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Author(s): Juliana M. Spahr
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Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*

**JULIANA M. SPAHR**

While the critical discourses about and the forms of what we call postmodernism continue to swell, the implications of these practices remain ambiguous. As Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* argues, postmodernism has an “insider-outsider” position and, as a result, “becomes either totally complicitous or totally critical, either seriously compromised or polemically oppositional” (201). To this list, one could add other theoretical tensions: relevant or obscure, usefully focused or hopelessly relative, feminist or anti-feminist, concerned with the marginal or the dominant, the minor or the mass. For Hutcheon, these critical contradictions should not be seen simply as “problems.” Rather, they constitute the terrains postmodernism must negotiate in its attempts to theorize without totalizing.

At the same time, however, it is important to realize that these theoretical contradictions may be less a problem with postmodernism and more a challenge to how one reads postmodern works. Critics like Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Anne Yateman, and others con-

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Spahr, editor of *Chain*, recently received her PH.D. in English from SUNY at Buffalo. She currently teaches at Siena College.
cerned with the political ramifications of postmodernism have made it abundantly clear that postmodernism unsettles all our current critical frames, inaugurating a climate of theoretical indeterminacy. While such critics do usefully broach postmodernism's formal techniques and the relation of these techniques to larger political issues, more attention has been paid to the construction of postmodern works than to the effects of these constructions on readers. There has been a tendency to avoid delving too deeply into how readers might engage with such moments of formal innovation. Jameson, however, is one important critical exception. In his *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson presents the complaint that postmodern works are distant and alienating. According to him, "the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" is "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9) that proposes an alienated, global space that is finally "demoralizing and depressing" (49). In Jameson's formulation, the postmodern cultural product brings together different systems of knowledge into a global space. But this global space, because of these cultural products' alienating formal composition, separates the reader from political action or response. Jameson argues that postmodern texts tend to cause readers/viewers' mental activities to become "colonized and miniaturized, specialized, reorganized like some enormous modern automated factory somewhere, [while] other kinds of mental activities fall out and lead a somewhat different, unorganized or marginal, existence within the reading process" (143). In his study of Claude Simon, Jameson argues that "reading undergoes a remarkable specialization and, very much like older handicraft activity at the onset of the industrial revolution, is dissociated into a variety of distinct processes according to the general law of the division of labor" (140). Jameson's definition of postmodernism is frighteningly bleak. And it is also finally inapplicable to a number of postmodern texts. Its attention is only to the surface ramifications of forms of textual manipulation. In this formulation of the relationship between reader and text, a one-to-one equation is proposed: the fractured forms of postmodernism create a fractured reading practice. A result of this fractured reading process is unengaged and distant readers.

While Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* is a world apart from the *nouveau roman* of Simon, it prominently uses the very techniques that Jameson holds responsible for the "colonizing specialization" of readerly labor: "the possibility that [the words] may be themselves a quotation, and that we are reading someone else's reading" and "the inserted foreign languages or the reproduction of letters printed in other typefaces" (141). Yet, Cha's text provides, in some sense, the perfect arena for examining what is essentially the opposite argument: that postmodern works can both emancipate and decolonize reading. By destabilizing reading practices that seek to conquer or master, a reader-centered work like *Dictee* calls attention to—rather than elides—all that is least assimilable about a reader's connection to a work, making it an integral part of what must be "read."

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My attention to the decolonization of reading needs some explanation. It has often been noted that reading is an act that walks hand in hand with resistance. In this formulation, reading becomes an act that constantly resists any tendency towards colonization because the reader’s agency is always reshaping the text. But I want to complicate theories of resistance to argue that while reading is in many senses distinctly individualistic, it is also a learned and regulated act. Reading primers tend to emphasize meaning as unambiguous and singular. Dick and Jane, to use the most clichéd example of a primer, teach how to live the normalized lives of the nuclear family as much as they teach how to read. Further, much of what is read does not fully engage the resistant possibilities within reading and as a result tends to perpetuate reading’s conventions. While one of the major lessons of poststructuralism has been that meanings and texts are constructed by the reader, I want to suggest that this construction does not take place on an entirely blank slate. To ignore the formal characteristics of the work is to ignore one of the crucial ways works carry meaning. Further, such an approach reads all works as bland and apolitical. Any work can use a wide variety of linguistic techniques to encourage, discourage, or inflect a reader’s construction of the work. A different sort of reading practice, for example, is encouraged by a heavily plotted and symbolic novel than by a piece of postmodern and mixed-genre writing.

While either work might affect the reader in many different ways, the formal aspect of each must play a role in any consideration of reading. My attention to the form of a work is similar to what Susan Stewart calls, in her studies of the lyric, “multicultural formalism.” As she writes, “[i]nstead of situating literature and other arts as both marginal to, and reifying of, cultural practices, aesthetic forms might be taken as central to the epistemological and ethical possibilities of culture’s emergence” (14). By taking Stewart’s cue and examining both the textual and the social, I hope to complicate theories of resistance in the context of reading and, finally, to locate the cultural necessity of postmodern linguistic practices in the way they challenge reading’s potential hegemonies by provoking and engaging the reader.

While I finally part ways with Jameson’s study, I must stress that his work is resolutely useful because it does not hesitate to acknowledge that function follows form. What makes his study of postmodernism so powerful is that he is willing to do the work of examining the consequences of form. But as Dictee demonstrates, it would be a mistake to end one’s analysis of its linguistic separations and intertextual fragments with the observation that because the work is fractured, the reader’s involvement with the work is also fractured. In Dictee, the use of nonstandardized second language practices, untranslated texts, and different cultural products has far wider effects than a theory of mere alienation would allow. Dictee forces the reader out of linear, absorptive reading practices and into vertical, circular, inter- and intra-cultural ways of reading all of which undermine the coercive aspects of postmodernism that Jameson would label colonialist.
As Dicte breaks down national, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries, it proposes not a global unity which passes over power relationships, but rather a transnational de-marginalization and de-colonization of these power relationships. By using second language, nonstandardized English and French as a compositional mode, Cha does the difficult work of complicating the relationship between language, political resistance, and internal colonialism. Through the appropriation and mixing of cultural products—literature, photographs, news reports, and a variety of historical documents—the roots of reading are cut and regrown in a multilingual, pidgin soil. As a result, Dictee is both a documentation of and an engagement with the transcultural text and accompanying issues of readerly reception.

I do not want to defend the term “postmodern” without qualification. I want to explore what Yateman calls, in Postmodern Revisionings of the Political “emancipatory postmodern politics” which, as she notes, “has a strong relationship of continuity with modern traditions of emancipatory discourse” (10). I am not positing a direct cause-effect relationship between alternative writing practices and radical social change. That would be naive. I am, however, arguing that it is crucial that reading be recognized as a foundational force for shaping social vision. And I locate an emancipatory possibility in the postmodern, multilingual work’s decolonization of reading.

If there is anything that feminist criticism has taught us with its relentless attention to Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, it is that it matters what one reads. If, as Annette Kolodny has noted, “as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms,” then we need to revise our paradigms of reading so as to include works which challenge limitations to originality and form (10). Patricinio P. Schweickart puts it clearly in “Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading”: “Two factors—gender and politics—which are suppressed in the dominant models of reading gain prominence with the advent of a feminist perspective” (39). So it is crucial to take the risks Dictee proposes—risks that deny origins and foundations and easy reading—because we can not afford to do otherwise.

She begins the search the words of equivalence to that of her feeling. Or the absence of it. Synonym, simile, metaphor, byword, byname, ghostword, phantommation. In documenting the map of her journey. (Cha 140)

Blood is a common metaphor for the essentialism that accompanies the categories of nation and race. One has, for example, the blood of a certain nation or race in one’s veins. But Dictee emphasizes a web-like, interconnected notion of cultural exchange that is constantly shaped by and through individual resistance. As a result, blood, and all that it signifies about nation and race, becomes a metaphor for the continual transcendence of boundaries. While Dictee is a text concerned with the relation between nation and
race and personal identity, it does not restore determinancy to the words "nation," "race," and "self."

This interconnected, cultural exchange is well illustrated in a passage where the narrator gives blood. While it might be seductive and is not uncommon to read *Dictee* as a text that affirms an essentialist relation between nation (Korea) and self (Cha), this passage shows how such a reading would be reductive. The passage begins in the first person: "She takes my left arm, tells me to make a fist, then open" (64). But first person pronouns do not extend beyond this first sentence and for the rest of the passage the first-person voice uses technical, descriptive language that dissolves the individual, first person specificity of voice:

She takes the elastic band and ties it tightly around the left arm. She taps on the flesh presses against it her thumb. She removes the elastic to the right arm. Open and close the right hand, fist and palm. She takes the cotton and rubs alcohol lengthwise on the arm several times. The coolness disappears as the liquid begins to evaporate. She takes the needle with its empty body to the skin. (64)

As the needle enters the skin, Cha uses technical terms such as "[s]ample extract" and "[s]pecimen type," but then immediately switches to a nontechnical language by writing of "[o]ne empty body waiting to contain. Conceived for a single purpose and for the purpose only. To contain. Made filled" (64). After the "specimen" has been taken, the possibility of "specimen type" disappears. Instead a larger comparison develops, one of "[c]ontents housed in membranes. Stain from within dispel in drops in spills. Contents of other recesses seep outward" (64). While it takes only seconds for the blood to be drawn and contained by the needle, blood continues to spill from the hole the needle has made in the arm. At this point, Cha writes:

*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*

She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark.

*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*

Something of the ink that resembles the stain from the interior emptied onto emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface. More. Others. When possible ever possible to puncture to scratch to imprint. Expel. Ne te cache pas. Révèle Sang. Encre. Of its body's extention of its containment. (65)6

Here the cotton square, the clotting mechanism used to stop the blurring of boundaries, does not keep the regions of internal and external separate. Instead, the "[s]tain begins to absorb the material spilled upon" and the interior is "emptied onto emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface" (65). Later in *Dictee*, this stain returns as a memory: "The memory stain attaches itself and darkens on the pale formless sheet, a hole increasing its size larger and larger until it assimilates the boundaries and becomes itself formless" (131). Here the blood with its metaphoric relation to wholes of

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nationality, race, and gender becomes instead a "hole" that assimilates the boundaries.

In Dictee, this emphasis on the transcendence of the essentialist categories of nation and race is complicated. Cha tells the stories of a number of women whose lives were directly affected by the powers of nation: Yu Guan Soon (who led the famous March 1 1919 resistance movement in Korea against the Japanese), Hyung Soon Huo (Cha’s mother, who left Korea during the Japanese invasion only to have to live in equally difficult conditions in Manchuria), and Jeanne d’Arc. But Cha emphasizes these women’s resistances to cultural norms over their patriotism. As she writes of Yu Guan Soon, “[t]he identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history, their names, dates, actions which require not definition in their devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice” (30). The exchange of identity appears throughout Dictee but is most evident in Cha’s concentration on female identity as a place of manipulation or even at times fraudulence. Jeanne d’Arc appears in this book not as herself but rather as a reference in a film still of Maria Falconetti playing her in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc and in a photograph of St. Therese of Liseaux playing her in a convent play. Similarly, Dictee quotes St. Therese writing of how she “cannot confine [her]self to desiring one kind of martyrdom” and how to satisfy herself she “needs all” the roles of martyrdom: St. Bartholomew, St. John, St. Agnes, St. Cecilia, and Jeanne d’Arc.

As identity is a site of exchange in Dictee so is culture. Korean, Chinese, Ancient Greek, European, American: all these cultures stain one another. Dictee is not about “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” as Edward Said defines the literature of exile in “Reflections on Exile” (357). And neither is it a product that can be read as, as Said further writes, an exile’s “urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (360). It might be more useful to consider Dictee as a text of immigration, a work that absorbs and takes on other places as its own. Its insistence that America is not, and never has been, monolingual, reforms our concepts of culture. It complicates and, in many ways, dissolves the powerful narratives of “national character” and “ethnicity,” as well as exceptionalist and isolationist frameworks. Dictee does not propose a “true home” and it does not “reconstitute.”

Yet, by invoking these contradictions and writing from within them, Cha does not construct, as might be argued, an obscurely relativistic or “post-modern” text divorced from Asian-American experience. Rather, without abandoning the particularities of minority experience, Dictee counters any tendency to see this culture as separate from the dominant. And, importantly, it also illustrates the opposite: that dominant culture cannot be separated from minority. With its emphasis on cross-cultural mixing, Dictee is a prime textual example of what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone”: “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,
often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Much of the narrative within *Dictee* also takes place in or concentrates on actual contact zones: a long passage describes the highly charged DMZ-esque space of customs, and the “CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY” section tells the story of Hyung Soon Huo living in a Korean community in Manchuria. Also, the formal construction of the book is itself a contact zone. It is part autobiography, part biography, part personal diary, part ethnography, part autoethnography, part translation. And all these genres are presented with an intertextual mix of photographs, quotations, translations, and language so as to make a history Cha’s move in *Dictee* is to collage multiple voices—American, European, and Asian—so as to build a history. But this history is a collage history. Collage is a form where the works collected are marked as foreign, detached from their context. The cuts and sutures of collection, left visible and unmixed, work against wholes and unities. Cha uses this form so as to make a history that while engaged with nation, denies national essentialism.7

But a further, more significant, ramification of this emphasis on cultural bricolage is a rethinking of the relation between reader and text. In the previously quoted passage, for example, the blood is not merely drawn into the needle but the “interior” is “emptied onto” (a spilling out towards the boundary/surface), “emptied into” (becoming a part of and mixing with the boundary/surface), and “emptied upon” (a placing on top of and a closeness to the boundary/surface). A theory of reading that allows such mixing and layering is far from the cliché of reading as a process that uncovers or decodes a slightly hidden puzzle or text. Instead, as *Dictee* documents the possible punctures, scratches, and imprints of reading, it figures this act as an active, creative response that generates meanings and does not merely connect pre-existing references.

Illustrative of this intent is that a great deal of *Dictee* is written in a grammatically nonstandardized English and French that mimics the stutters and misspellings of a second language speaker. While there is a tendency in many cultures to wash over second language practices and see them as a temporal, generational disability, Cha is well aware that language and nation and power all tend to walk hand in hand. It is not a coincidence that colonizers often require the colonized to abandon their current language and adopt that of the invading nation. This relation is very clear in Korean history as the Japanese, during the 1910-1945 occupation, outlawed the Korean language.8 While there is a big difference between being acquired by another nation and acquiring a language, an immigrant to America or Europe (like Cha), who is forced to learn the dominant cultural language, experiences a similar colonization. Language acquisition clearly mimics colonialism in its tendency to overtake, to smooth a difference—in accent or grammatical usage—into a uniform, seamless hegemony.

*Dictee* begins with a concentration on the difficulties of colonization for the colonized and language acquisition for the immigrant, but at the same

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time the book concentrates on the resistant agency of the individual to cultural and national colonization. Cha's use of English and French, the major languages of colonial expansion, concentrates on the moments where this hegemony is resisted.9

Dictee is written in the stutters, the revisions, the gaps that second language speakers utilize. The moments of dialogue that compose this book are not separated out with quotation marks nor are their "strangenesses" emphasized by italics, as is common in dialogic texts from the nineteenth century regional novel to Langston Hughes's "Weary Blues." Cha instead composes the bulk of Dictee in a language that is always drawing the reader's attention to its diversions, to its mechanisms and structures. The dialogic linguistic moment is not a diversion from the standardized correctness of English, but rather that which forms the stuff of language. As a result, Dictee exposes the myth of the possibility of a transparent, standardized language practice divorced from socio-economic or cultural forces. Her documentation of the process of becoming an English speaker/writer offers a paradigm for the cultural mixing that defines any reader's encounters with a work. It is a textual demonstration of the continual decolonization that any reader does with any text. It also demonstrates the way linguistic change in the modern era is defined by frisson as different language systems meet each other both geographically and within the arena of large political-economic systems such as colonization and transnational labor migration.

These diversions challenge readers to activate their resourcefulness, to become on their own linguists or translators. Dictee openly attacks one of the major assumptions of reading: that the text is written so as to be linguistically and culturally transparent to the reader without recourse to other systems of knowledge. The disruptive moments of untranslated or nonstandardized second language usage serve as subtle, temporal shocks that jolt the reader out of absorptive reading practices.

But multilingual texts can have tricky politics. Foreign words, for instance, are often viewed either as impure (the current "English First" movement provides ample evidence of this) or as connoting intellectual pretension. Further, complicating the politics of resistant language practices is that a multilingual text is not necessarily emancipatory. It is crucial to avoid conflating quantitative issues with qualitative ones by just considering how many languages are collected. A quantitative consideration would merely propose a simplistic, arithmetical alternative to the standardized text written in a single language. And such a straightforward accumulation of language/capital does not really question the difficult politics of grammar. Instead it leaves intact, if not reproduces, the existing social inequalities that walk hand in hand with concepts of standardized language. Dictee avoids this multiplying of oppressive structures through its attention to the divergent syntax and semantics of second language practices, by writing for the "byword, byname, ghostword, phantommation" (140).
Still, Dictee, depending on one's own language mastery of English, French, Korean, Chinese, Ancient Greek, and Latin plus recognition of the uncaptioned pictures, offers varying degrees of accessibility. So, one must ask, what happens when the reader is not fluent in all the languages that compose the text? What sort of effect can such a text claim over a reader only partially fluent in its languages? While it could be argued that such a text alienates those readers who might not possess the requisite language skills, I want to argue the reverse. The intercultural text, whether encountered by a reader with a multilinguality that matches that of the text or by one without such skills, speaks to a global linguistic relation rather than an isolating one.

Dictee, for example, with its beginning emphasis on the pronunciation of foreign languages, is not an alienating text but is rather a provocative empathic discussion of the difficulties of negotiating different linguistic systems as a narrator attempts to negotiate "Cracked tongue. Broken tongue. Pidgeon. Semblance of speech" (75). An understanding of Cha's text is undeniably enhanced and complicated by the multilingual reader, but the reader of just one or several of the languages in this book is not excluded from understanding and identifying with the text as a whole. It is important in this context to keep in mind that while this book is in some ways more difficult than many other texts, it is not finally impenetrable to any reader. The information in Dictee that requires an unconventional fluency is cultural, not personal.

The issue of readers' potential alienation has to be located in their own ingenuity. Readers who lack mastery of all six language systems in Dictee have a number of options: they can simply ignore the sections that are not readily interpretable to them; they can translate the text themselves with the assistance of a dictionary or someone who knows the language; or they can go out and learn the language and return to the text at a later date (I am ignoring here options that reject the reading process altogether, like throwing the book down in disgust, just because these options are always available when reading any book). The latter two possibilities speak by themselves to their value as cultural crossings. The multilingual text that provokes the reader to consult an outside text in pursuit of knowledge can claim a priority in stimulating thinking at the same time that it points to the necessary intercultural, web-like nature of all knowledge systems. This flaunting awareness of the dynamics of the current cultural situation, one whose prime characteristic is diversity, can serve as a weapon against, or a cure for, singular reading practices.

But even assuming that readers adopts the most passive of these responses and just skip over the sections that they cannot read, reading the multilingual text is still a decolonizing practice. Instead of questioning how to master the text, passive, skipping readers must confront, at each place they encounter the undecipherable language, the questions of who speaks to whom, what it might mean that they do not know this language, and what it means to be unknowing when performing an activity such as reading (an activity that requires of everyone extensive training and mastery). These

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readers are then forced to confront the way they cannot reign over the text, cannot assume reading's colonizing powers. They also cannot, as it could be argued of the translating reader's activity, naturalize or domesticate the divergent multiplicity of the text. The untranslated text serves as a clear reminder to readers that they have access to just one language pattern in the midst of a larger world with multiple communication systems that are not easily appropriated and owned as sovereign territory.

This model of interaction between reader and text is less about readers identifying with a similarity, whether linguistic or subject-oriented, in the text, and more about texts that grant possibilities to their readers that resist totalitarian direction. Even when critics discuss the possibility of identifying across gender, race, or class lines, a position of undeniable prominence in studies of science fiction or fantasy literature, these assumptions tend to be based on the reader's becoming (however momentarily) like the character. The possibility of a reader who identifies on the basis of difference or who enters into identification with a text for reasons other than self-affirmation has rarely been explored. As a result, a common and tautological complaint about the fractured postmodern text is that readers are unable to find a stable identification point.

Assuming a theory of similarity for identification is especially problematic with texts written by immigrants or other socially marginalized groups. Dismissing the fragmented text as too "difficult" or too alienating borders on an ethnocentric dismissal of the "difficulty" of immigrant experience. These texts often explore the ramifications of cultural dissimilarity rather than similarity and the inapplicability of generic forms for expressing such dissimilarity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha argues in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, the insistence on a literature of clarity (which is what an emphasis on a literature of identity formation necessarily is) "is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order" (16-17).

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"Dictee," French for dictation, is a technique used often for teaching foreign languages. Its premise is that repetition is the first step towards mastery. But dictation, in its many mutant forms, such as parody, quotation, collage, or sampling, is also a space of cultural comment. In these forms, receivers manipulate the received object as they resist the role of passive consumer and retransmits the old information in a new form. The model here is of a receiver (reader) who is also conduit: a two-pronged figure who takes in informa-

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tion and passes it on. Dictation turns here from a passive act that mimics brainwashing into an active one with its own, often political, agenda.

Dictee is a work of such mutant recitation. The introductory chapter, for example, has sections which order “ecrivez en francais”; “traduire en francais”; and “comple?tez les phrases suivantes.” But the phrases in these sections tend to be ominous and have as an underlying theme the colonizing practices of language acquisition. One “ecrivez en francais” exercise is “The people of this country are less happy than the people of yours” (8). The “traduire en francais” section is ominously self-concerned with the potential politics of speaking:

1. I want you to speak.
2. I wanted him to speak.
3. I shall want you to speak.
4. Are you afraid he will speak?
5. Were you afraid they would speak?
6. It will be better for him to speak to us.
7. Was it necessary for you to write?
8. Wait till I write.
9. Why didn’t you wait so that I could write you? (8-9)

These language textbook exercises provide a good example of how Dictee requires from its readers a sort of double vision. In order to make sense of this passage, readers are forced to read the passage doubly, recognizing it both as a language textbook and as a parody or some other form of cultural mediation. Cha makes such a requirement even more explicit in the examples that follow the command “Translate into French” which turn fragmentary and question the ability to ever translate anything into standardized language. Exercise number three, for example, reads in its entirety “Near Occasion” (14). Number five stutters,

She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response she believe she calling and the other end must hear. The other end must see the other end feel (15)

The larger issue that these passages demonstrate is that, despite being an act that many do every day, reading is never as simple as it seems. But a text written in multilingual, second language stutters obviously makes a different claim. Cha, instead of smoothing over the gaps of reading, uses a number of forms of grammatical hesitation, such as spaces or periods between phrases (“She call she believe she calling to” or “Each phrase. Of each word. All but. Punctuation, pauses. Void after uttering of each phrase”) and fractured words (“de composes” and “re veils”) to expose the constructed nature of language. The book “proper” begins with a bilingual passage where punctuation is turned from symbol to word:

Allerà la ligne. C’était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin point ce soir au dîner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule ouvrir 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

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ouvre les guillemets Il n'y a qu'une chose point fermes 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 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 close quotation marks. (1)13

These techniques not only interrupt what Charles Bernstein calls the absorptive nature of reading but also cultivate, even require, an act of resistant reading. When punctuational symbol turns to word, as the act of vocal proofreading makes clear, it no longer functions as a silent director of reading which monitors the flow of the sentence. When reading a passage such as this, readers become, like the narrators, unable to read smoothly and easily. Instead they are set adrift from the normalizing practices of reading. Dictee is, thus, almost anti-dictee in that it aims to keep the telling of history alive, to, as Cha writes in “THALIA COMEDY,” “keep the pain from translating itself into memory” through invoking in readers a similar pain as they struggle with this anti-absorptive text (140).

These issues come to the forefront in the “CLIO HISTORY” section where Cha tells the story of Yu Guan Soon, the sixteen-year-old leader of the March 1 resistance movement. This section collages Cha’s observations with several passages describing the Japanese invasion from F.A. McKenzie’s The Tragedy of Korea, news releases of the time, and a 1905 letter from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt requesting that the United States support Korean autonomy. The language of the appropriated collage pieces is detached, summary-like, and claims a certain historical authority. After a section called “SUPPRESSION OF FOREIGN CRITICISM” which tells of the Japanese killing thirty and decapitating two nonresisting “volunteers,” Cha discusses the continuing problem with historical discourse:

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. (32)

The text that surrounds this piece is an attempt to problematize historical representation without denying that “one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another.” Cha, for example, locates distance in the standardized language of the collaged news releases which use a passive diction:
To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernible features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other. This document is transmitted through, by the same means, the same channel without distinction the content is delivered in the same style: the word. The image. To appeal to the masses to congeal the information to make bland, mundane, no longer able to transcend their own conspirator method, no matter how alluring their presentation. The response is precoded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (33)

Her critique here of the unbiased, divorced voice of historical/political retelling does not trivialize historical representation or deny its validity. Rather, Cha challenges history's generic conventions. In place of these bland narratives of "no-response," Cha's political commitment is to exposing the difficulties of history for the colonized. Instead of using a bland, universal discourse such as that of the news release, Dictee opens up a space for readers to question the interpretative moves of history. With its "decapitated forms," Dictee deliberately avoids the reductive modes of discourse that the Koreans of Hawaii were forced to resort to in their letter to an uninterested President Roosevelt (38). The intent of the "CLIO HISTORY" section of Dictee is to present the concerns of representing history without making it abstract. Rather than turn Yu Guan Soon into an easy martyr or a figure that would speak to Cha's Asian heritage, Cha does the more difficult work of using the discourse that surrounds Yu Guan Soon to expose the totalities of grammar which walk hand-in-hand with nation.

"CLIO HISTORY" concludes with a page of Cha's notes (see figure 1). These notes say "I am here writing this history." It becomes even more clear through this page that Cha's attention to history is not to deny or relativize it, but rather to bear witness to it through crossing out, revising, and rewriting. The manuscript is more notation than anything else. It does not even accurately reflect the
previously read text and instead presents a collage-like collection of phrases and words. Denied a unified subject of enunciation, readers must struggle with this page of manuscript in much the same way they must struggle with the conflicting ideological and political conditions of *Dictee*’s many discourses.

*Dictee*’s mix of familiar, testimonial, and public discourses challenges the expectations of what is political or historical. This collection of multiple voices in *Dictee* acknowledges that history is personal and subjective. It draws attention to an emancipatory possibility of a larger text with multiple communication systems. A sizable part of *Dictee*’s critical power lies in the way it politicizes activities traditionally excluded from what we normally consider “the political” and “the historical.” Cha erases the distinct categories of public and private life, political and domestic economies. Her rewriting of the history of women’s possibilities for response brings forward marginal and major histories with the same attention to revision. While Jeanne d’Arc is a major historical figure, Hyung Soon Huo teaching in a section of China filled with Korean exiles is equally major in *Dictee.* While St. Therese of Liseaux disconnects from society, Yu Guan Soon organizes a massive resistance movement. These different points of view retell the history of female resistance as various and multiple. Cha does not, contrary to common clichés about postmodernism, abandon the political or the historical. Instead she twists these forms, concentrates on their intertextualities, their heteroglossias, rewrites them into a new, reader-centered form.

Writing a text that is a history (a whole) told through fragments, Cha intends to “name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion” (33). While the multitextual registers of this work deny readers an easy read, it is not that in postmodernism, as Hutcheon ends *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* “we may find no answers” (231). I am wary of this conclusion because it risks reducing postmodernism to the often-made complaint that it is an apolitical and unengaged form of discourse that self-destructs into relativity because of its refusal to uphold master narratives. This complaint has been prevalent in the criticism that surrounds minority and women’s literature. Such literature is often seen, since it is written by socially marginalized subjects, as having a political obligation to present a self without indulging in linguistic techniques that question referentiality and its relation to authoritarian discourses and constructions of self. Nancy Miller, for instance, writes, “the post-modern decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not . . . necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them” (106). According to this argument, exploration of non-normative linguistic practices is better left to the male bourgeois subject who can afford the privilege of challenging representational techniques.15 A related argument is that minority experience requires a narrative of identity formation or reconstruction because this history has never been constructed. But these argu-
ments tend to make an unnecessarily limiting equation between an uncomplicated "I" and "experience," thereby reducing the richness of any person's experience, minority or otherwise. I am also not sure that these arguments are finally representative of a large number of postmodern texts. There is an extensive, rich canon of texts that explore alternative linguistic practices to present resolutely political answers. Beyond *Dictée*, there are Trinh T. Minh-ha's self-aware documentary films, Guillermo Gomez-Peña's linguistic border-crossing performance art pieces, Michael Smith's and Linton Kwesi Johnson's dialogic dub poetry, Bruce Andrews and Leslie Scalapino's language poetry, Gloria Anzaldúa's and Cherrie Moraga's mixed genre writing.

Part of Hutcheon's unwillingness to grant postmodern discourse the weight of answers revolves around her inattention to the demands made on reception in such texts. *Dictée*, for instance, while it does not provide totalizing answers, does desire to provoke in the reader's reception a number of answers. It is very clear in *Dictée* that the history of the Japanese colonization of Korea should be told and that "one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another" (32). *Dictée* questions how this history can be told so as, to use Hutcheon's terms, to make present the past to its readers.

Lift me to the window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights 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. (Cha 179)

It is crucial that our theories of reading should make room for the sorts of extreme cultural mixing which compose the texts of contact zones. Michel de Certeau, when he speaks of reading as poaching, presents what might be the most useful model for such texts. As he writes, "readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (174). His metaphor of the reader poaching the landowner's woods escapes models in which reading is seen as an act that masters the text. If reading is poaching, it disobeys all the laws of property and ownership. In Cha's words, when "[you] read you mouth the transformed object across from you in its new state" (131). De Certeau also extends the idea of an empowered reading to all cultural consumers. He redefines reading from an interpretative act to a creative act, providing a concept of reading which does not claim that "the only freedom supposed to be left to the masses is that of grazing on the rations of simulacra the system distributes to each individual" (166).

A reader who is wanderer, nomad, is most at home in the fields and forests of the postmodern text. Not only does Cha's multilingual and intertextual work generate an active shift in reading's paradigms, but her faith in the maligned and under-represented diversions of a reader intelligent enough to deserve freedom constitutes a radical politics. This willingness to

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give a reader the power to cultivate his/her own reading is where the discourse about the political necessity of the postmodern text needs to be located. Critical avoidance of the reader's potential for resistant reading plays into the reductive cliché, that postmodern works present only a narrow, overly subjective view of the author and are not textual products of the world at large. Yet the fact that Dictee's influence can be directly felt in so many other works such as Walter Lew's *Excerpts from: For Dictee* (1982), Carla Harryman's *In the Mode Of*, Trinh Minh-ha’s “Grandma’s Story” in *Woman, Native, Other*, and perhaps Myung Mi Kim’s *Under Flag* directly disproves such an inference.

*Dictee* opens with an untranslated photograph of graffiti written in Korean on a wall (see figure 2). The words on the wall can be translated as:

- I miss you mother.
- I am hungry.
- I want to go home.

While French and English texts often appear side by side, Korean (Cha’s first language) is represented in this book only by this scrawled call for help. This badly photocopied and blotchy image teases. The origin of the graffiti is of some controversy and there are at least three contradictory readings of the graffiti.\(^1\)

It is generally assumed to have been written by a Korean laborer in Japan during the period of occupation. Some argue that the words are inscribed on the wall of a mine in Japan; others that the wall is part of a tun-
nel attached to a castle that was being constructed during World War II to provide a safe haven for its Japanese owners. But now, some linguists argue that the script follows the grammatical rules of Han-gul that were adopted after Korea’s liberation from Japan which might mean that the inscription is fake and perhaps written by Korean nationalists in Japan. Cha’s decision to begin *Díctée* with a document that complicates nationalist and colonialist discourse is not without coincidence.\(^{17}\) As the graffiti author’s context has decayed and faded away, it is Cha who brings this text back for her readers, rescues it as it were, without glossing the context. This photograph, as it appears in *Díctée* without a clear context or narrative of connection, speaks doubly to Korea’s formidable history of repeated colonization and to the difficult role of immigrant culture in Japan or the United States. This photograph, fraught with questions of truth and origin, haunted by potential nationalist rewritings of history, emphasizes cultural resistance as a process that decomposes national and racial essentialism.

As there is no native land or language in *Díctée*, there is no separate, essential, immigrant tradition. The book’s attention to reading’s resistances refuses the dominant culture’s desire to fix an immigrant culture and, at the same time, resists the totalizing processes of cultural assimilation. *Díctée* leaves its readers only with pieces of things: notes, photocopied photographs, and other cultural refuse. These scraps of information refigure “nation” as something complex, multifarious, articulated within and against a colonial tongue. They form America’s reinventing. *Díctée*, in this context, contests the exceptionalist framework of America by documenting the constant mixing that defines cultural response.

But the larger importance of *Díctée* is the way Cha’s collection of narratives demonstrates how women and minorities have more options than either evasion through silence or compromise through appropriated discourse. While *Díctée* begins with a photograph that speaks to the difficulties of location, the “POLYMNIA SACRED POETRY” section that concludes *Díctée* optimistically presents emancipatory possibilities as it tells the story of a girl travelling to search for a cure for her mother. At the end of this story, the child asks to be lifted up to the window to watch a series of pulleys moving. This image, as Robert Siegle writes, speaks of a narrator’s effort “to open a cultural window in order to ring out the full resonance of the voice of her personal, family, national, racial, and gender histories” (242). Siegle’s reading speaks true; *Díctée* is an open window that guides its readers towards interconnected pulleys, towards an alternative history, as it allows them to read.

**NOTES**

Gail Brisson, Eric Daffron, Anna Geronimo, and Charles Weigl as well as several anonymous readers’ reports provided invaluable help while I was writing this essay.

\(^{1}\)*Díctée* was first published in 1982 by Tanam Press. This same year Cha was killed in New York City.

3Charles Bernstein's *Artifice of Absorption* (Philadelphia: Singing Horse Press, 1987) is one of the best studies of the absorptive and anti-absorptive possibilities within writing.

4"Postmodernism" has been and continues to be an ambiguous term, and I do not intend to brush over this ambiguity with a rousing defense. Fredric Jameson's work, for example, often concentrates on texts that use postmodern techniques to depoliticize representational issues. Jameson's ambivalence toward the postmodern is probably a result of the way he limits his attention to postmodern products produced almost exclusively by male, mainly white, bourgeois, subjects. His list of the most significant postmodern artists— "Cage, Ashbery, Sollers, Robert Wilson, Ishmael Reed, Michael Snow, Warhol or even Beckett himself"—does not question its own politics of representation, a difficult move to justify as so many postmodern works have been created by women and other socially marginalized subjects (26).

5In the recent *Writing Self, Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee*, Elaine Kim argues that although Cha "focuses on the 'in-between'. . .Cha insists on the specificity of her Korean American identity. . . .For her, personal erasure cannot be separated from erasure of the collectivity"(21). While L. Hyn Yi Kang acknowledges that identity in *Dictee* is "very fluid and heterogeneous" it is so in her formulation only within the bounds of a "Korean feminist subjectivity"(98). An important exception to this argument is Lisa Lowe, who argues that *Dictee* "continually thwarts the reader's desire to abstract a notion of ethnic or national identity—orignating either from the culture's interrogation of its margins, or in emergent minority efforts to establish unitary ethnic or cultural nationalist examples"(36).

6I have preserved all spelling as it is in *Dictee*. Since I read these as a crucial part of *Dictee*'s resistance to standardized language practices, I assume them to be intentional and have avoided using [sic].

7See also James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, a useful study for thinking about collage as a global art form. In this article, he reads ethnosurrealism and surrealist ethnography as a form that "recovers its early vocation as critical cultural politics, a vocation lost in later developments [of ethnography]" (147).


9English and French were Cha's two second languages. Cha was born in Pusan but left Korea in 1962 for the United States. In 1976 she traveled to France to study film. For more information on Cha's life see Moira Roth's "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha 1951-1982: A Narrative Chronology," *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (151-160).

10As Carol Clover points out in her study of slasher films, there has been a tendency to underestimate readers/viewers and to see them as identifying only with what is similar to them. Clover concludes her introductory discussion of the movie
Carrie by noting “Certainly I will never again—take for granted that audience males identify solely or even mainly with screen males and audience females with screen females. If Carrie, whose story begins and ends with menstrual imagery and seems in general so painfully girlish, is construed by her author as a latter-day variant on Samson, the biblical strong man who overcame all manner of handicap to kill at least six thousand Philistines in one way or another, and if her target audience is any high school boy who has been pantsed and had his glasses messed with, then we are truly in a universe in which the sex of a character is no object. No accident, insofar as it is historically and, above all, politically overdetermined, but also no object—no impediment whatever to the audience’s experience of his or her function. That too is one of the bottom-line propositions of horror, a proposition that is easily missed when you watch mainstream cinema but laid bare in exploitation cinema and, once registered, never lets you see any movie ‘straight’ again” (20).

11An exception to this is Judith Fetterley’s The Resisting Reader. Her study of major American literary texts argues that women might be forced to read across gender lines. But Fetterley’s argument here is essentially the opposite of mine in that for her this crossing of gender lines is finally an undeniably negative experience that creates a “divided self” (11).

12See also Peter Quartermain’s Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe. Quartermain points to a tradition of immigrant literature which is composed of fragmented and colloquial language practices. His canon includes Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein. All these writers, he points out, either learned English as their second or third language or grew up in households whose primary language was not English.

Quartermain also notes the prevalence of bilingual or second language English speakers in the United States. “Of the nearly 28 million immigrants to the continental United States in the period 1820-1910, 63.5% of them (i.e., nearly 18 million) arrived in the thirty-one years 1880-1910, and 31.5% (almost 8.9 million) in the first eleven years of the twentieth century. In 1905, when James was speaking at Bryn Mawr, immigrants were arriving on average 2,400 a day; two years later, at the peak of immigration, the rate was over 3,500 a day. Few of them spoke English. In 1854, one of the peak immigration years, half of the 427,833 immigrants had been German speaking, and 37%, English; in 1882 32% of 788,922 immigrants spoke German, and 22% English; in 1907 of 1,285,349 immigrants, 29% and 8.9% spoke German and English, respectively. The Census Bureau reported that in 1900 over 12 million (16.4%) of a total population of 76.3 million were foreign born, and roughly 16 million (21.4%) were native born of foreign parents; that is to say, 37.8% of the population were either foreign born or native born or of foreign stock. The thirteenth Census (1910) reported that of the more than 32 million Americans in the continental United States enumerated as “Foreign White Stock” (i.e., 35% of a total population of nearly 92 million), well over 22 million of them—nearly 24% of the white population of the continental United States—came from non-English-speaking stock. Since the Census only recorded statistics for the white population, the figures are conservative, but it seems reasonable to estimate that roughly one person in four in the continental United States in 1910 learned English as an additional language, or did not know it at all” (10).

13Shelley Sun Wong in Writing Self, Writing Nation astutely points out that ‘two punctuation commands in French—“ferme les guillemets’ and ‘ouvre les guillemets’—have been omitted from the English translation. While the omission of the punctuation commands reveals the student’s failure to accurately reproduce the original, it
also calls attention to the fact that, contrary to established conventions, the commands have been written out rather than simply and unobtrusively inserted as punctuation marks" (119).

14As Elaine H. Kim points out in Writing Self, Writing Nation, at the same time this letter was written "the U.S. signed a secret pact with Japan, the Taft-Katsura Pact, that year. This agreement allowed Japan free rein in Korea in exchange for her promise to allow the U.S. to dominate the Philippines, which had recently been acquired in the Spanish-American War" (10).


16There are, for instance, three different narratives about this photograph in Writing Self, Writing Nation. See Kim (25, n. 9), Kang (99, n. 7), and Wong (107).

17There are numerous “fake” texts and moments in Dictée. The quote from Sappho that begins the book is invented. Cha also replaces Euterpe, the muse of music, with the made up Elitere.

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