



A Pale Persephone: On the Works of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

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ABSTRACT

This essay interlaces personal narrative with an analysis of the video and textual works of the Korean American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. I begin with a sequence of visits to the Puck Building, the site of Cha's murder in 1980, in an ill-fated attempt to recover her presence in luxury penthouse suites now owned by the Kushner family. I move toward the screen as a site of permanence where I can unearth Cha's ruminations on history, mythology, language, and cinema.

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It was the first week of the new year, with snowflakes illuminating the sidewalk in Nolita. I had been walking in circles around the Puck Building, sometimes alone and other times with Dimitri. I hadn't gone inside the building yet, although I'd glimpsed it from proximal streets, the layer upon layer of red brick, a Celtic sprite wielding a hand mirror perched on each vertex, figurines of Shakespeare's mischievous Puck. I wanted to find the vestiges of the poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's presence there, which I thought would be subterranean yet palpable, even after all this time.

Forty years ago, on November 5, 1982, the young Korean American avant-garde filmmaker and poet walked to the Puck Building to visit her husband, the photographer Richard Barnes, who was documenting the building's renovation. Cha was 31 years old. What would become known as her magnum opus, *Dictee*, had just been published a few days prior with Tanam Press.¹ The book evades succinct summarization, but I can say that it is an epic poem that contends with the inaccessibility of postcolonial history, tracing an exilée as she struggles to find her homeland. *Dictee* interlaces the mythic plights of heroines – Joan of Arc, the Korean martyr Yu Guan Soon, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Persephone, Cha's mother, Cha herself. In the end, the speaker beckons us to return to poetry and cinema, sacred locations where a pure experience of the present is possible.

But Cha would not live to see the radical afterlives of this book and how its legacy has persisted in syllabi across Asian American critical race theory, feminist psychoanalysis, postcolonial literature, and contemporary poetry. That evening, she was murdered in the basement of the Puck Building by serial rapist Joey Sanza, her body discovered in the dumpster of a Chinatown parking lot three blocks away.² I knew that all physical traces of her would be imperceptible now, four decades later, but it was the aura of the building that drew me, cold and oblique, how it enticed and expelled me at once like a lover.

At the time of Cha's murder, the owners of the Puck Building intended to transform it into a commercial condominium for businesses primarily related to the arts. When this project failed in 1987, the property was acquired by Kushner Properties, owned by the family of Jared Kushner. In 2011, Kushner sent in a request to the Landmarks Preservation Commission to erect six luxury penthouse suites on the upper floors of the mixed-use building. The executive director's initial response was that the historic building "should not be sacrificed for a wealthy developer's passing fancy to add an enormous and unnecessarily visible penthouse addition on top."³ After waging a months-long battle, Kushner's firm was finally granted permission to renovate.

At the time of this writing, each of the penthouses have sold or are selling for \$21–\$60 million.⁴ The interiors are co-designed by Kushner's wife Ivanka Trump; each suite is finished with La Cornue stoves, bullet-shaped H. Theophile door hinges, and custom mahogany-framed windows with built-in UV protection for artworks.⁵ After a few unlucky years on a stagnant housing market impacted by the COVID pandemic, many of the units remain vacant at the time of this writing. When I see the architectural renderings of the mother-of-pearl terrazzo floors, maple headboards with butterfly joints, Sicilian lava stone countertops, and the infinite recurrence of mirrors concealed inside of other mirrors, I think of Walter Benjamin's angel of history with his back turned from the past, hurling itself toward a future cleansed of its debris.

And then I think of the nameless ruins that comprise the cover of *Dictee* (Figure 1). It is a granular, black-and-white image of a cruel, inhospitable landscape: the ruins of the Nubian pyramids in Sudan, though I believe it is more faithful to the text to leave them unidentified. Five equidistant eroded monuments constellate the foreground, with one slashed pyramid in the background of the image. The scene has an uncanny sense because it implies a human presence while being evacuated of human subjects. It felt somehow significant to me that this set of luxury penthouses had become her unmarked grave. When I tried to look inside the windows, shiny as they were, all I saw was my own reflection.

Cha was born in 1951 in Busan, South Korea during the Korean War. When Cha was a child, her parents were forbidden to speak their native tongue while seeking asylum in territory occupied by Japanese imperial forces. Her family escaped from Manchuria to Seoul, from Seoul to Busan, and from Busan to Seoul again, finally settling in the United States in 1962. Her first exposure to English and French was at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a private Catholic girls' school in San Francisco, a city where Cha would spend most of her life. She earned an undergraduate degree in comparative literature and graduate degrees in art practice and criticism at the University of California, Berkeley, where she worked at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, which now houses her permanent collection.⁶ A student of Bertrand Augst at Berkeley, her studies in poststructuralism and semiology are potent throughout her work. The opening prose block of *Dictee* features a translation exercise that embeds the speaker as the subject of discourse while maintaining her narrative distance from the gathering:

Open paragraph It was the first day period
 She had come from a far period tonight at dinner
 comma the families would ask comma open
 quotation marks How was the first day interroga-
 tion mark close quotation marks at least to say

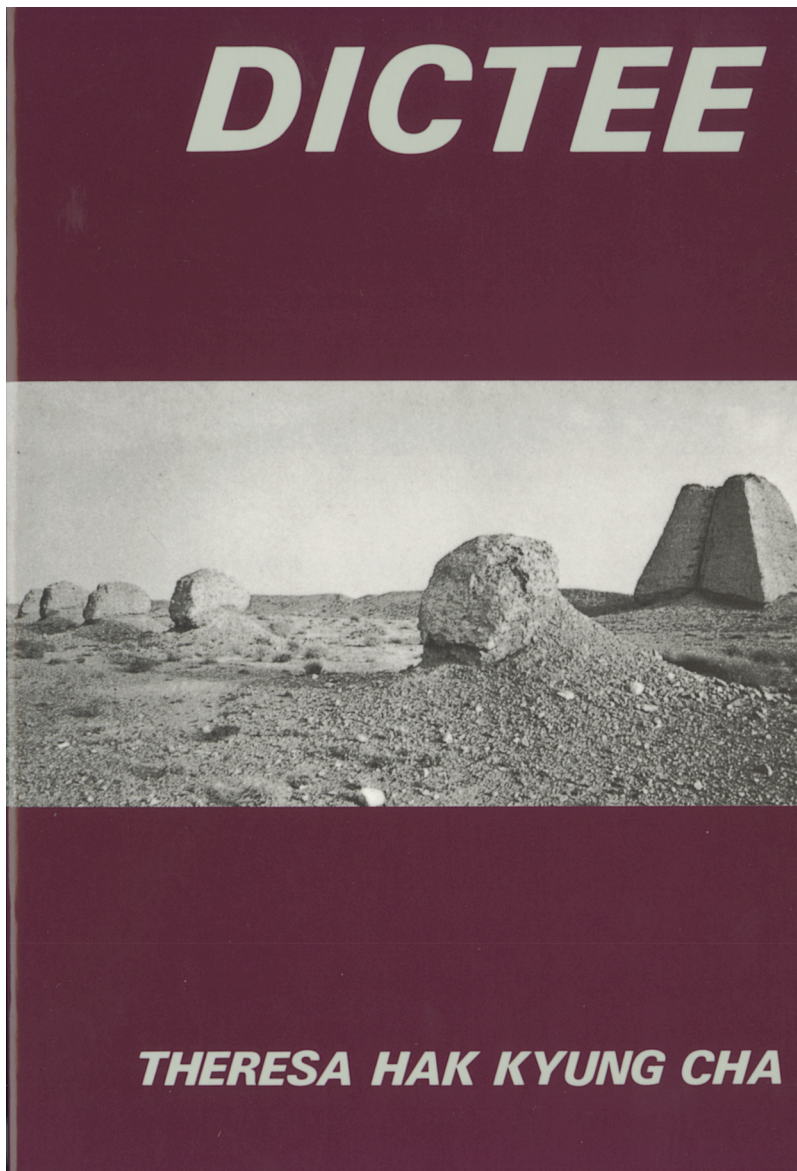


Figure 1. *Dictee* (1982). When I look at these six archaic tombs on the cover of the book, I think of the Puck Building's six penthouse suites as ruins in the present tense (Courtesy of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive).

the least of it possible comma the answer would be
open quotation marks there is but one thing period
There is someone period From a far period
close quotation marks⁷

Immediately above this text block is its rendering in French. The speaker's painstaking awareness of the translation exercise seems to dilute its authenticity. The assimilative practice is lost in the mouth's orifice. In another exercise that follows, the speaker also

transcribes her moans, snivels, stutters, and unedited sounds while practicing the new language. “She mimics the speaking,” she writes.⁸ Language acquisition becomes a disciplinary ritual that the speaker defies by saturating each exercise with her static murmurs. As Wendy Xu writes, “An immigrant dreams of total assimilation as both fantasy and nightmare,” an ambivalence reflected in *Dictée*’s hypnotic, defiant transmissions.⁹

In her 1975 video titled “Mouth to Mouth,”¹⁰ the dictation exercise becomes playfully evocative. The title suggests that we will be witness to an act of resuscitation, the rebirth of a lost mother tongue. This eight-minute meditation features a mouth sounding the vowel graphemes of Hangul, the phonetic script of the Korean alphabet. The mouth moves in and out of visibility, a proximity that suggests both intimacy and alienation. The mouth silently shapes itself to sound each vowel, but the voice is muffled by a soundtrack of bubbling water, bird song, footsteps, and a ticking clock. The audience barely sees the mouth through the haze of white static superimposed over it. What might have been clear at the point of transmission arrives as a snowy apparition, “language before it is born at the tip of the tongue.”¹¹ Much of Cha’s work magnifies this moment of suspension before meaning is encrypted into speech and then decoded again.

As an artist of the diaspora, Cha urges me to stop thinking of translation as the loss of the unadulterated original, as a delicate choice between style and meaning, our sacrificial lambs. Her video works delve into the transmutations and perversions intrinsic to the act, destabilizing the authority of the original by resurfacing the multiple tongues inside a mouth, tongues that coincide only to eclipse one another. Contrary to readings of her work by Lisa Lowe, Elaine Kim, and Shelley Sunn Wong collected in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, I don’t believe the presences in Cha’s work signal a reinvention of Asian American identity, an unstable intersection between Korean, Korean American, avant-garde filmmaker, performance artist, poet, exilée, etc.¹² For me, her work captures only the faint echo of an I, a mutability that endangers the act of identification itself.

As we walked to the Puck Building at midnight in the dead of winter, Dimitri innocuously asked why I went there every day and what I was hoping to find. We passed by a bubble tea shop called Cha Cha Cha, which is what I had been saying to myself as I looked for her. I didn’t know what I was looking for, and if I knew, I wouldn’t have to keep searching. That night, I read the Puck Building’s Wikipedia page to Dimitri. While much of the description is dedicated to Thrive Capital, the venture capital firm owned by the Kushner family, a short paragraph toward the end details Cha’s murder. As I looked for Cha in this dismal place, I realized I was not looking for her, but instead the proof of her absence. I wanted her to be haunting the empty estates, her mouth open wide enough to spill birdsong.

The title of Cha’s collected poetry and image essays published posthumously, *Exilée and Temps Morts*, translates to “exiled and dead time.” A poem titled “Arrival, August 31, 1962, United States of America” is positioned alongside a photograph of a beauty supply store selling mass-produced wigs:

The most astonishing
of the first day
was the abundance, wealth, the excess.
As a child, one imagined this “Gold Mountain”
as having no two treasures alike.

Instead, repetition became an inevitable
 vocabulary member
 Inexhaustible duplication self-regeneration
 as necessity
 This absolute wealth tyranny of objects
 As force of the machinery”¹³

The speaker is bewildered by the sheer accumulation of objects, and repetition is inserted into her syntax as a “vocabulary member.” Replication becomes a mode of abstraction. The commodity is a purification ritual that dilutes and divulges meaning, a self-contained field that seems to be able to spontaneously regenerate itself without extracting value from human labor. The emptiness of these multimillion-dollar units reminds me that “Gold Mountain” is beholden to an excess that eclipses its actual livability. When I looked at the Puck Building, I saw the phantom objectivity of capital divorced from the conditions of its accumulation – hard casualties in the construction of capitalism’s soft violence.

In 1992, ten years after Cha’s murder, Francis Fukuyama announced that the end of history had arrived; liberal democracy had become the final world order, the apex of human progress, and there would be no further evolution needed.¹⁴ I felt a strange tension between wanting to accept the unknowability of the past and the sense that this Gold Mountain’s prosperity was predicated on my forgetting. In the Puck Building’s cold sheen, I saw our phantasmic destiny reflected: a premeditated forgetting of the previous centuries of colonial violence that birthed such a fortress, the ruins of Fukuyama’s dream.

In the summer of 1980, Theresa and her brother James Cha visited Seoul for three months to film her only feature-length film, titled *White Dust in Mongolia*.¹⁵ The film was never completed as they were continuously harassed by officers in the wake of violent political unrest following a presidential assassination. All that remains is some unedited footage of trains, airplanes, mops, and the silhouette of an urban skyline. The film’s protagonist is a young Korean woman living in China, the descendent of Koreans who fled the Japanese occupation to Manchuria. She suffers without memory of the past, an amnesia that also causes her to lose all speech function. The narrative traces her search for a cure as she travels to Korea to have a history and an alphabet injected into her. Until history and language are recovered, what unfolds is a landscape of pure phenomenological experience, signs without specificity, a sentiment Cha recounts in *Exilée and Temps Morts*:

some door some night some window lit some train some city some nation some peoples
 Re Named
 utterly by chance by luck by hazard otherwise.
 otherwise any door any night any window lit any train any city
 any nation any peoples some name any name to a
 given name¹⁶

The *mise en abyme* of Cha’s travel to Korea to make a film about a woman who travels to Korea, only to be forbidden by martial law, reappears in *Dictée*. The section titled “MELPOMENE/TRAGEDY” includes a letter to the speaker’s mother about how the carceral legacy of imperialism percolates into the present tense: “I am in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed . . . We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination.”¹⁷ Although this may seem like an obvious continuity between the colonial era and the postcolonial era, Cha leads us to a more radical claim: that the relationship between the

colonizer and colonized becomes, in its essence, a semiotic relationship, elastic in its exploitation by future powers: “The enemy becomes abstract . . . The nation the enemy the name larger than its own identity . . . Larger than its own signification . . . Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary.”¹⁸ The relationship of domination is not incidental to her historical circumstance; it is systemic and eternal, embedded in the architecture of the nation-state.

What unfolds is a reckoning about the conditions of exile: when she realizes that no legal recognition can reverse this wound, the exilée also experiences a loss of the identity that was predicated on the perpetuity of her search. In *Dictee*, she writes, “I heard the swans/in the rain I heard,” alluding to Baudelaire’s exilic poem “Lye Cygne,” an interplay of *cygnes* (swans) and *signes* (signs):

I think of my great swan with his crazy motions
Like those in exile, ridiculous and sublime,
Consumed by a singular desire.¹⁹

Like the myth of the mute swan that sings beautifully in the moments before death, the revocation of this “singular desire” necessitates an undoing of the self. She arrives at the site of banishment in the hopes of reconciliation, only to be met with a double estrangement, casting her deeper into “the dim forest of the soul’s exile.”²⁰ Cha warns me against making the past into an Eden: when she reaches for the past, all she retrieves is a floating signifier. After her failure to make this film, Cha seeds a central question that propels the body of her work. If the exilée’s identity cannot be recovered by returning to her homeland, where should she go with this desire?

There is a recurring dream my Nainai used to have. Towards the end of her life, there was little else happening to her – Baobao, dying is so boring, she complained. I couldn’t be beside her because the lockdowns in China were several degrees more rigid than lockdowns anywhere else. Visitors were forbidden from entering retirement homes, even when my grandma entered hospice care. Calling me on WeChat became her main event of the day. Baobao, what did you eat today?, she asked, and I would tell her what I ate that day. Nainai, what did you eat today? And she would tell me what she ate that day. It seemed we had nothing else to say to each other beyond this script until I finally thought to ask her about her dreams.

When my Nainai was eight years old, the daughter of farmworkers in Anhui, she watched as Japanese soldiers captured her village, burning crops and ransacking silos. When I asked about this period of siege, she shrugged and said that it was fine. And then I asked her what happened, and she said that nothing happened. The closest she came to telling me about the occupation was when she told me about her pet pig. After the soldiers set her shack on fire, they slaughtered her pig, her prized possession, and roasted it on skewers while she stood in the courtyard and watched with her hands tied behind her back.

It had been at least a decade since I had last heard her talking about the pig, but she was suddenly afflicted with dreams of it toward the end of her life. She dreamt of the pig sifting through the muddy silt, its deafening screech upon capture, and the smoke that rose from her village like curdled milk. She described this dream with such explicit detail that now, in my dreams, a pig will randomly come trotting through my field of vision, injecting itself into my narrative. Sometimes it’s only a speck in the distance, and other times it’s close enough to touch. The dream pig pokes at me with its snout, leaving a trail of drool on my hand. Now that she’s gone, I feel like this pig is my inheritance. I don’t know what it means except that I am tasked with keeping it alive.

History comes to me as this decontextualized pig – pig as a talisman, pig as a cipher for something that is inaccessible to me. This pig is powered through adjacency, burning with the oil and blubber of other auras. Maybe writing this reveals my process of reconciling with history’s unknowability, admitting that I no longer feel a need to salvage the past in order to understand our future and its terrain of struggle. To me, keeping my Nainai’s pig alive is about condemning the militarized police state that forced her to live undocumented in America for over a decade as much as it is about condemning China’s parasitic and neocolonial trade relationship with Africa. The praxis has to be transcendental of any geotemporal context. It has to be greater than any nation-state.

In *Dictée*, Cha writes, “Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion.”²¹ If we are to “redeem the present through the grace of oblivion,” Cha asks us to follow her from the stasis of history into the realm of mythology. In an unpublished lyric essay made of fragments that never appeared in the final version of *Dictée*, the speaker recounts a dream sequence in which faces appear in transit on a freeway:

from the apex comes a continuous stream of heads without bodies. Faces from every history speed furiously down the tunnel, some glancing off my windshield. One stops, a pale Persephone, like a bee hovering. A moment of eye contact through the glass and then she accelerates past. It is fast in this era, there is no time for these dismembered shades to stop and tell their stories, to ask of their sons and daughters²²

This is the picture I see when I look at the blank spaces in my Nainai’s photo album: a pale Persephone, promising an impossible presence moments before her sudden abduction through a cleft in the earth. It’s true that we can’t bring Persephone back from Hades, but her disappearance gives us the spring.

From the start of the section titled “ERATO/LOVE POETRY” through the remainder of the text, the temporality of *Dictée* transitions from revolutionary time to geological time. “What of the partition,” she incites, alluding both to the DMZ and the screen that divides the performer from her audience.²³ In this crucial passage, the screen becomes “unattainably pure,” a place where all memory is collective memory, absent of historical epochs: “The memory stain attaches itself and darkens on the pale formless sheet, a hole increasing its size larger and larger until it assimilates the boundaries and becomes itself formless. All memory. Occupies the entire.”²⁴ There is no distinction between self and other, no expansion of the exilée’s identity that is necessary to make space for the coexistence of others. Instead of reifying her as an absolute other to be assimilated or expelled, her passage over the border is precisely what dissolves the border. This is the true end to exile: not the repatriation of the exilée, but the arrival of deconstructed space where *xénos* and *plíthos* are negated, and the conditions that originally produced her exile are abolished. The screen becomes the location where she can practice her enactment of this other world.

At night, after Dimitri fell asleep, I laid awake and looked at the Puck Building through the window of the hotel, how it emitted light despite its vacancy. Every shard felt manageable as it filtered through the blinds, gleaming with equanimity. And then I imagined a future where the building would be in ruins, a referent without a symbolic order attached to it. There was the slivered moon, and there was a slivered affinity between Cha’s deconstruction and my own revolutionary desire: to

evacuate the name of an empire until it recedes into oblivion. “She says to herself if she were able to write she could continue to live. Says to herself if she would write without ceasing. To herself if by writing she could abolish real time. She would live.”²⁵

I am indebted to Cha’s poetry as it makes fluid those categories of memory, geography, time, self and other. On the surface, the goal might appear to be total fragmentation, but I believe her intention is the opposite. The page is a location where we can gather and bear witness to each other, testing the boundaries of intimacy and narrativity, beyond spatio-temporal fixity and toward an open field – “in the enclosed darkness memory is fugitive.”²⁶ I felt Cha’s fugitive force vibrate in the hollows of the building, her aura petrified in the stone colonnades. It’s not an easy transcendence. I don’t believe that art lives on the exterior of history, or that history has an exit sign we can follow. And I still believe in militant struggle and the elsewhere it beckons that some things cannot be repurposed because they are destined to burn. But what I see in Cha’s cinematic allure is a blueprint for the dissolution of all sovereign borders.

The final pages of *Dictée* contain potent images of reincarnation: the theater is emptied after the simulation, a child revives her mother with the tinctures of a shaman, and flowers sprout from a slain branch. After the extinction event, we enter a creation myth beginning with the elemental substances: water, pigment, saliva, blood, light, and ink. “Earth is made porous . . . In the blue-black body commences lument.”²⁷ The world detaches itself from “plural pasts taken place beforehand.”²⁸ Time makes monuments into cenotaphs. Signs have their etymologies evacuated before they are imbued with new meaning:

Words cast by each other to weather
 avowed indisputably, to time.
 If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,
 residue of word, stand as a ruin stands,
 simply, as mark
 having relinquished itself to time to distance²⁹

These words, now hieroglyphs, are being primed for re-assembly into new orders. I kept the Puck Building in my field of vision before closing my eyes. Its light radiated outward, shining into the hotel room. “You remain dismembered with the belief that magnolia blooms white even on seemingly dead branches and you wait.”³⁰ After I fell asleep, my dreams were graced with visitations from my Nainai’s pet pig. I listened while it spoke softly to me, in a human voice.

Notes

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18. *Ibid.*, 32.
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23. Cha, *Dictee*, 131.
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27. *Ibid.*, 160.
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Notes on contributor

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