

Between Voice and Voicelessness: Transacting Silence in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

Elaine J. O'Quinn

"What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"
—Audre Lorde

The defining events of youth are often affairs that go unnamed, but years later they continue to shape us in deep ways. In remembering those one time silent spaces it is common to also recount the inner journeys taken in creating the self we have become. Finally able to say aloud that which was once stilled makes the naming of these instances all the more significant. As a young girl, I remember my own silent agony of feeling as though I were the only person in the world dealing with the hard punches life seemed to throw. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to talk to or what to say. And even though sheer naiveté was responsible for some of my silence, not being properly invited to speak about my inner world burned across the surface of my young life like a strangling toxic fire. It wasn't until college that anyone communicated the message that I did have the power to move beyond circumstance, a message that helped me usurp the troubling events of my own growing up and allow the suffocating smog of voicelessness to finally lift. As a teacher of young women, I am constantly aware of the profundity of this whole experience.

The truth is that my own youth was probably not very different from that of many young girls. In talking with friends, it seems very few of us had much indication from the adults around us that, as young women, we could talk about the disturbing ordeals of our lives. If there was any message at all, it was the unspoken but well-modeled gender rule that said nice girls keep the matters of self and family private. Like many others, I discovered early that I was expected to pay much closer attention to the proprieties of my supposedly ideal feminine roles than I was to the mysterious nature of my evolving self. The signals the world sent were confusing and contradictory at best, and I had no secure sense of

how to decode them. Certainly, it never occurred to me that anything offered up in school as "edifying" held any relief from or understanding of the experiences I was processing, and life outside of school fell equally short in helping me take measure. Quiet and composed on the outside, I recall the whirlwind of fear and uncertainty that pulsed within.

Yet, despite the anxiety that bubbled beneath the surface, I intuitively knew there was something else astir, some concept of self that, for all its outside appearances of docility, was as vigilant as it was vulnerable, as sheltering as it was unprotected. Silence, as I was coming to understand it, was a condition to either abandon myself to or learn to befriend. I could surrender to its imposing armor of loneliness and retreat, always fearful lest someone find me out and turn what

I hid against me, or I could use stillness as a vehicle of observation and deliberation, a refuge of thoughtful consideration of events past and present. Too young and unsophisticated in the ways of the world for any cognizant engagement of active agency, I did sense that the way

I chose to listen to myself and, consequently, present myself would seriously impact how I was perceived by the world. Though I knew my silence would probably not protect me, I understood that the way I used it would, eventually, in some way name me. Conscious or not, I was exploring the differences between being silent and being silenced.

At the time, I had no way of knowing that cultural and societal discourse, as much as familial and personal chaos, had forced me into a metaphorical site of suppression and restraint, a place I would later see identified by Gilbert and Guber (1979) as feminine "aphasia", an arena of "speechlessness" that has historically censored, if not totally silenced, the lives of many women. My reluctance to talk about the issues that haunted me was compounded by the very public message that identity lay somewhere outside of and beyond personal experience anyway; all I had to do was find it, embrace it, and the safety net of the world would fall into place. Validation for the happenings of my own veiled life was non-existent. I was a daughter, a sister, an adolescent, and a girl

If there was any message at all, it was the unspoken but well-modeled gender rule that said nice girls keep the matters of self and family private.

on the verge of becoming a young woman; there was no place in the scheme of relations for the uneasiness personal experience had visited upon me. Certainly, there was no place for the unpleasantness that would arise if I were to vocalize to others the personal impact of those events. Life for a young woman was supposed to be happy and wholesome; what I had to tell would more than challenge such popular notions.

Laurie Halse Anderson's insightful novel, *Speak* (1999), has reminded me anew of the distance women have come in identifying the oppressive and unhealthy behavior of the silences that so often betray them, as well as the strategic brokering they have always done to keep those same silent behaviors from becoming destructive forces. It is an important book in its exploration of the kind of agency involved when women endeavor to overcome personal violation and cultural authority with feminine sensibilities intact. The fact that Anderson writes this story for young women rather than about them, a notion of storytelling that is quite different from the one with which many of us grew up, is an important aspect of the book. Allowing readers to experience for themselves the capable rather than neutralized persona of main character, Melinda

Sordino, as she deals with her own rape, is enabling at both ends. As Melinda refuses to become a victim of the violent force that threatens her, but is instead emancipated by it, so too is the reader. Had such a story been available to me when I was Melinda's age, I'm certain my understanding of how we create ourselves in an unpredictable world would have been changed considerably. A character offered as a realistic model of what girls can do to maintain control of their own lives, even while wrestling with the undeniably difficult givens of it, would have been a welcome relief in a world of female characters who were always either essentialized, valorized, or criticized in the male tradition of femininity.

When as teachers we determine which women's stories we will teach our adolescents and how we will teach them, it is important that we find examples of works that enable students to see female characters as active agents in the troubling situations of their lives and not mere victims. We want them to understand that even though the victimization of women is not going to go away, the ways women are victimized can and should be challenged rather than simply described. We want our students to recognize that external silencing does not necessarily mean a silenced internal dialogue. In stories such as *Speak* traditional understandings of a woman's reason for silence are dispelled. As teachers we are able to use such a text to advocate against the history of silence as self-abnegation that is so common, working instead for an understanding that reinforces the more actualizing notion that succumbing to victimization through silence only reinforces powerlessness. Anderson's character is thoughtful, caring, and most of all resilient. She is not a compliant victim, and in the end finds the necessary inner resources to regain control of her feminine self as *she* defines it. Melinda Sordino stands as a strong model of the circumstances girls can overcome and not merely survive when they learn how to transact the harmful effects of private silences into the public domain.

I was exploring the differences between being silent and being silenced.

Thinking back to the nature of my own adolescent experiences with silence compels me to make some important comparisons with Melinda's. Her story prompts me to better understand that many women, who at one level do appear rendered "voiceless" by circumstance and experience, actually use that silent space at another level in defiant acts of reflective passage. Fighting a naturally protective urge to pull back and become a mere spectator to the traumatic events of her life, Melinda, by story's end, refuses the frequently implied directive which says women must silently adjust their behavior rather than strengthen their presence to fit the crisis of experience. Instead of stoically embracing the misfortune of her predicament, Melinda moves through the impasse and is able to more authentically and positively recreate rather than reproduce a way of being in the world. The irony of *Speak* is, of course, the detestable situation it forces upon Melinda, one which insists she lose what she knows of herself in order to gain any new understandings. As a sympathetic reader, my initial reaction to her story is to focus on

the pain of the experience and the source of the inflicted silence; however, as a feminist reader, I am intrigued by the strength of character that al-

lows Melinda to employ that same silence as a means of dealing with circumstances that have no place in her world, but have nonetheless arrived there uninvited. I am taken by the fact that her voice is never internally stilled, even while externally lost. The ensuing inner tempest is intriguing as well as telling; forced silencing transacted into a self-determined, creative silence becomes an ally for Melinda rather than an adversary. Within the boundaries of one, she learns to free herself for the other.

"I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior," says Audre Lorde (1997) of her own battle with silence, a battle which in the end she decides is always a transformative, if dangerous, act of self-reflection (204). Similarly, in *Speak*, Melinda also refuses to sit contemplating only her victimization, as may initially appear to be the case. Within her silences Melinda too is working through the measures required to not only reclaim her voice but also reexamine and eventually recreate what it means. As part of her refusal to be objectified, she maintains an on-going internal dialogue dependent on sense of humor, witty discernment of the world around her, and emotional resourcefulness, three life affirming attributes that help her through some truly dark times. Melinda's ballooning silence is about processing as much as it is about resolution. She resists succumbing to the trauma of what has happened to her as much as she tries to move beyond it. Behind the "S" of stupid, scared, silly, and most of all shame (*Speak* 101) that she attributes to herself, stands the "S" of strength, sanity, and self that Melinda continually embraces, albeit not without great difficulty. Rather than allowing herself to be defined by others, she determines to be driven by a more willful, creative understanding, a condition we know is imperative to growth.

Melinda's ability to eventually speak out about her condition is the direct result of the inner dialogue that belies her external silence. In a self-reflective search for authentic resolution, she is able to use the silence inflicted on her to dis-

cover the scope of needs and desires necessary for personal agency. Though the inward turn is initially a reaction to the isolation Melinda feels in her situation, it is also a pivotal point of active response. Carol Gilligan (1982) calls this juncture of recognizing the discriminating force of experience the "*Bildungsroman* that separates the invulnerability of childhood innocence from the responsibility of adult participation and choice" (132). Throughout *Speak* there is evidence of Melinda's desire to make good choices about what feelings, meanings, and values to assign the events she experiences, beginning with her call to the police from the party where the rape takes place. Even though we learn that fear prevents her from staying to tell the police what has happened, it is clear that she becomes increasingly more aware of what is required of her in order to navigate through the feelings with which she must contend if she is to come to meaningful action.

Given the other circumstances she must cope with as a new high school student who has lost all of her friends because she called the police to their party, and being the only child of parents who are as absent emotionally as they are physically, Melinda remains encouragingly flexible even in recognition of her situation. "I am prepared," she says about her first Halloween without her friends. "I refuse to spend the night moping in my room or listening to my parents argue. I checked out a book from the library, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Cool name. I settle into my nest with a bag of candy corn and the blood-sucking monster" (*Speak* 41). This brief statement is growing evidence of the conflict raging between the girl who would take control of her situation and the girl who three pages earlier believes that if she tries hard enough to "pull my lower lip all the way between my teeth" she can maybe "gobble my whole self" (39). Even in the exploration of her struggle, she is able to temper it; she is willing to recognize her nightmare experience, even if she is not quite ready to name it.

By the second section of *Speak*, Melinda is finally able to articulate to herself that she has been trying to bury the memory of the rape, "to make it go away" (82). In the same breath she realizes that it won't. "I want to confess everything," she says, "hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me" (51). In this section she also allows herself to give a name to the monster: "Andy. Andy Evans. Short stabby name" (90). In the struggle to either simply endure her ordeal or, more triumphantly, overcome it, Melinda alternates between revealing to the reader bits and pieces of what actually happened to her the summer before school started and describing the shelters she has since had to find for momentary protection. Both articulations are consequential if she is to succeed in finally recreating the self that experience has forced her to become.

To persevere, Melinda acquiesces to false friendship with

Heather, a new girl at school, and allows herself a distant interest in the activist causes of her lab partner, David Petrakis, a male character who stands in strong contrast with Melinda in that he is rewarded rather than punished for his silences. In a more deliberate move toward personal agency, Melinda situates herself in an abandoned janitor closet at school and claims it for her own. Under the watchful eye of a Maya Angelou poster, a writer herself once silenced by rape, she stocks her emotional fortress. Though it remains difficult to talk and she finds herself sputtering, freezing up, and waking some mornings with jaws "clenched so tight I have a headache" (50), Melinda recognizes that the closet provides a necessary "quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them" (51). A strategic retreat is not a surrender, and it is within the silent space of the closet that Melinda eventually finds her voice.

If superficial friendship, careful regard from afar of a fellow student who shows efficacy in the act of speaking up, and a colonized closet are the limited, but significant means of survival for Melinda, the sanctuary of her art class is the literal and metaphorical site of her passage and self-recreation. While the surrounding culture of events, institutions, adolescence, and people hold Melinda's silence in place, Mr. Freeman's art class encourages her to dislodge it. Ultimately,

Her story prompts me to better understand that many women, who at one level do appear rendered "voiceless" by circumstance and experience, actually use that silent space at another level in defiant acts of reflective passage.

art becomes a form of restoration for Melinda. It is a vehicle of expression that allows her to creatively process the horror of both her internal and external experience. As she moves through the process of recovery, she finds herself "Seeing beyond what is on the surface" (119) of the created world to that which moves inside. Though her literal project in art is to find a way to bring a tree to life on paper, that tree is but an

emblem of the life Melinda seeks to refresh in herself. Freeman, in acknowledging the difficulty of such a task, helps ease the way: "Breathe life into it. Make it bend-trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch-perfect trees don't exist" (153). In suggesting there is no such thing as perfection in nature, he enables Melinda to see that her own life is no less meaningful for its unforeseen imperfections.

Mr. Freeman, a male character the author allows to function with feminist insight, fully supports Melinda in her effort to release and relocate the memories of her trauma to a place where they can be safely but genuinely expressed. "Welcome to the only class that will teach you to survive," says Mr. Freeman, "...where you can find your soul...touch that part of you that you've never dared look at before" (10). On more than one occasion, he acknowledges Melinda's pain and her need for space without making her feel guilty for it; more importantly, he encourages her "voice" by providing her an alternative way of articulating it. Freeman enables Melinda to disclose something of herself in the safe presence of others. Her turkey-bone carcass complete with silenced Barbie head is a good example of this. Without words, Melinda expresses a degree of how she feels. Art allows her to reflect on

the nature of what already exists in the hopes of understanding how to create something new to value. It becomes a springboard for a renewed vision of self and relationship with the world.

The way Mr. Freeman responds to Melinda's silence is in direct opposition to the way the other adult characters in the story react to her. He encourages expression; they attempt to colonize it. From parents, to teachers, to principal, Melinda feels "It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it" (9). In contrast to Freeman, the other adults in Melinda's world seem to know very little about communication. Her parents converse by notes on the refrigerator, both to her and to each other. When they do consider her silence, it is in an accusatory way, with irritated wranglings of "What is wrong with you?" and "Do you think this is cute?" (87). "I don't have time for this, Melinda," (90) says her exasperated mother, while her father blames her crumbling world on a "slacker attitude" (116). On the other hand, Melinda's teachers are only adept at growling, grandstanding, and pontificating, while the principal prefers to tell a student his estimation of a problem rather than invite honest dialogue about it: "We all agree we are here to help," he says to Melinda in a feeble attempt to get to the source of her silence, "Let's start with these grades" (114).

It is little wonder that Melinda initially engages in silence as a form of self-erasure: "I wash my face in the sink until there is nothing left of it, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. A slick nothing" (45)." She truly has no intimate adult relationships to sustain or validate her—something, we can be sure, that happens to many adolescents. But despite her lack of viable resources, Melinda possesses some important impressions of how to act when the question of her moral obligation to others is at stake. This is a significant point in understanding how she comes to her own agency, for if she does not maintain her ability to care for others in positive, meaningful, and effective ways, she can never completely recover her ability to take the best care of herself. That care involves the import of self-realization every bit as much as it does the censoring required for self-protection. The obvious example of this is seen in how Melinda handles the situation she finds herself in with her ex-best friend, Rachel. Though Rachel hasn't acted at all as a friend might be expected to, Melinda never hesitates to concern herself for Rachel's well being. When she learns that Rachel is about to start dating Andy Evans, Melinda finds herself at a moral junction. Now she must navigate not only through the ordeal of her own rape, but must also consider Rachel's precarious position. What has been an isolated, private dilemma suddenly attains a community dimension.

Gilligan ascertains that in the transition of a crisis of experience women will either retreat into themselves, thinking only about the precautions necessary to insure their own safety, or they will reflect more broadly on who else the experience affects, exhibiting an active ethics of care and consideration for others who may also be impacted by the situation (*Voice* 123). She calls the "retreat from care to concern with survival" a "nihilistic position", one concerned only with an "ultimate self-protection stance" (*Voice* 126). In Melinda's situation many, perhaps most, would only be concerned with protecting themselves from future pain at the

hands of Andy Evans; indeed, sympathetic readers would never actively fault her for doing so. I say "actively" because I can't help but believe that for many readers there would remain a nagging sense of moral neglect if Melinda were to be so caught up in safe-guarding herself, that she would leave Rachel to her own fate. She certainly has every reason to do so. When her first two attempts to warn Rachel about Andy fail, Melinda risks whatever reserve of friendship she has left with Rachel to say that Andy is dangerous and will hurt her. Rachel's response is brutally harsh and stinging: "Liar!....I can't believe you. You're jealous. You're a twisted little freak and you're jealous that I'm popular and I'm going to the prom and so you lie to me like this.... You are so sick" (Anderson 184).

In *Women and Evil*, Nel Noddings (1989) makes an interesting observation about this type of response, one that certainly seems to apply in the case of Rachel's unwillingness to believe Melinda. "Women who have attempted to speak on moral matters," says Noddings, "have often been effectively silenced by the accusation that speaking and thinking on such things automatically separates them from the feminine principle" (*Women* 5). In the context of Melinda's story, girlfriends are expected to support each other in snagging the older, cuter, jock-type guy; to insist that this kind of guy "is not what he pretends to be" (*Speak* 152), is heresy. Friends, as much as family and teachers, are not supportive of Melinda when she is not playing along with the feminine role assigned to her. Though she has longed to speak out about the rape over the course of the book, none of her friends ever provide any real opportunity to do so. How can they when they too are tethered to their own ascribed roles? Only Ivy, who, it should be noted, is doing her own growing in art class along with Melinda, is able to offer any genuine lifeline. "You're better than you think you are," she says (146), an affirmation that Melinda internalizes and is eventually able to act on.

Despite Rachel's ungracious reaction to the news about Andy, Melinda's overture of care is a breakthrough point for her. That she is still able to express care for others and recognize she is right in doing so frees her to care for herself in nurturing rather than destructive ways. The very next day she returns to the site of the rape and allows herself to take back some of what was stolen from her. "I have survived," she concedes (188). But she has done more than that. Exhausted, yet strengthened by her long ordeal, Melinda knows the very core of self has resurfaced: "A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for" (188-9). The seed Melinda tends is one that has been growing both in conscious and unconscious thought. In social studies class she reports on the suffragettes, recognizing that "Before [they] came along, women were treated like dogs . . . They were dolls, with no thoughts, or opinions, or voices of their own" (154). At home she works the spring soil, raking out the decaying and rotting leaves of fall, mulching the green shoots hidden under the bushes, and readying the ground for planting. As the calluses toughen on her hands, Melinda becomes strong enough to "arm-wrestle some demons" (180). The icy pain that has kept her frozen and rigid, that has isolated her from her own evolving life, starts to

melt and crack, like the winter clay beneath her feet. "I don't feel like hiding anymore" (192), Melinda admits to herself. "I can grow" (198).

As teachers, it is essential we think about the messages in the texts we offer our students. If we are to provide a means for them to understand their lives in ways that help them process it while experiencing it, we must give them examples of characters their own age who do just that. We must also recall our own adolescence, what we feared, what we needed, what we misunderstood about our capabilities and evolving selves. Young adult texts can help. In my own adolescence I never once thought the reading I did was meant to teach me anything immediate about myself or my world, nor even that it could. Most of the texts put before me held interesting and sometimes puzzling information about the world, but never came close to the personal experience I carried inside. My affinity for what I was told to read in school was purely aesthetic. The characters bore little relationship to anyone in my own life, and at the most, they only engaged me with adult ideas I couldn't totally understand, but which fit my image of a cruel and unrelenting universe. Books such as *Speak* can free our students from such limited reading experiences. They can enhance an understanding of the power of self-creation by providing a knowledge of the world that opens up possibilities even while admitting adversity and hapless circumstance. By adding such books to school libraries and to lists of optional classroom texts, teachers can provide public spaces that support healthy inner dialogues.

In our society women are often conditioned to bear their griefs, burdens, and fears in a legacy of silence. They have been socialized to believe that to speak out is to risk betrayal of what amounts to nothing more than a patriarchal construct of femininity. Anderson helps young readers recognize that there are healthier feminine alternatives requiring a strength that keeps the lifelines of communication and connection with one's self and others open. She demonstrates that if women are to enact consistently a life of their own

choosing, they must overcome the silences that girdle them least those silences squeeze out the very breath of life. As a woman, I am thankful that writing such as Anderson's provides our young women knowledge of the world that helps them respond and not simply react to their circumstances. The oppression of silence which generations of women have stoically accepted is now being challenged publicly and becoming better understood privately as well. It is a forward-looking revelation that seeks to make certain that another generation of young women is not quietly left behind.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. New York: Farrar Straus, Giroux Press, 1999.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, second edition, 1993, original, 1982.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." In *Women, Creativity, and the Arts*. Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane and Ebersole, Lucinda (Eds.) New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997, pp.203-206.
- Noddings, Nel. *Women and Evil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Elaine O'Quinn is an Assistant Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She teaches courses in young adult literature, issues in the teaching of English, and secondary methods.