Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee

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Narrative, Volume 16, Number 2, May 2008, pp. 163-177 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/nar.0.0002

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Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s 1980 experimental text, *Dictee*, has garnered a great deal of critical attention. In Asian American studies in particular, analyses of the text have gone hand in hand with efforts to theorize poststructuralist subjectivity and postnationalism in the critical turn against unified subjectivity and reactionary nationalisms, and towards fragmented, heterogeneous, multiple subject-formations.¹ But despite critics’ theoretical orientation towards heterogeneity and the impossibility of final articulation, readers of *Dictee* nearly unanimously speak of a narrator and/or acting subject, and moreover, identify that narrator as Cha. For example, critics have read the narrator of the following passage, which appears early in *Dictee*, as Cha:

Aller à la ligne  C’était le premier  jour point  
Elle venait de loin  point  ce soir au diner virgule 
les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guillemets  Ça c’est bien passé le premier jour point  
d’interrogation  ferme les guillemets  au moins  
virgule  dire le moins possible virgule  la réponse  
serait virgule  ouvre les guillemets  Il n’y a q’une  
chose point  ferme les guillemets  ouvre les guillemets  Il y a quelqu’une point  loin  point  ferme les guillemets

Open paragraph  It was the first day  period  
She had come from a far  period  tonight at dinner

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comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks at least to say the least of it possible comma the answer would be open quotation marks there is but one thing period There is someone period From a far period (1)

Although there are no explanations in the text, Shu-mei Shih concludes that because “Cha attended Catholic school and learned French as a child, later getting a B.A. in Comparative Literature with French emphasis,” which constituted “a subtle imperialist trajectory,” her “response to such inculcation is subversion through acts of ironic submissions” such as this passage (155–56). Similarly, Laura Hyun-Yi Kang writes, “The passages end with not a polite, coherent reply but with the assertion of her undeniably displaced and ‘alien’ status in both the French and English settings” (85, my emphasis). Likewise, Lisa Lowe describes the passage above as “a dictation assignment in French, represented as if it were the first of many exercises performed during the narrator’s childhood” (132, my emphasis). As such, it “dramatizes not only the indoctrination of the Korean narrator within a ‘foreign’ Western language, but the ‘dictée’ . . . also alludes to the long history of the French Catholic missionary activity in Korea that dates from the early nineteenth century” (132, my emphasis). Furthermore, Lowe refers to the narrator as “‘translated’ as a namesake of Saint Thérèse” (134). Nowhere in the novel are we told that the “narrator” is named Theresa or that there is even a singular narrator.

Such identifications are striking in their apparent invocation of a genre, autobiography, that Dictee seems to explode. A radically experimental text, Dictee incorporates narrative sections, poetry, visuals, modern Korean history, Greek mythology, French Catholicism, Carl Dreyer’s films, and other elements. Some prefatory and closing material bookend nine chapters named after the Muses, and the “stories” in the text are loosely linked through the themes of women’s lives and the fraught processes of signification. While it is sometimes referred to as a novel, several references to Cha’s life as well as her mother’s lead some to call it a postmodern autobiography. As such, the text is, as Lowe writes, “without a recognizable linearity that depicts a unified subject’s progress from youth to maturity” (129), and it “alternately depicts subjects episodically and incompletely formed within linguistically and historically differentiated circumstances” (135). But while demonstrating how Dictee interrogates the unity of subjectivity, Lowe, like many readers, also posits a singular narrator identified with the author.

This tendency to identify the narrator and the author is a critical blind spot that blunts the text’s political and aesthetic project, which is otherwise so ably explicated by these same critics. I contend that the text does not necessitate the union of its voices into one narrator, and that the narrator does not have to be identified with Cha for the text to be effective. In other words, I argue that Dictee should be read as what Susan Lanser describes as an “equivocal” text, in which the author and narrator are neither wholly distinct nor wholly identified; rather, the dynamics
of this equivocation contribute to the project of the text. The lacuna in the criticism may seem minor but, I would argue, speaks to a tension between poststructuralist emphasis on textuality and subject-effects and a persistent desire for an active, ethical agent making a rhetorical argument through a text. Therefore a constant dialectic between the individual and communal informs the text and our readings of it. While its lyric and autobiographical elements would seem to encourage what Lanser terms “attachment,” or identification of the narrator and author, *Dictee* complicates these generic conventions in order to interrogate the boundaries of the individual speaking subject. In contrast, nondevelopmental and avant-garde literary conventions would seem to discourage attachment. Non-mimetic or non-realist aesthetics are usually ironic and distanced, striving to denaturalize realism and disrupt ideologically problematic identification and empathy. But the communal imperatives that problematize a singular voice also complicate a total detachment, or separation between narrator and author. The complexity of equivocation and the exploration of different axes of identification in *Dictee* serve its project of theorizing subjectivity, history, and ideology through aesthetic form. Attending to the equivocal status of particular points in the text informs our overall understanding of where *Dictee* falls in relation to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, and the issues at stake in such generic questions.

**ATTACHMENT, DETACHMENT, EQUIVOCATION**

According to structuralist narratology, the implied author is a textual function divorced from any real human beings. But, as Susan Lanser points out, reading practices include situations in which the narrative “I” is identified with the author (207). For example, we are more likely to identify the “I” of the narrator with the author in lyric poetry, personal essays, letters, academic writing, texts with an unnamed narrator (particularly if they have striking parallels to the author), and non-narrative passages. She refers to situations in which the narrative “I” is identified with the author as “attached” or “contingent” (208). In these, a reader has a strong investment in identifying the presumed author with the textual “I.” On the other hand, in “detached” texts, authorship is irrelevant to the significance and work of the text (209–210). Even if we know who wrote them, texts such as *The Star Spangled Banner* or the *Apostle’s Creed* are detached because “the ‘I’ who wrote them is not connected to any specific enunciating entity that the text inscribes” (210). “Equivocal” texts are those that “rely for their meaning on complex and ambiguous relationships between the ‘I’ of the author and any textual voice” (210, original emphasis). Most literature is equivocal, and much literary criticism assumes this equivocation.

Lanser delineates five criteria for determining the levels of attachment and detachment between the author and the textual “I.” First, singularity, or the presence of only one “I” at the highest diegetic level of the text, invites attachment; for example, much lyric poetry has a singular speaking voice. While attachment does not require singularity, singularity promotes it. Second, anonymity, or the absence
of a proper name for the narrator, facilitates identification of the narrator with the author. Third, when notable similarities abound between the narrator and the author, such “textual voices closely allied in identity to that assumed of the author provide readers with encouragement to attach” (212). In fact, she notes, sometimes when the narrator is unnamed, it takes notable differentiations between the historical author and the narrator to prevent attachment \( \text{\textit{ibid.}} \). Particularly for women writers, she continues, “even when a textual ‘I’ has differed from the author in name, the convergence of the author’s known identity with that of the narrating character has promoted attachment” \( \text{\textit{ibid.}} \). A fourth factor is the reliability of the narrator; if the narrator’s “values and perceptions” seem compatible with those of the author, then we are more likely to identify them. In general, an unreliable narrator discourages attachment, although there are exceptions. (For example, in \textit{Lolita}, while we do not identify Humbert Humbert with Nabakov, certain sentiments about American culture the narrator expresses may ostensibly be also attributed to the author.) As Lanser notes, there are also occasions when the “I” voices are double, multiple, and mutable: “the narrator’s words sometimes belongs to the author as well as to the narrating character and sometimes do not” (216, original emphasis). Fifth, we are more likely to identify the narrator with the author in nondiegetic passages, or in cases of non-narrativity or atemporality (213). She notes that “equivocal genres are most likely to enact their now-attached and now-detached character along lines of narrativity . . . \textit{even when these appear within fictional discourse}” \( \text{\textit{ibid.}} \), original emphasis). But whether a passage forwards the action of the plot or presents a metaphysical reverie, we are more likely to attach the narrator to the author when the narrator is heterodiegetic, or third-person omniscient. So while a nondiegetic, reflective passage in the text might tend to be linked to the author, a character-narrator is less likely to be identified with the author. Homodiegetic narrators, or narrators who are part of the story, Lanser continues, are in fact “the most equivocal of the equivocal genres, always technically detached and yet sometimes readily attachable” (214). To further complicate matters, while lyric poems with homodiegetic speakers tend to be detached, dramatic monologues like “My Last Duchess” are usually read as detached (Rader 150).

Equivocation also helps us elucidate texts in which communal imperatives may complicate a formally singular voice. In \textit{Fictions of Authority}, Lanser describes the “communal voice” as instances in which a narrative voice, often closely identified with the author, may have both a “singularity [that] corresponds to that of conventional authorship” and a communality that “arrogates to an individual author the self-reinforcing sense of multiplicity” (279). Lanser describes this particularly in terms of women’s “separate but resonant experiences,” observing that some writing can “carry the double imperative of constituting an unheard ‘we’ and literally articulating that ‘we’ into its diverse constitutive elements” (262). In such cases, there are several axes of identification: between the author and the narrator, the author and the community, the narrator and the community, and various members of community. \textit{Dictee}, with its interweaving and invocation of various women’s stories, certainly manipulates such tensions and connections through the use of communal voice. The notions of equivocation and “communal voice” help
us to mediate between the individual and the communal, retaining—without relying on unnecessary identifications and simplifications of characters, narrators, author, and readers—the notion of an active, ethical author who is part of communities and who attempts to communicate with readers.

In addition to Lanser’s guidelines, the perceived relationship of a narrator and author will also be conditioned by the expectations of what Peter Rabinowitz has defined as authorial audiences, or the hypothetical group of readers that the author rhetorically addresses, and the actual audiences. *Dictee* draws on (at least) two distinct aesthetic traditions that may be inextricably intertwined in the text but have until recently been associated with different groups of actual readers. The first group draws on the conventions of the avant-garde or postmodern art. As demonstrated by her education, exhibitions, employment, and earlier edited anthology of psychoanalytic film criticism, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus*, Cha was very much a part of the postmodern art movement of the 1970s—most of which did not explicitly deal with issues of race in the United States. For this authorial audience, the text requires familiarity with avant-garde aesthetic practices, and while contemporary critics of *Dictee* nearly all fall into this category, some readers have not found the text accessible. The second group of readers that the text explicitly invokes is those who focus on the Asian/Korean American, feminist context; moreover, critics have argued that to discuss the text without that specific context is to stifle its ideological critique. Elaine Kim writes that because *Dictee* “has a specific history and context, something that Cha repeatedly calls attention to as she inscribes the narratives ‘missing from the chronicles,’ to discuss *Dictee* without ever referring to Cha as a Korean American writer is to depoliticize the text and thereby obliterate or at least drastically reduce its oppositional potential and its empowering possibilities” (22; see also Wong 135). In other words, if the reading called for by the text includes attention to history and ideology, then a reading that omits these is politically at odds with the text in question. Furthermore, because the first set of reading conventions have been more associated with institutional privilege, those who privilege the second set of reading conventions may experience a text as purposefully exclusionary. Elaine Kim writes that “the first time I glanced at *Dictee*, I was put off by the book. I thought that Theresa Cha was talking not to me but rather to someone so remote from myself that I could not recognize ‘him.’ The most I could hope for, I thought, was to be permitted to stand beside her while she addressed ‘him’” (3). I articulate these two authorial audiences because for actual readers, when one set of conventions is omitted or unknown, the issue of attachment becomes particularly prominent and confused.

Actual readers attach or detach according to the conventions of their reading or interpretive communities, and this speaks to the reception history of texts like *Dictee*. Regardless of the relevant aesthetic conventions, some readers may attach texts by writers from underrepresented groups because their reading expectations are informed by the now thoroughly problematized logic of representation. In such cases, the principal desire is for a voice to represent an entire group, and this occurs despite modern readers’ general tendency *not* to read the implied author in a text because the convention is to read ironically (Booth 364–74, original empha-
Such readings may be informed by a kind of orientalism, often well-intended, that might read Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* as a literal autobiography about the unbreachable chasm between East and West. A more modern, enlightened version of this is liberal multiculturalism, which is distinguished from critical multiculturalism in that it assumes a set of discrete groups without considering differences in power and within groups. This is the type of reading I encounter most often in the classroom: students want to read the narrator of a marginal text as, first, the author, and second, the entire community. My efforts to counteract their deeply ingrained readerly desires are hindered by the fact that so much of our public discourse on race reduces the alternatives to liberal multiculturalism or racism. For professional readers, such a tendency might arise from the desire to attribute a “presence” to marginal writers out of fear of losing political and historical concreteness to the fundamental absence posited by structuralism, poststructuralism and formalist narratology. The other side of the liberal multiculturalism coin is identity politics, which in reading practices creates the desire to claim texts and authors by conflating the two. Early critics of *Dictee* have discussed being initially put off by the text because it did not reflect themselves or adequately represent the community along conventional lines. Kang writes, “I believed that I, as a Korean/American woman, should be able to immediately understand and identify with the work of another Korean/American woman, and since that instant mirroring/attraction did not happen, either there must be something ‘wrong’ with me or with [Cha]” (76). Kang’s initial alienation arose from a discrepancy between her reading conventions and the avant-garde reading conventions operating in the text.

When those disparate reading norms become reconciled, such changes indicate shifts in readers and society. The critical history of *Dictee* speaks, in Asian American literary studies in particular and U.S. ethnic studies in general, to the sharp divergence away from the logic of representation. When Wong writes, “*Dictee* is not a representative text” (103), she means both that the aesthetics of the text reject the representational logic of multiculturalism, and that the text’s divergence from earlier Asian American literary conventions led to its being ignored by scholars for the first decade after its publication. Such problematic logics of representation are also what render *Dictee* an equivocal, rather than attached, text.

**THE COMMUNAL LYRIC**

Although *Dictee* invokes lyric and autobiography, or the genres of the speaking self that tend to encourage attachment, the text also constantly frustrates a reader’s desire for a singular voice speaking about a single moment, emotion, or life, one detached from other voices and experiences. In its classical references, *Dictee* deliberately invokes and troubles the boundaries between personal lyric and national epic; it also questions the divide between the moment of the lyric and the developmentalism of the autobiography. The text does these things for several reasons: to complicate any singular condition of speaking, to demonstrate the inextricability of multiple interrelated voices, and to interrogate the individualism and
apparent self-presence of a lyric speaker. Such formal qualities reflect and enact the themes of the text. The personal experience rendered by lyric or autobiography is inseparable from other people and from history, but at the same time is not folded into any kind of uniformity of representation. The text demonstrates that lyric and autobiography can never be simple, individual, or static by emphasizing the ongoing nature of the articulation of experience and the speaking subject(s). The simultaneous singularity and multiplicity of the speaking voices therefore contribute to the equivocation of the text.

For example, the text complicates the singularity and attachment generally involved in reading autobiography. As several critics have noted, *Dictee* challenges the individualism of the traditional autobiography. For example, the chapter, “Calliope Epic Poetry,” draws material from Cha’s mother’s life and is told in second person, addressing this “you” as “Mother.” Although this situation invites a degree of attachment, the chapter also complicates singularity by interweaving communal voices. The first part of the chapter recounts the experiences of Cha’s mother while an exile in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation of Korea. In the later part of the chapter, an “I”-narrator addresses a “you” (presumably but not necessarily the Mother of the first part of the chapter), describing processes of adopting citizenship in ways that could be specific to these pseudo-characters as well as generalizable to any immigrant: “One day you raise the right hand and you are American” (56). The significance of different languages, displacement, an impossible notion of “home” that nevertheless motivates desire when in exile, adopted citizenship, and other issues resonate in the chapter between not only the narratee (the “you”-Mother) and narrator of the chapter, but also the author and other exiles and immigrants. In this chapter, common experiences are articulated and woven together through the fluidity of actor, narrator, and narratee.

Likewise, *Dictee* complicates the basic formulation of lyric—an individual speaking his/her feelings—by complicating each of those elements: an individual cannot be either strictly individual or perfectly representative of a community; the process of speaking is fraught with difficulties, and the expression is inseparable from the emotion being expressed; emotions and experience are inseparable from social constructions; and the experience of a single moment in time is inseparable from other moments. To do so, as Wong points out, the text posits the personal, momentary experience of lyric against the communal, progressive linearity of epic. For example, *Dictee*’s first pages invoke Sappho, who is seen as “the tenth muse... presid[ing] over a lyric rather than an epic tradition” (Wong 115), and the chapter that ought to be named for Euterpe, the Muse of music, is named “Elitere Lyric Poetry.” But the text also breaks down the strict divisions between the lyric and epic, individual and communal. For example, while the “Elitere Lyric Poetry” chapter consists primarily of a series of lyric poems in French and English, they are arranged in a progression reminiscent of epic journeys: “Aller/Retour,” “Aller,” “Retour” (124–32). While the poems themselves do not present an obvious narrative and may seem to indicate a lyrical singularity, if we incorporate these individual poems into the larger structure of a multi-generic nondevelopmental text, it again appears as equivocal.
Similarly, the singularity of the narrator within the section titled “Erato Love Poetry,” also indicative of lyric, remains ambiguous. Alternating in the chapter are descriptions of an unnamed woman watching a film, scenes from Carl Dreyer’s 1964 film *Gertrud*, and excerpts from *Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The chapter begins with a picture of St. Thérèse and ends with a still from Carl Dreyer’s 1928 film, *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. Furthermore, most of the chapter juxtaposes text between verso and recto leaves (in other words, when text appears on one side, the other side is blank). It is never clear whether there are several narrators or one narrator; the juxtaposition of recto and verso sections suggests two narratives, but there is no way to determine absolutely. Here the narrator is equivocal because the text presents the “love” of each speaker—St. Thérèse, Joan of Arc, Gertrud, the narrator, and/or the author—in conjunction with each of the others. In this way, the section exposes the social and ideological nature of emotions such as love by juxtaposing the social uses of romantic love: St. Thérèse describes Jesus Christ as her husband, while in the scenes from *Gertrud*, an estranged couple goes through the motions of their marriage. In these ways, rather than positing an individual lover, the tapestry of social discourses and personal voices around the subject of love is incorporated into the ostensibly personal individual voice. Each voice in this section demonstrates lyric integrity while also clearly relating to, being formed by, and forming others. While absolute singularity may be antithetical to the project of the narrative, moments of attachment in an overall equivocal text allows room for both the multiplicity and singularity of voices.

The text also does not choose, in terms of progression and time, between the moment of the lyric and the developmentalism of autobiography. Individual moments are constantly linked to history and the significance of change (or the lack thereof). We see an example of this linkage again in the “Calliope Epic Poetry” chapter. The series of events in the chapter serves not to change the characters or narrator, but rather to indicate a condition of displacement shared in the experiences of exile and immigration. This sequence exemplifies what James Phelan describes as “lyric progression,” one in which “the progression of events does not lead to a change in a character’s condition but reveals a character’s attitudes or a character in a static condition and/or invites us to participate in the character’s perspective without judging it.” This sense created by the lyric progression is also furthered by the use of present tense throughout the Calliope chapter. This sense of “now” permeating the two sections of the chapter invites attachment by serving as what Phelan calls “redundant telling,” or instances of narration in which the narratee presumably already knows the story the narrator is telling and therefore there is no mimetic reason for this specific communication from narrator to narratee. In such cases, the “disclosure function” of a text, or communication between implied author (via the narrator) and authorial audience, may conflict with and supersede its “narrator function,” or communication between the narrator and narratee (Phelan 12). In the “Calliope” chapter, because the narratee is the mother whose story is being told, presumably the reason for the narration is to tell it to *us*. The disclosure function, or the communication from the narrator to the reader/authorial audi-
ence, takes precedence. The text conveys a lyric progression in a redundant telling, and thus in such instances we may be drawn to attach the narrator to the historical author Cha, within a text that is equivocal overall.

CONVENTIONS OF UNCONVENTIONAL NARRATIVES

While conventions of nondevelopmental antinarratives might discourage attachment, the political, historical, and communal imperatives that trouble the singularity and attachment invited by lyric and autobiography also, conversely, put pressure on the strict separation between the historical author and her textual speakers. Equivocation is therefore an integral element of novel’s use of avant-garde aesthetic strategies, such as ironic juxtaposition and citation, self-reflexivity, and the frustration of the desire for narrative closure and textual mastery.

First, from the Surrealists to *The Simpsons*, the ironic juxtaposition of elements and citation as commentary are familiar conventions of antinarratives. The narrator, if any, is unlikely to be seen as attached and coherent; we instead assume coherence through an implied author who has assembled these elements to make some kind of point (even if that point is about pointlessness). *Dictee*, however, questions such ironic distance for any individual element being juxtaposed as well as the overall text. For example, the first chapter in *Dictee*, “Clio History,” intersperses the story of Yu Guan Soon, a sixteen-year-old Korean anticolonial heroine, with excerpts from other texts. The first part of the chapter reads:

In Guan Soon’s 16th year, 1919, the conspiracy by the Japanese to overthrow the Korean Government is achieved with the royal assassination of the ruling Queen Min and her royal family. In the aftermath of this incident, Guan Soon forms a resistant group with fellow students and actively begins her revolutionary work. There is already a nationally organized movement, who do not accept her seriousness, her place as a young woman, and they attempt to dissuade her. (30)

At first glance, the heterodiegetic and omniscient narrator may seem detached. But because *Dictee* is an experimental text, we include startling, ironic juxtapositions among the reading conventions, and so we expect that avant-garde texts have some kind of coherence. Interspersed with the Yu Guan Soon passages are excerpts from F. A. McKenzie’s *The Tragedy of Korea*, a 1908 Western scholarly history of the occupation of Korea, and from pro-independence English-language newspapers published in Korea during Japanese occupation (31). McKenzie’s thesis, that Korea is too weak to survive in the modern world and had best be left to Japanese rule, is contradicted by the Yu Guan Soon passage above, and the nationalist accounts of Japanese rule and Korean resistance are complicated by the implicit feminist critique of patriarchal discouragement of Yu Guan Soon’s political activity. The newspaper accounts also complicate the Western imperialism of McKenzie with the sympathetic missionaries of the English-language newspapers. The three
texts thus form a mutually conversant triad, and the juxtaposition between the narrative in *Dictee*, McKenzie’s text, and the newspaper articles challenge the divide between fiction, scholarly history, and journalism, drawing our attention to all forms of writing as ideological rhetoric. The contrasts constitute political, ethical arguments that lead us back to an arguing agent, or an author. Furthermore, while we can read each of these sections—the novel’s narrator, McKenzie’s narrator, and the narrator of the newspaper articles—as separate narrators, the presence of quotation marks around the excerpts suggests that a speaker mimics or quotes these passages. These signals all encourage us to attach the ideological and social position arising from the juxtaposition to the implied Cha.

Other cited passages, however, appear without quotation marks and may trouble our readiness to attach. The “Clio History” chapter also includes the full text of a letter addressed to President Roosevelt written by Syngman Rhee, president of the Korean provisional government in exile. This may suggest either an actual other narrator (Rhee and the letter writers) or a citation incorporated into the narrator’s voice. In either case, we do not necessarily identify the speaker (Rhee) with the author. This might be a form of character narration that the implied author manipulates in order to achieve certain effects, such as debunking McKenzie or documenting the history of Korean anticolonial movements. On the other hand, the narrator may be “speaking” those words. There is no definitive way to tell. But the equivocality of these sections does not wholly detach the author from them. We are still drawn towards posing a “subject” as agent in the text who for some reason has included these letters in the text. That is, it is possible that these letters are completely random, but we are unlikely to think so, because we are imaginative, active readers, and *Dictee* does not seem to be a random, unethical, or pointless text. We think the text uses antinarrative techniques for ethical, political, ideological reasons; that is, we trust the narrator/author. This response resonates with Lanser’s criterion of reliability; it is not just about the reliability of the narrator, but also our trust in the author, which is conditioned not only by extra-textual information but also the processes of the text itself.

One characteristic of antinarratives that might seem to invite attachment is self-reflexivity, but *Dictee* shows that self-consciousness can also be equivocal. Self-reflexivity apparently gestures toward the author, but such self-conscious gestures are often used in service of an antinarrative that denaturalizes the processes of representation, calling attention to the textuality that constructs subjectivity and problematizes the author’s authority. At the same time, the project of reclaiming unheard voices complicates the erasure of the author. For example, the last two pages in the “Clio History” chapter display a visual reproduction of a handwritten version of text from the previous page. It has evidently been edited; words and lines are crossed out and notes are written in the margins (40–41). In other words, this page appears to be a preliminary draft of the previous page, a reproduction of the original. The shift from normal print to such “handwritten” writing invites us to conceive a writing, acting agent beyond the bounds of the narrative itself. This strongly invites the reader to identify the speaker of those words—which we just saw in polished, published form—with the author who wrote and revised the text.
It not only indicates the implied author, whom we assume as an organizing force all along, but it self-consciously and pointedly draws our attention to the process of this text’s composition. While the purely formalist reader might not attach despite the indication of the authorial presence, the identity politics reader might attach even if the image highlights the constructed and revised nature of the finished text. This difference draws attention to the importance of the text’s equivocation: to read this moment as definitely attached or definitely detached misses part of the text’s project. By highlighting its own textuality and processes, particularly in the ubiquity of communal voices, the text invites attachment, but it also calls attention to the conditions of absence that prevent the immediate presence of an author or speaker.

Another characteristic of antinarratives is the frustration of the desire for narrative closure and epistemological mastery, and in *Dictee* this frustration poses a particular challenge to attachment. With an element that almost cannot be recuperated into the text, the section “Thalia Comedy” provides what I think is the most pointed argument for the equivocal nature of *Dictee*. While the excerpted material in other sections are placed in quotation marks, or, as with Syngman Rhee’s letter, the actual historical situation and writer are clear, this sections presents two letters to an unidentified, mysterious Laura Claxton. These letters cannot be readily attributed or identified. The first letter, dated 1915, is from an H. J. Small and notifies Mrs. Laura Claxton that a Mr. Reardon, to whom she had sent a postcard and with whom Small had formerly lived, no longer resided there. Furthermore, Small adds, “I have not heard anything from him and cannot advise you of his present address” (142). The second letter, dated 1921, is handwritten and informs Laura Claxton that her sister is “afraid of going crazy,” suicidal, unwilling to eat, and obsessed with riding horses (146–48). The writer signs the letter “A Friend,” and asks Claxton to “write often to her as your litters [sic] cheer her up” (148). Unlike the excerpts from McKenzie and St. Thérèse, there are no quotation marks and no citations in the endnotes. Unlike the letter from Syngman Rhee, these letters do not have a clear thematic or historical connection to the events, except perhaps the failure of communication. These mysterious letters are inserted, without introduction or explanation, and the originals exist, unannotated, in the Cha archive at the University Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive at the University of California at Berkeley. The other parts of the “Thalia Comedy” section do not directly refer to these letters. The mysterious Laura Claxton cannot be explained. I find it appropriate that this mystery takes place in “comedy”; although the reference is to the classical notion of comedy, the whole Claxton situation is akin to an inside joke to which we do not have the punch line. Unlike other voices that can be assimilated into or at least related to the narrator, these letter-writers are really outside our knowledge. It is as if, about two-thirds of the way into the text, the implied author chides us—the sophisticated reader who is very excited about incommensurability, heterogeneity, difference—not to read the narrator as singular and attached to the author. In other words, if a variety of subjects are in process in the text, some of these subjects are truly other, unknown and non-present, while still part of the community. Detachment here does not necessarily negate the viability of attaching at other places in the text, but it does call attention to the frequent equivocal status of the narrative’s discourse.
MOBILE, MULTIPLE IDENTIFICATIONS

As Lisa Lowe has explained, *Dictee* expands on the Althusserian model of ideological subject formation by exploring multiple and even contradictory “hailings”: “Although they may intersect and coexist or be linked through the use of similar modes and logics,” Lowe notes, “one site of interpellation may provide the means or instruments with which to disrupt another apparatus” (146–47). In this final section, I will examine one section of *Dictee* more closely to demonstrate how the text uses multiple, mobile identifications between not only the author and narrator, but also among intratextual speakers and extratextual communities, to theorize the individual and communal, historical and specific nature of subject formation.

The fourth chapter of *Dictee*, “Melpomene Tragedy,” takes the form of a letter written in Korea to “Mother,” “eighteen years” after both the speaker and her narratee have left it. The speaker recounts being caught in an anti-government demonstration and reflects on its similarities to earlier demonstrations (80). Although the narrator never says, “I am Theresa Cha,” similarities to Cha’s life certainly invite attachment: “Eighteen years pass. I am here for the first time in eighteen years, Mother. We left here in this memory still fresh, still new. I speak another tongue, a second tongue” (85). Cha returned to Korea at the end of 1979, and the narrator refers to “eighteen years ago” as 1962, which is when Cha’s family emigrated from Korea (Roth 155). Furthermore, Cha was a Korean-born immigrant, so the English in which this passage is written would be her second language, or “a second tongue.”

Formally we can distinguish between levels in the text: the actress who winds her way confusedly through a demonstration (the focalizing, experiencing-I), the writer of the letter who is presumably after the fact (narrator), the assumed unifying being who organizes these elements into the text of *Dictee* (implied author), and the actual author, Theresa Cha. But the text’s multiple, mobile points of view complicate these neat formal distinctions. Take for example the following section from “Melpomene Tragedy”:

We fight the same war. We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination. We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate . . .

I feel the tightening of the crowd body to body now the voices rising thicker I hear the break the single motion tearing the break left of me right of me the silence of the other direction advance before… (81–82)

The first sentences of this passage take the form of first-person plural, the “we” of the Korean people, and this promotes attachment to the Korean-born Cha. Similarly, several other sections refer to Korea as “our country” and the Korean people as “us” (28, 81), and this claim on community may invite attachment, with the speaker as representative or simply a member, while also complicating the notion
that attachment must occur between a discretely individual narrator and author. But in the last three phrases of the first paragraph—“Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate”—the focalizer becomes something that may be the first-person narrator, “we” the Korean people, a heterodiegetic narrator, or all of the above.

Then, although the narrator is ostensibly the same, the focalization shifts to that of the crowd: “I feel the tightening of the crowd body to body” (81). That is, while the narrator herself can feel others pressing against her, here she speaks of the mutual and dispersed pressure everyone in the crowd experiences. While she is still the narrator, the point of view also becomes that of each person in the crowd, individual yet collective, experiencing a kind of other-directed sameness and difference. The “I” is a specific and general individual—the narrator specifically as well as every other individual in the crowd experiences this—and part of several different collectives—the Korean people, the members of this particular crowd, individual human beings in any tense political demonstration. The points of identification are mobile. The distinctiveness of the narrator is asserted at the same time the narrator identifies with other points of view, but here the communality is less a kind of recuperation of consonant personal experiences, and more of an institutionally, ideologically imposed experience of common interpellation and alienation.

Ensuing sections have multiple focalizations that seem to distinguish the narrator from others but also may promote identification. The narrator remembers a similar experience of a demonstration eighteen years previous: “It is 1962 eighteen years ago same month same day all over again. I am eleven years old” (83). The year indicates not only that the text draws on details of Cha’s life, but also that here the speaking-I is not eleven years old. The narrating-I is the letter-writer; the experiencing-I is the eleven-year-old girl. The narrator is also distinguished from the police and soldiers quelling the demonstrations, particularly by the use of third-person plural. These official representatives “duplicate themselves, multiply in number invincible they execute their role. Further than their home further than their mother father their brother sister further than their children is the execution of their role given identity further than their own line of blood” (84). But again, when the address shifts to second person, even the police and authorities become identifiable with or at least parallel to the narrator, the author, and even the reader: “You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen” (86). As in other sections of the novel, “you” could be generic (as in “don’t you hate it when…?”); the “you” is ambiguous. While the “you” addresses the military representatives of state repression, it also suggests that the kind of ideological interpellation these soldiers undergo can happen to anyone.

In *Dictee*, the narrator’s identification with various points of view, and our identification of that narrator with the author, correlates to the complex of contradictions in multiple ideological “hailings.” So, in the passage above, while the police officer or soldier may be hailed as “you” by the state apparatus, the text has shown us that that “you” is also multiple and contradictory. “You” as the reader, or the general “you” that includes the narrator—both of whom want to look on and
judge from outside—can be implicated in this interpellation. The various focaliza-
tions in the “Melpomene Tragedy” chapter put the speaker into multiple and even
contradictory speaking positions. Such mobility of point of view and axes of identi-
fications, cast in the present tense, suggest that our subjectivities are constantly in
process, sometimes conflicting against one another. Furthermore, there is ostensibly
no limit to the number of identifications. The “subject,” whether according to
army, nation, religion, or whatever ideological system, can be anybody, as the mo-
bility of the narrator’s identification demonstrates. That is, the blind police are not
contrasted to crowd or the clear-eyed narrator; rather, we see how various ideological
subject positions are constructed. And here, the process of constituting the
subject in the world parallels the myriad ways we identify the narrator with various
points of view and with the author.

This process is why with a text such as *Dictee*, it is not simply a matter of
whether we should attach or detach; rather, we can attend to the ways the text’s
equivocation is part of its project of troubling the discrete boundaries between the
individual and communal, past and present, narrative and history, and various
generic conventions. If readers do attach, it may be because even if we prioritize
textuality and performativity, we retain a desire for some kind of authorial agency
and responsibility. By the same token, if we acknowledge and allow for individual
agency and subjectivity, that does not necessitate a repudiation of multiple inter-
pellations and contradictions. Examination of the complex equivocations of the
text demonstrates the continuing relevance of *Dictee’s* aesthetic and political pro-
jects to the understanding of our relationships to the books we read and the world
in which we read them.

ENDNOTES

1. To see more thorough elucidations of this critical history, see Shelley Wong and Sue-Im Lee.

2. As Mieke Bal writes, “It hardly needs mentioning that this agent [the narrator] is not the (biogra-
phical) author of the narrative. The narrator of *Emma* is not Jane Austen. The historical person Jane
Austen is, of course, not without importance for literary history, but the circumstances of her life are
of no consequence to the specific discipline of narratology” (16). This is why, as Rader notes of our
responses to lyric poetry, “though we often call the figure in these poems by the poet’s name, we feel
a little uneasy in doing so” (144).

3. See *Writing Self, Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictee* for more information
about Cha’s career, as well as *Apparatus*.

4. For a discussion of the difference between critical multiculturalism and liberal or “managed” multi-
culturalism, see Goldberg.

5. As Kang argues, because “identity and personal history for Cha [are] embedded in other persons and
histories,” *Dictee* is not “a discrete autobiography” and it refuses “the individualization of this
genre” (79).


7. I am going to use the term “nondevelopmental” and “experimental” to refer to nonrealist literary
styles, which include and are informed by modernist, postmodernist, and avant-garde works.
Although these genres and sub-genres have distinct histories, many of the aesthetic strategies for interrupting aesthetic realism and denaturalizing ideology are consonant. These are all applicable because Cha’s influences ranged from Dziga Vertov to Carl Dreyer to Marguerite Duras.

WORKS CITED


