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Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience

By Rey Chow

Reviewed by Andrea Riemenschnitter

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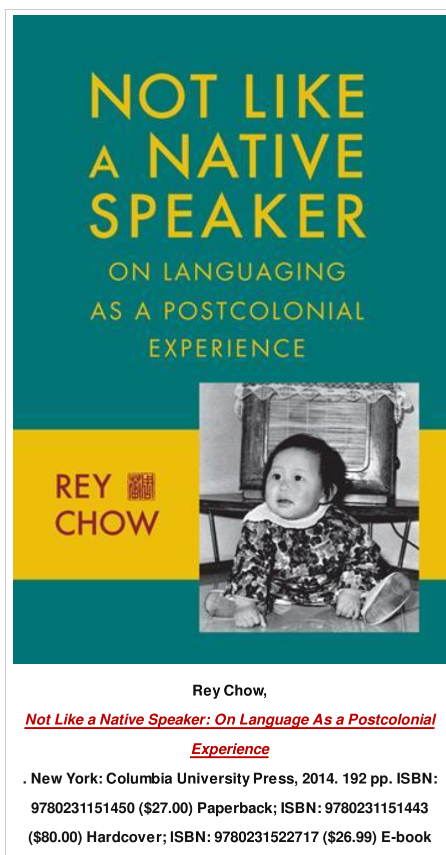

Rey Chow,
Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language As a Postcolonial Experience
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Research on the nature of human language traverses academic fields such as linguistics, literary studies, philosophical discourse, social sciences, ethnography, and psychology. Rey Chow's analysis of the postcolonial linguistic situation under the regime of global neoliberal capitalism both challenges and supplements this ongoing inquiry by looking into the value ascriptions undergirding prevailing linguistic politics, and the inequalities and irritations that they produce or perpetuate. *Not Like a Native Speaker* draws from ideas first developed in Chow's 2002 book, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* as well as research on colonial subjugation through linguistic displacement and dispossession. However, in its focus on the by-products of non-native "languaging"—such as accents, unarticulated affects, or reverberations of past iterations (in a different idiom)—it offers new, thought-provoking insights into the social effects engendered by imperialism and the rapid development of new communication technologies. Chow conducts a rigorous, timely investigation into today's unprecedented interlingual traffic, addressing both its unfavorable historical legacies and fallow opportunities. A series of questions, such as how language can become a tool to injure and destroy others or "how to strive for self-recognition even as one is forced to efface oneself in the process of speaking and writing" (p. 17), steers Chow's examination of the postcolonial linguistic conundrum. Applied to a wide range of theoretical and literary sources, these questions help to shed new light on the role of languaging in the production of communities, with their particular memories and knowledge, and thus serve her core concern: to understand how collective grief following experiences of (linguistic) loss—embodied in individuals who were concomitantly subjected to racial, cultural, class- and gender-related, or other ostracisms—spurred the contemporary, postcolonial world into becoming such a terribly fragile and dangerous place. To put it in Chow's words, the book asks how the non-native speaker can turn her loss into "a kind of prosthesis" (ibid.) through a positive attitude toward the emergent interlingual community; this implies striving for alternative possibilities of world-making rather than forever clinging to melancholy.

Chow conceptualizes the postcolonial experience as mediated, contaminated, and potentially fueled by antagonistic sets of the elites' subjugating language politics and subversive acts of linguistic recreation from below. These latter are overdetermined by political power relations, historical experiences, lingering cultural orientations, etc. on site. Through languaging they play an important role in the emancipation

of the racialized self, by quietly undermining the alien, superimposed forms of cultural domination. Revisiting the origins and critiques of racialized enunciation, Chow establishes a dialogue between Frantz Fanon's observation that colonial language possession could be translated by the colonized into more viable tones of skin color (*Black Skin, White Masks*) and Walter Benjamin's concept of naming (*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*). This dialogue requires a transposition of the romantic aspects of Benjamin's community-forming mimeticism—between humans and things—onto a sociopolitical frame, where the basic rules of the contact zone are established. Not things, but other people are being named in this frame. It is important to remember here that in Fanon's colonial environment this naming was symptomatic of a harmful practice in which insulting racial slurs, such as "Dirty Nigger," were common (3). Chow underscores the fact that such derogatory forms of naming cannot be easily rejected by the named, to the point that Fanon speaks of (symbolic) amputation in cases where one is determined to ignore a racist attribution. To put it another way, when the colonized is interpellated as an inferior member of the community, it should come as no surprise that he or she acquiesce to the attribution, because to deny it would leave the individual without an identity of his/her own, without an alternative avatar through which to imagine oneself and participate in the social order. Hence, Chow demonstrates that derogatory naming paradoxically affords some kind of participation even as it denigrates and truncates aspects of one's identity. The options for colonial subjects' future world-making are clearly limited by such practices; depending on the political climate, these can range from active participation in the formation of an imagined community to mere reactive tactics toward police surveillance and seizure.

The moments when an individual is made aware of such violent cuts, meant to injure, are frequently accompanied by experiences of shock and aphasia. Racialization "makes it impossible not to notice the cut as *asymmetrical, nonmutual, and unsuturable* and in that way brings us much closer to the rawness of the aphasia that afflicts those who bear the brunt of the cut's force/violence" (7). Playing out the audiovisual ambiguities of the word "tones," the introduction to the book offers two examples for the planes on which such linguistic violence may play out its effects. The anecdote of nine-year-old Barack Obama being shocked into aphasia by a journal picture of a man's irreversible defacement, due to his use of commercially advertised skin-bleaching chemicals, exemplifies the pitfalls of submissive self-renovation, as in the manner of the black man's attempts to whiten his skin that turn out to be a doomed kind of self-disguise. Indeed, the man's unappealing, fake skin tones indicate a double disfigurement: the "defective correction of something already deemed defective" (8). Chow's second example appears more reversible, but harmful nevertheless. The special language training imposed by the managers of offshore call centers on service people operating mainly from India and the Philippines ensures that English-speaking customers are addressed in an idiom and accent they recognize as their own. Would the regimes of globalization cease to tolerate such commercially invested fictions of linguistic nativeness, and their geopolitical consequences, if they better understood the corrosive social dynamics accompanying them? It is the various kinds of physical as well as psychological conversions, and their underlying forms of disfigurement and loss, that are submitted to rigorous reflection in the following two chapters.

Chapter 1, "Derrida's Legacy of the Monolingual," ventures into the deep waters of one's first—and sometimes, as in the case of Derrida, singular—language as a most intimate form of dwelling. Conforming to his critical attitude toward colonial domination, and yet seen from the vantage point of a privileged colonial subject, Derrida envisions monolingualism as "of the other"—that is, not fully one's own, but rather a legacy, a delegated habitat. Derrida's discomfort with his Algerian French accent, as a lived symptom of the linguistic violence of colonial French threatening to expose its alleged impurity or inadequacy for intellectual enunciation at any moment of the speaker's reduced vigilance, underscores the intricate paradox of colonial linguistic practice. In other words, "whatever he rejects about French he must declare in French, the only language he has, but which he, nevertheless, cannot call his own" (p. 24, Chow's quote from Abdel-Jaouad). Engaging Derrida's notion of the French Algerian monolingual habitat with Bourdieu's socioeconomic concept of the habitus (as a distinctive set of cultivated, or embodied principles of conduct and taste pertinent to specific social groups and their geohistorical condition), Chow highlights the two concepts' similarity in outlook. Derrida's linguistic habitat being inherited as a system and continuously transformed and deferred in actual speech acts, can thus be likened to Bourdieu's habitus as a similarly pre-given system of interpersonal practices. Their characteristics are most clearly visible when the economic order changes and a social group must adapt itself to new living conditions. It follows from the inequities inscribed into the colonial political economy that postcolonial monolingualism should be conceived of in terms of otherness. However, this otherness cannot only be an "exclusive sign of imposition by political force or cunning" (29); rather, it should remain open in character, promising some kind of utopian potentiality through the arrival of newness in the figure of "the coming of the other" (30). As Derrida's theorizing implies, to be aware of one's accent is a precondition for the imagination of other possibilities, but to turn the accent into a source of lifelong suffering, as he did, simultaneously hampers the possibility of their actual arrival. In conclusion, Chow raises two questions: first, given that Derrida looks at cultures as always being originarily colonial, what does it mean for egalitarianism, as an ethical political aim, if its utopianism inevitably results in oppressive homogeneity? Should it, under these circumstances, be abandoned altogether in favor of alternative visions of liberation? Second, and with an eye to the title of Derrida's book (*Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*), is it not conceivable to imagine multiple genealogies, and consequently origins, with colonialism being just one amongst them? In other words, is not Derrida's claim that all cultures originate in colonialism ultimately essentializing, and if so, will it obfuscate alternative futures and communities

rather than open hitherto closed doors?

The second chapter elaborates on the question of origins and multiple genealogies, offering as an example Chow's personal experience of colonial language education in Hong Kong. In particular, she reports on how she was assessed at Stanford University, where she had enrolled as a student. A supposedly well-intended comment by her professor on one of her papers complimented her on a clear writing style, concomitantly pointing out that her colonial education was the source of this laudable skill. The judgment of her writing not as something individually achieved, but rather as a collective symptom of successful political and ideological subjugation created in her feelings of unease and even stigmatization. The lingering irritation later led her to develop the concept of coercive mimeticism. Whereas people without a colonial background are spared the presumption of embodying a particular regime's intended effects, the colonial subject is predominantly perceived as a result of them. Proceeding from this observation, Chow aims at something else here—namely, harnessing the creative potential resulting from the irreversible givenness of a new interlingual situation, if the latter can be appropriated open-mindedly. Concluding her observations drawn from writers of multiple ethnic backgrounds and Benjamin's reflections on the decline of the aura of art objects as well as Foucault's definitions of the énoncé as found object, she envisions the mass experience of postcolonial languaging as a collective refashioning of the world with dispossession as its key.

Having explained the complicated linguistic situation in Hong Kong, where multilingualism traverses at least three idioms and two (and a half) writing systems—Cantonese (traditional Chinese characters), standard Mainland Chinese (Putonghua, simplified Chinese characters) and English (alphabetic characters)—Chow maps the pathways of postcolonial writing, locating them somewhere between Chinua Achebe's affirmation of the (albeit involuntarily acquired) second language on the condition that it does not slavishly mimic native speakers' English, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's resistant turn toward his native African Gĩkũyũ. Chow deems the latter's grief-stricken nativism as especially disturbing on the grounds that the formerly colonized finds him- or herself "condemned to a vicious circle of melancholic longing: displaced from her own indigenous language and accustomed to seeing herself and her culture from the outside, she . . . yearns for a return to a lost harmony, yet must continue to survive in a world in which such a return is impossible" (47). Chow stresses the fact that, despite their different approaches, both choices aim at preserving the particulars of the writers' local cultures, which are transmitted through language based on a transgenerational memory. This brings her to link the interlingual entanglements of the postcolonial cultural milieu—by including "languaging movements, gestures, habits, and affects" (38)—to Pierre Nora's communal environments of memory as outlined in the concept of *milieux de mémoire*. In colonial contexts the trauma of linguistic loss and displacement bleeds into culture via the collective memory, thus generating the melancholic postcolonial scene, argues Chow. Learning and speaking colonial English at school produces cultural uprootedness, including the vexation of being caught between languages that are encoded as indexes of superiority and inferiority. Globalization and new communication technologies render this scene of languaging even more intricate, so that the illusion of "a natural link between a language as such and those who are . . . its users by default" (41) has become shattered once and for all. Under these circumstances there is only one option: to embrace the non-native accents and linguistic multiplicities of postcolonial writers as harbingers of the future. Coining a new term that underscores this future-oriented, productive messiness of postcolonial knowledge and discourse, Chow offers the notion of the"xenophone," which is meant to be an anarchical, insubordinate, forever fluid mélange of different accents and tones.

Having drawn a connection between the barely visible handprints of the potter in Benjamin's reflections on the aura of objects and the unconscious of the énoncé in Foucault's discourse theory, Chow defines the xenophone as laced with the liminal experiences, memories, and expectations of postcolonial, interlingual communities. Whether the language they speak is already naturalized as monolingual (as in Derrida's case), or a hybridized secondary idiom as in Achebe's—and arguably Ngũgĩ's—case, they will invariably feed, as shades or tones, the marks of subjugation and lived inequality into their narratives. The three chapters that follow can be seen as a spectrum of case studies illustrating and testing the concept of xenophonic languaging developed by the author in the two preceding, theory-oriented chapters. Consequently, but no less surprisingly, they focus on what we would call, in musical contexts, the overtones of xenophone languaging rather than its literal aspects. Overtones are an essential ingredient of every musical piece without (normally) being perceived by audiences as a key part of the composition or performance. Yet, as Chow's three experiments elucidate, to pay closer attention to those co-presences that are hardly visible or audible is eye-opening, because the postcolonial world's aporia and possibilities are arguably best mirrored in these clandestine aspects of languaging.

A traditional mourning ritual described in Ba Jin's novel *Family* (家 1931) is used as the vantage point for Chow's reflections on the effects of cultural inequity in translation, as developed in chapter 3. The chapter's title is revealing of Chow's overall concern, as it is partly in parentheses, thus partitioning the trajectories at issue into a conscious and a subliminal part: "Translator, Traitor; Translator, Mourner (or, Dreaming of Intercultural Equivalence)" (61). Employing a distant, scornful perspective in *Family*, Ba Jin elaborates on the death of a family patriarch who imposed his rigid antiquated worldview on his large extended family. This death is met with the hope that it will finally liberate the younger generation, and by implication the newly founded Chinese nation, from their old, paralyzing cultural paradigms. Ba Jin's lengthy

description of the ritual scene both displaces and devalues the mourning women's ceremonial wailing as nonsensical, argues Chow. Staged as an embarrassing, anachronistic source of derision, the scene invites readers to reject the ancient values on which the ritual is based. Indeed, the narrative strategy recasts a once powerful native tradition in terms of regression and shame, depicting it as a moment of sheer noise. This procedure of cultural revaluation amounts to a kind of reverse translation: "what is Chinese . . . is translated . . . by being rendered into the (narrative consciousness's) language/literacy of modernization" (66). Ba Jin's construction of inequitable temporalities—between ancient local customs and modern global practice, or between a supposedly superior foreign culture and an inferiorized native tradition—must be understood as a case of unfaithful cultural (rather than verbal) translation, in other words, as a betrayal of one's native culture. In such an array, the translator's proverbial betrayal no longer resides in the nature of language as such, but in the "injunction against those languages/literacies whose circulations have not been driven by the motors of imperialist or capitalist success" (68). From the desire to modernize and the ensuing, drastic abandonment of one's native culture it follows that the latter continues to haunt the community as a "lost object," thereby converting grief into melancholy, in Freud's sense of the word. The community's unfinished relationship with its traditions thus produces unprocessed negative feelings of resentment and guilt, leading to the melancholic symptoms of "self-berating, self-devaluation, and withdrawal from the world" (69). This collective mood at some point induces a restorative attitude, with the melancholic intellectuals "going native," thereby triggering a cultural trend, which Chow calls the"melancholy turn." According to her, the risk of such restoration projects is to become caught in "slow-motion rewindings of the present, revealing, as though on a video recording, what might have been there at an earlier moment" (71). From here, and assisted by Achebe's reading of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darknes*s (1899), Chow moves on to link Ba Jin's narrative devaluation of his own native culture to the melancholic colonizer's essentializing perception of the colonies' *tristesse* as a result of their being nothing more than bad copies of the modern western original. Quoting Derek Walcott's critical comment on the presumed unfinishedness of modern Caribbean cities and culture from the perspective of uncomprehending visitors, Chow suggests how to overcome such grief, or melancholy—and, this reviewer would like to add, other collective negative emotions, such as mistrust and fear—by embracing cultural conviviality in terms of confidently lived diversity. Such an achievement would require the (re-)instatement of intercultural equivalence in a dynamic field of plural languages, literacies, and cultures.

From the examples of the unfaithful cultural translator and faithful melancholic nativist in mainland China, Chow's investigation shifts its focus to the politics and poetics of vernacular food consumption in the postcolonial, ex-British Cantonese-inflected Chinese environment of Hong Kong. "What does it mean to write about minor activities and classes of human beings when Hong Kong's story is regularly renovated and repackaged as part of the grand narrative of the rise and fall of the British and Chinese Empires as well as of global capitalism?," she asks in the book's fourth chapter, which discusses two contemporary writers, Leung Ping-kwan and Ma Kwok-ming. In order to demonstrate how Leung Ping-kwan's lifelong poetic reflection on the relationship between food and aesthetic creation differs from the cultural mainstream, Chow recapitulates the major trends related to eating and consumption in Chinese writing. "[H]unger, scarcity and necessities hard to come by" (81), she argues, have saturated Chinese literary texts, as can be gleaned from classical works dating from as early as a ninth century poem about farmers' labor to the depressing post-Mao Fifth Generation Chinese directors' hunger films, such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) or Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994). Chow identifies a gendered bifurcation with a "rugged masculinist approach to food, whereby ingestion is habitually portrayed as cognate with aggression and conquest" (82). Eating thus comes to be seen as a "virtuous form of violence, a power struggle between man and the hostile world" (82). A corresponding feminine perspective is firmly linked to family life and teaches women to cook in accordance with a set of values linked to health, economics, entertainment, and specific consumer needs. This approach, which Chow calls domestic sentimentality, today most prominently reverberates in overseas narratives, such as Wayne Wang's movie *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). Leung's markedly different attitude toward food according to Chow is an "unconventional thing-oriented preoccupation" (89) that, with sensuous attentiveness and tenderness, tries to redefine the human-thing relationship by engaging in a serious dialogue with vegetables, fruit, soup, or mussels. In this way it enables empathy and bids recognition of the (non-human) other's voice. While writing his poetic foodscapes, Leung takes issue with the world's handling of the city of Hong Kong itself as a consumer commodity. From the point of the 1997 handover, the city has been depicted in Western media as a mute object tossed between British imperialism and global economism, the forces of mainland Chinese nationalism and Western neoliberal moralism. Leung's intervention in this "demeaning *transcultural consumerism* inherent in global geopolitical narratives and commercial transactions" (89) brings to the fore how "Hong Kong is often being discursively swallowed, slighted, brushed aside, and—despite its singularly lived history—made to disappear without a trace down the hegemonic alimentary canals of the world's media" (89). Ma Kwok-ming, on the other hand, concentrates on the relationship between Hong Kong's underprivileged classes and food. Contrary to Leung's reconciliatory lyricism, he writes with a "sense of antagonism and emergency" (92), bringing to light the violent indifference of globalized, capitalist urban culture towards the struggles of the urban poor. Focusing on a series of marginalized figures, he uncovers a voracious cannibalism at work when, for example, Wan Chai's street hawkers are simultaneously persecuted and fined for unauthorized trade and exploited by restaurants and supermarkets who eagerly copy their inventions whenever they come up with new, successful varieties of street food. Ma does not, like modernist Ba Jin and many like-minded intellectuals in early twentieth century mainland China, employ subaltern characters simply to turn the glossy side of Hong Kong over and expose its "rancid underside" (100). Instead, he

carefully registers these characters' tactics of finding fleeting moments of fulfillment in a hostile environment that depends on their services without supporting them. In this way, Ma's essays illuminate the struggles of the underprivileged as ephemeral "constellations of heterologous life forms" (92).

The fifth and last chapter resonates with the second, but at this point engages with Chow's family. Whereas the second chapter's episode of the American professor carelessly judging Chow's clear writing in terms of successful colonial subjugation was introduced to explicate the relationship between political power, language, and habitat/habitus as articulated in its overtones—local accents, moods, unfaithful translations, etc.—this final chapter presents the story of her mother's professional career as a famous Hong Kong radio broadcaster and playwright. In a narrative that ingeniously merges the various ideas developed in the previous chapters into one single character's life story, the author explains the huge impact of radio sound, as an assemblage of increasingly incorporeal signs, on Hong Kong society before the arrival of wireless TV. Moreover, her biography of Ngai Mun (Ai Wen) underscores the coming-into-being of a unique yet fleeting form of lived conviviality, created by a network consisting of the playwright, the radio speakers, sound technology professionals, and the eager audiences of these plays. Chow describes in vivid terms the labors of the mastermind and her handwriting, while also highlighting the underpaid copying hands and the whole labor-intensive yet largely invisible production process. Chow's reconstruction of this network of lived conviviality incorporates her own childhood recollections. She remembers her happiness when listening or participating in the production, but also registers the lingering sadness of Sunday afternoons. These were spent missing her absent parents who produced the next week's program at the studio. Chow closes her recollections with her mother's declining of an invitation to create the radio version of a film, Long Gang's *The Twenty-Eighth Anniversary of Hiroshima* (1973). The movie tells the story of a family of Hiroshima survivors and was designed to be a "carrier of the universal moral 'peace'" (120). Yet Chow's mother, who had been exposed to Japanese imperialist aggression as a young girl together with millions of other Chinese, could not reconcile the film's trajectory with her own grief and feelings of solidarity with fellow victims of the Japanese war atrocities. In her eyes, collaboration in the project would have amounted to a betrayal of the Chinese community. Read with this aporia in mind, the "beyond" Chow hints at in the title of her last subchapter, *From Radio to Film … and Beyond*, leads into a minefield of hardly ever reconcilable meanings, tones, and (mute) accents.

Registering the most subtle linguistic reverberations of scarred historical legacies, *Not Like a Native Speaker* suggests to refashion future communities based on their shared experience of dispossession and on an equal recognition of the multifarious cultural fragments that linger after the loss of precolonial worlds. The book makes a convincing argument for the arrival of the historical moment for everyone to self-confidently pronounce one's own (non-western) accent, and for the world's opening to the creative attempts by contemporary postcolonial intellectuals to exit the epistemic violence of neocolonial capitalism. Once again, Chow demonstrates that western knowledge, especially European theoretical writing, is not external to postcolonial realities; on the contrary, it can play a crucial role in their critical deconstruction. When she concludes her reflections with the recollection of her mother being trapped within her nation's hermetically untranslatable memories, the promise of new horizons opened through affirmative xenophone languaging exposes its frailty, though. Ngai Mun's embodied memories of Japanese war atrocities cannot be set off against the other nation's experiences of victimization, or overwritten by universal moral peace narratives.

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