

THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRODUCTION:
FORM AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN XIAOLU GUO'S *A CONCISE CHINESE-
ENGLISH DICTIONARY FOR LOVERS AND A LOVER'S DISCOURSE*

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To date, Xiaolu Guo's critics have tended to concentrate on linguistic aspects of her work, treating her predominantly as a writer who breaks new ground in the literary evocation of linguistic encounter and migrant self-translation. This approach aligns with the wider linguistic emphases that have shaped studies of world literature and global English, under the influence of critics like Emily Apter and Pascale Casanova, and has led to readings of Guo's early fiction as "translational" writing (Gilmour), as translingual family romance (Spyra), as a transcultural "writing of the body" (Poon), and as a reflection on intercultural communication and identity (Hwang). While these commentaries have shed considerable light on Guo's treatment of language and translated subjectivity, they necessarily place less emphasis on her often striking contiguous formal and intertextual experiments.

In this paper I try to redress this critical bias by examining Guo's use of form: specifically, just one formal feature of her work – which, appropriately, develops out her interest in the migrant linguistic encounter – her use of the lexicon or dictionary as a template. In what follows, my discussion will centre on two of Guo's most clearly "lexicographic" works: her debut novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), and her most recent fiction, at the time of writing, *A Lover's Discourse* (2020), referred to hereafter as *CCEDL* and *ALD*. In reflecting on Guo's search for form I will suggest that continental philosophy and critical theory, and especially the French post/structuralist turn of the 1950s–60s, provide an unexpected set of intertexts and models for her work. I will also argue that the specific affordance of lexicographic form and intertextual suggestion in Guo's writing is that it allows her to play with ideas of

synonymy, duplication, and concealed meaning, and articulate a sophisticated economic and political critique of her own situation as a migrant cultural producer in the global anglophone creative economy.

At the outset, it must be noted that Guo's formal choices in both *CCEDL* and *ALD* develop out of a migrant context that is unusual when compared with the extensive body of anglophone fiction by or about other minority ethnic communities in the UK. This is because Guo was not able to draw upon, or react against, an established tradition of similar writings when she started writing in English. A literary tradition of British Chinese immigrant narrative does exist, as exemplified by early travel accounts by authors such as Min-Ch'ien T. Z. Tyau, memoirists and writers from the 1950s and 60s such as Dymia Hsiung and Han Suyin, and later authors such as Timothy Mo and P.P. Wong, but this genealogy of British Chinese writing was certainly not available to Guo at the start of her career as a set of pre-existing creative reference-points or influences. Neither could Guo assume that her (implied anglophone) reader would have much familiarity with mainland Chinese literature or culture. Indeed, something conspicuously lacking in Guo's migrant literary imaginary in *CCEDL* and *ALD* is even a passing "postcolonial" cultural intelligibility between migrant and host, which might derive, in other contexts, from a shared (albeit agonistic, racially demarcated) colonial history, or a familiarity with English literature or culture. This is not to ignore, of course, the long history of British mercantile and military intervention in Southern China, or the British colonial control of Hong Kong and the New Territories before 1997.

Apart from recognizing some general signifiers of global Englishness, Guo's migrant protagonists have few reference points in Britain; and in turn, they encounter an entrenched "sanctioned ignorance" of Chinese history and culture in British society, something which Guo has also noted in interview and compared unfavourably with a more extensive British public knowledge of South Asia. Indeed, a sanctioned public ignorance about China that tends to counterpoint the more general political and cultural invisibility of the long-standing Chinese community in Britain is something that has been underlined by social science commentators

(Thorpe and Yeh 4) and continues to effect community efforts to lobby for greater political recognition.

Guo's lack of a pre-existing formal or cultural reference-points means that her fiction rehearses an especially jarring encounter with the global asymmetries of power intrinsic to the anglophone global North. Guo's migrant protagonists also reckon with European orientalist assumptions about Chinese identity and negotiate the ideological legacies of a Cold War division between communism and capitalism (Spyra 457). It can be argued further that Guo's personal background in Maoist and post-Maoist China shapes a particular response, on her part, to the commercial and/or entrepreneurial pressures of the global marketplace. This is especially the case in her engagement with issues of commercial reproduction and originality, where, arguably, Guo seems more primed than other global anglophone authors for a critique of the creative economy.¹

It is against this very specific background that Guo's creative co-option of the bilingual dictionary and lexicon must be assessed, but there is an additional preliminary detail to be considered: the connection between lexicographic form and certain theoretical and critical emphases on order and structure – namely, an interest in the archive, the lexicon, and reference works such as the encyclopaedia – in the conceptual elaborations of post/structuralism. A creative engagement with critical (postcolonial) theory was a tactic that had been used by some earlier writers of multi-ethnic Britain and migrant diaspora, whether at a metafictional level – think for instance of Salman Rushdie's fictionalizing engagement with Gayatri Spivak in *The Satanic Verses* (1989) – or at the more general level of theme and politics: in an emphasis on the hybrid or in techniques such as rewriting and tactical reiterative citation. Nevertheless, it is rare for a contemporary global anglophone author to engage so closely and in such a sustained way with continental critical theory; such engagements, if they do occur, are usually modulated by devices of cultural disassociation and “provincializing” gestures which register the ethnocentric historical burden of such thinking (Chakrabarty).

Guo encountered radical continental thought in very different circumstances – in China as part of the post-Mao era of the 1980s and 90s, when western literature and philosophy was becoming newly available in translation to students, intellectuals, writers, and artists. For Guo, this experience was above all one of transcultural formal possibility. And this explains, in part, her continued enthusiastic dialogue with French *nouvelle vague* cinema and with the work of European cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin. In the writing of the former, I will suggest, Guo does find a sort of translated orientation: in the creative potential of the fragment, in challenging the idea of the unitary original, and in sophisticated, writerly acts of self-duplication and synonymy.

Lexicographic Form, Order, and Intertextuality

Guo's decision to adopt a lexicographic form in *CCEDL* was shaped by the need to find a mode of writing that would accommodate her own struggle to become proficient in English at broadly the same time as she wrote her first English novel, employing, in the process, "four different Chinese-English dictionaries – two Oxford, one Longman, one Xinhua", so that the resulting novel became "a diary recording my frustrations with learning another language and trying to make it mine" (*Once* 263).

As Angelia Poon states, because "each entry [in *CCEDL*] is prefaced by the dictionary definition of a word ... we may read the text that follows variously as an inflection, a repudiation, and / or an elaboration of the word" (2). This critical sense of the "reactive" repudiating or elaborative quality of Guo's use of lexicographic form is worth considering further. In contrast to the static definitions in her practical hypotext (the concise Chinese-English dictionary which Guo's narrator, Zhuang, carries and consults), Guo's novelistic "dictionary for lovers" is more fluid, allowing Zhuang to respond to aspects of English language and culture as idiosyncratic interventions in a second language. In one sense, then, her narrative is already a reduplication and supplement to the more standard bilingual learner's dictionary but challenges the functional expectations and strict formal limits of the latter.

In *ALD*, Guo employs a broadly similar lexicographic mode of digressive “entries” but extends these beyond single words to phrases and compound headings and adds a spatial organizing principle with the chapter titles “West”, “South”, “East”, “North”, “Down”, “Up”, “Left”, “Right” accompanied by the corresponding characters for each term in Standard (Mandarin) Chinese. In the later work, the inference of the discourse as (one side of a) dialogue also means that “quoted” exchanges between the narrator and her partner provide sub-header epigraphs. Form remains the same across both novels, however: in each, the primary compositional unit of Guo’s narrative is the one- or two-page “entry”, and development proceeds as a process of gathering impressions and reflections rather than a tightly structured narrative arc. In both works, too, the arrival in Britain is mediated through an intercultural love affair with a European man, and thus the experience of intimacy, which is also an erotic self-awakening, merges with the narrator’s growing intimacy with and fluency in her new language. The dictionary form enables Guo to present this experience as composite moments of cultural and individual recognition. Again, in contrast to the single word “entries” of *CCEDL*, themes or connected ideas carry across multiple entries in *ALD* and thus become meditations or miniature essays.

Guo’s use of a fragmented or discontinuous form is far from unique in Chinese literary history. An ancient tradition of citational narrative exists in Chinese *Biji* or “pen-note” texts, which flourished during the Song dynasty (CE 960–1279).² A much more recent *lexicographic* precursor to Guo’s fictions, and one which might be seen as a significant intertext (although no direct reference occurs in Guo’s interviews or biographical writings), is Han Shaogong’s Chinese language novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (1995). A major writer of the New Era (1979–89) of post-Mao reconstruction, Han was a teenager during the Cultural Revolution and served as a Red Guard for several years before being co-opted into Mao’s “Shangshan Xiaxiang” (“Up to the Mountains Down to the Villages”) campaign, which saw millions of urban college students “sent down” to the countryside to be re-educated by rural workers (see Honig and Zhao; Choy). Han’s *Dictionary*, written out of this experience of rural arrival and village life, takes the form of a

collection of entries on the Maqiao community and focuses on its topolect and its idiomatic sayings and words. As Paola Iovene points out, most of the entries in Han's novel are from Standard Chinese but have different meanings in Maqiao (198–9). In contemporary Chinese literature, Han Shaogong is notable as a leading figure in the *xúngēn* (“roots-seeking”) movement that saw in regional and rural ethnicities a way of reconnecting with the pluralism and distinctiveness of a China homogenized by Maoism.³ As Han's translator, Julia Lovell, emphasizes, Han used his experience as a “sent down” youth to write a microhistory of community reaction to twentieth-century revolution and modernity, thus effectively constructing a modern *Biji* text of the culture of rural Hunan.⁴

In *A Dictionary of Maqiao* Han's authorial voice reflects on his original plans for his lexicographic novel as “the biography of every single thing in Maqiao” – a creative aim that responds to his sense that the conventional fictional form of the novel is unfit for purpose: “The traditional kind of fiction ... has a very strong sense of plot. Main character, main plot, main mood block out all else, dominating the field of vision of both reader and writer, preventing any sidelong glances”. Moreover, in the conventional novel, continues Han, “any occasional casual digression is no more than a fragmentary embellishment of the main line, the temporary amnesty of a tyrant” (70–1). In contrast, Han's *Maqiao* lexicon revels in the potentiality for multiple lines: a manifold “flowering” of narrative strands. Yet this rejection of a unitary narrative does not entirely escape the claims of order. As Astrid Møller-Olsen notes:

according to the editorial foreword (which can ... be read as part of the novel), the author originally intended its 115 entries to be ordered according to the number of strokes in the first character of each term [as is customary in Chinese Dictionaries]. The foreword further states that the entries were rearranged “in order to make it easier for the reader to grasp the narrative thread [*shishi mailuo* or network of facts]”. The Chinese original still contains the stroke index corresponding to the

English translation's alphabetical entry list, but the text itself is ordered to suit a linear reading. (69–70)

What Han's metafictional digression reveals here is the underlying creative challenge that the choice of lexicographic form poses for *all* novelists, namely: the tension between the need for narrative development: the "main [narrative] line"; the "network of facts", and a more expansive encyclopaedic possibility, where non-linear single-use reference promises an almost exhaustive asynchronous understanding of a particular subject. Like Guo's novels discussed here, Han's earlier work also raises questions of intertextual influence in its apparent, but also successfully legally disputed indebtedness to Milorad Pavić's Serbian fiction *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel* (1984).⁵

A last point of orientation that must be sketched out in this preliminary mapping of Guo's lexicographic form is the influence of the Czech writer Milan Kundera, whose best-known work, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), was widely read, debated, and translated when it was published but has failed to sustain this reputation with later readers. Kundera's novel incorporates, in its third part, a lexicographic section subtitled "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words". Guo has frequently compared herself to Kundera as a fellow post-communist⁶ writer and voiced her admiration for his novel, but a further layer of contextual depth becomes apparent when we realize that it was through Han Shaogong's 1987 translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that many Chinese readers, including Guo, potentially, first encountered Kundera's work.

While presented as a type of personal dictionary or notebook, Guo's lexicographic narratives, like Han's before her, must be organized in such a way that a linear reading is inferred, not least because the experience of arrival and language acquisition is itself a (more or less) linear process of gaining linguistic proficiency – as demonstrated by the narrator's gradually improving linguistic fluency across *CCEDL*. Lexicographic form might be contrasted in this instance with other types of non-linear fiction such as so-called "shuffle novels",

exemplified by the British author B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), that are published unbound and boxed like a deck of cards, for the reader to shuffle, re-order and peruse according to the chance arrangement of the pages.⁷ As we have already noted, Guo meets these challenges of non-linear form by bringing other ordering mechanisms into *CCEDL* (and later *ADL*). The structure of the calendar year, which, in Mandarin Chinese, has a more progressive organizing logic than English because month names are numbered, provides a linear calendrical aspect to *CCEDL* and Guo's aforementioned tactic of gradually *improving* her narrative voice throughout the novel traces a linear dynamic of arrival and familiarization.

So far, in surveying Guo's lexicographic form, I have hinted at some literary precursors for her writing without noting a major hypotext for her "dictionary" novels: Roland Barthes's lexicon of affect, *A Lover's Discourse* (1977). As Guo has recalled in interview, when she was an art school student studying film writing in Beijing she was "very attached to a few European authors ... Barthes was one of the very important ones ... [he offered] a different type of narrative, of fragments – not a complete narrative".⁸ She has also suggested that after this early formative encounter with Barthes, she considered his writing "amongst the most original in postmodern literature".⁹ The lasting importance of Barthes's work for Guo will be picked up shortly, but first I want to engage with a broader set of formal and intellectual references in Guo's work: the legacy of the aesthetic aims and cultural-revolutionary ambitions of French radical thought in the latter half of the 1960s. In this reference-frame, by far the greatest stated intertextual and perhaps also multimodal formal influence in Guo's work (alongside writers such as Milan Kundera and Italo Calvino) is European new wave cinema. Guo became interested in French and Italian *nouvelle vague* as a student in Beijing in the early 1990s, and her prolific parallel career as a filmmaker has seen her pay homage to Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean-Luc Godard. Her most recent video work has also incorporated creative responses to the Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin's theorizing of mechanical reproduction – which also becomes a parallel theme, involving art reproduction, in *ALD*.

It is via Barthes and her other theoretical lodestar, Benjamin, that Guo navigates issues of production and authenticity in both *CCEDL* and *ALD*. Indeed, we can go further and suggest that the reflective engagement with, and digressive incorporation of these theorists allows Guo a certain latitude in what might seem a *self*-plagiarism and duplication, in which *ALD*, with its arrival and inter-ethnic romance trope, its lexicographic form and its London setting, appears to reprise the plot dynamic and setting of her debut novel, *CCEDL* and becomes “a continuation of the concerns” of that work.¹⁰ The continental-philosophical preoccupation with structure and taxonomy, and with exposing the contingency of structural truths (which marks the theoretical transition from structuralism to poststructuralism) also shapes the formal aesthetics of both works. The textual preferences of continental philosophy can be traced further in the way Guo continually brings language to the fore, denying it the transparency of realism. Indeed, the process of writing and self-translating in another language, which features so consistently and with such startling effect in Guo’s work, automatically draws attention to contingencies of meaning and emphasizes the linguistic-cultural construction of the world.

Guo’s strong affinity for the radical intellectual legacy of continental thought and aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s via figures like Barthes, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean-Luc Godard also takes in the Chinese and East Asian interests of these authors and auteurs. One of the best-known textual examples of this intellectual engagement with China is Michel Foucault’s second-hand reference to a Chinese encyclopaedia in the preface to *The Order of Things* (1966). Here Foucault recalls a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” referred to in a story by Jorge Luis Borges, in which animals are divided up into unexpected categories: “(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens” (xv). The passage is from Borges’ story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” included in the collection *Otras Inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*) (1952) and refers to a work, “The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge”, supposedly mentioned by the nineteenth-century philologist Franz Kuhn (see Wicks). For Foucault, the passage from Borges provides a telling insight into the cultural specificity of structure: “In the wonderment of this taxonomy ... the thing that, by means of the fable, is

demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (xv).¹¹

The East Asian fascinations of continental philosophy are readily evident in the Maoist sympathies of the French journal *Tel Quel*. By the early 1970s, the journal's editorial board, which included Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleyne, François Wahl, and Julia Kristeva, among others, had become disillusioned with the Leninist pronouncements of the *Parti Communiste Français* and started to pursue a pro-Chinese editorial line. In the process, argues Richard Wolin, "Sollers and company [became ...] convinced that the Cultural Revolution was tailor-made for semiologists like themselves ... at last, here was a revolution that placed cultural themes front and centre" (270). The journal's editors even organized a field trip to China in 1974 and were feted by the Chinese state in return for pro-Maoist copy on their return. Barthes accompanied the *Tel Quel* team on their excursion but was at turns bored and disappointed that China did not offer him the expected experience of radical difference. Barthes's interest in "the East" had already developed in more productive directions in earlier visits to Japan, the basis for his *Empire of Signs* (1970), where he immersed himself in Japanese culture as a semiotic landscape and revelled as much in the untranslatable aspects of Japan as the cultural forms he selected for analysis. In China, shepherded by the State and taken on tours and official visits, Barthes found the very opposite of his Japanese experience: a deadening sameness, uniformity, and totalitarian monotony (Zhang).

Barthes arguably made two important discoveries in Japan that point us back towards Guo's writing and its formal affordances: the beauty of the fragment and the effectiveness of an impressionistic repurposing of the travelogue. As Dennis Porter argues, Barthes's new take on the travelogue (in *Empire of Signs*) does not "grasp after meaning" or repeat a "turgid ethnography" but instead "explore[s] the nature of his own desire by means of a detour through otherness" (288). Each of these features could easily be taken as a description of Guo's writing method, with language-learning taking the mediating place of a kind of existential quest via desire and sexual self-discovery. The cumulative formal effect of Guo's close reflexive

engagement with Barthes and with French post/structuralism is, appropriately enough, a kind of mirroring or *mise-en-abyme* in which Guo's journey to (and arrival in) the West and her interest in lexicographic order riffs on an earlier French detour towards the East as a way of exploring similarly experimental notions of order and meaning. This is not to say that Guo does not sometimes decry the more absurd cross-cultural projections of the *nouvelle vague*, such as Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), a film about a radical Maoist cell in Paris which she saw and disliked at film school: "it just felt silly watching Westerners pretending they were taking part in the Chinese revolution" (*Once* 189). Yet when we consider the intersectional power dynamics of language and the legacies of a Cold War Chinese identity, Guo's engagement with a French avant-garde "radical orientalism" can be seen to co-opt the latter's playful challenge to taxonomy and forms of structured order.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers

Guo has suggested that her anglophone debut, *CCEDL* was as influenced by Barthes as her later work: "I have to mention the first novel I wrote in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. I wrote in broken English, and I was making an attempt to somehow make my own 'lover's discourse' [...] when I first came to London".¹² If Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* is a template for a fragmentary, citational self-analysing form in both *CCEDL* and *ALD*, then his preface in that text is worth reviewing here. In the first pages of *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes elaborates on his method as one in which *discourse* evokes the etymology of *dis-cursus*, "originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings ... the [Lover's] discourse exists only in outbursts of language" (3). Moreover, within this scheme, the discursive fragment exists as a "figure", which Barthes regards as an arrested phrase, almost a snapshot or captured moment that can be recognized as such by others. Lastly, in Barthes's exploration of the affective modality of being-in-love, the subheading for each fragment is not specifically "its definition" but is intended rather as an *argumentum*, an "exposition, account, summary, plot

outline" (5). The effect is a radically stripped-down series of moments that mimic impressionistic subjective experience because nothing intervenes to mediate them. As Stephen Heath notes:

The book is thus the staging of utterance, and its "method" (its strategy for writing) is figurative; the lover, presented dispersed in the spray of figures in which he or she consists, comes together in love: a single being but a host of figures. On this closeness of simulation – no meta-language no second order system of explanation (only, and *with* the lover, the action of a primary language) – depends the effect of the book as a series of little scenes, *tableaux*, an assembly of citations of love, the fragments, exactly, of a discourse. (101)

In *CCEDL* it is striking how closely Guo's methods align with Barthes's: Guo builds her work around "*ideograms of passion*" (Heath 103; my emphasis) and employs each of her dictionary "entries" not exactly as a definition but often, as we have seen, a counter-discursive interrogation of an idea or concept. Moreover, if Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* stages the lover as caught in a nexus of the symbolic and imaginary aspects of the French language, the bilingual consciousness of the protagonist (as lover) in Guo's *CCEDL* and *ALD* adds a further level to linguistic mediation since the physicality of language and libidinal attachment is a parallel concern that threads through both books

To be more precise, then, one of the *affordances* of the use of the citation/fragment in *CCEDL* is a focus on the difficulty of cultural translation, incorporating the resistance of the second-language learner to the particular logic or world-view of the new language as an aspect of the experience of falling in love. A major obstacle faced by mother tongue speakers of Modern Standard Chinese when learning English is the latter's tense structure. Unlike English, Chinese does not modify verbs according to tense and does not mark time except through qualifying time phrases and adverbials, and through lexis. The effect of this practical translation difficulty

in *CCEDL* is a narrative voice that chafes against the illogical complexity of English tenses, and much of the action occurs in the simple present tense, with temporality being conveyed by other textual means. In this sense, while Barthes's work exposes the subjective instabilities of the self-in-language, or as a product of language, Guo's protagonist, as a lover, exists in an even less stable space in a perpetual present tense *between languages*.

As in a number of Barthes's works, including *Mythologies* and *Empire of Signs* as well as *A Lover's Discourse*, Guo's adoption of a lexicographic form allows her to convey experience in fragments or successive figures, something which mimics the isolated impressionistic nature of cultural encounter and arrival. What interests me particularly about this formal choice is the way Guo incorporates a level of misrecognition or misreading into her chosen template for fiction – the bilingual dictionary – a form that conventionally pins down cross-linguistic equivalence and synonymy. In this sense, Guo, like the Barthes of *The Empire of Signs*, is clearly uninterested in constructing a “turgid ethnography” but produces instead a text woven under tension between translatable and untranslatable aspects of migrant arrival, between linguistic resistance and acquiescence. (It is important to remember here that the original “love affair” of *CCEDL*, as conceived by Guo, was Zhuang's growing linguistic intimacy with English as an object of desired cognitive familiarity, and that it was editorial pressure that led to the subsequent inclusion of an actual, characterized lover for Guo's protagonist.)¹³

Guo's formal dialogue with Barthes continues in *CCEDL* in the focus on cultural signifiers like “Full English Breakfast” or incidental pieces of text that bring into sharp focus the packaging and language of consumer products. In these, Guo's lexicographic choices are reminiscent of the catalogue-style arrangement of Barthes's *Mythologies* with its capsule essays on food, cars, and other consumer products. In *CCEDL* Zhuang's first encounter with a British meal is the “Full English Breakfast” offered at her hostel: this menu item evokes not the national heartiness or sustaining – albeit greasy – honesty that a British cultural theorist working in the tradition of Barthes's semiotic analysis might find in the term, but a foreignness that slips away from comprehension into a visceral response to unfamiliar food: “I never seeing a *breakfast* like that.

Is big lunch for construction worker ... food like messy scrumpled eggs, very salty bacons, burned bread, very thick milk, sweet bean in orange sauce" (16). Instead of the reassuring childhood familiarity for the British reader of food like baked beans, Zhuang's perspective wrenches subject-matter out of context in a form of cross-cultural defamiliarization. The manipulation and recontextualizing of the fragment is apparent again in Guo's focus on packaging and pieces of incidental text, like the graphic instructions found in a box of condoms, which provide Zhuang with a shocking insight into what can be said in the West: "I being stopped by these word: one hand pinch the teat of the condom to expel any trapped air ... I needing several seconds to imagine that scene. Is like pornography" (70). Because of their strange "lack of shame" the instructions on how to use condoms seem erotic to Guo's protagonist, whereas their effect for the mother-tongue speaker is much more clinical. As the basis for a lexicographic form, these fragments or *tableaux*, which extend into more abstract relational concepts such as privacy, commitment, personal space, and family, build into a unique kind of dictionary which unsettles as much as it consolidates meaning.

Here Guo's method is reminiscent of postcolonial forms of strategic displacement or "catachresis" in which the postcolonial subject "moves the site and sources of articulation and refuses to cooperate with or to acknowledge the propriety of the normative enunciations of colonial conceptuality" (Hawthorne and van Klinken 163). Fundamental to this process in Guo's fiction is an ambivalent relationship with language in which the language-learner's imperative need to understand a target language coexists with the abiding strangeness of the world view encoded in that language, and a recalcitrant resistance the host culture. Some qualifications are needed, however. Guo's interest in continental thought and her connected interest in order as an expression of a particular form (the dictionary; the lexicon) means that her work perhaps has more in common with decolonial analysis (in the manner theorized as a form of cognitive repositioning by Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo) than a tactical postcolonial catachresis. Furthermore, Guo's fictional account of arrival in Britain and its formal and reflective implications for the novel is also clearly informed by, although not ideologically wedded to, a

broader Marxist awareness of the structured inequalities, pressures, and individualist competitiveness of neoliberal capitalism.

Although not a form in the same way as the generic structure of the dictionary or lexicon, this political and economic critique does have a type of structure. In *CCEDL*, faced with the invisibility of Chinese culture for her British “hosts”, Zhuang resorts to pointing out their hidden connections with China through acts of consumption. She reminds her teacher, Miss Margaret, that her shoes were probably produced in Zhuang’s hometown, and when one of her fellow students gives her a sex toy as a present, its significance for Zhuang is that it was probably assembled in a factory in China in which, she thinks, the women workers did not understand the function of the products they made. “Those womans they don’t really know what is this machine for, but they just make it by putting every piece of spare parts together. It is like they make computers by putting pieces together, but they never ever use computer” (164). Returning to an issue noted in the introduction, Chinese cultural in/visibility in Britain, it becomes apparent that Guo’s strategy is to *make visible*, through her own ex-centric perspective, the hidden, networked lines that underlie China’s place as the distanced invisible production hub for the global North.

A Lover’s Discourse

Since her emergence in 2007 as a new migrant Chinese author writing in English, Guo has experimented with a range of genres, including creative non-fiction, speculative fiction, short stories, and numerous film essays and screenplays. Yet somewhat surprisingly, given this generic ambition, in *ALD* Guo appears to reprise her debut formula from *CCEDL* of the migrant Chinese student arrival in Britain, the struggle with language and an alien culture, and the central motif of the intercultural relationship and sexual awakening. Where Guo departs from the earlier work is in her use of historical setting: while *CCEDL* is set broadly at the time of writing (2002–3), *ALD* dates its student-protagonist’s winter arrival in Britain to December 2015, six months prior to the Brexit referendum, with all the confusion about belonging and

national identity that this historical placement entails – but the possibilities of this very specific historical dating remain undeveloped except in terms of broader themes of itinerancy, and is incidental across the novel as a whole.

Here again, in *ALD* as in *CCEDL*, the intertextual engagement with Barthes is strongly apparent but in the later novel the *implicit* debt to Barthes, evidenced above in Guo's statements about literary influence, becomes *explicit*. Not only does Guo borrow the translated title of Barthes's work for her own novel but she also prefaces her fiction with a quotation from the hypotext: "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers". Barthes's biographical writing is also discussed by characters in the novel, so that his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* operates intertextually on several levels, becoming a hypotext, while also standing as a focus on metafictional commentary *in* the text.

While the narrator of *CCEDL*, Zhuang, arrives in Britain as a language student, the unnamed narrator of *ALD* opts for postgraduate study as an armouring device against the existential threat of arrival: "I wanted to equip myself with an intellectual mind so that I could enter a foreign land and not be lost in it. I would have a stance or mission, a way of navigating as an outsider" (7). Guo's protagonist cultivates the required "intellectual mind" through doctoral research in visual anthropology at King's College London where she writes her thesis about a village of talented copyist painters in Guangdong Province, China, who have become adept at reproducing masterpieces by canonical western artists such as Monet, Chagall, and Da Vinci.¹⁴ This academic research develops into a separate subplot, running alongside the relationship between Guo's Chinese student protagonist and her boyfriend, a landscape designer. The novel's other major thematic concern is the nature of roots and home, conveyed in the setting of some of the narrative on a houseboat, and in the later attempts by the narrator and her partner to start a more settled, stable existence in rural Germany after the birth of their daughter.

The visual anthropology plot strand of *ALD*, apart from allowing Guo some ironic reversals of the ethnocentrism of conventional anthropology (when her student protagonist interviews

Londoners as “native informants”), enables her to elaborate on the aforementioned trope of production and cultural circulation with reference, this time, to Walter Benjamin’s well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.¹⁵ While Zhuang in *CCEDL* makes sometimes subversive connections between her own cultural invisibility (in post-millennial Britain) and her host country’s invisible web of economic connection with the lives of workers (as producers) in China; in *ALD* this global economic nexus of production and consumption is taken further so that the narrator’s research becomes a way of mapping and reflecting on the commercial reproduction of art in the China-mediated global economy. In this sub-plot, Guo deliberately challenges assumptions about value and authenticity by staging a metacommentary through the device of her narrator’s PhD *viva*, in which the narrator is questioned by the external examiner about her understanding of Benjamin’s essay and challenged with not understanding its wartime contexts. Guo’s narrator reflects afterwards that ultimately, she finds context unimportant, and that originality (as a kind of freedom from intertextuality) is irrelevant:

All the things I wrote about originality were kind of beside the point.

Originality is a fetish of people who want to control the art market and the publishing industry. It is also a fetish of academics, particularly the males and the old farts. What I was really interested in ... were the sweating workers in Chinese villages ... I loved being with those artisans and feeling their energy and their lack of self-consciousness. They were not precious in any way about their work. (222)

The narrator’s longed for identification with the subaltern copyists of rural China is both stated and enacted here, as Guo plays with the idea of the copy and the “fake” in her actual co-option and unselfconscious formal reproduction, on her own terms, of *A Lover’s Discourse* as a “classic” text of European critical theory.

For Guo's narrator in *ALD* a significant personal insight into Barthes's writing is the realization – gained through discussions with her partner – that Barthes's own experience of love was defined not by an expected stereotyped “French” heteronormative succession of lovers, but by Barthes's homosexuality and his close relationship with his mother.

For me, Barthes's discourses on love represented the complex relations between a man and a woman. I had always thought of it as heterosexual love. Now you told me this love expert had never really been romantically involved with any woman ... For all these years, the book had been a personal document for me, speaking to me. But now I had to admit it wasn't speaking to me, or of me, exactly. Or not in the way I thought it had. (81)

Across three numbered fragments titled “Barthesian Love Discourse”, Guo presents her protagonist's intertextual critical engagement with Barthes as a kind of misrecognition, hinting at the possibility that love itself is also prone to not really “knowing” the beloved, and setting up a thematic equivalence between textual misreading, cultural mistranslation, and the existential uncertainty of loving another person.

In *ALD*, Guo's protagonist's mis/reading of Barthes poses further questions about the need for an authorial contextual understanding of any text. More importantly, it sheds further light on Guo's duplicating and replicating technique. Subversively, the act of *textual* misrecognition here points towards misrecognition as an aspect of cultural encounter that Guo's protagonist recalls from reading Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, where, as we have seen, Barthes is less interested in comprehensive cultural understandings *per se*, and more creatively engaged with the feeling of misrecognition or disorientation generated by his lack of knowledge of Japanese. In *CCEDL* and *ADL*, both narrators' similar misrecognitions have a type of agency, not just as a defamiliarizing or catachrestic force noted earlier, but as a tactical reversal of the conventional, ethnocentric cultural dynamic in which the Chinese arrival *must* know English (and

understand British culture), but British/European nationals are historically sanctioned to remain largely ignorant of Chinese language and culture.

Form and Misreading

In this sense, Guo's use of form aims at almost exactly the opposite effect to Han Shaogong's dictionary novel. Where Han's work sought to evoke a whole multivalent ethnographic world, and to mimic the expansive epistemological mode of the dictionary or encyclopaedia, Guo's lexicographic form is more bound up with her sense of the gendered possibilities of particular writing modes. Recalling reading an interview with her favourite author, Marguerite Duras, Guo's narrator in *ALD* states:

Duras ... was talking about how she felt suffocated by reading classic novels, especially Balzac. She pointed out that Balzac describes *everything* in his books. Absolutely everything. And it's exhausting for readers. In Balzac's novels *there's no place for the reader*, I remember Duras said. I felt the same with most of the classic novels taught at school. They were too male [...] too exhaustive. (92)

In contrast to the "collating" anthropological ambitions of Han's *Biji* style (which, like Guo's writing, is itself a response to the apparent restrictions of conventional European realism), Guo's "lexicographic turn" anticipates a *particular* impressionistic, subjective narrative, one in which interstitial space is allowed for the reader. For Guo's narrator, form in *ALD* is also implicated in a sensuality that is central to reading itself: "the different kinds of sensuality expressed by different authors seemed to be a primal factor in my reading experience. There was always a barrier for me to cross when I read books by male authors" (91). Indeed, Guo's narrator is fascinated by Barthes's writing precisely because it challenges her gendered schema of literature: "The sole exception was Barthes. Barthes was like a woman who could not stop

talking. A good woman brimming with words” (91–2). As we have seen above, the constitutive irony in the “reading” of Barthes is that this insight derives from a fundamental misreading or misrecognition that challenges the whole idea of easy translation

What a comparative reading of Guo’s “lexicographic” fiction reveals, then, is an engagement with migrant arrival as a formalized mode of experience that does not just involve the subjective negotiation of “East” and “West” but also engages with an earlier relay of intellectual arrivals and departures between Asia and Europe in the work of commentators like Barthes. Built into this process are bold challenges to some conceptual *doxa*: namely whether the West must always be interpreted on its own terms, and whether context is always necessary as a frame for cultural encounter. A notable intertextual example of this issue occurs in Guo’s memoir *Once Upon a Time in the East*, where she recalls being introduced to Philip Larkin’s “MCMXIV”, a poem which famously laments the generation of young men lost in World War I. Reflecting on a line of the poem – “Never such innocence again” – Guo asks whether it means that “men and women can never again fall in love with the absolute innocence and passion of the first time” (256). The historical meaning of British innocence in 1914, and Larkin’s direct attempt to tackle that subject at a national level, makes Guo’s question something of a deliberate misreading, but the issue here is not to ask whether the reading is “correct”, but rather to consider what kind of aesthetic experience Guo forges from the opacity that cultural forms maintain for those who cannot (yet) claim them.

The “internal” formal connections of Guo’s lexicographic novels pose equally insistent questions about whether artistic originality can be sustained in a globalized world that obscures or distances the realities of production and consumption. Guo has noted of her first dealings with British publishers: “Here [in the West], it seemed that writing was another form of industrial production” (*Once* 266), a sentiment that sits uneasily with her creative investment in the counter-hegemonic energies of the 1960s. Indeed, for a writer who saw her new life in the West as largely dependent on her continued literary success, the tension that Sarah Brouillette has identified as “literature’s engagement with the incorporation of the value

of culture's autonomy from capital *into* neoliberal capital" (17) must have been even more acute for Guo. In *ALD* a certain level of irony accrues in Guo's "writerly" play with the idea of the replicated or franchised work. Within the neoliberal economy of global publishing, Guo seems to ask, should it not be possible, following an initial market success, to play with the idea of the copy? And in an industry that rewards marketing reliability and a consistency of return, is it not reasonable to assume that transnational authors will replicate or remake their own best works? Our immediate answers may be inconclusive but reading Guo we can be certain that the underlying forms of cultural dialogue and cross-referencing that now shape global literatures of arrival have taken on a new intercultural sophistication and complexity.

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Notes

1 In making this claim I do not assume that Guo's "postcolonial" migrancy, or its creative expression, is somehow inherently indicative of agency – a position which has been become dated, especially when associated with the work of Homi Bhabha, as part of a "default" mode of ideological critique in postcolonial readings.

2 *Biji* were collections of notes or entries, and the genre comprised (a) story compendia, (b) jottings or notes which cover a wide range of different subjects (something like a miscellany) or (c) collated jottings devoted to a single subject, such as calligraphy or poetry (Fu 104). The scholar-official class of Song China found in the discontinuous *Biji* form an ideal vehicle for knowledge which was often gathered during peripatetic careers that involved multiple postings in different parts of the empire (Zhang 45).

Nevertheless, from our present-day perspective *Biji* and other comparable forms such as category books are historically distant and their complex, longer-term influence on Chinese literature falls beyond the scope of this article. In referring to the *Biji* form here I want to

underline the long tradition of discontinuous narrative forms in Chinese literature while not suggesting a direct continuity between the *Biji* and Guo's work, or assuming the kinds of essentialized transhistorical cultural continuities associated with scholars such as Julia Kristeva, discussed elsewhere in this article. For a critique of this tendency see Gayatri Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame." *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1988. 134–53.

3 Like Han, Guo also has a deep understanding of Chinese rural culture as an aspect of her background, but this comes as a result of her being fostered by her grandparent in coastal Fujian until she was nearly seven, not as a political "sending down".

4 See "Translator's Preface" in Han Shaogong *A Dictionary of Maqiao* ix. For a contextualized discussion of Han's lexicographic novel see Monika Schmitz-Emans, "Examples and Poetics of Wordplay in Han Shaogong's Language-Reflective Novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao*." *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, edited by Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler, 1st ed. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018. 217–34.

5 For details of this debate see Paola Iovene, "Authenticity, Postmodernity, and Translation".

6

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/On+labors+of+love+and+language+learning%3A+Xiaolu+Guo+rewriting+the...-a0475226561>. See also Interview by Harriet Evans, "China in Britain," *Translating China*, 2021. Web. <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/06/15/beijing-from-below-a-conversation-with-harriet-evans/>.

7 In fact, as some critics note, the "shuffle novel" rarely fulfils its promise of continuous radical plot variation since authors tend to "stack the cards" to achieve particular plot pathways

(Husárová and Montfort). The “shuffle novel” does, however, lend itself to particular effects, evoking the fragmentary nature of memory and impressionistic post-traumatic recall, where linearity is not necessarily a predominant feature.

8 “Translating Love in the Time of Brexit” interview with Jaeyeon Yoo

<https://electricliterature.com/xiaolu-guo-novel-lovers-discourse/>

9 Xiaolu Guo “The Way we read has changed radically in the digital age” The New Statesman interview with Ellen Peirson-Hagger <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/goldsmiths-prize/2020/11/xiaolu-guo-a-lovers-discourse-roland-barthes-goldsmiths-prize>

10 “Translating Love in the Time of Brexit” interview with Jaeyeon Yoo

<https://electricliterature.com/xiaolu-guo-novel-lovers-discourse/>

11 No source text for Borges’s (or Kuhns’s) “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” has been identified and it is probably fictitious. Given that Borges’s writing often involves a wonderful fictional counterfeiting of bibliographic scholarship, the fictional Chinese source text should not be a surprise. The fact that Michel Foucault does not register this fictionality in his preface is also perhaps to be expected given that the engagement of intellectuals like Sartre, Barthes, and Kristeva with China was largely self-directed and defined by their search for alternatives to a dominant, “universal” European sovereign subject.

12 “Translating Love in the Time of Brexit” interview with Jaeyeon Yoo

<https://electricliterature.com/xiaolu-guo-novel-lovers-discourse/>

13 See Ania Spyra, 449.

14 See Guo's 2018 film *Five Men and a Caravaggio* which deals with the same subject matter.

15 See Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Illuminations, translated by Harry Zohn, Fontana, 1973.

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