

Mediation and Authenticity
in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée

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Introduction: Writing the Past

Authors of memoir and autobiography must always grapple with the difficulty of reconstructing the past. What may at first seem to be a manageable task of recollection turns out to be an act of translation that must cross distances of time and location. Authors must probe into the elusive, fluid space of memory and imagine back across time passed in order to access and reconstruct life's events. But memory is faulty, and the linearity demanded by text contradicts the simultaneous way we process experience. To translate life into text is to flatten out the robust simultaneity of lived experience into the linear medium of language.

To complicate matters, authors whose interests extend beyond autobiography and into familial and national history have another set of problems on their hands. How can an author faithfully write about a past event that he or she did not experience, or a person he or she never knew? Can the sources he or she uses (memoirs, photographs, historical records, etc.) make the past more "real" to a reader? If the author acknowledges his or her own limited access to the past, does it make the text more authentic?

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's book *Dictée* is loaded with experimental approaches to these questions. The avant-garde techniques she uses radically illustrate the problems of mediation and authenticity in personal narratives coming out of oppressive political contexts. The frustrated language that pervades the book paired with Cha's idiosyncratic incorporation of outside sources works to express not just the difficulty, but perhaps the impossibility of conveying a lost past.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) was a Korean-American performance artist who studied comparative literature and fine art at the University of California, Berkeley. Born in Korea, Cha immigrated to the United States with her family when she was thirteen. She became active in the San Francisco Bay Area art community during her time at Berkeley in the 1970s, and was known for blending the mediums of film, text, and performance in her efforts to address the personal and cultural losses that result from exile.

Her final work and only book, *Dictée*, recounts the strained cultural encounters of several different Korean women as they are faced with changing political and cultural atmospheres. She writes about her own experiences, but also about the life of her mother and other women whose experiences she found influential. She draws on historical, biographical, and autobiographical sources for her book's content, but, like Cha's artwork, *Dictée* resists easy genre classification. This is due, in part, to her inclusion of a multitude of other documents—photographs, anatomical charts, poetry, and excerpts from language textbooks. Because it draws on so many different types of sources, *Dictée* lacks the conventional linear narrative that is typical of most memoir writing. Cha's experimental approach scatters the non-narrative material throughout the more traditionally narrative sections of the book, creating a hybrid text that forces the reader to discern how the fragments of text and visual media work together to convey a cohesive story.

The unusual narrative sequence and her presentation of many photographs, charts, poetry, and other visual media make it difficult to classify the book in even the most basic categories, such as prose, for example. Some professors have treated the contents of *Dictée* as poetry, others as an example of postcolonial writing. Even the University of California Press cautiously categorizes the 2001 edition as "Literature Art." The strangeness of *Dictée* due to its avant-garde features has also appealed to critics of a wide variety of persuasions. Since its initial publication in 1982, the book has been received into the Asian American canon, though as scholar Timothy Yu points out, Asian American critics have often focused on *Dictée's* narrative elements "at the expense of its more abstract sections"¹. On the other hand, treatments of the book as experimental writing risk understating the cultural context surrounding the book's production,

specifically the political situation of Korea in the twentieth century and Cha's relationship to it. *Dictée* can be analyzed from feminist, postcolonial, and postmodernist perspectives, just to name a few, and these are all legitimate modes of understanding the book. However, in order to see how Cha prompts new ways of reading personal narrative, one must focus on the intersection between the avant-garde and the political in *Dictée*.

Politics in *Dictée*: Mother Tongue & Displacement

Cha immigrated to the United States during the Korean War, and exile is a prevalent theme throughout *Dictée*. The North-South split prompted by the Soviet and American occupations following World War II forms part of the historical background for the work, but the theme of oppression also arises where Cha references the effects of the Japanese occupation and cultural erasure imposed upon Korea by Japan in the first part of the twentieth century.

The sense of cultural loss brought on by military occupation, cultural displacement, emigration, and exile is persistent throughout *Dictée*. In the epistolary chapter "Calliope Epic Poetry," Cha writes in the present tense to her mother's past self, addressing her as "you" and recounting her mother's experiences as a young teacher in Manchuria.

Cha's grandparents relocated their family from Korea to escape the Japanese occupation and settled in a Korean exile community in Manchuria. Her mother, physically removed from Korea since birth yet enveloped in the Korean exile community, continues to feel the effects of the Japanese occupation in her parents' homeland, and this cultural oppression repeats itself in their new location. In 1940 she graduates from a teacher's college and the government requires her to teach in a small village for three years as repayment for her school loans. By this time, the Japanese had also occupied Manchuria and the effects of this are felt in the village school, where Japan's flag hangs and the language of the workplace is Japanese despite the fact that all of the teachers and children are Korean. Cha writes to her mother, imagining and describing her experience:

Still, you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are.²

She is required to speak Japanese and is forbidden from speaking Korean in the public sphere. She must speak Korean in secret, in inaudible whispers. The Japanese occupation not only affects her public activity, but also attempts to control something as personal as the language she speaks. The suppression of her native tongue results in an inward turn into the secret, subjective space that exterior forces cannot see or regulate. By equating the mother tongue with home and refuge, Cha suggests that the suppression of one's native language is equal to the suppression of one's identity and one's security. She writes that the mother tongue allows her mother to be who she is, suggesting that the political oppression of language is a direct oppression of the self. As a result, speaking Korean becomes a private political act that allows her mother to assert her identity amidst political oppression, albeit secretly.

Identity is wrapped up with language, and within the exile community, it is difficult to claim one's identity because of the linguistic fragmentation caused by the tension between one's native language and the dominant language. Born and raised in the Korean exile community, Cha's mother is not simply Korean, but a *second generation Korean exile*. Consequently, she is even more distanced from a Korean national identity. Already physically exiled from Korea, she

is exiled a second time as a result of her inability to express herself in her native tongue in public. The Korean language is her strongest claim to that identity, and even that is threatened by the same political force that caused her parents' exile.

The syntax of "Calliope Epic Poetry," like in most of the book, is disjointed and full of fragments that often repeat themselves with slight alterations, as though each sentence is a new beginning. For example, Cha changes "You speak in the dark. In the secret," to "you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret," a couple of sentences later. The movement here is not just repetition, but self-corrected reiteration. Cha constantly tries to get closer to the signified, but the imprecise signifiers get in her way. She reformulates her ideas in different variations first to share her attempt to get closer to the meaning, but also to show that she simply cannot access it. In the case of *Dictée*, this reflects the subject's difficulty with both native and foreign language. The language is fragmented because the subject's experience is fragmented by the Japanese occupation. Cha's mother must compartmentalize her speech and thought into the public and private realms because of the political weight each language carries, and this subsequently fractures her identity. Cha describes her mother's return to Korea after having been naturalized as an American citizen. Her complicated national identity—now a mix of Korean, Japanese, Manchurian, and American influences—is met with skepticism by the customs officials. Raised in the exile community, Cha's mother grew up considering Korea to be her homeland, but her proficiency in the Korean language is insufficient qualification for cultural acceptance:

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt.³

The interrogation by the officials is so adamant that she begins to doubt her own identity. She is judged by her linguistic capability or lack thereof, and in this moment her strongest tie to Korea begins to break down. She finds herself incapable of speech: "You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you"⁴. The emotional potency of these sentences, first conveyed through its content ("near tears"), is further emphasized through the repetition of the phrase "I know you," uninterrupted by a comma. She wants desperately to defend her identity and her belonging, but significantly, she does not say this. She *nearly* defends herself, but cannot speak the words. Whereas in the past she had been forbidden to speak her native tongue, she is now physically unable to do so. The effects of the cultural oppression she experienced in her youth linger on through her complicated identity.

The association Cha makes between her mother's native language and her identity makes clear why her private engagement with the Korean language while she lives in Manchuria can be understood as an act of political resistance. Private speech allows her to express in the language that is most intimate to her, and in that sense she is able to privately exercise her subjectivity in a way that is not permitted in public space. "Calliope Epic Poetry" is based on her journals, and Cha identifies writing to be an important outlet for her mother's resistance. Despite that it is unclear to what extent Cha reworks the journals for *Dictée*, these sections of the text allude to how her mother's secret resistance persists beyond its inception:

You write. You write you speak voices hidden masked you plant words to the moon you send word through the wind. Through the passing of seasons. By sky and by water the words are given birth given discretion. From one mouth to another, from one reading to

the next the words are realized in their full meaning [B]irds are mouth pieces wear the ghost veil for the seed of message. Correspondence. To scatter the words.⁵

Cha's mother writes and speaks in secret, burying her language in the ground. Her words are fertile seeds that sprout, reproduce, and disseminate her inner thoughts. Language is powerful here, and her mother's writing, which is both personal and political, is also potent. The transmission of ideas by mouth through speech and by text through writing can make the meaning of the words real. The metaphorical birds, scattering the seeds/words, wear the "ghost veil," operating invisibly to transmit her message. The mention of the seasons illustrates the passage of time, and Cha's use of the plant reproduction cycle alludes to the generative and regenerative powers of writing. Cha mentions the seasons in order to stress that these messages, these stories move across time, in this case from mother to daughter.

The word "correspondence" is an early hint at the reciprocal relationship Cha establishes between herself and her mother later in the chapter. Somewhat suddenly, Cha appears as the I-narrator of the text for one quick paragraph of the chapter, and in doing so she sets up several structural and thematic parallels between her own act of writing and her mother's. Though the rest of the chapter is also in present tense, this paragraph brings the reader to the moment of Cha's writing—into the immediate present. Instead of writing from the present about the past, Cha momentarily breaks away and writes from the present about the present:

I write. I write you. Daily. From here. If I am not writing, I am thinking about writing. I am composing. Recording movements. You are here I raise the voice. Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones. Not hollow not empty. They think that you are one and the same direction addressed. The vast ambient sound hiss between the invisible line distance that this line connects the void and space surrounding entering and exiting.⁶

She begins by discussing her own writing exactly as she discusses her mother's: "You write."/"I write." She emphasizes that she is writing "from here," from the present, and that it is an act of simultaneously composing and recording the past. Cha not only records her mother's story, but actively acknowledges her role in constructing it. Her mother is a part of the story, but it is Cha who transmits her voice. Where she says, "Particles bits of sound and noise gathered picked up lint, dust," she conveys that she is collecting tiny pieces that might otherwise be forgotten, otherwise left to scatter into the oblivion of history's shadow. She stresses that her mother's words are not hollow or empty, but like seeds, they are fertile and alive with potential.

It is clear that Cha values her mother's writing as a mode of subtle resistance to political oppression. Importantly, in this single paragraph Cha manages not just to convey that value, but also to insert herself into literally the middle of her mother's story (this paragraph is in the middle of the chapter). She enters as the I-character and in doing so crosses "the vast ambient sound hiss between the invisible line distance" between her mother's experience and her own. She identifies her own writing as the line that connects them across time, and by creating parallel structures in the discussion of their respective writing activities, Cha positions her own writing as a personal political act like her mother's. In this way, Cha uses her mother's personal history as a way to insert herself into the larger history that affects them both: the larger history of the Japanese oppression of Korean culture.

Counter-history

Cha sets up the tension between official history and personal experience even earlier in the text. The chapter "Clio History" begins with a picture of Yu Guan Soon, a young Korean

revolutionary heroine who helped organize one of the earliest Korean demonstrations against the Japanese occupation in 1919. Cha offers some information about Guan Soon in a manner that typifies the patriotic or, in this case, socialist biography of a celebrated hero or heroine, and her writing quickly turns to mock this model. She writes:

Guan Soon is the only daughter born of four children to her patriot father and mother. From an early age her actions are marked exceptional. History records the biography of her short and intensely-lived existence. Actions prescribed separate her path from the others. The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history.⁷

The language Cha uses to describe Guan Soon's familial origins and the emphasis on her parents' patriotism implies that she was destined from birth to be a national heroine. The language that explains that her actions were marked exceptional from an early age is a cliché that reinforces the notion that Guan Soon's revolutionary actions were innate and latent even from her childhood. This construction reframes all of Guan Soon's actions through the lens of her revolutionary activities as a young woman, and so the childhood image Cha creates of her is colored with the influence of retrospective knowledge. Cha's use of this cliché is a critique of the conventional biographic mode of writing, particularly as it pertains to socialist patriotic biography. Cha reappropriates these tropes into her biography of Guan Soon to redirect the reader's attention to her own activity of writing biography and away from the biographical figure herself. Essentially, the construction is what matters, and the person who is the object of that construction is interchangeable.

Cha introduces the concept of History as an agent that records Guan Soon's biography and singles her out as an exceptional national heroine, but History's recording is impersonal and entirely nonspecific to Guan Soon herself. This criticism is apparent where Cha writes, "Actions prescribed separate her path from the others. The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history"⁸. Here, Cha explicitly states that the construction of Guan Soon's character within the conventions of the sterile mode of socialist patriotic biography merely reinforces the image of the "heroine type" that this kind of writing creates in the first place. The word "prescribed" is loaded with the implication that Guan Soon's actions originate outside of herself, and in a certain way, they do. Though Guan Soon was an agent of her own revolutionary actions in their original execution, the reconstruction of them by History uses the prescribed formula of socialist biography and ultimately makes her fall flat as an individual. As a result, History makes Guan Soon into more of a character or a type than an actual person.

Toward the end of "Clio History," Cha's criticism of the impersonal nature of biographical writing expands to include historical writing more generally. Here, the text moves into an abstract discussion of the difficulty of describing the political circumstance to an outsider who did not witness or experience the original events. She implies that access to information about international events is mediated by news sources, written histories, and other types of news media, and she challenges the belief that one can "know" about these events simply from reading an article in a newspaper or a history book. She writes:

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded humanity of another.⁹

Cha suggests that to bear witness is to "know," and this knowing is not possible for people who have not witnessed an event firsthand. People's access to distant events is mediated by the

language of written histories, and consequently, their knowledge only exists through the abstract perception those histories create. Cha capitalizes “history” to make it into the proper noun “History” and suggest that official history is a dominant authority. It is History that affirms that one enemy nation has disregarded another’s humanity, and because History is unmistakable, it is authoritative in this assertion.

Importantly, Cha herself does not claim to have witnessed her mother’s youth in Manchuria nor Guan Soon’s political uprising firsthand. She cannot claim this. Even her access to these events is mediated, and she acknowledges this by using frustrated language and repetitive syntax to focus the reader’s attention on the difficulty of reconstructing lived experience using text. She bears witness to the *stories*, not to the events to which the stories refer. By shifting the focus from the content to the form, Cha admits that her own access is mediated and situates it as an inevitable aspect of writing about the past.

Written histories claim to offer access to these events, but their language is impotent. The fact that the words are unfathomable emphasizes that people’s desensitization to the language of war further limits their potential to understand it, which is problematic, as language is the primary vehicle for sharing news and information. Though she initially writes that the *words* are unfathomable, Cha quickly edits her word choice and instead refers to them as “terminology,” suggesting that they are simply a group of arbitrary signs for events that are ultimately inaccessible to people who did not experience them. The self-correction she enacts here contrasts the authoritative tone of History by enacting a type of writing that is malleable rather than paralyzed in time. In this way, Cha puts the personal back into the narrative that History has depersonalized through supposedly objective language. Her use of the word “terminology” can be understood to imply the sterility of this language, and this demonstrates the ambiguity words take on when severed from the events they attempt to describe.

The Documentary Mode of Knowledge

One of the ways that *Dictée* prompts more critical readings of both personal and historical narratives is by challenging the impersonal mode of writing that History performs. A book may say that a certain town was bombed by a certain group of people, but the impact of those facts is not substantial enough to create an adequate impression of what it was like to have lived that experience. Cha contends that popular knowledge of events in foreign places is “about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernable features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other”¹⁰. Just as Yu Guan Soon’s biography has been constructed within the socialist patriotic heroine type, foreign events are made abstract and indistinguishable by the language used to describe them. Cha writes that content delivered via the written word functions to “appeal to the masses to congeal the information to make bland, mundane”¹¹. Again, she emphasizes the sterility of this language and shows that words such as “atrocities” and “destruction” lose their meaning as a result of overuse. Cha makes references to physicality and to flesh and bone to point to the fact that text is a medium that risks disembodiment. Official narratives tend to hide the author behind authoritative and allegedly objective language.

Cha’s language is fluid, and rather than make adamant claims, she constructs her argument by adding modifying clauses to her statements and allowing the reader to see the progression of these ideas. She explains that words are, “Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to

continue”¹². Here, Cha critiques the language of official history by demonstrating how the same problem affects her own attempts to explain through writing. She tries to make her explanation concise, but her struggle to get at the signified is visibly compromised by the status of language as a representative medium. She allows readers to see this process, first, in order to show the difficulty she herself has in accessing and expressing meaning, and secondly, to convey the subsequent difficulty the reader will have in accessing that same meaning.

The fact that difficulty of access is shared by the writer and the reader is critical to an understanding of the effects of Cha’s avant-garde techniques in *Dictée*. One of the major perils that she sets up is the false belief that nonfiction texts will allow readers to *know*, and this is particularly problematic for postcolonial texts because it risks oversimplifying the experiences of a “cultural other.” Scholar Anne Anlin Cheng coins the term “documentary desire” to describe the hope that a text can function as an easy window into another time, place, or culture; that we can *know* through text. However, by emphasizing the imprecision of language, the questionable reliability of the text, and the subjectivity of the writing, Cha engages the reader in a way that prevents the passive consumption of the book. As Cheng aptly puts it, Cha’s approach “challenges the conceptualization of the use of private and communal records that is reinforced by the documentary mode of knowledge”¹³. Cha takes advantage of the tendency to operate in the documentary mode of knowledge by appropriating certain genre conventions and subverting them as soon as the reader thinks he or she has come to something familiar and accessible. This approach consciously and consistently dissatisfies the documentary desire, and as a result, *Dictée* resists oversimplification and negates the possibility of providing the reader access to an “authentic” experience.

One way that Cha exploits the documentary mode of knowledge is by incorporating a variety of photos, poetry, uncaptioned portraits, astronomy and anatomy charts, maps, historical documents, and other media to invoke the alleged authority of historical documents and other visual records. At first, her inclusion of this material could be understood as a way to assert the authority of her own writing. Visual aids in memoirs, such as portraits for example, tend have the function of making the people in the book more real and validating their existence with physical evidence; they embody the text. The privileged status of visual material over verbal material is aptly analogized in Cha’s description of her mother’s encounter with customs officials in “Calliope Epic Poetry.” Cha describes this phenomenon by equating authority and power with physical objects, and explains that the uniformed customs officials have the right to question her mother’s identity because “their authority [is] sewn into the stitches of their costume”¹⁴. Here, the tangible uniform symbolizes the more abstract concept of authority, and when they doubt her identity, their “eyes gather towards the appropriate proof. Towards the face then again to the papers”¹⁵. The papers, or documents, assert a similar authority to that of the officials’ uniforms and are eventually accepted as substantial proof of her identity. Documents carry the same authority when her mother becomes an American citizen: “I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature”¹⁶. The documents permit her entry into this new culture, and as in the previous example, tangible objects are used to validate the otherwise abstract concepts of authority and citizenship. However, though the documents initially allow her mother access into the U.S., they eventually mark her as an outsider upon her return to Korea when the papers show that she is an American citizen and the customs officials interrogate her about her identity. The documents, like language, are ultimately equally arbitrary and insufficient signifiers.

The Fragmented Image

More generally, Cha's use of extra-textual media in *Dictée* forms part of her critique of the documentary mode of knowledge. While the documents could at first be understood to back up Cha's authority, her blatant selectivity and seemingly haphazard placement of the material throughout the book caution readers against investing too much trust in this technique. The majority of this media lacks explanatory captions and is placed in the text seemingly at random, with no explicit correspondence to points in the narrative. The absence of explanatory information (subscripts, figure links, etc.) to accompany these elements severs them from their origins, leaving the reader with no knowledge of their original historical and cultural contexts. They become fragments of their sources, and *Dictée* becomes the only context available to the reader to frame his or her understanding of the information. This technique illustrates the dangers of interpreting texts at face value and suggests that Cha, as author of the text, has the power to shape her audience's understanding of her subject. Her use of the fragment reflects the process of selectivity that went into producing *Dictée*, and this reminds readers that the text—like any text—is constructed by someone with subjective agency.

Moreover, she points out that a picture or a quotation can take on a number of meanings that can differ from what it signified in its original context. By choosing to share one detail, the author inevitably rejects another. When these elements are severed from their origins, the book becomes their new context and the reader is forced to interpret them based only on the information the author provides.

This practice is effectively illustrated by Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha's treatment of the fragmented image in her film *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989). Blending an avant-garde cinematic style with an anthropological interest in depicting the lives of Vietnamese women, the film could be described as a surrealist ethnography¹⁷. At several points in the film, Minh-ha includes black and white photos of women as the voiceover speaks generally about the daily struggles of Vietnamese women during the war. There is no explicit connection between the content of the voiceover and the content of the images. In fact, the audience never finds out who the women in the photos are and under what circumstances they were taken. However, by nature of their simple juxtaposition, the images and the narration force the viewer to make a connection between them. Minh-ha, like Theresa Cha, forces her audience to make meaning from the content she has gathered. She works with the assumption that the audience is trained to do so, and she exploits this tendency in order to challenge the viewer's easy trust in documentary film.

Following the title page, the film opens with a series of slowed down black and white videos of Vietnamese women with sounds of slowly beating drums that recall war songs. The women are walking and wearing hats that appear to be part of a traditional costume. A series of images begins. First, a close-up of five women standing side by side, their heads occupying most of the wide rectangular photo against the black background. After a few seconds, the frame of the photo expands to reveal the content of its bottom half that had been cropped out moments before—the women are marching with rifles over their shoulders. Next is a photo that centers on three women's faces. The women are wearing hats and white scarves around their necks, and the photo occupies about an eighth of the screen. The frame of this photo quickly expands as well to show that the women are carrying flags and wearing uniforms in some sort of a political march. The revelation that there is more to the images than was originally on screen suggests the power a filmmaker has to put forth and hold back information from the audience. The cropped photos had stripped the images of their political content, and the expansion of their frames suddenly

instills them with politically charged meaning. These are not simply portraits of women, but fragmentary documentation of larger historical events. Without the sudden expansion, the viewer would not know that the photos had been cropped. This technique destabilizes the viewer's trust in the image and sparks the question: what else might be hidden beyond the frames of these photos, or beyond the frame of the film itself? It is significant that the hidden content is the political content because it heightens the risk of selectivity that comes with authoring and editing a film or text.

Cha employs an almost identical technique in *Dictée*. On the very last page of the book, after the notes and facing the back cover, there is a captionless photo of nine women posing side by side in two rows with their arms around each other's shoulders¹⁸. The black and white photo is grainy and overexposed, making it difficult to see the details of the women's faces. The only clear details are that they all wear their hair tied back and they all appear to be wearing the same outfit. At the end of the top row is Yu Guan Soon, and the only reason the reader might know this is because this is the exact photo from which Cha cropped Guan Soon's portrait for the beginning of "Clio History"¹⁹. The portrait at the beginning of that semi-biographical chapter singles her out from the group in a way that recalls History's treatment of her. The other eight women in the photo are unnamed and consequently fade into historical anonymity while Guan Soon persists as a celebrated patriotic heroine. Because the other women are unnamed, they are interchangeable, and the text suggests that were it not for History's treatment of Guan Soon as an exceptional figure, she could just as easily fade away into the past as well. By including the group photo, Cha recontextualizes Guan Soon within the larger revolutionary movement and demonstrates that the socialist patriotic biography ignores the complexity of the broader circumstance. However, this is not to belittle Guan Soon's individual accomplishments. Rather, Cha's inclusion of both the individual portrait and the group portrait from which it was extracted serves to show the multiplicity of meanings that one can gather from the same piece of information presented in different contexts. Cha does not elevate one over the other, but uses the contradiction of including them together to demonstrate the heterogeneity of experience that cannot be easily captured by text.

Competing Narrative Authority

In the same way that Cha's pastiche presents a variety of media without a clear linear narrative, *Surname Viet* employs several competing modes of narrative that increasingly undermine each other's authority. The audio track presents the viewer with songs, folklore, interviews, and multiple voiceovers with different narrators. No one mode of narration dominates over the others, and they frequently overlap and compromise the viewer's ability to attend fully to any one of them.

In one of the film's early interviews, a woman recounts painful memories about her and her husband's political struggles surrounding the fall of Saigon in 1975. About halfway into the interview, a Vietnamese song fades in and subtitles appear on the screen to translate the lyrics. The song and the subtitles come in as the woman speaks, and the viewer is forced to decide whether to listen to the interview or read the subtitles to the song. Toward the end of the interview, a voiceover interrupts and as soon as the voiceover stops, another subtitled song comes in, and all the while the interviewee is still speaking. The lack of a clear dominant mode of narration forces the viewer to participate by deciding which element he or she will privilege.

The next interview further divides the viewer's attention by providing subtitles that occupy the whole screen as the woman speaks in English. Large selections of the interview are

subtitled, but they often leave out phrases and are out of synch with the dialogue. In one instance, the text fades off of the screen when the woman is only halfway through speaking the selection, and the viewer has to decide either to read ahead and ignore the dialogue, or ignore the text and simply listen to the testimony. It is practically impossible for the viewer to attend to both at once, yet choosing to perceive only one is equally difficult because the film does not give any cues to indicate which would be the best option.

Essentially, the film asks the viewer to engage in an act of selectivity just as the filmmaker must. Presented with various sources of information that exist simultaneously, the viewer, like the filmmaker, must make a series of editorial decisions that privilege one narrative over another, despite the fact that no one option is inherently better or more correct than the others. The film medium is particularly effective for enacting this process because its temporal quality makes it impossible for the viewer to attend to the simultaneous visual information in its totality. *Surname Viet* does not allow viewers to be passive, but instead provokes them to take agency—and responsibility—for their interpretation of the film.

Surname Viet and *Dictée* work to prompt more critical interpretations of documentary and minority literature, but to what end? Of course, it is necessary to engage critically with text and film, but why do these artists make their audiences work so hard to get at the meaning, and why do they undermine their own authority in the process? The answer is essentially this: these works recreate the critical process in which those affected by political oppression must operate themselves. The subjects of these works lived under immense political oppression, and they accomplished the most quotidian activities through the tension of a persistent resistance that was often subtle, and sometimes revolutionary. Oppression puts the oppressed in a state of fear and caution, and *Dictée* obliges the reader to experience the dislocation that demands skepticism toward those in power and toward the (fictive) world created by them. The people in these stories subsisted because they critically analyzed what was forced upon them by the oppressive states and used their knowledge to resist total domination of the self. In order to honor these efforts and avoid the perpetuation of complacency, the reader must be required to do the same.

In keeping with the contention that someone must “invent anew, expressions for this [or any] experience,” Cha actively invents new ways to express her own experiences and the experiences of others. She essentially develops a counter-narrative to dominant history, albeit a more radical one. She proposes that the mediated nature of writing is an obstacle to authenticity, but her goal is not nihilistic. She does not suggest that nonfiction writing is a self-defeating attempt at accessing the past, nor does she critique the pursuit of knowledge through text as a fruitless endeavor. Rather, despite the fact that authenticity is questionable in all writing—and this includes both historical writing and her own—Cha proposes that it is not the past event that the reader has to interpret, but the mediated representation of that event²⁰. She invites, if not requires, the reader to consider new ways of understanding our access to the past.

Notes

¹ Yu, Timothy Ph D. *Race and the Avant-Garde : Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press (2009): p. 103.

² Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictée*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press (2001): p. 45-46.

³ Cha, p. 56-57.

⁴ Cha, p. 58.

⁵ Cha, p. 48.

⁶ Cha, p. 56.

⁷ Cha, p. 30.

⁸ Cha, p. 30.

⁹ Cha, p. 32.

¹⁰ Cha, p. 33.

¹¹ Cha, p. 33.

¹² Cha, p. 32.

¹³ Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*." *MELUS* 23.4, Theory, Culture and Criticism (1998): p. 131.

¹⁴ Cha, p. 57.

¹⁵ Cha, p. 57.

¹⁶ Cha, p. 56.

¹⁷ Ruohonen, Ilkka. "Surrealist Sensibility in Ethnographic Documentaries." *Visual Anthropology Review*. 23.1 (2007): p. 64-68.

¹⁸ Cha, p. 182.

¹⁹ Cha, p. 24.

²⁰ Cheng, p. 122.