Robyn L. **Schiffman**

Melinda and Merryweather High:

Parallel Identity Narratives in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

Above all, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999) highlights identity as a pivotal theme. But it is not only Melinda who searches for herself: Merryweather High School and several other characters get named, renamed, or nicknamed through the course of the novel. Though Anderson's novel may fit the model of the protagonist searching for his or her identity (and this certainly describes a majority of both children's and young adult novels), this conventionality goes beyond the protagonist. As Melinda figures out who and what she is, so, too, does the school; after a protracted battle, Merryweather High settles on its mascot—something that unites most of the student body and allows Melinda to feel part of something, anything, during the school year.

Published in 1999, *Speak* and its author have received widespread praise, and attention in scholarly journals has been more frequent, sophisticated, and theoretically informed. Authors such as Elaine O'Quinn and Janet Alsup use their own subject position, as teachers and as women who were once young girls, to see how *Speak* is a manual or guide for young women of today navigating their lives. Janet Alsup also claims that books like *Speak* must be taught to young people. For her, teaching *Speak* is not just about reaching out to women; it might also encourage a more "empathetic" student to reach out to those who are outcast or to take action when violence is observed (p. 168).

Mark Jackett (2007) uses *Speak* as a way to get high school freshman talking about unspeakable and uncomfortable topics such as sexual assault and underage drinking. Michael R. Anthony's master's thesis from 2004 discusses *Speak* as part of a study on teen angst. Don Latham's article from 2006 uses the lens of Queer Studies to see how Melinda's story is a "coming out" story by looking at metaphoric and literalizations of her closet(s) and ways in which the novel reimagines heterosexist ideologies. Chris Magee (2009) reconsiders how the novel is more than just an "empowerment narrative," following several critics' attempts to read in *Speak* ideas from *Reviving Ophelia* (a link Anderson herself suggests in an *ALAN* piece [Anderson, 2000]).

Barbara Tannert-Smith reveals how *Speak* engages with other narratives of trauma, though her most compelling observation concerns the use of fairy tale language she observes in the novel (and how YA fiction often reproduces the fairy tale narrative even as it construes that narrative as modern or new). Lisa Detora (2006) presents a Marxist reading of *Speak* in her discussion of suburban consumerism in two young adult novels. And finally, Linda Oatman High (2010) illuminates images of hope in several of Anderson's novels and includes an interview with the author.

This chronicle lists items distinct from the many reviews of the novel and interviews with Anderson in periodicals as varied as the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *School Library Journal,* and *Publisher's Weekly*. These authors' critical accounts have launched serious study of Anderson's first novel, which has been increasingly listed on high school and college syllabi. In this article, I hope to add to that discussion by delving into what I see as a dual and complementary search for identity.

The Broader Search for Identity

I enter into these critical conversations about *Speak* by demonstrating how the novel chronicles the theme of identity more broadly: *Speak* is not just Melinda's powerful story, but the story of a whole school. Of course, I do not mean to take away the voice of the rape victim who, at first silenced, triumphs by finding her voice and saying no when attacked again. Rather, I aim to show that the parallel narratives of the identity search of Melinda and Merryweather School contribute to the success of each. Indeed, the parallel identity search employed by Anderson contributes to the text's wholeness, its richness, and its successful use in the classroom.

These parallel searches for identity also emerge as deliberate from the point of view of the structure of the novel. Linking Melinda's identity issues to those of the school as a whole creates a tightly woven novel which is stylistically and thematically coherent, cyclical, and evenly written and balanced. While the academic year, a very common time frame and background setting for young adult texts, anchors the novel and gives it order, the effect on readers—who likely participate in or at least remember the routinized landscape of high school—is to feel a familiar, perhaps even uncanny, relationship to the material, a sense of déjà vu that is positive and uplifting.

Speak's confessional and conversational style grounds the novel and creates thematic unity. One byproduct of such a tight and succinct narrative is that the novel teaches really well and easily, though that is not my main point here. It could also explain readers' deep attraction and support for the novel: it does not try to trick the reader by being cute, self-conscious, or ironic. Though it may have flaws, the novel just seems to work because these various registers and plot patterns come together. The story succeeds, in large part, due to Anderson's skillful manipulation of its neat and organic unity and its tightly woven structure and balance.

Merryweather High as a Parallel Character

Merryweather High School becomes a character in the novel. By charting the stages and stagings of the school's identity, as Melinda presents it, we see how she, even at her most outcast, feels part of something, part of a group, during this yearlong search. She identifies with the school. Once she finds her safe space, the closet, she begins to find her voice and shape her own identity at the school. She even develops a sense of posterity: the closet in some future time will aid and shelter another voiceless student. The school can help heal, in other words, but only when its mascot situation comes to a conclusion.

From the novel's very beginning, we see the convergence of these two identity narratives—Melinda's and the school's. Melinda begins her journey through ninth grade before school begins, before the first bell has even sounded: the journey starts on the humiliating bus ride to school in which she is friendless and, even though she is picked up first and has the whole bus to navigate, knows she has no place to sit. So, too, will the school begin its battle to find out what noun will follow its name. In fact, as early as the bottom of the first page of the novel, Melinda reveals the problem with the school mascot. When she arrives on school grounds that first day of ninth grade, she writes of passing the janitors who are "painting over the sign in front of the high school" (p. 3), the one that had read Merryweather Trojans. She goes on to explain that the school board objected to them being the Trojans because "Merryweather High—Home of the Trojans—didn't send a strong enough abstinence message" (p. 4). This observation begins not only the novel but also Melinda's reporting on the yearlong struggle between the students and the school board/administration/PTA over the name of the mascot, which changes several times through the course of the year. At different points in the novel, they become the Devils, the Tigers, the Wombats, the Hornets, and back to Trojans.

Speak is not just Melinda's powerful story, but the story of a whole school.

The search for the school mascot involves the reader of the novel as well. *Speak* is cleverly divided into that realia of middle and high school life—four marking periods—complete with a replica of Melinda's report card at the end of each section. There are chapter-like divisions within the marking periods, but they are not numbered, only titled, and usually with a pun to showcase Melinda's humor. For instance, Melinda introduces the second marking period, and the second

part of the novel, by invoking a pep rally cheer and simultaneously asking for audience participation: "GO _____ (FILL IN THE BLANK)!" (p. 49). This comment is important because the "fill in the blank" part is also in quotes, leading the reader to assume that after a short pause, that is literally the cheer that the students shout, modulated, perhaps, by the parenthesis and the capital letters.

She has been erased, but the whispering and pointing encourage her to exist, in fact demand that she has a named place, Melinda.

The "fill in the blank" moment by Anderson is clever: it simultaneously asks one to provide something in the presence of emptiness while noting that the very act of providing it is itself the joke and the answer. One could also literally speak out loud "GO FILL IN THE BLANK" while reading, thus making it a kind of cheer in and of itself: the school becomes the "fill in the blanks." The reader is not actually supposed to write anything in that space (early modern literary or postmodern texts even more intelligent and self-conscious than Anderson's might employ this as a technique), but the blankness also does create a mental bridge to Melinda's condition. As outcast, which she self-diagnoses as early as page four, she is blank, and she has been blanked, rendered invisible by the kids who populate her high school. This, too, starts on the first school bus ride to ninth grade and the first page of the novel, where people whisper and point at her all the while denying her any right to exist. She has been erased, but the whispering and pointing encourage her to exist, in fact demand that she has a named place, Melinda. In other words, they legitimize her even as they think they deny her (an) identity.

Melinda begins to find comfort in this forced invisibility, and she even begins to seek it out, although she can never really be invisible: it is what causes her to head to the hospital when she plays hooky from school. "The hospital is the perfect place to be invisible," Melinda says (p. 111). Since she cannot be invisible, she opts to try for unseen and unheard. She plays at being sick throughout the novel, so it comes as no surprise that when she skips school and misses the mall stop on the bus because she fell asleep, she turns to the one place where people are not playing at being sick, they really are sick. She is reassured by her own health and quickly tires of the hospital smell and ambiance: "I put the gown back. There is nothing wrong with me. These are really sick people, sick that you can see" (p. 113). Her muteness is not only a function of her literal inability to speak, but also of her need to blend in and not cause any more trouble, even among the staff at school.

She meets Mr. Neck, whom Melinda first calls a predator, the first day of school at an assembly when he has to tell her to sit. Later, as the teacher in her social studies class, he remembers the incident from earlier in the day and again directs where she will sit: "I've got my eye on you," he says, "Front row" (p. 7). Melinda will also be under Mr. Neck's observation at detention or MISS—Merryweather In-School Suspension. Before she is even named to him, he marks her as trouble, which she is not. Though she tries, Melinda is not anonymous and exists even as a freshman even on her first day.

The search for a mascot continues while Melinda both tries and does not try to fit in at school. After Halloween, the school board christens the school the Tigers, not liking the religious and behavioral implications of the Devils. Melinda then notes that a very successful PR campaign run by the Ecology Club, complete with posters of the endangered species, succeeds in removing Tigers as the official mascot. The school then has a democratic assembly to come up with a new mascot; this results in a schoolwide election to choose from the Bees, the Icebergs, the Hilltoppers, and the Wombats (p. 50). The Wombats receive the most votes (though only 53 out of 1,547 students vote [p. 69]). Principal Principal, Melinda's nickname for the Principal whose name we never learn, decides to get rid of the Wombats and to do away with democracy altogether: they become the Merryweather Hornets by decree. Then the PTA starts a petition to get rid of the Hornets because of the "Hornet Hustle" (p. 141), a cheer the cheerleaders chant at sporting events that is deemed inappropriate and even gets broadcast on the local news, embarrassing the school. But the student council counter-petitions the PTA to remain the Hornets. In the counter-petition, the Honors society, on behalf of the student body, documents the "psychological harm" the students have suffered due to "this

year's lack of identity" (p. 141). They sound persuasive. But they also ring true, given what Melinda suffers as a result of the sexual assault.

Melinda takes great care in relating the struggles the school endures to select a mascot, to have an identity. While her constant reporting of this issue can be seen as just one of many dominant social narratives she observes all around her—and part of the beauty of this book is its pinpoint accuracy in relating such social narratives—it is easy to read in the counter-petition Melinda herself: she becomes the psychologically harmed student body suffering through ninth grade.

As smart as she is, Melinda does not see these parallels she creates. There is evidence to suggest she understands the tree metaphor that peppers the novel and her art project (and that serves as the cover art for Penguin's Platinum Edition of the novel), and she certainly understands the lesson her art teacher, Mr. Freeman, imparts to her about Cubism—or at least she applies it smartly to her own life, even as Mr. Freeman knows very little about her. But as the mascot issue is debated and resolved, Melinda gradually finds herself part of a network of other ninth graders, of other high school students, who feel this injustice deeply, more so than Melinda, and who also feel disenfranchised by the administration and the school board who have abandoned democratic ideals and activities (such as the election) in favor of what can only feel like tyranny to the young students. As the students rally around the school's lack of identity, Melinda will hesitatingly participate, while she also begins to find herself. Readers of the novel see the specific contours of this double identity search as we map Melinda's identity search onto the school's search.

Melinda reports on the events of the school's search for a mascot with her trademark irony and distance, yet her tone and language betray her: she cares and is as engrossed by this search for identity as any other student. "This is the only thing talked about at school," she reports, "especially during class" (p. 41). The students and Melinda do not seem to care about anything else as this discussion, the subsequent special forum, and the vote equalize the school. Though this struggle will have the greatest repercussions for the cheerleaders, of course, who have to keep trying to rhyme the new noun in new cheers, Melinda personalizes the school's search for a mascot, for a name.

The Quest to Belong

Though not an athlete or part of any after-school club or activity, Melinda enjoys this narrative of the school's identity search because she participates in the process, because it makes her feel part of something, anything. She attends the school forum to vote on the name, she regularly punctuates her narrative with updates on the name problem, and she finds in the school a version of her own search for an identity where nothing fits. Though she rather accidentally attends a basketball game when she stumbles upon the noise in the gym, she gets caught up in the display of camaraderie and the unaccustomed feeling of victory as the school wins by one point. Melinda comments on how infectious the feelings generated by the win are and how she became childlike in her shared glee. She says, "The noise of the gym pulls me in . . . I get caught up in the excitement and clap like a girl" (pp. 130–131). This excitement enables her to momentarily consider David Petrakis's offer to hang out at his house after the game for pizza (with both his parents home, he makes clear). But she does not go and ends up walking home instead, having a dialogue between her two selves, called Melinda One and Melinda Two, about whether she should have gone and about whether or not David had ulterior motives in asking her. The feeling of belonging is fleeting. It could have continued at David's house, but Melinda opts to cut it off.

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The idea of nothing fitting is both literal and metaphoric: Melinda remarks several times during the novel that she has outgrown her clothes. This leads her to go shopping at the discount department store where her mother works. She finds this humiliating because she can't afford the designer labels of the Marthas, and she doesn't have the sense of haute couture that Rachel/Rachelle adopts. She must also work there during school vacations, which marks Melinda as lower on the socioeconomic scale. With all that doesn't "fit," however, the symbolic search for the school's name does fit Melinda's search for herself

and her voice, and she notes each time a label or cause does not fit her. In the move from grades eight to nine, she has lost her clan, the Plain Janes, as each member (Rachel/Rachelle, Ivy, Nicole, and Jessica, who moved to Nevada and is never heard from again) gets reconstituted in the shuffle to high school. The girls recalibrate their social status after Melinda calls the police from Kyle Rodger's party. Her friends don't know Andy raped her, and she winds up being ostracized, not fitting in anymore.

Picasso's Cubist refraction comes to represent the many Melindas in the novel who all comprise just one.

In an interview about the novel, Anderson comments on the notion of being clanless, on what it feels like to be Melinda. Anderson says, "When you don't know who you are, your clan provides an identity. When you don't have a clan, you're sunk" (Anderson, 2000, p. 26). Melinda continues to be an outcast (noted on page 4 of the novel), which both is and is not a legitimate category. Being outcast is a placeholder of nothing and no one, though it is a label, obviously.

Melinda is famous throughout the school, even though her old friends will not talk to her and food wrappers and food are thrown at her. Everyone else gets sorted into predictable high school categories. Melinda names them all: "We fall into clans: Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas, Suffering Artists, Thespians, Goths, Shredders" (p. 4). Clan activity is mostly observed in the cafeteria, where who you sit with and where you sit determine not only the conversation of others but also (re)defines the social structure, status, and network of your place within high school. And most clan members sit with each other, reinforcing their status as entities with little entry or movement possible (either in or out).

As ninth grade continues and Heather, Melinda's lunchtime seatmate and one-time friend, dumps her, Melinda begins to lunch in the Art Room as a way of avoiding the public humiliation of being clanless and friendless. Melinda is sunk, trying to revive her clan all novel long through her attempts to talk to Rachel/Rachelle and to connect with Ivy and Nicole in art class and gym class, respectively. The clan does in fact get reconstituted, but it takes all year. It is significant that Nicole, who has become part of the jock clan, is one of the lacrosse-playing girls who open the door to the closet at the end of the novel when Andy attacks Melinda again.

The clan plays a critical role here, in that Nicole finds and rescues Melinda, Rachel/Rachelle is the first person Melinda tells about the rape (she writes it in a note to her in the library, partly to warn her about Andy who has in the meantime become Rachel's boyfriend), and art bonds Ivy and Melinda after they run into each other at the mall during spring break when they are both working on their assignment for Mr. Freeman. This movement of reconstitution and coming full circle does not seem forced in the novel at all, even though it may sound it. (It is a cliché of sorts to neatly wrap up several narrative strands that involve solving the problems of teen angst.) In fact, it is a natural progression of Melinda's growth and newborn (or newfound) identity and a productive, rather than trite, novelistic tactic.

A Girl by Any Other Name

So who is Melinda? Even Principal Principal, in the meeting with Melinda's parents, calls her Melissa (p. 114). Melinda is also called Mel by David Petrakis, Mellie by Anderson in her "Speaking Out" interview (p. 26), and Melinda One and Melinda Two in some of her own internal dialogues. Rather than view the latter example as any type of psychopathology, we see Melinda's dialogue with her two selves as a real expression of tension and concern about whether or not to go to David's house after the basketball game. When Melinda has this dialogue with her two selves at this moment in the novel, it comes across as in character and perfectly ordinary within the narrative. She is pulled in both directions, wanting to go and be social and wanting to retreat into herself.

Picasso's Cubist refraction comes to represent the many Melindas in the novel who all comprise just one. Even Melinda may be confused about who she is at points. Rachel/Rachelle has certainly grown up in the transition to high school: she is dating a senior, wears make up, and hangs out with the foreign exchange students (who noticeably increase her cool factor). Melinda, by contrast, still lives in a childishly

decorated room (a place Heather cannot wait to redecorate) and recalls longingly the childhood memories when Rachel/Rachelle was just Rachel.

While playing hooky from school at the mall, Melinda further indicates that she just wants "to be in fifth grade again" (p. 99), presumably a time when things were simpler. A whole other part of her journey, though it is muted in the novel, chronicles that transition between middle/junior high and high school. In many ways, Melinda, though now technically sexually experienced, still childishly clings to her past and her innocence. This is in direct contrast to Rachel/Rachelle, to Mr. Neck, gym class, lab partners you may or may not trust, and the high school cafeteria, all of which require navigation and survival skills Melinda has not quite mastered yet.

Almost every character in the school suffers a nickname bestowed by Melinda, except a handful of teachers: Mrs. Keen, the biology teacher; Mr. Stetman, the Algebra teacher; and the gym teacher who wants Melinda to trade her successful foul-shooting secret to the boys' team for an A in gym. In fact, Melinda's use of nicknames gives rise to many of the comic moments in the novel. Kids and authority figures alike get named or renamed by Melinda, often because of a personal tic or characteristic, sometimes just because of their function. I have already mentioned the social studies teacher, Mr. Neck; English is taught by Hairwoman (who does have a transformation [haircut] at the end and should rightly earn a new nickname), and THE BEAST, or IT, Andy Evans. Principal Principal, Guidance Counselor, and Librarian are other adults who populate Melinda's world and are defined by their roles. Rachel becomes Rachelle in an attempt to be cool and European (having moved on from the Plain Janes to the exchange students, she must Europeanize herself and thus transform her name and identity; she also speaks French or something Melinda thinks approximates it). Though Mr. Freeman does not technically have a nickname, his name itself hints at the role he plays in the novel by dictating his purpose. The comic effect of the Principal's name being repeated twice each and every time he appears initially registers the lack of respect Melinda and the other kids have for him. He is also just another nameless figure of authority.

Melinda does not escape the (re)naming. She, too, has been renamed by herself, with help from others. The novel opens with Melinda's identity at once lost, by her own pronouncement: "I am Outcast" (p. 4), she says on the novel's second page, with a capital O. The novel's insistence upon and attention to naming and renaming equalizes the students, faculty, and the school itself because no one escapes. Anderson demonstrates how the search for name, for identity, is caught up in other searches. Everyone's name seems to fit—either how they see themselves or how others see them—and the clan-like registry we observed earlier reinforces status and functionality.

The novel's insistence upon and attention to naming and renaming equalizes the students, faculty, and the school itself because no one escapes.

Melinda's own reading list—*The Scarlet Letter* and her extracurricular Halloween reading of Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance—participates in the larger identity searches as well and demonstrates, at least in part, the other names Melinda tries on. Links between Hawthorne's branded Hester Prynne and Melinda seem altogether obvious, and this overt parallel may indeed be one of the novel's flaws as we compare Hester's stoicism and Melinda's. *Dracula*, too, though perhaps less so, is centrally concerned with identity, public shame, and accountability as it revolves around primal fear—the threat of the Other to the white, privileged, European male of the late Victorian period. Melinda's reading registers her ability to see her own noticeable struggle in an established literary tradition, one that may legitimize her even as she is mostly silent in her commentary on these works.

Melinda's naming of herself also helps to set the plot in motion. Children's and young adult literature chronicle plenty of outcast protagonists who just do not seem to fit in with any crowd for superficial or documented reasons. Though there does not have to be a reason for Melinda to be an outcast in ninth grade, there is. She called the cops and broke up the party she and Rachel went to during the summer before ninth grade. She reports she did not intend to get people in trouble; she just did not know what to do after being raped.

That night, Melinda walked home to an empty

house. Indeed, one of the great mysteries of the novel concerns where her parents were that night. Melinda reports that both their cars were gone, leading the reader to believe that not only were they out of the house, but they went out separately. This is never referred to again, but it does clue the reader into the home dynamics of the Sordino family. Though not the perfect picture of a functional and loving family, the Sordinos do not seem on the edge of divorce, even though Melinda speculates that they would be if she had not been born (p. 70). (This, of course, is a very common young adult response: to have a fantasy about your parents possibly divorcing or even that you are an orphan, which Melinda also thinks [p. 147].) She does indicate she is just like them: she is "an ordinary drone dressed in secrets and lies" (p. 70).

As Melinda's sense of identity begins to emerge, she also gives her janitor's closet an identity that reflects her own.

So where were they that night? Melinda does not seem to question where they were, suggesting that she does not care and that perhaps this kind of behavior from them is normal or common. The absented parents are not even silent witnesses to their daughter's trauma, though they do buy her paints for Christmas, and Melinda remarks that they must have noticed her interest in drawing. Melinda is outcast at home as well; literally, she is as alone at home as she was the night of the rape.

In the bleachers at the pep rally, which Heather, the new girl, talks Melinda into attending early in the novel, Melinda is once again reminded of the collective anger of her schoolmates and the trouble she caused. Heather innocently introduces Melinda to other kids she of course already knows. When the girl sitting behind Melinda overhears her name, she begins to push and dig her knees into Melinda's back, telling her that her brother got arrested and lost his job because of what Melinda did. Though at this point in the novel the reader does not know the real reason Melinda called the cops, we trust and like her enough to give her the benefit of the doubt. The bleacher moment is significant because it clues Heather in to the kind of new friend she has in Melinda—one people hate and will ignore even as they pay attention to her. We also recognize that whatever it was that happened will prove to be the novel's mystery, and we begin to key in on clues to enable its solving. Melinda also oddly agrees to go with Heather to the pep rally against her best judgment, perhaps harboring some kind of childish fantasy about collective school spirit and her role as a student with friends. This gets dashed repeatedly and almost immediately and serves to make the reader feel sorry for Melinda.

When Melinda first finds her janitor's closet—what will become her safe space until Andy Evans finds her and attacks her there—she also connects the physical space with the idea of identity and naming. She says, "The closet is abandoned—it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me" (p. 26). What is useless and functionless becomes the proper fit for her, in her estimation. Decaying, moldy, and smelly, untouched for years, this closet is where Melinda begins to find herself.

Strength and Hope in Identity

As Melinda's sense of identity begins to emerge, she also gives her janitor's closet an identity that reflects her own. She transforms the closet into a lighter and brighter space of hope, triumph, and resistance; ultimately, it will become the only place she can comfortably sleep. It will also become her own private art gallery as her projects occupy its shelves and her drawings line its walls, a reminder of her yearlong creativity, struggle, but ultimate productivity in art class. When Melinda is ready to say goodbye to ninth grade and move out from or out of her closet, she considers leaving it, now new and safe, to the next inhabitant. Minutes before Andy's second attack, which Melinda of course cannot foresee, she says "Who knows, some other kids may need a safe place to run to next year" (p. 192). Even on the brink of Andy's second attack as the closet is in danger of becoming unsafe, Melinda saves herself and the closet by saying no and fighting back. She is also protecting the innocence and purity of the closet, which is under attack just as Melinda is. The seeds of strength grow in the face of an identity to fight for.

Anderson's novel offers a spin on the common identity search in young adult and children's literature by chronicling a host of such searches that parallel and interact with Melinda's. Studying the multiple

identity searches in the novel reveals how tightly wound and symmetrically plotted the novel is. Though that might sound like a criticism, it is not: because of these cycles of narrative, the novel works well with students who perform close readings and key into these kinds of noticing patterns in literary texts. Given Melinda's own relationship to close reading, one would think she would have appreciated analyzing *Speak* in her own English class under the guidance of a reformed and transformed Hairwoman. It would probably fare better than "Poor Nathaniel" (p. 100), who gets beat up a bit in Melinda's class discussion of his *Scarlet Letter*.

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