

Exploring a New Ethical Subjectivity in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*

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[ABSTRACT]

After examining Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* in light of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of language and literature, this paper argues that the narrator in *Dictée* is an ethical subject that aims to create another becoming with the ethics of hospitality. While revealing a resistance of the minority against the representation empire of major language and history, Cha's novel explores the possibility of a new subjectivity through minor language. In particular, the female narrator, "Disease," evokes the minority, the suppressed or obliterated voice in the past. Through her becoming-minor, the female narrator rewrites the dominant history of the majority. However, her project does not aim to write a new subversive history of the minority. The narrator in the novel, rather, enacts Deleuze's becoming-imperceptible, which endlessly creates another becoming, so as to avoid the entrapment of identity politics or the mirror of representation and sameness. In conclusion, this paper argues that Lévinasian ethics of responsibility and hospitality is essential in the narrator's becoming-imperceptible.

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Key Words : Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, Deleuze, Guattari, Lévinas, ethics, ethical subjectivity

1. Introduction

For decades, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* has been a topical text within Asian American literary studies. Many academic discussions on her work have been centered around the issues of postcoloniality, Asian-American identity or diaspora. Instead of focusing on identity politics, this paper locates Cha's work in a contemporary ethical thinking context. In doing so, it argues that Cha's *Dictée* shows us an ethical subject through an intense resistance against the major language and history. While dismantling the dominant language-power relationship, Cha's female narrator "Disease" dismantles the dominant history. The narrator not only evokes the minority of the past, but also performs what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming-minor" in their *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. However, what she aims to achieve through becoming-minor is not a new history of the minority. Rather, she takes another voyage of oblivion. And at the end of this voyage is found a new form of subjectivity, which embodies not only Deleuze's becoming-imperceptible but also Lévinas' ethics of responsibility and hospitality to the Other. Working with Deleuze and Lévinas' idea of the ethical, this paper aims to reveal how the female narrator in *Dictée* constitutes an ethical subject in the end.

In criticizing the modern representative subject, contemporary philosophers have struggled in many different ways. Deleuze and Lévinas respectively suggest alternatives in regard to the issue of the modern subject. Deleuze sees "every object as an unfixed and

ever-changing creation” (Lee 419). As for replacing the concept of subject to impersonality, multiplicity, and becoming, Deleuze criticizes the concrete, individual, and representative subject. In contrast to Deleuze, Lévinas is often considered the last defender of the modern subject. However, Lévinas is also against the totalizing representative subject of the modern, which subordinates the Other into the subject through the representation mechanism. To him, ethical thinking is first philosophy, and his most important thesis is that our existence is conditioned by our relationship with the Other: “It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself... in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality” (178). Lévinas’ subject is a subject that is only possible by the advent or arrival of the Other. His subject is a subject of responsibility and hospitality to the Other. It is also a subject which has to deconstruct itself in front of the Other to perform its responsibility and hospitality. In this sense, Lévinas reverses the dynamic relation between the subject and the Other in Western philosophy.

This paper first discusses language–power relationships in *Dictée*. While working with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of minor literature, it explores how Cha dismantles the dominant language power–system. Secondly, it examines the role of “Disease” in the novel. “Disease” literally means a female narrator in French. The female narrator’s displacement and change exemplify Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming. Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming is affect. The female narrator invokes the dead and the minority through her bodily affect. And, finally, it discusses an ethical subject in *Dictée* with regard to becoming–imperceptible and the ethics of responsibility and hospitality

to the Other. Although Lévinas (transcendental philosophy) and Deleuze (the philosophy of immanence) espouse opposite philosophical grounds, *Dictée* shows that these philosophers can be harmoniously juxtaposed. In focusing on the latter part of *Dictée*, this paper claims that Cha's ethical subject embodies not only Deleuze's becoming-imperceptible but also the ethics of responsibility and hospitality to the Other.

2. Language, Power, and a Minor Literature

Dictée enacts the minor literature of Deleuze and Guattari. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the minor literature is a literature that creates the line of flight from the major power system. The flight of a minor literature is not a passive escape from the majority, but a subversive becoming for a new life, and a revolutionary power changing the majority. In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari claim three characteristics for a minor literature: 1) the language of a minor literature "is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (16), 2) in a minor literature everything is political (17), and 3) in a minor literature everything takes on a collective value (17).

The title of Cha's novel can have multiple implications. It symbolizes, for instance, the oppressive and forced (foreign) language learning process, which most of us have to pass through despite varying degree of differences. The first section of *Dictée* foregrounds the language-power relationship in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of language. For Deleuze and Guattari, the main function of language is not to communicate information. Rather, they argue, "The elementary unit of language – the statement – is the order word... Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience"

(*TP* 76). Thus, what we should do is, escape “from the informational myth,” to “evaluate the hierarchic and imperative system of language as a transmission of orders, an exercise of power or of resistance to this exercise” (*Kafka* 23). In this sense, the realm of language is a battlefield for subjectification and signification. Cha experiments with this notion of language in several ways in her novel.

Cha shows the language-power relationship through a foreign language learning process, the very process of alienating the naturalness of English as the mother tongue in English-speaking countries. In the first two pages of *Dictée*, the reader is to have an unexpected and foreign reading-experience. The novel “begins with a translation: a paragraph in French with no punctuation is followed by a paragraph in English with the punctuation literally spelled out” (Cooley 126). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that every utterance is an “order-word.” The notion and belief that our speech acts are purely communicative is not only misleading us but also hiding us from the truth that all the speech acts are, in fact, disciplinary commands. As if foregrounding Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of language, the first paragraph of Cha’s novel consists of all imperative sentences: “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” (1). Cha’s biography can also shed further light on this first part of the novel. Given that Hak Kyung Cha first went to the US in 1962 when she was 11 years old, this first page can be read as a biographical story of the young Cha’s first experience in the US. Cha has literally “come from far” (1). For the girl from Korea who had never studied English, the new language is a foreign language (like French) as well as a forced one (imperative sentences). Thus, it is a

moment of evoking the young Cha, a very personal individual, but also of sharing this singular experience of minority with readers. This experience awakens readers to the language–power relation: language is not practiced in a natural, harmonious and peaceful way, but in the realm of power. It is a moment for the alienation of the belief to natural language.

Cha also destroys the imagined naturalness of language through the juxtaposition of foreign languages such as Korean, Chinese and French. For example, consider the movement from the left to the right: “She enters the screen from the left” (94). This seems natural, because we always read from the left to the right. Our eyes are accustomed to following this movement. However, the naturalness of the left to right movement can be shattered by the mine wall photo, the second photo of this book, in which the Korean inscriptions on the wall are written from the right top to the bottom. In *Dictée*, the juxtapositions or insertions of foreign languages are repeated to emphasize that the dominant, major language is not natural. Power always resides in the realm of each language. *Dictée* is a work of exposing and distorting the dominant power in language.

With this notion of language as an imperative system, *Dictée* also rewrites the dominant discourse of history. In Cha’s novel, the title *Dictée* also implies a kind of psychic dictation of the history’s disquiet. As the female narrator accepts others into her body and language, her diction and discourse actualize them. The invocation includes not only historical figures, such as Yu Guan Soon and St. Therese, but also common individuals, such as Cha’s mother, Hyung Soon Huo, Cha herself, and the unrecorded and often disregarded multitude of history. And her writing as a kind of murmuring of the minority constitutes “collective assemblages of enunciation,” which replaces the traditional

position of the modern subject, or protagonist in modern literature. In “CLIO”, the biography of Yu Guan Soon is juxtaposed with “PETITON FROM THE KOREANS OF HAWAII TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT” (34). One of the co-authors of the petition is Syngman Rhee, who became the first president, and first dictator, of Korea. This is not only a contrast between a girl who died in prison and a man who became president, but also a reassemblage of historical figures with a different perspective from the dominant. The April 19 Revolution in 1960 and the Spring of Seoul in 1980 are historical backgrounds for “MELPOMENE.” In this chapter, the personal experience of an individual is tied to Korean modern history and politics. The April 19 Revolution was a civil revolution against the Rhee regime. In this revolution the narrator lost her brother. She revisits this moment in history when she returns to Korea. 1980 is the year that many Korean people now remember as the Spring of Seoul. Seoul’s streets were crowded with ordinary people’s collective struggles against the state. Reading *Dictée* is to draw our attention to the unspoken minority, or the multitude. In this rewriting of history, the personal experience of a minority cannot help but be political. Rewriting history is a politically subversive act against the dominant history and its discursive power. In this sense, the female narrator’s invocation of the minority in history is an act of politics.

3. Toward a New Ethical Subjectivity

After this revisit of historical events, Cha’s writing is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. While the first half of *Dictée* is realistic and understandable prose with the juxtaposition of historical

and personal manuscripts, the signification of language is more deconstructed in the writing of the second half. By way of its non-representative language, *Dictée* launches a trenchant critique of identity politics. In addition to that, the female narrator's rewriting of history turns into a potentially ethical move to conceive a new subjectivity. The female narrator in *Dictée* does not resist the haunting of the past and the Other. She, rather, struggles with the oppressive power of representation by yielding herself to multiple others in the past and present.

Through *Dictée*, Cha claims that it is not only useless but also harmful to establish a new identity. Making a new identity or history is always an easy way back to re-territorialization or to becoming another major. Yu Guan Soon captured in the nationalistic discourse, becomes an idealistic figure for Korean female students and young laborers who are, in a certain way, forced to sacrifice themselves for their country like Yu Guan Soon. Syngman Rhee, who was once a revolutionary minor in the Japanese colonial period became a dictator. Leaders of the April 19 Revolution and the Spring of Seoul in 1980 became another group of conservative and corrupted politicians. *Dictée* is against this kind of re-territorialization.

When the struggle and resistance are represented, they are no longer political. Deleuze, in *Superpositions*, argues that the representation of struggle and resistance is already organized, systemized, and standardized, and thus the representation of struggle is already a product (158). When a post-colonial history is rewritten for the minority, the history is no longer for the minority. This history is already in the mirror of representation. Thus, it is already situated in the dominant power system in which we rather consume the representation of struggle and resistance. What we need here are

becomings, which continually take the line of flight from the standard of the majority. Becoming should be incessant, because there is always the danger of changing a minority into a majority, a danger of reconstructing the majority's standard. Thus, becoming-minor should always be an incessant becoming. Among all the becomings, becoming-imperceptible is the ultimate stage of becoming.

While avoiding the danger of falling into the mirror of representation and identity politics, *Dictée* suggests a Deleuzian subject: becoming-imperceptible. *Dictée*'s language becomes more unrepresentative, and it becomes the ultimate language of a minor literature: "Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits" (*Kafka* 23). When language moves toward its limits, it becomes imperceptible: "It had been snowing... In the whiteness / no distinction her body invariable no dissonance synonymous her body all the tide de composes eclipses to become yours" (118). Here is also oblivion for another becoming: "Discard. Every memory. Of. / Even before they could. Surge themselves. Forgotten so, easily, / not even as associations, signatures in passage. Pull by the very root, the very possible vagueness they may evoke" (128). In this world of becoming-imperceptible, the representation system is no longer available. The signifier no longer reaches to the signified.

Deleuze's ethics "involves a creative commitment to maximizing connections, and of maximizing the powers that will expand the possibilities of life" (Marks 87-88). Therefore, Deleuze's ethics rests on whether we can create a new life by emerging from the dominant aspects of our current life. In terms of creation of a new life, we have to be affected by the other through a new connection. How could we construct and constitute this new and productive connection? Pierre

Lévy in his *Collective Intelligence* argues that the ethics of collective intelligence or nomads is hospitality. Although Lévy argues about hospitality and minority in a different context, his idea of hospitality as an ethics of collective intelligence or nomads can shed light on *Dictée*. After taking a cue from the biblical tale of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lévy writes about hospitality as follows:

Hospitality sustains the possibility of travel, of meeting the other. Through hospitality, he who is lost, different, foreign, is welcomed, integrated, included in a community. Hospitality is the act of attaching the individual to a community. In every respect, it is the opposite of exclusion.... In a world where everything is in flux, in which everyone is faced with change, hospitality, the morality of nomads and migrants, becomes the very essence of morality. Yet the fact that he works to weave together the nomadic community does not mean that the just individual is willing to pay any price to achieve unity, uniformity, or unanimity. Lot, for example, took the risk of being in the minority, the smallest minority possible since he was alone in defending the strangers against the others. He put himself in the position of a stranger. (26-27)

Insofar as hospitality supports the possibility of connection with the others, hospitality is the ethics of nomads. Lot, who commits himself to the ethics of hospitality is the just individual. He is not of the majority in his society; he is, rather an outsider, a minority. Thus, the ethics of hospitality is the ethics of the minority. Deleuze distinguishes between minor and marginal: unlike the powerless marginality, the minority has the power to change its collective assemblages; every great literature which changes the history of literature was a minor literature. In this biblical episode, Lot, as a minority as well as the just individual, also has the power to change his society.

Why, however, did Lot fail to save his city? Lévy's answer is simple: "Because collective force is required to sustain a community" (27). One just individual is not enough to save a community: "At least ten individuals are required because the just must first pass the test of the society of the just.... The just are efficient; they are able to maintain the existence of a community, only when they form a collective intelligence" (Lévy 27). If Lévy knew the concept of Deleuze's multiplicity and becoming, his answer would have been different. Deleuze and Guattari argue that "each individual is an infinite multiplicity, and the whole of Nature is a multiplicity of perfectly individuated multiplicities" (*TP* 254). In the same way as Deleuze and Guattari, Cha also creates a collective subject.

"Disease," the female narrator is one who "allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm" (3) and "She relays others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering. Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them" (4). While invoking the dead, the oppressed, and the minority through her body, the female narrator embodies them with the same affect and motion: "The above traces from her head moving downward closing her eyes, in the same motion, slower parting her mouth open together with her jaw and throat ... turning her inside out in the same motion, shifting complete the whole weight to elevate upward" (5). The female narrator is a multiplicity. Within her body, she admits others to make her body full of swarm. She keeps creating another becoming while emptying herself for others such as Yu Guan Sun, Huo Hyung Soon, St. Therese, Joan of Arc and, above all, the unnamed minority of the mine, the street, and of Egyptian ruins. Thus, "Disease" is a multiplicity.

The just individual or the ethical subject cannot help but be collective, swarm and multitude. The female narrator's opening herself

to the Other is possible through the ethics of hospitality. The invocation of the dead is also possible when the female narrator opens her own body and voice for the other with hospitality. She allows the others in her own place, as Lot allowed the strangers into his own place. In these instances, the act of becoming is possible only through the ethics of hospitality. At least in Cha's *Dictée*, Lévinas' ethics of responsibility and hospitality can be connected with Deleuze's becoming and multiplicity

According to Deleuze, the substance of the subject is always becoming. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas defines ethics as a "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (43). This self-questioning never leads to an antagonistic relation with the Other. As Chun-yen Chen points out, "this kind of attentiveness to the Other takes place prior to the ego and consciousness: 'The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles'" (32). Thus, in Lévinas' philosophy, the subject is being constructed by his relation with the Other: responsibility and hospitality. In "THALIA," Cha says, "Now they retain their obligation as their own mass identity released to no individual being" (150). Does she argue that in becoming-imperceptible, we should also have obligation for the Other? In *Dictée*, Lévinas and Deleuze encounter each other.

5. Conclusion

At the end of *Dictée*, after passing through all the passages that embody and practice Deleuze's ideas, we confront a sudden change. "POLYMNIA" is the only chapter composed of standard narrative. Consider the letter to Mrs. Laura Claxton. This chapter clearly shows

us Lévinas' ethics of the responsibility and hospitality for the Other:

She handed it [a bowl of water] to the child to drink. She drinks quickly the liquid.... She looked up at the woman. Her eyes became clearer. She saw that the woman was smiling. Her brow fell softly into an arc on each side of her temples. Her eyes were dark and they seemed to glow from inside the darkness. The child smiled back to her timidly from her seat. (168-69)

Without saying a word, the young woman shows hospitality to the girl, as if she is her absolute guest. When she makes conversation with the girl, it is only to extend more hospitality:

The woman listened and when the child finished her story, she nodded and gently patted the child's head. She then brought over a basket and sat down beside her. [...] She said that these were special remedies for her mother and that she was to take them to her. She gave her instructions on how to prepare them. (169)

This is a story about hospitality without purpose, intention, and interests. The young woman never asks for anything in return from the girl: "It would be a mistake for me to respect the Other because I expect anything in return: my obligation and responsibility are not mirrored by the Other's reciprocal responsibility toward me" (Davis 51). Eventually, the young woman just disappears: "After a while she turned around to wave to the young woman at the well. She had already left the well. She turned and looked in all directions but she was not anywhere to be seen" (170). According to Lévinas, hospitality and responsibility to the Other means the recognition of the Other, and further the reinvention of the self. In the face of the Other, which is

infinite, to recognize the responsibility to the Other means the destruction of self-identity. In this sense, through the Other (a girl), the young woman reinvents herself. In accepting her responsibility for the Other, and then showing hospitality to the Other, her subjectivity is reconstructed. Thus, she is no longer herself in the past.

In subverting the dominant language and history, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha creates an ethical subject in *Dictée*. As this paper has revealed, Cha's ethical subject enacts not only Deleuze's becoming-imperceptible but also the ethics of responsibility and hospitality. If the first half of the novel focused on revealing the language-power relationship and overcoming the dominant history, the latter half aims to create an ethical subject, which will remain after the subversion of history. This new subject is not reduced to the realm of identity politics, as it aims to endlessly create another becoming with the ethics of hospitality.

A Deleuzian reading of *Dictée* reveals Cha's criticism of the dominant language and history. The female narrator strives to pursue a different life. However, Cha's ethical subject does not simply follow the ethical perspective of Deleuze. Despite her similarity with Deleuze, Cha is also inclined to the presence of the Other. Here, the thought of Lévinas helps us understand her better. In the light of Lévinas, we can claim that Cha is also greatly concerned to see the ethical issues of the Other. But it does not mean that we have to reject Cha's affinity with Deleuze. Rather, with her novel, she opens up various ethical issues that urge us to engage repeatedly with different milieux of ethical thinking. What Cha shows us in *Dictée* may never be fully understood in either way. Someone may read it as a sign of the insurmountable difficulty of being ethical. However, the recognition of Cha's commitment to the ethical generates more productive readings of her work, while challenging the so-called ethical incompatibility

between Deleuze and Lévinas. And this is the very ethical performativity of *Dictée*, as a work of literature.

[한국어초록]

차학경의 『딕테』에 나타난 새로운 윤리 주체 탐사

김영훈

본 논문은 차학경의 『딕테』에 나타난 새로운 윤리 주체 탐사를 목적으로 한다. 『딕테』의 여성 화자는 억압받고 망각된 목소리를 되살린다. 무당을 연상시키는 강신과 환기를 통해 그녀의 신체는 소수자 되기를 실천하고, 이를 통해 주류 역사를 해체한다. 그러나 이러한 탈역사와 해체가 새로운 소수자의 새로운 역사 서술, 혹은 되받아 쓰기를 향하지 않는다. 차학경의 여성화자는 전복의 역사가 또 다른 지배의 역사가 되는 것을 피하고자 한다. 이 새로운 주체는 들뢰즈의 지각불가능하게 되기를 실행하면서 다른 한편으로는 레비나스의 책임과 환대의 윤리를 실천한다. 그녀는 정체성의 정치, 동일성과 표상의 거울 제국을 거부한다. 그녀는 차라리 끊임없는 되기를 환대의 윤리로 실천하며 표상적 주체를 해체한다. 이런 점에서 『딕테』는 지배 언어와 역사의 표상 제국에 대해 저항하며 무한한 소수자 되기와, 환대의 윤리를 통한 새로운 주체성의 가능성을 탐사한다.

주제어: 차학경, 『딕테』, 들뢰즈, 가타리, 레비나스, 윤리, 윤리적 주체

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이 논문은 2016년 03월 14일 접수되어 04월 11일까지 심사받아 04월 15일 게재 확정됨.