

The Politics of Blood in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée

Richard Snyder

University of California, Irvine

BIOLOGISM, IN THE SENSE USED BY literary scholar Jenny Heijun Wills and sociologist David Skinner, speaks to a desire, particularly among diasporic residents of the Global North, to develop, bolster, or refine an identity based on a knowledge of ethnic and racial heritage, ancestry, and kinship. “Biology” operates somewhat differently in their respective accounts, signifying the search for biological, or “blood,” relatives in Wills’s discussion of transnational adoptees and, in Skinner’s account, referring to the means by which genetic testing provides specific ancestral knowledge for British residents of Afro-Caribbean descent. Both scholars, however, emphasize the powerful effects of biological knowledge on identity formation for people who are displaced from their ancestral homelands.¹

Also uniting these accounts is the degree to which alienation from an adopted country and a yearning for a greater sense of belonging fuel the biologicistic search. As one British resident indicated in Skinner’s article, although born and raised in England “I never felt welcome in Britain and always had a sense of belonging to some other land when growing up.”² Although this sense of belonging can be complicated for individuals who actually return to another land, Korean adoptees such as Jane Jeong Trenka, whose memoirs Wills discusses, often evince a similar sense of alienation. This alienation is matched by a desire to discover an essential, biological identity that can supplant the “constructed” American one they’ve grown up with. As such, this new biologism, operating across different nationalities, ethnicities, and races, may speak to the

¹ Jenny Heijun Wills, “Paradoxical Essentialism: Reading Race and Origins in Jane Jeong Trenka’s Asian Adoption Memoirs,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016): 202–22; and David Skinner, “Racialized Futures: Biologism and the Changing Politics of Identity,” *Social Studies of Science* 36, no. 3 (2006): 459–88.

² Skinner, “Racialized Futures,” 460.

limits of multiculturalism, or to the ways in which ostensibly “postracial” Western societies still enforce hegemonic norms and expectations, based largely on race, while contending, at the same time, that essentialism of any stripe is taboo.

In the fields of social and literary theory, this rejection of essentialism is clearly the inheritance of a poststructuralist valorization of indeterminacy and deterritorialization. Indeed, what could be less of a “body-without-organs” than that of a relative or ancestor who is sought to provide a stable sense of identity? While such an attitude may be the privilege of those who have a well-known history and heritage to decenter, as Wills contends,³ it may also speak to a deeper and legitimate fear of biological essentialism when configured at the group level and integrated into political programs and social policies. It is significant, then, that both theorists of biologism locate it expressly in relation to the individual. Certainly, the enhanced sense of identity sought through biologism implies a group, a broader community of consanguinity to which one can belong, but the biologistic impulse itself operates solely at the level of the individual, who is seeking the connections of extended family and community. In this sense, biologism, as constructed by these theorists, aligns much more closely with Nikolas Rose’s elaboration of neoliberalized biopolitics, dedicated to self-improvement and a Foucauldian “aesthetics of the self,” than with assertions of racial or national solidarity or triumphalism.⁴

The distinction between a biological essentialism espoused on the individual level by a member of a minority group and that embraced at the group level by a member of a historically powerful or dominant group could not be clearer. Yet the specter of biological essentialism filtered through taxonomies of power should, nonetheless, make one cautious about any move toward it. Indeed, the centrality of an essentialized conception of biology to the political programs that scarred the twentieth century — the notion that Nazism was nothing but “an actualized [*realizzata*] biology,” in Roberto Esposito’s words — is a potent reminder of how conceptions of “science” and self, nation and identity, can be abused.⁵ This reminder is distressingly pertinent now, when white-supremacist groups in the United States are gaining traction in the electorate and exposure in the media, explicitly positing a “biological” basis for their claims that “the races are not equal.”⁶

If evocations of a new biologism at once call out the deficiencies of postmodern liberalism and the prospect of dangerous alternatives to it, all these dynamics are not, of course, new but inscribed in the traumatic upheavals of the wars, genocides, and migrations that marked the twentieth century. Attending to the realities of these dynamics, even or especially when they contradict contemporary assertions of social equality and identity as a construct, not a biological given, can undoubtedly shed light on the complexities of identity construction and notions of exclusion and belonging for those caught up in them most directly. Although these dynamics may be at play in many works of diasporic literature, such as Trenka’s memoirs, they figure especially prominently in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*, a foundational work of postmodern Asian American literature, which represents nuances of longing and belonging across continents, cultures, and conceptions of the nation.

³ Wills, “Paradoxical Essentialism,” 204.

⁴ Nikolas Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 18, no. 6 (2001): 1–30.

⁵ Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (2004; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 112.

⁶ Jason Wilson, “‘The Races Are Not Equal’: Meet the Alt-right Leader in Clinton’s Campaign Ad,” *Guardian*, August 26, 2016, n.p.

To better understand some of these nuances, this essay will focus primarily on Cha's representations of "blood" in several of the book's opening sections. Blood, of course, can be seen as the ultimate determinant of biologicistic belonging and speaks to notions of kinship and community that are neither constructed nor elective. As such, it typically evokes social systems that are deemed premodern by Western theorists, and it is no accident that Foucault contrasts the "analytics of sexuality," by which modern biopolitical regimes are said to operate, with the "symbolics of blood" that underwrote earlier juridico-sovereign regimes, on the basis of the power "to *take* life and *let* live."⁷

Even if we reject or complicate the epochal and perhaps teleological nature of Foucault's formulations, his conceptions of power can shed light on the different valences found in references to blood in Cha's work. Complementing these analyses of blood will be discussions of other elements of the work that convey notions of social organicism, such as the "mother tongue" and ideas of internalized cultural identity, or a national "soul." Much of the discussion will center on the chapter Calliope/Epic, which counterposes a depiction of Cha's mother, as a young woman in an exilic community in Manchuria, with Cha's own traumatic return to South Korea. Informing the analysis of the latter will be a reading of the violent repressions of democratic protests depicted in Melpomene/Tragedy, which show a schism opening between the state and the organic nation as depicted in Calliope/Epic.⁸ The essay will close with a brief look at one instance in which Cha moves beyond all known taxonomies of identity and belonging in ways that resonate with Agamben's messianic conception of community.

In emphasizing biologicistic elements of *Dictée*, this essay seeks to add to the existing literature on the text, which focuses primarily on notions of constructivist identity. Since the appearance of Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón's seminal volume *Writing Self, Writing Nation* in 1994, critics have tended to follow the lead of Lisa Lowe and Shelley Sunn Wong, whose essays are included in the volume, and to emphasize *Dictée*'s often masterful manipulation and distortion of formal and representational expectations and standards.⁹ Positing connections between literary form and formal politics, these essays explore the powerful political implications of Cha's "aesthetic of infidelity"¹⁰ and her insistence on "difference and mediation," as opposed to "representativeness . . . and authenticity."¹¹ In doing so, these essays effectively collapse literary constructivism into social constructivism, arguing that Cha's manipulation of discursive and

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage, 1978), 136, emphasis in original. Foucault contends that in juridico-sovereign regimes "blood was a *reality with a symbolic function*" (147, emphasis in original). Blood's "high value" in these regimes derives from the three roles or functions it performs in them: "its instrumental role (the ability to shed blood)," its function "in the order of signs (to have a certain blood, to be of the same blood, to be prepared to risk one's blood)," and "its precariousness (easily spilled, subject to drying up, too readily mixed, capable of being corrupted)" (147).

⁸ The nine Greek Muses and their artistic domains serve as the primary structural device in *Dictée*. A list of the Muses appears in the book's opening, untitled section and serves as a de facto table of contents; all the following sections, save the final one, are named by a Muse and its domain. As critics have noted, Cha's version of the Muses departs in subtle ways from their standard representation.

⁹ For a detailed overview and analysis of *Dictée*'s reception history, see Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 100–122.

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 37.

¹¹ Shelley Sunn Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," in Kim and Alarcón, *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 104.

generic norms allows her to construct a subject defined, not by her assimilation to hegemonic social and cultural standards, but by her creation and insistence on multiple points of difference from them.

While not contesting the general notion that *Dictée* is a work marked by both literary and social constructivism, this reading will contend that aspects of the work that can be seen as elements of the latter, or the means by which Cha “creates the stain of difference which resists absorption by an American identity,” are at the same time indebted to a deeply biologicistic understanding of personal and social identity.¹² This biologicistic strain of the work has received much less attention from critics, but a closer examination of it can shed light on both the work’s remarkable affective power and its complex negotiations of the speaker’s relation to not just the American state but to the South Korean state and the ethnic nationalism that underwrites it. In calling attention to these aspects of the work, I do not mean to indicate or imply that Cha uncritically accepts them or presents a work that can be considered “nationalist” or “biologicistic” in any sense; her work is far too multifaceted and complex in its depictions of the broader processes by which individual or communal identification takes place for such labels to obtain.¹³ Rather, I seek to explore and illuminate a few of the ways in which conceptions of biologicistic identity function in the broader economy of *Dictée* and, specifically, in those sections of the work in which these conceptions are foregrounded.

If the notion of identity as a social construction seems antithetical to that of identity as beholden to inherent qualities, Cha’s deployment of the latter in service of the former makes sense, given the work’s complex interactions with different ideologies of nationalism.¹⁴ In resisting assimilation into the liberal-individualist system of the United States, Cha complicates the notion of the formal equivalence of citizens on which the system is predicated, as Lowe has noted,¹⁵ but she does so, at least in part, by reproducing the organicist basis of the ethnic nationalism that began in Korea under Japanese colonial rule and has flourished since. Perhaps because of the contempt with which ethnic nationalism has been viewed in the West since World War II, Cha’s engagement with its terms — blood and the mother tongue — has received relatively little attention from critics.¹⁶ To the extent that critics have noted this engagement, they have hastened,

¹² *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141.

¹⁴ Lisa Lowe and Shu-mei Shih have offered the most extensive discussions of nationalism in *Dictée*. While both critics present valuable insights, neither considers the differences between the types of nationalism that predominate in the two locales in which *Dictée* primarily operates, the United States and South Korea, but instead treat “nationalism” as a monolithic entity. See Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 49–51; and Shu-mei Shih, “Nationalism and Korean American Women’s Writing: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers*, ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 144–62, *passim*. Whereas in the United States an ostensibly voluntaristic form of liberal-individualist nationalism predominates, the legacy of its former status as a settler colony, South Korea developed an organicist, “blood-based” nationalism, largely in reaction to Japan’s colonization of the country in the first half of the twentieth century. See Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 1–24.

¹⁵ Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 53.

¹⁶ As Clifford Geertz noted in 1963, “in modern societies the lifting of such [primordial] ties to the level of political supremacy . . . has more and more come to be deplored as pathological. To an increasing degree national unity is maintained not by calls to blood and land but by a vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state.” Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973), 260. More recently, Anthony D. Smith remarks that “the ethnic version [of nationalism] remains

as Wong does, to contend that Cha complicates essentialist notions of identity and does not seek “to recuperate an essential, founding identity,”¹⁷ or they assert, as Lowe does, that her depictions of nationalism highlight and interrogate structural homologies between it and colonialism.¹⁸ To be sure, Cha subverts the androcentric and patriarchal basis of Korean nationalism by foregrounding female figures in *Dictée*, such as the militant nationalist Yu Guan Soon and Cha’s own mother, but her engagement with notions of national identity are more complex than Lowe indicates, as she depicts traumatic disjunctions between state power and the biologicistic and affective bonds of national belonging. The very trauma of this disjunction, as depicted at the conclusion of the section “Calliope/Epic,” may call into question whether Cha actively eschews the recuperation of an essential, founding identity or is forced to realize that such an identity is an impossibility for a naturalized “transplant.”¹⁹

The majority of *Dictée*’s references to “blood” or the verb “to bleed” occur in the three sections of the work that are set in Korea or Manchuria: “Clio/History,” “Calliope/Epic,” and “Melpomene/Tragedy.”²⁰ While containing heterogeneous materials, including a letter from Syngman Rhee and P. K. Yoon to Theodore Roosevelt and a map of a divided Korea, these sections are largely historical in nature, focusing primarily on Japan’s occupation of Korea in the early part of the twentieth century, the experiences of Cha’s mother while exiled in Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s, and the prodemocracy demonstrations that occurred under the rule of Rhee and Park Chung Hee in the 1960s and 1970s. If a feminist genealogy can be traced in these sections — from the depiction of the militant nationalist Yu Guan Soon in “Clio/History” to that of the speaker’s mother and the speaker herself in “Calliope/Epic” and “Melpomene/Tragedy”²¹ — it is significant that this genealogy is forged in the context of violence or the threat of violence. Significant differences exist across the representations of violence found in these sections, but what unifies them is that agents of the state, whether in colonial Manchuria or in US-sponsored South Korea, constitute the violent or threatening forces. These states, in other words, are essentially authoritarian regimes deploying the sovereign right to kill or let live. The means by which power is deployed in these sections, then, are considerably different from those by which it operates in the other sections, in which Cha encounters disciplinary techniques, such as dictation exercises, or meditates on the relations between cinematic images, memory, and time.

Before discussing the references to blood found in the sections of the work set in Korea or Manchuria, a brief discussion of one of the rare references to blood outside these locales will help to call out the ways in which different regimes of power operate in *Dictée*. This reference

profoundly suspect. It is widely equated with the exclusiveness of ‘blood’ associated with the organic version of nationalism.” Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 16. For more information on the emergence of modern conceptions of “organic” and “civic” nationalism in the years following World War II, see Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 117–46; and Smith, *Nation in History*, 6–7.

¹⁷ Wong, “Unnaming the Same,” 126.

¹⁸ Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 50.

¹⁹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (1982; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 20. All subsequent page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

²⁰ Of the fifteen instances in which the noun “blood” or forms of the verb “to bleed” appear in *Dictée*, eleven are found in the three sections set in Korea and Manchuria; eight appear in “Melpomene/Tragedy” alone.

²¹ Amie Elizabeth Parry, *Interventions into Modernist Cultures: Poetry from Beyond the Empty Screen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 140.

has already appeared, albeit obliquely, in this essay, via Wong's statement regarding "the stain of difference" by which Cha's work resists assimilation. With this phrase, Wong is clearly evoking a blood stain that Cha represents in "Urania/Astronomy," a section that appears between "Calliope/Epic" and "Melpomene/Tragedy" and that seems to refer to a time after the speaker and her family have immigrated to the United States.²² Wong quotes from Cha's description of a blood spill that occurs in this section of the work immediately following her assertion of Cha's resistance to a normative American identity: "stain begins to absorb the material spilled on."²³ While critics have focused, as Wong does, on the bloodstain's clear metaphorical resonance, conveying a reversal of processes of absorption or assimilation, in which the stain absorbs material, or have called out Cha's association of blood in the section with ink and, by extension, the process of writing,²⁴ few, if any, have emphasized the larger context in which the stain appears, as part of a medical procedure in a doctor's office.²⁵ This context is made clear by the passage's opening lines, "She takes my left arm, tells me to make a fist, then open" (64), and is reinforced throughout the opening paragraph, which describes the procedure in some detail.

As such, the bloodstain occurs squarely within the realm of Foucauldian power-knowledge, much like the speaker's mock confession and the dictation exercises presented in the book's untitled, opening section. Any doubt regarding the biomedical and biopolitical valences of this scene is removed by the conclusion of the passage's opening paragraph, which refers to the blood as a "sample extract" and "specimen type" (64). The metaphorical resonance of the blood spill as a stain that itself absorbs material occurs, then, in the context of a modern medical procedure in which blood itself has little or no symbolic value but is instead a material to be tested, presumably for the biopolitical "optimization of life." Space won't allow for a more detailed analysis of this passage, which withholds the term "blood" entirely until the appearance of *sang* in its penultimate line, but it should be noted that following this representation of blood as a "specimen type," "Urania/Astronomy" concludes with an extended, poetic meditation, in French and English, on memory and language. This meditation emphasizes the difficulty of language production and yokes it squarely to the body, presenting the well-known "Cracked tongue. Broken tongue" as the means of producing a "semblance of speech" (75).

If Cha complicates the processes of biopolitical normalization and ideological interpellation by presenting blood as a metaphor that inverts notions of assimilation and also by denaturalizing language acquisition, in the context of diasporic dislocation, as a function of the body under duress, very different conceptions of blood and language are presented in sections of the work set in Korea and Manchuria. "Calliope/Epic" opens in Manchuria, where Cha's grandparents fled in an attempt to escape Japanese forces colonizing Korea, and takes place in the 1930s and 1940s, when the speaker's mother is a young woman. Although the speaker's mother was born in China, the work asserts unequivocally that she is Korean — and not Chinese or Korean Chinese — a conception of nationality that is implicitly based on *ius sanguinis*, or the right of blood, rather than *ius soli*, the right of soil. Blood figures, along with language, strongly in the work's representation

²² Whereas the chapters that precede and follow it take place explicitly in Manchuria and Korea, "Urania/Astronomy" contains no indication of where it is set but is clearly not based on historical materials.

²³ Wong, "Unnaming the Same," 136.

²⁴ Shih, "Nationalism and Korean American Women's Writing," 153–54.

²⁵ Juliana Spahr indicates that "the narrator gives blood" in this passage, but she emphasizes, like Wong, the metaphorical resonance of Cha's description of the bloodstain. Juliana M. Spahr, "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," *College Literature* 23, no. 3 (1996): 27.

of the mother's identity, which is depicted not only as definitively stable but also as inseparable from her integration in a larger, holistic community of exiles: "All of you who are one, who by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue. You carry at the center the mark of red above and the mark of blue below, heaven and earth, tai-geuk; t'ai-chi. It is the mark. The mark of belonging. Mark of cause. Mark of retrieval. By birth. By death. By blood" (46). As the passage forcefully indicates, the mother's integration within the larger community is tethered to immutable processes of mortality and operates by an inalienable bond of blood, which subordinates the individual to the larger, consanguineous group, or "all of you who are one."

The passage will go on to assert that this inalienable mark of belonging, based on blood bonds, is located in the mother's *mah-uhm*, or "spirit-heart." This term itself is significant, in a passage focusing on language, blood, and identity, because it is typically seen to be a "pure" Korean word, or one not derived from Chinese roots.²⁶ For our purposes, it is perhaps more significant that the work's invocation of the mother's *mah-uhm* locates the basis of her identity as entirely internalized and not contingent on any external characteristics or performances, such as linguistic fluency or the reproduction of cultural lore. As such, this mark of belonging cannot be countermanded but is presented as inherent — by birth and blood — and constitutive of the mother's identity.

To be sure, linguistic fluency is also a central aspect of the identity of the mother and the larger group in which she is integrated, but the production of language itself is merely part and parcel of what marks her as inherently Korean. As the quotation above indicates, moreover, the larger group to which the mother belongs is prohibited from using the Korean language, or is "by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue." Much as exile can be seen to heighten nationalist longing, as Said has indicated,²⁷ the proscription of the Korean tongue by Japanese authorities may be seen to increase its importance to the mother's identity, as an earlier passage in the opening of the section makes clear: "The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. . . . Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly" (45–46). While the mother's relation to the Korean language is tragically complicated by the harsh realities of life under Japanese colonial rule, these complications shouldn't elide the terms by which Cha represents her mother's relation to the Korean language, which offers her a paradoxical type of ontological stability in the face of existential risk — or the ability to be who she is, "truly," under the threat of death.

Though both Cha's depictions of herself and of her mother revolve around notions of blood and language, the contrast between these depictions could not be starker. Whereas the identity of the speaker's mother is not only defined by her blood and language but also securely enmeshed in a larger social group, the speaker is depicted as isolated in a clinical setting in which her blood constitutes merely a "specimen type." The speaker's relationship to language, moreover, is defined not by an ontological stability and existential risk but by a poorly disciplined body that produces a "semblance of speech." If these elements of the work are correctly read as resistant to assimilation to a hegemonic American identity, this resistance itself must be understood in relation to the organicist parameters of the speaker's depictions of her mother. For in representing the speaker

²⁶ Personal communication with Eleana Kim.

²⁷ Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 359.

as an individual who resists normalization in the United States, Cha also represents her as one who is unable to attain acceptance upon her return to South Korea.

The primary reason for this lack of acceptance, of course, is because the speaker has become a naturalized citizen of the United States, a process Cha powerfully renders through the statement “Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph” (56). This statement occurs near the conclusion of “Calliope/Epic,” in a scene in which Cha returns to South Korea. Underlying this lack of acceptance, however, is a split between the South Korean state and the nation that Cha traces in her description of prodemocracy protests in “Melpomene/Tragedy.”

Organic nationalism is less prominent in “Melpomene/Tragedy” than in “Calliope/Epic,” but the representations of it found in “Melpomene/Tragedy” occur almost exclusively through notions of blood. As we will see, Cha relies on the symbolic value of blood to depict the suffering of the Korean people in a way that opposes, implicitly and explicitly, the Korean nation against the South Korean state headed by a military dictator. Whereas the organic nationalism represented in “Calliope/Epic” was forged in response to Japanese colonialism and the exile of Koreans, such as the speaker’s mother, to Manchuria, the less emphatic form of organic nationalism that appears in “Melpomene/Tragedy” comes into relief against the actions of soldiers representing the state. These soldiers play a prominent role in “Melpomene/Tragedy,” which depicts two protests for democracy in South Korea, one that takes place in the early 1960s, when the speaker was a girl, and one that occurs in the late 1970s or early 1980s, dates that effectively bookend the authoritarian Park regime.²⁸

Nowhere is the opposition of organic nationalism and the modern state seen more clearly than in Cha’s excoriating description of the soldiers who are policing the 1962 rally. This reference, like the one in “Calliope/Epic,” focuses on blood as a modality of belonging — but here this modality is rejected: “The police the soldiers anonymous they duplicate themselves, multiply in number invincible they execute their role. Further than their home further than their mother father their brother sister further than their children is the execution of their role their given identity further than their own line of blood” (84). Propelled by Cha’s breathless repetition of “further,” this passage makes it clear that the soldiers’ execution of “their role” somehow takes them beyond not only their homes and relatives but “their own line of blood.” This invocation of kinship and the representation of “a line of blood” as something that individuals possess (“their own”) speak to a conception of social belonging that is distinctly biologicistic and squarely within the realm of Foucault’s “symbolics of blood.”

In their anonymity, however, the menace of which is amplified by their large numbers, or their ability to “duplicate themselves,” the soldiers suggest social forces associated with Foucault’s conception of modernity. In claiming that these soldiers are betraying “their own lines of blood,” then, Cha is leveraging a notion central to organic forms of nationalism — that of an immutable sense of belonging bestowed by bloodlines — against the imposition of the modern state. In doing so, she doesn’t simply call out the larger, structural homologies between colonialism and nationalism, as Lowe contends,²⁹ but depicts a specific form of nationalism as implicitly opposed

²⁸ Park Chung Hee came to power in a 1961 coup d’état, following the departure of Syngman Rhee, who had ruled from 1948 to 1960. Park was assassinated by the head of his intelligence agency on October 26, 1979. Chun Doo Hwan orchestrated another coup in December 1979 and ruled the country until 1987. The governments of all three men were supported by the United States and are typically considered authoritarian.

²⁹ Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 50.

to the state — be it one run by a foreign power, such as Japan, or one supported by the United States and committed to “modernization” and “growth” at any cost.

Whereas the agents of the Japanese colonial government are not depicted directly in “Calliope/Epic,” the agents of the later South Korean state are clearly allied with the forces of modernity, in a Foucauldian sense. Not only are the soldiers that Cha depicts in “Melpomene/Tragedy” anonymous, but they are also highly disciplined, as a later passage makes clear. The military, of course, is one of the earliest groups to be affected by the development of the disciplinary techniques strongly associated with modernity, in Foucault’s account, and it is significant that Cha represents them in terms that indicate the discipline that accompanies their roles: “You stand on your tanks your legs spread apart how many degrees exactly your hand on your rifle. Rifle to the ground the same angle as your right leg. You wear a beret in 90 degree sun there is no shade at the main gate you are fixed you cannot move you dare not move” (86). This passage clearly represents the disciplinary training, designed to optimize performance by training the body, that the soldiers have received, with the effect that they now stand with their “legs spread apart how many degrees exactly” and do not move, regardless of how uncomfortable they are.

If disciplinary techniques effectively create individuals, as Foucault contends, so that each individual exists as a “secret singularity,”³⁰ this process of individualization is one that leads to a particularly “normalized” individual. In Cha’s terms, these trained soldiers become equivalent to one another not through any identity that might come from familial or other social relations but through their functions in the army: “You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen” (86). This passage attributes a type of functional identity to the soldiers that is, essentially, equivalent to anonymity (though the soldiers are surely well known, via their files, to the state), but what is also notable about the passage is Cha’s extension of this functional nonidentity to the nation (“you are your nation”). With such a claim, Cha effectively shows the nation to be an ancillary element of the state, or she depicts a nation that is not, in any sense, organic but the outgrowth of state power and ideology. In other words, she is describing the loss of the organic nation, its absorption into larger bodies wholly controlled by the state. That the representatives of this new “nation” are directed against their “own countrymen,” however, suggests a dynamic similar to the one discussed earlier, in which representatives of the state have forsaken the organic nation represented by “lines of blood.”

Such representations of highly disciplined forces turned against their own countrymen may seem to express a limit to Foucault’s formulation of biopolitics. If the soldiers are highly disciplined and functionally anonymous, paradoxically, in the individuality the modern state bestows upon them, they also represent instances in which the techniques that are hallmarks of modernity are not used to cause life to proliferate, as Foucault asserts is the rationale of biopolitics, but to subdue or end it. In “Melpomene/Tragedy,” the brutality of this task is matched by its bureaucratic nature, as Cha’s succinct description of the violent climax of the 1962 protest makes clear: “Orders, permission to use force against the students, have been dispatched. To be caught and beaten with sticks, and for others, shot, remassed, and carted off. They fall they bleed they die” (83). This matter-of-fact description appears immediately before the passage in which the soldiers are said to have gone “further than their own line of blood” (84). The close proximity of the

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; New York: Vintage, 1977), 193.

two passages underscores the ways in which the soldiers' de facto denial of one of the functions of blood, that of inherent belonging, is connected to a painful demonstration of what Foucault calls blood's "instrumental role," as the students "shed blood" in their opposition to the state.³¹

The state-sanctioned nature of this violence is evident in Cha's account of it, which specifies that "orders" and "permission to use force . . . have been dispatched." The disciplinary forces of the modern state, then, are clearly relying, in "Melpomene/Tragedy," on the older power of the sovereign to "take life or let live" rather than the biopolitical power to "foster life." While it might be possible to understand this conflict through the paradigm of "state racism" that Foucault elaborates in his lectures on biopolitics, the violence represented in the section also demonstrates, in the broader context of South Korea's rush to development in the 1960s and 1970s, a combination of the two regimes of power Foucault presents as distinctly opposed. In what seems an attempt to mitigate the epochal nature of his formulation, Foucault acknowledges that "the passage from one [regime of power] to the other did not come about . . . without overlappings, interactions, and echoes."³² Such overlappings and interactions are a key part of Seungsook Moon's claim that South Korean development in the second half of the twentieth century can be understood through the concept of "militarized modernity," which she develops "to capture the peculiar combination of Foucauldian discipline and militarized violence that permeated Korean society in the process of building a modern nation in the context of the Cold War."³³ As we have seen, "Melpomene/Tragedy" captures this "peculiar combination" as well, with effects that are often distressing.

While the state-sanctioned violence represented in "Melpomene/Tragedy" is clearly traumatic for the speaker, the affective repercussions of the split between an organic nation and an authoritarian state are further explored in the account of the speaker's return to South Korea at the conclusion of "Calliope/Epic." Apparently set in an airport, likely at a customs gate, the passage presents the speaker's reception as a result of the "papers" by which her identity has been overwritten: "You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality" (56). The opening sentence clearly lays out the speaker's isolation, as she is opposed to a collective rendered in the third person, though she represents herself in the second person: "you . . . are not one of them."³⁴ A rift opens up here, as well, in relation to language; the speaker can understand what's being said, perhaps about her, but is subjected to comments about her own facility as a speaker.

Underlying this rift, of course, is a disjunction between assumptions about ethnic appearance, linguistic facility, and national identity, which is made clear as the passage continues. Again, it is a "they" who scrutinizes a "you" in the passage: "They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt" (57). Here, the effacement of the speaker's identity by one "they" — that is, the American bureaucrats who have replaced that identity with "their photograph" — is carried further by another "they," whose

³¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 147.

³² *Ibid.*, 149.

³³ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

³⁴ Kang notes that forms of socioeconomic difference may also be at play in this encounter. Hyun Yi Kang, "Re-membering Home," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 279.

questions undermine whatever remains of it. Though this passage is ambiguous, in its use of pronouns and its avoidance of proper nouns, it carries the sense that the remnants of the speaker's original identity, the one overwritten by American documents, are being effaced as much as her new, naturalized status is. As the passage makes clear in the next few sentences, moreover, the members of this "they" who isolate the speaker and undermine what remains of her identity are empowered to do so: "They search you. They, the anonymous variety of uniforms, each division, strata, classification, any set of miscellaneous properly uniformed. They have the right, no matter what rank, however low their function they have the authority. Their authority sewn into the stitches of their costume" (57). The derisive reference to the "costume" of the officials lays bare the speaker's indignation and sense of helplessness.

While the passage does not offer more details about the officials, it makes clear that they are "authorized" agents of the state. If "Melpomene/Tragedy" locates a conflict between forms of nationalism — with one form represented by uniformed agents of the state who have moved beyond "their own line of blood" and the other by those who shed their blood in protest of the state and can thus be seen as connected to the organic nationalism that marks the work's depiction of the mother in the opening pages of "Calliope/Epic" — this conflict seems to have been decided in the closing pages of "Calliope/Epic." In Cha's representation of the speaker's "homecoming," the agents of the state have absolute authority, with the implicit acknowledgment that the state is coextensive with the nation.

In light of this development, whatever connection the speaker may have still felt for the "Korea" of her mother is rendered invalid. As a result, it is possible to see a chasm open up between the two parts of a question the guards challenge her with, repeatedly: "Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented" (57). Cha presents the two parts of this question side by side, without a conjunction, as if they can stand in apposition, but in the larger context of the events depicted at the end of "Calliope/Epic," this presentation seems to call out the extent to which the speaker may, in fact, have wanted to believe that they would require different answers. Regardless of whether she believes that who and what she is should be seen as different from "who is represented," it is evident that, to the representatives of the state whom she encounters upon her return, the second part of the question is the only one that matters, as it determines the first.

Cha's encounter with these representatives of the state is charged and leaves her "near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long," but her feelings are clearly not reciprocated (58). While Cha never explicitly claims, for herself, the biologicistic bonds that define the identity of her mother in "Calliope/Epic," it is clear that the loss of these bonds is largely responsible for the pathos that drives the section's conclusion. This pathos is what frequently falls out of readings that emphasize Cha's resistance to assimilation in the United States, and it is intimately connected with biologicistic bonds between not just mother and daughter but between mother and daughter and notions of a mother tongue and the ability to feel an innate sense of belonging to a national community. If Cha refuses to subordinate her gender, ethnicity, and the larger historical traumas endured by Koreans in the twentieth century to a hegemonic notion of American identity, it is not simply because she seeks to create a "stain of difference" that resists assimilation but because these elements of her identity and her history are tied up with a profound sense of loss and longing. Her work's ability to express these emotions is part of what makes it so compelling, as is its engagement with notions of blood and

belonging that are largely foreign to liberal-individualist social systems. That Cha constructs a text that demonstrates sustained resistance to such a system, moreover, is largely due to her work's often-overlooked investment in these elements of social organicism.

Following Charles Altieri's claim that Modernist poetry operates by means of a "constructivist expressionism,"³⁵ we might allow, then, that Cha's work negotiates the different regimes of power it encounters by means of a constructivist biologism, or a type of strategic essentialism.³⁶ Such an approach leverages aspects of a nationalism forged in response to colonial aggression against one marked by economic imperialism and neoliberal individualism, which would require the ostensible subordination of all social bonds and ethnic particularity to economic rationality. In a broader sense, this approach allows Cha to incorporate notions of biologism while acknowledging, via self-reflexivity, the status of her work as a made construct and demonstrating, sometimes painfully, the consequences of the survival of these notions in a diasporic context.

If this technique allows Cha to avoid the cultural nationalism that marked earlier works of Asian American writers — and that also affected the reception of *Dictée*, as Timothy Yu and others have demonstrated — it also places her work in proximity to ethnonationalist concepts that have long been unpopular in the West. Yet to downplay this proximity by emphasizing the context of assimilation or by simply highlighting the work's self-reflexivity and attention to processes of subjectification runs the risk of delegitimizing, via critical silence, an ethnic nationalism that is itself a response to racialized aggression. Conversely, these readings may implicitly legitimize, albeit via sustained critique, a liberal nationalism that, while cloaked in universality, is no less particular than any other.³⁷

Such emphases may also occlude, moreover, key moments in the text in which Cha gestures beyond all known taxonomies of identity and belonging. One such moment occurs in "Calliope/Epic," near the conclusion of Cha's encounter with the "uni formed" men who question and harass her at the airport. In this passage, Cha moves beyond any common traits or signs of belonging, be they blood, language, or a passport photo: "You see the will, you see the breath, you see the out of breath and out of will but you still see the will. Will and will only espouse this land this sky this time this people. You are one same particle" (57). Playing with the multiple meanings of the word "will," which is a term meaning "intention" or "desire" and also a modal, future-tense verb, this somewhat unexpected statement then proceeds to make a vow, of sorts, to her present surroundings. If the speaker desires to espouse "this people" — who are never explicitly specified — her desire is located only in its deictic insistence ("this," "this," "this," "this") and not in any ostensibly universal qualities by which the people, time, or place might be known.

Far from simply being an experimental technique, Cha's in-descriptive description moves toward a singularity predicated upon no qualities, much like Agamben's *quodlibet ens*, or "whatever being." In Agamben's terms, the *quodlibet ens* "relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*."³⁸ The very "this-ness" of Cha's moment is underscored,

³⁵ Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century Poetry: Modernism and After* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 5.

³⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 205.

³⁷ As Calhoun notes, the "need to account for the particularity of belonging" constitutes "the fundamental paradox of liberal nationalism" (*Nations Matter*, 136).

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1, emphasis in original.

moreover, by her own participation as “one same particle.” Not even a person, the category that stands at the head of the most basic taxonomic hierarchy, but a part(icle) of “this land this sky this time this people” (57), and one whose participation is not contingent on any recognized form of belonging.

Coming full circle, in terms of a politics of blood that might be discerned in *Dictée*, the paragraph closes with a turn to the body. Neither innately Korean by virtue of its blood or *mah-uhm* nor struggling to produce language, this body represents an unexpected conflation of the corporal and the terrestrial, a merging of organs and infrastructure: “To claim to reclaim, the space. Into the mouth the wound the entry is reverse and back each organ artery gland pace element, implanted, housed skin upon skin, membrane, vessel, waters, dams, ducts, canals, bridges” (57). In asserting this reclamation of “the space,” Cha envisions a civic-cyborg body that is partially organic yet not organicist, that contains “waters” rather than blood, and that is a part of “this land” as much as the land is a part of it. A