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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF OTHERS

Dictée’s counterhegemonic feminism

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Introduction

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s text Dictée (1982) is a seminal Asian American text that represents a turn toward transnationalism in Korean American literary voice. The book first garnered attention when two important critical texts, Writing Self, Writing Nation and Immigrant Acts, discussed the significance of Dictée and began the process of establishing its canonicity in Asian American literature.1 A “supposed autobiography,” it speaks “through disembodied yet multiple voices, borrowed citations, and captionless photographs” to problematize the “nature of a ‘cultural rescue mission’ and exposes that desire as an arena where epistemology and power are engaged in perpetual contestation.”2 Thus, the text has a fraught relationship with what Anne Anlin Cheng refers to as the “desire for documentary,” which is “the desire to know and to bear witness as some kind of ‘redemptive’ act [that] has fueled much of the recent academic moves to recognize and understand the various histories and forms of colonization.”3

However, Cha disrupts the common notion of the autobiography as documentary in multiple ways. Her text “gives false information, both obvious and not so obvious, along with verifiable facts.”4 She inserts a photograph of desperate etchings on the wall, presumably by colonial Koreans mobilized as slave-wage labor, except that the spellings show the etchings were made after the standardization of hangŭl in the 1950s. A quote from Sappho (“May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve”) that begins the book cannot be found in the works that are generally attributed to the poet.5 Cha names Elitere as the muse of lyric poetry instead of Euterpe. Sam Choy, the Honolulu chef, appears in a list of elements representing “Heaven, Earth, and Humans.”6 From the beginning of the text, the author tricks her readers—or perhaps alerts them to the danger of the compulsion toward the documentary and notions of essential self and historical authenticity.

The book’s title, a French term, gendered feminine, meaning both “dictation” and the “one who is dictated to,” suggests the complexity of Cha’s autobiographical subjectivity.7 Far from being a coherent record of one’s life, Dictée is a hybrid entity containing disparate self- and other-representations, made up of a series of narrative-like texts divided into nine chapters. Interspersed throughout the book are photographs, diagrams, maps of the human body and a country, calligraphy, charts, letters, and film stills connected to the female “characters” in the narratives.8 They are “the nine Greek muses, a storyteller named Diseuse, St. Therese of Lisieux,
the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Demeter, Persephone, Joan of Arc, Hyung Soon Huo, a daughter of exiled parents (often considered to be Cha’s mother), and a speaker who is her daughter (often considered to be Cha).” Notably, many of the images do not have captions or other kinds of explanation, and often it seems unclear how the images preceding or following a chapter are connected to it. Such narrative strategies disrupt the reader’s tendency to rely on the biographical data and linearity to construct a cohesive narrative.

In this chapter, I aim to show that the shifting positionalities and polyvocality of Dictée’s narrators build a layered postcolonial feminist narrative. Its multiple perspectives and protagonists actually constitute a strategy that allows the author to transgress the boundaries of race, temporality, and linguistic differences to construct a uniquely powerful autobiography, a counterhegemonic and transnational feminist text, without relying on a solid subjectivity nor politics of identification. The shifting perspectives in the text make it an initially unfriendly text, one that challenges the reader and refuses an easy indexicality or alliance. The challenge in part stems from its language and the way the author uses that language to highlight the theme of translation. Her focus on translation is in turn connected to the textual moment when she reveals herself as a subject with biographical details and family history. But even at this moment, she is not completely fixed, because she identifies with and speaks to and as her mother. This blurring of subjectivity and taking on of voices are connected to her larger focus on women’s experiences in the text. The author’s female focus and her refusal of a solid subjectivity validate those on the outside, the forgotten, misunderstood, and marginalized, to create a feminist text that forcefully illustrates its power of inclusion.

Incompleteness as a postcolonial condition

The issue of the Korean language and translation is central in Dictée, as Cha’s writing indicates that the question of legibility/indexicality and communicability is also one of belonging and identification. When Cha writes that she now speaks another language, she seems to suggest the impossibility of belonging to the nation of Korea, where her life began. This sense of non-belonging leads Cha to reject, in Hyo Kim’s words, “the instrumental definition of language as means of knowledge production.” For the author, the process of translation always contains the possibility of miscommunication, illegibility, and mutual mistrust. An excerpt from an untitled poem in Dictée describes the slow, difficult process of making sounds in a foreign tongue:

One by one.
The sounds. The sounds that move at a time
stops and starts again
all but exceptions.
Stop. Start. Starts.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.

The poem depicts the physical, intellectual, and emotional effort of beginning to speak a new language. Language acquisition is an interpellation into a system that demands of the newly arrived a cultural and linguistic familiarity and fluency, which is in the end something impossible to achieve because such transaction/translation posits absolute equivalents (“One to one”) that do not exist between languages and cultures. Hence, “rather than constructing a narrative of unities and symmetries, with consistencies of character, sequence, and plot, Dictée emphasizes instead an aesthetic of fragmented recitation and episodic nonidentity—dramatizes in effect, an
aesthetic of infidelity.” On the facing page from this poem are medical diagrams of the human body that show “Side View of Air Passages and Lungs,” “Position of the Larynx in the Neck,” “Front View of the Larynx,” and “Superior View of Larynx and Vocal Folds”; these are all seemingly visual representations of objective, scientific information that not so subtly show what standards and normalcy (“fidelity”) look like.

Translation as a leitmotif manifests in the chapter “CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY,” in which Cha writes to her mother, an eighteen-year-old Korean woman living in Yong Jung, Manchuria, where the latter was born of parents who had fled their colonized country. They are “Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles.” The chapter begins by chronicling her mother’s life as a young woman, who falls seriously ill while working as a teacher. The section moves without transition to introduce a biblical narrative in which Jesus leads the spirit to be tempted by the devil; the narrative then shifts back to the story of the author’s mother refusing to eat until she hears her father’s desperate plea. Placed in proximity to the story of Jesus, the anecdote takes on an air of mystery. Next, the text presents Chinese characters for “father” and “mother,” after which the author’s own story follows. This last part of the chapter depicts the desire to belong and the process of becoming a US citizen, though it seems that such status does not always confer the rights to a certain treatment: “Not a single word allowed to utter until the last station, they ask to check the baggage. You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you.” It is a vivid picture of the anxiety that one experiences while waiting for the verdict, of discovering whether one belongs “here” or not, and the anticlimactic moment when the decision is handed down almost indifferently by the authoritative other.

The diegetic world of Dictée is multilingual, and it contains several equally significant narratives. Hence, binary positions and equivalents, or any dependence on a system that counts on fixed positionality of opposites, cannot hold. Lisa Lowe writes of the subject and the translations that occur in Dictée as “unfaithful to the original.” Here the “original” signifies, among other things, English language/speech, but it might also be Korean. Cha’s multilingual, multicultural subjectivity constitutes her interloper status as both an insider and an outsider, with each culture inserting itself as the hegemonic one in the immigrant/returnee’s consciousness through language, as the earlier untitled poem illustrates.

In the chapter “MELPOMENE TRAGEDY,” Cha expresses her transnational perspective as a diasporic Korean American female subject unable to merge easily with the readily available Korean identity when she visits Korea in 1980 after eighteen years. Yet this is by no means a “tragedy,” as she insists on her difference, rather than showing a desire to merge. As one critic observes, “Cha suggests that postmodern writing strategies, which disrupt the master narrative and the coherent subject, might function as the ideal form for postcolonial representation.”

The questioning of South Korean (state-inscribed) monolithic identity, nationalism, and militarism and, most importantly, its developmentalist narrative of progress is what she shares with modern Korean authors. In other words, her heterogeneity brings her closer to the internal others in Korea, those who write against the state’s violence.

In a similar vein, Kandice Chuh writes, “Subjectlessness, as a conceptual tool, points to the need to manufacture ‘Asian American’ situationally.” She deploys this concept to analyze Asian American literature because “it serves as the ethical grounds for the political practice of what [she] would describe as a strategic anti-essentialism—as, in other words, the common ethos underwriting the coherency of the field.” Dictée as a text illustrates this contingency and situational character of Asian Americanness. Both the text’s structure and content push away from the compulsion for totality, uniformity, and cohesion. It insists on and itself performs heterogeneity, alterity, and multivalence. The aesthetics of Dictée, which builds fragments, half erasures,
and subjective memories that are meant to be biased, validates the incompleteness as a postcolonial and diasporic condition, in this case of female subjects. This incompleteness is not a lack but rather a hopeful condition from which one can write and perform new identities, futures, and communities.

Just as an absolute translation is impossible, so is a pure return to one’s homeland. Both the returning subject and “home” have changed with time and the experiences of the intervening years. An attempt to return to the pure past that lives only in one’s mind is a futile exercise, just as a translation of absolute equivalents is impossible. In the beginning of the text, the author illustrates a “faithful” translation that misses the mark by being literal. It is an example of a witty, passive resistance against the hegemonic language and the power of the culture associated with that language.

Open paragraph It was the first day period
She had come from a far period tonight at dinner
comma the families would ask comma open
quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks

This passage from Dictée’s first page is a translation in which even the punctuation marks have been committed to paper, resulting in a text that buries the meaningful words among meaningless ones. This example shows that when the subject of an untitled story, a student, translates everything, including punctuation, in a paragraph from French to English, she lays bare what usually remains hidden in language but absolutely adds to the ultimate construction of meaning, interrupting the suture effect of speaking and of translating. Cha enacts the slipperiness of language that occurs precisely when it is meant to be transferable to another and shows that absence is actually an essential part of translation. In this way, “Dictée problematizes the premise of translation as fidelity, underscoring instead the ambivalence, or double valence, of the translation enterprise.” Like a mise en abyme, this is a translation of a dictation, which folds back into the title of the book, upon the unseen authority of the one who dictates.

Such ambivalence goes beyond language to implicate the narrator’s subjectivity. The first-person narrator of “MELPOMENE TRAGEDY,” for instance, who is the most traditional of all the speaking voices in the text, is slippery and ever changing, even as the reader begins to feel oriented. The unknowability and the multifaceted nature of the narrator illustrate the falsehood of subjectivity as fixed or knowable and thus something that one can master. Instead, the first-person narrator endlessly reimagines/images herself, alerting the reader to the necessary labor of comprehending the stranger/other. Chuh writes,

Subjectlessness as a discursive ground for Asian American studies can, I think, help to identify and trace the shifting positionalities and complicated terminus of US American culture and politics articulated to a globalized frame, by opening up the field to account for practice of subjectivity that might not be immediately visible within, for example, a nation-based representational grid, or one that emphasizes racialization to the occlusion of other processes of subjectification.

We see such subjectlessness in Dictée manifest through a new form of autobiography. Autobiography is one of the book’s genres, and it takes on a new significance as the author foregoes some of its expected elements. In the hands of an immigrant female diasporic subject, Dictée as an autobiography can have only an ironic relationship to the classically conceptualized
autobiography, a Western genre par excellence that connects the act of writing to the construction of a solid, self-assured, (initially) male subject. In contrast, Cha’s autobiographical writing subverts and parodies the genre, which she refracts through a postmodern consciousness. This leads to articulations that are polyphonic and multivalent, the poetics of which are inevitably poststructuralist. In this autobiography, there is no singular subject, no transparent link between her experiences and her present subjectivity, no teleology of subject formation, and no bildungsroman. Sue-Im Lee writes that Dictée is suggestive “of a new form of Asian American subject representation, a postmodern, anti-realist subject whose empirical substantiality is not generated through the ‘intelligible whole’ of plot nor whose social identity is categorizable within ascriptive terms of the majority culture.” Indeed, she continues, Dictée’s subject is “physically unlocatable and socially invisible,” and “there is no linguistic representation of the subject as a corporeal entity”—it is “a determined enactment of non-identity” and an “expressive reminder of doing without the comfort of identity.” In the following section, I study how Cha explores her own subjectivity through that of her mother and also how she reconfigures Korean national consciousness in the most traditionally autobiographical chapter in the text, and I insist on her “social invisibility” and a lack of recognizability as a Korean subject.

Temporal archaeology

The autobiographical chapter “MELPOMENE TRAGEDY” is a kind of reinscription of Korean nationalist discourse by way of Korean social history through Cha’s engagement with her mother, whom she temporally translates. The chapter clearly shows a connection between the book’s central theme of translation with two other themes, speech and memory. As mentioned earlier, it stands out from the other chapters as the one that most closely resembles a traditional narrative, and it is also unique in that it contains autobiographical details of the author and her family. From this opening, I posit that Cha’s project of challenging and criticizing Korean nationalist discourse through a temporal translation of her mother’s text/time into the present is also her attempt to investigate her own ontological subjective position as a multicultural, multilingual Korean American woman, a condition that the interrelation between her (and her mother’s) personal and Korean national histories enables and necessitates.

Cha opens the chapter with a map of Korea and writes on the next page, “Not one second is lost to the replication of the totality.” The “totality” here means not only the total, as-real-as-possible reliving of the experiences of the past and present but also the totality of the question of the nationalist discourse that the South Korean government propagates. Cha reinscribes the text of her mother—her experiences and (shared) memories of the historical event, the April 19 Student Revolution of 1960—with her own articulations in her text; she thus writes her mother’s time many years ago as if it were coexistent with her own in early 1980s Korea, as a means of voicing her critique of the South Korean nation-state’s oppressive nationalist agenda.

Cha foregrounds the map of the Korean Peninsula torn in half at the beginning of the chapter to foreground national consciousness. This strategy takes on more significance later as Cha critiques the South Korean state’s nationalist discourse and suggests as an alternative not another kind of nationalist propaganda but rather a kind of national consciousness that aims for inclusion in place of enmity and division. The post-Liberation South Korean state nationalism under military dictatorships until the 1980s was fascist in nature, in that it did not allow the populace to dissent. The possibility of a North Korean invasion during a time of political chaos served as a convenient excuse for the brutal suppression of demonstrators demanding democratization. This possibility was more fiction than reality, and it was the oppression of a nation-state of its
own people that divided South Korea into “us,” the hegemonic power, and “them,” the political dissidents/enemy in its use of military power to suppress the demonstrators.

In “MELPOMENE TRAGEDY,” Cha returns to Korea after eighteen years, and she sees that her motherland is no longer the same—but is still the same. It is the change in Cha’s consciousness from a Korean child to a Korean American adult that renders the motherland altered in her perception, even though little about the political situation has changed. The “Korean conflict,” which was partly a proxy war between the superpowers, resulted in the United States emerging as the defender of the democratic world during the Cold War era in the peninsula and it becoming a close ally of South Korea after the division into the two Koreas. Cha’s writing personalizes this national problematic: the nation’s political turmoil and the governmental oppression resulted in the deaths of many, including Cha’s brother, who was killed during the April 19 Student Revolution. The continuing national problem, figured as also intensely personal and subjective, is what Cha articulates with passages like “Nothing has changed, we are at a standstill.”

The epistolary form of her text is significant for Cha’s claiming of a discursive space, in which she can voice her recollections, which function as a challenge against the South Korean government’s repression. Her text/utterances are destined to be heard, if only by her mother, to whom she addresses the “letter” in the text. The bond between the two women enables Cha’s translation of her mother’s text/experience through (and in) the letter addressed to the latter. It is a translation of times, as Cha goes back to Korea and tells her mother/readers what it is like to experience something close to what her mother had experienced, eighteen years ago: a national turmoil that is also a tragically personal one. Noting the repetitive pattern of this problem, Cha writes to her mother, “We fight the same war. We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination.”

Hence, Cha writes not only her mother’s story but also her mother’s time, by reliving and rewriting the experience. She writes in a way that intermixes the past and present, using the present tense to convey events that took place in the past and weaving the two temporalities together. When she visits South Korea under military rule yet again and encounters tear gas and scenes of violent confrontations between riot police and citizens, she remembers and relives the political instability of her childhood: “It is 1962 eighteen years ago same month same day all over again. I am eleven years old.” Through this technique of mixing what is happening and what has happened, Cha delivers a sense of immediacy in the situation she depicts. Yet at the same time, by mixing the past and present, and through an insistent, parodic repetition of certain words, Cha deliberately confuses her readers. Her purpose is to transmit, to the reader, some of the historical understanding of the recent Korean political predicament by alluding to the repetitive oppression of the people, first by the Japanese colonial government and subsequently by the Korean dictatorial regimes in both the North and the South. That is, by speaking of different moments in the Korean political and social history of oppression as if they were synchronous, the text reveals a predicament that has changed little through the decades.

**Memory of the revolution: writing against the hegemonic nation**

Theresa Cha’s homecoming amid political turmoil that has turned into a pattern is even-more dystopic because of her Korean American identity. One critic observes that “Dictée inscribe[s] an essentially melancholic subjectivity whose elusive beauty is engendered by an irreplaceable loss of cultural, national and linguistic belonging.” Her position as a multilingual Korean American who embodies disparate cultures now burdens her, even as it allows her to view the situation with an outsider’s lucidity. Cha tells her mother that “This is how distant I am. From then. From that time.” Even while acknowledging her distance from the historical and emotional
referent “then,” meaning eighteen years ago, Cha recognizes how the situations of “that time” and “today” have not changed.

Cha’s dilemma, then, is not about having to choose between Korea and the United States but about the fact that she and her mother are now Americans with memories of Korea. Cha’s subjectivity as a Korean American is eclectic and hybrid, much like her text, which tautologically reflects the constitution of such subjectivity. For example, Cha recalls being unable to understand the word d-e-m-o as a child in all its bloody reality and exigency in the Korean context; back then, it was just a word to her; “De. Mo. A word, two sounds.” But after eighteen years of separation from the scene of the original “demo,” she grasps the concept as an adult because the “same” scene repeats. The changed level of her comprehension is not only the difference between that of a child and an adult but also that Cha’s understanding in the present is from the perspective of a Korean American who has an outsider’s sensibility. The Korean use of the word demo, which comes from the English word demonstration and alludes to another, democracy, designates a political action (as is often the case) of students rather than showing or modeling something (e.g., for capitalistic consumption). In the US context, the word demo is not politically charged. Cha’s use of the word is therefore ironic and bespeaks a familiarity with the meanings of the term specific to both Korean and American cultures.

Further, Cha recalls that her brother, along with many other students in the “demo,” was wearing his school uniform. In this passage, Cha points out the bitter irony of the situation for both students and the government on multiple levels. First, the situation of April 19 is tragically reminiscent of colonial Korea’s Declaration of Independence on March 1, 1919, in which a massive number of students participated and were arrested or killed as a result. When Cha transcribes the words of her family’s tutor, “They are killing any student in uniform,” the demonstrators’ own nation-state has assumed the past identity of “they” that once designated the Japanese colonial rulers.

On another level, it is ironic that the students proudly wore their uniforms and represented their schools in a demonstration against the Korean government that had imposed on them the wearing of those school uniforms, a colonial legacy that was retained long after the “enemy nation,” Japan, had left. The colonial government in Korea had required all students to wear similar uniforms, and male students in particular had to wear some variation in black modeled after the nineteenth-century Prussian military uniform. The image of the black school uniform is a visual code that stirs up the ghosts of Japanese colonial discipline and militarism. The “native” culture, in this case Korean, has thus already been infiltrated by Western and Japanese cultures on linguistic and pragmatic levels, as we see in the word demo and the students’ uniforms in this passage.

As Cha encounters yet another scene of demonstration and deaths, she recalls her initial encounter with death, that of her brother. As she points out the uncanny repetitions between the now and “then” in her nation’s memory, she reveals the artificiality of the telos of the ethnonation. Revisiting the site of loss and reliving the experience as an adult in present-day Korea, she first comes to terms with her own foreignness in her motherland: “I speak another tongue now, a second tongue a foreign tongue.” Although Cha physically mingles with the demonstrators in the street, no one welcomes or confronts her: “No one facing me.” As Cha cries from tear gas, her tears evoke the rain during the aftermath of April 19, which triggers the memory of the blood of her brother and other demonstrators spilled in that past uprising.

While Cha’s subjective positionality grounds her multidimensional critique of the Korean military regime, the political and personal implications of writing her text in English are complicated. English is, after all, the language of the neoimperial power that divided her motherland to serve its own political agenda in the name of liberation: “We are severed in Two by an abstract
enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the sever-
ance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate.”35 Hence, English becomes the language of violence, both
to engage in it and to disguise it.36

However, Cha uses this language of violence to criticize both the United States and Korea
for their neoimperial relationship, as well as the latter’s silencing of political dissent through
military tactics. It is not a coincidence that the United States invests heavily in South Korean
armaments. Yet the United States can make a convenient case for itself as not being a neoimpe-
rial nation because officially South Korea is an independent nation. The United States is merely
a strong ally that helped South Korea achieve this negotiated independence and now helps pro-
tect the latter’s peace in the face of the communist threat of North Korea and “internal threats,”
persons such as Cha’s brother. In the previous passage, Cha articulates a vigorous cultural critique
of US imperialist practice during the division of the Korean Peninsula and Korea’s “complete
submission” to this imperialism.37 Interestingly, though, Cha does not indicate in the passage the
identity of the “abstract enemy.”

This vagueness seems to be symptomatic not of complicity but of the ambivalence in Cha’s
position as a Korean American: “I speak another tongue, a second tongue. This is how distant
I am.”38 The “tongue” is both an anatomical, physical part of the author and a concept-metaphor
signifying the spoken and written language that is an integral part of her acculturation. The “dis-
tance” that Cha mentions is that from the revolution of 1960, both cultural (“From then”) and
temporal (“From that time”). Moreover, she perceives this distance within herself, as something
internal. Her relationship to this foreign tongue is inherently ambivalent, because it is a useful
tool that is a reminder/remainder of the US neoimperial legacy in Korea at the same time. Yet
she deploys this language in order to articulate her oppositional and interventionist discourse,
or a national consciousness, which argues that people on opposite ends of the political struggle
belong together.

Cha points to the map and the division of Korea with passages like, “Mere names . . . even the
image would not be entire.”39 This division, in large part brought about by the “invisible enemy
under the name of liberators” that gives South Korea a “mere name” of an independent nation,
compels Cha to question her motherland’s status as an independent nation. Since Korean inde-
pendence was negotiated through neoimperial compromises with the United States and other
nations, she goes as far as to challenge the concept of Korea as a nation with the phrase “mere
names.” However, because Cha is writing for an Anglophone readership, she is compelled to
translate her motherland’s division into the language of violence. English has a ubiquitous pres-
ence in Cha’s text: the map of Korea has Romanized Korean place names and the demilitarized
zone, the DMZ.40 Hence, Cha is working with the paradox of both writing and fighting the lan-
guage of violence, negotiating her territory of intervention in her text to arrive at her eventual
destination.41 It is in these particular ways that Dictée is a postcolonial text, which acknowledges
the messy entanglements of the postcolonial subject straddling at least two national histories.

Imagining national consciousness as a counterhegemonic narrative

As mentioned earlier, Cha’s eventual destination in “MELPOMENE TRAGEDY” is the explo-
ration of her own subjectivity via her criticism of Korean state nationalism. This latter aspect
of her text is a kind of temporal archaeology, as Cha finds traces of violence in the nation-state’s
nationalist discourse. Cha then tells her mother’s story as a way of questioning dominant politi-
cal ideologies, including that of her son (Cha’s brother), from the perspective of someone who is
not indifferent toward her nation’s democratization struggles but chooses to prioritize her son’s
life over ideologies.
To illustrate these points, Cha addresses her mother, invoking and retelling the latter's experiences. The memory that haunts the mother is that of April 19, when she lost her son. Cha writes, “They are breaking now; their sounds, not new, you have heard them, so familiar to you now could you ever forget them not in your dreams, the consequences of the sound the breaking” (82). The “consequences of the sound the breaking” signify to Cha’s mother the loss of her son. When it repeats in the present, it signals more deaths. Although Cha’s mother speaks only through Cha’s recollections, as Cha repeats her mother’s words, her mother occupies a subjective position that is subsumed by neither Korean state nationalism nor by Cha’s brother’s politics.

Cha’s mother is unable to restrain her son from going outside to join the “demo,” though she foresees the fatal “consequences” of his choosing to participate in the demonstration. Beset by contesting ideologies for which people are willing to die and kill—“Dying is part of it. It must be”—Cha’s mother does not choose a position, though she is sympathetic to her son’s cause.

The mother’s plea to her son not to join the antigovernment demonstration questions the value of her son’s death, both in the context of the usefulness and/or necessity of the student revolution and regardless of such political movement. As Cha points out to her brother, the meaning of his martyrdom is, on the one hand, an idealistic and ideologically pure act of self-sacrifice for the democratization of Korea—“You are chosen to fail to be martyred”—and, on the other, communicated in the same breath (since there is no punctuation), a useless, anonymous form of self-destruction in itself—that is, if there had not been hundreds of other, simultaneous deaths. From the nation-state’s point of view, Cha’s brother, who protested against the government and died as a result, is an impediment to the nation’s “peace and harmony”: “an animal useless betrayer to the cause to the welfare to peace to harmony to progress.”

The author then reframes her mother’s dilemma: “You do not want to lose him, my brother… You say you understand, you plead all the same they are killing any every one.”

Cha recalls memories of eighteen years earlier as she finds herself among the crowd fleeing tear gas, and she sees traces of the past demonstration (among them her brother) as the latter’s blood mixes with the blood of the demonstrators in the present: “I cry wail torn shirt lying I step among them. No trace of them. Except for the blood.”

Expanding her critique, Cha describes how the Korean nation-state transforms and uses young men: “You are your vow in nomine patris . . . defending your country from subjective infiltration from your own countrymen.” The state’s nationalist propaganda creates the paradoxical confrontation of self against self by fostering a homogeneous identity, Koreans whose exclusive goal is to guard the nation-state from all perceived (whether grounded or not) dangers. The soldiers, who become human commodities through their infectious nationalistic hysteria and a sense of mission, are told that they are performing their duty “in nomine patris,” in the name of the father(land). As the word vow and a Latin phrase from a Catholic prayer connote, there is an element of religiosity, an aspect of unconditional submission and dedication regarded as an ideal state of mind and body of a believer, in the words “in nomine patris.” The father (God) is now a secular one, one’s nation-state, according to the latter’s nationalist doctrine. The military government’s realization of this agenda is closely linked with the phenomenon of the soldiers’ uniforms and the monolithic nationalist discourse that they emblematize.
physically demarcate the soldiers’ identity, homogeneously constructed through their inculcation of the state’s nationalism. In this light, the soldiers’ uniforms are emblems of an ideological apparatus that enforces and enhances uniformity of thought: Cha writes, “You cannot be seen behind the guns no one sees you they have hidden you.”

Cha breaks open the confines of Korean state nationalism by calling the soldiers, who initially seem antagonistic, not “they” but “you.” With this simple change of referent, she shows how they are yet another oppressed group of the regime. In terms of Cha’s subjectivity, Hyo Kim observes that “the theoretical paradigm offered in DuBoisian ‘double consciousness’ fails to delineate Cha’s text since in Dictée the subjectivity is radically decentered, exceeding the terms set by the double.” In this way, she constructs the enforcement of the state ideology through violence, using the soldiers as a tool, as an interpolation of a subject into the ideology of the state. Cha exposes the mechanism of such fabrications of national identity through the state uniform, which marks the soldiers as instruments and properties of the state. This inscription of the monolithic discourse onto the bodies of soldiers, which invests them with the state nationalist ideology, is laid bare by Cha in the following passage about camouflage: “Always the green uniforms the patches of camouflage. Trees camouflage your green trucks you blend with nature the trees hide you . . . they have hidden you.”

The state erases the soldiers’ individual identities with their green uniforms, which will supposedly enable them to hide in/blend with nature. But such use of green by the state transforms it into an unnatural color that reminds Cha of soldiers’ uniforms by association. A uniform visually signals one’s belonging to a group with a certain set of rules and regulations. The soldiers’ uniforms designate them as members of a national community, and more importantly, as belonging to the dominant power. In another section, Cha portrays uniformed soldiers as uniformly authoritarian: “However low their function they have the authority. Their authority sewn into the stitches of their costume.” Their uniforms and uniformity of authority are accentuated when Cha describes the soldiers as “uni formed.” With the inserted space Cha teases out the meaning “one-shaped” buried in the word. Their uniforms compel the soldiers to represent the hegemonic authority behind them: South Korea under dictatorship.

In contrast, when student demonstrators wear their uniforms during the April 19 antigovernment protests, the latter have different meanings. The students’ uniforms enable them to construct their own community: unlike the soldiers, the students choose to wear their uniforms so that they can recognize each other as belonging to the same side of the political struggle. At the same time, however, their uniforms function in an opposite way from those of the soldiers. Whereas the soldiers’ uniforms “hide” them, the students’ uniforms enable the soldiers to target and kill them. Cha recalls her brother’s tutor telling them, “They are killing any student in uniform. Anybody.”

Cha remembers how on that day, “[her brother] has on his school uniform, as all the other students representing their schools in the demonstration” (83). Furthermore, whereas military uniforms function as emblems of the uniformity of minds and (instrumentalized) bodies of soldiers, the students’ uniforms signify their heterogeneity of ideology in relation to the state’s nationalist discourse. Therefore, their uniforms denote dissension and a challenge to the dominant power structure. Because Cha comprehends how soldiers who exercise the state’s authority “in nomine patris” are instruments of the state nationalist ideology, the “us” versus “them” categories of identity cannot be seamlessly superimposed on the soldiers and demonstrators in this ideological battlefield. She thus calls the boundaries that separate them “Imaginary borders. Un imaginable boundaries.”

In this way, Cha comes to the realization that any one of the soldiers could have been her brother, under different circumstances. Cha addresses them as she would her brother, using the
same pronoun; “You who are hidden . . . you close your eyes to the piercing the breaking the flooding pools bath their shadow memory . . . your own blood your own flesh” (86). The passage implies that the soldiers share the “bloody” memory of the struggles with Cha and her mother, even though they are instructed to carry out orders and execute their own compatriots during the April 19 and numerous other antigovernment protests. Cha extends the imagined, but not false, blood ties between her brother and the soldiers to cover the whole nation of Korea as she points out the destruction of each who are blood related: “Further than their [soldiers’] home further than their mother father . . . is the execution of their role their given identity further than their own line of blood.” As Cha follows the trace of blood in a kind of archaeological endeavor of recovering national consciousness, she extends it as the bloodline of Koreans, including the soldiers who stand as antagonists of people like Cha’s brother in the political conflict. Cha’s positing of the common thread of blood between all Koreans, regardless of one’s political leanings, goes beyond the nation-state’s ideology, an ideology that constructs a homogeneous, hegemonic community by excluding those who challenge their power structure. This archaeology is an intervention in the Korean nationalist discourse; it is her assertion of an alternative vision of national consciousness as a counterhegemonic narrative.

Suddenly, in this highly dramatic scene of a “demo,” two children appear: “Two school children with their book bags appear from nowhere . . . their white kerchief, their white shirt uniform, into a white residue of gas, crying.” It is a moment of disorientation. Because of their youth and still-intact innocence, which their “white kerchief” and “book bags” suggest, the children seem very much out of place in this scene of political disturbance. And yet the children’s shirts are a visual extension of their identity like the older students’ uniforms, and signal that they, too, belong in the scene of political struggle.

At first glance, neither Cha nor the children belong in the scene, though for different reasons. But one can see the correlation between Cha’s experiences and the children’s experiences. Even though they differ in their historical/linear times and degrees of trauma, they all experience the moment of their first encounter with death through their witnessing of a political demonstration. Furthermore, the deaths they witness are politically inscribed and transform their moment of trauma into a beginning of political consciousness, even if they do not immediately recognize the significance of the experience, paralleling the author’s not fully comprehending the importance of the word demo as a girl. The children mirror Cha’s mental state in the present as well as in the past, as Cha relives her childhood experience as an adult who does not “belong” in the scene.

Cha’s way of writing past events as if they are occurring in the present conveys her sense of witnessing a terrible repetition of political upheaval and oppression: “Eighteen years pass. . . . They take me back they have taken me back so precisely now exact to the hour to the day to the season” (85). The children reflect the coexistence of Cha’s childhood with her present position as a displaced adult that embodies her childhood. They also function like a mirror, resonating with the repetitive suffering of Cha’s mother and her generation, due to political upheaval.

The discourse that Cha criticizes serves a particular kind of nationalism that enforces itself through militarism and the deliberate division of the nation’s own people. While leading to her censure of the South Korean nation-state, the soldiers in Cha’s text come to share the marginality with her brother and mother as Cha also sees them as a part of the oppressed mass under a government that exercises arbitrary power. At the beginning of the letter to her mother, Cha talks about her mother’s long wait for her motherland to gain its independence from Japanese colonial rule: “You knew it would not be in vain. The thirty-six years of exile. . . . That one day your country would be your own.” The soldiers also wait, as they stand in formation before moving in on the protestors: “You wait hours days. . . . Waiting for the false move that will conduct you to mobility to action. . . . Your boredom waiting would not have been in vain.”
In both cases, the anticipated results (i.e., Korea’s decolonization and the confrontations with the protestors) are only illusory resolutions that fail to end the state’s oppression of those who make up the national community itself. When Cha states in the beginning that “Many generations pass and many deceptions in the sequence,” she is referring to the succession of repressive military regimes in post-Liberation South Korea continuing. As a result, Cha writes, “You want to kill the time that is oppression itself. Time delivers not.” Here Cha goes beyond her earlier blurring of the distinction between the past and present to propose the collapse of linear temporality. Such a notion of temporal reality seems meaningless for those who face a historical reality of repeated political strife: “Not you, . . ., defined not by [time’s] limits.”

Voices of incommensurability: the female experience

What does it mean, then, for Cha to translate her mother’s narrative in this context? Cha’s translation is an act of transcribing texts and time from one (her mother’s) to another (her own) language in order for people of other cultures to comprehend it. Yet at the same time, Cha faces the problems of the inescapable mediation inherent in translation. The risk of miscommunication, compromise, and reduction of the original’s meaning and complexity are some of the pitfalls that Cha must avoid as she attempts to rewrite in English her mother’s original: her mother’s experiences.

Although this communality in their experiences does deepen Cha’s understanding of her mother’s position, it simultaneously complicates her task of cultural and temporal translation. Since Cha is exploring her own subjective position through the articulation of her mother’s narrative, which she constructs as a criticism of the South Korean state nationalism, she must necessarily insert her subjectivity in the process of this articulation. At the same time, there is a desire to harmonize with the original in Cha’s narrative: “Her once, Her to utter at once, She without the separate act of uttering.” This desire is impossible to fulfill, because her and her mother’s subjectivities are inherently disparate. Hence, she points ironically to this schism: “Nothing equivalent. Irreplaceable. Not before. Not after,” and “From another epic another history,” indicating the hopelessness of such an undertaking. This inescapable problem also bears on the temporal reality of translation. Even as Cha writes down the mother’s “present,” that present is already in the past vis-à-vis the precise temporality of her act of writing.

However, Cha tries to translate her mother’s text as empathetically as possible and suspends the time in between the past and present, bringing the two historical episodes together. Her writing of her mother’s narrative of the past as if it coexists with her own in the present is therefore a strategy of translation. Even so, it remains problematic because the mother’s stories and time are, ultimately, not the daughter’s own. The incommensurability of Cha’s subjective condition with that of her mother is an issue of how two subjectivities are differently informed, though they might have a common history.

As a Korean American writing in her homeland after eighteen years’ absence, it is impossible for Cha to declare a monolithic self-definition of her subjectivity as such, because it is hybrid and disrupted by different forces, such as the US neoimperial practices in South Korea that support her motherland’s militarism. Theresa Cha as a “subject” is a site of contesting ideologies. Her writing shows the traces of damage/dislocation done to subjects by hegemonic nationalist discourses and practices, whether they are Japanese colonial, US neoimperial, or South Korean military rule. And she foreshadows the possibility of more narratives when she writes self-referentially, “From another epic another history. . . . From the multitude of narratives. . . . For another telling for other recitations.” In this way, the book “also complicates the assumption that works which address colonialism and/or minority immigrant experience should propose
clear selves, group solidarities, easy nationalisms, traditional values, or the presentation of absolute cultures and identities.”

One such illustration whom Cha deploys is the figure of Yu Guan Soon, a Christian and an Ewha Women’s School student who led the March First Movement in her village against the Japanese colonizers in 1919 and became a patriotic martyr. She was seventeen at the time of her death. This woman child, whose bravery and gruesome torture and death at the hands of the colonial police have haunted the public imagination in the decades since through repeated storytelling in school textbooks, occupies a sacred position in Korean historiography at the intersection of being a filial daughter, illustrious Korean patriot, and an awakened Christian. And yet through a look at her uniquely constructed positionality in popular discourses, the reader might paradoxically question the complexity and flexibility of (the Western-missionary driven) religious indoctrination, discourses of nationalism, and the lingering influence of Confucian ideals of womanhood. When Cha writes Yu Guan Soon into her autobiographical narrative Dictée, therefore, she also reminds us of the distance between Yu Guan Soon and the anonymous narrator of the chapter, who may stand outside of all such identities and communities, insisting on her outsider status by refusing to close the gap of critical distance. Thus, “we see how all ideological subject positions are constructed through multiple ideological hailings and structural pressures.”

By focusing on the female subjectivity, the author simultaneously narrates the identities and lives of those women on the outside in a detached way and validates their status as those on the margins, the forgotten, the misunderstood, and the invisible. To do so, Cha creates a space in her text and also performs an ironic demystification that takes away their mythical status and replaces it with humanity. The seemingly disparate narratives of these female figures in the text are connected in this particular way.

In the chapter CLIO HISTORY, which contains Yu Guan Soon’s narrative and portrait, there is an uncaptioned black-and-white photograph of a group execution, presumably of anticolonial fighters by the Japanese authorities. This material is followed by a two-page spread of an excerpt, of the author’s handwritten draft of the same chapter that shows what she has corrected, scratched out, and edited. Cha thus makes the struggle to compose visible, which recalls the way she makes the creation of her text visible and the way that “ideological hailings” construct identities of figures such as Yu Guan Soon. By revealing the tentative progress of her creation, Cha demystifies the process and takes away its aura of mysterious power.

Similarly, Cha invokes the ritual of catechism in the Catholic Church to bring female difference and marginality into relief in order to challenge the religious power of indoctrination, which doesn’t always take hold. For instance, she reveals the written script that one must memorize to become a member of this community, but she does so out of context, rendering the process of religious indoctrination ineffectual. Cha emphasizes female difference in the parodic responses to the dictates of Catholic catechism and highlights the impossibility of religious or ethnonational hegemony fully enclosing the female subject. As a critic points out about Cha’s female characters and their subjectivity, “Identity is posited without an origin, without a stable foundation to ground it, and the women in the text struggle to speak in the face of a language that is no longer their own, in a land that they cannot call home.”

Dictée’s last chapter, “POLYMNIA SACRED POETRY,” contains a story told in a familiar pattern of Korean folktales that teach children lessons about filial piety. In this narrative, a kindly spirit disguises herself as a stranger and rewards a young girl for her filial piety. The story is reminiscent of the Korean legend of Princess Pari, who is abandoned by her father and mother, the king and the queen, simply because they have too many daughters, and who then travels to the netherworld and makes great sacrifices to save her parents’ lives. Princess Pari is also the founding mother of Korean shamanism, the powerful originator of female-centric traditional folk
religion and healing rituals, whose narratives combine elements of female isolation and sacrifice and of empowerment and reintegration into society. But the reintegration of such a female subject is complicated by her/the shaman’s experience of absolute solitude—the one who returns to the community is someone who is no longer the same, because she has seen the other world and communed with ghosts and gods. Thus, even though the ending of these narratives is hopeful and future oriented, it is not always an uncomplicated and happy one. Cooley points out how “women in Cha’s text refuse such nostalgia [that official histories create], reject wholeness and the notion of a priori origin in favor of a continual struggle with the broken language and landscapes they have been given as their inheritance.”

We see a further example of the complex relationship between female subjects and their world in the chapter “ERATO LOVE POETRY.” It begins with a depiction of the viewers’ spectral relationship to a silent film star, then the “marriage” of St. Therese Lisieux to Jesus, which is juxtaposed with that of her mother, a marriage that is both utterly conventional for its time and unhappy: “She is married to her husband who is unfaithful to her. No reason is given. No reason is necessary except that he is a man. It is a given.” And with no indication of which marriage it describes, the following passage says, “Her marriage to him, her husband. Her love for him, her husband, her duty to him, her husband.” The mother turns out to be the first in a series of women whom we meet in this section who cannot speak for themselves. In their place, by speaking for them, the previously powerless figure of Diseuse gains power.

The following passage captures the unequal relationship of a husband and a wife, or more specifically, the late-nineteenth-century marriage of M. Martin and his wife (the parents of St. Therese): “She took whatever he would give her because he gave her so little. She takes she took them. . . . She deserved so little. Being wife.” After this passage, St. Therese confesses her desire for martyrdom, of all kinds, which would rend her flesh. The tone of this confession and vision of oneself as a martyr is not, however, a victim narrative. On the contrary, she evokes the name of her “dear sister,” Joan of Arc. The chapter ends with a close-up still, from the silent Carl Theodor Dreyer film The Passion of Joan of Arc. Yet by means of this visual image, seemingly portraying female triumph, sacrifice, and power, the author deliberately complicates the message as such. She uses the actor’s face to represent Joan of Arc, guiding readers back to the unnamed famous silent film actor mentioned at the beginning of the chapter whom people imagine, follow, and desire, on the basis of the only thing that they know about her, her onscreen image. Furthermore, Cha’s presentation of the concrete image of the actor’s face in a close-up photograph brings up the question of reality, verisimilitude, and mythology, of both Joan of Arc and the canonical silent film; as we have seen in previous chapters, the picture/image doesn’t always tell the whole story.

**Conclusion**

Sue Kim writes that Dictée’s “mobility of point of view and axes of identification, cast in the present tense, suggest that our subjectivities are constantly in progress, sometimes conflicting against one another.” Cha’s refusal to close the critical gap between the speaking subject and the institutions that govern us ideologically and culturally is itself a bold political assertion that reveals an uncomfortable reckoning of difference, the outside, the unincorporated, whether it be a young woman/child revolutionary, the figure of Diseuse, or a Catholic saint. In Dictée, women reside in the outside space, and the author validates their difference by focusing on them and the space that they create and occupy.

This is the nature of feminism in Dictée. Cha constructs a new voice and narrative territory by deconstructing classical narrative strategies, genres, and temporalities. The book presents the
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tale of a postcolonial female subject finding herself as the colonizer’s uncanny Other, the distorted double and a mimic, who embodies the contradictions of such an identity. She recognizes that her own traditions and knowledge closely resemble those of the imperialist patriarchy and that they are indeed the basis of the alterity that she must build for herself and others like her. This process of writing her autobiography through others’ lives is at the same time a kind of translation. As she has done with the lives of eight women/figures in her book, Cha translates her mother’s life and interweaves that narrative with her own, without essentializing “Korean” experiences. In doing so, Cha presents us with a particular story of her family as a translator would present her work, which might be a faithful translation of the original, without being a collection of absolute equivalents, from one to another. The significance of *Dictée*’s postcoloniality resides here.

Notes

2 Cheng, “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire,” 119, 123.
3 Ibid., 120.
4 Ibid.
7 Cooley, “Japan Has Become a Sign,” 123.
8 Theresa Cha (1951–82) was a visionary Korean American poet, theorist, and performance artist. She was born in Korea during the Korean War, when her family lived as refugees in Pusan, and immigrated to the United States as a twelve-year-old and received a Catholic education as a child in a school with few other Asians. The experiences of multiple displacement, alienation, and adaptation are at the base of her work. Susan Wolf, in her essay, describes *Dictée* as “uncategorizable, merging different forms of writing, visual forms and kinds of information” (157).
9 Cooley, “Japan Has Become a Sign,” 124.
11 Cha, *Dictée*, 75.
14 Ibid., 45.
15 Ibid., 58.
16 Cooley, “Japan Has Become a Sign,” 119.
18 Cha, *Dictée*, 1.
22 Cha, *Dictée*, 79.
23 The regime of former South Korean president Park Chung Hee is a good example of such fascist rule. “In the summer of 1974, as indeed for most of the seven-year ‘Yusin’ (Renewal) period, a draconian Emergency Decree was in force, not only outlawing practically all criticism of the regime but also, for aesthetic roundness perhaps, making it a violation of the same Decree to denounce the Decree itself or even report on any violation thereof.” Paik, “The Idea of a Korean National Literature,” 555.
24 Cha, *Dictée*, 80.
25 Ibid., 81.
26 Cha’s text is dated April 19, 1980, a month before the historical Kwangju People’s Uprising on May 18. Although *Dictée* does not mention any geographic specificity of the author at this or any other point, the Kwangju Uprising that took place a month after when Cha’s “letter” is dated was an explosion of the people’s anger and resentment at their oppression by the regime of the dictator Chun Doo Hwan, who had led a coup d’état after Park Chung Hee’s assassination. It was only in April of 1988 that the government apologized and admitted that the Kwangju “incident” was indeed an uprising and not a
riot. The New York Times reports, “By official count, 191 people died, but opposition groups insist that as many as 2,000 people were killed” (April 1, 1988). This is symptomatic of the pervasive repression, brutality, and denial of misdeeds of Chun’s military rule over South Korea.

27 Cha, Dictée, 83. Interestingly, she writes 1962 rather than 1960, which is the actual year of the April 19 Revolution. This could be a “mistake” that she made in misremembering history, or she could be referring to another student protest that happened in 1962, because Korean students staged protests to commemorate the April 19 Revolution on the same day in subsequent years.


29 Cha, Dictée, 85.

30 Ibid., 84.

31 Korea’s Declaration of Independence on March 1, 1919, was a peaceful march against colonial rule. The event was national in scale and resulted in mass arrests and massacres of participants. It also became the turning point in the colonial rule over Korea, as Japan changed the governing tactic from military to cultural rule.

32 Cha, Dictée, 84.

33 Ibid., 80.

34 Ibid., 85.

35 Ibid., 81.


37 Ibid., 79.

38 Ibid., 85.

39 Ibid., 88.

40 Ibid., 79.

41 Hence Cha is negotiating her access of intervention from the inside of both worlds as a Korean American. Gayatri Spivak’s notion of negotiation and intervention from within is helpful here. Spivak writes, “[when] you have to make interventions in the structure of which you are part, it seems to me that is the most negotiated position, because you must intervene even as you inhabit those structures.” The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, 72.

42 Cha, Dictée, 84.

43 Ibid., 83.

44 Ibid., 84.

45 Ibid., 82.

46 Ibid., 85.

47 Ibid., 86.

48 Ibid., 85.

49 Kim, “Depoliticising Politics,” 469.

50 Cha, Dictée, 85.

51 Ibid., 57.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 84.

54 Ibid., 87.

55 Ibid., 84.

56 Ibid., 85.

57 Ibid., 80.

58 Ibid., 86.

59 Ibid., 80.

60 Ibid., 87.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 89.

63 Ibid., 79, 81.

64 Ibid., 81.

65 Spahr, Everybody’s Autonomy Connective Reading and Collective Identity, 126.

66 Kim, Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race, 75.

67 Cha, Dictée, 17–18.

68 Ibid., 149.

69 Spahr, Everybody’s Autonomy Connective Reading and Collective Identity, 134.

70 Cooley, “Japan Has Become a Sign,” 139.
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71 Cha, Dictée, 102.
72 Ibid., 103.
73 Ibid., 110.
74 Kim, Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race, 74.

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