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## Otherness as Reading Process: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*

Kirsten Twelbeck

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound.  
The past emotions all over again. To confess to relieve the same folly.  
To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each  
fragment from the word from the image another word another image  
the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (*DICTEE* 33)

When in 1982 the Korean American performance- and short-film artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha published *DICTEE*, no one in the Asian American Studies departments took notice of this multilingual text whose visual structure is characterized by different forms of writing and images. More than a decade later, pioneering Asian American critic and community activist Elaine Kim confesses that she was originally “put off by the book” (3). Laura Hyun Yi Kang, too, admits to an original preference for “homogenous definitions of Korean/American identity and collective experience” (76).<sup>1</sup> These confessions can be found in *Writing Self Writing Nation*, co-edited by former sceptic Elaine Kim herself. Although the collection offers some of the most insightful analysis to date (I especially admire how this book combines five different approaches to the text, reaching from the personal to the theoretical and the artistic), its overall *gesture* is irritating in the sense that it is represented as *the* legitimate interpretation of *DICTEE*: by means of cover-design, the organization and chronology of the texts, a very emotional preface which points to a connection between the political concern which manifests itself in *DICTEE* and the *sa-i-ku* crisis of 1992, and an introductory essay which embraces *DICTEE* as a kind of personal secret told forth. *Writing Self Writing Nation* implies a claim to cultural ownership. Appropriating the same red cover, equipped with a frontispiece taken from *DICTEE*, and illustrated with a “visual essay,” the collection is staged as a kind of “by-text” to the reprint of *DICTEE*, published one year later by the same press. In the preface, Kim declares herself a spokesperson for *DICTEE* by labeling *Writing Self Writing Nation* an “intervention” in contemporary debates that “largely ignored or sidelined Korea

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1 For a similar confession see Kim 3-4: “What *Dictée* suggested [...] seemed far afield from the identity I was after: a congealed essence defined by exclusionary attributes, closed, ready-made, and easy to quantify.”

and Korean America in their discussions of the book" (ix).<sup>2</sup> In her highly autobiographical and certainly illuminating "reflection" on *DICTEE*, Kim takes the role of a cultural insider, and thus authorizes herself to explain the cultural meanings implicit in the text.<sup>3</sup> In the course of her essay, the immigrant-artist Cha, American-born critic Kim, and the "struggling women" of Korea and Korean America (22) become one: "We are linked to nation by the blood our ancestors spilled and used to sign their protests against colonial erasure and the ink we use to make them and ourselves visible" (23). In order to justify this connection, Kim reads *DICTEE* in a largely associative and selective manner, identifying parallels between the text and her own experience as a member of a minority group. In itself, this method is absolutely legitimate. Reading oneself "into" this open and fragmented structure is precisely what *DICTEE* invites the reader to do.<sup>4</sup> However, it also stresses its singularity, reminding the reader of her status of "guest" to the personal account which is *DICTEE*: "Then you as a viewer and guest, enter the house. It is you who are entering to see her. Her portrait is seen through her things, that are hers" (98). Herself a highly self-reflective reader of "her" life, the writing "subject"<sup>5</sup> of *DICTEE* continuously reminds every one of us of our "own" modes of perception, of our different conventions and codes of understanding. It is this gesture of respectful distance that the introductory essay misses, thus not speaking *with* but *for* *DICTEE*.

My second objection to *Writing Self Writing Nation* concerns its status within the academy. It is the second book that has been dedicated to a single Asian American literary text.<sup>6</sup> With its help, *DICTEE* has become the central text of the Asian American anti-canon and thus the book that best represents the contempo-

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- 2 This assertion cannot bear close examination. When we look at earlier contributions, almost all of them read the aesthetics of *DICTEE* as specifically "Asian" or even "deeply Korean." The name of the author, the Korean history referred to, and numerous images from an Asian/Korean background without a doubt helped to identify the "mysteriousness" of *DICTEE* as a specifically "Asian" trait. Thus, early analyses largely led to satisfy "orientalist" desires (Edward Said). However, this is not at stake in Kim's complaints. In both her preface and her introductory essay to the collection, she clearly focuses on ethnicity, not interpretive quality. For a summary of the "orientalist" fantasies employed regarding *DICTEE*, see my essay "Reading the Literatures of Korean America."
  - 3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak problematizes this figure in "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book" 135. Although Kim in her contribution takes a clearly personal stance, the subtitle ("A Korean American's Reflection") posits her (and Cha) as representative of a seemingly homogeneous ethnic identity. As the first essay in the collection and the only contribution which offers a personal account, "Poised in the In-Between" does hold a position of authority.
  - 4 In "Reading the Literatures of Korean America" I have developed this thought in more detail. What is meant here in general is an "implied reader" who, according to Wolfgang Iser, is always driven by a wish for closure. Mechanically speaking, the more "open" a text, the more will the reader "invest" herself in it. For a definition of the "implied reader," see Iser 50-67.
  - 5 Because *DICTEE* is also a deconstruction of the notion of an autonomous, unified and fixed self, the "subject" needs to be understood in quotation marks.
  - 6 The first one is *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior* (Lim 1991).

rary experience of Korean Americans, especially of women.<sup>7</sup> However, its readership is largely limited to the academy.<sup>8</sup> Virtually in the shadow of the celebration of *DICTEE*, there is a growing body of contemporary Korean American works that remains largely unnoticed. Most of them are highly conventional autobiographies like Peter Hyun's *In the New World*, Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* or K. Connie Kang's *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm*.

As an attentive reader of Korean American literature, I want to first "de-canonicalize" *DICTEE* by positing it within the broader context of Korean American immigrant literature, and then "re-canonicalize" it as a unique text that makes it possible to experience "otherness" in a "cultural" sense. The overall goal of this double move is to loosen the text from the grip of contemporary discussions without denying its partaking in a specifically Korean American literary discourse. I locate the difference between these two texts not so much in the identity constructions themselves, but in their strategic effects employed towards an implied reader. As Donald Richie has rightfully noticed (unfortunately not without employing "orientalist" imagery), "[t]he Korean story belongs to all of us, and it is this which the disease, shaman-like forces speaking through her, tells us" (11). My essay self-consciously embraces the perspective of a European reader of Korean American literature. It is a reader who has been following contemporary debates within the field of Asian American Studies for several years. Of course, being overall dependent on texts written by or about Korean Americans, on the internet and on the opinions of Korean German "ethnic insiders," one comes up against limiting factors. However, this detachment might just as well be understood as a "culturally different" approach since it allows for a perspective in which the formative influence of contemporary American debates

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7 As Shelley Sunn Wong points out, the mind-change concerning *DICTEE* stands in direct relation to the "changing frameworks of reception within the Asian American community [!], changes that are a result not of transitory literary fashions but, rather, the conjunction of several historical developments in the 1970s and 1980s" (103-4). Guillory rightfully states, that it "is only as canonical works that certain texts can be said to represent hegemonic social groups. Conversely, it is only as non-canonical works that certain other texts can truly represent socially subordinated groups" (9).

8 *DICTEE* self-consciously affirms its intellectual profile by introducing a figure called "Elitere." In her excellent analysis of Cha's subversive use of invocation of the muses, Shelley Wong interprets this re-naming (of the muse associated with music, Euterpe) as an ironic commentary on the high status of epic literature: "With its resonant play on 'elite' and 'literare', *Elitere* emerges to critique the privileged place of epic as high literature. As an oppositional gesture, Cha assigns to *Elitere* the office of lyric poetry" (115). My comment should be seen as additional, not contrary. Also, the readership of *DICTEE* is limited to the English-speaking. When I interviewed two Korean American booksellers in the Los Angeles "Koreatown" in 1996, they had never heard about *DICTEE* nor about any other Korean American books written in English. The only Korean American text they could offer me was a success-story from the American Mid-West, written in *hangul*. Thus, there is a real problem of accessibility for the immigrant generation, a reason why Chang-Rae Lee wanted *Native Speaker* to be translated into Korean in the first place. See Belluck 20.

concerning the institutional status of Asian American Studies or the Canon is less prevalent. Contextualized thus, my analysis should not be seen in opposition to the contributions in *Writing Self Writing Nation* but as an objection to the impression of exclusive "ownership" asserted by that publication.

The first part of my essay juxtaposes *DICTEE* with a far more conventional work, Peter Hyun's *In the New World*, an almost classical "immigrant autobiography".<sup>9</sup> As Heike Paul has demonstrated in her dissertation, works like this are often relegated into the realm of "non-fiction" and thereby escape the attention of the literary critic, while sociologists and historians read them as authentic sources.<sup>10</sup> This division not only along the lines of genre but also of discipline is fatal, since it leads us to overlook the exceptional situation in the history of this body of works: most Korean American texts have been written in the 1980s and 1990s, but their authors are a significantly heterogeneous group. Historically, they stem from different generations, class backgrounds, and community histories. Due to the multilayered history of Korea, the dramatic changes of geography that took place in this century (due to colonization, division, urbanization and globalization)—the country left by early immigrants like Peter Hyun was very different from the one experienced by those who came in the aftermath of the Korean War like Theresa Cha.<sup>11</sup> Gender, of course, becomes a crucial category both in terms of experience and in regard to the texts. All written in the last quarter of the century, these texts engage in a literary conversation about the things that have changed and about the ones that have not. As this brief comparison will show, *DICTEE* in fact shares an interest in the very same "basic" questions, which are pronouncedly Korean American.

I could hardly have chosen two authors, whose (auto-)biographies differed more radically. The male author of *In the New World* (1995) died aged 87, before writing the final draft of the book. The edited text is a highly conventional life-story. As one of the first non-white directors in the American theater, Hyun enjoyed considerable success. However, his artistic ideal of integrating elements

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- 9 In "The Necessary Ruse: Immigrant Autobiography and the Sovereign American Self," William Boelhower sketches the immigrant as a person who has experienced two different societies, a circumstance that puts her or him into a position to compare two cultural systems. Nobody else but the immigrant, he argues, sees the American "new home" as much as "an experiment, if not indeed an asylum" (307). Boelhower develops a formula for the genre of the immigrant autobiography (see also 197). For a criticism of this generalizing theory, see Sau-ling Wong 152.
- 10 Referring to Sucheng Chan's editing of Lee's *Quiet Odyssey*, Paul states: "Mary Paik Lee is turned into an object of 'acquaintance', and thus is robbed of her agency as a literary immigrant: first, as 'historical specimen' she is subsumed into a global historical context of Korean American history, second, she is silenced as a historical subject" (230).
- 11 These two authors cannot represent the community of Korean American writers as such. I would like to mention other widely neglected authors like Mary Paik Lee, who writes from a working-class point of view, or Ty Pak, whose short stories link the Korean American experience to the Korean War. Today, a younger generation emerges, with writers like Chang-Rae Lee and Nora Okja Keller.

from Asian art into experimental modernist theater was not appreciated. After years of discrimination, isolation, and exclusion, he gave up. Depicting himself as a man of considerable self-confidence, Hyun managed to restart his career as a major in the American army. In 1945, the U.S. military sent him to Korea on a diplomatic mission. He was sent back to the United States for being too critical of the activities of the U.S. military there and too sympathetic to the communist opposition in Korea. A perpetual victim of a racist society, the protagonist is increasingly marginalized and driven into the ethnic ghetto he originally wished to escape from. In the end, he joins the civil rights movement. Shocking in its overall development, this heroic life-story can also be read as an effort to compensate for the endless chain of biographical ups and downs. *DICTEE* is of a totally different nature. When it was completed in 1982, Cha was only 31. Unlike Hyun, whose experiences in modern theater were not incorporated into the formal structure of his very didactic, and genre-conformist text, Cha's early involvement in performance art and film has deeply influenced the "experimental" nature of her book. *DICTEE* has been described as a multilayered, multilingual, and multimedia work that merges different styles of writing and visual forms. As indicated by its use of several Asian and European languages, this work contains not only a variety of literary conventions but also feeds on several cultural contexts.

However different in terms of form and focus, both authors write about and from an immigrant's experience. In order to analyze the similarities and differences between these two books, I have selected three interrelated topics which are, although treated differently, central to both texts (and to many other works by immigrants as well). They are, first, the struggle for a place to call "home;" second, language as a site for identity production; and third, gender as a culturally constructed limitation.

### *Home*

Both Hyun and Cha moved to the United States while they were in their teens. Both of them temporarily returned to Korea. Hyun was sent there in 1945 to promote the U.S. military policy among the Koreans. I consider this episode the central turning point in his autobiography. While the first part of the book resonates with the wish of the subject to "Americanize," with all the connotations this carries, Hyun now accuses the U.S. military of being an insult to the Korean people. The protagonist finds a new identity among political leaders in the Korean educated classes instead. For the first time the author reclaims his formerly rejected identity as a "Korean":

What startled them most was the sight of me in a U.S. Army officer's uniform. I could hear them speculating:

"Is he American or Korean?"

"Can't you see? He's an American officer."

"Yeah, but he looks like a Korean!"

I spoke to them politely. "Nyee, na nun Hangukin im ni da." ("Yes, I am Korean.") (212)

Here and elsewhere, the author takes the role of a translator, a position problematized in *DICTEE*, whose author would rather reject national identity and cultural translatability as an overall concept.<sup>12</sup> However, even in *In the New World*, there is something ambivalent about this code-switching. The "Korean-ness" Hyun is struggling to formulate is an almost paradoxical construction, since it is described as an inborn "Americanness" originating in Korea. In his view, the Christian faith, which his family like many Korean immigrants understood as a religion of resistance, makes them predestined to Americanization. A historically inherited "mentality" of adaptability and stubborn willpower makes "the Korean"—unlike immigrants from Japan and China—the "better American," without denying his roots.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the book, Korea is depicted as the Asian country culturally closest to the United States. While Hyun criticizes the imperialistic conduct of the U.S. troops in Korea, he also highlights positive aspects of the American "way of life," which the country has organically incorporated: "most of the men wore smart Western suits, and the swagger in their walks was also new [...]. The women [...] did not yield the right of way to men on the sidewalks, they kept walking in straight lines" (208). Obviously, Hyun reinforces the orientalist dichotomy between a progressive and enlightened West and the traditional and patriarchal societies of the East. On the other hand, the society he describes has not suffered "cultural colonization," but has self-consciously selected some of the progressive "American" notions of equality.

When in 1981, almost forty years later, the protagonist/narrator of *DICTEE* returns to Korea, she experiences a country which is not "Western by will," but "Westernized", controlled by a "machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own" (89). One year after the massacre of Kwangju, where thousands of peaceful demonstrators lost their lives, the southern part of the divided country is ruled by an oppressive militaristic government supported by the United States. Unlike Hyun, who was celebrated as a liberator from a long period of colonialization by Japan, Cha is distrusted and scorned. Even her body bears the mark of traitor, not of liberator:

12 For a problematization of the discourse of translation, see Niranjana.

13 There are numerous examples of this attitude in the text. The narrator tends to take a paternalistic attitude towards colleagues from Japan and China. In an episode about hitchhiking in America, Hyun writes: "I soon discovered no one would or could give all of us a ride. I explained this to the two students from Japan, gave them a map, and at the first opportunity put them in a car heading to Pittsburgh. My last words to them were, 'Don't be afraid.' Not too long afterward, I, too, got a ride" (71).

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you [sic] identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt. (56-57)

While the liberator Hyun claims to have easily abolished public doubts about his national identity by speaking Korean, the returning "subject" of *DICTEE* experiences a crisis of representation, that prevents her from speaking at all: "You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long" (58). Cha's Korea of the 1980s is neither the "better America" Hyun was creating, nor an alternative to the United States, nor their product. Her migrating, marginalized, and female "subject" cannot "choose" her identity. She does not feel fully represented either in the United States or in Korea. Instead, the marginalized "subject" is confusedly "beginning to doubt" the overall notion of a fixed identity. Going beyond the "dictation" by Korean nationalism and the Catholicism implicit in her name, the "subject" of *DICTEE* opposes the idea of a primary home and celebrates a "perpetual exile" (81).

### *Language*

Much has been said about how Cha displaces any idea of origin by her subversive and ironic use of language and languages, like Korean, English, French, Latin, and Chinese. Evolving from a history of colonization, exile, migration, and several intellectual and religious traditions, the female speaker of *DICTEE* constantly moves across cultural and linguistic barriers. "Cha rejects any romantic insistence on a fixed, essential identity through language," writes Laura Hyun Yi Kang (85). *DICTEE* itself insists that "our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search" (81). There is camouflage involved, when the foreign language student "mimics the speaking" of her new country, when "she takes on their punctuation" (4). However, she "takes the pause" too (5), she stutters, breaks the words, replaces the (native) sound with (her own foreign) voice (158). As Elaine Kim has argued, the speaker is "poised in the in-between" in terms of place and identity. *DICTEE* itself resists any discourse of wholeness: "Almost a name. Half a name. Almost a place" (159).

Itself "stuttering," grammatically "incorrect" and linguistically hybrid, *DICTEE* self-consciously shifts the responsibility of being understood from the "speaker" to the one who listens. It is in the beginning of the text that her foreign speaker "gives birth" to the text, deciding that "the pain not to say" is greater "than is the pain to say" (3). As self-consciously as it claims its right to speak,

*DICTEE* takes the risk of being misunderstood as a text. Indicated by the shifting meanings implicit in its language (which approaches the reader as a "disease's" prophesy, a threatening "disease" and as linguistic "dis-use"), the text accepts that communication, especially across various kinds of imaginary or real borders, involves frustration and embarrassment. This is a motive also found in *In the New World*. When its protagonist learned English at 17, he suffered exclusion:

"It was a strange fino-menom," I said rather proudly.  
 Dead silence.  
 "What did you say, Peter?" the teacher asked.  
 "It was a strange fino-menon," I repeated.  
 "How do you spell it?" The teacher appeared puzzled.  
 "P-h-e-n-o-m-e-n-o-n." I remembered the spelling, fortunately.  
 "Oh," the teacher smiled, "you mean "phe-nom-e-non"." The class burst into roaring laughter. (17)

When Cha formulates the process of acquiring language, she uses metaphors of pain and deprivation such as raw flesh, rape, cancer, suffocation, and the violence of giving birth. When he tries to speak English, the protagonist of Hyun's autobiography also suffers physically:

Such a way of speaking completely violated all the proper speaking manners I had learned in Korea: keep your face expressionless, don't reveal your emotions when you speak, and so on, until one could cultivate the perfectly immobile face of a cultured person. Now I had to forsake all the discipline and training and learn to speak in a different form; with a wide-open mouth, bare teeth, and flipping tongue—in general, with a contorted face. It was embarrassing even to try. (17-18)<sup>14</sup>

However, a former exile in Shanghai's Korean community, and used to the racial slurs directed to him there, the protagonist of Hyun's autobiography overcomes initial shame and masters English, just as he formally learned to speak Chinese. As a metaphor of successful assimilation, language acquisition in *In the New World* not only "americanizes" the protagonist but also the person of author. By mastering the conventional code of the American autobiography Hyun has, at least symbolically, inscribed himself into "America." In contrast to Hyun, Cha refuses this one-sided move "into" the linguistic mainstream. Her text prefers to settle on the outskirts of genres and languages thus positing its "subject" on the margins of cultures and nations.

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14 In Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, Kazuko, the second-generation Japanese American narrator, rebels against the body-related etiquette promoted by Japanese immigrants in her neighborhood. Here too, differences in the cultural construction of the body are used to highlight one's relationship to "America".

## Gender

Unlike Cha's speaker, the protagonist of *In the New World* is eager to overcome any trace of foreignness and is "determined to master the art of placing the accent over the right syllable" (17). He embraces English as "not only a language" but "a way of life" (28). Hyun describes language acquisition as an initiation of himself as an Asian boy into a new life as a Western man. He emphasizes not having succumbed to the "polite and shy" Western stereotype of Asian men, but having resisted any humiliation by being "bold," "daring," and "self-confident" (18). In the text, language control functions as the first step into Western masculinity, which is further signified by access to money, women, and cars. However, this dream of "melting in" shatters in real life. Although his experiences follow a downward curve, the text does not admit failure but insists on the "male" law of the American genre of success. The author employs the image of the *American Phoenix*, who, once destroyed, rises above his former gains. As a youth, he is characterized as a fighter. Grown up, he is repeatedly described as a pioneer and self-made man. The author embraces the image of the tough guy when he recalls his years as a soldier. Referring to his married life he labels himself the "breadwinner." *In the New World* can be read as a compensatory success story and fictional masculinization by what autobiography-critic Abbott has called a "crack-up," his description of someone who has suffered too many failures in life.<sup>15</sup> However, this is only one level on which the text can be read. Being overwhelmingly a masculine self-authorizing text, *In the New World* also seeks to formulate a speaking position from which to launch a bitter criticism of a racist society, which repeatedly hindered Hyun from obtaining what he thought was his mission in life, be it as a director or a diplomat.

*DICTEE* also refers to culturally constructed gender norms as obstacles, central for "her" self-positioning. In the case of the female subject, however, "she" can only destabilize the dichotomy (in which "the Asian woman" functions as "super-feminine") as such. In *DICTEE*'s description of Korea and of the United States, gender is constructed as a fixed hierarchical, binary opposition: "He is the husband, and she is the wife. He is the man. She is the wife. It is a given" (102). On the one side, the speaker ironically recalls a country deeply influenced by Confucianism and Korean nationalism. Here, a woman's place in historiography is limited to that of martyrdom. However, it is Catholicism that marks her name. *DICTEE* excessively mimics the prayers of Thérèse de Lisieux, the female saint who submitted herself to "the Name of the Father."<sup>16</sup> Emptying Catholic

15 "It is certainly possible for a person to undergo several major transformations in his or her life, but it is also possible that these repeated conversions are desperate attempts to avoid realization of the crack-up" (Abbott 192).

16 *DICTEE*'s treatment of Thérèse is much more complex than I can discuss here. As my dissertation shows in detail, *DICTEE* is also about taking possession of the "dictated" discourses that "occupy" the postcolonial subject. In my view, Cha not only mocks the prayers of Thérèse, but

female sainthood of its pathos by integrating prayers into translation exercises, and stripping Korean martyrdom of its sublime heroism by reducing it to the untimely death of a young woman, Cha points to the oppressive, nationalist functions of this image. However, she doesn't construct "positive" counter-images like Hyun does, when he challenges stereotypes with his version of a truer self. In *DICTEE* there is no authentic self, only an invitation to "lift the immobile silence" (see 179) imposed by deteriorated patterns of speech and nationalist rituals.

Though the "male" text Hyun left for later generations of Korean Americans is definitely not the kind of cultural memory promoted by Cha, and although *DICTEE* refuses to represent the kind of didactic information Hyun assumed to be politically useful, I do see a central political issue shared by both: their urgent call to exercise what we might call "cultural perspectivism." In the last page of his autobiography, after having demonstrated his efforts to assimilate, Hyun finally dares to challenge the unshaken ideological foundation of American pluralism, both in terms of culture and language: "Why must the world's people come and adopt the American way of life? Can't American people, too, learn and understand the cultures and languages of other lands?" (179). Having traveled far and experienced the hospitality of "Third World-peoples" who "love to practice their English" and "are so much friendlier, when you know how to say 'thanks' and 'good bye' in their native tongue," the imaginary liberal reader will easily support that claim. *DICTEE*, however, puts her/him to the test. More than just pointing to the necessity of intercultural understanding and the pain involved, Cha's text challenges any reader to question the usefulness of learned patterns of understanding and makes her or him question any notion of what is "given," therefore reminding all of us who are willing to submit to the "dictation" of its "foreign" sound, of an "other" within ourselves.

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also shows her as a historical figure beyond martyrdom, who practiced a powerful "discourse of her own." The authors of *Writing Self Writing Nation* repeatedly point to the fact that Cha attended a Catholic school in United States as a pivotal event. Although I readily agree that this experience may have been deeply influential, this information is not found in the text. It is interesting to note, however, how *DICTEE* works towards activating personal memories concerning early experiences with the faith of the dominant society. Thus, in a conversation about the Catholicism referred to in *DICTEE*, a Korean German friend told me that in the 1960s and 70s, the only schools that accepted Korean school diplomas in Southern Germany were Catholic. Korean children, who often came there because their mothers worked as nurses, had to consent to be baptized and take on a biblical name in order to gain access to those schools. The official reason for this re-naming was the "difficulty" implicit in Korean names. Ironically, most of the Korean pupils chose Christian names that could easily be pronounced and transcribed into Korean.

*Experiencing "Otherness"*

This hypothesis owes much to the work of Gabriele Schwab, who has written extensively on the aesthetic effects experienced by the reader of modernist or postmodern fiction. Referring to developmental psychology (Winnicott, Ehrenzweig, Bateson) Schwab defines the experience of reading as a sort of training towards accepting "Otherness," a category she understands both as psychological and cultural. Like the play of children, she argues, reading functions on an "intermediary level." "Lost" in reading/playing, the loss of the mother/the imaginary is temporarily compensated by a creative symbolic act, which is closely connected to the imaginary. Put differently, the division of the symbolic and the imaginary is temporarily blurred, thus enabling the individual temporarily to loosen and suspend the limits of its subjectivity and thus expand through a kind of contact with its "own" Other (Schwab, *Entgrenzungen* 42).

According to Schwab, this experience is facilitated by texts that dispense with narrative closure, like the ones modernism and postmodernism have produced. The *language* most suitable for enabling this process is the poetic, with its inclination towards the "other" qualities of speech, such as sound and rhythm (Schwab, *Mirror* 71-99)<sup>17</sup> Such a text cannot unfold its creative potential, when the reader expects to communicate with it on a predominantly informative, "secondary" level. This attitude will be disappointed even when the texts—in a postmodern manner—follow a strategy of radical self-reflection. As this essay will later show in more detail, *DICTEE* is just such a self-reflective and "musical" text. Its resistance to narrative closure and linearity, the radical breakdown of the semantic, and the constant shifting between the visual and the oral alienate the reader from her conventional reading habits. I have actually found myself listening to *DICTEE*, reading it aloud, experimenting with accents on the words, putting in commas since there are only a few. Virtually "overwhelmed" by a growing accumulation of contradictory information, a growing network of inner-textual links, a constant shifting between contexts and categories of knowledge, languages and genres, the reader creates her or his own system of orientation by finding new modes of understanding. As Schwab suggests, a "successful" reading of such a text involves a kind of "letting go," an approach of "unfocused attention," including submission to the more body-oriented "musical" qualities of a text (*Entgrenzungen* 52). Readers who have learned to enjoy texts like that,

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17 Julia Kristeva, who is an important source for Schwab, has also located "revolution" in poetic language. Clearly Cha's use of language resonates with ideas we might summarize as "écriture féminine." Although this "theoretical practice" is absolutely central for an understanding of Cha's use of language, it is, after all, "just" another discourse, "inhabited" by the parasitical "subject" of *DICTEE*. The feminine connotation of the "Other" is clearly marked as a cultural construction, since the title of the book always reminds the reader of the ideological nature of *all* discourses—including its own.

according to Schwab practice a new "openness" necessary for intercultural contact:

This training also means attuning us to a radical otherness. Unfocused attention is decidedly "noncentric" in the most encompassing sense: it precludes focusing on the centrism that still haunts our global world—be they ethnocentrism, sexism, racism, nationalism, or religious fundamentalism. (*Mirror* 87)

This generalizing parallel she draws does not seem convincing when we think of the authors Schwab concentrates on, such as Beckett or Pynchon. However, its truth-value is elevated when applied to texts like *DICTEE* that explicitly deal with the notion of (a plural, shifting, hybrid) *cultural* otherness. "Marked" by a constant breakdown of the categories implicit in the schooling genres of translation, "History," or religious prayer, *DICTEE* constantly reminds the reader that the categories problematized are always also (multi-)cultural. Reaching to its smallest "unit," its "broken tongue" (75), this text leaves no possible doubt about its (multi-)cultural nature. The musical qualities resulting from the semantic breakdown are always *also* allusions to the colonized Korean, who, denied a "language of her own," "speaks in the dark" (45), to the "broken tongue" of the Korean American immigrant, the "other speech" (132) of the woman who, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, is "speaking" the other, being spoken, "cannot speak" (106). Interspersed with the "cultural" languages "dictated" by Western and Korean nationalism, Western and Korean religion, Western and Eastern colonialism, Western and Eastern philosophy, Western and Eastern gender norms, the textual subject of *DICTEE* (and the reader) "remain[s] apart from the congregation" (155), a "transplant to dispel upon" (20), "fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile" (81). Thus, the destabilizing effect of this overwhelmingly hybrid text is never "just" an attack on conventional norms of reading (which, of course, are always cultural and historical). In the process of reading *DICTEE*, we are led to realize that the "stable ground" we lose is that of our own cultural norms and beliefs. In that sense, we may understand *DICTEE*'s metaphors borrowed from tectonics and archeology as indicative of the process of reading *DICTEE*: "Earth is made porous. Earth heeds. Inward. Inception in darkness. In the blue-black body commences lument. Like firefly, a slow rhythmic relume to yet another and another opening" (160). Here, *DICTEE* quite narrowly analyzes what happens when we read, or rather "delve into" *DICTEE*. The "pleasure" of the text lies not so much on the cognitive level—although it is indispensable for the overall understanding of *DICTEE*—but in the capacity of the reader to give her- or himself up to it, to become the "firefly," which, constantly filling itself with new energy, dances along its way from "opening" to "opening."

As Schwab makes clear in her analysis of the aesthetic effect implicit in John Cage's "noise-music," this "crazy dance" follows a composition (an alternative

"dictation") which is explicitly experienced as non-chaotic (*Mirror* 71-99). There are, in fact, ways to integrate the multiple and broken voices of the text. The first one predominantly relies on an interpretative system, schooled in feminist-poststructuralist and postcolonial theory. Accordingly, most contemporary critics tend to analyze the "broken language(s)" of *DICTEE* within a theory of resistance through and thus in language. Shelley Sunn Wong, for example, celebrates the text as a specifically Asian American "contest" against the Western "ideology of wholeness" (109).<sup>18</sup> However, it is only on the predominantly "secondary" level of "meaning," that *DICTEE* attempts "to inscribe a very fluid and heterogeneous Korean feminist subjectivity" (98) by subverting the English language. The second unifying "strange attractor" in the text is much more bound to the "imaginary." It is through an *emotional* impact that *DICTEE* "inscribes" "fluidity" and heterogeneity into its reader, whatever her cultural and linguistic background may be. In fact, *DICTEE* has never been described as "chaotic" but rather as "beautiful" (Wolf 11) or "offending" (Kang 75).<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the text,<sup>20</sup> *DICTEE* itself indicates that we in fact do dispose of a capacity to experience its polyvocal "slipperiness" (Kang 76) and disruptive structure as meaningful and enjoyable: "All rise. At once. One by one. Voices absorbed into the bowl of sound" (162). It is disruption itself that becomes the ordering principle, the absorbing "bowl" of the reader that enables this mixture of voices to resonate. Integrated into a common rhythm that makes change of the temporal its very own element, the mixture of literary genres, the constant change of grammatical person, the abrupt introduction of "other" languages and a constant shifting between visual and audial reception can all "flow" together and create the "different sound" *DICTEE* is aiming at: "Same word. Slight mutation of the same. Undefinable. Shift. Shift slightly. Into a different sound. The difference" (157). Interestingly, this "sound" clearly carries the discernable traces of a Korean (American) woman's history of domination as well as it heralds from "another epic another history" (81). However, this "other" memory, like all other "truths," remains hidden by the only instrument able to give notice of it: Lan-

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- 18 In the same volume, Elaine Kim links the unreliability and fluidity of Cha's language to the feminine colonial subject's perception of the inadequacy of language to represent "her" (19). Lisa Lowe interprets it as an elaboration of the writing subject as "hybrid and multilingual" (36). Laura Hyun Yi Kang, who is at the same time very much aware of the mutual relationship between text and reader, states that *DICTEE* "expresses the desire for self-expression and agency in language" (78).
- 19 Kang states that, when she first read *DICTEE*, she found herself "literally yelling at the book" (75).
- 20 This spatial category is bound to the time implicit while we read a text "from the first to the last page." However, what we actually do while reading *DICTEE* is best described as a spiraling movement, reaching back and forth throughout the text, always following the variety of "traces" transmitted to the reader. After having "gone" through some of the paths laid out, the reader's understanding of *DICTEE* will be "completed" with every new reading. Thus, *DICTEE* is actually a text without an ending.

guage, the element of dictation/ *DICTEE*. Allowing oneself to be "caught in [its] threading" (4), the reader of *DICTEE*, while being constantly made aware of the "deadness" of words (133), at the same time casts aside doubts about the representative function of language. Conscious of our *irrational* desire for a language-as-representation and communication, text and reader conspire in a shared hope: "If words are to be uttered, they would be from behind the partition [...]. If words are to be sounded, impress though the partition in ever slight measure to the other side the other signature the other hearing the other speech the other grasp" (132).

Clearly written from an immigrant's experience, the "subjects" of *DICTEE* and *In the New World* turn to code-switching as a means of survival. As their protagonists have both suffered exclusion from a self-acclaimed norm, they share a common concern with the widespread obsession with "centrisms," resulting in an inability to change viewpoints. Although they both speak from the margin(s), the textual "subjects" locate their speaking "position" quite differently. *In the New World* makes us witness a Korean American man's almost desperate effort to justify his ability to be accepted as a part of the mainstream. Stressing his superiority both as a man and a Korean American (in contrast to Japanese and Chinese immigrants) he follows a deeply contradictory strategy. Reading *In the New World* can serve as a highly instructive exercise regarding the pitfalls inherent in "claiming America" through the conventional means of the American dream of individual success.

Going far beyond genre conventions (by pitting them against each other), Cha has instead decided to go precisely against those conventions. Creating a text that is virtually "insinuated" by the "blood/ink" of cultural, national, religious, and linguistic hybridity, *DICTEE* "gives birth"<sup>21</sup> to an un-fixed subject beyond a self. A subversive inscription of a multiple self, this counter-narrative *also* causes the reader to lose control over her cultural belief-systems. Thus, on the "intermediary level" of the text we witness an interweaving of reader and the hybrid "subject" of the text.

This mechanism is best described as a process. The initial "fascination" of the Western reader, who may feel "invited" into the text by an "exotic" imagery (the calligraphy is just an example of this gesture),<sup>22</sup> quickly comes to an end.<sup>23</sup> Encountering the "other" within herself, the reader will go through a phase of

21 One of the many beginnings of *DICTEE* describes a birth-scene (see 3-5).

22 In my opinion, *DICTEE* uses a repetitive technique of "gazing back," labeled "mimicry" by Homi Bhabha (85-92 and 102-22). I have decided not to elaborate on this thought, since it would lead away from the central interest of this essay.

23 With its references to the "great" and "original" cultures of the West (*DICTEE* incorporates Greek mythology and photographs of "mysterious" Egyptian statues), the effect on non-Western readers should be quite similar.

frustration, comparable to the “dis-ease” experienced by tourist and immigrant alike, when confronted with their own inadequacy and inappropriateness. Like the immigrant/tourist, the patient reader will then try to understand and invent new codes to facilitate orientation. The first one heavily practiced by any “professional” reader of *DICTEE* (including myself) is a practice of association and comparison. Thus, while for Kim, reading *DICTEE* meant remembering her childhood as a member of a minority, Cha’s discussion of the Korean division gained importance to me when I ambivalently watched the former “class enemy” crossing the “iron curtain” between the German East and West. The second approach involves research, translation, and communication with “cultural insiders.”<sup>24</sup> Another possibility lies within the exercises integrated in the text. Like a student of a foreign language, I “*écrivais en français*” as I was told by a translation exercise, which forms a part of the text. Struggling with my French I expected to find a clue to a phrase like: “The people of this country are less happy than the people of yours” (8). In some instances, the translations and my experiments in pronunciation did give new meaning to the text, but most of the time I was betrayed. Luckily, nobody witnessed these embarrassing language-games, and they remained on the level of playful riddles. As Hyun insists, immigrants (and, on a different scale, tourists) tend to be less lucky.

Although all of these “techniques” broaden the overall perception of *DICTEE* (and ourselves), “[e]ach observance” is merely a “prisoner of yet another observance, the illusion of variation hidden in yet another odor yet another shrouding, disguised, superimposed upon” (145). Always aware of the specifically female Korean (American) context of the speaking “subject,” the reader is overwhelmed and disintegrated by the multiplication of meanings and languages, until she opens up to the “other” dimension of language. Operating on an “intermediary” level, text and reader engage in an exercise that includes being “inhabited” by a *Gestalt*, that differs in form as well as in temporality. Allowing oneself to submit to the sound and rhythm of *DICTEE* involves a readiness to doubt and “forget” internalized cultural norms and truths. Again, this is reminiscent of the new immigrant/tourist strategies of “committed wait-and-see.” Of course, the difference between “immigrant” and “tourist” is crucial. While for the migrating and marginalized subject implicit in *DICTEE* disintegration and “otherness” are permanent, the experience of the reader resembles the one of the (individual) tourist: as a playful, textual experience, “homelessness” is limited in time and devoid of risk. “Outside” of the text, both reader and immigrant alike usually prefer to be same, not Other.

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24 As I have argued elsewhere, this “unveiling” of a highly “veiled” text forms one of its primary strategies. That is why I think that “explaining” *DICTEE* from an “insider’s” viewpoint is not consistent with the imaginative author’s intent. By introducing her text through a frontispiece showing Korean calligraphy, Cha virtually “sends” the reader *outside* of the text, to the library, the dictionary, the native speaker. See also my “Reading the Literatures of Korean America.”

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