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# Dismantling Bellicose Identities: Strategic Language Games in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*

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HEE-JUNG SERENITY JOO AND CHRISTINA LUX

앵무새 부리 속의 혀바닥을 보았느냐?  
누가 길 들이면 따라하는 목소리  
그 목소리 아닌 말을 단 한 번 하고 싶은  
분홍빛 조봇한 작은 혀를 보았느냐?

——김명수, “앵무새의 혀”

Have you ever seen the tongue inside a parrot's beak?  
A voice that repeats whatever someone trains it.  
That yearns to say, just once, a word not in that voice  
Have you ever seen that pink, narrow, small tongue?

——Myung-Soo Kim, “The Parrot's Tongue”<sup>1</sup>

The United States has no official language; it has always functioned as a multilingual nation . . . at least orally. While textually, signs, commercials, newspapers and ads may be seen in various languages or in side-by-side translation, English remains the presumed official language of print publication for national distribution.<sup>2</sup> Even in cases where English is not the language of publication, a monolingual text is still often presented—in Spanish, for example. Extensive textual code-switching is rare. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* is unique in this context, particularly at the time of its publication in New York in 1982: it is written in Korean, Latin, French, English, and Chinese, a fact that contributed to its limited initial reception by a broad audience.<sup>3</sup>

We argue that *DICTEE*'s multilingualism trains the reader to resist imperialism by deploying multiple languages against multiple points of power. By training the reader in strategic language games, it resists what Amartya Sen refers to as a

“bellicose identity.” Sen explains that “[v]iolence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror,” and that the possibility for resistance lies in “understanding that the force of a bellicose identity can be challenged by the power of *competing* identities.”<sup>4</sup> Juliana Spahr and Lisa Lowe have both read *DICTEE* as a decolonizing text. We are specifically interested in the cumulative effects of the reader’s training in these strategic multilingual language games as an active participant who applies her acquired knowledge to each new form that is presented in the text.<sup>5</sup>

Concretely, *DICTEE* resists a bellicose identity by turning to French to elude the forces of Japanese imperialism in Korea, turning to English to resist French Catholic domination, turning to Korean to critique US neo-colonialism, turning to Chinese to destabilize the notion of a homogenous Korean ethos, and employing “vulgar” French to interrogate the authority of classical Latin. Tactically, this resistance involves writing in initially unexpected languages, languages whose juxtaposition and proximity may surprise, irritate, or discomfort the reader.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most unexpected language in the text is French, which displaces the assumed primary languages of Cha’s Korean American identity—the Korean of “authentic” origins, the English of US assimilation and citizenship, and the Latin of Western cultural authority. This essay traces the role of this “unexpected” language in the text, the language that takes up the most space after English.

Doris Sommer and Werner Sollors have both been at the forefront of US national discussions of multilingual literatures. Sollors demonstrates that the beginnings of the US nation-state were clearly textually multilingual. He notes that in 1917, there existed more than two thousand multilingual and non-English language periodicals under the surveillance of the US Postmaster.<sup>7</sup> In fact, he proposes an historical recovery of America’s multilingual literatures and advocates an “English plus” vision for the future of the nation, in contrast with “English only” policies.<sup>8</sup> With *Bilingual Aesthetics*, Sommer invites readers to play language games, to realize that to choose one language is to lose, that they must irritate the State, and to recognize that code-switching games are good for the democratic nation.<sup>9</sup> Cha also invites the reader to play language games, but with a much more somber overtone, with the heavy weight of history, and not simply as a celebration. Whereas Sommer and Sollors seem to envision a more inclusive democratic nation through multilingualism, Cha’s focus is instead on the strategic use of languages against each other to critique institutions of power. Sommer asks, “Can we count on good trainers of an edgy sense of play? No. Not yet, or not enough.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, Cha is precisely this. Her extensive use of language games in film and performance art provided the training ground for *DICTEE*. With its publication, she has become one of the major muses of such strategic language games.<sup>11</sup> *DICTEE* is now considered a classic in Asian American studies, as well as a staple in women’s studies and creative writing programs.

A decade before Shelly Fisher Fishkin’s 2004 call for a “transnational turn in American studies,”<sup>12</sup> *DICTEE*’s insertion into the Asian American literary canon

signaled a paradigm shift for Asian American studies, away from a cultural nationalism and toward a diasporic transnationalism. Sau-ling Wong describes this shift as a move from a “domestic perspective that stresses the status of Asian Americans as an ethnic/racial minority within the national boundaries of the United States,” to a “diasporic perspective [that] emphasizes Asian Americans as one element in the global scattering of peoples of Asian origin.”<sup>13</sup> While recognizing the necessity of a transnational framework to account for the workings of US imperialism abroad, Wong, writing at the close of the twentieth century, was already wary of the potential dangers of a dehistoricized transnationalism that repeated, instead of critiqued, a late capitalist paradigm of transcending the nation.<sup>14</sup> In other words, according to Wong, what is often lost in the “transnational turn” is the fact that “[n]ations [still] dispense or withhold citizenship, identity cards, passports and visas, voting rights, [and] educational and economic opportunities.”<sup>15</sup>

The transnational turn is also accompanied by a linguistic one. After all, language serves as a point of distinction in the US between a (monolingual) cultural nationalism and a (bi- or multi-lingual) transnational diaspora. The US commitment to monolingualism promotes speaking only English as a marker of authentic American identity, whereas speaking more than one language (particularly one’s “native” language) renders one’s national affiliations suspect. In the case of Asian Americans, multilingualism has historically functioned as a means of questioning not only their national loyalties, but also their very ability to assimilate successfully into the nation.<sup>16</sup> This skepticism of multilingualism in the US is complicated by the workings of late capitalism. Wong notes that “bicultural literacy” is now considered a “business asset” for Asian Americans.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it still functions to undermine Asian Americans’ national affiliations.

Taking our cue from Wong, we argue that *DICTEE* resists both a monolingualism that aims to create a homogenous national identity as well as a multilingualism that promotes transnational capitalism. Rather, Cha suggests the subversive potential of multilingual proximity and encounter. It is not merely the presence of unexpected languages (such as French) in an Asian American text, but rather the deliberate *mis*-translation, *mis*-dictation, and *mis*-use of French (highlighted by the presence of other languages, such as English) that critiques and resists “bellicose identities.” Furthermore, *DICTEE*’s simultaneous reliance on and suspicion of languages set up the games of the book’s non-textual elements: the language of photography, diagrams, and maps; cinematic language; and an orality/aurality that escapes the written text. The text’s initial *reliance* on multiple languages critically displaces the assumed link between English and national identity in the US. Moreover, its *suspicion* of all languages prevents an ahistorical celebration of multilingualism, and relocates the political possibilities of multilingualism within the realm of the domestic nation.

As a title and a form, *DICTEE* focuses on making explicit the importance of sound to language and the productive “errors” that can happen in transcription and

translation. Criticism of the opening dictation exercise in *DICTEE* has revealed how different readings are dependent on the variant subject positions we are invited to assume (dictation provider, translator, student, and corrector). In her analysis of Cha's use of dictée (French), dictation (English), and 받아쓰기 (Korean), Eun Kyung Min asks, "[t]o whom does it [dictée/dictation/받아쓰기] belong—the reader or writer or neither or both?"<sup>18</sup> Later language exercises contain errors, unclear directions, clear ideological overtones, and direct interpellations, all of which call into question the possibility of a neutral pedagogical authority, and a correct or corrected response (which is the final step of the dictation exercise, and in the text remains uncorrected). To textualize orality in this way is to preserve a memory of adaptation, the potential for improvisation, and the influence between languages. Cha's initial choice of an unstable form—a dictation in progress—pits these colonial languages against each other, resulting in productive errors that undermine their hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Both the quote falsely attributed to Sappho and the invented list of muses in the first few pages of the text tie directly into the initial dictation, for the reader has been trained to look for error and to listen to the sounds of language.<sup>20</sup> Thus, "Elitere" can be recognized as out of place among the nine muses, and the reader is prompted to search for the muse that has been replaced: the muse of music, Euterpe. Shelley Sunn Wong has read the name of this muse as a neologism derived from "elite" and "literare" and has interpreted it as referring to epic poetry.<sup>21</sup> However, if we choose to also *hear* the name of this muse in French (in addition to Latin), "Elitere" becomes "elle itère," meaning "she iterates," or "she repeats," a reference that recurs throughout the text: the iterating, speaking woman. This "iterating she" that permeates the text allows us to offer a new interpretation of the final page, which has received minimal critical analysis. According to Juliana Spahr, the final section, in which a child asks to be lifted up to a window, "optimistically presents emancipatory possibilities."<sup>22</sup> Siegle reads this final page as opening "a cultural window in order to ring out the full resonance of the voice of her personal, family, national, racial, and gender histories."<sup>23</sup> Wester reads it as an image of the daughter who will continue the mother's story.<sup>24</sup> We find all three readings overly optimistic. It is necessary to continue tracing Cha's use of French, to continue tracing the "elle itère," in order to be prepared to read this final page of text and to understand how it resists a bellicose identity through sound.

Following these initial language exercises, the reader is asked to translate religious texts, elements of the catechism, and confessions, which are intertwined with French geography lessons, laying bare the complicity between the Church and the State in the history of imperialism. It is at this point that Cha *breaks* the translation process by using text that translates well into French aurally, but otherwise appears to be in "broken English." The reader is asked to translate: "5. She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response she believe she calling and the other end must hear. . . ."<sup>25</sup> Once "she call" and "she believe" are translated from English into French, one will not hear the error that is clear in the

English written form. In French, all these verb endings *sound* the same. The error is that the speaker/writer is conjugating the verb in English for the “I” form instead of the “she” form. In French, both would sound the same because in the first instance the conjugation is identical, and in the second instance the final consonant is not pronounced in French: “j’appelle” / “elle appelle”; “je crois” / “elle croit.” This means that “broken English,” translated into French, would sound “correct”!

The absurdity of this translation exercise is further driven home at a later point by Cha’s use of British English to demonstrate the arbitrariness of “correctness” in comparison with American English:

6. We left London at half past seven and arrived at Dover after a journey of two hours. At ten o’clock the boat left the harbour. The trip across the channel took only an hour and a half. The sea was calm, we did not feel the slightest of motion. We made a stop of an hour at Calais, where we had luncheon. It was rather dear but well served. At six o’clock in the evening we were in Paris. The entire trip was only a matter of a little more than ten hours and an expenditure of fifty francs.<sup>26</sup>

How would “harbour” or “dear” translate differently in French, how would one convey the tone of British English, of the history of this language? Or the peculiarity of British inflection in “half past seven,” “the slightest of motion,” “luncheon,” “well served?” One cannot. However, it is possible to sensitize the reader to these differences between British English and American English by translating first from British English to French and then to American English. In the case of “dear,” for example, passing through French to arrive at an American English translation would actually clarify the meaning of the word in this context for an American reader who may not have previously been exposed to the British English usage. “Dear” translates as “cher” in French (meaning both “dear” in the common American sense and “expensive”). This game of “passing through the foreign” to understand the meaning of English as the American reader’s own “native language” attacks one particular aspect of a bellicose identity: the imposition of one common language on people—perfected, without error, without accent, without a betrayal of suspect secondary linguistic—and thus national—affiliations.

In this particular language game, when the numbering of exercises ceases but the content continues, we, as readers, are at a loss. Are we to continue translating into French? The content of this section will include the actual catechism, with invented, unrequested responses. For example, “Q: *WHO MADE THEE?* / A: *God made me. / To conspire in God’s Tongue.*”<sup>27</sup> The reader is invited to adapt the classic, sacred text, yet Cha implies that it is critical to do so through the national text. For a French Catholic reader this may recall demonic possession, suggesting the need for

exorcism. Yet, to the same reader who does not expect to see an enemy or a threat in the multiplicity of voices and languages, this can be read as the Pentecost, speaking in tongues inspired by God. For a Korean reader, however, this multiplicity of voices, this conspiring in the divine tongue, may recall a “kut” (꺤): a shamanist ritual that allows an individual or community to be healed or freed of oppression.<sup>28</sup> Cha pushes readers to ask: Do we read the multiplicity of languages as the result of demonic possession, a divine curse (Babel), a divine blessing (Pentecost), or a divine healing (kut)? As a continuation of the original translation game, Cha asks readers to translate their affective responses to the presence of multiple languages in one person or one space, particularly in the context of foundational religious beliefs. By acknowledging the nature of multilingualism within one religion (Christianity) and among different religions (Christianity and Korean shamanism), the reader must consider how her affective responses to multilingualism may have been shaped by what Sen terms “proficient artisans of terror,”<sup>29</sup> in this case, an Imperial Church. By acknowledging her affective responses in a religious context, the reader is prepared to explore how they continue to shape her reading of who is a “citizen” in a public context.

The reader is also invited to critique imperial forms of religion in the context of French Catholicism. Of course, in *DICTEE*, French is immediately highlighted for its role in the history of Western imperialism, particularly the French missionary presence in Korea. However, historically in Korea, in a reversal of the usual scenario of Western colonial dominance, French Catholicism ironically served as a subversive means of resisting Japanese rule. Though now known as a predominantly Protestant nation, Korea was first introduced to Christianity via French Catholic missionaries, whose work gained momentum in the mid-1800s. Catholics were initially persecuted (and thousands were killed) by the Chosun dynasty for practicing a form of idolatry that went against Confucianism.<sup>30</sup> Catholicism was also considered a Western invasion, as evidenced by French imperialist endeavors in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). During Japanese occupation, Catholicism, as a non-Japanese belief system, ironically became a radical space from which to resist Japanese colonialism. Missionaries and believers promoted Christianity (including Catholicism) as a means of condemning the atrocities of Japanese invasion. Intentionally or not, Christianity became a part of the larger Korean independence movement. The history of French colonial endeavors in Korea thus serves as an important intervention in the critique of imperialism, which often takes the form of a simplistic Western/non-Western binary.<sup>31</sup>

Christ’s body, “The Host Wafer (His Body. His Blood.) His,”<sup>32</sup> serves as the foreground for the reader’s entry into the next strategic language game: multilingual poetry that interrogates the relation between the sacrificial body and the nation. At this point in the text, Cha only presents two multilingual lines, a brief testing out of the creative co-existence of languages: “Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other / Tombe des nues de naturalized.”<sup>33</sup> “Tombe des nues” may be read as “tomb of the

naked women,” with the “es” at the end of “nu” indicating multiple women. Readers are asked to consider which women’s bodies have been sacrificed for the nation. If the reader flips through the remainder of the book, she will find images of such sacrificial figures: Yu Guan Soon, sacrificed for the Korean nation, and Joan of Arc, sacrificed for the French nation. However, the *sound* of “des nues” also recalls the verb “dénouer,” meaning to undo, to resolve, to unravel, to come undone. The reader is called to listen to these sacrificed women, to visit their (empty?) tombs, to come to a resolution, to unravel the stories of these competing languages, and to undo imperial projects.

It is as if this multilingual poetry emerged too early in the text, for French immediately disappears and will only return to provide a brief warning of the gravity of these language games before Cha breaks into extended side-by-side French-English poetry. In the subsequent sections, CLIO HISTORY and CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY, French is relatively absent, though Chinese and Korean emerge. After many pages of the noticeable absence of French, it reappears in URANIA ASTRONOMY, which involves blood being taken, the needle in the body, and blood/ink becoming one. This scene shifts the normal order of reality, as Park has emphasized:<sup>34</sup> “*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*” The French returns: “Ne te cache pas. Révèle toi. Sang. Encre. Of its body’s extension of its containment.”<sup>35</sup> The French here recalls the games we are playing, the dangerous games: “Come out. Reveal yourself. Blood. Ink.” This calling forth is reminiscent of hide-and-seek, of the child’s call to “come out, come out wherever you are” but with ominous overtones. It is at this point that Cha is finally able to break into extended poetry, it would initially appear, in side-by-side translation. However, it is quickly evident that these are not side-by-side translations. Rather, the two poems are interacting with each other, unveiling similar content. We as readers do not know which one may be the original, the source language. In this language game, we are invited to refuse a singular source, to be comfortable with not knowing the direction of translation.

The reader is also encouraged to “read” the images in the text as language games, particularly the two images that begin and end the French-English poetry in URANIA ASTRONOMY. The image that begins this section is a front and back acupuncture diagram of the human body, with crucial points marked in small, barely legible Chinese characters.<sup>36</sup> Echoing the yin-yang (in Korean 음양) theory of holistic balance in Eastern medicine, the diagram is depicted against a solid black background, with the contours of the body and Chinese characters delineated in white. It is, so to say, a map of the body. Not unlike the French-English mistranslated poetry that follows, bodily acupuncture points are generally displacements. In other words, because Eastern medicine regards the organs of the body as comprising one balanced whole (a headache, for example, can be treated by attending to its connecting points in the hand), the connections between the body’s points of pain and its points of healing are, from a Western viewpoint, inconsistent and inexplicable.

This representation of the body stands in contrast to a Western understanding of the body as a conglomerate of separated organs that can be individually targeted and treated. Presented at the end of this same section are four figures of the lungs, neck, larynx, and vocal cords, as would be depicted in a traditional Western medical textbook. Each figure is presented realistically in grey scale, within its own contained box, numbered, and with English labels (derived from Greek and Latin). In contrast to the former image where the Chinese characters are written directly onto, within, and along their correlating parts, these diagrams are careful to delineate between the picture and its English word. The “thyroid cartilage,” for example, stands outside of what it refers to, with a harsh line that penetrates the neck to mark the connection between the word and the picture. Read as a whole, the poem starts with the acupuncture diagram, then the French/English mistranslated poem, then the medical textbook diagram, and ends with the lines “Contradictions. Noise. Semblance of noise . . . / Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.”<sup>37</sup> The poem has traversed the body in this section, and what started as a complete universe embedded in the body ends within the organs of the throat and mouth.

The textual multilingualism around these bodies, the insistence on the connection between languages and living, breathing bodies, pushes readers to explore the tenuous and controversial linkage between language and nation and our ability to imagine diverse communities not only on the basis of race or ethnicity, but also on the basis of language(s).<sup>38</sup> Particularly, French works to critique a US exceptionalist understanding of the assumed connection between language and nation, and creatively disrupts the linguistic assumption that underlies the racial category “Asian American.” At the same time, the authority of any dominant language is immediately undermined by the insistence on multiple “broken” and incomplete languages. In a somewhat revisionist understanding of Audre Lorde’s famous claim, the text reveals that though “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” multiple languages drawn from several masters’ tools may be used to dismantle “other” masters’ houses.<sup>39</sup> Cha is not interested in beating the master at his own game; she seeks to undo the game itself.

Cha’s side-by-side French-English poetry is bracketed by these images. The poetry itself centers on the figure of the swan (cygne/swan and signe/sign sound identical in French). Cha draws from a long history of playing with the sign of the swan, from Yeats to Apollinaire. Park, in a chapter entitled “Modern Warfare,” has provided an extended analysis of how this poetry may reflect Baudelaire’s classic poem on the swan in relation to exile.<sup>40</sup> The swan, a repeating figure in world literatures, is renowned for its dying song: the swan song. This figure recalls the “iterating she” and the missing muse of music as we approach the last page of the text. The reader has been trained to read for the relation between image and text; thus, the swans may alternatively be read as a Paris scene: a reference to the Ile des Cygnes, where there is a replica of the Statue of Liberty, established in 1889. This statue commemorated the bond between the two nations, whose “tricolor flags . . .

spoke a language understood throughout the world. They told of fields where they shared in happy triumphs. . . . They promised a continuance of the noble rivalry between the two great republics in their generous efforts to broaden the foundations of liberty, equality, and fraternity.”<sup>41</sup> At the Ile des Cygnes, the swan’s presence is dissociable from the monument; the nation requires sacrifice: the swan’s song is a continual reminder of that sacrifice. These two symbolic figures, juxtaposed, drive home Sarah Ahmed’s critique of “how happiness is used to justify oppression;” “how happiness is used to reinscribe social norms as social goods.”<sup>42</sup>

The next section, entitled MELPOMENE TRAGEDY, begins with a map of North and South Korea.<sup>43</sup> Though it is a map of Korea, it is not a Korean map. Apart from the larger cities of Seoul, Pyongyang, and Pusan, the map also highlights smaller and lesser-known cities such as Masan, Suwon, and Wonju. The latter cities are immediately recognizable as sites of US military bases. This is a distinctly American map of the two Koreas, and not only because it is labeled in English. This visual map is reminiscent of one of the earlier pedagogical exercises prompting readers to translate the following into French:

4. France was formerly divided into thirty-two provinces, such as Brittany, Provence, Franche-Comte, etc., but since the Revolution of seventeen eighty-nine, it is divided into eighty-six departments. The names given to the departments come almost all from the rivers that traverse them, such as the Loire, the Seine etc.; some are borrowed from the names of the mountains, and a small number from the situation, such as the Department of the North, or from the nature of the soil.<sup>44</sup>

This passage elucidates that France is divided based on the names of rivers, mountains, and the nature of the soil. France is thus revealed to be a “naturally” created nation. In contrast, the map of Korea is marked, through the use of English, by its numerous colonial influences. The “Sea of Japan” and “Yellow Sea” are English translations of, respectively, Japanese and Chinese names for what in Korea is referred to as the East Sea (동해) and the West Sea (서해). In this map, Korea has no claim to the bodies of water that surround it, much less to itself. The thick, black line that is labeled the DMZ is not a mere marker of division between the North and the South. Rather, it is the line that has created these two separate nation-states. Its distinction as a demilitarized zone only emphasizes that the rest of the peninsula is heavily militarized, and technically has been at a ceasefire since the end of the Korean War. *DICTEE*’s reliance on and suspicion of English to label the Korean nation emphasizes the power of US neocolonial forces in Asia, suggesting that the project of US nation-building occurs outside the borders of the nation-state proper.

According to Sau-ling Wong, “only a diasporic perspective can provide the conceptual room needed to accommodate non-conforming cultural orientations, as well as expose the role of American foreign policy in shaping global patterns of population movement.”<sup>45</sup> In the case of *DICTEE*, its non-conformity lies in its resistance to both a narrative of national assimilation and a celebration of transnational rootlessness, all through a deployment and interrogation of multiple languages and the ways in which they work against each other. Cha stresses the contested histories that structure the formation of national languages and national subjects. Thus, *DICTEE* supports Wong’s argument that, “[w]ithout such historicizing, one of the most important aspirations of denationalization—to dialogize and trouble American myths of nation—may end up being more subverted than realized.”<sup>46</sup>

If we are encouraged to forge translations between the map of Korea and the text on the other side, the English that fills the opposing page is where the country of Japan would be. It describes an anonymous female sitting in the front rows of a theatre, anticipating the beginning of a film. The end of the page mentions “[t]he illusion that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible.”<sup>47</sup> Here, in the interplay between the map and the text, *DICTEE* is suspicious of the visual image, suggesting a fundamental disjuncture between the act of viewing and that which is seen. In the text, cinematic language emphasizes the role of textual language in the creation of images.<sup>48</sup> The last words of the section—“total severance of the seen. Incision”—return our focus to the DMZ: a zone created, labeled, and sustained by US military force.<sup>49</sup> The text’s focus on the need for translation between the image of the map and the language that surrounds it highlights the role of hegemonic languages in US imperialist projects abroad, including the acquisition and accumulation of “foreign” languages in the name of defense.

In the “Aller/Retour” sub-section (aller/retour being the French expression for a roundtrip flight), located within the final section, ELITERE LYRIC POETRY, Cha moves from side-by-side images and text in French and English, to code-switching in the same poem. On the very last page of the text, the integration of language that occurs in the “Aller/Retour” section results in multilingual prose, not only at the level of words and syntax, but also at the level of scenes, images, and sound. On this last page of prose, Cha invites readers to apply the skills they have learned in these strategic language games, to listen for creative dissonance. If they do so, they may notice several things: The reference to “mom,” which seems very “American” and very out of place in terms of language and tone with the rest of the text; the phrase “now darks and greys” that transforms color nouns into verbs; the “ruelle,” the French for little road, that is noticeably juxtaposed against “mom” and which prompts readers to wonder which country the narrator is in; and the trees “in attendance,” which is a direct translation of the French (“assister à,” which can also mean to witness). This “witnessing” follows previous images of martyrs; the reader may therefore be prompted to wonder what she will be asked to witness. This turns particularly ominous when a child asks her mother to lift her up to the window, after

which we read: “unleash the ropes tied to weight of stones first the ropes then its scraping on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky.”<sup>50</sup> It recalls a public execution scene, a hanging with the releasing of the weights, as witnessed by a child. Yet, readers are told that it is the bells that are falling. However, bells should not fall; they swing, they ring, they mark time. Perhaps it is time that is falling? Thus, Cha sends readers on a voyage of encounter by calling attention to the bells, to the “mom,” to the dissolution of the marking of time, and to an ominous sense of foreboding.

Here, readers are called to discover an important bell in Korean oral history: the Emille Bell (에밀레종). Although there are numerous competing versions of the story, the legend of the Emille Bell is that the bell could not be perfected, kept cracking, and as a result, a girl was sacrificed (some say, thrown into the cauldrons) to achieve the perfect bell, now a Korean national treasure.<sup>51</sup> The legend claims that this bell, when rung, calls out “Emille,” an older Korean word assumed to mean “mommy.” Suddenly the “mom,” the earlier “mah-uhm” (마음: Korean for “mind” and “heart”) in the text,<sup>52</sup> the ringing bell, the iterating she, all resonate for us, calling attention to a sacrificed girl-child who continually cries out in the language of the missing muse, the language of music. The sacrificed girl-child’s cry brings readers back to the beginning of the text, to the Korean inscription, “Mother, I miss you. I’m hungry. I want to go home.”<sup>53</sup> However, this buckling of the text does not create a neat circle. Rather, as Shelley Sunn Wong has shown, the Korean inscription ushers readers out of the text instead of into it.<sup>54</sup> This creates a shuttling effect that leaves the reader in a “caught” position: the reader is permanently put on the spot, called to attention, hearing the insistent echoes of sacrificed bodies. However, these are not the bodies of statistics; the call, the appeal, is relentless and familiar: it is a call to change the unjust situation, which is the demand to either assume a bellicose identity or be sacrificed for the nation.

Throughout *DICTEE*, Cha demonstrates the material and historical effects of this demand while also refusing to be constrained by it. She anticipates Sau-ling Wong’s two warnings concerning “denationalization”: 1) we cannot afford a depoliticization that occurs under the guise of theoretical self-critique (a common—if often misplaced—critique of postmodernism and the avant-garde) and 2) we must avoid “unwitting subsumption into master narratives.”<sup>55</sup> Here, Wong focuses on disciplinary concerns in Asian American studies. She cautions against the trends toward diaspora studies (via area studies) and transnational criticism as potentially dangerous for the field of Asian American studies. Cha is able to effectively address Wong’s concerns from both a diasporic and national perspective, *avant la lettre*.<sup>56</sup> Wong sees contradictory roots for Asian Americans: their roots are either grounded in a country of Asian origin or in a “commitment to the place where one resides.”<sup>57</sup> She calls Asian Americanists to remember that the field is founded on roots “where

one resides.” *DICTEE* itself straddles the contradiction between these two understandings of rootedness through its shuttling between multiple identities.

Cha’s text risks exposure to suspicion from both Korean Americans and Koreans. From the Korean American perspective, she is not committed enough to where she resides. From the Korean perspective, she relies on colonial and imperial languages.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, traces of the United States are certainly materially present by virtue of *DICTEE*’s New York publication house and its use of American English, which mark it as a clearly “American” text. On the other hand, in terms of content, the US nation-state takes up comparatively little space in the text. Its traces are found in the moment where Cha’s mother acquires a US passport, in the “Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt” (accurately reproduced in its entirety from the appendix in McKenzie’s *The Tragedy of Korea*), and in the Laura Claxton letters, which indicate New York addresses. Thus, it cannot be simply stated that the US or a commitment to the US is the focus of the text. Instead, *DICTEE* demonstrates how an approach grounded in the activist history of ethnic studies may in fact effectively influence diaspora studies (for example, by calling attention to the militarization of area studies). Conversely, a diasporic framework can challenge some of the political grounding of Asian American studies. For example, the petition from Koreans in Hawaii calls attention to the US as a colonial power (Hawaii was annexed in 1898). At the same time, the petition also documents the Korean diaspora’s appeal to the US to intervene in the Japanese colonization of Korea. This document implicates the contemporary Asian American subject—simply by virtue of citizenship—in colonialism and neo-colonialism, not just as a subject of colonialism, but as a colonizer as well.

Cha’s strategic language games dislodge the supposedly organic origins of national languages. By divorcing languages from their “appropriate” nations and contexts, Cha challenges the assumption that language competency signals successful cultural assimilation. Indeed, it is language acquisition that frequently marks the distinction between Asian American studies and Asian studies: Asian American studies historically arose from a commitment to English monolingualism to attest to a US cultural legitimacy, whereas Asian studies is committed to foreign language acquisition as a sign of Asian cultural competency. Sau-ling Wong identifies a “fundamental tension between Asian American studies with its history of resistance and advocacy, and diaspora studies of specific groups by origins.”<sup>59</sup> Diaspora studies, she suggests, is closer in origin to area studies. She notes the “vexed, at times openly antagonistic, relations” between ethnic studies and area studies programs, the former rising out of the US Civil Rights Movement and the latter rising out of a Cold War focus on defense.<sup>60</sup> To put it even more starkly, the former have historically critiqued the nation, whereas the latter have been historically invested in defending it. Such disciplinary distinctions articulate the larger issue of national identity for Asian Americans who continue to be considered “perpetual foreigners.” As Wong

notes, though Asian American studies departments are frequently mistaken for Asian studies departments, rarely are they mistaken for American studies departments.<sup>61</sup>

*DICTEE's* insistence on multilingualism, particularly the use of French, produces discomfort regarding this relationship between language and nation. It encourages continued, critical exploration of the tenuous link between nation and language rather than either the simple celebration of multilingualism as a privileged cosmopolitanism or the blind acceptance of universalism and assimilation (a concept familiar to the French nation). The dangers of the monolingual nation with one common national history are reflected in recent debates in France over the law of Feb. 23, 2005.<sup>62</sup> Article 4 of the law required that all school programs recognize the positive role of the French presence overseas (referring to colonialism). Following heated debate, the article was suppressed, yet it signaled the dangers of total assimilation to the universalizing nation. It made clear that a nation that promotes multilingualism as a form of cosmopolitanism (as a member of the EU) or as a form of incorporation (the State's passing of laws that finally allowed for the teaching of minority regional languages in schools) may still easily suppress particular languages and histories that are critical of the nation.

During the writing of this article, Arizona passed a bill (HB2281) effectively banning the teaching of ethnic studies in public schools. Moreover, SB1070 is attempting to legalize racial profiling in Arizona and the detainment of those who are perceived to be undocumented immigrants, which would result in massive civil and human rights violations. This national climate makes Sau-ling Wong's suspicion of a celebratory, dehistoricized transnationalism and her insistence on how nations continue to control our daily lives all the more prescient. Likewise, *DICTEE's* warning to be highly attentive to the languages and histories that unveil the workings of the state, both past and present, seems prophetic:

Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt. They search you. They, the anonymous variety of uniforms, each division, strata, classification, any set of miscellaneous properly uniform. They have the right, no matter what rank, however low their function they have the authority. Their authority sewn into the stitches of their costume. Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented.<sup>63</sup>

## Notes

We thank the Center for East Asian Studies and the Department of French and Italian at the University of Kansas as well as the University of Manitoba for supporting our research and collaboration. We are particularly grateful for the insightful comments of the anonymous reviewers of this equally co-authored article.

<sup>1</sup> Our translation. 김명수, *앵무새의 혀*, 김현 엮음 (서울: 문학과지성사, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 6. Sollors explains: “Literary histories, critical studies, anthologies, and even bibliographies of the United States nowadays inevitably present English-only materials and often imply a monolingual Anglophone reader.”

<sup>3</sup> On DICTEE’s reception, see Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 102–107.

<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 2, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 122–125, 136–140. Lisa Lowe, “Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Asian American ‘Novels’ and the Question of History,” in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, eds. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Many talk about their gut-level discomfort in approaching the text, their sense of estrangement, alienation, or unsettling recognition due not only to its multiple languages but also to its juxtaposition of genres and mediums. Kim acknowledges that she was initially put off by the book due to its juxtaposition of “foreign” forms such as French grammar and Greek mythology; yet she was profoundly unsettled when she recognized the Korean folk song Bong Sun Hwa because, “I had never expected to see lines from that song on a printed page in English.” Elaine Kim, “Poised on the In-Between: A Korean American’s Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1994), 4. Kang had expected to recognize herself in the text, but was instead frustrated and angered by its lack of accessibility, by Cha’s evasiveness: “My subjective positioning in relation to the text was most evident . . . when I found myself literally yelling at the book.” L. Hyun-Yi Kang, “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> These publications ranged in languages “from Ruthenian to Syrian, Bohemian, to ‘Spanish-Jewish’ (Ladino), Tagalog-Visayan to Rumanian, as well as bi- and trilingual

formats such as Polish-Latin, Danish-Norwegian-Swedish, or German-Hungarian.” Sollors, *Multilingual America*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of Cha’s artistic works, see Constance Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroad of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004.” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 17–57.

<sup>13</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 127.

<sup>14</sup> On the capitalist consumption of diasporic identities, see Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 140.

<sup>16</sup> On the relationship between English language acquisition and the politics of assimilation, see David Li, “On Ascriptive and Acquisitional Americanness: *The Accidental Asian* and the Illogic of Assimilation.” *Contemporary Literature* 45 (2004): 106–134.

<sup>17</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 135.

<sup>18</sup> Eun Kyung Min, “Reading the Figure of Dictation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 309. For a revised and translated version of this article in Korean, see 민은경, “차학경의 *Dictée*, Dictation, 받아쓰기,” *비교문학* 24 (1999): 135–150.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Lowe notes that “antagonisms to a particular demand for identity formation may be pronounced through recourse to another ‘language’ . . . even a language of domination.” Lisa Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 43–44.

<sup>20</sup> On the Sappho quote, see Stella Oh, “The Enunciation of the Tenth Muse in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 13 (2002): 9. On the muses, see

Shelley Sun Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Shelley Sun Wong, "Unnaming the Same," 115.

<sup>22</sup> Juliana M. Spahr, "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*." *College Literature* 23 (1996): 39.

<sup>23</sup> Siegle as quoted in Spahr, "Postmodernism," 39.

<sup>24</sup> Michelle Black Wester, "The Concentric Circles of *Dictée*: Reclaiming Women's Voices through Mothers and Daughters' Stories." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 10 (2007): 187.

<sup>25</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTÉE* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982), 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> On kut in *DICTÉE*, see Wayne Stein, "Exorcisms from Demons: A Reunification with the Korean Spirit," in *Korea and Regional Geopolitics*, eds. Walter Jung and Xiao Bing Li (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 117–125.

<sup>29</sup> Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Finch suggests 8,000 to 10,000 Catholics were killed or died. Finch, "The Pursuit of Martyrdom in the Catholic Church in Korea before 1866." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009): 100. Finch draws from Charles Dallet, *Histoire de l'église de Corée* (Paris: V. Palmé, 1874).

<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the notion of the "white man's burden" of Western conquest, Japanese colonialism of Korea was predicated on the assumption that Koreans were the same race as the Japanese and thus, Korean land was legitimately Japanese land.

<sup>32</sup> Cha, *DICTÉE*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 137.

<sup>35</sup> Cha, *DICTÉE*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–75.

<sup>38</sup> Sollors suggests that "language provides a model for an understanding of culture that need not be based on race, and language acquisition may be one way of making

voluntary affiliations, widening the circle of the ‘we,’ and at least in part ‘becoming what one is not.’” Sollors, *Multilingual America*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110–114.

<sup>40</sup> Park, *Apparitions of Asia*, 137–141.

<sup>41</sup> “France’s Liberty Statue,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1889.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>47</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Cinematic language is further developed in the next section, ERATO LOVE POETRY. “Shots” and “cuts” dominate the pages of this section, recalling the partition of Korea, both its land and its people, and ending with a close up still of actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti’s face from the French film, *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. *DICTEE*’s cinematic language further questions subjectivity and location, as the language is both descriptive (of what is happening) and prescriptive (of what is to come). The text moves from the perspective of the camera, to “she” who is watching the film, to “you” who are watching her, before all of these perspectives dissolve together: “You are she, she speaks you, you speak her, she cannot speak.” (106).

<sup>49</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>51</sup> According to the legend, this bell is assumed to be 성덕대왕 신종, a bell constructed for the Great King Sungduk. On the competing (Korean, Chinese, and Japanese) origins of the Emille Bell legend, see 황인덕, “에밀레종 전설의 근원과 전래,” *어문연구* 56 (2008): 289–322.

<sup>52</sup> Kim translates this as “spirit-heart.” Kim, “Poised on the In-Between,” 19.

<sup>53</sup> Kang, “Liberatory Voice,” 91.

<sup>54</sup> Shelley Sunn Wong, “Unnaming the Same,” 107.

<sup>55</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 135.

<sup>56</sup> On Cha as a member of the “1.5 generation,” see Shu-Mei Shih, “Nationalism and Korean American Women’s Writing: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” in *Speaking the*

*Other Self: American Women Writers*, ed. Jeanne Cambell Reesman (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 149.

<sup>57</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 140. She draws from L. Ling-Chi Wang, “Roots and the Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States,” in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Tu Wei-ming (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994): 187.

<sup>58</sup> On *DICTEE* as articulating an “in-between” identity, see Kim, “Poised on the In-Between,” 3–30.

<sup>59</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 139.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>62</sup> See the conclusion to Christopher Miller’s *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 56–57.