A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of Alfred University

Masculinity, Motherhood, and Memory: Gender and Cultural Construction through Language in

*Wait Until Spring, Bandini, So Far From God*, and *The Joy Luck Club*

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Introduction:

My two older siblings both chose Alfred University, so I made it very clear to everyone around me that I would break the mold and blaze a new trail. Apparently, that trail was meant to be along Allen Walk, because that’s the path I’ve traversed for the past four years. I didn’t choose Alfred because of the small Biology program, or the proximity to home, or the fact that my siblings were still around to cook me occasional dinners, though I did profit from those factors. I chose Alfred because it was the first school I’d ever visited where I felt like I was with my “tribe” of people.

It will always sound corny, but Alfred has been a home to me for the past (almost) four years. The events I’ve attended and the friends I’ve made have allowed me to be a more authentic and passionate me. I’ve challenged my stage fright and played Frank N’ Furter in Spectrum’s production of Rocky Horror Picture Show, danced the bachata in Raices with Poder Latino, auctioned myself off twice for charity during Spectrum’s annual date auction, and performed a Vagina Monologue through Students Advocating Gender Equality. I’ve had superbly touching interactions with Alfred alumni through working at the call center on campus and as a result of spending the past two summers working with Alumni Relations during alumni reunion weekend. Those experiences have then carried over to accentuate my desire to connect as much as possible to the people around me, which quickly led to me becoming an RA, and then OG, TA, mentor, Honors Big Sister, and tutor. I couldn’t stop getting involved!
What my resume can’t tell you is how I’ve been involved in smaller ways on campus. I’m an avid fan of Open Mic nights at the Terra Cotta, Bergren forums, Nana’s bento boxes, the Honors trips to see David Sedaris and Young Frankenstein the Musical, events like “Take the Lead” held by the JLC, Grimes Glen hikes with Forest People, yoga with Dr. Beach, and open mic performances with Alfred Creative Writers. I’ve taken enough extra classes at Alfred, from Tales of King Arthur to American Politics, simply because they’re fascinating, that I could have a minor in “Academic Exploration” along with my Biology major, and Chemistry and English Literature minors.

I’ve fashioned my Alfred experience so that I’m constantly living and breathing new experiences, and it’s been a whirlwind of fantastic interactions with some of the kindest-hearted and inspiring people I’ve ever met. I genuinely feel that Alfred has made me a better person, and as a result I’ve become involved to give back all that I can.

One of my favorite ways that I’ve gotten involved at Alfred is through the Honors program. I’ve taken Recipe for a Murderer, Happiness, Yoga and Meditation, Monsters, and Get Crafty. As a result, I have some of the oddest books and projects laying in my room and a mind full of genuinely fun facts. I’ve always had a busy schedule, but the Honors program seemed to have just the right class to entice me into taking two more credits. As a result of the Monsters class I’ve also become good friends with Dr. Eklund and have had the chance to attend multiple gatherings at his house to play Apples to Apples and watch horror movies. This is just one example of many where an Honors class led me to make meaningful connections with likeminded, passionate people.
As for my senior Honors thesis, I found it hard to pick a topic since I couldn’t narrow down my field of academic interest. My entire academic career at Alfred has been the result of creating an intellectual bouquet of experiences that, together, form my Alfred education. It wasn’t until Dr. Ryan suggested that I expand upon my work for her multicultural American literature class that I found a perfect project for me. We decided that I would work with tracing themes through three novels and then contextualize each with outside research on areas of interest. This project appealed to me because it gave me a break from all the lab work of a Biology major and allowed me to experience a type of project I could do if I were an English professor. Since I have not yet ruled out becoming an astronaut, I figured, Why not?

I’d always considered myself an open-minded individual, but Alfred exposed me to different lifestyles, gender norms, cultural variations, and personal backgrounds that I’d never experienced, to the point where I felt as if I’d only seen the tip of the iceberg as far as diversity went. Even in my senior year, Dr. Ryan’s readings from the multicultural American literature class caused me to question what it really meant to be “American”, and how many awesome, complex cultures I’d overlooked in my habit of looking for the familiar. This newly-tuned cultural awareness, mixed with my naturally high dose of curiosity, made a thesis that involved cultural analysis a great idea for the capstone of my Alfred education.

This project gave me the opportunity to examine Italian-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Chinese-Americans up close and decipher how their unique challenges with acculturation and language barriers affected their relationships to home and their families.
In the following paper, I’ve examined the unique interplay between gender, language, and culture in John Fante’s novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far From God*, and Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club*.

Fante’s main character, Bandini, uses his ability to speak Italian to connect back to his Italian roots and maintain his pride in the face of the American attempt to homogenize Italian-American immigrants in the 1930’s. Bandini regulates his use of Italian to either promote a sense of unity with the dominant culture through silencing himself or to preserve the Italian essence of his identity by metaphorically and literally raising his voice. His verbal communication is tied intricately with his sense of masculinity and self-worth, both of which, in the American capitalist system of values, rely entirely on his ability to work and economically support his family. In the face of a potentially jobless future, Bandini must struggle to maintain his masculine image and his Italian pride through the language he loves.

Castillo’s novel uses a bilingual backdrop of the Spanish and English languages to tell a story about the redefinition of the Latino-American “woman”. The novel follows the lives of two particularly influential women and examines the creation of a new gender role for women in response to the surrounding patriarchy, ultimately displacing men entirely. This new kind of “woman” synthesizes the stereotyped roles for males and females and provides for a powerful maternal and spiritual connection among women.

Lastly, Tan’s novel focuses on the unique mother-daughter relationships in Chinese-American immigrants, and the gendered struggle to preserve culture and maternal connection. Tan emphasizes the female connection in a strictly patriarchal culture to focus
on the complex transfer of familial responsibility and cultural heritage from mother to
daughter through the metaphoric and literal translation of stories and cultures.

I.

John Fante’s novel, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, centers around the preservation of culture through language. It focuses on the use of language to express pride in both Italian-ness and masculinity. Fante illustrates the complicated balance between speaking and keeping silent, and from that balance, derives greater meanings about the significance of language in expressing class, ethnicity, and masculinity. In this case, Svevo Bandini uses his Italian language to remind him of home, express strong emotion, or connect to other Italians. The novel presents this language difference as both a cultural gem and an obstruction to acceptance into the mainstream American public. Throughout the book, Bandini’s use of Italian fluctuations between prideful exhibition to careful repression to suit his needs, each with its own unique consequences. Ultimately, Bandini’s use of his native language is a delicate connection that, once severed, cannot be easily mended.

Language is the primary barrier dividing the Italian-Americans from the dominant culture. As a portrait of the Italian stereotype, Bandini is complete with a knack for volume. According to his son Arturo, Bandini, “...wasn’t satisfied with being an Italian, he had to be a noisy Italian” (Fante 35). In contrast with this boisterous speaker is Effie Hildegarde, the novel’s full-bred American woman. Effie is a tangible representation of the general public. When in Effie’s presence, the colorful Bandini becomes mute with admiration: “[Bandini] could only mutter happy grunts at whatever she said, her rich precise words flowing from her deep luxurious voice” (176). This complimentary description reveals Bandini’s fascination with Effie’s
high social class simply because of her smooth manner of speaking. Before Bandini is comfortable enough to call Ms. Hildegarde by her first name, he refers to her as “the pretty Widow with two hundred thousand dollars in the bank” (192). Her status as a noteworthy female lies entirely in her possession of money, indicating Bandini’s fascination with the success of the rags-to-riches idea embedded in his particular American dream. That is not to say that Bandini overlooks Effie’s obvious assets, such as her “hips blooming sensuously” as she glides about her home, but rather that her sensuality and her affluence are intimately related (182). Effie’s “American” qualities are therefore generally contained in her sexual appeal, pleasing voice, and obvious education. In response to her mellifluous statements, Bandini expresses his discomfort in the situation by reducing his Italian speech to grunts. In doing this, Bandini chooses relative silence over attempting an English response to Effie, showing his ultimate preference to blend in with the public.

The awkwardness of being Italian in this English-dominant society is also subtly present in the way the schoolboys in the novel address an Italian schoolgirl as an “Eyetalian dame” (226). The boys disregard the entire language by brutalizing this vowel sound. The cringe-worthy name for the romantic language hints at the American inability to understand the beauty of the spoken Italian word.

Since Bandini is a man of few words, the words he’s willing to share are significant. When he does express himself aloud in Italian, it is often an expression of pride or homesickness. Bandini sings “Come Back to Sorento” in Italian while laying brick in Effie’s home, joyous at the opportunity to work (189). What Bandini is ultimately celebrating is the restoration of his sense of manhood in having work that will sustain his family, since singing
represents both his masculine expression and a cultural tie to Italy. Linda Reeder explains in her paper on the Italian sense of masculinity up to the 1930s that “manliness” was “measured by a man’s ability to provide for his family....A man could only claim to be head of a household as long as he was able to earn money” (Reeder 20-21). This perfectly outlines why working for Effie was so emotionally fulfilling for Bandini. Effie gave Bandini a way to regain his position of power in the family by economically providing for his wife and kids. Bandini is able to redeem his sense of manliness through the work with Effie, allowing him to recover from the painful emasculation he endured by not being able to work during the winters.

Reeder further explains that this shift in the meaning of masculinity for Italian immigrants such as Bandini is the result of removing a man from a culture that valued community and family connections to one that valued capitalism above all else. In her explanation of Italian honor, Reeder discusses the transition from a culture in Italy that values “masculinity grounded in the system of honor” to America, “where notions of manliness rested explicitly on the values of market capitalism” (18). Bandini’s crisis then stands for the general crisis experienced by Italian-Americans who had to adjust to a culture that valued them based solely on the contents of their bank accounts. Their “value” was entirely economic, and had nothing to do with the “honor” of having close friends, strong family relationships, and a good reputation.

This further highlights the importance of having steady work on Bandini’s sense of manliness, since his personal ‘American’ value rests not on his passionate expression and connections, but his ability to raise money and enter the capitalist society around him.
The emotion Bandini expresses through song shows Bandini’s longing for and connection to his homeland, as well as his pride in his mother country and culture. In the face of Effie’s powerful American charm, Bandini still maintains a piece of his fundamental Italian-ness. Arturo picks up on the melancholy beauty of Bandini’s Italian songs towards the beginning of the novel while overpowered with emotions. The narrator explains, “[Arturo] wept...for Svevo Bandini, for his father...for that feeling in him when his father sang of Italy, of an Italian sky” (56). Since Arturo could not understand anything beyond spoken, conversational Italian (88), he can listen to his father’s song as a partial outsider to its meaning. All that he is picking up on is the general pride of the song and the beauty of the Italian words, and that power alone causes Arturo to weep. The Italian song provides a feeling of home for Bandini, so it is not a stretch to imagine it appeals also to Arturo’s fierce need to belong. However, Bandini soon struggles to maintain this strong authenticity as the push to act more “American” constricts his use of his language. Whereas before, Bandini used his language to connect himself to Italy and a vision of home, towards the end of the novel he acquiesces to the American pressure to be silent.

In his relationship with Effie, Bandini experiences validation through his lack of language and reliance on strictly physical communication. While at first his interactions with Effie consist of his ‘happy grunts’, Bandini soon finds himself utterly silenced. Earlier in the novel Bandini’s feelings exploded forth into aggressive words, but around Effie Bandini finds that, “[t]he protests died on his lips...Nervous and without speech, he behaved like a man” (184). This idea of manhood deserves special attention since it indicates the transition of Bandini’s sense of manhood from one of passionate expression and volume to manhood embodied in purely his
non-verbal communication. He relies entirely on his careful worth ethic to prove his masculine sense of worth. Here Bandini represents more of the masculine model Joan Weibel-Orlando describes in her paper on homosociality between Italian men. Weibel-Orlando states that the “masculine ideal” is a man who is a “man of actions, not words” (Weibel-Orlando 162). This newly adapted form of masculine expression allows Bandini to remain inconspicuously Italian while appealing to the essential American woman around him.

Without language to distinguish himself from the Americans, Svevo relies upon his physical dominance to communicate his importance and “manliness.” In complying with Effie’s silent seduction, Bandini struggles to maintain his Italian identity, and therefore responds with physical violence to assert himself. Describing a post-sexual encounter, the author says, “The leave-taking he loved most of all. That surge of satisfaction, that vague chauvinism telling him no people on earth equaled the Italian people…” (202). You can practically taste the bitterness Bandini feels towards the Americans as he positively brims with national pride. Referring to his feelings as “chauvinistic” shows the aggressive extent to which he views Italians as superior beings to Americans. In maintaining his pride and manliness, Bandini sees nothing wrong with exerting sexual dominance over his conquered rival, the American woman. While he celebrates what he views as an ultimate cultural triumph, he does not realize that his relationship to his language has been permanently altered by his silence.

Despite the new surge of Italian pride, Bandini’s temporary loss of language changed him irreparably. Following his description of the sexual power-play with Effie, the narrator explains Bandini’s conversations with his friend Rocco in saying, “Considering other matters, they spoke in English, but of [Effie] it was always in Italian, whispered and secretive” (203).
Though the intimacy between the friends is charming, this signals the final shift of spoken Italian from public to entirely private spheres. This is the isolation of cultural expression even when between two Italians, demonstrating the voluntary squashing of Bandini’s Italian “otherness.”

Bandini experiences a sense of separation from the general public perfectly akin to the young Rodriguez in Richard Rodriguez’s essay, “Aria.” In the story, Richard struggles with the cultural separation between his family and the public school he attends. He sums up the feeling in saying, “the confidence of ‘belonging’ in public, was withheld” since Rodriguez did not speak the public language (Rodriguez 1576). Like Rodriguez, Bandini feels the profound awkwardness of his cultural “otherness” due to his foreign heritage. Richard is also able to revel in the feeling of coming home after school and sharing a “language of joyful return” with his family and a “reminder of intimacy,” much in the same way that Bandini used to communicate with Maria in their private language (1577, 1579). What would have made Richard the perfect influence on Bandini is his ability to separate his public and private identities. In this way, Richard gains the confidence to maintain an external self with his American companions, while preserving the essential intimacy of his language at home (1586). In failing to simultaneously maintain his sense of Italian pride and his American ambition for economic improvement, Bandini must choose to preserve one or the other, and ultimately loses the intimate language he once shared with his family.

A permanent change as a result of Bandini’s loss of language is the break between him and his wife, Maria. The infidelity and distance were problems already, but they were not what shattered Bandini’s marriage. The narrator says, “He bent over to hand [Maria] the bills, trying
to think of the old words, their words, his and hers, their language” (161). The factor that ultimately breaks the marriage is Bandini’s inability to recall his shared language of love with Maria. In spending time with Effie, Bandini forgot his intimate language in exchange for more material means of communication. These severed ties to his native tongue in the end silence it, so that Bandini cannot even remember how to speak to Maria.

It is not until the final chapters of the book that Bandini attempts to change and reclaim any of his language. He begins this reclamation of Italian-ness through passionate language. Bandini first scorns Effie’s “politeness” and claims, “it was a lie” (207). While before Bandini had been thoroughly charmed by Effie’s clean and pristinely ordered home and self, describing it as “a place out of his dreams,” by the end of the novel Bandini realizes that the widow’s wealth does not make up for her bitter interior (173). She represents the failure of the American dream of economic independence to materialize for non-thoroughbred Americans.

After experiencing his control over Effie, the thin veil of American appeal she’d once claimed falls away. Bandini now realizes that her words, while frilly and pleasing, hold none of the passion he respects. When Effie yells at Arturo and calls Bandini’s family “peasants” and “foreigners,” Bandini is finally able to flare up into his former self and call Effie a “puttana” in defense of his son (265). With these words, Bandini could be standing up directly for his family or his heritage, or a combination of both. In rejecting Effie’s façade of civilization and high class, Bandini accepts that it is better to be brutal and honest than cultured and fake. In this way, Bandini reclaims the passion of his language, his masculine sense of control, and gives himself a voice once again.
In his eagerness to be accepted into American society, Bandini all too eagerly suppressed his fundamental Italian-ness by silencing himself. Now he must struggle to regain his former connections to his culture. Whether or not the passionate and personal language between Maria and Bandini can ever be recovered is arguable. Judging by Bandini’s relationship with Effie, the importance of maintaining his marriage pales in comparison to maintaining his connection to Italy. In order to maintain this sense of self, Bandini must connect to a sense of Italian masculinity, since that is what defines him above all else. In the American context that Fante provided, Svevo’s masculinity appears violent and unstable, while if he were in “Sorento”, it may render Bandini an honorable and admirable man. The misspelling of the Italian town, Sorrento, also signifies the base misunderstanding an outsider would have on Bandini’s dreams, and that in the translation from Italian to American culture, something of that original dream is lost. Fante then leaves the reader to wonder whether Bandini’s struggle to maintain his Italian masculinity in America is proof that his masculinity is flawed to the point of self-destruction, or whether American society has made it so by attempting to suppress it.

II.

Whereas John Fante outlined the collision of cultures and gender roles between Americans and Italians, Ana Castillo created a woman character who transcended those categories. La Loca was the daughter who defied definition from the very beginning of Ana Castillo’s novel, So Far From God. Not only did she fully adopt her nickname from the age of three, the narrator tells us that by the age of twenty-one, “no one remembered her Christian name” (25), showing her early resistance to societal norms such as a Christian name. This was the first example of many where La Loca broke the neat categorization her community
members attempted to place upon her. Loca’s close kinship with animals exaggerated the ambiguity surrounding her, increasing her own personal mysteriousness and causing her to be called a patron saint of criaturas after her death (232). Her ability to communicate and sympathize with her fellow animals, combined with her own disinclination towards people, blurred the lines between human and animal. The challenging of this boundary helps the reader understand La Loca’s ability to see the greater, shared spiritual picture forming around her. Since she is included in both the human and animal realms, Loca is able to provide a unique, outsider perspective on the lives of her family members. The narrator mentions an episode of Loca’s sister Caridad sleep-walking, and sums up the familial spectators by saying, “[d]ogs, cats, and women, twenty-eight eyes in all” witnessed Caridad walking about the house, further normalizing the equality and connection between the humans and animals (37). This comparison suggests the natural balance between the animal and human capacity for compassion and understanding.

Even in the presence of the harsh line between the living and the dead, La Loca was someplace in between. Loca’s mother, Sofi, bemoans the fact that her precious daughter had never been sick before her fatal brush with HIV, other than a brief period of being entirely dead (225). The humor in this line is contained in both Sofi’s casual mention of her extraordinary daughter and the community’s futile compulsion to separate those around them into clear, dichotomous categories. In order to better understand La Loca once she is dying for the final time, the community members attempt once more to find a single definition for Loca. In her final days, the family healers convene to “curar” Loca, a term the narrator explains relates to women who give birth or have an abortion and are therefore “alleviated” (230). This illustrates
the intimate parallel between women giving birth and women getting delivered themselves into the afterlife. The natural cycles of life and death paired with a menstrual cycle demonstrate the feminine nature involved in the taking and giving of life. Following this comparison, the community believes that giving a statue of La Loca will bring good luck to a new bride and groom (249). What these people fail to see by trying to place La Loca into the position of a wife and mother is that she in fact transcends both categories.

La Loca’s true abilities were misunderstood because she was a new definition of woman. Her connection to the bodies of women and complete understanding of giving birth were knowledge La Loca came upon without any outside instruction (164). Her innate understanding came from a deeper comprehension of womanhood, as if she were connected directly to a higher maternal vein not accessed by others. Her isolation from the society that brutalized her three sisters was her shield from the harms of the world, and although that ironically would not save her from an untimely death, this isolation was what enabled Loca’s special maternal connection to remain undamaged by outside forces (152).

The literal cause of her death was AIDS, and the reasoning for this end for La Loca is highly symbolic. Similar to the way the HIV wore down Loca’s immune system to the point of transparency, the sensitivity and vulnerability necessary for Loca to express her unique gifts of communication and expression were her eventual downfall. She simply could not have maintained such open emotional and spiritual susceptibility to the world around her without eventually becoming fatally ensnared by the rough world. Loca’s capacity to contract AIDS without contact with the outside world proves that one cannot ever be fully isolated from the evils of the world, and that there is a price we must pay for each gift we receive.
This delicate and fatal connection is what makes La Loca so special to the women in the novel. She is the channel between the ultimate force of motherhood and the common woman. To her mother, who was gifted in her own ways, La Loca was her “eternal baby” (218). While this was not literally true, Loca did maintain a child-like innocence, honesty, and openness in her interactions with the spiritual and physical realms to earn her that title. Remaining a ‘baby’ also enabled La Loca to sustain an open connection to the maternal forces around her both literally and spiritually. Her meetings with the sacred Woman in Blue were a few of many examples of her extreme spiritual interconnectedness (245). Loca is able to directly interact with powerful figures of womanhood with the same familiarity and frankness that she treated her regular physician, highlighting a sense of spiritual equality between Loca and the higher beings present in the novel (245).

This magical connection to the spirit realm renders Loca’s alleged symbolic relevance as good luck statue for new couples a gross underestimate of the connection that she truly represented. While the townspeople were content to let La Loca represent the unity between a man and wife, she ultimately united women with the higher Mother. Without a marriage, La Loca was still the epitome of true “union,” while the town skewed her significant to represent the basest form of union.

La Loca also served as the spiritual hinge between the land of the dead and the living. Her most remarkable gift was the ability to converse with the dead and bring peace to her family members regarding the death of her sister, Esperanza. Once La Loca shared the news that their loved one had passed on, the three women “began to wail and moan like Cihuacoatl” (162); a “Cihuacoatl” is a patron saint of women who died in childbirth (161). Through this cyclic
connection of life and death, La Loca is able to spiritually “deliver” the women in her family and bring them peace.

La Loca is the only woman in the book who truly sympathizes with the troubled men in the novel. Her spiritual connectivity to the greater Mother and her observations of the men struggling around her allow Loca to maintain the only non-critical perspective on the male characters. Loca does not blame the men around her for the suffering they’ve caused. For example, Loca’s mother, Sofi, carries her own emotional scar from the town referring to her as “la abandonada Sofi” after Loca’s father, Domingo, failed to return home for twenty years (Castillo 134). Instead of focusing on the pain he’s caused, what Loca sees in Domingo upon his return home is his extended visit to hell, the self-reflection he must have faced, and his own “onion”-like complexity he’s been forced to confront in himself (42). Separate from the experience of the other women in the family, Loca sees her father through the eyes of a girl who’s also been to hell and examined herself and is therefore able to uniquely give credit to her father’s struggles.

This extension of pity is also present in how Loca prays for Fe’s lost love, Tom, right after he abandons his plans to marry Fe. Loca understood that Tom’s heart would never be the same after he crushed his feelings for Fe and that his heart may not open again, which is something the narrator tells us even Tom would not quite comprehend (33). Even without direct contact with Tom Loca realizes the extent to which Tom’s damaged his ability to love will stunt his future, and altruistically offers prayers for his recovery.

Each of these examples of Loca’s unconditional acceptance of the errs of men lead up to Loca’s pardoning of the highly despised man, Francisco el Penitente. All we know for certain
about Francisco is his affinity for black clothing (200), his obsessive reverence for Caridad (91), and his kidnapping of Caridad’s friend, Esmeralda (207). He is both literally and metaphorically a colorless character, frustrated by his circumstance as an imperfect human. The narrator leaves out many details necessary to definitively say whether or not Francisco loved or lusted after Caridad, or whether he actually did rape Esmeralda as a sign of dominance over Caridad after getting her into his van. There is even a loose connection between his black clothing and the shapeless force that mutilated Caridad that was “darker than the dark of night” (77). This implies Francisco’s potential culpability in all matters dealing with nameless, merciless males in the novel, opening his life up to extreme ridicule and blame. From this standpoint, Francisco is the most despicable male character, which makes Loca’s ability to forgive him all the more impressive.

Loca converses with the Woman in Blue about Francisco and is then able to understand his greater significance in the lives of women. Loca sees a connection between the Woman in Blue and Francisco and concludes that, “they must be related” (245). What relates these opposing forces is their ability to suffer. Only Loca is able to see the biting horsehair vest the Woman in Blue wears beneath her clothes to cause her pain (244), similar to the ashes Francisco mixes in his food to generally suffer (191) and the inadvertent suffering he experiences by accident. Loca honors Francisco’s suffering in this comparison, which up until this point in the novel appeared half-hearted. While this parallel between the epitome of male evil and a sacred woman may not make immediate sense, the Woman in Blue elucidates Francisco’s faults in a simple sentence. When Loca asked if the Woman in Blue knew Francisco, she replied, “[Y]es, she had known a few” (245). Therefore, Francisco is a general
representative of the evils of man, and just a single man in a long line of similar men before him. This abstraction of Francisco allows his actions to be symbolic of a larger evil than a single man, with him as the simple conduit. Just as the Lady in Blue donned a “horsehair vest beneath [to] cut into her delicate white body” (244) to symbolize her humility and supplication to a greater force for good, so does Francisco puts ashes in his food to bring himself closer to his God (191). La Loca is capable of witnessing the larger significance of both figures’ willingness to suffer for the sake of self-improvement in the eyes of a greater power and therefore can see the relation between the two characters. With this knowledge from the sacred Woman in Blue, Loca is able to understand Francisco’s struggles, and instead of judging them for their face value as the other females in the community have done, Loca transcends a gendered judgment and forgives him as a true saint would.

La Loca’s mother, Sofi, is the precursor to the powerful women in the novel and a force of her own. La Loca defies labeling and sets forth a new standard for spiritual unity among women, while her mother constructs a new definition of general femininity. At the conclusion of the novel, Sofi is translated into two separate Tarot cards that summarize her identity in the novel: the “Queen of Swords” and the “Empress” (250). These dominating, maternal forces combine to form the matriarch of the novel, and illustrate in what ways these (at times conflicting) forces create the ultimate woman.

In the most fundamental sense of mothering, Sofi fulfills the needs of her children through providing food. While caring for her daughter, Esperanza, the narrator comments that “feeding is the beginning and the end of what a mother knows to do for her offspring” (48). Even in a house of complex, passionate women with intricate needs, this basis for caring for all
her daughters cannot be under-valued. From mother’s milk as their first sustenance to spiritual support and guidance in their later years, providing nourishment is Sofi’s main force for providing for her children. In this way she is a familiar, motherly care-taker, aware of her own limitations but eager to give all the same.

Sofi deviates from the stereotypical mother figure in the expression of her sexuality. She incorporates her sexuality matter-of-factly into her identity, rather than allowing her sexuality to represent a caving in to sexual desire due to vulnerability or weakness. During moments of intimacy with her husband, Don Domingo, Sofi felt as if she were melting “like liquid gold” (110). Her feelings as “gold” emphasize the precious nature of her intimacy and its existence as a virtue rather than a flaw. In a moment that could show Domingo’s dominance over Sofi, we see instead Sofi incorporating this sharing of her body into our definition of womanliness. From this view, sharing of one’s body signifies a unity between two people that allows feminine power to flourish.

We can see a directing of this new form of feminine power in Sofi’s use of her sexual repression as a power for good in her community. While she previously “melted” in Domingo’s embraces, after remaining alone and sexually faithful for twenty years, she experiences what the narrator calls, “the rage of twenty years of celibate living” (112). In this way, both the sharing and denial of sexual expression stem from Sofi’s supreme sense of personal control and self-government. She then uses this repression as impetus for change in the community by rallying neighbors and starting community organizations for the betterment of the town (146). Just as priests or holy men must learn to curb their sexual desires and channel them into a greater good, so does Sofi use her own “rage” to unite the community. In the commonly
patriarchal role of Mayor, Sofi brings together her struggling neighbors and exhibits a ruling, maternal power worthy of her “Empress” title on her Tarot card. She is an empress through her role as a feminine organizer and unifier of the community masses.

We’re shown Sofi’s extraordinary qualities in subtle images such as her eye color. The narrator defines them as “funny-colored eyes that are not green or gray or brown but something in between that changed with the light” (134). As the eyes are commonly considered the window to the soul, it’s not a stretch to imagine that Sofi’s peculiar eye color is a metaphor for her inner complexity and ability to adapt to her surroundings depending on how receptive she cares to be to the people around her. Just as a pupil constricts to limit light, so can Sofi adjust her sensitivity to her social and spiritual environment.

Sofi’s capstone achievement is her production and mothering of vibrant, intense women. Though she may not have planned to spend her days caring for daily miracles and tragedies, the mention of Sofi’s versatile eyes proves that she contains the very complexity she endures in her daughters, and makes the production in incredible offspring inevitable. Sofi once complained that at her age she should have grandchildren, but instead, she “had to produce the kind of species that flies!” (84). Sofi therefore acknowledges, however grudgingly, her role as a creator of a new “species” of women.

As a spiritual hinge, Loca understands what her sister, Esperanza, can only discover once she’s crossed into the spirit realm: the true tale of La Llorona, a mourning mother. Though Loca’s grandfather believed La Llorona was simply a reminder for women not to sin, Esperanza’s spirit clarifies this version by adding that La Llorona was that way because of men (161). Esperanza’s spirit understands, “La Llorona in the beginning (before men got in the way
of it all) may have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess” (163). The representation of men as the jumblers of circumstance, the interrupters of spiritual attainment for women, and the source of feminine suffering fully applies to La Loca’s family. It is then apparent that men serve as general obstacles in the way of progress for women. La Llorona, depending the gender of the storyteller, represents either a self-pitying and disobedient woman or the epitome of womanly love.

According to the two most common versions of the tale of La Llorona, she is known for her wailing after her lost children and her seduction of unfaithful men (Kearney 199). She is then both generalized as an evil mother and an evil lover. La Llorona had multiple illegitimate children, but once she found that her lover rejected her, she drowned her children in a river and proceeded to woo and then physically attack vulnerable men after her death (199, 200). It makes perfect sense that this idea of a powerful, sexy, vengeful woman would threaten La Loca’s grandfather. From his perspective, as well as the patriarchal view of La Llorona in general through Kearney’s article, the men are the victims of an irrationally wrathful woman. They see her as a seducer and temptress, rather than the actual victim, as La Loca sees her. From La Loca’s vantage point of higher spiritual connectivity, she is able reinterpret La Llorona from outside of the patriarchal lens that society created and see her value as an injured passionate woman.

In order to understand the full significance of La Llorona in the novel and Sofi’s parallel character, it’s also necessary to outline La Llorona’s cultural significance as an icon for activism. According to Domino Perez in his book, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, La Llorona represents “the articulation of a contemporary struggle...reminding
us of the necessity and consequences of acting out against oppression” and how “to use our voices, whether wailing in protest or shouting in liberation, so that we may actively shape new cultural and social realities” (Perez 73). Of all the dominant and influential women in the novel, Sofi represents the tangible shift from dwelling under patriarchal power to dominating as a powerful, all-encompassing mother figure. Not only does she assume the role of mayor in the absence of male guidance, she also excludes male influence from her home directly by kicking Domingo out for the final time. Both of instances exhibit her leadership and role as a catalyst for social and political change in her community.

Though Sofi’s direct activism makes her a comparable figure of change to La Llorona, the comparison extends beyond the exterior similarities. Loca also creates a connection between Sofi and La Llorona, since she intimately communicates with both women and is considered the spiritual connection in the community to one and to the other, an “eternal baby” profiting from an immediate, maternal connection. In a world maintained by mother-daughter bonds, Loca equally and metaphorically lounges in the lap of her mother and La Llorona as her guiding forces, further stabilizing the comparison between the women. Perez continues to explain that La Llorona allowed for a Chicana identity that evades the common dichotomies of categorizing women, since she existed between many categories, and created new groups altogether (73). Likewise, Sofi does not choose to compromise between her fundamental forces as a “Queen of Swords” with its masculine battle imagery and the role of “Empress” with its thoroughly feminized form of leadership. She instead combines the two and rules as a newly formed woman, successfully incorporating gendered stereotypes into a functional conqueror.
True to her depiction as the “Queen of Swords,” Sofi melds the fields of feminine and masculine responsibility so as to make a new construct of femininity. While she embodies the nurturing mother, Sofi also represents the fatherly aspects of raising her family, since she is the only provider of food and income for her family during Domingo’s twenty year absence. It is Sofi who runs the family meat shop, raises the animals, and butchers them (28). Sofi not only economically supports the family, she combines the role of being a nurturing raiser of animals and an appropriately violent butcher together into a successful woman.

Upon his return home, Domgino recognizes this fierce fusion of the gender roles in the home and senses his own displacement as a result of Sofi’s new, all-encompassing identity. Though he has trouble putting his finger on the exact issue, Domingo feels certain he will be run out of the house (144). Due to the expanding role of his wife, Domingo senses that his power is threatened, and by extension, so is his sense of manhood. This presents a shift in the power structure from a patriarchal dominance over women to a structure where the women dictate the usefulness of the men. Domingo honors this shift in power by the manner in which he addresses Sofi: a shift from, “la Silly Sofi” to “la Mayor Sofia of Tome” (149). Along with the title of “Mayor”, Domingo attaches her full name instead of a nickname, showing the formality and respect inferred in his address, signifying his respect for her new position in the home. Regardless of Domingo’s acceptance, Sofi gains full command of the house and herself in remembering that it was she who kicked out Domingo from their house twenty years ago (214). This is the final shift in Sofi’s identity that allows her to leave behind any connection to ‘la abandonada’ and assert herself as the master of her own fate.
Sofi synthesizes the roles of defender, nurturer, and provider into a single, maternal force as the leader of the family, creating the ultimate woman. Her realms of influence encompass both gendered spheres of responsibility, and through her fine-tuning of her involvement in stereotypically masculine and feminine areas of work, Sofi is able to render a strict ‘father’ figure entirely redundant. The emphasis on the power of the mother-daughter connection transcends the need for any male interference.

III.

From the passionate and aggressive women of So Far From God, I’ll now shift gears to discuss yet another fruitful example of mother-daughter relationships within Amy Tan’s novel, The Joy Luck Club. The mother-daughter relationships Tan brings to life are characterized by decorum and maternal piety, seasoned with an intimacy based on subtle cultural clues of affection and an understanding that the daughter is a vital extension of the mother’s identity. Tan’s novel follows the lives of four Chinese-American immigrant families and centers around the changing dynamics between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. The novel highlights the uniquely gendered struggle of the Chinese-American daughters to maintain Chinese culture and connection to their mothers. Although each story is uniquely studded with these themes and others, I’ve chosen to focus on Jing-Mei (June) Woo’s story to outline this mother-daughter bond.

It’s vital that I first explain the organization of a Chinese family to contextualize the daughter’s position in the family. In comparing Western relationships with Chinese relationships, Yu-Wen Ying explains in her article entitled “Chinese American adults’ relationship with their parents” that while the husband and wife dyad represents the basic
family unit in the West, in China, the parent-child unit is the fundamental human relationship (Ying 35). The focus of the family is then in providing strong maternal bonds with daughters rather than fostering a close husband-wife bond. This places heavy cultural dependence upon the strength of the mother-daughter bond.

This pressure is especially present in June’s position as the eldest daughter in her first-generation Chinese-American household, making her the primary preserver of family culture. Ying continues to explain in her article that as a member of this first generation, any child would be expected to behave “traditionally” and “attain mutual understanding with their parents” (37). This is the first hint at the extreme levels of pressure upon June to fill the role of her mother and serve as her “replacement” both literally, in the game of Mah Jong, and culturally after her mother passes way (Tan 19).

June’s mother, Suyuan, is the principle force pressuring June to succeed by embracing culturally appropriate values. While we know little of June’s professional life, she describes herself as succeeding in small accomplishments, saying, “I was no better than who I was. I was a copywriter” (207). Her small achievements are personally satisfactory, and yet Suyuan continually pressed June in her childhood to surpass her own expectations and strive for excellence. Suyuan’s criticism of June’s motivation stems from her role as a “tiger mother,” as outlined in Amy Chua’s memoir, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother. According to Priscilla Lui and David Rollock’s review Chua’s memoir, the two values most emphasized by this intensely authoritarian mothering style are obedience and achievement (Lui and Rollock 453). Suyuan’s status as a tiger mom stems from the blunt force with which Suyuan made June search for a talent that would distinguish June, and by association, herself. Suyuan expresses her frustration
with June’s lack of excellence in saying, “Not the best. Because you not trying” (Tan 136). This example is one of many that illustrates the pressure exerted upon June to excel and reflect well on her family, for whom she is a direct representative.

June is also a representative of Chinese culture as a whole. The authoritarian approach to parenting that Suyuan represents in raising her daughter is a result of working to preserve Chinese culture through her daughter. Lui and Rollock perfectly explain this purposeful parenting style by stating, “The ultimate successes of tiger parenting also rest on inculcating in offspring a view of themselves as inextricable members of a particular cultural heritage...Chua aims to have her children view themselves as distinctly Chinese” (Lui and Rollock 454). While it will take 36 years for June to fully connect to the Chinese parts of herself, which I will later discuss, this statement illuminates Suyuan’s attempt to steep June in Chinese culture as a means of preserving it in the new, Chinese-American generation.

Suyuan expresses this Chinese culture with her daughter in the way she shares intimate moments and food with her family. Lui and Rollock explain that while authoritarian childrearing is highly controlled, it nonetheless represents a high level of care and concern that establishes close relationships with their children (453). True to this dual offering of control and care, June explains, “That’s the way Chinese mothers show they love their children, not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, stuffed gizzard, and crab” (Tan 202). June knows through personal experience that her mother’s affection is apparent in the attention she pays to how she feeds June. While it is different from the Western version of more obvious affection through physical embraces and soft words, June and Suyuan exchange a more subtle kind of affection that remains intimate. That June picks up on this deliberate subtlety is a mark
of how closely June observes her mother’s behavior and how well she can interpret Suyuan’s actions.

Despite this intimate connection, Suyuan and June struggle to communicate over the language barrier between them. When describing the ways to play Mah Jong, Suyuan’s method of explaining the differences in strategy leave June feeling as if Suyuan had used a foreign tongue. June complains, “These explanations made me feel like my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, and she answered back in Chinese” (34). Even in explaining the simple rules of a game, June feels that switching between languages causes some of her mother’s lessons and wisdom to get lost in translation. This void extending between the two women is representative of the separation between the new generations of Chinese-Americans and their Chinese parents. This cultural barrier divides the younger generation who have acclimated to the new culture and become Americanized by early exposure and the parental generation of immigrants who still hold fast to their cultural roots. June explains the frustration involved in this separation between mother and daughter in saying, “[the mothers] see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English...to these closed, American-born minds, “joy-luck” is not a word, it does not exist” (41). June values her relationship with her mother based on how well her mother can adapt to American culture, as opposed to valuing her mother for her natural Chinese culture. The fact that the Chinese equivalent of “joy-luck”, Suyuan’s preserving mantra and the title of the novel, is lost in translation foreshadows the trouble involved in bridging the generational and cultural divide.
The largest consequence of this cultural divide is June’s fundamental misunderstanding of Suyuan’s personal history. June indicates that each time her mother attempts to explain her past in the city of Kweilin, she must suspend her belief. June defends herself by saying, “I never thought my mother’s Kweilin story was anything but a fairy tale. The endings always changed” (25). June elaborated further in saying, “Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine” (21). June’s inability to understand her mother’s past is representative of the unbelievable weight of the cultural history Suyuan attempted to bestow upon June through her stories. Suyuan’s repetition of the same story demonstrates the importance of those particular experiences in shaping her, as well as the urgency with which Suyuan tries to communicate them to her daughter. Since June cannot understand this urgency, she’s unable to fundamentally understand her mother.

June’s elementary problem is therefore that she must first understand her mother’s background and essence before she can represent her family’s culture. Her struggle to do so is evident in June’s friend’s comparison between June and Suyuan that leaves both family members disturbed. Rather than taking the comparison as a compliment, Suyuan exclaims, “You don’t even know little percent of me! How can you be me?” (27). Here Suyuan points out her status as a complete mystery to even her closest of kin, sparking the beginning of June’s need to discover the true meaning of her mother’s life. Expressing her greatest fear, June says, “[My sisters] will think I’m responsible, that she died because I didn’t appreciate her” (271). In admitting this fear, June voices her guilt from not seeking to understand her mother sooner,
and, worst of all, that her sisters would blame her for not naturally recognizing the power and significance of their mother’s life.

As the cultural torchbearer, June must first maintain a separate sense of self from her mother. Bogged down by the pressure of representing her entire culture, June initially rebelled against her mother’s directions to practice piano, saying, “I failed her so many times, asserting my right to fall short of expectations...For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me” (142). This adolescent struggle for autonomy allowed for a construction of June’s sense of self that was separate from the June Suyuan envisioned. June saw herself as an entirely disconnected entity from her mother. This makes complete sense in the context of Lui and Rollock’s mention that, “Traditional Asian parents tend to view their offspring and families as extensions of self,” whereas American parents view their children as separates selves (Lui and Rollock 451). Therefore, June was reacting against the very real pressure to fulfill the goals of her family as a whole through the direction of her mother.

Despite June’s rebellion against her mother’s image, June finds herself relating to her mother in unexpected ways. Suyuan recognized June’s value in naming her ‘Jing-Mei’, meaning, “Not just good, it’s something pure, essential, the best quality...When you take the impurities out of something...what is left—pure essence” (Tan 281). Therefore, June’s Chinese name represents her refined, undeniable value in her mother’s eyes. Sadly, June doesn’t hear about the meaning of her Chinese name until after her mother dies of a brain aneurism, but the story of her name nonetheless solidifies June’s worth in her family.

Once she’s come to terms with her own value, June begins the transformation into a fully-actualized Chinese woman. Whereas before June shrugged away cultural ties to China, by
the end of the novel, June now searches for a way to solidify her connections to her mother and to her culture. In spite of her initial rebellion to her heritage, June’s mother warns her, “Someday you will see...It is in your blood, waiting to be let go” (267). This remark portrays June’s identification with China as inevitable and natural, as if somehow her Chinese-ness lay dormant within June, waiting to be set loose.

The novel opens with a conversation between June and her Aunt An-Mei that also reveals how June’s nature is already deeply internalized by the first few pages of the novel. In discussing her late mother with her Aunt An-Mei, June tells her aunt that she does not know anything about her mother. To this, An Mei replies, “Not know your own mother? She is in your bones” (40). This connection to her mother within her most fundamental biological make-up further accentuates the powerful, raw connection between mother and daughter.

With the story of her mother preserved in her bones and the history of China pumping through her veins, it’s only natural that June revives the Chinese qualities within her at the end of the novel. Not surprisingly, the transformation involves both her affected blood and bones in the process. June begins by saying, “I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, my mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (267). The “new course” for her blood signifies a change in paths or the construction of a new system inside her, which in this case is an authentically Chinese system. The pain of this transformation is familiar because in accepting her heritage, June accepts the shared memories of her family and becomes a part of a collective family unit. Upon meeting her two estranged sisters, June realizes the part of her that always would be Chinese: her family. June comments on this by saying, “And now I see what part of me is
Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (288). The piece of her that is truly Chinese is not a defect of her own or a cultural embarrassment she carries within her, but rather a connection to her family. In accepting this fact, June no longer has to worry about how to categorize herself or relate to the other women around her. She now knows, for the first time, that her true place of belonging is not in the foreign land of China but in the Chinese parts of herself and her family.

The meeting between June and her two sisters for the first time is the point in the novel where June finally understands the role her mother has played in her construction of identity. Before her had passed away, Suyuan gave June a jade necklace to represent her “meaning,” explaining that understanding this “meaning” was June’s “life’s importance” (208). The weight of the cold necklace represents the pressure and restriction June felt in having to explain to herself, and later, her siblings, what exactly her mother’s life meant. This understanding of her mother was what ‘Suyuan’ literally stood for, since her name means “long-cherished wish” (280). June is then fulfilling this wish by traveling to China to meet her sisters, and together they experience a collective version of their mother. Once together, all three women murmur, “Mama”, “as if she is among us” (280). Through their shared desire to connect to their mother, the three women become representatives of maternal preservation. As the last line in the novel, June says, “Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish” (288). Once together, the women are able to form a complete version of their mother, illustrating the pieces of her preserved in each daughter. June is then able to share the meaning of true Chinese culture and maternal connection with her sisters. Through her struggles to recognize the true meaning of her mother’s life, June
discovers the perfect connectedness between her mother and her siblings, and the power of the cultural ties she shares with China.

Just as Fante used language to articulate Bandini’s sense of masculinity and cultural heritage, so does Tan use language to preserve June’s mother and connection to China. In the final pages of June’s story, she’s united with her long-lost sisters and they simultaneously call out to their mother: “’Mama, Mama,’ We all murmur, as if she is among us” (287). By calling her name, the sisters invoke the collective memory of their mother and strengthen the familial context in which they’re to understand one another. “Mama” is especially significant in this moment because it is a universal word that will not change in meaning through translation from one language to the next. This word is then the bridge between the cultures for the three sisters.

June also evolves in her incorporation of language as she learns to accept her Chinese background. While she originally was embarrassed by her mother’s dependence on speaking in Chinese and her inability to blend in with average Americans, by the end of the novel, June actively preserves in her father’s story-telling about her mother by requiring that he speak of June’s mother in only Chinese. She instructs her father by saying, “No, tell me in Chinese. Really, I can understand” (281). This is significant in representing June’s ability to comprehend that her mother’s story will not translate entirely from Chinese to English, and that her mother can only be judged and accepted in her natural, Chinese form. June cannot truly know her mother until she abandons the American lens through which she’d previously tried to relate to her mother, and instead, process and value the stories of her mother’s history in their original glory.
Conclusion:

Each of the three aforementioned novels involves the complex relationship between language, culture, and gender. While Bandini alternately used his language to preserve his Italian culture or to allow him to blend into the American background, June used her control of language to first shun her foreign mother, and eventually, accentuate her cultural connections to China and her family. June also experienced the power and emotion in mother-daughter relationships, which Loca and Sofi build upon in their own culture to promote the creation of the ultimate woman.
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