

Sor Juana's Rhetoric of Silence

This essay illuminates the place of seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the history and theory of rhetoric. I examine rhetorics of silence and interruption in La respuesta, Sor Juana's most well-known prose piece and an autobiographical polemic that preceded her actual silence in the face of disapproving Church authorities. By insisting that silence is something to listen for and demanding that rhetors underscore their use of silence by "naming" it, Sor Juana theorizes about silence as a persuasive entity and provides an early instance of a nondominant, protofeminist, New World rhetoric.

The works of seventeenth-century nun and author Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) enjoy canonical status in Spanish and Latin American circles, yet remain largely unknown in English studies.¹ The inclusion of Sor Juana's *La respuesta* in at least two recent compilations of texts in the history of rhetoric can be attributed to feminist scholarship of the past twenty-five years, research that has contributed substantially to our understanding of her rhetorical skill.² Yet few have explicitly looked to Sor Juana as a source for rhetorical theory. In other words, she is sometimes viewed as a rhetor but rarely as a rhetorician. Yet as a prolific writer of poetry, drama, and prose (much of which was commissioned by both religious and state authorities of New Spain), she was necessarily adept in political rhetoric. And, although she is self-taught, her work reveals her knowledge of the classical rhetorical works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and quite possibly Plato. Though she confines her overt definition of *rhetoric* to the conventionally narrow "figures, tropes, and locutions," her writings are fundamentally concerned with the problems of language, the constrictions imposed by discourse, and the provision and acquisition of literacy in her multilingual society—all concerns of rhetoric (*The Answer/La respuesta* 53).³ This essay aims to illuminate the place of Sor Juana in the history and theory of rhetoric, using feminist methodology to "extrapolate" Sor Juana's rhetorical theory from her seemingly nonrhetorical statements and activities (Ratcliffe 4). A more complete understanding of this important figure will contribute toward a fuller picture of American (in the continental sense) discursive traditions.

Sor Juana was dubbed the “Tenth Muse” of the New World in her own lifetime, and her cell in the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City served as a salon among intellectuals of her time. She was friends with Mexico’s Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, read the scientific works of Athanasius Kircher, and was prominent in the court and church hierarchies of colonial New Spain. Octavio Paz’s acclaimed book, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith*, vividly positions Sor Juana’s intellectual prowess in the context of New Spain, which was even more repressive and intellectually conservative than Spain, which was in turn significantly behind other parts of Europe at this time. As a Creole, an American-born Spaniard, she was of the elite, ruling class, and her primary affiliations were most often with the Old World. Some of her liturgical and ceremonial pieces demonstrate her role as a purveyor of hegemonic discourse, addressing a broad, multicultural constituency that included Creoles, mestizos, and natives. Yet, as a woman, she struggled to learn to read and write without teachers and outside authorized classrooms. This experience of being both inside and outside dominant discourse marks her rhetorical stance and consequent rhetorical theory.

In the pages that follow, I examine how Sor Juana’s negotiation of her own identity leads her to a rhetoric of silence, as extrapolated from her epistle, *La respuesta*. My essay argues that Sor Juana consciously engages with rhetorical theory; her nuanced understanding of the rhetorical potentials of silence adds to more traditional rhetorical knowledge that focuses on speech only. Operating from her position as a woman who has confronted others’ attempts to silence her, she takes a gendered approach to rhetorical theory, so that her contributions are important considerations in feminists’ recent efforts to regender rhetoric (Glenn). Sor Juana’s rhetoric of silence calls attention to silence as meaningful and purposefully persuasive, especially for women and women’s communities. Her obsession with noise and muteness leads her to carefully consider the interplay of interruption, silence, and speech. By insisting that silence is something to listen for and demanding that rhetors underscore their use of silence by “naming” it, Sor Juana theorizes about silence as a persuasive entity (*La respuesta* 43).

While recent commentators have remarked on Sor Juana’s attention to silence, little effort has been made to place Sor Juana’s thoughts on this matter staunchly in the field of rhetoric. My contention is that she is someone who actively considered how people communicate with or persuade one another. When the term *rhetoric* is used by modern scholars, it generally refers more narrowly to Sor Juana’s skillful use of language, especially as a literary device (for example, see Segura) or as evidence of her familiarity with classical rhetorical arrangement (for example, see Perelmutter Pérez).⁴ The more contextualized studies understand Sor Juana as adept at navigating the rhetorical complexities of the

religious and colonial worlds (for example, see Merrim and Sabat de Rivers). Hence, she defies Paul and in the face of religious and state hierarchy employs what Josefina Ludmer terms “tricks of the weak,” or strategies of “one in a position of subordination and marginality” (87). However, even a reader as sensitive as Ludmer tends to disparage rhetoric, seeing it as something Sor Juana must escape and positing the existence of a silent textual space that is finally “stripped of rhetoric” (88). In contrast I understand Sor Juana and her silence to be always immersed in rhetoric. I begin here by arguing for Sor Juana’s quiet but conscious entry into rhetorical theory, a field most women were excluded from. I then show her indisputable immersion in a literacy battle with a silencing bishop. From there I move on to Sor Juana’s problematic relations with other women, especially fellow nuns, whom she wished were more silent. Finally, I examine her explicit call for and enactment of silent rhetoric toward the end of her life.

La respuesta was written in 1691 when Sor Juana was forty-three years old and had lived in the convent for twenty-two years. She was at the pinnacle of her authorial career; almost all of her major works had already been written, and her collected works had been published two years earlier in *Inundación Castálida*. She wrote the letter in answer (*respuesta*) to a bishop’s critique of her own critique of a well-known Jesuit’s sermon. The bishop attempts to silence Sor Juana. Her response is at once feminist manifesto, exegetical treatise, and autobiography. Above all, it is an apologia for her own and other women’s intellectual capacity. Although it was never published in her lifetime, its circulation elicited a chain reaction of opposition from Church authorities. The bishop’s chastisement came at a time when court support of Sor Juana was weakened. Previously, her friendship with two vice regent wives had resulted in literary sponsorship and protection. But now a new vice regency was in power, and maize shortages led to widespread hunger and economic hardship. This left the new court weakened and distracted, and eventually culminated in a Mexico City riot over the diminished maize supply in 1692 (Paz 438–44). Ultimately, *La respuesta* led to Sor Juana’s political downfall, marked by a formal confession of sins, a rejection of humane studies, and the dispersal of her library.

That is to say, possibly the first feminist tract written in the New World was initiated by the writer’s own rhetorical analysis of a forty-year-old oration. Thus, although Sor Juana may not have designated herself a rhetorician, she certainly must have understood herself as working within the arena of rhetorical theory. Dealing with the interplay of gender, religion, and identity, *La respuesta* is a rhetoric of belonging in the way it displays the symbolic vocabularies used when people join or dissociate from others. *La respuesta* is also a woman’s rhetoric, attentive to the specific concerns of the female body and female literacy. An assertion of what we would now call interdisciplinary linking is a suggestive

marker of Sor Juana's conscious entry in rhetoric. In *La respuesta*, she shows the correspondences between cooking, a feminine art she acquired at the convent, and scientific speculation. Noting that eggs become solid in butter and oil but dissolve in sugar, or that egg yolks and whites are of such contrary natures they cannot be mixed together when used with sugar, she remarks:

But in truth, my Lady [as explained below, *La respuesta* is written to the bishop, but addressed to his pseudonym, a nun he calls "Sor Filotea"], what can we women know, save philosophies of the kitchen? It was well put by Lupercio Leonardo that one can philosophize quite well while preparing supper. I often say, when I make these little observations, "Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more." (75)

Sor Juana overtly pokes fun at Aristotle in this passage, wittily suggesting that his *curriculum vitae* might have been stronger had he suffered the female fate of having to study at home with only available instruments. But her soliloquy on cooking can also be read as a response to Plato, whose *Gorgias* castigates rhetoric as analogous to mere cooking. In this dialogue Socrates says that both rhetoric and cooking are not arts at all, but habitudes. Distinct from the lofty art of dialectic, habitudes merely produce gratification and are branches of the deceitful and base business of flattery. On the contrary, Sor Juana replies in the passage cited above, cooking is philosophical. Playfully yet with full seriousness, she asserts a female rhetorical space that is distinct from, yet in conversation with, theorists of classical rhetoric.

Sor Juana's "Literacy Letters"

Sor Juana's entry in the field of rhetoric is more aptly termed an intrusion. She gets caught in a written exchange with Church officials that oddly cloaks class and gender hierarchy with supposed equality and intimacy. A series of what I will call "literacy letters" came in several installments.⁵ First, in January of 1690 she wrote a critique of a sermon that had been delivered in Brazil by Padre Antonio de Veyra forty years earlier. In the critique itself and in *La respuesta*, Sor Juana says that she only wrote the critique, now known as the *Carta Atenagórica* or *Letter Worthy of Athena*, after being urged to do so by the bishop of Puebla, who had heard her orally expound on the subject.⁶ In November of the same year, this same bishop published the critique without Sor Juana's knowledge and prefaced it with a letter using the pseudonym "Sor Filotea," sister who loves God. Sor Filotea praised Sor Juana's critique but "asked" her to

discontinue her secular studies and writing and to behave more appropriately as a nun. A few months later, in March 1691, Sor Juana wrote her response, now known as *La respuesta*, her best-known and most explicitly feminist and polemical text. Two additional letters attributed to Sor Juana and concerning her relations with the Church have recently come to light: the *Carta al Padre Núñez* (1682), a caustic rejection of her confessor that was discovered in 1980 and the *Carta de Serafina de Cristo* (1691; first published by Trabulse in 1997), which may have been a private version of *La respuesta* because it is a more explicit and satirical response to critics of the *Carta Atenagórica* and to Núñez in particular.

Examining this cycle of letters as “literacy letters” means conceiving of literacy not as technical correctness but rather as the correctness or appropriateness of an author’s behavior and stance—the way in which a writer relates to her writing and audience—within the context of a specific society. Sor Juana is caught in a web of prohibited topics, a web in which others attempt to “change the subject” of her discourse, which effectively means changing her subjectivity (Brodkey, “On the Subjects” 126). In the preface to his published version of *Carta Atenagórica*, the bishop writes that he admires her great learning and her career spent on “intriguing subjects.” But it is now time to “move on” to “edifying ones” (Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Sor Juana Anthology* 202).⁷ He does not disapprove of verse, but “I could wish that, as you imitate [religious poets] in meter, you might do so as well in choice of subject” (200). He also says it is acceptable for women to study as long as they remain obedient. And certainly she has remained subordinate, “[f]or if other nuns sacrifice their wills for the sake of obedience, you hold the mind captive, which is the most arduous and the most welcome sacrifice one can offer on the altars of Religion” (200). He attests to having “admired the keenness of your concepts [in the *Carta Atenagórica*], the skill of your proofs, and the vigorous clarity that lends conviction to the subject, a quality inseparably linked with wisdom” (199). In short, his directives are indirect, couched in a rhetoric of praise such that reading the bishop’s letter today requires imagination, historical background, and a strong sense of irony to understand how it could have led to the dramatic close of Sor Juana’s career. The message is not straightforward. He asks her to stop writing yet simultaneously publishes her critique; he tells her to focus on divine subjects, yet her critique has been on the topic of God’s greatest gift. Maneuvering within this complex web, Sor Juana’s response puts herself forward as rhetor and rhetorician—someone intimately adept at maneuvering through the web’s political entanglements and profoundly concerned with the acquisition, use, and effect of language in real-life contexts.

Unlike today’s letter, the epistle genre mixes impersonal formality and publicly known convention with a pretense of familiarity. Writing about the period

just preceding Sor Juana's, Laurel Carrington says, "letters between friends were routinely circulated and even published, and were structured carefully to reflect the status of writer and reader, the linguistic competency of the writer, and the respective needs and concerns of both parties" (215). Hence, the intimacy projected in Sor Juana's letter is something readers today need to be wary of—the self-image she shares is more clearly a public relations gesture than sincere autobiography. At the same time, the semblance of intimacy has significant rhetorical impact. As Nereida Segura points out, it's difficult to doubt the authenticity of a nun's confessions (44). Sor Juana takes advantage of such readerly trust.

The bishop also relies on a pretense of intimacy. By choosing to reprimand Sor Juana in the female voice of a fellow nun, he effects equality. In reality, of course, the staged equality deflects the actual wielding of authority. What voice can Sor Juana assume in response? In the letter opening, she assumes the standard trope of humility by declaring her inadequacy as a respondent, addressing Sor Filotea as "My Most illustrious Lady" (*La respuesta* 39).⁸ The bishop's actual power—and gender—are more overtly alluded to when Sor Juana refers to him as "a second Ahasuerus," the autocratic ruler in the book of Esther, who has granted her "kind license to speak and plead [her] case" (45). In the letter's closing, she even more explicitly acknowledges the "distance between myself and your most distinguished person" (103).

Thus the bishop and Sor Juana write carefully considered and publicly minded missives to one another, articulating their respective versions of what can be read and spoken—what are the acceptable subjects? And how can subjects speak? Their own status as "subjects" is part of this question. They are asking not only whether the subject of her writing should be secular or divine, but also who can Sor Juana be? They are divided as to whether she can be a nun who is also a scholar and a publishing writer. The letters are fraught with the tension of power dynamics, of hyperalertness to who is in charge (who is subject to whom), and with strategies regarding how to wield, acknowledge, and subvert authority. In a wonderfully ironic moment toward the end of the text, Sor Juana disavows any desire to publish her writings, points out that he, not she, has published the *Carta Atenagórica*, and then says that only a few devotional writings were printed under her own supervision, and even then without her name. "I submit to you a few copies of the same, so that you may distribute them (if you think it seemly) among our sisters" she continues (101). Having been told to focus on spiritual matters, sending along some religious pamphlets is staged as an act of obedience. Yet given the bishop's instructions to stop writing, it is difficult to see how he could receive this as anything other than a direct affront. In the bishop's excessive politeness and guise of equality and Sor Juana's corresponding humility, we see both figures simultaneously transcending and reinforcing

distinctions in hierarchy. And we realize how intensely aware each writer must have been of the actual class and gender distinctions that separated them.

The Subject Is Women

Sor Juana's response to these questions about women's discourse is proto-feminist, but complicatedly so. Most recent studies embrace her as critic and resister of the status quo, yet I believe it's important to also acknowledge her more conservative side. By embracing what I feel are both appealing and unattractive aspects of Sor Juana's contributions and by insisting on seeing her as both a countercultural and a hegemonic figure, my own feminist rhetoric highlights the ways in which the complicated subjectivity she embodies generates a complex and occasionally even contradictory rhetorical theory. Hence, when we turn to Sor Juana's exegesis, although there's a boldness in confronting St. Paul's admonition, "Let women keep silence in the churches," her solution isn't terribly radical (1 Cor 14:34). She says it is permissible for women to study and interpret scripture *in private* (*La respuesta* 81–91). But if her exegesis is mild in tone, there is an intended ribbing in the way in which Sor Juana refutes the Pauline tradition that taught girls and women that silence was fitting for them, and then endorses its use in new and subversive ways by sketching a positive rhetoric of silence that she, a woman, enacts. As others have noted, she refuses the "'feminine' convention of silence" even as she invokes it (Franco 23; Myers 483).

At times, Sor Juana's stance toward gender is troublingly dismissive. Because her engagement in letters is something she did not choose, she claims it is justifiable. She recounts her autobiography as a series of intellectual urges that began as early as the age of three, when she followed her sister to school and "caught fire with the desire to learn" (49). This implies that her vocation to pursue letters and philosophy, beginning at such a young age, is biologically induced (*La respuesta* 49); a three-year-old didn't "choose" to study. "I study because I must," she asserts (77). Elsewhere she says, "I know that I was born so much a poet / that when whipped, like Ovid, / my cries sound in meter" (*Obras completas* I.93 lines 22–24; my translation).⁹ Until experience taught her otherwise, Sor Juana thought everyone "lisp'd in Numbers," speculated about the diversity of human character, saw geometrical proportions and shapes in the spinning of a child's top, and empirically observed the laws of perspective (*La respuesta* 73, 75). Her claim to be a prodigy in effect discards gender.¹⁰ Writing and studying are a calling for which she cannot be responsible. This deflection of responsibility serves to deny her own agency in defying gender norms. She is not a woman breaking codes but a poet who just happens to be a woman.

But she also shows that in practice for a woman to pursue the call to learn is no easy task. As a child, she begged her mother to allow her to dress in men's clothes so she could attend the university (49). As an adult, she spiritedly warns against the risks incurred when a young girl confronts a male teacher (87). She points continually to the obstructions, hazards, and interruptions that have recurred in her attempts to study. Her portrayal of the female intellectual is markedly different from the classical image of the bodiless masculine mind. Rather, Sor Juana's own body intrudes upon her learning. It presents disruptions. For example, when she is a child, she decides not to eat cheese because she hears it causes stupidity (*La respuesta* 49). If she fails to learn her lessons in the time she has allotted, she punishes herself by cutting her hair (51). She measures scholarly progress against bodily desire and growth. Although her efforts to learn reflect a desire to conform to Plotinus' ideals and suppress the body, her portrayal of this struggle reveals her awareness of a very different female reality. Moreover, while male aspirants to knowledge have recorded similar struggles, instead of stressing the benefits of continence, as Augustine does, for example, Sor Juana finds a way to incorporate bodily knowledge. Although the body potentially imperils learning in her early years, as a mature adult she learns to accommodate the body's lessons and acknowledge its needs, as the reference to cooking and Aristotle demonstrates. The kitchen becomes a pedagogical site.

Like Christine de Pisan, Sor Juana invokes a community of historical women as her source of inspiration, and as proof that women have been accepted intellectual leaders in both the spiritual and secular realms.¹¹ Thus the Hebrew Bible yields Deborah, the Queen of Sheba, Abigail, Esther, Rahab, Hannah; the Greeks had Minerva, Zenobia, Arete, Nicostrata, and Aspasia Miletia; and Christian thinkers have included Catherine, Gertrude, and Paula, this last woman one of the founders of Sor Juana's own Hieronymite order of nuns (*La respuesta* 77–79). Several of the women have specific significance for rhetoric: Sor Juana explicitly hails Esther for her gift of persuasion. Nicostrata taught the Romans the alphabet. Aspasia was a teacher of rhetoric. St. Catherine defended her learning to male inquisitors and successfully converted them, as well as Emperor Maxentius' wife and two hundred soldiers while she was imprisoned. Christina of Sweden abdicated the throne, converted to Catholicism, and set up an intellectual academy. She was a crossdresser and known for outrageous behavior. Nina Scott has given a detailed account of all forty-two women Sor Juana cites (“La gran turba”). This “catalogue of illustrious women” demonstrates Sor Juana's own need for a “sense of belonging to a community of likeminded peers” (Scott 212). Despite her assertion that her inclination to letters was so strong that she “had no need of exemplars,” this demonstrates that even exemplary women need exemplars (*La respuesta* 77). Barbara Biesecker's critique of inserting “great

women speakers" into the history of rhetoric rests on the premise that this practice reifies patriarchy by including a few exceptional women who speak or write according to established male rules. Yet, like many "exemplary" women, Sor Juana works both within and against patriarchal norms. Several of her examples do not at all conform to Biesecker's "female tokens." Rahab is a prostitute, Aspasia is often portrayed as a courtesan, and Christina of Sweden was a crossdresser known to have had illicit relations with men *and* women; all three represent women who knowingly crossed the boundaries of decorum regarding speech and bodily habits.

The Rhetoric of Interruption

As shown above, the body figures in Sor Juana's defense, and even if her attitude toward it is sometimes negative, her awareness of the link between the female body, material needs and desires, and gender expectations marks her account of a woman intellectual. In this way the text offers a perspective on rhetorical training and practice in which gender is foregrounded. Yet any attempt to embrace her early feminism is quickly dampened. While her own body presents obstacles in childhood, as an adult, it is other female bodies, her fellow nuns, that most intrude upon Sor Juana. She explains in *La respuesta* that she joined the convent because it was a way to avoid marriage and pursue salvation (51). But the community of nuns interferes with her educational progress. Her fellow nuns like to talk, and to interrupt her. She finds such "noise" (*rumor*) "repugnant" (*repugnante*) (51, 46). She took the veil to receive salvation, even though she would have preferred to live alone, unimpeded. Instead of the silence characteristic of religious communities, Sor Juana's communal experience is marked by interruption:

And instead of explanations and exercises I had interruptions, posed not only by my religious duties [. . .], but by all those other things incidental to life in a community: as when I would be reading and the nuns in the next cell would have a notion to sing and play; or I would be reading and two maidservants, arguing, would come to appoint me arbiter in their dispute; again, as I was writing, a friend would come to visit me, doing me a very bad turn with very good intentions, so that one must not only make way for the interruption but give thanks for the harm done. (59)

Hence, Sor Juana throws open the notion of women's community, and critiques it as a participant. In contrast to María de San José, a sixteenth-century

Spanish nun who wrote a wonderful dialogue that portrays a fertile, collaborative community of knowledge-makers among convent sisters, Sor Juana indicates that her fellow nuns were not her intellectual counterparts.¹²

While she laments that her “only teacher was a mute book,” Sor Juana rejects the companionship of the convent (59). Lacking suitable “schoolfellows,” she places herself in the companionship of illustrious dead women. Yet in the presence of an actual community of women, she shuns collaboration and favors what Andrea Lunsford calls the “garret” model of writing and study (“Collaboration”). Although she maintains significant interaction with the outside world, in many respects she is literally a “writer in a cell” (Brodkey, *Academic Writing* 56). Unlike modern compositionists, she valorizes such isolation: “The noise of the community would interrupt the tranquil silence of my books” (*La respuesta* 51).

As she traces the repercussions of belonging to a community, Sor Juana rejects the community of women most immediately available to her, responding with a rhetoric of disruption and dissociation that is at times vitriolic: “Why should it be judged evil that the time which I might spend in foolish chatter at the grille, or in a cell sniping at everything that goes on in and out of this house, or fighting with someone or shouting at a poor servant or wandering idly through the world with my thoughts, be invested in studying?” she asks in the letter to her confessor, Padre Núñez (Scott, “If You Are Not Pleased” 431). Although she dismisses her fellow nuns, the cadre of historical female companions shows the pains she takes to portray the scholarly world as not exclusively male. This scholarly community is also Old World. Unfortunately, her affiliation with the Old World, so instrumental in the earlier dissemination of her work, soon backfired. As the controversy over the *Carta* and *La respuesta* escalated, Sor Juana’s second volume of collected works was published in Spain. It opened with the *Carta Atenagórica* and contained over two hundred changes from the Mexican edition, some of which attacked her enemies’ theological points with renewed emphasis (Trabulse 22). This book was prefaced by copious comments from well-placed Spaniards voicing praise—and implicitly responding to Mexican authorities. However, as Paz points out, by the time the volume reached Mexico City in 1693, a weakened vice regency made the Spaniards’ support a liability rather than an asset (447).

While Sor Juana’s solidarity with women precludes the nuns in her own convent, eventually, having had ample time to reflect upon the role of interruptions in her own life, she recognized them as potentially productive. Following fellow nuns’ lead, she interrupts the bishop. Her very act of response is interruptive, since what she *should* be doing is heeding his advice and shunning letters. Instead, by issuing a rejoinder, she breaks in upon his discourse. She knows that

when she is interrupted, she must listen to others; she counts upon her own interruption ensuring her an audience. By refuting the bishop's admonishments, she sounds a nondominant, disruptive, and potentially resistant voice. Sor Juana reconstructs the nuns' interruptive behavior into a "female" rhetorical model of resistance and challenge.

The Rhetoric of Silence

Simultaneously, Sor Juana harnesses the traditional silence of the convent and converts it into a rhetorical strength, mapping the dynamics among interruption, silence, and speech. Interruption can provoke silence *or* speech; it is an effective conduit for rhetorically effected change. In Greek rhetorical theory, *aposiopesis* incorporates this rhetorical interplay of interruption and silence. It describes the act of "stopping suddenly in midcourse, leaving a statement unfinished; sometimes from genuine passion, sometimes for effect" (Lanham 20). Sor Juana invokes a variant of *aposiopesis* (without using the term) at the beginning of *La respuesta*. She tells Sor Filotea that the challenge of responding to her almost left her resolved to

leave the matter in silence; yet although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing, one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that, silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing. (41–43)

Though terse, this constitutes a nuanced awareness of rhetorical potential. A more literal translation of "one must name the silence" in the above passage "is one must put a brief inscription or label ("*breve rótulo*") on silence." Sor Juana's whole *La respuesta* is this "brief inscription." The phrase appears again in the same passage:

And so I, my lady, shall answer only that I know not how to answer; I shall thank you only by saying that I know not how to give thanks; and I shall say, by way of the brief label ("*breve rótulo*") placed on what I leave to silence, that only with the confidence of one so favored and with the advantages granted one so honored, do I dare speak to your magnificence. (43)

In a very different context, a poem to an absent loved one, Sor Juana also invokes silent speech:

Hear me with your eyes,
 Now that the ears are so far,
 And from my pen my laments
 And injuries echo in your absence;
 And now that my crude voice doesn't reach you,
 Hear me silent, for I complain mutely.
 (OC 1.313 lines 7–12; my translation)

In *La respuesta* she generalizes this poem's more private plea to hear silence. She interrupts her own potential silence to call attention to it as meaningful, as rhetorically replete. In essence she says, "If I do not make a full response, or if I stop suddenly in midcourse, it is from passion *and* for effect. Be sure to hear my silences. 'Hear me silent.'" I read these comments as conscious engagement with rhetorical theory. If the "proper function" of silence is "to say nothing," Sor Juana's use of silence must be slyly yet subversively "improper." She continues: "[O]f those things that cannot be spoken, it must be said that they cannot be spoken, so that it may be known that silence is kept not for lack of things to say, but because the many things there are to say cannot be contained in mere words" (43). Through silent innuendo, which manages to fly just under the ecclesiastic radar by not quite saying what it means, she invokes a rhetorical approach that operates both within and against traditional rhetoric.

The efficacy of silence is something she had learned earlier in her career. In the letter to Padre Núñez, she tells him that although she has heard of his anger at what he regards as her "public scandal" (her writing), she hasn't replied despite her informants' urging. She didn't do so,

judging that my silence might be the most delicate way in which the anger of Y. R. would be cooled; until with time I have come to realize that on the contrary it seems that my patience irritates you, and thus I determined to reply to Y. R., without impugning my love, my obligation, and my respect. (496)

Silence, she had learned, could be an effective irritant, and she chalked up this knowledge for future use.

At the end of *La respuesta*, Sor Juana tells Sor Filotea that she will "keep still" and write nothing more without approval, and, in fact, she wrote little afterwards (though not nothing) (*La respuesta* 99).¹³ Two years later, in 1693, shortly after the arrival of her second volume of collected works, she became subject to an ecclesiastical tribunal that dealt with disciplinary infractions and examined her work for the presence of heresy (see Trabulsee). While little

detail is known about the proceedings, what resulted was a public confession by Sor Juana repenting her former sins, a renewal of her vows, and a profession of faith signed in blood. The title of this last item says it contains an abjuration of humane letters, though the text itself does not mention this (Paz 463). She also turned over her library and her musical and scientific instruments to the Archbishop. Just before she died, she wrote the self-declaration that María Luisa Bemberg has used as a title to her 1990 film about Sor Juana: "I, the worst of all." The motivation for these acts remains the central mystery of Sor Juana's life. They have been variously interpreted as a sincere renewal of faith (this is the conservative approach that helped to paint her as a saintly figure, originated by her 1700 biographer, Diego Calleja), or a necessary bow to authority with furtively defiant gestures (this is the more recent, feminist interpretation). There are those who construe her as victim (Ward) and others who believe she miscalculated her political strength (Trabulse; Paz). The final tragic note to this story is that a year after the public confession, at the age of forty-six, Sor Juana died, after contracting an illness when caring for victims of a plague in Mexico City.

Sor Juana's death becomes part of the meaningful silence *La respuesta* forecasts. In that text, when she finally put her experience with Padre Núñez to use and "named" the significance of her own impending silence, she also articulated a theory of silence in general. Clearly, she didn't simply have a "lack of things to say" (43). And because she does not tell us precisely what her silence means, we have to fill it in. In this way her text and life function as enthymeme: Silence is meaningful (the major premise, stated explicitly). I shall now be silent, "keep still" (minor premise, stated explicitly). Therefore, you should attribute meaning to my silence (inferred conclusion). What meaning can we attribute? Since someone with so much desire for learning has been unable to stop herself, if she does stop, it's not of her own choice—it will mean she has been stopped by the authorities. She cannot announce this; she can only suggest it, enthymematically enlisting her readers in doing the work the theory itself espouses.

Susan Sontag explains that "Since the artist can't embrace silence literally and remain an artist, what the rhetoric of silence indicates is a determination to pursue his activities more deviously than before" (12). Certainly we can read Sor Juana's statement "deviously," using it to shed light on her own mysterious silence in the years following this letter. But though spare, this passage reads more broadly as well, as a general prescription for deviousness as a valid rhetorical strategy when political circumstances constrict a more explicit response. Indeed, Sor Juana's biblical model of persuasion, Esther, persuades through dubious means: with her beauty, by withholding her ethnicity, and by deferring her plea until just the right moment (see Bokser).

Hence, Sor Juana interrupts the bishop in order to explain her past reticence and to announce her impending silence so that she herself will be listened to—by those who know how to hear. The rhetoric of interruption merges with a rhetoric of silence. And we come to see a theory that comes directly from her own life experiences: The rhetoric of interruption transforms from a whiny complaint about fellow nuns to a rhetorically replete act—an act that reads as theory but that also constitutes her most critical and life-determining praxis.

Josefina Ludmer's probing discussion of Sor Juana's silence similarly asserts that Sor Juana makes silence into a praxis, a "space of resistance vis-à-vis others' power" (89). Sor Juana asserts, "I do not study in order to write, nor far less in order to teach (which would be boundless arrogance in me), but simply to see whether by studying I may become less ignorant" (*La respuesta* 47). By associating her own learning with silence (learning, not teaching; mute books; lifeless teachers), Ludmer says, she separates knowing from saying and creates an epistemology that aligns knowing with not saying ("no-ing"), or silence. In this way she can legitimate her own possession of knowledge without infringing on the male territory of *speaking*. Ludmer's article is wonderfully insightful, but neglects Sor Juana's self-declared "inscription" of silence. That is, Sor Juana *does* speak, effecting what Cheryl Glenn calls a "delivery of silence" (2). Glenn asserts:

Silence is perhaps the most undervalued and *under*-understood traditionally feminine rhetorical site. Silence has long been an unexamined trope of oppression, with "speaking out" being the signal of liberation, especially given the Western tendency to valorize speech and language. But sometimes women choose the place of silence. (175–76)

Much like Glenn's exemplary Anne Askew, the sixteenth-century radical Protestant Englishwoman, Sor Juana practices a "purposeful rhetoric of silence" (Glenn 153).

Sor Juana's literacy letters theorize this rhetorical practice, delineating its contours and suggesting the circumstances of its application. She initiates the reexamination of the resources of silence that Glenn, Frank Farmer, and this essay undertake centuries later. Elías Trabulse has argued that Sor Juana's abjuration at the end of her life is insincere—the vows and documents she signed sound distressing to us but are all formulaic, and she invested money that would have served to support her for life, presumably because she anticipated dire consequences from the tribunal (*Los años finales*; see also Paz 462, 468). His research on Sor Juana's investments tell us significantly more than we

knew before about the final years of Sor Juana's life, and his argument is persuasive. But of course, we want it to be. We cannot know what really happened to Sor Juana at life's end, what her motivations or feelings were. Each historian's construction of these events, including my own, is an attempt to give meaning to what was perhaps most of all, like other tragedies of history, a meaningless loss. The space of our constructions is spurred by Sor Juana's silence, which she has asked us to "hear with our eyes." Her silence is the space of invention—but also connection—to Sor Juana, to history, and to the possibilities we may hear in other silent rhetors.

Notes

¹I am grateful to *RR* reviewers Andrea Lunsford and James Murphy for their probing feedback at various stages. I also extend warm thanks to Don Marshall for his ongoing support and interest and to DePaul University for a Faculty Research and Development Grant.

²See entries in anthologies edited by Bizzell and Herzberg (second edition) and Ritchie and Ronald.

³Hereafter, *The Answer/La respuesta* will be cited as *La respuesta*.

⁴Despite its suggestive title, Segura's study does not situate Sor Juana in the field of rhetoric. Rather, she writes convincingly about the rhetorical complexity of Sor Juana's method of intentionally using negatives to convey positives, a false "yo" to convey a real "yo," and not saying in order to convey meaning.

⁵I borrow this term from Linda Brodkey ("On the Subjects").

⁶Eliás Trabulse argues convincingly that the actual addressee of the *Carta* is Sor Juana's former confessor, Padre Núñez (18–19). Paz believes Sor Juana and the bishop published the *Carta Atenagórica* together in an attempt to attack Archbishop Aguiar y Seijas, Vieyra's friend and fellow Jesuit (403).

⁷The *Sor Juana Anthology* edited by Trueblood contains the only English translation of the letter from Sor Filotea I know of.

⁸Jan Swearingen discusses the potentially empowering aspects of Sor Juana's use of this trope in the context of a female tradition of humility that allows women access to public writing.

⁹I offer my own translation when none is available. Subsequent references to the four-volume complete works of Sor Juana will be abbreviated as *OC*.

¹⁰In contrast, in a series of *villancicos* written at approximately the same time as *La respuesta* and which Trabulse describes as "belligerent," Sor Juana portrays St. Catherine as a bold violator of gender norms for precisely the same traits she herself possesses (19). These poems were not sung in Mexico City but in the far away safety of Oaxaca.

¹¹Nina Scott asserts that Sor Juana was evidently not acquainted with Pisan's works ("La gran turba" 222, note 1).

¹²María de San José's works are excerpted in Spanish and English in *Untold Sisters* (Arenal and Schlau 19–117).

¹³*Villancicos* to St. Catherine were performed in Oaxaca in 1691, presumably on her saint's day of November 25th; Sabat de Rivers assumes they were written after *La respuesta* (36). Trabulse says she was writing new works and preparing her manuscripts for the re-edition of her collected works in the two years between the appearance of *La respuesta* and the beginning of her public

confession (*Los años finales* 21). Also, one poem (*OC* 1.158) was found unfinished after her death—she had not destroyed it (Paz 459).

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