example of how we can find small, but important places where the tensions and misunderstandings between speakers must be alleviated through writing or written texts. Like Lindo Jong, Winnie Louie in The Kitchen God’s Wife is highly aware of the importance of writing and authorship. Winnie demonstrates her ability to create meaning through writing the banners that she designs for her floral business. As Pearl tells the reader, the red banners she includes with each floral arrangement did not contain typical congratulatory sayings. Instead, “all the sayings, written in gold Chinese Characters, are of her own inspiration, her thoughts about life and death, luck and hope” (19). These inspirational banners with their creative sayings like “Money Smells Good in Your New Restaurant Business” and “First-Class Life for your First Baby” represent more than a creative outlet. For Winnie Louie, their authorship is the very reason for her business’s success and an expression of her identity.

Winnie continually stresses the importance of her literacy and that of her mother. As a child on a trip to the market with her mother, Winnie tells the reader that she could not read and therefore could not tell what the paper her mother purchased was. Unable to read, she misses vital information about events that will eventually change her life. However, by the end of her narrative, her ability to write letters to her future husband enables her to escape from China before the Communists take power. In a society where the “traditional way” (121) deems that “the girl’s eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing” (121), the fact
that Winnie’s mother was both highly educated and bilingual represents an important difference. Winnie’s ability to write in both Chinese and English indicates that her use of oral narrative was a conscious choice rather than the result of some limitation. That Winnie can choose between the two languages and modes of expression demonstrates that talk-story works only in selective situations and that it is not the only choice Chinese women have for authentic self expression. Instead, literacy—the ability to both read and write—marks Tan’s mother figures as powerful forces in her texts.

Though Tan asserts the voice of Chinese immigrant women through her own writing, the written texts that appear throughout her works endow Chinese and Chinese-immigrant women the agency to write *themselvès*, an agency that critics have not yet recognized in the over-emphasis on talk-story. Tan has intentionally fashioned a complexity of voice for her Chinese mother figures. In her essay, “Mother Tongue,” Tan emphasizes her conscious desire to give validity to the voice of those who speak “broken” or non-standardized Englishes in her novels. She tells her reader that she writes her stories with all of the Englishes she has used throughout her life. Most importantly, she says that she “wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her [mother’s] intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts” (7). Tan attempts to capture what no language ability test would reveal: the fundamental literacy of her Chinese mothers. In addition, she also captures their literary ability. Tan’s emphasis on the aesthetic power of non-native speakers emphasizes the art inherent in their narrative. Instead of representing the reclamation of voice, as some studies have suggested, Tan’s portrayal of Chinese women’s use of written texts demonstrates a less marginalized presentation of Chinese mothers than the critical focus on talk-story would indicate.

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* Tan focuses her attention even more closely on the possibilities for communication in written texts. In his article on *The Joy Luck Club*, Stephen Souris argues that the Chinese mothers in that text speak into a void and that “no actual communication between mothers and daughters occurs” (107). He goes on to suggest that it becomes the reader who establishes the connections between the dialogic voices of the text
and in whom the prospect for reception of the stories resides. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan 'creates the possibility for the reception of cultural and personal memory in the American daughter because the daughter, in effect, becomes the reader of her mother’s text.

*The Bonesetter's Daughter* focuses intently on the permanence of written texts and writing’s most basic materiality through the recognition of ink’s physicality. The connections between the physical nature of ink, the process of writing, and the lasting nature of text resonate throughout the narrative. Pan, LuLing’s teacher and father figure, recognizes that writing preserves the moment in a way that cannot easily be retracted or erased and through this recognition stresses the effect of permanence in written texts. He believes that written texts become artifacts, and so he emphasizes the importance of writing one’s “true purpose” when he reminds LuLing that “once you put the ink to paper, it becomes unforgiving” (295).

Precious Auntie also specifically connects the act of writing with the quality of the text produced. She teaches her daughter, LuLing, that when you use the modern bottled ink,

> You simply write what is swimming on the top of your brain. And the top is nothing but pond scum, dead leaves, and mosquito spawn. But when you push an inkstick along an inkstone, you take the first step to cleansing your mind and your heart. You push and you ask yourself, What are my intentions? What is in my heart that matches my mind? (225)

Precious Auntie thus stresses the physical process of writing by drawing attention to the amount of work entailed in preparing an inkstone for writing. She believes that the use of an inkstone, a more physical process of writing, forces the writer to be conscious of her true purpose, rather than the immediate feeling of the moment. Through repetition of this idea, the novel emphasizes the importance of intent in writing and indicates that the type of writing important to the characters in the novel is not the unthinking act of recording immediate thoughts but the conscious and deliberate act of preserving and communicating specifically selected messages.
Consequently, the writing and texts in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are represented as having power and importance because they are conscious and deliberate rather than haphazard. Precious Auntie teaches LuLing that when writing “a person must think about her intentions,” and LuLing recognized that when Precious Auntie wrote, “her *ch'i* flowed from her body into her arm, through the brush, and into the stroke” (269). Each stroke, then, becomes representative of the energy and character of the writer, and the words on the page can signify more than the ideas that the shapes represent; they come to signify the intent and character of the author. The marks on the paper do more than represent words because they also somehow embody the life and person of the writer. The autobiography that LuLing writes so precisely does more than tell her life story; the perfection of the vertical rows and complete absence of mistakes alerts Ruth to the clearly evident care taken with its creation and the text’s consequent importance. Although Ruth cannot understand the meaning of the manuscript’s Chinese characters, she can understand that they are important through their presentation.

Ruth could only understand this deeper significance because she had developed a respect for writing’s importance as a child through her sand writing and her diary. The young Ruth recognized that she “had never experienced such power with words,” as she wrote “messages” from Precious Auntie to give her mother instructions (85). As a child Ruth used words to gain power over her mother by pretending to write the words she said Precious Auntie’s ghost told her. Her “ghost writing” had the power to move her family and upset her mother’s daily life, even though the words were only her own. A similar power was also available to Ruth when she wrote out the hate she felt for her mother in her diary because she knew that her mother would read the diary and she knew that the words would affect her mother in a specific way. As she wrote the words in her diary, she was conscious of her intent and recognized that what she was writing was risky. It felt like pure evil. And the descending mantle of guilt made her toss it off with even more bravado. What she wrote next was even worse, such terrible words, which later—too late—she had crossed out. [. . .] ‘You talk about killing yourself, so why don’t you ever do it? I wish you would. Just do it, do it, do it!’ (159)
When Ruth discovers the next day that her mother has fallen out of a window, her worst fears about the power of her writing make her believe that she has killed her mother. She comes to believe that words and writing have importance because of their potential power, a belief that will affect her throughout her life.

As an adult, Ruth states that her childhood guilt and fear has prevailed over her desire to write her own words. She knows that by writing a novel in the high style of writers like Jane Austen, she could “revise her life and become someone else. She could be somewhere else” (31). But the possibility of erasing those parts of her life she does not like through revision frightens her, and her fear of imagining her life differently through the vehicle of a novel stops her from writing her own texts and restricts her to writing texts for others as a ghostwriter. Even as an adult, she believes that “writing what you wished was the most dangerous form of wishful thinking” (31). The fear that revising her mother out of her fictional life may erase her from reality hinders Ruth from claiming any sense of agency she might find through original authorship. Ruth’s career as a ghost writer allows her to mold the words of others without the possibility of affecting her own life. Her fear also emphasizes other characters’ perception of writing’s power in this text. She has no personal investment when writing the words of others; they remain “safe” for Ruth.

Ruth eventually comes to recognize the importance of original authorship through the discovery of her mother’s autobiography. Just as Precious Auntie saved LuLing through writing her autobiography, LuLing’s writing replicates that rescue through her autobiography’s effect on Ruth. By the end of the text, Ruth will continue the tradition started by Precious Auntie and begin to write her own stories. These Chinese women use written autobiographies to reveal and establish lasting conceptions of their individual identities. The text reveals Precious Auntie’s identity to the reader through the autobiography that LuLing writes for Ruth, even though LuLing never actually reveals this secret to her daughter. Thus, Tan’s palimpsest-like layering of written autobiographies in The Bonesetter’s Daughter highlights the specific connection between authorship and the articulation of self and the importance of written text over oral narrative.
The written nature of these autobiographies illuminates each woman's sense of identity, while it also emphasizes the stability and power of written narratives over the oral. For LuLing, writing has a cultural and an ancestral importance. By replicating her own mother's autobiographical writing, she displays reverence for the importance and power of literacy. However, writing also has a practical importance for LuLing because she understands that her memory—and thus her ability to orally narrate those memories—is failing. She begins her narrative with the statement "These are the things I must not forget" (173). This opening line of her autobiography indicates that through her writing she will be able to preserve the past beyond her own memory of it. LuLing's narrative achieves a physical permanence like that of an artifact that the constant revisions and indeterminacies of talk-story lack. Although her speech (like that of Tan's other mothers) often results in misunderstandings and an estranged relationship with her daughter, her written narrative allows Ruth finally to understand her story.

Unlike the oral narratives told by the Joy Luck mothers, Winnie Louie, and Kwan Li in Tan's first three novels, LuLing's written narrative allows Ruth to be prepared to consciously understand and internalize the cultural importance of the story. Because LuLing's stories are written, they retain a possibility for translation beyond the immediacy of a mother-daughter exchange; the text's materiality allows LuLing's memory to be uncovered and read at a point when her dementia prohibits her from orally passing on her story and memories to her daughter. The written text also differs from oral narratives in that it allows for later translation and mediation—the only way that Ruth is able to understand the text—while an oral narrative's immediacy creates a transitory moment in which the story must be understood. Ruth's inability to read Chinese highlights a specific form of illiteracy and makes tangible the necessity for the specific knowledge necessary to translate meaning between mothers and daughters, a need that parallels that of other daughter figures in Tan's work. The written text's permanence and physicality allow Ruth to give the manuscript to someone who has access to both English and Chinese for translation.

This translation comes through Mr. Tang, who is only able to recreate LuLing's voice in her text because he understands both the Chinese and English language systems. Using a photograph of
LuLing when she was younger, Mr. Tang uses all of his senses to interpret LuLing’s manuscript. He tells Ruth that “seeing her would help [him] say her words in English the way she has expressed them in Chinese” (341). Telling Ruth that he will need two months to translate the narrative completely, Mr. Tang declares, “I don’t like to just transliterate word for word. I want to phrase it more naturally, yet insure these are your mother’s words, a record for you and your children for generations to come. They must be just right” (342). His declaration that he does not only “transliterate” LuLing’s writing signifies a move beyond a strict interlingual translation to an incorporation of textual mediation. It also should remind us both of Precious Auntie’s earlier statements about writing and of Tan’s own position as a writer who translates Chinese and Chinese American culture for a larger audience. Mr. Tang recognizes the importance of giving Ruth access to her mother’s words through the embedded signals inscribed in the process of writing. Mr. Tang’s desire to capture LuLing’s “essence” in the text is a recognition of writing’s ability to preserve a moment, an intent, and the character of both. Mr. Tan recognizes that LuLing’s text is more than a simple historical account, but can contain evidence of LuLing’s entire self. This recognition leads him to emphasize the preservation of both the meaning of the text and of LuLing’s aesthetic voice in the process of translation.

Tan clearly succeeds at giving a legitimate voice to the Chinese immigrant mothers in her texts through the representation of their storytelling, both oral and written. Her articulation of women’s authorship and the emphasis on the power and importance of written words throughout her novels should signal that Tan works from an aesthetic tradition broader than that of talk-story or even of oral narrative; she works also from a literary tradition. In the conclusion of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the image of Ruth using her recognition of Chinese identity by actively engaging in the act of writing emphasizes the importance of the literary tradition in Tan’s own work. “Ruth remembers this [her mother’s story] as she writes a story. It is for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother” (403). The production of an écriture féminine—of women writing women and of woman writing herself—becomes repeated and amplified through the written autobiographies of Precious Auntie, LuLing, and eventually Ruth
by means of the writings of another American daughter, Tan herself.

As I have already argued, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* does not represent a divergence from an earlier pattern, but the amplification of an often ignored pattern in Tan’s work. The misunderstanding of these patterns may have oversimplified analyses of Tan’s works. For instance, if we recognize LuLing’s narrative as a written text because it lacks the verbal markers of other narratives, perhaps the reading of *The Joy Luck Club* as an experiment in talk-story and the voices as actual *oral* voices does not take fully into account the possibility that each voice has in effect authored its own written text. In the mothers’ sections of *The Joy Luck Club*, we do not see the same stylized representation of speech that we find in Tan’s texts when someone hears a Chinese immigrant speak. The mothers’ voices do not seem to speak directly to their American daughters, as Winnie Louie’s or Kwan Li’s voices do, but instead seem to create texts that their daughters do not read. In certain sections of those texts, the voice of each mother becomes the narrative voice, and each woman effectively authors her own autobiography. Although it is Tan who actually writes these autobiographies, the narrative voices are highly literate and highly literary in their use of highly stylized and manipulated language. The importance of inscribing one’s self on paper resonates most powerfully in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, but it is speech’s failure and the appearance of texts throughout Tan’s other novels that should serve to suggest new ways to interpret written representations of Chinese immigrant women.

Tan’s Chinese mothers not only verbally convey their stories, but also use writing to assert their identity. Their understanding of literacy, the power facilitated by the permanency of writing, and their active engagement with and use of written texts demonstrate that Tan’s mothers do more than talk-story. Scholarship about Chinese American literature became more recognized and integrated into the university curriculum after the highly successful *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, but imposing the same critical paradigms on the works of Amy Tan (and perhaps other Chinese American women writers) has confined and distorted the discussion of Tan’s texts. The lack of critical recognition of Tan’s Chinese mothers’ literacy has produced studies and
analyses that depended on an assumption of marginalization or silence. Many critics have assumed that the mothers’ fragmented English represents their only means to impart a specifically Chinese cultural memory and identity to their American daughters. These studies have been important in opening the discussion of Tan’s work, but they have missed the complexity of the representations of Chinese American immigrant women available in Tan’s work. Amy Tan’s novels do not demonstrate the inability of Chinese mothers to communicate with their American daughters but the artistic complexity of these interactions. Tan has created a literary tradition apart from Kingston. Not dependent on speech alone, Tan’s mothers are able to move between speech and writing, voice and silence, through their literacy rather than their limitations.

More importantly perhaps, the misreading of authorship within these texts serves as a potent metaphor for the misreading of Tan’s own authorship. In fact, the relative lack of favorable critical attention that Tan’s work has received as compared to Maxine Hong Kingston’s displays the effects of canon formation and canon critique. In his chapter “Material Choices,” Robert Dale Parker argues that arguments critiquing the canon often rest on a notion of representation, and it is because of this reliance on the idea of representation that they ultimately fail. The idea of representation assumes that “there is a stable and coherent entity to be represented” and that “there can be an equation or one-to-one relation between signifier and signified, and that the signified (e.g., identity) somehow rests independently of and underneath the process (e.g., a novel) of signifying it” (171). Thus, the critical inclination to recognize oral narratives, like talk-story, assumes a certain identity politics—by representing one voice in the canon, we represent a constitutive identity (a good and noble endeavor, certainly). But if the canon is expanded or obliterated to make room for, based on some notion of difference from a master narrative (i.e., representative of a majority identity), then there exists the risk of limiting based on the very exoticism of that difference. The terms of the discussion have not changed to be more inclusive, but instead use difference as a new policing mechanism.
Twenty-five years after Lyotard introduced a critique of grand narratives in *The Postmodern Condition*, the syllabi of university courses have expanded to include women’s writing and the writing of women of color, but as this analysis of Tan’s work demonstrates, this inclusion often comes at the cost of silencing the multiplicity of voices that challenge notions of identity representation on which critiques of the canon have been based. The focus on and near-fetishization of oral narratives, or other “non-traditional” narrative strategies, can produce the same limiting effect that those attempting to expand or abandon the canon critique. The failure to recognize what should be considered a major theme running throughout Tan’s work and the pervasive focus on oral narrative demonstrate the way that critical practice informs reception and eventual recognition of texts. If, as John Guillory argues, the canon—composed of those works that appear on syllabi—serves as an ideological tool to teach the masses, we must also understand that this tool, which so many have used to represent the minority or ethnic voice, at the same time keeps it safely contained.

Notes
1. Guillory argues that “the distinction between serious and popular writing is a condition of canonicity; it belongs to the history of literacy, of systematic regulation of reading and writing, as the adaptation of that system’s regulatory procedures to social conditions in which the practice of writing is no longer confined to a scribal class” (23-24).
2. For studies that focus on the dialogic in Tan’s work see especially Souris, Wang, and Braendlin.
3. For critics who focus on oral narratives between mothers and daughters in Tan’s work, see Chen, Reid, Shear, and Xu. For more general discussions of talk-story in Tan’s work see Foster, Unali, and Reid.
4. Tan’s work is often overlooked for other reasons besides the use or lack of talk-story. What has been perceived as a relative simplicity or the popularity of her novels has also had an effect on the academic reception of her works. In a review of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* in the *Houston Chronicle*, Gibson writes, “Amy Tan has become the Rodney Dangerfield of contemporary novelists: Too often she doesn’t get the critical respect she deserves because her books are such tremendous best sellers. If her writing is that popular, some critics conclude, it must be less serious than that of lesser-known artists like Maxine Hong Kingston, whose *Woman Warrior* is taught at many universities” (21).
5. I do not mean to argue that critics have ignored or overlooked the Chinese mothers in Tan’s work. Many critics have productively analyzed the mothers in Tan’s novels. See especially Gately, Braendlin, and Shen. However, this study
seeks to add to the current discussion by bringing to light an ignored element of
the presentation of Chinese mothers: literacy.
6. While *The Hundred Secret Senses* does not focus on written texts as much as
her other novels, the literacy of the mother figure remains important. In *The
Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia Laguni also becomes acutely aware of the
limitations of illiteracy when she travels to China. As she drives through a
Chinese village with her Chinese half-sister, she realizes that she cannot read the
signs and requires Kwan, the text’s mother-figure, to translate for her. While
Olivia’s illiteracy makes her relatively helpless, Kwan’s ability to move between
Chinese and English in both spoken and written language aligns her with the
pattern of highly literate and *literary* mother-figures who have no need to
negotiate between a Chinese and American self.
7. For more on translation in Tan, see Yuan, Hamilton, Chen, and Lee.
8. For more information on the differences between intralingual, interlingual,
and intersemiotic translation, see the use of Jakobson in Dan.
9. Guillory has more thoroughly explained the problem with a liberal pluralism
as applied to canon formation.

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