

# A POET'S "CANNY ACTS OF SABOTAGE": DIASPORIC LANGUAGE IN CATHY PARK HONG'S *DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION*

RUTH WILLIAMS

*I train mine talk box to talk yep-pub as you  
'Merrikans say "purdy" [ . . . ]*

*I speak sum Han-guk y Finnish, good bit o Latin  
y Spanish . . . sum toto Desert Creole en evachanging dipdong  
'pendable on mind mood . . .*

—*Cathy Park Hong, Dance Dance Revolution (2006)*

From the opening pages of *Dance Dance Revolution*, Cathy Park Hong's 2006 collection of poems, we are presented with an English that, while recognizable, is delightfully strange. Spoken by the Guide, the mysterious central figure of the poems' narrative, this English is, as Hong describes it, "an invented dialect that is really a mash-up of extant and extinct English accents" (2007a). No mono-tongued, purebred King's English, this language has been run through a diasporic blender, creolized to become a language of many tongues. Though the events of *Dance Dance Revolution* (hereafter referred

to as *DDR*) take place in an imagined landscape called the Desert, Hong uses the dialect of “Desert Creole” to represent English as it is spoken in an era of globalization; no longer standardized, this is a tongue on the move, constantly morphing as it incorporates new sounds, words, and speakers.

While Hong’s linguistic invention in *DDR* is certainly unique, her innovative reimagining of the relationship among language, ethnic identity, and migration has not yet been explored by scholars of diasporic literature. This is unfortunate, as there is much to be gained by considering the political implications of Hong’s invented dialect and the imagined “center of elsewhere” in which it is spoken (Hong 2007b, 20). Using Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization, this essay illustrates how “Desert Creole” subverts the hegemony of standardized English by unsettling systems of power that connect citizenship to fluency. By situating this language within a population that embraces a similar cultural hybridity, I argue Hong offers readers a model for coalition that recasts revolution for a global era. Finally, I briefly discuss Hong’s use of real-world historical references that challenge common perceptions of Korean history and US-Korea relations. Such references connect Hong’s work to other Korean American writers who carve similar “disloyal” paths between the US and Korea. Ultimately, Hong’s poetry illustrates the enormous potential the genre possesses as a social literature; in *DDR*, she not only gives us an aural treat in Desert Creole’s play of dialects, but also she presents readers with a potent allegory, leading us into the Desert in order to bring us back to our world, changed.

In *DDR*, Hong adopts the guise of a character simply named the Historian, who serves as our guide to the Desert. Throughout the text, the Historian intercuts her transcription of the Guide’s dialogue with field notes and excerpts from her own memoir.<sup>1</sup> Fittingly, it is history that has brought the Historian to the Desert. In the “Foreword,” the Historian tells us she’s grown up in the US knowing little of her father’s past in Korea: “But even to his death, he revealed nothing about his past life. And my own mother, a shy Midwestern woman, died before I turned three. I am a historian, you see, but history has always been stingy to me” (Hong 2007b, 21). As a result of these vague origins, when the Historian learns that “the woman [her] father loved before [her] mother” lives in the Desert, she travels there in the hopes that this woman will become a guide to her father’s past (21).

Hong places these characters in a landscape the Historian describes as a “planned city of renewed wonders, city of state-of-the-art hotels modeled after the world’s greatest cities” (Hong 2007b, 20). While these landmarks suggest a stable geography, in reality the Desert is characterized by migratory flux. Not surprisingly, the Guide is herself a diasporic subject; a former South Korean dissident, her “pure and hypnotic” voice “led thousands into the streets” during the Kwangju Uprising (21). In a description that mirrors actual historical events, the Historian explains: “Kwangju is the provincial capital in the southern part of South Korea. After a dictatorial takeover in 1980, the citizens of Kwangju rose up to protest the coup, only to be brutally massacred by the US-backed Korean government” (21).<sup>2</sup> After her release from prison, the Guide fled to the US, then on to the Desert, a self-imposed exile. As she says, “I’mma double migrant. Ceded from Koryo, ceded from ‘Merrika, ceded y ceded until now I seizem / dis sizable Mouthpiece role” (26).

Distancing herself from Korea and the events of her past, the Guide assumes the role of “a talky Virgil,” selling the Desert experience to tourists from around the world (Hong 2007b, 26). Accordingly, in the Barnard Women Poets Prize Citation for *DDR*, Adrienne Rich describes the Guide “as one of those migrant people the world over whose past has been ruptured or erased by political violence, who plays whatever role she must in the world of the global economy, using language as subversion and disguise” (Rich 2007, i). The Guide is a “double migrant” who feels no great nostalgia for the US or Korea; in a sense, she is truly at home in the Desert, a place whose population consists mostly of those who hail from other homes.

In the “Foreword,” the Historian describes how the language of the Desert reflects this constantly shifting population: “In the Desert, the language is an amalgam of some three hundred languages and dialects imported into this city, a rapidly evolving lingua franca” (Hong 2007b, 19). In light of this flux, the link between language and culture cannot be presumed; rather, language operates in a diasporic space of commerce, shifting as various tongues encounter one another: “Here, new faces pour in and civilian accents morph so quickly that their accents betray who they talked to that day rather than their cultural roots” (19). Unsurprisingly, in an environment in which one’s accent is unfixed, morphing as it encounters new dialects, linguistic mastery becomes a meaningless benchmark of citizenship; as the Historian notes, in the Desert, “Fluency is also a matter of opinion. There is no tuning fork to one’s twang” (19).

Hong's interest in exploring the influence of migration on language stems, in part, from her experiences as a Korean American. As the American-born child of immigrants who came to the US in the 1970s, Hong grew up primarily in Los Angeles's Koreatown. Despite her birth in the US, Hong's first language was Korean; she didn't start speaking English "until seven or so" when she entered public school (Hong 2002, 15). In Hong's view, one of the beneficial aspects of bilingualism is that it better allows one to "witness language's limits in articulating a cohesive whole, "a distinct advantage when it comes to writing" (Hong 2006). As she explains, "Being bilingual affords a richer opportunity for writers, especially poets, because from early on you learn that there is more than one linguistic system for every thought. You learn that there is more than one word that could describe an object and that gives resiliency to the way you look at language" (Hong 2002, 15). Hong has never experienced English as a static system of meanings; rather, for her, "English is always in transition" (Hong 2007a). Thus, is it not surprising that she uses the language in her poetry to peel back the façade of standardization, exposing the "busy traffic of dialects, accents, and slang" which make up our living English language (Hong 2007a).

As a whole, *DDR* exemplifies what reviewer Jan Clausen has called Hong's "fiercely instructive politics of *dislocation*" (2002, 15, emphasis in original) which provocatively suggest the diasporas wrought by globalization need not be thought of as resulting solely in scattering and trauma. In the Desert, it is this very flow of population that creates new, more powerful articulations of language and nationality. Though the forces of disconnection and fragmentation may seem stronger than ever, Hong's poems in *DDR* assert that we should not give up on revolution yet. As the Historian notes in the "Foreword," by attending to the lessons of the Desert, we'll come see, though the forms of revolution may have changed, "the pulse of unrest" continues to work "unpredictably, in canny acts of sabotage" (Hong 2007b, 20).

## I. DETERRITORIALIZED LANGUAGE IN DIASPORIC SPACE

In studying the "canny acts of sabotage" within *DDR*, it is instructive to begin at the linguistic level as Desert Creole is one of Hong's most nuanced "dislocations." Not only is Hong's verbal power and wit on display in this invented dialect, Desert Creole represents a potent challenge to our conceptions of fluency. In the satirically titled "The

Importance of Being English,” the Guide explains how she came to “seizem dis sizable Mouthpiece role” as a guide for tourists (Hong 2007b, 26). When she was young, her “gor-belly fadder” passed along a “pep gem echo / me mind chamber time y time” (45). During the Korean War, the Guide’s father is confronted by American G.I.s who accuse him of being a spy. The Guide describes the scene:

Big booted potato finga’d giants cockim guns  
 en him ear cos tink he Commie spy. Big error  
 but all he kaim say? *Ssalyu juseyo!*  
 Gibberish to dim ears! (Hong 2007b, 45).

The father’s life is spared only when he recognizes the Army’s Korean translator is an “old school chum” who he can ask for help: “He recognized me and took the Officer aside, // and whispered in English. / Like a miracle, they rested their guns and walked out the door” (45). After this experience, the Guide says: “Me fadder sees dis y decide to learn Engrish righteo dere. / Become a Jees cuckin stool fo means o survival” (45). Based on this experience, the Guide’s father imparts this wisdom:

You can be the best talker but no point if you can’t  
 speak the other man’s tongue. You can’t chisel, con, plead,  
 seduce, beg for your life, you can’t do anything, because you  
 know not their language. So learn them all (Hong 2007b, 46).

Like the Guide’s father, for the non-native speaker, learning the language of those in power may be a key to survival, quite literally. Formerly, the Guide used her voice to incite revolution, yet in the Desert, she uses it to sell the Desert experience to tourists; as she says, “betta de phrase, ‘purdier’ de experience” (25). She views language as a commodity, the ability to speak fluently as a means of survival. However, while the Guide has learned to speak “the other man’s tongue,” her English is far from pure; indeed, she speaks a tongue which her father, and those potato-fingered American soldiers, would likely find alien.

Rather than simply become a “cuckin stool” to escape threats of violence, in the Desert, the Guide survives as a kind of linguistic huckster. As she boasts, out of “twenty t’ousand guides here . . . I’m #1 . . . [I] train mine talk box to talk yep-puh, as you ‘Merrickans say ‘purdy.’” Appropriately, the Guide sells “no goods only phrases” (Hong 2007b, 25). Her desire to “learn them all” belies her understanding that an artful and knowledgeable tongue will help her fill her wallet. While the Guide’s father is forced to mold his tongue to

fit the language of those in power, the Guide, as Rich suggests in her introduction, uses language more “as subversion and disguise” (Rich 2007, i). Certainly, the Guide molds her tongue to the needs of tourists. However, she does so with a sense of play, a sly wink; after all, she says, her language changes “en evagchanging dipdong ‘pendable on mine mood” (25). In a sense, the Guide skews the divide between native/non-native speakers—speaking all sorts of languages, she can subversively slip her way into any tongue.

“The Importance of Being English” hints at how Hong’s Desert Creole can be read as a satirical challenge to what we might call linguistic nationalism, the way we use fluency as a measure of citizenship. In the Desert, the language is constantly changing; thus, there is no way to deduce nationality based on fluency or a particular accent. To further illuminate Desert Creole’s political implications, it is helpful to examine Hong’s creation through the frame of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization. In an uncanny echo of the Desert landscape of *DDR*, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Deleuze and Guattari describe deterritorialization as “bring[ing] language slowly and progressively to the Desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry” (1986, 26). No mere sound, this cry is the exhalation of a language being pushed past the boundaries of order. As Deleuze and Guattari note, “a deterritorialized musical sound [is] a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words—a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying” (6). Like Desert Creole with its pastiche of dialects, deterritorialization disrupts our usual perception of language by rending apart the façade of standard signification to expose what Hong describes as the “busy traffic” of lived language (2007a).

When encountering deterritorialized language, it becomes difficult to see our native tongue as existing in a static state; rather, we have to recognize that language is always “a mixture, a schizophrenic mélange, a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can’t be said” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 26). When a writer pushes language beyond familiar usage, we discover that we speak a “blur of languages, and not at all a system of languages” (24). Though this may seem like an inconsequential shift in our perception of the structure of language, Deleuze and Guattari connect the production of deterritorialized works of literature to the social fabric by noting “national consciousness . . . necessarily

exists by means of literature” (17). Since we use language to construct group identity, such as those narratives of “us” which can be used to reinforce nationalism, the use of deterritorialized language, that which exposes the many intersections of linguistic and ethnic difference that create this narrative, may result in a literature that is “positively charged with the role and function of the collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation” (17).

Unsurprisingly, the essential diversity of a nation’s collective utterance is often suppressed in favor of an official language that coheres “us” around a central, dominant identity. To resist this suppression, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a writer must find “his own point of underdevelopment, his own *patois*, his own third world, his own desert” (1986, 18). From this marginal position, one can make “use of the polylingualism of one’s own language . . . to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play” (27). It is through the author’s willingness to become a “sort of stranger *within* his own language” that he or she is able to expose the play of the parts, those assemblages which make up the whole (26). Authors do not create the polylingualism of a language; rather, their writing reveals the repressed dialects which have been hidden by the projection of a solid “state language, an official language” that represses difference on both a linguistic and ideological level (27). Deleuze and Guattari exhort authors to “Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor.” Such a “minor” position will reveal the “revolutionary conditions” embedded within language, those assemblages that normally remain marginalized and obscured (27). Yet, they note that “[a] minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). Deterritorialized language is revolutionary precisely because it arises out of, not apart from, a major language, forcing what has thought itself the majority to recognize its own minority, so to speak.

The Guide’s language effects just such a recognition. Her dialect is cobbled together from a variety of “major” languages; as she explains, “I speak sum Han-guk [Korean] y Finnish, good bit o Latin / y Spanish” (Hong 2007a, 25). Speaking this deterritorialized language, the Guide recombines linguistic parts into a whole that reveals its own seams. While some might cast aspersions on a creolized language, viewing it as an impure or diluted dialect,

Hong, like Deleuze and Guattari, presents this tongue as a locus of linguistic power. Thus, while the Guide is a displaced person, a “double migrant” (Hong 2007b, 26), her possession of this deterritorialized “fluency” allows her to successfully navigate the Desert, earning a living as a tourist guide who sells “no goods only phrases” (25). Unlike our English-dominant world, in the Desert those who speak an “official” language are not the most successful; instead, it is those who are open to the endless contamination of their own tongue by others, that get along best. It is this openness that allows, as Deleuze and Guattari describe, “the oppressed quality of this language to [oppose] its oppressive quality” (1986, 27). Essentially, by inverting our usual devaluation of creolized or non-dominant languages, Hong suggests in a globalized era there is something to be gained, to return to Deleuze and Guattari, in “becoming-minor” (1986, 27).

Recognizing the need for such a perspective shift, Deleuze and Guattari pose a question in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*: “How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 19). For those whose experience has not included migration, displacement, or whose ethnic identity does not place them in a minority position in culture, reading Desert Creole is linguistically pedagogical as it forces us into a new relation with our language. Critic Zhou Xiaojing describes this perspective shift as a product of Hong’s “nomadic poetics” which employ a “contaminated” English to “enact the experience of migration and displacement” at a linguistic level (2007, 64). In this respect, Desert Creole is at its most potent for Hong’s English-only readers who are used to easy passage through texts, especially those that offer themselves as ethnographic guidebooks, essentially translating the foreign to make it understandable. *DDR* contains no such translations; in fact, Hong deliberately unsettles readers who expect accurate translations and trustworthy guides.

To enact this unsettling, Hong emphasizes the dependence of readers on the Historian. Yet, rather than allow us to blindly take the Historian at her word, in the “Foreword,” Hong has the Historian confess: “I’ve had difficulty deciding whether to transcribe [the Guide’s] words exactly as said. . . . I’ve decided on a compromise—preserving her diction in certain sections while translating her words to a proper English when I felt clarification was needed” (Hong 2007b, 20). This admission comes after a list of phrases the Historian translates that underscore the destabilized,



deterritorialized condition of Desert Creole. For example, one such phrase “Dimfo me am im” translates “Let me tell you about him” while another “G’won now, shi’bal bato” results in “Leave, you homosexual son of a baboon” (19). A speaker marginally familiar with Korean would recognize “shi’bal” as a Romanization of the Korean word for “fuck” and could use a dictionary to quickly deduce that “bato” is not the Korean word for “baboon.” Instead, it appears to be a possible reference to Puerto Rican slang for “dude.” Intriguingly, this line contains a mistranslation. Such slippages suggest that these words have lost their original meaning within the Desert while also hinting at the fact that the Historian is not the most trustworthy guide. The Historian herself admits that some of her translations may be “inexact,” not only due to the slipperiness of the language itself, but also from “technical glitches” introduced when she left the audio tapes of her interviews in the rain (20).

Certainly, the Historian’s admissions here illustrate the difficulty in translating a language that could read to many as totally incomprehensible while still accurately representing the nuances of its linguistic texture. Like many translators, the Historian attempts to strike a balance between readability and accuracy; yet, it is important to note, by explaining her process in the “Foreword,” she openly acknowledges the subjective nature of all acts of translation. Rather than obscuring such decisions, the Historian cops to her difficulties, going so far as to mark the literal gaps in her recordings of the Guide with ellipses. Dotting *DDR* from start to finish, these ellipses signal those parts of the Guide’s story we’ll never gain access to. While these mistakes on the part of the Historian do not fully impede the reader’s navigation of the narrative, they do represent a playful jab on the part of Hong at readers’ expectations of easy passage through the text. Furthermore, they are yet another signal that *DDR*, despite containing the words of a Historian, a figure we normally associate with fact and truth, will not claim to contain any “official” language; rather, it is a text that openly shows evidence of its own “contamination,” so to speak.

In light of these displacements within the language of Desert Creole as well as the narrative structure of *DDR*, readers must reassess their expectations in a radical way. Rather than clinging to outmoded ideas of linguistic nationalism or expecting a “guided” experience to a minority culture, Hong suggests we learn instead to adapt to this instability. Indeed, the world Hong builds in *DDR* provides us with an opportunity to reconceive what it means to be

“fluent” by adopting a “becoming-minor” perspective on our own language. Rather than championing a fixed idea of pure language or English-only dominance, fluency in a diasporic era is a matter of flexibility. Furthermore, those who speak “contaminated” languages hold a revolutionary power as they, like the Guide, can recombine the “major” into new, unofficial articulations.

Accordingly, the people of the Desert see the flux and flow of their language, less as a negative consequence of diaspora, and more as an opportunity for a playful linguistic enterprise premised on subversive rearticulations. As the Guide takes the Historian around the Desert, they encounter a street auction in which trademarked phrases are sold to the highest bidder. The Historian explains the scene with a footnote: “In the Desert, so many words have become trademarked that it is impossible to even speak without stumbling upon someone’s trademark” (Hong 2007b, 90). Hence, auctions are held in which one can buy the rights to a phrase. In the poem “The Auctioneer’s Woo,” Hong not only illustrates the shifty nature of language in the Desert, but also she pokes fun at those who might still cling to the façade of a pure and proper tongue.

The auctioneer calls out: “First up is a mint, a classic: / *May I have this dance*: a phrase for thy empire / waisted” (Hong 2007b, 90). Hong’s arch line break between “empire” and “waisted” suggests the way in which languages become territorialized as property when their possession dictates access to social power, here resonant in “empire” and the wealth evoked by an empire-waisted gown. It is fitting, then, that the auctioneer stresses the purity of the phrase as crucial to its value: “This is a proper woo, a very proper woo, with / societal promises of velvet crushed cossets / and a lock of Anglophine hair as a keepsake” (90). The images here connote a vision of upper-crust society at the turn-of-the-century when the British Empire held the key not only to much property, but also to a superior and “pure” English. Indeed, the auctioneer suggests the purchaser of the phrase might benefit from its high-class associations: “Here here, for those who pang / for manners,” while simultaneously warning that the new owner should “use it sparingly” as “this phrase’s hoary delicacy may fray with / slattern use” (90). Hong’s choice of words suggests the weakness of “pure” English, as a speaker from a lower class, one who dares make common use of the phrase, will discover its essential fragility as it easily frays.

Amusingly, this poem illustrates the intriguing destabilization of linguistic nationalisms that occurs in the Desert; those who would

have previously been kept outside of “pure” English, here associated with a presumably white “Anglophone” speaker, are now successful enough to be able to buy their way in. The attempt to preserve purity, to keep the “hoary delicacy” of language intact, is ultimately an impossible project in the shifting linguistic landscape. In effect, the King’s English can no longer maintain its boundaries; up for sale to the highest bidder, it has become deterritorialized.

## II. THE DESERT POPULATION: BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND ASSIMILATION

While Hong’s creation of Desert Creole carries compelling political resonances, the narrative of *DDR* is clearly meant to serve as an allegory for our times. Similar to the way Desert Creole’s constant morphing challenges linguistic nationalisms, the people of the Desert resist a fixed notion of national identity through their openness to the “contamination” of one culture by another. After leaving the auction of phrases described in “The Auctioneer’s Woo,” the Historian and the Guide stumble on a wedding celebration. In “Toasts in the Grove of Proposals,” the Historian records the rousing refrain, “[L]es’ toast to bountiful gene pool, / to intramarry couple breedim beige population!” (Hong 2007b, 92). The toast giver makes a special point of emphasizing the wonderful diversity in these pairings; among them are a “man en rabbinical cape” who stands alongside a “goy,” and a “brassy Brahmin” in robes who swoons for a “faire Waspian” in wingtip shoes (92). This scene makes clear that just as desert-dwellers do not claim a standard dialect, they also do not celebrate pure bloodlines; instead, they laud the creation of an indeterminate “beige” population.

In this sense, the Desert population represents a vision of culture similar to the one described by theorist Lisa Lowe in “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences” as “replacing notions of ‘identity’ with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from cultural ‘essence’ to material hybridity” (Lowe 2003, 145). Such a conception of cultural identity embraces “neither nativism nor assimilation” (145); rather, it is a group identity that coheres around a state of perpetual heterogeneity. Similar to deterritorialized language that reveals the chaotic “cry” of assemblages suppressed by our official, state language, Desert dwellers cross and re-cross ethnic and national boundaries to such a degree that these boundaries become completely indeterminate.

Perhaps we could say that Hong's send-up of an uncontrollable "beige" population is one of the political "interventions" of which Lowe speaks in her essay, as this allegory articulates a cultural identity in which our union, the national "us," never solidifies around one definition. While one may hold onto the markings of their home culture, the Desert national identity, like the language, is essentially nomadic. Interestingly, in an interview Hong explains she wanted to "work beyond the parameters of identity in *Dance Dance Revolution*" to explore the Desert as "an omnibus city, an allegorical space of a present condition" typified by diasporic intermixing, not static ethnic identities (Hong 2007a).

Certainly, the allegory Hong has built in *DDR* displays, on both a national and linguistic level, the possibilities of not fitting in. As Hong explains, "To exist between tenuous borders gives you liberty where you're less beholden to tradition and the expected parameters of the English language, forms, and genres" (Hong 2007a). While such a statement relates directly to her own poetic aesthetic, Hong has recreated in *DDR* a population that similarly exists "between tenuous borders." Rather than resisting such flux, the people of the Desert, and Hong through them, celebrate an ever-changing population uninterested in maintaining ethnic boundaries or papering over difference to create a unified vision of a national "us." Accordingly, in "Toasts in the Grove of Proposals," the people call out to a "husky Ontarian y teacup size Tibetan" praising them for the "miscegenatin' amour dim seem to reek" (Hong 2007b, 92).

While "Toasts in the Grove of Proposals" may cast the Desert as a kind of post-racial utopia, Hong's mention of miscegenation brings to mind the violent enforcement of racial and ethnic boundaries in the US. Indeed, such repressive forces are not absent from the Desert. Suggestively, Hong sets the characters in *DDR* in motion around a crisis provoked when those in power seek to arrest the flux of the Desert population so lauded in "Toasts." In this way, Hong uses *DDR* to play out the political tensions global migration has created, not just in the US, but around the world.

In the "Foreword," the Historian explains that the "city of rest" has become "the city of unrest" as "exiled natives" have begun a random and bloody bombing campaign. According to the "Chronology of The Desert Guide" that precedes the text, these are likely natives who were involved in the Dance Dance Revolution of 1988. Though we are not given many details about this revolution, we can assume the natives were on the losing side as they were "exiled to New

Town, located along the borders of the Desert” (Hong 2007b, 17). In this regard, Hong’s allegory echoes the long history of colonization as a dominant power marginalizes native populations in order to gain access to land and resources. While presumably the ongoing suppression of these natives has been successful, what makes the current crisis especially troubling for Desert officials are the rumors “that migrant hotel employees are now joining [the exiles] and tourists don’t know who to trust” (21). As a consequence of this increased violence, the tourist industry has fallen “by 30 percent” (18).

In order to combat the spread of this unrest, those identified by Desert officials as threats are relocated to New Town to join the natives. In a description that sets New Town in direct contrast to the linguistic flux observable in Desert Creole, the Historian explains what happens when rebels are sent across the long bridge to New Town. They cross into a territory of “unfractured idiom”: “No longer / the tongue anahems with another / man’s slangy ahems” (Hong 2007b, 76). Because there is no trade in New Town, there is no influx of migrants and thus, the population “can follow their words back to the first tribe” (80). Being forced to leave their homes in the Desert is a traumatic experience for the rebels; as they cross the bridge, “they turn their heads so far back, their heads seem wired backwards, as if frozen in a paralytic fit” (81). Unsurprisingly, they aim to get back.

However, they do not seek a simple return; rather, they take aim at the oppressive rulers of the Desert, striking at the heart of the economy, the tourism industry. The rebels “sneak back” into the Desert to “enact the role of seers, dancing a toll, / a toll, misleading travelers to stumble / into mines from last era’s war” (Hong 2007b, 78). It is not a mistake that Hong uses the word “toll” to describe the actions of these rebels; this violence is the “toll” paid by the Desert officials for the repressions they impose on the people in New Town. The conflict develops in a cyclical way; as Desert officials resort to increasingly violent means of suppression, more violence erupts. In one such incident, officials raid a boy’s room in New Town. They “slit open [the] boy’s belly to see if he stored land mines in his body,” of course, killing him in the process. After the incident, though, “the father suffered hysterical blindness,” and “his other son snuck back into the city to assume the role of guide” (82). Eventually, the son leads a boatload of tourists “Letheward” onto “riverbeds pocked with mines” where they are blown to bits (82). Such attacks are a contamination of the carefully constructed simulacra of the Desert;

accordingly, the Historian describes them as a “spittle of unrest,” sullying the “hotels of white watted carapace, / hotels of watered sward, waddled orchids, / hotels of exterminated scorpions” (78). The result of this forced exile, the fixing of these people and their language in New Town, is literally explosive. As the Guide says: “dim ‘ready / planned a blast coronal, clotting toget’a, / sabotage is pending” (118).

Hong casts this unrest as representative of a new kind of revolution; it proceeds, not from an official revolutionary platform, with key leaders, but from a grassroots level typified by guerilla tactics. In the “Foreword,” the Historian makes this contrast clear, noting that past revolutions “were an act of propulsion, of anguished, woodcut masses marching in cohesion,” whereas this new “pulse of unrest” works “unpredictably” (Hong 2007b, 21). Furthermore, this revolutionary war is not waged solely by the natives, as the Dance Dance Revolution presumably was; instead, a coalition of migrants and natives work together to bring down Desert officials.

While Hong does not explicitly address the motivations of the migrants who have joined the natives, one can only assume these people feel sympathetic to a population of the displaced, as they themselves have been displaced from their homes. However, we could also pin this coalition back to the hybridity of the Desert population. Desert identity is created, not through the adoption of a limited definition of a national “us,” but through the celebration of difference. The ability to see oneself as part of a group, despite fundamental differences, makes it easier for migrants and natives to perceive their common interest in fighting the Desert officials. Indeed, while the language of the Desert and its people unfurl in ever-changing waves of beige, the Historian explains the city’s official “decree” is “*there is difference only in degree*” (Hong 2007b, 20, emphasis in original). In part, this decree refers to the carefully cultivated simulacra that is the heart of the Desert’s tourist industry, in which tourists can choose to stay in hotels styled to recreate the experience of visiting the world’s great cities. Yet, this governmental platform also sets itself directly against the actual, on-the-ground conditions in the Desert, where difference cannot be measured in degree because the population never stops mixing. Difference is always multiplying. By repressing the citizens of New Town and those who they believe to be working with rebels, the Desert officials have sought to create a stable national unity in which difference is rendered stuck, measurable, and thus, one would assume, more easily controllable.

In contrast to this suppression, New Town natives and citizens of the Desert form a diasporic style of coalition where ethnic identity is not the basis of politics; rather, shared aims are the glue that unites disparate forces. Hybridity, and the preservation of it, becomes a positive organizing principle in the Desert's diasporic space. These revolutionaries share the common goal of restricting the flow of tourist capital upon which the Desert officials presumably base their power, so that they will fall, undoing the boundaries they have placed on New Town. While Desert dwellers may have previously celebrated their hybridity even as they actively participated in the marginalization of these New Town natives, in this new revolution, they understand their own flux and flow—which benefits their commerce—is imperiled by the continued repression of New Town. If deterritorialized language is a “cry” that escapes signification, a process that reveals the linguistic assemblages that are hidden by “official” language, we can see this revolution as unleashing a force of human deterritorialization. There is less interest in this revolution in a shared, official platform, and more in striking unpredictably, in creating confusion in the official system, breaking it open to reveal its contamination—all its multiplying “beige” forms.

If we read this Desert revolution for its allegorical implications, what emerges is a vision of coalition that transcends identity-based politics. In this regard, the Desert population seems a potent vision of what Hong believes is necessary to combat repressive powers today—revolutions that cross all sorts of ethnic, national, and linguistic lines in order to coalesce around shared aims. This is not to suggest that Hong's allegory posits a utopian, post-racial society in which there is no registering of identity; rather, as we see in “Toasts in the Grove of Proposals,” in the Desert, ethnic and linguistic difference is acknowledged, various national homes are named, but most importantly, what is celebrated is that these categories are never fixed—all boundaries can and should be crossed. Ultimately, it is in the defense of this unfixeness, that the Desert population finds its unity.

### III. *DDR* BETWEEN THE US AND SOUTH KOREA

Though Hong has stated that her primary concern in *DDR* is not an exploration of ethnic identity, this is not to say that her particular experiences as a Korean American do not inform the text.

Foremost, as she herself has suggested, her experience of bilingualism and biculturalism inform her creation of *Desert Creole*. While the text is rooted in an imagined geography, there are also many points in the narrative that reference events in Korean history. As she says in an interview, “Korean history plays a large part in the book and there is a latticework of border crossing, but that has less to do with the self per se than with history and collective” (Hong 2007a). In seeking to explore the nature of history and the way we use it to explain who we are as a nation, Hong illustrates an additional benefit in maintaining a diasporic cultural position “between borders” (2007a). As discussed above, Hong believes that her position as a bilingual writer allows her to be “less beholden to tradition” as it relates to the English language, but such a position also more easily allows her to question dominant historical narratives. Similar to the Desert population, Hong feels no need to pledge loyalty to one nationalism over another; living “between borders” she is in a better position from which to uncover the perspectives that haven’t made it into the history books.

Given the particular history explored in *DDR*, we might read it as a distinctly Korean American feminist text. As described by literary critic Elaine Kim, such a text provides a “rearticulation and carnivalization [of] what has been traditionally viewed as fixed and clear-cut boundaries between congealed entities—Korea and the United States, workers and consumers, material and psychic needs, social structures and cultural representations, and perhaps even resistance and complicity” (2003, 315). Kim’s description here hearkens back to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of deterritorialization as providing one with a nomadic viewpoint from which what is official can be re-seen; here, a Korean American feminist text unsettles the “clear-cut” to reveal the porousness of such boundaries. Kim’s use of the term “carnivalization” points us toward the possibilities in re-visioning history; as an author, such as Hong, reassembles our understanding of the historical narratives of the US and Korea, we are able to move away from official narratives to construct a more complex and accurate understanding of the national “us.”

In *DDR*, the Guide performs the most direct “rearticulation” of history as her stories of the past challenge both Korean history as well as the average reader’s understanding of US-Korea relations. Take, for example, the Guide’s descriptions of the Korean War which forcefully depart from a paternalistic vision of American military intervention: “Some populii tink GIs heroes wit dim strafing



‘Pinko chink’ / but eh! Those Jeos like regula pirates, search for booty y pillage” (Hong 2007b, 43). The Guide further reveals how her father “sole Makkoli wine to whitey GIs” and “guidim to widow fo bounce” (43). Not only do the soldiers take goods to pillage, they also take physical “booty” by taking widows as sexual partners. This detail echoes the development of camp towns, sites of prostitution which sprang up around US military bases in South Korea in and around the Korean War.<sup>3</sup> Though the “booty” exchanged between the US and Korea gets a mere mention in *DDR*, it serves to remind readers that US military actions aimed at benefitting local populations do not always leave these populations unharmed. Certainly, it exposes readers to a new vantage point on an oft-forgotten piece of American history.

Similarly, the story the Guide tells of her role in the Kwangju Uprising offers a specific challenge to the male-dominated landscape of Korean history. As Kim points out, “[Korean women] are bypassed and sidelined because *minjung* nationalism agrees with the state that only men can be the real subjects of history” (2003, 313). *Minjung* refers to the cultural movement which arose in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s that “celebrates resistance and revolution by the oppressed” (Lewis 2002, 100). In Kwangju, it was the spirit of *minjung* that contributed to mass citizen protests against the repressive government of President Chun Doo Hwan. Despite the failure of these protests to depose Chun, as researcher Linda Lewis notes, the Kwangju Uprising lives on in Korean national memory as an expression of “independence, in the sense of freedom from interference by outside powers (especially those in the United States)” (2002, 148).

Hong’s choice to represent the Guide as one of the influential “voices” of the Uprising posits Korean women as equal actors alongside men in this key event in the development of Korean democracy. In a section of the book entitled “Kwangju,” the Guide tells us how she served as the “voice o Kwangju”: “Mine voice chattel tru amps, transista radios, / clock radios, furred mine voice tru batta’d Kwangju / streets” (Hong 2007b, 105). Her “nihilint gallicry” not only inspired the citizens to fight, it also magically removed obstacles: “mine decibel swatted away dragonflies / swarmim round shredded bodies . . . cut tru smoke / y copsal stink, clear eyesights” (106). As the “uprising’s danseur principal,” we assume the protesters wouldn’t have fought so hard had the Guide not been there to inspire them (104).

Though this description of the power of the Guide’s voice is hyperbolic, it is not without historical truth. Several women dissidents

gave rousing speeches during the Kwangju Uprising. Among them, Lewis describes Pak Yong-sun “a twenty-one-year-old college student” who “had been doing ‘street broadcasts’ (*kadu pangsong*), a woman’s job, since May 24” (2002, 54). Lewis, who was living in Kwangju at the time of the Uprising, quotes Pak’s final broadcast on May 27<sup>th</sup>: “Citizens! Now the marital law forces are invading! Our beloved brothers and sisters are dying from the soldiers’ guns and bayonets. If we all rise up, we can defeat them. We will defend Kwangju to the end!” (quoted in Lewis 2002, 54). In recovering the active role the Guide plays in the Uprising, Hong echoes the real-life heroism of the women of Kwangju. Though it may be unlikely that many of her readers will know of this history, seeing a woman play a key role in a revolution that changed the course of one nation’s history certainly stands out as a reversal of narratives that normally cast history as happening on a male-dominated stage.

With the inclusion of these connections to real-life history, Hong forces us to contend with *DDR* as an allegory connected to real-world political dynamics, in Korea, the United States, and beyond. Yet, as she indicates, this history is not meant to seem only relevant to a specific (past) time and (foreign) place; rather, Hong has said we are meant to view the Desert as “an allegorical space of a present condition, which could be present-day Korea or America as well as other places” (Hong 2007a). Though the history within *DDR* may have happened, as the Historian says, “elsewhere,” we are asked to recognize “as the world shrinks, elsewhere begins to disappear,” necessitating that we question how this “elsewhere” connects to us now (Hong 2007b, 20). If we take the challenges the Guide’s story makes to the well-known historical narratives of the Korean War and the Kwangju Uprising, we learn we should not hew too close to any one home, any one version of history. Not only does such a view inaccurately represent the diversity that actually makes up the national “us,” it does not reflect the interconnectedness of our global world; in making visible the connections that exist between the United States and Korea in *DDR*, Hong pushes her readers closer to understanding that this “elsewhere” is also part of “us.”

#### IV. THE REVOLUTION WILL BE DANCED

The numerous layers of the allegory Hong creates in *DDR* attest to its strength as a politically potent project; however, Hong also deftly creates a resonant narrative arc by tracing the change the Guide

undergoes as she leads the Historian through the Desert. While the Guide boasts of her revolutionary fervor in Kwangju, after detailing the nature of the current unrest, the Guide confesses that she's betrayed some of the residents of New Town, spying on them and turning them into Desert officials. She explains, "b'needs to rake profit . . . So I'se spy en spies fo a buck / tip Desert officials whom raid jing-purist hovels / y haulem off to camps" (Hong 2007b, 99). She protests at the Historian's shocked reaction: "D'wan stare at me, I usta be jingo-purist mefelf! / A fist-a-cuff naysaya! (99). She admits that she's ashamed of herself, "Now I'm nut'ing but a yeller cawin' castrati," and says she knows that the Historian's father, Sah, her former lover and revolutionary partner, would be ashamed of "me spyim like dis" too (99).

Interestingly, Hong places the Guide's confession of traitorship before the "Kwangju" section of the book, in which the Guide finally reveals the events that led her to leave Korea. During the Uprising, she mistakenly believed she'd killed the Historian's father when she threw a bomb into a school filled with soldiers without realizing he was also inside. After this incident, like many of the demonstrators in the real Kwangju Uprising, the Guide was jailed. She describes years of hard labor in the "Ginseng Colony" where prisoners ironically die while harvesting a root Koreans believe has numerous medicinal properties. In the prison camp, the Guide undergoes a political sea change. When she discovers a fellow prisoner is the teacher who introduced her to revolutionary thinking, she rebuffs her, saying she learned "nut'ing but pain" from her. Instead, she vows to pursue a new kind of life: "[I]f I escape / Dis dreadnaught, only pleasure from n'won" (Hong 2007b, 111). Upon her release, she leaves Korea and her past behind, saying "no mo, none . . . Now I guide" (112). Clearly, Hong means for us to understand the Guide's act of selling out the rebels in the context of this trauma, understanding her callousness as a symptom of the deep wounds that still linger from her revolutionary days.

However, with the arrival of the Historian to the Desert, the Guide's past has come back to haunt her. Having assumed Sah was dead all these years, the presence of the Historian causes the Guide to reconsider her past as well as her present. As the Guide and Historian stand at the precipice of the bridge that connects the Desert to New Town, the Guide mysteriously says: "I's not miming as guide, but I wait / like mines napping in sand, / I wait . . ." (Hong 2007b, 99). What is she waiting for? As she gazes on "de

smoke curdlim air ova slag,” she begins to predict what seems to be the second coming of the Dance Dance Revolution: “bombing de imposting, / miming guides plotting, potting more mines . . . will come a momentum . . . // . . . rushing, rushing” (118). The momentum of this revolution will be powerful, unstoppable. The Guide hints at the reason for this power when she describes the rebel guides who currently “sweep unda bridge, dim guides sweep / unda storyline, sweep unda you, / soaking into tureen lotted plot” (119). Sweeping under the storyline is a canny act of sabotage; it implies an unpredictability that effectively contaminates the “lotted plot.” Similar to deterritorialized language, this revolution is powerful because it infiltrates the “official” vision of the Desert sold to tourists, externalizing the many parts that have been suppressed to make up this whole. In other words, this new revolution unleashes what those in power would prefer to sweep under the rug.

As she muses over the sight of the smoke from yet another mine explosion, the Guide has an epiphany, telling the Historian: “I’s sum o all I’s rued, sum o me accents / y twill mine worn, travels mine tilled, deaths mine endured, / Sah I’s left y Sah you’ve brun beck” (Hong 2007b, 119). At this moment, the Guide comes to terms with the whole of her past, and is so doing, she reclaims her once-revolutionary voice:

Summon mine last sieve blood  
 invocation det roused thousands not fluke  
 o me guided flue which led you  
 to dis mine pocked river, sum me might  
 so I’s be righted (Hong 2007b, 119).

By indicating that she’s been “righted,” the Guide suggests that she has found a way to make the events of Kwangju part of a useable past that can help her navigate the present. This signals a possible return, not to a disengaged, apolitical life as a traitor, but to her life as a revolutionary.

It is interesting that it is the Historian’s entrance into the Guide’s life which ignites this reconsideration. The Historian came to the Desert seeking answers regarding her father’s life as a way of understanding her connection to him, and Korea through him—her own personal places of “elsewhere.” Though Hong does not provide us with a clear resolution at the end of the text, there is a sense that both the Historian and the Guide have come to better understand

the nature of their individual relationship to a larger collective history. In so doing, in the case of the Guide at least, we see hints of a newly engaged attitude regarding the possibilities of revolution.

This open-ended conclusion leaves us considering the future not only of the Desert, but also the means by which we might engage our world. If we are to change anything, clearly we, like the Guide, must be open to the possibility that we can, despite what we may think, play a revolutionary role in this new world. However, this engagement will require a new vision of our personal histories, especially those that include loss and trauma, as foundations from which we can build anew. Furthermore, it will require a new vision of our collective histories, as we must re-see nationalistic narratives and the role we play as individuals in supporting or opposing them. Hong's decision to cast the Guide's transformation as sparked by the Historian also suggests the benefits of cross-generational relationships, in which young do not merely learn from the old, but mutually benefit from the past-present connections they can forge together. Certainly, the story of the Historian and the Guide suggests that we cannot hope to forge forward until we look with new eyes at what has come before.

At heart, *DDR* is a hopeful book; despite the fragmentation wrought by globalization, revolution is still possible. While we do not see exactly how the revolution will unfold in the Desert, the thematic elements of the text suggest a new model for conceiving of the interplay between self and society in an era of widespread migration. Rather than clinging to identity-based politics or to linguistic nationalisms, Hong suggests a more playful mode of being, one open to the kinks and collisions produced by the intermixing of people and tongues. In her celebration of the "beige" desert population, she recognizes that flux is always stronger than fixed as in this fluidity one is able to create new articulations of revolution that will ultimately prove more resilient than in the past.

Though the previous Dance Dance Revolution may have failed, as the title of the book suggests, the force of this particular unrest is not yet dead. The "dance" of this new revolution will not be one with a long and proper history; rather, it will be defined by a motley flurry of feet, a "sly unrest, a darting dance" that evades attempts to pin it down (Hong 2007b, 118). Still, as with many dances, this one will require a partner. Thus, it seems appropriate that the final lines the Historian records the Guide as saying offer both the reader and

the Historian an invitation. Running the delicate phrase we've previously seen up for auction, "May I have this dance?" through her diasporic tongue, the Guide offers us her hand: "If de world is our disco ball, / might I have dim dance?" (119).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Historian is not overtly gendered by Hong; however, for the purposes of this paper I would suggest we read the Historian as female in order to highlight the connection between Hong's identity as a second-generation Korean American and the Historian's identity as a mixed-race child of an exiled Korean and his Midwestern bride. Both Hong and the Historian live at a physical remove from Korea, yet in *DDR* they each contend with the country's history and their relation to it. As such, identifying the Historian as a woman allows us to read her as a character that expresses Hong's own desire to engage with Korean history, but also her generational and geographical remove from this "home." While this essay does not address the thematic implications of the Historian's memoir, the memoir creates interesting resonances when juxtaposed with the Guide's evasion in sharing the details of her past. In a sense, the inclusion of the Historian's memoir casts her as the one who seeks, a position seemingly fitting to her second-generation identity, while the Guide deflects and downplays this Historian's attempts to access the "forgotten" past.
- <sup>2</sup> The Kwangju Uprising (also known as 5.18) took place in May 1980 in the center of Kwangju, Korea's fifth largest city located in South Cholla Province. Lasting ten days, the Uprising began with peaceful citizen protests calling for an end to the oppressive military regime of President Chun Doo Hwan. When government-backed paratroopers entered the city on May 18th, violence erupted. After protestors forced troops to flee, the government mounted a renewed assault which effectively ended the clash. Though casualty estimates vary, Lewis offers this account: "When I asked the head of the Injured People's Association, Pak Yong-sun, in 1996, for statistics on the victims, the figures he gave me included 2,710 injured and 284 dead (154 citizens who died at the time, 83 who had died since, and 47 missing)" (2002, 70). United States involvement in the Uprising has long been debated in Korea and elsewhere, but it is generally assumed that the US government turned a blind eye to the misdeeds of Chun and other despotic leaders of South Korea in order to maintain stability in the face of a North Korean threat. Certainly, to many Koreans, Kwangju represents an "act of American foreign policy failure and betrayal" (Lewis 2002, 88).
- <sup>3</sup> Katharine H. S. Moon (1997) details how Korean prostitutes were essentially used as diplomatic currency between the United States and South Korean governments during the Korean War.

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RUTH WILLIAMS is an Assistant Professor of English at William Jewell College, specializing in twentieth- and twenty-first-century US women's poetry. Her scholarly work on women's writing has appeared in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Michigan Feminist Studies*. She was a Fulbright fellow in Seoul, South Korea in 2011-2012.

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