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I MISS YOU MOTHER: THE KOREAN DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE AND COLONIAL
SILENCING IN THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S *DICTEE*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
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ABSTRACT

MOM, I MISS YOU: THE KOREAN DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE AND COLONIAL
SILENCING IN THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S *DICTEE*

BY HYERIM YOON

This thesis examines *Dictee* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha as a diasporic text that reconstructs Korean cultural memory through matrilineal storytelling, performance, and linguistic fragmentation. Drawing on the long, complex history of the Japanese occupation of Korea, it argues that Cha's experimental form of prose and poetry reflects the cultural and linguistic rupture experienced by Koreans displaced through imperialism and colonialism. The first section explores how *Dictee* centers women's stories, particularly those of figures such as Yu Guan Soon, otherwise known as the Korean Joan of Arc, and Cha's own mother, Huo Hyun Soon, to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Korean history. Through a matrilineal framework, the section highlights oral storytelling traditions and the transmission of "diasporic maternity" and trauma from mother to daughter, putting memory in a position where it serves as a form of cultural survival. The second section examines the performative aspects of Cha's narrative voice, focusing on the influence of Cha's previous artistic practice and training. By incorporating cinematic direction and visual spacing, it argues that Cha transforms reading into a performance, making the reader the co-creator of meaning and interpretation. The final section analyzes the limited presence of Hangul within the text, arguing that the dominance of colonial languages such as English and French reflects the linguistic erasure produced by colonial education systems. Ultimately, this thesis explores how *Dictee* resists narrative coherence in order to represent the many fractured realities of the Korean diaspora. Through multilingual experimentation and the intentional use of silence, Cha creates a literary space within *Dictee*

where suppressed histories can be remembered and performed beyond the boundaries of traditional historical discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

“Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again.”¹

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

The majority of my childhood was spent moving back and forth between South Korea and the United States. These frequent moves cast a cloud of doubt in my early adolescent, moldable mind when it came to my personal sense of belonging, and made my cultural identity something I was constantly measuring—was I “Korean enough” despite my prolonged presence in this English speaking country? Was my mother tongue being replaced with a language my grandparents could not even understand? I worked day and night to prove my “Korean-ness” to myself in spite of these questions, and I was stuck in a never-ending battle to show that my Korean identity hadn’t changed simply because I had grown accustomed to life in both Seoul and Los Angeles. Within the binary I had created for myself in my head, I came to believe that I was “too Korean” for Korean-Americans and “too American” for Koreans, and there was to be no in-between. This is why *Dictee* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha had such a strong impact on me when I first read it—it was the first time in my American education where I got to read the stories of my people and my culture. It was also the first time I got to see my peers, far from my Korean identity, engage, ask questions, and analyze the significance of cultural representation within the classroom setting. As I progressed through my education, I learned that what originally felt like a never ending battle with my identity, and the strict rules I set for myself to become “more Korean” were not unique experiences, rather, I was one story of many that were part of the “old wound”—a pain felt by Koreans working to reconstruct their “national memory

¹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. *Dictee*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1982), 33.

and identity”² in the wake of our peoples’ historical resistance to Japanese domination. *Dictee* focuses on this “old wound” and places emphasis on how collective the hurt is felt by generations of Koreans displaced across the world due to the catastrophic impacts of imperialism.

To further explore this “old wound,” it is crucial to have a foundational understanding of Korean history, particularly in relation to Japanese colonization. Following the Russo-Japanese War in the early twentieth century, the United States government promised Japan “dominion over the peninsula”³ in exchange for Japan stepping back from interference with the U.S. expansion into the Philippines. Backed by the United States, a global superpower, Japan immediately began to dismantle structures that had existed for centuries in Korea, ranging from government to cultural life. Additionally, Koreans were suppressed from speaking their language or practicing traditional customs, and through “sōshi-kaimei,” a policy that enforced the changing of family names, crucial aspects of the Korean identity were stripped away. Cha navigates the pain of cultural erasure felt by those of Korean descent in *Dictee* by incorporating multiple forms of media, ranging from an image of the martyr Yu Guan Soon to a letter addressed to President Roosevelt. The weaving of prose and poetry with primary sources in the text goes to show that, while the cultural pain may initially feel distanced through time to readers, it had a real impact on the lives of many and remains deserving of global recognition. The choice to make the text multimedia is especially significant for individuals impacted by the Korean diaspora, as it presents opportunities for those displaced from their homeland to resonate with and see their own

² Moo-yong Kim. “National Memory and Identity of the Working Class in Korea (1910~1950)” in *International Journal of Korean History*. <https://ijkh.khistory.org/journal/view.php?number=291>

³ L. Hyun Yi Kang. “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (Oakland: Third Woman Press, 1994), 79.

experiences reflected in Cha's work. This is exactly how *Dictee* has become influential for Koreans globally—as Elaine H. Kim argues in her essay, “Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*,” experiences like my own battles with identity and thus finding solace in *Dictee* is actually more common than one might think, as Cha's work gives Koreans and Korean-Americans alike “something from American literature to call [their] own,”⁴ and brings Korea into conversation unapologetically by celebrating the “in-betweens.”⁵

L. Hyun Yi Kang approached with a different take by noting in her essay, “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*,” that she believed *Dictee* was speaking to a “highly literate, theoretically sophisticated audience”⁶ that made it difficult to agree with or identify with. This is an understandable take, as *Dictee* can be read as inaccessible due to the non-linear structure and multiple languages present throughout the text. However, it does not necessarily mean that readers should assume they are excluded from absorbing or fully appreciating the contents present. The Korean identity, especially that of the Korean female, cannot be put in a box—there is no measure for how “Korean” someone can be due to the variety of identities shaped by diasporic experiences following occupation and imperialism. Written primarily in English while also featuring French, Latin, traditional Chinese, and Korean Hangul,

⁴ Elaine H. Kim. “Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (Oakland: Third Woman Press, 1994), 23.

⁵ Kim, “Poised on the In-between,” 23.

⁶ Kang, “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*,” 76.

Cha's "polyglot book"⁷ draws from her family's lived experiences as "exilées." Cha, too, is within the group of Koreans globally yearning to be understood. The way that *Dictee* is structured, being split into nine sections named after each of the Greek Muses (Clio, Calliope, Urania, Melpomene, Erato, Euterpe, Thalia, Terpsichore, and Polymnia), attempts to thematically organize the stories that are crucial to Cha, shaping her global understanding and the context that she exists within. The muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, history, language, and oral tradition, and while she is never named directly, her presence as a maternal figure is deeply embedded in Cha's work. *Dictee* explores mother-daughter relationships alongside themes of immigration, religion (particularly French Catholicism), and Japanese colonial occupation. These elements are tied not only to Cha's intersecting identities, but also to the identities of the women featured in *Dictee*.

The diversity of *Dictee* is not lost on scholars. It was described in "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictee*" by Lisa Lowe that "it is impossible to reduce *Dictee* to a single classification or preoccupation, for it resists such determination."⁸ While the text remains difficult to categorize, it makes sense why the text had to be written this way when observing Cha's upbringing. Born in Busan, South Korea during the Korean War, Cha spent much of her youth fleeing political unrest. After moving to California, she began to attend Convent of the Sacred Heart Academy, a Catholic school in San Francisco. Her French Catholic education from high school is reflected back in *Dictee*, with the title of the text being a nod to the practice of

⁷ Emma Zhang. "'Dictee' by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha" in Asian Review of Books.

<https://asianreviewofbooks.com/dictee-by-theresa-hak-kyung-cha/>.<https://asianreviewofbooks.com/dictee-by-theresa-hak-kyung-cha/>

⁸ Lisa Lowe. "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictee*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (Oakland: Third Woman Press, 1994), 36.

taking dictation, used in French language education as “a process of taking language itself and representing it.”⁹ Her years of undergraduate and post-graduate study in art at the University of California, Berkeley is also reflected through the inclusion of various photographs, handwritten memos, and copied historical documents in the text that all play a role in making *Dictee* what it is—a book written for those exiled from their mother tongue.

The idea of diasporic maternity emerges as a form of inheritance for those exiled from their language, in which the mother transmits cultural memory and the lingering effects of displacement, shaping the daughter’s sense of identity in the absence of a fully preserved language and culture. The passing on of diasporic maternity from mother to daughter is especially highlighted towards the start of the “epic poetry” dedicated to Cha’s mother, Huo Hyun Soon, in the section “Calliope,” which recounts in second-person narration how Huo had her Korean language and identity taken from her when living in Manchuria under Japanese occupation. By the end of the text, Cha concludes with the narrator returning to her mother’s arms, “celebrat[ing] the eternal bond between mothers and daughters and offer[ing] courage to face a world of violence and hostility.”¹⁰ Aside from the focus on mother-daughter relationships and the passing of trauma, the stories that make up *Dictee* allude to historical moments in Korean international history as well as figures, both named and unnamed, that “reimagine women as the protagonist of otherwise patriarchal narratives.”¹¹

To understand *Dictee* as a whole seems like a daunting task, but it is summarized best when observing Cha’s narrative voice and stylistic choices. Most of *Dictee* is told through the

⁹ Ken Chen. “The Stakes of *Dictee*: An Introduction to a Famously Difficult Work.” (New Haven: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Zhang, “‘Dictee’ by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.”

¹¹ Chen, “The Stakes of *Dictee*.”

“disease,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “a female artiste who specializes in monologue.”¹² Jennifer Lee Tsai in “The Figure of the Disease in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*: Language, Breaking Silences and Irigarayan Mysticism” added onto this definition by writing that the “disease” is a nameless character only referred to by the pronoun “she,” who Cha deploys to emphasize “the pain and difficulty involved in speech and...on the connection between body and language.”¹³ Rather than separating Cha from the “disease” as other scholars have done, I choose to look at the “disease” as a character that Cha takes on and embodies throughout the text. Anne Anlin Cheng stated in her article, “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*,” that:

Dictée is anything but self-evident. Speaking through disembodied yet multiple voices, borrowed citations, and captionless photographs, this supposed autobiography gives us a confession that does not confess, a dictation without origin, and history without names.¹⁴

Cha, as the “disease,” continues to do the dictation exercises of her youth as a student of the French language in order to translate her cultural trauma and history to readers, making for a non-linear “confession that does not confess” and “history without names.” While there are multiple voices present throughout *Dictée* like Cheng argues, the complexity of the “disease” comes from the occupying role it takes on through Cha. By collapsing the distinction between the two, the “disease” becomes an extension of Cha’s identity as a Korean impacted by the diaspora—a role that readers are also allowed to occupy as they progress through the stories

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, “disease (n.)”

¹³ Jennifer Lee Tsai. “The Figure of the Disease in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*: Language, Breaking Silences and Irigarayan Mysticism” in *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* (2025).

¹⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng. “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.” *MELUS* 23, no. 4 (1998): 119–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467831>.

within *Dictée*. This argument is backed up by Josephine Nock-Hee Park, who wrote in her article, “‘What of the Partition’: *Dictée*’s Boundaries and the American Epic,” that Cha’s act as the “disease” serves as “a speaker for disparate voices”¹⁵ and “allows others to occupy her,”¹⁶ as she converts their presence within her to speech. This is exemplified through the almost clunky nature of the prologue of *Dictée*, where Cha, taking the place of punctuation marks, types them out (e.g. “comma/virgule” and “period/point”), becoming the “border between these other presences and their voices.”¹⁷ The way that French and English are placed side-by-side show how, in the process of dictation, punctuation remains the same. Additionally, Park argues that the translation of these punctuation marks reveals, “from one language to another; they persist across the border between languages,”¹⁸ indicating shared struggle in the fight to exist freely across cultures.

Through Cha’s attempts to grapple with her own identity as an “exilée,” *Dictée* offers readers a unique look into one experience out of around 7.3 million that classify themselves as displaced from Korea. Cha’s use of multimedia, fragmented language, and deliberate acts of translation all add up to make *Dictée* into something that does not need to be whole or singular—rather, it serves as a form of collective memory. *Dictée* challenges how this collective memory can be expressed while offering room for viewer interpretation. By focusing on a matrilineal lens and oral tradition, Cha rewrites the patriarchal history interpreted by the West in a way that includes Korean women in the discourse. The first section of this thesis will be

¹⁵ Josephine Nock-Hee Park. “‘What of the Partition’: *Dictée*’s Boundaries and the American Epic” in *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 2 (2005): 213–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489115>. 23.

¹⁶ Park, “What of the Partition,” 25.

¹⁷ Park, “What of the Partition,” 25.

¹⁸ Park, “What of the Partition,” 25.

focused on diving deeper into the matrilineal focus of *Dictee*, further examining the section “Calliope” and how Cha’s portrayal of her mother’s youth has impacted the other stories she retells throughout the text, including Yu Guan Soon’s. It will also touch on the oral traditions of Korea and the role that mothers specifically play in keeping culture alive. From this matrilineal passage of stories emerges the necessity of performance, where fragmentation in writing serves as a tool. Through Cha’s performative role as the “disease,” she positions herself as a vessel for telling the stories of women who have had their voices taken away, understanding that she cannot claim authority over a history that is incredibly complex for every individual residing outside of Korea. The second section will highlight the visual performativity of *Dictee*, and how Cha uses silence as a syntactic tool in her writing. This performativity raises questions about language itself, but more specifically, what is spoken and what remains untranslated. Section three will thus examine the role of Hangul in *Dictee*, and how its lack of presence signifies colonial silencing.

1. HISTORICAL & MATRILINEAL PASSAGE OF DIASPORIC TRAUMA IN *DICTEE*

“Mother, I dream you just to be able to see you. Heaven falls nearer in sleep. Mother, my first sound. The first utter. The first concept.”¹⁹

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

After moving to the United States, my mother tasked herself with the responsibility of keeping my twin brother and I in touch with our Korean culture. To this day, what remains most memorable about my mother’s influence is how, on long road trips, the minutes before bed, and all the moments in between, she took the time to patiently retell the stories of everything she knew, from my favorite Korean folklore involving gwisins (ghosts) and dokkaebis (goblins) to her personal elementary school experiences in her hometown of Gapyeong. What I failed to realize then was that intertwined with these fairytales and snuck into her childhood stories were facts regarding Korea’s poverty level post-Korean War, and sad truths involving our country’s deeply patriarchal society that are still protested to this day. My mother always emphasized to me that a lot of her stories were the same ones her mother once told her, and these oral retellings of classic tales became something I looked forward to hearing everyday. *Dictee*, and the stories of women told by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha within the text, remind me of my mother, my mother’s mother, and the resilience of all the women that came before me. When history tried to silence Korean women, refuse them their right to education, and even take away their language—as we saw with the Japanese occupation of Korea—they fought back through the narratives they passed down to their children.

Elaine H. Kim opened up in her essay about the inner battle she faced when figuring out her cultural identity, sharing my similar sentiments, while noting that to be the “Korean female”

¹⁹ Cha, *Dictee*, 50.

was oppressive, but to relinquish that identity “would have meant abandonment to other oppressions.”²⁰ The “Korean female” experience, according to Kim, has been constantly overshadowed by male narratives, as women were greatly discouraged from learning due to Confucian precepts that preached “female ignorance was a virtue and worldly knowledge [was] a vice.”²¹ Introduced by China in the Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla) period, Confucianism had, and still has, a great influence on Korea, especially during the Joseon dynasty, where it became the primary philosophy guiding government and social structure. It is interesting to note that the limits imposed by Confucianism onto Korean women were somewhat mediated by Catholicism. According to the journal article, “Re-Opening “Dictee”: Interpreting the Void in Theresa Cha’s Representations of Christianity” by scholar Evan Chambers, French Catholic missionaries came into Korea, spreading Catholicism and promoting basic literacy for all, especially women, so they too could read and preach the bible. When the Japanese imperial army occupied Korea, Catholicism provided the Korean people an avenue to quietly rebel through the practice of a religion different from Japan’s widespread Shintoism. The French Catholic missionaries can be credited as one of the reasons why women’s literacy rates have fluctuated in Korea, and yet, the Korean female experience still remains overshadowed by male narratives due to the patriarchal nature of Korea’s power structures. This meant that even after the 35-year Japanese occupation and the three-year Korean War, it was solely the stories of affluent, literate men that were shared with the West—there was not much of the written word from Korean women widespread enough to learn history from. This left scholars to decipher

²⁰ Kim, “Poised on the In-between,” 7.

²¹ Kim, “Poised on the In-between,” 14.

Korea's rich history through the strict lens of literate men, removing the narrative of women almost entirely unless told by their counterpart.



Figure 1. Yu Guan Soon, Page 24 of *Dictee*. Courtesy of *Evergreen Review*.

Dictee starts with a re-telling of the story of “child revolutionary child patriot woman soldier deliverer of nation,”²² otherwise known as one of the most famous women in South Korean history—the martyr Yu Guan Soon. Within the section “Clio,” we are introduced to Yu Guan Soon through an old, blurry image of her staring at the camera in traditional Korean hanbok (e.g., see figure 1). The section’s narrative voice details her to be “the only daughter born of four children to her patriot father and mother,”²³ known widely across the country as a freedom fighter and independence activist. Yu Guan Soon was one of the key activists and organizers of the March 1, 1919 Samil Movement at the age of sixteen, where she rallied a resistant group with fellow students against Japanese colonial rule. As the leader of the

²² Cha, *Dictee*, 37.

²³ Cha, *Dictee*, 30.

revolution, she received “punishment deserving of such a rank,”²⁴ and was stabbed in the chest before receiving a seven year prison sentence “to which her reply [was] that the nation itself [was] imprisoned.”²⁵ Around the time of Yu Guan Soon, between 1910 and 1945, Japan had begun attempting to erase the existence of Korean culture and language, which started by prohibiting people from speaking Korean. Cha reflected on the collective cultural pain felt by Koreans through the repetition of the word “enemy,” expressing how “entire nation against the other entire nation”²⁶ has caused unfathomable destruction in Korea, resulting in “one enemy nation...disregard[ing] the humanity of another.”²⁷ While “enemy” has put Korea and Japan on opposing sides, Korea in specific was referred to as “this people” who was “their ruler’s subject and their ruler’s victory,” thus removing all dignity and national pride, subordinating them. Through this language, Cha emphasized how colonial power functioned not only through physical violence but also through linguistic domination that reduced an entire population to conquest. By describing Koreans as the “subject” and “victory” of the Japanese ruler, *Dictee* highlighted the way imperial authority transformed people into objects of political triumph, highlighting the broader dehumanization experienced under Japanese colonial rule, where Korean identity, language, and autonomy were systematically suppressed. By recounting Yu Guan Soon’s resistance with the context of colonial language, Cha restored dignity to a figure that was silenced by colonial forces. While Yu Guan Soon’s memory is kept alive in Korea, as she appears in school curriculum, children’s books, and gets brought into conversation every

²⁴ Cha, *Dictee*, 37.

²⁵ Cha, *Dictee*, 37.

²⁶ Cha, *Dictee*, 32.

²⁷ Cha, *Dictee*, 32.

year on Samiljeol²⁸, through *Dictee*, she is seen as a person outside of “any other heroine in history,”²⁹ and her memory is not only respected, but gets preserved through a reflection on her age and her image.

For the narrator, or the “disease,” Yu Guan Soon will not know age. While time has stopped for her, “[her] image, the memory of [her] is not given to deterioration,”³⁰ meaning that rather than allowing Yu Guan Soon to fade into history as a casualty of colonial violence, Cha preserves her through her language, and ensures that her presence continues beyond her death. *Dictee* resists the natural loss of memory that often occurs in historical retellings, especially for women whose stories have traditionally been minimized or reduced to symbolic martyrdom. In this way, Yu Guan Soon exists in a suspended state within the narrative, as she neither ages nor disappears, but continuously appears as both a historical figure and embodiment of resistance. Cha utilizes the suffering of Yu Guan Soon by reframing her narrative and challenging dominant historical narratives that marginalize women’s roles in political movements. This is particularly significant when contrasted with the way Western media has historically represented women, as, in many Western narratives, Asian women are frequently portrayed through stereotypes as victims in need of rescue or as silent, submissive figures lacking agency. Cha recognizes the harm of these portrayals, which is why *Dictee* insists on recognizing Korean women as active participants in national struggle outside of a popularized narrative. Thus, Cha transforms Yu

²⁸ “‘Samiljeol,’ or March 1st or Samil Movement Day in English, commemorates the resistance movement that rose up against the Japanese occupation of Korea on March 1, 1919.” National Folk Museum of Korea, <https://www.nfm.go.kr/user/month12Bbs/english/81/977/Month12BbsEngList.do?bbsCategoryIdxs=&bbsDataIdx=20571>

²⁹ Cha, *Dictee*, 30.

³⁰ Cha, *Dictee*, 37.

Guan Soon from a distant historical martyr into a symbol of resistance, resilience, and enduring cultural memory through *Dictee*.

Expanding beyond Yu Guan Soon, Cha broadens her narrative to encompass the intergenerational experiences of Korean women, emphasizing personal struggles often omitted from historical accounts. By choosing to challenge established notions of history and tell Korean women's stories through both prose and poetry, Cha emphasizes the complex realities of the Korean female experience and highlights how identity and cultural displacement intersect. Her work shows that, while our lives may have led us down differing paths, we are all connected by the struggle to exist in the context of what we feel is familiar to us. *Dictee* actively shifts the male-centered narratives of Korea that dominate Western education and instead presents a matrilineal focus that is particularly evident in *Dictee*'s epic poetry section, "Calliope," where the day-to-day realities of her mother under Japanese occupation are shared with the reader.



Figure 2. Huo Hyun Soon, Page 44 of *Dictee*.

Cha's mother, Huo Hyun Soon, is the central focus of "Calliope." Huo's parents chose to relocate to Yong Jung, Manchuria to escape the Japanese occupation in Korea. From the illnesses

Huo faces to the community she surrounds herself with, Cha familiarizes readers with the nuances that accompanied her mother's life as a young adult. As the youngest of four children, Huo lived in a village with other Korean refugees while Japan attempted occupation of China after occupying Korea. After graduating from teacher's college, she left her village for the first time to her teaching post at a small village in the country in order to pay back her school loans. After arriving at her post, Huo taught children in Japanese, despite the fact that the teachers and children are Korean. We see a homesick Huo yearn for the comfort of her mother, and her constant illnesses seem to mirror the psychological and cultural strain of living under colonial rule. Her body becomes a site where the violence of displacement is expressed, and thus reflects the broader condition of Koreans forced to navigate a life detached from their linguistic and cultural origins. Huo's experience almost parallels Yu Guan Soon's through the struggle to maintain a sense of self under oppressive structures.

Within the section, Cha utilizes language that makes it appear as though the narrative voice is learning to speak for the first time, like a baby. The writing feels awkward, childlike, and oftentimes, even jagged from the lack of punctuation—as the reader, it is difficult to comprehend and process, especially with how non-linear the text already is to read. An example can be seen below, when Cha details Huo's homecoming after being away at her teaching post:

You are home now your mother your home. Mother inseparable from which is her identity, her presence. Longing to breathe the same air her hand no more a hand than instrument broken weathered no death takes them. No death will take them, Mother, I dream you just to be able to see you.³¹

³¹ Cha, *Dictée*, 49.

The style of writing here is meant to serve as a reassuring coping mechanism for Huo while emphasizing her youth. “You are home now your mother your home” lets Huo know that home is something embodied in her mother’s presence as a source of comfort and identity amidst displacement. The repetitive phrasing mirrors the way a child might try to make sense of overwhelming emotions, and the lack of punctuation and clarity reflects Huo’s broken sense of self from linguistic suppression. Cha’s choice of wording further exemplifies feelings of disorientation for those whose native tongue has been stripped. Additionally, considering that a lot of the “Korean female” history we know has been passed down from mother to child orally, this style of writing is meant to mirror the imperfect nature of speech, showing readers the very nature of how stories were told from mother to child. As Cha retells the story of her mother, it is safe to assume that she was once told this herself, passed down through memory rather than in a written form. This further explains the intimate quality of the writing style in “Calliope,” and suggests that what the reader encounters is a reconstruction of what has been told orally. The imperfections in the narration also shows the vulnerability associated with passing down stories across generations, and the act of retelling reinforces the concept that history for Korean women under colonial rule was not something neatly documented. We see the shortcomings of oral tradition when women became victims of tragedies (e.g. “comfort women” history), as a lot of facts regarding war crimes became unspeakable, with crucial narratives being hidden or swept under the rug by women themselves to avoid bringing shame onto their communities. Through Huo’s story, *Dictée* reflects on the dark history of women being silenced and excluded from the main western narrative while acknowledging holistically the cultural pain that Korean people had to endure over time in the hands of Japanese imperialism.

Cha invites the reader into “Calliope” as the protagonist when telling the story of Huo by using second-hand narration with statements that start with “mother, you” or simply just the pronoun, “you.” The method of narration causes the thoughts of both mother and daughter to seamlessly intertwine, and, as the narrative voice, Cha adopts the tone of her mother to tell readers the story that shaped her own childhood and her mother’s young adulthood. An example of the voices merging can be seen with the quote, “Mother my first sound. The first utter. The first concept.”³² We, as the reader, are unsure whether it is Cha referring to her mother, or her mother referring to her mother. Both facing generational trauma, they equally yearn for the familiar feeling of the mother figure in their lives during a time of political and economic turmoil. Her continued fragmented style of writing compliments the idea of a child retelling what was told to her. Cha, intertwined with her mother’s thoughts, is sharing with her audience what she knows to be true about a story that has impacted her own life, all while inviting us to make our own interpretations in the gaps of cultural understanding through the pronoun “you.” Huo, having shared the details of her young adulthood under Japanese occupation, is also engaging with this idea of “diasporic maternity,” allowing audiences to see the significance of the role women play in passing down crucial stories within the diasporic Korean peoples’ history.

Additionally, rather than portraying her mother as someone that should be pitied amidst active erasure of Korean peoples and their existence, Cha invites her audience to view Huo through specific moments of strength, rebellion, and cultural preservation like when she whispered and sang the song of the bongseon flower (봉선화, otherwise known as a garden balsam), a plant that represents Korea. The bongseon flower holds both traditional and cultural significance, especially for women, as it was used throughout history and still continues to be

³² Cha, *Dictée*, 49-50.

used in modern day for girls and women alike to dye their fingernails. Many myths and folklore revolve around this flower, as it is said to “ward off evil spirits and disease,”³³ and bring young girls love and fortune. More broadly speaking, the bongseon flower has also been used throughout Korean literature to “symbolize the Korean peoples’ resilience and enduring spirit, particularly during the Japanese colonial era,”³⁴ as we see with Huo’s song, narrated by Cha. The process of the bongseon flower, which serves as a culturally reflective space reserved for women, shows the passing down of memory from mother to daughter in a country focused on its patriarchal traditions and rites. Cha, by choosing to highlight the song of the bongseon flower in relation to her mother’s struggle away from home for the first time in her life, portrays the power of resistance during a time of uncertainty.

While the writing in the section “Calliope” evokes a feeling of nostalgia for readers, as they see both Cha and Huo yearn for a maternal figure, it is reminiscent of many other works of literature that follow the protagonist’s stream of consciousness. One comparable example can be seen at the very start of James Joyce’s 1916 novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Within the first few pages of Joyce’s text, through third-person limited omniscient narration, we meet Stephen and his newfound curiosity as he becomes conscious of the world around him. The stream of consciousness style is similar to that of *Dictée*, with lines that move with the unfiltered flow of thought, serving as a tool to introduce readers to a variety of Stephen’s young memories, like wetting the bed, his impressions of his family members, his relationship with God, and playgrounds that had mean boys like his bully, Nasty Roche. Like Cha, Stephen repeats phrases yet fails to properly convey to the reader the true meaning behind his actions, leaving much to

³³ N. Ali. “The Art of Bongseonhwa” in *The Krazie*.

<https://thekrazemag.com/latest-updates/2019/6/23/the-art-of-bongseonhwa>

³⁴ N. Ali. “The Art of Bongseonhwa.”

audience interpretation. The narrative style creates distance between the narrator, Stephen's thoughts, and the reader, and it shows a level of experimentation with language that emerged with literary modernism. Amidst World War I and the profound and traumatic transformation it was causing to Western civilization, there came a need for new tools that experimented with language and thus creatively reassembled the fragments of a broken world. Modernity emerged in the wake of violence, displacement from land, and loss of culture, responding to historical impulses as a colonial process. Considering that Ireland was occupied by the British Empire during World War I, Joyce's style of writing can be studied alongside Cha's because both have faced the trauma of once residing in—and leaving—an occupied land.

Dictée resists the idea that history can ever be singular, and Cha presents it as something that is continually reconstructed through memory and narration. Introducing stories of Yu Guan Soon and Huo Hyun Soon, Cha shows readers that the lives of Korean women exist within the very fabric of history that has tried to exclude them. Her experiment in conveying oral storytelling traditions through writing parallels Joyce's text, which, similarly to Korea and Manchuria, shows the development of consciousness within a colonized Ireland. Like how Stephen's early perceptions are shaped by the structures surrounding him, Huo's voice in "Calliope" reflects the disorientation felt when native language and identity have been suppressed. Both texts reveal how colonial conditions impact the ability to articulate self, and yet, the stories of Yu Guan Soon and Huo Hyun Soon do not offer closure or a resolution the way Stephen's does. Cha uses storytelling to highlight the significance of remembering the histories of diasporic women and makes her text a site of resistance to the erasure of matrilineal memory and the silencing of trauma passed from mother to daughter across generations.

2. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF SILENCE IN *DICTEE*

*“She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words.”*³⁵

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

For as long as I can remember, I have performed. From ballet when I was four years old to clarinet throughout my K-12 and intermittent debuts in varying roles within the walls of my school theatres, I have always relished in the feeling of being on stage. When I am performing, I am not myself. I shed the skin of the person I am everyday and take on the role of another—a prima ballerina, a world-class clarinetist, or the lead on a Broadway show. It was not until I was introduced to *Dictee* when I began to understand performance as something more than just a form of art. My own performances were shaped by the instruction and correction of those that came before me—I pushed my body through the strenuous training made of rules set by others to best communicate with my audience. I kept perfect posture, tempo, and tone in everything I did, which helped me recognize the way Theresa Hak Kyung Cha stages silence within her own works. For Cha, silence is also a performative act. Her narrative voice as the “disease” in *Dictee* is shaped by past trauma and utilizes the colonial education and patriarchal authority that has pushed women to take on performative roles within their day-to-day lives to enact for audiences and evoke feelings that are lost on mainstream audiences today.

As much as *Dictee* serves as a message for those displaced by colonial occupation and imperial power, it is ultimately reflective of Cha’s artistic education and training. Cha was known to “take the thematic and formal approaches developed in one medium and reinterpret

³⁵ Cha, *Dictee*, 3.

them in another,”³⁶ and Dictee exemplifies this method by translating the performativity of cinema into a literary form. An example of this is present when observing pages 94 through 97 of “Erato,” where Cha’s disease places readers in a position between a camera and an unnamed woman. See pages 94 and 95 below:

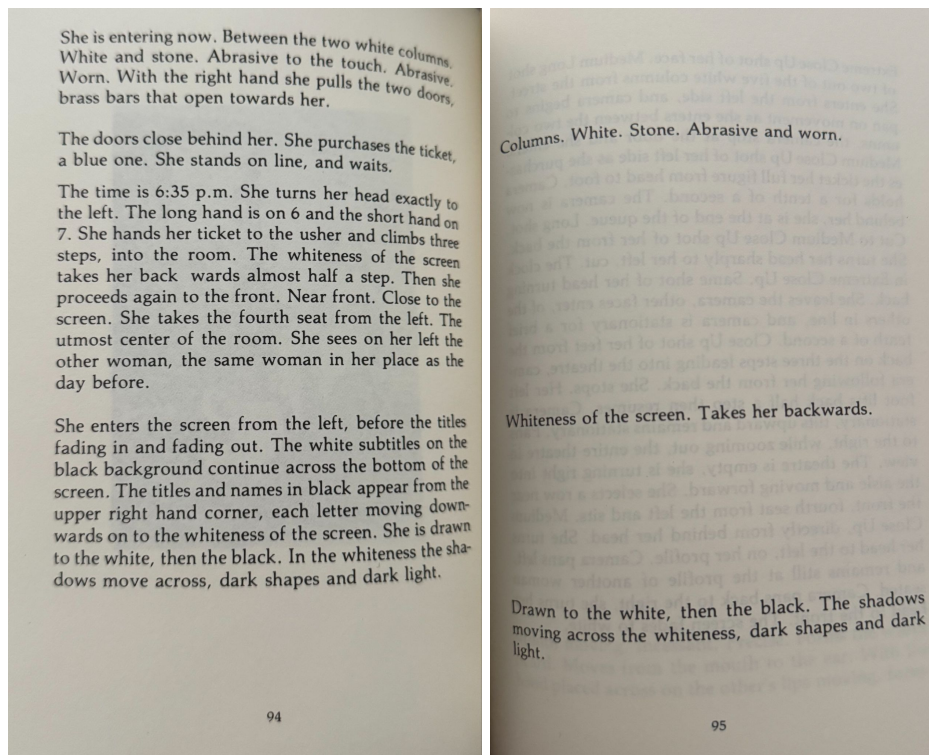


Figure 3. Pages 94 and 95 of *Dictee*.

These pages are written in the style of film direction, from different close-ups to camera pans. While writing is not the most conventional method to depict film, the technique Cha uses works to highlight the act of observation. Cha positions the reader as a viewer who must actively interpret what is being seen, which mirrors the experience of watching a film. This stylistic choice also places significance on the distance between representation and reality, further

³⁶ “Artist Statement” in *The Dream of the Audience*. <https://theresahakkyungcha.com/artist/>

proving that “*Dictee* is always failing to replicate some missing source.”³⁷ The sense of absence embedded in this cinematic framing suggests that what the reader encounters is only a partial reconstruction of memory, identity, and history. The fragmentation of Cha’s writing serves a different artistic purpose here—it is described by writer Alexa Climaldi as a feature that “annihilates the reader...as there is no straightforward narrative to make the process of reading seamless and uninterrupted.”³⁸ It functions as more than a stylistic experimentation, and by interrupting narrative continuity with abrupt shifts in perspective and visual description, Cha destabilizes the reader’s expectations of storytelling. The reader is thus tasked with piecing together meaning from scattered textual fragments as the director, assembling individual frames of film coherently. Thus, Cha transforms reading into an active interpretive process rather than a passive consumption of narrative, which forces the audience to confront the gaps, silences, and absences that structure both the text and the histories it seeks to cover.

Within this style of writing, Cha continues to tell the lost stories of women unable to speak it themselves in true *Dictee* fashion, focusing the first portion of the section on experiencing infidelity, which is proven when the diseuse states that the character “sees on her left the other woman, the same woman in her place as the day before”³⁹ at the theater. Page 95 of *Dictee* appears to be oddly spaced out at first glance, but as the diseuse directs, the reader inadvertently becomes part of the performance, and the necessity of the space emerges. The “whiteness of the screen” takes us backwards, then the reader becomes drawn from the white blankness to the blackness of the text as Cha plays with mediums. It almost begs the question of whether Cha is directing us, the readers, on how to perceive this section of *Dictee* by

³⁷ Chen, “The Stakes of *Dictee*.”

³⁸ Alexa Climaldi, “*Dictee*/Diptych” in *Evergreen Review*. <https://evergreenreview.com/read/dictee-diptych/>

³⁹ Cha, *Dictee*, 94.

“reimagin[ing] the page as a cinematic screen.”⁴⁰ While the space between the text takes adjustment to understand wholly, it serves a direct purpose in filling in the gaps from the page before it. Every time there is a gap in direction on the left pages of “Erato,” the right pages fill it in, making it absolutely necessary to read both pages in tandem. *Dictee* is both “completely empty and completely full when the book is closed,”⁴¹ and the division only occurs when read, appearing as “photographic negatives of each side.”⁴²



Figure 4. *Aveugle Voix* by Theresa Cha on display at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

The white blankness of “Erato” is not out of character for Cha, as she has utilized the lack of color and blankness of space as symbolism in her other works, suggesting the silencing of the colonized body. For example, in her performance of *Aveugle Voix* (blind voice), Cha drew on her studies of French language and her familiarity with Korean cultural traditions by wearing white mourning garments and tying fabric strips over her eyes and mouth. According to the Berkeley

⁴⁰ Chen, “The Stakes of *Dictee*.”

⁴¹ Climaldi, “*Dictee*/Diptych.”

⁴² Climaldi, “*Dictee*/Diptych.”

Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), wearing white signified political resistance to the Japanese occupation of Korea in the twentieth century. The color operated not only as a marker of grief, but also as a performative portrayal of defiance. White, while representing loss and resistance, also brings attention to silence, which serves as a key aspect of Cha's works. We often think of silence as an absence or an empty space where language or meaning should exist but Cha complicates this assumption by filling silence with gesture, form, and visual structure through *Avegule Voix*. In *Dictee*, silence is not just lack of speech, it is another communicative system. The blank spaces, fragmented lines, and interruptions, as analyzed above, function as gestures on the page. Cha presents silence as something structured and deliberate, implying that there is an underlying syntax to it. While syntax and grammar are typically associated with spoken or written language, Cha demonstrates that silence can operate through its own kind of syntax through things like the spacing of text and the abrupt breaks in between phrases. Absence thus becomes a component of communication.



Figures 5 and 6. From left to right: page 93 of *Dictee*, page 119 of *Dictee*.

Cha's use of Thérèse of Lisieux and Joan of Arc in "Erato" further solidifies the performative nature of identity present throughout *Dictee*. Rather than painting the saints to be

sacred figures, Cha includes images of these saints in the text when they are not their authentic selves—Thérèse of Lisieux is presented at the beginning of the section dressed as Joan of Arc, and Joan of Arc is shown at the end, “represented by actress Renée Falconetti in a still from Carl Dreyer’s 1928 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.”⁴³ As the reader, we never encounter the “authentic” version of saint, but rather, we see the figure through a performance. By using images that are not the martyrs themselves, Cha highlights that the performativity we all experience in our day-to-day lives is not just limited to the human experience, but also touches those that we see as holy and out of reach. Joan of Arc is only accessible through Falconetti’s performance, and similarly, the “disease” in *Dictee* is only accessible through layers of language and cultural memory. By presenting these martyrs through a version of themselves that is being reenacted through performance, Cha destabilizes the distinction between the sacred and humans in costume. She challenges the stability of religious figures and suggests that Thérèse of Lisieux and Joan of Arc are figures that are subject to the same processes of narration and reinterpretation as any other person or history.

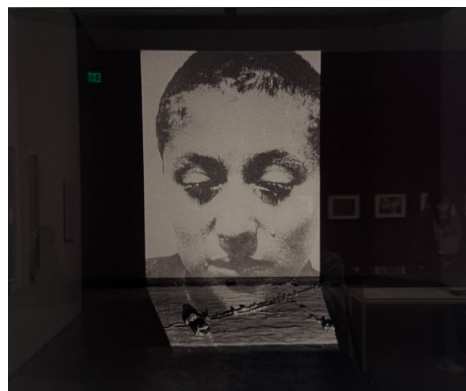


Figure 7. *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard* on display at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA)

⁴³ Chen, “The Stakes of *Dictee*.”

The saints in performance parallel the way the women of *Dictee* are presented by Cha, as their stories are all a part of a script that must be performed. Cha shows through women like Yu Guan Soon and her mother, Huo Hyun Soon, as well as unnamed characters like the one from “Erato,” that our identities are shaped by historical and cultural contexts that surround us. Renée Falconetti’s portrayal of Joan of Arc is not unique to *Dictee* and reappears in Cha’s performance piece, *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard*. By placing her own body in front of a projection of Falconetti, Cha enacts emotional and physical suffering by raising her arms above her head and dragging fabric ropes tied to rocks across the floor. According to a curator from BAMPFA, “an art critic” wrote that he “left feeling suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, as if [he] had been dreaming someone else’s dreams”⁴⁴ after witnessing this performance. This reaction shows the disorienting effect Cha creates for the viewer, as they become no longer certain of whose suffering is being witnessed. The boundaries between Joan of Arc’s, Renée Falconetti’s, and Theresa Cha’s stories begin to blur through the tension of the three being present at once. Similarly to the critic’s thoughts, we, as readers, are caught in a moment that seems to exist between past and present when reading *Dictee*, and identity becomes a dream we did not create consciously, rather, it becomes one shaped by collective memory and historical trauma.

Cha redefines performance as a necessary condition of existence for diasporic people rather than a confined act in *Dictee*, staging identity and memory through silence. She uses the cinematic structuring and visual disruptions through spacing to turn language into something that reveals and obscures meaning. The reader becomes a performer and enters *Dictee* as one of

⁴⁴ Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard*.

Cha's characters, being drawn into this process through reading and interpreting, as they are forced to navigate gaps and construct meaning from the white blankness of absence and literal directive notes. Cha demonstrates that there is no singular, authentic self by incorporating saints into *Dictée* and highlights that identity is always mediated through language and history that has been shaped by colonial memory. Silence, in the context of Cha's works, is a deliberate form of expression speaking to the violence of erasure. With what initially reads as absence, Cha exposes how marginalized voices persist and positions performance as a site of oppression and a means of survival.

3. LACK OF HANGUL & COLONIAL SILENCING IN *DICTEE*

*“I speak another tongue, a second tongue. This is how distant I am. From then. From that time.”*⁴⁵

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

Once in a while, my mother tells me the story of my three month period of silence following our move to the United States. In progress reports, my first grade teacher would regretfully mention that I had a difficult time making friends, adding that she could not truly gauge how well I understood the subjects we were learning because I simply would not respond to questions in class. At play-dates with prospective friends and even at my own birthday party, I kept to myself. At home, my Korean speaking additionally became limited as I exchanged my mother tongue for a world of English books. Once known as a “수다쟁이” (chatterbox), my mother could not believe how drastically my behavior had changed. She believed she made the wrong decision by choosing to move to a new country with her two kids, and started contemplating whether or not we should move back to Korea. One day, my mother’s stubborn daughter who would not utter a single “hello” the day before suddenly started speaking fluent English. I was participating in class, making new friends, and back to my normal habits at full force. Everything, from my accent to my grammar (for a six year old, at least), was perfect. My family jokes that I went silent because I am such a perfectionist—so much so that I could not handle the idea of making mistakes in the language learning process. The more I grew up and let the English language consume my day-to-day life, I noticed how Hangul’s presence started to slowly diminish. Similarly to Cha, I studied French extensively in high school, and being a language learner yet again pushed Hangul on the back burner. So, when I read *Dictee* for the first

⁴⁵ Cha, *Dictee*, 85.

time, I was not entirely shocked by the lack of Hangul—rather, I understood Cha’s choices wholeheartedly. Like her, I began speaking a second tongue that consumed me and further distanced me from my mother tongue.

Considering that a large chunk of *Dictée* was written in or translated into the French language, the few moments readers see Hangul in the text is all the more significant. One connection to Hangul that readers are introduced to is through Huo Hyun Soon’s “MAH-UHM” (마음), or “spirit heart” that keeps her strong in the first pages of “Calliope,” allowing her to cling onto her Korean identity in moments where she feels as though she’s losing touch with her language and culture. An act that appears as simple as Huo singing the national anthem or the song of a bongseon flower in Hangul becomes a symbol of her bravery and defiance against the new Japanese identity that was forced onto her. It also serves as a message that her Korean culture was still a deeply rooted part of her that followed her everywhere she went through the spirit of her heart. “MAH-UHM” gets repeated extensively, almost like a mantra through pages 45 and 46. Scholar Hyo K. Kim writes in “Embodying the In-Between: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s ‘Dictée’” that every single time Cha uses “MAH-UHM,” the word “resists objectification,”⁴⁶ meaning it refuses to be fully translated or assimilated into English. The anglicized spelling does not simply convert the Korean word “마음” into a readable Western form, rather, it leaves an essential conceptual topic ungraspable outside its cultural context. While Cha offers the translation of “spirit heart,” “MAH-UHM” is more than a word, as it captures Korean national identity. In 2024, the Korean Cultural Centre chose “MAH-UHM” (spelt “ma-eum” on the website) as their theme for their yearly Korean Film Nights event to

⁴⁶ Hyo K. Kim. “Embodying the In-Between: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s ‘Dictée.’” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 46, no. 4 (2013): 127–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030712>. 132.

depict this expression and feeling through documentary cinema. Inspired by Cha, the theme focused on how “MAH-UHM” can mean both heart and mind, as it symbolizes the bond between reason and emotion.

One of the films featured in Korean Film Nights 2024 included Cha’s *Vidéoème*, which was a single-channel video that toyed with the French language and black, blank visual space. Taking a language that is not her mother tongue, Cha dismantled words and made her own definitions. An example of this is shown through the title of the piece itself: *Vidéoème* is a “French neologism that combines the word for video (derived from -vidre, ‘I see’ in Latin), with that for poetry, poème.”⁴⁷ It is clear through stills of *Vidéoème* (shown below) that Cha perceived language to be something fluid, especially for those displaced and impacted by colonialism.

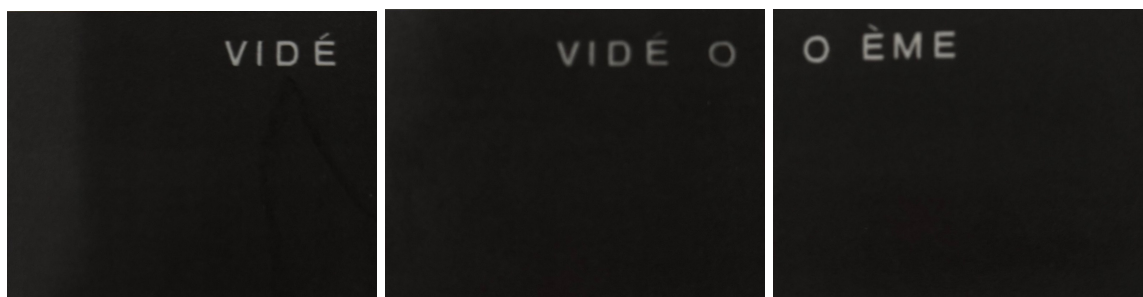


Figure 8. *Vidéoème* by Theresa Cha, 1976. Left to right, “VIDÉ” (emptied), “VIDÉ O” (emptied zero), “O ÈME” (very least).

By specifically showing sections of the word “vidéoème,” Cha made the words “emptied,” “emptied zero,” and “very least.” Cha intended for the white words, visible on the screen yet rid of any cultural meaning, to not juxtapose, but to parallel the blackness that surrounds it and the silence of the film, conveying to audiences how language can be

⁴⁷ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Vidéoème*. <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/videoeme-202125/>

simultaneously present to our eyes and absent. Using French in this instance, unlike most of the French we see in *Dictee*, Cha visually strips and pastes together a colonial language and mirrors what colonial subjects experienced when their words become void of meaning. Cha's experimentation with language is prevalent through many of her works, but this instance, playing with French in *Vidéoème* shows similarities with her careful approach and use of Hangul in *Dictee*. The repetition of "MAH-UHM" remains conceptually intact as it cannot be fully "emptied," and, to counter Hyo K. Kim's point, "MAH-UHM" resists reduction rather than objectification, as it carries a cultural weight that exceeds translation and refuses to dissolve under colonial pressure.

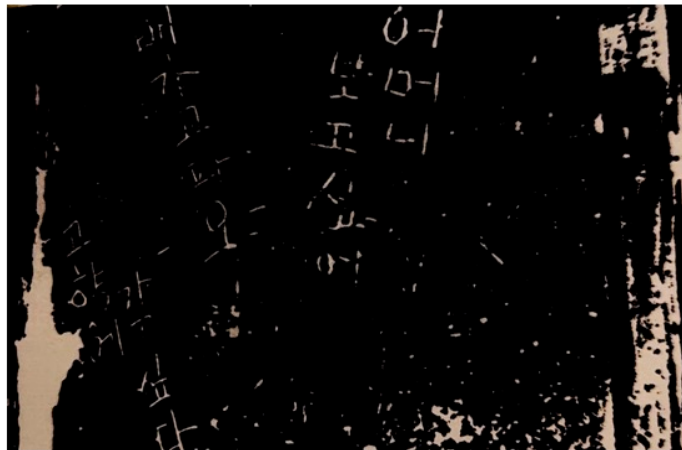


Figure 9. Front matter of *Dictee*. From left to right, “고향에 가고 싶다” (I want to go to my homeland/hometown), “배가 고파요” (I’m hungry), and “보고싶어 어머니” (I miss you mother).

The other instance of Korean in *Dictee* is at the very start of the book, but it doesn't come in the form of Cha's writing, rather, it is an image of graffiti—one that is very easy for readers to miss, appearing in the front matter of the text. The image reads, “고향에 가고 싶다” (I want to go to my homeland/hometown), “배가 고파요” (I'm hungry), and “보고싶어 어머니” (I miss

you mother). These phrases were carved onto the walls of a Japanese coal mine by Korean miners during the occupation of Korea. Here, Cha used untranslated Korean as a statement piece to show that there will always be a limitation to what readers can fully understand, especially when it comes to understanding the experiences of people from different cultures and time periods. However, this does not mean readers cannot draw their own interpretations. Cha's Masters of Arts thesis, "Paths," states, "the viewer holds the position as the complement, an avenue, through multiple interpretations, [and] give[s]...multiple dimensions to the work,"⁴⁸ suggesting that an artwork is incomplete without the presence and engagement of an audience, which is especially significant when considering the untranslated Korean graffiti. For those who do not understand Korean, the image resists comprehension, but rather than viewing the language barrier as a hindrance to understanding the value of the image, Cha creates a space where meaning is produced through the reader's effort to interpret what is in front of them. The "complement" thus becomes someone who completes the work by bringing their own frameworks and limitations to their interpretation of the text.

After walking through Cha's galleries at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, it was clear to me that Cha believes the role of the viewer to be not just a complement to her work, but also that of a "distant relative," as, even with a language and comprehension barrier, there obtains a sense of familiarity. As she examines with her mail art and installation art piece, "Audience Distant Relative," Cha recognizes the differing familial and ancestral backgrounds that her viewers come from and how it contributes to their overall understanding of art. The text on the envelopes read:

I address you

⁴⁸ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. "Paths." (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1978).

As I would a distant relative

As if a distant relative

Seen only heard only through someone else's description.⁴⁹

Positioning the viewer as a “distant relative,” Cha builds a relationship both intimate yet estranged, familiar yet distant. This framing complicates the traditional role of the audience, and, like relatives separated by migration and history, the viewer encounters Cha’s work through fragments, with translations that do not fully translate and images that resist clarity. The “distant relative” could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the diasporic experience, similarly to how one might inherit memories without fully grasping its cultural origins, separated from their land. By addressing the audience this way, Cha shifts the burden of interpretation, as the viewer is responsible for navigating their own position in relation to the work, especially when they encounter a history that is not fully theirs, or a language they cannot understand. Rather than asking the viewer to translate and decode, Cha’s intention is for the reader to recognize the gaps in their understanding and to reflect on what those gaps signify.

The significance of the coal mine engravings can be further examined through comparison with poetry on the barracks of Angel Island. Located across from Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay, Angel Island operated three decades following the Chinese Exclusion Act as an immigration station for Chinese immigrant detainees, and there were hundreds of poems that were carved onto the walls by those awaiting decisions on their status. While an article by *The New Yorker* states that it is very much possible that “much of what was written [on the walls were] destroyed,”⁵⁰ the poetry that was preserved reveals a haunting moment in history where the

⁴⁹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Audience Distant Relative*.

⁵⁰ Beenish Ahmed, “The Lost Poetry of the Angel Island Detention Center,” *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-lost-poetry-of-the-angel-island-detention-center>

brutal Chinese-exclusionary laws of 1882 put the livelihoods of many at jeopardy. What was interesting was that, while there were all different kinds of writing present on the walls, the only poetry reported was classical Chinese poetry, featuring “parallel couplets, alternating rhymes, and tonal variations.”⁵¹ After intense questioning on the connections they had to American citizens, what these Chinese immigrants could not confess directly to interrogators ended up on the walls as inscribed poetry, reminiscent of what we see in *Dictee*. Considering that “European and many other Asian émigrés were typically allowed entry to the U.S. after just a few hours or days,”⁵² poems detailed feelings of resentment over how they were treated. Teow Lim Goh, in her book, *Islanders*, uses immigration documents and oral histories to tell the lost stories of women on Angel Island, writing about cultural “wounds that strip searches, medical exams, and extended interrogations did not reveal.”⁵³ The poetry of Angel Island shows that what seems like innocent graffiti on a wall is rather an act of resistance, and highlights the pain of displacement when systems worked to erase the voices of immigrants.

In the body of the text, colonial silencing is represented in multiple forms that also help explain the lack of Korean, and thus, why the overt presence of the colonizer’s tongue is so significant. To better understand the intentionality of Cha’s literary choices in *Dictee*, it is important to understand how education was weaponized as a tool in both the United States and Korea. In the United States, education worked to “disrupt Indigenous families, culture and

⁵¹ Ahmed, “The Lost Poetry of the Angel Island Detention Center.”

⁵² Ahmed, “The Lost Poetry of the Angel Island Detention Center.”

⁵³ Ahmed, “The Lost Poetry of the Angel Island Detention Center.”

sovereignty,”⁵⁴ with children being stolen from families to learn in “systematic militarised and identity-alteration methodologies to assimilate Indigenous children through education.”⁵⁵ Students repeating language that was not their own in the classroom setting was a method of learning, and how colonial power disciplined speech. In Korea, we saw something similar—during the Japanese colonial period, public schools served as a tool for assimilation. It was stated in In-duck Kim’s “The Association between Education and Society: The Educational Struggle for Korean Identity in Japan 1945-1948” that Japanese imperialists believed that Koreans could be assimilated through education, and what they taught was “essentially how to live as Japanese rather than Koreans”⁵⁶ with the primary objective being to “prepare its students for the Japanese military and stifle any feeling of Korean nationalism.”⁵⁷ Cha mimics the structure of education and how it was used for colonized subjects to reproduce a language and history that is not their own. The “disease” speaks an imperfect, rehearsed language, and describes a person impacted by the loss of their own voice. The fragmented form of writing is meant to feel constrained and resist articulation, and this refusal to give into colonial silencing critiques the authority of the colonizer. Trauma does not need to be made into something that is neatly explained to the audience, which also explains the lack of structure.

⁵⁴ H. Came, V. Kerrigan, et al. “Unravelling Colonial Education: From Dazzling White to Deliberately Decolonised and Supporting the Case for Indigenous Universities.” *Whiteness and Education* 11 (2): 113–29. doi:10.1080/23793406.2024.2376018.

⁵⁵ Came, et al. “Unravelling Colonial Education.”

⁵⁶ In-duck Kim. “The Association between Education and Society: The Educational Struggle for Korean Identity in Japan 1945-1948.” *Asia Pacific Education Review* 9 (3): 335-343. 336.

⁵⁷ Kim, “The Association between Education and Society,” 336.

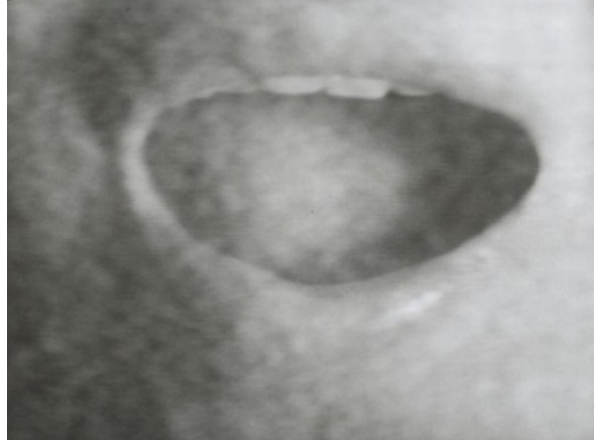


Figure 10. Image still from *Mouth to Mouth* by Theresa Cha, 1975.

When observing Cha's other works, we see a common theme, as she often chooses to articulate the experience of displacement and colonialism through silence. As stated in "The Plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages" by Lawrence R. Rinder within *The Dream of the Audience*, "*Dictée* can be understood as Cha's attempt to recall her lost genealogy and to articulate it in words and images...yet, speech itself appears to have been fractured through the trauma of exile."⁵⁸ Her loss of speech stems from her physical and cultural displacement, which is why she resists communicating in a single tongue. In an artist statement for her video, *Mouth to Mouth*, Cha stated that the "main body of [her] work is with language, looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue."⁵⁹ *Mouth to Mouth* is an eight-minute video published in 1975 that features "close-up shots of a mouth silently enunciating each [Korean] vowel."⁶⁰ Kimberly K. Lamm in her article "Mouth

⁵⁸ Lawrence R. Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages" in *The Dream of the Audience*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001), 18.

⁵⁹ Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, *Mouth to Mouth*.

⁶⁰ Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances," 18.

Work: Writing the Voice of the Mother Tongue in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha” describes *Mouth to Mouth* as a “meditation on the significance of language in Korea’s colonial and diasporic history,”⁶¹ that offers “physical reflection on the Korean language as a mother tongue”⁶² She expresses that “*Mouth to Mouth* evokes the desires for belonging,”⁶³ yet also causes a “sense of distance and alienation”⁶⁴ for readers due to the video production methods utilized, as the mouth is never directly in view and remains obscured by static.

Cha’s work reveals that language is never just a tool for communication. Through the presence of Hangul in *Dictee*, Cha demonstrates that meaning does not disappear even when language is stripped or rendered unfamiliar. Rather, her work emphasizes what cannot be articulated through repetition and absence. By positioning the viewer as a “distant relative,” she emphasizes that understanding of art is always incomplete and shaped by one’s own cultural frameworks and limitations. However, Cha maintains that viewers are capable of generating their own interpretations through effort. Similarly to the silence I once inhabited and the gradual distancing I felt from my mother tongue, Cha’s work reflects the quiet process through which language can be lost, reimagining silence as a space of memory rather than just tragedy associated with loss. *Dictee* emphasizes that fragments of language carry traces of cultural identity, and thus, through silence, Cha’s work challenges the expectation that language must be whole or easily translatable to be meaningful. By the end of the text, Cha invites us to reconsider what it means to understand language within the context of diasporic histories.

⁶¹ Kimberly K. Lamm. “Mouth Work: Writing the Voice of the Mother Tongue in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 43 (2): 171-193, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcaa011>

⁶² Lamm, “Mouth Work.”

⁶³ Lamm, “Mouth Work.”

⁶⁴ Lamm, “Mouth Work.”

CONCLUSION

*“Lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high above her view the glass
between some image a blur now darks and greys mere shadows lingering above her vision her
head tilted back as far as it can go.”*⁶⁵

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*



Figure 11. “Quipu Girok” by Cecilia Vicuña on display at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA)

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s life was cut short on November 5, 1982, only two months after *Dictee* was published. She was 31. Although she never got to see the full success of her book, Cha’s legacy lives on in many forms, with many artists still taking inspiration from her works on a regular basis. After the publication of a collection of critical essays in a book called *Writing*

⁶⁵ Cha, *Dictee*, 179.

Self, Writing Nation in 1994, *Dictée* became more widely known and started being taught in contemporary literature classes. Cha's 2026 exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Multiple Offerings*, which I had the privilege of visiting as part of writing my thesis, is one example of this. The exhibition included works that "centered [on] her art, her life, her making"⁶⁶ rather than her death, according to curator Victoria Sung. The works of other artists were featured as well, especially those that play "crucial roles in keeping her legacy alive."⁶⁷ The exhibition also reveals the different ways in which artists perceive Cha's works—while some thematically reflect on Cha's concepts of memory and the impacts of colonization, others look at her works physically and how she portrayed performance through image, video, and text.

One notable installation in Cha's exhibition is Cecilia Vicuña's "Quipu Girok," pictured on the page above. Taking up quite a bit of space within the museum, the piece is something that instantly catches the eye. The Chilean poet, artist, activist and filmmaker, like Cha, was interested in "displaced people from different wars and tragedies,"⁶⁸ and the two had originally planned on meeting the week of Cha's death. It was stated in the article "A Cult Figure, Silenced Too Soon, Resurfaces" by *The New York Times* that this missed encounter still haunts her, and inspired the creation of multiple pieces in her memory. Vicuña's piece at BAMPFA uses materials that align with Andean and Korean textile traditions, paying homage to both artists' cultures. The "quipu," meaning "knot" in the Quechua language, is something Vicuña has spent her entire career reinventing. The "quipu" was once used to "[keep] records, [tell] stories,

⁶⁶ "A Cult Figure, Silenced Too Soon, Resurfaces," *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/28/arts/design/teresa-hak-kyung-cha-profile-bamfa-art.html>

⁶⁷ "A Cult Figure, Silenced Too Soon," *The New York Times*.

⁶⁸ "A Cult Figure, Silenced Too Soon," *The New York Times*.

[record] communal rules, and even [write] poems,”⁶⁹ and, through this art form, Vicuña “keeps alive what would otherwise be a long-forgotten Indigenous heritage.”⁷⁰ Vicuña thus creates a language that exists outside of written forms, similar to Cha’s own resistance to linguistic authority in *Dictee*. The act of weaving in this instance by Vicuña can be interpreted as a continuation of Cha’s work to transform the histories of displacement she focused on into something materially moving.

Dictee was the first work that truly stuck with me throughout my time at UCLA because of how relatable it felt despite its non-linearity. Just as Cha navigated the distance between languages within her works, ending my thesis, I am just now recognizing the quiet ways in which spoken words can be both lost and remembered. Like a child being lifted up to a window—the image Cha leaves readers with on the final page of *Dictee*—I find myself thinking about what it means to be positioned between seeing, yet not fully understanding, my own identity as a person who has evenly split her time between South Korea and the United States. The child described on the page is raised into clarity by their mother, paralleling my split culture that has felt like something I can only get a glimpse into when surrounding myself with others, but never fully claim as my own. What stayed with me since reading *Dictee* for the first time was not just Cha’s exploration of identity, but how the text becomes a space to inhabit for those “in between” cultures like me. Cha’s work reveals that diasporic identity for Koreans is not defined by what is fully known or preserved within history books, but rather by what is carried forward in their “MAH-UHM.” This is precisely how *Dictee* endures the test of time and still remains significant within the classroom: it refuses closure unapologetically. It leaves readers, the “complement” and

⁶⁹ “Rediscovering the Quipu: The Textile Art of Cecilia Vicuña,” The Thread.

<https://blog.fabrics-store.com/2024/08/20/rediscovering-the-quipu-the-textile-art-of-cecilia-vicuna/>

⁷⁰ “Rediscovering the Quipu,” The Thread.

the “distant relative,” with the understanding that within the incompleteness of history and identity lies endurance.

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