

# VOICES AND EMPATHY

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**G**hosts are merely transparent suggestions of someone who used to be. Their voices are deadened and destined to be forgotten. Maxine Hong Kingston gives her late aunt's ghost a voice in her essay "No Name Woman." Kingston's mother tells her of a vague shame that grows in her aunt's belly until it cannot be ignored, and it eventually devastates the family. In a small Chinese village in 1924, her aunt became pregnant by a man who wasn't her husband, and as a result, her family decided to disown her. This narrative of dishonor and destruction is deconstructed and reconstructed by Kingston until I can see it through her aunt's eyes. Kingston stands on the threshold between her aunt and me, offering herself as a medium for understanding, for communication. Even ghosts need voices, because all ghosts contain stories. Stories need to be acknowledged and accepted—disavowal is the gravest punishment for a ghost.

One memory I can hold up, against disavowal, involves my mother and a dish of bubbling steam between us. My mother lives for spicy food. Her hometown, Szechuan, is renowned for its hotpot. The broth inside the pot is the reddest red. It bubbles so vigorously that the chili peppers floating in it are cast to the edge of the pot. In contrast to the broth's animated boil, steam lazily curls off the surface. My mother sits across from me, beyond the pot. The steam veils her face like gossamer, softening her features in a way that makes her seem aloof, distant. I wonder if my mom sees me through the same haze as I see her.

The haze seems to blur her voice, as well, when she speaks after our bellies are full.

"I've trained you well. You can handle it," she tells me.

She indicates my bowl, stained red from the chili broth. My tongue is numb from the peppercorns and my lips burn, but the pleasant rush of warmth in my chest I feel at this is not from the chili.

"You could actually visit Szechuan now." She says these words in her native dialect, syllables long and drawling, teasing. Somehow, it feels like an invitation, an introduction, a true acknowledgement that yes, you are my daughter. You are my daughter, and you like spicy food. She smiles at me. Suddenly, I want so badly

to respond in her dialect, almost feeling as though the burning in my mouth could manipulate my tongue to do so. Almost.

“I’ve been before, Mama!”

Mandarin is not a dull language, but it seems so lacking in vitality compared to the ribbons of her Szechuan dialect. The lovely warmth in my chest expands, until it seems to spill out of my ears, my nose, my mouth.

“You haven’t really been until you can handle the heat,” she explains.

Something as simple as a taste for spicy food forged a deeper bond between my mother and me. She has passed onto me a piece of herself that is not genetic, and I have chosen to incorporate it as a crucial part of my identity. She lent me a part of her voice that I could call my own. While I made a choice to integrate myself more into my mother’s culture, the family of Kingston’s aunt chose to completely erase her connection to them. Her family calls this unnamed aunt a “dead ghost” while she is still alive, almost as though they were subconsciously aware of her imminent fate (391). She is a vengeful, dangerous, living ghost, unlike the dead ancestors who leave their descendants gracefully with their reputations intact. The dead “act like gods, not ghosts,” because they are remembered and revered (391). However, even though she struggles at the mercy of those who betrayed her, Kingston’s aunt is not passive.

Although you do not get to choose your family, you do have a choice in how present they are in your life. Kingston’s aunt, a victim shunned by her family, knows this best. But such a choice is not always about shame and spite. It can also come from forgiveness and maturity. Chiron, the protagonist of Barry Jenkin’s *Moonlight*, struggles with a mother who is neglectful, distant at best. In addition to accepting his own sexual identity, Chiron must come to terms with how much of his life, if any, will belong to her. In his youth and adolescence, living under his mother’s abuse and control, he struggles against becoming a living ghost, not unlike Kingston’s aunt. The sneers and jeers he receives from his classmates are less painful than the fact that he cannot yell back. His voice is dulled by his mother’s detachment and his own vague sense of identity. Thus, Chiron is at the mercy of his mother, his peers, and his own shame, and that makes it easy for him to say that he hates her. His frustration builds until, on the day when he finally snaps and strikes his longtime bully with a chair, he risks veering completely into the territory of spiteful anger, where Kingston’s aunt is trapped.

Unlike Kingston's aunt, however, Chiron still has his whole life ahead of him. He is given the opportunity to mature and to forgive. He moves away from the town where he had no voice to become something new. Now, an adult, his new role as a drug dealer puts him in a position of authority that gives him respect and, more importantly, a voice he lacked so painfully in his youth. While his occupation is illegal and dangerous, this new role allows him to grow into a man who is able to open his ears and heart to his mother's remorse and her love. When she tells him, "You ain't gotta love me but you gon' know that I love you," he accepts it. It takes a certain strength to overcome the spite that would have made it so easy to walk away, to stay bitter, and leave his mother behind. He had the opportunity to turn his mother into a ghost, just like he was, but he chose not to. She would have been like Kingston's aunt, deliberately forgotten and wiped away by her own kin. Chiron's forgiveness saves her from that fate.

Not only does he make peace with his mother, but he also makes peace with his own identity. When he goes to see his childhood friend, Kevin, years after realizing his feelings for him, Chiron is able to finally reveal a part of himself to Kevin that had been too long hidden away. Kevin had always been there for him, from youth to high school. He was one of the only people that treated Chiron as someone worthy of respect and dignity, encouraging his voice instead of dulling it. Chiron finally dares to say to him, "You're the only man who's ever touched me," a sort of confession that his younger self would never have imagined uttering. The audience can finally hear his own voice. He is saying something that completely comes from within himself, free from outside pressure. It is a sign that he has grown and escaped the fate of becoming a ghost, a confirmation that escaping such a fate is possible after all.

When my mother spoke to me in her dialect over hotpot that night, the warmth I felt affirmed to me that I was not alone. My mother's dialect is something she offered to me as a gift of intimacy. Had someone shown young Chiron and Kingston's aunt this warmth, perhaps the shame and spite would have been softened. Chiron's mother realized this too late, but she still manages to make amends years later. Chiron reveals himself to Kevin in his confession, as he shares his true identity without fear of the repercussions. Listening and being heard matter. Kingston understands this as well, which is why she lends herself to her aunt. Offering a piece of one's self is a crucial part of being heard. To me, it is a privilege to have heard my mother's dialect, as it not only shows that she

acknowledges me and that she values our relationship, but also that she trusts me not to forget her. She gave me the responsibility to keep her from becoming a ghost, and in that process, I realize the importance of having a voice, in both life and death. No one asked to hear Kingston's aunt's side of the story when she was alive, and the circumstances under which she got pregnant were completely overlooked. There was no sympathy, no chance for her to justify herself. Her voice was blotted out by the need of so many to punish her for the sake of upholding conventional morality. But now that she finally has a voice through her niece, she can evoke the empathy she needed so desperately during her life. Given a second chance through Kingston's words, she may not be a ghost anymore. Kingston has provided her with the beginning of justice. The story of Kingston's aunt serves as a reminder that listening to someone else's voice is as important as having one yourself, for their stories exist to be acknowledged. And acknowledgment can change everything.

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#### WORKS CITED

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