



Recreating Exile: Multimedia as Effecting Reader Destabilization in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*

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Abstract— Korean-American writer, filmmaker, and performance artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*, first published in 1982, is an avant-garde, multimedia work. Its key themes are exile and dislocation, primarily that of the Korean diaspora as its members navigate (post)colonial violence and trauma. This paper explores Cha's usage of diverse and unconventional mediums — namely, uncaptioned images, fragmented prose, and letters, and how they contribute to the work's exile effect. *DICTEE*, through its intentional lack of context, simulates an exile from familiarity. The symbolic erasure forces the reader to experience and understand the discomfort of those who are exiled from their homeland. The reader is faced with a choice: one can give up on trying to understand the text due to their discomfort with foreign language and references, or one can grapple with the exile effect and emerge from *DICTEE* having a greater understanding of the painful feeling of exile and capacity to empathize with those who experience it physically in their lives. Though Cha's approach may perhaps be viewed as counterintuitive to the purpose of writing as dissemination of ideas to the mainstream, she is more interested in the maximum potential of a textual work to impact the reader. Readers who explore their discomfort rather than turn from it embrace the position of the exiled and shed light on what Cha obscures and evokes.

Keywords— multimedia literature, exile, destabilization, *DICTEE*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* (2001) is an avant-garde, genre-bending collage of storytelling that includes (auto)ethnography, poetry, translation, and (auto)biography. Its most striking characteristic is its radically multimedia nature: Most of the work is prose and poetry, but there is a plethora of other mediums, including uncaptioned images, calligraphy of *Hanja*, or traditional Korean/Chinese characters, translation exercises, historical letters, scanned drafts of handwriting, anatomical diagrams, drawings, and maps throughout the book.

DICTEE explores a multitude of themes, including migration and dislocation, speech and silence, spirituality, loss, and womanhood. One of its primary thematic narratives recounts the colonialism and imperialism suffered by Korea, from Japanese imperialism during the first half of the 20th century, to American

neocolonialism during and after the Korean War. Historical letters, long prose, and personal accounts come together to weave a history of trauma, violence, and resistance. *DICTEE* has no defined protagonist and slips between multiple narratives and timelines, although throughout the work emerges an unnamed speaker struggling with exile. Many of the narratives are ambiguous in their speaker, an intentional choice to demonstrate the overlapping, fluid, and shared quality of stories. *DICTEE* features female figures like Korean teen revolutionary Yu Guan Soon; Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Cha's namesake; Cha's mother; and numerous unnamed figures.

DICTEE is confounding, uncomfortable, and disorienting in its lack of context behind references, borders between different types of media, a primary narrative, or distinction between the English and French languages. The work's fragments do not fit together,

contrary to the usual expectations of readers of fragmentary writing (Ferens, 2019, p. 29). *DICTEE* can be compared to a sculpture of not only pottery shards but of found objects and valuables of all different shapes, sizes, and materials, their only common ground being the intentional manner in which the artist assembled them. The discomfort felt by the reader is not only intentional, but it is also precisely what makes the work revolutionary; Cha boldly flouts conventions of “[the traditional American] narrative apparatus” (Duncan, 2004, p. 138) in favor of a new collage for a new agenda.

The different natures of the various mediums work to enhance the sensation of exile in more physical, literal representations. Destabilizing the reader has the effect of allowing one to experience a similar exile to the one lived by the narrator — the *diseuse*, or the “speaker” — as well as Cha herself. Upon reading *DICTEE*, the reader is faced with a choice: either to succumb to discomfort and abandon Cha’s work, or thoughtfully consider its intention and enrich their understanding of exile by experiencing an imitation of it. In this paper, I specifically examine the mediums of uncaptioned images, what I call “fragmented prose,” and letters, and how they contribute to *DICTEE*’s exile effect.

II. UNCAPTIONED IMAGES

Cha’s intentional decision to remove the black-and-white photographs of *DICTEE* from spatial, temporal, or historical contexts allows the work to exist suspended, resisting the reader’s desire for some sense of stability (Ferens, 2019, pp. 32-33). Further, we can examine how the visual ambiguity of the images themselves contributes to this effect. *DICTEE* opens with a grainy, black-and-white image of an unidentifiable, desert-like wasteland with multiple large boulders throughout (see Fig. 1) (Cha, 2001). The image places the reader in a literal exile, lacking proximity to human civilization. Whatever assumptions the reader has about the text or its author would be challenged by their first impression: this barren photo, void of context — or much content. The image serves as an introduction to Cha’s destabilization method.

The next page contains *DICTEE*’s frontispiece: an image of Korean characters carved into stone (see Fig. 2) (Cha, 2001). Readers unfamiliar with Korean will not understand the message and likely ignore it (Duncan, 2004, p. 152). Readers familiar with Korean will understand the text but they may not understand the context from which the image comes. The Korean reads (from right to left): “Mother / I miss you / I’m hungry / I want to go home” (Cha, 2001). The message was written on the wall of a coal mine by a person forced into labor

during the period of Japanese occupation (Friedman, 2003, p. 56). In approaching the image, both the non-Korean-speaking reader and the Korean-speaking reader experience a dislocating effect, in two different ways. The choice of image highlights the ironic gap between the subjects in the text and the non-Korean-speaking reader. The reader ignores a plea for help, for relief from the violence of colonization. After all, they do not know it is a plea for help, because they do not share linguistic ties with the colonized. This is not to say there is no effect on the non-Korean-speaking reader: due to the untranslated *Hangul* (Korean characters), the reader likely begins to feel uncomfortable about their lack of knowledge of their position within the textual environment. The Korean-speaking reader knows the meanings of the words but is likewise stripped of any context that could allow them to connect more deeply with the image.

Another obscure image depicts a hillside grassland where three blindfolded people are in a cross-like position, arms outstretched, and six people are looking at and surrounding them (see Fig. 3) (Cha, 2001, p. 39). With context, this is an image of the execution of Korean peasants by the Japanese army (Joyce, 2008). Yet, the photo’s subjects and setting are so ambiguous that the reader could imagine it to be depicting various scenarios. For example, one reader could connect the poses of the men in white as mirroring that of Jesus and the two thieves from the Bible, especially since Cha makes references to Christianity throughout the book, or even a kind of prayer or shamanistic ritual. Cha’s intentional lack of contextualization of this photo represents the violence that occurs without the reader fully being aware of it happening — only discovered when the reader independently searches for the historical context.

Cha takes reader-image tension to its extreme with a charged and dynamic image of a crowd of open-mouthed faces looking at something outside the frame (see Fig. 4) (Cha, 2001, p. 122). The air is electric; the expressive faces feel like a pressing, live call to action. Yet the lack of context discourages communication between the moment captured and the reader, halting the inspired solidarity, fear, anger, or horror. The image originates from a Korean protest against Japanese imperialism; the crowd is shouting, although the reader cannot know this to be correct. The graininess of the image further limits the reader from identifying the setting or time. The reader thus becomes aware of their own inability to ascribe explanation to image, which hopefully prompts them to reevaluate how they assess iconography or historical documents outside of the book.

III. FRAGMENTED PROSE

Throughout *DICTEE* in both English and French, Cha writes in “fragmented prose,” an awkward, deconstructed style that denies the reader any linguistic comfort. According to Amanda Murphy, this prose reminds the reader of the difficulty of navigating language and speech, both “foreign” and “native” (Murphy, 2020, p. 10). In these segments, the prose is clunky and repetitive; often, commas and periods stab in between words. In reading this prose, the reader is placed in the position of the foreigner who struggles to express and articulate themselves: “She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words... *It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say*” (Cha, 2001, p. 3). Having lost the comfort and normalcy of standard grammar conventions, the reader feels alienated within their own language. By writing extended passages throughout *DICTEE* in this stuttering prose, there is a constant inability to communicate what haunts both the speaker and the reader. The reader, by reading the broken language of the exiled, feels exiled from a sense of normalcy or fluency.

Cha's semi-autobiographical speaker experiences a “painful self-annihilation” (Lim, 2019, p. 93) at the Korean airport upon her return to South Korea, eighteen years after emigrating to the United States. The passage recounts the speaker's passing through Border Security, a painful attempt at homegoing. The speaker eventually learns that as an exile, they will never feel at home anywhere — even in their “native” land. The passage slips from the “I” pronoun at the beginning to “you,” moving into a more active self-insertion narrative: “You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference... Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak” (Cha, 2001, p. 56). The choppiness and discomfort of phrases continue.

In some unspecified liminal space, the speaker's broken mother tongue fragments into “particle bits of sound” and “[s]peech morsels. Broken chips of stones” (Cha, 2001, p. 56). The depiction of a literal and physical fragmentation of speech is unsettling and even violent. The speaker's language serves as a metonymy for their Korean identity, and a fragmentation of that speech corresponds to a splintering in their sense of self. The passage also depicts a “painful self-annihilation” because the destroyed identity of the speaker is replaced by that of the reader. Although the reader is aware that the passage consists of the speaker's experience, the use of the pronoun “you” draws them to identify also as the exile.

IV. LETTERS

Letters throughout the work also contribute to a destabilizing effect. There are three formal “letters” — one historical and two presumably fictional — and one prose passage that begins as a letter from the narrator to her mother (Cha, 2001, pp. 34-36, 80-89, 142, 146-148). In all four cases, there is no context given or resolution that follows. By reading the letters — which by nature are meant only for the sender and receiver to see — the reader becomes implicated in their exchange.

Patti Duncan (2004) notes that the letters “never receive responses, never spark dialogue and engagement between two parties” (p. 153). This lack of reciprocity and communication heightens the sense of isolation that comes with exile, as well as the act of navigating *DICTEE*. All of the outward calls are not answered; nor is the reader's search for some sort of contextual anchor.

In the middle of the book, in a chapter called “*THALIA COMEDY*,” there is a typewritten letter addressed to a woman who has sent a postcard to a man who no longer lives at that address (see Fig. 5) (Cha, 2001, p. 142). Lines like, “The last time I heard from him was in Chicago, doing Cabaret work and shortly after was taken sick” (Cha, 2001, p. 142) offer a sense of absurdity in their strangeness and seeming irrelevance to the themes presented in the rest of the book. In a way, the letter encourages the reader to resign to the dearth of context granted to the reader by the book; once the reader accepts this fact, they will be able to lean more into identifying with the exile, drifting in between texts and artifacts with minimal to no stability or grounding.

One of the fictional letters is handwritten and at moments barely legible, causing the reader to ask themselves if it was included in *DICTEE* to be read by others in the first place (see Fig. 6) (Cha, 2001, pp. 146-148). Yet for a letter to have been intended to arrive in the possession of another, it must be legible to the receiver — they must have a prior relationship. The letter is also signed “Yours Truly [sic] a Friend” (Cha, 2001, p. 148) — the writer does not identify themselves to us, nor do they feel obligated to do so. This notion forces the reader out into the margins as still implicated in the attempted dialogue (unable to completely disassociate from the letter) yet unable to comprehend the correspondence. The resulting tension mirrors that of the exiled, who is attached to their origin but cast out into the margins, the external.

It is even more troubling that we do not know of any responses to these letters because of the urgency of their contents: “Dear madam I will write in regards to your sister. she is in an awful shape she threatens to kill her self and her children and husband has done all they could

possibly do..." (Cha, 2001, p. 146). The gravity of the situation raises the stakes for the reader as they are unable to find a sense of resolution to the situation. They are only able to read a letter that has already been sent and received but are never able to learn if there is a response.

V. CONCLUSION

Cha's ability to create art that serves as a rigorous psychological self-insertion achieves a great feat — she is able to recreate a lifelong or otherwise long-term condition in visual and literary form, plunging readers who have never been "exiled" into such a state during their reading of *DICTEE* despite their background. Readers emerge from *DICTEE* having a greater capacity to extend empathy across experiences and understand the painful feeling of exile in others.

Cha recognizes the destructive and painful nature of dislocation and exile and, throughout *DICTEE*, points to its root: violence, primarily caused by colonialism and imperialism. She brings awareness to this phenomenon by presenting it interactively through form, as well as through content. Though her approach may perhaps be viewed as counterintuitive to the purpose of writing as dissemination of ideas to the mainstream, Cha is not interested in this purpose in regard to *DICTEE* — she is more interested in the maximum potential of a textual work to impact the reader. *DICTEE*'s obscurity is a test for readers' openness, patience, and perseverance — once passed, one uncovers a rich work of art and literature, as well as the various traumas, histories, and heritages that inform it.

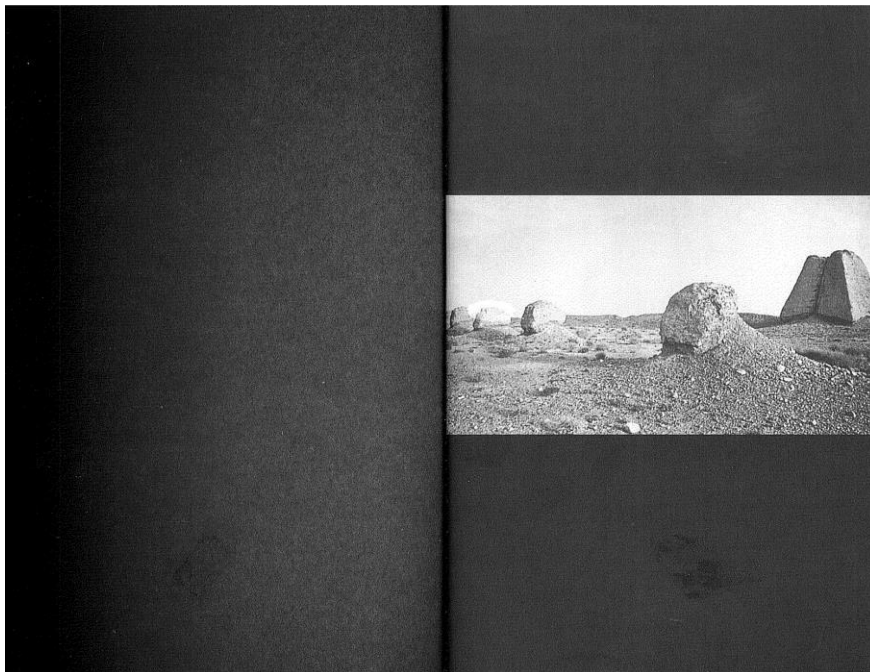


Fig.1: First pages of *DICTEE*

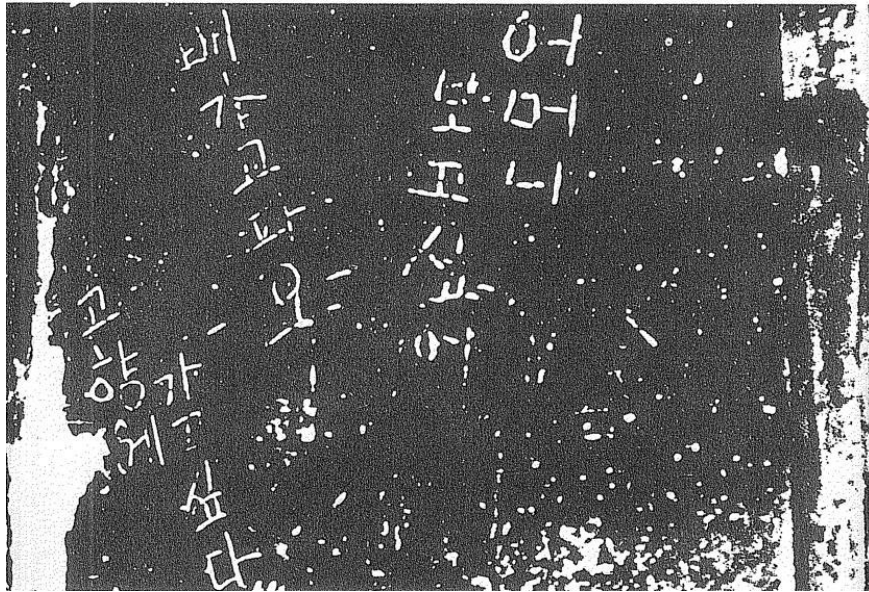


Fig.2: Frontispiece

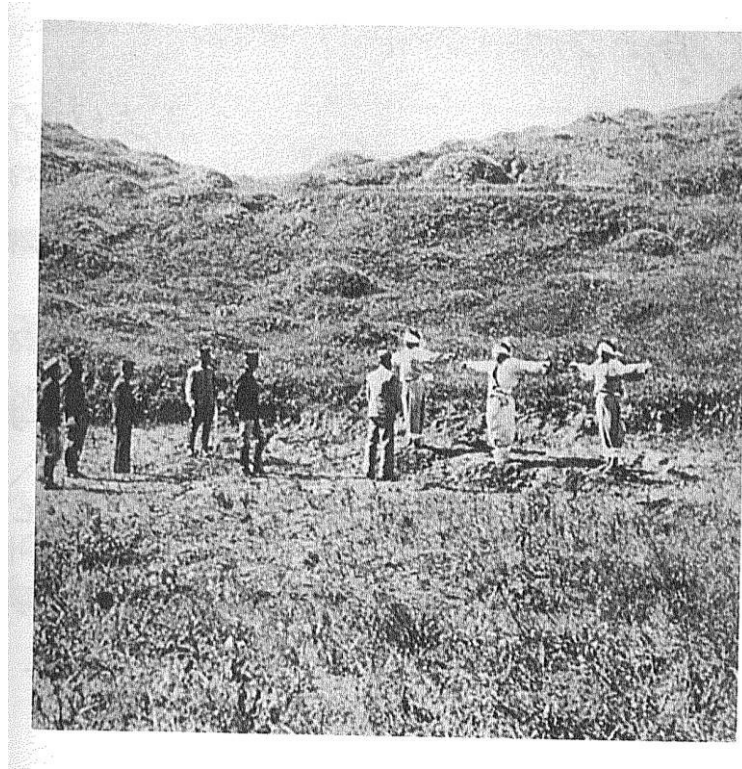


Fig.3: Execution

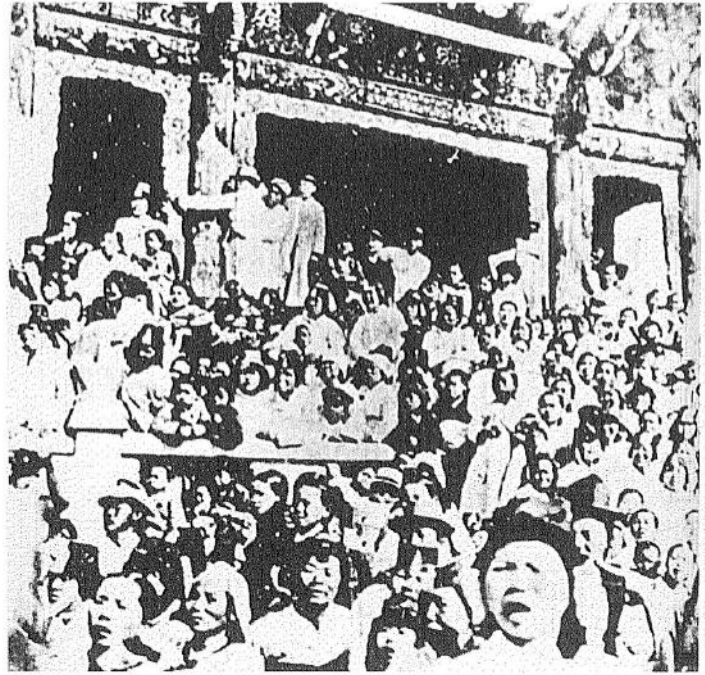


Fig.4: Crowd

Holyoke, Apr. 22, 1915.

Mrs. Laura Claxton,

53 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dear Madam:--

Noticing a postal card addressed to Mr. Reardon with your name signed to same and having been living in the same apartment with him, I thought I would let you know that Mr. Reardon has not been living here since last July.

The last time I heard from him he was in Chicago, doing and Cabaret work and shortly after was taken sick.

Of late I have not heard anything from him and cannot advise you of his present address. I might also state that Mr. Reardon's mother removed to Hartford about three months ago.

I shall keep your address in case I hear from him and will be pleased to advise you if you so desire.

Trusting this will be acceptable and hoping to hear from you I remain,

Very sincerely,

H. J. Small,
173 Main St.,

Fig.5: Typewritten letter

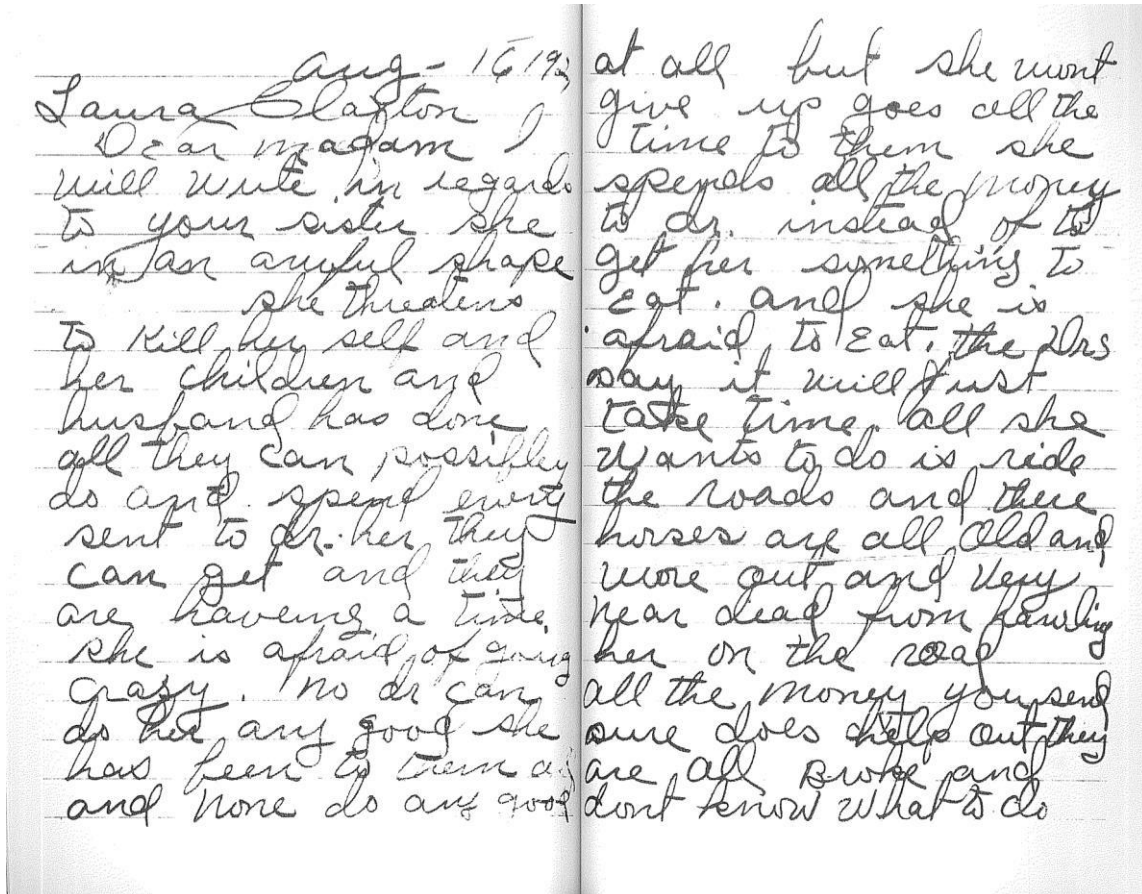


Fig.6: Pages from a letter

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