Cutting the Tongue: Language and the Body in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*

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One of the most widely taught books in American colleges in recent years, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* has a vexed reception history that both attests to its popularity and questions it.¹ The debates regarding Kingston’s text that flared up immediately after the book’s publication primarily concerned authenticity and representation.² These conflicts centered on whether Kingston’s representation of Chinese culture and Chinese Americans was faithful. While the debates over authenticity and representation have subsided, the questions raised regarding the representation of a minority still find their way into recent scholarship on *The Woman Warrior*, if in varying forms.³ This essay focuses on a key figure from Kingston’s text—tongue-cutting—because it embodies a key concern raised by critics of *The Woman Warrior*: does Kingston misrepresent the Chinese American community as barbaric while accommodating the mainstream readership’s expectations for Orientalist tales.⁴ Because of its physicality and violence, tongue-cutting runs the risk of being inscrutable when approached within a narrow set of definitions of civilization and its norms.

Perhaps the easiest way to take care of this problem is to regard the tongue-cutting in Kingston’s text as fictional, as an exercise of Kingston’s creative imagination. The impressive work that has been done so far on Kingston’s innovative use of genre in *The Woman Warrior* supports such a reading.⁵ Viewing Kingston’s text as a memoir in the traditional sense is now largely discredited.

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However, while *The Woman Warrior* does not ask for a sorting out of fact from fiction, too hastily labeling as fictional every incident in the text that potentially signals intercultural tension does not help understand Kingston’s sophisticated manipulation of reality and imagination. To explore the figure of tongue-cutting in the text as it marks a crucial intersection between the body and language is to take a step further from the debates over representation and to think about how Kingston’s text interconnects social reality and the material conditions of life.

A recent article in *The Houston Chronicle*, also on tongue-cutting, serves as a point of entry into the relation between language and the body in *The Woman Warrior*. The October 19, 2003, issue of *The Houston Chronicle* reported the case of tongue-cutting among school-age children in Korea, prompted by their zealous parents who wanted their children to acquire full proficiency in English. “Chop a centimeter or so off your tongue and become a fluent English speaker” reads the first line of this arresting newspaper article (“Korean”). Tongue-cutting, in the Korean case, takes place as a result of a misconstrued relationship between language and the body. Parents believe that there is an optimum mouth structure for unlimited language capacity, and they couple this with a misplaced faith that modern medicine can produce an optimum bodily organ through surgery. Such thinking ties together the body and language in a simplistic cause-and-effect relationship. While *The Woman Warrior* debunks the idea that there can be a causal relationship between language and the body, it grapples with the question of what it means for a racialized body to acquire a language. By showing how the body’s racial marker precedes language performance, Kingston dismantles an easy distinction between language ability and disability and makes the reader aware that language is always intimately linked to the body that speaks and the material conditions of that body.

I borrow from recent scholarship on disability studies to think through the shifting bases of ability and disability and to examine the role of the body—both the exterior that is visible and the interior that is not so readily visible—in the subject’s self-perception and social acceptance. A social constructionist view of disability, the view that “disability is neither ‘natural’ nor essential
but rather that it is socially produced” has made it possible to see how disability and ability are in fact mutually constitutive (Marks 78). The close link between disability and ability has always been acknowledged, but before social constructionism showed that disability is neither something one is born with nor something that “sticks,” disability commonly was thought of as the lack of ability. The dynamic between disability and ability, however, is more complicated. Racial and cultural difference influence the assessment of language performance in The Woman Warrior, illustrating the shifting ways we assess ability and disability. In her portrayal of the Chinese immigrant community in the US and the role that language comes to play in the immigrants’ transformation into US citizens, Kingston shows how the illusory idea of standard English, which is inextricably tied to assimilation, comes to enforce a regime of language normality that is only supported by excluding language diversity.

Kingston criticizes the construction of a language norm by showing how language difference becomes racialized. The figure of tongue-cutting is crucial to understanding how language, often taken to be devoid of material significance, cannot be thought of apart from the body. Erving Goffman’s theory of stigma underlies a large part of my discussion, since I show how the creation of a language norm goes hand in hand with the stigmatization of certain language differences. I also rely on works about freakery, the grotesque, and monstrosity in thinking about the place of the body in negotiating and mediating differences. As a bodily organ that often escapes the notice of viewers, the tongue resists being transformed directly into a spectacle, unlike visually noticeable racial markers. Yet the tongue still works in consort with outward appearance to mark the narrator’s social status as the other. In looking at the narrator’s tongue as a register of the anxieties of linguistic disablment, I view it as a space between the exterior body and the invisible interiority; this space helps us conceptualize the link between the social perception of the raced subject and the racial melancholy of the subject. The demand for conformity leaves its mark on the narrator’s body, a mark that will impact all her social interactions involving language.
I start by looking at the narrator's school initiation into a social world of "normal" language and social practices. The narrator's struggles in school, due to clashes between her and the school's ideas of acceptable classroom performance, illustrate how the criteria for determining ability and disability change according to social and cultural circumstances. I then focus on the figure of tongue-cutting and the ambivalent relationship that the narrator has to her language. I take two incidents from the text where the narrator's anxieties about linguistic mediation erupt and trace the configuration of her relationship to language.

For the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, school is the site where she first learns about norms. While public schooling is a well-known means of socialization, the cultural differences between home and school complicate the experience of socialization for the narrator. The first coping strategy she adopts when she is thrust into an alien world of public institution is to resort to silence:

When I first went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent... During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten... I enjoyed the silence. At first it did not occur to me that I was supposed to talk or to pass kindergarten... It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. (165-66)

Muteness has served as a protective shield, but it turns into a stress factor the moment the narrator realizes that muteness is frowned upon by her teachers. The innocence of muteness is lost when the narrator develops an awareness of the social function attributed to language.

In a multilingual society, where a unity between home language and public language cannot be assumed, language performance in school settings can be a form of intercultural transition and translation. According to the Census Bureau's 2000 census data, approximately 83% of American-born Chinese students have a language other than English spoken at home. Entering school, for language minority students, signals a transition from a limited
English environment to an English dominant environment. This transition, far from being value neutral, often entails a hierarchized and compartmentalized understanding of social languages where the home language becomes something less than the school language. In a recent study of racial melancholy, David Eng and Shinhee Han present the case of a Japanese American boy whose cause of depression can be traced back to the humiliating experiences he had in grade school due to his Japanese-accented English, which he had learned from his mother. The boy’s experience ironically points out how public education, which seeks to empower the individual, in this case caused an irrecoverable loss of esteem for an individual’s home culture and his mother.

Minority students have to deal, of course, with numerous differences, yet language matters underlie a lot of the tensions that emerge in school. “My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school painting with black paint,” confesses the narrator (165). The narrator plasters each of her artworks with a black coat; to her this is a stage curtain but for others this indicates her oddity. Combined with her muteness, her black paintings single her out as a troubled child. Even after the narrator assimilates herself into the culture of speaking, she still has to learn that her voice needs to be adjusted once again to the norms of standard speech:

We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year, the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voices would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists. Some of us gave up, shook our heads, and said nothing, not one word. Some of us could not even shake our heads. At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage. (172)

The interlacing of the first person, singular pronoun with the first person, plural pronoun in the passage suggests that being referred to special education and therapy regularly took place for Chinese American students in schools. While the intention behind identifying and referring students to special education may be to provide each student with the adequate support she or he needs, the
absence of nuanced criteria for assessing students' needs and the cultural insensitivity with which the assessment is often conducted creates numerous problems for students. In the case of language minority students, an often-cited problem is that of overidentification (see Olson). Because of their divergence from what is perceived as standard language performance, language minority students come to be shuttled back and forth between regular classes and special-ed classes. Only lawsuits on behalf of language minority students, such as Diana v. California Board of Education (1970) and Lau v. Nichols (1974), forced school boards to rethink the parameters of monolingual education and monolingual assessment (Olson 3, Mclean 8).

The question of misdiagnosis raised with regard to language minority students points to the vexed relationship medical discourses bear to discourses of race. The fact that science (or pseudo-science) has often been deployed to legitimate ideas of racial hierarchy and to establish racial norms makes suspect the medical discourse that identifies language minority students as in need of special education. The purpose in mulling over medical diagnosis, of course, is not to demonize medical assessment but to argue that medical assessment can best be made when the complexities of individual circumstances are taken into consideration. Studies in disability that revise the "medical model" allow us to reconsider the authority of medical discourse in regulating the human body (Marks 52). The field-study results of David Goode (quoted in Jim Swan) are a good example of how the objectivity of medical assessment can come under scrutiny. Goode, an ethnomethodologist who worked with girls with rubella syndrome, discovered that an assessment of an impaired person's subjectivity varied depending on the assessor's relationship to the impaired person (Swan 290-91). "The higher up the chain of professionalization," remarks Swan, "the more negative and pessimistic was the assessment" (291). The people who were on the lower rung of the medical profession, of course, were the people who had the most contact with the girls with rubella syndrome.

An ableist view focuses on competency without duly considering what goes into the production of such competency and
what an achievement of such competency rules out. The series of legal changes made in favor of bilingual education are significant in this regard, since they moved away from earlier notions of equating bilingualism with English deficiency, which resulted in an attempt to erase the home language and enforce a reductive monolingualism. Recent changes in bilingual education reconsider competency by acknowledging the bias in conducting a competency test in English for non-English dominant students and seek ways to help students move between and develop fluency in two languages. Written in the wake of collective actions for language minority students, Kingston’s The Woman Warrior illustrates the futility of designations such as normal and abnormal, and competent and incompetent. Kingston also illustrates through the figure of tongue-cutting that the making of a “normal” voice is troubled and violent.

In the last chapter of The Woman Warrior, the narrator ruminates on the origins of her speech. After reflecting on her aptitude for inventing and embellishing stories, the narrator startlingly discloses how uncertain she feels about her storytelling talent: “[m]aybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue” (163). The incident of tongue-cutting is rendered all the more mystical by its indirect presentation. The memory that the narrator has of her tongue being cut is filtered through the mother’s recollection of the incident, which lacks details. The narrator’s attempt to visualize the incident through the mother’s sketchy account results in an allegorical picture framed by a Chinese maxim:

She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of scissors. I don’t remember her doing it, only her telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry—and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird’s, cut. The Chinese say “a ready tongue is an evil.” (164)

Her tongue becomes a childhood obsession for the narrator, who “made other children open their mouths so [she] could compare [their tongues] to [hers]” (164). While the factual status of the tongue-cutting is never clear, the metaphorical meaning of tongue-cutting assumes a prominent place in the narrator’s life and in her
self-understanding. Through her interpretive act, she incorporates the story of her tongue-cutting into a part of her identity. “Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue” (164). The descriptive phrase “a powerful act” succinctly expresses the ambivalence with which the narrator conceives of the act. In part it means an act of liberation; by cutting her tongue her mother has set her loose somehow from the restrictions she was born with as a woman in a patriarchal community. Subverting traditional expectations for being a reticent, unobtrusive, and obedient woman, the narrator is now equipped to walk a path of her own choice, with a free tongue. On the other hand, it remains a violent act. The violence of the act disorients the narrator to the point of her harboring ambivalent feelings toward her mother and by extension, her mother’s Chinese culture.

In contrast to the narrator’s numerous conjectures and speculations, the mother’s explanation as to why she cut her daughter’s tongue is simple:

I cut it so you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You’ll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do these things, so I cut it. (164)

How should one understand the mother’s fantastical proposition that a mobile tongue would make a child a language prodigy, which, in turn, would most possibly equip her with a social mobility? The belief that language skills can be improved by medically operating on the tongue holds biological adaptedness and language capacity as correlates. In the case of frenotomy, the medical term for tongue-cutting, the length of the frenum determines one’s receptivity to language. Not surprisingly, the notion that one’s speech capacity is anchored in the material body has a long history in Western medical thinking. In a brief chronicle of the theories of stuttering, G. M. Klingbeil traces back to Aristotle the long association between stuttering and a defective tongue. Aristotle, according to Klingbeil, initiated the tradition of
"[attributing] the whole blame in stuttering to the tongue" (115). In Klingbeil’s chronicle, instances of cutting the frenum as a cure for stuttering appear as early as the sixth century. Widespread belief that a defective tongue would cause speech impairment prompted the routine practice of midwives slitting the babies’ frenum, often with fingernails or with other pre-modern instruments. Today identifying the cause of ankyloglossia, or being tongue-tied, as a biological malformation has been discredited. Clinical observation has shown that not all short frenums lead to ankyloglossia and that frenums sometimes grow with the development of the baby. It is now standard practice to desist from performing frenotomy on a child before the age of four (Levy 346).

Changing medical practices notwithstanding, the history of tongue-cutting shows that more often than not the construction of a medical norm is based on the accumulation of misbeliefs rather than objective, scientific evidence. Aristotle’s connection of the tongue with speech problems, the lasting association this created between a biological organ and language performance, and the continued effects of such an association raise intriguing questions about the status of the body in relation to notions of ability and disability. While the narrator’s mother in The Woman Warrior claims to have performed frenotomy on her daughter as a preemptive measure to enhance the narrator’s language ability and rule out the possibility of her language disability, the imprint this act leaves on the narrator is a heightened consciousness of the self as represented by linguistic mediation, rather than actual signs of her language ability or disability.

The language background of the narrator and her immediate family adds another dimension to the narrator’s complex relationship to language. Although it goes unsaid in the mother’s account, the mother’s desire for a superlative language ability for her daughter may well reflect the social pressure for English fluency felt by immigrants. The use of languages other than English in public sectors was common until around the 1880s in the US, when language policy started to take a more restrictive turn (Dicker 46). By the early twentieth century, when the narrator’s parents immigrated, the enforcement of an English-dominant language policy was well under way (Brisk 6). With the
valorization of English as the public language, a lack of familiarity with English often came to be taken as a sign of social inferiority, and English deficiency came to be diagnosed as a condition that needed to be remedied. Despite the fact that communication is a two-way traffic which places the responsibility of communicating on both participating parties, often the burden of making oneself understood fell on the shoulders of the language minority. Racial stereotypes also play a role in the stigmatizing of language difference. In this sense, race and accented English come to be imbricated in the social process of marking out the other.

A conversation that takes place between the narrator and a drugstore owner in The Woman Warrior illuminates how the linguistic performance of an ethnic minority is judged by stereotypes and assumptions:

“Mymotherseztagimmesomecandy,” I said to the druggist. Be cute and small. No one hurts the cute and small.
“What? Speak up. Speak English,” he said, big in his white druggist coat.
“Tatagimme somecandy.”
The druggist leaned way over the counter and frowned.
“Some free candy,” I said. “Sample candy.”
“We don’t give sample candy, young lady,” he said. (170)

The narrator stammers under the weight of having to explain to the druggist the complicated situation; she has been sent as an envoy by the mother to notify the druggist that it is a “crime” according to Chinese standards to send a wrong delivery for drugs and that the mother wants candies as a gift to prevent any ill events ensuing from the mistake (170). The druggist ends up believing she is begging for candy because she is too poor to afford it, and the narrator’s family is provided with free candy for years whenever they stop by the drugstore. Though the miscommunication that takes place in this scene is humorous and apparently harmless, it nevertheless conveys a keen sense of frustration. The druggist displays a certain resistance to listening to the narrator and demands that she “[s]peak English” when she is already speaking it. His ready assumption that people who look Chinese, or Asian,
tend not to speak English, or to speak only broken English, enhances the narrator’s nervousness.

The mother’s wish that the daughter be armed with superlative language skills reflects a compensatory desire caused by the stigmatization of English spoken by Asian immigrants. Her resort to frenotomy is based on a cause-and-effect relationship that she construes between a dysfunctional tongue and flawed English. In the mother’s mind the social norm for standard English has been transferred to the idea of a biological norm for optimal linguistic performance. While the immediate referent of the biological norm in this case may be the structure of the speech organs, this biological norm is not unrelated to a racial norm that suggests English as a language that suits whiteness. For the narrator, the tongue that is cut loose becomes a bodily sign that is not visible to others. The visible sign of her difference, rather, is her race, the first marker by which she is classified and understood in the social realm.

The narrator speaks “normally,” and while the mutilated tongue may have no relation to her language performance, it stays as part of her bodily baggage to constantly remind her to speak right and prove she is linguistically able. The narrator’s ambivalent relationship to language comes up most forcefully in an encounter she has with a classmate; this classmate is of Chinese descent, like the narrator, and from the narrator’s neighborhood of Chinese immigrants:

She was a year older than I and was in my class for twelve years. During all those years she read aloud but would not talk. Her older sister was usually beside her; their parents kept the older daughter back to protect the younger one. . . . I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team, and I, the last chosen for my team. (172-73)

Many critics have pointed to the mute girl as a mirror of the narrator, but Anne Cheng goes further to draw attention to the narrator’s uneasiness about appearing the same as her classmate. In Cheng’s words, “[w]hat the narrator dreads in both the other girl and in herself is that ineluctable compliance of the visible . . . what the narrator sees as the girl’s vulnerability to Asian female
stereotypes” (74). The narrator’s discomfort at her classmate also comes from the girl’s muteness, her refusal to participate in the normative practices of social mediation through language.

One day after school, the narrator corners her classmate in the school lavatory and bullies her in a feeble attempt to squeeze words out of her. Coaxes and threats, verbal and physical, fail to induce a single word of protest from the girl. Faced with the unexpected resilience of her victim, the narrator herself breaks down in a flood of tears. “[Y]ou, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk you can’t have a personality. . . . You’ve got to let people know that you have a personality and a brain” (180). Is it true that personality and intelligence are solely dependent on verbal performance?

While the narrator’s bullying of her classmate can be viewed as an active effort on the part of the narrator to deal with the anxieties she has about language, it cannot be denied that the narrator replicates on a child’s scale the violence and oppression that accompany the logic of assimilation and mainstreaming. After her scheme to force speech out of her classmate fails, the narrator’s unspoken remorse and the intimate link between body and mind cause the narrator to develop a “mysterious illness” that keeps her out of school and in bed for a year and a half (182). Cheng takes this as a physical manifestation of the ambivalence of assimilation, as well as an illustration of the problem of legitimacy for the assimilated subject (73-75). The illness becomes most telling “in its profound confusion between health and pathology, wholeness and disability” (72). The narrator’s isolation due to her bodily sickness also relieves her from having to use language for social interactions. The body speaks and conveys meaning when language falls short. In bed, the narrator stays reticent, having exchanged her ability for language performance for temporary disablement of the body. The figure of the mutilated tongue underlies the figure of the disabled body, and what is meant to be a sign of linguistic ability actually morphs into a sign of invisible sadness, a dis-ease of the mind.

“I am my language,” declares Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands/ La Frontera in the chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (81). The intimate relationship between oneself and one’s language that
Anzaldúa draws can be found in a Chinese story retold by the narrator in the last chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” Ts’ai Yen, a young poetess of Han, is taken prisoner by a nomadic tribe and held in captivity for twelve years. One night Ts’ai Yen is inspired by the music of the barbarians to create a song of her own in response:

The music disturbed Ts’ai Yen; its sharpness and its cold made her ache. It disturbed her so that she could not concentrate on her own thoughts. . . . Then, out of Ts’ai Yen’s tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman’s voice singing. . . . Ts’ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left the tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by the barbarians. (208-209)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the etymology of “barbarian” as “a foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from the speaker’s.” The emphasis on language in naming difference originates from the ancient Greeks who thought that having a Greek language was indispensable to having a Greek identity. Such prioritizing of language underlies the Greeks’ use of the word “barbaroi” to pejoratively refer to both the babble of foreign speech and the non-Greeks (see Hall).

As the examples of Anzaldúa, Ts’ai Yen, and the Greeks show, language often draws a boundary around the self, marking it off from the other. What the figure of tongue-cutting in *The Woman Warrior* emphasizes is that language is never a neutral site of exchange. One enters into language with a body that is already socially codified and performs in contexts that are already socially determined. Kingston’s setting up of the Chinese/barbarian distinction in the story of Ts’ai Yen brings to view the precariousness of what both terms, Chinese and barbarian, signify. As a Chinese woman long held in captivity, Ts’ai Yen has already acquired the barbarians’ language and intermarried with a barbarian. Her children cannot speak Chinese. Ts’ai Yen’s situation parallels that of the narrator who, as a Chinese American
woman, finds it impossible to hold onto stagnant ideas of Chinese-ness or American-ness. The criticism that was hurled at The Woman Warrior when it was first published, the accusation that Kingston represented the Chinese American community as “barbaric,” misreads her play with ideas of foreignness and nativeness.

Kingston underscores the fluidity of culture and identity, but she also does not underestimate social norms that police and exclude differences. The tongue that is cut loose remains with the narrator as a sign of her awareness that language is in fact a battleground. In the narrator’s case, the social standards of assessing language ability always fall short of her actual language ability. The assumptions and prejudices that mark her racially and culturally influence the social determination of her language performance. The cut tongue begins as a sign of the bodily regulation that meets the social pressure of standardization, yet it ultimately becomes the figure through which Kingston resists.

Notes
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1. The MLA collection Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior (ed. Lim) is being read in colleges. See Lim.
2. See Chin for a contemporary response to The Woman Warrior, Wong’s “Autobiography” for a recent summary of the autobiographical debate, and Shu for a recent reading of the cultural politics of Kingston’s text.
3. See Nishime and Lee.
4. Kingston’s response to contemporary reviews of The Woman Warrior (where she cites various misreadings) is the best place to go for a quick overview of how her book was received by the mainstream readership. See “Cultural Mis-readings.”
5. Most notable of these are Wong and Smith.
7. Recent years have seen an increase in works that examine the intersections of race, sexuality, and disability. For an example of the intersection between race and disability, see Cassuto. For examples of the intersection between sexuality and disability, see essays in Deutsch.
8. On racial melancholy see Cheng, and Eng and Han.
9. See Davis for discussions of normality in disability studies.
10. In Diana v. California Board of Education, nine Mexican American students brought to the school board's attention the unfairness of public school competency tests conducted in English only. A collective action by 1,800 Chinese American students, Lau v. Nichols was the first to raise awareness of language rights for minority students in public schools.

11. According to Marks the medical model of disability, "[what] lies at the heart of most official definitions of disability," is based on the idea that the human body is a closed, physiological machine and that disease can be treated by a medical intervention into this closed system (52-53).

12. It should be noted here that upper-class bilingualism was viewed differently from working-class bilingualism. Sommer comments that class and the languages involved influence judgments on bilingualism (4-7).

13. In the chapter on "Stuttering," Johnson and Moeller dismiss as inaccurate and ungrounded the common misconception that the tongues of people who stutter would be different from those of non-stutterers.

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