

THE YALE REVIEW

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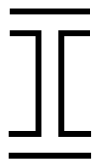
# **The Weight of Memory**

Honoring my dear friend

**Yong Soon Min**



James Cha, *Portrait of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, c. 1978. Courtesy the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive



MET THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA in 1975 at University Art Museum (now Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive) when we both received awards for our visual

art upon our college graduation. At this exhibition, an etching of mine was displayed, and Theresa's video "Mouth to Mouth" was also shown; her work was far more advanced than mine. We built an immediate bond rooted in our immigrant Korean background, which led me to consider Theresa as *uhn-ni*: an "older sister." She was only two years older, but my feelings stemmed from my deep reverence for her. Our lives continued in parallel: we both went on to pursue MFAs at Berkeley, separately visited Korea in 1979, then moved to New York City, Theresa in 1980 and I a year later.

When I first read *Dictée* after her death, I was instantly arrested by the early section, "Clio – History," which is bracketed by two archival photographs and includes a passage that begins: "Some will not know age." The first thought that came to my mind was that the phrase was a dreadfully foreboding reference to Theresa's life, which had been brutally cut short.

“Clio” is framed by photographs. The first is an image of Yu Gwansun, the female Korean freedom fighter who was imprisoned and martyred in 1920 at age seventeen. The image at the end of “Clio” is an enigmatically still and focused photograph of three men suspended in a row, dressed in farmer’s *hanbok*, their arms outstretched, their faces blindfolded. They are observed by six men in uniform, presumably members of the Japanese military, in front of a hill poignantly punctuated with traditional Korean burial mounds. Thirty-five years under Japanese rule had led to myriad tragic stories of bravery and martyrdom, encapsulated by the figures in both these photographs, whose “countenance evokes not the hallowed beauty, beauty from seasonal decay, evokes not the inevitable, not death, but the dying.” “[T]he memory is the entire,” Theresa goes on to say at the end of the chapter, as if in memorializing these three martyrs, we claim them and others who are lost and missing through our individual and collective recollection.

Some will not know age. n't age. Time stops. Time will stop for some. For them especially. Eternal time. No age.

As deterioration. Time fixed for some. In their view  
their image, ~~then~~ the memory of them. Or their countenance

the hallowed beauty that is ~~proof~~ evidence  
<sup>captured</sup> standing before hallowed beauty. The ~~only~~ beauty, <sup>that connects</sup> because of the  
loss, the absence, the ~~present~~ object presents the loss, the  
missing ~~that is~~ left to the ~~own~~ imaginary. Exposes

Their countenance evokes not ~~the~~ beauty, <sup>the</sup> ~~but~~ <sup>hallowed beauty from the</sup>  
the inevitable the dying. <sup>not death, but</sup> <sup>hallowed beauty from the</sup>

standing before hallowed beauty. The beauty, <sup>only because</sup> ~~that is~~  
standing face to face with the ~~memory~~ memory of it missed. it's  
missing. still. what of time. ~~does~~ not move. remains there.  
Misses nothing. Time, that is. all else. all things else.  
all ~~off~~ things other. Subject to time. Must answer to time.  
Time dictates all else, except <sup>for some</sup>. It misses. All installed in time,

Courtesy the University of California Press

Turn the page, and the words “Some will not know age” appear again, in the arresting spread of Theresa’s handwriting fluidly flowing across the open pages. Here, Theresa’s fountain pen– drawn words, larger than the typescript found elsewhere in the book, claim the space. The handwriting is confident, replete with captivatingly drawn lines or marks drawn over words and across phrases, a large bracket over two lines of text, carets to squeeze in words, and a big X across four lines of sentences. Theresa must have selected these handwritten draft pages because they exude just the right combination of poeticism and gravity.

When I was asked to design the book *Writing Self, Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee*, which would situate Korea and Korean American history at the core of the discussions of *Dictee* and which was published in 1994 with contributors Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Lowe, L. Hyun Yi Kang, and Shelley Sunn Wong, I knew immediately that Theresa's handwriting spread would serve as the cover of the book. I chose to match the color of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* to *Dictee's* maroon, which allows the beauty of Theresa's handwriting to be seen vividly in glowing white. The first part of the book title – “Writing Self” – was readily satisfied by the literally authentic handwriting on the cover but also by Theresa's singular voice in everything she wrote in *Dictee*. The second part of it – “Writing Nation” – suggests the struggles and the negotiations between the self and the world, the body and language, a nation and Theresa's own interstitial femininity.

On the back cover, a square image of my arms over my torso is placed where Yu Gwansun's class photo was displayed on *Dictee's* original back cover. There's a happy coincidence that my crossed arms echo the X mark found in Theresa's handwriting. Theresa's two pages of handwriting also appear on the very first and the very last page of the book, both made of semi-transparent vellum. Peeking through the handwriting is a black page with a centered map that shows North America and the peninsula of Korea. This square image shows the two torn maps creating what appears to be a new continent that intimates Theresa's and my own intermingling of Korean American subjectivities.

As much as I risk hagiography by trying to analyze Theresa's handwriting like a graphologist, it's hard to resist. Theresa's confident sense of balance is visible in the pages of her handwriting in *Dictee*, as well as in the handwritten postcards she sent me on her Asian travels. I can sense the influence of her avid tai chi practice and the sense of decisiveness and ambitious determination that was evident in her writing as early as 1974, when she summed up her career on her CV as "producer, director, performer, writer in video and film productions, installations, performances and published texts."

Many moons later, on December 4, 2021, I was able to pay my respect to Theresa and to *Dictee* by collaborating with GYOPO and USC to honor and observe Theresa's seventieth birth year at a *Dictee* marathon in Los Angeles. Thirty readers along with thirty ASL signers were selected to read the entire book for the afternoon. Among the many illustrious participants, Theresa's younger brother and niece served as readers, while her older brother John Cha joined Lawrence Rinder and L. Hyun Yi Kang to introduce Theresa's work.

The memory is the entire.

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**YONG SOON MIN** is an artist whose practice includes years as a curator, educator, and activist. Her work engages the interplay of identities within colonial and diasporic histories.

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