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# Speaking in Wild Tongues: The Borderlands of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker

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SPEAKING IN WILD TONGUES: THE BORDERLANDS OF EUDORA WELTY AND  
ALICE WALKER

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

SARA GABLER THOMAS

May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa describes her experience undergoing a dental procedure as a battle between her wild tongue and the dentist. Beginning with a discussion of Anzaldúa's concept of the wild tongue, this project asks how writers across the US South depict unruly tongues and infelicitous speech. Methodologically, this thesis inverts the common reading model in literary studies of reading Third World writers through First World theorists. Instead, beginning with Anzaldúa, I propose to reverse this process and assert a new reading methodology of reading First World writers through Third World theorists. The trope of the wild tongue will mobilize an examination of fiction from other souths than Anzaldúa's geography of the US/Mexico border, thereby locating the open wound of the borderland as a certain condition of women's experience that is both violent and productive. In particular this project will constellate various aspects of wild tongues and embodied borderlands in the fiction of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker. I have three objectives in this inquiry: first, to contribute to a conversation in New Southern Studies; second, to show *how* women's bodies constitute embodied borderlands; and third, to show how class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability intersect in expressions of speech and silence. In the latter two objectives the fracturing of bodies correlates to the silencing of wild tongues.

## DEDICATION

For ERG and ALW

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful for the guidance and support of my thesis committee: Leigh Anne Duck, Annette Trefzer, and Jaime Harker. This project began as a conversation about Gloria Anzaldúa with Leigh Anne Duck, and I am indebted to her encouragement to pursue this topic. Sincere thanks also go out to Annette Trefzer for her assistance with my research on Eudora Welty in particular. Additional thanks go out to the other faculty members who have shaped my thinking over the years and my peers for their rigorous conversations. Finally, I am thankful for my other support team, Andrew and Rio.

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## INTRODUCTION

### WHERE WE DRAW THE LINES: BORDERLANDS THEORY IN REVIEW

Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa begins the section “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” with a visceral account of a dental procedure. In this section she coins the term “wild tongue” to describe the activity of her tongue during her visit to the dentist. She depicts her mouth as open and prey to prying tools: “The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. . . . ‘We’re going to have to do something about your tongue,’ I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles” (75). A putrid smell issues from her gaping mouth, and she rejects the intrusion of the foreign and phallic tools. Twice the dentist exclaims, “We’re going to have to control your tongue” and “We’re going to have to do something about your tongue.” His use of “we” demands Anzaldúa’s compliance; his anger rises as he’s losing control. In this passage Anzaldúa sets the scene for an argument close to her Chicana roots: language is a male discourse and Chicanas especially speak *el lenguaje de la frontera* (76-77). The Chicana’s language is rogue, non-normative, queer, beautifully hybrid, and *wild*.



So Anzaldúa asks: “How do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?” (75). The metaphors mobilized in this passage are especially poignant, and they underscore the vulnerability of women in the borderland. Taming, training, bridling, saddling, making lie down—these are all processes of *domestication*. These metaphors are provocatively and temptingly vague because Anzaldúa blurs the distinction between who is being domesticated: an animal or a woman. At first glance these associations are demeaning to women in the way they evoke what were once considered necessary regulations on sexuality and speech. They emphasize the dangerous nature of wild tongues: they cannot be left to freely roam the world but must be quieted or controlled. Returning to the scene in the dentist’s office, Anzaldúa’s open and exposed body is doubly subject to regulation: firstly, because as a woman her sexuality is under constant surveillance, and secondly, because her *mouth* itself is dangerous, both for what it can *say*—the noisome claims of a woman in defiance of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, etc.—and for what it can *do*, such as push and prod the dentist’s tools, give and receive pleasure, etc. Describing more than a procedure, Anzaldúa’s account symbolizes a common silencing of women who have been objectified by medical practice, subjugated by the psychiatrist’s couch, made to symbolize a lack, or taught that their bodies are not theirs to possess. But the wild tongue revels in her animality, in her wildness, which has the potential to disrupt or deconstruct power structures. In this set of rhetorical questions, Anzaldúa’s metaphors themselves revolt against the syntactic form of the sentences. The very animality of these metaphors buck and break, suggesting that there is no way to tame a wild tongue. Try as one may, they will not be bridled, tamed, saddled, etc. Any attempt to domesticate Anzaldúa, or other wild tongues, will be met with resistance and unbridled orality.

This project begins in the dentist's chair with Anzaldúa. The trope of the wild tongue will mobilize an examination of fiction from other souths than Anzaldúa's geography of the US/Mexico border, thereby locating the open wound of the borderland as a certain condition of women's experience that is both violent and productive. In particular this project will constellate various aspects of wild tongues and embodied borderlands in the fiction of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker. Methodologically, this thesis inverts the common reading model in literary studies of reading Third World writers through First World theorists. Instead, beginning with Anzaldúa, I propose to reverse this process and assert a new reading methodology of reading First World writers through Third World theorists. I have three objectives in this inquiry: first, to contribute to a conversation in New Southern Studies; second, to show *how* women's bodies constitute embodied borderlands; and third, to show how class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability intersect in expressions of speech and silence. In the latter two objectives the fracturing of bodies correlates to the silencing of wild tongues.

First, introducing Anzaldúa to a discussion of traditional southern fiction through the writings of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker challenges the geographic restrictiveness of southern literary studies by networking the US South to the southwest of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. This is not to elide the important cultural, linguistic, and racial specificity of Anzaldúa's work, but rather to highlight the intersections of feminist thinking across these writers' works. Reading for shared themes and tropes across these writers' oeuvres reveals the various ways the female body is itself a borderland, "*una herida abierta*," the open wound, the locus of gendered violence (*Borderlands* 25). This first objective opens up the possibility of the second two.

Borderlands theory reveals two things about the US South: first that power relations (the grating of worlds) is directly mappable to the particular organization of racial, cultural, gendered,

sexual, or ableist hierarchies of that region, and second that this mapping does not produce an image of the US South as an exceptional place—though it had been considered an exceptional space up until the interventions of Global South and New Southern Studies. Accepting that the conditions of the borderlands are neither universal nor exceptional, this project predicts that the geographically unrestrictive approach will produce new and interesting results.

By organizing this project around Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing this project implicitly looks to make an intervention in Global South studies. Anzaldúa’s work rejects strict national affiliation or categorization which is useful for deconstructing the rigid national and academic boundaries of American literary studies. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine’s collection *Hemispheric American Studies* “approach[es] distinct regions in the Americas, many of which now lie within U.S. borders, as products of overlapping, mutually inflecting fields—as complex webs of regional, national, and hemispheric forces that can be approached from multiple locations and perspectives that can help us reframe American cultural analysis” (3). A discussion of Gloria Anzaldúa’s relation to American literatures is especially fruitful in relation to Levander and Levine’s approach. Rather than presuming a completely geographically unmoored position, Anzaldúa’s writings enable reading practices that constellate shared experiences across national contexts. In fact, Anzaldúa’s work is at times specifically rooted to her sense of place, but her willingness to accept that place as hybrid, contested, and multicultural enables her to see herself within a global context.

This project is ultimately situated in the intersection of Global South and New Southern Studies. In their Preface to the 2006 special issue of *American Literature*, “Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies,” Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer develop a praxis for reading southern literature that is more globally minded: “As we plough new fields

and chart new territories, we are certain in our knowledge of the South's metonymic relation to the nation and convinced of its centrality to American studies, but are equally interested in the region's fascinating multiplicity and its participation in hemispheric and global contexts" (677). In the context of New Southern Studies, Anzaldúa's writings can also help change the ways we think about the US South, contributing to the ongoing progress of the field. For instance, Anzaldúa connects Welty and Walker to an American geography further west than conventional conversations that mapped their work to the north, or more recently to the Caribbean. McKee and Trefzer further explain: "Our intention is deliberate: to showcase a new Southern studies based on the notion of an intellectual and practical Global South, a term that embeds the U.S. South in a larger transnational network" (678). This transnational network was present in Anzaldúa's writings all along; all we need to do is take notice.

Reading Eudora Welty and Alice Walker with an eye to their more global or hemispheric dimensions contributes to the new reading practices being developed in the field of New Southern Studies. In the past decade a number of publications indicate an upsurge in interest in the Global South and New Southern Studies. Such collections and monographs as Suzanne Bost's *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas 1850-2000* (2003), Jon Smith and Deborah N. Cohn's collection *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), like Levander and Levine's work and among many others, have contributed to a growing and adapting set of methodologies. In her article "What Was the New Southern Studies," Leigh Anne Duck offers an update on the state of the field: "New Southern Studies has, among other things, sought more interesting ways to explore how regionality is produced, imagined and experienced and how cultural forms move, interact, and develop." This project continues these developments through the no-longer unusual pairing of Anzaldúa, Welty, and Walker. The trope

of the wild tongue networks the writers in this project in the exciting and radical ways Duck envisions while at the same time reorienting the geographic directionality of our reading practices.

This project will bridge the fiction of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker—two authors solidly part of the canon of southern women writers—in order to uncover a network of wild tongues that extends across the twentieth century. Traditionally these two authors are more often discussed in terms of their racial difference than for any continuity between their shared geography, gender, or politics. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger opened up a conversation about southern women writers in order to read Welty and Walker, among others, across racial lines. This project extends Yaeger's objective by breaking down the geographic lines that separate Welty and Walker from Anzaldúa and vice versa.

For Anzaldúa, the open wound of the borderland is created when the First and Third Worlds grate against one another, as along the US/Mexico border. This grating occurs as cultures and economies, differentially constructed, come into often vexed or violent contact. Similarly, the US South is a space where a violent history of the grating of disparate worlds along racial and ideological lines is played out. Drawing from Houston A. Baker's *Turning South Again*, Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn express one way the plantation created disparate worlds within the US South: "plantation technologies for restricting the social and physical mobility of African Americans, carceral technologies first modeled at Parchman Farm and Tuskegee Plantation, have persisted throughout the United States" (3). From plantation slavery to the modern carceral state, the technologies for regulating African Americans structure and enforce racial boundaries and create a borderland experience for African Americans in the US South. The grating of racial

identities is especially important to consider in relation to Alice Walker's fiction because her depiction of racial geographies complicates the distinction of First and Third Worlds. In other words, Walker disrupts the US's exclusive First World privilege by locating sites of Third World exploitation within its borders. Additionally the history of the eugenics movement within the US South points to the strict boundaries between disability and sexuality which disproportionately disenfranchised persons with disabilities, women, and especially women of color in the US South and Global Souths. In considering Welty's fiction, the grating of these social geographies becomes apparent in the ways they define normative and aberrant bodies. In both cases, the grating of these worlds gets mapped onto women's bodies; when women speak about the open wound of the borderland, their mouths open up a history of gendered violence.

Anzaldúa's theory of wild tongues applies in conceptually similar ways to the works of these writers spanning the decades from the 1940s to the 1970s. From the publication of Eudora Welty's first collection of stories, *Curtain of Green* (1941), through Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian* (1976), a series of characters emerge who experience restrictions to their chosen forms of verbal expression. The trope of the wild tongue is durable in this way, in part because it speaks to a multiplicity of ways that speech and silence function. Through Welty and Walker, various aspects of verbal expression testify to the presence of wild tongues: linguistic blockages, difficult speech, non-speech, other nonverbal sounds, emancipatory exclamations, shouts, and representational occlusions, among others. Some of these expressions are forced while others are willfully transgressive. Across Welty and Walker's fiction these various expressions show the power and vulnerability of both speech and silence. Whereas speech is generally privileged as a means of expression over silence, the wild tongue paradigm helps make sense of silences that are willful, agentic, or stubborn modes of communication. The wild tongue's speech or silence can

be forced, controlled, constrained, appropriated, or manipulated, and in the contested relationship between the two states of speech and silence the conditions of the borderland will become apparent.

Welty at first glance may seem an unusual choice for this project, but fortunately Welty's reputation as a genteel, *tame* southern lady has been demystified by scholars of late. Instead, a more politically and socially attuned Welty is emerging—a brave, wild-tongued writer whose subtlety is cunning and keen. Welty employs a different kind of wild-tongued animality than Walker or Anzaldúa; while her delicate prose at times camouflages her socially attuned politics, behind the luxurious surface lies precise and profound commentary on sexuality, gender, class, and even race. Including Welty in this study pushes the wild-tongued paradigm into corners of the southern canon that have for too long been closed off or domesticated. Scholars are becoming more aware of Welty's geographic reaches as they shift perspective on her reputation. In the decade before Welty published *A Curtain of Green*, she attended Columbia University, visited New Orleans, worked as a traveling photographer for the Works Progress Administration, traveled to Mexico by car, and made several trips to New York City—meaning that from her earliest stories her awareness was national, if not international.<sup>1</sup> In her story “Why I Live at the P.O.” the first-person narrator, Sister, is a vociferous talker who has been misread by popular readers and critics alike. Re-reading “Why I Live at the P.O.” through the wild-tongue paradigm recasts Sister's narrative as an emancipatory speech act. Conversely, in “Petrified Man” the potential for feminist speech is contested even within the gendered space of the beauty parlor. Connecting Welty to Anzaldúa in this story exposes a new dimension of wildness in Welty's style in the way she exposes the gendered and class-based aspects of the borderland.

The easiest and most effective way to tame a wild tongue is to literally cut it out, as happens to Louvinie in Alice Walker's *Meridian*. The novel's genealogy reaches into antebellum history through the account of Louvinie, a slave on the Saxon plantation. Louvinie, a master storyteller, tells a tale so gruesome that it frightens the young son of the plantation to death. In retaliation, the slave master brutally cuts Louvinie's tongue from her mouth and crushes it with his boot in the dust. She is therefore punished for her storytelling power and creative force. Anzaldúa theorizes this kind of violence: "Attacks on one's form of expression with intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*. Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (*Borderlands* 76). This claim provides a particular point of confluence between Anzaldúa and Walker; both Anzaldúa and Louvinie experience violations to their forms of expression by *el Anglo*. Louvinie as a transatlantic figure, garners censorship because her form of expression is derived from her African homeland. In this way, having a wild tongue is a dangerously embodied condition. Though this punishment for Louvinie was an act of violence sanctioned within the ideology and legal realm of chattel slavery, the dismemberment of another human being should by now be socially reprehensible and illegal. Nonetheless, attacks on one's form of expression persist in other ways: some institutionalized through medical practices or academic discourse, others socially and linguistically ritualized.

Walker and Anzaldúa share a unique feminist interest in racialized wild tongues—across the Deep South for Walker and the US/Mexico border for Anzaldúa. The US South has been a place where the borders between races have been just as pronounced and unbridgeable as those Anzaldúa experienced. Just as African Americans in the US South experienced limitations on their spatial and social mobility, Anzaldúa growing up in the borderlands of the southwest



experienced limitations on her linguistic expression. As a child attending school in Texas Anzaldúa was forced to speak English by a teacher who asserted ““If you want to be American, speak American”” (75). Moreover, Anzaldúa cites various examples of lynchings which were racialized rituals for punishing not only African Americans but also Chicanos (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 30). Additionally, Anzaldúa’s lesbian Chicana feminism was being developed at the same time as Walker was developing her theory of womanism in the 1970s. Because of these various confluences it becomes incredibly productive to discuss these two authors synchronously. In particular, the racial tension of the borderland relates to Walker’s *Meridian* in the ways that the open wound gets mapped onto women’s bodies, as in the case of Louvinie. This embodied experience also affects *Meridian* and two other characters, Fast Mary and The Wild Child.

Ultimately, Welty, Walker, and Anzaldúa are *all* globally minded writers. In fact, the geographic connections between Welty, Walker, and Anzaldúa extend as far south as Mexico, making the gravitational pull for these writers more equatorial than has been previously imagined. From Welty’s 1937 car trip to Mexico to Walker’s later residence outside Mexico City to the Spanish and indigenous cultures and languages inherent to Anzaldúa’s writing, these are writers whose geographies do intersect—not to mention each writer’s global scope and vision (Marrs 56).<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa’s writing seeks a global audience, in part because she finds herself alienated from her homeland on several fronts:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the

collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos;  
yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture,  
a new story to explain to the world and our participation in it, a new value system  
with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.

*(Borderlands 102-03)*

Anzaldúa's wild tongue paradigm provides just one symbol of global confluence that brings the  
writers in this project together and works toward Anzaldúa's proposed creation of a new culture,  
a new value system arising from collective and connective experience.

## CHAPTER 1

### TRASH TALKERS AND PERFORMATIVE SPEECH IN EUDORA WELTY'S A CURTAIN OF GREEN

“And as to where I intend to go, you seem to forget my position as postmistress of China Grove, Mississippi,” I says. “I’ve always got the P.O.”

Well that made them all sit up and take notice.

—Eudora Welty, “Why I Live at the P.O.”

Beginning with the publication of her first short story collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941), Eudora Welty’s fiction entered into a conversation about the southern grotesque. Conventionally stated, the grotesque is both “the disharmonious and the disjunctive” and “a combination of, or, rather, tension between humor and horror, as provoking laughter and fear” (Meindl 2, 6).<sup>1</sup> From the gargantuan bather in “A Memory” to the “freak show” attractions in “Petrified Man,” Welty’s characters produce an affective response by flirting with humor and horror. This has led scholars to comment on the garrulous nature of her female protagonists and the abject quality of their bodies.<sup>2</sup> But this aesthetic concern often becomes the dominant reading praxis for understanding Welty’s work more broadly. Because the grotesque is so enmeshed in aesthetic theory it becomes, especially in the form of the southern grotesque, a mode of reading that primarily concerns form instead of social context.

Patricia Yaeger offers an alternative reading of the grotesque in *Dirt and Desire*, by tracing the subversive nature of this aesthetic mode.<sup>3</sup> Arguing that “instead of the grotesque as decadent southern form,” the artistry of women writers transforms the grotesque into something altogether more complex, dangerous, and even celebratory. Yaeger’s feminist perspective is bold:

I want to reexamine the importance of irregular models of the body within an extremely regulated society and to focus on figures of damaged, incomplete, or extravagant characters described under rubrics peculiarly suited to southern histories in which the body is simultaneously fractioned and overwhelmed. (xiii)

This approach opens up southern women’s fiction to an analysis that combines the aesthetics of the grotesque with the material concerns of gargantuan and abject bodies. The claims Yaeger makes are especially important in understanding Welty’s complex portrayal of women’s bodies in a southern milieu. I want to propose an extension of Yaeger’s reading practice in order to ask what happens when we extend the borders of “southern history” to encompass other histories in which the body is similarly “fractioned and overwhelmed.”

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* presents an invigorating rubric by which to enhance our understanding of the ways southern women experience the fracturing of their bodies and, especially important for this study, silencing of their voices. Introducing Anzaldúa to a discussion of Eudora Welty contributes to the ways scholars like Stephen Fuller have been reorienting Welty’s fiction. By linking Welty’s aesthetic sensibility toward Europe, Fuller helps open other geographic trajectories. Orienting Welty’s fiction southwest will reveal how the female body itself is itself a borderland, “*una herida abierta*,” the open wound, the locus of gendered violence (25). Considering Welty’s fiction, we see the grating of social geographies

that constitute borders between normative and aberrant sexualities and between economic classes. Exploring the embodied borderland of women's mouths creates an exciting new paradigm by which to read Welty's fiction, one that foregrounds Welty's engagement with "wild tongues."

The "wild tongue" is a concept that calls up images of the abject and aberrant just as the grotesque signifies "damaged, incomplete, or extravagant characters." Remembering Anzaldúa's encounter with the dentist confirms how women's sexuality is under constant surveillance. Anzaldúa's procedure conjures up a history in which women's bodies become "fractured and overwhelmed" through medical discourse and practice. Looking at the ways the body is disciplined contributes to a growing body of scholarship in feminist disability studies. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, topics such as "the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of normalcy" etc. are only a few ways that feminist and disability studies intersect (4). And these topics proliferate in Welty and Anzaldúa's work. Examining two stories from Welty's first short story collection, "Why I Live at the P.O." and "Petrified Man," will show what vociferous talkers Sister, Leota, and Mrs. Fletcher are and will show how they make use of and make known closeted sexual knowledge.

#### Diagnostic Silencing: Reclaiming Sister's Speech in "Why I Live at the P.O."

I would like to first examine how reading practices function as regulatory modes of silencing. A persistent concern for critics of "Why I Live at the P.O." from *A Curtain of Green* is the reliability of Sister as a narrator. As Axel Nissen describes in his article "Occasional Travelers in China Grove: Welty's 'Why I Live at the P.O.' Reconsidered," Sister has been diagnosed as a case of dementia praecox (by Katherine Anne Porter, no less) and a schizophrenic; in more gentle treatments, she is still dubbed self-deceptive (72). Nissen notes

how these readings “appl[y] the *perspectival principle*” which leads readers to reason that “[b]ecause Sister’s world is a topsy-turvey one, . . . there must be something wrong with her way of seeing it” (72). In light of disability scholars' growing interests in literature of the US South and Eudora Welty, it is difficult to accept these critics insistence on diagnosing Sister with a mental disorder.<sup>4</sup> Clinical treatments of Sister are only useful to one end: disqualifying her speech by silencing her wild tongue.

And yet diagnostic readings of Sister persist. Reine Dugas Bouton’s analysis of “Why I Live at the P.O.” paints a rather limited picture of Sister. “While amusing at times,” Bouton writes, “Sister renders a self-righteous narrative, which only transparently veils her dire need for attention as she tries to convince her audience and her family of her worth” (201). And Bouton’s criticism only becomes more biting: “For Sister, authority seems to mean that one voice must be heard above all others, and that voice must be her own. However she is not equipped to handle such authority” (202). I can only call this judgment appalling. Bouton strips Sister of the authority to tell her own story, a reading that reveals more about patriarchal and ableist discourse than about Sister or Welty. A feminist must resist the assertion that disqualifies Sister as a narrator on the grounds that she offers a “spectacle rather than an authority” or that she is not “equipped to handle” authority (Bouton 205). If we continue to find Sister’s sanity questionable or inadequate, we lose the import of what she says and her speech’s impact on her independence.

Ultimately, clinical diagnoses are one crucial mode for silencing wild tongues. Or, to invoke Anzaldúa: wild tongues get diagnosed as much as they get cut out. Therefore reading Sister as mentally incompetent is a disabling reading practice. Diagnostic readings of Sister only reify hierarchies that privilege reason and technological rationality over nonlinearity, associational awareness, and orality. Additionally, reading this way says something about who is

accepted as a participant in public (or literary) discourse. A more sensitive and nuanced reading would accept Sister's narrative as *her narrative* and inquire instead into the ways our reading practices themselves seek to disable Sister and why they do so. The persistent diagnostic readings of "Why I Live at the P.O." should instead direct us to consider the lived experience of persons with mental differences and how these persons are disenfranchised by practices similar to those that disqualify Sister's narrative. Rereading Sister as a wild tongued figure restores her voice and perspective as resistant and productively irrational, or at least asks us to reconsider the relationship between rationality and irrationality. Indeed, her "topsy-turvey" speech is the heart of this essay. Accepting that Sister is the right person to tell her story, to give testimony to her family trials, reveals within "Why I Live at the P.O." a candid and emancipatory speech.

The emancipatory speech that emerges from Sister's narrative is one instance in which Welty traffics in wild tongues. This reading extends the conversation about gargantuan and abject bodies and begins to question the role of speech as a counterpart to these bodies. In her chapter from *Dirt and Desire*, "Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Gargantuas" Patricia Yaeger discusses how the gargantuan woman in "A Memory" exemplifies the way southern women writers eschew the cult of southern womanhood by refusing to write miniature bodies, because such bodies result in a loss of power (Yaeger 117).<sup>5</sup> By analogy, wild tongues are subversive and resistant because they do not speak in miniature. Where, in Yaeger's estimation, Welty refuses to write diminutively sized women, she also refuses to give many of her female characters weak, miniature voices—voices that refuse to be domesticated.

#### Speaking Up: Sister's Emancipation in "Why I Live at the P.O."

Sister in "Why I Live at the P.O." is the first in the genealogy of Welty's oft-scrutinized first-person narrators, prefiguring Edna Earle Ponder in *The Ponder Heart* and Laurel McKelva

Hand from *The Optimist's Daughter*. Disgruntled, to say the least, by the return of her sister Stella-Rondo with child in tow, Sister is not reticent about speaking her mind about her newly disrupted and unhappy world. It is with this issue of *speaking* her mind that this section is concerned.

The family quarrel that ensues after Stella-Rondo's return is the catalyst that unleashes Sister's wild tongue. In the very first sentence, Sister discloses the central problem of her predicament: "I was getting along fine with Mama, Pappy-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again" ("Why I Live at the P.O." 57). After Stella-Rondo's appearance disrupts the family equilibrium, Stella-Rondo spares no time in alienating Sister from the other family members, first by instigating a conflict between Sister and Papa-Daddy over his beard and then maligning Sister to everyone else, causing intrafamilial politics to flare. As she narrates her frustration at her family circumstances, the tenor of Sister's expression introduces a mode of speech that I will refer to as trash-talking.

The power of a wild tongue's speech lies in the language she employs. Trash-talking is a transgressive register of speech for the ways that it foregrounds the infelicitous and inappropriate. Trash-talkers say what should not be said. A character like Sister in "Why I Live at the P.O." says things in such *bad taste* that even readers have failed to interpret her subversive power. Since "[t]he language of creative transgression is an act of daring, a border crossing that is both 'festively vertiginous' and dangerous," we can further notice that trash-talking is active and performative (Lashgari 12). The trash-talker reveals the creative fluidity of language for the ways her speech constantly crosses social borders producing a sense of vertigo. But trash is also a signifier of the refuse cast off by society; trash is made up of the material items which we produce and discard from our daily activities. Therefore, trash-talkers are verbal polluters; they



make audible what others do not want to hear or refuse to acknowledge. Heather Russell unpacks the syntactic nature of the language in “Why I Live at the P.O.” and recognizes the unique qualities of Sister’s diction and dialect: “the language of ‘P. O.’ seems to mimic oral speech—it is often choppy and fragmented, full of digressions, emphatically studded with exclamation points, and demonstrating a clearly biased voice” (29).<sup>6</sup> Both in content and form Sister’s speech is creatively transgressive while also festively vertiginous and dangerous. Trash-talking as a mode of verbal expression points to pollutant or taboo subjects and disrupts class signification.

Sister’s trash-talking narration exposes Welty’s sense of class consciousness and a more general sense of class anxiety around issues of female sexuality. Trash-talking suggests presumed lower-class means of expression. The performativity of the trash-talker is rooted in her inability or refusal to participate in normative (read middle-class) speech. As such, the trash-talker’s mouth opens up a contact zone, “*una herida abierta*,” between classes and ideologies. Insofar as trash-talking indicates lower-class speech because of its undomesticated impropriety, Welty’s use of the first-person explores the ways voice expresses class. In other words, what Sister in “Why I Live at the P.O.” and Leota and Mrs. Fletcher in “Petrified Man” say testifies to their sociocultural milieu and dramatizes anxiety about class status and female sexuality.

Welty’s use and awareness of various English dialects is akin to Anzaldúa’s project of using and reclaiming abjectified languages. The form of *Borderlands* slips between Standard English, working-class and slang English, Standard Spanish, Standard Mexican Spanish, north Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, *Pachuco*, etc. (Anzaldúa 77). In a similar fashion, Welty moves between various class-based and race-based English dialects of the US South all within her first collection of stories. She even depicts speech patterns of northern urban landscapes in “Flowers for Marjorie.” Just as the woman in “A Memory” becomes the vehicle

for Welty to explore class consciousness and the grotesque (Yaeger 133), the speech of Sister and later Leota and Mrs. Fletcher indicates Welty's engagement with how such aesthetic and social relations are manifested linguistically.

In the case of "Why I Live at the P.O.," wild tongues are trash-talkers and also loose tongues: they tell things that would normally be kept secret. The silences the family imposes contributes to a closeted structure of discourse. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes "closetedness" as "a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). In "Why I Live at the P.O." the family's secrets are closeted by their own family-instituted codes of speech, which Sister breaks open and exposes.<sup>7</sup> Through her trash-talking narration, Sister pollutes the boundaries of permitted speech and "outs" various family secrets.

Sister has a more open relationship to the knowledge about Uncle Rondo's drinking, Cousin Annie Flo's history, and Shirley T's parentage than the rest of her family. First Sister outs Uncle Rondo regarding his perennial drunkenness: "What he'd really done, he'd drunk another bottle of that prescription" (59). Later she calls him "A certified pharmacist" (60). This candor, while at first humorous, intimates Uncle Rondo's violence, perhaps sexual violence. Sister's wild tongue emerges again when she gives voice to the family taboo. During a conversation with her mother Sister compares Stella-Rondo with another family member: "Just like Cousin Annie Flo. Went to her grave denying the facts of life, I remind Mama" (62). If Stella-Rondo, like Cousin Annie Flo, did not understand the "facts of life," then Stella-Rondo does not understand sexual reproduction—a nice euphemism for conception, gestation, and parturition. Mama responds: "I told you if you ever mentioned Annie Flo's name I'd slap your

face,' says Mama, and slaps my face" (62). Though we never learn the story of Cousin Annie Flo, we do see Sister test the limits of permitted speech. The circumstances of Cousin Annie Flo's death matter little against the power that her name evokes—a slap in the face. Clearly Sister crosses some family-enforced boundary, and this transgression earns a sharp rebuke within this family structure, heightened by the connection Sister draws between Stella-Rondo and Cousin Annie Flow.

Sister's accumulation of knowledge about Cousin Annie Flo and Shirley T.'s parentage comes to light in her process of trash-talking. In addition to the dirty laundry being aired about Uncle Rondo's drinking and Cousin Annie Flo, we learn of a more serious family secret regarding Stella-Rondo's child, Shirley-T. As various scholars have noted, this taboo involves the possible incestuous relationship between Stella-Rondo and Uncle Rondo.<sup>8</sup> Sister comments repeatedly on the patriarchal family resemblance: "[Shirley T.] looks like a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy" (58). Later Shirley T. even calls Uncle Rondo "Papa" (65). Sister is therefore suggesting that Shirley T is illegitimate, and perhaps Stella-Rondo, like Cousin Annie Flo, does not understand the facts of life, or is denying the facts of life by claiming that Shirley T is adopted. Sister's observation indicates two things: first that she does understand the "facts of life" and second, that this knowledge enables Sister to out two instances of pre- or extra-marital (and even incestuous) sexual encounters within the family.

The circulations of sexual knowledge throughout the story extend to Sister herself as she reveals a shocking amount of information regarding her relationship to Mr. Whitaker. He is, after all, the catalyst for the rivalry between Sister and Stella-Rondo. Stella-Rondo's crime against Sister is the theft of her romantic partner, and throughout the story Sister makes this abundantly clear: "Mr Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in

China Grove, taking ‘Pose Yourself’ photos, and Stella-Rondo broke us up” (57). And near the end of “Why I Live at the P.O.” Sister retorts: “‘*He* left *her*—you mark my words,’ I says. ‘That’s Mr Whitaker. I know Mr Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he’d up and leave her. I foretold every single thing that’s happened’” (68). In the context of the prolonged rivalry between the sisters over Mr. Whitaker, this statement suggests Sister’s laying claim to Mr. Whitaker by right of a prior sexual encounter with him. In this way, “to know” Mr. Whitaker in the Biblical sense is to possess intimate sexual knowledge about him. The previous passage is both an instance of sexual innuendo, and a telling instance of Sister’s alienation within her family: no one recognizes her claim to Mr. Whitaker. As Sister’s possible sexual relationship with Mr. Whitaker prior to Stella-Rondo, along with the other examples of sexual taboos, are laid bare before the reader, Sister’s permissible speech is nearing a limit.

In the face of an unhappy family environment, Sister uses her speech to creatively reinvent her world. She is held responsible for the family discord, in all probability because she refused to ignore the circumstances of Stella-Rondo’s return or keep her mouth shut about her observations. So Sister leaves; she glosses: “So I pulled my napkin straight back through the napkin ring and left the table” (59). The repercussions are Janus-faced: she is systematically being excluded from the family structure, but she turns these circumstances into an opportunity for imaginative self-invention.

Sister’s self-invention involves relocating and repurposing household items which clutter the narrative as class signifiers. Sister makes apparent the family’s consumptive power by obsessively and precisely naming the items which circulate in the family from Shirley T’s “lost” Milky Way to Stella-Rondo’s “cheap Kress tweezers” (59, 61). Moreover, part of the family drama is staged around items like jewelry and Stella-Rondo’s kimono—items with sexual

connotations. Stella-Rondo “lost” her Add-a-Pearl necklace that she “threw away” playing baseball when she was nine, which for Chouard signifies Stella-Rondo’s refusal to remain “pure” (57; 39). Additionally, Stella-Rondo’s flesh-colored kimono that Uncle Rondo wears, spills ketchup on, and then rips off unabashedly suggests sexual violation (“Why I Live at the P.O” 64). Welty is also intent on emphasizing the smallness of China Grove, the ruralness of this location, and Sister’s family’s diminished stature in the community. Regarding Papa-Daddy, Sister states, “He’s real rich. Mama says he is, he says he isn’t” (58). Welty’s attention to these material details may on the one hand indicate the story’s Depression-Era setting, but may also point to the taboo subject of class within the story. Sister then outs the family’s own anxiety about class when she voices the discrepancy between Papa-Daddy and Mama’s understanding of the family’s wealth.

Sister’s move to the P.O. involves collecting a number of items to take with her. Before leaving the house Sister gathers the oscillating fan, a needlepoint pillow, her charm bracelet, the cot, fern, radio, sewing machine motor, calendar, thermometer, ukulele, watermelon rind and other preserves, and blue wall vases (“Why I Live at the P.O” 65-66). These items comprise an environment of utility and paltry finery. Sister collects just the kind of bric-a-brac that will establish her material status as an independent woman in China Grove. She manages the problem of where to live by creating a bricolage home at the P.O. She asserts: “There’s plenty of room there in the back” (65). She has access to an independent space, and in an act of creative accumulation, fills it with the items she appropriates from her family’s home. This bric-a-brac signals Sister’s valuation of her material world. She populates her new home with items that give her comfort, but she does not incorporate items associated with Stella-Rondo’s sexuality or sexual violation, like the necklace and kimono.

The bricolage world she creates resonates against Anzaldúa's account of the *mestizas* backpack. In a section titled "The Mestiza Way" Anzaldúa describes the Mestiza's material possessions:

She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the multi-bart metromaps, the coins are heavy and they go next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps her knife, can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, *hierbas*, eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete *tolteca*. (104)

For Anzaldúa this is a process of remaking the self, transforming the "small 'I' into total Self" (105). Though in Anzaldúa's writing the *mestiza* must relinquish her ties to certain cultures by shedding items, Sister remakes herself by addition. This of course has connotations for Sister's relationship to capitalism. Whereas the *mestiza* rids herself of dominant cultural signifiers, even down to the greenbacks, Sister is complicit in middle-class material culture. This is an important difference between Sister and Anzaldúa's *mestiza* because the *mestiza* is aware of how material items can be signifiers of cultural imperialism. But this is a difficult realization to come to and it becomes more important for Sister to build her own meaning around the items she repurposes. Anzaldúa continues: "Her first step is to take inventory . . . *Pero es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto* . . . She reinterprets history, and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths" (104).<sup>9</sup> When we look closely at Sister's bricolage world we see the symbols that she appropriates for new meaning: the food items she canned are the products of her labor, the radio and the P.O. itself connect her to the world at large, and the other items are part of a symbology all her own. But she does edit out the items associated with her sister's troubled

heterosexual material world, suggesting that Sister may be redefining her sexuality in a new way, by finding no use for the sexual material signifiers of Stella-Rondo's world.

Sister's emancipatory speech can be fulfilled because she has a room of her own. Uncle Rondo's firecracker prank is the final straw in a series of humiliating encounters with her family leaving Sister determined to leave: "So I just decided I'd go straight down to the P.O. There's plenty of room there in the back, I says to myself" (65). Sister's process of moving is openly defiant: "Well! I made no bones about letting the family catch on to what I was up to. I didn't try to conceal it" (65). Her actions strengthen the force of her words, which are disregarded by her family. She then formulates a plan: "'And as to where I intend to go, you seem to forget my position as postmistress of China Grove, Mississippi,' I says" (65-66). Sister's last words in the story maintain her defiant attitude: "But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy" (69). Sister's speech is different from that of her family because her speech is a declarative act. By transgressing the boundaries of permitted speech she is able to exit the oppressive boundaries of her family structure. The title of the story helps explain Sister's wild tongue. "Why I Live at the P.O." is an emancipatory speech act—the narrative force that frees Sister from her unhappy family arrangement. If Sister is able to find emancipatory power in her speech, she also gains a kind of spatial independence as well. With the issue of constructed space in mind, "The Petrified Man" offers a more complicated perspective of the gendered space of the beauty parlor.

#### The Violence of Speech in "Petrified Man"

As much as discussions of the grotesque dominate Welty's work, so too do discussions of gossip and women's spaces dominate the conversation around "Petrified Man." In this story gendered speech, vis-à-vis gossip, transforms into full-fledged trash-talking, and as in "Why I

Live at the P.O.” the characters in “Petrified Man” speak in a class-inflected dialect. But this story magnifies the sexuality and violence of wild tongues.

Trash-talking is the mode of speech mobilized within the gendered space of the beauty parlor. Carol Ann Johnston characterizes the power of this gendered space differently: “Though Welty’s dialogue initially may seem like inane small talk, the jumbled minutia one sees through the microscope of small-town living, with it Welty exposes the double, and sometimes triple, energy of women’s conversation” (280). Johnston’s description offers a useful way to start thinking about the difference between gossip and trash-talking. Gossip itself is a term that suggests the vocalization of something trivially insulting: something like “inane small talk” or “jumbled minutia.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gossip is mere idle talk. We will see how the conversation in “Petrified Man” has far more serious consequences than “idle talk” and therefore must be considered as something altogether different. Though Johnston advances the complex qualities of dialog in this story, she stops short of a more radical reading of speech as affective, violent, and highly sexualized.<sup>10</sup> Instead we will see how the conversation in the beauty shop is trash-talk.

The tenor of the conversation allows Welty to explore class anxiety in “Petrified Man.” Material signifiers float throughout the narrative, and Leota in particular invokes various items within her domestic space. In describing her misfortune of having Mrs. Pike as a renter (a judgment Leota takes only after Mrs. Pike turns in Mr. Petrie for the reward) Leota actually reveals much about her and Fred’s economic condition:

Well, you know, we rented out our room to this Mr and Mrs Pike from New Orleans when Sal an’ Joe Fentress got mad at us ‘cause they drank up some home-brew we had in the closet—Sal an’ Joe did. So, a week ago Sat’day Mr



and Mrs Pike moved in. Well, I kinda fixed up the room, you know—put a sofa pillow on the couch and picked some ragged robins and put in a vase, but they never did say they appreciated it. Anyway, then I put some old magazines on the table. (32-33)

This is another instance where Welty reveals a sense of class consciousness. Leota and Fred's renters are of a transient nature, and the kind of amenities that Leota emphasizes are more trivial than luxurious. Moreover, Leota and Fred's domestic arrangements drive the drama inside the beauty parlor—the minutia of daily life *matters*.

Mrs. Fletcher and Leota's conversation gives voice to taboo sexual subjects. As Johnston has noted, their conversation about the freak show "pygmies" is full of sexual innuendo regarding their partners' sexual prowess. Regarding the size of the "pygmies" Leota hypothesizes: "Just suppose it was your husband" (27). She then says about Fred: "I tell him he's still a shrimp." The conversation about Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy opens up the taboo subject of abortion. Johnston argues that this conversation disrupts the notion of a decorous Eudora Welty. She writes, "The discussion of the pregnancy takes a surprising turn at this point, surprising if you believe that motherhood is a woman's highest calling and that marriages are happy havens of love (in other words, if you believe that Eudora Welty is a nice, genteel, Southern writer, as she is described by many of her critics)" (Johnston 279). Within the space of the beauty parlor these women discuss their gendered power within their relationships. Once Leota broaches the subject Mrs. Fletcher responds: "Well! I'm almost tempted not to have this one." (25). And then even more directly she states: "Mr. Fletcher can't do a thing with me." Such knowledge is dangerous because if disclosed to the wrong person (i.e. Mr. Fletcher), Mrs. Fletcher would lose her control over her pregnancy. Though Mrs. Fletcher says she does not care what her husband

thinks about her pregnancy, her statement is both assertive and defensive: she claims to have the power in the relationship, but she has no control over the knowledge Mrs. Pike and Leota share. Moreover, Johnston lists the other taboo subjects that crop up in the women's conversation, including "Mrs. Fletcher's strategies for gaining control in marriage; a rapist on the run; and the serious unanswered questions of what happened to Mrs. Pike when she was living in Mr. Petrie's (the rapists) house for six weeks in New Orleans" (281). We therefore have another instance of Welty imaginatively employing trash-talking characters to break with gender expectations and to explode those silences that erase or quiet women's sexual experiences.

These women are bound to each other and the system of knowledge that grows from their community and conversation. Within this space they are able to break restrictive language codes that would silence their concerns in a more public context. They can discuss their sexual relationships and especially things they keep from their partners. Through the particular conversation that develops during Mrs. Fletcher's appointment we can see how knowledge/power dynamics work in "Petrified Man." For example, the knowledge of Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy drives the conflict between Leota and Mrs. Fletcher throughout the story. Yet the power dynamics are unequal as each woman is still subject to ocular surveillance outside—the knowledge of which becomes fodder for conversation within the beauty parlor. As in "Why I Live at the P.O." the setting is an intimate community, small enough for Mrs. Pike's presence to dramatically upset the equilibrium of the character's relationships, but not so small as Sister's world in "Why I Live at the P.O."

The conversation in the beauty shop is highly sexualized, in part because the space itself is sexually charged. Welty opens the story by describing the atmosphere: "Hidden in this den of curling fluid and henna packs, separated by a lavender swing door from the other customers, who

were *being gratified in other booths*, she could give her curiosity its freedom” (22; emphasis added). It is hard to ignore the sexual connotations of “gratification.” The gratification these women experience comes from the shared knowledge that circulates here, because their tongues can be loose to openly discuss their sexual lives. In contrast to the mortifying subjection of the dentist’s chair, the beautician’s chair presents an alternative, perhaps affirmative experience for women; here is an accepted social space for women to gather and share sexual knowledge and encounters. Unfortunately this potential is not fully achieved; sexual knowledge is exploited to produce gratification. Mrs. Fletcher is defensive about her pregnancy because she is not the observer but the object of verbal consumption.

Though the beauty parlor is a space that rewards self-assertion and tenacity and one that invites wild tongues it can also be a vertiginously dangerous space. As conversation turns into trash-talking, we see how the kind of conversational jostling that occurs turns violent. Leota and Mrs. Fletcher nearly engage in a scuffle as Mrs. Fletcher searches for Leota’s other client, Thelma—the alleged source of the gossip about Mrs. Fletcher’s pregnancy. Mrs. Fletcher cries that she’s going to “get it out of [Thelma]” (23). Leota, knowing her client’s fury, rushes to intervene, “as though to hold Mrs Fletcher down by the hair” (23). The physical tension escalates into a kind of verbal warfare. Leota and Mrs. Fletcher argue over a previous appointment and the possible reasons for Mrs. Fletcher’s hair loss; Mrs. Fletcher speculates that it was “that last perm’nent” Leota gave her, remembering that Leota “cooked” her for fourteen minutes! Leota retorts, “You had fourteen minutes comin’ to you” (25). To summarize, Leota “cooked” Mrs. Fletcher for unexplained reasons, and then physically restrains Mrs. Fletcher by pulling her hair. Upon closer examination, the whole beauty shop experience is a violent one: “At some point Leota had washed [Mrs. Fletcher’s] hair and now she yanked her up by the back locks and sat

her up. . . . Her scalp hurt all over. Leota flung a towel around the top of her customer's head" (33). The violence of the beautician's chair begins to call up similar affective responses as did Anzaldúa's account of the dentist's chair, with one crucial difference: the violence in "Petrified Man" is inflicted on women, by women. As such, the beauty shop begins to look more like a borderland than a sacred space; it is fraught with the fragility of power and the fear of exploitation.

The complexities of the power dynamics in this space are only further exacerbated by the presence of Billy Boy, whose rifling through Leota's purse, no less, shows how permeable the beauty shop is. Welty does, after all, give Billy Boy the last word: "Billy Boy stomped through the group of wild-haired ladies and went out the back door, but flung back the words, 'If you're so smart, why ain't you rich'" (36). His comment silences the women's conversation. The violence of his words "flung back" at the women highlights the irony of their quibbling over the reward money and also interjects a conservative diagnosis of the women's abjected state—they do not deserve better economic conditions.

### Giving Voice to Feminism

What I had hoped to uncover in this chapter is a sampling of renegade talkers whose untamed stories reveal as much about their social milieu as they do our reading practices. Initially I had expected this examination of wild tongues to reveal a purely progressive feminist narrative within Eudora Welty's work. I have found instead that the presence of wild tongues is complex and often contested. Though particular figures speak against the gender expectations and regulatory permitted speech, though their speeches often cross borders, there remain barriers to their unimpeded speech.

These women's internalization of patriarchy and even capitalist ideology is one such barrier. Leota's response to the reward money for the rapist Mr. Petrie complicates a positivist reading of the story. She says, "Four women. I guess those women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred an' twenty-five bucks apiece someday to Mrs. Pike" (35). Leota, irritated that she is not the one to collect on the reward, vents her ire toward Mrs. Pike. In her frustrated realization that she placed the clues to the case literally in Mrs. Pike's lap, she turns her fury against her friend and is ultimately unable to see the human value of the four violated women. In this way Leota represents the ways that women often become implicit contributors to patriarchy and capitalist ideology, a form of internal colonization, as her economic concerns supersede her sense of unity or fidelity to Mrs. Pike. By giving voice to this capitalist narrative Leota proves that wild tongues can be tamed by the dominant patriarchal ideology, by perpetuating the marginalization of women's bodies as sexually commodifiable.

This chapter has charted two cases early in Welty's career of wild tongues. In the case of "Why I Live at the P.O." we can see how trash-talking functions within a family space and we see how loudly Sister must talk in order to gain her independence. Second, the communal female space of the beauty parlor promotes trash-talking and shows how dangerous wild tongues are. Because of its power to disrupt the dominant discourse about sexuality, the tongue becomes a contested site. It is an embodied borderland, an open wound that gives testimony to the violent medical and social forces which seek to silence it. Out of this borderland issues not the noisome decay that the dentist in Anzaldúa's account observes, but a rich language and vibrant sexual energy.

This shift in focus from the grotesque bodies of Weltian characters to their renegade speech acts is in line with the shift the critical image of Eudora Welty herself. Suzanne Marrs, in

*Eudora Welty: A Biography*, notably dispels the once accepted picture of Welty as a genteel southern woman. As numerous articles and books have pointed to recently, Welty writes about female sexuality, race, politics, and class courageously, if also subtly.<sup>11</sup> And these subjects proliferate in Welty's first collection of stories, *Curtain of Green*. To find trash talkers in Welty's fiction is to find an author deeply engaged with the complex politics of female speech and with representing nonnormative female speech.

Though many wild tongues are gendered female, as Anzaldúa makes clear, wild tongues are often marginalized in multiple ways. Not all of Welty's characters get their own narratives like Sister or have the social space to assert their control over their husbands like Leota and Mrs. Fletcher. For example, the young, unnamed woman in *Delta Wedding* (1946) that Ellen Fairchild finds in the woods is both raped and killed in a train accident because she transgresses defined social spaces. Moreover she has no voice to tell her story to Ellen or otherwise, and her silence is incorporated into the normative order, first through her rape by George Fairchild, and second in the spectacle of her death. Though wild tongues appear in Welty's fiction, this example from *Delta Wedding* shows how important rogue speech acts are to undermining a social structure that is harmful to and disables women.

The limitations on women's expression are compounded by racial discrimination in the US South. As Yaeger argues, "To know the mind of the (white) South is to know what it refuses to think" (11). As a white writer, Welty garners Yaeger's criticism for the ways she writes her African American characters into the atmosphere. Characters like Roxy, Pinchy, and others become the "unthought unknown." However, Welty in some of her other fiction does write across the color line. To get a sense of how embodied borderlands and wild tongues work along racial lines, it becomes useful to look at the fiction of Alice Walker, another canonical southern

writer. Tragic and triumphant, Walker's womanist fiction is committed to the vulnerability and extravagance of wild tongues. As Barbara Christian writes, "Walker does not choose Southern black women to be her major protagonists only because she is one, but also, I believe because she has discovered in the tradition and history they collectively experience an understanding of oppression which has elicited from them a willingness to reject convention and to hold to what is difficult" (47). Drawing on the collective experience Christian mentions, Walker writes a genealogy of wild tongues. Turing to Walker will ultimately show how persistent the wild tongue trope is throughout the twentieth century within the same geographic space, and will show how wild tongues disrupt racial boundaries.

## CHAPTER 2

### WILD, WILD TONGUES AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BODY IN ALICE

#### WALKER'S MERIDIAN

what i be talking about  
can be said in this language  
only this tongue  
be the one that understands  
what i be talking about

you are you talking about  
the landscape that would break me  
if it could the trees  
my grandfolk swung from the dirt  
they planted in and ate  
no what i be talking about  
the dirt the tree the land  
scape can only be said  
in this language the words  
be hard be bumping out too much  
to be contained in one thin tongue  
like the language this landscape this life

Lucille Clifton, "defending my tongue"

Lucille Clifton's poem "defending my tongue" offers a creative exploration of the connective tissue between issues of embodiment, systemic violence, and the voice of the poet.



The speaker testifies to an archeology of violence that is not only legible in the trees, dirt, and land evoked in the poem but also in the bodies who inhabit this land and in the *swinging* fragmentation of the lines themselves, which constitute the fragmented (in)formal quality of the poem as a whole. Through the profound rhetorical power in the fluctuations between the characters on the page and the blank spaces intervening, Clifton creates a destabilizing ebb and flow between writing and speech, *langue* and *parole*, speech and silence, and even tongues and voice. By letting the punctuation and other formal or mechanical devices slip into and out of the blank spaces, Clifton turns up the volume on silence and plays with the testimony or orality of the body and the land. These are all apt devices and maneuvers of the wild-tongued writer, and this kind of kinetic writing has significant political imperatives.

In the confluence of land, body, and language, Clifton's poem gives us a glimpse of the multiple vectors that converge in the writings of women of color to express their compounded marginalization. The poem conjures an image of the racial violence committed against African Americans in the segregated South by depicting a lynching. The unity of body and land in the lines "the trees / my grandfolk swung from" leads Thadious Davis to claim that "Clifton maps a 'southscape,' a geography of race and region" (2). Davis's term, southscape, "acknowledges the connection between society and environment as a way of thinking about how raced human beings are impacted by the shape of the land." Examining the ways that bodies are shaped by social practices and the nonhuman environment is also an objective of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory. In the telling of instances of racial violence, Anzaldúa and Clifton make use of their wild tongues.

Like Anzaldúa, the speaker's position in "defending my tongue" is defiant, proud—"only this tongue / be the one that understands / what i be talking about"—as she makes use of a

language either inaccessible or misunderstood by the “you” of the second stanza. The speaker’s preference for “this language” and “this tongue” occurs precisely because her tongue can give testimony to an archeology of racial violence, legible on her body and the landscape: “the map she draws is a living one, alive in memory and in blood” (Davis 1). The power of self-expression for the woman artist of color is echoed by Gloria Anzaldúa in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers”: “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. . . . To discover myself, to preserve myself *to make myself*, to achieve self-autonomy” (*Bridge* 169; emphasis added). From painful archaeologies of violence Clifton derives expressive force: “no what i be talking about / the dirt the tree the land / scape can only be said / in this language.” The repeated emphasis on “this language” both asserts the speaker’s possession of her story and creates a new language for telling it. Her tongue too is active, “bumping out too much / to be contained,” and its excess mirrors the excessive violence the speaker testifies to. As such, her poem is an exemplary segue to the wild-tongued women in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*: Meridian, Fast Mary, Louvinie, and The Wild Child.

Clifton writes from a genealogy of feminists of color that also evokes the themes of speech and silence. Despite the themes of gender oppression that had already appeared in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Walker, among others, the 1970s were a crucial decade for feminists of color. Specifically, Alice Walker and Gloria Anzaldúa began their careers in this period; as contemporaries their writings deserve more consideration in conjunction with one another than as strands of two culturally disparate feminist traditions.<sup>1</sup> In drawing together such various writers as Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldúa, Adrienne Rich, Frances Beale, and Toni Cade Bambara, it becomes clear what a productive period the 1970s was for feminists

of color. By giving voice and often *sharing voices*, these writers shaped the fabric of a more hybrid and multiethnic feminist discourse. This discourse yielded intense and lasting interest, including Lucille Clifton's poem published in her 1991 collection, *Quilting*.

Feminist discourse of the 1970s was especially vocal on the issue of reproductive rights, a topic that combines problems of medical abuses and silencing. The activist perspectives of Adrienne Rich, Frances Beale, and Toni Cade yielded productive aesthetic explorations of the facets of the body. Rich's seminal monograph *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published the same year as *Meridian*, demystifies the medicalization of gynecology.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Beale and Cade articulate the racial context of reproductive rights and the contested division between black nationalist ideals of womanhood and the autonomy afforded women through contraceptives. This chapter draws on these writers for the insight they bring to understanding the context of *Meridian* and the reproductive rights activism of the 1970s.

In particular, the function of forced sterilization in this period is discussed in the writings of Beale and Cade. Historically, forced sterilization has been a reality for women of color and disabled men and women across the US and Global Souths. In a post-World War II context, eugenic practices, the proliferation of birth control clinics in the US, and the excessive sterilization of women in Puerto Rico have been well documented.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of these practices influenced US feminists of color such as Beale and Cade to tackle the issues of reproductive rights for women of color in the seminal *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, first published in 1970. Beale and Cade grappled with the goal to support women's sexual autonomy and liberation while at the same time acknowledging the actuality that birth control was a state-enforced method for regulating their bodies. Agreeing that negotiating issues of birth control for African American women is divisive, Beale and Cade both assert the significance of the

woman's choice: "Black women have the right and the responsibility to determine when it is in the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them, and this must not be relinquished to anyone" (Beale 119). This put them at odds with black nationalist notions of womanhood and motherhood, notions that Walker also rejected. Their perspective is especially important in the context of Walker's fiction because *Meridian* dramatizes these tensions through Meridian's two pregnancies and the account of her abortion procedure.

As this chapter will more specifically address, Gloria Anzaldúa and Alice Walker share a political commitment to speaking against sexist and racist regimes of power. Drawing on encounters with their oppressors, each woman writes activist prose and poetry to express the condition of being outsiders within their geographic and social contexts. Their fiction and poetry, along with their more political nonfiction writings, point to the "double jeopardy" that women of color face. A phrase initially used by Frances Beale in "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" to describe the condition of black women in America, this term is re-imagined by Anzaldúa in the predicament of *la mojada, la mujer indocumentada*, who is "doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 34). Therefore the continuities of marginalized experience become increasingly apparent across variegated identity positions: woman, lesbian, black, Chicana, *mestiza*—a fact that perhaps drove Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga to compile the seminal collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). But Suzanne Bost theorizes another route to understand racial and cultural hybridity across the Americas.

In her book, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas 1850-2000*, Bost uses the term *mestizaje* to bridge the various racial identities she explores. *Mestizaje*

is a term that “highlights the mixture of identities in the Americas and the friction that occurs between them. Although *mestizaje* derives from a specifically Latin American context, its fusion of African indigenous and European heritage describes race dynamics throughout the Americas as a whole” (Bost 8). By accepting Bost’s concept of *mestizaje* (and even Anzaldúa’s idea of *mestiza consciousness*), continuities of experience for women of color across various US geographies surface. Alice Walker is precisely the kind of writer who benefits from this kind of networked analysis. In her novel *Meridian*, she explores the uneven and arbitrary spatial and social meanings of race. In terms of geography, this novel oscillates between the US South and New York, suggesting the variegated nature of race rather than a universalization of racial experience or the exceptional state of the US South. Rejecting a mythology of her race, Walker proposes a more hybrid or holistic acceptance of her actual self: “We are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are ‘white’ too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness” (“In the Closet of the Soul” 540). In so uncovering the often arbitrary nature of racial inclusion and exclusion, Walker might also reveal the very arbitrary nature of national borders and therefore national identities. Breaking the geographic and racial barriers that generally separate Anzaldúa and Walker produces the kind of inquiry that reveals a sisterhood of “wild tongues.”

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa describes the psychic roots of her artistic and political commitments: “Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it” (95). From this passage two areas serve as points of continuity between Anzaldúa and Walker’s experiences. First, they both experience the psychic effects of living in a borderland. Where Anzaldúa roots her unrest in her Chicana and

lesbian identity along the US/Mexico border in Texas, Walker locates her womanist identity transnationally in Africa and the US South (and Cuba, Mexico, California, etc.). Both writers find themselves outsiders within, and each author sublimates her unrest into political and artistic expression. And second, Anzaldúa's statement reveals the embodied reality of living in a borderland, because the borderland leaves marks on bodies and psyches: the cactus needle worries itself into Anzaldúa's flesh. Out of the twinning of these two states of unrest, psychic and physical, springs forth creative energy, artistic expression, and political action: after all, Anzaldúa "keep[s] aggravating [the cactus needle] by poking at it." Women like Anzaldúa and Walker write of the threat of persistent visceral violence, as activists whose own voices were dangerously dissident.

Looking to Anzaldúa's concept of the wild tongue will help uncover the relationship between the festively vertiginous energy and dangerously paralyzing forces that erupt out of experiences of psychic and physical violence. In *Meridian*, the bodies of women of color, such as the title character, become the site upon which the grating of disparate worlds and ideologies becomes viscerally evident. Meridian, Fast Mary, the slave-woman Louvinie, and The Wild Child are characters who embody various borderlands, whether spatial/geographic, sexual, social, or linguistic. Examining their acts of speech and silence and their voices and bodies, will demonstrate how gender and race contribute to the silencing of wild tongues, which I understand as aspects of embodied borderlands. As such, the bodies of these figures reflect the open wounds of the borderland, described by Anzaldúa in the following excerpt:

1,950 mile-long open wound

dividing a *pueblo*, a culture

running down the length of my body,

staking fence rods in my flesh,  
splits me      splits me (24)

This wound is produced or opened by the grating of economies (First and Third World), the disjunctive conflict of cultures (white American, Mexican, indigenous), and the fluidity of the boundaries between physical and material worlds. As Anzaldúa's body gives testimony to arbitrariness of national boundaries, her body also *carries* the signs of various boundaries. Meridian, too, split by the warring strains of the Civil Rights Movement—nonviolence and radical revolution at any cost—becomes marked by these opposing forces. She defies identification in many ways, and the fluidity or hybridity of her body makes her subject to disciplinary violence. She makes the borders between speech/silence, agency/coercion, rational/irrational, civilized/feral, punishment/torture, legal/illegal slippery. This project specifically asks how medical and legal practices contribute to producing the ritualistic borders that Patricia Yaeger calls “arrested systems of knowledge,” or systemic practices that keep in place these ritualistic borders (11).

Not only do experiences of racist and sexist oppression surface in the writings of Walker and Anzaldúa, but these conditions are perpetuated by our reading practices of southern fiction, as Patricia Yaeger makes evident in *Dirt and Desire*. From the perspective of the writer of color she imagines this problem: “How do you write a story everyone knows but white people rarely hear? How do you speak a story when your tongue has been severed?” (*Dirt* 10). Imagining that these authors' voices have been silenced by a reading public that refuses to hear their stories, Yaeger suggests a cause and effect relationship between selective reading and the forced silencing of various authors' voices. She then offers the grotesque as corrective because “[i]t offers a figure of speech with the volume turned up, a body that entices one's hearing and

speaking because of its anomalousness” (10). Rather than a decadent or exaggerated response meant to shock and appall, the grotesque is a reminder of a painful and visceral reality that gives bodily testimony via its own severed tongue. This image drives home the systemic violence affecting wild tongues, but also the often-creative imperative that propels them to give voice to their trauma as Clifton’s poem attests to. The image of the tongue itself helps to locate the nexus of the “arrested systems of knowledge” that Yaeger claims plagues readings of southern fiction by women, and the expression of bodily trauma and affliction that these writers give testimony to (11). Writers like Walker and Welty (among others) “produce vociferous writing that is incredibly responsive to political silence, body talk, and object obsession as well as to a series of ontological questions about rights to citizenship and self-possession that not only plague the South but have spread throughout the nation” (11). This investigation expands Yaeger’s objective to read across racial lines to explore issues of race and sexuality as they “spread throughout the nation” and beyond via the trope of the wild tongue. Reading across geographic lines constellates political exigencies and writerly kinships, which have been present all along.

In the case of *Meridian*, wombs and mouths are the embodied locations of the borderlands, and in drawing the connection between Anzaldúa and Walker we begin to see why: The same mechanisms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ablism control, constrain, and seek to possess speech and silence. In this way we can understand the scene of *Meridian*’s abortion as a ritualized response to subduing female fecundity, a message that women’s wombs need controlling. The womb, body, voice, sexuality, and race are all subject to control through medical, legal, and social rituals. *Meridian* also draws boundaries around the socially permitted expressions of women’s sexuality and self-expression. Throughout *Meridian*, Walker delineates social boundaries, spaces which the protagonist and others cannot cross. Often these boundaries



are vocal—what can and cannot be said. But the violence that is intrinsic to these border crossings plays out on the woman’s body itself. The black woman’s body, as the site of violence—“*una herida abierta*”—is the borderland.<sup>4</sup> Though Alice Walker’s fiction testifies to these histories of exploitations and the pain of being (in) the borderlands, her fiction transmutes violence into creative energy. There is always the potential to remake the world and to remake the self. The genealogies throughout *Meridian* constitute one such tangled process of remaking, as does the relationship between Meridian and The Wild Child. Ultimately, *Meridian* presents a very ambiguous account of embodied agency and exploitation, often muddling the distinctions between agency and coercion, or speech and silence, just as Lucile Clifton’s poem “defending my tongue” and Welty’s short stories also testified.

#### Where Her Flesh Made Word: The Operating Table

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa’s account of her dental procedure unveils a traumatic experience common to many women: the experience of being forced to submit to invasive, humiliating, and body-altering medical examinations and procedures.<sup>5</sup> This experience is meant to illustrate that wild tongues cannot be silenced; they can only be cut out. The move from the dentist’s chair to the operating table presents a specific moment of confluence between Anzaldúa and Walker. Wishing to demystify the masculine-centered medical practice’s systemic mistreatment of women, both writers illustrate women’s oppression via the regulation of their mouths and their wombs. Locating sites of sexual violation within socially and scientifically sacred spaces (i.e. the dentist’s chair and gynecologist’s examination table) unveils the subjection of women’s bodies at the institutional level.

In *Meridian*, the narrator describes the torturous encounter between Meridian and the doctor performing her abortion. While attending Saxon College, a school for young African

American women in Atlanta, Georgia—characterized by its ability to mold these young women into a white middle class ideal of gentility, femininity, and virginity—Meridian becomes pregnant. After a single sexual encounter with Truman Held, Meridian is dismayed by her body's productiveness: "She was . . . disgusted with the fecundity of her body that got pregnant on less screwing than anybody's she had ever heard of" (*Meridian* 119). For a young woman so unpleased by sex with a man her pregnancy presents another disappointment, for now Meridian must seek the school doctor for an abortion rendering her doubly vulnerable to sexual and medical exploitation. Because any continuation of their romantic relationship is undesired by Truman, and more importantly because Meridian herself has no desire to be a mother again, she seeks an abortion. But this would not have been Meridian's first encounter with the school doctor. If, as scholars like Rudolph P. Byrd assume, Saxon College is a loosely veiled rendering of Spelman College, Meridian would have undergone routine pelvic examinations, just as Walker herself experienced while attending the school: "The purpose of the pelvic examination was to determine if a student was pregnant. Or, put another way, the purpose of these carefully timed examinations was to police and regulate the sexuality of Spelman Students" (Byrd 7).

The regulation of Meridian's sexuality at Saxon College then dramatizes how the medical office becomes a site of patriarchal exploitation. Clearly, the relationship between the doctor and Meridian is not one of trusted medical professional to trusting patient. Adrienne Rich explains: "The highly developed (and highly dubious) technology of modern obstetrics is merely a late stage in what Suzanne Arms has called 'the gradual attempt by man to extricate the process of birth from women and call it his own.' . . . Not simply Western capitalism, but a male need to feel in control of female reproductive power, is at issue here" (*Of Woman Born* 102). Within this

closed space we can notice how the medical profession creates the conditions by which the relationship between Meridian and her doctor becomes a relationship of torturer to tortured.

The scene of the abortion shows both the physical and psychic violence enacted upon Meridian. As in Anzaldúa's account, the school's doctor performs a medical procedure that quickly becomes an enactment of torture. The abortion is performed without anesthesia—"the doctor *tore into her body*"—while he offers Meridian a lecture on her morals (118; emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> Meridian "saw stars because of the pain. . . . It enraged her that she could be made to endure such pain and that he was oblivious to it" (118-19). Walker's prose attempts to convey the inexpressibility of pain through the image of seeing stars, but more effective is her depiction of the act itself. The description of the doctor tearing into Meridian's abdomen intensifies the fact that he breaks into her body, renders it open, rips out the fetus. Meridian understands the inexpressibility of her condition as at the very moment of intense pain she thinks of Truman, the one person who by a chain of responsibility should have knowledge of her pain.

The pain Meridian experiences in this moment shifts the focus of this scene away from the abortion itself, the termination of her pregnancy, to the process of creating pain in her body. Walker underscores how the role of the torturer is one meant to explode the victim's body with pain as the account of Meridian's abortion contains the prolonged experience of violence:

'I could tie your tubes,' *he chopped out angrily*, 'if you let me in on some of all this extracurricular activity.' *His elbow somehow rested heavily on her navel* and a whirling pain shot from her uterus to her toes. She felt sure she'd never walk again. She looked at him until his hard face began to blur. 'Burn'em out by the roots for all I care.' She had left his office wide-legged with blood soaking her

super Kotex and cramps bending her double, but she was crying for other reasons.  
(119; emphasis added)

The medical procedure becomes an opportunity to create pain in Meridian's body and thus deconstruct the world as she knows it. The doctor essentially tortures Meridian into consenting to tubal ligation. He "chopped" out a question, knowing that as his elbow rests heavily on her abdomen that Meridian is incapacitated by pain and that her acquiescence is given under duress. Ultimately, the excruciating pressure he applies to Meridian's body is meant to extract her acquiescence to a form of sterilization.

Additionally, the above passage points to the weapons the doctor uses: his voice and his body. He is the weapon; his elbow pushes against Meridian's abdomen, his words chop out at her. Elaine Scarry explains, "As an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain; as a perceptual fact, it can lift pain and its attributes out of the body and make them visible" (16). Physically, the dentist's tools, the doctor's scalpel (or elbow), the cactus needle all explore the flesh of the victim, perceptually producing in each instance the experience of pain, but also identifying the powers which control or make pain by devaluing the bodies which experience it. If, according to Scarry, the weapon of torture has its own expressive potential—i.e. an image of a lash should metonymically and visually function for the work it does on the body of the victim—so then in this instance, the doctor's body becomes the sign of the weapon (17). Such has been the case according to Frances Beale: "Black women are often afraid to permit any kind of necessary surgery because they know from bitter experience that they are more likely to come out of the hospital without their insides" (118). Beale also criticizes the practice of misnaming facilities "maternity clinics" as a fictitious euphemism for the reality that such facilities "purge Black women or men of their reproductive possibilities" (118).

Meridian's experience of medical torture and sterilization is a ritualized subduing of female fecundity, which sends the message that wombs need controlling. As such, this scene produces what Scarry terms a "fiction of power": "In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fictions of power" (18). The doctor's "obsessive display of agency" seems to reinforce Meridian's vulnerability. Her vulnerability is evident in the way she is rendered silent during this scene and the way she then submits vocally to the procedure. Pain can produce a speech act that is in effect a ventriloquizing of the torturer's power—the "transla[tion] into another person's voice"—exactly what they want to hear. Moreover, the doctor in this scene reveals the anxiety in the culture at large concerning women's sexuality by making vicious assumptions about Meridian's sexual activity and, as Walker puts it, "lectur[ing] her on her morals" (*Meridian* 118). At his point, Scarry can even offer us a way to understand why this happens: "When a society experiences a crisis of belief the material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend the cultural construct the 'aura' of realness" (14). Or, to put this in the context of the novel, the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements of the previous decade shattered the state's explicit legal power over the civil liberties of women and persons of color. In *Meridian*, we see how these social movements compelled a backlash that manifests itself against the bodies of women of color, like Meridian. The scene of Meridian's abortion shows how medical practices continued to assert the biological inferiority of minority racial groups and women in order to substitute an "aura" of realness to white patriarchy. As such, Scarry helps illuminate how contested this moment of torture is: the pain in Meridian's body and the "fiction of power" are co-evident. But Meridian's embodied experience also has a historical precedent.

Feminist responses to forced sterilization practices provide a context for this moment in *Meridian*. In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Beale and Cade criticize the idea that women are sumptuous bodies, waiting to birth the next generation of black warriors. Because they reject the black nationalist imperative for motherhood, they are able instead to look closely at the exploitation of women's bodies especially regarding reproduction. In "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," Beale exposes a history of exploiting the reproductive capacities of women of color. She criticizes the "current campaign to promote sterilization of non-white women in an attempt to maintain the population and power imbalance between the white haves and the non-white have nots"—a claim that criticizes the larger capitalist system that perpetuates the second-class status of women of color (116). Beale sees straight through birth control campaigns in poor and nonwhite communities as "surgical genocide" produced by elite whites to keep the black and/or poor communities in control (116). "Birth control" almost always becomes a euphemism for invasive sterilization procedures like salpingectomy, performed on women, while also underscoring the invasive nature of "control" that Beale sees as concomitant to the US's imperialist practices abroad and at home. Abroad, Puerto Rico was "a huge experimental laboratory for medical research" where doses for the pill and other procedures were tested on "Puerto Rican women and selected Black women (poor) using them as human guinea pigs to evaluate its effect and its efficiency" before these methods were then imported back to the US (117). Beale concludes: "The lack of availability of safe birth control methods, the forced sterilization practices, and the ability to obtain legal abortions are all symptoms of a decadent society that jeopardizes the health of Black women (and thereby the entire black race) in its attempts to control the very life processes of human beings" (119). The scene of *Meridian*'s abortion and sterilization is one that resonates against this history of eugenic sterilization

practices. Additionally, Walker is writing in the shadow of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* as well as the monumental Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade* (1973). This situates Walker at a prime position to comment on the issues Beale raises and the limitations of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. In this social context, Meridian's abortion may have been legal but she is still a victim to the institutionalized sexual crimes her doctor commits.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between reproductive control and sexual exploitation is consistently united. Later in the novel, as Meridian begins to experience more severe "blue spells," she encounters the doctor again. She had not planned on seeing the campus doctor because "he would want payment for having tied her tubes" (*Meridian* 123). This second physical examination brings back all the horror of the first: "Without waiting to hear her symptoms he had her lifted up on the examination table . . . and she was given a thorough and painful pelvic examination. Her breasts were routinely and exhaustively felt" (123). In addition to the excessive physical prodding the doctor again makes a heteronormative assumption about her sexual activity by lecturing her on the dangers of sleeping with boys. As in the account of Meridian's abortion, Walker does not end this scene within the confines of the doctor's office, but follows Meridian out the door, down the street, as the effects of the abortion and examination continue to manifest inside her body. The psychic effects of this procedure play out in Meridian's life throughout the novel in her relationship with Truman Held for the ways that after the procedure she is permanently removed from the nationalist ideal of true black womanhood.

Though Walker throughout the novel rejects a representation of traditional black womanhood, she nevertheless problematizes the reproductive rights for women of color in the US South at this time. Meridian's sterilization is precariously presented as having been coerced and also having been an act of volition, in the sense that Meridian does manage to abruptly

demand the doctor ““Burn’em out by the roots for all I care.”” This speech act is not lost on this examination of feminist orality (119). Though Meridian does give acquiescence to the doctor to undergo tubal ligation, this acceptance is given under the conditions of duress and evokes a history of forced sterilization. Under such conditions it becomes difficult to untangle the difference between agency and coercion. It is precisely the contested nature of Meridian’s speech that makes her a figure of the borderland. In this scene Meridian’s body is a visceral open wound revealing the embodied effects of racial and patriarchal ideologies.<sup>8</sup> One issue this scene does clearly illustrate is the racist and sexist paradigm of the state and those that enforce its designs: medical and educational institutions. And finally, *Meridian* represents a moment of social crisis. Situated within the context of the Civil Rights movement the novel is clearly a text that conveys the material body as the site for working out social instability.<sup>9</sup>

This is a significant reading for both feminist and Global South studies. The power of women’s reproductive capacities elicits strong regulatory responses from state institutions. But this scene also helps to decenter the First World from a position of moral superiority. As Malika Dutt argues, “At present, popular domestic perception regard human rights violations as phenomena external to the United States in which the United States plays a key policing role. This perception makes human rights violations effectively invisible inside the domestic arena, and also allows the US to act with impunity in the rest of the world” (235). Inderpal Grewal further explains how First World fantasies of Third World women perpetuate human rights violations by “representing poor women and children as victims in distress and in struggles against overwhelming odds” (502). These narratives “universalize the Third World as a region of aberrant violence, and this notion of aberration occurs in relation to a First World that is seldom included in violating its women” (502). To clarify, from Dutt and Grewal we can examine the



US South as both a First and a Third world space. The US South then deconstructs the binary between First and Third World distinctions. As Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn suggest in *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, “As the uncanny double of both the First and Third Worlds, the U.S. South of course calls attention to (and enables displacement of) the First World traits of putatively Third World writers and the Third World traits of the putatively First World” (10). The scene of Meridian’s abortion in Walker’s novel unveils the crimes that the First World commits on its own citizens, while at the same time showing the often Third World status of poor women of color in this space, allowing us to open up the boundaries of Third and First World discourses.

### Exploring Genealogies

As the earlier image of the cactus needle from Anzaldúa suggests, creative potential is born out of acts of violence. And *Meridian* shows how creative potential is often tied to communal bonds. Walker imbeds *Meridian* with a genealogy that points to a history of black women’s nonreproductive community. This history creates the “crazy quilt” form of the novel. As described by Madhu Dubey, the crazy quilt is a “capacious, highly flexible form [that] offers Walker a womanist medium that thoroughly scrambles the reading codes of Black Aesthetic ideology” (126). Aside from its aesthetic implications, the crazy quilt form draws together various narratives.<sup>10</sup> One way Walker achieves the crazy quilt form is by weaving together the stories of the four women: Louvinie, Fast Mary of the Tower, The Wild Child, and Meridian. Importantly, these women share a genealogy through the southscape of Saxon College. This genealogy underscores the connection between wild tongues and embodied borderlands in the novel.<sup>11</sup>

Examining the history of Fast Mary of the Tower uncovers a second layer of Walker's politics of reproduction. As legend goes, a girl named Mary, a student at Saxon in the 1920s, had a baby in one of the residence halls. She concealed the pregnancy because she "of course was too ashamed to ask for help or tell anybody anything" (35). Caught after attempting to dismember and dispose of the baby's body, Mary was flogged and then essentially imprisoned in her parents' home. She hung herself after three months of confinement. Generations of students at Saxon found this story representative of their own fears of unplanned pregnancies. But these young women transformed the story of Fast Mary of the Tower into an antifertility ritual, as they struggled to achieve control over their bodies and reproductive practices: "Any girl who had ever prayed for her period to come was welcome in the commemoration, which was held in the guise of a slow May Dance around the foot of The Sojourner (which had been, it was said, Fast Mary's only comfort and friend on Saxon campus)" (35). This veiled yet egalitarian ceremony brings the students together around the largest and oldest tree on campus, and "[o]n that day, they held each other's hands tightly" (35).

Fast Mary's story elicits an empathic response from the current students at Saxon, but her story is also full of fear, self-hatred, violence, and death. Through the story of Louvinie and the Sojourner tree, Walker transforms an act of violence into a (re)productive occasion for female community. "There was one Sojourner ceremony, however, that united all the students at Saxon—the rich and the poor, the very black-skinned (few though they were) with the very fair, the stupid and the bright—and that was the Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower" (35). This is an occasion that suggests association with occult secretive menstrual rites. The women of Saxon College congregate in acknowledgement of the limits placed on their sexuality and reproductive rights. This event is wholly in the context of the 1970s struggle for reproductive

rights I have already discussed. Their ceremony concedes the precarious nature of their social value as young black women and the dangerous and mysterious interworking of their bodies. Meridian and the other girls at Saxon college know the radical and dangerous potential of their wombs and they find unity around the Sojourner tree and the legend of Fast Mary.

The legend of Fast Mary of the Tower resonates powerfully against Meridian's experience of sex and motherhood. Mary's fear of discovery and public censure speak to a general sense of sexual shame perpetuated at Saxon. The sexually sterile environment of fabricated femininity was a disservice to Mary, as it proves to be for Meridian and her peers. Mary's fear was likely brought on by both the rigid standards of the school and her (presumed) limited knowledge of her own body. If Meridian was given scant sex education, we can perhaps assume the conditions were even more insufficient for Mary. After all, Meridian's abstinence-only education could hardly be called education; her mother's only advice was to "Be sweet" or "Don't be fast" (86). The ceremony commemorating Fast Mary corrects the communal disservice of the previous generation. For example, Meridian's mother could have initiated a communal form of sex education, passing down intimate knowledge as part of a female community. Instead, Mrs. Hill's sequestering of sexual knowledge and the politely cryptic euphemisms she manages to utter harm Meridian and her neighbor friend Nelda: "Nelda knew that the information she had needed to get through her adolescence was information Mrs. Hill could have given her" (86). These failures are recuperated through the ceremony for Fast Mary, who was also a victim of the failure of female community.

Meridian shares a second association with Mary because she also rejects motherhood by giving up her first child and terminates her second pregnancy. Much like Mary, Meridian finds motherhood oppressive. Regarding Meridian's son the narrator glosses, "She might not have

given him away to the people who wanted him. She might have murdered him instead. Then killed herself” (89). Though this does not transpire, it evokes the history of Fast Mary. For Madhu Dubey, Meridian is connected to Fast Mary along with Louvinie and The Wild Child because each of these threads of the story magnify a fantasy of suicide and infanticide (131).<sup>12</sup> That Walker would include these responses as the only available alternative to motherhood says quite a bit about the limited opportunities for women of color in the context she is writing in: motherhood, exploitation, or death.

A step further back in history leads Walker to the account of the slave woman, Louvinie. Nestled within the history of Meridian’s life is the account of Louvinie, a slave on the plantation that becomes Saxon College. Louvinie was renowned for her storytelling abilities. The children of the plantation would beg for her stories, derived from her homeland in Africa. These stories grew increasingly horrific by demand until one day she frightened the frail son of the plantation owner to death. The master, with full force of the law, then severs Louvinie’s tongue which was also the source of her spiritual life: “Louvinie’s tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon” (*Meridian* 34). Not only is the organ of Louvinie’s creative force stolen from her, but she is denied the rites her culture practices regarding dismembered body parts—which is a secondary blow to Louvinie’s creative expression. This passage from the novel resonates strongly against Anzaldua’s description of the systemic silencing of wild tongues: “Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the Frist Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*. Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (*Borderlands* 76). Louvinie’s speech is so volatile and excessively expressive that it cannot be domesticated, and is thereby

ripped out. But unlike the violence done to Meridian, the violence done to Louvinie is ritualized through legal practices instead of medical practices.

In the case of Louvinie, the legal rituals that define her place in the world as a slave also enable her master to legally inflict torture. Colin Dayan in *The Law Is A White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, draws on the early legal concept of the *deodand* to unveil how personhood is constituted and how retributive justice became a legal standard in certain cultures. Of the *deodand*, Dayan describes: “Not only could objects kill, but they could cause death with intent. Whether inanimate (a tree or the wheel of a cart) or animate (a horse or a dog), they were believed to possess an evil will and were known as ‘deodand,’ meaning ‘what must be given to God’ (*Deo dandum*)” (127). Louvinie becomes a deodand because she is considered material property under the paradigm of chattel slavery. If she is considered property then “we cannot help seeing that the state may with advantage treat slaves as capable of committing crimes and suffering punishments and when the state has begun to punish the slave it begins to excuse the master” (129). What is done to Louvinie is understood as retributive punishment which excuses the pain inflicted on her body. The legal ritual of the deodand strangely acknowledges the embodied condition of the slave insofar as that embodied state makes possible punishment and the fiction of power of the master. Dayan’s historically specific rendering of the master/slave relationship resonates against the earlier discussed relationship of torturer and tortured, wherein the violence enacted produces a fiction of power—here reinforced by legal rituals. This observation helps illuminate the historical precedent of silencing wild tongues. If by the 1970s the legal rituals which affected Louvinie have become legally and politically defunct, we have seen how instead medical rituals have replaced legal enforcements of biopower.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore the story of Louvinie also brilliantly depicts the systemic response to wild tongues across historical periods. The coupling of Meridian's sterilization and the dismemberment of Louvinie's tongue evidence how the biopolitics of the dominant white culture systematically marks the bodies of nonwhite women. Louvinie invites us to notice the complexity of speaking across generations, especially when what is made legible is the body of the teller. By uncovering the story of Louvinie, Walker both testifies to the material experience of Louvinie's body—reversing the ritual of the deodand—and she remakes Louvinie's story into an occasion for communal expression and renewed spiritual life through ceremonies around the Sojourner Tree.

The legend of Fast Mary of the Tower is significant for the community of women at Saxon College and for the work this story does in tracing a genealogy of fractured bodies throughout the novel, from Louvinie and Fast Mary to Meridian and The Wild Child. Rather than revel in their creative potential, these young women do fear the social repercussions of their creative bodies. This does not mean that they reject their bodies outright, but rather that they feel the presence of the “open wound” persistently. These many rejections of motherhood help make sense of why Meridian takes on the responsibility of The Wild Child. In taking up for The Wild Child, Meridian finds a way back into the community.

#### Re-making the World

In the 1990s feminist critics started noticing the power of silence, opening up an array of readings that gave agency to the nonspeaking subject, teaching us that a woman who chooses not to speak uses silence in a subversive and/or powerful way.<sup>14</sup> Diedre Lashgari's evaluation of women's speech and silences is especially insightful:

Conscious anger openly expressed may serve as a counterforce to the stultifying weight of conformist silence. Many Third World texts emphasize the necessity of such confrontive anger and action. Others portray countercommunity, empowered by shared silences, as the most effective opposition to violence. . . . silence may be a means of survival, or of subversion—disguise, masking (8-9)

Instead of presenting speech and silence in opposition to one another, Lashgari suggests a more complex and open understanding of the power, politics, and fragility of speech and silence in women's literature. Lashgari's strategic openness reflects Walker's openness to a field of verbal expression in her various characters ranging from Louvinie to The Wild Child. As Lynn Pifer notes, "Early in *Meridian*, Walker links the contrasting strategies of silence (withholding one's tongue as opposed to having it forcibly removed) to the politics of racism and patriarchy" (79). Another, more culturally mindful, way speech has been discussed in relation to the novel is by connecting Walker to the oral tradition.<sup>15</sup>

In talking about tongues and speech in *Meridian* this project acknowledges and builds upon these kinds of readings, and in so doing notices the role of both speaking and silent subjects in the text. It is particularly important to notice these modes in relation to Meridian, who oscillates between them. Her calculated speeches and profound silences have been well attended to by critics. Lynn Pifer in her article "Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's *Meridian*: Speaking out for the Revolution" highlights three major silences over the course of Meridian's life. First, there is the moment in her early childhood when Meridian could not repent of the accusations of theft her mother levels against her. Second, Meridian fails to finish the patriotic speech given at a school function. Thirdly, Meridian refuses to say she will kill for the revolution, and is rebuked for her presumed cowardice by her friend Anne Marion. Pifer reads these silences as Meridian's

refusal to play the role of the “ventriloquist’s doll, a mindless vehicle that would spout the ideological line,” leading to the conclusion that “Walker realizes that would-be revolutionaries must avoid reproducing the power structures that they combat” (77). Meridian’s silences pose an alternative wildness to Anne Marion’s speech, which, following Pifer’s lead, reproduces the power structures she combats. Anne-Marion is a better *wild* tongue; when she is shoved around by a policeman during a nonviolent protest she responds viscerally: “she dug her nails into her arms to restrain herself, but could never resist sticking out, to its full extent, her energetic and expressive pink tongue” (*Meridian* 26). Though she is confident, brave, and courageous, she is also naïve, reactionary, and violent. In contrast, Meridian’s nonspeech is akin to nonviolence. Meridian’s refusal to say that she will kill for the revolution ends her friendship with Anne Marion:

This group might or might not do something revolutionary. It was after all a group of students, of intellectuals, converted to a belief in violence only after witnessing the extreme violence, against black dissidents, of the federal government and police. Would they rob a bank? Bomb a landmark? Blow up a police station? Would they ever be face to face with the enemy, guns drawn? Perhaps. Perhaps not. “But that isn’t the point!” the small voice screeched. The point was, she could not think lightly of shedding blood. And the question of killing did not impress her as rhetorical at all. (15)

In the first part of this passage Walker explores the contradictory impulses and pressures of the Civil Rights movement. This is the backdrop for Meridian’s choice of nonviolence, a decision full of anguish and personal struggle, but not without ultimate determination: “the small voice screeched” a response. Though Meridian’s response to “Will you kill for the Revolution” isn’t as



audible as Anne Marion's, it is no less strong or committed a position. Meridian's political position will become even more resolutely nonviolent after her interaction with The Wild Child. Within this constellation of speech and silence emerges a third figure: The Wild Child. Her silence in language adds another layer to the function of the wild tongued figure.

Scholars have long commented on the uniqueness of The Wild Child and her place in the community. First Pifer notes how The Wild Child presents a "natural state of freedom" because she is "so removed from civilization that her language consists of swear words she picked up in alleys" (81). But does she merely present a glimpse of a "natural state of freedom"? This kind of reading is dangerous because it relies on outdated ideologies that would cast The Wild Child as a kind of noble savage. Surely her sexual exploitation and marginalization discredit the glibly optimistic claim to a "natural state of freedom." But the opposing perspective is just as dissatisfying. Madhu Dubey argues that Meridian essentially tampers with The Wild Child by acting as an agent of white elite culture when she captures The Wild Child: "a scene that disturbingly recalls the archetypal conquest of the primitive other" (Dubey 139). This reading is overly cynical. Walker makes abundantly clear that Meridian is not prompted by gain or driven to investigation when she takes in The Wild Child; rather she seems to be clearly interested in care and community. Pifer's and Dubey's perspective set up a false dichotomy in the readings of The Wild Child. Instead, examining The Wild Child as a wild tongued figure opens up a more humane, if still tragic story here.

The most apparent connection between The Wild Child and the wild tongue paradigm is evident in her "wildness." Loud, dirty, pregnant, feral, and homeless, The Wild Child is pushed to the edges of the neighborhood. Through a process of identification and disavowal, the community defines itself in relation to this peripheral figure. Examining this character will reveal

the violence of overlooking and peripheralizing persons deemed worthless. This reading asks us to rethink the notion of wildness itself, to see how wildness is produced through legal peripheralization and social ostracism. But this reading also explores the way wildness can be productive. In the confused interactions between Meridian and The Wild Child we can see the interplay between speech and silence through the very structure of language. Although sociolinguistic rituals often exclude persons from the community, they occasionally produce communities as well. Meridian's intrepid sense of care is meant to include The Wild Child as a peer, resulting in the improvised community at The Wild Child's funeral and the stronger communal tie between Meridian and the Saxon neighborhood.

Kalpana Rahita Seshadri's exploration of the role of feral children in society unravels the complex interplay of Meridian, The Wild Child, and language. In *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language*, Seshadri looks at the relationship between language and law: "the practice of dehumanization depends on the logic of a power that can decide on the value of a given life. Such a decision works fundamentally to exclude the other from the realm of human intercourse, which can be achieved by denying access to speech, and of course, law" (ix-x). Like Louvinie, The Wild Child is denied access to speech and law; this denial is a disenfranchisement that dehumanizes them both. But Meridian counteracts these processes of dehumanization, as The Wild Child teaches her to create an improvised community, to relish in laughter and nonnormative speech, and to be humane.

The Wild Child's juridico-linguistic status and her spatial relationship to the Saxon community make her a figure of the borderland. Seshadri draws on historically documented feral children and the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida in order to argue that the wild child has a particular relationship to language that is distinct from other outsider figures

because “the wild child is in language insofar as it is silent and does not speak” (141). Like the feral children Seshadri documents, The Wild Child’s story follows a particular pattern: she is sighted at a young age, perhaps five or six; she is captured by Meridian using a cat-gut string and beads; she is brought to Meridian’s dorm at Saxon College; The Wild Child is properly bathed, dressed, and fed; she rejects attempts to assimilate her, attempts to escape her captivity, and is struck by a speeding car; finally she is refused funerary rites by the white president of the school. The Wild Child’s animal wildness at first seems to be the reason for her exclusion from the community and her failure to assimilate. Instead, Seshadri argues that feral children inhabit a space that is between human and animal. The Wild Child is described in constant motion: bolting, scavenging, and running. Her motions denote a skittish animality as well as acquired human habits: “Wile Chile rummaged about as before, eating rancid food, dressing herself in castoffs, cursing and bolting, and smoking her brown cigarettes” (*Meridian* 24). As an interstitial figure—undomesticated but not animal either—The Wild Child reveals what happens in the space between language and law according to Seshadri.

As Seshadri unpacks the role of formalized language in developing social inclusiveness she shows how hospitality functions in relation to the anomalous figure of the wild child. Like The Wild Child in *Meridian*, feral children are nameless: “As an essentially nameless being unrelated to the violence of the name, the wild child insofar as he/she cannot take the oath, tell the truth, or lie, poses a powerful challenge to the sovereignty of the name and the oath” (153). Without a proper name the wild child cannot request hospitality. Nor can she receive hospitality without giving verbal testimony to her identity. The formal name testifies to a person’s credibility and becomes the basis of trust between strangers. The house mother rejects The Wild Child outright: “‘She must not stay here,’ She said gravely. ‘Think of the influence. This is a

school for young ladies”” (*Meridian* 25). That The Wild Child lacks a formal name is only part of her exclusion; she also lacks domesticated behaviors that come from fluency in language and human community. Her lack of a given name is in part a result of her lack of language:

“Language then, is not only the foreign language of the law in which the stranger must ask for hospitality, but also the language of ethics (lying, truth telling, promising) in which the alterity of the stranger is in play” (Seshadri 160). Her alterity is further reinforced when Meridian tries to find her a place to stay: “Meridian phoned schools for special children and then homes for unwed mothers—only to find there were none that would accept Wile Chile” (*Meridian* 25). The persistent exclusion of The Wild Child begins to unravel an ethics of language that excludes based on the silence of The Wild Child in language. Though The Wild Child cannot speak in the ritualized, domesticated language of the Saxon community, her presence is of value because she opens up a language of ethics. Therefore, The Wild Child’s alterity begins to deconstruct the rigidity of the boundaries between self/other because she cannot participate in the rules of ritualized hospitality and because her nonname cannot hold her accountable to the law.

Apart from her physical repulsiveness, The Wild Child is linguistically repulsive. Though silent in language in that she cannot speak Formal Standard English, The Wild Child is not without vocal capacities or orality. In fact, her vocal expressiveness is one of her defining characteristics. Patricia Yaeger describes figures like The Wild Child as pollutants. The house mother and characters like her “maintain their social power by upholding strenuously demarcated boundaries against pollution, instantly policing ideas that ‘confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (Yaeger 262). Some characters, like Meridian and The Wild Child, “consecrate filth . . . adore dirt and revel in becoming pollutants” (Yaeger 262). They enjoy their ability to blur or pollute social boundaries. By extension, the vociferous orality of these characters

contribute to their roguery: “Wile Chile shouted words that were never uttered in the honors house. Meridian, splattered with soap and mud, broke down and laughed” (25). Enamored of her “free use of inappropriate language” Meridian’s attempts at taming this young woman are caring if inadequate to the task (Pifer 81). Another mode of understanding pollution is to notice how “the spatial boundaries erected in the segregated South may be read as manifestations of a desire on the part of the dominant group in power to prevent blacks, or any minorities from polluting their space” (Davis 7).<sup>16</sup>

The novel explores an alternative to exclusion in the unconditional welcome The Wild Child receives from Meridian. Sheshadri asks:

No doubt the wild child demands an absolute hospitality if only because it has been abandoned by every law, is expelled from every city, and manifests a life against which no crime can be recognized as crime. But how can hospitality be expressed to one who has somehow persisted, stayed alive as an exile from the law, who has been abandoned by the law, for which no law speaks, to whom no law is addressed? (162)

The Wild Child’s exclusion from the community requires a response that forgoes conventional hospitality based on the proper name. These rituals breakdown in the presence of The Wild Child, and they become unethical.

Because Meridian can relish in The Wild Child’s filthy body and filthy tongue, she participates in a form of unconventional hospitality. As Seshadri explains, “that where unconditional hospitality is concerned, language seems to fall silent” (163). Though the function of the proper name falls silent, the moment of unconditional hospitality does not have to be *silent*. In fact, this moment in the novel is *loud*. What instead erupts at this moment is something

wholly new to Saxon College: The Wild Child's curses and Meridian's laughter. The Wild Child teaches Meridian the value of improvisation through laughter and an ethics of language that transforms Meridian's social activism.

Ultimately, the rigidity of the school's policing of pollutants prompts Meridian to move out of the dormitories. Following The Wild Child's death she moves into the immediate surrounding neighborhood: "she could not live on campus, although she continued to attend classes, and lived instead in the ghetto that surrounded it. It was a poor community but friendly and very clean" (97). The Wild Child had a tangible impact on Meridian's activism—which grows more and more productively unconventional. The first step is to renounce the school's strictly enforced sexual, behavioral, and lingual borders. In continuing to explore the wild child's role Seshadri asks, "Is it not that that it is the human being on the side of speech who receives hospitality from the child on the side of silence, from infancy? (179). This question suggests that the wild child in fact is the party who exhibits hospitality to the speaking subject. The Wild Child, in teaching Meridian to reconsider who constitutes her community, has taught Meridian an ethics of language. Therefore we can come to understand how The Wild Child teaches Meridian an important lesson in hospitality, social ethics, and improvisation, prompting her to leave the confines of a disciplining order and join in the marginalized community beyond. Or, as Thadious Davis articulates, "Meridian as body and as space is the site in which new social arrangements can be formed and on which new political theory can be written" (354).

### Rejoicing in Wild Tongues

In *Meridian* a community of wild-tongued women emerges. Louvinie, Fast Mary, The Wild Child, and Meridian's bodies all testify to the violence of the borderland, but their embodied experiences also voice the creative potential of the borderland. The way forward is to

acknowledge both these states. As Walker comments: “The healing begins where the wound was made” (Walker qtd. in Davis 21). Among the many material and psychological wounds in the novel, the death of The Wild Child is the most productive for the Saxon community—in particular for Meridian and her peers. Like the ceremony of Fast Mary of the Tower, the Saxon students unite around a sense of indignation over the disposability of The Wild Child. After the “impeccably tailored patriarch with glinting, shifty gray eyes” turns away the funeral procession from the school’s chapel, the mourners erupt in voice and violence:

Then the knowledge that The Wild Child was refused admittance to the chapel caused a cry to rise from the collective throats of the crowd in one long wail. For five minutes the air rang with shouts and the polite curses of young ladies whose home away from home the college was. They were so ashamed and angry they began to boo and stamp their feet and stick out their tongues through their tears.  
(37-8)

The Wild Child has the power to bring out the wild tongues in the young women of Saxon College. They learn to be activists in the here and now and to use all the expressive potential of their tongues. Though their unbridled indignation results in the destruction of the Sojourner Tree, they have at least found the power of their voices in unison. Ultimately Walker reanimates The Sojourner Tree indicating that wild tongues are not easily silenced—nor are their ceremonies or genealogies. The activist enthusiasm that erupts after The Wild Child’s refused funeral is therefore an accomplishment of improvised community. Moreover, the ways Walker seeks healing in the place where the wound was made mirrors the poetry of Lucille Clifton and resonates with Anzaldúa’s description of the cactus needle. From various souths and through these confluences a constellation of expressive wild-tongued writers emerges.

## CONCLUSION

### THE FREAK SHOW AND BEYOND

This project began as an ambitious intersectional investigation into several authors who are usually not studied together: Gloria Anzaldúa, Eudora Welty, and Alice Walker. What at first was a surprising ahistorical combination of writers ultimately proved a useful methodology for uncovering previously unexplored aspects of their works. The confluence between these writers is manifest in more ways than I had foreseen, proving this project to be a productive one.

On the issue of gender these authors were unified: the borderland is a constant experience for women, if differentially expressed. In the texts discussed we have seen how gender is regulated in striking ways often with racial, classist, or ableist inflections. The ways gender is constructed in different geographies is explained by Inderpal Grewal:

Since women's bodies have always been used in nationalist agendas, it is important to counter such uses by suggesting the historical contingency of gender formations—to claim that women are not victims but are persons whose agency is differentially constructed within formations that come not only from state and nation, but also from geopolitics, economics, religion, sexuality, etc. The analysis of women's subject positions within institutional formations reveals the specific contexts that allow exploitation and help formulate ways to deal with these contexts. (516)



Whereas Sister's gender was constructed within a strict family zone which regulated voiced expressions of sexuality, Leota and Mrs. Fletcher relished in the verbal play available in the gendered space of the beauty parlor. However, this space was not as ideal as first imagined. Not all wild tongues are exceptional feminists, and the women in this space are vulnerable to internal colonization by inherently patriarchal capitalist ideology and by Billy Boy who permeates their sanctuary. From Alice Walker it became apparent that Meridian's gender was constructed both by a white male dominated medical field and against black nationalist ideals of womanhood. But Meridian is such a provocative character because Walker refuses to naturalize gender or sexuality.

In addition to the trope of the wild tongue, the proliferation of freak shows promises to be another area of confluence between these writers. From the petrified man of "Petrified Man" to the body of Marilene O'Shay, "One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World," in *Meridian*, these authors flaunt bodies (*Meridian* 4). The vociferous body in terms of bodily excess, aberrancy, and especially disability challenges categories of normalcy. Additionally, the freak show magnetizes physical, sexual, and racial differences. When persons are corralled and made into spectacles, their bodies, if rendered as grotesque, present "a kind of contact zone where the reader runs smack into ideology—but ideology as body and blood" (Yaeger 249). Two registers the freak show capitalizes on are sexuality and disability.

It is not a coincidence that this analysis of wild tongues abuts representations of physical anomaly, as in the freak shows proliferating through Welty and Walker. And I would argue that it is no coincidence that the body as freakish, disfigured, and grotesque would make an appearance in Walker and Welty because the body is the site where social anxiety is often mapped: "As it delves into the realm of serious politics and history, the freak show maps the

anxieties and fantasies that undergird collective responses to contemporary events” (Adams 3). Centering a discussion of Welty and Walker on their representations of freak shows would also ask what other geographies they belong to: circum-Atlantic, North American, southwestern? And would this new investigation necessitate looking to other sources than Anzaldúa for guidance? An excellent starting point would be Welty’s story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” from *A Curtain of Green*.

### Speaking in Tongues

Central to Anzaldúa’s writing, but not fully addressed in this project, is the issue of linguistic identity. She writes, “Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself . . . I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing” (81). Anzaldúa intends for the idea of wild tongues to be tied to bilingualism, to speaking in tongues: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (81). Though Anzaldúa uses languages in the singular form here, her linguistic (and ethnic) identity is hybrid. In the spirit of a more open canon of southern women’s fiction, I will propose two other authors who would wonderfully fit within the existing framework of this project: Dorothy Allison and Monique Troung. There is an enormous amount of potential for scholarship between Allison and Troung in connection to Anzaldúa.

Various linguistic codes and registers are represented in Anzaldúa’s writing—after all, her bilingualism is not comprised of either Spanish or English, but rather a cacophony of formal languages, geographically specific dialects, etc., all of which she slips into and out of. This linguistic pluralism is noted by Dierdre Lashgari in her introduction to *Violence, Silence, Anger*: “This increasingly wide use of English and other European languages by writers from Third World cultures has expanded the range of those languages, carrying them beyond the imperial

singular to an inclusive plural ‘englishes,’ ‘frenches,’ ‘spanishes’ capable of embodying cultural difference” (6). Dorothy Allison, like Anzaldúa speaks in several linguistic registers. She slips into and out of various “englishes” and the languages available to her resemble in some ways Anzaldúa’s long list: academic speak, bar talk, her mother’s cursing, gospel music, etc. Linda Hammerick’s experience of language is vertiginous in a different way: she *tastes* language. The role of synesthesia is both a formal aesthetic component of Troung’s novel *Bitter in the Mouth* and the embodied experience of the central character who encounters a conflation of sensory experiences. Linda Hammerick takes a different kind of pleasure in language, in her wild tongue, than do any of the other characters discussed in this project.

The inherent feminist architecture of this project would benefit from an examination of other registers of embodied experience, in particular sexuality and disability, as I have noted. And there is ample material within Welty and Walker’s fiction to address these modes. But unfortunately these avenues remain regrettably underdeveloped in this project, especially the queer sexuality of the borderland. Anzaldúa’s sexuality is just as much a part of her borderlands experience as her culture, language, and gender is. Her lesbian identity powerfully shapes her writing, and looking to queer aspects of the borderlands would certainly contribute to the objective of New Southern Studies and the Global South. Anzaldúa’s contributions to queer theory would also enhance the proliferation of work on the queer South. Mapping queer sexuality in Anzaldúa, Welty, Walker, and Allison would be one way to continue to queer the borderlands, expand upon the work done in this project, and provide another contribution to the growing and adapting field of New Southern Studies.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION: WHERE WE DRAW THE LINES: BORDERLANDS THEORY IN REVIEW

<sup>1</sup> There is a clear emphasis in recent critical works about Welty to situate her personal life and writings alongside larger national and international political and literary movements. Cf. Pollack and Marrs, Trefzer, and Fuller on issues of national politics and race, social welfare, and the surrealist movement, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Describing Walker's collection of poetry, *Absolute Truth in the Goodness of the Earth*, Thadious Davis writes, "In adding a third layer of geography and hemispheric reference, Walker forges ahead with the connections that are now inspiring the new Southern Studies to look beyond the borders of the traditional South and towards the Latin and South American nations for twenty-first century comparative analysis" (373).

#### CHAPTER 1: Trash Talkers: Performances of Speech in Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green*

<sup>1</sup> Meindl places the grotesque at the center of the American literary landscape in the nineteenth century and beyond. Yet in Meindl's imaginary, the American literary landscape is almost exclusively male. The elision of female writers from his discussion is reminiscent of the once accepted exclusion of Welty from the pantheon of "southern writers." Cf. Manning.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gleeson White, Berlant, and Yaeger in *Dirt and Desire*.

<sup>3</sup> In an even earlier work, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (1988), Yaeger begins an exploration of the celebratory power in women's writing yet

finds herself caught within a post-structuralist debate. What I find most interesting about *Honey-Mad Women* is both the way this book prefigures Yaeger's later scholarship, but also how it evokes the tongue, taste, and pleasure which creatively constitute women's writing.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hagood and Arant. Additionally, at the 2014 MLA conference in Chicago, the Faulkner Society sponsored a panel specifically on Faulkner and disability studies.

<sup>5</sup> Welty is a complex writer in Yaeger's estimation. In *Dirt and Desire* she also discusses Welty's tendency to write her African American characters into the atmosphere (98).

<sup>6</sup> Russell ultimately argues that Welty finds these characters "comical and inept" because they "exploit lexical, grammatical, and sociolinguistic patterns to taint the objectivity of their stories (45). Russell's final analysis brings us back to the unreliable narrator problem.

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick defines the closet as "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71). Because the phrase "coming out of the closet" seems to have a free-floating quality in our culture, Sedgwick argues, "a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in the twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosexual/heterosexual definitions" (72).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Chouard (44) and Russell (26).

<sup>9</sup> But it's difficult to differentiate between what is hereditary, acquired, or imposed.

<sup>10</sup> Discussing how gossip is also sexualized speech, Sedgwick calls gossip a "devalued art" that is practiced for "the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about *what kinds of people* there are to be found in one's world" (23).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Johnston and Pollack and Marrs's collection *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*

CHAPTER 2: WILD, WILD TONGUES AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BODY IN  
ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN

<sup>1</sup> These confluences matter. Anzaldúa, in an early essay “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers,” reveals her indebtedness to Walker by referencing *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (Bridge 171).

<sup>2</sup> Additionally Nancy Chodorow's study, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) is an integral psychoanalytical component within this 1970s moment. Although I oppose narrowly psychoanalytic approaches to understanding gender and motherhood, Chodorow's book is very much a part of the fabric of a growing body of feminist scholarship in the 1970s. Unfortunately, many of these early feminist psychoanalytic projects naturalized gender and motherhood.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. María Milagros López and Edward J. Larson, among others.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, William Harvey, the seventeenth century physician who was the first to dissect a female body with attention to the reproductive organs, exclaimed upon viewing the postpartum uterus that it resembled ““an open wound”” (Rich 152). See also Anzaldúa's poem “La vulva es una herida abierta/The vulva is an open wound” collected in the *Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*.

<sup>5</sup> In *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich describes in particular the professionalization of gynecology, a move that ushered in male doctors and pushed out women's communities of care, as an integral moment to the progressive control over women's bodies by a professionalized male-dominated medical field.

<sup>6</sup> The doctor's moralizing about Meridian's sexual activity is a practice that has been revisited in contemporary contexts. For example, over the past few years there has been much pressure to pass legislation written by pro-life organizations that would enforce the mandatory transvaginal or abdominal

ultrasound for any woman receiving an abortion. For detractors of such legislation, these practices amount to emotional blackmail. Cf. Bonnie Rochman and Maya Dusenbery.

<sup>7</sup> The timing of the novel complicates this point to some degree. Though published in 1976, much of the action occurs in the late 1960s. If Meridian's abortion occurred in the late 1960s then it would have been illegal for her to request such a procedure, but not illegal for her doctor to perform it as part of a eugenics objective. The narrative itself only emphasizes the sexual exchange the doctor proposes, not his vulnerability in performing the abortion, if he even is vulnerable. Ultimately, I don't think this chronology disrupts Walker's objective or my reading.

<sup>8</sup> If there was any question about the still contested status of women's bodies, take for example Colorado Congressman Gordon Klingenschmitt (R) whose comment on the violent crime committed against a pregnant woman this year speaks for itself: "This is the curse of God upon America for our sin of not protecting innocent children in the womb," Klingenschmitt said. "And part of that curse for our rebellion against God as a nation is that our women are ripped open" (Stokos).

<sup>9</sup> Walker continues to explore women's sexual and reproductive limitations in her later works. For example, in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she writes about female genital mutilation (FGM). Isabelle R. Gunning offers an astute criticism of Walker's representation of female genital surgery in her film *Warrior Marks*, cocreated with Pratibha Parmar that reads Walker's portrayal of FGM as imperialist and insensitive.

<sup>10</sup> In concluding her chapter on *Meridian*, Dubey writes, "[the] refusal to conform to any aesthetic or ideological mastercode is frequently celebrated as a peculiarly feminine form of

madness in Walker's work" (144). The vertiginous connotations of a celebratory madness are the kinds of stylistic imperatives of the wild tongued writer.

<sup>11</sup> Building on the metaphor of layers, Alan Nadel's application of archaeology as a methodology is instructive: "Walker treats narrative as archaeology and this provides instructions for reading Meridian's life as though it were inscribed on the archaeological site of her body" (56). However, Nadel does not explore the materiality of the body, reading instead its allegorical function (60), or relation to the body politic (56). Archaeology as a formal metaphor is useful, but I prefer genealogy as a conceptual frame for its Foucauldian and feminist implications.

<sup>12</sup> However, I depart from Dubey in her reading of The Wild Child's death as suicide and infanticide in part because the text does not intimate any intent to these forms of self-violence (129).

<sup>13</sup> Though Edward J. Larsen places the decline of eugenics activism in the US South after the 1940s, *Meridian* complicates this chronology, or at least shows how eugenics moves underground (Larsen 1).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Eds. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. And *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*. Ed. Dierdre Lashgari. More recently, DoVeanna S. Fulton's book *Speaking Power* is more focused on African American expressions of speech and silence.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. DoVeanna S. Fulton. Although I especially like Madhu Dubey's application of visuality as the dominant cultural matrix in *Meridian* through the metaphor of the crazy quilt.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer C. James's article "'Buried in Guano': Race, Labor, and Sustainability" offers a third way of understanding pollution in *Meridian* as environmental.



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