

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Becoming a Global Subject: Language and the Body in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* Angelia Poon

In public and academic discourses, it is the metaphors of flow and fluidity that has most visibly dominated descriptions of the historical phenomenon we think of as contemporary globalisation. It has become axiomatic to speak of national borders dissolving and leading to the worldwide circulation of goods, people, information, images and cultures. For sociologist Manuel Castells, for example, writing as early as the 1980s, what makes contemporary globalisation as effected by developments in information technology distinctive is the way a 'space of flows' has emerged alongside the older 'space of places'.¹ Arjun Appadurai's memorable use of 'scapes' (e.g. mediascape, technoscape, ethnoscape, ideoscape) to characterise a complex, interrelated and shifting global cultural economy has been influential in arguments about the diminished significance of the nation-state as a conceptual and organisational paradigm in thinking about modernity and culture.² Zygmunt Bauman has called the current state of global modernity 'liquid,' justifying his description on the grounds of modernity's 'self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive "modernization", as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long.'³ Metaphors of flow and liquidity imply, of course, lack of friction and obstruction, ease of communication, and flexibility of subjectivity. It is easy to be seduced by such tropes; the problem, as Anna Tsing has pointed out, is when this metaphorical language is adopted uncritically and universally rather than viewed as part of specific and localised claims about scale commensurate with, if not undergirding, certain investments in notions of globality and locality.⁴ Indeed, critical detachment from the rhetoric and poetics of flow in discourses of globalisation is also necessary, I argue, in order to be able to attend more carefully to questions about representations of embodiment and materiality that would otherwise be elided in considerations of globalisation. What happens to the explanatory force of accounts of smooth globalisation when the body comes into the picture? What does it mean to be, not just a global subject, but an *embodied* global subject?

These are questions that bilingual writer and film-maker Xiaolu Guo provokes in her debut novel in English published in 2007, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*.⁵

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 1996-1997.

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, trans. Lydia Bauman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) 11.

⁴ Anna Tsing, 'The Global Situation,' *Schools of Thought: Twenty-five Years of Interpretive Social Science* ed. J. Scott and D. Keates (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2001) 108.

⁵ Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (New York, Anchor Books, 2007). The novel will be referred to as *Dictionary* for the rest of the article. Guo was already an established author in China before she started writing in English and translating and reworking her Chinese novels into English. She moved from China to the U.K in 2002.

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Guo's novel is striking for its preoccupation with bodies, materiality, and tactility.⁶ The narrator and protagonist of the novel is a character named Zhuang Xiao Qiao who calls herself 'Z' for short in the face of English speakers unable to pronounce her name and unwilling to try, a common enough move that is shorthand for the hegemonic tendency of globalisation to simplify or subsume cultural and linguistic differences for the sake of dominant groups. Z moves to England for a year to learn English as part of a not entirely self-willed process of transforming herself into a global subject and embedding herself even more firmly and irrevocably in the social, economic, and linguistic networks that characterise modern day globality. Building upon this basic plot premise, the novel explores the phenomenological way language intersects with the body as it represents Z's embodied bilingual subjectivity while she learns English and encounters the West. What does it mean in visceral and corporeal terms to learn a new language and how is the acquiring of cultural knowledge figured in bodily images in the text? As Z seeks to figure out her place in the world – the relationship between home and away, and Chinese and Western cultures – as part of her global subjectivity, the word-flesh nexus assumes symbolic and narrative importance and the body becomes a slippery and paradoxical signifier of liberation and entrapment, self-sufficiency and deficiency, as well as communication and non-communication. Again and again, the text teases and flirts with the boundaries of language and the material body to test the possibilities of intimacy and communication in a globalised world. At the same time as it discloses how the body is constructed by language, the novelistic text also raises the prospect of the linguistically-resistant body, of how, in short, the body can exceed and evade language to offer instead its own inarticulable yet reassuring and expressive meaning.

Written in struggling English that improves as the narrative progresses, Guo's novel constructs a 'private personal voice' for narration and resembles a notebook or diary registering narrator-protagonist Z's increasing competence in the language; it is divided into what appears to be multiple and separate entries that are a hybrid of sketch, note, and missive which Z addresses to her lover or 'you' but which are also occasions for ruminating upon cultural differences, specific words, aspects of grammar and other vagaries of the English language.⁷ Each entry is prefaced by the dictionary definition of a word; thus we may read the text that follows variously as an inflection, a repudiation, and/or an elaboration of the word. Unfolding in linear fashion, month-by-month over the space of a year, the novel contains scraps of texts including the instructions on a box of condoms, newsprint, and excerpts from 'you's diary, echoing perhaps the multifarious ways in which the global subject at this contemporary moment seeks to construct coherent meaning from a mélange of fragments. For its narrative architecture, the novel draws upon elements of various literary

⁶ See Shumei Guo, 'New modes of Women's Writing in the Age of Materialism,' trans. Gerald W. Cheung, Yomei Shaw and Terry Siu-han Yip, *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* ed. Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010). Guo has noted how, from the 1990s onwards, many Chinese women writers started to reject the 'grand themes in socialist representation' by turning to a more personal mode of writing that dwelled on the body and 'the unique life experience of an individual' (160).

⁷ I use the term 'private personal voice' as described by Susan Lanser in her book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992). Private voice refers to 'narration directed toward a narratee who is a fictional character' as opposed to public voice which is 'narration directed toward a narratee "outside" the fiction who is analogous to the historical reader' (15). Personal voice is used to refer to autodiegetic 'narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories' (18).

forms including the travel narrative with its description of cultural encounter and exchange, and in a more temporally-compressed manner, the *bildungsroman* or the education novel, that ‘symbolic form’ of modernity⁸ described by Franco Moretti which negotiates and manages such central tensions as ‘mobility and interiority’⁹ and ‘individuality and socialization.’¹⁰ Rachael Gilmour defines Guo’s novel as ‘translational,’ of a piece with texts that bear the ‘traces of multiple languages’ and which ‘foreground and dramatize the processes of translation of which they are both product and representation.’¹¹ According to this reading, Guo constructs her protagonist’s subjectivity from between languages, demonstrating in the process, the instabilities of translation.¹² Indeed, the text pays considerable attention to the problems of intercultural understanding and the practices of transculturation. Through this focus, it gives the lie ironically to its own title since it proves the very idea of conciseness – ‘*Concise* meaning simple and clean’ (8) (*italics in the original*) – to be a chimera, an impossible ideal.

Dictionary begins with Z describing her feelings on board the flight from China to England and explaining how the impetus for her learning English in the first place comes not from her but her parents, one-time peasants in a small village who stumbled into the shoe-making business and found new wealth and a new sense of global relevance. Z’s physical journey to England to learn a second language may easily be read as being at one and the same time a journey of self-discovery that comprises a sexual awakening, a heightened sense of her Chineseness, and an increase in Western cultural knowledge and cultural capital. In this sense, the transformative journey to the West may appear allegorically to underscore a common enough Eurocentric historical narrative that it is the West which inaugurates China into modernity, a narrative which postcolonial criticism has sought to challenge in multiple contexts in the last few decades. Under Western tutelage, the Chinese subject learns how to be modern and global. This finds an echo in the novel as Z’s lover serves as her teacher who, among other things, actively encourages her to travel and enrich her repertoire of experiences. ‘You,’ the lover whose Hackney home Z moves into, is a fount of knowledge in more ways than one, including linguistically, culturally, and sexually. Yet the text deliberately troubles this linear reading of progressive development, identity and embodiedness through its exploratory depiction of the possible, multiple meanings of corporeality – meanings it offers, sometimes only to dismantle.

To learn a language means to acquire a body. In her book, *Haunted Nations*, Sneja Gunew takes up this proposition, drawing upon Michel Foucault’s notions of a technology of the self to explore the ‘somatic effects and affects’¹³ of learning and speaking English which

⁸ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000) 5.

⁹ Moretti 4.

¹⁰ Moretti 16.

¹¹ Rachel Gilmour, ‘Living between Languages: The Politics of Translation in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.2 (2012) 211.

¹² In her article based on an interview with Guo, Zhang Zhen describes the writer in similar terms. See Zhang Zhen, “‘I’m a Modern Peasant’: Encountering Xiaolu Guo,” *World Literature Today* 82.6 (2008) 45-48. Guo’s transnational status means she will ‘inhabit’ a homeland by ‘moving between languages, between words and images’ (48).

¹³ Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 51.

produces particular subjectivities within specific colonial, immigrant, or ‘more diffused globalized’ contexts.¹⁴ English studies, comprising both the language and its literary tradition, is a technology and disciplinary regime which animates, choreographs and regulates bodies in specific ways, a point she illuminates with regard to three writers (including the late Palestinian postcolonial scholar Edward Said) who articulate their relationships to English in visceral and intimately-felt terms. Languages, she notes, ‘all function as somatic or corporeal technologies.’¹⁵ In Guo’s novel, this insight is transmuted into images of the self doubled and troubled. Thus Z struggles to express the ontological experience of being caught between two languages when writing in her diary, ‘I trying express me, but confusing – I see other little me try expressing me in other language’ (33). The experience, she muses, ‘Is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time. Yes, I not lonely, because I with another me. Like Austin Power with his Mini Me’ (33). With a popular cultural reference to the well-known Hollywood movie starring comedic actor Mike Meyers, Z presents herself as unevenly split, bodying forth her lack of articulacy in her second language in the image of a diminished and diminutive self.

Later in the novel, this interlanguage struggle assumes visual and material form when it ‘erupts’ textually, appearing twice as a confessional passage written in Chinese followed by its English version. In the first instance, Z expresses her intense frustration at how difficult it is to learn English, a process she casts in terms of a violation and an overwhelming of the self, ‘I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me’ (143). In the second, she laments the different culturally-derived notions of freedom that she and her lover have. In both cases, the very presence of the Chinese words makes it seem as if Z’s Chinese self has burst forth from the strictures that have hitherto held it at bay and in these moments, the English text, juxtaposed against the Chinese one, is explicitly and visibly forced to serve as a translation. Self-consciously highlighting the process of translation, the text seeks to embody something of the viscerally-felt violence and ontological disruption that occurs with the acquisition of a second language. The moment, captured in print, assumes a liminal status – between languages, between bodies, and between selves. In this way too, we see how the representation of the emerging bilingual self may be said to trouble one of the most fundamental assumptions in (monolingual) fictional autobiography where the establishment of a stable identity is rendered equivalent epistemologically, thematically, and emotionally to the coming into one’s voice in one language. Yet, in a characteristic gesture suggesting the tortured complexity of the situation and the impossibility of easy solutions, Z rejects the possibility of abandoning English and remaining monolingual. She undercuts any sense that her Chinese self is more authentic by suggesting that perhaps the Chinese language was not that naturally acquired either given her memory of ‘the pain of studying Chinese characters’ (143) when she was younger.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gunew 62.

¹⁵ Gunew 63.

¹⁶ Here, I would dispute the English translation in the novel of the Chinese words 天生 as ‘simple’ in the line ‘But is my own native language simple enough?’ (143). A more accurate translation would be ‘natural’ or ‘that which one is born with.’ These two moments in the novel where Chinese and English are juxtaposed offer the possibility of differing levels of understanding to the reader depending on whether the latter is a monolingual English reader or one who can read both English and Chinese. They reinforce the text’s concern with communication, meaning and the possibility of translation.

Just as the text makes clear that the increase of one's lexicon in a foreign language is an ontological experience, so too does it confirm the converse – that the perceived loss of words is something felt corporeally. Thus Z's lover 'you' expresses his frustration as an increasingly reluctant teacher of language, 'It is too tiring to live like this. I cannot spend my whole time explaining the meaning of words to you, and I can't be questioned by you all day long' (141). It is a role he experiences in terms of a physical violation of private space and his own person as he tells her, 'I am losing my words' (141). Z's acquisitive appetite for learning is an act of aggression as she robs her lover of his language as well as the experience of his own body. Z realizes this ironically only after reading Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* where she 'can't breathe freely because there are hardly any stops' (147). In terms that inextricably braid language and the body together by capturing the corporeal effects of words, she adds, 'The writing is so forceful, is nearly painful for me to read. I suddenly understand that you must be suffered a lot from me, because I am so forceful and demanding on words too' (147).

Thus although the connection between language acquisition and corporeal transformation is variously reiterated throughout the narrative in *Dictionary*, perhaps the most explicit rendition of the connection lies in the narrative coalescing of Z's journey west to improve her English with her realisation of her sexuality. Having met 'you' and moved in to live with him, she describes their mutual physical attraction and how they 'have so much sex' (57). Confessing how she initially felt shameful about sex because it is such a 'taboo' subject in China, she then assesses how far she has come, 'Now I naked everyday in the house, and I can see clearly my desire' (57). Sex with her lover is compared to appropriation and possession. Admitting her addiction to his love-making, she writes, 'My whole body is your colony' (104). Reinforcing the image of her lover as both a teacher to her of words and her own sexual body, Z also relates how he had once used a small mirror to show her her clitoris, a word she duly mispronounces as 'liquorice' (109). Knowledge about the sexual body directly intersects language learning when Z discloses how she once sat for three hours in a cafe by herself, schooling herself in English from reading the stories in a porn magazine (94). In another instance, she learns the language from the instructions for use printed on a box of condoms. The functional import of the instructions – clinically and seriously worded – is subverted as the words produce unintended effects. To Z, the instructions are instead replete with other meaning, suggestive of sexual possibilities and illustrative of Western culture. She writes, 'Words on the instruction are more exciting than sexy magazines on shelves of corner shop in our street' (59).

Yet any sense that Z's bodily transformation as her English improves consists solely of sexual awakening and liberation is rendered problematic by the way sexual liberation almost always shades into exploitation in the novel's depicted version of an interconnected global world. When her Japanese friend gives her a vibrator for her birthday, for example, Z is initially perplexed by what looks to her like a 'plastic cucumber' (131). Pondering over its 'Made in China' sign, she imagines the Chinese peasant women who work as cheap labour in the factory manufacturing such products, not knowing at all what they are assembling: 'And those peasant womans will never use the vibrator in this life. All they want to know is how much they will earn today and how much money they can save for the family' (131). The unevenness of globalisation is registered not only in terms of economic and capital disparity but in a visceral way, closer to the body, in terms of sexual desire and pleasure. The sense of melancholia evoked by this awareness of the difference in the way globalisation determines

how the female body experiences basic needs and sexual pleasure is heightened ironically by the comic disconnection displayed when Z's Asian party guests disagree with her Western guests over whether or not Asians have a sense of humour. Z's heightened awareness of the way bodies are variously valued and positioned surfaces again later in the novel when she watches a peepshow in the red light district, justifying her consumption of porn as part of a quest for further cultural knowledge about the West. As Z gets increasingly titillated, inserting coin after coin at the peepshow to watch more and more of the prostitute's body as it is revealed to her, she cannot help but wonder, 'What is her name? What her life like? Is there man in her life or lots of mans? Where she from? Serbia? Croatia? Yugoslavia? Russia? Poland?' (109).

Z's experience at the peepshow serves to illuminate as well a central tension in the novel between the idea of corporeal transformation through language and the fantasy of the body as free from language – not the word made flesh or the flesh made word but word and flesh as separate and distinct. While Z watches a performance involving two prostitutes, a male and a female, she finds herself seduced and enthralled by the eloquence of the copulating bodies, their balletic and fluid moves in the throes of sexual ecstasy representing seemingly perfect communication and conveying the clear meanings of desire and pleasure. She confesses, 'While I am standing there watching, I desire become prostitute. I want be able expose my body, to relieve my body, to take my body away from dictionary and grammar and sentences, to let my body break all disciplines. What a relief that prostitute not need speak good English. She also not need to bring a dictionary with her all the time' (110). In expressing her desire to present her naked body and let it stand on its own, she presents her body as its own self-evident means of communication, at once message and medium, signifier and signified. Yet, the moment is short-lived since, ultimately, it is not Z but 'you,' her bisexual sculptor lover, whose desire for the body to exceed words and language eventually proves stronger. Responding to Z's question about why he is always so interested in the body, he replies, 'Because you will never get bored with the body [...] Eating, drinking, shitting ... The body is key to everything' (240). As an artist, Z's lover creates sculptures of bodies and body parts which he leaves strewn all over the garden of his house in Hackney. Z's lover celebrates the plasticity of the body; his friends, Z discovers, speak casually about transsexual surgery and sex change operations which allow them to sculpt the body and the self. To Z, her lover's bisexuality, his vegetarianism, and his love of plants are a defiance of the traditional Chinese gender norms she grew up with. 'You' is, if not really an anarchist, certainly a hippie with anti-establishment sentiments who also considers physical labour honest and ennobling.

At the same time, his hatred of his all-female family (his mother and sisters), his own flesh and blood, symbolises both a self-loathing and a desire to be autochthonous that is congruent with his sense of the body as complete in itself. Z seems troubled by this position as it goes against a Confucian and Chinese understanding of the importance of the family as a fundamental unit of society, filial piety, and the obligation to maintain familial ties.¹⁷ To her, the very ideograph '家' ('jia') encapsulates the idea of many people in a family who are one. The Chinese word has three equivalent meanings in English corresponding to family, home,

¹⁷ Daniel Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 159-160.

and house. Z writes, ““家” a roof on top, then some legs and arms inside. When you write this character down, you can feel those legs and arms move around underneath the roof. Home, is a dwelling house for the family to live’ (100). Thus despite her fraught and often acrimonious relationship with her mother, there is no question of a severing of ties. If ‘you’ sees the body as elemental, beyond all ties to blood, as well as anterior to and purer than language, Z is ultimately more ambivalent about the body and the possibility and desirability of complete autonomy.

Z’s ambivalence towards the body comes into focus again when she sees how her lover’s physically exacting job leaves him exhausted and in pain while she feels unable to help him. Her predicament of inevitable and dejected detachment recalls Elaine Scarry’s argument about the inexpressibility of pain in her foundational text, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*. Pain, Scarry observes, may be a sufferer’s certain reality but it is the ultimate test of the bystander’s imagination, even perhaps the example *par excellence* of what it means to be in doubt. Thus she writes, ‘Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.’¹⁸ How one begins to express and communicate the body in pain is at the center of the imaginative act of representation to which literature belongs. In *Dictionary*, Z’s lover’s pain cannot be expressed in words; it can only, for him, be relieved by sex. His stubborn adherence to a life of manual work because of his belief in the labouring body means that the inexpressible body in pain serves as the obstacle in his relationship with Z, denying the working of language for communication and shared intimacy. Rejecting the mind-body split underpinning the Cartesian model of the self in Western philosophy, ‘you’ derives his idealised view of physical labour from a working class, socialist tradition that he thinks should resonate with Z because of China’s history and culture of communism. But as her command of the English language improves, Z longs instead to be an intellectual, her desire for this perhaps reflecting a Confucian reverence for learning and education. The Chinese words for an ‘intellectual’ or ‘zhishifenzi’, translated literally from the Chinese means a small part or element of knowledge. The Chinese words imply liberating and abstracting the individual, allowing her to transcend the individual body and person altogether to be subsumed as part of the larger entity known as knowledge. Z can conceive of knowledge and language, however flawed, enabling a transcendence from the body. To her lover, Z’s new found intellectualism is merely distasteful as he tells her, ‘I wish I’d never given you books. Now all you do is sit there reading and writing. You’ve become so *bourgeois*’ (139) (italics in the original).

In the novel, if the bodily sculptures her lover makes represent to Z an extension of her lover’s indecipherability and the material objectification of their inability to communicate with each other, her answer to this may be found in her expressed desire for a secret and private language. Thus she recounts wistfully the death of the last speaker of ‘Nushu’ (97), a four-hundred year old secret language that only some Chinese women can speak, that she reads about in a stray newspaper article. To have one’s own private language, that no one else knows and understands, Z thinks, is to possess a fullness and self-absorption that betokens self-sufficiency rather than lack of communication. With her own language, she will have ‘privacy’; she adds, ‘You know my body, my everyday’s life, but you not know my “Nushu”’

¹⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 4.
7

(97). That is her counterpoint to the voiceless and inscrutable body sculptures her lover creates. As the novel progresses, it is clear that Z and her lover's narrative trajectories are clearly opposed. As the former moves closer to becoming a writer, 'you' seems to withdraw further into himself and to desire a solitary and isolated existence far from the city. By the end of the novel, Z has to leave England because her visa to stay on has been denied. It is a separation she feels intensely, 'deeply, in [her] bones' (279), writing, 'People say nowadays there are no more boundaries between nations. Really? The boundary between you and me is so broad, so high' (279). She resigns herself to the fact that they have to lead 'parallel lives, no more crossing over' (282).

Upon her return to China, Z settles in Beijing, feeling alienated from the fast-changing city and its ersatz, derivative Western quality even though her proficiency in English now allows her to take better advantage of the city's globality and global pretensions. As her friends and family remind her, 'But you can speak English, that alone should earn you lots of money! Nowadays, anything to do with the West can make money' (282). The novel decisively repudiates this triumphalist telos and tone however, concluding instead with Z receiving her lover's last letter to her from Wales, the place he has finally moved to. Reading his letter, she muses:

Your words are soaked in your great peace and happiness, and these words are being stored in my memory. I kiss this letter. I bury my face in the paper, a sheet torn from some exercise book. I try to smell that faraway valley. I picture you standing on your fields, the mountain behind you, and the sea coming and going. It is such a great picture you describe. It is the best gift you ever gave me. (283)

In her final lines of the novel, Z tries to capture the materiality and tangibility of her lover's body – even if it is just its trace – through his letter and his words. She pictures him at home in the natural place he has chosen for himself: solitary yet whole and self-sufficient. The image is one that appears to celebrate the idea of the 'immanent body' or 'being-in-itself.'¹⁹ It suggests the saturation of the body in space, a kind of phenomenological plenitude that recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of the body in relation to spatiality (and temporality): 'Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.'²⁰ Z observes that the image of her lover at peace with his surroundings and at one with himself is the most beautiful gift he has ever given her. Yet, it is only possible because his body is beyond her, and beyond her reach. Z, the female global subject, is the one who is left alone and lonely at the end, not her lover. She has only a memory of their shared intimacy in the past, of how it had rained when they went to Wales together and how that rain had covered everything. Through Z's most poetic and eloquent English, the novel's conclusion underscores at once the power of words – its expressiveness – as well as its paradoxical powerlessness since words only ever stand for things and are based on the fundamental absence of the body. The novel thus ends on a melancholic note of loss and mourning – of the impossibility of a recovery of intimacy – instead of the successful attainment of global selfhood.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1994) 86.

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1963) 5.

As a cultural text of the contemporary globalised moment with its emphasis on embodied subjectivity, Guo's *Dictionary* complicates the glib idea of English as a global language and *lingua franca*, a (technical) language of opportunity desirable for the access it provides to markets, social networks and power, as well as the ease of communication it enables. Thinking of English in this manner assumes an easy slipping between identities and bodies consonant with a neoliberal understanding of selfhood that emphasises empowerment and individual choice or the view of individuals, as Rosalind Gill has described it, 'as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating.'²¹ Yet the novel qualifies any sense of a progressive, rational self-formation by stressing emotion, affect, and the ineffable. It also repeatedly insists that questions about communication and the possibilities of shared understanding and intimacy remain fundamental in a globalised world. In grappling with the problems posed by the materiality of the body for the global subject, Guo's novel reminds us of the intractability of the body as well as its openness to linguistic meaning and inscription. In this way too, it challenges current discourses of globalisation to include an emotional and embodied vocabulary about absence, isolation, withdrawal and loss of intimacy, terms which at the very least, should compete with the more conventional concerns about connection, exchange, and circulation that have become natural in thinking about the global world.

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²¹ Rosalind Gill, 'Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times,' *Subjectivity* 25 (2008) 436.