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(Un)Binding the States of Location, Be(long)ing, Re-  
presentation: Getting Lost in the East Asian Library

*"You speak different language."*

*"Yeah, I'm speaking Korean," I respond.*

*"No, that's not what I mean. You speak different language. Neither  
Korean nor English."*

*"Ah . . . Then how can we understand each other?"*

*"Understand each other? Well, perhaps, we could, at least, communicate  
with each other if we both are willing to endure this schizophrenic state of  
language."*

—Anyssa Kim, *D,R,E,A,M.*

Down the Rabbit Hole

Walking through the damp, narrow aisle in the basement of the East Asian Library, I suddenly sense an uncommon tenderness floating around. Books are filed like a giant castle and I do get lost in myself pretty quick. There's a weird peacefulness in it. Part escape and part exile. It's a nice place to doodle away, although I usually pick one book and read it in the darkness. I slowly open the book I choose. There's a different spirit inside this one. Less anxiety maybe. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I can feel the harboring memories of the book, belonging to a place where I was born and raised. The book is trance inducing, like an enchanting folklore from the village I barely remember. When I start to read it, the unsung, unseen language prompts me to dance with the book all along. There's some nice alchemy at work between us, and I dance in the past, in the moment that no longer belongs to time. Do I ever feel the book has a schizophrenic sense for me, with memories tied to different lines inside me? Well, maybe I'm not exactly a graceful dancer, I think. I close the book. A fresh, earthy smell of the pine tree from the time where the language was born tenderly takes me to the place where I am from. I place the book where it belongs and hurry upstairs. The time is out of joint.

To Whom Am I Speaking?

As Anyssa is sitting at the desk where she works, she looks over the window, brooding on what she has just discussed with her colleagues at the library. Working at the East Asian Library located in one of the U.S. academic institutions on the east coast, Anyssa and her colleagues—so-called student assistants with "language specialty"—are all able to understand, at least, two different languages. Some are migrants from East

Asian countries to the United States, while others are U.S. born natives. Some Chinese assistants study Japanese. Some American assistants study Chinese. Some Korean assistants study Korean. Anyssa? She studies English, whatever that means. The East Asian Library is a culture deeply embedded in its variegated nature, though the common denominator for communication at the library is exclusively English. Everyday in the library, narratives of East Asian librarians and student assistants harbor the memories of the place where they traveled and lived and loved. By situating the multiple locations and positionalities in the production of its ever-changing identity, the East Asian Library re-places the space of memory and culture and language. At its limit, the disruptive order between space and place is fundamentally a question of belonging and representation.

When the sun goes down toward the Hudson River, Anyssa and her colleagues, Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Mouse, and Ms. Flamingo, gather around the circulation desk talking about postcolonial theory courses at the comparative literature department.

Someone mentions that Professor Spivak's postcolonial theory course is worth taking, while another complains about her esoteric teaching style and her theory's obscurantism.

Mr. Rabbit suddenly participates in the conversation. "I think, in this academic institution, deconstruction and postcolonialism are so dominant. From my point of view, when we purport to speak on postcolonialism, especially in US academia, one cannot ignore those issues concerning its political disorientation and complicity with American cultural imperialism."

In response, Ms. Flamingo promptly objects. "Well, I guess now it's something of a cliché to say that Spivak's use of deconstruction tries to perform the paradox of her own positionality. In fact, Spivak has herself long been acknowledging this double bind in her work."

"I know. But my point is not her use of deconstruction. My point is her political disorientation, with its supposed connection to her guilt-ridden positionality in US academia. Despite her efforts to give a voice to the voiceless Other, Spivak's postcolonial theory operates within the privileged vantage point of the US intelligentsia," Mr. Rabbit adds as an explanation.

In turn, Ms. Flamingo makes a sharp riposte. "To me, your position is seriously associated with the ordering of place. This is similar to the provocative accusation directed against postcolonial theory by Terry Eagleton in *The Gaudy Supermarket*."

Pulling his long tail from under the Chinese cabinet, Mr. Mouse groans, "Mr. Rabbit and Ms. Flamingo. To whom are you speaking?"

Anyssa seems a bit quiet today, but she is actually trying to grapple with the issues Mr. Rabbit has just raised about American cultural imperialism. In fact, it deeply opens up the concerns of her intellectual trajectory with feminist poststructuralism. As a South Korean woman living, working and studying in the US, Anyssa's position on place is

often entangled with this double bind, in that she attempts to explore postcolonial challenges to conventional conceptions and enactments of belonging and un-belonging, place and displacement, territorialization and deterritorialization. In response to Mr. Rabbit, her impulse is to point to contradictions and ambiguities, to the porousness of identities, to complicate matters rather than provide an answer, to blur distinctions between native and non-native, dominant and marginalized, the East and the West. It is because, to Anyssa, the kernel of Professor Spivak's project lies in the problematization of place as an opposite movement to American cultural imperialism. However, Mr. Mouse's question—"To whom are you speaking?"—makes her squirm uncomfortably. Anyssa ponders along these lines: Notwithstanding Mr. Rabbit's notorious antipathy to postcolonialism, his interrogation of the relationship between postcolonial theory and its complicity with American cultural imperialism remains absolutely critical. Perhaps this is what Mr. Mouse inquires with *who gets to speak and who gets to hear*. After all, isn't there a gap between those who have the privilege of speaking and those who have access to hearing?

To whom am I speaking?

Meanwhile, the debate between Mr. Rabbit and Ms. Flamingo continues. Mr. Rabbit carries on, "Thank you, Ms. Flamingo, for reminding me of Terry Eagleton's vitriolic response to Professor Spivak's project. I think there is a great deal of timely good sense in Eagleton's argument as a response to Mr. Mouse's question. As Eagleton claims, Professor Spivak is at once the best- and worst-placed author to carry out the postcolonial project, because ethnic minorities within metropolitan countries are not the same as colonized people."

Ms. Flamingo retorts, "I think your rhetoric paradoxically—and even violently—closes the border between native and non-native, minority cultures and host-culture of nation-states. Despite the apparently generous gesture to give voice to the voiceless Other, the political implication of your argumentation does not, cannot provide a solution to the dilemmas on the relationship between speaker and audience. In contrast, your argument permanently forecloses the border between spatial binaries! Mr. Mouse, what do you think?"

Mr. Mouse crumbles his fortune cookie from last night's supper at his favorite Chinese restaurant. "Um . . . The history of this Chinese fortune cookie is a contentious issue. The Chinese fortune cookie is not even Chinese—it was invented by a Chinese immigrant. Then, does this fortune cookie belong to *Chinese* or not? That is my answer."

Eating too many fortune cookies, Mr. Mouse falls asleep fast.

All of a sudden, Anyssa feels as if she were completely lost. Augh, I'm afraid I'm no longer able to understand the language in this library. It's not English, nor Korean, nor Chinese, nor Japanese. It's something else! And she ponders on: In these national, transnational, postnational times, what happens to a sense of belonging when religious organizations, national groups, and political parties become (de)stabilized? In this global

era, what issues are at stake with its reconfigured experiences of belonging?

#### A Mad Tea Party

Anyssa and I sit by the table at the library staff meeting room, sipping our peppermint tea with ginger lemon cookies. "I like this teacup. It looks clumsy but it feels really different from the other potteries," she says.

I take a glimpse at the bottom of my teacup and notice two initials engraved as *JJ*.

Anyssa explains, "These two teacups were made by someone, who was once a cataloguer at this library. He was fascinated by the ancient Korean urns and began to make replicas of them by himself. He called his potteries *The Masterpieces of a Clumsy Forgery*."

"Is he Korean?" I ask Anyssa out of curiosity.

"Korean!? What do you mean by Korean?"

"Korean. Not Japanese, nor Chinese, nor American!!"

"Ahh...!" Anyssa sighs and pauses a moment. "Well, I guess you better ask this teacup whether it belongs to *Korean*."

I take the last bite of my ginger lemon cookie and mumble to myself, "Perhaps this teacup is out-of-status."

Tapping her fingernails along the table's edge, Anyssa begins to talk about her dream out of the blue. "I had a strange dream last night. I tumbled down the rabbit hole with a book from the East Asian Library. Then I met a rabbit, a mouse, and a flamingo in the middle of nowhere. They were all speaking different languages and—"

"What does your dream mean?" I interrupt.

Anyssa immediately frowns. "Do you always understand your dream? Dream is just a dream. Dream. D, R, E, A, M."

"But dream exists in our life. It is part of our life!" I insist.

"True. But no explanation is available. That's dream!"

"Alright, so what happened then?"

"Well, I'm telling you now."

So the story begins without beginning.