

# The Disease's Performativity:

## Subjectification, Truth, & Essence in Dictee

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**ABSTRACT:** Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's postmodern autobiographical text *Dictee* follows the narrating disease – a student of dictation and daughter of a Korean exile. Her unfaithful and often disrupted re-narration – through dictation – emerges as *Dictee*'s master-motif, marshalling the motifs of resistance to subjectification and motherhood. By situating the text in theoretical conversations on subjectification, the metaphysics of presence, and performativity, I argue that in her dictation, the disease performatively animates memories of – and reunites her mother with – a multiply transformed and divided Korea.

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**KEYWORDS:** *Dictee*, essence, ideology, literary criticism, metaphysics, performativity, subjectification

## I

The narrating “disease” (i.e., reciter) – a student of dictation and daughter of a Korean exile – is the central figure of Korean American author Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s postmodern autobiographical text *Dictee*. Throughout, she fails to faithfully reproduce in her dictation the multiple and often intersecting colonial and nationalist subjectifications (i.e., transformations into ideological subjects) of Korea and its people: by French Catholic missionaries from the nineteenth century, while under Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, into the Korean nationalist body during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, and by the United States upon emigration from and return to a divided Korea (Lowe 1996, 135). Drawing on American studies scholar Lisa Lowe’s contention that “unfaithful” dictation is the text’s “emblematic topos” (131-132), consolidating such motifs as resistance to subjectification and motherhood, I engage *Dictee* with theory on subjectification, the metaphysics of presence, and performativity. The disease’s self-conscious, unfaithful enactment of dictation, in consolidating *Dictee*’s sub-motifs, performatively animates memories of – and reunites her mother with – a multiply transformed and divided Korea.

I will first define, with reference to Lowe, dictation as a means of subjectification and resistance, identifying the disease’s deviation from the model of dictation as simultaneously exemplifying and complicating Structuralist Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s interpellation: the process wherein individuals are hailed into subjectivity (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, 701). I use Althusser to explain how the unfaithfully dictating disease is determined not only by conflicting ideological hailings, but also in resistance to them. With reference to deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence, I shift to explain that – because of the trace left by Korea’s multiple subjectifications – the disease cannot articulate memories from any ‘essential’ Korea. This culminates in my explanation of how the disease’s unfaithful dictation performatively reunites her mother with their motherland.

## II

Dictation is a pedagogical technique wherein the student renders “an oral example into a written equivalent” (Lowe 1996, 131). By reproducing what is dictated, the student internalizes the lesson, and “all students are iterated and abstracted as uniform, generically equivalent sites of these reproductions” (131). In *Dictee*, dictation is a “model for other processes through which cultural ideological systems transform individuals into subjects” (135). The disease, however, is unfaithful to the model of dictation that requires faithful reproduction: she “recites poorly, stutters, stops, and leaves verbs unconjugated. She fails to imitate



the example and is unfaithful to the original” (132). Lowe notices that the text’s opening dictation exercise – which alludes to early-nineteenth-century French Catholic missionary activity in Korea – features two significant deviations from the model of dictation: first, the disease, rather than reproducing the French oral example verbatim, translates it into English, marking herself as “unevenly ‘dictated’” by colonial languages (Cha 2001, 1; Lowe 1996, 133). Also, rather than obeying punctuation rules, the disease writes out the grammar commands, rendering “explicit the disciplinary artifice of the dictation,” thus indicating a “‘failed’ subjectation” (Lowe 1996, 133). Deviating from the model of dictation to repudiate subjectification – of herself, her mother, and of Korea – is, indeed, one of *Dictee*’s central motifs.

Ideology, for Louis Althusser, is constituted materially in its subjects via interpellation – his conceptualization of subjectification – whereby subjects, upon hailing, “are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of [Ideological State Apparatuses or ISAs]” (Althusser 1970, 701). Good subjects misrecognize the ideology into which they have been interpellated as the real state of affairs, “working by themselves” within the regulations of ISAs (701). Conversely, subjects who are not adequately interpellated – “bad subjects” – may be sanctioned by the “repressive State apparatus” (701). In *Dictee*, the disease’s articulation of colonial, nationalist, and foreign instances of subjectification can be read simultaneously as Althusserian interpellation and unfaithful dictation (Lowe 1996, 139; 145). For example, in “Calliope/Epic Poetry,” the disease retrospectively re-narrates to her mother her colonial subjectification following the 1910 occupation of Korea by Japan. At the same time, the dictation throughout the section is littered not only with sentence fragments, run-ons, and gaps within words, but also uses the forbidden Korean

word for “heart” – “Mah-uhm” – five times (Cha 2011, 45-46). In Japanese-occupied Korea, speaking Korean was forbidden, so in the disease’s unfaithful dictation of Japanese colonialism, she constructs for her mother a “fragmented and indirect” relationship with the “mother tongue” (Lowe 1996, 140). The disease’s dictation, at once exemplifying and resisting Althusserian interpellation, thus reunites her displaced mother with her language (140).

Though certainly exemplary of interpellation, dictation indicates that resistance to ideological hegemony is more complex than Althusser’s notion of nonconforming “bad subjects,” and is determined, rather, by conflicting interpellations faced by the subject at a particular time (Lowe 1996, 146-147). Such resistance is demonstrated in the previously discussed dictation exercise, in which the student translates the example into English – another language of domination – rather than the prescribed French. Indeed, throughout *Dictee*, the disease “makes use of her own partial fluencies in English and French to revoice that censoring [of her mother] and to forge a new composite voice” (Lowe 1996, 140). Another instance of an opposing ideology as a site of resistance is found in “*Calliope/Epic Poetry*,” in which the disease illustrates her mother’s internal recourse to French Catholicism while a Japanese subject: “From the *Misere* to *Gloria* to *Magnificat* and *Sanctus*. To the *Antiphonal* song... The sacrifice, the votive, the devotions, the novenas, the matins, the lauds, the vespers, the vigils, the evensong, the night-song,...” (Cha 2001, 46-47, emphasis original). Here, earlier interpellation by French Catholicism implied by names of hymns (‘*Misere*’, ‘*Gloria*’, ‘*Magnificat*’, ‘*Sanctus*’) and Catholic rituals (‘*novenas*’, ‘*matins*’) is, for the disease’s mother, a means of resistance to the Japanese occupation. Hence, the disease’s unfaithful dictation – in its navigation of linguistic and colonial hailings – identifies recourse to a conflicting ideological hailing, rather than simply failed interpellation, as a means of resistance to subjectivity.

### III

In her dictation of her mother’s colonial subjectification, the disease “cannot perform a simple, untroubled recovery of the ‘mother tongue’ either for herself and for her mother – any more than there exists, for Koreans or Korean Americans, an unproblematic return to a precolonial and unpartitioned Korean ‘homeland’” (Lowe 1996, 140). Put otherwise, because Korea has been transformed variably over time, there exists no singular referent Korea from which memory can be animated. Dictation, thus, can be identified with Jacques Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of

presence: the notion that “the mind’s ability to grasp the presence of an object or of an idea [is] the gold standard of truthfulness” (Derrida 2004, 300). Derrida contends that any attempt to grasp the present as the locus of truth is bound to fail, as the present at a given moment is informed by the trace left by past presences (278; 294-295). Korea bears not only the trace of French missionary colonialism, but also of Japanese rule and American intervention. The latter is elucidated in the following passage from “*Melpomene/Tragedy*,” depicting the nationalist transformation of individuals during the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 (Lowe 1996, 135): “You are your post you are your vow in *nomine patris* you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen” (Cha 2011, 86, emphasis mine). As Lowe points out, the identification between South Korean soldiers (‘you’) being called to service for their fatherland (“in *nomine patris*”) is reflective of Japanese colonial attempts to subjectify individual Korean subjects into one nation (‘you are your nation’), and American exploitation of Korean nationalists’ internal divisions to defeat Japan in WWII (‘subversive infiltration from your own countrymen’) (Lowe 1996, 142-143), resulting in the nation’s 1948 partition (135). In the same way that, for Derrida, the present bears the trace of past presences, Korea bears the traces of French Catholicism, Japanese occupation, and American intervention. These traces mean that there exists no one present Korea from which memory can be truthfully animated, so the disease’s unfaithful dictation repudiates the metaphysics of presence.

It is precisely the lack of a truthful referent Korea that underscores the disease’s articulation of memory as performative. For Judith Butler, “gender is in no way a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519). In the same way that there is no essential gender from which acts proceed, for the disease, there is no essential Korea from which memories can be dictated. Moreover, like the acts that constitute gender denote not the actor’s identity, but the illusion of identity (Butler 1988, 520), dictation articulates illusions of Korea. Because there is no essential Korea, the disease is able to performatively re-articulate memories of her homeland, like, as Lowe points out, in her re-narration of the 1919 Korean nationalist resistance against Japanese colonialism in her account of seventeen-year-old Yu Guan Soon’s martyrdom (Butler 1988, 141): “Child revolutionary child patriot woman soldier deliverer of nation. The eternity of one act. Is the completion of one existence.

One martyrdom. For the history of one nation. Of one people” (Cha 2001, 37, emphasis mine). In figuring a young woman’s martyrdom for the memory of the Korean nation (‘woman soldier deliverer of nation’, ‘one martyrdom. For the history of one nation’), the disease performatively re-narrates and, as Lowe clarifies, feminizes Korean nationalism (Lowe 1996, 140-141). In so doing, she performs a feminine motherland in opposition to a “masculine, nationalist state formation” (141). To borrow a final analogy from Butler, “a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but . . . requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (1988, 526). Perhaps Korea, as defined by significant dates and geography, is the surviving script, and the disease, in her unfaithful dictation, is the actor performing her.

Like Korea, the disease’s mother remains as a script with no stable essence and has been differently performed over time: as a French (Cha 2001, 1-19) and Japanese colonial subject (45-53) as an immigrant to the United States, and as an exile in her own motherland (56-58). The disease’s unfaithful dictation, however, performatively reconnects her mother with her non-essential motherland. She does so, for instance, in her performance of a “fragmented and indirect” connection of mother with the motherland through their “mother tongue” in resistance to Japanese colonialism (Lowe 1996, 140; Cha 2001, 43-60). As well, the disease’s mother bears the trace of United States, which becomes both exiles’ home and is responsible for Korea’s partition in 1948 (Cha 2001, 56-58). She bears this trace still upon return to the motherland: “You return and are not one of them, they treat you with indifference” (56). But, because the traces of French Catholicism, Japanese colonialism, and the United States efface any essential national identity of her mother, the disease is able to performatively “actualize and reproduce as reality” (Butler 1988, 526) her lasting connection to her motherland: “Will and will only espouse this land this sky this time this people. You are one same particle. You leave you come back to the shell left empty all this time” (Cha 2001, 57, emphasis mine). Despite no essential motherland remaining, the disease here retrospectively, performatively, and poignantly affirms the mother’s intimate connection with her motherland: “You are one same particle” (57).

#### IV

Consolidating the motifs of subjectification and motherhood, the disease’s dictation is Dickey’s master-motif. By bringing it into conversation with Althusser’s interpellation, Derrida’s repudiation of the metaphysics of presence, and Butler’s critique of essentialism, I have identified dictation to be performative. It is this perfor-

mativity that allows the disease, in her self-consciously “unfaithful” (Lowe 1996, 132) recounting of fragmented memories, to not only articulate a voice in resistance to colonial, nationalist, and masculine determinations of herself, her mother, and Korea, but also reunite her mother with their motherland.

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