Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Decolonizing Aesthetics

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“THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA’S DECOLONIZING AESTHETICS”

by
Sarah Lin Chin Halabe

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN AMERICAN
STUDIES

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Abstract

Critics of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) have widely hailed her poetry book *DICTEE* for its idiosyncratic exploration of form, arguing how its narrative disruptions constitute an interrogation of dominant modes of knowledge production which are inherently steeped in oppressive ideologies. However, Asian American Studies has largely ignored how her visual and intermedia pieces execute a similar interrogation in perhaps even more radical ways. This thesis intervenes in Cha scholarship by centering her visual art which has been historically ignored. Cha’s visual art is extremely abstract and difficult; this thesis will demonstrate how its seeming illegibility constitutes a decolonizing aesthetic in its centering of the audience, rejection of linear temporality and narrative, and resistance to mastery. This thesis ultimately takes up the question of what constitutes “political” artistic engagement and demonstrates how Cha’s work encourages an alternative mode of engagement that is distinctly political- characterized by slowness, individuality, and circularity.
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Introduction

The story of this project began in November 2019 when I expressed interest to Professor Liu in writing my senior thesis on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and he suggested that I take a look at her visual art which has generally floated in cultural obscurity, historically ignored by critics in favor of her poetry book *DICTEE*. However, one could argue that this story really began in June 1991, when the Association for Asian American Studies hosted a panel on *DICTEE* in an attempt to recuperate it from a similar position of cultural obscurity. This being said, one could also argue- and I intend to- that the story of this project *really* began in the early 1970s, when Cha was still an undergraduate studying comparative literature at the University of California Berkeley and the Asian-American artistic canon was slowly starting to gain shape and traction. Shelley Sunn Wong describes the debates within this period regarding which sort of texts should be officially “claimed” by the Asian-American literary community:

Critical debate concerning the political value of specific works of Asian American writing were argued within the terms of a cultural nationalist discourse. In the context of an Asian American identity politics that was steadily gaining ground throughout the 1970s, the two leading criteria for determining literary and political value were representativeness and authenticity. (103)

Wong continues to explain how this attitude continued into the early 1980s and *DICTEE*, published in 1982 by the independent Tanam Press, was never even considered by the literary community due to its radical use of form which insistently rejected ideas of comprehensive, authentic representation.

However, due to the conjunction of several historical developments in the 1980s: “major demographic changes within the Asian American community; the growing strength of the

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women’s movement, and the postmodernist concern with fragmentation” (104), the Asian-American literary community turned their focus to DICTEE, launching it from cultural obscurity into a precarious spotlight. The 1991 Association for Asian American Studies quickly took advantage of DICTEE’s newfound attention in the hopes of fully recuperating it and sharing it with a wider audience. What followed was DICTEE’s slow but steady rise to fame within the Asian-American artistic canon; in 1994 Third Woman Press published a collection of essays from Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Lowe, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, and Shelley Wong on DICTEE titled Writing Self, Writing Nation, which is now considered the absolute go-to for DICTEE scholarship, and in 2001 the University of California Press republished DICTEE, ensuring its continued circulation as Tanam Press had long since gone bankrupt. DICTEE is now commonly found in syllabi of Asian American Studies, Art, and Gender & Women’s Studies classes in universities nationwide. It is widely if not universally considered to be Cha’s magnum opus.

However, it is not Cha’s magnum opus, and this fact is the motivation behind my thesis. Cha thought of herself as primarily a visual artist, and produced an extensive collection of photography, film, performance art, book art, and intermedia pieces before her murder in 1982. By the time DICTEE was published weeks after her murder, her visual art had been featured in several exhibitions in San Francisco, New York City, Paris, and Amsterdam; she had received several prestigious fellowships for her visual art; she served as artist in residence at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; and her films had been featured in video festivals in San Francisco, New York City, and the Hague, Netherlands. She was nationally and internationally known for her exceptional visual repertoire. And yet the overwhelming majority of Cha scholarship focuses primarily on DICTEE, mentioning her visual art as an afterthought if they mention it at all.

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2 Ibid
As the Asian-American literary canon rallied around *DICTEE*- because of *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, because its momentum has turned into a poster child for Asian-American literature, because it’s used to assert the validity of the canon which continues to struggle with an institutionalized lack of funding and political capital, and because it’s an extraordinary aesthetic document- Cha’s visual art faded into the background. This thesis focuses primarily on Cha’s visual art in an attempt to recuperate it and carry on the legacy of Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Lowe, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, and Shelley Wong, who dutifully recuperated *DICTEE* 29 years ago. Through an analysis of three pieces, I will demonstrate the highly relational nature of Cha’s work and argue that her visual pieces must be considered in order to fully understand her phenomenal impact and legacy. Moreover, I will evaluate the highly abstract and difficult nature of her visual work, eventually demonstrating that its seeming illegibility constitutes a decolonizing aesthetic in its centering of the audience, rejection of linear temporality and narrative, and resistance to mastery. Lastly I will take up the question of whether Cha’s art is making a political statement, outlining how Cha encourages alternative modes of engagement with art that are inherently political for the reasons listed above.

Cha was born in Pusan, South Korea in 1951 and immigrated to the United States in 1963. She attended high school in San Francisco then matriculated at the University of California Berkeley where she received her BA in Comparative Literature, and her MA and MFA in Studio Art. While her repertoire is diverse, it is tied together by her overarching fascination with language; as she explains in her artist statement:

> The main body of my work is with Language: ‘looking for the roots language before it is born on the tip of the tongue. Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more ‘consciously’ at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation towards language. (1)\(^4\)

In the first chapter of this thesis which examines the mail art piece *Faire Part*, I demonstrate how the estranging effect of the piece locates the English language as an index and site of colonial violence. As hinted in her artist statement, Cha has a troubled relationship with language as she indicates that Western languages are inherently steeped in cultural suppression and violent colonial ideologies. This chapter will also draw upon her interest in French Film theory and demonstrate how she identifies visual as well as written communication as harmful modes of knowledge production. Finally, this chapter will address Cha’s fascination with audience-artist relations: in her artist statement, Cha insists upon the active role of the individual audience member:

> The audience-spectator is a major consideration, from conception to realization of the piece. She/He holds a privileged place in that She/He is the receptor and/or activator central to an exchange or dialogue. (1)\(^5\)

Cha believes in active audience participation and encourages her audience to develop their own interpretation of her work with minimal guidance on her part. Through my analysis of her treatment of language, I conclude that she does this in order to equalize the inherently skewed artist-audience relation and put her audience at the center of her work, pushing herself to its peripheries.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzes *Chronology*, which uses the lens of family photography to engage in topics of cultural, historical, and personal memory amidst occupation, war, and displacement. In this section I argue how the non-linear temporality of the piece encourages alternative modes of engagement that don’t rely on western narratives of progress or linear temporality. This chapter argues how photography is a uniquely formidable lens to explore how memory is mediated by trauma because the photograph confirms the existence of past

\(^5\) Ibid
events without offering any clarifying insight into them. This is an especially potent idea in the context of intergenerational haunting and postmemory, two theoretical frameworks which I take up in this chapter. Intergenerational haunting is a phenomenon summarized by Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham as “the phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the others”\(^6\) (175). Torok and Abraham describe the experience of those whose ancestors endured extreme historical trauma which younger generations don’t have direct access to, but are haunted by nonetheless. First posited to describe the experience of children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, many Korean-American critics have taken up this idea to describe descendants of Koreans who lived through occupation and war. In her book *Family Frames: Photography, History, and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch coins this term as *postmemory*: “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated”\(^7\) (22). Postmemory is an especially useful term in describing the Korean-American experience due to dominant U.S.-centered frameworks which forget the history of Japanese occupation in Korea, brush over the unspeakable violence of the Korean War, and dismiss the U.S.’s ongoing neocolonial projects in Korea. As Grace Cho puts it:

The naming of the Korean War as the “forgotten war” in the United States marks this event as a black hole in collective memory. Neither the general population nor second-generation Koreans have much conscious awareness of it. When such forgetting is made official, one must question what the psychic implications are for the diaspora that arrived here (in the United States) as its result\(^8\).

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Importantly, while the reproduction of photographs in *Chronology* results in a stagnant, rather ghostly effect, the use of text provides new insight and modes of interpretation. This encourages viewers to approach the piece in creative ways. Cha acknowledges the blankness of history but refuses to cede to it, offering alternative modes of engagement that center creativity and mitigate postmemory’s alienating effects.

These alternative modes of engagement lead nicely into the third piece, *Amer. Amer*, a rendering of the U.S. flag, is an anomaly among Cha’s visual pieces as it is the only one which explicitly engages in American iconography. The climate in which Cha created *Amer* was undeniably political; it was made in 1976 on the 200th anniversary of America’s founding amidst the Berkeley protests, which were characterized by condemnation of social oppression at home and imperial violence abroad. The use of French text in the piece disrupts isolationist and exceptionalist frameworks of the United States, reflecting Cha’s feelings of disorientation and ambivalence towards the flag. However, the formal aspects of the piece do not explicitly engage in a political statement about America, raising the question of whether this is a “political” piece of art, and if so, how. Ultimately this chapter demonstrates how Cha’s overall focus on form over content encourages a distinctly political engagement with art: one that forgoes mastery and instead ushers the viewer into a state of meditation and continual revision of his previous ideas. Moreover, I argue how Cha’s work is built on a network of relations, which asserts the importance of putting equal emphasis on her visual art and demonstrates how there is no “beginning” or “end” to her repertoire as each piece leads you into another. Ultimately Cha offers a mode of engagement which is circular as opposed to linear, and disregards mastery and legibility which are inherently steeped in colonial ideologies. Thus the question of whether Cha’s art is political or not fades into the background; a close look at her visual repertoire encourages
the reader to engage with art in a distinctly political manner, which one can apply to all artistic engagement.
Chapter 1: Faire Part

“hopefully these words not in vain but carry a weight (200 lbs worth)”
- Theresa Cha, 1976

Faire Part (1976) consists of 30 slides, each slide featuring a picture of an envelope designed by Cha. There are 15 envelopes total photographed front and back. Some envelopes are open and some are closed. There is a thick black frame around the rectangular part of each envelope, and various French words and letters printed on some of the fronts and backs. The words vary largely in size, placement, and boldness. There’s no discernible pattern within the text on the envelopes, and a traditional “reading” of the piece (flipping left to right through the images) doesn’t glean any cohesive narrative or story. The only way to begin analyzing this piece is the way that is most obvious: through the form of the envelopes. The envelope’s practical function as a vehicle for communication is crucial to Cha’s larger artistic interests in language’s written vs. aural function, and the capabilities of language to bridge space and time. Moreover, it’s in line with Cha’s larger approach to visual art as she was a dedicated student and contributor to the post-structuralist art movement that emerged in France in the 1960s. This movement boldly questioned traditional methods of rational thought; though its members came from diverse backgrounds, they were brought together by their shared rejection of 19-century bourgeois realism, and its “increasingly corporatized publishing houses, film, art, and educational institutions,” all which reinforced dominant cultural ideologies through their “commodification of art, taste, pleasure, and desire.”

structuralist movement by putting equal, if not more, emphasis on form as opposed to content. The obvious and most important effect of this is that the viewer’s attention is shifted away from understanding what the art is trying to say and instead to how it’s trying to say it. This chapter will ultimately explore how the form of the envelope presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between communication and visual ideology, and how Cha interrogates modes of knowledge production through *Faire Part’s* estranging techniques.

**Figure 1 & 2.** The front and back of envelope 1. Courtesy of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.

### 1. Language, Violence, and Estrangement

One of the first things viewers will notice about this piece is that it has “misuse value:” the envelopes aren’t being used in the way they should be. While puzzling, the literal emptiness of the envelopes actually presents more of an opportunity than a disadvantage for critical interpretation because they are being used in a subversive manner. The term “misuse value” was coined by Bill Brown in his 1998 article “How to do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” which discusses the insight we can derive from objects being intentionally or unintentionally misused. In *Racial Things, Racial Forms*, Joseph Jeon builds off Brown’s ideas when he explains how all objects have a “secret life: a previously unseen complexity that offers intimate access to a might
otherwise seem a reified commodity”\textsuperscript{10} (xx). This de-commodification of the object reveals implicit codes embedded within it, bringing our attention to these normalized codes which would otherwise escape notice. \textit{Faire Part} actually employs a double misuse value: the envelope is empty with no postage or address. Moreover, the French title of the piece, \textit{faire part}, translates to “announcement” or “share” in English. A “faire part” is typically celebratory, denoting a wedding or birth. There’s obvious irony here, and it humors me to think about a person receiving an envelope labeled “faire part,” expecting cheery news and instead finding a disorienting, arbitrary hodge podge of black-and-white phrases and letters. The title nods to Cha’s dry humor, which is infrequent yet wonderfully present in \textit{Exilee} and her visual pieces. Many critics have discussed how Cha’s of puns and double entendre further her exploration of semiotics, but none have noted that it is often quite funny, and adds another layer to the already rich emotional spectrum of her work. There is a dominant trend in Cha criticism to treat her as humorless and hyper-serious; indeed, all of her work deals with very serious subjects such as colonial violence and estrangement from one’s homeland, but there are fleeting funny moments, and this trend in criticism unnecessarily narrows the perception of her as an artist and as a person. Moreover, not only does the title reveal a hint of Cha’s humor, it also draws the reader in by promising an exciting announcement. Its failure to deliver on this promise constitutes the primary emotional effect of this piece: perplexing and a bit frustrating- invoking the charming intimacy of the letter-writing practice but also a palpable sense of disorientation and estrangement.

The form of the envelope is a logical choice for Cha, whose oeuvre is deeply interested in language’s physical manifestations- as symbolized by a letter, envelope, or page of a book. In her 1976 book art piece \textit{Earth}, Cha opens the book with a handwritten dedication to her siblings: “to

The unusual syntax of this preface intensifies its mysterious and intimate effect. While it’s not clear what, exactly, Cha is trying to say, she openly lays out the intersection of materiality and language, a theme which dominates both DICTEE and her visual work but is usually only considered in the context of DICTEE. In this dedication, Cha asserts that language carries materiality and can function like a physical object, not just a two-dimensional image on a page or a sound in one’s ear. In remarking on this dedication, Joseph Jeon notes that it draws attention to the page as a spatial realm in which language carries physical, not just intellectual presence. With this in mind, we can see how the physical form of the envelope in Faire Part highlights the materiality inherent to language.

The feelings of estrangement that Faire Part evokes, as well as its emphasis on the materiality of language, introduce a key ideological principle of Cha’s repertoire: the inextricable relationship between language, violence, and the body in a postcolonial subject. In a Korean context, language’s literal manifestations are inextricable from cultural suppression and physical violence. Under Japanese colonial rule, the Korean language was forbidden in both public and private spaces and its use would result in physical violence. In an act of erasure and estrangement from their native culture, Korean citizens were forced to discard their names for new, Japanese ones. This violence continued through U.S. imperialism in Korea and the Korean War; as Maddie Kim points out,

During the Korean War, the violence inflicted upon Korean civilians by American soldiers, who killed refugees regardless if they were from the North or South, was inseparable from language, from the American distortion of the word miguk, meaning

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11 http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf109n97d7/?brand=oac4
12 Racial Things, Racial Forms, 23
America, into the slur gook, to that famous, haunting, familiar American line: ‘Every man’s dearest wish was to kill a Korean. ‘Today...I’ll get me a gook.’ (17) \(^{13}\)

The intimate relationship between violence and language is present in the context of Japanese colonization of Korea and U.S. imperialism in Korea. In this sense, Cha’s identity as a Korean woman and an immigrant is wrapped up in a double estrangement: not only was Cha’s family estranged from their native language under colonialism, but Cha was estranged from her native language and land when her family immigrated to San Francisco during her childhood.

DICTEE explicitly explores the bodily manifestations of colonial violence and language suppression in its opening section:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To this enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, the rests as records, as document (32)

In this passage, Cha figures language suppression as the “instrument” of colonial violence, likening it to a needle or other sharp object that would be used to extract blood or harm someone. She subtly equates blood to ink, drawing a comparison between the colonized body and words on a page as a site of memory. The use of “measure” and “record” evokes the blood of the violated colonized body as a written record or written “document” of that violence, which, despite its prevalence, is often overlooked in dominant cultural narratives of Korean history and U.S.-Korea relations. When Cha immigrated to the United States, she was forced to learn English and use it in school: another act which rendered her further estranged from her native culture. Indeed, Maddie Kim argues that “DICTEE, written in a combination of English and French with very little Korean at all, directly implicates the Western languages in the Korean speaker’s education and suppression, aligning the space of the classroom with the violent landscape of an imperial

war” (17). Moreover, zooming out from the specific institution of education, it is clear that this passage fits into a general immigrant narrative of Asian subjects arriving in the United States and being forcibly “filled” with lessons about language, culture, proper etiquette, and other qualities that will make them seem more American and less foreign. Thus, the envelope, in both its materiality and form, invokes feelings of estrangement which draw attention to language’s inextricable relationship to physical and cultural violence in a postcolonial, Korean context.

II. Visual ideology and Apparatus

This section will demonstrate how the use of text in Faire Part brings attention to the text’s function as an image and how images, just like language, are entrenched in oppressive ideology. Moreover, I will draw upon Cha’s interest in French film theory to argue how Cha identifies visual ideology, not just written, in her meditations upon the relationship between communication and power. Lastly I will turn to another one of Cha’s mail art pieces, Audience Distant Relative, to show how its relationship with Faire Part informs one of Cha’s main artistic goals: to subvert inherently oppressive structures within filmic and visual communication by fostering an equal, open, and creative dialogue with her audience.

As with many of her visual and intermedia pieces, the use of text in Faire Part is extremely confusing, subversive, and seemingly arbitrary. The words are often printed in looping, diagonal orientations, forcing the viewer’s eye into acrobatics. The way we typically read written information- left to right, up to down, is completely erupted as Cha reminds us that this mode of reading is a learned and regulated skill taught in a classroom, not naturally acquired15. This idea is also relevant to the fact that some words and letters are significantly bigger and printed in bolder font than others. The viewer’s eye is inherently drawn to them; their

14 Ibid
15 This connects back to my point in section I discussing the education regime under Japanese colonization, and how education is a tool of ideological formation and knowledge production.
apparent privilege makes them seem more vital to “decoding” whatever message Cha has set out in this piece. The size and boldness of these words brings attention to how some forms of information will always be privileged over others in spaces of knowledge production such as the media and the classroom.

Figure 3. The back of envelope 15. Courtesy of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.

Crucially, however, the most important aspect of the use of text in this piece is how the visuality of the text- its size, shape, and placement, renders it as more of an image than as text itself. Cha continually explores the intimate relationship between text and image in her work, and she frequently draws attention to how text functions as an image and why it is useful to view it as such. For example, back of the sixth envelope reads “La forme de l’ACTION,” which translates to “the form of the action.” The text is printed in a dramatic circular arc and the “N” of “ACTION” is used as the first letter of the word “Néant,” which translates to “nothing” and is printed diagonally below like in a crossword puzzle. The phrase “form of the action” puns on the
visual form of the sentence, and its relationship to “nothing” indicates that there’s no meaning behind the text aside from its rendering as a visual image. The effect of this is that the viewer’s attention is pulled away from what the text is saying. Throughout *Faire Part*, the myriad of potential significations in the simple, incongruous words printed on the envelopes: “vide, noir, blanc, fin, etc,” renders the process of meaning-making impossible. As discussed on page 5, *DICTEE*’s alignment of the classroom with the landscape of imperial war highlights the ideological and critical issues tied to any form of dominant Western knowledge production. By stubbornly focusing on form and not content in *Faire Part*, Cha highlights the problematic nature of knowledge production and, importantly, resists its further perpetuation for her audience. By this I mean that she creates a space for her audience to develop their own ideas about *Faire Part*. I will discuss this in more detail in section III of this chapter.

Cha’s identity and talent as a filmmaker hasn’t received much attention due to critics’ overemphasis on *DICTEE*. However, filmic images and metaphors saturate both her visual and written work; *Faire Part*, specifically- invokes the image of a film strip or movie screen due to the black borders around every envelope. This blurring of medium offers the viewer new critical and interpretive possibilities; by figuring the process of reading an envelope to the process of viewing a film, Cha rearticulates the relationship between two comparable modes of viewership: that of reading vs. that of seeing.

Cha spent the spring semester of 1976 at the Centre d’Études Américain du Cinéma in Paris through UC Berkeley’s study abroad program. This time in Paris reinforced her love for film and filmmaking, which had been inaugurated by studying semiotics and french film theory with Bertrand Augst, a professor in Berkeley’s French and Comparative Literature departments. While abroad, Cha studied the work of legendary figures such as Jean-Luc Godard, Christian
Metz, and Dziga Vertov who she drew heavily from as she began to make films of her own.

Although *Faire Part* isn’t a film, she brings attention to how its visuality mimics a film in order to explore the relationship between visual ideology and communication. In 1980, Cha created and edited a film theory anthology titled *Apparatus*, which was published by Tanam Press. *Apparatus* is a collection of essays on the intersection of psychoanalysis, culture, and film, pulling from the figures mentioned above as well as scholars such as Roland Barthes, Gregory Woods, and Marc Venet. In the preface to the anthology, Cha states that her intention is to turn backwards and call upon the machinery that creates the impression of reality whose function, inherent in its very medium, is to conceal from its spectator the relationship of the viewer/subject to the work being viewed (1).

The “machinery” she locates here is the filmic apparatus itself, but also cultural machinery and hegemonic ideologies implicit yet omnipresent in everyday life. Her locating of the “impression of reality” emphasizes how our perception of the world is fundamentally intertwined with dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shape representation. As filmmaker Pratibha Prmar says: “The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.”

From the moment the reader opens *Apparatus*, it becomes clear that it is an anthology not so much concerned with film as it is concerned with the power structures of visual ideology, and how the screen and the image inhabit our psyche just as much as language.

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The opening essay of *Apparatus* is Barthes’ “Upon Leaving the Movie Theater,” who purports that the physical setting of the theater encourages an idleness and impressionability in the viewer who has willingly come to the theater to participate in just that; Barthes claims that “there exists a ‘cinematic condition’ and this condition is prehypnotic” (1). Later, he invokes Jacques Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” to argue for the inherent ideological nature of the filmic image:

A filmic image (sound included), what is it? A *lure*. This word must be taken in its psychoanalytic sense. I am locked in on the image as though I were caught in the famous dual relationship which establishes the imaginary...In the movie theater, regardless of the distance I find myself from the screen, I glue my nose, to the point of disjoining it, on the mirror of the screen, to the imaginary other with which I identify myself narcissistically...In final analysis, does not the image have, by statute, all the characteristics of the ideological? (3)
Barthes’ analysis highlights how a Lacanian understanding of the screen-image dynamic can help us identify visuality (and the movie theater specifically) as one of society’s main instruments for ideology. The reason we respond so powerfully to this, according to Barthes and Lacan, is because the images we see feed our unconscious desires. *Apparatus* speaks in detail about the mechanical processes of film: what exactly goes into filmmaking to create the product we all enjoy, in order to familiarize the reader with cinematic machinery and interrupt the mystery of this very process. *Apparatus* is ultimately a collection that aims to familiarize and demystify the screen in order to draw attention to implicit messages that we all receive when we consume visual media.

**III: “I can only hope that you hear me:” Artist/Audience Relation**

In his foundational book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire details how the traditional relationship between a teacher and a student perpetuates hegemonic ideals and keeps the student trapped in a state of submission. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes how the institution of education was inherently designed so that the teacher “narrates” information while the student passively listens without a chance to question the information he is receiving.

According to Freire,

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently [receive]...The scope of the action allowed to the students only extends as far as [receiving and filing]...But it is the students themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, invention, and knowledge in this system. (72)

Although Freire specifically refers to the institution of education with this analysis, its commentary on unequal power dynamics within communication systems can be applied to all transmission of visual and written media. Just as the student is forced into a state of passivity by

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the teacher, the audience in a movie theater is lulled into a similar state of idleness and vulnerability as laid out in the Barthes essay. As demonstrated by her selected writing in *Apparatus*, Cha’s interest in semiotics and film theory was rooted in the unequal power dynamic of visual ideology that is frequently perpetuated by film, wherein the filmmaker assumes the role of the all-knowing teacher and the audience assumes the role of the passive student. Moreover, by figuring “Faire Part” like a film screen, Cha utilizes the blurring of genre to demonstrate how a lot of visual media perpetuates this oppressive power dynamic. In art, the audience/artist relation is inherently skewed; while it may seem as if the difficulty of Cha’s work perpetuates this dynamic, it actually subverts it. The lack of coherence within *Faire Part* and other pieces allows the viewer to develop their own interpretation while being less influenced by the sway of the artist. Moreover, as explained above, the multitude of potential interpretations refuses the viewer any sort of mastery so one person’s understanding of the piece can never be “superior” to another’s. Not only does Cha erase the hierarchy between artist and audience, but between individual audience members.

In the power dynamic laid out by Barthes and Freire, the artist holds all the power in determining what the viewer sees, how the viewer sees, and what the viewer thinks. The artist has a god-like position and Cha seeks to subvert that. This is confirmed in Cha’s artist statement when she says, “the audience-spectator is a major consideration, from conception to realization of the piece. She/he holds a privileged place in that She/he is the receptor and/or activator central to the exchange or dialogue” (1). Here, Cha figures the audience as a crucial, active part of the artistic process as they will “activate” or animate the art to give it life and a unique interpretation. This way, the audience has as much agency as the artist and will not be subject to manipulative
modes of processing. This is highlighted again in Cha’s MFA thesis, “Paths,” when she claims that

the artist’s path is close to that of an alchemist in that his/her path is that of a medium. His/her vision belongs to an altering, of material, and of perception. Through this attempt the perception of an audience has the possibility of being altered, of being presented a constant change, Re volution” (1).

By figuring the artist as a medium- a tool in understanding- instead of an all-knowing figure, Cha asserts the audience’s active role in interpreting the piece and “altering” their perception according to their own interpretation. Cha puns on the word “revolution,” to emphasize the fluid, circular dynamic between the audience and the piece as the audience is encouraged to mold the piece through an individual perception that is constantly changing and evolving. This, Cha asserts, will “revolt” against predatory visual ideologies which attempt to force the oppressed group into a perpetual state of submission. Indeed, as Freire argues, “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (72)¹⁸.

![Figure 6 & 7. Audience Distant Relative. Courtesy of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.](image)

¹⁸ Ibid
Another one of Cha’s mail art pieces, *Audience Distant Relative*, materializes this discussion about the potentially revolutionary relationship between artist and audience. This piece consists of six envelopes with the phrases “audience distant relative,” “letter sendereceiver,” “object/subject,” “messenger,” “between delivery,” and “echo” written on them. Each envelope is accompanied by a brief poem. In “audience distant relative,” Cha writes, “i address you / as i would a distant relative...i can only assume that you hear me / i can only hope that you hear me”. This poem presents an oxymoronic intimacy in which Cha and her audience are separated by temporal and material distances yet she addresses them like kin. The tone of “i can only hope” is both optimistic and resigned as Cha admits to the incalculable distance between them yet believes they can enter into productive conversation nonetheless. Though Cha’s work is estranging due to its difficulty, her artist statement and *Audience Distant Relative* demonstrate how she is deeply committed to reaching out towards her audience and building a relationship. In “letter sendereceiver,” Cha writes, “this is a letter read aloud. / upon opening it / you hear the sender’s voice as your eyes move over the / words. you, the receiver, seeing the sender’s image speak over the / voice” (*Exilée Temps Morts* 21). The visual yoking of “sender” and “receiver” implies their indistinguishability, both on the page and in terms of their positionality within the dynamic that Cha lays out. Cha is simultaneously sender and receiver in this poem, creating art for her audience to engage in but leaving herself open to the role of “medium” in which she acts as simply a stepping stone, not a God in her audience’s processes of understanding. The poem itself blends and connects the sender and receiver- exploring the visual and aural components of reading a letter: how it triggers both the image of the sender and the sound of their voice in the recipient’s mind. For a short poem, it’s quite dense, commenting on the profound sensory
experiences of human connection sans direct interaction or audible speech. As Mayumo Inoue explains,

This piece materializes Cha’s nascent concern with her artwork’s ability to institute aleatory relations among the work, the artist, and the audience, and to disarticulate their putative sense of ipseity…By showing a condensed overlap of meaning between a relative who is distant and a distance that is relativized by the letter’s missive movement, Cha’s ‘address’ questions normative notions of both ‘relative’ and ‘distance’ enacts a poiesis of relation between the two heretofore estranged entities whose sensuous faculties only partially apprehend each other (63)

Inoue’s analysis clarifies how Cha reticulates the roles of art, audience, and artist in order to reshape the power dynamic that perpetuates hegemonic visual ideologies. According to his thoughtful consideration of Cha’s multi-valenced use of language, he demonstrates how Cha subverts traditional definitions of “distant” and “relative” to assert the possibility of a creative, equal audience-artist collaboration that transcends spatial and temporal distances. This is confirmed by the poem “object/subject” whose obsessive repetition of “you are the object/i am the subject” and “i am the subject/you are the object” constitutes a fluid relationship between audience and artist where the audience is allowed and encouraged to develop their own individual and nuanced understanding of Cha’s work. This is ultimately a subversive act working against the oppressive power dynamic laid out by Freire.

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Chapter 2: Chronology

“Thus the life of someone whose existence has preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it- and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it”
-Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography

Chronology (1977) consists of 18 pressboard panels that feature color-photocopied photographs and text. The first panel features a young Korean woman with a neutral expression on her face (photograph 1) and the text “could have been knot one.” The second panel features a young Korean man dressed in formal attire (photograph 2) with the text “pa / cing second.” The third panel is a literal combination of the first two, with photograph 1 directly juxtaposed over photograph 2 and both lines of text present, the first printed slightly above the second. Though the photographs and text vary, this pattern continues through all 18 panels; some panels are repeated exactly and some panels are repeated with a slight textual change.

Significantly, the structure of Chronology mimics a family album. If viewers are familiar with Cha’s work, they’ll notice that the woman in the photograph on the first panel is Hyung Soon Huo Cha, Theresa’s mother, whose same photograph is the cover of the 2001 University of California Press edition of DICTEE. On the following panel is a photo of Hyung Sang Cha, Theresa’s father, whose photograph is featured in her 1975 book art piece “Father/Mother.” Panel 3 shows the two standing side by side in traditional Hanbok wedding attire. Panel 8 features a photo of five young children: Theresa and her siblings. The progression of the piece: woman, man, marriage, children, is clearly indicating a family structure, and Cha scholars will know this for sure as they’ll recognize Hyung Soon and Hyung Sang from her other pieces. This

20 From left to right: Elizabeth, John, Bernadette, James, and Theresa
momentary spark of recognition is sure to engender a feeling of intimacy in the viewer as they realize they are being offered a rare glimpse into Cha’s personal life.

Figures 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. Panels 1-3, 7, 8. Courtesy of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.
I. Reproduction and Image-Text Relation

With this structure in mind, viewers will inevitably see “Chronology” as an artistic representation of a family album. That being said, the piece drastically reformulates the dimensions of a typical family album; even from an external vantage, the open display of the panels as opposed to the closed structure of a physical book disrupts and subverts expectations. Instead of acting as a “caption” and offering context or identification for the photographs, the text that accompanies them is fragmented and seemingly nonsensical, and the phrases are continually repeated throughout the panels. Similarly, the photographs themselves don’t progress in a chronological manner; there are only six photographs total and they are repeated throughout the 18 panels. Overall, the piece shows an utter disregard for a cohesive narrative. As viewers move through Chronology they are unable to access the pleasure they anticipate—the pleasure of interpreting the arc of a family’s life. Instead they are faced with a seeming anti-narrative as Cha erupts the linear temporality of the piece. A palpable tension between movement and stasis is born as viewers proceed to the next panel but are stuck on the same photograph.

Chronology’s seeming refusal to “progress” or provide viewers with a coherent narrative encourages and in fact forces Cha’s audience to find an alternate mode of engagement. The repetition and sparse-ness of the photographs force the audience to slow down and spend an extended period of time with each one to see if they change even the slightest bit between panels. In Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Barthes identifies this process of careful observation as a loving endeavor for “truth:”

If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or person it represents...I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of intense observation; I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth (99)\(^\text{21}\)

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As I write this, I have spent a full calendar year with Chronology and its “truth” still remains hidden to me. I don’t know what Cha intended to accomplish in this piece, and I never will. However, my time with it, suspended in a Barthes-esqe state of “lingering”, has gleaned insight nonetheless. As I examined the photograph of Cha and her siblings, which is repeated 10 times throughout the piece, I noticed that it does in fact change slightly in contrast, exposure, and saturation. These shifts reveal tiny details: the smooth texture of Theresa’s coat, the curve of John’s hand as he protectively holds Bernadette, the youngest, in his lap. A close look at Hyung Soon and Hyung Sang wedding’s photo reveals white lines in the bottom right hand corner, evidence of a photograph being bent or folded. These creases drew my attention to the wedding photo’s status as a material object- a piece of paper that Cha herself once touched. This sense of materiality liberated the photograph from what Barthes identifies as the “flat death”\textsuperscript{22} of two-dimensionality, and in turn, roused a surprising feeling of intimacy with Cha within me; witnessing the materiality of the photograph linked me to not only an artifact dating to a particular historical moment, but also to the life of Cha herself. Thus, Chronology’s refusal to offer up a linear, cohesive narrative did indeed present an alternative form of engagement- one that was less comprehensive, but more intimate- that gave me insight into the piece nonetheless.

The repetition of the photographs subverts typical notions of “progress,” both in a temporal and narrative sense. Another interpretive difficulty of this piece is the seemingly completely incongruous relationship between the images and their accompanying text. The only apparent “pattern” or “clue” is that panel 1 features the word “one,” panel 2 features the word “second,” and panel 7, which offers the third photograph, features the word “three.” Although this doesn’t provide any context to the photographs, the use of these words indicates Cha’s

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid, 92
self-awareness regarding the difficulty of the text. The intentionality of the pattern seems as if Cha is being purposefully obstinate- again, offering us another brief glance at her peculiar sense of humor. In his book *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that when viewers are offered both image and text, they subconsciously pay more attention to the text:

> The typical ekphrastic text might be said to speak to or for a semiotic “other” - an image, visual object, or spectacle - usually *in the presence* of that object. The point of view of the text is a position of a seeing and speaking subject in relation to a seen and usually mute object (184).

In the dynamic Mitchell lays out, the text “speaks for” the image it accompanies, rendering that image mute. Mitchell clarifies that this isn’t necessarily the artist’s intention, but rather due to the way we as viewers have been conditioned to regard the status of text vs. image:

> Texts present, in general, a greater threat to concepts of the ‘integrity’ or ‘purity’ of images than vice versa. For one thing, they unavoidably and literally impose themselves within and around the pictorial objects…The images in texts, by contrast, are generally regarded as immaterial, figurative, and dispensable (209).

Cha’s body of work continually engages both text and image and subverts the typical text-image relation by presenting the two modes of understanding as equally important. In *DICTEE*, the interspersed images tell as much of a story as the text itself, crucially informing the viewer’s experience in moving through the book. In *Chronology*, by making the text purposefully difficult to understand, Cha stages an equalizing of text and image as modes of information- she rearticulates the relationship between reading and seeing so that it is on the same level.

### II. The Myth of the Family

In her book *Family Frames: Photography, History, and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch discusses how the advent of photography and family photographs buttressed the developing cultural narrative of the family romance. Hirsch argues that

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24 Ibid.
The family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals. Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real, it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics. As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history. (7)

Hirsch’s identification of “myth” is crucial. She explains how family photographs offer only superficial insight into a family’s life, and yet are prized, in historical memory, as some sort of universal and transcendental truth. Cha similarly identifies the dangerous and reductive capacity of myth in DICTEE; she writes about the naturalization of cultural myths as a process that “rendered incessant, obsessive myth, rendered immortal [heroes’] acts without the leisure to examine whether the parts false the parts real according to history’s revision” (28). In this passage, Cha argues how myths perpetuate cohesive, convenient stories that don’t tend to the nuances of history. Chronology’s filial structure raises questions about biological reproduction as well as the reproduction of cultural myths throughout history. One of the many ways Chronology resists the reductiveness of myth-making is by repeating the photographs so there isn't a narrative to put together. The repetition of the photographs evoke Walter Benjamin’s theory of aura in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Benjamin discusses how the invention of photography and film presented a threat to the physical and historical “aura” of a work of art: its originality. He proposes that “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (4) and “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (6)25. Ultimately the essay argues that reproducible works resist qualities of originality and genius that, when drawn to their extreme, are inextricably tied to fascism. Like Hirsch and Cha, Benjamin warns of “tradition” and “ritual” due to their

perpetuation of myth which inherently carries ideological abuses\textsuperscript{26}. This theoretical framework is important to keep in mind as we move through *Chronology*.

*Chronology* clearly aims to disrupt myth through its fracturing of narrative, but it’s important to identify what myths, specifically, are being disrupted. Why does Cha use family photos, and why does she use them in this specific way? The repetition of the photographs produces a palpable tension between movement and stasis. This tension is pregnant with expectation and frustration as viewers expect to see the Cha family develop and grow older over time, but instead they remain immobilized. As mentioned in the previous chapter, western storytelling is based on linear development; in second grade when I was being taught how to formulate a story, my teacher prescribed a specific structure: exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. Importantly, not only is the structure of western narratives based on the progress of the characters in the story, but greater narratives of Western exceptionalism are predicated on the myth of progress themselves. “Progress” and the advancement of society has historically been used to justify the United States’s colonial telos. With this in mind, Cha’s identity as a postcolonial subject becomes crucial for analyzing this piece. While *DICTEE* focuses on colonialism’s psychological and bodily effects on the individual, *Chronology*’s use of family photos demonstrates how the trauma of colonialism and displacement extends past the individual and into the family, enacting what I touched on in the introduction as “intergenerational haunting.” Scholars such as Grace Cho, mentioned in my introduction, have highlighted how the idea of intergenerational haunting is especially potent for diasporic Korean-Americans due to the “forgotten” nature of the Korean War which, historically, has been cloaked in shame and secrecy.

Moreover, Cha’s invocation of the family unit in *Chronology* is important because historical oppression of Korean citizens is tied up in many interlocking narratives of family

\textsuperscript{26} See Barthes’ *Mythologies* for more context on this
separation. During Japanese colonial rule, tens of thousands of young women (as young as 13 years old) were removed from their homes and drafted as “comfort women-” sex slaves for Japanese soldiers. This continued past the period of occupation, 1910-1945, and into the war. Moreover, as Crystal Baik discusses in *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory*, during the Korean War,

> Korean children fathered by U.S. soldiers stationed on the peninsula after 1945 were depicted by American media as bereft orphans and destitute urchins in desperate need of Western love and humanitarian intervention. Extracted from the South Korean populace, these so-called GI Babies were ushered into the American populace with the expectation that they would assimilate. Between 1958 and 2008, the number of Korean transnational adoptees would swell to more than 160,000 with close to 110,000 children adopted by American families and 50,000 more adopted by European families. (100)  

While the United States touts the image of the cohesive nuclear family as an instrument of nation-building to further their neo-colonial projects abroad, these projects frequently result in family separation of the oppressed group. This pattern is incredibly pronounced in Korean-American relations. Thus, as a Korean-American artist, Cha is uniquely posed to think about the effects of colonialism and imperialism on the family structure. *Chronology* disrupts the myth of the family in order to demonstrate how the family itself is a myth under colonialism, which uses family displacement as a tool for their teleological efforts towards “progress.”

**III. Beyond Haunting: Postmemory and Reparative Creativity**

Photography and specifically family photography is a unique lens through which to view memory, in a historical and personal sense, because its very nature embodies the paradox of memory amidst occupation, war, and displacement. In describing her book’s aim, Hirsch explains how the postmodern space of cultural memory is “composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways” (13). The emphasis on a variety

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of competing perspectives as characterizing memory’s inherently fragmented nature reflects the generally fragmented nature of Cha’s work as she explores interlocking themes of language, violence, intergenerational trauma, and historical narrative. Moreover, family photography is uniquely posed to mediate the space between personal memory and historical events. This is an especially troubled relation for Cha due to the fact that she was only thirteen when her family immigrated to the United States and thus did not experience the full effects of the War because she was not old enough to understand them. The haunting pathos of both *Chronology* and *DICTEE* reveal the sense of internal haunting that Cha feels towards her history, partially because of its violence but even more so because she doesn’t have access to it; most of the events that haunt Cha’s repertoire occurred before her birth. This brings us to another crucial aspect of *Chronology*: the juxtaposition of photographs on top of each other.

![Figure 13. Panel 17. Courtesy of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.](image-url)
Panel 17 features the parents’ wedding photo overlaid onto the sibling photo. Out of the three juxtaposition panels, this one is most unsettling because the wedding photo is in portrait style while the sibling photo is in landscape so their shapes look very unusual on top of each other. The effect is unusually eerie in an already eerie piece: the wedding photograph, which is on top, casts ghostly shadows on John and James’ pale faces, obscuring Bernadette altogether. The faces of Theresa and Elizabeth, who sit on the right and left sides, respectively, are darkened by the purplish hue; only their outer arms, left out of the frame, are untouched. The unsettling, mournful effect of this juxtaposition is mainly because the combination of the two photos renders them both illegible: viewers can barely make out the subject’s individual faces. The photographs, which were comprehensible when viewed separately, are mutually blurred and blurry in their juxtaposition. Moreover, this overlaying executes a forced visual yoking of two generations, one whose aesthetic affect is quite unsettling.

This forcible yoking of two generations speaks to Hirsch’s point about how “the family photo displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness” (7). A typical family album certainly produces a sense of cohesion, but Cha’s unusual treatment of the photographs in Chronology conveys a profound distance between Cha and her parents. This sense of alienation and generational divide lurks beneath the surface of DICTEE and Exilee; in one of DICTEE’s most well-known sections, the speaker writes,

Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you now live. You are not Chinese. You are Korean. But your family moved here to escape the Japanese occupation...You live in a village where the other Koreans live. Same as you. Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles. Farther away from the land that is not your own (45)

The continued use of the second person produces a clear divide between the speaker and her mother who lived through Japanese occupation and the war. This reminds readers of a similar
divide between Hyung Soon and Theresa: one having lived through occupation and the other having lived through its shadow. Although many critics have seen this passage as the speaker’s effort to reach out and build a connection with her mother, putting it in conversation with *Chronology* and panel 17 in particular highlights a profound generational separation between Theresa and her mother.

Marianne Hirsch articulates this phenomenon in her book as *postmemory*, defined as the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (22)

Hirsch posits the term postmemory to describe the experience of second-generation Jewish-Americans who parents were Holocaust survivors, but it has since been applied to Korean-American Studies by many critics. In *Family Frames*, Hirsch draws on Barthes’ notion of photography as inherently filial to articulate why it is an extremely helpful medium through which to explore postmemory:

Photographs in their enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first and second generation remembrance, memory, and postmemory. They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources [of the work] of postmemory. They affirm the past’s existence, and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unrideable distance (23)

The paradox of the photograph is that its realism affirms the lived experiences of previous generations, and yet in its “flat death,” its complete impenetrability, it doesn’t offer any insight into these experiences. This tension is ultimately what produces the haunting, ghostly effect of *Chronology*.

Postmemory is ultimately a trauma-based approach to the tangled intersection of family and cultural memory; importantly, *Chronology* does not simply dwell in this trauma, but recuperates it through a creative investment, ultimately offering an alternative mode of

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28 Barthes 92
engagement that extends beyond postmemory’s haunting effects. Dorinne Kondo labels this as “reparative creativity:” a process of working through historical trauma via artistic creation. The primary way *Chronology* does this is through its use of text. While the reproduction of the photos refuse progression, invoking an unsettling effect of stasis, the use of text in the panels lends a subtle yet significant sense of movement to the piece. Cha’s frequent use of text in her visual pieces demands attention because she carefully manipulates the text’s orientation, boldness, and placement to render it into a unique and fruitful visual image. Specifically, the text in *Chronology* sprawls across the panels, bending and extending to fill space in geometric and innovative ways. As the viewer progresses through the piece, the text gives the impression of crawling across the panels like a line of ants, opening up possibilities for movement amidst the stasis of the photographs. The text in the first panel reads, “could have been knot one,” (Figure 1) with the letters “h, a, n” bolded. While the modifier “could” conveys Cha’s skepticism about the past, the phrase on the whole implies a sense of multiplicity and togetherness. This is buttressed by the play on “knot/not,” giving the sense of something that is inherently tied together, like a family. Moreover, “Han” is a river and an ethnic group in China, and “ha” can be interpreted as an expression of humor or surprise. Thus, an array of new emotions: camaraderie, humor, and surprise can be forged from this panel alone. Panel 3, which features the portrait of Hyung Soon overlaid onto the portrait of Hyung Sang, says “time’s own shadow too” (Figure 3). This reinforces how the photographs cast shadows on each other and form a completely new artifact when juxtaposed. Moreover, the rhetoric surrounding time gives it materiality and substance: transforming it into an object capable of casting a physical and metaphorical shadow. This emphasizes how, harkening back to my earlier argument, time becomes its own character in

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Chronology, one who importantly is dynamic and subversive as it resists Western modes of knowledge production which are inherently violent. Moreover, the phrase “three: begins one again / not be fore” is humorous as “three comes before four” but the phrase “begins one again” implies a cyclicality or return just as the piece emphasizes the importance of returning to one’s roots, no matter how much trauma that involves.

Ultimately, the use of text, in lending a sense of movement and depth to the “flat death” of the photographs, emphasizes how Cha refuses to cede to the blankness of history. Despite its painful nature and inaccessibility, Cha finds alternative modes of memory that aren’t seeped in trauma. In describing postmemory, Hirsch notes that “its connection to its object or source is mediated through an imaginative investment and creation” (22). The importance of imagination and its direct connection to “play” cannot be overlooked; in using repetition and text to play with the structure of a traditional narrative, Cha revises and transforms the past, opening up a multitude of interpretations and approaches. Importantly, none of these approaches offer any “answers” in a traditional sense, but it is this rejection of tradition which makes the search worthwhile. Chronology ultimately posits a new form of memory and meaning-making in the face of colonial violence; it explores, embraces, and refigures the fractured past instead of just mourning it.
Chapter 3: Amer

A land not mine
Still forever memorable,
The waters of its ocean
Chill and fresh.

Sand on the bottom whiter than chalk,
And air drunk, like wine,
Late sun lays bare
The rosy limbs of the pine trees.

Sunset in the ethereal waves:
I cannot tell if the day
is ending, or the world, or if
the secrets of secrets is inside of me again.

-Anna Akhmatova, “A land not mine,” translated by Jane Kenyon

Amer consists of an American flag hanging vertically with the letters “a,m,e,r” printed successively in the individual stars. The word “AMER” has been printed vertically on the second to left stripe. The fonts used for the lettering are different: in the stars, the letters are lowercase, faded, and in a typewriter font. For the vertical lettering, the letters are upper-case, bolder, and in a more modern font. There are 48 stars and 13 stripes on the flag (on a traditional flag there are 50 stars and 13 stripes). The piece was created in 1976, 16 years after Alaska and Hawaii were officially declared as states and represented on the flag.

I. Asian-American, Asian/American

In her contributions to the ongoing discussion of the use of the hyphen (as opposed to a backslash or space) in the term “Asian-American,” Cynthia Wu explains how the convention of hyphenating U.S. immigrant destinations, especially those that are European in origin, references a teleological narrative of acculturation. In this model, the
progression of generations allows for the ethnically marked to overcome the perceived limitations of their social location, (103)\textsuperscript{30}

and that the increasingly common practice of omitting the hyphen in “Asian-American” is intended to reject this model, which is centered on an erasure and depoliticization of one’s non-American past “in order to affirm the success of the nation-building project of the present” (103). Wu’s chapter also advocates for the use of the backslash while emphasizes how the hyphen produces a false sense of difference between the terms “Asian” and “America” when “the continent of Asia- in its materiality and in its idea- has always been part of the making of the U.S. nation-state” (104). Indeed, the designation “Asian-American,” which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was created “at the agonistic intersections of feminist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist social movements...composed through conjoined political mobilizations for Civil Rights in the United States and against American imperialism in Asia, most pointedly through the Vietnam War.”\textsuperscript{31} Although all of Cha’s work is informed by imperialism, these topics are only explicitly mentioned in \textit{DICTEE}. \textit{DICTEE} includes a letter signed by P.K. Yoon and Syngman Rhee- in it they implore President Roosevelt for U.S. assistance in freeing Korea from Japan’s long occupation (34-36). Later the book features a map of Korea prominently featuring the DMZ (demilitarized zone) line (78). Both of these artifacts are presented without context or commentary, but anyone with a knowledge of Korean history will know their significance. Years after the letter was written, Syngman Rhee- heavily backed by the United States- became Korea’s leader. This further allowed the U.S. military to build a heavy presence in Korea, quickly becoming a neocolonial presence and eventually drawing the DMZ line at the end of WWII, dividing the nation into communist North and capitalist South. From 1950-1953, the U.S. waged


the Korean War as South Korea became a lynchpin for Cold War containment. This historical context is crucial to keep in mind when analyzing Amer, which initially seems to take an apolitical position towards the United States but ultimately produces palpable feelings of ambivalence and disorientation that reflect Cha’s attitudes towards American involvement in Korea and perhaps even America in general. While Cha’s other pieces highlight the intimate and intergenerational damages of colonialism, Amer, in its invocation of American iconography, specifically locates the United States as a violent imperial force. Namely, the use of French text and 48 stars disrupts isolationist and exceptionalist frameworks of American culture by nodding to America’s long and painful neo-colonial involvement in Korea. Lastly, another important aspect of Amer is that it is Cha’s only piece which exclusively and explicitly invokes American imagery, encouraging audiences to ask whether this is a political work of art, and if so, what makes a piece of art political.

Figure 14. Amer. From The Dream of the Audience

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II. **Postmodernism and the Berkeley Revolution**

*Amer* was finished in 1976 amidst the rise of Postmodernist art in the United States. Postmodernism in art and literature arose in the late 1960s and was characterized by a rejection of universal principles and truths. It drew on the ideas of philosophers such as Derrida and Lacan and embraced individual experiences while collapsing the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. Cha’s visual pieces participate in many of the sub-Postmodernist movements, which included “performance art, installations, hyper-realism, intermedia experiments, and [others] that are deliberately theatrical, deliberately situated ‘between the arts’” (217)\(^{34}\). As demonstrated by all of these subgenres, this movement broke down a barrier between text and image, enthusiastically incorporating language into visual art in a way that modernism had previously shunned. The incorporation of text, of course, is an incredibly important part of Cha’s body of work. Cha’s work is extremely innovative, nuanced, and abstract. It’s difficult to analyze because there’s very few, if any, artists out there who are doing similar things. However, as unique as she is, it’s crucial that we recognize her as part of this larger Postmodernist art movement, partially for our own understanding and partially because a lot of aspects of her work directly responds.

![Jasper Johns’ Flag (1954)](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78805)

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35 [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78805](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78805)
Besides the use of text, another crucial theme for Postmodernist art was a diverse range of materials. *Amer* utilizes both canvas and ink; just how the content of Cha’s work—namely, *DICTEE*, pulls from a variety of sources: history, mythology, film theory, photography, personal artifacts, her visual work uses a diverse range of materials and many of her pieces combine materials in counterintuitive ways. The materiality of *Amer* is one of many qualities which makes it closely echo Jasper Johns’ famous flag paintings. Johns’ *Flag* (1955) thoroughly shook the art world and remains as one of the main indicators of the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism. The reason *Flag* attracted such widespread attention was that it treated the national symbol in a novel way: it juxtaposed the geometrical grid-like qualities of many Modernist works with expressionistic, anti-geometrical marks and nonnormative materials. *Flag* like *Amer*, has notable material qualities as Johns built up a dynamic, layered surface using shreds of newspaper dipped in encaustic and positioned so some of the text is still legible. The bold formal qualities of this piece reflect its subversive messaging as Johns intended to complicate his audience’s perception of the national symbol; he created this piece in the midst of Cold War era McCarthyism, which touted the image of the flag as a hegemonic symbol of national power against communism and its various manifestations of evil. Johns’ artistic career launched after being discharged from the Korean War, one of America’s first real showings as an imperial power.

Both Cha and Johns are deeply interested in semiotics—specifically, visual semiotics. How do we reconcile the many significations and dichotomies buried in an icon like the American flag? While it is ultimately impossible to answer this question, both Johns and Cha treat the flag in subtly subversive ways to highlight the complexities of these significations. Like *Flag*, *Amer* was also created during a charged historical and political moment, finished in 1976.

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36 [https://www.theartstory.org/artist/johns-jasper/artworks/](https://www.theartstory.org/artist/johns-jasper/artworks/)
on the 200th anniversary of America’s founding. Cha was in her first year of her Master’s in Studio Art at the University of California, Berkeley, which was experiencing tremendous social upheaval that rippled through the country. During the late 1950s and 1960s, the Free Speech Movement and anti-Vietnam War sit-ins and protests rocked the campus, often resulting in violent confrontation with police that further stoked the flames of rebellion against institutional power. These protests consisted of mostly students and young people, brought together by their shared condemnation of US imperialism abroad and social injustice against minority communities at home: namely, people of color, women, and the gay community. Importantly, 1969 marked the official creation of the Third World Liberation Front: a group of poc students from Berkeley and San Francisco State fighting for an ethnic studies curriculum Asian-American Studies, Chicanx Studies, etc- designed for and taught by people of color. This movement led to the institutionalization of Asian-American studies: the canon that Cha’s work is placed within in contemporary context. While there’s no evidence that Cha participated directly in the Berkeley student protests, her work heavily drew upon the spirit of experimentation and counter-culture that they represented.

III. Bitter Sea

The use of French text and repetition in Amer produces a notably ambivalent effect. While the word “amer” is undoubtedly short for “America,” it also translates to “bitter” and “to the sea” in French. This casual use of a foreign language within the framework of a distinctly American image transforms the flag into a transnational and transcultural object, reminding the audience that America is not and has never been monolingual. The ease and fluidity with which Cha moves between English, Korean, French, and Chinese in her body of work stands in sharp contrast to the way she describes the painful bodily manifestations of speech in DICTEE:
“Broken speech. One to one. At a time. / Cracked tongue. Broken tongue. / Pigeon. Semblance of speech” (75). Cha plays with the word “pigeon:” a mute bird, as a reference to “pidgin:” a language invented by two groups of people whose native languages have nothing in common, created so that they can communicate with each other. A pidgin language has no recognizable origins or roots; its inclusion in this passage emphasizes the utterly arbitrary nature of language’s rules and also gestures to the speaker’s feelings of instability as she is forced into the tenuous, uncharted terrain of the English language. The difficult, fragmented nature of this passage suggests that it is not ease or fluency that Cha moves through these different languages with; rather, it is a deep sense of ambivalence. This ambivalence in form directly leads us to an analysis of ambivalence in content; the word “bitter,” especially in the context of Cha’s identity as a non-white immigrant and English language learner, suggests both historical and personal bitterness towards a nation and society that expects English and punishes those who are unable or unwilling to conform. Lisa Lowe remarks that in DICTEE, the processes of coming to speech are “thematized as a ‘forced fluency’” (47). “Bitter,” in its allusions to taste, also evokes a bodily reaction not unlike Cha’s description of the process of coming into speech: “bared teeth, groan,” (3) wincing, etc.

While the use of French text evoked feelings of ambivalence towards the national symbol, the use of different fonts printed in different directions evoke feelings of disorientation. Orientation and disorientation are important concepts in this work, as the flag is oriented vertically but the text in the stars are oriented horizontally. The translation of “amer” to “to the sea” alludes to the familiar lyric “from sea to shining sea” in the familiar, patriotic song “America The Beautiful.” “A mer” also evokes the seemingly infinite horizon of the ocean. However, the vertical alignment of the flag itself breaks this horizon and the visual result is
slightly disorienting. The use of disorientation in the context of American imagery evokes a passage in *DICTEE* wherein Cha describes the naturalization process:

> One day you raise your right hand and you are American. They give you American Passport. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image (56)

The abruptness of this passage, with its choppy sentences and unusual repetition, produces feelings of uneasiness and an uncomfortable, detached tone. Cha bifurcates the word passport, playing with the idea that becoming a citizen might allow her to “pass” as American, although the entirety of her oeuvre dismantles this myth. Moreover, visuality is a main theme in this passage; the following sentences constitute a loss of subjectivity as Cha describes her identity being replaced by an ID photograph the American government took of her. Although she is the subject of the photograph, she feels she has no ownership over the image as indicated by the phrase “their photograph.” She is not coming into her identity here; rather, her identity is being erased. This discomfort evokes Dubois’ theory of double consciousness, which he explains in *The Souls of Black Folk* as a permanent bifurcation experienced by black Americans due to dissonances between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the world:

> The Negro [is] gifted with second-sight in this American world- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others (3)³⁷

Both Dubois and Cha explore how non-white subjects are forced to see themselves through the eyes of white society. However, while Dubois posits a doubling of sight, the *DICTEE* passage actually proposes a reduction of sight: Cha can only see her own image through the perspective of the American government. This erasure of identity is also an erasure of individuality as she

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becomes just another face in a sea of American faces. While the traditional narrative of American naturalization posits it as a moment of celebration and pride, Cha’s description offers a much more frank perspective. For Cha, her citizenship transforms her subjectivity into an object capable of being possessed and reproduced, literalized by the passport. Thus, her personhood is trite, foggy, as reproducible as the photograph they took of her: merely a single star in a sea of repeated identical stars. Ultimately, the use of various visual directionalities produces palpable feelings of disorientation in the viewer that reflects the disorientation Cha feels towards her assimilation into American society.

This meditation on “bitter sea” implicitly highlights the United States as an imperial force, especially in the context of the image of an “infinite horizon” mentioned above. Many critics have noted how boundaries and borders feature prominently in both content and form in Cha’s work but none have spoken about them in relation to “Amer.” The historical bitterness between the United States and Korea highlights a long history of U.S. imperial involvement in Asia and the ocean specifically as a passageway between the U.S. and Asia. While manifest destiny signified the colonial expansion westward, imperialism marked a neo-colonial expansion eastward across the ocean. This idea harkens back to Cha’s emphasis on directionality and orientation in relation to imperialism, both on an affective and conceptual level.

IV. Aesthetics of Decolonization

In evoking these feelings of disorientation and ambivalence, it is important and necessary to ask ourselves whether Cha is making a political statement about America. As aforementioned, Amer is her only piece which utilizes American visual iconography, but it’s used in a very ambiguous way due to the lack of commentary and context. This raises a larger question about Cha’s oeuvre which continually engages in issues of imperialism, colonialism, and national
identity, but only in elusive, abstract terms. There is continued critical speculation around
whether Cha would want her art to be viewed as a political statement or not; A New York Times
article by Amei Wallach explains how Cha’s family removed *Amer* from her posthumous 2002 show at the Bronx Museum because they worried it would be perceived as a commentary on US involvement in Iraq (Cha died in 1982, so it obviously isn’t) and subsequently distract from the rest of her pieces. In the article, Wallach ruminates about whether Cha would have approved of her family’s choice to remove *Amer* and states that Cha’s art “avoided the political and instead reached for the universal.”\(^{38}\) While a broader, universal understanding of language is certainly one of Cha’s main interest points, Wallach’s statement implies that the “political” and “universal” are directly at odds. This sentiment directly opposes Cha’s vision as her work continually highlights how there are oppressive ideologies inherently embedded in language and visual culture.

Although we can never know what Cha considered to be “political” art and if she intended her art to be “political,” it is clear that Cha was comfortable sitting in the ambiguity of these questions. In the preface of her film theory anthology *Apparatus*, Cha opens with a quote from Jean-Luc Godard:

> -You have repeatedly defined the difference between making a political film and making a film politically.
> -Yes, these two things are completely different. As Bertolt Brecht already said, it’s not important to know what are the real things but rather how things are real. The relation is in that reality. An image is nothing. It’s the relationships between the images that matter. Why are these relationships important? Marxism indicates what is the nature of relationships between things. They are relations of production. A machine is not or a worker is not important by themselves, what matters is the relationship between the machine and the worker. (Preface)

The emphasis on “how” and not “what” further highlights Cha’s focus on form as opposed to content in her work. Moreover, Godard’s focus on the relationship between the machine and the worker encourages us to think about a potential parallel in the relationship between the flag and a Korean immigrant like Cha. As Godard claims, neither of these agents are important by themselves and neither have meaning by themselves. It is their relationship that is important. As a Korean woman and an immigrant, Cha has a vastly different relationship to the symbol of the flag than an English-speaking white man. Cha’s attitude towards iconography parallels Godard’s: her ambiguous treatment of the flag acknowledges that it contains wildly different and elusive significations for different people depending on their identity. These significations also change depending on time and space, as demonstrated by the Cha family’s removal of Amer from the Bronx Museum. Although Cha never intended Amer to be commentary on American intervention in Iraq, the context of the time period would suggest otherwise.

I have come to this understanding after extensive research on Cha’s biography and many months of thinking about her nuanced take on imperialism, colonialism, and national identity. What about a viewer who has never heard of Cha and simply encountered Amer in a museum exhibit? Because Cha doesn’t provide any context, explanation, or commentary on her work, and because her work is very abstract, this viewer would never be able to come to the same conclusions that I have. Whether this is or is not a failure on the part of Cha is a question that has stuck with me throughout this entire project. There’s no shortage of evidence that Cha wanted all of her work to be audience-centered: she gives them the freedom and mobility to move throughout her oeuvre and develop understanding according to their own unique background and opinions. However, a lot of this understanding will undoubtedly be lost if they aren’t familiar with her work, haven’t read previous research on her, or haven’t read her artist statements (which
are only available to the public through the Online Archive of California, a website that few
typical people would peruse for fun). Many critics have avoided this question in commentary on
Cha, partially because it’s ultimately impossible to answer and partially because it feels like a
faux pas to question the decisions of a dead artist. Juliana Spahr addresses this tension in the
context of DICTEE, arguing that it remains extremely subversive and informative even if readers
enter without context and choose not to seek context. The basis of her argument is that reading is
an inherently colonial practice and reading in nontraditional ways, even unintentionally, gleans
precious insight:

But even assuming that readers adopt the most passive of responses and skip over the
sections that they cannot read, reading a multilingual text is a decolonizing practice.
Instead of questioning how to master the text, passive readers must confront, at each
place they encounter the undecipherable language, who speaks what to whom, what it
might mean that they do not know this language...These readers are then forced to
confront the way they cannot reign over the text, cannot assume reading’s colonizing
powers (31-32).39

This is a valid argument, especially considering Cha’s identification of the inherent violence of
language and her emphasis in her artist statement that she desires all of her work to be driven by
the audience. However, one could also argue that it is the very “passivity” that Spahr identifies as
subversive which Cha actively rejects through making difficult pieces that require a lot of time
and effort to understand. Ultimately, Spahr’s insight leaves us with more questions than answers.

We’ll never know Cha’s intentionality, and obsessing over the question of whether the
difficulty of her art constitutes a failure is ultimately futile. However, it is extremely important to
note that regardless of whether Cha’s art is political, the mode of engagement that she proposes
is distinctly political. The highly relational nature of Cha’s work ultimately challenges our
notions of boundaries: where a body of work begins and ends. A typical approach to visual art is

39 Spahr, Juliana. “Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s DICTEE.” College Literature,
Unknown, 1996.
to consider and analyze each piece individually, attempting a preliminary mastery before we move on to the next one. However, Cha’s oeuvre is built on a network of relationships: each piece informs another and provides an entrance into another. Thus, the process of interpreting her art is slow and circular as opposed to linear. Her body of work doesn’t “begin” or “end” and requires a constant engagement and return: a constant re-evaluation of what viewers thought they knew before. This circularity encourages the viewer to abandon expectations of mastery, which carry implicit hegemonic ideals, and also consider their own relationship and feelings towards the pieces. Importantly, this type of engagement is political in itself, and the question of whether the piece was meant to be political fades into the background. This is why Cha’s art embodies decolonizing aesthetics: because its circularity forgoes mastery and centers the audience, and because the audience embarks on a journey whose destination is not understanding, but rather a meaningful meditation. Ultimately, through the form of her art, Cha proposes a decolonizing mode of engaging with all visual culture: one that is built on a constant state of contemplation and return as opposed to final mastery.
Conclusion & Acknowledgements

It is worth noting that the conclusions I have arrived at over the course of this project have been informed as much, if not more, by my personal interpretive journey through Cha’s repertoire than the formal elements of the work itself and other critics’ analyses of it. Though this is perhaps unconventional for a critical thesis, it is not unusual for those who have spent time with Cha’s art. The highly abstract and difficult nature of her work leads to an analysis process characterized by frustration; this frustration in itself is not particularly notable, but what is notable is the fact that it feels distinctly personal. Anyone who has encountered DICTEE cannot help but share their own personal reaction; even Elaine H. Kim, who is perhaps most well positioned to offer objective and incisive remarks on DICTEE’s formal qualities begins her essay with an emotional reaction: “The first time I glanced at DICTEE, I was put off by the book” (3).40

This is one of the central paradoxes of Cha’s work; despite its highly abstract, difficult nature and frequently detached tone41, it’s very moving; it gets under your skin. When I first started a close examination of her visual pieces, I noticed the recurring sensation of being simultaneously drawn in and pushed away; this is best demonstrated in Audience Distant Relative in which Cha writes, “I can only assume that you hear me / I can only hope that you hear me,” (19) while purposefully obscuring what, exactly, she wants us to hear. Sometime in June 2020 I labeled this the “estrangement/intimacy paradox,” and it became one of the frameworks which I returned to again and again throughout the course of this project.

Once I committed to the idea of focusing on Cha’s visual art I dove into the process of examination, and encountered the estrangement/intimacy paradox at every turn. I spent

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40 Writing Self, Writing Nation
41 Even Cha’s artist statement is written completely in passive, second-person voice.
innumerable hours with my copy of *The Dream of the Audience*, flipping through its pages over and over trying to glean insight from the black-and-white photographs of her pieces. I looked at the images first thing in the morning in the hope that my not-yet-awake brain could glean some insight that my alert brain was missing. I went on a road trip to Mt. Shasta and, despite my friends’ eye-rolling, brought a backpack full of Cha materials in the hope that the elevation and fresh mountain air would offer some answers (it didn’t). I watched different genres of dance on Youtube thinking that it would help me become more comfortable with unfamiliar forms of creative expression. All throughout this the images remained impenetrable. I felt like a stranger to Cha, despite knowing everything an outsider can know about her life and death. And yet her work continued to touch me, calling me back each day like a siren and sustaining my interest.

Obviously, as evidenced by the existence of this conclusion chapter, I finished the project. There was no elixir to my understanding, no grand moment of clarity. The lucid, empowering moment of cracking the code- a moment that I imagined as justifying hours of frustration and self-doubt- never came. Instead I found alternate modes of engagement. I stopped thinking about what Cha was trying to say and instead focused on how she was trying to say it. I circled through the pieces again and again, constantly revising my previous ideas. I developed new ways to feel “close” to the piece; not by understanding it, but by appreciating the smallest, most unspectacular details: the creases in Cha’s parents’ wedding photo, the meticulous attention she paid to different font sizes.

As humanities scholars, we strive to make illegible objects legible, both for our own enjoyment and as justification for the difficulties of being in a field that doesn’t get the respect it deserves. However, as Cha’s work highlights, the effort to make something legible is a way that the colonizing nation marks the colonized subject. The concept of mastery over a subject is
inextricable from oppressive ideologies which perpetuate hegemonic power structures. In the context of Cha’s repertoire, I previously understood my simultaneous feelings of estrangement and intimacy as directly at odds with each other. Eventually, however, I found that the feelings of estrangement Cha’s work evoked were my entry point into the work. The estrangement/intimacy paradox was not a paradox; it was an intentional act on the part of Cha to encourage viewers to expand their notions of artistic engagement. The estrangement, ambivalence, and disorientation she felt towards concepts of language, the nuclear family, and American iconography allowed me to see how she identified and subverted these three modes of knowledge production. Thus, the way I have come to the conclusions in this thesis are the conclusions themselves. They have fundamentally changed my perspective on artistic production and political engagement. It has been an honor to be touched by Theresa’s work in this way, and I feel very excited and humbled to be part of a small coterie of writers who have kept her memory alive.

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