

The Transitional Self and Tertium Quid in Theresa Cha's *Dictee*

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Abstract The essay addressed the representations of gender, identity, and nationalism in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's novel *Dictee* to argue that the text offers an interstitial space to conceptualize an identity that both invokes and resists the attempt by the dominant culture to contain the immigrant female self. The novel is composed of repeated silences, peculiar pauses, and narrative gaps found in translations that deviate from the original in an effort to explore the agency of an individual female subject within the national social order. The term "mistranslation" refers to the literary technique of directly altering meaning by leaving out an exact or equivalent translation between languages. Through mistranslation, the text reveals and disrupts the traditional use of translation during colonialism and imperialism as a method of cultural domination.

Key words *Dictee*; mistranslation; identity; Asian American literature

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's text *Dictee* (1982) is composed of repeated silences, peculiar pauses, and narrative gaps found in translations and mistranslations between English and French that explore the agency of a female subject within national narratives of culture and identity. The author's innovative formal qualities include frequent changing between English, Korean, and French that produce "mistranslations" of the original meaning, thus creating a novel that complicates national narratives of culture and identity. The book, which might best be called a mixed-media novel, is an autobiographical compilation of prose, poetry, drawing, maps, diagrams, and photography that follows the lives of several women including Cha herself, Yu Soon—a Korean revolutionary leader, Joan of Arc, Demeter, Persephone, and Cha's mother. The author's personal stories as a Korean native and Korean-American immigrant show a resistance to the forces of integration and assimilation under colonial and imperial forces. The poetic passages of the novel alternate between French and English to represent the transitional female identity as expressed seen through the views of

French colonialism and Korean nationalism. The term “mistranslation” refers to Cha’s literary technique of directly altering meaning by leaving out an exact or equivalent translation between languages. Through mistranslation, the text disrupts the traditional use of translation during colonialism as a method of cultural domination. Similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s “word of another,” Cha understands language as composed of multiple voices, most directly of the colonized other in resistance to the colonizer. The text sees the act of translation as a form of both domination and resistance. While the colonized are forced to use the colonizer’s language directly or indirectly, the speaker actively shapes the words for double meanings that allow her original voice through. In the dominant process of language reacquisition, the native language that is now “colonized” becomes temporarily silenced, but never permanently erased from consciousness. The colonial and imperial use of translation functions to assimilate the female subject into the dominant social order based on cultural hierarchies, wherein the colonized female individual is labeled as inferior.

Cha’s narrative of her own experience as a Korean immigrant woman in twentieth-century America offers a different model of translation as a mode of resistance. Translation in the text becomes the method by which immigrant subjects re-insert a self-chosen identity into the linguistic and metaphoric space that arise out of the overlap between two cultures, thereby allowing a third identity to emerge. This third identity is located both between and beyond the dominant and subordinated cultures. The alternative immigrant subjectivity is identified by Cha as *tertium quid*, which in Latin means a “third thing.” A *tertium quid* subjectivity is positioned not only in relation to the imperial and native culture, but also in relation to the individual, internal consciousness of the female subject’s personal life in America.

The literary technique of mistranslation creates dissonance within the narrative by dispelling the notion of equivalency in translation. The logic of equivalency between two or more cultures minimizes linguistic and social differences to suggest that meaning and identity are easily transmitted, unchanged between languages. Equivalency in translation is based on the idea that one word of meaning can be seen as an equal exchange for another meaning or experience. Yet it hides the fact that there exist difference and cultural hierarchies.

The use of translation occurs between Korean, the colonial French, and English. French is employed to refer the experience of French Catholic missionary activity in colonial and postcolonial Korea. Specifically, Cha directs our attention to the French colonial project to educate Koreans within foreign institutions of education that stress language acquisition at the cost of suppressing native languages. English is employed to refer to the language of the imperial United States during the mid-twentieth century and later, as well as to refer to the experience of Cha as a female Korean immigrant in

America who lives as a disenfranchised citizen. Cha employs these languages to show that the imposition of an outside, foreign language increasingly suppresses Korean language, cultural practices, and forms of knowledge.

More than showing the multiple layers of colonial and imperial domination through the use of mistranslation, the passages create a new or third meaning that is not found in a single language or culture. These alternative meanings that erupt symbolize the ability of the Korean American subject to challenge dominant forms of representation and immigrant identity by manipulating imperial cultural institutions of language production, which demonstrates that subjectivity cannot be represented uniculturally.

New forms of language and meaning challenge the dominant social order that dictates proper ways of assimilation for the female immigrant. The proper ways to assimilate include accepting the notion of equivalency that ignores the cultural hierarchies and forces one to speak “properly” following the rules of grammar and knowing when to be silent.¹ Cha employs silence in unique ways throughout the text and directly addresses the suppression of an individual voice in the colloquial American phrase “bite your tongue” in an ironic sense in the poem “Urania/Astronomy” when the speaker commands herself and the reader to stay silent. The immigrant subject resists the “proper” roles of speaking and acting by breaking the rules of language in order to express an alternative voice that narrates the lived experience of domination and assimilation that enforces a silence upon the subject.

In our attempt to understand the function of translation as a method of assimilation within the process of colonization and imperialism, it becomes apparent that language is one of the first tools used to assimilate the subject under a new order of rule. Language is an instrument of power that provides the means for representation and constitution as a legitimate subject of the new nation. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon explains that language is the primary medium by which the colonizers control the colonized subject because the ability to speak affords the possibility of assuming a position within a culture (53). Lisa Lowe argues that “deviation” in language, such as found in the mistranslations in Cha’s novel, is the location where the self is articulated not only because the self resists racist domination through language but also due to the unspoken narrative in the gap of translating that allows the marginalized self to act (Lowe 38). In Cha’s text, colonization requires the subject adopt the language of colonizers because it is language that transmits the moral dualities of identity formation within the colonial social order, which simultaneously legitimizes and degrades the native subject. Colonization therefore dictates a dualistic paradigm of identity formation that articulates a subjectivity within a hierarchical framework of identity and culture. Writing on the subject of colonization,

language, and identity, Lisa Lowe explains the contradiction of the colonial formation of subjectivity:

The imposition of the colonial language and its cultural institutions, among them the novel, demands the subject's internalization of the 'superiority' of the colonizer and the 'inferiority' of the colonized, even as it attempts to evacuate the subject of the 'native' language, traditions, and practices. (97)

Lowe argues that the encounter between the colonizer and colonized demands that the colonized must void or suppress notions of identity based in 'native' culture. However, the attempt to void the native or pre-colonial culture is paired with the employment of the native culture as a relational point of difference that defines the colonial culture, thus creating a subject that is inferior yet necessary. The dissonance between the attempt to erase the subject's past and the attempt to employ the subject's past as a basis for moral comparison to the superior colonial culture creates the grounds for the subject's resistance. This resistance is precisely due to the fact that the contradiction demanded by the colonial culture is too impractical.

Forced assimilation produces both the silences and fragmentations of the indigenous and colonized subjects, which give way to the articulation of a dominant social order that marginalizes the female immigrant. However, the dissonance between the indigenous and colonial cultures provides a place for resistance to the dominant culture because language is manipulated by the initially silenced individual to serve the needs of a newly formed subject. This new subjectivity is fashioned partly in resistance to domination, but partly as a personal and non-public representation of the individual. Language is a tool of power used by the colonizers, but colonial language can also be co-opted by the colonized to challenge the power of the dominant social order. *Dictee* reveals this process through sections of poetry and prose that employ autobiographical references to the female Korean American immigrant who breaks the rule of language and the 'proper' order of assimilation by refusing inferior status. For example, the poem in the chapter "Urania/Astronomy" begins with the speaker listening to the sounds of swans and rain, then transits into a list of speech organs. The poem takes the reader on an imaginative journey into the physical body in an attempt to understand the *origin* and impact of speech.

In the opening stanzas, the speaker relates a feeling of confusion with images of the physical body trying to express itself:

Impossible de distinguer les paroles
Exhalees. Affirmees en exhalation. . . .

La language dedans. La bouche dedans
La gorge dedans
Le poumon l'organe seul
Toute ensemble un. Une.

Not possible to distinguish the speech
 Exhaled. Affirmed in exhalation . . .

Tongue inside the mouth inside
 The throat inside
 The lung organ alone. The only organ.
 All assembled as one. Just one. (66-67)

Confusion arises in the first line because the speaker is unable to “distinguish the speech” and unable to speak herself it seems. The focus on exhalation addresses the anxiety about wanting to speak but being afraid to articulate sound and self. We are caught in a moment of silence, where the repetitive stress on the words *dedans/inside* draws further attention to the body and physical organs of breath and sound—the tongue, mouth, throat, and lung.

By focusing on the body as the site of language production for the female immigrant subject, readers become aware of the fact that language is not produced merely through physical movement of organs, but depends upon a cultural ideology that directs acceptable speech production. This brings to light Cha’s perspective on the explosive interplay of the body, culture, and colonization as a process that relies upon the immigrant for the expression of power and resistance to that state power. Identity formation within the colonial social order demands dualistic and hierarchical relationships wherein the integration of the subject is based upon identifying with the dominant social order and the contradictory erasure of the native culture. As the moment of speech gestures toward the subject’s formation and agency, the ambiguity of meaning in the speech act embodies the silent agency of the subject, the unspoken narrative of the self in the gap between languages.

The formation of identity in Cha’s text occurs through linguistic representation, allowing the themes of resistance to come across in the act of speech itself. For instance, the divergent punctuation in the first line of the second stanza occurs through the placement of the period that alters the meaning between the French and English lines. The French text reads: “*La language dedans. La bouche dedans,*” while the English ‘translation’ (or mistranslation) reads: “Tongue inside the mouth inside.” The

simple displacement of the period radically alters the meaning of each sentence in each language, further underscoring the notion that meaning is culturally contingent. The English version indicates a sense of unraveling as the imagery delves quickly into the body via the speech organs. In contrast, the French sentence comes across factually with a period separating the description of the tongue and mouth. The French language thus functions as a perfunctory explanation while the English version gives rise to a heightened feeling of panic by linking the tongue and mouth, suggesting that both organs are encapsulated by something larger. The idea that the tongue and mouth rest “inside” the body but also beyond the body, points toward the function of ideology by suggesting the formation of identity is attached to any speech act.

The altered meaning of the aforementioned phrase between French and English occurs with the lost period, which reminds the reader of the nonequivalency of languages and cultures. In other words, Cha repeatedly articulates her view that knowledge and identity are created in culturally specific spheres which are not communicated ‘equally’ between cultures. This inequality shows that a subject is never fully formed or integrated within any national order or ideology. It also indicates that a subject must always have avenues of resistance to the dominant order that tries to minimize difference and erase minorities within the majority. This calls forth the dilemma elucidated by Edward Said when he inquires about the problems that arise in asserting a different identity than that of the colonized self. The asserting of a new identity is an effort to “discover the bases of an integral identity different from the formerly dependent and derivative one” (213).

Frequently throughout the text Cha employs the technique of misplaced punctuation that creates improper pauses in the narrative in order to stress the impossibility of achieving absolute equivalence between cultures and meanings. The minor grammatical change of one period does indeed alter the meaning of the stanza because there is a pause in the French text that does not occur in the English version. These discrepancies found in the mistranslation between two or more language almost always involve a silence of lack thereof in the book. Thus, the placement of silence or moments of pausing become the linguistic and metaphoric space where Cha articulates an alternative Korean American agency.

Narrative gaps between translated texts represent the deceptive silence arising in the processes of forced assimilation and translation wherein the female Korean American speaker resists the inferior positioning imposed by the government. The act of translation can also be an act of resistance. Mistranslations do not reproduce the original form and therefore function to resist colonial/imperial attempts to erase the native past and the present immigrant identity. These narrative gaps left from mistranslation, as noted above, employ the logic of nonequivalency, which rejects the

duality of superior and inferior social roles. Nonequivalency is also a rejection of the concept of exchange value that makes different things the same and of the attempts to obliterate the hierarchical relations between a dominant and oppressed culture.

As the poem continues, alterations in language accompany an emphasis on the experience of erasure. This experience, however, gives rise to the events of resistance found in repeated mistranslations and moments of silence in later chapters. The untitled poem in the chapter “Urania/Astronomy” quoted above ends with images of violence and dismemberment that are paired with images of resistance and deceptive silence:

*Mordre la langue. Avaler. Profondement.
Plus Profondement. Avaler. Plus encore.
Ju'usqu'a ce qu'il n'ya aurait plus d'organe. (70)*

Bite the tongue. Between the teeth. Swallow
deep. Deeper. Swallow. Again, even more.
Until there would be no more organ. (71).

The juxtaposition of these moments works to show the refusal of the Korean American subject to be written into the dominant American narratives of assimilation that only offer the immigrant inferior public roles within the national social and linguistic order. The stanza below begins with the speaker telling herself, as well as the reader, to devour the self. Immediately before these lines above, the speaker contemplates the disappearance of written language by imagining the absence of punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, pages, books. Here, we find the disappearance not only of written language, but of speech as well. The violence of the act is disconcerting and underscores limitations on agency as a marginalized subject. Even in the restraint or violence upon the self, the subject ascribes value to the silence. From the outside, the subject is silent, but from within ferocious activity taking place upon the self, the tongue painfully disrupts the hegemonic order that attempts to control the female subject.²

The impossible, agonizing act of eating one's own tongue symbolizes the painful process of speaking an imposed language of the dominant culture. Cha commands how to bite and swallow the speaking instrument of the tongue; one must sever the articulation of yourself in the forms made available through colonial and imperial languages. The speaker wants to swallow her own tongue, the source of the speech production that articulates identity, in an attempt to defy imperial demands to speak and act ‘properly.’

In this section quoted above Cha comments on the dissonance between the inner self and external social reality created by that act of speaking the imperial or national language. Craig Calhoun reminds us that “nationalism is not just a doctrine, however, but a more basic way of talking, thinking, and acting” (11). Assimilation produces painful moments for the immigrant who must renounce aspects of the self in order to articulate an identity in the adopted culture. However, this violent form of self-silencing by biting and swallowing one’s tongue is an act of resistance as well because the speaker refuses to accept the dominant narratives that demand a subjugated positioning in order to begin to speak. The speaker in Cha’s poem nullifies the rules, both grammatical and ideological of the colonial/imperial cultures. The violent, self-inflicted pain of silence through devouring speech organs suggests that the speaker wants to control her own representational status in the language. Therefore, the subject refuses to speak the imperial language in the terms set forth. Cha makes the body acutely visible in these sections by materializing an otherwise invisible process. To a certain degree, Cha indicates that it is the physical body that marks the limitations of assimilation into the dominant culture.

In the final stanzas of the poem, the speaker “voids the words” of the dominant language and then she “voids the silence” (73). This gestures toward the belief that the speaker has the ability to void the imposed dictum of an inferior subjectivity that conforms to the colonial/imperial paradigms of power relations. Voiding the silence imposed by colonialism and imperialism gives rise to new forms of agency that are articulated in the “broken speech” and “pidgeon” languages that stop and start at odd times in relation to the internal demands of the individual rather than the external demands of the nation.

The emphasis on interruption in the these stanzas below further underscores the view that the immigrant subject will create an alternative identity by deviating from expectations of the dominant culture. The effect of introducing an alternative identity or source of agency works to disrupt the dominant position of the colonial language. Rather than a French (mis)translation of the text for this passage, there is an anatomical drawing of the head, chest, and speech organs. This draws our attention to the point that speech and language rules are produced by the ideology of the dominant social order, which enacts cultural hierarchies and moral dualities between imperial nation and immigrant subject.

Stop. Start. Starts

Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise.

Broken speech. One to one. At a Time.

Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.

Pidgeon. Semblance of speech.
 swallows. Inhales. Stutter. Starts. Stops before
 starts.

Stop start. Where proper pauses were expected.
 But no more. (75)

The speaker's interruptions and unexpected silences create hybrid forms such as a "pidgeon" language. Repeated emphasis falls upon the notion of "proper rests" in the passage above. However, Cha suggests that improper rests are the places where the individual actively resists assimilation. These stanzas are composed of rests where language is broken off and stopped short of expectation so that new meanings emerge. The speaker begins but stops abruptly on the line, emphasizing the inhalation and exhalation of breath that focuses upon the body. The physical function reflects the interiority of the self wherein identity is demarcated by the breath and the pause—the moments of silence that turn into contemplative resistance. The last line is a defiant stance of the speaker's rejection of the rules of speech and translation that demand uniformity. After biting off and swallowing the metaphoric tongue of imperial culture, the speaker articulates an alternative identity that does not conform to the "proper pauses" in the language.

The text's improper pauses are part of the new, hybrid language or pidgeon speech that considered by the dominant culture as broken speech, however for Cha this is precisely where a new subjectivity is formulated. The new language and agency that she creates in this poem does not simply borrow from other cultures but actually creates a new alternative language. This displaces hegemonic rules of order and assimilation because it reveals the multiplicity of meaning that incorporates endless forms of subjectivity. The speaker's pidgeon language accords agency in other forms that acknowledges the painful process of assimilation and resistance. The positioning of the letter 'g' in the word pidgeon creates allusions to the common pigeon bird. Thus, pidgeon speech is a play on words that hybridizes the word even further because it also symbolizes freedom and escape from domination and social erasure in the image of a flying bird.

Dictee disrupts the subjugated positioning of the Korean American subject in the process of assimilation through language by manipulating the process of translation that creates the possibility of an alternative identity within these indeterminate spaces of speech. Rather than defining the subject in a dualistic relation between imperial and native culture, the 'cracked tongue' subject speaks an alternative language that contains reference points to both imperial U.S. and Korean cultures as well as colonial

French culture. The tertium quid for Cha is this alternative immigrant subject who resists assimilation into the dominant social order by refusing to speak “properly.” In addition, the tertium quid identity refuses the abstract notions of native cultural identity located only in relation to Korea or located within a dualistic framework of the dominant and the oppressed. For example, the book opens with a prose poem that questions the standards by which identity is defined:

From a Far
 What nationality
 or what kindred and relation
 what blood relation
 what blood ties of blood
 what ancestry
 what race generation
 what house clan tribe sock strain
 what lineage extraction
 what breed sect gender denomination caste
 what stray ejection misplaced
 Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other
 Tombe des nues de naturalized
 What transplant to dispel upon (20)

This opening poem demonstrates the text's project as a whole to explore the social methods of demarcating the self in a relational opposition to another. The text asks us to imagine identity outside of social categories and cultural dualities by suggesting tertium quid as the better possibility—identity found between the mistranslations and the silences of the speaker. Identity throughout Cha's unique text is not defined in normative colonial or postcolonial categories based upon hierarchies, but conceptualized as a hybridized form of a language that is shaped by the speaker, rather than the nation or political elite. Korean American identity is understood in relation to the dominant culture but is best defined by an internal dialogue that rejects hegemonic dualities of order and meaning.

Notes

1. See Lisa Low, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Lowe examines the formal deviations of colonized literary production, which contradict national narratives that attempt to incorporate the subject into the dominant social order.

2. See L. Hyun Yi Kang, "The "Liberatory Voice" of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*." *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. Eds. Norman Alarcon and Elaine H. Kim. Oakland: Third Woman Press, 1994.

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