

## Diary 17-26 November 2019

Will Harris

### Sunday 17 November

In a week or so I have to talk to a group of students about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*. The train sways. The woman opposite has a sketchpad on her lap. Looking out of the window.

Tinkering with my slideshow, I make the background of each slide the same purple as the cover of the original 1982 edition of *Dictee*. I arrange and rearrange blocks of Cha's text: *Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken.*

The man across the aisle is eating a packet of ready salted crisps. He looks like he's wearing a clip-on moustache from a Christmas cracker. The drinks trolley rolls between us.

*Spoke* and *spoke*. The bars radiating from the hub of a wheel and the past tense of speak. Both from Old English – *spáca* and *spræc* – and entering usage around the same time. I spoke and was spoken to. We spoke in turn. Each spoke supports the turning wheel.

We roll past Welwyn Garden City. The woman opposite still drawing. Out of the window: playground, fields, trees, houses, pylons, trees, fields.

### Monday 18 November

Canvassing the other day, someone recommended a writer called Marion Milner – also a psychoanalyst – and today I borrowed *A Life of One's Own* (1934), Milner's first book, written after seven years keeping a diary to record and analyse what happiness meant for her. She describes being forced to listen to classical music and feeling like a 'bloated monster' is weighing

on her, stopping her from connecting with it emotionally. There are entries like this: *Feb 2nd. Absorbed in my own gloom until the lunch hour when Lincoln's Inn in the misty sun made me think 'What does it matter how I feel!'*

Going back to my notes on Cha, I rehearse the dates in my head. Born in 1951 in Busan during the Korean War (1950-53). Her family emigrated to the United States in 1962, temporarily settling in Hawaii before moving to the Bay Area in 1964 where she attended Convent of the Sacred Heart High School in San Francisco. Fluent in English, French and Korean. After graduating from UC Berkeley in 1974, she became known as a film and performance artist. *Dictée*, her first book, was published in October 1982. A week later, going to visit her husband, she was raped and murdered in the Puck Building in New York City.

Juliana Spahr discusses the title of the book:

"Dictée," or dictation, is a technique often used in the teaching of foreign languages. Its premise is that repetition is the first step toward mastery. But dictation has many mutant forms, such as parody, quotation, collage, or sampling, and thus can become a space for cultural comment.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside these techniques, Cha also undermines mastery through the strategic use of 'mistakes', refusing to smooth over stuttery surface of language:

if name be known if name only seen heard spoken read cannot be  
never she hide all essential words words link subject verb she  
writes hidden the essential words must be pretended invented  
she try on different images essential invisible.

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1. Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, 2001

## Tuesday 19 November

Wake up at 5am, take the train from Victoria to Gatwick and fly to Copenhagen, where I'm going to a mini-festival for black, indigenous and poc writers set up by Maya and Elisabeth.

When I arrive, the airport smells of cinnamon rolls. The morning sky is long and flat and full of silver herring-shaped clouds. Everyone is tall and looks like a retired member of an ABBA covers band.

No adverts on the metro. The trains are electric and self-driving so children stand at the front looking out of the big window pretending to drive. The letters here have beautiful embellishments: not a but å, not o but ø (apparently ø by itself means island).

In Nørrebro, I'm taken by M to get *grød* (porridge). A small, trendy place with a diverse range of international *grøds*. My first Danish meal is congee.

After M leaves, I take a *kanelnurrer* (cinnamon roll) to the cemetery where Hans Christian Andersen and Kierkegaard are buried, along with lots of other Danish people with similar names. The sky at sunset is the colour of smoked salmon. Berries are dropping from the trees because of the clumsy-eating crows.

I read more Marion Milner. In a happy moment, Milner describes listening to music and becoming *a hollow vessel filled with sound*. She describes herself on a train back from Birmingham singing *I wish I were a cassowary*.

## Wednesday 20 November

There's a sub-section in *Dictee* called DISEUSE which begins: *She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words.*

I'd never looked up *disease*, thinking it meant something like disuse (an important word in the book) or disease. But it turns out to have an entirely different meaning: *disease* is from the French for *talker* and refers to 'a

female artiste who specialises in monologue' (*OED*).

I look up an old recording of Joyce Grenfell (1910-1979), a popular English *diseuse*. Its vibe is confusing. A mix of impressions, sketch comedy and dramatic monologue. *Spread out. Wider... wider. Just fingertips touching. Sue, let go of Neville! Well, because flowers don't hold hands, they just touch fingertips.* It seems to exist in the same post-apocalyptic music-hall world as the plays of Samuel Beckett. All speech the mimicry of speech, mocking itself.

Scrolling through my phone, I find a quotation from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* saved as a note: *It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open.*

### **Thursday 21 November**

The chocolate bars at the 7-Eleven all have names: Grainy Bill, Crispy Carrie, Salty Fred, Fit Fiona. I buy a Salty Fred and go to the Workers Museum. There are clothes on the washing line in the yard. I look at them through the net curtains in a reconstructed workers' bedroom. Now I'm sitting in the café on the first floor.

I have a habit of leaning on homophonic coincidences and echoes. I guess they're puns, but I don't think of them like that. Probably they give me the same paranoid comfort flat earthers get from chemtrails. Once I made a list of all the echoes of the word 'joy' in James Joyce's corpus, thinking they had some coded significance for him. Like when Leopold Bloom remembers Molly feeding him a chewed seedcake from her mouth. *Joy: I ate it: joy.*

It's a shallow way to engage in a text, but maybe that's the point. Sometimes I want writing to be pure surface, so that I can look at it until

the edges start to fray, the pattern repeating itself, one stray word taking on the inferred weight of the author's soul.

This way of looking doesn't prove anything, and it doesn't try to. It's the thrill of the *disease*. Speech becomes surface. Surface becomes speech. Words stressed, repeated, confused. Revealing and ravelling themselves. *Mere fact of music shows you are.*

### **Friday 22 November**

Back in London. Out of place and energy.

After travelling for a few days, the distances – though mostly travelled sitting still, looking out the window – catch up with me. They feel so large, but only in hindsight. And then there's the people. The towns and cities. Playgrounds, fields, trees.

I page randomly through *Dictée* in bed. Each section is named after one of the nine muses. In 'Calliope', named after the muse of epic poetry, Cha's mother is a young woman teaching Korean children in Manchuria. At one point she has a fever, and the way Cha addresses her – coaxing yet firm – reminds me of those YouTube videos posted by Californian self-realisation gurus I listen to when I can't sleep:

the irresistible draw replacing sleep dense with images condensing them without space in between. No drought to the extensions of spells, words, noise. Music equally out of proportion. You are yielding to them. They are too quick to arrive. You do not know them, never have seen them but they seek you, inhabit you whole, suspend you airless, spaceless. They force their speech upon you and direct your speech only to them.

## Monday 25 November

It's after the talk. I arrived in heavy rain, wearing the wrong shoes. In spite of the day's four-dimensional greyness, I took a selfie outside the cathedral before walking to the university. The students were quiet but seemed open to it. They didn't know what a *disease* was, so I showed them a clip of Joyce Grenfell.

As I was talking and talking, describing the way a *disease* – like the voice in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* – conjures a world into being, knowing this world exists only as long as the *disease* keeps talking, I became aware of myself doing the same thing. *Utter, there's nothing else, utter, void yourself of them, here as always, nothing else. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open.* But I kept going.

Now I'm lying on an air mattress in R's living room and I can hear a couple outside arguing about a mutual friend, referring to her as a border collie.

It was Nisha who first recommended *Dictée*. We were in an empty light-filled office near Old Street, temporarily vacant so being used by artists. She said it was her most formative book. All of its different sources and voices and selves. Its way of being autobiographical without using an 'I', or by using other people's 'I's. It's evasive, while giving so much. It's about poetry and voice, trying to speak and being stifled. The parts about her mother speaking Korean when the country was under Japanese rule, not being able to trust her mother tongue or feel safe in it.

*I mean I'm monolingual, said N, but I feel like I still don't trust the language I speak in and need a code for speaking in it so that certain people can hear me and certain people can't.*

## Tuesday 26 November

*Bound and bound.* The past tense of bind (as in the four-spoked burning wheel Ixion was bound to) and a dog springing upwards or leaping. From the Old English *binden* and the French *bondir*. The modern commercial book is machine-bound in a factory. Spoken words bound beyond their speakers.

Milner: *Possibly the thing that matters, that you are looking for, is like the roots of plants, hidden and happening in the gaps of your knowledge.*

I open the curtains and the trees are bound in cobwebs. In the park I can barely see the joggers despite their glowing lycra. I buy coffee and walk past the canal as the fog burns away. Now the buildings and trees look unreal, or hyperreal. Like cut-outs. Blue blue blue.

There's a pun at the end of *Dictee*, in the final paragraph. Cha is imagining her mother holding her up to look out of the window:

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

Those last words – *a peal to the sky* – make me think of a peeled rind. But also of a chapel surrounded by thick fog and a supplicant breaking the stillness, marking it with an abrupt peal. Which is also an *appeal*. An appeal to the world beyond the self.

## **Will Harris**

Will Harris is a writer of Chinese Indonesian and British heritage, born and based in London. His debut poetry book *RENDANG* is published by Granta in the UK and Wesleyan in the US. It won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection 2020.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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