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Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's "Joy Luck Club"

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A SELECTION: pp.604-605; ‘.613.

As the essential medium of subjectivity, language is the ground for playing out cultural differences. Gloria Anzaldúa has written about her language use as an insignia of her "borderlands" identity situated between Mexico and America: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself." The speaker of this "language of Borderlands," Anzaldúa suggests, has the freedom to "switch codes" at will; it is a "bastard" language located at the "juncture of culture [where] languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized."<sup>19</sup> In *The Joy Luck Club*, the language of the mothers—their border language—marks their positioning between two cultures. However, in exposing linguistic limits, the novel also argues for reclaiming language as an instrument of intersubjectivity and dialogue, and as a medium of transmission from mothers to daughters.

In the novel, the daughters understand Chinese, but they speak English exclusively. The mothers, in contrast, speak a version of Anzaldúa's "language of the Borderlands," a *patois* of Chinese and English that often confuses their daughters. Observing her aunts, June thinks: "The Joy Luck aunts begin to make small talk, not really listening to each other. They speak in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialect" (p. 34). Embarrassing at times to the daughters, this language is a form of self-inscription in an alien culture, a way of preserving significance in the new reality of America. For one, the nuggets of foreign words incorporated into this speech duplicate aspects of self-identity that have no equivalent in another language. Words like *lihai*, *chuming*, and *nengkan* must remain in their original Chinese in order to retain their power and meaning. For Ying-Ying, the essence of her youthful character before she became a lost soul, a "ghost," is contained in the word *lihai*: "When I was a young girl in Wushi, I was *lihai*. Wild and stubborn. I wore a smirk on my face. Too good to listen" (p. 243). Her confidence in

her special knowledge is expressed by *chuming*, referring to her "inside knowledge of things" (p. 248). For Rose, *nengkan* expresses her mother's ability to act on pure will and determination, as shown in An-Mei's summoning of her son's spirit after he has drowned at the beach (pp. 121-31). On another occasion, An-Mei's command of this hybrid language enables her to articulate, on her daughter's behalf, Rose's disorientation during her divorce. When An-Mei complains that Rose's psychiatrist is making her *hulihudu* and *heimongmong*, Rose ponders: "It was true. And everything around me seemed to be *heimongmong*. These were words I have never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be 'confused' and 'dark fog'" (p. 188).

In discussing the use of "multilingualness" in women's writings, Patricia Yaeger suggests that the "incorporation of a second language can function . . . as a subversive gesture representing an alternative form of speech which can both disrupt the repressions of authoritative discourse and still welcome or shelter themes that have not yet found a voice in the . . . primary language."<sup>20</sup> Although Yaeger is concerned with specific narrative strategies used in women's texts, her analysis has resonance for the significance of maternal speech in *The Joy Luck Club*. Without being overtly political or subversive, the mothers' bilingualism in the novel is nonetheless strategic. Switching from English to Chinese can express rejection and anger, as when June's mother berates her for not trying hard enough at her piano playing: "'So ungrateful,' I heard her mutter in Chinese. 'If she had as much talent as she has temper, she would be famous now'" (p. 136). Or, the switching of codes may initiate a shift into a different register of intimacy, as when the same mother speaks in Chinese when making her daughter a gift of a jade pendant (p. 208). To express her resentment against an American husband who persistently puts English words in her mouth, Ying-Ying uses Chinese exclusively with her daughter (p. 106). Deliberate deformations of language, too, are used to convey veiled criticisms, as when Ying-Ying snidely refers to her daughter's profession as an architect as "arty-tecky" (p. 242), and An-Mei dismisses Rose's psychiatrist as "psyche-tricks" (p. 188). Finally, the use of

As we have seen, the maternal voices in *The Joy Luck Club* begin to shift from "I" to "you" to engage the discrete subjectivities of mother and daughter in a tentative exchange of recognitions and identifications. In the same way, the novel's resonant structure and its use of parataxis effectively write the reader into the text as a crucial participant in the making of meaning.<sup>31</sup> The reader of *The Joy Luck Club* is a weaver of intricate interconnections who must, like Suyuan's unraveling of an old sweater, randomly "pull out a kinky thread of yarn, anchoring it to a piece of cardboard, [roll] with a sweeping rhythm, [and] start [a] story" (p. 21). This way of engaging the reader as an active constructor of meaning allows the feminist novel to project a community of sisterly readers.<sup>32</sup> In tracing a family history that blurs the demarcations between the roles of mothers, daughters, and sisters, *The Joy Luck Club* breaks down the boundary between text and reader in order to proffer the notions of sisterhood as a literary construction and as a community constituted through the act of reading. At once disintegrative and constructive in its operations, the novel holds its dual impulses in unresolved suspension and fulfills its fundamentally transformative project—a mutation from daughter-text to mother-text to sister-text.

## NOTES

1. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985). For a useful survey of the critical literature on this subject, see Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters," *Signs* 7 (Autumn 1981): 200-222.
2. Dianne F. Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Black Women in America: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-