

**Imagining the Mother/Motherland:  
Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Theresa Hak  
Kyung Cha's *Dictee***

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**Abstract**

*Tropic of Orange* and *Dictee* differ greatly in the manner they communicate a diasporic consciousness in a transnational context. Divergent as the two novels may be, they share the trope of Mother as Motherland. Examining the narratives centered on maternity and mothers, this paper attempts to explore the politics of maternity narrative in relation to nationalism in a transnational arena.

The only mother figure in *Tropic of Orange* embodies the victimization of the First World patriarchal capitalism. The linkage of the mother to motherland is further established by the concept of a cycle. Tracing the separation and reunion between the mother and her son, I demonstrate how she brings a discursive salvation for the over-capitalized dystopia evinced in the multicultural community of Los Angeles.

In *Dictee*, the motif of regeneration underlies the discontinuous, fragmented narrative of displacement in terms of gender- and nation-formation. The trauma of being displaced and colonized is closely related to the loss of the mother/motherland, which connotes a sense of pre-oedipal wholeness in the novel. In light of a feminist view of the woman's body, I illustrate how the birthing process in maternity could serve as a trope for the "border-crossing" in a global context. The maternity narratives in these two post-colonial texts therefore destabilize the masculine idea of "border," and add a new dimension to transnational feminism.

**Keywords**

*Tropic of Orange*, *Dictee*, mother, motherland, nationalism, border-crossing,  
Karen Tei Yamashita, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Both categorized as texts of Asian American literature and having received critical attention at the turn of the twenty-first century, *Tropic of Orange* and *Dictee*, nevertheless, differ greatly in the manner they communicate a diasporic consciousness in a transnational context.<sup>1</sup> Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* conveys a "cynical optimism" about the "magic" border-crossing between the United States and Mexico.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* discloses the immigrant's extreme sense of loss in dictating a colonizer's language/culture. Divergent as the two novels may be, they share the trope of Mother as Motherland, which connects them in the lineage of Asian American literature.

Since the splash of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, conflicts or miscommunication between generations have been considered symptomatic of an identity crisis in Asian American literature.<sup>3</sup> Most of the time, a mother figure holding on to Asian culture and values opposes to her daughter's adapted identity.<sup>4</sup> However, after continuous conflicts and reconciliations with her mother, the daughter comes to an understanding of her Asian selfhood through the imagining of the Mother's land, which has not only made the mother what she is, but also ensured the daughter of her own identity. The imagining of mother/motherland thus signifies both a continuity and discontinuity of cultural lineage in Asian American literature.

The linkage of a mother to motherland has been common in various art forms. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, a figure of a woman, often a mother, symbolizes the spirit of the collectivity in many cultures (45). Semantically, the word "mother" suggests a source, an origin, or a cause.<sup>5</sup> One's earliest memory, blood relation, and even primordial identity are all associated with mother. As a biological reproducer and cultural transmitter, the mother plays a crucial role in the construction of ethnicity/race/nation. The maternity narrative of a fictive nationalism that transforms a bio-

<sup>1</sup> *Tropic of Orange* was published in 1997; *Dictee* was originally published in 1982 and reprinted in 1998. According to Su-Mei Shih, Cha's *Dictee* was ignored for almost a decade because "it did not speak to any activist agenda" in the Asian American community (Shih 145).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview Yamashita indicated that she meant to convey literary entertainment (magic realism, noir, etc.) in her novel. See Murashige 339. The literary entertainment turns out to be "sweetly cynical optimism about human nature" (Morales 61).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts* also holds the view on Asian American novels that "the loss or the transmission of the 'original' culture is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as generational conflicts between the Chinese-born first generation and the American-born second generation" (62).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, the two most popular Asian American texts, feature an intricate mother-daughter relationship.

<sup>5</sup> Consult, for example, *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, 1991 and *Longman English-Chinese Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1988.

logical mother into an abstract motherland further contributes to the establishment of one's pre-oedipal identity. Although it remains unsolved as to whether one's identity is based on essential attributes or on historical contingency, of greater significance in these two texts is how one should read the narrative centered on a mother figure or remembrances of one's mother in the historical context of Asian American literature. How does Yamashita's maternity narrative differ from Cha's? What goal does the maternity narrative aim at in these two texts? This paper attempts to explore the politics of maternity narrative in relation to nationalism in an international arena, as evinced in *Tropic of Orange* and *Dictee*.

Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* consists of forty-nine chapters, each assigned to one of the seven days of a week and seven characters, who are either living in or on the way to Los Angeles. Among them, Rafaela Cortes is the only mother figure, and the first to perceive the presence of the magic "Tropic of Orange." Around her characterization evolves the maternity narrative of the novel. How is she, as a mother, related to the mythic motherland of Mesoamerica? In what sense does she bring forth a transnational vision by re-crossing the "border" and re-mapping the geography? The re-invention of Aztec myth incarnated by Rafaela will be the focus of my analysis of the maternity narrative in this novel.

Through her writing of *Dictee*, an experimental autobiographical novel, Cha then endeavors to re-mend the broken bond of her root by recalling the destiny of her mother and motherland. In her maternity narrative Cha includes the reminiscences of her mother, sentiments over a severed motherland, and a folk tale of a filial daughter. From the conception of the Holy Mother in the beginning *novena*, to the mother and daughter in the well/womb-like space at the end, the concept of "birth/rebirth" is closely allied to the process of writing and voicing. In the narrative of fragmentation and discontinuity, how is the imagined mother/motherland related to its recurring theme of a lost subjectivity suffering from a trauma of being transplanted and colonized? My analysis demonstrates how the maternity narrative can offer a new dimension to the politics and poetics of transnational feminism.

The grid structure of HyperContexts shown in the beginning of *Tropic of Orange*, composed of seven characters of diverse cultural backgrounds, breaks the linear narrative of traditional novels and invents a complex narrative intersected by multiple episodes. Complicated as it is, there are mainly two storylines: one constituted by the snapshots of the highly-urbanized multicultural community of L.A. and the other formed through the migration of the Mesoamerican characters from a dreamlike

Mexican retreat across the border to the United States, which accidentally leads to the northward movement of the Tropic. The two narrative strings weave together in the family reunion of Bobby Ngu, Rafaela Cortes, and their son. If we regard this *c'est L.A.* story as moving from a multicultural utopia to an over-capitalized dystopia, the one who brings a promise of salvation at the end is Rafaela, who precipitates a redrawing of the geography and serves as a metaphorical mother of the Tropic, which I will elaborate later.

The beginning scene in the opening chapter offers some significant clues to the metaphorical reading of the character Rafaela, who appears as a housekeeper at Gabriel's retreat, the "Tropic of Cancer," in Mazatlán, Mexico. Having an angel's name, Rafaela guards Mazatlán, the name that is derived from the mythic Mexican homeland, Aztlán. It is the summer solstice, the time when the sun runs through the fourth zodiac, Cancer. In the house dead bodies of crabs, along with those of other insects and tiny animals, lie scattered over the floor. It is noteworthy that it takes hours of walking to reach Gabriel's retreat from the beach; the presence of crabs in the house is simply abnormal (64). In such an inland villa the odd appearance and death of the crabs, representative of the zodiac sign of Cancer, imply the disappearance of the Tropic of Cancer. About the same time, an orange tree in Gabriel's orchard has grown an aberrant orange out of season. Under the tiny bud of the tree, Rafaela notices a line, barely visible but continues "farther in both directions, east and west, east across the highway and west toward the ocean and beyond" (12). The miraculous appearance of the Tropic of Orange, perhaps as a replacement for the old Tropic, anticipates a new cartography of borders and geography.

Rafaela is the first one to discover the presence of the Tropic of Orange. Almost all along the northward migration, she is the only one who can "see" the Tropic. In other words, the new Tropic "comes into being" in the narrative only through Rafaela's eyes. From the very beginning, she has been an attentive observer and care-taker of the orange (10-12). Rafaela as such can be regarded as a metaphorical mother for the new Tropic.

Why is it Rafaela, rather than any other, who mothers the line? Being a mother of a small child, Rafaela's maternity is particularly accentuated in her full-time care of her two-year-old son, Sol. She is also the housekeeper of Gabriel's retreat, and Gabriel "seems to be the sort that required mothering" because he is rather "lost" in the disorder of his dream (66). Of the three main characters of indigenous American background, Rafaela seems the most "authenticized" while Gabriel is an Americanized

third-generation immigrant and Arcangel is of mythic origin, invented in the domain of magic realism.<sup>6</sup> Rafaela is also the offspring of weavers from Culiacán, Mexico. Of the Aztec cultural heritages, weaving is a master craft, which is so finely developed that people can talk even through their weaving (8).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Rafaela can read palms. From the very beginning, she seems to possess innate simplicity and intuitive subtleness, the qualities also found in another indigenous American character, Arcangel.<sup>8</sup>

But the manual craft declines as the imported machine-made products flood the local market. In a homeland dependent on the First World, the pure blood or native culture of Mexico does not ensure a good comfortable life. Like thousands of Mexicans who cross the border to seek better opportunities, Rafaela leaves Mexico and goes north to L.A., where she meets and marries Bobby, “the Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15). Rafaela enters the janitorial business, the low-wage labor mainly undertaken by under-privileged people of color.<sup>9</sup> Going to a community college, Rafaela learns the truth of class conflicts and ethnic discrimination, so she joins Justice for Janitors, an organization of solidarity. As a consequence, she has a quarrel with Bobby leaves him, returning to Mexico with her little boy Sol.

Tracing Rafaela’s roots and routes, we can locate her personal history in the context of the Mesoamerican history of colonization.<sup>10</sup> As stated in Arcangel’s poems,

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<sup>6</sup> Rafaela is “authenticized” in the sense that she is more representative of indigenous Americans than Gabriel and is more “real” than Arcangel.

<sup>7</sup> Freud remarks that weaving is one of the few contributions women made to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization. He says that weaving is an art women use to conceal their genitals, or lack of a penis. See Freud 132. Some feminist artists in contemporary arts therefore use the work of torn weaving as a protest against Freud’s association of weaving with femininity. See Isaak 180-81.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am not trying to reinforce the stereotypes of indigenous Americans by saying that Rafaela is such a type. In a novel marked by “multiculturalism,” the ethnic background of each character is clearly indicated. But Rafaela and Arcangel are the two most closely related to their native land and culture. Both are indigenous Americans, sharing certain traits. Significantly they are also the only two figures crossing the geographical border between Mexico and the U.S. Indeed, Yamashita employs stereotypes only strategically. Stereotypes are invoked here because it is politically useful to do so. By rendering Rafaela and Arcangel the representatives of Mesoamerica, their northward movement across the border and the wrestling match at the end can be read in a significant way.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Sze states that immigrant women workers are usually the victims who face elevated occupational exposure to toxic chemicals (37). Other environmentalists, like Laura Pulido, also agree that a highly polluted environment produced by manufacturing industries and auto-dependent transportation system is experienced by low-income communities and people of color (Sze 36).

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford uses the term “routes/roots” to discuss the close relationship between “cultures of displacement and transplantation” and “specific [...] histories of economic, political, and cultural intersection” (36). Susan S. Friedman also uses “routes/roots” to discuss the dialogic pull of routes and

the arrival of Spanish colonizers, the so-called great discovery in the West, is actually the doom of indigenous Americans (51). The Western imperialists drained the land's natural wealth, exploited the natives' labor, and worst of all, degraded their crafts and culture as "backward" (143-48). Even today, Western imperialist capitalism practices a new form of economic exploitation in the name of free trade or free market. The productivity and fertility of the land, narrated in Arcangel's poems, contribute to the close association between collective identity and motherhood.

Rafaela's linkage to her motherland is further built by her transformation and empowerment through Aztec myth. At first Rafaela's maternity is merely manifested in her caring and guarding of Sol. It is not until her separation from Sol that the strength or power of maternity is exerted to such an extent that the mythic past of her motherland is summoned back. Witnessing a transnational project of baby-organ smuggling, Rafaela is kidnapped and separated from Sol. In order to fight the villain who endangers her son's life, Rafaela transforms herself mysteriously into a serpent, evoking one of the Aztec deities—Quetzalcóatl. Figured as a feathered serpent, Quetzalcóatl is the patron of arts and crafts and the god of self-sacrifice. Being the patron deity of the Hero Twins, whom barren women prayed for children, Quetzalcóatl is also related to motherhood.<sup>11</sup> From the very beginning, there is a mysterious connection between the serpent and Rafaela. Returning to the opening scene, we can find that "[a] snake was always alive" in Rafaela's house while she is sweeping the dead bodies of other tiny animals and insects (3). The serpent, the incarnation of the Aztec mythic past, is actually Rafaela's guardian. Meanwhile, the villain is also transformed into a feline. The battle between these two mystic beasts is enlarged and echoes the sweeping fights and continuous conflicts between indigenous Americans and the Spanish army in early colonial days.

Rafaela's fight and the historical battles of the past have been mysteriously merged together in the narrative. Her war is not merely personal, but symbolizes the collective resistance and victimization of her ancestors as "[b]attles passed as memories: massacred men and women [...] discarded in ditches, tossed into the sea"(220). In the reminiscences of the colonial past, two mother types are contrasted in relation to

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roots in relation to narratives of identity. According to Friedman, "root" refers to one's state of being tied to a single location whereas "route" implies travel, physical and psychical displacements in space (151).

<sup>11</sup> Claudia Sadowski-Smith discusses the creative use of Mesoamerican myths in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. She thinks the Mesoamerican cosmologies of Quetzalcóatl, Earth Mother, and the Hero Twins are used to symbolize Native Americans' nostalgia for pre-colonial life (98).

nationalism. La Malinche, abandoning her children and becoming a translator, was accused of treason and buried alive. La Llorona is much lamented and memorialized because she suffers the loss of her son. As noted in the narrative, “[a]nd there was the passage [...] of one hundred mothers pacing day after day the Plaza de Mayo with the photos of their disappeared children, and Coatloopeuh blessing it all” (220-21).

The mothers receiving blessings are those who lost their children in the battle. The mothers’ sense of loss is compared to the sadness over a devastated motherland. That sense of bereavement is nearly a death. The archetype of such a mother found in Greek mythology is Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and productive soil. When her daughter Persephone disappears, Demeter’s grief is so great that she almost leaves the land to die in dreadful and cruel weather.<sup>12</sup> Continuing the motif of Demeter’s myth and La Llorona’s tale, *Tropic of Orange* constitutes the core of maternity narrative with a mother’s grief for the loss of her child and the ravages of motherland.

The concept of cyclical time is also crucial to the maternity narrative in this novel. In Greek mythology, the times of separation and reunion between Demeter and Persephone are noted by seasonal cycles. The seven chapters assigned to Rafaela follow the cycle of a day—Midday, Morning, Daylight, Dusk, Dawn, Nightfall, and Midnight. According to one of Arcangel’s poems, a cycle of fifty-two years marks the doom of Mesoamerican history. The imaginative return of the pre-colonial past to present-day reality constructs a narrative cycle as a reminder of continuing exploitation from colonial imperial power to post-colonial transnational capitalism. The mother and motherland are linked because they are both capable of re-producing and creating a life cycle that indicates the historical genealogy of one’s root. The feature of maternal reproduction underlies the premise of the novel.

The returning/cycling of Mesoamerican history culminates in the arrival of the Tropic in L.A. Once named Porciuncula, Los Angeles was the second largest city of México before 1848. Pushing the Tropic northward to L.A., Arcangel metaphorically merges L.A. back within the borders under the reign of Mexico. The re-mapping of the geographical space of Mesoamerica implies a return of history to pre-colonization, which is envisaged as a utopia in Arcangel’s poems. Thus the dragging of the Tropic, related to the re-invocation of an early utopia in Meso-american myth and history, signifies a salvation for the novel’s dystopic L.A.

The flow of people and capital in L.A., as the novel shows, has created an illusion

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<sup>12</sup> When Persephone disappears, “that year was most dreadful and cruel. Nothing grew; no seeds sprang up. [...] The whole race of men would die of famine” (Hamilton 52).

of multiculturalism, which is represented superficially in the multicultural options of entertainment and consumption, without real equality and respect for all ethnic communities. Examining the episode of “Hiro’s Sushi,” we can see racial discrimination under the pretense of multiculturalism. The white woman in Hiro’s *sushi* bar praises “[the] international world,” showing off her knowledge of Japanese cuisine and culture, but refuses to address Emi, the Japanese American sitting next to her (128). Both Emi and the chef, Hiro, are “invisible” to her; only “tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card” make sense to her (128). This is why Emi comments cynically in the *sushi* bar, “I hate being multicultural” (128).<sup>13</sup> The over-capitalization of L.A. gives rise to the enlarging discrepancy between the rich and the poor, the homeless individuals’ heartless watching/consumption of the media, and the commodification of the human body, namely, the smuggling of children’s organs. As shown in the novel, the conflicts between economic classes are usually entangled with racial discrimination. The chapter, “Margarita’s Corner,” uncovers the fact that the most exploited class is basically composed of people of color. The verbal snapshots of various problems in L.A., though narrated in a light tone, discloses the darkness of First World patriarchal capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The possible salvation, symbolized by the northward dragging of the Tropic, is to re-draw the map of power.

The great wrestling match between El Contrato Con America and SUPERNAFTA dramatizes the tug-of-war between Mesoamerican nativism and transnational capitalism (in the name of free trade). No one really wins the fight. The result of the battle implies that the opposition will fall into a deadlock if it becomes an either-or choice. The final reunion of Bobby, Rafaela, and Sol, nevertheless, opens another possibility for the opposition between nativism and transnationalism—that is, the transethnic affiliation of minorities. The coalition of Asians and indigenous Americans brings a new transnational vision for the racist “multiculturalism” and multinational capitalism. Additionally, when the Tropic breaks at the end, the one who holds it is Bobby, “the

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<sup>13</sup> R. Radhakrishnan differentiates metropolitan hybridity from postcolonial hybridity, which is an expression of “extreme pain and agonizing dislocation.” Metropolitan hybridity, a celebratory, comfortable “jouissance” of cultural heterogeneity, hides “the subject of the dominant West.” For further elaboration of Radhakrishnan’s view, see Shih 146. Here in *Tropic of Orange*, Emi apparently does not agree with the “multiculturalism” that is mistaken or reduced to merely the “metropolitan hybridity” of the white people.

<sup>14</sup> Patriarchy and capitalism are both the institutions based on the exploitation of others, while the former oppresses women and the latter exploits the working class. Doubtlessly, a woman laborer is doubly oppressed because of her sex and class. Here, by “First World patriarchy capitalism,” I mean the economical and ideological institution on an international scale that determines the lives of the Third World people, especially women.



Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15). Bobby appears to be the most appropriate person to re-draw the map of power, as he is an amalgamation of multivalent ethnicities. Bobby’s hybrid identity has mobilized the essentialist concept of identity and ethnic border.

As the biological mother of Sol, Rafaela herself embodies the exploitation of the First World patriarchal capitalism. But she is also the metaphorical mother of the Tropic, whose northward migration has elicited the history of oppression out of the land of Mesoamerica. The linkage of mother to motherland is further established by the cycle of nature, through the cycle of history, and finally to the cycle of life. The narrative recurrence of Mesoamerican history, standing in contrast to contemporary urbanized L.A. reaches its peak in the wrestling match between El Contrato and SUPERNAFTA. The maternity narrative finds a discursive solution in the marriage of a Mesoamerican mother and an Asian father. *Tropic of Orange* offers a new dimension to the significance of “border-crossing.”

*Dictée*, opening with a picture of carved words in *hangul*, speaks the pain central to a diasporic consciousness—“I miss my mother. I am hungry. I want to go home.”<sup>15</sup> Using simple, child-like language, the persona tells the reminiscence of her mother in association with sustenance and home. Biologically speaking, a mother is the only one to provide food and a protective home (womb) at the pre-birth stage. The motif of birth connects the opening epitaph to the ending section. On the last page a child is calling her mother to lift her up to the window,

to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky. (179)

The view of the window shows a bell with a rope tied to stones. In this passage, the bell can be seen as an inverted womb and the rope a navel string. The unleashing of the rope, thus, symbolizes the process of childbirth. In this sense, “a peal to sky” is actually the birth of a voicing subject.

In discussing need, desire, and demand, Lacan thinks that the birth of an infant is

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<sup>15</sup> The Korean inscription is said to be done by Korean laborers who were forced to work on a coal mine in Japan. However, some have pointed out that the language itself was not written in the grammatical style before liberation (Kim 25; Spahr 43). However, Elaine H. Kim thinks that the symbolic significance of the inscription should not be ignored in the reading of *Dictée* (25).

a process of experiencing a “lack”—the lack of the “anatomic wholeness” that a mother offers, namely, the protection and nourishment. But that lack evokes in the infant an instinct for survival. An infant becomes aware of his need from the time of separation from his mother. Therefore, subjectivity is born by separation.<sup>16</sup> The Korean carving in the opening—“I miss my mother”—presupposes a loss of wholeness because the persona is separate from her mother. In *Dictee*, the loss of the mother/wholeness is both inscribed and alleviated through the process of writing. The subjectivity is formed and ensured by the motif of birth at the end. The resounding of the peal indicates a transformation from a subject of dictation (a *disease*) to a subject voicing her being.

Structurally the opening and closing sections, separated from the nine chapters named for the nine muses, have been regarded together as the tenth chapter or the articulation of the tenth muse.<sup>17</sup> Thus, *Dictee* is considered to form a circular structure. The motif of reproduction or regeneration, in fact, underlies the discontinuous, fragmented narrations of being displaced in terms of gender- and nation-formation.

Relocated in the post-colonial context, the imagining of a mother who presupposes the loss of the mother/wholeness becomes an imperative for the exiles. Following the first section, “Clio History,” Cha recalls the life-history of her mother in the section, “Calliope Epic Poetry.” Just as Cha feminizes the history of Korea by upholding a young heroine, Yu Guan Soon, as an important figure in the construction of Korean nationhood,<sup>18</sup> the masculine narrative of a classic epic is also transformed into the feminine narrative of a diasporic epic.<sup>19</sup> In naming her mother’s life-narrative an “epic,” Cha ironically adds a diasporic dimension to the traditional definition of an epic by equating “exile” to “adventures,” a woman’s personal biography to “the heroic episodes that are important to the history of a nation” (161). Cha apparently attempts to redefine the relationship of a woman to nationalism by recomposing her mother’s life history.

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<sup>16</sup> For Lacan’s view on subjectivity, see Grosz 59-74.

<sup>17</sup> In her article, Shih considers the twenty-one pages leading to the nine sections of *Dictee*, and the dozen unnumbered pages to be the tenth section, or the evocation of the tenth muse (157). The number ten in Chinese cosmology, as Shih notes, signifies “a completion or a reunion” (162).

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Lowe also agrees: “the account of the life of female nationalist leader Yu Guan Soon also ‘feminizes’ and fragments the masculine narrative of Korean nationalism” (“Unfaithful to the Original” 49). However, Lowe does not explore the subversive insertion of a woman’s life-narrative into the genre of classical epic.

<sup>19</sup> In the definition of an epic, “[...] characters of high position are presented in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race” (Holman 161).

The Calliope section begins and ends with the photographs of Cha's mother, Hyung Soon Huo. And the retrospective narration of Huo's girlhood is articulated in the present tense, indicating the conformity between the narrated time and the time of narrating. Such a textual feature reminds us of the pre-oedipal phase, when the child identifies himself/herself with his/her mother, assuming that they constitute a wholeness together. Implicit in the recollection of her mother's exile is Cha's longing to regain the pre-oedipal wholeness with her mother and motherland—as shown by the narrator's exclamatory words telling Huo's reunion with her mother: "You are home now your mother your home. Mother inseparable from which is her identity, her presence. [...] Mother, my first sound. The first utter. The first concept" (49-50).

Huo's exile in Manchuria reveals the trauma of being colonized. During the Japanese rule of Manchuria, Japanese was the official language and Korean was strictly prohibited. Language was particularly employed as a powerful tool to exert the colonizer's dominance over the colonized. However, the Koreans secretly kept their language, representing their MAH-UHM, because "[your] Mother tongue is your refugee. It is being home. Being who you are" (45-46). The love for their mother tongue/motherland even surpassed their love of life: some even risked death by uttering each word. The fervor for Korean nationhood was so intense that "[i]nside MAH-UHM fire alight enflame"(46). The song Bong Sun flower, the stories of martyres, the lineage of blood, along with red-and-blue national flag, constitute the rhetoric of Korean nationalism. Young as she is, Huo's commitment to Korean nationalism can withstand any trial, comparable to Jesus's faith in his Lord as he fasts in the wilderness and resists Satan's three temptations (52-53). Seriously ill and dying, Huo is motivated to survive only when she returns to her "family," where she restores her blood relations and inherits an imagination of her motherland.

It is not only a biological mother but also an imagined motherland that gives a life to Huo. It is rather ironic that Huo and Cha, being exiles for years, return to their homeland but are estranged and questioned by Korean customs officials for "who and what you are, who is represented" (57). An American passport with "their signature their seals" has taken their identity and "makes the difference" (56). Although the mother and daughter remain faithful to the nation—"will and will only espouse this land this sky this time this people"(57), they are "otherized" because of the traces of another nation.

Kim has mentioned the price paid for being a "real" Korean woman— proficiency in Korean language and history, consent to nationalist sentiments, and most important,

the practice of Confucian ideals of feminine modesty, frugality, chastity, fidelity, and maternal sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> The price is so dear because women are often required to carry “the burden of representation.” According to Yuval-Davis, women are constructed as “the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honor” (47). As Confucianism is so important in the construction of Korean national culturalism, a Korean woman needs to conform to Confucian gender norms in order to be “recognized.” Therefore, Korean nationalists tend to expel or condescend to any overseas Korean woman if she does not follow the Confucian ideal of womanhood as a consequence of foreign influence or carries any trace of foreignness. The Korean national identity formed during the colonial days of Japanese rule turns to be extremely exclusionary. As official outsiders bearing American citizenship, Huo and Cha lose the legitimacy to reclaim their motherland.

The pain of being banished from a superior (American) nationalism has been expressed in the opening through the metonym of mimicking a privileged language of the “other” (3-5). The wound that has been made by an ethnic “other,” as it turns out, is struck by an ethnic “self” as well, so “[i]nto the mouth the wound the entry is reverse and back each organ artery gland pace element” (57). The national identity founded on “the soil, seed, amount of light and water necessary, the genealogy” (58) here exposes its exclusionary/homogeneous vision of “nation,” and destroys the myth of common origin or shared blood. The mother and daughter in “Calliope Epic Poetry” are exiled not only in an alien land but also in their homeland. The unspeakable pain is felt again when the mother opens her mouth halfway, nearly saying but only silently addressing her land: “I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long” (58). The imagining of motherland, intervened by nationalism, is proved to be no less than a mirror reflection, a subject of pure fiction.

The myth of nation as the natural extension of kinship relationship reveals its contradictions by excluding the diasporic kinswomen who bear the mark of “otherness.” It proves that the membership in a nation is not “natural” but artificial. Different political agendas can lead national passions to discrete nationalist narratives. In “Melpomene Tragedy,” the severance of Korea, in fact, is the result of Western colonial intervention in the formation of the Korean nation. In 1945 Soviets and Americans disagreed on the legitimacy of the competing political groups seeking to govern Korea.

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<sup>20</sup> Kim indicates the importance Confucianism in the construction of Korean national culturalism. She protests against the strict gender norms imposed by Confucianism on women—its confinement of a woman to the role of a wife and a mother. It is not exactly the virtues of motherhood that Kim critiques. See Kim 6-7.

In 1948 the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel hardened into an international boundary with the establishment of Syngman Rhee's government in the South and Kim Il Sung's in the North.<sup>21</sup> In *Dictee*, the foreign intervention in Korean nationalism, "under the title of liberators," leads to Koreans' loss of the imaginary motherland, a loss of "wholeness"—"hers alone not the whole of her and even the image would not be entire her fraction her invalid that inhabits that rise voluntarily like flint" (88). The destination of Korean people is thus "fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile" (81).

The development of nationalism in Korea has conformed to the need of dictators for political homogeneity. Political dissenters are dismembered by "the police the soldiers anonymous" (84). Authorized by national institutions, the police and soldiers shoot at the students out of "their own line of blood" (84). Whereas it is supposedly for the sake of "womenandchildren" that men go to war, in Korea the green uniform (soldiers) treat the white uniform (students) as enemies and thus, victimize "womenandchildren."<sup>22</sup> So the children are killed and the mothers suffer the extreme pain of bereavement. The fact that those in "uniform," whether in green or white, lose their names and individuality in the text further indicates that they are merely the collective scapegoats of conflicting ideologies.

Nevertheless, the loss of one's child is an irremediable pain for a bereaved mother. The reference to Demeter in the narrative implies how the motherland suffers severance as much as the mother suffers the separation from her child. The pain of a mother's bereavement is compared to the loss of wholeness as hinted in the line: "Her own who is offspring and mother, Demeter and Sibyl" (88). The body of a pregnant mother, with an unborn baby inside her womb, includes both "offspring and mother" and constitutes a "wholeness" of flesh. The separation of child from mother is corporealized to be the pain caused by the very division of flesh in the process of childbirth. The motif of losing wholeness is reinforced by the recurring narrative of separation, incision, and division. Nationalism, as an artificial construction, breaks the natural bonds between mother and child as well as the connection among the people living on their land.

In a heralding poem of the section entitled "Clio History," Cha traces the extended blood relations from family to nationality, which constitute the base of ethnic nationalism. But at the end of the poem she interrogates such a "natural" construction

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<sup>21</sup> Please refer to Flint for details about the background of Korean War.

<sup>22</sup> The term "womenandchildren" is borrowed from Yuval-Davis 45.

from the perspective of Korean diaspora—“[w]hat stray ejection misplaced [...] what transplant to dispel upon” (20). Under the inspiration of a certain national ideology, people feel that their membership in the nation is “natural” rather than chosen. Because of such an assumption, the nation, like the family, can ask for sacrifices. Yu Guan Soon and other patriots were martyred for the independence of their nation. However, more people were sacrificed after Korean independence because two different nationalisms were competing for legitimacy. The “natural” belonging that one assumed to a certain national identity actually led to a civil war, and thus broke families and severed a nation. The nationalism constructed on the myth of blood proves to be the most exclusionary and thus most damaging to blood-connected kinsmen. From “Calliope Epic Poetry” to “Melpomene Tragedy,” nationalism has become a great oppression of women, who suffer bereavement and the burden of representation.

The Korean myth of the filial daughter in the ninth section, “Polymnia Sacred Poetry,” symbolically restores what mothers have lost in terms of nationalism. In the myth the well quenches the thirst of the fatigued daughter, and the well-keeper also gives the daughter special remedies to heal her ill mother. The well in the story is endowed with multifold significance. A well could symbolize femininity, which is evinced not only in the sisterhood of the daughter and the well-keeper but also in the lineage of the mother and daughter. It is also related to salvation and purification, as hinted by its healing power for the ill. As a hollow in the earth (169), a well is also the underworld. The well-keeper’s warning for the daughter not to stop on her way back and the daughter’s backward glance at the well-keeper recalls the Greek mythological figures Orpheus and Sibyl, both taking a journey down to the underworld.<sup>23</sup> Also, Demeter in her desolate search for her daughter, who has been kidnapped to the underworld, is carefully tended beside a well by several maidens.<sup>24</sup> A well therefore also connotes death.

At the end of the Korean myth, the daughter returns from the well to home near dusk. In a sense, she has transcended death through the journey to the well/underworld, and so has her mother. What follows is a transcript from the tenth sign of Chinese cosmology: “Tenth, a circle within a circle, a series of concentric circles” (173). Shih has pointed out that the tenth sign of concentric circles brings the promise of regeneration, after the nine-day ritual (*novena*) of the Immaculate Conception, nine-day

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<sup>23</sup> Orpheus goes down to the world of death to bring his wife, Eurydice, back. Sibyl of Cumae and also a woman of deep wisdom, guides Aeneas to the underworld. See Hamilton 102-04 and 226-30.

<sup>24</sup> For details of the well scene, please refer to Hamilton 50.

separation of Demeter and Persephone, nine pockets of medicines fetched by the filial daughter for her ill mother (156). Here the connotation of concentric circles can be elaborated further in that it is “a life within a life” viewed symbolically if we recall that the body of an expectant mother is a wholeness of both “offspring and mother” (88). The concentric circle is the very sign of reproduction, through which a woman becomes a mother.

The circle, related to the number ten, also symbolizes the return to unity from multiplicity.<sup>25</sup> Through the maternal sign of concentric circles, the fragmented narrative, the broken tongue, and the severance of motherland are unified. The bell and the peal on the last page, as discussed above, further signify a rebirth after “the death in life” caused by a displaced identification in both an alien land and motherland.

The mother and motherland in *Dictee* connote a sense of pre-oedipal wholeness. However, through the mediation of colonialism/nationalism, the mother/motherland suffers the separation from her children, as well as the severance/incompleteness of her body.<sup>26</sup> Only by reviving maternity or the artistic elevation of birth through writing can the mother/motherland regain its wholeness. Lowe has also noted that motherland can be fetishized by patriarchal nationalism and thus becomes a fatherland. Women would also be relegated to merely “the symbolic register of figuring the nation.”<sup>27</sup> Lowe asserts a Freudian view that a mother is “incomplete” or “castrated” to claim that colonial or national narratives of motherland is merely a fetishism, substituting another object in place of the “missing” part.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, I find in *Dictee* a reconfirmation of mother/maternity as a wholeness. Moreover, the recurring motif of birth, so prevalent in post-colonist texts, should be explored from a new perspective.

From a post-structuralist perspective, any narrative concerning a primordial and essentialized “origin” or “identity” is riddled with interrogations. However, in the diasporic texts of ethnic minority, the narrative centered on a mother figure or the

<sup>25</sup> For details, please refer to Cirlot 45.

<sup>26</sup> Colonialism is actually a distorted expansion of nationalism.

<sup>27</sup> Lowe thinks that *Dictee* undertakes a rewriting of that “fetishism” from a site of difference that displaces both colonialism and nationalist oedipal narratives. For further details, please see Lowe’s “Unfaithful to the Original” 66.

<sup>28</sup> In “Femininity” Freud claims that the castration complex of girls is initiated from a sight of male genitals. Noticing the biological difference between male and female genitals, girls feel “seriously wronged,” and fall a victim of “penis envy.” That’s why girls turn away from their mothers, who are also “castrated,” and turn to their father for the expectation of possessing a penis from him. See Freud 124-35. Here Lowe thinks that nationalisms inherit the oedipal narrative to have the son (citizen) identify with his father (fatherland/nation-state), just like “a fixation [of the psychoanalytic logic] which disavows ‘castration,’ or incomplete wholeness of the mother, by substituting another object in place of the ‘missing’ part” (“Unfaithful to the Original” 66).

remembrances of one's mother should be read not simply as a root or nativeness that counters First World hegemony. As noted by Stuart Hall and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, positivist essentialism is itself a necessary construction, used strategically for political interest.<sup>29</sup> Imagining one's root is not necessarily to essentialize ethnic difference, but to serve as a provisional access for an ethnic minority to enter a transnational arena.

What I find worthy of further investigation is the concept of border and border-crossing in the process of childbirth and being a mother. Gillian Rose has mentioned that in traditional time-geography the human body is considered "a neutral, objective container of rationality," formed with a unity by its clear division from the outer world. The bounded body with an unbroken border between inside and outside is assumed to be masculine. Feminists argue that motherhood is an artificial construction and should not be objectified specifically as woman's work just because a woman's body is endowed with the biological functions of conceiving and breastfeeding. Instead, a woman's menstruation and childbirth, according to feminists, are bodily processes which transgress the boundary between inside and outside the body. The body, actually, is a map of power and identities, rather than a neutral container of rationality (Rose 31-34).

The feminist view of woman's body offers an insight into the maternity narrative in a transnational context. A mother is defined by the process of childbirth—a transgression between the inside and outside of the body.<sup>30</sup> The trope of the mother as motherland in these two transnational texts can be read other than consolidating one's root or primordial identity. Re-discovering mother is not merely a means to explore the imaginary border of one's self, but also a way to transgress the borders between the self and the other. The birthing process registered in maternity can be a trope for border-crossing. Therefore, just as the border-crossing in maternity transforms a woman's incompleteness (castration) to infinite potentiality, the border-transgression in a transnational context can change the marginality that lacks political power into openness by infinite affiliations and expansions of margins.

Citing feminist concepts of woman's body, my study does not intend to essentialize the sexual difference between man and woman. Rather, this paper aims to liberate a more discursive space out of woman's body, which has been traditionally

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<sup>29</sup> Please refer to Hall 446-47. Spivak also proposes a strategic use of positivist essentialism in her discussion of subaltern studies; see Spivak 205.

<sup>30</sup> Iris Marion Young, a socialist feminist, has described childbirth as the process that "entails the most extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer" (Rose 31).



“closed” by masculine discourse. In addition to disclosing the mother’s victimization under the impacts of nationalism and transnational capitalism, I propose to view maternity positively in a cross-cultural context. The motif of birth and maternity can be the site of woman’s agency because birthing is a trope of border-crossing, signifying a unity from multiplicity.

In *Tropic of Orange* and *Dictee*, maternity narrative is closely related to the transgression of borders. Rafaela is the metaphorical mother of the Tropic and accompanies its northward movement to Los Angeles. Her marriage and final reunion with Bobby further suggest a transgression over the invisible border of ethnicity. The transgression offers an alternative to solve the deadlock between nativism and globalism. In *Dictee* Cha demonstrates the transgression over the visible and invisible borders. The mother’s transnational migration parallels the spilling of blood from blood vessel onto the pavement or the ink from the pen onto the paper (64-65). The very act of writing is a transgression, too—to deliver ink from surface to surface, boundary to boundary. The book itself is a transgression over genres, languages, and texts (pictorial and verbal).

Border crossing in these two books means reunifying fragments and regaining wholeness. As Persephone crosses the earth for a reunion with her mother, Rafaela crosses the Mexico-U.S border for the rescue of her son and Cha’s mother crosses the border for a look at her motherland. To imagine the mother/motherland is to cross the border for that lost wholeness. Symbolized by the concentric circles, maternity brings a return to unity from multiplicity, which may be “vernacular cosmopolitanism” from a view of cultural globalism. According to Homi Bhabha, it is “to translate between cultures and across them in order to survive, not in order to assert the sovereignty of a civilized class, or the spiritual autonomy of a revered ideal” (24).

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