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The Figure of the Disease in
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*:
Language, Breaking Silences and Irigarayan
Mysticism

*From another epic another history. From the missing narrative.
From the multitudes of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles.
For another telling for other recitations .
(Dictee 81)*

What does it mean to write and speak in a language which is not your own? And as a writer, how important is it to feel a sense of literary heritage or ancestry, which one is connected to, is able to access and feels part of? These questions came to mind when I first encountered the writing of the Korean-American poet, writer, film-maker, producer and visual artist, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982), and in particular, her most renowned work, *Dictee* (1982).

Dictee is a profoundly elusive, complex and deeply personal text. Interdisciplinary in its content and form, it incorporates elements of autobiography, prose, poetry, photographs and documents. From the start, the inclusion of certain images, charts, Chinese characters, anatomical diagrams as well as other forms of written text subverts the reader's expectations with regard to textual representation. What makes this work truly remarkable and unique is how it navigates the vast, emotional terrain of individual, historical, political and collective imaginaries as well as its violent realities. Cha was born during the time of the Korean War in 1951, in Busan, South Korea, the middle daughter of five children. At the age of 12,

she emigrated to the United States with her family experiencing first-hand the effects of loss, exile, migration and displacement, which were later explored in her creative work.

Given the scope of Cha's intellectual interests and scholarly achievements, the seriousness and intensity of her artistic output is unsurprising. During the 1970's she completed four degrees from the University of California at Berkeley: a B.A. in Comparative Literature, a B.A. in Art, an M.A. in Art, and an M.F.A. in Art. She also had an interest in film and studied film theory at the Centre d'Etudes Americaine du Cinema in Paris in 1976 under the tutelage of Jean-Louis Baudry, Raymond Bellour, Monique Wittig, and Christian Metz. Despite the fact that her life was tragically cut short at the age of 31, Cha left behind a rich legacy of work that was informed by a diverse range of cultural, theoretical and symbolic references including French psychoanalytic film theory, linguistic theory, Symbolism, concrete poetry, Korean cultural traditions and shamanism, Catholicism and Confucianism.

As a Korean-American writing about female experience from a variety of perspectives – maternal, mythical, historical and mystical – Cha has had a discernible influence on Asian-American/British contemporary poets such as Cathy Park Hong, Bhanu Kapil and Ocean Vuong. In *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition* (2020), Hong includes a full chapter on Cha entitled *Portrait of an Artist* in which she reflects on her legacy and the violence of her death. Just a few days before the original publication of *Dictee*, Cha was murdered and raped by Joseph Sanza, a security guard who was known to her, as an employee in the building where her husband was working at the time. Hong draws attention to the silence that shrouds Cha's death, which gives *Dictee* a "haunted prophetic aura" and the "baffling" contradiction between the ways in which "scholars will argue how Cha is recovering the lives of Korean women silenced by historical atrocities while remaining silent about the atrocity that took Cha's own life" (Hong 155, 157).

Hong further discusses the extent of Cha's importance to her in terms of language, particularly in terms of a shared Korean-American identity and how English, as an inherited language, operates, in part, as a form of oppression:

Cha spoke my language by indicating that English was *not* her language, that English could never be a true reflection of her consciousness, that it was as much an imposition on her consciousness as it was a form of expression. And because of that, *Dictee* felt true. (Hong 155)

From the outset, Cha explicitly draws a connection between language and the body, the "ability and inability to speak" (Cha 56). The epigraph to *Dictee* testifies to the influence of Ancient Greek myth and lyric poetry in its reference to a quotation attributed to Sappho, "May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve." The later invocation to the Classical Muses, "O Muse, tell me the story/Of all these things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus/Beginning where you wish, tell even us," in itself a reworking of Hesiod's invocation of the Muses in *The Theogeny*, situates the placing of epic and lyric traditions of poetry in juxtaposition (Cha 7).

Breaking Silences

The difficulty of speech and language is at the very forefront of *Dictee*. The title of the book echoes the French word, *dictée*: dictation, or read aloud. The implication, therefore, is that language is something that is imposed through an external authority. It is notable that the notion of the first-person narrator is absent, thus negating the presence of a lyric "I."

Most radically, Cha opens up new ways of thinking about and reading a text. The frontispiece of *Dictee* is a black and white photograph of Korean phrases etched in stone. Taken from the wall of a Japanese coal mine, the inscription is attributed to a Korean exile, one of many, who were forced into labour by the Japanese at the start of the century. The translation is: "Mother/I miss you/I am hungry/I want to go home."

The multi-lingual nature of the text is immediately established by this use of Korean characters as well as the simultaneous use of two languages: French and English. The opening passages in French and English reflect Cha's educational background: she attended Catholic school, learnt French as a child, studied for a B.A. in Comparative Literature with French emphasis. They emphasise her displacement within these Western languages, and the indoctrination of the Korean speaker with these dominant languages. Cha presents the reader with a dictation exercise common in French missionary schools in Korea and during the Japanese colonial period of Korea. Indirectly, this alludes to the presence of French Catholic missionary activity in Korea, which dated back to the early nineteenth century. During this time, imposed use of the dominant language evidently constituted a form of cultural colonisation. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1957), Frantz Fanon makes a similar point in highlighting how "colonized people," "in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality' inevitably find themselves 'face to face with the language of the civilizing nation" (Fanon 18). *Dictée* begins:

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

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

all 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 (Cha 1)

Cha's use here of two languages and the frequent use of repetitive broken phrases embodies the experience of learning an unfamiliar language. This bilingual approach foregrounds the ways in which grammatical structures, syntax, words and meanings are constructed. In turn, this compels the reader to consider the arbitrary, ideologically enforced conventions that often govern language and writing. Additionally, this opening passage illustrates the difficulty of communication and expression for the "She" who "had come from a far," the nameless immigrant figure who is linguistically and politically disenfranchised and displaced.

What alternatives are possible for this "She"? How can "She" express herself? Cha invites us to depart from linearity, into circular, intercultural and intra-cultural ways of reading. The tone that she adopts in her work is notable for its detachment and irony. Cha refuses the notion of a singular voice; her use of classical references negates the boundaries of a purely lyric text. The lyrical moment is thus never seen in isolation or as a singular presence.

The structure of the book is delineated into nine sections correlating to the Nine Greek muses:

CLIO – HISTORY

CALLIOPE – EPIC POETRY

URANIA – ASTRONOMY

MELPOMENE – TRAGEDY

ERATO – LOVE POETRY

ELITERE – LYRIC POETRY

THALIA – COMEDY

TERPISCHORE – CHORAL DANCE

POLYMNIA – SACRED POETRY

This organisation endows the work with an epic grandeur, aligning it with mythical resonance and narrative, as well as emphasising the validation of mystical and divine experience. Further, Cha's mythical invocations act as a powerful appeal to the presence and existence of a female divine albeit within a Western framework. Here, I would like to draw upon Luce Irigaray's ideas on female divinity, particularly her essay, "Divine Women," to illuminate and develop the implications of Cha's narrative and poetic devices with regard to conceptions of myth, religious iconography especially within Catholicism and female divinity. Irigaray argues that the reconceptualising of a God in their own image is fundamental for women in order to establish a fully autonomous subjectivity, "If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity" (Irigaray 43).

Further, she critiques the history of Christianity for its conception of God in the masculine gender, "Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender (*genre*), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity" (Irigaray 41). In contrast, women lack access to a divinised feminine, "Our theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit" (Irigaray 43).

The conception of a feminine God is something that Irigaray believes is an active act of imagination. The emphasis is on "becoming": "The goal that is most valuable is to go on *becoming*, infinitely" (Irigaray 41). Joy, Poxon and O'Grady argue that, "For Irigaray, the process of constructing a feminine figure of God will be a deliberately conscious one – not simply an unconscious projection of unsatisfied desires" (Joy, Poxon, O'Grady 40-41).

Divine Women

Another significant aspect of Irigaray's thought is her recuperation of the figure of the mother. This is reclaimed through an affirmation of the mother-daughter relationship. She states:

It is essential that we be God *for ourselves* so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have already been outlined...It is equally essential that we should be daughter-gods in the relationship with our mothers, and that we cease to hate our mothers in order to enter into submissiveness to the father-husband. We cannot love if we have no memory of a native passiveness in our relation to our mothers, of our primitive attachment to her, and hers to us... without the possibility that God might be made flesh as a woman, through the mother and the daughter, and in their relationships, no real constructive help can be offered to a woman. If the divine is absent in woman, and among women, there can be no possibility of changing, converting her primary affects. (Irigaray 47)

Irigaray thus sees the mother-daughter relationship as one that is potentially divine. The route to divinity is not transcendental but incarnate, one that affirms the experiences of women. In *Dictee*, the mother-daughter relationship is similarly explored as well as the myth of Demeter and Persephone. It narrates the stories of several women including the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Cha's own mother Hyung Soon Kuo, a Manchurian-born Korean to first generation exiles as well as Cha's own story, and mystics such as Joan of Arc and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux across different times and spaces, interspersed with letters, photos, calligraphy and diagrams.

The first section of *Dictee* introduces the figure of the "disease" – a nameless character who is designated only by the pronoun "She." Cha's deployment of language reflects both avant-garde and modernist influences. There is pain and difficulty involved in speech, and an emphasis on the connection between body and language.

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures

with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position.

It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void.

From the back of her neck she releases her shoulders free. She swallows once more. (Once more. One more time would do.) In preparation. It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refuelling itself. Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak. (Cha 3)

The notion of mimicry is significant here and further links to Irigaray who uses the mimicry of male discourse in *Speculum of the Other Woman* to parody patriarchal modes of argument. Toril Moi states that: “Hers (Irigaray’s) is a theatrical staging of the mime: miming the miming imposed on women: Irigaray’s subtle specular move (her mimicry *mirrors* that of all women) intends to *undo* the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by *overdoing* them” (Moi 140).

This raises interesting questions of what it means (or meant, to Cha) to perform aspects of female subjectivity on the page. Cha was notable as a performance artist and in her performance piece *A Ble Wail*, Cha (1975) claimed an intention to create “the dream of the audience” through her work (LeWallenm 2001, 3) acknowledging the fluidity of movement between the artist, her artwork and the audience and simultaneously, the tensions and misinterpretations that might inevitably occur. In her art piece *Audience Distant Relative* (1977), she states:

you are the audience

you are my distant audience

i address you
as i would a distant relative
seen only heard only through someone else's
description

neither you nor I
are visible to each other
i can only assume that you can hear me
i can only hope that you can hear me (Cha 10-11)

There is a palpable sense of distance in Cha's work: distance from her mother country, from her audience, the audience from the text, and languages from each other, but also a yearning to belong. In some senses, the audience represents a privileged Other whose presence opens up the possibility of exchange.

Does Cha's writing, then, sacrifice the self, perhaps for symbolic reasons to do with rebirth, transformation or transcendence as well as for reasons that go beyond the self in order to tell a larger story, one that is mythic or archetypally significant, combining the personal with the historical?

Language and Power

Cha points to the ways in which female subjugation has traditionally taken place: "She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The other each occupying her" (Cha 3).

In these first few pages, the dynamic invoked is one between inner and outer. There is a mystery to the passage; the age of the "She" is unknown: is it a child or adult? However, what seems to be outlined in the female protagonist's difficult passage into language, which involves coercion, domination and

occupation. This seems especially significant given the colonial context of Korea: French missionaries' colonisation of Korea in the early twentieth century, Japanese occupation (1910-1945).

In invoking the difficulty involved in the act of speech, the "She" seems to reassert herself in the space/void of an "echo":

She allows herself caught in their threading, anonymously in their thick motion in the weight of their utterance. When the amplification stops, there might be an echo. She might make the attempt then. The echo part. At the pause. When the pause has already soon begun and has rested there still. She waits inside the pause. Inside her. Now. This very moment. Now. She takes rapidly the air, in gulfs, in preparation for the distances to come. The pause ends. The voice wraps another layer. Thicker now even. From the waiting. The wait from pain to say. To not to. Say. (Cha 4)

The act of speech is charged with urgency and intensity, and arises out of hesitation, the building of inner strength, and "waiting." Language is represented as the site for resistance and recreation:

She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver. (Cha 4)

There is a clear religious, mystical dimension, a sacrificial element: "She relays the others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering. Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them." Cha further describes a mystical, physical, bodily dissolution which takes place: "Now the weight...the whole weight to elevate upward" (Cha 4). The figure of the diseuse and Cha's depiction of multiple female characters in *Dictee* resonate with Irigaray's exploration of mystical discourse and the figure of the mystic in the essay, *La Mystérique*. Here, Irigaray explores the figure of the female mystic and the nature of "what, within a still theological ontological perspective is called mystic language or discourse" in ways that are powerfully reflected in the figure of the diseuse "She" in *Dictee* (Irigaray 191).

Mystic language and discourse are characterised as occurring necessarily “off-stage,” in “that other scene” within a realm that consciousness designates as ‘*cryptic*.’ Irigaray describes it as “the place where consciousness is no longer master, where to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames” (Irigaray 191). For women, the position of the female mystic offers the redemptive possibility of being a speaking subject, one which eludes boundaries, divisions, patriarchal logic:

This is the place where “she” – and in some cases he, if he follows “her” lead – speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about “subject” and “Other” flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another, about contempt for form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of jouissance and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason. (Irigaray 191)

Mystical discourse thus opens up a visible space, “the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly” in which the unconscious is able to give voice, to speak, and binary structures relating to categories of subject/other, inner/outer break down. It is a specifically female space, “The ‘soul’ escapes outside herself, opening up a crack in the cave (*une antr’ouverture*) so that she may penetrate herself once more. The walls of her prison are broken, the distinction between inside/outside transgressed” (Irigaray 192).

The French title of Irigaray’s densely poetic essay *La Mystérique* evokes multiple meanings of mysticism (*mysticisme*), mystery (*mystère*) and hysteria (*hystérie*) which are lost in English translation. These qualities are aligned to the feminine gender “*la*.” Joy, O’Grady and Poxon point out the highly allusive nature of Irigaray’s text, referring to “the mystical experience of Teresa of Avila, Simone de Beauvoir’s treatment of female mysticism in *The Second Sex*,” Bernini’s famous statue of Teresa, and Lacan’s well-known discussion of women’s desire, which uses Teresa’s mystical experience as an emblem of feminine eroticism” (Joy, Poxon, O’Grady 28).

Spivak (1999) in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* highlights this issue of representation in her oft-cited question “can the subaltern speak?” – she argues that for the “subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (Spivak 269, 272). However, perhaps the necessity is to show awareness of the limits of representation, rather than abstain from representation. Cha’s text thus points to inherent limitations in representing the postcolonial, diasporic subject. Additionally, this illustrates the problematic nature inherent in the act of speaking on behalf of silenced Korean women which exposes power relations between Cha as author/critic and the historical displacement of Korean women. These are acknowledged in the visual representation of gaps and silences by use of white space in between words, sentences and pages. Nevertheless, the opening seems to close on a note of empowerment and depicts a position of female resilience, fortitude and vulnerability:

She takes it. Slow. The invoking. All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times. The pause. Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter. (Cha 5)

To necessarily conclude, I want to end with a thought from a 2019 interview with Bhanu Kapil for MAP magazine where she reflects on the politics of poetry communities within US institutions, in avant-garde (white) spaces and with poets of colour. Kapil states, “I am thinking here, too, of something I heard M. NourbeSe Philip say, during a talk she gave at Naropa University, and which I scrawled on a napkin: “The purpose of avant-garde writing for a writer of colour is to prove you are human.” In the same way, Cha’s writing bravely creates a multi-faceted, hybrid space, one that both defines and transcends her subjectivity, opening up “a circle within a circle, a series of concentric circles,” to forge infinite possibilities. The mystical *disense* is exhorted to “break open the spell that is cast upon time upon time again and again” (Cha 175, 123).

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