

***Han* and Trauma:
the Inheritance of Violence in Korean American Literature**

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Representing the experience of violence and trauma means confronting the unspeakable, and thus induces an aporia: how does one voice that which, by nature, cannot be uttered? And what happens when the experience of violence is not immediate and is only realized through transmission—a child hearing about her parents’ trauma, for example? Marianna Hirsch developed the concept of *postmemory* to refer to the ways the children of Holocaust survivors may ‘remember’ and re-present their parents’ traumatic experience. The concept can be expanded to include other instances of inherited trauma, in particular, trauma resulting from imperialism and nationalism as well as gendered and racialized violence. Considering the role played by the term “Asia” and the fantasized representations of Asia in the formation of American nationhood, an examination of the way memory and violence have contributed to forming Asian American identity should help us to understand the relationship between trauma and nationhood.

The Asian subject/immigrant has systematically been represented as other in its incorporation within American discourse: that other is the foreign entity against which the American citizen might be delineated. Within the totalizing label of ‘Asia,’ Korea in particular poses a series of interesting problems since the conceptualization of both Korean and American nationhood has been fraught with questions of imperialism, sovereignty, and dispossession. Adding gender to the terms of this equation only complicates it further, as the violence experienced by Korean American women stems from both racialized and gendered violence in America, which is rooted in Western hegemony and specifically anti-Asian sentiment, as well as specific kinds of trauma from Korean history. Korean women bore the brunt of successive waves of Japanese invasions and colonization, as well as of U.S. imperialism and political repression in what is now South Korea, the repercussions of which still have an impact on the American-born generations. The annexation of the country by Japan from 1910 to 1945 and the imperial rule that ensued were characterized by the exile and forced displacement of a great part of the Korean population, and the repression and eradication of Korean culture and traditions, including language, which subsequently led to the rise of a specifically Korean nationalistic ethos, that defined the nation, *minjok*, as an ethnic entity.

In this context, *han*, as a specifically Korean melancholy or grief, with no equivalent in the English language, is directly linked to the conception of Korean national sovereignty, or the denial thereof by bigger foreign imperial powers, such as Japan, Russia, and the United States. Quoting various Korean scholars and authors, Seo-Young Chu explains that *han* can range from bittersweet yearning to utter and destructive “despair” (97). She also notes that *han* is never expressed, but rather compressed and repressed within the self: Ishle Yi Park calls it “a pent-up historical and personal anguish” (quoted in Chu, 97). By crossing *postmemory* with the experience of *han*, Chu coins a new concept, *postmemory han*, that sheds light not only on the traumas endured and inherited by Korean American women, but also on the specific

characteristics of these traumas. As a result, understanding those specificities may lead us to a fuller awareness of both the strategies Korean American women writers deploy in their texts to represent the unspeakable portion of their heritage, and of the ways American identity formation is built on complex intersections of racialized and gendered violence derived from imperialism.

I will argue that the representation of trauma in the Korean American diasporic community, and particularly for its female constituents, necessarily implies a confrontation with the quasi-impossibility of remembrance, and the creation of alternative memorial processes and historiographies that draw on a specific relationship to both Korean and American nationhood. The ensuing manifestations of postmemory *han* are complicated by gender, which disrupts concepts of nationhood and allegiance, and thus implies necessarily to revise the idea of homeland. Through analyses of the works of two Korean American women writers, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Cathy Park Hong, I will examine how these writers process *han* and reconfigure their relationship not just to singular national entities, but to the very idea of a fixed and perennial nationhood.

Postmemory *han* and Korean American literatures

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe laid the foundation for theorizing Asian American literatures and subjectivities and highlighted the ways in which Asian immigration became crucial to the very foundations of the American nation, all the more so as the Asian immigrant has been repeatedly figured as the quintessential Other: “In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally. [...] the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States” (4). In this perspective, the presence of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States disrupts a linear, mythologized conception of nationhood that originates with the United States’ assertion of independence from the British monarchy and extends into the westward expansion, spurred on by Manifest Destiny. The latter conceptualization of nationhood also tends to be racially and ethnically homogeneous, nearly synonymous with whiteness: the presence of non-white Americans, whether indigenous or immigrants, becomes the abject¹ that haunts the national narrative, which strives to misremember them, or forget about them entirely, as Anne Anlin Cheng argues in “The Melancholy of Race”:

Because the American history of exclusions, imperialism, and colonization runs so diametrically opposed to the equally and particularly American narrative of liberty and individualism, cultural memory in America poses a continuously vexing problem: how to remember those transgressions without impeding the ethos of progress? How to bury the remnants of denigration and disgust created in the name of progress and the formation of an ‘American identity’? (50-51)

¹ The concept of the “abject” stems from Julia Kristeva’s analysis of subject formation, rooted in psychoanalysis, as she develops it in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection* (1980). The abject as applied to the Asian and the Asian American formations was notably used by Anne Anlin Cheng, and by David Leiwi Li in *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (1998). There, Li contends that the emergence of the “self” necessitates the constitution of a “not-self,” the “abject” being “the part of ourselves that we willfully discard” in the process (6).

Lowe identifies Asian American literature as a unique space to contradict the universalizing narrative of integration of the American national cultural sphere, explaining the vital role of culture in developing and imagining counter forms of belonging: “Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined” (22). This uniqueness derives from the United States’ history of regulation of Asian immigration and of colonization of Asian countries for economic and political reasons, its continued othering of the Asian as perpetually foreign, its dependence on racialized labor, and the national discourse on assimilation. In this respect, while Korean American identity is still not as widely studied as the Chinese American or the Japanese American ones, it proves nonetheless highly relevant to the discussion of Asian American cultural productions as sites of opposition and subversion stemming from a singular experience of colonization, imperialism, and immigration.

Within this framework, postmemory *han* appears not just as a coping strategy in the face of displacement and erasure, but as a structural aspect of Korean American cultural formation: the mediated memorial process addresses both trauma and its aftermath, highlighting how it may be both experienced directly and inherited, passed down within a familial structure as part of an inheritance. As such, postmemory *han* works within the Korean American imagination to crystallize issues of legacy and authenticity, but also issues of representation and legitimacy, as Chu points out: “A second-generation Korean American might be haunted by her parents’ anguish, but she would be equally haunted by the knowledge that she herself was not directly victimized by the circumstances that led to such pain. [...] How, then, does she ‘remember’ the pain caused by such experiences?” (98). In this perspective, it would be reductive to consider postmemory *han* in terms of what Chu calls “imagined memory.” More than the intersection of imagination and remembrance, postmemory *han* is a psychosomatic manifestation; it materializes an original imaginative act that tethered the homeland to the individual body and psyche and magnifies the significance of shared memory that circulates at both the national and the individual level. Chu provides examples, derived from Korean American literature, of how postmemory *han* manifests itself physically:

What does it mean for a second-generation Korean American to grieve for an uncle who disappeared in North Korea long before she was born? What does it mean for a second-generation Korean American to feel personally degraded by the soldiers who raped thousands of comfort women during WWII? Why should their dehumanization affect her so viscerally? How can a second generation Korean American feel wounded by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—as though the wound were still raw, as though the 38th parallel cut her own body in half? Is it possible for her to feel homesick for the mountains of North Korea, an alien land where she has never been? (99-98)

The answer is obviously yes, but the question remains of how to represent this phenomenon. Its paradoxical nature forces the writer to interrogate the relevance and adequacy of traditional modes of representation when confronted with liminality: “the experience being remembered is at once virtual and real, secondhand and familiar, long ago and present. Such an enigma eludes straightforward representation, yet does not defy language altogether” (Chu 99). The two writers studied here, in addition to those that Chu evokes in her article, eschew the modes of realism

inherited from the Anglo-American literary tradition and imposed on the Asian American canon. Instead, they either subvert these modes or venture into new literary territory, seeking to open up spaces distinct from traditional, canonical narratives, unfettered by expectations of realism and representation, and thus uniquely suited to the genesis of counter-narratives that disrupt the dominant discourse on the construction of the self and of the nation.

If postmemory *han* is integral to the Korean American imagining of nationhood, it also proves structural to Korean American literature. Though it does not always appear in obvious forms, it nonetheless remains particularly well suited to articulating the trauma specific to the Korean American community because it highlights both the cultural specificity of the phenomenon as well as the issues and ambiguities inherent to the process of remembering. Indeed, the memorial process can never be linear or whole, and must always incorporate a margin of error in its textual representation. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* materializes the stakes of this process, by establishing a resonance between the thematic deconstruction of Korean American experience and the syntactic dislocation of the text.

Dislocation and Recreation of Memorial Processes

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was a writer, artist, and videast; she was born in 1951 in South Korea, but emigrated early on with her family to the United States, first to Hawaii, then California. Her magnum opus, *Dictée*, which was released just before her death in 1982, is a collage of textual and visual documents, including translated and handwritten text, prose and poetry, diagrams, maps, and black and white photographs. *Dictée* is highly fragmented, polyphonic, and multilingual; in this respect, it counts among the most audacious experimental works in contemporary literature. In its most recognizably narrative and representative passages, *Dictée* seeks to articulate a meditation on the consequences of exile and the erasure of female voices in history, or their reduction to ciphers that are rendered mute because of their univocity. Cha links her experience as a Korean American woman from the "1.5 generation" who finds herself in a liminal position, unable to fully belong to either term of her hyphenated identity, to her mother's experience, who endured exile in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. By doing so, Cha reactivates the possibility of voicing what has historically been marginalized or censored—the trauma of exile and of being denied a community, in particular for women. She also creates a space dedicated to articulating the consequences of trauma inherited from female predecessors: postmemory *han* can thus be broadened in her case to diasporic *han*, in order to accommodate the complexity of the 1.5 generation's experiences in terms of citizenship and nationhood.

Cha stages her mother's exile in Manchuria, which she juxtaposes with her own return to Korea after growing up in the United States, and with vignettes focusing on Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon, a Korean revolutionary woman who helped organize the March 1st movement in protest against Japanese imperial colonial rule and was tortured to death in 1920. This juxtaposition has two consequences. First, the juxtaposition of scenes and sections mimics the excavation of memory, a fractured and fragmentary process that is composed of discrepancies, lacunae, and instability, and that is systematically brought back to the reality of power dynamics containing violence, both visible and latent. These dynamics include Japanese imperialism and the

repression of Korean identity, Korean nationalism, which reproduces patriarchal dynamics of female marginalization, and the pressure of assimilation into Western colonial systems and into Western colonial languages. The structure does not thematize the lacuna and the fragment—rather, the latter become the text’s *modus operandi*: the layout plays on the arresting visual quality of blank space, on the superposition of different languages and different modes of representation (visual and textual). The white expanse of the page thus becomes a testament to how much is lost not just in translation—as the comparison of the opening translation exercises shows—but in the broader process of memorial recovery.

Handwritten documents are included within the text, taking up the entire page; the text on these documents is sometimes reproduced so that we may know what is written. Nonetheless, the intrusion of handwritten script, as opposed to the more legible typed script, inscribes the effort of deciphering into the reading process. We are confronted with the reproduction of a firsthand document: the presence of the singular handwriting implies that yet another subjectivity, that of the person who wrote the letter, haunts the text of *Dictée*. Yet this subjectivity remains foreign to us, removed from our sphere of experience even when named. This is further emphasized by the repeated presence of captionless visual documents, such as photographs and diagrams. These offer no explanation for their presence or for the subjects they depict: the source has been removed. This eruption “creates the effect of hallucinatory visions erupting from nowhere into consciousness” (Chu 118): our reading experience is disrupted, since we must contend with a document that is both textual and visual, to be read and to be looked at, but we are also forced to reassess the limits of the knowledge with which the photographs provide us. One photograph can be presumed to be of Cha’s mother, but what does it mean to articulate the mother’s experience while confronting the reader with her nameless portrait? The gesture is coherent with the increasingly abstract nature of the text: there is a progressive erasure of referentiality. Furthermore, violence lurks within these photographs, either within the subject they depict—prisoners about to be executed—or in the scission operated between the photograph and its caption. Omitting the name means removing immediate access to an explanation: this impedes readers’ efforts to understand – since we may not know where to start looking for an explanation—but also open up a space that allows more nuance and complexity in the reflection on history, since we are not permitted to make an easy equation between the representation and its referent. The captionless photographs then allow us to measure the gap between our knowledge of historical events and our ignorance of the events’ contexts and ramifications, while still providing another, more immediate, means of accessing memory and history. They strive to document, memorialize, and contain historical violence all at the same time—in this sense, they also enact postmemory *han*, since they stage a distantiated reenactment of historical violence experienced by the Korean and Korean American communities.

The second consequence of the structural juxtaposition is that it establishes transhistorical parallels between the various depictions of female experience: the daughter’s arc mirrors the mother’s, in the sense that their juxtaposition highlights how the complicated relationship to the lost motherland is inherited. The mother-daughter dyad is refracted through multiple other female figures, resonating in particular with the lives of two young female revolutionaries, who have been claimed as national heroes by the country they sought to reclaim from imperial power, and who have paid the ultimate price—both Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon having been killed

before they turned twenty, the former burned at the stake, the latter tortured to death. Nonetheless, the presence of these female figures does not compel the reader to subscribe to straightforward nationalist discourses. Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon may have won nationwide recognition but their gender magnified them as subversive figures. They had to prove that their gender was not an impediment, and proving themselves meant divesting themselves, to some extent, of their gender: Joan of Arc dressed and presented as a man in order to evade initial suspicions, while Yu Guan Soon had to demonstrate “her conviction and dedication in the cause” since the male members of the “nationally organized movement” already in place did “not accept her seriousness, her place as a young woman” (30). In the eyes of the masculinist retelling of nationalist history, Yu Guan Soon became a revolutionary *in spite of* her gender.

The text recounts elliptically Yu Guan Soon’s history, or rather what is known of it: after her capture, torture, and subsequent death, she is characterized as a “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.” (37). She is abstracted into the incantatory enumeration that celebrates the unity of the nation and the people: her sacrifice is hailed as the (almost literal) apotheosis of her life: to be remembered, she must surrender herself to the cause of the nation. Joan of Arc’s presence in the text is limited to two occurrences, presumably because it is assumed that her name is known outside of the Korean community. Early in the text, a female speaker “calls the name Jeanne d’Arc three times. / She calls the name Ahn Joong Kun five times” (28), Ahn Joong Kun being the name of Cha’s mother. Later, in a short monologue framed with quotation marks, a female speaker—perhaps the same as the first one, though this cannot be ascertained—praises martyrdom: “Martyrdom was the dream of my youth [...] 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 addition to the sanctified Agnes and Cecilia, both Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon are evoked in the framework of martyrdom, to which they have been relegated by nationalistic discourses that reduced them to ciphers. Joan of Arc is given no background story: it is assumed that we, as readers, will know who she is and fill in the blanks accordingly. Yet, the text continuously asserts the existence of lacunas, fragments, and errors as constitutive of history: our reliance on what we think we know of Joan of Arc is thus unsettled, and we are forced to reconsider our vision of history, which has been shaped by dominant discourses in school and elsewhere in the public space.

In contrast to Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon, Cha makes sure that her and her mother’s experiences as liminal figures who bear the consequences of imperialism cannot be recuperated by dominant discourses and confined to martyrdom. Cha addresses her mother directly through letters: “Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you now live. You are not Chinese. You are Korean” (45). This establishes an exclusive relationship between the speaker and the “you,” where the reader is relegated to the sidelines, forced solely to bear witness as the speaker details the situation of the exiled mother. When Cha recounts her own experience of going back to the Korean homeland, she again takes control of the narrative so as not to let it slip into simplistic interpretations and dichotomies:

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image. And you learn the executive branch the legislative branch and the third. Justice. Judicial branch. It makes the difference. The rest is past.

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt. [...] Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented. The eyes gather towards the appropriate proof. Towards the face then again to the papers, when did you leave the country why did you leave this country why are you returning to the country. (56-57)

While the “they” of the first paragraph is clearly identifiable from contextual clues, and refers to the United States authorities, its referent in the second paragraph shifts and becomes less clear, since it could refer to both the Korean and the United States authorities. The significance of the speaker's experience takes on a different aspect, depending on which national identity is chosen. In both cases, however, the speaker is ultimately otherized, unrecognized, categorized as foreign and unfamiliar. She thus grounds her experience of nationhood in liminality: no nation proves hospitable to her and ready to accept her as she is. One grants her citizenship but the condition for her assimilation hinges on the erasure of her personal history (“The rest is past”); the other denies her belonging and acceptance, and constantly interrogates her identity. No hybridity can exist within nationhood unless it is officially sanctioned and approved: as such, Cha and her mother are slippery subjects who defy fixed, naturalized conceptions of nationhood. Remembering who she is, and thus reactivating postmemory *han*, makes Cha a problematic national subject since she reactivates the trauma that stands at the heart of each national identity, the abject that each would rather forget and repress.

However, Cha does not let the abject go unmentioned. She stages numerous moments in Korean and U.S. history predicated on violence, for example the military repression of a student revolt against the dictatorial government on April 19, 1960 (called *sa-il-ku* in South Korea). To this end, she embeds the representation of bodies dismembered and truncated into the disruption of syntax. As Lisa Lowe notes, no purposive narrative context, no closure can be available here: “there is only blood, as if blood that issues from both the breaking of syntax and limbs is the only language that emerges out of the violence of grammar” (110). In this back and forth between the material body and the textual one, *Dictée* reconfigures the violence that has been wreaked upon both: death and torture find a textual corollary as words, syntax, and paragraphs are dislocated. *Dictée* thus achieves a mode of representation that seeks to unite the material fabric of historical memory to its means of transmission—the text—and this, in turn, paves the way for a new mode of subject formation, as Lisa Lowe explains: “fragmented ‘flashes’ of memory at once refuse the uniformity of the South Korean national project by invoking the heterogeneity of Korean people's histories, and they critique U.S. history's erasure of Korean people in national accounts. In the recomposition and redeployment of ‘history’ as material memory, a new Asian American

subject emerges” (112). This redeployment, as we will see presently, anchors itself in particular in the representation of the body.

Passing Down the Wound: The Body of the Korean American Subject

The recurring foregrounding of the body and of physical, sensorial experience in Korean American poetry attests to the function of the body as a prime locus of both the materialization of violence and the subversion of oppressive power dynamics. The female body in particular is perceived as deviating from the norm set by masculinity: it is frequently categorized as monstrous or when it is seen in a more positive light, it is reduced to an assigned biological function—childbearing and childbirth. More generally, dominant gender dynamics, deriving from an essentialist point of view that ignores the fluidity of gender, consolidate masculinity and femininity into a fixed set of properties and legitimate this by ascribing to gender an irrevocable biological foundation². Nonetheless, some Korean American women poets have contributed to disrupting this conceptualization of gender, and more broadly, of the body as the site of naturalized identities. Furthermore, as we have seen, postmemory *han* originates in the body: as a psychosomatic condition, it highlights the ways that trauma is not only experienced, but also passed down and inherited. Since the female body is most often associated with the biological act of transmission,³ it comes as no surprise that matrilineal lines in Korean American poetry become the passageways through which postmemory *han* is activated, and that the body is where postmemory *han* first materializes.

Translating Mo'um, published in 2002, is Cathy Park Hong's first poetry collection, and the one where the discussion around ethnic and racial identity is most obviously centered. That she would choose to open it with a double quote from Bakhtin and Cha is no coincidence. The epigraph from Bakhtin states, “The grotesque body....is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.” The second epigraph is excerpted from Cha's *Dictée* and reads, “She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech.” Both of these quotes highlight not a state but a process: the two most important terms, “becoming” and “speaking,” are –ing forms, meaning that the focus is placed on not on the action before it starts or after it terminates, but as it is happening. Hong's work effectively hinges on metamorphosis, and more specifically physical transformation: the body is ceaselessly recomposed as the speakers attempt to negotiate their sense of identity. In this sense, it is the ultimate grotesque body, according to Bakhtin's definition. Furthermore, the quote from *Dictée* highlights the disassociation between the physical act of uttering sounds, “speaking,” and

² Dominant conceptualizations of gender identity thus consider transgender and non-binary identities as anomalous since the latter require a disassociation of gender and biology.

³ Within a cisgender, hetero-normative framework, it has long been thought that the father was the one who passed down his genes to his children, while the mother only served as a vessel to carry the child (the metaphor of the seed attests to this enduring representation). Yet we would argue here that even though inheritance is still mainly thought of in patriarchal terms on the legal level (the child usually being assigned the father's last name), the image of the “womb,” in which the mother provides nutrients to the growing fetus, highlights the role of the mother as the most fundamental enabler of biological transmission.

its socially constructed counterpart, “speech.”⁴ The former “might resemble” the latter, meaning that either the link between the two has been severed so they are no longer isomorphic or that there was no straightforward, self-evident relationship between the two to start with. The impossibility of having two terms coincide with each other is magnified since the speaker “mimics the speaking”: mimicry happens twice, first at the level of “speaking,” and then at that of “speech.” The mimetic movement expressed in this line subsequently gains a quasi-parodic effect.

Dictée effectively dislocates “speech” from “speaking” in order to reveal how the meaning ascribed to the former is arbitrary and contingent. In her video work, Cha notably focuses on pronunciation and spelling of different words in different languages, recording and playing over and over again the utterance of a single vowel from the Korean language, for example. *Dictée* provides textual variations on this, by foregrounding the dual gesture of the *dictée*, or dictation, and translation between French and English. Dictation, as an exercise, embodies complex struggles for power and authority abstracted through a complex relationship to several languages. The person dictating becomes a voice that becomes a paragraph; the person copying down and eventually translating the text follows the same movement. The unequal relationship of authority between them becomes inscribed within the writing (one paragraph is placed in first position and precedes the other); yet writing also reveals disruptions in this relationship. The opening paragraph of *Dictée* is in French and reproduces everything from the dictation: both the sentences and the commands (“aller à la ligne,” “virgule,” “ouvre les guillemets”), denying the performative aspect of the latter—when one hears “virgule,” one is supposed to write, or draw, the comma, not spell it out (1). Even the commands are unstable: some are written in the infinitive, others in the second-person imperative. The second paragraph allegedly is a faithful translation of the first into English; yet already a few things are lost—punctuation, but also the gendering of the text. The first two paragraphs include the phrase “Il y a quelqu’une” and its translation “There is someone.” While the English subsumes the gendering of the text into the unmarked term “someone,” the French preserves gender markedness and embeds it within the very grammatical structures.

Dictation, translation, and more broadly the act of speaking thus constitute sites where the physical, linguistic, and social aspects of language intersect and reveal the power dynamics experienced by the subject. In the shuttling back and forth between different languages, and between the vocalized utterance and its textual transcription, the properties assigned to the body—gender, race, ethnicity, and so on—emerge to define the subject. In *Translating Mo’um*, Hong carries on the linguistic experimentation that Cha had initiated in *Dictée*. “Mo’um” means body, as Hong clarified in an interview, and not “mom” as an Anglophone misreading would have it (Clausen 2002). The poems deal with translating a material object—the body—both into a linguistic and textual one—the graph “mo’um”—and into another language, presumably from Korean to English, which subsequently entails not merely translation but transcription of one alphabet system (Hangul) into another (Roman). Subsequently, the grotesque body from

⁴ “Speech” is understood here as the result of the meaning-making process that takes the series of sounds uttered through “speaking” and ascribes them meaning based on order, syntax, pitch.

Bakhtin's quote undergoes concrete, material transformations and is, in the same dynamic, abstracted into language to become another signifier.

This body is the first locus of difference and subversion; it is what sets the many speakers of Hong's poems apart, what often leads to their marginalization, and what bears the physical marks of violence and trauma. The process of metamorphosis imposed upon them is characterized by its fundamental absence of completion, which can initiate violence. Indeed, the body of the Other is systematically constructed within the dominant discourse as incomplete and monstrous because it does not fit into the norms set forth. It is perceived to be yearning and waiting for completion – meaning, assimilation into the norm: it lacks whiteness, maleness, or any other marker of what is socially recognized as the norm. This is paralleled in its relationship to language, where the voice that has a distinct accent when speaking the dominant language—here, English—is perceived as lacking in fluency: the accent must be erased so that the speaker might be integrated within the dominant class of English speakers. In short, the speaker “mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech” in order to attain normalcy; yet this mimicry is doomed to fail. The poems from *Translating Mo'um* materialize the inadequacy of superimposing one language over the other to establish correspondences between the two when they are not isomorphic. For example, the title poem of the collection provides the reader with an overabundance of context for the translation of a single word: “mo'um is: / fur / food / heart / lust” (69). While all these terms relate to the body, the dictionary translation never appears: the poem circles the absent center of the accurate definition. In much the same way, “Translating Pagaji” looks like a traditional language class exercise: it opens with “please fill all appropriate blanks with ‘pagaji’” and proceeds to give us sentences riddled with blanks (21). But we are never given any actual translation for *pagaji* and are thus locked out of the exercise, since the solution remains unintelligible and inaccessible to us. Consequently, the translation exercise materializes the dislocated narrative of the immigrant.

The opening poem of the collection, “Zoo,” confronts head-on the irreducible gap that exists between Korean and English as linguistic and cultural entities, and the repercussions on the speaker's body, which must hold those two entities at once and thus metamorphoses into a hybrid, unstable figure. “Zoo” alternates between descriptions of different immigrant voices, giving them various animal attributes, and glosses on groups of three Korean syllables or words. These glosses can take the form of remarks on the phonetic properties of the origin language (“the fishy consonant / the monkey vowel”) or offer translations of a few words: “*shi*: poem / *kkatchi*: magpie / *ayi*: child” (13). Yet, in spite of what appears to be a profusion of explanation, silence is just as present as speech in the book—countless characters are mute or do not answer. When there is speech, it is often garbled and unintelligible—“gibberish” (20), literally barbaric, its Otherness magnified—or else misunderstood. The speakers of this “immigrant's tongue” (13) become half-human, half-animal: “The mute girl with the baboon's face unlearned / her vowels and cycled across a rugged phonetic map.” (13). This girl is closely identified with, and yet disassociated from the “I”—this doubling gesture recurs throughout the collection and prompts two observations.

First, it materializes the dynamic of erasure, replacement, and marginalization that characterizes the immigrant's path to uneasy belonging in the new nation. The girl “unlearned” the language

she previously knew and is now confronted with the “map”—both linguistic and physical—of the nation which she must integrate. Entering this new landscape requires her to shed what was constitutive of her previous identity, yet this process renders her mute and grounds her in a liminal space that defies definitions of the human and the animal.⁵ The scission required from the immigrant between two identities thus initiates a doubling up at several levels: linguistic, psychological, and physical. Secondly, this doubling is constitutive of the immigrant discourse, and maintained as such by the dominant discourse in order to preserve its otherness. The girl must remain human *and* animal even she tries to assimilate because she must always be brought back to her foreignness and her inability to belong on the terms of the dominant discourse.

This is especially visible in the ways that *Translating Mo'um* articulates portraits of characters who have been traditionally viewed as freaks within the white Western perspective: among those, the two conjoined twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, Saartjie Baartman, and Tono Maria. Saartjie Baartman, a Khoi woman from South Africa, was put on display in England and France, her body deemed a curiosity because of the proportions of her buttocks and genitalia. Tono Maria was an indigenous Brazilian women, whose scars, strewn all over her body and totaling more than a hundred, presumably indicated the number of sexual transgressions she had committed within her tribe. Both women were exhibited in the context of “Venus shows”—essentially human zoos of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and the Western gaze of the time used them to uphold the alleged purity and moral superiority of the white woman over the non-white woman, who was in turn represented as sexually depraved and physically deformed. This further skewed beauty standards towards Eurocentric norms, perpetuated the mutilation and negation of nonwhite bodies, and continues today, as evidenced by the poem about Tono Maria, where the speaker – the mute girl from the first poem – identifies with the indigenous woman. The sixteen stanzas are each an “exhibit;” they alternate between a fragmented description of Tono Maria and the recollections of the speaker recounting in first person the loss of her voice early on in childhood. In four stanzas, the identification is accentuated by the instability of the conjunctions used: “the girl and/or a girl” (33-34). The woman speaking in this poem is herself viewed as abnormal and relegated to the margins—sent to “Special Ed, / with autistics, paraplegics, and a boy / who ate only dirt.” Her voicelessness renders her other; we can deduce this otherness also has a racial basis, since in college, she “was suspicious that some / man [she] slept with was an Asiaphile” (33). Just as Baartman and Tono Maria were “forced to star as a grotesque exhibit in the Western narrative of racial otherness and ‘native’ inferiority” as Jan Clausen notes in a review of the book (16), the speaker must contend with the ways that her own body is rendered grotesque and alien in the contemporary framework of immigrant and assimilationist narratives.

The poems thus show a potent affinity between the speaker and these female figures whose gender and race exclude them from the mainstream Western narrative and lead them to become

⁵ The presence of references to animals, and especially to monkeys and apes, throughout the collection resonates with racial stereotypes of Asians as constructed by the dominant discourse. These animals are usually associated with trickster figures, and are thus perceived as suspicious and “tricky”—a view that Hong reprises in her poems—but they also unsettle dominant subject formation because of their genetic proximity to humans. Characterizing entire human groups as simian thus reveals a profound refusal to recognize humanity and otherness.

the subject of violence. In *Translating Mo'um*, as in *Dictée*, postmemory *han* must be articulated through the conjuring of historical figures that endured the same fundamental marginalization as the speaker did. The resulting identification allows the speaker to locate the origins of the violence she experiences as a Korean American subject in the genealogy of her Korean immigrant parents and of historical, marginalized female figures, and to rearticulate knowledge about her Korean past and language in order to gain access to modes of subject formation that resist the dominant discourse. In this sense, the doubling and hybridizing dynamic that saturates *Translating Mo'um*—visible notably through the focus on figures of twins, the recurrence of such words as “splitting,” “helix,” or “ventriloquist,” and the instability of the syntax that suggest a perpetual doubling of meaning—becomes the textual materialization of the numerous scissions that the Korean peninsula itself underwent, as a colonized subject and the first battlefield of the Cold War.

In *Translating Mo'um* (as well as in *Dictée*), the Korean American female subject sees her identity picked apart by authorities foreign to her; the poems triangulate the relationship between her body, her homeland, and her language (both as speech and text) to show how the same dynamic experienced by Korean nationhood, which sees its sovereignty assaulted and used by foreign powers, mutates to form the foundation of the Korean American subject's experience of dual identity. In this sense, postmemory *han* is not just inherited from forebears and passed down from generation to generation: it is activated in the superimposition of the body of the nation with the body of the Korean immigrant subject, which equates the violence done to the nation with that endured by the immigrant subject. This leads to a recurrence and an intensification of the doubling dynamic in future generations of Korean American subjects, who must contend with both the dual identity imposed by their racial otherness and the memory of a split point of origin. Their legacy has been severed from its foundation, but the foundation itself has been sundered. Postmemory *han* for the Korean American female subject thus acts as a psychosomatic manifestation of an original form of violence, inflicted on the national entity and, by extension, on the individual subject, that initiated a fundamental, irrevocable split within the subject's sense of identity. However, while Korean American women writers do acknowledge this violence in the constitution of their subjects, they tend to go beyond it so as to interrogate dominant modes of subject formation that tied individual identities to nationhood, so as to highlight the transnational characteristic of the Korean American female subject. Within such a dynamic, postmemory *han* is no longer tethered to a particular conception of Korean nationhood; rather, it allows the integration of gendered diasporic subject to enter into a broader reflection on the nation-self continuum.

The Transnational Female Subject: Deterritorializing *Han*

At first, Cathy Park Hong's second poetry collection, *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), does not seem to present mediated access to *han* since the main speaker is from Korea and has experienced firsthand the violence and trauma tied to Korean nationhood. Nonetheless, along with the fragmented representation of trauma, her identity as a political refugee complicates the depiction of both postmemory and *han*. Set in 2016, *Dance Dance Revolution* takes place in a fictional city called the Desert where hotels are modeled after world cities. On the outskirts of the Desert, separated by a bridge, stands New Town, where native residents of the Desert were exiled

after fomenting an uprising. Two voices alternate: that of the Historian,⁶ gender unknown, who writes in Standard English and visits the Desert as a tourist, and that of the Guide, a South Korean revolutionary woman who fled to the Desert, made her way from housekeeper to tour guide, and speaks in the trademark Desert language, itself a fluid idiom based on English grammatical structures but culling its vocabulary and pronunciation from over three hundred languages and dialects. The Guide's father and grandfather were Korean *yes-men*: they colluded with the Japanese and American foreign imperial powers, and were informants on the local resistance groups. By contrast, the Guide became a revolutionary and participated in the historical Kwangju uprising. As reported by the Historian's father, she was known as "the woman whose pirated radio station led thousands into the streets during the uprising" (21). However, her later political trajectory counters any kind of straightforward political narrative about her: having voluntarily exiled herself abroad, she has become disillusioned and cynical, both with the possibility of revolution and with the powers that be. She hints at having become an informant in the Desert, reporting those who started the eponymous revolution (99). Her notion of self is fractured by a complicated relationship to nationhood: her allegiances are always shifting; she embodies a transnational movement that transgresses all types of national and personal identification and allegiance.

We can inscribe this ambiguous representation of allegiance within a certain history: that of associating femininity with treachery, and, particularly within a U.S. cultural framework, of seeing in Asian American female figures a subversive potential when it comes to national and ethnic allegiances. In *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion*, Leslie Bow examines the relationship between gender and collectivity with a focus on Asian American formations. She highlights that, while women may embody the country on a symbolic level (visible in such expressions as *motherland* or *mother country*), this does not grant them agency in the construction of the national identity. Female labor and contributions throughout history have been largely sidelined, if not rendered invisible, and this holds true even in anti-colonial movements that seek liberation from an imperialist oppressor and the establishment of a new self-determined nation. In their introduction to *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi explain how anti-colonial nationalism "idealizes the self-sacrificing woman who is devoted to the national liberation struggle: mothers as asexual vessels of fertility dedicated to revolutionary husbands and sons" (4). Patriarchal ideology subsists in anti- and post-colonial contexts, and "confers neither anti-colonial revolutionary agency nor autonomous subjectivity to women" (Kim and Choi 4).

Women also figure the destruction and repudiation of collective ties: having historically been represented as fickle creatures, whose nature is to beguile and betray the masculine subject, they are perceived as both the symbolic foundation of a community and the trigger for its downfall. In particular, any woman who dares question the male/nationalist project underlying the community will be categorized as a threat to the cohesion of the collectivity. In this sense,

⁶ As it seems impossible to determine the gender of the Historian, who is alternatively referred to as 'he' or 'she' in the book reviews of *Dance Dance Revolution*, we will use the neutral 'they' to refer to the Historian from this point on. Some excerpts of the Historian's memoirs have been interpreted as coding the character as male, but evidence remains inconclusive; this is part of the overall dynamic of troubling and subverting traditional modes of subject formation.

betrayal can be an act of subversion inasmuch as it interrogates the foundation of the communities involved (Bow 3). This remains valid in anti-colonial contexts, where feminism “has either been subsumed under or subordinated to the greater cause of national liberation, which usually imagines the liberation of men. Women who brave these conflicting forces are at once endangered by and dangerous to the integrity of the masculinity discourse of nationalism” (Kim and Choi 7). Since they negotiate assimilation and resistance in specific terms, immigrant women thus stand outside of the binary instituted by male cultural nationalist narratives. The figure of the female migrant is then doubly suspicious, both to the dominant community of the new country and to her home and immigrant community, because of her gender and of the transnational dynamic within which she is inscribed: by crossing borders, she is transgressing geographical materializations of the physical realm of the nation and challenging official conceptions of the nation that enforce borders as natural, necessary, and sacred. By not occupying one unified space, by contending with racialized and gendered forces of assimilation and resistance, of acculturation and ethnic solidarity, she is contesting the unity and homogeneity crucial to all national entities. Within the dislocation and reconfiguration of the syntax of both experience and text emerges the possibility of a new conceptualization of the subject, through the figure of the female transnational subject. This subject is liminal, unstable, and disrupts traditional modes of envisioning the nation-self continuum, notably because she embodies the potentiality of multiple and/or shifting allegiances.

In the case of the Guide, she complicates straightforward depictions of *han* as a nostalgic movement of longing towards the homeland. Her transformation into what she had rebelled against—an informant collaborating with autocratic powers—reinscribes her into her familial legacy of treachery against the nation. Yet, ultimately, one question remains: which homeland are we talking about, exactly? Is it the liberated Korea for which revolutionaries fought during Japanese occupation? Is it the ideal of a democratic South Korea for which the Guide fought as a revolutionary? If she has turned informant in the Desert, does that invalidate her previous commitment? This would signify a transnational continuity between national entities⁷: collaborating in the Desert would equate collaborating in South Korea, and a few remarks would tend to have us think that the depictions of the Desert and Korea are meant to, if not coincide, at least resonate with each other. The Historian explains in a note that the Guide chose to be a guide at the St. Petersburg hotel because “it was her calling to work as a guide for the great hotel of St. Petersburg and besides, her heritage and the heritage of Russians are similar: they both love the combination of dried fish and very strong liquor” (28). Beyond the suggested continuity between Russia and Korea, which makes sense on a political, cultural, and geographical level, the Guide is identifying with an image (the hotel) of Russia, which points to a parodic continuity. In addition, there seem to be strong analogies between the political systems in the Desert and in South Korea, especially in the way both spaces have evolved politically. After the division along the 38th parallel that ruptured the Korean peninsula and created two distinct political and national entities, South Korea experienced a series of autocratic regimes, backed by the United States and characterized by brutal repressions of social movements. In 1987, the country shifted to a market-based democracy in 1987, and figures now among the leading economies in East

⁷ For the sake of argument, we will consider the Desert as a national entity, since no information is given as to whether it is part of a broader nation-state, or whether it functions as an independent city-state.

Asia. This development is a direct manifestation of the brand of global capitalism the United States has sought to implement throughout the world since World War II.

In a similar fashion, it seems the Desert's history associates a transition to economic prosperity with recurrent political repression within a globalized, capitalistic framework. This is most obvious in the ways the language is used in this space. The Desert language is a fluid, creolized idiom built on English grammatical structures and culling its vocabulary from "some three hundred languages and dialects" (19). This individualized *lingua franca* is shared and understood by everyone, yet specific to each individual; it transforms by mimicking and borrowing from the language of other speakers. As such, it ruptures the relationship between language and national origins, and curtails the possibility of recuperation by official authorities. However, it also seems subject to trademarks, with words and phrases, such as "May I have this dance?" being literally auctioned off (90). In a footnote, the Historian indicates that "so many words have become trademarked that it is impossible to even speak without stumbling upon someone's trademark" (90). In addition, this Creole appears to have venal origins: "Language / First began warping when the first ship docked and they hybridized a word for money so that group 1 would understand group 2" (80). The language stems from the necessity of communication for commercial trade. This 'free-market' idiom ultimately helps magnify certain inequalities through a reinforcement of private property concealed by the illusion of free access to the language.

Consequently, the Guide's shifting and murky allegiances appear not as a signal of growing conservatism or unabashed opportunism, but rather a survival strategy within a political and social entity that ceaselessly tries to have individuals surrender their identity. Postmemory—or diasporic—*han* is thus enacted as a response to two types of treason: first the forefathers' treachery in relation to Korean nationhood, which led the Guide to revolutionary action in an effort to counter her generational heritage, and then the South Korean government's violation of democratic ideals, which ultimately led the Guide to seek the status of political refugee. Both types of treason have caused trauma, and their conjunction initiates the transnational movement that will transform the dynamic of the Guide's subject formation—as well as the Historian's. Indeed, it is revealed that the Historian is the child of the Guide's former lover in South Korea, a fellow revolutionary whom the Guide believes to have died during a protest, but who eventually comes to the United States, becomes a doctor, and marries a Midwestern woman. The Historian has come to the Desert in order to meet the woman about whom the Historian's father told stories, and to record her history. However, their attempts seem at first to prove futile: as they explain in the prologue, the Guide makes sure to wait until the Historian's tape has run out before she introduces herself and starts talking (21-22). In general, access to the past is never facilitated for the Historian, who says that "history has always been stingy to [them]" (21). Postmemory *han* thus finds its most willing embodiment in the Historian, whose access to their own familial—and by extension, national—history must remain mediated, fractured, and elusive.

Dance Dance Revolution alternates between the poems told in the Guide's distinct voice, which make up the major part of the collection, and brief excerpts (no more than a page, on average) from the Historian's memoir, prefaced by a prologue where the Historian lays out preliminary observations about the Desert and its language. These are almost ethnological in tone; they

indicate that the Historian intends at first to be a spectator who listens and records, thus guaranteeing that something attesting to the presence and reality of the Desert's microcosm will subsist. Yet two main conclusions pointing to the instability—and perhaps unfeasibility—of this historical project, can be drawn. First, it is fundamentally fragmentary: the Historian does not have access to stable, complete archives, and must rely mainly on the Guide's accounts. Whether these center on the Guide's story in South Korea or on the Desert's history of rioting and repression, they are voiced by a fundamentally unreliable narrator. This unreliability stems as much from her shifting allegiances as from the language she uses, which eschews stability and fixity of meaning. Furthermore, the project of recording the Guide's history is coupled with that of presenting the Historian's own history, through fragments of the latter's memoir. Personal, national, and transnational histories are juxtaposed and interlaced, but the Historian's memoir reveals, if anything, not only how tenuous the boundaries between the three are, but also the impossibility of the Historian's grasping them all at once. The Historian's life is one of fragmentation and alienation, steeped in anxiety which stems from "the burden of consciousness" (37): they spent their childhood mostly in boarding schools, in Sierra Leone or world capital cities, yet remained disconnected from their surroundings. Their interaction with others—the piano teacher, the father—highlight the irreducible distance between two individuals: silence overtakes any form of communication.

When the father appears in the memoir excerpts, there is no trace of him speaking about his days as a Korean revolutionary; yet, from the characterization of the Historian that we are able to compose, page after page, we understand that the trauma of national exile incurred by the paternal generation has been passed down to the Historian, who transforms it into a personal exile. In the context of this enduring solipsism, we may view the Historian's trip to the Desert and their efforts to recover the Korean side of the family history as an attempt, resulting from a specific articulation of postmemory *han*, to cope with trauma that has fused with the family history and been transmitted from one generation to another. This attempt is necessarily restricted in scope, as the Historian is not going back to an ancestral homeland, but to a place that precisely articulates ahistorical transience. The modelization of the Desert seems to reinforce the slipperiness of such a project: since the hotels are modeled on world cities, the line between the object and its double, or representation, grows increasingly blurred, so much so that it becomes impossible to distinguish what is the original and what is ultimately functioning as a parody. Furthermore, the circumscription of cities and their displacement within a new urban structure that subsumes them under a commercial imperative and reduces them to cultural archetypes, dehistoricizes these cities, removing them from the complexity of their historical and cultural heritage, and ultimately rendering the Historian's presence ironic. Nonetheless, the Historian appears as yet another iteration of a transnational female subject whose subversive power comes from their ability to stand—and remain—outside of fixed, stable national entities. As we have indicated, the Historian's gender is unknown—and ultimately proves to be irrelevant—but we may still argue that they are inscribed within a feminine dynamic and heritage. They move away from the father figure to the substitute mother figure of the Guide; their reluctance to adopt a fixed form of consciousness or to identify themselves in terms of belonging to a certain fixed community appertains to femininity insofar as it places them in opposition to dominant discourses of nation and subject formation.

Conclusion

Han is present in the works of Cha and Hong, and fundamental to the process of subject formation and memorial recovery. Nonetheless, it remains elusive and layered: the longing and grief for the lost homeland are neither straightforward, nor self-evident. Returning to the homeland proves to be complicated, if not downright impossible, especially for the female subject, who can embrace neither American nor Korean identity. Seo-Young Chu revised *postmemory* to apply it to the Korean American experience and to articulate the concept of *postmemory han*, which serves to bring to light the mechanisms of transmission of trauma. I have broadened this concept to that of a diasporic *han*, which accommodates the complex experiences of *han* claimed by immigrants and their descendants, and brought a gendered lens of study to this concept. This has allowed me to highlight the strategies that two Korean American women writers⁸ employ in order to address issues specific to their experience of migration, nationhood, and violence. Their heterogeneous writing is haunted by a problematic, complicated *han*—against the repression of this sentiment, there is a clear attempt at opening it up, exposing it, without denying the ambivalences it contains regarding nationhood. Indeed, these writers place ambiguity and ambivalence at the center of their depictions of both the Korean and the American cultural and national spheres. They stage subjects who resist the integration with the American national-cultural sphere, while also interrogating the possibility of straightforward univocal representations of the homeland, because of its own political history. Korea then becomes a space that the diasporic subject has left and that has become foreign: this space views the Korean American subject with suspicion (*Cha*) and instantiated complicated allegiances (*Hong*). In these texts, deconstructing and rewriting *han* to better reflect the particularities of individual narration of the homeland brings out the gendered violence and trauma inherent to Korean American history and stemming from both terms of the hybrid identity. This process consequently outlines a new process of subject formation—that of the transnational female subject, which actualizes the transgressive power contained in shifting, redrawing, or puncturing altogether lines of allegiance to any and all community, and which leads to a radical redefinition of the nation-self continuum within a contemporary framework.

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⁸ Our observations are obviously specific to the restrained sample we have chosen. Nonetheless, given the influence of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in experimental writing, Korean American writing, and women's writing, as well as the strong presence of Korean American women in contemporary literature, it would be safe to come to the conclusion that Korean American women's writing tends to complicate the representation of *han* and of nationhood and belonging in general.

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