Poetic Language as a Sounding *Mo'um* (Body): Reading Cathy Park Hong's Poems as Deleuze's "Minor Literature"

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Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, Volume 73, Number 2, Summer 2017, pp. 83-101 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2017.0010

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INTRODUCTION

Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong has a unique relationship with the Korean language and culture through her innovative and stylish English verses in *Translating Mo'um* (2002; hereinafter *TM*) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007; hereinafter *DDR*). These books elaborate Hong's "cultural zigzagging," the re-importation of the English language back to Western culture, and "misplaced cultural bartering" in the imagined city called "the Desert" (Kryah, "Interview").[1] Reading Hong's work in relation to a matrix of French post-structuralist thinkers and phenomenologists reveals that her language can be interpreted as a "minor literature" as described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and that her work enacts new forms of culturally or ethnically "in-between" or "becoming" ethnic subjectivity.

Hong's "minoritized" ways of using language no longer denote the Korean or Asian American subject as a racially and culturally homogeneous subject. Her "minor" language functions as a new cultural lens through which these "in-between" subjects, if only temporarily, reinterpret themselves and the world around them; therefore, Hong's experimental language is an important political tool for these culturally in-between figures. Like many other contemporary Asian American writers, Hong's attitude towards the term "Asian American" is ambivalent. As Song Min Hyoung has noted, Asian American writers and poets in the last three decades, including Hong, are "engaged in actively redefining what it means to be an Asian American . . . [and] work within a space of tense creativity that reflects a national unease

Arizona Quarterly Volume 73, Number 2, Summer 2017 • ISSN 0004-1610

about the question of race" (14). Eunsong Kim and Don Mee Choi also state that in the contemporary era, Asian Americanness is no longer a manageable or controllable category, as it is comprised of rich and complex genealogies of diverse cultural and racial groups in their manifesto "Refusal=Intervention." In this regard, the importance of reading contemporary Korean American women poets no longer lies in "their exploration of the complexities of 'Korean' or 'Korean-American' or 'Korean-American woman' as subject positions or as opportunities for constructing even minority/oppositional voices . . . , [but in] their poem's hostility to these questions" (McNeill 2).

Hong's art aesthetic revolving around the pure language—that does not have any fixed semantic referent—and new "becoming" subject is evident in *Dance Dance Revolution*. The title is derived from the name of a series of music video games produced by a Japanese company. To play this game, the players first choose a pop song and stand on a platform to hit the colored arrows on the screen with their feet to musical cues. Hong titles her work *DDR* because this process of cultural zigzagging—in which Western pop music and dance moves are imported, made into game formats in Asian countries, gain popularity and are reimported into Western countries, losing their cultural originality—is similar to the ways in which the English language in the contemporary era is losing its original meaning and becoming distorted or transformed under the influence of globalization.

The contemporary world is one in which different cultures daily flow across their borders, and so cultural/ethnic identities are continually being disconnected and dislocated by elements from other cultures and languages. No one culture or language now can be truly insulated from another. "The Desert" in Hong's *DDR* is a microcosm showing how our fast-changing multicultural and multilingual society creates a culturally and racially different (Asian American) subject that has lost its cultural or national originality. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. In *DDR*, she incorporates elements of the Korean language and culture into her English verses, attempting to construct her "becoming" or "in-between" writing subject. Hong's hybridized language has the creative and transformative force to construct identities beyond conventional notions of nation and culture. Hong uses a hybrid of English and foreign elements, particularly from Korean language and culture, to differentiate her subject from a homogeneous national/cultural identity—but not

entirely. Under the conditions of this transnational or cultural mobility the main character, the Guide, and her use of hybridized English in *DDR,* for instance, gradually deterritorializes[2] its original meanings and becomes gestures devoid of cultural or historical origin.

In other words, Hong seeks the most appropriate linguistic expressions of her characters' "in-between" or "becoming" cultural and ethnic identities. Her books of poems, for instance, mainly explore the lives of immigrants, displaced people, and exiles who have lost touch with their homeland and made their way to the Western world, taking on different jobs and languages. For instance, the main character in *DDR* is the Guide, who introduces herself as a "double migrant. Ceded from Koryo, ceded from 'Merikka, ceded y ceded'" (*DDR* 26). There is also the Historian's father, who left Kwangju and "later moved on to become a physician" in Sierra Leone. The main plot of *DDR* revolves around the Guide, who went through the postwar political confusion in South Korea from the 1970s to the 1980s, later leaving her native place and moving to a Vegas-like city called the Desert to lead a multi-cultural life. The Guide also helps the Historian—the narrator—travel through the Desert, all the while expressing her satirical opinion about the city. As the pair wander, Hong's topic digresses from her main narrative into her childhood memories, most of which are anecdotes of her participation in the Kwangju democratization movement in South Korea in the 1980s.[3]

Of particular interest here is how these culturally and racially "in-between" characters use English. In *DDR,* for instance, the characters in *DDR* mix English slang with Korean, Spanish, and even Russian to avoid constructing homogeneous national or cultural identities for themselves (except the narrator, who uses Standard English). Hong's other book of poems, *TM*, also deals with the unfamiliar relationships between Korean American speakers and their parents' mother tongue as well as their choice to use their native language in more "corporeal" ways. The second or third generations of Korean Americans supplement their English with native Korean words and phrases in what Deleuze refers to as a "pure sonority" to reveal the failure of constructing their bodies as objects of conventional desire. Their experiences often bring semantic breaks or gaps into the Korean language and force the (re)creation of their meanings cut off from their original cultural resonances, and Hong seems to approve.

Hong's poetic language also engages with critical/philosophical appraisals of modern and contemporary Asian American literature. Her works stem from the multi-cultural and ethnic background of what Victoria Chang refers to as the second generation of Asian American poets. The term "second generation" is derived from Chang's book *Asian American Poetry: the Next Generation*, the topic of which is Asian American poets after the 1990s. Chang broadly divides Asian American poetry into two generations. Her first generation includes poets such as Cathy Song, John Yau, Li-Young Lee, Marily Chin, and Garrett Hongo, whose works in the 1980s addressed personal yet universal topics, such as the "parent–child relationship, rebellion . . . [and] bewilderment and vulnerability in the face of the adult world" (xviii–xix).

Chang's second generation consists of younger and contemporary poets, born after the 1960s such as Timothy Liu, Marisa Santos, Cathy Park Hong, C. Dale Young, and Mộng-Lan (xx). According to Chang, the second generation generally distanced themselves from their predecessors' ethnic and political themes, moving towards more taboo subjects such as gender, queer experiences, voyeurism, and cultural differences, as well as how those diverse and personal experiences influenced their unique or "in-between" cultural identities. Other noticeable features of this generation are their experiments with their "language, the line and white space, the stanza, rhyme, form and syntax" (xxi). Especially, Chang notes that Hong, Jennifer Chang, Mộng-Lan, Brenda Shaughnessy, and Warren Liu exhibit more innovative and experimental language play, such as leaving out the verb form or punctuation marks and interrupting the lines with white and blank spaces (xxi–xxiii). For Chang, Asian American poets in the millennium era can no longer be defined by a single ethnic term, because of the increasing numbers of multiethnic or multicultural poets, such as Dale Young, who is "a quarter Asian (1/8 East Indian and 1/8 Chinese), half-Caucasian, and a quarter Latino" (xxvi), which is reflected in the increasing diversity in subject matter and style in their works.

Song in *The Children of 1965* also explores how technological developments in telecommunications and travel have recently reduced time and space and brought about "the literature of globalization" (179). Through the works of many contemporary Asian American writers such as Gene Luen Yang, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hong, and Mine Okubo, Song explores how the process of globalization in

the last two or three decades has accompanied issues such as the "in-between" subject, hybrid language, historical memory based on short-term memory, and the cultural dislocation of the new Asian American subject. Contemporary Asian American literature, according to Song, not only breaks off the chain of time and history but also disturbs the normalized ways of thinking about Asian or Asian American subjects and their lifestyles. Especially in the latter part of *The Children of 1965*, Song compares these new generations of Asian American people and their diverse living conditions to Deleuzean "nomads" wandering through the desert and constantly dislocating their original cultural identities. Here, the meaning of "desert"[4] is where these nomadic subjects constantly deterritorialize the meaning of their lives and identities, remaining so without desiring to make them secure (198–200). Moreover, in order to show how the different landscapes, subjectivities, and geographies constantly coordinate and influence each other to form a Deleuzean "becoming" subject, Song refers to Hong's *DDR* and Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* as examples of the Deleuzean "desert" and contemporary Asian American "nomadic" subjects in the multicultural globalized era. According to Song, Hong and Okubo's works are set in the "desert," a place where the hierarchical social orders, and the cultural/historical sense of "root"–which precipitates the characters' conventional subjectivization and their "shared" past memories—do not apply. Song further notes that Hong's globalized language used by her characters in the Desert—such as a throng of dialects, patois, slang, and specialized languages intermixed with other cultural elements—no longer denote a homogeneous cultural meaning nor the sharable semantic "root" inside. Song calls this rootless language a "weird English," tracing the original term to Evelyn Ch'ien's book *Weird English*, meaning "barely intelligible and sometimes unrecognizable English created through the blending of one or more languages with English" (Song 204).

HONG'S USE OF KOREAN WORDS IN *TRANSLATING MO'UM* AND ITS RELATION TO THE BODY

Hong's language, like Deleuze's "embodied language," is based on the interaction between the speaker's inner representative system and his/her bodily experiences, or the inside realm and the outside. At the same time, they undo both concepts of "inside" and "outside" to bear culturally or racially more diverse and different meanings.[5] In this regard,

Hong's hybrid English verses—mixed with diverse Korean patois and vernacular in *Translating Mo'um*—has much in common with Deleuze's embodied language or what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the "ontology of flesh." All these languages draw a close analogy between the body and the use of language while emphasizing an "ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible* 152).

The bodily experiences of Hong's subjects in *TM* break into language and introduce semantic gaps that helps to initiate a new language. Hong's Korean language does not merely represent external objects; it is a bodily expression of affect that transfigures the speaker's knowledge into another system. The Korean American speakers in *TM* rarely understand and often simply mimic "the immigrant's tongue." Her speaker, however, prefers these words to remain as untranslated blank marks that are unregistered by the dominant cultural realm, comparing the sounds to "blathering in the dream," a "sealed letter," "a pocket of unsaid gas," or the "wooden clack of a puppet's mouth" (13). The speaker also compares the physical voice of her mother tongue to animal sounds such as "the voice like the flash of bats," an "apish libretto," and even her parents' "old third world smell" (13). These Korean words without semantic referents in *TM* have a similar function to Deleuzean "pure sonorous material" or "sonorous intrusion"—much as Deleuze reads the violin sound in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (*Kafka* 5). Deleuze's explanation of the "pure sound" is developed into his concept of "minor literature." "Minor literature" uses the dominant language to catalyze transformations beyond the boundaries of nations, races, and cultural histories to create new, perpetually fluid meanings (*Kafka* 16–17). In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze explains that every mother tongue inevitably becomes an anonymous and deviant space through its encounter with the languages of cultural minorities and this way it can be emancipated from its previous cultural and historical context. "Minor literature" is the language of minorities within the dominant language system that transforms a singular and homogeneous language system to "forces of creative deformation that various minorities utilize in fashioning their own speech within a dominant language—[like] Czech Jews in German, the Irish in British English, [and] African Americans in white American English" (Bogue 72). In *TM*, Hong also compares her Korean language to "the ventriloquist's voice" that cannot find its original source (72). Rae Armantrout similarly remarks, "Ventriloqui /

is the mother tongue," implying that the mother tongue functions as a physical sound that stems from nowhere to "in-between" subjects (qtd. in Waldrop 234).

Hong and Deleuze's embodied languages serve as points of contact where the immanent aspect of the language meets the speaker's symbolic realm, or what M. C. Dillon calls "a conjunction of immanence and transcendence . . . necessary for consciousness to be conscious of something other than itself" (195). When the physical sound of the migrant's tongue is brought into the English-speaking discourse, its previous meanings are erased by the sound's phonetic ambiguity, and alternative referents are attained mostly through the speaker's bodily or external experiences. For example, the word "*mo'um*" in Hong's "Translating Mo'um" is used in close relation to the speaker's bodily senses, such as her temperature, the tactile impressions of feeling a blanket, a thermostat, and a peeled apple against her skin. In an interview with *Women's Review*, Hong also identifies the real meaning of *Mo'um* as "the body" (몸). She adds that since she learned the Korean language at home, she was always "unfamiliar with the exact definition and [could not help] kn[owing] the words by association" ("Slipping and Sliding").

To Hong, "*mo'um*" is a phonetically ambiguous word. Although *mo'um* is usually translated as "mind" (마음), "vowel" (모음), or "body" (몸), the speaker in the poem repeats the word in assorted contexts with more diverse referents such as fever, spirit, mind energy, blushing, pain, and mom. For this reason, the word is often used as synonymous with expressions such as "[t]he dull fat tongue," the "throb of bone hugging muscle," or "Sagawa moguh (Eat this apple)":

> And it is fever that I first defined as mo'um,
> The chills, heated energy—
> Oma ujiruh (Mother, I am dizzy)
> Fevers whose gift was a day off from school,
> My blanket, a thermostat, hothouse avalanche,
> Sagawa moguh (Eat this apple)
> To cool off the thick-lensed heat,
> Mother offered me peeled fruit, sliced in sweet geometry
> I answered: Mo'umi oppa oma.
> Fever is the pathology of blushing,
> Knotted heat, red shrouding sight,
> The dull fat tongue, throb of bone hugging muscle. (69)

In the third section of "Translating Mo'um," the meaning of *mo'um* further relates to the feelings of the speaker's hands, which touch, claw, wipe, powder, and clap (*TM* 72). In other words, the speaking subject reconstructs meanings of *mo'um* through her bodily senses, so that the word can occupy a space that Merleau-Ponty describes as "where our brain and the universe meet" ("Eye and Mind" 139). Hong's Korean words lack the essential link between sound and referent because of their phonetic ambiguity. These words are therefore words as sounding body, further evinced when the speaker draws the distinction between *mo'um* and *ma'hm*, and compares them to her grandmother's two different fingerprints on the floor (*TM* 70). These words as corporeal images or hieroglyphs suggest that *mo'um* is a word that bears the physicality of the subject's body, such as "the weight of fist to breast":

> Grandmother kneeled. Two whorls against the floor:
> the difference between mo'um and ma'hm
> always the pain that we first associate with mo'um,
> the weight of fist to breast. (70)

In "Gatherer," too, Hong illustrates how the body becomes a tool to gather basic information about the world and words for the primal hunter woman who has not learned a language. Here, the gatherer's language is also described as the language of the sounding body that lacks any "syntax of pathos" (68) or "glossary of character," and the speaker thus calls her hands "the phonetic of hands" (67). "Hottentot Venus" is another poem where the immemorial language is depicted as the pure sound that comes from "[her] throat, [her] organs, [her] bones," not from her always-existing inner perceptual categories (53).

In "All the Aphrodisiacs," Hong also uses Korean phrases and sentences such as *pae-go-p'a* (배고파, a Korean word for "I'm hungry"), *chi'I wa* (치워, "clean up"), and *kae sekki* (개새끼, "a son of a dog"), connecting them to erotic phrases such as "turn you on" and "make you climax" (37). Here, both the speaker's Korean mother tongue and her "sibilant body" are compared to the palimpsest-like "strips of white cotton," that will be sullied and affected by her sweat and other bodily secretions.

> Strips of white cotton, the color of the commoner, the color
> of virtue,
> the color that can be sullied—

> my hand pressed against your diaphragm, corralling your pitch,
> a pinch of rain caught between mouths,
> strips of white cotton I use to bind your wrist to post, tight
> enough to swell vein, allow sweat—
> sweat to sully the white of your sibilant body,
> the shrug of my tongue, the shrug of command, sssshhht. (38)

In this sense, Hong's "Strips of white cotton" no longer denote Koreans as a homogeneous people, although Koreans are traditionally called the "white-clad race."[6] Her usage of the Korean language helps take on different cultural resonances intermingled with her bodily senses and experiences. Similarly, in "Rite of Passage," the Korean word *saek-shi* (색시), originally meaning a respectable and marriageable young woman, is transformed into "sexy" by American GIs in the bar.

The way Hong's Korean American speakers reinvent the meanings of these untranslatable Korean words in *TM* based on their bodily senses strongly resonates with Merleau-Ponty's description of the "Amnesic–aphasia patient," who consciously substitutes imaginary contexts for the original meaning of words. They usually have trouble with the act of naming or interpreting words "due to the absence of conscious categorical intentionality" in their brain system (Dillon 137). So the patient often attempts to "compensate for its losses by the 'substantial behavior,' since the possibility of meaning has not yet been sedimented in his spatial horizons" (137). This "substantial behavior" is marked by the speaker's "conscious effort of substituting an imaginary and constructed context" for unfamiliar names (138). In other words, since his brain has erased the possible links between the "sense-giving intention" and its emotional concepts, he must infer the word's meaning based on his bodily senses. The speaker's body in Hong's poems similarly performs this "primary operation [that] . . . makes what is expressed dwell in signs, not through some previous convention, but through the eloquence of their very arrangement and configuration" (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose* 78).

CONSTRUCTION OF "IN-BETWEEN" ETHNIC SUBJECT IN *DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION*

In *DDR*, Hong's speaker uses a hybrid and unorthodox language that represents Hong's characters' local personal and private identities. Like Deleuze's "minor literature," Hong's hybrid English becomes a catalyst

for transformations beyond the boundaries of nation, race, and cultural history, and Hong places a high value on this function. Much of *DDR* is set in "the Desert," a globalized city where tourists, workers, and migrants from over three hundred countries go in and out every day. The protagonist, the Guide, introduces herself as "Chun Sujin, lest name first, first name lest. Allatime known as Ballhead, Jangnim" (22). Living in an English-speaking milieu while excluded from the dominant cultural realm, the Guide invents her own hybrid English, a mixture of "sum Han-kuk y Finnish, good bit o Latin y Spanish . . . sum toto Desert Creole" (25). Additionally, her English contains a range of pronunciations—all different regional, racial, and gender-specific pronunciations—rather than the dominant and prestigious enunciations, as seen in expressions such as "supa-mahikets en de 'Asia' secsion" (95), and so creates a liminal zone of indeterminate meanings.

Through this transformation process, Hong's hybrid English not only defamiliarizes the culturally homogeneous meaning system of both English and Korean, but also creates a new representative system that fits more appropriately to the these characters' culturally more diverse living conditions. Hong's English both destroys or challenges the dominant cultural representative system and invents another language for the culturally and ethnically more diverse subjects. In other words, the Guide's hybrid spoken English mixed with hundreds of different foreign languages often serves as pure intensity or energy rather than fixed conceptual or representational units. The Guide, as Deleuze said of Kafka, is "taken over by a creative utilization [of English] for the purposes of a new sobriety, a new expressivity, a new flexibility" (*Kafka* 23). In one scene, the Guide recalls her childhood memories of South Korea:

> Assim fate flag X mark spot en me,
> chillins call me bbak-bbaggi, trow pebbles at mine ball head
> while ajamas tut tut, tut tut. Salutations
> hab falsetto o "lawdy mine gawd looky dat chile." (51)

Here, the Guide's narration is mixed with English and Korean patois and vernaculars such as "Assim" (a mispronunciation of "I think"), "bbak-bbagi" (빡빡이, "bald head") or "ajamas" (아줌마, "a middle-aged woman"). To the ears of non-native Korean readers, however, these words serve only as pure and material sounds that are "capable

of disorganizing [their] own forms and of disorganizing [their] forms of contents" (Deleuze, *Kafka* 28). Although the trademarks of specific sentences and phrases such as "May I have this dance?" are daily auctioned off in the Desert (90), there are so many culturally diverse tourists and residents that "it is impossible to even speak without stumbling upon someone's trademark" and using it to the point of deforming its original meanings. The Guide explains that even these "auctioned" words, instead of fulfilling the privileges of the inventor, recklessly mutate or "morph so quickly that their accents betray who they talked to that day rather than their cultural roots" (19).

The Guide's language is also easily decomposed and incorporated into a different syntax and pronunciation, or else new proper nouns are derived from different discursive regimes. In this way, her "Konglish" slowly becomes an illegible code that does not have any clear referent. For instance, what "Merikkens" pronounce as "purdy" (pretty) or "purdier" (prettier) is incorporated into the Guide's Korean mother tongue as "yeppeuda" (예쁘다, "pretty"), then transformed into the hybrid word "yep-puh" (25). "Microcosm," after being assimilated into Korean pronunciation, is turned into "McCosm" (25), "supermarket" into "supa-mahikets," and "children" into "chillins" (95, 27). "[C]hillins" is also African American vernacular. Also, the phrase "season changed" turns into "Seasons chenji," and "my fellow Gardener" to "Mifela Gardena" (29).

Moreover, the Guide often mixes Korean words into her English sentences, intentionally or unintentionally, especially when making reference to Asian cultural elements such as "Arirang"—a traditional Korean folk song that has been sung for more than five hundred years—or the emotion of "Han"—the Korean word for collective resentment in response to political oppression by foreign powers throughout their history.

> Aiiiree . . . Airreee . . . epic song lasting
> twotreefo day . . . sponge up de Han . . . ssulp'un yaegge . . .
> Ssarang-han nam'pyun . . . wit only a fan y jug to wet her
> troat. . . . (36)

Here Hong intentionally maximizes the phonetic ambiguity by writing Korean words and phrases as they are pronounced, as in "ssulp'un

yaegge" (슬픈 이야기, "a sad story") and "Ssarang-han nam'pyun" (사랑한 남편, "a husband that I loved"), and using ellipses to further segment and transform the words into unfamiliar strings of letters. "Aiiiree . . . Airreee" also mimicks "Arirang."

In addition to the anomalous syntax and pronunciation, English nouns and pronouns in *DDR* are often used in different cultural contexts, producing an estranging effect for the culturally mixed characters. Even when Hong maintains the same spellings and pronunciations of words, as with the Guide's English, language, in this way, confuses and transforms cultural origin. For instance, the Guide talks about what happened in an Asian factory that used to produce canned carp. Many Japanese and Korean people like to eat canned fish such as sardines, mackerel, and tuna, often with steamed rice or stew. The Guide says, however, that the factory was on the brink of bankruptcy because canned carp was not selling in Asian groceries in the Desert. So the company secretly attempted to supply the canned fish to "service louts" and "jailbirds," but soon the inmates, who heard this news, rioted in the prison, causing the factory to close down forever. After that, the live carp, which had been considered a food source, were moved to more than twenty thousand hotel fountains in the Desert, where they received grooming service from a trainer from Osaka. Elsewhere, the Guide explains to the Historian that she chose to work at the St. Petersburg Hotel because her Korean heritage is similar to a Russian one. Russians and Koreans "both love the combination of dried fish and very strong liquor" (28), which colors the meaning of lines such as "[the hotel serves] only best surgeon fish y beluga bedtime special. Deelicious" (27), providing a subtle joke likely to elude readers lost among the intermixed cultural contexts and moods.

Moreover, English proper nouns that Hong uses to clarify the cultural/national meaning, such as "GIs heroes" (43), often take on negative or sarcastic connotations within different historical contexts, such as the democratic uprising in Kwangju, South Korea. Many Korean citizens who rebelled against the US-backed Chun Doo-Hwan military dictatorship in 1980 were defeated and killed. This Korean government is here called "Merrikken puppet plis boi patos" (56), and English words on Christmas cards, such as "Have a Jolly Holiday," became the "enemy's words . . . tittled with pox" (51). This is because American troops stationed in South Korea during those times were seen by the

speaker only as "regula pirates, [who] search for booty y pillage" (43). The Guide also recalls from childhood how she and her comrades were unjustly called "Commie spy" "prole," or "populii" (45). By these means, Hong ironically satirizes the meanings of the true nationalism and liberalism attributed to "U.S. o A" into a product of blind ideological manipulation (56). Not only the ideology of liberalism but the communism of Korean revolutionaries are also depicted as insecure and imperfectly mediated concepts, as in the words "a sekrendry source o Marx translated / bine semi-illiterate Korean" (56). In this way, Hong shows how English written and read in different cultural and social backgrounds can take on different connotations.

This new language—which crosses different cultural groups and morphs quickly—constitutes a culturally "in-between" or "becoming" subject. Hong's language precipitates the coincident encounter between the body and mind, but simultaneously undoes both concepts. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari state that such an encounter generates "the difference in degree between the [speaker's] perception of matter and matter itself" (133). They add that this "difference" further leads to resorting to the newly registered mind, or new virtual world of the speaking subject (38). But according to him, this new virtual world system of the speaking subject "would not be the old one where the mind signaled, but rather ones where . . . thought is mobilized to both heighten the mind-body conjunction and to dismantle it" (133). Deleuze calls this process "movement" or "becoming." In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze also states that writing is inseparable from the process of "becoming," since in writing one always becomes "another"[7]: "one becomes-woman, becomes-animal, or vegetable, becomes molecular to the point of becoming im-perceptible" (1). Elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari explain that a "becoming" subject is produced only "by transversal communications between heterogeneous populations" and is thus always in transition to another, running its own line of flight, rather than involved with concepts such as progression, evolution (by descent and filiation), classification, unity and genealogy (*A Thousand Plateaus* 239).

Likewise, Hong's Korean words in *TM* or hybrid English in *DDR* reconstitute the subject's identity to another "I" in the process of

"becoming"—the identity that does not belong to either Korean or American cultural discourses, but an "in-between" state. Hong thereby compares the writing process to the image of the speaker's body becoming a "palimpsest" that, to borrow another of Deleuze and Guattari's terms, "deterritorializes" its original historical/cultural meanings (*TM* 65). Hong's poetic language and subject, we see that Hong's is what Deleuze and Guattari call a "strangely polyvocal kind of writing" (*Anti-Oedipus* 39), which here reveals a failure to construct Asian American subjects as such, but rather produces "in-between" subjects that are neither properly Korean nor American.

Hong's Asian American characters in *DDR* are always in this "becoming" state, faithful to their present moments and not settling for them. One of Hong's central metaphors in *TM* is the palimpsest body of a naked woman, such as a simian woman's "Dark-eyed body" (71) in "Translating Mo'um," or "a dark-skinned woman who spat / and sparred" (25) in "Melanin." The language of these primal women embodies an inexhaustible potential to inscribe different meanings derived from their bodily senses, such as sexual desire and motherly affection. Their bodies often appear to be darkened or coated with ash or dirt, as in expressions such as "the ash that rained / and darkened our skins," (70) "ash fell like feathers before coating one's skin" (71), or "soiled hands . . . [that] powdered my skin" (72). Through these images, Hong suggests that bodies, or even beings, not only perform the "linking" function between the outer and inner world, but break the conventional relationship between the perceiver and the perceived object then regenerate it with different layers of meanings. Moreover, in this process, the speaker's body is removed from her cultural origin and replaced by contingent meanings that better suit her "in-between" or "becoming" conditions of culture and ethnicity.

These images of a palimpsest body are, however, continually contrasted with images of molting or scrubbing off dead skin in *DDR*. In the Desert, there are also exiled natives "who crave for time to stand still" and cling to their cultural purity. They lay explosives around the riverbeds and try to stop the influx of immigrants and tourists. Their aspiration to counter the "becoming" process is further expressed in their religious ritual, which is to "rub their mouths along a stone until chapped skin bursts to blood" (81). This image of rubbing or scratching the skin also appears in *TM* through the images of the old

generation of Korean immigrants who are obsessed with "white" skin. Their attempts restore their national purity are also depicted through images of the naked bodies of old women, whose skins constantly granulate and cicatrize. In "Zoo," for instance, the speaker's parents are obsessed "with hygiene" and, as mentioned above, try to "get rid of their old third world smell" (13). In "Ablution," artists' obsession with delivering the exact and transparent meanings of their art is further compared to the image of the Korean bathhouse full of old "women / with flaccid breasts scrubbing / their bodies like the casual chore / scrubbing laundry" (65).

Hong's new sign system in *DDR* helps the speaking subjects stop using or recollecting their previous memories and intelligence, and evoke the contingent impressions of the object or the world. The new system does not produce a symbolic system as such, but rather facilitates the subject's dissolution into the immanence of intensity and difference. Besides Hong, many other contemporary Asian American writers such as Julie Otsuka often attempt to reactivate traumatic historic/cultural memories, such as Japanese internment camps, by focusing more on short-term memories that always and requisitely "includes forgetting as a process" than "the injunction to remember and bear witness" (Song 216).This process of "becoming" that takes place in the characters of Otsuka's *Emperor* and Hong's works is also analogous to the moment when Rosi Braidotti's notion of "collective subjectivity" is created. The phrase "collective subjectivity" here refers to the embodied state of fusion between the subject and object in which one's self is totally broken from the past. By the "past," Braidotti means:

> A sedimentation of habits, the institutionalized accumulation of experience whose authority is sealed by memory and the identity it engenders. Becoming imperceptible plunges us into the impossible, the unheard-of: an affirmative present. This is what Deleuze calls "an event"—or the eruption of the actualization of a sustainable future. (*Transposition* 260)

In this self-annihilating moment, we also witness the emergence of Hong's new Asian American subjectivity. The fundamental aim of Hong's stylistic and experimental language in *TM* and *DDR* depends on how her language brings about the new relationships between the

world and words, reestablishing identities in the dominant cultural and social realm.

POLITICAL FUNCTIONING OF HONG'S POETIC LANGUAGE

Hong's "in-between" or "becoming" subject is not, however, apolitical or ahistorical. Her characters are never entirely free from their "identities"—socially and politically given—because, as she says, "there is always [the issue of] subject—and beyond that, the specter of the author's visage—and that specter is never, no matter how vigorous the erasure, raceless" (Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness" 1). For instance, the Korean American speakers in her poems—mostly immigrants and exiles—are never entirely free from their deep-rooted grief and historical trauma, ranging from memories of the uprisings against the modern military government in South Korea to contemporary political experiences of exiles and immigrants in American society, especially those who lost their original nationality and language. At the same time, Hong's language does not espouse a conventional "identity politic." Rather, she explores how the experimental languages of avant-garde poets can also deal with urgent pragmatic and even political issues such as prejudice and discrimination regarding gender, race, and ethnicity. She believes her "minor" language of these "minor" people can also approach subjects such as polyvocality, hybridity, collage, and appropriation without forgetting their histories and social pressures.

Hong's experimental language serves as an alternative political space where her "in-between" ethnic subject can feel comfortable, even if only temporarily. Deborah M. Mix notes that this "in-between" poetic space in the works of Asian American female language poets has the dual functions of "offering the comfort place [for the hybrid subject] to rest if only temporarily and unsettl[ing] the potentially stultifying power of a comfort zone" (144). Deleuze and Guattari's term a "becoming subject" also possesses this political duality or complexity. Braidotti maintains that the strength of the Deleuzian "becoming subject" lies in its "pragmatic and labile engagement with the present in order to collectively construct [social] conditions and subjectivities of hope" (*Nomadic Theory* 290). This political agency of Deleuze's "becoming" subject, in other words, constructs alternative models of political subjectivities, as do Hong's multi-cultural and inter-subjective characters in *TM* and *DDR*.

Hong's "becoming" or "in-between" subjectivity is not, therefore, without political efficacy. Deleuze argues that one of the major features of "minor literature" is its being political and collective. Bogue also highlights that a "minor language" plays an important role as "a kind of fabulation" whose major function is to invent a people, especially the minor people, and consequently help invent the voices of those who are "seized in a becoming-revolutionary" (74). The power of "becoming" means the power to create a new identity without dependence on prior social/cultural contexts. In this regard, Hong's pure and hybrid language can be said to help her culturally and racially in-between characters express themselves as recognizable and visible human beings without belonging to any culturally homogeneous categories.

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NOTES

1. In an interview with Joshua Kryah, Hong mentions that "English is a busy traffic of dialects, accents, and slang words going in and out of fashion. Slang is especially fascinating. I love outdated slang dictionaries—these words are artifacts that tell you the mindset and squeamish taboos of a certain milieu during a certain time period. I wanted the English in the book to be a hyperbole of that everyday dynamism of spoken English" ("An Interview" 1).

2. I have used the term "deterritorialize" to reflect how one's original social/cultural/national identities can be deconstructed or released from the limits of a restrictive conceptual/political space, in Deleuzean terms. Of course, it was originated from Deleuze and Guattari's theory, but now the term takes on more generic meanings in globalization theories (Song 54).

3. But Korean history and its modernization process during the two decades—such as the Kwangju democratization movement in 1980 and independence from the US-backed military governments—are satirized through the Guide's voice. The Guide does not take sides between North/South, liberalists/socialists, or right-wing pro-American/left-wing pro-North Korean parties, etc. in the book. Through the Guide's satirical voice, Hong rather ironizes how artificially one's homogeneous national or cultural identity is made through the government's ideological maneuvering and how much this process relies on the oppressive propaganda and injurious rhetoric of the Korean government.

4. Here, Song's meanings of "desert" vary from a life-form that lacks diversity, a place that excludes one's sense of belonging, to a place deprived of the explicit sense of place. It is even compared to the Lacanian concept of "the Real." But borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari's term "rhizome," Song defines the use by many contemporary Asian Americans of "desert" as the "placeless place" or the space

where the landscape, geography, and one's subjectivity constantly coordinate and affect each other to create a new racially and culturally "becoming" subject.

5. For a discussion of the relation of internal meanings and external bodies in Deleuze and Guattari, see Bogue 64–66.

6. According to *Namuwiki*, the Korean people, from ancient times, were known for wearing white clothes and were therefore dubbed "white clothes people" or "white clad race" (백의 민족 in Korean). For instance, the people in Goguryeo (BC 37–AD 668), one of the three ancient kingdoms of Korea, used to wear white clothes mostly for religious reasons. They performed ancestral rites to worship the Sun God and believed they were the chosen people of god. This tradition continued into the dynasties of Gorye (AD 918–1392) and Joseon (AD 1392–1897). Especially in the Joseon Dynasty, people preferred wearing white clothes mostly because of the tradition of Confucianism, in which white means chastity, integrity, and sublimity. In contrast, they believed that wearing colored clothes that express one's emotions was indecent or went against common decency (*Namuwiki*).

7. For Deleuze and Guattari's definition of "becoming," see *A Thousand Plateaus* 237–309.

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