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Author(s): Anne Anlin Cheng

Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Theory, Culture and Criticism (Winter, 1998), pp. 119-133

Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467831>

Accessed: 31/05/2010 08:46

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Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*

Anne Anlin Cheng

University of California, Berkeley

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* is rapidly acquiring critical currency as one of the most recent pieces of ethnic autobiographical evidence to be resuscitated by researchers within the fields of Asian American, feminist, film, and post-colonial studies.¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha in her seminal work *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* invokes Cha's work as a narrative instance of post-colonial displacement. A new volume of critical essays devoted to *Dictée*, edited by Elaine Kim, recently appeared.² At the same time, another rescue mission is underway: the University Art Museum in Berkeley is currently in the process of establishing the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, featuring everything from her videos to her private, pencil-scribbled journals. So when I call the increasing attention to Cha's so-called autobiography a resurrection, I am alluding to both the text's incipient emergence into critical attention *and* the larger project of exhumation surrounding Cha's life.³ But what does it mean to read this increasingly prominent text as a "multicultural, feminist, post-colonial and ethnic memoir" when its process of *recollection* continually stalls and refuses identification even on the simplest level?

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. It offers up bits of re-collected narratives, but they stand in the text as half-revived, half-buried information. Indeed, in *Dictée*, acts of recollection (in the sense of memory recall) are frequently indistinguishable from acts of collection (in the sense of gathering bits of objects). There are sections, for instance, where the narration seems to be offering us personal memories, but it soon becomes clear that the narrator might be merely reciting borrowed lines from other textual sources. One would be hard pressed to pinpoint what it is specifically that makes this text an autobiography. The process of memory

within this text is difficult and recalcitrant—a double movement of attachment and detachment, retrieval and interment. How do we read its political intention when we can hardly locate a political subject? How do we construct a political subject when that “subject’s” very voice, *and its boundaries*, is always in oscillation? How does this apparently postmodern, seemingly ahistorical and dislocated *récit* come to effect its intense, localized critique of cultural history and its reconstructions?

Prior to designating *Dictée*’s representative value as a piece of cultural evidence, it seems crucial to confront the text’s resistance towards its own visibility: the oblique relation it takes towards itself as an object of revelation. Accordingly, this essay examines how the very nature of a cultural “rescue mission” is profoundly problematized within *Dictée* and exposed as an arena where epistemology and power are in perpetual contestation. I will begin by focusing on this so-called autobiography’s troubled relationship to visibility, history, and marginalization as a critique of certain modes of minority discourse. I will demonstrate the ways in which the text undermines its own “filmic, documentary” desires and suggests ways in which this ambivalence embodies an internal critique of documentation as the foundational logic of the memoir. Cha’s critique of the “ready-made” image of the marginalized subject disturbs the tenets of representation on which the ideology of the ethnic *bildung* rests. I propose that the “form” of *Dictée* effects a historical and cultural reconstruction that enacts, simultaneously, a critique of that reconstruction.

1. Resuscitation

How does a reconstruction of history effect a critique of that reconstruction?

In order to answer that question, we need to first examine the desire for history, especially when it comes to minority literature. The desire to know and to bear witness as some kind of “redemptive” act has fueled much of the recent academic moves to recognize and understand the various histories and forms of colonization—a desire, in other words, for the documentary.⁴ This desire becomes doubly loaded when it comes to ethnic autobiographies in that, often in the service of producing a body of representative literature, such as Asian American letters, both writer and reader embark on a journey in search of a “whole” narrative—something along the lines of a package-deal, ready for consumption. At the same time, the documentary impulse as a mode of knowledge carries certain pedagogical assumptions that reinforce the academic tendency to conduct “corrective re-readings” and to have faith in the “history lesson” (i.e., his-

tory *as* lesson.) At first glance, *Dictée* would seem to possess all the signs of a documentary in its cinematic chronicle of historical events with textual and imagistic citations: it constructs itself almost archivally to bear witness to the traumatic events of modern Korea;⁵ it presents the life and experiences of a Korean-American woman immigrant, who occupies the multiple positions of religious, colonial, post-colonial, and feminist subject(s); and it is intensely interested in the relationship that socio-historical forces bear to those identities *Dictée* would thus seem a likely candidate to satisfy, not only the academic will-to-knowledge, but also the requirements of the ethnic memoir, which is predicated upon developmental narratives.

Yet *Dictée* hardly offers itself as a comprehensive or reliable source of information. Conspicuously lacking in proper documentation, Cha gives her readers evidences divorced from their testimonies. We find, for example, dislocated in the text an unidentified, grainy black-and-white photograph of a mass protest (122). We want to know that photo's referent. We can research and uncover the fact that the photo documents the 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration, where over two hundred students protesting for democracy were brutally mutilated; the event was then silenced by the Korean Government, who declared to the world that the protest belonged to a communist uprising. But we are still left with the problem of how to read this evidence as decontextualization itself.

I want to suggest that rather than advocating some form of abstract universality, Cha's use of the fragment/truncated image is intimately bound up with the particular history of modern Korea and its significance for Cha as a subject in relation to those national memories. If the desire for redemption underlies recent academic interests in marginalized histories, then the form of Cha's text offers a critique of that documentary desire. Not only does this conjunction of immigrant and post-colonial autobiography—full of borrowed and homeless voices—fail to privilege (or even account for) identity over difference, but it fundamentally challenges what it means to be invested in those terms (“identity,” “difference”), and what it means to try to bear representative witness to a “lost” or “suppressed” history. Cha's refusal to supply the available referent speaks to her suspicion of the over-circulated image. Earlier in the text she writes about the image:

The image. To appeal to the masses to congeal the information.... The response is pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (32-33)

Cha refuses the possibility of an uni-directional correspondence between the image and the referent it supposedly guards. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, the imperial gaze loves the image of the “native” as a violated and aggressed site (Trinh, *When the Moon*). And as critic Rey Chow demonstrates in her recent article “Where Have the Natives Gone?” the liberal critic does too. The gesture of redeeming these images has frequently only served to re-violate them. It is within the awareness of this contestation over the image that *Dictée* asks how does one represent history? When Cha writes about recording history—especially traumatic history—one gets the sense of both the urgency and the impossibility of the task:

Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording.... Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. (32)

We confront here a double bind: how do we make history “real enough” when “making it real” presents a false and complacent reassurance? Indeed, how does one re-invent historical trauma when it “exists only in the larger perception of History’s recording”?

Dictée suggests that modern Korea exists only as a history of found images—even, of dead images. The black-and-white photo of that student demonstration and subsequent massacre is homeless because *that* “original” event was homelessness itself, a story lost. By giving us images without context, Cha does not advance a simplistic version of historical or aesthetic transcendence, such as the notion that the particular must be sacrificed to the universal. Instead, she is telling us that if we were to be aware of today’s recuperative critical tendencies, then we must attend to the ever increasing disposition towards identity for identity’s sake—as though the mere act of identification is sufficient for restoration. For Cha, the naming of history (and of marginalized people) only resurrects “unfathomable words.” Specificity has been all too often deployed as containment, and the dream of a “true,” “complete” historical recuperation turns out finally to be a false one. Cha’s use of the photo without context demonstrates that historical events cannot be recaptured in all their temporal and cultural specificities, except as *a record*, with all the remembrance and the emptying-out of remembrance. It is not the historical event of the student protest which the reader is asked to interpret, but its mediated representation. To confuse the two is not only a misunderstanding of Cha, but a misunderstanding of history itself. The

photo of the student protest is thus always already false, to the extent that it promises an authenticity that cannot be.

By challenging the documentary impulse underlying the ethnic or post-colonial *bildung*, Cha disturbs the academic tendency to conduct "corrective re-readings" and to have faith in the "history lesson" (i.e., history *as* lesson.) The very form of *Dictée* reveals that the documentation of history is itself a process of pluralization and performative reiteration, suggesting that retrieved history must be understood as an instance of dissimulated historicity with all the fantasmatic attachments inevitable to any act of reconstruction. That is to say, to be given a piece of historical evidence is also to be given a history of its silence and revival. What we are given in *Dictée* is an after-image of the event, *and* Cha reminds us that it is the after-image that we have to deal with, that has been placed in constant and *uncanny* (in the Freudian sense) circulation.⁶ Consequently, Cha's photo is neither own-able by the imperialist, nor the liberal anthropologist. To see the photo is to hear its call *and* also witness its loss: it is in this way that the image effects, paradoxically, both attachment and detachment. The words on the opposing page of the photograph reads: "*Dead time. Hollow depression interred invalid to resurgence, resistant to memory. Waits. Apel. Apellation. Excavation...*" (123). The presence of the image signals an equivalence between excavation and appellation: an Orpheusian narrative which collapses emergence with interment. *Dictée* deters us from reading the fragment as either reified value or as pure disconnection. Rather Cha suggests that the collection and erasure that *is* the "fragment" may be the only kind of history which can memorialize without reappropriation. *Dictée* consequently problematizes the very nature of a "cultural rescue mission" and exposes that desire as an arena where epistemology and power are engaged in perpetual contestation.

Indeed, the "native" is both the object and the effect of that mission. Cha's use of the image in *Dictée* illuminates a question posed by Rey Chow regarding the "native":

Is there a way of "finding" the native without simply ignoring the image, or substituting a "correct" image of the ethnic specimen for an "incorrect" one, or giving the native a "true" voice "behind" her "false" voice? (Chow 29)

Chow herself offers us some answers. She suggests that we recognize that 1) the image reflects above all the fantasies of the imperial gaze; 2) the severed image represents nothing more than just that, a record of severance; and 3) the "idealized native is, literally, topographically

nowhere (Chow 49).” What I called Cha’s double strategy of attachment and detachment not only enacts the critical methods Rey Chow called for, but also implies that the no-where-ness, the utopia, of the native is more than “a symptom (in the Lacanian sense) of the white man” as Chow points out, but, more crucially, a symptom of the so-called native herself. What *is* the “native’s” sense of her own nativism? The narrator gives us two scenes of homecoming, both again tied in to “the image.” First we have a scene of her induction into U.S. citizenship:

Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American...someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph.... Their own image.... (56)

Then we have a scene of her “homecoming” back into Korea:

[Then] you return and you are not one of them.... They ask you identity.... Whether or not you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you are.... You say who you are but you begin to doubt.... Why did you leave this country why are you returning.... (57)

If she were coerced by the image of American ideal citizenship, she is equally divorced from a “native” image of herself. These moments not only question the construction of citizenship, but they also profoundly incapacitate the narrator’s autobiographical capability (her own ability to place her self in relation to history and community). The “private” and autobiographical difficulties of this *récit* is deeply tied to the power and coercions effected by public and communal records. The disturbance of “places” and of mapping seeps into the ontologies of geography and body. In the same section, the narrator meditates on various forms of passage:

To claim to reclaim, the space. Into the mouth the wound the entry is reverse and

back each organ artery gland pac element, implanted, housed skin upon skin, membrane, vessel, waters, dams, ducts, canals, bridge. (57)

In this scene of reverse birth, the landscapes of geography and anatomy merge, suggesting that one of the problems of the immigrant predicament is always the question of boundaries, of entries and returns, of what is proper to me and what is not.

Such boundary disturbance also realizes itself in the textual organization of *Dictée*. The *en face* quality of the text’s construction speaks

of an aesthetic of the montage, which in turn effects a dialogue between texts, and between texts and image. The dialogue between the fragments, however, breaks down since the pieces of narration do not directly align with one another. (For example, that image of the 1919 demonstration comes almost thirty pages past a narrative reference to that incidence). In filmic vocabulary, in the staging of this conversation, the eyelines do not match. If the privileged function of the shot-counter-shot is understood to be the power of dialogue, then the textual juxtaposition that occurs in *Dictée* highlights the dialogue of power. That is to say, the interrogation, interruption, and inter-penetration of *Dictée's* textual body plays out a dynamic of power: whose narrative and point-of-view gets to succeed the other's? Even the physical body is subjected to this competition for epistemological documentation and containment. Cha gives us two maps to the human anatomy: a diagram of the human respiratory system, which derives from the Western medical system; and a diagram of the human body based on Eastern acupuncture (74, 63). Both visions of the human body divide and sub-divide along systems of ideological differences: male/female, exterior/interior, or Western/Eastern. These mappings reveal that one's sense of one's physical self is deeply rooted in one's imaginings, and those imaginings in turn must be understood as profoundly connected to cultural fantasies of the body. It is exactly the confusion between what might be called the "real outside" and the "imaginary inside" that ideological colonization effects.

If *Dictée* then serves as a fable for hegemonic interpellation—a dictaphonic relay where the voice without becomes the voice within—how then does it effect its political intervention?

2. Echo and the Sound

How does a voice on the outside become a voice within? What are the imaginative and theoretical implications of recognizing that one's own fantasies of identity exist in relation to, or even echo, external social (re)construction? Does this insight necessarily repeat the pattern of subjection from which one would hope to resist?

I suggest that, for *Dictée*, the voice within comes into being as an injunction from without. Furthermore, it is only by acknowledging this fundamental indiscretion between the "inner" and "outer" that political resistance might be enacted, rather than idealized.

Dictée offers us a series of parables, dramatizing the various forms of social interpellation as working precisely through echoing our desire for the echo—that is, our desire to mime the structure of repetition. Early in the text, we are given a description of a woman literally

coming to voice. She tries to sound (through imitation):

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech.... Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words.... The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink...breath.... From the back of her neck she releases her shoulders free. She swallows once more.... Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak. She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her.... She relays the others.... (3)

This scene may describe an adult language lesson (i.e., a lesson in learning the vowels), but it also strongly suggests the image of an infant coming into speech. The infant coming into speech echoes and mimics the adult (Laplanche). Here then we have the central political conceit of the text: the dictaphonic structure of linguistic interpellation: that language is occupation, *and* it is coercive.

Now this scene of coercive sounding is preceded by a more explicit scenario of a "language lesson," where the narrator is transcribing a French dictation lesson. As Lisa Lowe and Shelly Wong have pointed out, this familiar and perhaps mundane scene of a grammar lesson resonates powerfully against the colonial context of Korea. It calls forth French missionaries's systematic colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century; it also reminds us of other linguistic colonization to which Korea has been subjected (the Japanese occupation in 1910-45). The language lesson then denotes a colonizing and disciplinary act. Why then the second, but almost more *primary* scene of "sounding" as I am calling it? Cha clearly wants to imply that such a linguistic invasion can occur at a more ontological level. The point is not to read these two sections as a reduction or universalization of the former: that the colonial language merely exposes fundamental linguistic appropriations. But, rather, the point is to understand the constitution of the subject as always already a political constitution. There is no subject without "the others in place of her." Consequently, the reader is not allowed to sentimentalize over a prior, "original, native" voice. We have not been allowed, in other words, to imagine we might know the end of dictation.

How then does this help us envision subversion? Perhaps resistance needs to be located, not outside of cultural relay (that is simply not possible as we have seen through *Dictée*), but rather *within* that relay, dictaphonic structure. In that opening dictation (Cha 1), the subject not only recites poorly ("stutters, stops"), but she also translates poorly, verbatim (by refusing to heed the understood punctuation commands and by transliterating rather than making the re-

quired diacritical marks) and thereby exposes the disciplinary artifice of the dictation. One might say that the narrator of *Dictée* makes a bad scribe by being, in fact, too faithful. If authority calls for an assimilation (to and of itself), then *Dictée* repeatedly exposes the necessary *imperfection* (incompletion) of that call—necessary because, as we have just seen, perfect identification with the Big Other can in fact only parody and expose that Big Other as an empty signifier, infinitely reproducible. *Dictée* obsessively dramatizes injunctions of imitations and their failures as a result of equally obsessive compliance. Cha gives us catechistical indoctrination, for instance:

Q: WHO MADE THEE?

A: God made me.

Q: GOD WHO HAS MADE YOU IN HIS OWN LIKENESS.

A: God who has made me in his own likeness. In His Own Image in His Own Resemblance, in His Own Copy, In His Own Counterfeit Presentment, in His Duplicate, in His Own Reproduction, in His Cast, in His Carbon, \ His Image and his Mirror. Pleasure in the image pleasure in the copy pleasure in the projection of likeness pleasure in the repetition. Acquiesce, to the correspondence. (17-18)

In the traces of this metonymic skid, one sees catechism as a form of scripted dialogue, a dictation. The parodic submission reveals the ironies of the demand in the first place for all to submit to the “One,” the “Him.” Furthermore, the “subject-supposed-to-know” reveals itself as a source of clichés—clichés being that most facile distance between vehicle and tenor. Pushing the limits of Cha’s aesthetics of repetition, one arrives at the Inimitable as anything but that. Quite the contrary, the inimitable has the potential to initiate nothing but imitation, nothing but reproduction—a promiscuity of “the word made flesh.” If dictation as form signals a model of conversion that transfers the individual into a subject of discourse through the repetition of form, a regulated reproduction, then *Dictée* provides the counter-model by which one sees the indiscrimination of such regulation.

We are now in a better position to answer the question posed at the beginning of this section: are we merely repeating on the intersubjective level a hegemonic fable of interpellation? The answer lies within the doubling itself, for only by recognizing the desire *for the echo* can we begin to challenge the assumptions behind the injunction to mime. It is therefore imperative to note that Cha’s aesthetics insist as much on the principle of sameness as on the principle of difference. Sameness can be at once fascistic *and* a strategy of intervention (i.e., correspondences which enact *un-authorized* forms of reproduction).

By not allowing for the mobility and complacency of translation, Cha suggests that it is precisely the radical contingency of terms such as “alien” and “original”—the mobility of their signification—that forms the basis for and finally offers a critique of both colonial *and* nationalist discourses of origin. Thus Cha disrupts patriarchal and colonial discourse, not by negating them, but by miming the very principles of mimesis and difference initiated by the discourse of identity.

What does all this say about autobiography as an act? If identification can be seen as an act of approximation, it should be seen, at the same time, as being indebted to an internal metonymic grammar. In the writing of the memoir, the “subject” exists *only and all* in description. What haunts the narration of this text is not the content of fantasy—who you think you are; who is in the frame—(indeed, the text’s competing narratives dispel quite quickly that narrative obsession)—but what haunts is chasing after the fantasy of identity. Each representation, each attempt at figuration and documentation carries the possibility of self-objectification; the one who imagines also runs the risk of already being the product of the imagined:

You think you have seen this before. Somewhere else. In *Gertrud*. It is her, with her elbows on the piano. It is you seeing her.... You look through the window and the music fills and breaks the entire screen from somewhere. Else. From else where.

You know how it was. Same. For her. She would do the same....

From the other room you knew as she would begin playing. You walk inside the room, you sit behind her you knew the music, which ones.
(108, emphasis added)

Somehow, we as viewers (and possibly “You” as narrator herself) have coincided with “her”—even preceded her. We are at once within and without the film, past yet prior to the telling of the event. We cannot tell anticipation apart from repetition.

Dictée demands a reconsideration of the identificatory process as pure citationality. If we go on to look closely at a series of “resuscitations” that the text evokes (makes flesh, so to speak), we can begin to understand why this autobiography images itself through figures of cultural fantasy—figures, however, that have been alienated precisely from the very context of the cultures that fantasized about them. *Dictée* hosts a multitude of women who embody, in various contexts, cultural mythologies: the Nine Muses, Korean nationalist martyr Yu Guan Soon, St. Therese of Lisieux, and Jeanne d’Arc. These figures

exist as fragments in the text, alienated from the very cultural contexts that fantasized about them. Making their appearances through bits of letters, confessions, and images, these "heroines" confound rather than confirm their privileged status as "originals." The Nine Muses, for instance, appear as sectional headers, yet their constellation appears incomplete and divorced from their individual and proper jurisdiction. Parts of St. Therese's confession, which may be said to be a forerunner of female confessionals, has been textually incorporated as diegesis. Joan of Arc appears, not as "herself," but as Maria Falconetti playing Carl Dreyer's vision of Joan of Arc. The story of Yu Guan Soon appears as a bare, almost ridiculous biographical outline ("She is born of one mother and one father" [25]). It is as though Cha is citing citations.

What seems to be at stake is not the revival of heroines as examples or as models of ideal identification (since their identities are very problematic), but rather the institutionalization of collective cultural fantasies. Rather than celebrating the performances of these figures, Cha reveals the performative nature of these models—or, the performativity that these figures have been solicited to enact. Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* offers a succinct explanation of what is at stake in the difference between performance and performativity: "performativity must be understood not as singular or deliberate 'act,' but as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2). What is at stake is the agency of the subject. Cultural figures such as Joan of Arc or Yu Guan Soon (both, not coincidentally, nationalist figures)—these figures of historical canonicity operate contradictorily to cover over their historicity, must appear as always "original." But the production of the subject (as creator of her own myth and life story) is revealed as *historically* significant precisely as a consequence of cultural citations. We have been given, not myths, but the making of myths. Butler also speaks of the peculiar status of history in relation to performativity: "[performativity's] apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity" (Butler 12-13). History serves as a narrative alibi for itself: it is the story that comes to cover over the gap between private memory and communal imaginings. Once again, the relationship between story and self, between history and autobiography is disturbed—not to mime postmodern aesthetics, but to textualize the conjunction of political and ontological dispossession.

As much as Cha the post-colonial, exile immigrant is defined by the traumatic history of her "heritage," she is equally vehemently

dispossessed by that inheritance. Cultural trauma as concept and phenomenon, like the photograph of the protest, recurs as a profoundly unlocatable event *and* threatens the discretion of the "I" precisely in that unlocatability, echoing Blanchot's meditation that:

[Disaster] does not touch anyone in particular; "I" am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside.... We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future; it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat.... To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it. (Blanchot 12)

In hindsight, in history, it seems as if disasters never ceased to speak: in papers, journals, histories. Yet one's "own" relationship to that disaster (one's ownership of that memory) can express itself *only in description*. In other words, the "I's" relationship to historical trauma is always inherently journalistic. Cha's own brand of intervention seeks to break down the boundary between "I" and those cultural/comunal memories; or more accurately, it seeks to break down the representation of trauma *as* liminality. In such a way, it re-asserts the power and non-conformity of private fantasies as a means of short-circuiting "the response...[to disaster]...pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible" (33).

For Cha, "to brush history against the grain is to break open the myth that the process of transmitting history is, in fact, free from barbarism" (Wong 8). The re-collection of cultural and historical memories participates as much in the production of violence as its containment. As Wong so well puts it:

The spell that is to be broken is the naturalization of history promulgated by colonial and patriarchal discourses, a naturalization that involves a process of naturalizing or otherwise rendering innocuous troublesome manifestations of political or cultural difference by insisting on a model of identity and its corresponding narrative structure. (Wong 8)

But more than just de-naturalizing history, Cha's own particular brand of disruption implicates us as witnesses of that history. She exposes "[t]he illusion that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible" (79). We are not allowed the complacency of spectatorship and to imagine that spectatorship as having "changed things." To wrestle an object away from its context is to display it in its displaced-ness. But Cha also forces us to question the very idea of an

original context in the first place. In reading *Dictée*, our instinct is to re-compose all the time, to “correct,” to fact-check, to narrativize, to contextualize, to trace origins in this empire of signs. Our compositional desires are constantly evoked and exposed. Thus the deployment of photographs and other fragments in the text makes for a kind of *impossibility of imaginary identification*—the very point where collective memories fail. What is difficult (to swallow?) about Cha’s *Dictée*, therefore, turns out not to be its lack of rhetorical coherence or even its narrative opacity, but rather that it implicates us in our very desire to know and see through reading—implicates, in fact, our positions as private, historical, or literary witnesses.

The “remnant” (38) and its re-citability offer Cha a site of iteration and performance—a site, furthermore, that is contestable. Intertextuality in *Dictée* plays out that competition. In fact, intertextuality, for Cha, is intrinsically bound up with social discourse—is the form of social discourse. Resuscitation, with which we began this essay, turns out to be none other than *the* premise of contestation. It is *Dictée’s* re-emergence, as a question of (textual and national) resuscitation, that most disturbs one’s complacency as enlightened reader of history and challenges the conceptualization of the use of private and communal records that is reinforced by the documentary mode of knowledge.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this paper has been presented as a talk, under the title of “History and Fragment: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” at the 1996 American Comparative Literature Association Annual Conference at Notre Dame University.
2. Kim’s volume addresses for the first time Cha’s text as an act of political intervention produced at the intersecting (not isolated) sites of race, gender, and imperialism. The essays by Lisa Lowe and Shelley Wong in this volume are especially illuminating in articulating the nature of difference as political strategy. In relation to this volume, my essay seeks to: 1) study the specific, formal ways in which Cha’s apparent postmodern aesthetic enacts her political project; 2) explore the text’s unexamined relationship to film, and specifically the documentary, as a means of theorizing the relationship that Cha’s so-called post-colonial autobiography bears to the tension between public and private records; and, finally, 3) complicate further the idea of difference-as-intervention by introducing the concept of fantasy and mimesis at work in Cha’s text.
3. Published in 1982, *Dictée’s* narrative inaccessibility and its “failure” to represent a recognizable model of ethnic identity made it an unlikely candidate for critical attention in the nascent field of Asian American letters back in the early eighties. What attention *Dictée* did receive came in the forms of postmodern/avant garde critics, such as Michael Stephens in *The Dramaturgy of Style* and Stephen-Paul Martin in *Open Form and the Feminine Imagination*—both of whom, for the most part, glossed the enigmatic quality of Cha’s writing as “female experimentation” with all the immediate connotations of “experimenta-

tion" as mystification, "difficulty" as incomprehensibility, and "feminism" as simply anti-masculine. It is precisely the connection between Cha's aesthetics and her political project that has been overlooked.

I would suggest that the "problem" of reading *Dictée* has largely derived from the critical problem of negotiating cultural studies and poststructuralism, especially when it comes to minority literature. With its insistence on interdisciplinary studies and socio-historical context, cultural studies has productively challenged the textualist approach of an earlier formalism: at risk, we have learned, is a certain intellectual and political quietism. The formalist, we have learned, tends to "enclose" the text, to isolate it and herself from the vicissitudes of ideology, of history and social life. The importance of reading *Dictée* is precisely its engagement with this larger, pressing critical "divergence." It offers an instance where formalism might be as responsive to local specificities of history and culture as it is attuned to abiding and transhistorical structures of thoughts—to questions of voice and genre, to philosophical, psychoanalytic, and other non-local modes of analysis. Indeed, *Dictée* raises the question: what challenges might the reconsideration of form pose for the claims of cultural studies?

4. In *The Culture of Redemption*, Leo Bersani studies and critiques much of our assumptions regarding the redemptive virtues of literature. I am suggesting that what Bersani calls the "corrective will," along with its accompanying documentary desire, profoundly motivates minority and ethnographic discourse. Indeed, more than providing the motivation, such "will" often determines the very modes of critical approach when it comes to an "ethnic" text.
5. *Dictée* alludes to the "spiritual colonization" of Korea by French missionaries, as well as to Korea's history of foreign invasions (starting with The Russo-Japanese Wars at the turn of the century) by Russia, Japan, Manchuria, and the United States. And of course as early as the thirteenth and fourteenth century the Japanese and the Manchurians have made repeated forays into Korea.
6. In his 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," Freud speaks of a type of anxiety which he designates *unheimlich* (which in German literally means "not homelike" or "not at home"). By tracing the linguistic ambivalence of the root *heimlich*, Freud proposes that two definitions coincide in *heimlich*: both the familiar and the concealed. The term *unheimlich*, translated for us as "uncanny" then refers to the double state of having something reminiscent of "home" turning into something unfamiliar and disturbing. Freud's notion of the uncanny lends itself to an understanding of Cha's strategy of distancing, of making the over-familiar (such as "news" and history) unfamiliar.

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