

**Linguistic Theatricality: Translations of Phenomenological Experience of Desire in Julia  
Cho's *The Language Archive***

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In Julia Cho's *The Language Archive*, a character leaves a marriage to bake bread enhanced by the flavor of her tears dripping into her starter. A couple exclusively argues in English as opposed to their native tongue because in their words, "English is the language of anger...and [their] language is too sacred for this kind of angry talk" (16). Cho's whimsical realism bends the rules of a traditional linear narrative and in a sense, conjugates the characters' expression of feeling into a theatrical language all its own.

*The Language Archive* follows George, a linguist who interviews the last speakers of the world's dying languages and stores these recordings in his language archive. The show opens as Mary, George's wife, decides to leave their marriage. George desperately searches for the right words or gestures to revive their dying union while conducting interviews with Alta and Resten, the last speakers of the made-up language Ellowan. Unfortunately, this task proves to be difficult as the couple refuses to speak to one another. All the while, George's assistant Emma struggles to learn his favorite language, Esperanto, in order to most meaningfully communicate her unrequited love for him. It is as if her body rejects the risk required to speak in an unfamiliar language, let alone one that must embody love.

I directed a production of *The Language Archive* as my undergraduate capstone project at SUNY Purchase college. I think I chose the play because I had no idea how to stage it and that challenge felt enticing. For a play about linguistics, Cho leaves a great deal of communication to the imagination of the actors and the audience. The text provides ambiguous stage directions like "the railroad platform appears" (50), as characters encounter metaphorical and literal crossroads in their lives. As the text is rooted in the poetic rather than the literal, I decided to embrace its ambiguity in my interpretation. In my production the actors in this scene entered with chairs, sat

down in rows and physicalized each bump, twist and turn of the ride. They became passengers on a train speeding toward a proverbial destination rather than a literal one.

Cho's characters experience a tension between their internal lives and the language they possess to express themselves. Such dissonance creates an arguably inconceivable directorial challenge: to stage the barrier between each character's phenomenological experience of human emotion and their ability to communicate it. Yet, Cho's writing embraces what I will argue are two key ingredients that allow for a director to translate emotional expression into theatrical choices: What Dr. Bess Rowen calls "affective stage directions" and theorist Hélène Cixous' "écriture féminine" or "feminine writing." Using these as a vehicle, I will elucidate Julia Cho's lyrical manner of playwriting as well as the ways in which I adapted the play's affective stage directions in my production.

Hélène Cixous's theory of the creative superiority of "écriture féminine" is as much a creative call to arms as a manifesto for a more evolved manner of storytelling. In her critical essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous asserts that the characteristics of feminine writing are closely related to "poetry...(as they) involve gaining strength through the unconscious because the unconscious...is the place where the repressed manage to survive" (880). The most authentic expression of the marginalized artist lies within writing that embraces the esoteric, the obscure and the pros that break form. Cixous' essay traverses the many forms of activism within the feminine art form with little structure. Cixous argues that the characteristics of "écriture féminine" embody a radical form of creative expression because they are "never simple or linear..." as in the "phallogocentric tradition" of male writing (879). This parallel between poetry and the survival of the repressed signifies a feminine need to reject the monolithic style of what

Cixous describes as male writing. A linear narrative is arguably antithetical to her idea of feminine expression because the perspective of the oppressed individual lacks the privilege of utilizing a more straightforward form of communication. If women's bodies have been confiscated, and their right to create censored, as Cixous suggests, then the literary traditions of their oppressor simply do not tell their stories accurately (880).

Cho's writing subverts the repressive characteristics of masculine writing that Cixous critiques while centering her narrative on a male protagonist. George engages in a confessional relationship with the audience. In the moment that Mary declares that she wants to end their marriage, he interrupts the action of the scene to address the audience: "My heart was beating very loudly. But instead of thumping, every beat was saying 'take it back, take it back, take it back.' Just like that. Like a rhythm" (Cho, 11). To compare the rhythm of a heartbeat to a cadence of emotional loss suggests that George feels a primal need to express love for his wife. Yet, when Mary presents George with the opportunity to tell her how he feels and he responds, "Don't ...Go...?" (11). In my production the actress playing Mary froze as if becoming a memory, a snapshot that George will play over and over in his head. I provided the actor playing George with a microphone in the fashion of a TED Talk or an academic conference. The actor and I decided that George would process emotion the only way he knows how to process anything - through academia.

Perhaps the aforementioned moment in the play signifies a lack of bravery on George's part. An actor could decide that George harbors too much fear of his own vulnerability to allow Mary to see how truly devastated he feels or maybe he simply processes emotion at a slower rate than she does. The options are abundant and therein lies the heart of Julia Cho's deeply authentic

depiction of the difficulties of human expression; the space between the moment of the feeling and the moment of verbal communication. George's journey toward recognizing his feelings of love and loss rejects the masculine writing that Cixous describes in that it is circuitous—he goes to the audience, first, before addressing the other characters in the scene. George's expression of his innermost thoughts and desires that lie embedded in his poetic unconscious illustrates the play's nonlinear orientation toward emotional expression.

Cho elaborates on her “écriture féminine” through the play's stage directions. She communicates with future production teams with what Dr. Bess Rowen describes in her essay, “Undigested Reading: Rethinking Stage Directions through Affect,” as “affective stage direction.”

“Affective stage directions require actors, directors, and designers to think through their own embodied experiences in order to make meaning out of these moments of the script, allowing for production teams to make these parts of the plays relevant to a particular cultural moment and location” (308-309).

For example, while George searches for the right words to say to Mary, Emma attempts to learn George's most beloved language Esperanto in order to express her feelings for him. I like to think of their individual journeys as “emotional research” as both of their careers entail linguistic investigation. Their emotional research culminates in a stage direction that translates their unique desires into a physical action; “*the embrace of perfect happiness and perfect sadness*” (40). In breaking from the traditional form of stage directions, Cho leaves room for the actor and director to collaborate with her writing in as abstract or concrete a way as they choose. Another example of this opportunity occurs as George frantically questions the ending of his marriage. The stage

direction following this moment simply states; “*Every careful thing is undone*” (33). Through this affective stage direction Cho elucidates George’s point of view of his meticulously constructed life while leaving space for the production to physicalize exactly what that idea means to them.

As a director, I found that the play asked me to approach it with both structure and an open mind toward the circuitry that Cixous’ advocates for in her theory. Initially, I was not sure what an “*écriture féminine*” style production might look like but I imagined that it started with treating the poetic imagery in the writing with the same weight as the more obvious forms of storytelling like dialogue or staging.

One of my favorite symbolic images in the show occurs at the very end. The actress who plays Alta breaks the fourth wall and describes the deaths of Resten and her own character to the audience.

“They didn’t die...they became trees that intertwined around each other so that one would never suffer the loss of the other, and yes, that is some old myth and not reality, but that is how I choose to tell it and what’s it to you if the last speakers of Elloway are now two trees whose leaves whisper to each other all day long?” (56).

Cho presents Alta’s last line to the audience with a kind of meta theatrical duality. The actor and the character speak as one, enveloping the audience into the world of the play. Alta breaks the barrier between the “real,” the myth, and the theatre while at the same time, asserting that nonlinear forms of language exist as a part of the fabric of nature. Just as humans communicate with each other, so do trees.

My first directorial impulse was to translate this mythic imagery in a literal fashion. I asked the actors to embody their ideas of trees growing through a series of movement exercises. While researching linguistics for the show, I came across the Swedish word “Lagom” which refers to the necessity of moderation. Through my tree experiment, I discovered the intricacies of artistic “lagom” throughout the process. While a lovely idea and a useful movement exercise for the actors, the “human tree” staging looked out of place and forced.

Despite cutting the movement pieces I incorporated the natural world through projection. The production’s projection designer created a video of hand drawn leaves falling. During pivotal scenes in which the characters expressed love or the loss of love, a leaf would fall. To me, the leaves symbolized the beauty and sadness of emotions changing with the passage of time. Love begins and ends just as leaves on trees die and regenerate.

To conclude I offer a final Hélène Cixous quote from “The Laugh of the Medusa.” “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and the one of the privileged alibis” (879). Cho’s writing often works against reason but not necessarily in the same confrontational style as Cixous’s work. Instead she reconstructs the language of “the privileged” in a whimsical way that compliments the magical realism world that she created for *The Language Archive*. Her work rebels against patriarchal styles of writing in a gentle but equally impactful way as Cixous’s call to arms. From instructing future production teams to flood the theatre with the smell of Mary’s freshly baked bread to teaching the audience phrases of Esperanto, *The Language Archive* positions the audience in the same emotional space of the characters despite their differing phenomenological experiences. The play gives its audiences examples of emotional expression that leave room for

the moments where we do not have the “right” words. Although clumsy and sometimes misguided, Cho highlights the courage it takes to speak the same literal and emotional language because, as one character intuits during the final scene of the play, “What is language, my dear if not an act of faith? (56).



## Works Cited

Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of Medusa." *Jstor*. The University of Chicago Press, n.d. Web.

Cho, Julia. *The Language Archive*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2012. Print.

Rowen, Bess. "Undigested Reading: Rethinking Stage Directions through Affect," *Theatre Journal*, John Hopkins University Press, 20 Oct. 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/706609>.