



Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

“

Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is mother who waits nine days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all.

— Dictee

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Quick Facts

- * 1951-1982
- * Born in South Korea
- * Her best-known work, *Dictee* (1982), is part novel and part autobiography

Biography

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the third of five children, was born on March 4, 1951 in Pusan, Korea, outside of Seoul. Because of the chaos of the Korean War, Cha's family moved many times during the 1950s. After hostilities ceased, the family moved back to Seoul where Cha attended Ewha University Elementary School and Toksoo Elementary School.

In 1962, the Cha family moved to Hawaii and, two years later, to Northern California. Theresa and Elizabeth, her older sister, went to the Convent of the Sacred Heart School, an all-girls, Catholic school. Cha studied briefly at the University of San Francisco before transferring to the University of California, Berkeley. She obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees in comparative literature under Bernard Augst and a Master of Fine Arts degree, studying with the performance artist, Jim Melchert. Cha spent 1976 in Paris doing postgraduate work in film-making and theory with Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel. She then returned to the Bay Area and continued the films and performances she had begun to gain recognition for as a graduate student.

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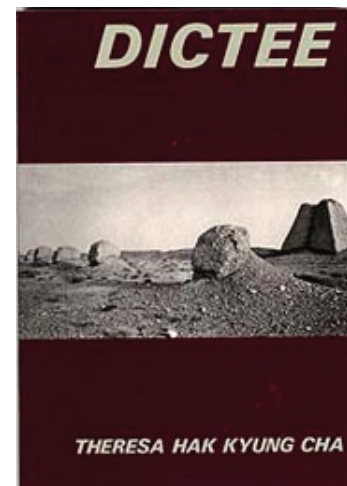
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Biography continued

Cha's output was varied, consisting of films and mixed-media performance pieces in addition to her written works. The primary theme of her artistic output was the dislocation -- cultural, geographic and social -- embodied by immigration. She used slow fadeouts, repetition and subtle shifts of words through the use of closely allied meanings and cognates to reveal a sense of displacement and fragmentation which she likened to memory and the experience of the immigrant.

Cha's best-known work, *Dictee*, is the story of several women: the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Joan of Arc, Hyung Soon Huo (Cha's mother, who was born in Manchuria to first-generation Korean exiles), Demeter and Persephone, and Cha herself. The element that unites these women's lives is suffering and the transcendence of suffering. The book, divided into nine parts structured around the Greek muses, mixes writing styles (journal entries, allegorical stories, dreams), voices and kinds of information as a metaphor of dislocation, loss and memory's fragmentation. Cha's language becomes increasingly poetic after the story begins to expand into a "detailed abstract expression of the experience of exile, infused with intense emotion" (Wolf 13).

Dictee is an autobiography that transcends the self. Throughout the work, Cha makes the reader aware of the process of writing. Therefore, the reader struggles with the writer through pages of a rough draft, a handwritten letter, exercises in French grammar, photographs and diagrams. This struggle allows the reader to experience Cha's life and the lives of those she chronicles. There "is a sense of triumph in living through these struggles and of something deeper, more mythical, giving meaning to these lives" (Wolf 13). Cha was murdered at the age of 31 by a stranger in New York City on November 5, 1982, just seven days after the publication of *Dictee*.





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Works by the author

Books

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Dictee (Tanam Press, 1982).

Films

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Recalling Telling ReTelling (1978).

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Performances

Barren Cave Mute (1974), at the University of California, Berkeley.

Aveugle Voix (1975), at 63 Bluxome Street, San Francisco.

A Ble Wail (1975), at Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley.

Life Mixing (1975), at University Art Museum, Berkeley.

Vampyr (1976), at Centre des etudes americains du cinema, Paris.

Reveille dans la Brume (1977), at La Mamelle Arts Center and Fort Mason Arts Center, San Francisco.

Other Things Seen. Other Things Heard (1978), at Western Front Gallery, Vancouver, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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Works in languages other than English

Japanese

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Korean

Dikt`e, trans. Kyong-nyon Kim (T`omat`o, 1997). (Text in Korean and French)

Archives and Special Collections

The Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive is located at the Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive, University of California.