

TACTUAL POÏESIS: MATERIAL TRANSLATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Julie Phillips Brown

August 2011

© 2011 Julie Phillips Brown

TACTUAL POÏESIS: MATERIAL TRANSLATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

Julie Phillips Brown, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2011

Critical studies of literature and the arts have long emphasized visual comparisons between the two-dimensional spaces of the page and the canvas, often to the exclusion of other senses, dimensions, and media. *Tactual Poïesis* develops an expanded vocabulary for how to read literature and the arts through attention to tactile, multi-dimensional innovations in the poetry of Susan Howe, Cecilia Vicuña, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. As contemporary poets continue to broaden the material, tactile dimensions of their writing, an equal expansion in critical discourse becomes necessary. For Howe, Vicuña, and Cha, ordinary textual conditions no longer satisfy—the poem must be seen, heard, and felt. At the heart of each poet's formal innovation is the potential for *tactual poïesis*: a rewriting of history and a reordering of the contemporary world through poetic and readerly processes that are, literally, hands-on. I argue that it is precisely a poem's tactility that makes its text, and the histories contained therein, actual, present, and physical—and therefore, subject to manipulation by both poet and reader. The histories these poets revise are numerous and far-ranging: from personal, familial narratives in Howe's *The Midnight* and Cha's *Dictee*, to cultural and national memories in *Dictee* and Vicuña's *cloud-net*, to linguistic and literary conventions in all three works together.

My first chapter examines Howe's textual and visual collage in *The Midnight* as an elegiac performance, whereby the poet transforms the book into a costumed extension of her own body. This transformation animates the text from within and activates an intermediate space between the living and the dead. My second chapter argues that Vicuña's *cloud-net* relies on bodily contact between poet, reader, and text to open the "trans": a transitive space between the present and an earlier time prior to globalization, global warming, and species loss. From the "trans," the poet attempts to reclaim the forces of universal genesis and heal the destruction wrought since then. My third chapter argues that Cha's *Dictee* imagines the possibility of the material, tactile word as a means of concretizing history and exchanging the seeds of anti-colonial resistance from one body to another.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julie Phillips Brown was born in Philadelphia, where she later earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in Fine Arts, Visual Studies, and English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. Trained as a painter, poet, and graphic designer, she earned joint MFA and PhD degrees in Creative Writing and English Literature at Cornell University. Her research interests include modern and contemporary poetry, poetics, and literature of the Americas; cross-genre, multi-ethnic, and transnational approaches to literature; feminist and gender studies; and the relation of visual art and digital technology to literature. During her time at Cornell, Brown's essays and poems have appeared in issues of *Contemporary Women's Writing*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Webconjunctions*, *Kblog* (Kelsey Street Press), and *delirious hem*. She lives in Walla Walla, Washington with her fiancé David.

For my mother, Linda Phillips Brown

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In recent years, and in the many years preceding the writing of this dissertation, I have been the very fortunate recipient of much time and attention, for which I can offer only humble thanks. I am enormously grateful to my committee chair Roger Gilbert, who provided the careful questions and steadfast, even-keeled support to steer my project aright; to Shirley Samuels for her razor-sharp wit, her savvy, and her keen, perceptive reading of my work; and to Rayna Kalas, for all the times her questions sent my work in a new direction and enriched it, and for her enthusiasm, practicality, and inimitable wry humor.

I thank Susan Stewart for her knowledge, compassion, and generosity in direction my early writing on Wallace Stevens, and for guiding me toward graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University. Many, many thanks are due to Julie Schneider, for her advocacy of my visual art, and for her continued support well beyond my years as her student. To Greg Djanikian, I will be forever grateful not only for his humor and warmth, but for his suggestion that in fact, I might just be a poet.

I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to Susan Howe for her generosity in opening her home and studio to me during our conversations, and for taking the time to relive the writing of *The Midnight* with me. To Cecilia Vicuña, I owe the deepest thanks as a student, colleague, and friend. Our continuing collaboration on her *Kon Kon* and artist websites has been an invigorating artistic challenge and an absolute pleasure. I wish to thank in particular Susan Friedman and the other editors and readers at *Contemporary Women's Writing*, as well as Stephanie Sacharov and Beth Schewe, for their help in

brining my writing on *cloud-net* to its present form and publication. I am grateful to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, which made possible all of my conversations with Howe, Vicuña, and others, through the generous support of a Graduate Research Travel Grant.

To my father, brother, mother, and David, an overabundance of love. Thank you for believing in me, keeping me laughing, and lighting the way.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Material Theater of Elegy in Susan Howe's <i>The Midnight</i>	20
Chapter Three: 'touch in transit': Manifestation / Manifestación in Cecilia Vicuña's <i>cloud-net</i>	57
Chapter Four: Mouth to Mouth: Bare Utterance in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's <i>Dictee</i>	93
Chapter Five: Coda	122
Appendix A: On <i>The Midnight</i> : A Conversation with Susan Howe	131
Appendix B: On <i>cloud-net</i> : A Conversation with Cecilia Vicuña	181
Works Cited	205