Jasmine An

"A Handful of Syllables Thrown Back across the Water": *Dictée*'s Aesthetic Legacy and Thai American Poetics

Abstract This article draws on the formal and aesthetic qualities of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* as a critical model for theorizing the transnational legacies of colonialism and empire embedded in the acts of language learning and as an opening for Asian American literary studies to engage with the previously understudied genre of Thai American and Thai poetry. Foregrounding aesthetics and unique, translingual poetic practices, the readings in this article explore rich connections between *Dictée* and two experimental collections of Thai and Thai American poetry: Padcha Tuntha-obas's *trespasses* (2006) and Jai Arun Ravine's *แล้ว and then entwine* (2011a). Thai American cultural production is uniquely situated to offer aesthetic insights into the history of US presence in Southeast Asia from the mid-twentieth century onward, which in Thailand took the form of allyship and soft power as Thailand's formally uncolonized status obscured the violent codifications of gender, racial, and sexual norms to align with Western, imperial worldviews. The author argues that, just as *Dictée* marked a revolutionary period in Asian American literary studies as the field grappled with the role of poststructural theory, experimental literary forms, and transnational, decolonial politics in the United States and Asia, a more sustained engagement with Thai American and Thai poetry can offer a critical entry point to address US informal empire building in Southeast Asia, including activities often occluded in mainstream historical narratives by a singular focus on Vietnam during the Cold War era.

Keywords Asian American literature, poetry, gender and sexuality, Southeast Asian diaspora, Thai studies

The opening scene from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's groundbreaking text *Dictée* follows an unnamed, female speaker through the embodied actions of learning a language: "She mimicks the speaking. . . . Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. . . . *She would take on their punctuation. . . . She would become herself, demarcations . . . dissolving her*" (Cha 1982: 3–5). Shot through with disjointed punctuation and fragmented images, this scene traces the violent impact of language education on the body of a colonial subject. In this

American Literature, Volume 95, Number 1, March 2023
DOI 10.1215/00029831-10345365 © 2023 by Duke University Press

article, I use *Dictée* as the theoretical lens for two collections of Thai and Thai American poetry: Padcha Tuntha-obas's *trespasses* (2006) and Jai Arun Ravine's *แล้ว and then entwine* (2011a), as I show how Tuntha-obas's and Ravine's texts take up *Dictée*'s formal and aesthetic structures as a critical model for theorizing the transnational legacies of colonialism and empire embedded in acts of language learning.[1] With *Dictée* as a touchstone, I argue that a more sustained engagement with the previously undertheorized, aesthetic innovations of Thai American and Thai poetry constitutes a critical opening for Asian American literary studies to address the informal US empire building throughout Southeast Asia, activities that are often eclipsed by highly publicized US interventions in Vietnam during the Cold War era.[2]

Bringing *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine* into a productive dialogue with *Dictée* frames the aesthetic connections between the three texts as a shared, poetic response to the practices of informal empire building. Like Cha's, Tuntha-obas's meditations on learning English also catalog the impact of a colonizing language on the learner's psyche:

> Surfaces long for depth . . .
> words. manners. speeches. acts. all
> but none is hers to own but hers to
> follow. (Tuntha-obas 2006: 33)

Tuntha-obas adds the note "In admiration of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" to the titular poem of her book, but even without this direct citation, the fragmented style of her short, choppy stanzas echoes the iconic way that Cha's text plays with both punctuation and white space on the page.

Jai Arun Ravine cites both Cha and Tuntha-obas as inspirational figures in the creation of *แล้ว and then entwine*. This homage is evident as Ravine (2011a: 71) transposes the lines,

> Pulling across water translated your hands
> veins rising above the surface of your skin . . .
> You began with the circle in the letter,
> the tiny eye

over the image of a Thai-language alphabet worksheet. This description of hands and ป (the twenty-seventh consonant of the Thai alphabet) paired with the visual of a language worksheet recalls the many diagrams, images, and facsimiles of handwriting scattered throughout *Dictée*'s pages. In both *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine*, *Dictée*'s influence is present in the shared grappling with the frictions of language learning, and also in the aesthetic and formal qualities of each text—the halting punctuation of *trespasses* and the play with visuals and multimedia in *แล้ว and then entwine*—that illustrate the legacy of empire.

My work on Thai and Thai American literature contributes to the growing field of Southeast Asian American studies. I aim to highlight the importance of informal empire in the Southeast Asian context, particularly the significant military and cultural infrastructure the United States established in Thailand, infrastructure that provided crucial support for subsequent US interventions in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.[3] Informal empire—referring to the economic, political, and cultural influence imperial powers have over other states and societies without the establishment of formal, political control over sovereignty—is most commonly used to describe the power relations of the British Empire, or the coercive influence of the United States in Latin America (Pizzo 2016).[4] However, in this article I argue that informal empire also accurately describes the US relationship with Thailand throughout the twentieth century.

I share Fiona I. B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam's (2012: 678) investment in a Southeast Asian American studies that moves away from a politics of visibility and witness and toward critical interventions that foreground questions about the "circulation of, and compromise with, and challenges of the knowledge regimes of US empire" and conceives of Southeast Asia as a "unique site for crucial engagements with US empire and its professions of liberal humanism as well as its practices of neoliberal violence." This article's focus on Thai American literature is inseparable from these global dynamics, as one of my overarching goals is to further an understanding of how informal empire, as practiced by the United States in Southeast Asia, contributes to "America's" global influence.[5]

This specific focus is necessary because, within Asian American literary and cultural studies, scholarship on Thai America and Thai American literature is conspicuously absent. Despite the presence of Thai American communities in the United States, canonical histories of Asian America that provide overviews of the varied immigration histories of different Asian ethnic groups either gloss over or do not include narratives of Thai immigration to the United States.[6] Similarly, on the literary front, critical anthologies ranging from the classic *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology* (Wong 1996) to the more recent *Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* (Parikh and Kim 2015) do not engage with any Thai American literature. This article fills a critical gap in scholarship on Thai diasporic and Thai American poetics and, in doing so, challenges Asian American literary studies to undertake a more robust and nuanced look at how the field historicizes US colonial and imperial presence in Southeast Asia—particularly in understudied countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos—and the resulting Southeast Asian American diaspora.[6]

My emphasis on the formal, aesthetic practices of Asian American poets in this work of disciplinary and historical reorientation rejects the lingering tendency of mainstream readers and critics to read nonwhite writers as ethnographical reporters of ethnic experience rather than practitioners of literary craft. In her trailblazing work on Asian American poetry and form, Dorothy Wang (2013) argues that, because of the historical narratives framing Asian Americans as a culturally and linguistically unassimilable population, Asian American poetry is uniquely situated to explore the frictions among a poets' racial interpellation, language, and literary value—and that poets theorize these dynamics "as much in the formal structures as in the thematic content" (24–26) of their poems. I find it fitting that poets' responses to structural injustices can be similarly structural and/or formal. In my close readings, I focus on how poetic texts theorize the conditions of their construction both through their content and through the formally innovative ways the content is delivered to the audience.

By positioning *Dictée* as both a poetic and a theoretical lens through which I read Tuntha-obas's and Ravine's work, I emphasize theorizing not as an abstracted academic discourse but, rather, as an interdisciplinary genre of writing that enacts a speculative critique of concepts taken as natural while reflexively "thinking about thinking" (Culler 2013: 15). As scholars Barbara Christian and Kandice Chuh have argued, the writings of people of color, including Asian Americans, "have always theorized" through story and "play with language" (Christian 1987: 52).[7] Through this understanding of poetic and literary texts as theorizing, I use the constellation of Cha's, Tuntha-obas's, and Ravine's texts to theorize anew the contribution of Southeast Asian diasporic literature to Asian American literary studies. Framing these three texts as actively theorizing their different historical and sociopolitical contexts is not to suggest that any of these specific texts are exceptional in their ability to theorize but, rather, to suggest an orientation to the act of literary analysis that avoids a hierarchical relationship between critic and text and allows space for the understanding that *all* texts can theorize. The formalist yet flexible approach to reading and theorizing with, rather than about, frames my focus on aesthetics as a methodological choice of allowing the poems to theorize and the scholarship to follow as I home in on the meaning created in the interactions among aesthetic practice, content, and context.

In this article, I first elaborate on my understanding of how *Dictée* offers a poetic model of theorizing language and empire. Then I turn to reading sections from both *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine* that highlight both the aesthetics and the moments of divergence these texts share with *Dictée* and with each other and what these poetic expressions can offer to expand the discourse around US empire building in Southeast Asia. In closing, I return briefly to the broader interventions offered to the field of Asian American literary studies by this engagement with Thai American poetics through the frame of *Dictée*'s aesthetic legacy.

***Dictée*: Language Embodied**

Considered one of the seminal texts of Asian American literature, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982) is a powerful meditation on the legacy of colonialism, migration, the politics of language and of gendered and racialized bodies, as well as a rigorous exercise in a text self-theorizing its own form and structure. I turn to *Dictée* as a crucial interlocutor for the Thai and Thai American texts I study because, informed by the texts themselves, I believe *Dictée* provides an important template and opportunity for imagining a poetic, self-theorizing Asian American literary studies grounded in but not constrained by materialist and historical contexts. In particular, like generations of other writers and scholars, I am inspired by *Dictée*'s fierce commitment to formal innovation alongside an equally vested commitment in the embodied stakes of speaking and writing in colonial contexts.[8]

Among *Dictée*'s many themes fragmented across multiple languages, images, and diagrams, I focus on how the text dwells on the power of language education, including the acts of reading and writing, to remake bodies and reality. Considering the long and overlapping histories of French missionary work, Japanese colonialism, and American imperialism to which *Dictée* responds, this power is not a benevolent force. An early and striking example of the violent power of language occurs in the opening sequence of the book, titled "DISEUSE," as the narrator's body absorbs the weight and discipline of learning French:

> *She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver . . .*
> Now the weight begins from the uppermost back of her head, pressing downward. It stretches evenly, the entire skull expanding tightly all sides towards the front of her head. She gasps from its pressure, its contracting motion. (Cha 1982: 4–5)

In her reading of *Dictée*, Lisa Lowe (1996) connects these descriptions of a body absorbing the physical effects of language learning to both French missionary colonialism in Korea dating back to the early nineteenth century and Cha's girlhood education in French at a Catholic high school in the United States. This scene shows that, while it is often "the physical body that bears the traces of colonial disfiguring and mutilation," the body is also the "literal and figural site from which different and often fragmented speech is uttered in resistance to the imposed competency in the colonizer's language" (139). In this passage, the body of the speaker takes on the impact of external punctuation: absorbing, spilling, seizing, being demarcated and contracted, subject to pressure. Yet these descriptions are delivered in an alternatively under- or overpunctuated flow of language that significantly deviates from the colonial imperative to "correct" grammar. *Dictée*'s theorization of the body as a central site where the trauma of language is both felt and contested is a crucial contribution taken up by both *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine*.

Emphasizing the friction between, within, and across languages made palpable in this scene of compulsory education, *Dictée* enacts what Sarah Dowling (2018: 6) terms *translingual poetics*, or poetry that is "self-consciously situated between languages and that attends to the complex processes of domination and refusal." Avoiding a false binary between monolingual and multilingual, translingual poetics describes the collision between "numerous languages and forms of writing" as a strategy of negotiation in relation to each writers' unique "competencies and repertoires" (5). Translingual poetics serves as a particularly useful distinction from multilingual in the case of *Dictée*—and also Tuntha-obas's and Ravine's work—because translingual explicitly addresses the range of competencies within as well as across languages (5). While other sections of *Dictée* include French and Korean, this scene utilizes solely English, yet it still points out how gendered legacies of colonialism sculpt the speaker's body and negotiations with punctuation within the English language.

Both translingual poetics and Lowe’s foundational reading of *Dictée* also note the importance of opacity and “untranslatability” (Dowling 2018: 6) as a crucial component of *Dictée*’s decolonial aesthetic and means of troubling an essentialist understanding of categories such as “Asian American” or “woman” (Lowe 1996: 153). In his survey of the text’s critical reception, Timothy Yu (2015: 320) notes that *Dictée* remains a “paradox in the heart of our [Asian American literary] canon,” appearing in the 1980s as “both a cause and a symptom” of a poststructuralist, theoretical turn in Asian American studies that profoundly challenged the cultural nationalism within the field’s history while at the same time insisting “on history, on the body, on the physicality of writing” often missing from purely poststructuralist readings of the text. Yu also flags the fact that, due to the text’s formal innovations and structural indebtedness to poststructural theory, critics tend to read it in isolation rather than placed in conversation with other Asian American works (319). However, rather than ascribing to either a purely identarian or poststructuralist reading, Yu suggests that *Dictée*’s own dual commitments show us that the “movement from identity to theory is not a unidirectional one,” in which theoretical abstraction is synonymous with an abandonment of identity and history (320). Instead, *Dictée* offers a model of theoretical abstraction that “turns us back towards the material and the physical rather than away from it” through its focus on the body as “material trace” within the text (320).[9] With this approach, *Dictée* offers “not a victory of theory over identity but a kind of inversion of these terms” (320). Rather than beginning with an essentialist notion of what counts as an Asian American identity, a problematic many Asian Americanists have written against, Cha’s text offers the opacity of linguistic abstraction as a means through which to theorize the material realities of the racialized, Asian (American) body.

In this piece, I place *Dictée* in dialogue with the work of poets such as Tuntha-obas and Ravine as my contribution to the task that Yu (2015: 320) so deftly laid before us: of creating a “new paradigm” to “ground a newly theoretical Asian American studies in history and politics.” By bringing Cha’s, Tuntha-obas’s, and Ravine’s texts into conversation with one another, I honor the role of each author as a knowledge producer offering unique entry points into the embodied experience of language learning, which is a central feature of all three texts. Tuntha-obas and Ravine take up *Dictée*’s translingual poetics and use of “different and often fragmented speech” as aesthetic strategies of negotiating colonial demands for knowledge (in other words, capture) and build on these strategies through their own innovative poetics. I take care to situate Tuntha-obas and Ravine, respectively, as a Thai national writing in English while navigating the US higher education system, and a Thai American born and raised in the United States learning Thai as a second language. These two distinct positions allow Tuntha-obas's and Ravine's aesthetic practices to speak collaboratively yet differently to the specific history of soft power interventions by the United States in Thailand that came to a height in the Cold War era, and the subsequent influence on Thai immigration patterns to the United States in the following decades. Collectively, I see the work of these three texts exemplifying the self-theorizing abilities of poetic forms and aesthetic practices, not just in response to historical/cultural contexts but to actively shape the historical and intellectual terrain of Asian America.

trespasses

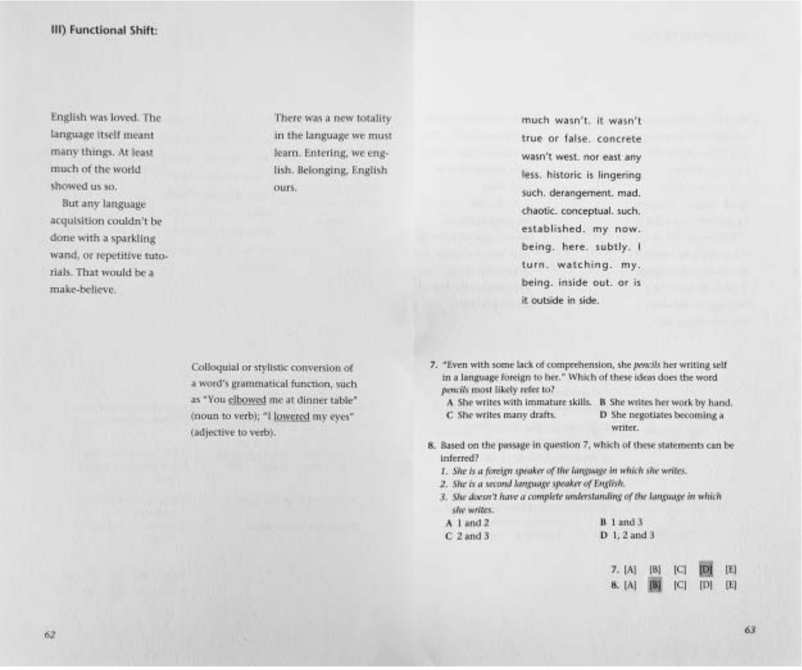
The first Thai text I turn to is Padcha Tuntha-obas's *trespasses*. Tuntha-obas is a Thai writer who began publishing poems written in a mix of English and Thai while studying philosophy and creative writing in the United States, including an MFA at Mills College (Hodge 2016: 5). I focus on the titular section of her book, which begins with the acknowledgment, "In admiration of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" (Tuntha-obas 2006: 55). Beyond this written acknowledgment, *trespasses* builds directly on *Dictée*'s aesthetic model—specifically, the use of white space, typography, and fragmentation—to construct a poetic response to the subtle yet coercive nature of informal empire.

Alone among Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has never been formally colonized by a Western nation. However, many scholars have traced how American influence in Thailand "insinuated itself into nearly all aspects of Thai society" through militarization, including collaborations with the Thai Army as well as nonmilitary modernization projects and cultural exchanges that arguably amount to the practice of "informal empire" (Padoongpatt 2017: 5). In Thai studies, post-World War II through the 1960s and 1970s is known as Thailand's "American era."[10] Thailand was designated an official R&R destination for soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and the United States built and maintained a significant military presence in the country as part of anticommunist efforts during the Cold War (Sookkasikon 2018: 194). However, prior to this militourism infrastructure, the United States already had a significant impact on Thailand's cultural landscape through the education system. Specifically, Thai American studies scholar Mark Padoongpatt highlights a series of educational initiatives with joint US government and private backing that sprang up following a 1950 educational exchange agreement between the United States and Thailand. These included the development of the Fulbright Foundation and the American University Alumni Language Center, which intended to "help Thais develop English skills before leaving to study in the United States" and restructured the Thai higher education system to follow an American model (Padoongpatt 2017: 30). These educational initiatives left their mark on the cultural ethos, particularly of the Thai elite, prior to the Cold War era relationship between the two countries.

Tuntha-obas, a Bangkokian educated in the United States, writes from the legacy of these transnational dynamics that illustrate the push and pull of American influence in Thailand, even without the label of formal colonization. Similarly to *Dictée*, *trespasses* focuses on the politics of language learning, which in this context also speaks to the significant role educational institutions played in shaping the relationship between Thailand and the United States. By interrogating acts of learning and translating between English and Thai, Tuntha-obas critiques the unequal balance of power between Thailand and the United States, evoking how Cha used language as an entry point to elucidate the trauma of Japanese colonialism and American imperialism in Korea. My reading elaborates on the significance of the aesthetic similarities between the two texts and expands on how we might read *trespasses* as textually manifesting the unique history of Thailand's relationship with the United States, including the resulting impact on Thai American immigration patterns and racialization in a diasporic context.

The titular section of the book, "trespasses," contains four poems that each follow the same standardized format: five stanzas scattered across two pages (see fig. 1). The first page of each poem holds three stanzas all set in a serif font, but the third stanza is set in a smaller font size than the first two. On the second page, the fourth stanza is set in a larger, sans serif font, while the fifth and final stanza mimics the form of a multiple-choice question from a standardized test. Each stanza is self-contained, even as the layout of the poem scatters the reader's attention across the entire spread. Initially, the subtle changes in font type and size are nearly indiscernible, but on closer inspection the differences become apparent. Each of the four poems within the section adheres to this same typographical format.

The formal structure of these poems exemplifies the disorientation experienced by language learners as they encounter language education's role in enforcing informal empire. The fact that each poem follows the same set of arbitrary but persistent rules recalls how the rules of both the English language itself and educational institutions may



III) Functional Shift:

English was loved. The language itself meant many things. At least much of the world showed us so.

But any language acquisition couldn't be done with a sparkling wand, or repetitive tutorials. That would be a make-believe.

There was a new totality in the language we must learn. Entering, we english. Belonging, English ours.

much wasn't. it wasn't true or false. concrete wasn't west. nor east any less. historic is lingering such. derangement. mad. chaotic. conceptual. such. established. my now. being. here. subtly. I turn. watching. my. being. inside out. or is it outside in side.

Colloquial or stylistic conversion of a word's grammatical function, such as "You elbowed me at dinner table" (noun to verb); "I lowered my eyes" (adjective to verb).

7. "Even with some lack of comprehension, she *pencils* her writing self in a language foreign to her." Which of these ideas does the word *pencils* most likely refer to?
   A She writes with immature skills. B She writes her work by hand.
   C She writes many drafts. D She negotiates becoming a writer.

8. Based on the passage in question 7, which of these statements can be inferred?
   1. She is a foreign speaker of the language in which she writes.
   2. She is a second language speaker of English.
   3. She doesn't have a complete understanding of the language in which she writes.
   A 1 and 2 B 1 and 3
   C 2 and 3 D 1, 2 and 3

7. [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]
8. [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]

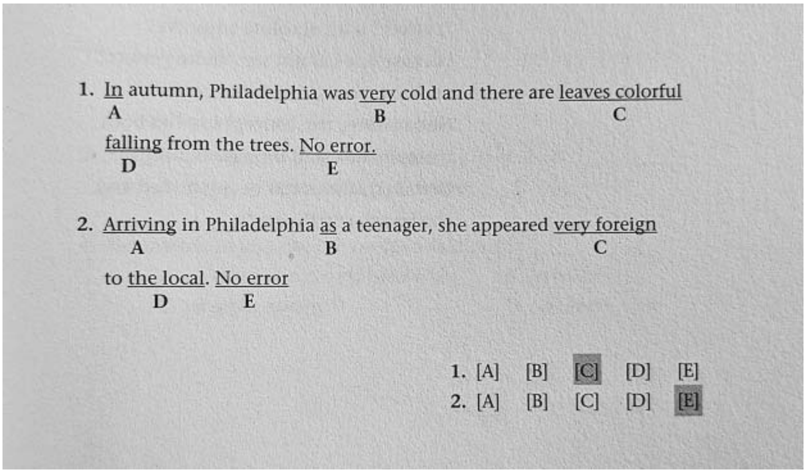
62

63

Figure 1 The layout of the poem "Functional Shift" as an example of the standardized layout of all poems in the section "trespasses" (Tuntha-obas 2006: 62–63)

seem arbitrary to language learners, even while the stakes for failing to conform are high. Additionally, the way readers must split their attention between multiple spots on the page at once echoes how a language learner must simultaneously negotiate both linguistic and also cultural differences in the language classroom. Aesthetically, these poems manifest the estrangement of negotiating hierarchical experiences of language learning that function as sites of informal empire.

In particular, the multiple-choice language test format is an instrumental aesthetic structure that facilitates Tuntha-obas's poetic critique of the colonial demands for perfection placed on language learners. In Tuntha-obas's work, the dominant language that carries the weight of expected competency is English rather than French or Japanese. She writes: "We speak English as a foreign language. . . . Thus we must get a flawless score" (Tuntha-obas 2006: 58). The opening, untitled poem of "trespasses" introduces the framing context for the poem's speaker while utilizing the multiple-choice format to renegotiate the compulsory perfection demanded of nonnative English speakers (see fig. 2).



1. In autumn, Philadelphia was very cold and there are leaves colorful
A B C
falling from the trees. No error.
D E

2. Arriving in Philadelphia as a teenager, she appeared very foreign
A B C
to the local. No error
D E

1. [A] [B] [✓ [C]] [D] [E]
2. [A] [B] [C] [D] [✓ [E]]

Figure 2 A close-up image of the first multiple-choice section of “trespasses” (Tuntha-obas 2006: 57)

In this poem, the narration of the speaker’s arrival to Philadelphia in the fall is housed within a stanza that mimics the format of multiple-choice question that asks test takers to find a grammatical error in the sentence. The content of the two sentences or “problems” is offered with various words underlined as possible errors. In the second problem, E for “No error” is shaded, that is, selected. Initially, this seems like an incorrect answer and that the correct answer should be D because “the local” is singular and the second clause of the sentence should theoretically read “she appeared very foreign to the locals” (plural). However, it is also possible that “the local” could be a name for a specific individual, in which case the sentence would contain no grammatical errors. Choosing the answer E points out that this decontextualized sentence contains multiple possibilities. Further, by exposing the inability of the multiple-choice format’s rigidness to account for these multiple possibilities, using the multiple-choice question as a poetic form highlights the impossible parameters of the demands for linguistic perfection placed on foreign English speakers by the American education system.

Turning to a fuller explication of the link between *Dictée* and *trespasses*, I read the fourth stanza of poem “Functional Shift” in direct dialogue with the opening scene from *Dictée* quoted to begin this article, as both texts speak back to colonial demands for linguistic perfection. The well-known passage from Cha’s (1982: 4) text describes the pressure of language on the narrator’s person: “*She would take on their* *punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver.*" Tuntha-obas's (2006: 63) poem responds in kind:

. . . historic is lingering
such. derangement. mad.
chaotic. conceptual. such.
established. my now.
being. here. subtly. I
turn. watching. my.
being. inside out. or is
it outside in side.

This stanza from "Functional Shift" mirrors *Dictée*'s style of "different and often fragmented speech" (Lowe 1996: 139) most clearly in its punctuation style. The unorthodox use of punctuation paired with the definition of *functional shift* introduced in the poem's title results in the word *being* holding multiple meanings.[11] Within the disjointed reading experience created by the insertion of periods after almost every word, *being* shifts between a noun and an adjective, between describing the speaker's existence and the speaker's condition: "my. being." versus "my. being. inside out." versus "my now. being. here." Lowe notes that Cha's use of punctuation "provides gaps" and creates "opportunities through which the student may alter or disrupt the lesson" (133). Similarly, I argue that it is the fragmentation caused by Tuntha-obas's play with punctuation that allows meaning to shift unreliably in this stanza. *Translingual poetics* is once again a useful term to describe the negotiation of multiple competencies within English as the manipulation of punctuation surrounding the word *being* exposes the bewildering number of possible meanings contained in a single word.

Further, I read the closing lines of Tuntha-obas's stanza alongside Cha's work to foreground how both writers—though each in their own way—dwell on the intrusive effect of language on the body. Tuntha-obas's (2006: 63) stanza ends with the lines

I
turn. watching. my.
being. inside out. or is
it outside in side,

closely echoing *Dictée*'s lines, "*Inside her voids . . . dissolving her . . .* parting her mouth open together with her jaw and throat . . . not stopping there but turning her inside out in the same motion" (Cha 1982: 5).

Despite Tuntha-obas’s more abstract description of the speaker as “my. / being” and *Dictée*’s use of specific body parts—mouth, jaw, throat—both writers draw on the duality of inside/outside to describe the seemingly violent effect of language on the bodies of language learners.

Importantly, in my reading of the similarities between Cha’s and Tuntha-obas’s texts, informal empire emerges as a shared condition between two writers from very different cultural, political, geographic, and temporal contexts. “Functional Shift” is most closely aligned with the opening section from *Dictée* that references French Catholic missionary work in Korea. While Lowe describes this history as missionary colonialism, I would add that the heightened influence of religious institutions can also fall within the purview of informal empire. Therefore, while *Dictée* addresses the militarized violence of Japanese colonialism in sections such as “CLIO/HISTORY” and “CALLIOPE/EPIC POETRY,” the opening section “DISEUSE” is oriented around instances of French, religious, and linguistic influence. These informal dynamics more closely mirror how missionary work and the educational system—rather than formal, militarized occupation—characterized the initial relationship between the United States and Thailand.[12] This reorientation has the potential to expand future readings of *Dictée* while foregrounding Thai and Thai American poetics’ important contribution to Asian American literary thought.

The formal and aesthetic structure of “trespasses,” exemplified by the poem “Functional Shift,” illustrates how colonial coercion can fade into the background of an administrative encounter, such as an English test, in the absence of overt, military violence. Importantly, *trespasses* theorizes the dynamics of informal empire not simply through a thematic focus on language education but primarily through formalized, aesthetic features of the text itself, such as mis/use of punctuation and the specific, typographical layout that thrusts the reader into an experience of textual disorientation similar to that of a language learner simultaneously negotiating the regulatory effects of informal empire in the classroom. Throughout Tuntha-obas’s collection, *Dictée* serves as an important model for aesthetic innovation that remains grounded in the material consequences of history.

Ultimately, the poetic theorization of Tuntha-obas’s collection *trespasses* illuminates informal empire in Thailand as a necessary site of inquiry for scholars invested in understanding the full scope of the US imperial project and the resulting impact on Thai diaspora. While the population of Thais and Thai Americans is still smaller than other

Asian ethnic groups in the United States, more Thai immigrants than any other group arrived between 1965 and 1975 (Padoongpatt 2017: 58). The changes in US immigration policy following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, coupled with the cultural capital associated with "Americanness," which had been built up by the presence of American officials, diplomats, and cultural workers in Thailand, prompted large numbers of Thais to enter the United States through the "side door" of a student visa, with the intention of earning a degree and then taking that knowledge and the associated social status back to Thailand (Padoongpatt 2017: 58–59). Crucially, while Thai immigration was influenced by wars and political conflict in Southeast Asia, the majority of Thai immigrants to the United States were not refugees, setting them apart from many other Southeast Asians relocating to the United States post-1975. Though Tuntha-obas came to the United States for education during the early twenty-first century, concrete examples of these dynamics persist, including the continued efforts of the Thai Office of the Civil Service Commission, which offers full scholarships at American universities to Thai students in return for a guarantee of government service on the completion of their degree (OCSC n.d.).

Yet informal empire's benign facade is exactly that: a facade. The focus on more privileged Thais coming for education does not tell the complete story of Thai immigration to the United States. Each of the three main waves of Thai immigration to the United States included people from different demographic categories. The first, between 1945 and 1965, was composed of mostly male, government officials and other upper/middle-class Thais from Bangkok; the second, post-1965, included more women as brides of US servicemen, as well as younger migrants and students; and the third in the early 2000s included primarily unskilled workers without a formal education from rural areas of northern and central Thailand who were then funneled into restaurant work and other low-income industries in the United States (Padoongpatt 2014: 2). An all-encompassing focus on higher education and white-collar immigrants can veil the realities of low-income Southeast Asian immigrants and communities, populations of Asian America that are often already occluded by a monolithic understanding of what groups count as "Asian American" and the stereotypes of the model minority myth when it comes to narratives of Asian racialization.

Additionally, distinctions among the experiences of Thai immigrants occur along the axes of gender and sexuality, as well as race and economic class. Significantly, Thai immigration and the formation of Thai American communities are assumed to be heteronormative

(Sookkasikon 2018: 198). Most previous studies of the Thai American diaspora characterize Thai American communities by their “familial networks,” “strong family character,” and the (heterosexual) phenomenon of American servicemen bringing back Thai women as war brides.[13] This gendered and heteronormative language used to historicize Thai migration and Thai American communities obscures those individuals and subcommunities that do not fit within the normative framework and continues to work in tandem with the misleading characterization of Thai (and other Asian) immigrants as feminized, eroticized, and available for conquest.[14] As tragically illustrated by gunman Robert Long’s attacks on three Atlanta-area spas in March 2021 that claimed the lives of eight people, including six Asian women, the gendered and racialized consequences of such imperialist tropes can be deadly.

แล้ว and then entwine

To further explicate these dynamics, I bring the work of Thai American writer, performer, scholar, and mixed-medium artist Jai Arun Ravine into the dialogue begun by Cha and Tuntha-obas. Ravine’s 2011 collection *แล้ว and then entwine: lesson plans, poems, knots* theorizes the geopolitical relationship between Thailand and the United States and the resulting Thai diaspora in the United States through formally innovative, multimodal, and translingual poetics. In a hybrid, photo essay about the process of writing *แล้ว and then entwine*, Ravine (2011b: 3) describes their work as indebted to both Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Padcha Tuntha-obas: from Cha, “I learned what it means to ‘come into speech,’ . . . and what arises in the discourse between two languages/two nations;” and on discovering Tuntha-obas’s translingual poetics, “For the first time I felt I was not alone and that my own work could be possible.” Facilitated by the experience of reading both *Dictée* and *trespasses*, *แล้ว and then entwine* brings a sharpened attention to the gendered politics that infuse translation and language learning. Ravine, writing as a US citizen and nonnative Thai speaker, brings the lens of queer and trans of color critique to reiterate the embodied nature of translation and language learning. Their text exemplifies how a lineage of aesthetic practice can provide both a condition of possibility and the seed for something new, because even as *แล้ว and then entwine* draws on the models provided by *Dictée* and *trespasses*, this collection adds a new layer of meaning through its investment in creating a space of self-determination for diasporic, Thai American, trans lives.

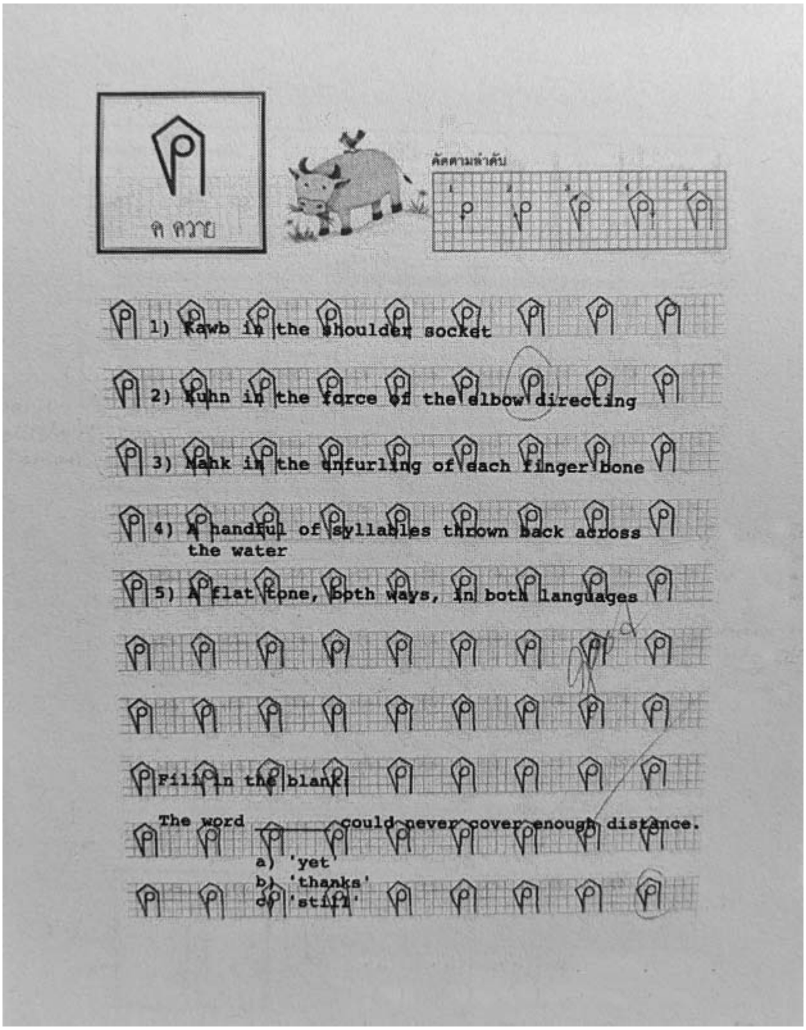
Ravine has published both creative and scholarly work that theorizes the collision between Western and Thai concepts of gender in the contested space of the Thai American diaspora. Ravine (2014: 388) is particularly interested in how Thai Americans' constructions and conceptualization of their gender identities within a "QTPOC (queer and trans people of color) framework" ultimately "clashes with Thai constructions of gender . . . rendering us illegible as Thai" (398). Both Ravine's scholarly and artistic endeavors, which I see as inexorably intertwined, focus on understanding the silence and alienation when it comes to queer and transmasculine Thai Americans. Ravine's work offers an important and groundbreaking foray into investigating how and why Thai and US concepts of gender and sexuality create friction when they meet in a transnational, diasporic context and begins to fill in the gap in language, scholarship, and cultural understanding of Thai and Thai American transmasculinity.

Usefully, tracking the concept of transmasculinity historicizes some of the broader frictions created when Thai and American paradigms of gender, sexuality, race, and national identity collide in diaspora. In a scholarly article, Ravine (2014: 390) describes their frustration with the "failures of translation and poverty of language" when it came to describing a transmasculine identity in a Thai or Thai American context: whenever *transgender* and *Thailand* came up together in the same context, people immediately assume a *kathoey* or male-to-female transgender perspective. Provocatively, Ravine argues that "Thai transgender men may be rendered invisible in Thai discourse because of how they reject and refigure the femininity embedded in the ideal of Thainess" (395).[15] In a diasporic context, the feminization of Thainess is further heightened when it becomes entangled with racialized, American stereotypes of feminized Asianness.

In the US, diasporic context, Ravine (2014: 398) highlights the role race plays in conceptualizing gender identity for biracial individuals: "Being Thai (and having Thai mothers) conflates Thai identity with femininity, rendering our gender transition as a transition away from being Thai. For those of us who are half white, our queerness often makes us more white. . . . Thus our trans identification distances us from femininity and Thai identity and makes us 'whiter.'" Ravine's self-analysis of Thai American trans(masculine) identity shows that they are critically aware of the conflation of racialized Thainess with femininity. In the US context, their transmasculinity—a movement away from femininity—is thus simultaneously a move away from Thainess and inevitably toward whiteness.[17] This dynamic is further exacerbated due to the disconnect of terminology and ideology when it comes to possible options for gender and sexual identities in the US versus Thai context. When there is no Thai language equivalent for *trans* or *queer*—the identities explicitly claimed by Ravine and other Thai American trans people—holding onto and identifying oneself using these terms places one more firmly into the American/white rather than Thai category. This example highlights the fact that gender and sexual and racial identities are interdependent and cannot be separated. The interwoven nature of identity becomes particularly apparent in diaspora because diaspora multiplies the vectors along which each category operates.

I argue that it is through the multimedia, translingual aesthetic practices inherited from Cha and Tuntha-obas that Ravine addresses the “failures of translation and poverty of language” that frustrated their scholarly work. *Dictée* and *trespasses* offer critical models of theorizing the complicated inheritances of race, gender, and sexuality in the Thai American diaspora through aesthetic practice and poetic form. Recalling Ravine’s experiences learning Thai as a second language, I see these poems using their unique formal and aesthetic structure to intervene into binary prescriptions of gender that often accompany the embodied experience of language learning. Specifically, these poems highlight how the process of learning Thai can force individuals to choose between two gendered sets of vocabulary and thus solidify their own gender identity according to preexisting linguistic and cultural paradigms. However, by privileging the visual register as well as the textual and relying on a mix of Thai and English to create meaning between/across both languages, the poems resist those binary choices and construct themselves as a cultural object possible only due to the confluences and contradictions of diaspora. I focus my reading on a selection of the collection titled “รำ: a workbook” that specifically address language learning and Ravine’s important contribution to the conversation begun by Cha and Tuntha-obas. This section contains a series of poems that appear in a Courier New–style font juxtaposed over the scanned images of Thai alphabet worksheets. The fourth poem in the workbook series is written on the worksheet for *ค*, the fourth consonant in the Thai alphabet (see fig. 3).

ค is equivalent to the “k” sound in the Latin alphabet. In the Thai alphabet song, it is pronounced as “kaw kwai” (ค ควาย). *Kwai* means water buffalo and is paired with the letter ค as a mnemonic like “A is for apple.” Across the top of the workbook sheet are a large image of ค in the upper left-hand corner, a small cartoon image of a water buffalo, and



ค ควาย

คัดตามลำดับ

1) Kawb in the shoulder socket
2) Kuhn in the force of the elbow directing
3) Mahk in the unfurling of each finger bone
4) A handful of syllables thrown back across
the water
5) A flat tone, both ways, in both languages

Fill in the blank

The word ________ could never cover enough distance.
a) 'yet'
b) 'thanks'
c) 'stiff'

Figure 3 The ค ควาย alphabet worksheet poem (Ravine 2011a: 73)

a five-step set of visual instructions for how to write the letter. Following this header are ten lines with the letter ค written out by hand nine times per line. Overlaid on top of this worksheet is the text of a poem:

1) Kawb in the shoulder socket
2) Kuhn in the force of the elbow directing
3) Mahk in the unfurling of each finger bone
4) A handful of syllables thrown back across the water
5) A flat tone, both ways, in both languages

> Fill in the blank:
> The word ______ could never cover enough distance
> a) ‘yet’
> b) ‘thanks’
> c) ‘still’
> (Ravine 2011a: 73)

Lines 1–3 each contain a transliterated but untranslated word of Thai.[18] If read vertically, these three words form the phrase ***kawb kuhn mahk*** (in Thai: ขอบ คุณ มาก), which translates to “thank you very much.” Across both the textual and visual registers, this singular poem includes English, transliterated (but untranslated) Thai, and Thai (untranslated and untransliterated), as well as visual interplays between typed and handwritten text and visual imagery.

The first two lines of the poem gesture toward the possibilities afforded by translingual poetics’ play with the fissures that occur when transliterating Thai words to the Latin alphabet and highlight the poem’s investment in modes of communication beyond the written word.[19] The word ***kuhn*** that starts the second line means ***you*** and when spelled in Thai begins with the letter ค; it makes sense that this transliteration is overlaid on a worksheet for the letter ค. However, the word ***kawb*** that starts the first line, even though it begins with the same “k” sound, is spelled with the letter ข, the second letter of the Thai alphabet. In a nontonal language such as English, the sound of the two letters is identical; however, in Thai, which is tonal, ข and ค follow different rules that affect pronunciation and meaning. The conflation of these two different letters of the Thai alphabet into their phonetic counterpart “k” from the Latin alphabet points to Ravine’s creative engagement with sound and the aural presence of utterances irrespective of the written form of a word when moving between languages.

Rather than seeing the inability of the Latin alphabet to fully capture the Thai words as a failing, it is precisely this moment of disjuncture that comes when trying to translate a tonal language with no standardized romanization into a nontonal language that affords this multimodal intervention. I read this, similar to *Dictée*, as another example of translingual poetics, or a refusal to “presume or perform translational equivalency” or transparency for an imperialist gaze (Dowling 2018: 6). Rather than reading Ravine’s spelling as a nonnative Thai speaker’s mistake, I read this as a constructive misstep that embraces the aural, alliterative, and playful aspects of moving between languages instead of striving for a colonial sense of mastery.

Through the combination of transliterated Thai and English in the first three lines of the poem, Ravine reaches back to *Dictée*'s meditation on how (gendered) language enters and shapes the body. Each of these lines begins with a Thai word that is transliterated into the Latin alphabet but remains untranslated:

1) Kawb in the shoulder socket
2) Kuhn in the force of the elbow directing
3) Mahk in the unfurling of each finger bone

For monolingual English speakers, the focal point of comprehension in each of these lines rests squarely on the body: the shoulder socket, the elbow, the finger bones. The repetitive construction of the sentences uses the word *in* to place the untranslated words of Thai within their respective body part. The Thai words remain untranslated linguistic objects that enter and reside in each of these sentences, just as they enter and reside within the body of a language learner.

For those who can parse the transliterated Thai, the meaning of each line reads more like this:

1) [rim][20] in the shoulder socket
2) [you] in the force of the elbow directing
3) [very much] in the unfurling of each finger bone

Reading for meaning across both Thai and English, the second line becomes particularly salient because it introduces an actor, the *you*, directing another's body. The *you* could be a language instructor or one of the collection's two speakers, or the second-person address also opens the possibility that the reader is the one applying directive force to the elbow. Regardless, all readings highlight how language directs and disciplines the body. Read separately, the Thai and the English text of this stanza still hold meaning; however, to construct a holistic reading, I found it necessary to construe meaning across both the English and transliterated Thai words.

These three words of untranslated Thai are also crucial in forming the poem's critique of binary gender. In the phonetic rendering of form the phrase "thank you very much" or *kawb kuhn mahk* in the first three lines, the poem breaks with conventional Thai speech patterns and refuses to divulge the speaker's gendered identity. In spoken form, the Thai language has multiple end particles that speakers add to the end of sentences to change the tone (from polite to sarcastic), to indicate varying levels of familiarity with the person they're addressing, and to communicate acknowledgment or agreement. The two most common ending particles are gendered feminine and masculine: *kha* (*ค่ะ*) and *krap* (*ครับ*). The form of the word used depends on the gender of the speaker. A typical utterance of the phrase “thank you very much”/*kawb kuhn mahk* would include the word *kha* or *krap* at the end to make the phrase more polite, with feminine being *kawb kuhn mahk kha* and masculine *kawb kuhn mahk krap*. The letter ค (k) is also the first letter of both these words, so within the logic of the poem it would make sense to continue line four with either *kha* or *krap* and complete the phrase. However, by leaving off the final gendered particle of the phrase “thank you very much,” the poem refuses to identify the speaker with either binary gender option.[21] This refusal highlights the friction created as Ravine’s trans and gender-nonconforming paradigm collides with the Thai language’s role in shaping Thai cultural understandings of gender, but also begins the process of opening uncharted space for Ravine’s previously stated goal of creating possibility for nonbinary, diasporic, transmasculine Thai identity formation. Through these three words of untranslated Thai, Ravine breaks from the paradigm of binary gender offered by the Thai language to create space for a nonbinary gender status born of linguistic hybridization.

Importantly, while the poem critiques the binary choice between *kha* and *krap* in the Thai language, it does not privilege English as a site of liberation from the restrictive gendered expectations of Thai; rather, it presents the inability of both languages to address the complexities of negotiating gender identity in diaspora. The line “handful of syllables thrown back across the water” brings to mind the intergenerational pattern of immigration and then return followed by both Cha and Ravine (to Korea and Thailand, respectively) (Ravine 2011a: 73). This line tracks the looping geographical movements that left linguistic traces to be revealed in the translingual poetics of both writers and argues for the inability of monolingual, or even strictly textural, aesthetic practices to address the complexities of diasporic existence.

Returning both thematically and structurally to the site of language’s limitations, the final section of the poem begins with a directive to “fill in the blank.” Each of the options, “yet,” “thanks,” or “still,” offered to fill the blank in the sentence “The word ______ could never cover enough distance” fits uneasily within the gap, neither blatantly incorrect nor an obvious fit (Ravine 2011a: 73). Knowing that the poem contains the Thai phrase for “thank you very much,” the option “thanks” seems to be the best fit, yet even if we presume this is the correct answer, the constructed sentence, “the word thanks could never cover enough distance,” speaks more to the failure of language than to its triumph. The recalcitrant tone of this final section dovetails with the line "a flat tone, both ways, in both languages" that closes the previous section of the poem. Crucially, even while resisting the compulsion to choose between binary gender identifications in Thai, the poem does not suggest English language as a remedy. Rather, the word, any word, in both languages could never cover enough distance. Similar to my reading of the disjuncture in transliteration that occurred earlier in the poem, I read these final lines as emphasizing the poem's disavowal of colonial, linguistic mastery and privileging in the unknown sense of possibility that comes from sitting uneasily in the interstices between visual and textual modes of communication.

Finally, the history behind the specific visual image of the language worksheet adds a further layer of meaning that ties the poem's critique of enforced gender norms in language learning to the context of informal empire. Ravine took Thai language classes at Payap University in 2004, and given the presence of a check mark and the annotation "good" on the worksheet itself, I read the worksheet as invoking Ravine's (2011a: 84; 2011b: 5) experience of formal Thai language education. Founded in 1974 by the Church of Christ in Thailand, Payap University is a private, Christian university in northern Thailand (Payap University, n.d.).[22] This history ties the university to the informal US empire in Thailand, which Padoongpatt (2017: 25) notes existed prior to military developments in the WWII era as "American missionaries served as the first US diplomats in what was then called Siam." Payap University is a direct descendent of these geopolitical relationships. I find it particularly impactful that Ravine critiques the violence of the US interventions in Thailand and gendered language acquisition by co-opting the instructional materials from an institution complicit in a heteronormative imperial project. Ravine's use of worksheets that were likely acquired while enrolled at Payap University echoes Cha's appropriation of dictation to respond to the history of French colonial missionary projects in Korea, and repurposes the history of missionary work in Thailand into a new reality that reimagines the possibilities of language and communication and insists on the existence of gender-nonconforming, diasporic descendants of informal empire.

This poem exemplifies diasporic cultural production's ability to imagine new possibilities for being in the world; Jai Arun Ravine's translingual and multimodal aesthetic practice depends on a history of movement between Thailand and the United States and a genealogy of literary models in the form of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Padcha Tuntha-obas. Ravine's translingual aesthetic practice that plays with the dissonances between Thai and English communicates a refusal to conform to either strictly Thai or strictly Western understandings of gender or sexuality. Crucially, it is the poem’s mixing of visuals and text, of Thai and English, that facilitates these interventions. Reading only the English text and disregarding the visual presence of the alphabet worksheet, there is no sense of a gendered intervention, so to understand the holistic scope of the poem it is necessary to consider the role of the letter ค worksheet as tied to gendered ending particles and the meaning of the Thai phrase *kawb kuhn mahk*, and to the context of Payap University as a site of language learning for a diasporic, Thai American subject. I argue that, ultimately, Ravine’s poetics enact a nonnormative practice of gender that straddles both Western and Thai paradigms, including a crucial awareness of how race impacts gender identity in a diasporic, American context. Just as meaning in *แล้ว and then entwine* arises simultaneously from multiple languages and registers, so too do the poems illuminate how a diasporic Thai American understanding of gender and sexuality pulls from multiple, and sometimes contesting, sources.

Acts of Care and Literary Legacy

trespasses and *แล้ว and then entwine* represent just two examples of the innovative and genre-defining work happening in Thai and Thai American poetics. In addition to the direct thematic and aesthetic invocations of *Dictée*’s legacy within these two texts, I see also multiple points of connection between the robust body of work from other contemporary Asian American writers, such as Don Mee Choi’s *DMZ Colony*, Ching-In Chen’s *recombinant*, or Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint’s *Names for Light*, that can similarly claim *Dictée* as a condition of possibility, as well as resonances with the broader tradition of documentary poetics in twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry by American writers of color, of which *Dictée* is an influential participant. Further engagement with the unique aesthetic forms of these texts, and other examples of Thai American poetry as an exciting yet overlooked genre, offers important contributions to how Asian American literary studies narrativizes the history of US presence in Southeast Asia, and also to how scholars, creative writers, and their respective texts can collaborate to create new modes of aesthetic reckonings with history and politics.

I foreground aesthetics in my readings of *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine* to point out the role that cultural production plays in shaping the official, historical narrative and the importance of the varied mediums and modes through which historical knowledge is created. The focus on aesthetics also points to poetic form as a crucial part of the equation that is often lost when considering texts by writers of color. I trace the way these texts' responses to the conditions of their production take place through the aesthetic practices of visual and translingual poetics, sometimes even more explicitly so than in the content of the poems.

Beyond the thematic thread of language learning, which is shared by many other canonical Asian American poets, such as Li-Young Lee and Myung Mi Kim, my reading highlights how *trespasses* and *แล้ว and then entwine* build on *Dictée*'s unique and disruptive set of translingual and mixed-media aesthetic practices to make their interventions. Central to all three texts is a structural and aesthetic disavowal of the "imposed competency" of language learning and the related colonial imperative for mastery (Lowe 1996: 139). *Dictée*'s speakers avoid reduction to an essentialized sum of their parts by remaining fragmented and unknowable, thus providing a model for how Tuntha-obas's poems, in their ambivalence about the possibility of any "correct" answer, hold open a space of possibility for unruly translations within the rigid structures of English grammar. Similarly, moments of translingual untranslatability allow Ravine's poems to carve out gaps within language itself that allow nonbinary speakers to exist within gendered, linguistic expectations. The incorporation of multiple languages, texts, and visual and textual modes of communication at the heart of each of these texts fundamentally resists the ability of the reader to fully know, and render transparent, the racialized other.

Looking toward the future of expanded study of Southeast Asian American poetics, there is still much work to be done to further engage with Thai American literature within Asian American literary studies. Reading *Dictée* alongside other Asian American texts, rather than held apart as an exceptional example, and reading Thai American texts *as* Asian American texts represent the beginning of my foray into that work and an opportunity to continue exploring how Thai American cultural production is uniquely situated to offer aesthetic insights into the history of US presence in Southeast Asia from the mid-twentieth century onward, particularly how discourses of allyship and Thailand's formally uncolonized status obscured the violent codifications of gender, racial, and sexual norms to align with Western, imperial worldviews. The serious engagement with this geopolitical history offered by these poetic texts encourages Asian American literary scholars to consider what our field has to offer in dialogue—both in tension and in relation—with other disciplines such as Asian area studies. I hope this article contributes to the evolution of Asian American studies as the field continues to interrogate its own foundations and futures as influenced by a strong history of student activism, institutionalization, imperialism, and wars both open and secret.

Jasmine An is a poet pursuing her PhD in English and women’s and gender studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Naming the No-Name Woman* (2016) and *Monkey Was Here* (2020), and her creative work can be found in such journals as *Poetry Northwest*, *Waxwing*, *New Delta Review*, and *Black Warrior Review’s Boyfriend Village*.

Notes

Thank you to the poets whose presence, on and off the page, reminds me what is possible. I’m grateful as well to the Lora Hutchins Heberle Award Committee of the University of Michigan’s English department, the 2020 Council on Thai Studies Graduate Student Paper Prize Committee, my peers in the Sweetland Dissertation Writing Groups, and many other interlocutors for encouragement and feedback on this article.

1 In the front matter of *แล้ว and then entwine*, Ravine notes that “*แล้ว* denotes past tense. It is used after states or actions to indicate they have already occurred. *แล้ว* + *ก็* (Gaw) becomes a conjunction meaning ‘and then’” (2011a).

2 Yến Lê Espiritu (2014: 18) notes that despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of “national resolution,” the Vietnam war has the distinction of being the “most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped” war in US history.

3 For more on the secret war, see Sisavath 2019 and Vang 2021.

4 I am aware that the term *neocolonialism* is more commonly used to refer to similar US-Asia dynamics. My use of *informal empire* draws from Thai American studies scholar Mark Padoongpatt’s (2017: 1) use of the term and also nods to a long-standing and still lively debate within Thai studies about the terminology used to refer to the influence of various Western nations in Thailand, as the country was never formally colonized.

5 I use the word *America* intentionally here to signal, as Inderpal Grewal (2005) has theorized, how the idea of “America” is still a salient vehicle used to disseminate ideals of democratic citizenship and belonging through consumer practice, as well as other disciplinary technologies.

6 For an overview of Thai immigration to the United States and Thai American communities, see Padoongpatt 2014; for two influential histories of Asian America, see Chan 1991 and Takaki 1989.

7 Building on Christian’s (1987) “The Race for Theory,” Chuh (2003: 19) argues for defining Asian American literature as theory because liberal

multicultural logic sees minoritized literatures as simply an "ethnography of the other" that is excluded from the category of the "literary." Co-opting this stance, Chuh argues that if Asian American literature cannot be literary because of its racialized status, it becomes theory, following Jonathan Culler's definition of theory as work that "exceeds the disciplinary framework within which they would normally be evaluated and which would help to identify their solid contributions to knowledge" (19). Asian American literature, Chuh argues, "exceeds" the literary through the literary's exclusion of ethnic literature.

8 Timothy Yu (2015: 318) notes that as of 2015 a remarkable seventy-three scholarly articles had been written on *Dictée*. One of the most influential clusters of work on the text was the anthology *Writing Self Writing Nation* (1994), which grew out of a conference panel at the 1991 Association for Asian American Studies conference and features works by Elaine Kim, Lisa Lowe, L. Hyun Yi Kang, and Shelley Sunn Wong. Lisa Lowe's 1996 field-defining text *Immigrant Acts* grew out of her chapter in this collection, so in this way *Dictée* has also significantly influenced the critical, as well as creative, evolution of Asian American studies as an academic discipline.

9 Yu's essay highlights recent work by scholars such as Hyo K. Kim and Joseph Jonghyun Jeon that contributes to this reframing of *Dictée*'s place within Asian American literary studies.

10 Exact periodization differs, but prominent scholars Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2014) periodize the American era as lasting until the 1960s, while Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (1985) use a slightly later end date of the 1970s.

11 The OED defines *functional shift* as "a process by which a word belonging to one part of speech is used as another part of speech," such as "making verbs out of nouns."

12 During the Vietnam War and the secret war, the United States did maintain a military presence in Thailand. However, these troops were primarily using Thailand and Thai military infrastructure as a base from which to direct their attention outward toward North Vietnam and Laos (Ravenstein and US Air Force 1984: 14: 22: 30).

13 See scholarship by Jacqueline Desbarats (1979), Sirida Srisombati (2005), and Mark Padoongpatt (2017), with gratitude to Pahole Sookkasikon (2018) for establishing this genealogy.

14 I am grateful to have access to Sookkasikon's (2018) dissertation, which offers a new perspective on a queer, Thai America that begins the process of contesting these dominant narratives and nuancing the narrative possibilities of antiheteronormativity within the Thai American diaspora.

15 Many Thai studies scholars have noted that, in the mid-twentieth century, the joint projects of modernization and nation building were relocated "onto the bodies of [Thai] women" (Thepboriruk 2019: 233) as Thai femininity and feminine beauty standards were instrumentalized by Thai nationalism to promote Thailand's standing as a modernized (read: civilized) nation, while also "retaining the specificity of a 'traditional' Thainess" (van Esterik

1996:11-16) quoted by Aizura (2009: 305). Further, Sookkasikon (2018) argues that Thainess was further gendered as feminine in a transnational and diasporic context due to the various economic, military, and political facets of the relationship between Thailand and the United States, including Thailand's designation as an R&R destination for American soldiers, which cemented sex and prostitution as "integral to global depictions of Thainess" and led to an influx of Thai immigrant women to the United States as war brides after the Vietnam War.

16 This ideological presumption is further perpetuated by the fact that many Thai immigrants are indeed women (and wives of US servicemen), meaning that many second-generation Thai Americans fall into the pattern of having Thai mothers and American/white fathers.

17 In this article, I follow Ravine's choice of romanized spelling when it comes to transliterating Thai.

18 There is no universalized rule (such as pinyin for Chinese) for transliterating Thai in the Latin alphabet (Anderson and Mendiones 1985: 4). There is an International Standard system of transliteration, and Thai can also be transliterated through the International Phonetic Alphabet, but these standardizations are not commonly followed. Each language school and even each individual language instructor will often use their own system of romanization when teaching Thai to foreigners (Bunmee, pers. comm., December 19, 2019).

19 As a standalone noun, *kawb* most often means rim, outer boundary, perimeter. The meaning switches to "thanks" when *kawb* functions as part of the compound word *kawb kuhn*.

20 Many other readings of the ending particles could be engaged in here, but I refrain for the sake of length and clarity of argument. One tangentially interesting example is how leaving off the particles also indicates impoliteness. Patrick Jory (2018: 444) argues that in Thai society manners affirm and reproduce the social order, and impoliteness is therefore a violation of that order. I suggest that Ravine's "impolite" phrasing here deliberately violates the social order to further destabilize what Ravine would characterize as static and insufficient categories of gender identification.

21 It is important to note that the Thai language does not differentiate between the words for sexuality and gender. Instead, the Thai word *phet* (เพศ) encompasses the various meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality/sexual identity. Therefore, sexuality in a Thai context is commonly framed as an extension of gender, and the separation between sex and gender, foundational to LGBT and queer activism in the United States, does not translate easily to the Thai context.

22 The Church of Christ in Thailand is an independent organization; however, it has significant ties to the Presbyterian Church in the United States, according to Global Ministries and the World Council of Churches (Global Ministries n.d.).

References

Aizura, Aren Z. 2009. "Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialisation in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics." *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 3: 303–17.

Anderson, Benedict R. O., and Ruchira Mendiones. 1985. *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*. Bangkok: Duang kamol.

Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. 2014. *A History of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. 1982. *Dictée*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chan, Sucheng. 1991. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Woodbridge, CT: Twayne.

Christian, Barbara. 1987. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 6: 51–63. doi.org/10.2307/1354255.

Chuh, Kandice. 2003. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Culler, Jonathan. 2013. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. https://www.veryshortintroductions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780199691340.001.0001/actrade-9780199691340-chapter-1.

Desbarats, Jacqueline. 1979. "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," *Geographical Review* 69, no. 3: 302–18.

Dowling, Sarah. 2018. *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood under Settler Colonialism*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Espiritu, Yến Lê. 2014. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Global Ministries. n.d. "The Church of Christ in Thailand." https://www.globalministries.org/the_church_of_christ_in_thailand (accessed October 30, 2020).

Grewal, Inderpal. 2005. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hodge, Siobhan. 2016. "'Time That Travels Sings Concurrently to the Path of Letters': Translation in Padcha Tuntha-Obas' Composite. Diplomacy." *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, no. 32: 4–36.

Jory, Patrick. 2018. "Bupphesanniwat Fever: Gendered Nationalism and Middle-Class Views of Thailand's Political Predicament." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 2: 440–56.

Kim, Elaine H. and Norma Alarcón (eds). 1994. Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on "Dictée" by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.

Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ngô, Fiona I. B., Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam. 2012. "Guest Editors' Introduction." In "Southeast Asian American Studies," edited by Fiona I. B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam. Special issue, *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, no. 3: 671–84. doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1593492.

OCSC (Office of the Civil Service Commission). n.d. "ทุนสำหรับบุคคลทั่วไป | สำนักงาน ก.พ." ("Scholarships for the General Public | Office of the Civil Service Commission") https://www.ocsc.go.th/scholarship/personal?fbclid=IwAR0Y1PqE4UE1NkFhAacT9gaOc4RYevWw0ksdxPrxIyl-wy4FwWReeck5tPg (accessed May 4, 2021).

Padoongpatt, Mark. 2014. "Thai Americans." In *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Mary Yu Danico, 894–97. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi.org/10.4135/9781452281889.

Padoongpatt, Mark. 2017. *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Parikh, Crystal, and Daniel Y. Kim. 2015. *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Payap University. n.d. "Payap University | มหาวิทยาลัยพายัพ." https://www.payap.ac.th/home/?load=content&lang=en&id=0000000005 (accessed October 30, 2020).

Pizzo, David. 2016. "Informal Empire." In *The Encyclopedia of Empire*. Wiley Online Library. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe298.

Ravenstein, Charles A., and US Air Force. 1984. *Air Force Combat Wings: Lineage and Honors Histories, 1947–1977*. Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, US GPO.

Ravine, Jai Arun. 2011a. *แล้ว and then entwine: lesson plans, poems, knots*. Kaneohe, HI: Tinfish Press.

Ravine, Jai Arun. 2011b. "Behind the Poetry of *แล้ว and then entwine*." Doveglion Lit, August 1. https://web.archive.org/web/20180505073133/http://www.doveglion.com/2011/08/jai-arun-ravine-behind-the-poetry-of-%E0%B9%81%E0%B8%A5%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%A7-and-then-entwine/.

Ravine, Jai Arun. 2014. "Toms and Zees: Locating FTM Identity in Thailand." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3: 387–401. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2685651.

Sisavath, Davorn. 2019. "The US Secret War in Laos Constructing an Archive from Military Waste." *Radical History Review* 2019, no. 133: 103–16. https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-7160089.

Sookkasikon, Pahole. 2018. "Bangkok Is Burning: Queer Cultural Productions of Thainess in Diaspora." PhD diss., University of Hawaii.

Srisombati, Sirida. 2005. "BKK-LAX: Transurban Mules and Low-Rent Globalization." PhD diss., University of California at Santa Cruz.

Takaki, Ronald. 1989. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, Updated and rev. ed. New York: Little Brown.

Thepboriruk, Kanjana Hubik. 2019. "Dear Thai Sisters: Propaganda, Fashion, and the Corporeal Nation under Phibunsongkhram." *Southeast Asian Studies (Kyoto (Japan))*, vol 8, issue 2: 233–258. doi:10.20495/seas.8.2_233

Tuntha-obas, Padcha. 2006. *trespasses*. Oakland, CA: O Books.

van Esterik, Penny. 1996. "The Politics of Beauty in Thailand." In *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests and Power*, edited by Coleen Cohen, Richard Wilk and Beverly Stoeltje, 203–16. London: Routledge.

Vang, Ma. 2021. *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wang, Dorothy J. 2013. *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wong, Shawn. 1996. *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. Harlow, UK: Longman.

Yu, Timothy. 2015. "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the Impact of Theory." In *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature*, edited by Rajini Srikanth and Min Hyoung Song, 306–23. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.