

## The Ambiguity of Devotion: Complicity and Resistance in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*

*The world is an open channel; we are an open channel. The world is a floodgate gaping. An aperture pried open. The world rushes past, in, through, and we have no valve. The world demands collaboration. We collaborate simply by being? All collaboration is collusion?*

—Jen Hofer

*Mu, a diglossial orthography, the first non-single letter, we might say, of an anti-colonial alphabet.*

—Sora Han

THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA MADE three visits to Korea between 1978 and 1981, a period of repeated popular uprisings and rapid political change. Cha had not seen Korea since emigrating with her family to Hawai'i and then California when she was twelve, and the passages in *DICTEE* that seem to refer autobiographically to these return visits register continuities between the time of her departure and the present, as well as ways that both time frames echo past struggles for national independence and democracy. As Elaine Kim notes, this brief period saw dictator Park Chung Hee's assassination, a 1980 military coup and subsequent uprising contesting military rule, and labor protests.<sup>1</sup> General Chun Doo-hwan declared martial law on May 18, 1980, igniting the Gwangju Uprising, in which soldiers and police killed, assaulted, and tortured a still unknown number of prodemocracy protestors.

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ABSTRACT This article offers a reading of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 1982 experimental text *DICTEE* as performing purposefully ambiguous devotional work. As a meditation on unfinished struggles against colonial and patriarchal violence, *DICTEE* registers devotion's role in both oppression and liberation. Cha's engagements with female martyrs, Korean *mudang* shamanic practice, and colonial languages demonstrate the inseparability of structures of domination and traditions of resistance. The essay argues that even as *DICTEE* wrestles with inescapable forms of complicity, its efforts to transform perception denaturalize the violence of racial, gendered, and political divisions. REPRESENTATIONS 153. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 85–104. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.153.6.85>.

In Cha's multigenre, multimedia book *DICTEE*, a letter to the narrator's mother from Seoul, Korea, dated April 19, relates

I am in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed. . . .  
. . . They are breaking now, their sounds, not new, you have heard them, so familiar to you now could you ever forget them not in your dreams, the consequences of the sound the breaking. The air is made visible with smoke it grows spreads without control we are hidden inside the whiteness the greyness reduced to parts, reduced to separation. Inside an arm lifts above the head in deliberate gesture and disappears into the thick white from which slowly the legs of another bent at the knee hit the ground the entire body on its left side.<sup>2</sup>

The passage goes on to describe more explicitly the physical impact of tear gas and its overwhelming, disorienting effects: "The stinging, it slices the air it enters thus I lose direction. . . . In tears the air stagnant continues to sting I am crying the sky remnant the gas smoke absorbed the sky I am crying."<sup>3</sup> This protest scene is a site of violence and death, one that recalls and repeats other such scenes. It is, in fact, difficult to tell when these passages are portraying events contemporary for the narrating voice and when they are blending depictions of these events with more distantly past occurrences. "Step among them the blood that will not erase with the rain on the pavement that was walked upon like the stones where they fell had fallen. Because. Remain dark the stains not wash away."<sup>4</sup> *DICTEE* is a meditation on unfinished struggle against entrenched patterns of violence. It is also, I will argue, a study in the practices of devotion that sustain liberatory struggles of all scales (from the individual to the transnational) that simultaneously registers devotion's role in upholding those same modes of violence.

*DICTEE* juxtaposes multiple forms of religious, national, familial, and textual devotion. It reiterates these devotional forms in ways that are themselves constitutive, generative modes of practice. Yet it is an uneasy practice, one that raises uncertainties about its own motivations and outcomes. *DICTEE*'s practices of devotion are neither faithful nor cynical; they offer critical interpretations at the same time that they mobilize ritual power. Rather than striving to determine relative degrees of critique and credulity, irony and sincerity, I want to offer a reading of Cha's text as engaging in purposefully ambiguous devotional work. *DICTEE* addresses and inhabits an intertwining web of historical traumas associated with colonialism, gendered and racial oppression, and personal experiences of loss and dislocation. I argue that Cha's devotional practice, often read as caught between inescapable conditions, attempts to work through sites of apparent impasse by grappling directly with these tensions.

*DICTEE* is engaged in transformational work that blurs media, traditions, languages, and timescapes in a method that Cha once referred to as

“alchemy.”<sup>5</sup> Devotion is a key mode of this work *and* a significant barrier to undoing systemic violence and historical trauma: it upholds militarism and drives militant anticolonial resistance; it reinforces patriarchy and relativizes masculine power in religious, familial, and political contexts; it confers power and demands sacrifice in cultural mythologies with complex outcomes for women/feminized actors.<sup>6</sup> In these devotional forms and practices, there is no easy division or absolute distinction between complicity and resistance, violence and healing. While *DICTEE* foregrounds and insists upon these ambiguities, it draws attention to the mechanics of its own artistic work in ways that expose the fractures that propositional statements and linear narratives would allow ideology to conceal. Ultimately, Cha strives to rearrange the patterns of perception that naturalize racial, gendered, and political divisions and (often unconscious) complicity with violent repetitions.

### Submission and Possession: Invocations

*DICTEE* has multiple narrators, multiple protagonists, and a series of (usually martyred) heroines whose stories are rendered in both historical and mythical frames. It invokes five different languages (Korean, Chinese, Latin, French, and English), Greek and Korean myths, and several different cosmological frameworks (the ancient Greek muses, Roman Catholicism, Korean *mudang* shamanic practice, a list of Chinese aspects of the universe, and a meridian chart indexing the bodily flow of energy in Chinese and Korean medicine). This multiplicity, moreover, structures the text’s initial self-presentation; *DICTEE* opens with an artist’s call for inspiration, a series of dictation exercises, a suggested ritual of shamanic possession (*kut*), and a declaration that it begins a *novena*, or nine-day prayer for grace. Without attempting comprehensive summary, I want to highlight the ways in which the multiple openings to *DICTEE* concentrically structure what is often read as a chaotic, disjointed text.

The work begins in the voice of a writer who is simultaneously a subject or agent and an occupied vessel, channel, or space. The epigraph reads

May I write words more naked than flesh,  
stronger than bone, more resilient than  
sinew, sensitive than nerve.<sup>7</sup>

Attributed to Sappho, this passage is actually Cha’s. Or, perhaps Cha’s narrating voice is already possessed and issues this invocation as invitation to the reader to observe a set of contradictions that are both textual and

phenomenological. This voice wills writing and words to be flesh—to become *more than* flesh—and thus to be exposed, vulnerable, durable, connective, sustaining, regenerative, and responsive. This is a text meant to remain open and alive, to be in organismic relationship with its surroundings.<sup>8</sup> As a form or practice of devotion, such writing demonstrates the excesses contained in repetition *and* aims for more than either repetition or preservation.

Greek muses listed as a table of contents further frame *DICTEE* as the work of a poet, intimating that each muse will be given voice in turn. Kun Jong Lee points to an intertextual relationship between *DICTEE* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, which details the "birth, functions, and blessings" of individual muses. Cha's list also designates functions for the muses, although, as Lee notes, these functions are remade within *DICTEE* to portray "the troubles and sorrows of women and make us remember the history of women" instead of "Hesiod's Muses who sing the glory of the gods" and reassure men.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, women's writing and histories guide *DICTEE*, which portrays not only their trials and suffering but also their desires, commitments, and participation in domains usually thought to belong to men. Whereas Hesiod commands that the muses tell him "each thing as it came into being" in "proper order," Cha's mimicked invocation invites the addressed muse to tell the story "beginning wherever you wish."<sup>10</sup> *DICTEE* thus places narrative power in the hands of feminine voices, summoning their volition and priorities. It suggests that following their direction will upend presumptions about origin, creation, and chronology.

One of the muse's names is another invention presented as fact: "Elitere" is listed as the muse of lyric poetry, replacing Euterpe. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo and Christina Lux note that when broken apart, "Elitere" can be "*elle itère*," meaning "she repeats" or "she iterates."<sup>11</sup> This interpretation resonates with the figure of the "disease" (a female reciter; one who performs monologues or recites text, often to music), who appears two pages later in a tortured attempt to produce speech.<sup>12</sup> The disease is perhaps the closest thing Cha provides to a narrator for *DICTEE*, with the key qualification that her very name indicates that her words are not her own.

*DICTEE* depicts the production of speech as viscerally agonizing in a way that precipitates uncertainties about voice and what it means to speak. The section named for the disease depicts a physical struggle to perform the anatomical mechanics necessary to produce sound: "Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking the gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place."<sup>13</sup> The passage describes deliberateness, but also a loss of control and experience of force. The internal "pain of speech the pain to say," surpassed only by "the pain not to say," issues from or within the disease

who “allows others. In place of her . . . The others each occupying her.”<sup>14</sup> Hertha D. Sweet Wong notes that Cha deploys terms that suggest labor and birthing—swelling, gasping, contractions, and a final “delivery” of speech.<sup>15</sup> Speech inhabits the disease, but as a form of occupation that generates an impulse to purge. The disease’s surrender leads to the Hesiodic call to the muse to begin wherever she would wish. The process of opening herself to reciting or telling is steeped in physical and mental anguish.

These opening struggles to speak have been analyzed as wrestling with subjective accession to language, problems of translation, and pressures toward assimilation.<sup>16</sup> We might also read the pages prior to the sections named for muses as portraying entry into a shamanic trance. Korean *mansin* or *mudang* are ritually initiated in a process that “opens the gates of speech” (*malmun*), which allows them to speak the words of spirits (*kongsu*).<sup>17</sup> This initiation involves a painful journey through illness, directed toward healing and insight but full of difficult and perhaps frightening sacrifice. As Sora Han explains,

The specificity of the *mudang*, in contrast to healers or priests, is in her ability to summon the spirits through trance, or *shinbyung*, a mysterious form of psychotic and physical illness that befalls a woman. Her survival is thus seen as a sign of her chosenness by the gods for this divine role.<sup>18</sup>

This chosen, sacrificial role is also, Han clarifies, an experience invested with mythological significance that simultaneously affirms familial and national pieties. Yet its presence in Cha’s work unsettles the very forms of relationality, chronology, and place that secure such identifications.

Han invokes the notion of “Muisim” as bringing together Korean *mudang*; *mu* as a “nickname of sorts” for the Greek *muthos*, meaning myth; and the Japanese philosophy of *mu* “as a nonmetaphysical system of thinking about absolute nothingness” that has gained recent currency in US Black Studies through the work of Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten.<sup>19</sup> This alignment does not assert any presumed commonality in the forms of displacement and dispossession registered in Black writing on *mu* and Korean anticolonial struggle.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Han elaborates “an uncanny relation of thought” that flows through *mu* as mouthed shape and sound that implicates these concepts in one another. In a shamanistic mode, their relation travels through an “animist conjoining and eventual dissolution” of the distinction between *mu* as concept or idea and its physical, embodied sound.<sup>21</sup> Circulating around the *mudang* in today’s academic context, then, is the understanding of *mu* as “a form of negation so complete” that voice and language seem to emerge “out of nowhere.” And yet, this overlap between *mudang* and Japanese *mu* also reinforces the idea that “colonial language does not express an already existing structure of domination, but

is that very structure.”<sup>22</sup> This is especially true in the context of *DICTEE*, which devotes large sections to mourning and protesting Japanese colonialism in Korea. To subsume or even channel the definition of *mudang* through the concept of *mu* is simultaneously compelling and complicit.

Han mobilizes Moten’s question about whether *mu*’s pursuit of nothingness nonetheless “proceeds through and toward a certain drive toward sovereignty.” The Japanese *mu* that signifies “not have, or without,” when passed through the Korean *hangul* alphabet, homophonally synchronizes with two different Chinese and Korean *hanja* characters that respectively mean “dance” and “shaman or spirit medium.”<sup>23</sup> As Han notes, *hangul* writing appears only once in *DICTEE*, in a grainy photograph that serves as its frontispiece. While other commentators have smoothed the translation into grammatically simple English, Han insists that we retain “the necessary bumbles in the process of translation” along with “a primary madness of writing.” She suggests that the writing in the photograph be relayed as something like, “Mother want to see stomach is hungry would like to go hometown (or homeland)” or “homeland (or hometown) would like to go stomach is hungry want to see mother.” This invocation summons the memory, loss, and longing that Han argues *DICTEE* attaches to *hangul* itself.<sup>24</sup> Though it disappears for the remainder of the text, its absence signals a “homology between the body and the word [that] can only be grasped in a translingual writing of a hollowness of meaning symptomatic of colonial violence.”<sup>25</sup>

The *mudang*, when read through these multiple resonances (many of which Cha could not have anticipated), is a figure whose emptying out in order to serve as spiritual channel resonates with ongoing contemporary negotiations of the voids and excesses that attend colonial violence, anticolonial resistance, and the impossibility, at times, of fully disentangling their movements. The presence of Chinese and English writing in *DICTEE*, like the fact that present-day elaborations of *mu* and its potentialities occur largely in English, evinces indelible traces of additional colonial and imperialist incursions.

As Josephine Nock-Hee Park notes, the disease is submersed in linguistic occupation that evokes political occupation. Despite the disease’s combination of determined strength and willing surrender, there is an inescapably coercive dimension to her possession.<sup>26</sup> Its performance, both willed and forced, sacrifices the “feminine political subject” for intimate and national collectivities.

This form of shamanistic myth requires a feminine figure’s submission to being possessed by a form of divine madness—which is to say, to give place to a form of carnal descent wherein the effacement of difference between human experiences of suffering and a mythic origin of a people is relentlessly pursued through a form

of active loss, not having, being without, at the centre of what is now recognised as “Muism.” As such, the myth is not simply a folk allegory upholding the virtues of filial piety, but is also the cultural valorisation of a uniquely feminine political subject essential to the defense and reproduction of the Korean nation.<sup>27</sup>

I will return to the significance of the *mudang* and her role in *DICTEE* in a moment. For now, I want to suggest that the implicit shamanic presence at the opening of *DICTEE* might signal that the book itself could be taken as *kut*. The story of Princess Pari, the origin story for much of Korean shamanism, often recited at funerals, recurs throughout the work, reinforcing the notion that this devotional legacy and its attending ambivalences structure the otherwise disparate layers of invocation at the beginning of *DICTEE*. The feminine protector of family and nation, initially rejected by both family and nation, proves her loyalty, strength, and indispensability. At the same time, the sociopolitical conditions that demand such proof remain obstinately intact, barely moved by the valor and worthiness of a woman protagonist.

Cha’s invitation to the muse to “tell even us” shares in the sense that the speakers and readers of *DICTEE* are unexpected, perhaps improper, audiences and agents.<sup>28</sup> It decenters “the heroic and masculinist self-importance of epic poetry” to foreground Korea, which has experienced “multiply layered foreign domination,” and Korean women, whose histories have been either neglected or smoothly absorbed into narratives that preserve gendered hierarchies and masculinist values.<sup>29</sup> Shelley Sunn Wong has argued that a lyric rather than epic voice guides the text as a whole, and she critiques the universalizing, hegemonic claims that French, US, and Japanese colonialisms have all exerted on Korean contexts. In doing so, she exposes the forms of suppression and coercion that underlie promises of progress and liberation.<sup>30</sup> David Cho concurs, while pointing out that lyric in Cha’s text does not directly oppose or cancel its epic reiterations and resonances. (And Cha reveals that the lyric form itself can carry “certain ‘universal’ principles or universalizing references” that likewise collude with domination.) *DICTEE* adopts epic postures in order to critique their elisions and overgeneralizations.<sup>31</sup> I would only add that the text mobilizes the epic force of *Theogony* to center that which has been too often ignored and dismissed: Korean history in transnational and global narratives and women’s history in Korean narratives. With alternating parody, protest, and revisionist telling, Cha suggests that history itself is other than the stories it has been said to contain, and that those stories that reflect “real events” are shaped to reinforce larger cultural mythologies and ideologies. At the same time that she leads the reader to consider what it would mean to tell world (or cosmological) history starting with Korea or

Korean history starting with Korean women, Cha questions the impulse to secure a central point of reference that can serve as a steady hermeneutical guide to the rest.

The final ritual that opens *DICTEE* might seem to sit curiously with these claims, since it is a Roman Catholic Ash Wednesday mass in which authority is decidedly located in a priestly figure whose maleness aligns him with a masculine God and requires submission from women congregants. Unidirectional power is commanded in a sentence structure that takes for granted obedience: “Kneel down on the marble the cold beneath rising through the bent knees. Close eyes and as the lids flutter, push out the tongue.”<sup>32</sup> There are only women kneeling in this preparation for the sacrament, women whose bodies apparently conform as expected to the instructions given in the text (which one infers do not need to be spoken in the scene itself). Nine translation exercises inserted into the narrative interweave prayer, matter-of-fact statements about France, an account of travel from London to Paris, choppy agrammatical statements that mimic grammar exercises but seem to refer to a dislocated feminine subject (“She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response”), and an abridged account of the composition of the French national anthem.<sup>33</sup> Cha suggests that embedded in the scene of religious devotion are proliferated and presumed orientations that do not, perhaps cannot, offer to the feminine subject whose identity has been cast as foreign (from afar) a coherent means of linguistic expression. It is impossible to call and be heard using the suggested vocabularies of devotion to God and nation.

And yet, the disease does not simply fade to the background or exit the scene. She instead engages in the confessional ritual in a way that derails the reproductive work that ritual is supposed to perform. She confesses to the reader, “*I am making up the sins. For the guarantee of absolution. . . I am making the confession. To make words. To make a speech in such tongues.*”<sup>34</sup> While abiding by the requirements that delineate devotional practice, and thus participating with some complicity in prescribed hierarchical relationships, the disease departs from the ostensible goal of the performance. Her own objectives “to make words” and to possess language in order “to make a speech in such tongues” focus on the instruments of the power relationship (words) in a way that paradoxically thwarts their functioning. A confession that is about making words might provide relief from the incoherence referenced earlier but does not generate the presumed modes of self-reflection or obedience. It also does not enact explicit confrontation with those demands.

As the exchange progresses, however, the disease’s responses become more rebellious, performing an exaggerated alignment with liturgical convention that turns into something like mockery.



Q: WHO MADE THEE?

A: God made me.

To conspire in God's Tongue.

Q: WHERE IS GOD?

A: God is everywhere. Accomplice in His Texts, the fabrication in His Own Image, the pleasure the desire of giving Image to the word in the mind of the confessor.<sup>35</sup>

Already there is uncertainty about what kind of truth telling might be happening in and through the "fabrication" that imitates God's image. It is unclear who is the accomplice or whose pleasure is at stake, as "the confessor" could be the one giving or receiving confession. The next response escalates insinuations of falsification and, while explicitly offering exuberant assent, lays bare the ritual structure's invasive and exploitative dimensions.

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. Acquiesce, to the messenger. Acquiesce, to and for the complot in the Hieratic tongue. Theirs. Into Their tongue, the counterscript, my confession in Theirs. Into Theirs. To scribe to make hear the words, to make sound the words, the words, the words made flesh.<sup>36</sup>

This progression, or perhaps degeneration, of the copy who would merely recite the given words subverts the confessional practice. Yet even as the answering voice registers subtle critique, questioning the sort of "copy" she could possibly be, she emphasizes the inescapable acquiescence still present in her action. *Their* words become flesh, making the speaker into a hierarchically bound entity for whom straightforward self-expression is impossible. It becomes clear here that pleasure belongs to the one(s) whose image is projected onto others. For Han, "The question for us, then, is not only about whether, when and how *Dictée*, as a text begins. It is also, whether, when and how *this* subject, the disease of *Dictée*, comes to a life born precisely on not assuming its beginning or having begun."<sup>37</sup> To speak at all in this setting is to acquiesce to one's nonexistence or disappearance into others who dominate. Still, the disease speaks, does not remain silent; her voice echoes and rambles in ways that are both complicit and seditious.

Complicity, then, implies not only accession to domination but a relational enfoldedness.<sup>38</sup> It signals not only collaboration or collusion with power but also entanglement that allows for multiple modes of engagement. Frances Restuccia suggests that Cha's elaborations of Catholic ritual are not solely mocking but mark the sacredness of the project

of turning toward “that atemporal core of trauma, the Real.”<sup>39</sup> I would argue that this statement flattens the tensions Cha highlights between resonant traumas across time and space, an awareness of the ways that mythology can obscure historical contingency, and the ways that Roman Catholic rituals can both reenact and occasion trauma.<sup>40</sup> Yet I take Restuccia’s point that ritual in this part of the text is doing multiple things at once: ironizing, critiquing, and sacralizing. Cha closes the overlapping scenes of Catholic ritual with, “NOVENA: NINE EACH. THE RECITATION OF PRAYER AND PRACTICING OF DEVOTIONS DURING A NINE DAY PERIOD.”<sup>41</sup> As one of the invocations that begin *DICTEE*, this could be read as the *mudang* and/or disease calling for grace, or grace as that for which the nine sections named for muses collectively beseech. In the painful, playful, disoriented calls that open *DICTEE*, devotion does not equate with absolute sincerity; it involves discomfort and critical engagement at the same time that it reflects and generates conviction.

### **Martyrdom, Objecthood, and Devotion**

The self-voiding, always compromised practices that open *DICTEE* provide important interpretive clues for reading its juxtaposition of women martyrs from different locations in time and space. Cha presents figures that are at the same time historical and mythological (Thérèse of Lisieux, Joan of Arc, Yu Guan Soon) whose acts of devotion are presented as detached “from the very cultural contexts that fantasized about them.”<sup>42</sup> Their devotion and sacrifices are rewritten in ways that emphasize their volitional force but suggest that martyrdom’s generalizability is a distinct form of violence. As Anne Anlin Cheng points out, the reader is left to reflect not (only) on historical events, but on their inevitably mediated representation and the performative processes such representation entails.<sup>43</sup> Cheng demonstrates that *DICTEE* reframes exemplarity as citation by exposing the mechanisms that construct and foreclose historical narration. The social and political roles these women inhabit are “prescribed” and overdetermined, and rely on performative dissimulations that cover over historicity in order to claim “their privileged status as ‘originals.’”<sup>44</sup> Their acts of devotion are both full and empty, willfully engaged in larger causes but unclaimable within narrative structures that attribute all meaning and agency to God, nation, and patriarchal family.

Yu Guan Soon, the subject of the section entitled “CLIO HISTORY,” as a teenager organized against Japanese colonialism and died in 1920 while

imprisoned for her political activities; she is an exemplary daughter of the nation but also (or thereby) “exchangeable with any other heroine in history.”<sup>45</sup> Cha cites her legendary “devotion to generosity and sacrifice” which are lifted up as unique, but are paradoxically rendered generic in their telling. Cha draws a parallel between Yu Guan Soon’s story and Korea itself: the narrative of enemy nation facing enemy nation, like that of a female/feminized political martyr, is overdetermined and thus a foregone tragedy. Cha’s implied critique of martyrdom is that the prescribed path, like calmly observed catastrophes in faraway places, elicits no real attention or understanding. It is “not physical enough . . . to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for *this* experience.”<sup>46</sup> The linguistic rituals commemorating martyrdom and colonialist war are, in fact, another form of violence. Their citational invocation allows for containment, for news “about (one more) distant land” not to register as tangible reality.<sup>47</sup> Cha, however, does not rest with the story that is “neutralized to achieve the no-response,” but persistently highlights the limitations of this narrative form. In Yu Guan Soon’s case, Cha insists that the story lacks dimensions of particularity that must have existed, omitting both individuality and connection in her isolation as “exceptional.”<sup>48</sup>

Yu Guan Soon’s interchangeability with other martyrs uncomfortably resembles the devoted anonymity of the soldiers who uphold nondemocratic governance decades later. “You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive influence.” These soldiers, too, are devoted to their country. They are single-mindedly focused on their work in a way that separates them from “your own blood your own flesh as tides ebb.”<sup>49</sup> Devotion to country can contest, but just as often upholds, “*time that delivers not.*”<sup>50</sup>

It is crucial, then, to trace the intersections of devotion and ideology in *DICTEE*. For Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *DICTEE* calls attention to textual materiality in its use of mixed media. Its evident objecthood necessarily alienates the reader from assigning smooth, transparent meaning.<sup>51</sup> The work’s sometimes overwhelming materiality leaves the reader to interpret *DICTEE* as object as well as—at times, rather than—word.<sup>52</sup> It does not exist to be simply read, and this resistance to reading can be both an initial source of disappointment and a key reason that the text elicits such dynamic and ongoing efforts at interpretation. Through the book’s own insistence that it be regarded as a “foreign thing,” Jeon contends, the reader is directed toward seeing what is “alien” as well as to an understanding of seeing itself *as alienated*.<sup>53</sup> This, in turn, can allow for more direct reflection on what alienated seeing that does not recognize its own alienation might be doing.

Jeon associates the blurring and transforming of media into one another with heightened attention to materiality that undoes a clear

distinction between participant and observer, viewer and viewed.<sup>54</sup> The juxtaposed character sketches in the section “ERATO LOVE POETRY” are presented in a format that is at once book and film, combining stage and camera directions and accounts of an audience’s viewing experience. Segments of blank page cause the eyes to alternate between verso and recto pages and leave asymmetrical white space, even a fully blank page that ceases to answer its countertext. By purposefully highlighting the media that relay these stories, Cha immerses the reader in the constructive process that generates narrative and perspective.

Depictions of the Carmelite nun Thérèse of Lisieux (who also appears dressed as Joan of Arc) and an anonymous film character intertwine throughout this ambiguously hybrid screen-page form.<sup>55</sup> The film character is known only as a wife; she is viewed on screen, first through “her traces”—clothing, bathwater, “the space, not the objects that fill the space” in her house.<sup>56</sup> While this opening sequence leads the audience to anticipate her beauty, the character is caught in an environment that overdetermines her role according to gender: “Her marriage to him, her husband. Her love for him, her husband, her duty to him, her husband.”<sup>57</sup> The wife is hemmed in by her scripted role; the text recounts the film and its viewers’ perceptions in ways that vividly render her neglect and desperation. Dryly reciting the situation’s justifications, the narrating text reiterates but does not affirm their logic: “She is married to her husband who is unfaithful to her. No reason is given. No reason is necessary except that he is a man.”<sup>58</sup> The audience observes her struggle from the clearly mediated distance of third-person narration.

In contrast, Thérèse’s first-person statements are exuberant and desirous, even as they plead to be dominated and subsumed. She offers herself as “*VICTIM of your love, O Jesus!*” and celebrates that “*Love* has chosen me as a holocaust” despite being “a weak and imperfect creature.” While Thérèse pronounces herself undeserving, she also names herself an accepted divine love object. It is for “*Love*” to be fully satisfied that “it is necessary that It lower itself,” and this lowering ultimately begets transformation for the lowly object of love. *Love* itself desires love in return, and this requires “that It lower Itself into nothingness and transform this nothingness into *fire*.”<sup>59</sup> To offer oneself for possession, even destruction, is to engage in a relationship with divinity that contains a paradoxical form of reciprocity.

By framing these figures within a shared, though differentiated, filmic apparatus, Cha highlights not only the scripted and performative aspects of both situations but also the fact that, in spite of their clear disparities, they build on shared gendered tropes. Thérèse’s surrender is a hyperbolic rescripting of marital roles. This is made all the clearer by the inclusion of Thérèse’s wedding invitation, written by Thérèse herself, announcing her marriage to Christ.<sup>60</sup> There are fluctuating degrees of difference between

these practices of sacrifice. The wife's socially commanded devotion evidently effaces or blocks a desiring subject, which contrasts intensely with Thérèse's determination to be violently taken. There is both troubling similarity and profound distance between "She deserved so little. Being wife" and "*Love* has chosen me as holocaust, me, a weak and imperfect creature."<sup>61</sup> While the affective lives of degraded wife and passionately devoted saint are in many ways incomparable, both positions take for granted expectations of feminine servitude, sacrifice, and even annihilation. Cha presents without resolution a gaping ambiguity regarding this common template for gendered relations. The photographic invocations of Joan of Arc that open and close this section of *DICTEE* draw these questions about imitation and shared scripts into the political realm. In the first, Saint Thérèse stands dressed as Joan of Arc, whom she portrayed in two self-authored plays.<sup>62</sup> The closing photograph is a shot of Renée Jeanne Falconetti in the 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Joan of Arc's presence signals a connection with Yu Guan Soon (sometimes called Korea's Joan of Arc), which evokes Cha's ambivalent critiques of political martyrdom that recognize both its agency and scripted construction. While a neglected wife and anticolonial martyr might seem to exist at opposite poles of gendered possibility, Cha implies that they are in necessary proximity.

The inseparability of familial and national gendered ideals also leads back to Princess Pari. As Han explains,

The *Pari Gongju* myth is an epic poem about the devotion of a daughter to her family: abandoned by her royal parents because she was a girl, *Pari Gongju* nonetheless braves the underworld for a magical elixir to save her ailing parents, and in the process, she is transformed into a goddess with the power to guide the dead in their transition to an afterlife. As the origin story for Korean shamanism, the myth is performed by *mudang*, who are usually women, and as well, is a cultural tradition of feminine filiation that departs both from Oedipal and Confucian patriarchal orders.<sup>63</sup>

Astonishingly, Cha's retelling in "POLYMNIA SACRED POETRY" emphasizes none of these elements, instead focusing on the protagonist's journey to retrieve "remedies for her mother."<sup>64</sup> She does not pass through the underworld, but reaches a bucket into a well to retrieve water *for herself* from beneath the earth.<sup>65</sup> There is no suggestion that the daughter was disowned or abandoned, but rather that she might have been well cared for: "Her mother had given her a white kerchief to wear on her head to avoid the strong rays and a lightly woven smock which was also white."<sup>66</sup> The girl does not become a goddess, but neither is she sacrificed. She approaches home with the medicine to see "a small candle . . . flickering," anticipating her return.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Cha returns to the movie viewer's experience in "THALIA COMEDY," in a section entitled "*Memory*." The account reads almost like stage directions: "Turning left to see her, she is alone, immobile in her body. Her hands are folded on her lap with her other belongings. . . . Her eyes open to distance as if to linger inside that which has passed in shadow and darkness."<sup>68</sup> This viewer, subject to her own film-like description, repeats the descent of the disease and the *mudang*. She struggles internally with a difficult vocation ("She knows all along. How it is not easily believed. . . . By her even. Without a doubt she knows what she must say"). And this process is framed as both "re-uttering to revive. The forgotten" and a repetition that fails to directly cite its original: "She remains for the effect induced in her, fulfilled in the losing of herself repeatedly to memory and simultaneously to its opposition, the arrestation of memory in oblivion."<sup>69</sup>

Jeon argues that much of the power of Cha's work derives from its revelation of the ideological apparatus that holds together perceptions of "imperialistic innocence."<sup>70</sup> In the same way that the whiteness of a brightened film screen causes the audience to become visible, thereby calling attention to the mechanical apparatus that allows temporary absorption into fictional worlds, *DICTEE* points out "the compulsion to mis-see."<sup>71</sup> Jeon notes that a common audience reaction is to resent exposure as betrayal, to feel irritation and disappointment at the moment that "the medium becomes a thing."<sup>72</sup> Yet the fact that *DICTEE* calls attention to itself as a thing is also a source of ongoing wonder. The arbitrary alignment of linguistic signs and sounds, such as the word *mu* read and sounded in Greek and Japanese, then filtered through Korean and Chinese writing, shows that the apparatus is not omnipotent or determinative. Its materiality takes on different meaning and produces different effects depending on the interpretive lenses applied. To read *DICTEE* through its practices of devotion changes the apparatus itself by altering the ways that it functions.

Thingness is an open channel through which ritual productions of language can lead by chance to the compelling resonances associated with *mu*. The arbitrary overlaps with the historically constrained, since, to quote Han again,

The haunt of colonialism obtains specifically in the correlation of imposition with *an inability to speak with just one voice*; and thus, with the appearance of each letter can be seen the "trace", or "mark" of another that has disappeared. A whole poetics of non-relation—what Cha might have called a poetics of "phantomnation"—emerges here as the true order of Korean post-colonial history.<sup>73</sup>

To say that *mu* is “a diglossial orthography, the first non-single letter, we might say, of an anti-colonial alphabet” gives the anticolonial alphabet a beginning (or nonbeginning) that is entangled, impure, and complicit.<sup>74</sup> Its multiple origins are painful and liberative, contingent and deliberate. With *mu*, the arbitrariness of the sign converges with purposeful efforts to construe identity and structure chaos.

Ideology and devotion are neither equivalent nor fully separable and can in some circumstances work in opposition. This is especially the case when what emerges contingently in devotional practice draws attention to the ideological apparatus and its structuring assumptions. To consider devotion as a site of alchemical possibility suggests that even practices that seem to void or discount certain types of agency may not be fully compliant with the forces to which they submit. The diseuse, the compliant wife, the confessing penitent, and the eager martyr are all more challenging figures than they appear at first glance. And apparent agents of rebellion (Yu Guan Soon, Joan of Arc, the implied *mudang*, perhaps Cha herself) do not decisively escape.<sup>75</sup>

The ongoing possibility of resistance necessarily exists, necessarily compels, and is always compromised by linguistic histories and bodily situatedness. *DICTEE* is anticolonial in stance, but its avenues of resistance all involve varying degrees of complicity that reinforce the “hollowness of meaning symptomatic of colonial violence.”<sup>76</sup> At the same time, complicity is not simply or only participation in injustice. As Debarati Sanyal defines it, complicity can mark “understanding or intimacy,” being folded together in ways that are complex and multivalent.<sup>77</sup> To note that *DICTEE*'s efforts at healing and grace retain a hollowness continually haunted by coloniality, race, and gender means that alchemy is not salvation. There is no filling in the gaps—it would, in fact, be more harmful to do so. Yet perhaps amidst the voiding and multiplying that attend both *mu* and Cha's characters, fragmented nonrelation coexists with continually reformulating modes of relation.

Devotion between mothers and children recurs in *DICTEE*, from the frontispiece carving in *hangul* to Cha's writings to and about her own mother, to the story of Demeter and Persephone. The final page begins with a startlingly casual, “Lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high above her view.”<sup>78</sup> Neither absent nor reuniting, the mother can be momentarily taken for granted as one from whom to demand assistance. The scene outside the window is “early dusk,” headed for night and wrapped in quiet. Even the trees partake in an expectant waiting: “Trees adhere to silence in attendance to the view to come.” But what arrives is not a view but a motion that causes sound. “Lift me to the window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its

scraping on wood to break stillness.” In the midst of a cheerful intimacy, the mother’s lifting the child sets something in motion.

The sound of ropes scraping wood, for Joo and Lux, “recalls a public execution scene”; the cut ropes cause something to fall. The image brings “an ominous sense of foreboding.” They also note that the “Emille Bell” (the Divine Bell of Seongdeok the Great) of Korean oral legend supposedly called out something sounding like a word meaning “mommy.” The bell repeatedly cracked and “could not be perfected,” and a young girl was sacrificed so that the bell could finally be complete.<sup>79</sup> The story of a martyred child, while distressing, echoes many of the other stories that structure *DICTEE*. Yet there is also the sound of the bell falling and a direction or acknowledgment: “Follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to the sky.”<sup>80</sup> Is the peal, which is also an appeal, directed only to the sky, or to the child as well? Is the child’s appealing set in motion at the sound, or is something being signaled to her, asked of her? The falling does not bring death, at least not immediately. Instead, a moment mediated by mother-daughter intimacy lifts a plea for divine and human attention, for devotion that will not be met with oblivion. As the bells approach ground, their sound reaches sky.

## Notes

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The epigraphs are taken from Jen Hofer, “Interventions: Notes on Translating *Intervenir*,” in Dolores Dorantes and Rodrigo Flores, *Intervenir*, trans. Jen Hofer (Brooklyn, 2015), 181, and Sora Han, “Poetics of Mu,” *Textual Practice* 34, no. 6 (2020): 929.

1. Elaine Kim, “Poised on the In-between: A Korean American’s Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s DICTEE*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley, 1994), 29n22.
2. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (Berkeley, 2001), 81–82.
3. Between 1980 and 1987, tear gas was a key tool of military suppression, commonly used against demonstrators in cities across South Korea.
4. Cha, *DICTEE*, 82. The April 19 dating of the letter is important, referencing the April 19 Movement of 1960, a student and labor uprising that resulted in President Syngman Rhee’s resignation. The letter itself suggests that it is written in 1980 (83); the date both references protests held to observe this anniversary and adds to the sense of recurring struggle.
5. Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City, 2012), 19.
6. Gendering terms such as “feminine,” “female,” and “woman” are used in this essay in ways that are connected but not entirely interchangeable. I am not making systematic application of each term, but hope that these fluctuations draw attention to the ways Cha presents gender as continually reformulating



- and in process. I see Cha engaged in actively demonstrating and critiquing how binary contrasts with notions of “masculine,” “male,” and “man” are produced and maintained.
7. Cha, *DICTEE*, epigraph.
  8. As the uneven but recurrent critical attention to *DICTEE* since the early 1990s indicates, the text remains open to such dynamic rereadings. I had not, until writing in the unfolding protests and suppressions in the United States in 2020, given much attention to the teargassing scene with which this essay opens. This form of military and police brutality symbolically marks a still-unfolding period in US history that ignited after the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.
  9. Kun Jong Lee, “Rewriting Hesiod, Revisioning Korea: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* as a Subversive Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*,” *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 78. Lee’s interpretation explicitly takes cues from reference to Cha’s plays on Hesiod in Sunn Shelley Wong, “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in Kim and Alarcón, *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 103–42.
  10. Hesiod, *Theogony*, cited in Lee, “Rewriting Hesiod,” 82, and Cha, *DICTEE*, 7, 11.
  11. Serenity Joo and Christina Lux, “Dismantling Bellicose Identities: Strategic Language Games in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE*,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2012), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19c9k0br>.
  12. Cha, *DICTEE*, 3–5.
  13. *Ibid.*, 3.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. Hertha D. Sweet Wong, *Picturing Identity: Contemporary American Autobiography in Image and Text* (Chapel Hill, 2018), 155.
  16. See esp. Lisa Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, and Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC, 2002), 220–22.
  17. Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion* (Honolulu, 2009), xxviii. See also the chapter “Modern Warfare” in Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Politics* (New York, 2008) where Park references the disease’s “shamanistic labor” (134).
  18. Han, “Poetics of Mu,” 933.
  19. *Ibid.*, 928, 930.
  20. Han does not deny that such parallels could be made but notes that “those ends tend to arrive at the same analytical conclusion: polite solidarities of sociological and cultural comparison whose arguments shrivel and recoil—dissolve—in the face of the most ugly human impulses of self-preservation, on the one hand; and inconsequential defenses of the universal sanctity of life and human rights in general, on the other”; *ibid.*, 924.
  21. *Ibid.*, 923, 928.
  22. *Ibid.*, 928–29.
  23. While I have elementary Chinese reading skills, I do not read Korean and rely on Han’s assessment of *hanja* definitions and overlaps.
  24. Han, “Poetics of Mu,” 935.
  25. *Ibid.*, 936.
  26. Park, *Apparitions of Asia*, 134.
  27. Han, “Poetics of Mu,” 933.

28. Lee, "Rewriting Hesiod," 83, referencing Cha, *DICTEE*, 7 and 11.
29. Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 224 and 229.
30. Wong, "Unnaming the Same," 106.
31. David Cho, *Lost in Transnation: Alternative Narrative, National, and Historical Visions of the Korean American Subject in Select 20th-Century Korean American Novels* (New York, 2017), 135–38. Lyric as it appears in *DICTEE* also departs markedly from the kind of lyric writing that was most recognized and celebrated in Asian American literary criticism by the time of its publication. Timothy Yu analyzes a shift in the 1970s and 1980s toward "a poetics of the individual lyric voice" that favored autobiographical narrative. Yu notes that this trend closely resembled white literary aesthetics of the same period. Yet it also made *DICTEE* difficult to reconcile with "the perceived political foundations of Asian American criticism," since the work undermines steady notions of subjectivity, voice, and identification; Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford, 2009), 104–7. Cha's play with lyric reaches its height in the chapter "URANIA ASTRONOMY" when she rewrites Charles Baudelaire's *The Swan* in a French/English poem that is punctuated by the first-person refrains "J'écoutais les cygnes" (I heard the swans) and "J'écoutais les signes" (I heard the signs). This play with sound and sign (and imitation) occurs within a poem that is, like Baudelaire's, preoccupied with loss, memory, and change. It repeats the diseuse's struggles with physical and phenomenological workings of speech—cries, silence, noise, and eventually "Cracked tongue. Broken tongue. / Pidgeon. Semblance of speech"; Cha, *DICTEE*, 66, 70, 75. Cha's lyric voice stops and starts, anguishes in ways that suggest a tension between immigration and smooth poetic speech. It makes use of arbitrary symbolic alignment that intriguingly parallels the present discussion of *mu*.
32. Cha, *DICTEE*, 13.
33. *Ibid.*, 14–16.
34. *Ibid.*, 16–17. All italics in quotations from *DICTEE* are original.
35. *Ibid.*, 17.
36. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
37. Han, "Poetics of Mu," 932.
38. I am thinking here of Debarati Sanyal's understanding of complicity as an enfolded and enfolding relation, an idea that I more directly engage in the conclusion. See Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York, 2015).
39. Frances Restuccia, "Dictée's Postmodern Mourning: A 'line connects the void,'" *American Imago* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 396.
40. Thanks to Amy Hollywood for helping to clarify the point about Roman Catholic rituals.
41. Cha, *DICTEE*, 19.
42. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford, 2001), 148.
43. *Ibid.*, 144.
44. Cha, *DICTEE*, 30; Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 148–49.
45. Cha, *DICTEE*, 30.
46. *Ibid.*, 32.
47. *Ibid.*, 33.
48. *Ibid.*, 30.
49. *Ibid.*, 86.

50. Ibid., 87.
51. Jeon, *Racial Things*, 2.
52. Ibid., 7–8. Sweet Wong makes a similar observation, stating, “Before readers can ask ‘What is she talking about?’ they must grapple with a more fundamental question: ‘How do I read this?’”; *Picturing Identity*, 162.
53. Jeon, *Racial Things*, 28. Jeon argues that objecthood in Cha’s wider body of work is a “means of investigating the foreignness of racialized bodies” (2).
54. Ibid., 11, 32–33.
55. Several other second- and third-person characters appear in this chapter. An also-anonymous theatergoer, referred to only with the pronouns “she” and “her,” is depicted as both watching the film and being filmed. This same character may be the one addressed in the second person who witnesses the on-screen wife’s plight; Cha, *DICTEE*, 96, 106.
56. Ibid., 98, 100.
57. Ibid., 103.
58. Ibid., 102.
59. Ibid., 111.
60. Ibid., 101, 103.
61. Ibid., 110–11.
62. Thanks to Amy Hollywood for first pointing this out to me.
63. Han, “Poetics of Mu,” 933.
64. Cha, *DICTEE*, 169. Notably, in this version, it is the mother whose health is at stake and for whom the daughter acts.
65. Ibid., 168.
66. Ibid., 167.
67. Ibid., 170.
68. Ibid., 149.
69. Ibid., 150. The use of the word “oblivion” echoes eerily with the declaration in “CLIO HISTORY,” which contains the story of Yu Guan Soon, that the past is resurrected “to name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion.” This act awaits response, aiming in its piecing together of fragmented word and image for “the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion” (33).
70. Jeon, *Racial Things*, 32.
71. Ibid., 33.
72. Ibid., 36.
73. Han, “Poetics of Mu,” 931. Han purposefully invokes Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, 1997).
74. Before the examination of Asian embeddedness in settler colonialism gained its current momentum in Asian American studies, Kandice Chuh recommended robust engagement with postcolonial studies to account for “the ways that national identities come into being through negotiations with global nexuses of relations of power”; Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* (Durham, 2003), 177. Chuh demonstrates that “Asian-raced” attributions of foreignness by the United States, “as simultaneously nation and empire,” occur alongside variegated impacts of US imperialism and neocolonialism, intra-Asian coloniality, and decolonial movements within Asia (116, 123). These multiplicities and ambiguities are embedded in what it means to take up *mu* through an Asian Americanist lens.
75. The matter of whether or not to read Cha as martyr is complicated not only by textual questions of autobiography but also by her murder in 1982, just after the publication of *DICTEE*.

76. Han, "Poetics of Mu," 936.
77. Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 10. Sanyal, like Cha, is especially invested in complicity's relationship to memory and even suggests that complicity can be "a form of commitment" (12).
78. Cha, *DICTEE*, 179.
79. Joo and Lux, "Dismantling Bellicose Identities."
80. Cha, *DICTEE*, 179.