

## Introduction

Cathy Park Hong's 2020 *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, the signal elaboration of Asian American experience in our era, features a fresh inquiry into the circumstances of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's death. Hong's focus on this tragedy is a return to the prophecy of Cha's final and total work of art, *Dictée*: Cha's death saturated my reading of *Dictée*, gave the book a haunted prophetic aura – *Dictée* is, after all, about young women who died violent deaths – although I would never admit to that interpretation in a class or a talk.<sup>1</sup>

In a chapter entitled "Portrait of the Artist," Hong tracks Cha's rape and murder in 1982, the year of *Dictée*'s publication. A detective on a cold case, Hong is both obsessive and rueful: "The younger version of me," she writes, "would have been annoyed that I'm now imposing a biographical reading onto *Dictée* as if her life were an answer key to a book that refuses answers" (171). The force of Hong's driving inquiry cuts against long-standing scholarly reticence around Cha's death – but what answers a biographical reading could offer for this work finally elude Hong's examination.

And so, though the chapter features gripping interviews with Cha's family and friends, the talk Hong has elicited does not broach *Dictée*'s refusals:

Cha, I should note, developed an aesthetic out of silence, making it evident through her elisions that the English language is too meager and mediated a medium to capture the historical atrocities her people have endured. It was more truthful to have those horrors partially spoken, like Sapphic shrapnel, and ask the reader to imagine the unspeakable. In a way, the scholar is mirroring Cha's own rhetoric of silence. (165)

"Sapphic shrapnel": there is no better description of Cha's work. Though Hong does not pierce this "rhetoric of silence," her labors provide a startling portrait of the artist, and *Minor Feelings* as a whole is a study of artists: Cha emerges anew in Hong's interviews, and Hong's first-person identification with her predecessor produces a feeling lineage of avant-garde Asian American women artists. In thus resituating Cha, Hong fills in her portrait: "I'm imposing myself onto her, filling her in with myself" (171).

I offer a further imposition that aligns Cha's brutal extinction to her masterwork. Hong's obsessive return to Cha's death lays bare a simple but troubling truth: our knowledge of Cha's rape and murder conditions our reading of *Dictée*. Hong recalls her prior treatment of Cha's violent end: "Didn't I also type and then delete the word *rape* before *murder* when I wrote the review where I mentioned

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World – Random House, 2020), 155. Subsequent page numbers in parentheses.

Cha?” Hong continues, “*Rape* burns a hole in the article and capsizes any argument” (172, original italics). The fact of rape cordoned off Cha’s fate from appreciations of her art, and thus absented, a silence has settled around Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, even as her work has acquired increasing prominence. Hong has voiced the heretofore unspeakable resonances between the violent deaths enshrined in Cha’s final work and her own, final suffering. In acknowledging this continuum, I propose to identify Cha’s agony within her art.

*Dictée* is a book about the interaction of an artist with her materials and her readers – and yet, as Hong’s searing interrogation reveals, we have come to read Cha’s book without her. My reading is governed by Cathy Park Hong’s longing to know Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and I have returned to *Dictée* to find her for myself. This Element works through the relation between text, author, and reader – a nexus theorized as the “apparatus” in Cha’s study of cinema – at the core of *Dictée*, and it follows her lead across the pages of her epic. With Cha as my guide, I work through two key intertexts in her work: an excerpt from Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner,” a submerged literary resonance in *Apparatus*, the anthology of film theory Cha assembled, and the writing of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a primary intertext in “Erato / Love Poetry,” the cinematic core of *Dictée*. In thus tracing a literary thread lodged within her cinematic praxis into the story of a modern saint – and Cha’s namesake – who binds rapture to torment, this study explores identificatory practices that materialize the artist.

Following Cha’s clues, I pick my way across a black-and-white landscape: the cinematic apparatus that interlaces artist to viewer in black and white, the textual reproductions that disintegrate into black-and-white grains, and, ultimately, the black and white of sins and saints. *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in Black and White* reads flashes of identification, often in punishing self-encounters, ultimately tracing these labors to Cha’s death through the figure of the martyr. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is the patron saint of growing generations of artists and scholars fascinated by her art and her suffering. This Element is an effort to locate the martyred artist within the shards of her art.

### Black and White

One year before *Dictée*, Cha published *Apparatus*, a volume “conceived as a collection of Autonomous Works on the apparatus of cinema.” *Apparatus* is an artifact of Cha’s residence in Paris in the late 1970s, where she studied with theorists and practitioners of cinema – and reopening it, the redolence of its era is overpowering. Perceptive scholars of Cha have marked the salience of this collection for *Dictée*: *Apparatus* maps out Cha’s theoretical milieu in the period

of *Dictée*'s gestation.<sup>2</sup> The anthology opens with Cha's definition of the cinematic apparatus as "the interdependent operations comprising the 'film, the author of the film, the spectator'"; the cinematic apparatus is "the process of film," which Cha aims to reveal in her assemblage of "the theoretical writings and materials of filmmakers."<sup>3</sup>

Three essays by Jean-Louis Baudry form the theoretical spine of the collection, in which Baudry ponders the identificatory processes of cinema. It is the spectator, pitched within Plato's cave and steeped in Freudian dreamwork, who occupies pride of place in these discussions: the spectator, like the dreamer, has a participatory role in the "more-than-the-real" encountered on the screen.<sup>4</sup> "The entire cinematographic apparatus is activated in order to provoke this simulation," Baudry writes, explaining that "it is indeed a simulation of the condition of the subject" in which, ultimately, the subject "is led to produce mechanisms mimicking, simulating the apparatus which is no other than himself."<sup>5</sup> The technical cinematic apparatus plunged within the dreamer's psyche: this is how film theory went then, and it is also how Cha understood the profound interdependence that would animate her epic.

Marc Vernet's essay in the collection, "Blinking, Flickering, and Flashing of the Black-and-White Film," offers a visible means of registering these submerged operations: "black-and-white" (Vernet underscores his hyphenation "because it is not so much a question of their opposition as it is of their conjunction, their fusion") is "the representative, in the diegesis, of the enigma structure, of the fetishist economy, and of the cinematic apparatus."<sup>6</sup> "Black-and-white" marks a point of convergence between the story on screen – the diegesis – and how cinema functions – its apparatus; it is "none other than cinematic representation itself, none other than the uncertain status of the moving perspective image."<sup>7</sup> This "blinking, flickering, and flashing" registers Baudry's unconscious identificatory processes, and in Cha's hands, this trace of the apparatus flickers across multiple art forms. Black and white is the process of making art rendered visible in the unfolding work of art, and it is the palette for all of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's works, whether filmic, performative, or poetic.

<sup>2</sup> Sue J. Kim's "Apparatus: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the Politics of Form," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.2 (2005): 143–169, situates *Apparatus* as a means of historicizing Cha's use of form. Kim indicts the abstraction and ultimate passivity of the volume, in which she identifies an "increasing reification of form" (146).

<sup>3</sup> From Cha's unpaginated preface to *Apparatus. Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings*. New York: Tanam Press, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," in *Apparatus*, 41–62, at 41. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Vernet, "Blinking, Flickering, and Flashing of the Black-and-White Film," in *Apparatus*, 357–369, at 357, 365.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

Roland Barthes's "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater," the opening contribution in *Apparatus*, marks a direct resonance with *Dictée*. "The subject who speaks here must admit one thing," begins the essay, "he loves leaving a movie theater." Barthes's leaving reads like a reverse instigation for *Dictée*'s "She is entering now," when Cha's text presents movements into the theater and onto the screen. The phenomenological bent of Barthes's departure ("He is stiff, a little numb, bundled up, chilly") resonates with the embodied experiences Cha details, but in the theater, the reverie Barthes describes is utterly different.<sup>8</sup> He is captivated by the image: "I glue my nose, to the point of disjuncting it, on the mirror of the screen, to the imaginary other with which I identify myself narcissistically."<sup>9</sup> From this attachment, Barthes asks, "How does one pry oneself from the mirror?" to conclude "there is another way of going to the cinema": by becoming "two bodies at once," both the narcissistic self and a secondary one attuned to the situation of the theater.<sup>10</sup> Barthes is careful to stipulate that this secondary position is not an intellectual one: "It is, so to speak, an amorous distance."<sup>11</sup> The fascination of this distance offers another mode of pleasure.

The privilege of this doubled identification is unimaginable for Cha, whose "subject who speaks" is itself uncertain. *Dictée*'s speaker, its "disease," suffers "the pain of speech the pain to say" (3); unlike Barthes's pleasurable bodies, she takes in others at the expense of her own integrity. Thy Phu's 2005 consideration of *Dictée*'s "decapitated forms" – citing a phrase from the "Clio / History" section of the text – positions Cha against "Barthes's self-absorption" by examining Cha's self-documentation. As Phu puts it, *Dictée* "is remarkable for its defacement and arguable erasure of the autobiographical 'I,'" illustrated by Cha's choice of photocopies over photographs of her family.<sup>12</sup> The black and white of the photocopy strips the cinematic apparatus of the pleasures of spectatorship; Vernet's flicker, the pulsing of light and dark that brings the image to life, has been run through the machine.

The photocopy is central to much of Cha's work: Alison Fraser's recent study of Cha and xerography notes her "seven artist's books from photocopies or by photocopying," connecting this work to the "material significance of copies" in "deeply interrelated institutions, particularly as it is fixed to various state apparatuses."<sup>13</sup> Through Fraser's particular focus on the Xerox machine, she

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater," in *Apparatus*, 1–4, at 1.    <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 4.    <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Thy Phu, "Decapitated Forms: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility," *Mosaic* 38.1 (2005): 17–36, at 28.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Fraser, "Diasporic Object Lessons: Material Identity and the Korean Diaspora in the Work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 47.1&2 (2019): 31–47, at 32, 34.