

DICTÉE

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (author)

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Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in Pusan, South Korea, in 1952. Because of the Korean War, her family had to move several times until 1962, when they finally migrated to the United States. Here, she received her BA and MA in comparative literature and Fine Arts at the University of California, Berkeley, and continued her postgraduate studies in film-making and semiology in Paris in 1976. Her varied educational background shaped her subsequent versatile artistic practice consisting of film, mixed media performances, and written works, and thematically focused on the experience of expatriation and its link with memory and language. Her most famous work, *Dictée*, was published in 1982, a week before she was murdered by serial rapist Joey Sanza in New York. It was not until 1994 that the book started to gain critical attention after Elaine H. Kim's publication "Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on *Dictée*," published by Third Women Press. Since then, *Dictée* has often been part of the syllabi of experimental literature classes around the world and is considered an emblematic work for Postcolonial Studies, Third Wave Feminism, and Asian-American Literature.

The 1980s was a decade when postcolonial theory and multiracial feminism opened an interdisciplinary dialogue within the humanities. Postmodernism gave birth to some of its more representative works at that time, whereas an emerging need to reflect on indigenous cultures marked the transnational turn of American Literature (Azim 1993). Cha's best-known work seems to be somewhere between these tendencies since it encompasses a poststructuralist vision of the text, intertwined with inquiries about myth and history, revealing autobiographical experiences of suffering after colonization and diaspora. The intersection of race, class and womanhood that permeates the nine chapters of the book, named after the nine muses, illuminates a well-

formed composition of chronicles about the experience of the ‘other’ emphasized by the hybrid narrative and the stylistic experimentations of the text.

The book focuses on the lives of six women: Cha’s mother, Cha herself, Demeter, Persephone, Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon, a Korean revolutionary. The narrative is inconsistent, fragmented and circular, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish the differences among the lives of the heroines, in such a way that each story ramifies through the others. Its polymorphic body, consisting of prose, poems in English and French, sparse words, photographs, a handwritten memo, Chinese calligraphy, diagrams and a movie still from Carl Dreyer’s film ‘Joan of Arc’, makes the work unclassifiable in terms of monolingual identity and art form. In this respect, *Dictée* portrays the cultural logic of geographic displacement resisting the Eurocentric narrative of history, language and memory, and challenging traditional storytelling through its figurative diction and avant-guard structure.

Dictée’s poetic configuration serves as a metaphor for loss and marginalization. Within the heterogeneity of the hybrid text, language and self are interrelated in an attempt to subvert culturally and nationally narrowed narratives: the multilingual elements are accompanied by French language exercises on success and labor (“Ecrivez en francais: ... 9. Be industrious: the more one works, the better one succeeds” [Cha 2001, 8]), descriptions of the act of speaking, emphasis on small sounds and utterance, and transgression of the syntactical rules through missing punctuation. Migration’s physical effects are embodied within the text in such a manner that the reader becomes aware of the process of writing itself: the language of the “disease” [*sic*], the female speaker that comes “from afar” (1) conducts the book’s motif through a writing that personifies the materiality of the narrator’s fragmented emotions and reality:

She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all). Bared noise, groan, bits, torn from words. [...] Let the one who is disease. Disease de bonne aventure. Let her call forth. Let her break open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again. [...] It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. (3)

The ‘pain of speech’ that is distinctly portrayed in *Dictée* is denoted through the ban on Cha’s family speaking their native language after the annexation of Korea by Japan and their subsequent emigration to the United States. Those experiences underline the major themes of the book, which are the separation from the mother tongue and motherland,

two traumatic experiences depicted through the lives of Cha's mother and the revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, and poetically represented through the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In her unconventional portrayal of historical downfalls, it is likely that Cha uses the male cruelty of Ades that separated a mother from her daughter as a metaphor for the relentlessness of colonization, for imperialism is the evil aspect of the "history of phallogentrism, history of appropriation: [...] that of man's becoming recognized by the other (son or woman) reminding him that, as Hegel says, death is his master" (Cixous 1991, 79).

Words in *Dictée* become the subject of a deeper consideration of the historical and political circumstances that shape the life of the individual. Linking this function with the development of a feminist narrative within the work through the presence of female figures, the reader witnesses an unconventional "rewriting of the masculinist canon" (Ruthven 1990, 36) which is typical of feminist discourse, and it penetrates culture, ethnography, and history. Cha's narrative about Korea is not about "founding fathers" and glorious victories, but rather it focuses on "mothers and daughters struggling through history's in-between moments" (Joyce). Her concentration on the communal traumas which individuals come across after their countries' occupation encourages her to treat history the same way she treats language: from the revisionist perspective of the oppressed. Thus, even if the mother tongue was colonized by patriarchal brutality, there is memory to reconstruct her telling:

Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is disease, one who is mother who waits nine days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is disease, one who is daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all. (Cha 2001, 133)

The presence of mixed media poetics within the written text plays an important role in the work's subversion of literary and historiographical traditions, beyond its content. In order to comprehend their purpose, we should bear in mind that in the context of textuality, visual elements operate a type of narration which is different from the reception of semantics; they involve a larger level of abstraction because they are much more open to multiple interpretations. The juxtaposition of visuality within a written text transforms the experience of reading regarding linearity, and the complementary

relationship amid words and images presupposes an approach to language which presumably questions its authoritative dimension (Heusser et al. 1999, 47). Visual features in *Dictée* vary: a movie still, use of film vocabulary, a photograph of three Korean peasants being crucified, portraits of women, an image of abandoned ancient scenery, montage of documents and newspaper reports. Apparently, the book's aesthetics request an optical responsiveness and susceptibility for the creative process of its reading. Similarly, the juxtaposition of Western numbers with Chinese calligraphy that is found in the pages of *Dictée*, and the visual cohesion of cross-cultural concepts, are articulated as an attempt to embrace the multiethnic reality of Cha's experience.

Another point concerning Cha's usage of documents and visual material to accompany her written text relates to her historic interest. According to literary scholar Stephen Joyce, Cha seems to initiate "a debate about the relationship between narrative and historiography" by structuring her work through metahistorical methods that denounce traditional historical structure. Joyce points out that history in *Dictée* "creates meanings out of the raw facts and these meanings can change based on the form of the narrative" (Joyce). Considering the variety of elements that are used and the parts of history that are highlighted, Cha relocates the interest from his-tory to her-story by creating a rather genuine work.

Dictée's artistic thickness illustrates a profound contemplation of language, identity, culture, history, mythology, ethnicity, and narrative in a way that succeeds in employing writing in a wider political scheme. Abolishing the limits between written text and visual art, *Dictée* is in constant search of a border-crossing self. Its polyphonic feminism, associated with multiple cultural, social and racial issues, enables a dialogue with contemporary issues upon the question of intersectionality. Deeply personal and poetic within the disposition of poststructuralism and postcolonial thought, it transgresses singular definitions of writing and subject and provides us with multiple possibilities for the literary text and the emotional relevance of reading.

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