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Love as a Contact Zone in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982)

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ABSTRACT

In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's (1951-1982) fragmented, multi-lingual, and non-linear novel *Dictee*, love is a contact zone that brings together Korean, French, Greek, and unidentified female characters who are silenced and oppressed in patriarchal societies. By connecting fictional and historical women across time and space, the novel shows how love serves as a political tool that endorses patriarchal, religious, and nationalist ideologies: Patriotic love connects French and Korean national heroines, Yu Guan Soon and Joan of Arc; the French Saint Thérèse's unconditional love for Jesus is juxtaposed with an unnamed wife's slave-like position in marriage; and maternal love brings together an unnamed Korean mother and her Korean-American daughter with the Greek goddesses Persephone and Demeter. The novel shows how female sexual desire has been repressed and domesticated as women channel their love towards their nation, family, and Christ.

Keywords: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*, contact zone, love, feminism, nationalism

In the Korean-American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's (1951-1982) novel, *Dictee*, love is a contact zone between Korean and non-Korean women, whose voices have been muted and suppressed in colonial and patriarchal societies. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt (1992) defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the global today" (4). A contact zone between diverse forms of genres (autobiography, fiction, history, and poetry) and languages (Korean, English, and French), *Dictee* is a site where multiple voices of women from different social, national, and historical backgrounds blend and clash. Women across time and space come in contact in Cha's transcultural and fragmented narrative of an unnamed Korean mother and her unnamed Korean-American daughter, who, like the author, immigrates to the United States with her family and attends a French Catholic School in San Francisco. The stories of these unnamed Korean women merge with those of the French Catholic saints, Joan of Arc (1412-1431) and Thérèse Martin of Lisieux (1873-1897), Queen Min (1851-1895) of Korea's Chosŏn dynasty, and Yu Guan Soon (1903-1920, hereafter Yu Kwansun, except in direct quotations from *Dictee*), a young Korean woman who took part in demonstrations against the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945).

What connects "geographically and historically separated" women (Pratt

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1992, 6) in *Dictee*, is love that has been used as a political tool to maintain female subordination to nationalist, patriarchal, and colonial powers. Mythological, unidentified, and historical female characters come in contact as they express dictated forms of love that serve the interests of nationalist, religious, and patriarchal ideologies: Queen Min, St. Joan, and Yu Kwansun die for national causes; an unnamed wife obeys her despotic husband; and St. Thérèse devotes herself to her divine spouse, Jesus. As they connect through their shared love for their nation, husband, and for Christ, the text shows how women's love has been "domesticated, repressed and channeled in socially acceptable ways" (Duben and Behar 1991, 88). Opposing socially imposed forms of love, *Dictee* elevates maternal love that excludes "the fathers"—nation, husband, and Jesus; and connects the unnamed Korean mother-daughter with the Greek goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. In supporting matrilineal tradition, *Dictee* also questions the universality of heterosexual love by letting Sappho, the ancient Greek lesbian poet, speak first in the text. An intermediary between female characters, love creates a site of cultural plurality where women connect despite their ethnic, religious, and cultural differences.

There has not been much analysis of the role of emotion in *Dictee* other than Anne A. Cheng's (2000) and Jennifer Cho's (2011) studies on melancholy. Current scholarship on *Dictee* primarily focuses on its multilayered and nonlinear form. In her contribution to *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, a collection of essays on *Dictee*, Lisa Lowe (1994), for example, argues that the text is not a bildungsroman of self-formation and self-education and that its non-developmental narrative "problematizes the uniformity of ethnic gendered, or nationalist identity and genre" (38). She adds that *Dictee*'s fragmented structure resists the reader's desire to impose a single literary theory to decipher the text. In "The enunciation of the tenth muse," Stella Oh (2002) agrees with Lowe that "the fragmentary nature of *Dictee*" becomes "the site for resistance" against conventions of genre (12). For Anne A. Cheng (1998), Cha writes in fragments in order not to repeat or resurrect official Korean history. Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2005), in "What of the Partition," on the other hand, reads *Dictee* as a "fractured epic journey" that portrays the "broken" and "cracked" voices of suppressed women in patriarchal societies (214). Anne A. Cheng (2000), Eric Hayot (2006), Hyo Kim (2008), and Sue Kim (2008) focus specifically on how the identities of the narrator and the narratee are fragmented, and how who is addressing whom is mostly indeterminable in the text.

Since the publication of *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, many scholars have connected the fragments on Sappho, French saints, Greek muses, and Korean immigrants in the context of Korean history and Cha's multi-ethnic identity. Elaine Kim (1994) comments that it is impossible to talk about *Dictee*'s experimental form independent of Cha's Korean heritage: "She foregrounds a highly specific cultural context, inserting Korea, Korean women, and Korean Americans into the discourse" (8). For Helena Grice (2000), Cha "attempts to tell her personal and national stories through female voices which are fractured"; and her "primary project" is to "creat[e] a Korean (American) national identity which is gendered" (44). In "Suspicious Characters," Sue-Im Lee (2002) examines how the novel engages

with "the politics of Asian American identity" and renders "Asian American subjects socially and culturally visible" (229).

While paying close attention to *Dictee*'s collage structure and cultural context, I propose including a third dimension—the politics of love—to examine how mythological, historical, and fictional female characters are set in dialogue. The text challenges the romantic view of emotion as being biological and universal; and relates emotion to power, ideology, and colonialism (Lutz and White 1986). Social constructionists, like Clifford Geertz (1973), argue that "not only ideas, but emotions too, are cultural artifacts" (81). In *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) also discuss emotion in the context of "sociability and power" and "the politics of everyday life"; "rather than internal states" (1-2). Linking emotion and politics, I examine how Cha's female characters connect because their love is intertwined with nationalist, religious, and patriarchal discourses that regulate female sexual conduct and support traditional female roles of passivity and silence. *Dictee* also questions the socially constructivist views of emotion by elevating maternal love as being instinctual. The following three sections examine how culturally constructed forms of love maintain women's social conformity, and how the text imagines love—maternal and lesbian—that excludes fathers.

Love for the Nation: Queen Min, Yu Kwansun, and Joan of Arc

"Nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love," Maurizio Viroli (1995, 5) writes in *For Love of Country*, but *Dictee* shows how both Korean and non-Korean women's national love has been confined to the domestic sphere. They are not allowed to be fighters, but expected to be virtuous mothers, who bring up potential warriors for the nation. In "Begetting the Nation," Seungsook Moon (1998) writes that while Korean men, as "founders of the nation," are "righteous warriors or patriotic soldiers," women's only role in Korean nationalism is to be "the bearers of sons who will inherit and defend it" (57). Excluded from "soldiering" (Moon, 57), Korean women are expected to sacrifice their sons for the nation. The unnamed Korean mother, in *Dictee*, for example, has to be proud of her martyred son, who "shed blood to be set [*sic*] an example"[1] (83) during the 1960 Korean revolt against the dictatorial rule of the South Korea's first President, Syngman Rhee. The patriarchal structure of Korean nationalism is evident as it expects not women, but men to be national heroes and martyrs whose deeds are celebrated in history. However, the three national heroines—Queen Min, Yu Kwansun, Joan of Arc—leave their domestic sphere to fight for the nations they love.

Clio, the muse of history, recalls the intelligent and ambitious, Queen Min (1851-1895) of Korea's Chosŏn dynasty, who was not content with her traditional subservient role. In fact, she was strong enough to challenge the regency of her father-in-law, the Hungsŏn Taewŏn'gun, who hoped to maintain his power by marrying his child-king son to an orphan wife who was expected to lack significant

[1] *Dictee* is also unconventional in that it does not always respect rules of grammar. Or, one might say, the grammar of the narrator reflects the hybridity of her situation.

family support or political allies. However, he did not realize that as an orphan the queen had the opportunity to educate herself without an authoritative father figure to teach her patriarchal ideals of femininity. In fact, the sixteen-year-old bride did not let her father-in-law use her as a political pawn, and even had a role in his "retirement as regent" (Kun Jong Lee 2006, 85). She also sought to protect Korea against the Japanese threat. In 1895, a gang of toughs in the service of the Japanese consul assassinated her and burned the corpse of this intelligent, patriotic, and ambitious Queen, who had stridently opposed the Japanese occupation of Korea.

Dictee presents Queen Min's death as leading to the 1919 Korean independence movement, which although Queen Min had died more than twenty years before the demonstrations, enables Cha to connect these two historical moments. In particular, it allows the Queen's assassination to serve as the inspiration for Yu Kwansun to rebel against the Japanese in 1919:

> In Guan Soon's 16th year, 1919, the conspiracy by the Japanese to overthrow the Korean Government is achieved with the assassination of the ruling Queen Min and her royal family.[2] In the aftermath of the incident, Guan Soon forms a resistant [*sic*] group with fellow students and actively begins her revolutionary work. (30)

Dictee supports a multidimensional and asymmetrical view of time by presenting the date of Queen's death not as 1895 but 1919. In *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*, Leslie Scalapino (1999) focuses on how different time periods can occur separately and at the same moment in writing: "The implications of time as activity—the future being in the past and present, these times separate and going on simultaneously, equally active … suggest a non-hierarchical structure in which all times exist at once" (3). "All times exist at once," as the narrative presents the Queen's death and Yu Kwansun's protest against the Japanese in 1919. The abrupt shift from 1895 to 1919 marks the Queen and Yu Kwansun as women who inspired national consciousness.

Patriotic love also brought the death of Yu Kwansun, who was beaten to death in a Japanese prison for continuously shouting for Korean independence (Sohn Pow-key 1982, 265). Ironically, while nationalist discourses inspire unconditional love and commitment to the nation, in *Dictee* Koreans try to dissuade Kwansun from leading a nationwide demonstration: "There is already a nationally organized movement, who do not accept her seriousness, her place as a young woman, and they attempt to dissuade her. She is not discouraged and demonstrates to them her conviction and dedication in the cause" (Cha, 30). Although Korean nationalist discourses define love not as a romantic relationship, but a political passion to serve Korea, Koreans, according to the narrator, do not want Kwansun to be a political actor. Many historical sources, on the other hand, claim that Korean male authors called on women to join forces with men and to fight against Japanese imperialism (Kyung-Ai Kim 1996, 68). *Dictee* reminds us of Korean women's active participation

[2] Japan had actually annexed Korea in 1910. Moreover, with the exception of Queen Min, the Korean ruling family was not assassinated by the Japanese.

in the national outcry by presenting Kwansun as the leader of the Korean independence movement; and also by providing a photograph of female protesters in Seoul (122).

When Yu Kwansun calls upon the name of Joan of Arc (1412-1431), the text sets her in dialogue with the heroine of a country whose forces had unsuccessfully invaded Korea in 1866, and shows how both women were punished for defending their countries. The two executed national heroines are in contact as Kwansun utters the name of Saint Joan, who fought for France against England during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Just like Kwansun, she was a national heroine at a very young age due to the strength and courage that allowed her to lift the British siege at Orléans in nine days. The seventeen-year-old French woman warrior in her suit of armor, however, posed a political threat to the English. She was publicly executed in France for heresy (compounded by cross-dressing) and for refusing to renounce her visions as being from God. While Charles VII of France remained silent on St. Joan's unjust death for almost two decades, her family appealed her trial, which led to the nullification of the judgment of heresy. Past, present, and future merge as St. Joan's oppression is shared by Kwansun and Queen Min. As Kwansun "calls the name Jeanne d'Arc three times" (28), the text bridges cultural and historical gaps between the two national heroines through their love for their nations.

Queen Min, Kwansun, and Joan of Arc's love for the nation, however, do not inspire national love in *Dictee*. Despite its theme of patriotic love, *Dictee* is not a nation-building novel that promotes self-sacrifice for national unity. In fact, a short unrhymed poem, in the beginning of the text, points out the futility of creating a unified national subject:

> What nationality
> or what kindred and relation
> what blood relation
> what blood ties of blood
> what ancestry
> what race generation…
> what lineage extraction…
> Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other… (20)

The poem's perpetual questioning of "what" implies that national identity is not stable and fixed, but is continuously shifting and changing. In fact, as a Korean-American writer with a French-Catholic education, Cha herself is a "tertium quid," and cannot be classified into a certain cultural identity. Lisa Lowe (1996) also argues that the fragmented structure of *Dictee* "interrupts the development of a national subject" (113). The novel does not try to overcome cultural fragmentation and restore Korean national unity through a progressive narrative. On the contrary, it undermines the importance of ancestry, lineage, and race by connecting the French saint with Queen Min and Kwansun. While reviving the three heroines' stories of national love and self-sacrifice, the text refrains from portraying them as

role models and endorsing any national consciousness.

Love for Christ and Love for the Husband

As national love connects Queen Min, Kwansun, and Joan of Arc, divine love brings the French Catholic nun, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), into dialogue with St. Joan and an unnamed wife in the "Erato/Love" chapter. Thérèse's spiritual marriage with Jesus and an unnamed wife's unhappy life with a despotic husband show that both religious and secular love require obedience from women. St. Joan and Thérèse forsake their sexual desires to dedicate themselves to Jesus and the unnamed wife accepts her subordinate position in marriage. Unidentified quotes from Thérèse's writings, particularly her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, and the wife's culturally indeterminate status suggest that many women across time and space have submitted to "Man-God" (Cha, 13) and to their husbands.

Unconditional love for Jesus becomes a contact zone between Thérèse and her patron saint, Joan of Arc. Excerpts from Thérèse's writings quoted in *Dictee*, suggest that St. Joan, who whispered Jesus's name before being burned for heresy, is her role model. She dreams to be a martyr, like St. Joan. "The law of love has succeeded to the law of fear" (111), Thérèse writes; and for her love for Jesus, her divine spouse, she is willing to undergo torture to understand his suffering on the cross.[3]

> "Martyrdom was the dream of my youth … I feel that my dream is a folly, for I cannot confine myself to desiring one kind of martyrdom. To satisfy me I need all. Like You, my Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged and crucified. … I would undergo all the tortures inflicted upon the martyrs. With St. Agnes and St. Cecilia, I would present my neck to the sword, and like Joan of Arc, my dear sister, I would whisper at the stake Your Name, O Jesus." (117)

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004) writes that "the word 'passion' and the word 'passive' share the same root in the Latin word for 'suffering' (passio)" (2). The connection between passion and suffering is evident as Thérèse thinks of physical pain as the evidence of her love for Jesus. As Ahmed remarks, Thérèse's love makes her "reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous" and "works to subordinate the feminine and the body" to religious doctrines (3). In the case of Joan of Arc, however, divine love neither leads her to passivity, nor crushes her selfhood: she does not subordinate her body to patriarchal constructions of femininity. Thérèse overlooks St. Joan's ambivalent gender identity as an androgynous armed soldier by simply recalling her name along with the two Roman saints, St. Agnes and St. Cecilia, who glorified virginity.

Contrary to Thérèse's depiction of St. Joan, a still of the French actress, Renée Falconetti, playing the role of St. Joan in Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent movie, *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), represents both her divine love and her ambivalent gender identity with short hair and make-up free face. The close-up on her half-

[3] For more on suffering and torture in Christianity, see Stan Van Hooft's "The Meanings of Suffering" (1998) and Kent Brintnall's "Regarding the Pain of Christ" (2005).

open mouth, half-closed eyes, pale skin, and her head held up suggests a moment of transcendence, a spiritual unification with God. In *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont (1957) defines Platonic love as a state of "divine delirium," "an infinite rapture away from reason," and "a transport of the soul" due to heavenly inspiration: "It is therefore to be called *enthusiasm*, a word which actually means 'possessed by a god'" (51-2). St. Joan claimed to have visions from God to protect France, and the photo that ends the "Erato/Love" chapter expresses a moment of enthusiasm or ecstasy of feeling close to God. Rougemont further writes that such a moment of "religious soaring" is the requirement for "purity," which is essential for unification with God. The two French saints connect in Cha's intertextual novel as the theme of purity reappears in an unidentified quote from the autobiography of St. Thérèse, who was inspired by St. John of the Cross (Kappes 1994, 176): "The smallest act of PURE LOVE is of more value to her than all other works together" (115). Divine love is a contact zone that brings together St. Thérèse and St. Joan in *Dictee*.

Thérèse's and St. Joan's unconditional love for Jesus, however, does not pass on to the unnamed Korean-American daughter with a French Catholic education. The novel merges autobiography and fiction as Cha recalls the dictation of catechism at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, the Catholic school she attended in San Francisco. She questions the purity of Christian love, which was forced upon students through religious propaganda:

> First Friday. One hour before mass. Mass every First Friday. Dictée first. Every Friday. Before mass. Dictée before. Back in the study hall. It is time. Snaps once. One step right from the desk. Single file. Snaps twice. Follow single line. Move all the way to the right hand side of the wall. Single file. The sound instrument is made from two pieces of flat box-shaped wood, with a hinge at the center. It rests inside the palm and is snapped with a defined closing of the thumb. Framed inside is an image of the Holy Virgin Mary robed in blue with white drape or white robe with a blue drape over her head, her eyes towards Heaven, two hands to Heaven, shrouded in clouds, the invisible feet. Framed inside next to her is the sacred heart of Jesus… (18)

Form complements the content of the passage as short sentences with stressed one-syllabic words create the effect of dictating. Repetitions above also suggest how religious stories, like the Last Supper, have been told and retold to make students memorize church teachings. Even the "flat box-shaped wood" clappers framed with images of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary, remind students of their catechism. Cha disobeys the authoritative dictates of her French Catholic education by blurring the lines between Christianity and mythology; and by asking the Greek muses to tell her story.

Dictee further questions Thérèse's unconditional divine love with the parallel narration of her "spiritual espousal" to Jesus and an unnamed wife's devotion to her despotic husband. The two stories are set in contact as the "Erato Love" chapter narrates the arranged marriage of an unidentified couple on the left pages, and gives voice to Thérèse on the right pages:

"Letter of Invitation to the Wedding of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face… [They] wish to have you take part in the Marriage of their Daughter, Thérèse, with Jesus…."[4]

Her marriage to him, her husband. Her love for him, her husband, her duty to him, her husband.[5] (101-03)

He is the husband, and she is the wife. He is the man. She is the wife. It is a given. He does as he is the man. She does as she is the woman, and the wife… You only hear him taunting and humiliating her. She kneels beside him, putting on his clothes for him. She takes her place. It is given.

The identity of "her," in the third quotation, becomes slippery as the unnamed woman's marriage is juxtaposed with Thérèse's wedding invitation on the right column. The placement of "Her marriage to him… Her duty to him" in Thérèse's narrative space serves as a critique of Catholicism, which asks women to be obedient to men. The French saint's wedding invitation states that Jesus has absolute power as "King of kings, and Lord of Lords," and that she will passively accompany him as his lady (101). In fact, Thérèse became a leading figure in the Roman Catholic Church through her fulfillment of female virtues of humbleness, sexual purity, and goodness. Her voice was not heard until her autobiography was published a year after her death. Her silence resonates with that of the unnamed wife, who, like T. S. Eliot's character, J. Alfred Prufrock, thinks she would disturb the universe by speaking. Once the reader closes the pages on the saint and the wife, the two narratives merge as the lines fill in the blank spaces of the corresponding pages. Repetition of "husband" in the last quotation on the right creates the effect of a "dictee" that teaches both St. Thérèse and the unidentified wife that man is the master.

Despite her unconditional love for Jesus, Thérèse, herself, laments the inferiority of Christian women. Ironically, "PURE LOVE" (115) and "VICTIM" (111) are the only words that are capitalized in the quotes from her autobiography. She points out the gender segregation in the Italian Catholic Church:

"I still cannot understand why women are so easily excommunicated in Italy, for every minute

[4] Here Cha quotes from Thérèse's letter 118 (1890) "Archives Du Carmel De Lisieux," *Archives Du Carmel De Lisieux*, accessed July 19, 2014, http://www.archives-carmel-lisieux.fr/english/carmel/index.php/lt-111-a-120/960-lt-118-lettre-dinvitation-aux-noces-de-soeur-therese-de-lenfant-jesus-de-la-sainte-face.

[5] Though paired with Thérèse's words, these two lines do not come from her writings, but rather represent the narrator's commentary and interpretation on the saint's ideas and serve as a transition to the next section.

> someone was saying: 'Don't enter here! Don't enter there, you will be excommunicated!' Ah poor women, how they are misunderstood! And yet they love God in much larger numbers than men do and during the Passion of Our Lord, women had more courage than the apostles since they braved the insults of the soldiers and dared to dry the adorable Face of Jesus." (105)

Thérèse overtly challenges traditional female roles of passivity and obedience by showing how women endured the insults of soldiers to dry the face of the tortured Jesus. In fact, the tears in Jesus's eyes also problematize the association of masculinity with reason; and femininity with emotions. Thérèse believes that Jesus does not support female oppression: "In heaven, He will show that His thoughts are not men's thoughts," she writes (105). She therefore implies that patriarchal ideology is not God-given but socially-constructed; and that there is gender equality in heaven. *Dictee* represents both French saints as victims of divine love as Thérèse, due to her unconditional love for Jesus, is compared to an unnamed submissive wife with a despotic husband, and as her role model, St. Joan, is executed for not denying her visions from God.

Love between Mothers and Daughters

As opposed to socially-constructed and dictated forms of love for God and love for the nation; *Dictee* represents maternal love as natural and biological. However, mother-daughter love becomes an unstable signifier as *Dictee* simultaneously presents it as being universal, and as an ideal that cannot be reached. In *Love, Power and Justice*, Paul Tillich (1960) defines love as "the drive towards the unity of the separated" (25), and *Dictee* hints at the impossibility of such reconnection. The simultaneous attachment and distance between mothers and their children is portrayed right from the first page of *Dictee*, which shows a photograph of a Japanese prison wall with Korean writing: "Mother I want to see you. I am hungry. I want to go home" (translation from Oh 2002). The Korean prisoner and the unnamed Korean daughter come in contact with Greek and Korean mythological figures through their mutual love and loss of their mothers. While suggesting the superiority of maternal love over national and religious forms of love, the text also hints at the unattainability of a universal instinctual love through the distance between the Korean mother and her daughter, Demeter and Persephone, and between a young girl and her sick mother, similar to the Korean myth of Princess Pali.[6]

The unnamed Korean daughter elevates her pre-oedipal relationship with her mother, her life-giver: "Mother, I dream you just to be able to see you. … Mother, my first sound. The first utter [*sic*]. The first concept" (50). The daughter's association of her first sound with her mother resonates with Julia Kristeva's equation of the semiotic, the pre-oedipal and pre-linguistic period, with the mother. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva (1984) praises the semiotic period, when children's drives and impulses are not yet constrained by the dictates of the society,

[6] For an extended discussion of the myth of Princess Pali (=Pari), see the works of Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2005) and Michelle Black Wester (2007).

religion, and family. Children's incoherent sentences and gestures are regulated during the symbolic process, when they learn to express themselves according to the linguistic structure and syntax of a phallocentric language. According to Kristeva, the "nourishing and maternal" (26) semiotic flux resurfaces in dreams; and that is why the Korean daughter, in *Dictee*, dreams to see her mother and comments that "heaven falls nearer in sleep" (50). Here heaven, for the daughter, is not a Christian afterlife, but her connection with her mother, who was in exile in China during the Japanese occupation.

The daughter's elevation of maternal love and the semiotic resonates with her language, which does not conform to the grammar and punctuation rules of standard English, but resembles the semiotic flux of dreams. For Kristeva, the semiotic does not manifest itself only in dreams, but also in a literary text, "which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations … destruction and construction" (16). Literature has power for "political revolution," for Kristeva, because it can defy male-dominated discourses with its dynamic semiotic drive (29). *Dictee* goes against the language of the symbolic with its non-linear, multi-lingual, and fragmented narrative, and with its uncaptioned photographs, which parallels the chaotic and random structure of the unconscious. The daughter chooses to tell her and her mother's story in the borderlands of Korean, Chinese, and American culture with a narrative that challenges socially-constructed literary conventions, such as unity of time and space, and character development.

Even though the text elevates mother-daughter love as an instinctive, rather than a dictated emotion, it also hints at its unattainability through the distance between the Korean daughter and mother. The absence of a single dialogue between them hints at their lack of communication. The letter the daughter writes from Korea to her mother in the United States is the only contact between the two immigrant women in *Dictee*. Returning to Seoul for the first time in eighteen years, the Korean-American daughter with dual citizenship writes in English to tell her mother that she does not feel at home in Korea: "I speak in another tongue now, a second tongue a foreign tongue. This is how distant I am" (85). Her distance to Korea parallels her distance from her mother, for whom Korean language is her refuge in exile. She is distant both from her mother and her cultural and lingual identity.

The Korean daughter and Persephone come in contact through their continuous attachment to and distance from their mothers. In her letter to her mother, the daughter elevates the bonding between "offspring and mother" and refers to Demeter, the Greek goddess of the harvest, whose daughter Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, the god of the underworld (88). The narrator of "Lyric Poetry" chapter also describes how Persephone unites with her mother and "restore[s] spring with her each [*sic*] appearance from beneath the earth" (133). Ironically, Demeter and Persephone's mutual love and separation are indispensable for harvesting, agricultural growth, and the natural cycle of seasons. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch (1989) writes that Persephone "lives both

symbiotically united to her mother and ineluctably distant from her" (35). The "continued *opposition, interruption, and contradiction*" Hirsch locates in the Greek myth is also evident in the Korean mother-daughter narrative: As Persephone returns to Hades, the Korean-American daughter returns to Korea and its language and culture, which keeps her distant from her mother. The "interruption" in their relationship is portrayed through Cha's fragmented narrative that does not tell their story in a coherent fashion. The themes of loss, separation, and desire to unite, in both Demeter's and the Korean daughter's stories, render maternal love as a shifting unstable signifier whose meaning is continuously differentiated and deferred.

Demeter's love for her abducted daughter brings her in contact with a sick mother who is waiting for her daughter to bring her medicine from a nearby village. The "Polymnia/Sacred Poetry" chapter is about a young girl who takes packets of medicine from a woman she meets at a well. She thanks the woman and goes back home as fast as she can to heal her mother. At the end of the story, the girl is about to enter the house and see her mother:

> Already the sun was in the west and she saw her village coming into view. As she came nearer to the house she became aware of the weight of the bundles and the warmth in her palms where she had held them. Through ***the paper screen*** door, dusk had entered and the shadow of a small candle was flickering. (my emphasis, 170)

Dictee starts with a Korean prisoner's longing for return and ends with "the paper screen door" that keeps the young girl distant from her mother. The door that reflects the candlelight does not simply stand for "the art of *Dictee*" that makes "such boundaries visible" (Nock-Hee Park 2005, 214), but also for the continuous desire for and the impossibility of the mother-daughter union. The unstable and wavering light does not make the door visible, as Nock-Hee Park argues, but implies that the boundary between the mother and daughter is both there and not there. The interplay of absence and presence also speaks to the relationships between Demeter and Persephone, and between the Korean mother and daughter.

It is through this problematic and unattainable love between mothers and daughters that the text imagines a matrilineal lineage as an alternative to a patrilineal one that determines one's identity according to the father's surname and ancestry (Moon, 53). In *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray (1993) writes: "Female genealogy has to be suppressed, on behalf of the son-Father relationship, and the idealization of the father and husband as patriarchs" (92). *Dictee*, on the other hand, imagines a female lineage with its mother-daughter narratives that eliminates the patriarchs: the fathers and husbands. The woman at the well passes her knowledge of making medicine to the young girl; and Persephone's unification with her mother is the rebirth of nature. While excluding the fathers, however, *Dictee* does not attempt to mend the broken bond between mothers and daughters by representing the Korean mother-daughter's and mythological characters' relationships as being harmonious and stable. The flickering door between the young girl and her sick mother, the lack of any dialogues between Korean mother and daughter, and Persephone's return to Hades hint at both the desirability and

unattainability of such an ideal connection.

Love between women, in *Dictee*, is not limited to mother-daughter relationships. Heterosexual love, which "ensure[s] population" and "reproduce[s] labor capacity" (Foucault 1990, 37), is not the norm in a text that begins with a quote from the ancient Greek lesbian poet, Sappho, who engages in nonproductive sex and defies her maternal duties. She asks permission to establish a female literary tradition that is not informed by social, moralistic, and religious dictates: "May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve." Sappho's emphasis on human nature—"sinew," "bone," "flesh," and "nerve"—suggests that emotion cannot simply be defined by social categories (Burrow 2005, 33). With Sappho, *Dictee* gives space to lesbian love that resists patriarchal dictates that domesticate women's sexual desires and that allow them to engage only in utilitarian marital sex, which is essential for the reproduction of national and cultural values. *Dictee*, however, excludes heterosexual romantic narratives that endorse the nuclear family and national unity (e.g. Sommer and Ahmed).

Overall, love operates in *Dictee* as a contact zone between women across time and space. The text shows how women's love has been confined to patriarchal, nationalist and religious dictates: Queen Min's, Yu Kwansun's, Joan of Arc's national love interacts with the unconditional love Saint Thérèse has for Jesus and an unnamed wife for her abusive husband. Maternal love, on the other hand, connects the unnamed Korean mother-daughter with both Greek and Korean mythological figures. Although the text elevates mother-daughter relationships over dictated forms of national and divine love; it also shows how maternal love has become ideological with its purpose to reproduce nationalist values. As love brings together historical and fictional female characters, it does not become a magical wand that can unite North and South Korea or overcome cultural differences between the Korean mother and her Korean-American daughter. The fragmented, multilingual, and cross-cultural narrative itself does not support any nation-building project. In fact, love endorses not national stability, but cultural plurality, by connecting women from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. It even proposes a multidimensional time, as opposed to the western concept of time as a movement forward on the ladder of modernity, by bringing together women from different centuries. A contact zone, love does not bridge cultural, religious, historical, and ethnic differences among women, but creates a space where their differences do not prevent them from being in dialogue with one another.

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