

FROM LOVE LETTERS¹

Maiko Tanaka

You write. You write you speak voices hidden masked you plant words to the moon you send word through the wind. Through the passing of seasons. By sky and water the words are given birth given discretion. From one mouth to another, from one reading to the next the words are realized in their full meaning. The wind. The dawn or dusk the clay earth and traveling birds south bound birds are mouth pieces wear the ghost veil for the seed of message. Correspondence. To scatter the words.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE*, 2001²

It's 7:40am. I'm sitting in bed, transcribing excerpts from artist and poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* into my sketchbook. Before going to sleep, I retrieved this book from the living room and placed it next to the bed, hoping when I woke up that Cha's words planted to the moon might guide me in writing this letter to you. The passages I'm lifting are written for and through Cha's mother, Hyung Soon Huo. The preceding passages tell of Huo's experiences living in exile in Manchuria, a decision her parents made to escape the oppression of Japanese occupation back home in Korea. The passages that follow tell of the policing of identities, bodies, objects, earth, and seeds that come with her family's migration to the U.S.

"Writing letters is intimate, romantic, kind of a tender process."³ You wrote this to me in your first correspondence from our letter-writing project. *DICTEE* reads very much like tender correspondence, addressed to and through Cha's muses—her mother being one, and Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon another. Cha brings Soon's resistance against military occupation

into the present by weaving photographs, news clippings, documents, and other historical fragments through the narrative's of Cha's mother, and also through stories of Joan of Arc, and the mythological figures of Persephone and Demeter. The chapters of the book are named for the Greek muses, including Erato, the muse of love poetry. Eros, or intimacy, or love, is the vessel of this book, and permeates throughout, so that it reads like a long, episodic love letter.

A photograph of Korean words that appear to be hand-carved on a wall opens the book. There is no caption, but a quick online search shows that it is graffiti made by Korean slave labourers in Japan during WWII. I anxiously wait for Chris to wake up so he can translate the meaning. Here's what he reads:

Mother
I want to see you
I'm hungry
I want to go back to the place I was born⁴

The way Cha reproduces these heartbreaking words immediately brings me back to a public art action in New York City, back in 2006. It took place during an intensive I participated in on socially engaged art practice at The Kitchen, an experimental performance space located in Chelsea. It was the summer of the Israeli bombings in Lebanon, and guest artist Emily Jacir had printed out dozens of emails that had arrived in her inbox that week from friends and acquaintances describing what was happening on the ground over there: reports, messages to loved ones, cries for help. Jacir gave a different email to each of the participants and asked us to work with it as material for a socially engaged artistic response in the neighbourhood. For her response, Atlanta-based artist Lauren MacDonald focused on a line from the email she had been issued:

Last night was probably the most frightful night I have ever experienced in my whole entire life.

Using sidewalk chalk MacDonald handwrote the provocative sentence across the exteriors of buildings around Chelsea, accompanied by a link

to the author's blog for passers-by to look up what the sentence was referring to. What struck me was how Jacir's proposition and MacDonald's action put otherwise radically disjointed experiences of war into proximity. Living bodies in different places across time, brought together through acts of writing, disseminated like fertile seeds in the wind.

You've written in your past letters about writing as an act in love—as love in the act.⁵ I read Jacir and MacDonald's dissemination of the emails as acts of writing, gestures of love. Love letters. But not in a western Romantic sense of longing or making promises of infinite devotion that are more about the writer's narcissism than their object of affection. Both Cha's writing and Jacir and MacDonald's actions bring into being a connection with community that crosses time and space. Through writing they reconfigure the world into embodied proximity with each other. To write—not only as a way to be able to feel what it might have been like to be these women, or to have experienced the bombings, but also as a way to be *with* them. I wonder: could this also be a form of writing as love in the act?

Similarly, through the simple act of writing *with*, Theresa Cha does time travel without the special effects. She weaves the very different historical contexts of the women in her book by having readers feel their suffering, and their strength. This weaving of remote voices, bodies, and experiences in the form of a poem feels like a fugitive, intimate act. Somehow, Cha brings their cells, their skin, their bodies, the earth they walked on, into a process of bringing into being the body of the text, the reader and her own body as the writer. Writing here is not only an act of love, but an act of making life, living across time periods and putting into proximity genealogies in the making.

In your correspondence on the topic of eros, you write about writing from the body and the risks of this, as well as the exhaustion that comes from standing up and calling out. But that it's also for you, the only way to write, writing that is so connected to the body, a writing that is not a self-silencing.⁶ I've recently been searching for stories through which I can feel my own body,

called upon. Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* opens up one of these paths for me. In it, Jiko, an old Buddhist nun living in the mountains, tells stories to her great granddaughter of her contemporaries: revolutionary women in late nineteenth-century Japan from whom she drew strength when dealing with the loss of her son to the war and the imperialist forces of Japan. They expressed their anti-imperialist commitments through poetry, journalism, and activism. After searching online I was excited to find that these women actually existed, transforming my own histories and genealogies in the making.

This led me to *Prison Memoirs of a Japanese Woman* by Fumiko Kaneko, a text she wrote while awaiting sentencing for co-conspiring against the Japanese government with her comrade and lover, Korean revolutionary Pak Yeol. There is a section of her memoirs that recounts her experience growing up in Japanese-occupied Korea. Reading these stories, I feel the risk in taking on the horror and shame of acts of colonial violence done to and enacted by people whose histories I've inherited. But through the stories of women that look like me, I'm finding continuity with lives that were not my typical role models growing up, stories of women who take risks, in solidarity with the oppressed—stories that completely dismantle the stereotype of the docile Japanese woman that I've long internalized.

I'm starting to really feel how this act of writing is bringing ourselves into being within worlds that we desire and thrive on in a non-linear reality. A reality that rejects the concept of progressive time and the stupid idea that humans are the most evolved species on earth, superior to all others, and the rationalized actions that go with it—the entitlement to conquer, control, pillage. The linear way of viewing the world in the image of “progress” not only breeds acts of colonial violence and extraction, but also fails to see the wondrous ways we are actually existing in entangled histories and potential futures. Writing is an important tool we have at our disposal, a tool that is specific to the human species. Writing is an act of bringing to life the ongoing continuity of life, in love.

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It's nearly the end of the morning now. I've since moved to the living room, sitting on the floor—half on the cushion, half on the rug—typing away at my computer. I've transposed the scribbles and transcriptions from my sketchbook to an OpenOffice document, continuing this letter through type. Your beautiful image and words accompanying me this whole time.

You've said before that I'm your muse, and I've said that you're mine. We've talked about not knowing exactly what this means, which I love. After reading through our letters to each other and ongoing conversations about our correspondence project, I'm wondering if we might be muses for each other in the way that Theresa Cha invokes hers:

I write. I write you. Daily. From here. If I am not writing, I am thinking about writing. I am composing. Recording movements. You are here I raise the voice. Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stories. Not hollow not empty. They think that you are one and the same direction addressed. The vast ambient sound hiss between the invisible line distance that this line connects the voice and space surrounding entering and exiting.⁷

Muses for Cha are not distant, unreachable objects of inspiration that she dedicates her writing to, but an ongoing practice of “writing you,” of being with, over time and distance, space and consciousness. Is this what we are doing when we write each other? Writing each other, going about our lives and thinking of writing each other, as an act of being with and for each other. Not so much writing *to* but writing *with*, for, alongside.

You've also written about how we might find affinity or share in our very different struggles with writing.⁸ Our different experiences, our different bodies coming from different places and histories. One way you do that for me is in sharing the worlds of people, texts, and poetry

that you've woven into your letters writing me. You're writing me. I wonder, while reading this letter, if you can feel that somehow your letters form part of the genealogy of this letter writing you. That your writing me is carrying on in my writing you. Without saying trite things like “you change me”; “I'm a better person because of you”; the stuff of that self-indulgent romantic crap that is just not what we do, I prefer to simply say,

you write me

and i write you.

xx
maiko

1
Love Letters is a writing project conceived by Nasrin Himada in collaboration with Maiko Tanaka that began in October 2014. Look for their correspondence in a chapbook coming out soon.

2
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, DICTEE (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48.

3
Nasrin Himada, 20 October 2014.

4
It could also be read as “home-town,” he says.

5
Paraphrased from two different sections from Nasrin Himada, 4 December 2014. Excerpts from the original texts: “I want to commit to a process that lets tenderness, vulnerability in, that feels like an act in love. [...] And that is how I want to approach my work as a process connected to life, that is how I want to approach this project. As an artful process, as love in the act.”

6
Himada, 1 August 2015.

7
Cha, DICTEE, 56.

8
Himada, 1 August 2015.