

# 1

## *vocal critics*

Introductions to books can be revealing, especially books of feminist criticism. Nancy K. Miller, in *Getting Personal*, entitles her Preface "Feminist Confessions: The Last Degrees Are the Hardest," where she writes: "Most of the chapters of this book were, at least originally, occasional. I have never really understood why occasional writing is held to be a deconsidered genre. . . . (Actually, I do understand, but I don't share the prejudice. I prefer the gossipy grain of situated writing to the academic sublime)" (11). Introducing her work *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes her palpable engagement with "words, my passion for the daily struggle to render them concrete in the world and on paper, to render them flesh . . ." (Preface). Approaching the corporeal dimensions of writing a bit differently, Judith Butler prefaces her work, *Bodies That Matter*, by describing a question continually asked of her: "In the recent past, the question was repeatedly formulated to me this way: 'What about the materiality of the body, Judy?'" I took it that the addition of 'Judy' was an effort to dislodge me from the more formal 'Judith' and to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorized away" (ix). What kinds of writing and bodies might be dislodged, assembled and reassembled? Eve Sedgwick introduces her collection of critical essays, *Tendencies*, by describing not only their "queer" subjects, but the various "queer" and "crossed" forms of writing she engages: "the autobiographical narrative, the performance piece, the atrocity story, the polemic, the prose essay that quotes poetry, the obituary" (xiv). The desire for this mosaic of prosy, embodied, theoretical, autobiographical, polemical, poetic essays would seem to fuel the passion of much feminist criticism. Rachael DuPlessis opens her book *The Pink Guitar* with these words: "I began to write essays, with an abrupt startled need, in 1978; the first was 'Psyche, or Wholeness' . . . in which elements of guarded, yet frank autobiography, textual analysis, and revisionary myth-making suddenly fused into a demanding voice, with a mix of ecstatic power over cultural materials and mourning for the place of the female in

culture. The multiple pressures of living out feminist thinking led me again and again to this non-objective, polyvocal prose . . ." (vii).

Almost as if commenting on these messages about feminist critical writing, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joers and Elizabeth Mittman introduce their collection, *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, by wondering if "the essay—with its openness, its accessibility, its sense of initiated dialogue, its emphasis on the particular and the concrete, its stress on dynamic process—could become an alternative form for feminist critical writing . . ." (20). Something in me wants to reply, "What do you mean *could* become an alternative form?" We seem already to be very much there, and yet, where exactly is this site of writing, and what are its writerly contours and contexts? Responding both analytically and self-consciously to such questions, various critics have described this "alternative" mode in different terms—as distinctly postmodern, or reflective of multicultural traditions, as just plain personal or enticingly queer, or simply "feminine" and appropriately intimate. I want to account for it as a reworking of critical language instigated by the emergence of sound within the written word, and the effects produced by the oral and aural reverberations of language as they infuse writing and thought. For what the introductions to all these books reveal is the intense attention their authors devote to their own critical language, and the way this intensity builds from a sonorous and somatic engagement with words—gossipy and fleshy, dialogic, performative, polyvocal.

I have grown especially interested in the twists and turns of critical language since this genre of writing has itself become the site for questioning and contesting so many assumptions about language. The conspicuous emergence of critical theory during the last three decades—to the delight of some and disgust of others—signals a wide-ranging inquiry into the very linguistic grounds we stand on. Words, metaphors, and signifiers churn away in this so-called linguistic turn of events, where language shapes the very theory that examines the construction and effects of language. Across the disciplines, the language that feeds critical traditions—in the diverse registers of philosophy, science, law, the humanities, and social sciences—has become conspicuously unstable material, vulnerable to deconstruction and an accompanying analysis of the cultural forces that give it shape and legitimacy. Discourse has moved to the forefront of our intellectual probings. In many ways, discourse has become *the* subject of theory.

With all this talk about language and discourse, it comes as no surprise that the very notion of literacy has grown into a hotly contested topic. Calls for reclaiming literacy—in terms of both writing skills and a

written record of knowledge—have attracted more than their fair share of attention in recent years, especially from conservative writers bent on preserving the kind of standardized language and cohesive knowledge described by E. D. Hirsch in his best-selling book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Should Know*. All the while, within the terrain of scholarly critique, which hardly seems to sell at all these days, literacy and literate traditions are neither standardized nor stable. Wlad Godzich, for example, in his book *The Culture of Literacy*, responds to those who would insist on a fairly standardized literacy by arguing that we must be aware of the “multiplicity of functions that language performs” (5). He describes “difference-sensitive theory” as that which recognizes a “cry,” not some universalizing and cohesive language, but those proliferating utterances that “can only sound and resound” (26).

Writing more specifically about such sounding literacy, Houston Baker argues that African-American scholarly writing should make room for “vernacular rhythms” and poetic “sounds.” Enacting this language in his own criticism, Baker explains that his purpose is not to replace European traditions of literacy with Afrocentric ones, but to produce what he calls “supraliteracy,” the opening of spaces “within linguistic territories” that would augur the rearrangement of literacy itself. The result is an exceptionally mixed mode of critical writing, language that incorporates lines from Shakespeare and Ralph Ellison, sounds from gorillas and philosophical musings from Jacques Derrida, not to mention Baker’s own theoretical abstractions often rendered in rhythmic, poetic cadences—as when he offers this jazzy description of supraliteracy as an event that “changes a dualistic Western joke and opens a space for the sui generis and liberating sound of the formerly yoked” (382). Shunning the styles associated with a conventional critical writing, or for that matter with a rebellious sounding orality, Baker’s supraliteracy is nonetheless doggedly critical. He keeps his ear tuned for the workings of language and thought.

Baker and Godzich, as we shall see, are hardly the only theorists who approach concepts of written language by shifting our attention to the dynamics of the oral. But in interesting ways, they—along with Hirsch—help me frame my own reading of feminist theory and its sonorous linguistic conduits. For I sense that something is happening with the language of feminist theory, a kind of discursive shift in the midst of the linguistic turn, one which opens spaces “within linguistic territories” for sound and for the “resounding” meanings that have peculiar and crucial bearings on feminist thought. Hirsch does not even mention feminist thought in his claims about cultural literacy (though he includes the word “feminism” under the letter “f” in his list of terms

that "Literate Americans Know," preceded by the entry "female of the species is more deadly than the male"). Godzich acknowledges that his book contains absolutely "no engagement with feminism" (33) because his early experiences with the feminist movement have made him question its racial biases. Meanwhile Baker, who elsewhere devotes important critical attention especially to African-American women writers, here understandably focuses entirely on the racial dimensions of a sounding language.

Thus the frame that these three very different critics construct both sets up parameters and, at the same time but in different ways, ignores the large and looming questions surrounding feminism and language. As a result, our conceptions of cultural literacy are not only woefully incomplete, but miss the opportunity to gauge the effects of feminist writing that enacts the very kinds of sounds identified by Baker and Godzich. And so I readily use their frame as an entrance into feminist linguistic territory, a passageway that leads through the looking glass and into the audible sphere of feminist theory. Let me begin by suggesting that this enactment of sound in writing works like a voice.



In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating . . . that element is the song. . . . Why this privileged relationship with the voice?

—Hélène Cixous ("Laugh" 251)

I guess the same invitation made me want my essay "rendered" in the writerly sense—wrought, maybe verging on wrought up. . . . (I remember how much I cheered up . . . when I realized one result was that I could start with a sentence in iambic pentameter. . . .) I wanted to make it inescapable that the piece *was* writerly.

—Eve Sedgwick ("Against Epistemology" 134)

What is it about voice and writing, vocalization and writerliness, that so distinctively fuels much feminist theory? In this opening chapter, I want to ponder the connections between oral sounds and written words, the ways in which voice can insinuate itself in writing. Critical theorists, after all, are highly literate creatures—and often notoriously "writerly" creatures as well. How might we turn an ear toward the aural tenor of this writing, listening for messages in the very suggestive and complicating sounds of language?

I pose these questions because I believe that we need to understand feminist critical writing as something more than personal or subjective, and as something that unfolds more complexly and more sensuously than voice erupting from silence. Not that I object to these terms, or that I discount the historical reality of women's diverse and long-enforced silences within literate traditions. But feminist writing, especially as it takes shape within the contemporary scene of criticism and theory, is complicated, critically complicated, by the mixture of different orders and modes of language. And voice, too, is a complicated concept. Voice can proclaim, as Cixous insists women's voices must when they infuse writing and sustain "the power moving us" ("Laugh" 251). But voice also has a way of insinuating itself in writing—as Sedgwick's "writerly" iambic pentameter line alerts us not so much to her ideas, but as she explains, to the "unacknowledged codependency between the institutions and disciplines of humanistic thought, even the chastest of them, and the ostensibly marginalized practice of the florid writerliness of many of their founders, catalysts, and celebrities" ("Against Epistemology" 135).

I get Sedgwick's message, but more than that, I hear other meanings evoked in this passage: her choice, superlative term, "chastest," urges me to conjoin the notions of sexual and linguistic purity, to wonder if this purity has been linked to institutional and humanistic thought that strives for communication through pure, untainted language. Her own carefully paced sentence neatly combines two clauses, but then complicates their meanings: a reader must search for messages not only by putting all the parts together, but following the suggestions and echoes of related ideas—from "codependency" to "catalysts" and "celebrities." I find myself considering, and reconsidering, exactly who is dependent on what, pondering the divergent claims of chaste and florid language, disciplined and florid thought. And my own thinking begins to move—to subjects hardly unrelated to Sedgwick's claim, but different from the particular topics she discusses.

I recall, for example, the notions of "writerly" and "readerly" language described by Roland Barthes, where to be "writerly"—far from Sedgwick's notion—is to be authoritative and definitive in one's use of writing, but where to be "readerly" is to write precisely for the "plural" meanings of words. The vocal quality of such writing is unmistakable in Barthes, who suggests that even determinate modes of writing invite us to "listen to the text as an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices, on different wavelengths and subject from time to time to a sudden *dissolve*, leaving a gap that enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to another, without warning: the writing is

set up across this tonal instability . . . which makes it a glistening texture of ephemeral origins" (S/Z 41–42). Perhaps responding to such "sudden dissolve," I shift my own point of view to Virginia Woolf, thinking about her novel *The Waves*, her eventual suicide by drowning—and recall how she captured her own ambivalent feelings about the great repositories of such texts when, standing in front of the university libraries of England, she pondered "how unpleasant it is to be locked out" while also reflecting "how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (*A Room of One's Own* 24). Am I reading too much into Sedgwick's sentence? Or am I simply reading it for all its "tonal instability," its sounding, rebounding suggestibility? Am I being excessively oral, or am I tuning into the waverings of the written word?

We know that poetry and novels, not to mention other modes of literary writing, have long been infused with the energies of oral, sounding language, in myriad traditions and contexts.<sup>1</sup> But the specific genres of critical and theoretical writing have largely kept the audible resonances of language at bay. As Joan Scott, describing conventional traditions for social scientific prose, says, "Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects . . . writing is then put at its service. . . . Writing is reproduction, transmission . . ." ("Evidence" 365–66). In short, disciplined writing should be transparent; thoughts must be made clear—as in, "I see what you mean." Sounds and metaphors that blur this clarity must be sharpened, focused, "put in the service" of what we can be seen and known. Thus scholarly precision, critical insight, theoretical mastery.

Then again, what might happen if knowledge and writing were not so tightly, exclusively linked to vision? Donna Haraway, writing about "Situated Knowledges," wants to hold onto to vision, which she describes as a "much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse" (*Simians* 188). And yet the kind of vision she has in mind resembles more the changing, refracting qualities of light that Scott, as I described in the opening of this book, associates with the dimming and reflective medium of language. Instead of clear, focused, universal vision, Haraway urges us to hone in on "partial perspective." Her examples of such vision actually run the gamut of sensory experience:

These are lessons which I learned in part walking with my dogs and wondering how the world looks without a fovea and very few retinal cells for colour vision, but with a huge neural processing and sensory area for smells. It is a lesson available from photographs of how the world looks to the compound eyes of an insect, or even from the camera eye of a spy satellite or the

digitally transmitted signals of space probe–perceived differences “near” Jupiter that have been transformed into coffee table colour photographs. (*Simians* 190)

There is vision here, to be sure, refracted through the eyes of an insect, differently shaded through the eyes of her dogs, who are of course seen through the eyes of Haraway. But then we also have her dogs smelling their way to knowledge of the world. And we have those “digitally transmitted signals” from Jupiter, coming to us via a translation of sound waves into numbers. Is all this vision, or vision negotiated through an assortment of sensory devices? And if Haraway’s dogs are like mine, then there is the question of their barking, their vocal response to stimuli, visual or otherwise, not to mention their intense sense of hearing virtually everything that moves—all of which play a part in the sensory ways we come to know our worlds.

And then there is the question of Haraway’s own critical language, its lively motion, its relentless pace. Describing her frustration with philosophers who believe in a fixed scientific objective vision, she writes:

Of course, my designation of [such philosophers] is probably just a reflection of residual disciplinary chauvinism from identifying with historians of science and too much time spent with a microscope in early adulthood in a kind of disciplinary pre-oedipal and modernist poetic moment when cells seemed to be cells and organisms, organisms. *Pace*, Gertrude Stein. But then came the law of the father and its resolution of the problem of objectivity, solved by always already absent referents, deferred signifieds, split subjects, and the endless play of signifiers. Who wouldn’t grow up warped? (*Simians* 184)

Something about Haraway’s prose *sounds* like it does indeed generate from a pre-oedipal and poetic moment. She seems as willingly “tangled” in her language as Patricia Williams is when she describes being caught up in “cables and connectors,” in “bubbled words” (208–9). To be “warped,” in this sense, is to realize that your language always means more than you say. My question for Haraway is this: How does one recall and engage these excessive meanings, the “absent referents, deferred signifieds . . . the endless play of signifiers”? Don’t words themselves echo the sounds and meanings of other absent or deferred words? When, for instance, I read “*Pace*, Gertrude Stein,” I can almost hear some of Stein’s own “endless play of signifiers” in Haraway’s very language. It is as if a kind of rhythmic, endlessly suggestive poetic

language pulses within Haraway's critical prose. I can hear its beat, and *through these sounds*, I can *think* of subjects that are absent, deferred, now recalled and tangled into what I read, into what is written.

We might say that the sounds of Stein's rhythmic and repitious writing haunt Haraway's critical prose. Indeed we might simply say that sound itself haunts the written word.



Even displaced, set aside or considered as a remainder, enunciation cannot be dissociated from the system of statements. . . . [W]e can distinguish between writing's effort to master the "voice" that it cannot be but without which it nevertheless cannot exist, on the one hand, and the illegible returns of voices cutting across statements and moving like strangers through the house of language, like imagination.

—Michel de Certeau (159)

When I read Haraway, when I read myriad expressions of feminist theory, I sense something oral and vocal wandering around in their sentences, "moving" very much "like strangers through the house of language." Of course the oral qualities of language have always become audible whenever writers exploit the sounding properties of the written word—in varied literary and especially poetic modes of writing, as I've suggested, and often as well in conversational and dialogic prose, even unintentionally in writing that strives to be transparent but where words and phrases speak their own suggestive sounds in spite of the text's purported meanings.

But orality itself is a topic whose history and ramifications extend far beyond the written word—into the study of diverse oral cultures, and into diverse theories about the different registers of spoken and written language, oral and literate practices. Consider Walter Ong's pivotal study of *Orality and Literacy*, which synthesized an enormous amount of research devoted to the distinctly oral language practices of such cultures and groups as the Aborigines of Australia, narrative poets in parts of eastern Europe, the Lakota Sioux in North America, African-American preachers and gospel singers, the Luba in Zaire, medieval troubadours throughout Europe, and the Homeric Greeks. Synthesizing this research, Ong developed a list of the peculiar "psychodynamics" of orality sustained largely through the powers of sound in cultures without written texts to store information. Among these characteristics of oral language are its additive, aggregative, and redundant qualities (contrasted with the sparse linear construction of writing) that foster rich oral expression; its agonistically toned expression and its empa-



thetic and participatory qualities that reflect the immediacy of interpersonal relations (contrasted with the distancing that writing tends to foster); its immersion in present events and its closeness to human experience (contrasted with written facts or ideas divorced from human activity). The effects of such language are to promote thought that is situational rather than abstract, that is tied to immediate events rather than the product of distanced, analytic reflection and speculation. Again and again, Ong emphasizes the peculiar effects of sound as a linguistic medium, one that stores information and continually reshapes that information through rhythmic vocal utterances. As such, sounding language bears a peculiar and crucial relationship to thought, which becomes a dynamic product of sounding language.

Numerous scholars have variously echoed Ong's conclusions even while revising and adjusting his arguments.<sup>2</sup> Some of the more striking examples of this investigation into oral-literate contrasts would include Eric Havelock's work that links writing with the inception of philosophy and abstract thought in classical Greek culture; Jack Goody's arguments about how writing shaped modern social and bureaucratic systems, and about the "interface" of orality and literacy in diverse cultures; Ruth Finnegan's detailed observations on the complexity of communication and thought in numerous indigenous cultures; Marshall McLuhan's intriguing speculations about the oral dimensions of contemporary media technology; Deborah Tannen's linguistic analysis of the oral-literate continuum in conversation; John Miles Foley's investigations of oral performance; Jonathan Boyarin's collection of essays, which address the interactions of orality and textuality in the reading process; and in a more theoretical vein, Michel de Certeau's analysis of our "Scriptural Economy" and the ways in which it is permeated with the residual sounds of orality.

Could any or many of these theories about the distinctive qualities of oral language bear on the sounding qualities of feminist critical language? I would cautiously suggest that they do, and that what I call "hearing the O" relies to a large extent on the capacity to develop a sense for the sounds and nuances of the spoken word. But in reading feminist theory, we have obviously crossed over from oral to literate territory; and in listening for sounds *in writing*, we are obviously dealing with a peculiar intersection of the oral and literate. Thus I've found myself drawn to one particular and particularly fascinating dimension of research devoted to oral-literate contrasts: the effects of orality as it feeds, as it seeps into and permeates, the written word.

I believe that such a concern is of no small consequence in feminist theory, yet our awareness of the possible "residual sounds of orality" in

written language remains unconnected in any sustained way with the feminist inquiries into gender-based language differences, topics surveyed in such recent anthologies as *The Feminist Critique of Language* and *The Women and Language Debate*. It is not that such connections have gone completely unnoticed. Ong, for instance, has speculated that European women's exclusion from learned Latin for well over a thousand years must have influenced the style of women writers particularly as they contributed to the development of the novel and made it "more like a conversation than a platform performance" (160). In very different contexts, one can hardly miss the oral forces at play in Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic disposition" of language ("From One Identity"). Recently, Katie King has explored what she calls the "politics of the oral and the written" to argue for the inclusion of poetry, song, and story within the genres of feminist theory, and argues further that we need to pay attention to varied "writing technologies" that inform feminist and cultural literacies.<sup>3</sup> And as I have insisted throughout, myriad feminist claims about voice are rooted both metaphorically and materially in the oral resonances of language.

Yet what if we are dealing specifically with the language and genres of critical writing, with the sharp analysis and hefty abstractions of theory? I want to suggest that some appreciation for how sound works in oral language can help us approach this question by turning our sensory antennae to what is audible rather than purely visible in critical language and thought. For instead of looking at words on a page, people in oral cultures talk and listen, a distinction far more revolutionary than it may at first seem because of the remarkably different physical and psychological effects of sound and sight. While sight inevitably entails some distancing between observer and observed, the environment of sound tends to be one of immersion.<sup>4</sup> Some oralists suggest that sight becomes a dominant mode of sensation in literate cultures, and dissection and analysis accordingly become dominant means of response and thought; whereas in oral cultures, sound functions as a primary mode of sensation, and thought and analysis evolve through the continual retellings of narratives (Ong 72, Havelock 111).

But the argument can turn. The peculiar modes of sensation and thought associated with sound can blend into writing, as on a mobius strip, and language built on visual distance can turn into one of immersion, resonance, suggestibility. In his most recent study of oral works, for example, John Miles Foley advocates a "spectrum model" for understanding the connections and complicity of oral and literate language. Following this model, he suggests, we might study language

ranging "from the now rare situations in which writing has played no part whatsoever through the myriad intermediate cases where oral tradition and literacy intertwine in fascinating ways and on to the works composed by literate authors that nonetheless owe some debt to an originative oral tradition" (210–11).<sup>5</sup>

Adopting a similar tone, Eric Havelock, in an essay written just before his death in 1988, suggested that the myriad studies of orality to emerge during the past twenty years have not only redirected us to the spoken word, but have "provoked closer attention to its counterpart, the book, the printed text, the written word." Expanding on the significance of this move, he continued: "Far from going back to orality, what we can be invited to explore in depth are the new possibilities of literacy, a literacy of readers of communication by print, rather than literacy by voice" ("Equation" 18).

Among such studies he mentions are Elizabeth Eisenstein's investigations into the effects of print in reshaping culture, and also what he calls "the ways in which modern philosophies in their speculations have also occasionally brushed against the oralists' question, having viewed, perhaps reluctantly, the presence of oralism in the modern mind" ("Equation" 19). His specific references are to the Derridean "distrust" and deconstruction of writing, Heidegger's search "for hidden and deeper meanings concealed in textualized statements," Wittgenstein's movement away from a conception of "language as the instrument of logical clarity," and J. L. Austin's study of speech acts and the "syntax of performative speech" (17–19). To these I would add Foucault's ideas about the incessant "buzzing of discourse," Bakhtin's theories of the "dialogic" qualities of writing, Barthes's notion of *Writing Degree Zero* and its ceaseless "signifying" potential and "plentitude" (*WDZ* 48, *S/Z* 216)—his zero echoing the same sounds of the O that I discern in writing. These very sounds invite us "to listen to the text," as Barthes says, "as an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices" (*S/Z* 41–42).

In my own attempts to come to terms with what Havelock calls the "presence of oralism in the modern mind" (we might more accurately say the postmodern mind), the ideas of Michel de Certeau can particularly help to put us in touch with the residual traces of orality in writing, and to follow the actual "enactment" of oral language as it affects word and meaning. In his essays "The Scriptural Economy" and "Quotations of Voices," de Certeau explores the varied institutional effects of writing (isolation, classification, systematization, capital, the modern city, technocratic society, legal regulation), and the residual effects of orality as the spoken word "insinuate[s] itself into a text" as a

"reminiscence in the scriptural economy, a disturbing sound from a different tradition, and a pre-text for interminable interpretive productions" (155).

Yet these two orders of language—the scriptural and the vocal—are not, de Certeau insists, definitively opposed to each other. Far from that, within the scriptural economy they mutually affect each other, and in varied ways. At times, voice remains purely exterior to writing, such that the resulting discourse continually attempts to "multiply products that substitute for an absent voice . . ." (161). At other times, there emerges what de Certeau calls a "space for voices" in the text, where enunciation "disturbs and interferes with syntax . . ." (162). For example, he considers these different effects of sound in literary and scholarly writing: "The literary text is modified by becoming the ambiguous depth in which sounds that cannot be reduced to a meaning move about" (162); "In scholarly writing, it is nothing other than the return of voices through which the social body 'speaks' in quotation, sentence fragments, the tonalities of 'words,' the sounds they make" (163).

Of course I am precisely interested in this phenomenon of what happens in *scholarly* writing—this "return of voices," the way they move around, disturb, interfere, remain ambiguous. And I find myself especially drawn to the idea that they function as an "enunciation," an "enactment" of what is otherwise written about or described from some distance. For my sense is that while varied contemporary theorists have described this phenomenon, feminist theory is distinctive in the ways in which it enunciates these voices, enacts this language. When sounds enact meanings, de Certeau understands them as a "practice." I understand feminist theory as such a "practice," or to recall Rachael DuPlessis's evocative terms:

The practice of language. The anguish of language. The anger of language. (165)

When orality "insinuates itself" in the scriptural domain, voice becomes not some revolutionary cry that overthrows a staid and systematic literacy, but instead emerges as volatile, transitory, potentially disturbing and transforming practices *within* language that keep words and their references on the move. Thus "anguish" insinuates itself, through its very sound, into "language." Thus "language," echoing "anguish," is itself insinuated with "anger." Thus one word, one thought, resonates with and into another. Through sound, words move.



Talk to me  
 Three words  
 moving with heavy feet  
 across the open spaces

—Margaret Randall (*Dancing* 35)

If voice can insinuate itself in written language, then I would evoke Randall's invitation, "Talk to me," as urging us to make some very specific oral moves on the page and all its potential open spaces. For it is precisely these kinds of moves, I believe, that are enacted throughout feminist discourse. For example, Bakhtin's ideas about dialogic language—the "living utterance" that "cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads," which "cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (276)—shares more directly with the dialogic powers of oral communication than, say, Derrida's more abstract deconstructions of writing. But compared to either of these theorists, the lyrical prose of Hélène Cixous actually brings to, seizes within, critical writing the very "phonic and oral dimensions of language" that she describes: "But look, our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent. . . . Heterogeneous, yes" (*Laugh* 260). Bakhtin and Derrida write compellingly about the event; Cixous enacts it. Similarly, Patricia Williams's own critical narratives directly engage the kind of dialogic exchange that Bakhtin associates with the novel, making space for a critical heteroglossia, a critical social dialogue, in her analysis of the law:

"'But what's the book *about*?' my sister asks, thumping her leg against the chair impatiently.

'Howard Beach, polar bears, and food stamps,' I snap back. 'I am interested in the way in which legal language flattens and confines in absolutes the complexity of meaning inherent in any given problem . . .'" (6).

These kinds of expression—intense engagements with sound and rhythm, with dialogue, with the unfolding narrative of thought, "Howard Beach, polar bears, and food stamps"—mark the residual effects of oral language *within critical writing*. They share much with related critiques of logocentrism, but there is a direct engagement here—what de Certeau calls a "practice" and what DuPlessis would surely nod to as a distinctly "feminist practice"—that marks Williams's writing as different. We know that contemporary theorists talk endlessly about language, but what I've come to recognize more and

more is that feminist theorists are conspicuous for actually *talking* that language in their writing, for making the “practice” of language so conspicuous in their critical thought.

And yet, there is also something about the oral that might well make feminist scholars uneasy. We are, after all, a highly literate group with strong, albeit different, connections to the written word. What’s more, orality may signal certain danger zones within feminist criticism and theory—such as a lost realm of maternal origins that might be idealized as refuge from a paternalistic world, or a lost feminine language existing outside the phallic symbolic order. For many feminist scholars, the study of orality is simply foreign territory, more the terrain of anthropologists and folklorists than critics and theorists. For some, to enter into the worlds of oral tradition may risk the appropriation of cultures not our own; for others, aligning all women with oral language runs the risk of essentializing women and the language we claim.

All of these hesitations seem plausible to me, though hardly sufficient to warrant turning away from such a rich and suggestive field of inquiry. As I have said and will continue to say throughout this book, the feminist critics I bring together here delve into the process of transformation, not reclamation. Orality in their writing does not mark some distinctive order of language, but instead becomes a vehicle for instigating changes in language from within, through the medium of sound. This is not a story of return, but of rupture and reinvention. Besides, oral language holds no golden key to liberation, offers no absolute refuge from any variety of beliefs and ideas and ideologies—from matrifocal to patriarchal, fascist to anarchist, empirical to postmodern—that language may encode. The kinds of epistemologies shaped through oral narrative can be as diverse as those encoded in the stories of Mwindo in the African Mwindo epic, the quests of Ulysses in early Greek oral epic, the spiderwoman stories of certain Native American groups, or any number of filmic narratives that unfold in movie theaters. Engaging the dynamics of voice will not necessarily return us to a world more sensitive to the experiences and imaginations of women any more than literacy will inevitably take us down the road of patriarchy.

Yet oral language is a particular kind of conduit that produces peculiar effects both on its own and within the parameters of writing. How this happens within feminist critical writing is, I believe, a story all its own—with its distinctive characteristics, effects, ramifications. Indeed the very concepts of orality and sound themselves only partly account for a more complex range of sensory suggestion that permeates feminist theory. As I suggested earlier when reading passages from

Haraway's prose, its rhythm and movement draw us at once into intense visual, aural, and kinetic modes of thought—as we follow the visible path of words on the page, hear their sounds, try to keep pace with their motion: “But then came the law of the father and its resolution of the problem of objectivity, solved by always already absent referents, deferred signifieds, split subjects, and the endless play of signifiers.” For me, the sounding qualities of this language—its rhythms, alliterative patterns, its sheer rhetorical flair, what Sedgwick would call its “writerliness”—provide a kind of primary conduit for multiple sensory energies, not the least of which is the very expanded, refracted notion of vision that Haraway seeks to theorize.

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to Nancy K. Miller's preference for what she calls “the gossipy grain of situated writing to the academic sublime” (11). As someone with a fondness for both styles of language, I can sense how Miller's own prose keeps moving between these two alternative modes, almost as if one is haunting the other. I often become fixated on its own “gossipy grain,” an almost tactile quality to Miller's words and narrative that helps me feel my way along an incident, only to find myself ultimately caught up in the sublimity of critical thought, populated by voices in the house of theory.

For example, Miller describes an incident at an academic conference on feminist theory, where everyone commenced to claim, speak from, and speak for specific ethnic and racial identities. First, Miller relates, one speaker “exhorted Jewish women to identify themselves (take back their names and their noses) and wondered aloud from the platform, aggressively, polemically, why Jewish (better yet, Yiddish), female-authored texts were not taught in Women's Studies courses alongside Chicana, Native American, etc. works as ‘ethnic’ or ‘minority’ literature (which is a fair enough question).” Then another speaker replies, “equally polemically and upping the ante, that Jews had no right to speak of oppression or marginality since, unlike blacks, they could ‘choose to pass.’” Then another, Miller continues, “rose from the audience to observe that six million of them seemed to have failed to exercise that option.” And then another of the panelists “urged the audience to remember their Palestinian sisters, who were not with us, and whose men were dying.” In response to all of which, Miller writes: “I sat there, in silent shock at the turn this politically correct occasion was taking, not saying anything, and waiting for it to be over” (96).

The “gossipy grain” here is unmistakable, and so are all its sounding, oral properties: there is the translation, in writing, of spoken voices; there is one speaker who “wondered aloud” from the platform; there's what oralists would call the agonistically toned expression and

the participatory exchange that characterize oral communication; there are rhetorical exhortations and urgings. In short, the sounds of language permeate this "gossipy" writing, even the empty echo of Miller's own "silent shock," her "not saying anything" in response. And yet, the "academic sublime" lingers, as we wait for Miller to say something, critically, about the event—to think about it in writing, to produce theory. And so this sentence follows: "What was there, really, to say once the structure of competing oppressions had been put in place in those terms?"

Keeping in mind that all these voices are emerging at a feminist theory conference, we can rightly ask what theory indeed lurks here. For Miller is very much working toward the articulation of theory. She proceeds to contemplate what it means for her to be Jewish, what it might mean for her to "speak 'as a Jew,'" why she really does not want to assume that "rhetoric of identity" even though she is, in fact, both Jewish and feminist. She decides that she does not want to be involved in "signing" the quotations she reads from her writings, that she would prefer to let "readers read for me—which meant their placing, identifying, and worst of all, perhaps, misreading me. . . ." And so, at last, we arrive at something like the "academic sublime," but already so infected with gossip and voice that the two modes insinuate themselves in each other in Miller's final ponderings:

The questions before us in critical theory might go something like this: can we imagine a self-representational practice—for feminism—that is not recontained by the pre-constituted tropes of representativity? How do the cultural and political constraints that provide the context for our discussion police and shortcircuit their effects? (97–98)

Her language has suddenly taken flight from the "gossipy grain of situated writing" to the hefty abstractions of theory: we are now caught up in "self-representational practices," "pre-constituted tropes," "representativity" itself. And yet something about the words "pre-constituted," "political restraints," and "police" (is their alliteration intentional?) brings us back to the matter of voice—not some liberated voice speaking this or that ethnic position, but quite the opposite: the way such a voice may already be policed, determined, made to speak in a certain sanctioned fashion. After the emergence of so many voices, what we arrive at here, at last, is a rather resounding critique of voices, self-representational practices, the whole issue of representation itself. And Miller's own voice—as a critic, as a theorist—hardly shouts out from



the page, but instead instigates, and is itself instigated by, sounding moves within her own writing and thinking.

Is she engaging in gossip or in the academic sublime? What other gossipy sounds might be absent here, or deferred, or signified elsewhere? If the academic sublime is haunted by such gossipy voices, how, in turn, might academic gossip be haunted by sublime writing? If we can engage these questions as we read Miller (and she does deliberately invite our readings rather than stamp messages with her own signature), if we can follow the residual sounds of her words, then we are beginning to hear the O. We are beginning to get in touch not with some voice emerging from silence, but with the sounds and voices that haunt feminist critical writing.



He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord. . . .

—John 1.23

I am perception and knowledge, uttering a Voice by means of Thought. [I] am the real voice. I cry out in everyone, and they know that a seed dwells within.

—*Gnostic Gospels* (66)

In my initial drafts of this book, I had hardly imagined turning to the gnostic gospels as a way of discussing voice in contemporary feminist theory. Now, such a turn seems an apt way to bring this first chapter to a close. It also brings us back again to the topic of cultural literacy—that hotly contested field of language and knowledge—and to a reconsideration of the ways in which writing practices often remain “transparent,” to use Scott’s term (“Experience,” 368), and work only to confirm existing ideas and thought paradigms. How do certain modes of language—such as objective description—remain “transparent,” while other kinds of language—erotic, passionate, poetic—are said to be charged with predetermined meanings? Indeed how might the texts of early Christianity be read as documenting such contested notions of language?

I am drawn to Elaine Pagels’s studies of the gnostic gospels as an example of the way certain modes of language construct the discourse of early Christianity, and the way other kinds of language are ultimately suppressed—all of which turns out to be of no small concern to

feminists. Hers is an investigation into the origins of early Christianity, but it is also an exposure of the means through which those who controlled the production of texts also suppressed certain kinds and qualities of language.

As Pagels details her critical narrative, four books in the New Testament—the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are accepted by millions of people as relating the words and messages of Jesus Christ. But these are by no means the only “testaments” of what Jesus Christ had to say. At least some fifty-two texts—retrieved from a buried urn that was accidentally discovered in upper Egypt—contain various other gospels, secret teachings, narratives and poems that were attributed to Jesus Christ or his disciples. Recent textual scholarship has shown that these texts are translations of writings that circulated during the first century A.D., around the same time as had the now approved gospels of the New Testament. Yet by 200 A.D., these other gospels had been almost entirely suppressed by the bishops and priests who controlled the early institution of Christianity. Why?

Pagels’s fascinating account of the gnostic gospels gives us all sorts of information about these texts and possible reasons for their suppression. Generally, the gnostic texts were denounced because they contained varied kinds of information that was deemed unacceptable and “unorthodox.” In some, Christ is portrayed as a figure more interested in illusion and enlightenment than in sin and repentance, more eastern than western in his teachings. In another, the story of the Garden of Eden is told from the viewpoint of the serpent. In others, we read of the power of the Mother and feminine elements in the divine. Yet remarkable as it may seem, these diverse messages contained in the gnostic gospels were denounced as heretical and suppressed by priests and bishops in the space of a mere century. To a large extent, as Pagels documents in her third chapter of *The Gnostic Gospels* on “God the Father / God the Mother,” and in her *Signs* essay, “What Became of God the Mother?,” this suppression amounted to a censorship of the gnostic portrayal of Christianity as far more feminine than the sanctioned texts of the New Testament even begin to indicate. As a result, there are tremendous gaps in the account of early Christianity that we have been given by select men who controlled its language and texts.

What is missing, for instance, is what Pagels calls “an extraordinary poem” from a text entitled *Thunder, Perfect Mind* spoken in a feminine divine voice:

For I am the First and the last.  
I am the honored one and the scorned one.

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I am the whore and the holy one.  
 I am the wife and the virgin. . . .  
 I am the barren one,  
 and many are her sons. . . .  
 I am the silence that is incomprehensible . . .  
 I am the utterance of my name. (xvi)

What is also missing is the *Gospel of Mary* that records Mary Magdalene's challenge to Peter in his role as institutional authority figure. What is missing is the characterization of a divine mother as Wisdom, indicating the feminine and procreative powers of knowledge. According to some gnostics, she is responsible for teaching Adam and Eve self-awareness, for guiding them to food, and assisting in the conception of some of their children (64–65). Also missing are portrayals of a male god jealous of his mother.

Many gnostic texts record various stories of the mother of the presumed originary male god of Judeo-Christian traditions. Often portrayed as Wisdom, she is variously distressed by her son and castigates him for his presumption and jealousy. In one text, when the male god exclaims that there is no one above him, his mother "'cried out against him, "Do not lie, Ialdabaoth . . ."' (69). According to another text, when this male god exerts his exclusive power, we read this story: "'And immediately Sophia ("Wisdom") stretched forth her finger, and introduced light into matter, and she followed it down into the region of Chaos. . . . And he again said to his offspring, "It is I who am the God of All." And Life, the daughter of Wisdom, cried out; she said to him, "You are wrong, Saklas!"' (70). One gnostic text portrays the feminine divine as a voice. Entitled the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, meaning "Triple-formed Primal Thought," it reveals, according to Pagels, "the feminine powers of Thought, Intelligence, and Foresight." The text reads: "I am perception and knowledge, uttering a Voice by means of Thought. [I] am the real Voice. I cry out in everyone, and they know that a seed dwells within" (65–66).

This "Voice by means of Thought," intimately connected to a conception of knowledge as palpable and seedlike, was emphatically and promptly suppressed by church authorities. As Pagels points out in her *Signs* essay, it would be a mistake to hastily assume that the gnostic gospels "were suppressed only because of their positive attitude toward women," yet as she explains, "the evidence does indicate that two very different patterns of sexual attitude emerged in orthodox and gnostic circles" (105). And, I would add, an oppositional dynamics of language. In these gnostic stories, we hear multiple voices even as they are

contained in one voice ("I am the honored one and the scorned one"). We hear voices of disturbance and disagreement ("You are wrong, Saklas"). These are not controlling narratives, but stories filled with interference and response. To use de Certeau's terms, the voices here "enact" rather than confirm thought. In one gnostic text, for example, Peter complains to Christ that Mary Magdalene is dominating the conversation and, as Pagels explains, "displacing the rightful authority of Peter and his brother apostles. He urges Jesus to silence her and is quickly rebuked." Mary replies: "'Peter makes me hesitate; I am afraid of him because he hates the female race'" (78).

Now this is a story. In suppressing all of these voices that crowd and vex the gnostic gospels, those who established the literate canons of early Christianity in fact used literacy—as written word and as shared knowledge—to solidify only certain stories, and only certain kinds of stories. In the process, they suppressed not simply texts, but very specific "voices" and the distinctive ways of knowing that were connected to these voices, this language. As Pagels explains, the very meaning of *gnosis* is to know directly, to know through experience or insight: "*gnosis* is not primarily rational knowledge. The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ('He knows mathematics') and knowing through observation or experience ('He knows me'), which is *gnosis*" (xviii). The release of this kind of knowledge through Pagels's readings of the gnostic gospels marks a significant rupture in accepted literate traditions that have favored rational and scientific modes of knowing, just as it marks a rupture in the controlling authoritative voice of orthodox texts. While I do not want to strictly align these other voices and ways of knowing recorded in the gnostic gospels with oral traditions, I would suggest that their release works to unsettle the accepted canons of Christian literacy through volatile language and competing narratives—not the singular voice announcing the one meaning, but voices within that utter meanings, that continually utter thought itself. Stories upon stories unfold in Pagels's account of these gnostic texts, each interfering in different ways with the accepted narratives that orthodox Christian literate traditions have encoded. As Pagels tells us, she does not want to return the gnostic gospels to some position of originary authority, but "reopen" the story of early Christianity, to put more than one narrative in circulation, to reconsider and reinvent through the very process of telling and thinking through stories. I recall de Certeau: voice "alters a place (it disturbs), but it does not establish a place" (155).

Pagels herself engages such an altering critical narrative, a story that begins like a murder mystery but works toward no fixed conclu-